

ENGLISH TEACHER



A MEMOIR



Interlude on the Gurgaon Road

***English Teacher* is a compilation of portraits and anecdotes shading into autobiographical memoir recording what it was like to be a student and teacher of English Literature in various parts of the world between Canada and China in the late 20th century...**

**CAMBRIDGE POETRY WORKSHOP
EDITIONS**

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“Soon we shall be as old as spring”.

The illustrations on the covers are of Mr Jain’s artistic ashram on the Gurgaon Road in South Delhi, the painting being one of a pair by Rani Drew while the photo is of an interlude during a poetry workshop.

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INTRODUCTORY

Rani was teaching English, all the way from Khanna to Rewa, before she met me and has since both taught and written about many more people in many more countries than are mentioned in this memoir. Rani's side of the story is not told here nor those of our children. This story is not about the far more essential world of family, though obviously the family was always in the offing. It is about the related world of work, paid or unpaid. Occasionally there is some overlap.

Few women teachers figure in a story which is rooted - or uprooted - in a male boarding school education. The composite English Teacher now would have to be androgynous, an *ardhanarishvara*, but that was not so for those of us who grew up in the single-sex boarding schools of post-Dickensian times. W-I-N, win, D-E-R, der: Winder: go and clean it, boy. Thankfully, that is now history – recorded here for a more fortunate posterity.

The wider world these portraits and anecdotes purport to cover is not so wide, being confined to the northern hemisphere, Canada to China. Our sole venture into the southern hemisphere was a brief foray into the magical world of Papua New Guinea and its *wantok* poetry.

The memoir was originally no more than an article or two on English teachers one or two thousand words long. It just grew and grew and morphed eventually into straight autobiography. Several passages have been hacked out and developed into longer articles, as a couple of earlier publications, *Bangla File* and *Unearthing England* will attest. I have thrown in three new articles drafted recently.

The mode is anecdotal. This may be a legacy of my brief time as a gossip columnist, spin-off of my father's career as a journalist reporting human interest stories. The anecdotes have the advantage of being particular and individual. Paradoxically, the autobiography is a common story: English teachers and their teaching are generic. And beyond the generic we are, as the poets well know, Anon.

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CHAPTER 1: SCHOOLED

King's School, Canterbury

Mr X. Could my father keep the name of my English teacher out of the national newspapers?

The telephone call came through to our Kentish cottage one evening from the Headmaster's Secretary. My father, a local reporter who had made good as the news editor of a Fleet Street paper (before the frenetic stress of the job killed him), explained that he had no control over the content of any paper but his own. As for his own it was his principle to print the news without fear or favour, affection or ill-will.

The news my father had was that there was trouble for my English teacher, a gay man (of course that happy term was not used then, homosexual sex between consenting adults remaining as much a heinous crime as it had been when Oscar Wilde was incarcerated in Reading Gaol).

Simon Stuart, constantly confronted on the greensward of the Canterbury Cathedral precincts by Jimmy, a boy with whom he had fallen in love while teaching in the East End, had finally been provoked into charging him with blackmail.

Since Simon was the brother of a Lord, he could expect to be named and shamed in the papers. If so, Miss Millward explained, the school would have no option but to sack him. My heterosexual parents looked askance. I felt devastated.

In the event, no paper named him except *The Times*. Simon left the school. I can be troubled now by the implications of a power relationship between an aristocratic man and a working class boy but I don't doubt Simon was driven only as a last resort to the public ignominy of the courts. I wrote a valedictory poem.

The sixth form was where my serious love for Literature began. Discipline and rigour came from the History class in the Library above the Norman staircase. Seated either side of a rectangular table, we were suddenly, unaccountably, treated as if in Cabinet and initiated into the complexities of the Balance of Power in Europe.

To be fair, a dramatic piece I wrote in my ill-disciplined if deferential way about intellectuals arguing in a coffee house prior to the French Revolution was given its due. Thereafter I fell into line.

The only time I ever saw Mr R. W. “Duffy” Harris, the History Master, disconcerted was at a lecture given by a visiting theatre director who, in describing a contemporary version of *Macbeth*, was astonished by the disproportionate laughter he provoked when he mocked the modishness of names such as Banky and Duffy. *What have I said?*

It was Simon’s English classes across the School House quad that were a revelation. Simon, in statutory gown and (B.A. Cambridge) hood, perched like an eagle on the edge of his desk and we gathered around like a Parliament of Fowles, soaring like larks as did the brilliant A.N.A. Browner (who was to die young) or croaking like crows at the back as did the hirsute “Bloggo” Hutton.

The occasional class directed towards ‘A’ and ‘S’ level exams provided us with what Simon referred to as the Party Line. Otherwise we drank neat from the Pierian Spring. I was hoist by my own petard. Asked at first to write about Yeats’s Irish Airman driven by a lonely impulse of delight, I must have copied an essay from a previous year by somebody far brighter than I, maybe ANA. The simple comment: *A triumphant reading* was something I had to learn how to live up to.

I didn’t always manage to do that but, as we read a tale by Chaucer (that year the *Knight’s*) and a play by Shakespeare (*Henry IV Pt II*) line by line (all a secondary school student of literature needs in order to learn to read), I had my moments, if only as Doll Tearsheet.

Emotionally, Simon had prepared us for, among much else, his departure. *Banish plump Jack and banish all the world.* [Pinter pause]. *I do. I will.* We would never thereafter be enamoured of sound common sense, cold political calculation.

Falstaff's rejection is followed by a knock at the door. Jan Kott not long after would remind us that we needed to have heard a knock at the door in Communist Poland to fully understand the dramatic power of a similar knock in Shakespeare's plays written in the police state of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

The poet Tony, otherwise at grammar school T.W., Harrison recounts in a memorable poem of his that his working class accent led him to being given by his English teacher the role of the drunken porter in *Macbeth*. *Knock, knock, knock. Who's there in the name of Beelzebub? Knock, knock.* Entry is interminably delayed but we know all is not well within: King Duncan has been murdered in his bed.

In school I had my own experience of stage doors. Though at a public rather than grammar school, King's, Canterbury, I too was conscious I was the first in my family to be in such a place - and so always somewhat out of it. Moreover, my house was full of actors good enough to become professionals. When we staged Chekov's *The Seagull* as our house play in the Chapter House, the cast included from my year alone Oliver Ford "Orf" Davies, Jeremy Paul [Roche] and Ian Thompson.

Malcolm Burgess, who would design the set for a Cambridge production of *Zuleika Dobson*, wafted in to transform our drab stage flats. I remember endless strings of red, white and black ribbons needing to be pinned in decorative parallel lines down the walls.

Unfortunately, one door in this prima donna of a set alternately stuck fast or swung loosely open. My keenness to be involved in the production led to me being positioned behind it so that it could not misbehave at stage entrances and exits. Having to take my cues by

sound and not sight, I felt like one of the blinkered horses Cromwell was reputed to have stabled here or hereabouts.

I have not in my time had many parts but, when someone less keen than I dropped out of a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Archdeacon's Garden, the Cathedral its unadorned backdrop, I did play the Apothecary. This too involved a door but Romeo shouts for attention rather than knocks to obtain the drugs that according to Mantua's Laws are death to any he who utters them.

It was another midsummer performance in the same midsummer's dream garden that reminds me I can track my literary career further back. Nick Raffle was playing Caliban in *The Tempest* (a sequel to which, *Caliban*, Ariel belatedly meeting with Caliban, my playwright wife Rani has written and recently produced in both Mauritius and Bangladesh).

You might say Raffle, who would soon to be picked as hooker for England's Rugby XV, needed little make-up to play Shakespeare's brutish islander. But Raffle was a gentle giant who could blush and he did need the extra make-up they lavishly piled on his face.

The garden, like the Chapter House, backed onto the Cathedral Cloisters. A year later, as fag to the Head of School, Roger Simon, a boy destined to become a Canon, I had the job of every night locking up the gates to the Cloisters. This was an eerie ritual, the more so since my passage was through the Dark Entry haunted, so literary legend had it, by the ghost of a servant girl, Nell. After the Canon she worked for as cook took a lover, she had put a fatal dose of poison in his food.

It was into these atmospheric Cloisters the deformed and brutish Raffle, between scenes in the summer evening performances of *The Tempest*, would slip out through the door in the garden wall that was the only backstage exit for those not content to hide behind some trees and bushes.

One evening as twilight imperceptibly fell, Raffle was taking one of his breaks in the Cloisters when sharply round the corner came a young woman, the Archdeacon's niece. She saw a monster ahead, screamed and fainted. Raffle, alarmed, immediately rushed forward to come to her aid. Revived, the young woman opened her eyes only to see the same monster now looming right over her. She screamed and promptly fainted again.

St Michael's

I had in fact seen Raffle on stage several years earlier in a similar role in a similarly ill-lit scene, stealing through the dark as the Thief in *The Bishop's Candlesticks*. I was then beginning my education in a small intensely religious prep school founded by an Anglo-Catholic priest, Father Tooth, who had been sent to prison for taking out religious processions in the street. The school still took out processions but in their private 80 acres of land on the North Downs. There they were spared the ricocheting protests of Kentish Fire.

When I arrived to board at St Michael's in the austere days just after the end of "the War" we read out loud from *The Victory Reader*: "La Dernière Classe", "The Sinking of the Graf Spee" and extracts from *Oliver Twist*. On account of another Dickensian character I acquired my first nickname: Mealy Potatoes. We saw plenty of those. And lumpy porridge. Bread and scrape. Vitamin C jelly. Sitting on hard wooden benches at refectory tables. Bring your own sweets: five a day: share with those without any tuck.

Except for the religious rituals – as omnipresent as the seasons their pagan originals celebrated - we might have been at Dotheboys Hall. The same Terror. For shoving a pisspot under another boy's nose in the dormitory Kaye (from alien Hornsey – I never pass through it without remembering him) was ritually flogged with venom and expelled. Every morning we chanted repeatedly in Greek, *Kyrie eléison, Christe eléison*.

Since there were but a dozen boys in the upper school we all had to participate in every cultural event - whether athletic or artistic. In my first term I was one of a Chorus of be-flowered Chinese maidens in *Lushan*, a play written by our resident missionary to China, Father Wyman. *Hark the singing of the breeze, Floating through cherry trees, Lushan, Lushan.*

On the other side of the Himalaya, the Empire we were being educated to govern, was being wound up. Willans, whose father was a Major in the Indian Army, taught us a chant in Hindustani: *Oony, poony, ping pong piney, chalawallah whasky, chiney ching*. Perhaps this curiosity may be permitted to pass quietly into oblivion along with the multiple lost languages of India mourned by Dr Devy of the M.S. University of Baroda.

The chapel was far more central to the school than to any Cambridge college. In time I graduated to being the Thurifer, smothering the processions both inside and out in clouds of frankincense and myrrh. A much put-upon lad from Lincoln named John Hurt played Boat Boy to my Thurifer. He was the understudy for my role. In time he would make a convincing Raskolnikov.

Unfortunately, John was further put upon by the diminutive Scots *dominie*, Donald Cormack, who terrified us all with his black strap. There's nae royal road to learning, he would say with pleasure as he inflicted pain.

One day, a bookish boy appropriately named Read - he had read the likes of Rider Haggard and Percy C. Westerman - stood up to face Cormack after a board duster thrown at him had narrowly missed hitting his head. He declared sobbing: One day when I'm as big as you I shall come back and beat you up. The rest of us held our breath and waited for the world to end. Nothing happened. No sooner said than done.

On another occasion the same boy locked himself in that same End Classroom and threatened to commit suicide. I remember he gave

me credit for talking him out of it through the closed door. I have no idea how I was supposed to have done this. John Hurt did not come through as unscathed as David Read and he needed the world's larger stage before he unmasked Cormack as a child abuser.

Sometimes the necessary therapy for childhood trauma has been through writing. Repair. For Aristotle, the great poetic dramas of Greece were therapeutic: there are Houses of Healing beside the amphitheatre at Epidavros. That was a matter of public health. But private writing such as is found on the smaller stage of poetry workshops can also be therapeutic.

When one of my students years later in an Adult Education workshop in Cambridge appeared a trifle stand-offish, unready to share, I asked her about this. She confessed this was true. As a child, she had experienced extreme torture and abuse from a Churchman, she explained, communication with the outside world forbidden – and the fear of recrimination remained if she spoke out.

In the event, the generosity of the poetry group, composed mostly of older women free to write, often enviably well, for the first time, was such that Alesha Racine wrote of the workshop course as a “victory”, the beginnings of a life without fear.

We, too, in the world of the prep school were entirely self-enclosed, taught to despise the pagan world that lay beyond the school bounds. Charles Atlas, yes, biceps like Popeye, but what is his soul like? Occasionally, sensitive, overwrought, tearful children would run away. They were always brought back. Was there anywhere to run to? We would have to wait until adulthood to encounter other worlds. Somehow our happy homes didn't enter into it.

Meanwhile we made do by building and breaking down each other's camps in the glorious grounds into which we were intermittently released; fought out with slender sticks the adventures of *The Three Musketeers* (organized by Oleg Volkonsky, invariably D'Artagnan as befitted the emigré Polish prince he, like Conrad's Roman, really

was); ran Hare and Hounds streaming over the Downs; watched as the grey squirrels decimated the reds; and put red ants in the black ant hills to see what would happen. *Lord of the Flies*.

It is hard to think of Cormack as an English teacher. Latin, yes, and French, learned on the end of Big Tickler. English, surely not? He did once promise to pay ten bob – a whole term's pocket money for the very wealthiest – to anyone who could recite Chesterton's *Lepanto* by heart but he never paid up when Paul Clairemonte – later in life spotted writing a letter on prison reform – did just that. *Dim drums throbbing in the courts of the sun...*

I remember other teachers reading us the stories and ballads we came to enjoy but the only distinctly literary remembrance I have of Cormack is writing on a report of mine that I should *scorn delights and live laborious days*. Milton. Less approachable these days than Shakespeare but at St Michael's we were prepared for the Fallen World quite as much as anything in *Paradise Lost*. *Holy Michael, Great Archangel, nerve thy arm and bare thy sword...*

Covering for someone at the Cambridge Tech (now Anglia Ruskin) one term, I taught *Samson Agonistes*, the exemplary dramatic poem Our Lady of Christ's intended it to be. Almost to the line, it follows the structure of the wonderfully poised *Oedipus at Colonus* written when Sophocles was 90 and produced in a court of law as evidence he still had his wits about him.

A protagonist and an encircling Chorus, what more does a play need for a structure? Perhaps an antagonist, perhaps not? The only other thing required, some marvellously meditative poetry. Only.

Noticing that the names of the protagonist and antagonist in Milton's play were Samson and Haraphat I scribbled a short updated version based on the contemporary figures of Sharon and Arafat, the balance of power between the nations in the perennially unholy Holy Land having shifted. My wife Rani used the similarly compelling story

and structure evident in *Antigone* to write a full-length variant set in Iraq during its recent wars, *The Great Wall of Adhamiya*.

The short Samson sketch was part of a miscellany on *The Middle East* I put out at the time of continuing opposition to the Iraq War following the vast demo in London - about which I had also written a verse. I sent a copy of "The March Against the War" to Simon.

The year before, I had sent Simon on spec to an ages-old address in Sussex a copy of a poetry book of mine, *Letter from Exile* and he had replied to say he admired and was warmed by the humanity with which the book nailed the pain, the cussedness of things, the succinct rhymes and patterns reinforcing the sense of contradiction, of sod's law. Any student would be forgiven, I hope, for quoting fullsome words of praise from a teacher who had inspired such poetry to begin with. That he addressed me as David mattered not at all.

Now when I wrote again, I received a reply from his son Tristram saying he too couldn't read my name. He was sorry to say Simon had died the previous year. Tristram, sorry too I had missed the memorial service, sent me a copy of the extensive programme put out to mark it. He had read the poem on the March I had sent his father: he had been at the March himself and at one point marvelled at the jam-packed streets from the top of a telephone booth.

Tristram, I was to discover, was author of a grand history of vegetarianism, *Bloodless Revolution*. It being a book by my old teacher's son, I was particularly happy to find myself in (what is always fun, anyway) a footnote. That was at a point when India came into the story. India was omnipresent too in a fine history written by Tristram's partner, Alice Albinia, *Empires of the Indus*, all the grander for being a stirring adventure story.

CHAPTER 2: THREE INDIAN TEACHERS

Chanchi

He had a shock of white hair, pock-marked moon face and a khadi kurta with a distinct white bow at the neck. He was a priest, scolding a prostitute. The next moment he had turned and was the prostitute, simpering in a high squeaky voice.

Chanchi's stage was the little room on the Maharaja Sayajirao University hostel roof he had been assigned by Vice-Chancellor Hansa Mehta in honour of his copious services to Gujarati literature, theatre in particular. On this occasion he was enacting the Sanskrit *bhan* of the priest and the prostitute, a pair who, as a result of one of life's customary mix-ups, exchange heads. But not bodies.

This performance was for the benefit of one of his students, a newcomer from Britain: me. Usually he would meet me separately, though sometimes together with Kelkar from Maharashtra and Kemmu from Kashmir. Sometimes we would walk about the campus, passing the bushes of bougainvillea and chameli, talking our way into familiarity.

The room was a retreat but also a hive. One day the Bhattas are about to arrive bringing with them an old *bhavai* folk play actor. But first Chanchi has picked up a book for me from the Forbes Gujarati Library while he was in Bombay. Suddenly he is reciting a vibrant "jazz" poem he has written about New York City.

Another day we have tickets to travel to Ahmedabad to see and meet the dancer, Mrinalini Sarabhai. Do I think the Romans could have built the amphitheatre at Nagarjunakonda? What a curse it is to enter any one of the new Tagore theatres and find actors using microphones. Can I imagine Bal Gandharva?

And then, by way of dismissal, it is time for Chanchi to prepare a simple lunch of *arbi ki sabzi* on a little primus stove.

Chanchi, like Hansaben, had played his part in India's freedom movement and had edited a couple of issues of Gandhi's paper *Navjivan* when its editor Mahadev Desai was unwell. But he was no pious Gandhi-cap.

His most famous play, *Aag-Gadi*, is an indictment of the British *Raj*, a moving account of the exploitation and destruction of a railway family on the occasion of the Viceroy's train passing through. But Chanchi was also heretical enough to suggest that at times the famed Non-Co-operation movement was pure theatre with *satyagrahis* falling down under police batons that had not touched them.

Whatever the truth of that, the idea appealed to his sense of theatre. Needing material about Bombay for his play *Hoholika* (I think it was) Chanchi had once joined a begging circle centred on the then Flora Fountain and was paid for his (no doubt) successful "take" in cinema tickets.

His was an independent turn of mind. Partner in an unsatisfactory arranged marriage, when his wife fell in love with someone else, he took himself off to Baroda to ask the Maharaja Sayajirao to grant her a divorce. This was allowed on condition he settled in Baroda. He did – and he didn't. One is a wanderer.

Thomas Mann once took the story of the Priest and the Prostitute for a novella. The Germans being great indologists, Chanchi, at a time when it was difficult to get permission and money to leave India, cleverly exploited the Cold War situation in Europe. He would tell the East Germans the West Germans had invited him to a theatre gathering and vice versa – and, hey presto, he received simultaneous invitations from both.

It was coming off one such visit I first met Chanchi – Chandravadan Chimanlal - C.C. we would come to call him – in London. I had been awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to India and was assigned to him as his student. He was in a grey city suit that looked as if it had been tailored in East Germany, he had a pair of thick glasses that

suggested errant sight or manufacture and his English was a trifle blurred. London, though it was mid-August, was grey and cold. He looked miscast.

Baroda was something again. It was my turn to shrink into diminuendo. I took ill after too many samosas in the bazaar. Being my guru in the full, if slightly playful, sense of the term, Chanchi arranged for me to go away to the princely estate of an artist friend in Kathiawar until my health was restored.

Once I had recovered, on my return among the *vad* and *peepal* trees of Baroda, Chanchi took the Brahminy bull by the horns, wishing to know whether I wanted to spend my time in India as a Sanskrit scholar or as a traveller in search of theatre. He was then overall editor of a projected *Bibliography of Stageable Plays in Indian Languages* and, appraised of my linguistic incompetence, sent me off round the country with the addresses of all his regional editors.

Not all Chanchi's editors were old troupers like himself but many were and those who weren't gave me entrée into the parallel and alternative worlds that theatre offers. In Calcutta, I interviewed Utpal Dutt for the BBC, his *Macbeth* adapted to the cause of a Communist peasantry; in Karnataka, I wrote for *The Times* of seeing the Gubbi Veerana Company mirror for the villagers their belief that Rama had passed through on his way to rescue his wife Sita in Lanka, its rocks his tears.

Chanchi was too much the travelling player to be in his room for more than a fortnight at a time and, not surprisingly, our paths would – often serendipitously – cross. Arrived in Madras (third class ticket from Baroda, rupees 34/-) I discovered I had the wrong address for him. Repaired to the local Gujarati Mandal, I was unerringly redirected me to the house of Chandralekha, the Bharat Natyam dancer who took her cues from classical Indian sculpture.

Chanchi was there and in his element. Chandra, also from Gujarat, her father a connoisseur of toy-making, was as independent-minded

as Chanchi, upsetting the purists with her ideas about choreographing Bharat Natyam for group dancing.

Like Chanchi, too, she had the arts in her blood. Her house was open to him and any he might vouch for, including (fortunately) his itinerant student. Having to move on, as ever, in diverse directions, Chanchi and I were sorry we would miss an upcoming public dance performance of Chandra's. She gave us a private recital instead.

Chanchi thought I ought to marry a Maharashtrian but, come midsummer, I married a Punjabi. He declared himself happy with this rearrangement once he had come to stay with us when we later found ourselves in England and Canada and been welcomed as part of the family. In time Rani would take up his profession as playwright and wander the world producing her plays.

Chanchi's wanderlust stemmed from his days growing up on the pioneer Bombay, Baroda & Central Indian Railway, riding from one station to the next – and then back - in the cabs of engines. He never lost his childhood love for – and extensive knowledge of - the railways. Long before the Internet, he made it his business to know the times of rail journeys the world over.

One day, in the small Canadian village where we were later living, we received a letter to say he would be arriving on one of the (infrequent) trains due at such and such a time on a certain day. As I walked down to the little maroon-painted wooden station to meet him, there was Chanchi strolling up the dirt road.

A couple of evenings later, Chanchi was sitting in our white wooden cottage discussing Sanskrit chants with another visitor, poet Allen Ginsberg, who sang them to the accompaniment of his finger cymbals. The students gathered there were as wide-eyed as I was when I first walked with Chanchi among the chameli flowers in Baroda.

And then, Chanchi was gone, catching one of his beloved trains to wherever else up the line there was a theatre and a friend and a little dish of vegetables.

What strange star led you to London where I met you, face eclipsed... Half the globe and a whole world away I watched you grow/ the cotton falling off you in folds, white and finely-spun as the chameli flowers past which we walked...

Mallik

Arrival at Sagar by the Bina to Katni Local, invariably delayed, might come at any hour after midnight and before daybreak.

When family concerns prevented my friend Mallik from hanging round all night at the station, the assigned tonga, one of many in the station forecourt, would zig-zag very slowly through the deserted streets of the town and begin the long ascent to the university quarters on the hilltop plateau. The night air was cool, why hurry?

The tonga journey matched that of the train with frequent stops for the horse, far better companion than I for the tongawallah. He talked to it continually. Just when one had sleepily settled for any sort of arrival before dawn, the cluster of little boxed residences came in sight.

Since they were indistinguishable from one another even in daylight, Mallik would be dancing around in the darkness with a flashlight to act as hospitable guide. An outside light on his bungalow was the only mundane riposte to all the stars in the sky.

Sagar is dead in the centre of India. As its name suggests, it has a lake – filled by a dark and deep origin legend - and this is overlooked by the hill that the tonga climbed as if it were Himalayan. By rights Sagar ought to be the capital of India. Instead, it seems all its livelier

inhabitants have fled north, south, east and west to establish capitals at the cardinal points of the compass.

The hill overlooking Sagar, its top sliced off as if some mythological demon had once come marauding through these parts, was used as a base for the Indian Army at the time Mallik was taking his degrees in Madras.

Perhaps it was destined that Mallik's name, diminutive of Mallikarjunan, should sound more northern than southern. When, in the general push and shove that accompanied Independence, the Sagar army base was turned over into a mofussil affiliate university, Mallik was driven north, perhaps by the anti-Brahmin stirs in South India. There he found himself part of a fifth column superintending the diffusion of the former King-Emperor's English, scheduled to be phased out as India's link language by 1965.

Mallik once described his job at Sagar to me as "rural uplift". The lovely little squared-off compounds that provided family accommodation on the hill always did have a village feeling about them and, as the years went by, began to acquire cows, chickens and other *gramdan* accoutrements. *Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.*

I cannot be sure of the exact moment I first met Mallik. It would have been in International House, a residence for foreign students on the University of Chicago Midway, pastoral myth marooned, segregated some might say, amid an urban sprawl that looked as if it had migrated from the Deep South.

When I first went for a walk in the park to get down to the lake, a police car emerged from the bushes and, having ascertained I was taking a walk in the park, warned me never to do so.

It was the Fall of 1960 and that term would see John Kennedy narrowly elected President of the U.S.A. thanks largely to ghost voters from the old Hyde Park district just north of us, a slum

flattened in an urban renewal programme and so in the gift of Mayor Daley.

Mallik and I were both studying for a Master's in English Literature, myself admitted on a Fellowship for prospective teachers for which it turned out belatedly I was not eligible but, what the hell, was waved through anyway. On equally questionable grounds, I had earlier been admitted by U.S. Immigration at Weslaco, Texas, and would be so again much later at Detroit. God bless that America.

Unfortunately, the approach to literature at U.C. was as depressing as the urban sprawl that contained us. Intended to be rigorous, it caused me to think of Allen Ginsberg's contemporary line that college professors would not know poetry if it came up and buggered them. Shakespeare scholar Willard Farnham, guesting from California, was an honoured exception.

In fact, in spite of the stony silence that followed my snigger when Morton Darwen Zabel, the acclaimed "expert" on Conrad, peering like Owl Eyes in *The Great Gatsby*, asked our small seminar how many miles off land the *Patna*, Lord Jim's fatefully abandoned ship, sank, these professors probably did have the love of literature their students had. Zabel wrote well on Conrad.

No doubt the professors thought they had to be professional and find a way to demonstrate their subject was scientific: all a bit sad. Mallik was quite properly detached about these matters. Later, he even managed to obtain a rare interview with mandarin of mandarins Elder Olson, doyen of the New Criticism, a figure so invisible to the rest of us we had no means of knowing whether he was still alive.

Did I meet Mallik first at the table in the cafeteria of International House to which students from cricketing nations naturally gravitated or in the practices the even more widely far-flung House soccer team had down on Stagg Field, heir to the site of the running of the first nuclear chain reaction?

Mallik was an unforgettable figure. Lean and made to look even leaner in a loose-fitting oversize Indian Army coat someone in Sagar had given him on hearing he was bound for a winter in the Windy City, he resembled nothing so much as the images of starving Indians that in those days seemed to be a staple of Western newspapers.

In truth, Mallik did come close to starving that winter in Chicago, Indian food in the West then being confined to Irish stew seasoned with “curry powder” and served with Uncle Ben’s (short-grain) rice. Poor Mallik was even denied the consolation of his favoured panwallah on the corner.

When I moved into an apartment with some Americans, Mallik opting to stay in the utilitarian confines of International House, we had him over several times and served him Indian food according to the above recipe. In his polite way, he expressed great appreciation for our efforts, curried on a rusty gas cooker I was later to blow myself up on during a White Sox game.

As for the Master’s programme, Mallik struggled with the mandatory foreign language paper in French as I struggled with the mandatory Anglo-Saxon. If a student did nothing but study, they might hope to pass their (coursework) A.M. in three of U.C.’s four annual quarters. Most students opted to spread it across the year.

We did all we could to help our emaciated Indian friend who looked colder and colder and thinner and thinner as the winter wore on. I should have observed him more carefully and taken a hint from his performances on the soccer field.

Typically self-effacing, Mallik would stick out an angular leg apologetically to deprive an opponent of the ball and just as deftly pass it on to a well-placed team-mate. He invariably had the situation sussed (while I blundered about to no good effect, once to the fury of our Israeli captain giving away a penalty).

We bonded especially closely the day the wind off the lake was so bitter our African team-mates didn't show up.

The end of the Chicago chapter of the story can be quickly told. While the rest of us (apart from, now I think of it, one bright young woman named, yes, Renée Capellini) were relieved enough to get the requisite passing B grades within the three quarter terms, Mallik surprised everybody by obtaining straight As.

Congratulated in no uncertain terms on this achievement, he demurred. "I am a good deal older than all of you", he replied modestly, "I was awarded my M.A. at Madras Christian College in 1945. I feared only to disgrace that".

Mallik was a first-rate scholar and could have held his own anywhere in the world were such competitiveness a part of his nature. He was especially fond of T.S Eliot's work and his long-delayed thesis grew out of his imaginative idea that Eliot's five dramas could beneficially be read as the five acts of a single play.

One small reason, perhaps, why he valued our continuing contact was that I could appreciate this work of his, although Eliot never meant as much to me as Yeats and, unfairly, I would recall poet Irving Layton's line that Eliot was without marrow juices, a single hair from the beard of Dostoievsky.

In London a couple of years later as a Diary journalist I could do little for Mallik's researches beyond telling him of how when I went to interview Christopher Fry, the other verse dramatist whose work he valued, in London's "Little Venice", he had amended a notice on his gate to read: *Beware of the Doge*.

Gossip – but I did also report on Fry's observations on verse drama and I managed to obtain from one of my contacts, Miron Grindea, the editor of *Adam*, a rare copy of his special issue on Eliot (whose funeral in Westminster Abbey I attended and reported on). Sadly,

the postal services never managed to get the copy of *Adam* to the hilltop bungalow in Sagar. In what Dead Letter Office in central India, I wonder, did it end up being eaten – perhaps to their enlightenment – by white ants?

Mallik was not the only scholar on site, rural as it was. His Head of Department was fellow Southerner Dr S.R. Swaminathan, whose love of Keats and Shelley was such that, instead of sitting at a Government-issue desk and conducting Department business, he perched himself like a sannyasi on top of a veritable Meru of books that slid away on all sides of him. Mallik, lacking Swaminathan's opportunity to research for a D. Litt. at Oxford, ran the Department for him.

Perched on the actual hilltop at Sagar was also Dr West. Unlike his fellows in the English Department, he did not require a research library, only Bhasmasura's lumpy hills. West, a geologist, was the world's leading authority on central Indian hills. On the walls of his house were pictures of his old school and mine, King's Canterbury.

Swaminathan was not the first person I had met whose idea of the literary life was to sit in a room devoid of everything but books. A year earlier, as a journalist in London, I had been impressed when interviewing playwright John Antrobus to find his bedsit was an empty room. For him, of course, it was an open stage.

This reference to London deserves a Cross Note to another literary encounter I had that caused me to reconsider my career as a Fleet Street journalist and perhaps played a part in determining I land up instead in India as a scholar-gypsy. This was an interview I had with George Painter.

The tip-off had come from Miron Grindea, very much a literary journalist of the old school who had fled Paris just before Hitler marched in. Ringing up Eliot, he'd say Willie had suggested it.

Ringling up Yeats, he'd say Tom had suggested it. All the Grub Street tricks were at the disposal of some original literary scoops – as old issues of *Adam* can attest. Even Miron's chosen address spoke volumes: Emperor's Gate.

Miron tipped me off that Painter had written the sort of biography of Proust scholars call definitive (though nothing ever is). The gossip column angle, silly as it was, was that the biography was slated for immediate translation into every major European language bar French. *D'accord*.

Painter was Keeper of Incunabula at the old British Library and I rang him to fix an interview. He agreed to look in his diary for a convenient date some weeks ahead. What did I suggest? I suggested that I take him out for a coffee at 11 o'clock in 15 minutes' time.

Discombobulated, Painter came shuffling out from below the figure of the Easter Island moai. I bought the coffee and listened with open mouth as he told me the story of the 14 years it had taken him to write the biography, the intellectual strain and the strain put on his friends and family. What it takes.

Suddenly Painter realised his Incunabula were missing him: he had to go back. Would I be kind enough to send him a copy of the interview? This request brought me down to earth. As many copies as you like, I said, but please understand these are a few trivial paragraphs that have no value other than as a bit of publicity for your new book.

And when will the interview be published? Oh, I said, I will phone it in right now. You see that news-stand across the street? By the time you have your lunch, it will be in the paper selling there.

George Painter and I stood and looked at each other across a gulf as wide as that known to Dives and Lazarus.

Next door to us at Sagar was Mallik's brother Śivaraman and his wife. Śivaraman must have been a pretty good physicist since it was extremely difficult to leave India (given the statutory limit of £9 from the Reserve Bank) to study at Hull. His son Satya, Mallik's true heir as he later described himself to be, turned up unexpectedly in our Cambridge kitchen some years ago with an amusing film in which microbes sock it to verminous human beings. Later we heard from him in Ecuador where a grand dance-drama of his celebrating a sustainable planet had been staged.

I can't speak for the scholarly pursuits of other teachers on the hilltop: bespectacled Moorthy, dashing Mukherjee or greying Roy in the bungalow just across from us. I never heard Roy speak about his subject, Economics, but I see him now outside his house smoking a hookah and telling wry stories about how he had resisted, cheeked and done God knows what to the British to make them quit India – before eluding them by swimming across the Ganga Mai at Patna. The rural economy had reclaimed Roy.

Mallik not only ran the English Department: at times he seemed to run the campus. There was repeated trouble between the South Indian boys and locals in the hostels and Mallik was the only person trusted by all sides to sort it out fairly.

He organized much of the extracurricular sport – well, the cricket anyway and the football where he used to dispossess me as adeptly as he had our opponents in Chicago – and, when transport was needed, he alone could persuade Dr West to lend his Landrover, the one four-wheeler on campus.

We walked everywhere, passing and repassing the panwallah in his little raised box on the corner. One day we walked out with a young man named Vijay Chauhan looking to find just the right location for an amphitheatre. The theatre company was to be called *Prayog* – a wild dream but, to my astonishment, I learned years afterwards that Vijay had realised that wild dream before, sadly, dying at an untimely young age.

Mallik himself had not yet acquired the scooter that marked his absorption into the consumer society. I feel guilty now I may have corrupted him by bringing the first “luxury” decoration into the house: a tapestry of a Tibetan Khampa dancer from Kalimpong.

Once inside Mallik’s bungalow campus life did not intrude (though it often knocked at the door) and Mallik and Lakshmi settled down to their very simple South Indian life style.

A floor, a mat, a *ghara* of cold water, a corner for puja: what more is needed? Letters would arrive daily bringing news of the outside world, among them letters from students giving their examination number and a promise of reward if they were passed. It was only fair, Mallik would observe, not to look at the number lest he failed them at that point.

Actually, no one ever did more for his students. Too much, perhaps. Required by statute to teach in English, the rudiments of which few of his local students knew, Mallik, Tamil his own native language, would frequently follow his classes with a brief Hindi version in the corridor outside. Rural uplift, yes, but also exemplary teaching: following the dharma without attachment to the consequences. *Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.*

What did intrude into the house in my time there was me. My arrival and extended stays must have posed a multitude of problems of which I remained blissfully – no, stupidly – unaware. I seemed to have been there for all the seasons of the academic year, 1963-4 – but could not have been since I also travelled the length and breadth of India – from Darjeeling to Ernakulam.

I suppose I must always have made my way via the country’s putative capital in central India. It was a home from home for me after that prolonged bout of dysentery in Baroda and I recovered my health and spirits in a home where I was well looked after and wrote bad poetry.

I remember especially the hot winds against which we had to close the shutters quite early in the day and that first smell of the coming rains far away: *rooh e zameen* (Hindustani pertaining). The particular casements in question faced west above my bed and that reminds me that the room given over to me was the main living room of the house.

The initial problem it was assumed my presence would cause was dispelled when it became evident I was in no way inconvenienced by the simplicity of the house, least of all the toilet. I had been living, and had fallen ill, in a rather filthy college hostel, customarily unrelieved by running water. A clean, swept house was a luxury.

My presence, apart from interrupting the even tenor of family life, must have proved rather more problematic when Mallik got the (usual last minute) call to go off to Bilaspur or Jabalpur as an external examiner or some such.

As I came to learn later, questions were asked on the hilltop (beyond the immediate circle) about the propriety of Mallik leaving his family in the house with an itinerant (maybe even, who knows, irascible) foreigner inside.

I am glad to be able to say that the only black mark against the foreigner was that by day he turned the living room into a cricket pitch with 4-year-old Raju for long hours defending a doorpost as wicket. Fortunately, the simplicity of the furnishings acted in favour of cricket and not even the clay water-jug, appropriately enough fielding at gully, got broken.

Lakshmi, shy of her English if not of its native speaker, appeared happy with this arrangement since it gave her freedom to concentrate on her other son, a tiny soul born the very day I arrived in India whom she carried naturally about on her hip when he was not at her breast. This allowed her to make the delicious tomato chutneys that I try to emulate to this day.

Unfortunately, there was one downside to the cricket. Raju did not like being “out” and his mood would suddenly change and he would throw the bat down or even away, common enough in most, if not all, small boys.

Mallik’s conduct was exemplary, he expected the same of his elder son and was perhaps rather stricter and less indulgent than either Lakshmi or I were with Raju’s tantrums. It was this perhaps that opened up some unfortunate gap between them that so often bedevils father-son relationships. *Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.*

Birjé

A bearded policemen was slouched in one corner of the railway compartment dozing, his badge of office, a *lathi*, between his legs. He was undisturbed by our entrance.

That the carriage had seen better days was evident from the rack in front of a ceiling fan designed to hold a block of ice. Perhaps the carriage had been first class and on the road to Mhow from Ajmir in the Queen-Empress’s day: now downgraded to the Ujjain to Dewas branch line.

J.D. Birje-Patil (*nom-de-plume* Jaysinh Birjé) was taking me to see the little princely state of Dewas that had charmed and alarmed Morgan Forster when he made his passage to India. We were to stay with his aunts.

I first met Birjé when, as a student arrived at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda to study Indian theatre with Chanchi, I paid a visit to the English Department.

Behind one of the swing saloon doors in the low-slung building sat the smiling figure of a man whose dress and accent both bespoke Oxford. It was not so but that, or something like, was soon to follow.

For now Birjé was directing his students in a production of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* with the blessing of his Head of Department, another Shakespearewallah, Professor Kantak. Titania's fairyland Indian boy returning (though scholars dispute it) home.

Birjé's eventual visit to England – to study for a Ph.D in theatre production under Hugh Hunt at Manchester University - also involved a railway carriage. Birjé was travelling by ship to Naples – though there was no Duke there any more – and thence overland by train. My wife Rani and I were visiting Belgium at the time but we hoped – in the vague way the young and just married do - that we might catch Birjé – if not quite under Shakespeare's Cliff – in Dover.

Unfortunately, our ferry from Ostend was re-routed into Folkestone. Our vagueness prevailed and, before boarding our local train to the Kentish village where my mother lived, we ran a check on the adjoining boat train bound for Victoria. In the corner of one compartment, unbelievably, we found Birjé. If we were astonished, Birjé was not. He was expecting us.

A day or two later, bound for Manchester with a huge wedge of my grandmother Nanna Ling's fruit cake that he never forgot, Birjé had his first encounters with a culture that had long been part of his being.

Once he was on the spot, academic Frank Kermode presented himself as a more appropriate supervisor for his dissertation topic than the theatrical Hugh Hunt – something on the Jacobean playwrights, I think. The University bureaucracy informed Kermode that the switch could not be made. Kermode informed the bureaucracy that it already had been.

Finding digs was something again. *Blacks and Irish need not apply*, Mancunian equivalent of Concession Shanghai's *Dogs and Chinese not admitted*. Birjé trudged up one front path, knocked at the door

and applied to the man who opened it for the advertised room. The man made it clear he was not welcome.

Well, if you feel like that, old chap, said Birjé turning to go. Hello, wait a minute... When Dr Birje-Patil left to return to India three years later – and strenuous efforts were made to dissuade him from ever leaving – he was told the home would always be there for a prodigal – and evidently surrogate – son.

Birjé's return to India also involved a railway compartment. Together with a Pakistani and an Englishman, he teamed up to make the overland journey to the Subcontinent – mostly by train but finally by ship from Basra.

All went well until the trio crossed out of Israel into Syria. At the first station inside Syria they were hauled out of their compartment and taken to a dark room in the station. Here they were briefly interrogated as far as pidgin English permitted and, under protest as their train went on to Aleppo without them, locked in.

If the night had been uncomfortable, the dawn was more so. They were marched across the sand to an army barracks where they were rigorously interrogated by an urbane officer fluent in English. The problem was they had visited Israel. Who was to say they were not Israeli spies?

A Muslim from Pakistan, you claim? Yet, all the time you have been observed, you have never once said your prayers. And you, from India you say, so you will know your Raj Kapoor films, their songs full of the loneliness of the heart, the resilience of the poor?

The officer made reference to a particular film, perhaps, savouring the appropriateness of the title, *Awara* (The Vagabond), though possibly another film, equally pertinent for its allusion to the Indian penal code, *Shri 420*. Would Birjé care to say something about its plot?

It may be evident by now that Birjé, though a Maratha aristocrat claiming descent from the Sun and Moon, was part of a dissident minority of the Confederacy that had (more or less) thrown in their lot with the British by serving the Maharajas of Baroda. Shakespeare, yes. Prithvi Raj, a Shakespearewallah, maybe. Raj Kapoor, no.

Haply, one evening, from the same English Department office where I first encountered him, Birjé, protesting like Cinna the Poet, had been dragged off by a group of colleagues to see a Raj Kapoor film, whether *Awara* or *Shri 420*. That fortuitous event one day ensured he and his two fellow travellers did not finish up in the lone and level sands of Syria.

To return to the Dewas Local, not much further along the line than where we left it. The Ujjain that had known Kalidasa, India's Shakespeare, was reluctant to let us go.

Birjé was preparing me for our stay in Dewas with his aunts when the slouched policeman woke up suddenly and, out of curiosity, not officiousness, enquired as to our business. Told of our interest in literature, he began to recite *ślokas* of Hindi poetry. And continued to do so all the way to Dewas.

No-one remained in the tiny princely state of Dewas – once the old Dewan died - who could remember Morgan Forster. The Janmashtami festival celebrating the birth of Krishna that illuminates his novel still goes on during the Rains under the gaze of the Devi on her Hill.

For the rest of the year Krishna is dispersed into the thousands of little puja rooms set aside for him such as that to which we were admitted in the tumbledown wooden house belonging to Birjé's aunts.

The aunts had a story of their own. One of the aunts, having failed to have a child by the Maratha noble she married, took it upon herself to find a second wife for her husband. The second wife, no doubt like any further wife that might have been found, failed to give him a child.

Not so long after, the noble died and the two widows settled down together, living happily ever after - as we found them - in their radiant devotion to Krishna - *Infinite Love taking on his form to save the world.*

CHAPTER 3: TEACHING AT UNI

Saint John

When I was a sixth former, my aunt Vickie, my father's sister, gave me a book. Since she had fallen out with my mother, out of loyalty I dismissively consigned the book to the high shelf. Only years later did I take it down, and probably only then for the very bad reason it was being adapted for television. *Brideshead Revisited*.

If I am not wrong, my aunt would have savoured the account of the glossy socialite world of England between the Wars that Waugh captures so disarmingly. But Waugh glosses his own glossiness. He has the “degenerate old dago”, Anthony Blanche, drag artist Charles Ryder away from the gallery where his tropical canvasses are being declared virile and passionate. Down in the subterranean depths of a louche little gay bar, he denounces them as being full of c-creamy English ch-charm, playing t-tigers. Blighty's blight.

It was John Grube's lot that he wished to be both Anthony Blanche and Charles Ryder. Alternately. Simultaneously. Grube (pronounced as if with a final r) was one of the three Johns who made up the English Department a year after the inception of the new branch of the University of New Brunswick in the port city of Saint John, Canada.

No sooner did Grube establish an identity for himself than he had to get round the other side of it. No sooner patrician than prole – no sooner outsider than insider. It was hard to keep up with him but even if you didn't want to, he would suddenly be on your doorstep and, by turns amusing and boring, outstay his welcome.

Grube, a gay man in times when there was no social gaiety in it outside the bathhouse, attributed his personality to his birth. His gay mother, as he termed her, had been a teacher at Dartington, the radically progressive art school in Devon. To all appearances, John was the son of a father who was not only a most distinguished

Classical scholar, his book on Plato never out of print in his lifetime, but had also led the old socialist CCF party in Ontario.

His real or biological father, John told us, was an equally distinguished Hungarian physicist, Dienes Pál, who had conceived of n -dimensional curved space. As if two intellectual fathers were not enough, John chose a third one he had encountered in his native Toronto, Marshall McLuhan, very much the media guru of the 'Sixties, radical and in academic circles controversial.

John came into Saint John as a new branch of the provincial university was being established there in the 1960s. Some in the city felt this was far too long overdue. In the provincial capital, Fredericton, some felt it should never be due.

The Founding Fathers, in the aftermath to the American War of Independence, were responsible for this situation. Nova Scotia, the so-called 14th American colony (though there were others), stayed loyal to the Crown. As the counter-revolutionaries and their camp followers poured north, another province, New Brunswick, was carved out of the Nova Scotian hinterland.

The new province's port city, Saint John, was considered so grubbily commercial by the gentry that they removed the capital to greener pastures further up the Saint John river – well beyond McCoy's Mistake, on the real McCoy, the Main John, - apportioning to it, in addition to the legislature, a cathedral and a university.

This was not surprising with characters such as David Fanning fronting up among the flood of immigrants in the port city. Fanning is the only member of a British legislature ever to be condemned to death for attempted rape. His alleged victim was a lady known in official documents as Sally London, better known on the streets of Saint John as London Sall.

Fanning's appeal to the Mother of Parliaments was lodged on the grounds that the charge against him was a put-up job since whatever

he attempted he always achieved. He had a case. Captured 14 times during the War of Independence, Fanning had escaped 14 times.

In Saint John, challenged to a fight by a miller he had insulted, Fanning agreed to let his opponent choose the weapons if he could choose the venue. When the miller decided to take advantage of his huge strength by having a fist fight, Fanning elected to meet him on the ice of the Saint John River. The fight went in Fanning's favour. So did the appeal.

Now Saint John was to have the university denied to it for 200 years, John Grube made it his business to determine what kind it was to be. The other John, MacKeen, a patrician Nova Scotian who had taught at a school in Hampshire, loved Hardy and was building himself a log house on the Arcadian Kingston Peninsula, and I, graduate of the established provincial university and with a young family, were dragged along in his wake.

Grube wanted to take on the parent English Department on its own terms and have our students write the best essays on Pope as a mock heroic poet – they don't realise *The Rape of the Lock* is really an epyllion, he would sneer – and Wordsworth as the Poet of Nature – why don't they leave the description of daffodils to sister Dorothy?

Counter to that ambition of outflanking the parent university, Grube had a vision of the new university as a downtown college serving not the children of the polite bourgeoisie from the removed suburban housing "parks" but those of the working class in the city's derelict South End.

Many of these residents were descendants of those Irish families who, escaping from the Famine, had managed to evade a grave on quarantine Partridge Island. McHugh. Riordan. McCluskey. And French also: our student Louis Cormier, a promising poet, published in the samizdat *Intercourse* rather than the official student *Intervales*.

In the event, our students did match their peers academically. Two young women from the Saint John branch came first and second in the university's end-of-year exams on the Romantics. Take your bow Dina Coates, poet to be as Dina Cox, and Bonnie Ellis.

I had to go up to the parent campus at Fredericton to take part in the university-wide marking of exams and the Moderator, David Galloway, kindly offered to put me up. David was a Shakespeare scholar and his wife Pat recounted how during the Cuban Missile crisis, the tic in his eye twitching furiously as the nuclear clock ticked down to Armageddon, he refused sandbags in favour of sitting in his armchair re-reading *King Lear*.

The properly pastoral provincial capital had been denominated the Poets Corner of Canada in commemoration of three post-Victorian poets including the unbelievably named Bliss Carman. It was not allowed to rest smugly on its laurels.

After the War, Fred Cogswell emerged from a rural community higher up the Saint John River – *Not soft the soil where we took root together, it bred not giants but the stunted strong* – to chastise the provincial capital for its provincial racial prejudice. In a short *Ode to Fredericton*, following an incident in a barber's shop, he listed all the iconic whitenesses, including the pitying snow, that belonged to a city of cold, white Christians, *so white [they] would not cut a black man's hair*.

Eyes glinting, Fred – he would talk pipe in mouth, hence Fwed – had served in the War and so had the benefit of a vet's education. He studied first at UNB under unassuming poet Alfie Bailey, who taught history in the library basement on the site of his old family orchard and started the poetry magazine *Fiddlehead* Fred would inherit.

It was probably while working on a doctorate at Edinburgh that Fred first came across and later did a fine translation of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, a more distinct and sympathetic

telling of Cressida's love story I reckon than either Chaucer or Shakespeare managed.

As in other marginalized cultures where words have to make do for deeds, New Brunswick gave rise to many good poets, so solitary that, although they were all known to Fred as the editor of *Fiddlehead*, they were not necessarily known to each other.

In Saint John we made a point of bringing them in to read to our students: the city's Kay Smith, who had written her own lyrical *Footnotes to the Lord's Prayer*; Biddy Brewster, who like Fred had recorded in verse the life of a small rural town; and, along with visitors such as Milton Acorn and Al Purdy Fred had published, Fred himself, who had long made a weekly trip to teach night school in the city.

We did not stop at poets. Following Grube's conception of the college as a downtown centre, we brought figures from city life into the one old building that then served as campus. Dapper Joe Drummond spoke to his thesis that East of Québec was Alabama and tough union organizer Fred Hodges – I am amazed the names come back – told of life working on the docks.

Marxist Barry Lord showed slides of the neglected working class paintings he was then digging out of the basement of the provincial museum. Did we, by way of contrast, invite in, as we should have done, Ernie Whitebone, the father of one of Grube's bemused students, old Rightist war-horse and hobby-horse letter-writer to the local paper?

One person who shied away from meeting our students was writer Alden Nowlan, then Night Editor of the local paper, the *Telegraph-Journal*. Alden had been removed from formal education after grade 5 to work in a timber mill. Side-stepping the mistaken assumption he had completed high school, Alden broke into journalism on the path to realising his ambition of being a poet.

One poem Alden owed to his career in journalism is *The Night Editor's Poem*, a fine tribute to Martin Luther King. It catches perfectly the disjunct between the high-pressure professionalism required to set up a news story in print in time and the subject of the story itself. It is only at the end, the paper gone to the press, that the exhausted night editor, grabbing a quick bite in an all-night diner, has time to understand *that Martin Luther King is dead and that I care*.

We are fortunate to have this poem since, as other poems ghoulishly record, Alden was on the point of dying of cancer in the local hospital when we arrived in the city. When I went to see him there, he had been advised that if he lived two more days, he could expect four and so on. Double or quits.

As a student, I had read and liked a slim volume of Alden's verse Fred had published, *The Rose and the Puritan*. What I didn't then know – and I think Alden didn't remember – was that, six years earlier in a review he had written in *The Fiddlehead* of the UNB student magazine *Intervales*, he had singled out a poem of mine as best meeting Scott Fitzgerald's demand that a writer must give of themselves.

Knowing the wide reading Alden had done in a public library to educate himself secretly – who else, for God's sake, has read the weighty collected Herbert Spencer? – I referred to the then Head of the UNB English Department in telling him he could out-Pacey Pacey. Probably I never said a thing to him he valued more and several years later he took up the offer Cogswell urged Pacey to make him of being Writer-in-Residence.

For the time being, though reprieved from hospital, Alden could not escape journalism to write poetry full-time. A one-finger typist, he asked me, a two-finger typist, to type up his application for a Guggenheim grant. Three fingers must have been lucky: he got the grant.

One full-page story Alden wrote for the newspaper covered a visit by Allen Ginsberg I had arranged. As a struggling local poet, Alden was not altogether happy with the invitation to Ginsberg. His verse is flaccid, he objected, he's as sentimental as Longfellow. I reminded him I had repeatedly urged him to read his own poetry to our students. The trouble was, unschooled, he had been shy of entering a university.

Allen Ginsberg I had first encountered in another port city, Liverpool. As a journalist on the *Evening Standard's* "Londoner's Diary", I had been sent on an extramural trip to Liverpool to cover Ginsberg's visit to the home of the Beatles.

This visit to Liverpool provided the occasion for a group of local poets to emerge from their dingy cavern on Canning Street where they ran a smudgy little magazine called *Underdog* and add a Liverpoolian dimension to the Beats. They included surrealist artist Adrian Henry, Brian Patten, the clerical Roger McGough and Heather Holden.

The men came into prominence thereafter as the Merseyside Poets but whatever happened to Heather? Women poets rarely got a look-in in those days, although Carol Ann Duffy, who would become the first woman Poet Laureate, must have been somewhere in the Merseyside offing.

Having proclaimed Liverpool to be the centre of cosmic consciousness - and Liverpool having decided Ginsberg was really gear - Allen went on to Newcastle to say the same thing there, although it was left to a poet of a quite different ilk, Tony Harrison, to declare that Newcastle was Peru.

Ginsberg was in England after being crowned King of the May in Communist Prague. His happy knack was to create or validate a joyous counter-culture wherever he went. Just the person we needed in slumbering Saint John.

Presiding over the new branch of the university initially was a high school principal, Forbes Elliot, who, though game, was left rather at sea by some of Grube's high-falutin' high table visions. As former principal of the local academic high school, he had excellent contacts among the leading citizens.

The day before Ginsberg's scheduled arrival, Elliot was tipped off that the Immigration authorities at the airport were going to refuse entry to the dissolute American poet. We should cancel hotel and hall bookings immediately.

King's County had a Progressive Conservative M.P. named Gordon Fairweather. A fair weather conservative, but a foul weather progressive. Without delay I telephoned him. He came off the curling rink and promised to have a telegram in my hands from the Minister of Immigration within the hour. All I had to do was swear – so help me God - that while he was our guest, I would ensure Allen did not do drugs or corrupt the youth.

My old Indian teacher and dramatist, Chanchi Mehta, was then visiting us and, together with Alden in his capacity as journalist, we met Allen outside his hotel in the morning. He had found a Gideon Bible in his room and, on re-reading *Ecclesiastes*, had been moved to say it was one, long, bloody, bitter poem. *I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.*

Alden could have told him, though he didn't, that as a youth he had believed it was his mission on Earth to add books to the Bible.

We were all standing in the hill-top Loyalist Graveyard on which the town is centred. A residual covering of snow packed into ice led Ginsberg to hazard what he thought might be a haiku: *Many drunks have slipped on this snow and bloodied their heads on these stones.* When Alden told his story in the newspaper, he used another of Allen's quips as a headline: **TRUTH IS A FIVE-LETTER WORD.** Writing this memoir, I found I had mis-remembered it as: **LOVE IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD.**

After the gathering in the graveyard I walked Allen shambling down the hill to the waterfront past the City Market with its iconic flower-seller at the gate. Lamb the butcher. Pipes the organist. The law firm: McKelvey, Macaulay, Makem and, yes, Fairweather. The names required no Dickens to make them up.

Eventually we reached the grimy old New Brunswick Museum. Ginsberg was delighted by a notice advertising an exhibition: *Secrets of the Deep - Upstairs*. He was even more delighted by the reception he received upstairs from the Archivist, Mrs Robinson. Oh, she said on being introduced to him, Aren't you the son of Louis Ginsberg? He's my favourite poet.

Having walked right across the decaying city, Ginsberg claimed that had he been born in it he would never have left. That was true of so many of its natives and when Ginsberg read his clarion call *Howl* later that evening to a hall full to overflowing it flushed out of the woodwork an assortment of local eccentrics few of us had imagined existed. *I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed...*

Grube claimed in his gruberisque way that Ginsberg should have been a cantor in the Catskills. Possibly also in the Himalayas? Crowded into our cottage in Rothesay after the reading, our students listened wide-eyed as Allen and Chanchi discussed – to the accompaniment of finger-cymbals - Indian and Tibetan chants.

It was Allen's turn to pause and look wide-eyed when our baby daughter, in her cot upstairs, was awakened by all the sound: Why, he asked, is the child crying?

Mention of the New Brunswick Museum triggers a Cross Note. My research in the New Brunswick Museum, like my job at UNBSJ, followed upon an undergraduate degree at UNB in Fredericton. I shall pass over those misspent years. I was one of Fred Cogswell's indulged students and Honours in English were assured after Simon

Stuart's teaching at King's. I wasn't registered for Honours in History. But...

As an undergraduate at UNB I spent or misspent most of my time in extracurricular activities, perhaps working most energetically, apart from playing Soccer, on the student paper and in the Drama Society. These interfered substantially with a proper academic career.

Even subjects and teachers I embraced enthusiastically fell foul of my errant behaviour. One week I resolved to follow Fred Cogswell's Canadian Poetry class religiously from then on and even turn up for it early. Just before the hour, my reformation intended to glitter o'er the fault, I made my way to the appointed classroom.

The room in the old Arts building was eccentrically designed so that you had to pass the lecturer to get to the rows of desks. I was surprised to find others even more eager than I and the class already begun. I nodded to the lecturer as I passed him. He nodded genially back. Quickly I found a place for myself and took out my pen to write. At which point Fred said: Now Dwew has awwived we can concude this class.

MacNutt dealt with my devotion to extracurricular activities slightly differently. Though also with humour. Why do members of the Drama Society, humph hm, bother to register for my course, humph, hm? Thus Stewart MacNutt who, together with Alfie Bailey, distinguished historian and founding editor of *The Fiddlehead*, had called into question the received (Upper Canadian) reading of by-passed Maritime history.

On this occasion, however, MacNutt was teaching a course in Medieval History: miss a week, miss a century. The putative English Teacher is likely to have an interest in both Drama and History but in this case the productions of a contemporary Drama Society were pre-empting the divagations of medieval History.

A term essay of mine comparing Michelet's concept of cathedrals as a sigh with Sacheverell Sitwell's image of them as a steam engine brought me a suspended sentence. MacNutt gave me the benefit of a very grave doubt. The jury was out and all would rest on the final exam. Dilettantism had no place there. There were to be six sections covering a thousand years of history, an alternate question in each section.

I repaired to the trailer in the woodlot belonging to Christie Stockdale. Christie was a mature student, a poet (of the mischievously wicked sort). His father, Old Tom, had worked one of the province's many marginally productive farms down on Darling's Island on the Kennebecasis River since 1906.

It was heart-breaking, back-breaking work but for a man who had grown up on Lord Lonsdale's feudal estate in Yorkshire, it was something to be the proud owner of. For me, an idling student, it was Paradise.

Unfortunately, Christie in his youth had had an accident under a combine harvester and this had crushed his chest (I think it was), left his body twisted. As we set about studying for exams, a further tragedy happened that sobered us up (even as coffee – endless coffee - had become our preferred drink).

There was another lad from the Old Country, Dennis Bazeley, who had submitted articles to the student paper, *The Brunswickan*. They tried to be funny, eyes and nose, weren't, and were spiked. Would that one of them at least had been printed. Bazeley climbed rung by rung up the ladder of the one chimney downtown that was as tall as the cathedral spire and, having reached the top, threw himself down. I wrote an elegy that mitigated nothing: *A shed broke his fall...*

Death put summarily aside, Christie and I set about "spotting" enough questions on Medieval History to allow us to pass. I revised for just seven questions. As I turned the exam paper over I could not believe what I saw. Each of the six sections contained one of the

questions I had revised. I took a deep breath. Where should I begin? They registered me for History Honours retroactively.

Perhaps that was one reason I was later asked to co-edit *A Documentary History of New Brunswick*. I spent many hours in the Archives of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John absorbed in the collections made by a couple of 19th century doctors, Webster and Ganong, together with overlooked items such as a magazine, *Neith*, put out by overlooked black residents at the turn of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, all the documents were finally packed up and sent to my co-editor, Bill Acheson, in Fredericton when, on impulse, we decided to up sticks and go to live in Dehra Dun with Rani's much loved mother. The book never saw the light of day. I regret that.

Further Cross Note. While writing this in 2021 I discovered that my old prep school History teacher at St Michael's, Roy Haines, then doing a thesis on Motte (we said Moat) and Bailey castles, was this same year, 1966, teaching, unknown to me, at our arch-rival provincial university, Mount Alison. He may well have used the Archives from time to time. Perhaps we sat in the same room, unknowing.

Since Rani was taking the course in Canadian Poetry Fred Cogswell was teaching at night school in Saint John, he would drive her back to our cottage in Rothesay and stay for dinner. He drove but a shade better than Irish poet Brendan Kennelly, whose driving instructor famously offered him his money back if he'd only pull over and stop.

Grube pronounced Fred to be chthonic. He was that and much much more. Alden, a poet from a rural background close to Fred's and like him well-read on the wider world, wrote in the final line of a dedicatory poem that Fred followed *Ayesha, She who must be obeyed, into the Caves of Kôr*. Fred was such a constant presence

before and during and after our time in New Brunswick, genius of the land, voice of its people, that I would never be able to write enough or adequately about him.

After two years of existence, the new branch of the university, like its old trunk, was removed from the hurly-burly of the city centre to a quiet suburban campus. Grube, bequeathing the library a fine collection of science fiction, returned to his native habitat in what Maritimers contemptuously refer to as Upper Canada. We left for India.

CHAPTER 4: TEACHING IN A POLY

Toronto

Eric Wright was chair of a “service” English Department at a polytechnic in Toronto, Ryerson (now Toronto Metropolitan University). We were all workaday “instructors”.

I had written to Ryerson from our *kothi* in the foothills of the Himalaya applying for a job: a growing family was going to be fed neither by a proffered university post paying 200 chips a month nor by the odd bit of freelance journalism such as that on the ashram in Rishikesh the Beatles were about to groove in on, “Asceticism with all the Comforts of Home”.

When offered an interview, I pleaded I couldn’t travel 7000 miles just on spec. Eric then hired me on the basis of the recommendations of the two Canadian Maritimer poets, Fred Cogswell and Alden Nowlan. God knows what they said.

On his retirement, Eric upped his game to become Canada’s oldest first novelist. His Inspector Salter solved the first crime Eric put him onto precisely because he had grown old, been sidelined, left out of the reckoning. Thereafter each successive Crime Club Choice of Eric’s had to find ingenious new ways of disguising or discrediting Salter’s belated successes.

About Eric no less than Chanchi and Fred I have little to say. He too was a presiding genius of the goodly fellowship, less a subject for anecdotes than someone who could be talked to intimately as an Elder. A touchstone for teaching. I still imitate his mannerisms.

As I write this I am surprised by the recollection that, after some induction at Ryerson, three of us from the Old Country sat down to have a beer together, for all the world as if we were expatriates in Singapore. The fate of the other two throws into sharp relief my modest confinement to classroom teaching. Before very long, Dave

was Principal, President, Grand Panjandrum or whatever of a neighbouring Further Education college. Chris, in Rome with his friend Rick, was fatefully drowned attempting to swim the Tiber: *I don't know why, for freedom or something.*

Eric was also from the Old Country. Originally from South London, he had worked as a guide in fishing camps up in the Canadian north, and now couldn't believe anyone would pay him for teaching what he liked doing anyway.

In our case, that was teaching literature. You put poems by Keats or Shelley in front of students and rode home on their trailing clouds of glory. Well, not on quite anything so high-falutin' in a polytechnic where no-one in the vocational departments we serviced considered any sort of literature either relevant or useful.

In some Departments we could address the quest for relevance by resorting to modern Canadian "texts", rarely poetry (for God's sake) such as that by the likes of Cogswell or Nowlan. Occasionally for budding journalists, not a million miles away from Tony Harrison's Litter-a-chewer, we weighed in with candidates for the Great Canadian Novel.

I once had to take over such a course at (or beyond) the very last moment and, clutching my unread copy of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* as I rushed into the classroom, was aghast (on taking the register) to discover the novelist's daughter was sitting in the front row.

In most of the technical Departments, our stock-in-trade was an anthology of lively North American short stories. With these, apart from encouraging close reading, it was a question, as Eric and I agreed, of talking about characters in books as a way for students to look at their own and other people's lives. Not that we would put it that way whenever, as happened periodically, the Departments we served tried to put us out.

My concern for the Public Health students, rat-catchers to be, over several years may have got back to some of their own faculty teachers and stood us in good stead when the crunch came. At some periodical revision of their curriculum, the Public Health faculty voted to abolish the irrelevant Humanities courses.

The vote was 9-6, close enough for us to cry foul and call for a chance to make our case prior to a second vote. Deputed to represent us, I don't suppose I either cited F.R. Leavis or pointed out that much the students learned in their practical courses would be obsolete by the time they graduated.

Whatever I did or did not say, it was just enough that a couple of other Public Health teachers joined those of their peers who vaguely felt we did a bit of good for their students. The original vote was overturned 8-7.

That was the year I had two elderly veterans of the Korean War retraining to be Public Health Inspectors. It was the custom of the students to call me by my first name. The vets, sitting together in the middle, rarely intervened in discussions but when they did they made us all jump by coming to attention (even while sitting down) and barking out a crisp: Sir?

Paterson was in that class. We were reading Thurber's story *The Catbird Seat* and I must have said something about the moment when it occurs to drab, clerical Mr Martin there is a clever way he can get the better of his oppressive boss. Paterson somewhat tentatively suggested the key moment was to be found in another passage. I stopped, looked at it again, realised he was right and, without making much of it, said so before moving on.

When the students graduated, they invited me out for a graduation drink on Yonge, believed then to be the longest street in the world. Paterson, standing head of his class, asked me if I remembered our reading *The Catbird Seat*. That was the first time in my life, he said, that a teacher had said to me that I was right and they were wrong.

These same years in Toronto, in off-Broadway fashion, little theatres – notably Factory Lab and the Tarragon – were opening up off Yonge and producing original plays. I took to reviewing these for *Performing Arts in Canada*, a new magazine started by a Hungarian exile, Steve Mezei.

As a literary variant to the staple of modern short stories I read in class with the Public Health Inspectors, I would encourage them to see a play. Most were as wary of the experience as if I had proposed they go to a cat-house but one year I persuaded them to see a play at the Tarragon. It was about four men with cerebral palsy awkwardly fumbling about trying to have a pee in a urinal while planning to liberate themselves from incarceration in a Rotary workshop.

The play, *Creeps*, was riveting and horrifyingly funny. I had the playwright, David Freeman, come in to talk to my students. Nothing could be more dramatic than the disjunct between the highly articulate play they had just seen and its playwright rendered almost speechless by the same disability.

When teaching, say, five classes, it is not surprising some begin to go better than others. I have known total disaster. One Fall semester I read some science fiction novels with a lively group of Electrical Engineers and looked forward to working with them after Christmas. Alas, it was not to be.

A South African colleague had had a bad term doing the same course with some Mechanical Engineers. Since I was on a roll, I was deputed to do a swop with Rex. The Mechanical Engineers stopped me dead in my tracks. I never got anywhere with any of them all term, one staring to me throughout as stone-faced as the Lincoln Imp. I never asked Rex how he got on with the Electricians.

In later years, teaching at the University of Budapest, I travelled home on a tram into the Buda Hills one evening with Ruttkay

Kálmán, Professor of English Literature so Emeritus he had been allowed on retirement two literature classes in perpetuity. He confessed one of his current classes was animated, the other, that by all benchmarks should have been similar, was languishing. Johnny Walker's Bifty-bifty.

Group dynamics is puzzling and not by any means a simple matter of whether, as my Budapest office mate, Ferencz Győző, said comparing his Hungarian students with those in the United States, they refuse to open their mouths or refuse to shut them. Fizzing or flat, any class is a curious composite of individuals, some of whom come to our attention, if ever, only long after.

The Business Department at Ryerson was not happy to do business with literature but our sop to relevance with them could be nicely accommodated by the many American novels critical of Main Street and its hypocrisies. One year I flushed all the – perhaps half-dozen - dissident students out of Business by offering them as an option something utterly irrelevant: Modern Indian Literature in English, the first-ever such course in Canada.

The experimental untimed open book exam I gave them at the end of the course petered out only when the last student left after seven hours. Peter Jackson. His father was Education Officer or some such for the Province of Ontario and Peter had blotted the family name by not being enrolled at the University of Toronto.

Irfan did not take this course of mine but remains very much on my mind. If the Indian course was a misfit in the Business programme, even more so was he. Irfan had been sent West by his brother in Jehangirabad to learn the dark arts of modern business management.

Teachers learn over the course of time that while certain students respond to the particular style they pride themselves on, others do

not: they are happier with someone else down the corridor who approaches books quite differently.

It so happens I can recall the infinite variety of the three teachers who offered Irfan the service English courses he was required to take as a business student. Marianne, Marie, Karen. All so utterly different, even incompatible, in character and temperament. All fell in love, in the Platonic way teachers may, with Irfan and his fine literary perceptions.

Oh dear. Irfan should never have left the music rooms and chess-boards of his native Avadh court. The stress and strain of sailing west in search of a passage to some other India was too much, the balance tipped and he put a bullet in his beautiful brain, making a mess even of that: he lay in a coma for many months, having discovered *the world really is flat and has edges*.

Media Studies, newly offered in the erstwhile practical Photographic (these days Image) Arts department as a response to the demands of the Hippy Sixties, looked more congenial. It had its illuminations. The unforgettably named Angel Wells for one.

I was teaching together with Gail Dexter, one of the six members of the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada: with her like-minded partner, Barry Lord, she did a very great deal to salvage and popularize a whole tradition of working class Canadian art that had been consigned to museum basements. In later life, I was intrigued to read that, with their expertize on art galleries, they took the Louvre by storm – a capital enterprise.

One morning while Gail was struggling with a refusenik projector designed to show some slides of neglected paintings, Angel kept making a string of silly remarks such as had been her habit since joining the course. Eventually, the disturbance mounting, I asked her to leave.

Where shall I go? Angel asked pertly. Go anywhere you like, I replied (regrettably close to losing my cool), but please don't ever come back. Several days later she approached Gail and I to ask if she could rejoin the class. All her young life Angel had been shut inside classrooms and wanted out. Shut out for the first time, she realised she wanted in.

That was not true of a fresher in another class in that same course. Murray Markowitz – I am astonished the name materialises as I write this. And wasn't it Murray who made a short film on lesbian love, *April and May*? I seem to remember the title shifted to *May and June*, *June and July* as the summer months wore on. Whether this materially altered the script I can't say.

Murray was a genuine archetypal Hippy and had no desire to compromise with formal education. Every time an intellectual discussion began he denounced it out loud as Mind Fuck. He did not have to be asked to leave: he left. Or so I suppose.

Did Murray alter like his film's title and turn yuppie like Yorkville, Toronto's Carnaby Street, on having to find a conventional, if not actually commercial, film-making frame for his fuck-you integrity? Perhaps, perhaps not. Happily, pen-pushing poetry does not have to bother its head about such questions.

There are a couple of other incidents in that groovy circular classroom I remember. On one occasion, another instructor and I were interviewing students applying to take the Media Studies course. An important qualification was that they had an interest or interests other than photography. It was usually easy to find this out but one day a large youth with a blonde thatch sat shyly in front of us giving nothing away.

Was his name Bill or Jim? Perhaps I confuse it with that of Welsh writer and mountaineer Jim Perrin, who would one day tell my Budapest students who were showing him the way to Plot 301, Nagy Imre's grave in the cemetery where those implicated in the 1956

Uprising were buried, that he had never left the Communist Party of Great Britain: it had left him.

The blonde Bill, as he may be, in Photo Arts sat next to the always amazed-by-learning Paul Douglas who (I still cannot take it in) died young. Bill was genial enough and we felt rather sorry for him, being so inarticulate.

Finally Karl, my fellow interviewer, leaned towards him and asked kindly, Did you go anywhere, do anything last summer? Yes, I did, he replied. Well, what was that? Almost inaudibly came the reply: I climbed K2. You did *what*? To do us – and Bill - justice, Karl and I both fell off our chairs before gingerly managing to clamber back up.

Media Studies did fail one ultimate test. I would invite literary figures in to talk to the students – I remember Hugh Garner, challenged about publishing in the U.S., telling the students that that was the only way he could see his novels such as *Cabbagetown* selling on Toronto Metro station bookracks. Also that people such as himself who had fought for the Republic during the Spanish Civil War in the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion had had to suppress that information for 30 years. The Mac-Pap survivors had been allowed to re-enter Canada only with difficulty.

Among those in the thick of the culture wars at this time was Jack Herbert, who had made real social impact with a play produced off-Broadway, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, the story of gay men brutalized by prison. Jack, like Hugh, was angry he had to go south of the border to get his work known. Eventually, the Canadian Film Development Board did agree to make a film of *Fortune* but Jack didn't like their take on his story and had his name taken off it.

At this point, he talked to our Media Studies students about a new script he had written, *Queen Street Café*. When there is a downturn in the economy, a family who run a downtown café fall out with

their customers one by one and then, as things get worse, with each other.

It was an exciting idea and we agreed with Jack to make a film of it on a shoestring budget. Sadly if understandably, when the chips were down, not enough students were ready to sacrifice their summer jobs for the chance of making the film.

In what had once been an Orangeman's city, self-condemned in Wyndham Lewis's phrase, there were a number of exciting little theatres springing up. Jack himself had a theatre on Yonge Street, *The Garret* – it was in a garret up a long flight of stairs. Rani, who acted as his stage manager in an experimental production of *Wozzeck* recalls him standing at the top of the stairs and wailing: Why doesn't anyone come?

Jack would carry his protests to an imposing new centre of arts culture, the Saint Lawrence, where he reviewed the safe, repertory theatre fare on offer by parading in flamboyant drag about the tuxedo-crowded foyer. Culture with a capital C – or even K.

While I was never promoted, my colleagues at Ryerson did me the dubious honour of electing me to a new Hiring and Tenure Committee. This had been formed, so we fondly supposed, as a democratic alternative to arbitrary decisions being made by an irresponsible Administration.

We would visit the classrooms of prospective teachers, initially offering advice about teaching but eventually judging who might best do the job. Judge not lest ye be caught with yer pants down.

On one occasion I was "inspecting" the class of a prospective instructor. Poor chap, the louder he shrieked his lecture at the class, the further back they sat in a thin crescent. I took him out afterwards for a friendly chat over an orange juice. You need to drop your voice,

I advised him, bring the students in to you. If you raise your voice any more, there'll be no-one left in the room.

I left Azim for a class of my own. There was no-one in the room and none came. Had I got something wrong? No, the time - and the classroom – was right. Was this hubris with a vengeance? Maybe it was. Panic and emptiness. I was shaken for as long as it took to learn that the Montreal Canadiens at that very hour were in town to play the Toronto Maple Leafs. Still, no-one, no-one at all? That night the gods smiled wickedly.

That Faculty could now decide who their own new colleagues were to be proved illusory. Admin had grasped that if salaries could increase, so could workloads: there would be no new colleagues. When, after a sabbatical year and a further year off on unpaid leave, my researches in pursuit of an *ignis fatuus* led me to resign from my job, Eric arrived at our door in Cambridge with my resignation letter asking me to take it back. There would be no jobs in future. The die was cast.

I was on the receiving end of the inspector's boot several years later when I did return temporarily as a part-timer to pay off debts to Canadian friends who had put up money for a down-payment on a house we had finally bought in Cambridge. Ryerson was moving upmarket and our workaday service Department had allowed itself the *cachet* of engaging a distinguished novelist.

Connie was deputed to inspect one of my Media Studies classes. This course had students making their own presentations and this particular class had proved so responsive they were fully engaged over the entire three hours. The distinguished novelist reported back to the Head that she could not submit a report on my work in the class since I wasn't doing anything.

The English Literature teacher often has a sneaking hope he might one day be granted an immortal poem. John Beer told me that when T.R. Henn was a senior figure in the English Faculty at Cambridge he regularly put in a submission, anonymous as all were mandated to be, for the annual Poetry Prize offered by the Faculty.

Fame is the spur.... It was in Toronto poetic fame beckoned me as beguilingly as it ever did Professor Henn.

Jon Silkin was visiting Canada to do a series of poetry readings and to promote his “baby”, the literary magazine *Stand*. Some of his audience at one reading asked him if he would do a master class with them at their next adult education session at York University. Jon apologized that he had to return to England but suggested instead they could ask me: he had published poems of mine in several issues of *Stand*.

I prepared for my grand debut by giving the students a selection of my immortal works in advance. On the dark, icy winter’s night itself, I took myself off to the small downtown campus of York University. Three functional buildings of three storeys each confronted me like ships docked in the night before I boarded one of them and approached the reception desk.

Alas, Reception was simply Security and had no record of what classes were held where. No matter, they said brightly, each door had a little glass window to it through which I could identify the inmates. No point in rehearsing now how I traversed each of the three floors of each building in turn, peering through window after window until I began to feel like a thief.

Having cased the whole campus, I returned to Reception where they said, again brightly, I would be sure to catch my class in the cafeteria during the half-time break that all classes took. Oh yes? Oh no. When after the break I rather desperately began to repeat my round of the buildings, one foot broke through some thin ice into a bitterly cold puddle and I was reduced to a slow limp.

Eventually, homesick and no longer fixed on being famous, I gave up. It was at that moment on I wot not what floor of what building, a party of people swept round a corner, some of their faces vaguely familiar. Before I could cry out in relief, they suggested I join them for a beer somewhere. But my poems? I stammered. Never mind, they replied, we got along fine without you. *Love, we are dust, owing rent.*

Several times after that, I did have audiences for my poetry, well, that is, people turned up to hear top billing poets such as Brendan Kennelly in Bedford, Roger McGough in Dartford and a bevy of European heavyweights at a Poetry Day on the Danube in Budapest to whom I was a lower order backing act. By the time my turn finally came, surfeited audiences were shuffling off to catch their buses - or boats – home. That said, I count it now as a great privilege to have read in the same room with Brendan.

On several other occasions I have given two-hander readings with my wife Rani, still upstaged, in places as far-flung as Teruel and Bangalore to a dwindling congregation of scattered souls. Bless them: when billed to read alone, I have invariably outnumbered my audience. I must conclude that my daemon has wisely stepped in to prevent me crossing the Ilyssos into a seductive world of dizzying public acclaim.

He was desperate, could he come and stay with us? Grube's voice was strangely subdued, strangled almost. Urgent, no time to explain. We were renting the upstairs of someone's house in Toronto, sharing a bathroom and had two very young daughters.

We had some idea of what was happening. Grube had written to say he didn't intend to be chickenshit any longer. He had been hired as the token WASP, as he put it, at Assumption, a Catholic University seeking Government funding.

A colleague called Phil London, he added, had been hired as the token Jew. Made to feel token, they made their being token felt. When Phil – or was it somebody else called Vern McEachern? - was fired, Grube, next in the firing line, went into action.

In his urbane guise, Grube wrote to the *Toronto Globe and Mail* to explain that the form of the protest he proposed would not be anything so vulgar as a sit-in such as was then fashionable but – key word for a Catholic university - a vigil.

Taking on the Catholic Establishment with but a few acolytes would have been a strain anyway but Grube's coming out as a radical was also informed by his long suppression as a gay man. As his, no doubt demonized because cross-border, colleague, the American writer Joyce Carol Oates, described it in a short story she wrote for *Playboy*, his vigil was graced not only by candles and incense but by his naked body.

The Rector got the permission of Grube's parents to have him locked up in a psychiatric ward. Grube would comment bitterly that not even Sicilian peasants would have done that to one of their children. It was from the hospital, with their permission, we sprung him. He was full of drugs and smelt horribly. Our two daughters moved in to share our bedroom, he took theirs.

Naively, we went for cold turkey, stopped Grube's drugs and he went through terrifying manic-depressive cycles reminiscent of Tibetan *thangkas* of Mahakala and the Wheel of Life: now at the top of the cycle a raging tyrant threatening to destroy us all, then at the bottom, falling to his knees, our humble slave abysmally apologetic. We locked our door.

Slowly the cycles levelled out. Rest and darkness were the great healers. Grube was frightened of going outside at all but his parents insisted I take him to the Clark Institute to see a psychiatrist. Grube confided that, like Robert Graves, a poet he uncharacteristically

admired, he planned to take refuge on an island in the Mediterranean. Delusions of grandeur, hazarded the psychiatrist.

Stranger still perhaps, before long Grube got a job teaching at the Ontario College of Art and set about trying to become initiated as a shaman on a First Nations Reserve. Rani wrote two plays about him, *The Oedipus Question*, produced in Cambridge, and *Asia Calls*, produced in Budapest. Grube flew in to see both productions and, when he died, left Rani \$10,000 in his will.

Rani used the money to return to Canada to try and revive one of the plays and, while there, produce a new play with some Eastern Algonkian people. Like the title of a play she had written about trying to produce one in China while the tanks rolled into Tiananmen, it was a play that never got done. Too bad. It would have *looked not out of place propped among the birch trees*.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH: BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS.

Who on Earth – or off it – could have ordered John Beer’s *Coleridge the Visionary* for the Ryerson library? What caused me to pluck it off the shelf?

A Harvard scholar named John Livingston Lowes had written a book with the intriguing title, *The Road to Xanadu*. Tracking Coleridge’s voluminous reading, Lowes shows how the images the poet uses in his best-known poems originate in all sorts of wonderful travel books. Hence the fountain in his unfinished gem of a poem *Kubla Khan* is a fusion of descriptions of fountains in Kashmir, Ethiopia and a dozen other places. And so on with his images of the sun, the river, the caves of ice.

Wonderful as is the journey Lowes leads us on, Beer takes issue with it in terms of what Coleridge himself says about the way the poetic imagination works – as opposed to just the fancy. When the poetic mind is intense in imaginative composition, Coleridge argues, it is ideas rather than just images that fuse together. The sun, the fountain, the first letter of the alphabet, the emperor, may all be fused as a single identical image of the source. It is for this reason that *Kubla Khan* begins to live up to the title Coleridge gave it as “a psychological curiosity”.

There was little room for academic books in a “service” department and I might have thought no more about this one until the prospect of a sabbatical year came along. Up until that time, instructors could spend it on an island in the Mediterranean writing – or not writing – poems for all anyone cared but a new upgraded policy determined that it should be spent attached to some institute of learning.

Since I was interested in India, I took the trouble to find a copy of Beer’s book on E.M. Forster, assuming he would read Forster’s imaginative novel on India in much the same way as he had read Coleridge’s poetry. All too hastily excited, I was surprised to find John Beer read the novel rather differently, not giving priority to the

high regard in which the working novelist held the dizzier flights of the Romantic poets.

I fired off a letter to this effect to Professor Beer at whatever address I could determine from the publisher's blurb, perhaps Manchester. I did not hear back.

Meanwhile I needed to find an educational institute where I could register to do a sabbatical year of research. My widowed mother was still living in England and one obvious choice, given my interest in India, was to write to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Unfortunately, I received back one of those discouraging letters that, however justified, make one feel very small and inadequate. I consigned it quickly to the waste paper basket, a (disposable) Portuguese janitor (shortly to be fired by Cuts) took it away and overnight it had gone.

I was in my office between classes a fortnight later when my wife Rani – unusually – telephoned. There's a letter come for you from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, she said. I don't want to hear it, I replied, it can wait till I get home. But they want you to give a lecture there, she said. They *what*?

It was incomprehensible. Rejected in no uncertain terms as a student, SOAS had asked me to give a lecture? Oh yes, at a summer school, no doubt, but as an unknown and unpublished teacher at a polytechnic, I was in awe of such places, summer, winter, autumn, spring.

It took another fortnight before the mystery was solved. A letter of apology arrived from Professor John Beer at Peterhouse in Cambridge. My redirected letter to him had arrived on his desk at much the same time as one from SOAS asking him to give a lecture on Forster at their summer school.

John Beer had taken the liberty of suggesting they ask me to give the lecture instead. That was my introduction to Cambridge. *Kings, Trinity, the Backs and meadows behind the house;/ Autumn, including the mushrooms, crab-apples and blackberries/ Keats forgot to mention... Intellect at a premium...*

Before I finally left Ryerson, I thought to try out some of the ideas about Forster's Indian novel on the students of a Media Studies course I shared with a philosopher who was introducing them to Plato's ideas. I had become excited by what I perceived as a Platonism that had overtaken Forster in his novel ("dazzling" as a librarians' magazine in the States would one day startlingly describe this insight).

Rushing down the stairs to a circular room in the new state-of-the-art Photo Arts building, I held the swing doors open for someone and, turning back, briefly bumped into a pillar. No matter, my mind was absolutely absorbed in articulating an idealist philosophy that held the material world to be immaterial.

To my delight, the photography students, they if any surely chained while watching shadows on the back wall of a Platonic cave, hung on to my every word for the best part of an hour. Attentive, on the edge of their seats. Never before or since have I held so many people so spellbound.

I sank back exhausted – I could feel the sweat - ready for questions. After a long silence, one enraptured young woman broke it, apparently speaking for all, to ask: Excuse me, John, do you realise your face is covered in blood?

So it was that, rather belatedly in my thirties, I opted to pursue a Ph.D. at Cambridge. It was a disaster in many ways, I had a young family to support and, as year gave way to year, I found myself afloat on a lotus. The ocean was one of books.

Cross Note.

It was not at Cambridge but at Oxford that, in my brief avatar as a journalist back in the 'Sixties, I had come across a story that, like the interview I had with George Painter, brought the world of newspapers into a nice confrontation with that of books.

If I cannot remember now what story it was I was sent to Oxford to uncover, it is probably because it has been wiped from my memory by the much better one Rex George, the local "stringer", had to tell me. This concerned a *Mirror* journalist, Jack Jones (possibly his real name, I can't be sure now).

The *Mirror* had heard (via Rex no doubt) that a considerable amount of money had passed hands among some of the gilded youth in the gilded college, Trinity. Trinity was presided over by Sir Arthur Norrington prior to his presiding over the entire university as Vice-Chancellor. Norrington perhaps had nowhere else to go. He had previously presided over the Oxford University Press.

Jack, a sharp-witted Londoner, proposed to confront the Master of Trinity. The problem, as Rex saw it, was that this august figure was inaccessible. He explained to Jack that many professorial figures in the university had waited for years hoping to be asked to take a glass of sherry with Norrington.

This explanation took some teasing out since Jack was puzzled by the significance of it. Never one to hesitate, the *Mirror* reporter headed straight for the Master's Lodge. By great good luck

Norrington came to the door himself. Always direct, Jack explained to Norrington why he had come.

Norrington apologized coldly for being unable to help him and was shutting the door when Jack, looking straight past him, stopped him. Excuse me, Master, he said pointing to the rows of bookshelves behind, but have you read all those books?

Norrington, for all his *sang-froid*, was ever so slightly wrong-footed. Well, yes, since you ask, Mr er... Jones, I have read quite a number of them. Then, if I may make so bold as to say so, I think you really do deserve to be Master of this College. Well, that's very good of you to say so, Mr Jones. [Pause]. Would you like to step in and take a glass of sherry with me?

The two men talked about books and newspapers over a sherry and then Norrington said: Mr Jones, that little matter you came about. I can see you are a man of the world. You and I both know that when men have a hand of cards, whether under the arches at Waterloo or in the courts of an Oxford college, they are bound to throw a bob or two into the pot. With each re-telling of the story the amount gets enlarged. That's all there is to it.

Tony Harrison has a poem *Book Ends* in which he recounts how what sadly stands between him and his working class father is *Books, Books, Books*. Incidentally, the Oxford University Press these days has an underground room containing some 180,000 volumes. It is called the Norrington Room but, no, Jack, it is not true Sir Arthur had read most of them.

Though I did pay one visit to the august Duke Humphrey Room at the Bod, it was libraries at (what the narrow-minded refer to as) the "other" university where (unlike Sir William Jones who moved on to his third, at Nadiya) I did most of the reading for my research.

My supervisor, John Beer, did once send me off to look at an old volume at the British Library (then housed in the Museum) and when I returned to complain someone had scribbled all over it, he said quietly, Yes, I think it was Coleridge.

The U.L., the University Library, in Cambridge is not only a wonderful depository of almost every book you might ever want to read or refer to: so many are on the open shelves. That can be a problem. As John Beer once observed, you can find yourself spending so much time putting three-day reserve slips in the all-too-many books you have come across in various far-flung parts of the library that you end up doing nothing other than perambulating through the library re-reserving them.

My preferred library was that of the small Oriental Studies Faculty. I could lose myself along the stacks digging out old books that sometimes did and sometimes did not illuminate the mutable subject I was ostensibly pursuing. There was a congenial librarian there who did not make me feel out of place and I was often the only reader, especially in the summer quiet. This was true on the day that a big man in a long *jellabiya* swept up to me as I sat at a table and said simply: Take me to the House of Iqbal.

Now our own son's name is Iqbal but, in the circumstances, that seemed coincidental. I guessed that my interlocutor was looking for the house where the poet Iqbal had lived while studying in Cambridge. He was lucky: I knew where it was: there is a plaque on the house in Portugal Place. I walked him there via the Market where a friend, also in a *jellabiya*, was waiting for him. Neither visitor knew any English so all I could do was point and say, as if producing it out of a hat: There is the House of Iqbal.

In the Romance stories of Alexander the Great, in a pattern that recurs in other great literary epics, there is a dark night of the soul

as he crosses demon-infested deserts in his search for the terrestrial Paradise. I caught up with these medieval stories in Cambridge.

At one point when I was struggling to see any pattern or conclusion at all to a thesis topic concerned with India and the Romantic Imagination – nothing fitted, came together, made sense - I went to the Library of King's College to see Oliver Stallybrass, the editor of the Abinger Edition of Forster's work, to ask him what he knew and could tell me about Forster's interest in mysticism.

There was no-one else in the library apart from a company of librarians bringing books, papers and cups of tea to his commodious and ordered desk. Oliver confessed he knew nothing about the mystical side of Forster. Oliver's position, like his disposition, seemed enviable to me but, after a visit to India where he, like me, was conducted to Dewas by my good old friend and fellow English teacher, J.D. Birje-Patil, Oliver, haunted by demons I knew not of, took his own life.

Does some connection exist between the imaginative life and the going into the dark of suicide? My further researches in Cambridge took me to the poems and stories Alun Lewis wrote in India before, facing the Japanese armies in the Arakan, he too apparently took his own life.

The reaction of Alun's fellow Welsh poet and friend Alan Watkins was to ask in the final line of an elegiac poem he wrote: *O had he seen the Highest for which alone we are born?*

Cambridge continued as serendipitously as it had begun on a library shelf in Toronto. Perhaps it should never have been begun. Serendwip I took in along the way, together with Jambudwip and all the other *dwipas* that circulate on traditional Indian maps of the world.

I was looking for Indian influences on European culture but every time I shouted *Eureka*, it transpired the Indian influence could as easily have been Greek. The search having begun in the 20th century, crossed as many historical periods as Alexander the Great did deserts, and finally gave out sometime in or shortly before the 6th century B.C.

With my young family on short rations and my researches floating around in serendipitous circles, I submitted a dissertation that was an undifferentiated clutter of literary, historical and philosophical speculations. No wonder it was forensically taken apart by the External Examiner and charged with being methodologically absurd.

I could scarce have forborne to cheer had I not by then been reduced to working long hours as a postman (JD274): uniquely, perhaps, I delivered the damning letter from the External to the Internal Examiner at Newnham College (Walk 83), my fate quite literally held in my own hands.

The Internal Examiner, Sita Narasimhan, an intellectually sharp South Indian Brahmin, was supportive but in an equally alarming way. The dissertation, she declared, was immoral – by this, I take it she meant it was transmuted autobiography. Elaborating on this even more alarmingly, she declared it to be tantric, before clarifying that the word *tantra* has the meaning of mind-expanding.

The dissertation was rejected - referred is the euphemistic term - but my wife Rani, digging into my ribs, insisted the referral be deferred, I rewrite it and it be re-submitted. Rewrite it I could not but, nursing an industrial injury sustained loading trains, I edited it a bit and, under Sita's guidance, supplied an introduction explaining I was taking a hermeneutical approach. I must confess I was so little in the scholarly swim I wouldn't have known a hermeneut if I saw one.

During this dark night of the soul, John Beer, epitome of the Peterhouse don, came through in the quiet surprising way he could.

Twice already he had caught me on the hop with dry rejoinders in clipped Oxford accent: When I worked on the Post Office... When I worked as a Notts miner... Oh, you never, John...

When I complained to him my Examiners were taking years to give my dissertation a second reading, he said: They'll be reading it for the rest of their lives... Do I imagine he also remarked immediately after the initial rejection: It was always said that if Empson ever returned to Cambridge nobody would recognize him. Nonsense of course but in the context, what straws for a drowning man to clutch.

In the event I didn't drown. What *jadoo* Sita practised on Bob Grant in the interval I shall never know, perhaps stuck pins in a little clay figure of him, but when I arrived at Newnham College, nervous and resigned, for the second *viva*, he was babbling on earnestly about homeopathic medicine.

Totally thrown by this unexpected turn, I desperately tried to sort out in my mind the differences between homeopathic, allopathic and ayurvedic medicine. Reason not the need. After 20 minutes, Bob apologized for not having grasped that the methodology of the dissertation was based on the same principle as that of homeopathic medicine.

In time I hacked half a dozen crisp, readable articles out of the desultory, unreadable dissertation on *India and the Romantic Imagination* and submitted these successively to O.U.P., to Shambala in Colorado (at George Woodcock's suggestion) and finally to Oxford University Press in India.

Rukun Advani, so rigorous an editor he had Ram Guha, prolific author on Gandhi, forests, cricket and much else, rewrite his first book three times, insisted on publishing the material in its original, extended, which is to say distended, form. This, on account of footnotes so labyrinthine that, on the occasion of our Golden

Wedding Anniversary dinner, Roy Cross made them the subject of a witty speech. Hence the origin of the eponymous Cross Notes.

Rukun salvaged the book where others had savaged it and had left me feeling it was a will o' the wisp leading me and my family badly astray.

I was both flattered and astonished when Rukun confessed recently from his fastness in the high Himalaya that the book's pitch for Neo-Platonist philosophy being the governing factor in Forster's *A Passage to India* had blown his mind, changed his conceptual horizons. As much, he added, bringing me back down to the Plains with a bump, as the sublime idiocies of Jeeves and Wooster.

The book, for all its quilted Cross Notes, sold out and, sublime idiocy, went into a paperback edition. This was some compensation for the fact that two earlier grand projects had fallen by the wayside: the documentary history of New Brunswick and the film production of Jack Herbert's *Queen Street Café*.

The book was well received in India since it turned the traditional wisdom concerning the passage of literary influences on its head. Odd fire-crackers popped off. A scholar in Latvia wrote in to Oxford India claiming that if they published my book, they should publish his. Another scholar, this time in Hungary, Rozsnyai Bálint, greeted me as the author of it when I went to Szeged on the quite different mission of establishing contemporary British Studies at the university there.

One reader in Blighty I can be sure of is Mike Franklin, best biographer of the incomparable William Jones. He first got in touch with me when we were on our way to Tibet while teaching in China. I imagine you as a latter-day George Bogle, he wrote in response to my reply, and recommended the book to a whole new generation of students.

Years later an article - on the intellectual decline of English departments - by the poet Kaiser Haq in the introductory issue of *Bengal Lights* initiated me into the mysteries of homeopathic medicine and its significance for India and the reading of literature. Periodically I read the article anew to try and make sense of my own work.

There are several stories that arose from my double life in Cambridge. Once, in my dusty overalls loading the mail on trains at the railway station, I caught a young lady who was part of a Romantic Poetry seminar I supervised at Girton College going home for Christmas without having handed in her final assignment.

When I apprehended her, several passengers took it upon themselves to suppose she was being harassed, if not actually assaulted. Goodness knows what they made of it when they saw and heard her affect penitence in a most theatrical way while promising to send me an essay before Christmas.

When, on alternate weeks, I was running in letters for my walk at 5 in the morning at the Sorting Office (now part of Anglia Ruskin University) on Mill Road, it pleased Mark Hobbs, nephew of Jack, in the frame next to mine to refer to me ironically as Professor. Something of a mythographer, “Blondie” addressed my other neighbour, Arthur House, invalided out of Burma in the War only to wait bitter months for a boat to take him home, as Senior Man.

During these unacademic years I was made up to the status of Professor on one other occasion, this time taking me straight out of the world of letters into that of books.

One day I had just reached home at lunchtime after a long early shift at the station when the phone rang. A lawyer asked me if I could head without delay for the Magistrates Court. A student of yours is in trouble, he said, no time to explain. Come right now. I stepped out

of my overalls (bidding farewell to the shower and sandwich I was looking forward to), put on a tie, jumped back onto my post office bike and pedalled off furiously.

Arrived at the court, I was met by the lawyer looking out anxiously for me. No time to explain, he repeated and handed me on to an usher who pushed me into the witness box. For a moment I felt like the kafkaesque character in an Alden Nowlan poem who is progressively hurried on as Press, priest and so on until he finds he is really the prisoner about to be executed.

The Chair of the Magistrates (who turned out to be the University's Regius Professor of Law) addressed me as Professor Drew. Since I professed nothing, I felt rather uncomfortable, the more so since I had just sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

As I first realised sitting once upon a time among Army officers in Kipling's Amballa Cantonment talking about their promotions, I have never been promoted in any of the many jobs I have done. Not to this day. There are advantages to not having, or pulling, rank.

Professor? And in court? What was going on? I had no idea but was being asked to speak about the character of one of my Girton College students, Elizabeth. Happily, I was able to applaud her work, no assignments outstanding, lively thinking, creative responses. But why was I doing this?

It transpired that, a carefree American co-ed, she had felt so stifled by the single-sex boarding school atmosphere at Girton she had eventually gone downtown and, in a brainstorm, shoplifted a pile of poetry books from Heffers. Caught and prosecuted she had named me as one of her "professors" who could testify as a witness to her character.

In the event, bound over to keep the peace in the short interval before she made her escape back to America, Elizabeth only ever made

contact with Girton again to ask much later for a transcript of her academic record. They professed no knowledge of her existence.

What would Edwin Arlington Robinson, notable literary proponent of the American dream gone awry, have made of an occasion where poetry books got brazenly “borrowed” instead of sitting forever unread *on the darkest inch your shelf allows*.

One final story concerning books comes from Singapore. The Ph.D. allowed me to escape the Post Office by going to teach in Singapore. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, his country’s economy acting as a model for Mrs Thatcher, returned the debt by recruiting from Cambridge for his National University.

Deputed to host a seminar on the modern English novel: Forster and Lawrence, jointly with John Kwan-Terry, a fine scholar originally from Hong Kong. I went to John’s office to arrange the schedule. John, senior man as we would say on the Post Office, had no ordinary office. It was a veritable library, bookshelves lined equally with all the Chinese classics as well as all the canonical English ones.

It must be wonderful, I gasped, to be utterly immersed in the classics of two cultures such as these. Sadly, I am not, replied the thin cadaverous figure in a melancholic tone he may have acquired among the pines on the South Mountain, if not in the damp of the Fens. There are times I am reading a Shakespeare play and there’s a line with some nuance in it that absolutely escapes me.

A nuance that escapes you? I repeated. Anyone in Britain would admit there are whole passages of Shakespeare’s plays that are quite beyond them. Only an old Mandarin like you would worry there is a mere nuance of Shakespeare’s that eludes you.

Cross Note on Editors.

Acknowledgement is due to those editors, critics and readers with whom a writer may come in contact with. My first poems, the ones that come when you get into your stride and second wind, were not printed when they were sent to *Stand*, Jon Silkin then sharing the editing with the likes of Ken Smith and Tony Harrison.

I remember a letter Ken sent me in reply to a poem I had written about a mythical Herr Einszwei who had died on the Berlin Wall. His letter showed such a close and careful reading it hardly seemed like a rejection. A line or two of the poem still runs in my head, it was quite lyrical, but no, John, political poetry is not your forte.

I once asked Alden Nowlan whether he took any notice of the critical reviews of his poetry collections. Of only one reviewer, he replied, Milton Wilson in (I think) *The Canadian Forum*: the poems he expresses reservations about, said Alden, are invariably those I have my own doubts about.

I was delighted to have some sympathetic reviews of *The Lesser Vehicle* in newspapers as diverse as the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Worker*, and more particularly from poets such as Peter Porter, Martin Booth and Iain Crichton Smith. Their support gave me the confidence to print up my own collections when other editors turned them down.

That sympathetic second reader is always worth having and I have perennially turned to David Heal, now in South Wales, and, on the other side of the world, Bob Lumsden, in, I'd like to say New South Wales but it's actually Victoria, to tell me what they think of a putative draft of any new collection. It's a helpful check to have that second – and third - opinion.

There is considerable overlap between being a good teacher and a good reviewer and editor.

CHAPTER 6: WORKSHOPPING POETRY

Interludes

One evening, after a reading in The Eagle among the poets in Peter Singer's curiously named Histon College of Poets, I crossed the road to the side passage into Corpus Christi college to find my old bicycle had been stolen. The very next day *The Lesser Vehicle*, my first poetry collection that had taken its title from the bicycle, was published by Neil Astley at Bloodaxe Books. Reincarnation.

Iqbal once asked me what I was going to do when I grew up. Dunno, son. In my mid-forties, literary life was taking a turn: David Heal (battle cry: *Stand*, Magazine of the Arts, 3/6) had earlier co-opted me into an Iowa Review *Symposium of Young British Poets*. My academic book was also published at this time. But I was older than I should have been not only in a poetic symposium for the young but also in applying for academic jobs.

On our return after a couple of years teaching in Singapore in the mid 1980s, two possibilities opened up. The first was to become a poetry entrepreneur, the other, not unrelated, a school teacher. Both involved me in re-thinking the teaching of English literature.

When I signed up for Unemployment Benefit, the D.H.S.S. at once hauled me in and proposed I take advantage of Mrs Thatcher's Enterprise Allowance Scheme designed to promote business start-ups.

Hence was born, thanks to a grocer's for-profit daughter, the Cambridge Poetry Workshop, a notion almost as far-fetched as Chesterton's Flying Inn. More productive was a course I took for a Postgraduate Certificate of Education.

If teachers of Public Health and Domestic Science in a polytechnic had their doubts about English literature as a subject so did the Classicists and Divines when not so many decades before it had been

proposed as a university discipline at the University of Cambridge. You could read literature and discuss the books you had read but it was quite ludicrous to suggest they could and should be a subject of systematic academic study.

Cambridge English did come into existence with various programmes designed to study literature in a systematic way and much of the anglicized world followed examples set by “Q” and I.A. Richards and the Leavises.

Nonetheless, the massed ranks of school and college students could scarce forbear to cheer when counter-culture poet Allen Ginsberg suggested English professors wouldn’t know poetry if it came up and bugged them or when a film such as *The Dead Poets Society* was shown.

I must confess to a bias. Over the years I have had various jobs that might qualify me for the title of man of letters: journalist, postman and, yes, English teacher. But, as the latter, I too have never been altogether comfortable with the idea of literature as a subject or a discipline. Keats once bemoaned that reducing all to rule and line was to unweave a rainbow.

Keats’s perfect complement, Shelley, who unlike him never did load every rift with ore, suggested the analyzing faculty was not sufficient for creating or understanding poetry. When a scholar with such a forensic mind as A.E. Housman, noted for his ability to restore lacunae in texts by the Roman poet Manilius, wanted to write poetry of his own he resorted to a pint of beer to dull the cutting edge of his mind.

Housman had done his homework. He did not abjure study nor does his work show that he was careless of that craft and sullen art that Dylan Thomas exercised in the still night after the pubs were closed. Nonetheless, poets, Romantic poets anyway, appeal to the idea of a Muse, mystery in its meaning of enigma rather than craft. There is

evidence that some poetry, especially Romantic poetry, has been created in an exalted or subliminal state of mind.

Keats, having written perhaps the finest odes in the English language, had apparently done so when he was out of his (conscious) mind for, just before he died young of TB, he regretted he had not had time to leave behind him any poetry to make his friends proud of him after his death.

How then can we best approach, say, the odes that Keats left us? Do we read and read and analyze and attempt to unweave the rainbow? Will that give us an understanding of the poems? Or should we seek to assimilate ourselves to the state of mind in which the poem was composed? Or at least pursue the illusion of doing this? Doesn't Borges suggest somewhere that if we really and fully respond to *Don Quixote* we will find ourselves bringing the composition of it to fruition, in effect rewriting, even being rewritten by, it?

My concern as an English teacher to find a way of apprehending the poetry of the past led me away from asking students to write essays on Wordsworth and Nature to writing parodies, pastiches and other "updates" of the works of the past they responded to, felt a special affinity for.

The idea was to take seriously for their own writing Wordsworth's trenchant comments about the need to be rid of artificial "poetic" diction, to use the "real language of men" and perhaps even to notice what pleasure there is in the superaddition of metre.

Take as a point of departure, say, a bridge you know as well as Wordsworth knew Westminster Bridge. Take also as a point of departure the 14 lines of a sonnet. Update or in effect translate Wordsworth's sonnet *On Westminster Bridge* to your own time and place.

One can go on doing these exercises with everything from *Caedmon's Hymn* about the beginning of Creation – with its

marvellous context of the story of Caedmon trying to avoid having to compose verse - to William Carlos Williams' *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*.

The best place to learn about teaching of any sort is in a primary school. Welcome, go wherever you like in the school, said Mr Fraser when, after cycling over, I arrived in rural Barrington. When you have any questions, don't ask me, ask the children. A child not yet seven years old gave me my first lesson on how to use a computer. *Ever tried. Ever failed.*

In a secondary school in Coventry, the Sidney Stringer, I observed another Head Teacher constantly circulate through crowded classrooms, one with 70 pupils in it. His habit reminded me of Mao's exhortation to People's Liberation Army soldiers to swim seamlessly among the people.

This quality of moving so self-effacingly it is stylish was equally true of Eric Wright at Ryerson, whether he was ensuring all was for the best with a literature class or with the plot of a novel he was developing or with a family he had befriended. Or with a stranger on top of a London bus when it pleased him to act the ignorant colonial: *Excuse me, miss, can you tell me...?*

My Cambridge Poetry Workshop did occasionally bring in some small income. Once I was asked to go to a primary school in Suffolk for a week with a brief to broaden village children's horizons. What better, I thought, than a trip through space and time by putting before them the most obvious Chinese ideograms of trees and rivers - such as had misled Ezra Pound - and some of the Anglo-Saxon riddles that may once have had their origin among the South Folk of these very parts?

While inadequately schooled in either myself, I was just about able to stay ahead of eight and nine-year-olds who had huge fun copying

out such strange Chinese and Anglo-Saxon hieroglyphics and, when not turning them into drawings, guessing at their meanings, scribbling verses derived from them.

What little experience I had of secondary school teaching (in search of the PGCE) I found more difficult. All too often there were thirty-four children, twice as many as a Comprehensive class was intended to have, perhaps half-a-dozen of those seriously disturbed from broken homes.

Michael, in one class of 11 and 12-year-olds, gave me particular trouble, taking all the attention away from others. When the time came for my teaching to be inspected, I told the inspector, Tony Adams, a generous soul, I was in difficulty.

We were looking at Cockney rhyming slang, I remember. Michael was as good as gold, diligent, angelic. Ever street-wise, he had detected an even Higher Authority figure in place at the back of the room and, bless him, closed ranks.

I had difficulty with all classes in the adolescent age-bracket. In an older class in the same school, I sought to keep them in order one day by laying the heavy trip on them of Plato's Myth of the Cave. Finally a pupil put up her hand to interrupt and ask: Dr Drew, do you realise we are only 15? I met her in a supermarket sometime afterwards when she ran up excitedly to tell me she had been to Brazil.

I'd like to persuade myself Plato's Cave really was the right sixth form stuff, what you are readier to take in when you begin to realise what discipline really means and you become a disciple. That said, the young woman who taught that class to a very high standard had them eating out of her hand whatever she chose to teach. Any luck I had with them – I have glossed over the dispiriting days - was dependent on my being associated with their mentor.

There were three large lads in that same class who sat together, backs against the wall. One day, I asked the class to break into groups of three and prepare a dramatization of Beckett's single page play, *Come & Go*.

The three lads, perhaps embarrassed to be playing three women sitting on a bench, thought they'd raise a laugh by ignoring the banal text altogether and simply following the stage directions. These involve a complex exchange of seats and an interlaced gripping of each other's hands.

Instead of laughter, their silence was met with an ever-deepening silence from their peers, so much so they quite spooked themselves out. Beckett would have been delighted.

Once, the Cambridge Poetry Workshop having been invited to Dillingen in Germany, I recommended to some secondary school teachers the value of teaching English by getting their pupils to compare Rilke's *Der Panther* and Ted Hughes' *The Jaguar*.

One teacher objected that the English of some of his students was so poor, they would only be able to sit and read the Rilke poem. By way of reply, I repeated the last half of his sentence. Slowly, word by word.

In writing workshops, it is reassuring to have a model for all to go on. Some will sit back on that. Others will spring off from it until what they write has no recognisable relationship to the original from where they started. Tradition. Innovation.

It is best for would-be writers to identify poems they like from different times and places. If they like them, there is something inside themselves that responds to them and that something inside has the potential to create a poem of their own. But the original

inspiration need not be a poem; it may be anything in Art or Nature, and the response may not be in the form of verse.

My assumption is that we are all potentially creative and, since language is the one material that is rooted in our guts, poetry is the ideal medium for giving utterance to the things that most matter to us in our lives.

We could all be poets but find ourselves deflected from an ideal destiny by the need to make a living, go to work and go shopping, Wordsworth's getting and spending by which we lay waste our powers.

As Shelley says in his *Defence of Poetry*, written in response to his friend Peacock arguing that in an age of science the time for poetry is over, we have a propensity to accumulate that is embodied in Money and a complementary faculty for assimilation that is symbolized by Poetry. We are all potentially poets.

Do-it-yourself amateur theatricals is a very English tradition. Dickens would delight in performing at home with his family and friends scenes from, among others, the comedies of Ben Jonson, whose humorous caricatures surface again in his novels. His enthusiasm was such he'd then sometimes take them across the country.

There was in Cambridge across several decades a summer school run by Eddie Mortlock, one of whose ancestors had been Mayor of Cambridge countless times. Eddie had somehow persuaded a language school in Hastings that they needed a flagship arts and culture course for advanced language learners from across Europe – these included the young women from Spain who continued to smoke as a rite of passage long after everyone else had given it up.

The school, staged for two months each summer in the theatre of venerable Peterhouse, was itself a piece of theatre, Eddie himself dressing up in a gown and mortarboard and urging the graduate students he perennially got to teach for him to give the impression we were Cambridge University.

It never seemed to occur to Eddie that, as the years went on, many of his work-horses had become well-known if wandering scholars of English popular culture such as Gerald Porter, based in, if by no means confined to, Finland, and John Skinner, there and in Italy.

Eddie's show did include impressive walk-on appearances by the likes of Hank Brugmans, first Rector of the College of Europe, and his wife the poet Hanna Kirsten, Ian Ousby, editor of *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* and distinguished military historian of Occupied France, and Robert Inglesfield, Browning scholar who spoke on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Evelyn Waugh couldn't have conceived of a grander parade.

My part in proceedings, apart from pinch-hitting with dramatized lectures based on E. M. Forster's essays deliciously disguising the identities of Coleridge and Keats - once too, put to it, on the discovery of the structure of the Double Helix at or about The Eagle - was to run the amateur theatricals and poetry workshops from noon until lunchtime.

Little groups might read Edwin Morgan's *First Men on Mercury* closely with a view to dramatizing it or come to understand its shape by unscrambling a scrambled Shakespeare sonnet. The theatre was perfect for this, though, in fine weather, the gardens even more so. It was joyous. Who is to say Cambridge was ever done better?

Not just Dickens, we have Shakespeare's love of home-spun theatricals for the *The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet* and I have never lost the opportunity of giving others a chance to engage in the fun that in

A Midsummer's Night's Dream so absorbs the rude mechanicals that work for bread upon Athenian stalls.

Once in Cologne at a British Council seminar for German teachers of English we were entertained in the evening by a couple who performed some scenes from Oscar Wilde's comedies.

My German neighbour asked me who these people were. They were, I supposed, the local Director of the British Council and his wife. The German teacher was astonished. A Director of the Goethe Institute would never be seen doing something like that in public, he observed.

Transylvania in Romania is far from Germany unless the Pied Piper transports you there but on another weekend jamboree just after the fall of the Berlin Wall it was my job to organize the evening entertainment for a group of Romanian academics.

During a day of brainstorming, two senior colleagues from Edinburgh had initiated them into the mysteries of post-post-modern exegeses of literary texts. By the evening, on the sylvan slopes of Sinaia, Mount Sinai translated, our Romanian friends were quite ready for a convivial evening in the bar.

On the first night, perhaps out of curiosity alone, all but one of them gathered to watch proceedings. *The Tempest*, I announced. *Act I, Scene i*, I added, and reminded them (though I hardly needed to) of the storm and the shipwreck.

But who will act it? the scholars asked, less inhibited than their German counterparts, looking around perhaps for a local Director of the British Council. You will be doing the acting, I explained.

There were several elderly scholars in the front row, not merely distinguished philologists: one had actually been put in prison by the Communist regime for using the British Council library in Bucharest. The young deferred to these doyens with great and

genuine respect. Unless the old professors moved, the young, even if ready, were unwilling to do so.

Having made my pitch, I suddenly realised to my dismay no one was going to play. I had not come up against such a stone wall since being confronted by that group of intransigent Mechanical Engineers at Ryerson who refused to study any literature at all. From January through to May, they never budged. What a wasted springtime it had been, to be dreading getting up in the mornings.

In Sinaia, in my panic, yes, O Socrates, better than your nay-sayer, my daemon came through with an idea of genius. Like John Kwan-Terry, Romania's elders such as Ioan Preda and Andrei Bantaş knew their Shakespeare inside out. I banked on that.

I will make a bargain with you, I said. I once acted in *The Tempest*: if anyone can guess the role I played you are free to spend the evening in the bar or, if you prefer, walk in the grounds of the royal palace of Peleş or read more of those translations of Eminescu by Sylvia Pankhurst you found so unrecognizable this morning.

The scholars all sat up: Shakespeare's characters: this was their meat and drink and they intended to show it. They took the stage. First the leading male roles: Prospero? Holy Gonzalo, honourable man? Surely not Caliban? No, not Caliban. But, of course, Ariel? No, not Ariel. Well, then, Naples, Milan? No, still no.

Thereafter, successively, amid growing laughter, the jester, the drunken butler? Who's left then? The Master? The Bosun? No? They left not a role behind. What about Billy Budd then? [More laughter].

A smart young woman lecturer, Corina Iordache maybe, roused further mirth by suggesting a Shakespearean answer: perhaps I had cross-dressed as Miranda? A good guess – I had been educated back in the Dark Ages of single sex boarding schools. But no, not Miranda.

Finally, when no roles remained, the scholars, becoming positively skittish, accused me of having them on. Cheat. Fraud. The party was warming up.

I held my fire. I reminded them of the promise they had made to act. They agreed on condition I kept fairly to my side of the bargain.

In Canterbury, long ago, in an ecclesiastical garden, I told them, in the revels dreamed up by Prospero to celebrate Miranda and Ferdinand's nuptials, I had once danced a *pavane*. That was in my role as...[I paused, they still didn't get it]... the First Nymph.

The room exploded into laughter and there were further reverberations as some wit dubbed my (thick-set) Edinburgh colleagues Second and Third Nymph respectively. To my great relief, the evening revels were definitely "on".

I proceeded to divide my actors into Sailors and Storm and set them to yell against one another. Can't hear. Louder. Still can't hear. Just Act I, scene i, again and again until the room was rocking and shipwrecked. Next evening, the old soak who had stayed in the bar, no thespian he nor ever teacher who had a vocation, turned up for the theatricals.

Cross Note.

G.K. Chesterton's Donkey had one far, fierce hour and sweet. And so did Bottom the Weaver. And so – theatrically – did I. My hour came at the Canadian Dominion Drama Festival Finals in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1960.

I was playing the part of Lieutenant Hibbert in the University of New Brunswick's production of R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* set in the trenches in World War I. Hibbert suffers from what was then sneeringly called funk, though we nowadays take a more

sympathetic view of what Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were telling us even at the time the soldiers were being put through.

Hibbert has only a few scenes, always tottering on the edge of a nervous breakdown (type-cast, they said). I don't know what possessed the audience of some 2,200 that night in Halifax, but, to my surprise since there had been no such reaction in previous performances, they burst into prolonged applause at the end of each of my cameo scenes.

Our director was delighted. He had visions – passed on to me – of my receiving the Festival's Best Supporting Actor award. It carried with it a scholarship to study at Stratford, Ontario. I held my breath as the Festival Adjudicator, Philip Hope-Wallace, drama critic of *The Guardian*, gave his assessment of the leading roles.

"There is no doubt the audience liked you very much indeed", he began when he finally came to Hibbert, "but...". But. That was one more road not taken. Thereafter, the closest I came to acting was being denounced – by a well-respected theatre director very much closer to home – for my classical role as a hypocrite.

I was perhaps fortunate to have been assigned the part of Hibbert at all. Drama was not given much credit at the provincial university, U.N.B., when I began my course there as an undergraduate. Students preferred variety shows with popular songs and kick-lines.

The previous year, however, Stephen Fay, in direct line from the Fays of the Abbey, had arrived on campus, touting the new wares of Osborne, Pinter, Beckett. At the same time a burly Canadian Football player, Mike Gordon, surprised everyone by throwing in his lot with theatre. Director Alvin Shaw proposed we do a comedy or something light from the repertory in the Fall semester and hope this would bring enough of the student audience back for a serious production in the Spring term.

It was not a comedy but a thriller, Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, that I first found myself in. I was playing the part of the phoney architect, Christopher Wren (typecast, they said as usual). Again this was a small part but important in that Wren has to set the chilling tone by becoming the first suspect in this particular murder case.

Once more, the audience on the first night showed itself to be a critical part of theatre performance. The Drama Society had been attracting 20 or 30 loyal followers to its shows. To our astonishment, as we assembled backstage, we were confronted with a full house and people still cramming in at the door.

I should add that, in addition to the burliest of football players, the Drama Society had also attracted to it the best-looking woman fresher of that year. Serious about theatre, she was playing the part of the landlady of the guest-house where the action is set.

The atmosphere in the crowded Memorial Hall theatre was electric as Christopher Wren breezes into the guest-house and, greeted by the landlady, seeks to establish his credentials as an architect. I throw out my arms as I look up, down, then all round the room before declaring somewhat affectedly: What lovely proportions.

I can only assume the excitement of having a full house caused my timing to be a shade too hurried as I turned to the landlady. To my horror, instead of a gripping silence, my opening remark was greeted by the audience with gales of laughter. Once an audience starts to laugh, it laughs at everything. The simplest sentence thereafter became funny.

Christopher Wren, like Hibbert, has to break down a scene or two later. With the Director audibly threatening to kill me if I ever came off-stage, I hardly needed to pretend a breakdown. I swear I felt the waves of laughter rolling in towards me as I collapsed on stage.

Fortunately, I did not share the fate of (the traduced) Canute, the tide held, turned and we had the thriller we wanted on our hands. The

following year, to the acclaim of the good, intelligent, sophisticated theatre-goers of Halifax, my career as a bit actor enjoyed a dizzying Icarian flight before plummeting to its journey's end.

Sinaia saw Ioana Petrescu, later an Australian poet, write her first poem in English, and Dan Popescu set off in pursuit of the amorous and other intrepid adventures of Paddy *Ill Met by Moonlight* Leigh-Fermor. Paddy's adventures began with his expulsion from King's Canterbury, school whose venerable ecclesiastical confines had proved too constricting for the irrepressible spirits of previous writers such as Kit Marlowe and Somerset Maugham - even, ye gods, where is he now, Hugh Walpole.

My last memory of the emeritus Andrei Bantaş, bespectacled and beaming, is in a woodland glade in the forest of Bazoş after a summer conference in Timișoara, a tape recorder in his hands, its plug trailing forlornly since there was no socket to plug it into.

We were – I was - intending more amateur theatricals during a picnic and Andrei had spent years dreaming of such midsummer's revels as he had been shunted around under the Ceaușescu regime. He had changed university five times and, so they told me, each time took a new wife.

It was in Timișoara too Rani was to produce her dramatic monologue *Cleopatra*, shorn of Antony, the title part played so convincingly by Jasmina Sazdovska from Macedonia, one member of the audience, Encarna Hidalgo, a Professor from Spain, at once booked it for a performance in her native Granada.

Shakespeare, as happy as Hamlet with the travelling players, can be perennially relied on as an old magic-show maker. But, contrary to Jan Kott's Polish experience, he was not always regarded as our contemporary in his own country. Both he and Dickens fell out of favour, blown from the Canon in the new Hippy Sixties universities

before twenty years later Mrs Thatcher, though no hipster she, also ordered the British Council to promote only up-to-date British Studies abroad.

From time to time employed as a lecturer by the British Council in the post-communist world, I had no difficulty meeting that requirement by choosing, among much else from Britain's increasingly diverse cultures, novels by the likes of Ishiguro, Rushdie and Mo, plays by Caryl Churchill and Stephen Poliakoff, poetry by Grace Nichols and John Agard and Linton Kwesi Johnson and from an arresting new anthology from the North of Ireland in which even editor Frank Ormsby's inclusion of himself was, *mirabile dictu*, justified.

Cross Note on Rushdie.

Sometimes after my temporary return to Ryerson asking old colleagues about their views on a particular novel, I was surprised when they quoted back to me what they said I had told them about it several years before: unrecognizable to me. Not only those who teach but those who write should be prepared for their words *to be modified in the guts of the living*.

After returning to Cambridge from a decade in Hungary on one-year contracts, apart from holding poetry workshops during the academic year, I ran some weekend seminars for the University's Adult Education Centre at stately Madingley Hall.

One seminar – on the Roma in English Literature – was well received and ran on and on as several participants went on to contact local Roma groups. Confoundingly, another seminar devoted to novels I knew almost by heart, *Kim*, *A Passage to India* and *The Satanic Verses*, was panned in several of the student evaluations. Teaching, like writing, is a rum game.

The most surprising reaction to *The Satanic Verses* did not come from a student at all. The novel had once, when originally published, aroused considerable controversy on account of the two short chapters that depict the *faux* Prophet Mohammed as a knockabout figure. A *fatwa* had been issued.

Rather sadly, the same people in Bradford and Bolton whom Rushdie had spoken up for when they were "Paki-bashed" now burned his novel as blasphemous. The good offices of Professor (these days additionally Lord) Bhikhu Parekh acting as a go-between having proved unavailing once everyone else got into the act and no-one listened to anybody else, Rushdie had perforce to accept the police protection provided by the real life counterpart of another of the figures remorsefully guyed in his novel, Mrs Torture.

The novel offers a brilliant kaleidoscope of contemporary cultural life in Britain and India in particular but, it may be argued, is actually truer to post-modern canons if the two satanic Arabian chapters (round which the rest concentrically circle) are removed. The hole in the middle of the po-mo donut.

I did make clear in advance at Madingley that, if any participant in the seminar supposed their sensibilities might be hurt by reading the putative satanic chapters (that were not about our topic of India anyway), they might omit them from their reading.

To my astonishment I got a phone-call from the British Council telling me Salman Rushdie had been on to them from New York. He was furious to hear that people had been told they could, if they so wished, leave out two chapters when reading his novel. He demanded a full explanation. I give it here.

Poetry workshops make nothing happen.

CHAPTER 7: SCHOLAR-GYPSIES

Budapest

I faintly recognized the student standing waiting in the corridor outside my office. He was a language student, not one of mine, but I had once been directed to him about some IT problem I had, as indeed I constantly have and was almost denied my PGCE on account of it.

I apologized to him for keeping him waiting but I was seeing a student of mine, Gabriella, who wanted me – at the thirteenth hour - to listen to the last chapter of her dissertation on Irish poet Medbh McGuckian before she submitted it.

This task wrapped up a little quicker than was my habit, I rose and again apologized to the lad in the corridor for the wait. No, do come in now, I said as Gabi gathered up her papers. Attila – such names they have in Hungary – looked me blankly: I am not waiting for you, he said, but for her.

In the course of time Atti and Gabi would get married. Shame on me, I never wrote them an epithalamion - writing occasional verses should be the very staple of poetry. At least I did manage a line or two on the birth of their first daughter, Anna.

I have been reflecting on the office of English teacher but what of the offices out of which we work and the considerable influence of whoever we share them with? The Head Teacher at the Sidney Stringer School I once visited in Coventry was never in his office, always floating through the overcrowded classrooms, lending a hand here and there. A university office, conversely, can become something of an *ad hoc* classroom – for its resident tenants as well as peripatetic students.

I shared an office at ELTE, the University of Budapest, with Ferencz Győző, poet. He worked for the Europa publishing house and,

though engaged to teach Hungarian Literature, he had also taught English Language - on the hoof – in a secondary school out in working class Csepel. Nursery rhymes, Christmas carols, Irish ballads, whatever came to *samizdat* hand.

When Győző asked me about whether he should switch permanently into university teaching from publishing – either position in the new capitalist dispensation too poorly paid to support the young family he had – I advised him to do so: the university could only be on the up and up. I didn't know what I was talking about and turned out to be quite wrong. He has never held it against me.

A diffident self-effacing younger man, he advised me against learning the Hungarian language on the grounds that even Hungarians were weighed down by it. Shamefacedly, I seem to be congenitally incapable of learning a language: Győző acted as my translator. I am indebted to him for his generosity.

What I know of Hungarian – as occasionally of British and Irish - literature and culture is mediated – much of it while gossiping in the office – by way of his drôle ironical soul.

Rather fortuitously for me, the Fall of the Berlin Wall coincided with the time in life at 50 when I might have expected to be unemployable. As it was, Rani and I had pioneered in China the contemporary British Studies both Deng Xiao Ping and Mrs Thatcher favoured. We were in pole position to develop and promote them further in Eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall came down and the Wessies went in.

When I had gone for the China Interview at the British Council, one interviewer asked what would happen to the Cambridge Poetry Workshop without me, and another, perfectly pleasantly, observed he had never before interviewed a postman.

When I went there next to apply for a job in Eastern Europe, I was taken aback while sitting in the waiting-room when the door was flung open and the representative from Warsaw said: Don't let them send you to Hungary, John, come to Poland.

As I entered the room for the interview, desperate for any job, in Siberia if need be, the chairman (the eponymous instigator of Cross Notes) greeted me with: I've never seen you with a tie on before.

Roy Cross proceeded without further ado to recommend, or command, that we go to Budapest. There were more theatres there for Rani to perform her plays in than in the two smaller towns in Poland where posts were available. *The evenings lengthen – a flutter – and they are gone.*

One curiosity of our assignment to Budapest was that, as a schoolboy, I had been one of two pupils collecting (186) signatures protesting the refusal of our school's *ex officio* Chairman of Governors, the Red Dean of Canterbury, to condemn the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956. To our surprise we encountered a core of refusals in dissident, perhaps anarchist, Grange House where David Buchan actually drafted verses celebrating the Dean as a valued institution.

My father also valued the Dean for being a robust Christian socialist in his Manchester days as well as a cleric who had got out into the world. As for David, he was the only boy who ever terrified the astute and brilliant Head, Fred Shirley, facing him down with his direct gaze during prayers in the Chapter House. David later took his own life, one more in a growing list I have never counted and would be too afraid to try and account for.

The summer previous to the British Council interview that took us to Budapest, I had had a taste of Europe's East at Professor Fisiak's famous (sleepless) three-week summer school at Poznan, an annual affair for all graduating English majors in Poland. As a younger Hungarian colleague intrepid enough to cross the border into

Romania would later remark of the dinner following an English literature conference in Timișoara: This is more like a Hungarian wedding. Poznań likewise.

As for the literary knowledge, at my first poetry workshop, I quickly turned the question back to the group of students sitting in a courtyard when they asked me to read the Anglo-Saxon of my favourite starting-point: *Caedmon's Hymn*.

There was a large young man seated four-square at the back looking as dull and out of place as Thurber's cartoon football character struggling to answer any question that would enable him to enter Ohio State University. Tomasz, I think his name was, read it far better than I ever could... Just as well I asked. He turned out to be Professor Fisiak's star student.

As I was to learn, Eastern Europe was dotted with elderly scholars who, living under Communism, had forgotten more about English language and literature than had ever been known to the suited, booted young men – why always men? – who, post-1989, frequently breezed blithely through touting British Studies. On occasion it was embarrassing. As Harriet Harvey-Wood, Head of the British Council's ever threatened Literature Department, had advised about British Studies: *Festina lente*.

Hungary conspired to preserve my record of never having been promoted. Its creaky bureaucracy was such the one – adjunct - post allowed to a foreign teacher was that of lowly *lektor*. As befitting my allotted position, I was careful to ask my senior colleagues what books they would really value having. Invariably concerned with Shakespeare, Dickens and suchlike, these I included among the orders for the contemporary works younger staff were happy to join me in promoting.

Taking a small box of sought-after books down the Department corridor as gifts from the British Council was a sight more tangible

than the whole libraries of notional acquisitions the European Union was offering through loans of millions of euros.

Everything was political. The very building we were in had been requisitioned from the Church under Communism – its chapel divided into two floors - and the Church wanted restitution.

Within weeks of my arrival, we invited an old friend from the Drama Academy in Shanghai to come and lecture on the way a Shakespeare play is translated into Peking or Beijing Opera.

“Victor” Yu Wejie, then studying for a doctorate in Wagner’s Bayreuth, gave his lecture at Charles University in Prague before taking the train for Budapest. In vain did I wait for him at the Keleti Pályaudvar.

The Border Guards at remote Szob, unfamiliar with foreigners and as welcoming as the Berlin Wall, hauled Victor off the train, impounded his passport as false, locked him in a room, refused him contact with the world outside and packed him back on the next train to Prague.

My new colleagues, raised from their beds as together with an unhesitating lecturer, Szalay Kriszta, I knocked at their doors all over the city, quickly divided into two camps. There were those who were unhappy if Victor had a false passport and those who were unhappy if it was genuine. While fake passports were now no longer in order, under a Communist Government, it was explained to me, they had become a badge of honour, genuine ones a sign of ingratiation with the Authorities.

My serious concerns were alleviated by an anarchic colleague who, immersed in Joyce and familiar with every house in every street in Dublin, celebrated every Bloomsday in Bloom’s ancestral Szombathely.

On his Saturday morning chat show, the irrepressible Takács Feri, a Takács Quartet all in himself, followed a Border Guard officer who, when quizzed, had referred to the many Chinese arriving in Hungary on false passports. Pressed further, the officer admitted that Victor's was in fact the first he had spotted but, he affirmed, there would be many more in the future.

Thereupon Feri warmly congratulated the officer on his talent. A man with such a vivid imagination ought not to be stuck in a bureaucratic job on the border, he said. He should be teaching Irish literature in Budapest.

A public apology was never made but the discrete word reached us that Victor, whatever the provenance of his passport, would not be stopped if he made his way to us via the main Vienna rail line.

Eventually, belatedly, our British Studies students did have the benefit of hearing a riveting lecture on how the passions in *Othello* and *Macbeth* are translated into the colourful face paintings and the nine permitted scenes of a Beijing Opera.

When Feri had been going to England for the first time – knowing Feri, possibly without any sort of passport at all – Professor Emeritus Ruttkay Kálmán said to him: Don't miss going on to Ireland, *people* live there.

Ireland's (knotted) tie to what poet Brendan Kennelly (when I once shared a poetry reading with him in Bedford) referred to jocularly as the Mother Country meant that for the British Council expanding into Eastern Europe in a literary way it was also inescapable. Feri's Joyce. Győző's Yeats. Zombory Erzsi's Beckett.

Erszi's Beckett, that is, if you hadn't yet encountered itinerant Plymouth bookseller Jeremy Parrott ensconced, hawklike, among his vast collection in "Red" Szeged, believing he was - as an unrivalled examination of Beckett's onomastics revealed him to be – an incarnation of Sam.

So extensive is the Romantic myth of Ireland that not only did the Poles refer to themselves as the Irish of Eastern Europe but so (vis-à-vis the stiff-necked and imperialist Austrians) did the Hungarians. That is, until you reached the Romanian border. There it was the Romanians (vis-à-vis the stiff-necked and imperialist Hungarians) who claimed to be the Irish of Eastern Europe.

Chinese Shakespeare was not our only Shakespearean novelty. Rani hit back at Shakespeare with a two-hander called *Shakespeare and Me*. Based on the scenes between Celia and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, it used the relationship between a feminist young woman seeking to enter the Hungarian Drama Academy and her feminine friend with an abusive skinhead boyfriend as an occasion to update a series of the Bard's set pieces: hence the Seven Ages of Woman and so on.

Her minimalist stage required only a bust of Shakespeare – to be draped in a Hungarian flag. Rani sought the services of an old sculptor living further up our road in the Buda hills, Széher út. She willingly agreed to make a bust for the play but when Rani went to get it, she, like Pygmalion, had fallen in love with her Shakespeare Bácsi and wouldn't part with it. Fortunately, one of the actors was a dab hand with papier-mâché.

The old lady was not eccentric. Shakespeare, by way of the 19th century translations of Arany János, is often accounted the national poet of Hungary. For old Baron Hatvany this was also true but in his case by way of Goethe's German translations. On his death-bed the Baron was finally moved to read *King John* in its original form. It's almost as good in English, he observed.

Nadásdy Ádám, Head of the composite English Department when I arrived in Budapest, commiserated with me. You English are stuck with Shakespeare in the original Elizabethan English, we can translate him afresh for each new generation. Which Ádám promptly

did – a baker’s dozen at my last count (including both parts of *Henry IV*) – aimed, as he put it, at school kids in Szolnok.

My arrival in Budapest was a small part of the expansion of not only the European Union but also the Empire of English. Ádám was the Head just long enough to advise me – in an unaccustomed role for me as functionary – which other universities in the country I should visit with a view to staffing them with a British Studies post and stuffing them with accompanying resources.

The English Department split into a trinity of Linguistics (Ádám’s academic field), Literature (including an art critic, Kunos Láci, and a whole History Department in himself called Lojkó Miklós) and Language (all the teachers of Russian in the country being retrained to teach English).

It was Ádám, always the man of letters and raconteur, who told me the story of a colleague of ours in the Philosophy Department, Bence György. Ádám told the story sitting beneath a framed poster advertising a performance of *Tosca* directed by his father in Florence in 1938. While I hoped this was not the same day Mussolini showed Hitler around the city, that ominous misalliance cast its shadow over the story he had to tell.

At the time when Bence was a new young lecturer, a leading publisher proposed to bring out an edition of the best Hungarian translations of Plato’s dialogues. Bence was assigned the daunting task of approaching the renowned Classicist and Orientalist, Telegdi Zsigmond.

Old Professor Telegdi’s version of *The Symposium* - the great dialogue on Love that had moved Shelley to do a translation of it into English - was reckoned to be the best. Unaccountably, it contained some elementary mistakes. It could not be published without revision.

The young Bence approached the revered Telegdi in some trepidation. He explained the purpose of his visit, blurting out some excuse about revisions being needed on account of newer scholarly findings. His request to amend the text was gently refused, though met, to his surprise, not with indignation but an understanding smile.

Telegdi explained that his translation had been done bit by bit, pencil stub by stub, in a labour camp for Jews and others categorized as Undesirables in the Second World War. It was mostly translated from memory with little or no help from the usual scholarly reference materials. It had been undertaken as a labour of love to remind its translator that there was a world where love did exist.

Bence, speechless on hearing this, agreed whole-heartedly no changes should be made. So did the publisher.

As an exemplary tale of the human spirit, this story was matched – and more - by one told me by Győző. Like Telegdi and on account of the same racial prejudice, the poet Radnóti Miklós was propelled into labour camps in the War. Just as these were being liberated, he was unlucky to be in a last batch of internees force-marched into and across Hungary to a Nazi death camp.

Radnóti was one of a dozen wretches massacred near the village of Abda. After the War ended, villagers pointed out the site of the mass grave and the bodies were exhumed. Poems in a little black notebook found in the coat pocket of one of the dead together with a locket containing a photo of his wife identified him as Radnóti.

Somehow Radnóti was writing poems up to the moment the man marching next to him stumbled and was shot. His record of this could have been a description of his own death.

That he was managing to scribble poems at all in such unpropitious circumstances, let alone assume they could ever survive, quite literally blows the mind. They too had to be published as they were – that is, as closely as their tattered remnants allowed.

The #7 bus stop where, nearly half a century later, I began my journey home across town every evening stood opposite a large Maria Theresa yellow building. During the War this had been the 14th District H.Q. of the Arrow Cross, the particularly nasty Hungarian variant of Nazi bully-boys.

In the basement of this building, a doctor, Berend Miklós, who had sheltered Jews in his hospital when it was a fashionable Arrow Cross sport to push them into the Danube, had his face smashed in beyond recognition while his wife was interrogated in an adjoining room.

As Szép Ernő, one who exceptionally survived this time to write about it in *The Smell of Humans*, replied whenever asked who he was: I was Szép Ernő.

Fanni Gyarmati, widow of the murdered poet Radnóti, also survived the time, having kept a diary before and all through the War. She lived to be 100 but, unlike the Ancient Mariner, she did not buttonhole anyone at all, let alone a wedding-guest, to tell her harrowing tale.

While she was alive, only one person had access to her diaries: Győző. He taught Yeats, *silly like us*, but even the rough beast slouching towards Jerusalem to be born must have paled into insignificance.

Happily those times were behind us, or so we supposed. Fascists gone. Communists gone. Though Feri affected some affection for the days when Hungary had been the happiest barracks in the Communist camp – how can those who haven't known the Kadar regime know how sweet life can be? - we were going all gung-ho for a liberal democracy.

British Studies offered a kaleidoscope of lecturers, young and old, scientists as well as humanists from all over Hungary and Britain culminating in a series billed as *Inside Two Cultures*.

This series brought back to Hungary an array of distinguished Hungarians who had settled in Britain after being driven away in the ‘Thirties, the ‘Fifties, or the ‘Seventies - a distinct class distinction in itself.

The stories of these exiles - often of experiencing a good many more than two cultures of various sorts – did not draw the expected audiences. Whether Határ Győző plastering Hungarian poems over café walls in Hampstead or entrepreneur Zollmann Péter, having finished the Channel tunnel, hurrying from Bristol to Cambridge to defend his use of poetastering as a rhyme word in one of his ballad translations, they were considered to have abandoned the Magyar *szülőföld*.

We should have seen the warning signs. By the time Győző came to submit his unique (what scholars would call definitive) dissertation to the gerrymandered Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Radnóti Miklós and his immortal story had fallen out of favour with the all-too-mortal reigning Dunces.

Radnóti’s manuscripts, offered round by Fanni, were so left going begging they might just as well have reinterred his iconic notebook at Abda. Győző, his own man, neither anti-semitic nor politically committed to any clique, was pushed – metaphorically on this occasion - into the Danube.

British Studies aimed to offer parity of perspectives on and from the four founding national British cultures, branching out thereafter into a wider multicultural picture embracing questions of class, “race” and gender.

On a visit to Budapest, Michael Longley, having read from his collection *Wreaths*, poems about individuals known to him who had been killed in The Troubles in Belfast, electrified the students when, in answer to a question, he replied coolly and dramatically that few

causes were worth the loss of an arm, a hand, a finger, a finger-nail, let alone a life. They were excuses to murder.

Among our other visitors for the Cultures series was George Szirtes (*Sir-tees*). A fine translator as well as teacher and poet, the very story of his name tells us something about translation. He was born in Hungary as Szirtes Gábor (*Seer-tesh Garbor*) or Gabi (diminutive also of Gabriel).

Taken to England as a boy after the 1956 Uprising, he found his name was unfamiliar to the tongue there and he was called George instead (curiously this happening to be his second name). By the time he returned to Hungary, his name was translated as Szirtes György (*Seer-tesh Di-urge*).

George's contribution to the Cultures series was to talk about translating poetry, including his own translation of Rakovsky Zsuzsa's moving elegy for a friend lost in the Underworld: *They were burning dead leaves...* George asked us to think back too to Nashe: *Brightness falls from the air...*

For an overlooked and undervalued culture such as Hungary's, the double-headed Janus of translation has to be a richly creative activity, difficult because (as I argued in an essay Győző kindly translated and published in *Nagyvilág*) the finest poetry demands the total freedom *ex nihilo* that translation necessarily forestalls.

As counterpoint to the flutes of autumn and all the other undertones, we organized, in the absence as yet of any grand schemes such as Erasmus, our own improvised exchange of students writing poetry.

English being the medium, many more students went George's way to the Norwich School of Art, informally "lost" in his writing workshops – while squatting in the apartments of those few who had ventured into our Mysterious East.

It is comforting to flatter oneself by remembering the good moments when students responded to one's teaching. There are always countless other students who endured classes quietly and vanished from sight, happier with teachers down the corridor taking quite other approaches.

And then there was the Somi Panni affair. Panni was a budding dancer of Indian classical forms. She submitted an undergraduate dissertation on, I think, 19th century theatre in English in India. I was asked by the then Head of Department, Peter Ágnes, to be the examiner.

There is a problem about such a subject in that, while lists of performances can be gleaned from newspapers, detailed accounts of them and their quality are few and far between, if extant at all.

Modestly approached, these sort of research difficulties can be partly resolved. Unfortunately, the dissertation was presented in a slovenly way and poorly, if at all, proof-read: titles of well-known plays garbled. It deserved no more than the 3/5 that indicates a pass but little more.

The next thing Ági knew, she had received a blistering attack on my integrity and competence from the student, who cited the fact that she had an extensive library of her own on the subject. Ági was most embarrassed since I was not only a guest but vital conduit to the ascendant British Council.

Asked to respond, I too invoked my guest status and, to Ági's relief, offered to stand down and leave resolution of the matter to a referee or fresh examiner. The dissertation was put into the hands of *eminence rouge*, Sarbu Aladár, last Head of Department under the Communist régime.

Aladár had his own agenda and, probably unwittingly, had the last laugh on both Panni and I. The dissertation was not merely poorly

written: it should never have been approved as a topic since there was no-one in the Department competent to examine it.

On the other side of the balance sheet, Győző remarked on the way some of the more awkward or ill-fitting students were attracted to our writing workshops – as had been the case with Fred Cogswell's.

Step forward the aptly surnamed Faragó Kálmán, with his penchant for sticking challenges to flytinges on our door and fellow poet of the Friday afternoon *Handful of Plums* anthology, Kovács Kinga, shy but, with pen in hand, as dextrously sinister as behoves an underground Tilos Rádió staffer.

Who else but Kinga, back from a wildcat trip to Wales, would call a translated anthology of Welsh poetry she edited *moving wails*? Or dedicate a Friday afternoon (dear God, Friday afternoon) workshop anthology, *Handful of Plums*, with (in part) this character sketch:

Long beard?/ White./ Wine?/ No, beer./ In the past?/ No future./ It's tense./ mood?/ Brew ha ha./ Mug?/ Looking-glass./ Lacking proper glasses?/ Abolish classes./ Left?/ That's partly right./ but hey, I'm getting spent./ Kent?/ No, no smoking./ Bent?/ No, his spine/ is fine now,/ I think./ (thank god)./ Buddha?/ You're a real pest...

Another student, Németh Robert, used a course evaluation form to suggest an introductory poetry course should not have been planned so deliberately. Teaching being the spontaneous overflow of [ah] immense knowledge, better for the teacher to act simply as a compass pointing to where best to look in a library.

In the classroom, he concluded, a piece of chalk to hand, the teacher should pull from his fine leather case - besides the half-eaten ham sandwich, ballpoint pen and hankies, though those too might provide miracles - books full of poems, one of which on its appointed day will do the trick.

Occasionally a student turned up so confident and mature she demanded attention as if she were a colleague. Katona Zsuzsa from Bucharest made her striking initial appearance at a British Studies lecture one day and ended up editing *Inside Two Cultures*. Ended up? The last I heard from her, her multilingual children were demonstrating for Arab rights – in Arabic and Hebrew - outside their primary school in Israel.

One year, when Győző was off in Ohio championing the right of Weöres Sándor and other Hungarian household names to be more widely heard while his wife Kati was experiencing the fact that foodstuffs such as *töporityü* were equally neglected, Scott Long, gay in every sense of the word, lighted into our office to take up residence.

During Scott's time there, several students nervously, shyly, discretely, came out as gay. One was Zombory Erzsi's talented son, Gerevich András, a poet of the new generation already translating Seamus Heaney's poems. We were visited, too, by our own son: *The nude green valley below us, the birds cruising the sky... trading resentments for flowers.*

Another outcomer there was Sándor Beáta, a student who, in an introductory literature class of mine given over to the writing of parodies and other miscellanea, had chosen to respond to George Barker's *Lyric XXVI* by writing her own *On Unlearning Not to Speak*.

Long after we had left Budapest, I received from her the sort of letter that would move any teacher. She wrote that at the year's end she had the strange wish to let me know that she remembered so many things, that my classes meant a lot to her and she was glad I had lived in that city and we had met.

CHAPTER 8: ON THE SOUTH MOUNTAIN

China

The graduate students of Corpus Linguistics at Henan Normal University in the rural heartlands of China, were dismayed. Their Dean, Li Wenzhong, had proposed they set aside valued study time to take poetry and theatre workshops from a couple of foreign teachers.

Some students like Liu Guobing pleaded exemption on grounds of dissertation research: as ample compensation he gave me Englished versions of poems declaring his pride in his peasant father whose *beautiful poems were published in the fertile field* and on whose *back he could step to find a way home*.

I understood the corralled students' dismay. When our friend Rukmini Bhaya turned up at Clare Hall in Cambridge to write a dissertation in Literature and switched to Linguistics, I had been disconcerted.

Theory barely yet practised and decolonisation far in the future, Eng. Lit. had become almost as venerable – and vulnerable - as Classics or Divinity and some of us, like the proverbial hedgehog, knew – and in my case still know - only one thing.

Rani and I were in Henan because one day from across a desk in the Cambridge English Faculty library, a young woman had shouted my name (in a loud whisper). Remember me? she asked. Singapore! No. Fishing – teach me how to fish – I had guessed wrong. Shanghai it was.

Liang Xiaodong had been in one of the classes we had given to students at the Foreign Languages Institute, in the days when it was being made over as Shanghai International Studies University.

“Little Bottle” Deng was opening China up to the world (the world fondly assuming it was about to enjoy the rich pickings of the Chinese market).

The students in Shanghai had come from all over China. Hu Xiaomin, P.L.A. officer and our monitor, led the chorus of hisses that arose whenever some student taking my course in 20th Century British Poetry fell back into the habit I had declared anathema of asking for a writer’s biographical details: *Gossip, gossip, gossip*. This memoir is itself a prime example of the gossip that is but fluff compared with the true stuff of poetry.

I recall two small cultural curiosities about being a teacher in Shanghai. Students consulting you in your office would draw a chair up so close to you they were almost sitting in your lap. Private space was at a discount. Bob Cooper, a Glaswegian from Jordanhill, was perplexed shortly after his arrival to come upon a student rifling his desk to find their essay. Simple, Bob. The essay belonged to the student, they wanted it back.

Bob was even more stupified when a hotel was made to disappear from under his feet. He had gone to Beijing to join his wife at the end of a tour a party from Britain was making. The rest of the party had left the hotel for an early morning flight back home and when sole remaining occupants Bob and his wife got up rather later to go down to breakfast they found the baseless fabric of lobby, shop and cafeteria had all vanished into thin air.

Best guess was hotels elsewhere had been overbooked so two floors of a new building had been smartly requisitioned, made up like a stage set to accommodate them and dismantled immediately after their departure. Magic realism, Bob.

It was not a general cultural trait but a personal idiosyncrasy of Xiaomin’s friend Yu Zhenping to find everything I said very funny. Years later from Birmingham, the West by then having opened up to the ever-expanding Celestial Empire, she sent me her own

versions of some mundane Buddha verse-fables I had once written. This was one example of the constant reminder I have had that, if not quite gossip, scribbly verses I have penned have often gained greater attention than my immortal poems.

Cross Note.

The verse fables in *The Buddha at Kamakura*, originally composed to draw our little son each day out of a family toilet required by his school-going sisters, have been picked up, translated and published in Romanian, Hungarian (twice, one bilingual version shelved in Tarr Dániel's digital Buddhist library) and, most wonderfully, Japanese, with one odd verse (on the spider) even appearing in Malayalam.

When Yoshiko Motegi, the Japanese translator, advised me that the nature of Japanese was such that the meaning of the verses might change radically at times, I replied that that was appropriately *zen*. One reader of her Japanese versions went further: it would be impossible, he said, to translate them into English. For those wishing to argue the toss, Shueisha in Tokyo published a bilingual edition.

Back in Shanghai, Sun Jian Jun, cartoonist (his snake: I am twisty for the ways are twisty), relished the role of Mak the Sheep-Stealer in our medieval Christmas revels. Fang Zheliang, played Zhang Dahu, the rich first husband in Rani's English production in translation of *Panjinlian*, a feminist compendium bringing together on stage many of the traduced heroines of traditional Chinese literature.

The mass sit-in protest by students in China's geomantic centre, Tian'anmen, happened bang in the middle of our time there, the Government, after long struggle sessions in the Praesidium, sending

in tanks to crush it while we were mucking in with our students in a common bath-house at a Workers holiday home in Wushi.

The students bent on returning to join the resistance in a Shanghai brought to an absolute standstill, every crossroads blocked, Rani and I found ourselves spending our Silver Wedding anniversary in sweltering heat wedged in a train at Nanxiang, delayed for hours by the burning of another train in Shanghai ahead of us.

Occasionally, a message would reach me from London asking me to report any cases I came across of English books being pirated. This request struck me as being wholly counterproductive to my brief of spreading the word about contemporary Britain and its literature after several decades of China being utterly closed to the West.

For my students, impoverished teachers from every corner of the country, a single book in English was worth its weight in jade, and I did whatever I could to make sure they each had as much as possible to take home with them.

In later years I would write a monograph concerning the way Macmillan's had once prosecuted an equally impoverished bookseller in Leicester for cyclostyling for the edification of working people cheap hand-scribbled pirate copies of a poem Macmillan's would have originally found too impious to publish: FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of 'Omar Khayyám*.

Among our students in Shanghai, Yao Dan, after acting the part of Nora in Rani's *After Nora Left Home*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* having inspired other sequels in China, was moved not only to take on the name Nora but to adopt a female orphan child.

Nora stayed in university life but Fang Zheliang's work unit determined he should become a banker. He still felicitates his old teachers on the annual Teachers Day - instituted to paper over the treatment of teachers humiliated during the Cultural Revolution. The

Revolution was then still an open wound in people's memories, three of which Rani picked for stories that remain a lively living record.

At least some of the students, including Liang Xiaodong, did go on to become the English teachers the Shanghai programme intended them to be. Come back again to China, said Xiaodong years later in the sentimental way old students do before vanishing back into their own busy lives.

On this occasion - happy exception - we found ourselves back in China, although in an altogether different region. Not in commercial Shanghai, now unrecognisably cosmopolitan from the time we knew it, but in the rural heartlands on the Wei River, tributary to the mighty Yellow. Not much frequented by foreigners and hence our welcome presence there.

Timothy Mo, in his comic novel *Sour Sweet*, parodies a common Western stereotype when he has a traditional Chinese woman in South London bewail the fact that all the foreign faces she sees look alike, lacking the great diversity of Chinese physiognomies. As for faces, so too for our students and their teachers.

Li Wenzhong was and is a distinguished Corpus Linguist – or should I say Linguisticist? Key words are part of it, aren't they? Joe Horváth in Pécs once put me to the test of recording me speaking out loud and then asking me what I supposed was the commonest word I used. He gave a thin smile as he told me it was the word: I. Oh dear.

Wenzhong had run a poetry magazine while a student in Xi'an and then, on a sabbatical year in Singapore, had been intrigued to come across creative writing workshops being offered in the National University. Was this a case of an old ghost coming back to haunt me?

Cross Note.

Twenty years previously I had offered creative writing classes at the National University of Singapore, Heng Siok Tian notably stretching the villanelle form to include filmic Japanese aircraft coming in to bomb Singapore on Friday nights. *Torah, torah!*

Siok would go one better in doing an Edward Thomas on us by writing a dedicatory poem to her teachers, poet Arthur Yap and I, comparing words to scholar-gypsies that *leave no clue/ whether they will housecall again,/ tickle your imagination/ and let you sit up in the middle of the night/ wondering about their next destination/ and your own condition.*

More flamboyantly, Ovidia Yu (attended by her augur Daphne Pan) wrote a deliciously subversive story about a couple of conventional parents giving birth to a hibiscus bush. Lucy Cavendish offered her a place in Cambridge on the strength of it – that is, until some literal-minded bureaucrat in Mill Lane decreed that, for entry into graduate studies, a Hibiscus Bush required an Honours degree. They withdrew their offer: bad karma.

No matter. Ovidia's modest hibiscus bush has recently sprouted, at last count, eight mystery stories based on various trees, frangipani through rambutan. Lucy's loss...

Wenzhong assured his students they would not, contrary to their expectations, be wasting their time by engaging in literary workshops. You will never ever forget them, he said, giving Rani and I an entirely free hand.

So did Li Qiufa in the Foreign Office, his wife studying ballet in Moscow while he allowed us to waltz through Henan with no other restrictive minder than our Chinese-speaking daughter, Anita. So perish all stereotypes. *Ganbei.*

To calm the nerves of my prospective poetry workshop students I wrote up on the blackboard a poem I had tried to write in Chinese. The handwriting of the characters they could see was infantile and the understanding of prosody woefully lacking. After they had had their fun, somewhat suppressed since laughing at any teacher, let alone a foreign guest teacher, is simply not done, they began to get the point. Now, I said, it's your turn.

I set the students some simple subject or other to write about during the following week: on my path across the campus, on looking out of my window, on seeing my grandparents, on leaving the station for home, or some such prompt and left them to it. No formal requirements.

When they returned a week later, I sat the students in a circle and had them read out whatever they had written. If not a full piece, in verse or prose, at least a line. No public comment permitted. From me or anyone. Just a read-in. Read your own work out loud. Listen to the others. I took in the writings and suggested a further subject, the same pattern of a read-in to be repeated.

Comment was permitted only once participants, growing confident and comfortable, insisted on it. Initially too, only words of encouragement or comments that spoke to general points such as the choice of clichéd adjectives or use of weak rhymes. By return I got such delights as “tricky wind”, “happy grass”, “simple day”, “little bits of winter”, “as capricious as a kaleidoscope”.

My own critical suggestions, always tentative, were scribbled privately on individual papers. This was a doubly secure encryption since, as Public Health student Paterson had confided at his Ryerson graduation, none of my students could read my handwriting with its picky criticisms, only know that their work was being read closely.

A time came to introduce the possibilities of form, something well enough known from the Chinese tradition. The real language of men

in English was not available nor was the sound of iambic stresses (even though many students could sing English nursery rhymes).

The staple assignment of any poetry writing workshop I have offered is an update or translation of a poem from another time or place that participants have enjoyed. Any such positive response suggests they could give tongue in their own words to something similar. Works in - or out of - the Canon are thus helpful points of departure.

Hou Linmei was impelled by Caedmon's example to compose her own alliterative hymn to creation - before excusing herself from classes for as long as it took for her family back home to get in the harvest. Li Qian, whose football-playing boyfriend had explained to her the meaning of the word "nutmeg", went head to head with William Carlos Williams in finding Thirteen (brilliant) Ways of Looking at a Poem that "rests on snowflakes".

There were moving poems about family and friends – and strangers; love lost, found, even laughed about; concrete poems in the shape of a Chinese character, a smoking cigarette, a Buddha's foot; a "breathless" poem that ran on and on – and on – breathlessly bemoaning the fact it was impossible to write such a poem.

Over the period of a 14-week term even the most nervous student had two or three efforts to be proud of. China's Open Door Policy had opened doors. My own role was essentially that of a light-touch editor.

We began to decorate the drab walls of the classroom with these poems and, once the walls were filled up, the equally drab walls of the corridors outside. Democracy Wall. Some visiting American students expressed their admiration - to the delight of the Henan students (not high-fliers from Beijing or Shanghai, remember).

That said, the building was shared with other Faculties and sometimes poems were taken down, went missing. The poems must be good, I told the students, people are stealing them to take home.

No doubt other explanations crossed their minds but the Dean insisted on giving the poems renewed life in booklet form. We never knew our students as people, he said, until they wrote poems in English. Neither did I. As I read them again now in the booklet *Henan Harvest* I feel humbled they gave, as Alden Nowlan citing Scott Fitzgerald had said a writer should give, so much of themselves.

Wenzhong's comment was the more gratifying coming from a linguisticist. So too was his further comment that he had noticed the Department's driver and I, on one festive occasion, toasting each other and talking gibberish intimately in our respective languages.

One striking image of an English teacher is that of Frank in the engaging Liverpool play, *Educating Rita*, his exemplary views on life and literature masked by his alcoholism. After an admittedly grand farewell meal with some graduating HeSheDa students at a local restaurant one evening, I had to be carried home legless, my arms round the shoulders of two of them.

Legless I was on that festive occasion but not on account of the lavish meal we two *zhōngguó péngyǒu* had been kindly entertained to: my lower back had given way. It was put right miraculously quickly next day by Dr Han - as remarkable a figure in peacetime in a shabby, overcrowded hospital as Canadian Norman *The Scalpel and the Sword* Bethune had been during the Civil Wars in both Spain and China.

Hey presto, Dr Han's fingers at once found the requisite pressure points. Since I was manifestly back on my feet so soon, my story of injury did not stand up with the gossip-mongers.

I did supervise one student, Jiang Shichang (aka Tuchang), in his dissertation on the three Thomases, Edward, Dylan and R.S. My aim in China was to encourage students to use their knowledge of the great tradition of Chinese poetry to read and provide fresh insights into English poetry. I never got very far with this. Students

invariably wished to know what the correct English reading was of the English – or Welsh – poets. I wonder how Empson dealt with this unambiguous view during his years in China?

Wenzhong asked me to meet occasionally with school teachers of English whose job must have been as heart-breaking in rural Henan as those teaching French in rural Suffolk. In answer to a question one day, they were taken aback when I suggested to them that they might have more in common with teachers the world over than with business people in Shanghai or Guangzhou. Did these *zhōngguó rén* all dream of being urban entrepreneurs?

Perhaps so. Fred Cogswell gave me my first chance of running a writing workshop at a summer school in rural Nova Scotia in 1966. To my surprise not a few of the participants wrote about living a prosperous life in Hollywood. Fred himself has a poem where a country couple play out their love-making as surrogates of Betty Grable and Rock Hudson.

It was at a remote university in a truly rural part of Henan somewhere south of the mercurial Huang He where I gave not the workshop I would have preferred but a requested guest lecture. It had as unexpected an effect as the one I gave at Ryerson with blood all over my face.

The lecture hall was packed with several hundred students, few of whom spoke English but were apparently curious to see a foreigner from Xu Zhimo's Jiànqiáo. I lectured on contemporary British literature, as packed with graphic examples as the hall was with students. Since it was something of a mini-anthology, at the end of the lecture I said I would leave all my papers on the lectern for the benefit of those students who knew some English and were interested in literature.

As I walked away, the entire hall descended on the lectern and tore the papers to shreds, every last one of the students apparently wanting a share of the action. Did they suppose I had been talking

about the dead poets and wished to propitiate them with *jīnzhǐ* or joss papers to burn? As it was, living British poets were *scattered...and wholly given over to unfamiliar affections*.

What credit could Rani and I take from our writing workshops in Henan? At one point the provincial TV station had come and lived with us every working hour for two whole days. When all the footage was cut to a half-hour cultural programme, what we saw as much as anything was two foreigners industriously learning how to write in Chinese characters and paint in the Chinese style.

Perhaps all our peregrinations around the world should have been like that. *Qīng qīng de wǒ zǒu le...*

CHAPTER 9: ENVOI

Bangladesh

The Archivist at the Tagore Museum at Shantiniketan checked his computer database first for “George” – plenty of those – and then for “Thompson” – that drew a blank. When did you say he was here?

George Thompson was a guest of the Tagores, I said slowly and with emphasis, who went up-country unarmed as a matter of pacifist principle in 1857. 1857, I repeated pointedly. It didn’t ring a bell. 1857’s too early, the Archivist replied, Rabindranath was born in 1861.

I had been accompanying Rani as she made a grand progress through North India, lecturing on her plays and holding drama workshops. My own role had largely been confined to carrying her excess baggage – without the advantage of the many elephants Bishop Heber had once enjoyed.

Arrived at Tagore’s sylvan campus where wandering bauls sang their mystical songs under the trees, I thought I might offer a talk on the Bengali experiences of a radical British figure I had come across among dusty papers in Manchester’s John Rylands Library.

George Thompson, M.P. for Tower Hamlets, both an abolitionist with a price on his head and a champion of aboriginal rights, had twice been an honoured guest of the Tagore family in the mid-19th century.

Having consigned 1857 to the dustbin of history, the Archivist, presiding over a Museum that gives prominent place to the award of the Nobel Prize to Rabindranath – it made him feel like a cat with a tin-can tied to its tail, Tagore said – asked if I could give a talk instead on cricket. This I did – greeted fantastically, as never before or since, with rounds of Kentish fire.

Not wishing to abandon the unjustly neglected Thompson, I contacted Kaiser Haq, the Kaiser-i-Bangladesh, Poet of the Lungi, with whom I had once shared the teaching in poetry workshops run by poet and renegade Eng. Lit. teacher, Rukmini Bhaya, in Mr Jain's paradise garden on New Delhi's Gurgaon Road (immortalized, incidentally, in a couple of Rani's delicately *khaki* paintings).

The Kaiser passed my notes on Thompson on to Fakrul Alam, the Tagore scholar then editing *pro bono publico* the literary pages of the *Dhaka Daily Star*, and he kindly laid before his readers my account of an old radical link between Tower Hamlets and Bengal.

Thanks to Thompson, I have ended up writing some thirty articles and verses of (more or less) Bengali interest for the *Star* (many recently collected into a book, *Bangla File*). This in turn caused the Kaiser to propose Rani and I be let loose for a term among his students in Dhaka.

Rani directed them in *Caliban*, her sequel to *The Tempest* that she had directed previously in Mauritius. For my part, I put before a handful of students as diverse as the five continents notable poems from all over the world, the originals together with translations. These were intended to act as a stimulus for new writing of their own.

We began with a dodgy street-speak poem that bespoke contemporaneity. Whatever the students made of it, they were aghast when I revealed it was a translation I had done of a section from Tagore's *Gitanjali*. As Fakrul observed, it was neither *magnifique* nor Tagore, simply an example of the old adage that the poetry is what gets lost in translation.

If Joyce, Yeats and Beckett had written in Gaelic, would we know them as seminal figures in 20th century literature? Bengali, like Hungarian - and one of the students in the Dhaka class, Tashneel, astonished us all by singing a song in Hungarian - has a long and cherished tradition of poetry but, unlike English, is not a language

that is widely known and read across the world. Hence its literary works are not appreciated and savoured outside a limited linguistic circle. Translations cannot catch the context or convey the taste.

Against that, poetry, especially if the original is run-of-the-mill, can actually find itself in translation. Any translation, to be lively, wants to be as free as is the composition of an original poem has to be in any language. A translation cannot be that: it is anchored. Slipping the anchor, it is likely to be unfaithful.

While this may be a cause for academic disapproval, it can be the *cause célèbre* of a poetry workshop. Neruda's bicycles from Chile, for example, happily resurfaced in Dhaka as cycle-rickshaws.

This memoir is being scribbled in a beautiful handmade Bengali notebook inscribed by Pia on behalf of her classmates as “a reminder that we exist”.

I remember my father's old schoolteacher, Alan White, remarking one day that it never occurs to the pupils how much the teachers talk about them in the common room. Or how much, he could have added, they live off the memory of them, as I do now, in later years.

The Kaiser, possibly, possibly not, given his name on account of a grandfather exasperated by the British treatment of Bengal, asked me to supervise two students separately who refused to fit into my, or anybody else's, creative writing classes.

One, Eli Prue, was a simply-dressed, urbane young Chakma woman from the Chittagong Hills; the other, her fellow conspirator, Jesmin, was richly adorned with the ornaments of an urban tribe. The latter could command, it pleased the Kaiser to warn me, a posse of gun-toting bikers. Whenever they did brazenly show up – the students, I mean, not the bikers – they ran rings around me.

Cross Note.

The talk in the gym at Shantiniketan was not to be my last literary contribution to cricket on the Subcontinent, a game Ashis Nandy has declared to be an Indian one accidentally discovered by the English.

Prompted by a remark of Chanchi's long before, I had done some research into the whereabouts of the first known cricketing on Indian soil off the Gulf of Cambay in the fortnight before Christmas, 1721.

What isn't known from the bare reference are any details of the actual playing beyond it being one of a number of diversions enjoyed onshore by marines off a couple of local John Company trading vessels.

In honour of Chanchi and, thanks to the efforts of two teachers who had formerly studied at MSU in the shadow of both Chanchi and Birjé, Sandhya Gajjar and Susan Bhatt, we were able to watch a dance-drama I had written on the subject performed in the open and wonderfully transformed by the Triveni Theatre Company in Vadodara, Panisai Chari having worked up versions in both English and Gujarati. *Howzat?*

Last Word

Did anyone besides myself ever take John Beer's visionary book on Coleridge down from the shelves of the Ryerson library? Poet, editor and Blake scholar Karen Mulholland almost certainly, she probably ordered it, but who else?

Books sit on the shelves, sometimes for years, waiting like wall-flowers. Eventually some librarian of the new dispensation, never the old school, sweeps the shelves clean of those books that have seldom, if ever, been taken out. *Full many a flower is born to blush unseen.*

It was on the shelves of a bookshop in Liverpool that Béa, my old student from Budapest, had found the last copy in a bookshop of my first collection of poems, *The Lesser Vehicle*. She sat down beside a fountain – no, I am not making that up – and was enchanted, she told me in a letter, by their mixture of mysticism and mud.

Rarely do poets hear of the messages we send out from our desert islands reaching any destination at all, let alone an unexpected one.

Very recently, my wife Rani, the professional writer in our family (and one is more than enough, they say), received an e-mail asking if she knew me and, if so, apologies for asking, whether I was still alive. While her reply to either question is unrecorded, the enquirer was a composer who had long (and scrupulously) been trying to locate me so he could get permission to set a short poem of mine to music.

A resident of Provo, the red heart of the Latter-day Saints, bless them, Andrew Maxfield had come across the poem in a Bloodaxe Books anthology, *Poetry with an Edge*, he had found in his local college library. Perhaps Andrew was the first person in Utah to take the book down, let alone light upon this particular poem.

The poem had been written one Christmastime when my overtime docket claimed I had worked 106 hours that week loading mail onto trains at the Cambridge railway station.

One night, cycling home down Station Road to grab a couple of hours' sleep, I had heard and seen a bird singing on a streetlight. Its notes were as crystal as a nightingale's. I supposed it to be a blackbird or a thrush, although one ornithologist rushing up to me after a reading in Budapest, as I fondly supposed to congratulate me, insisted it was a robin.

Shortly after that cycle ride, I was trying to write a long poem comparing the loading of the Christmas mail in the railway sidings into separate piles for different parts of the country to the floating of millions of little lights down the rivers of India during Diwali.

Unlike its subject matter, this sprawling poem was going nowhere until suddenly the bird turned up again and took over the entire stage. If the Pierian spring in Provo does not fail Andrew, the song of the bird is now destined to swell the chorus of a larger song cycle on (slight shift again) Snow. The poem concludes: *If I could sing like that/ I should not need a name/ Nor anyone to hear me.*

Simon. Fred. Chanchi. Mallik. Birjé. Chris. Grube. John MacKeen. Irfan. Eric. John Beer. Ádám. Riad... And so many others, named and unnamed... *these, our actors, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air...*

Fortunate it is to have danced a pavane before the vision fades.

Education and Employment. b. London August 29th, 1939. St Michael's School, Otford 1947-52. King's School, Canterbury, 1952-57. Beaverbrook and St George Scholar, University of New Brunswick, 1957-60 (B.A. Hons in History and English). Woodrow Wilson Fellow, University of Chicago, 1960-61 (A.M. English). William Hickey, Daily Express, 1962-63. Commonwealth Scholar, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1963-64. The Londoner, Evening Standard, 1964-65. Lecturer in English Literature, UNBSJ, 1965-67. Freelance Journalist, Dehra Dun, 1967-68. Instructor in English, Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, 1968-1974 (on leave 1974-76). Ph.D. student Cambridge, 1974-77. Part-time Instructor, Ryerson, 1977-79. Cambridge Post Office, Postman and Station Mails Porter, 1979-83. Cambridge Ph.D., 1982. Lecturer, National University of Singapore, 1983-85. Cambridge Poetry Workshop founded, 1975. PGCE, Cambridge, 1987-88. British Council British Studies Lecturer, Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute, 1988-90. British Studies Consultant to British Council, 1990-91. British Council Lecturer in British Studies, ELTE (University of Budapest), 1991-99. British Council Lecturer in British Studies, JPTE (University of Pécs), 1999-2000. Tutor, Cambridge University Institute of Continuing Education, 2001-03 and c.2006-2010. Visiting Poetry Workshop Tutor, Henan Teachers University, Xinxiang, 2003-5. Poetry Tutor, Open College of the Arts, 2002-14. Visiting Poetry Workshop Tutor, University of the Liberal Arts of Bangladesh, 2019.

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Unearthing England Encountering Elsewhere, Essays and Verses, CPWEs 2025.

Not Out: Cricketing in the 80s, Cricket Plays and Essays, Cricket Wicket Press, CPWEs 2025.

****** The Buddha verses deserve a special note of their own, refusing to be done and dusted. Others have been moved to keep adding to them and so have I. Dan Popescu translated a selection from the *Buddha at Kamakura* and *In the Temple of Kali* into Romanian, *Poeme*, Biblioteca Revistei Familia, Oradea, 1995. Tarr Dániel translated the originals into Hungarian, *A Kamakurai Buddha*, Budapest, 1999, then filed both in his digital Buddhist Library online. Balogh Dániel did another Hungarian version, *Buddhák és Egyebek*, the following year. I also found myself putting together further informal booklets, *The Buddha in April* and *Buddha on a Birthday*, both in 1999, and from time to time have scribbled odd add-ons since. One day, the verse on the spider arrived in the post from Kerala translated into Malayalam.

Selections

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The English Teacher ends here.

There follow
Three Stray Essays
crammed in lest otherwise they be lost.

1: On Olympus Once

Foy Nissen's story began with an old will he found among papers in a small cardboard box under his father's bed after his death. Foy told my wife Rani and I the story one long afternoon after an impeccably laid-out lunch in his Bombay apartment. Olympus Altamount.

Arrived at the traffic hub of Kemp's Corner, there was always a confusing moment trying to determine the right road to take twisting up out of it onto Cumbala – if not Malabar - Hill and then, the heights gained, trying to identify the right tall apartment block a short walk away.

Cultivated, mannered, meticulous rather than supercilious, actually kindly and even mischievous, Foy in his lonely eeyrie was discreetly looked after by a Maharashtrian woman, Mangala. She it was who emerged from behind a screen to serve lunch in the airy room with its tasteful furniture and shelves of damp books, the floor piled with copious papers about Indian antiquities, in particular the architectural curiosities of Bombay.

“In Bombay and not yet seen the cathedrals in Bassein? You must”, Foy would direct. “Going to Bhopal? Do take the bus out to the caves at Bhimbetka”. “Get hold of copies of George Michell's monographs on India's ancient cities”. In the evening, as part of a griffin's induction into India, Foy would take him along the ridge to the Shri Walkeshwar Temple.

I had first encountered Foy when I arrived in India as an enquiring student – a very accommodating position for a Briton to be in in newly Independent India: it opened doors. Foy was the local representative of the British Council - there were panjandrums above him who, like Ministers in relation to a Permanent Undersecretary, came and went.

Foy it was who met me at the airport on my arrival, I disbelieving of the heat coming off the tarmac there as of the scudding yellow rain

that swamped the city and had me wading along Merewether Road to get to and from the judiciously placed Salvation Army hostel. Merry weather indeed.

Foy it was who instantly arranged for us to see Shanta Rao dance at the Tejpal Auditorium, the rhythms of the dance and accompanying music strange to my feringhi ear, and then to meet with Prithvi Raj at a party on Cumbala - or was it Malabar – Hill, the old trouper's talk of performing Shakespeare rather more familiar to me.

Foy, the Council's local enabler, it was who proposed I use my Commonwealth Scholarship to study Indian theatre under the supervision of yet another old trouper, Chanchi Mehta, in then Baroda, its university, in those pre-goonda days, still flourishing in what had been a progressive princely State.

Alas, the Rains had washed away parts of the coastal rail line from Bombay to Baroda, if not the bridges Foy's great-grandfather had helped construct over the many creeks they spanned. Not that Foy knew about his great-grandfather then. But I am running ahead of - as well as getting away from - Foy's story.

When his father died Foy knew next to nothing about the history of his family. Neither how long the Nissens had been in India nor where exactly they had come from. He had ventured out to Cambridge for his education but, while that helped cultivate his love of architecture and the visual arts, it told him nothing about his own kin.

This is where the cardboard box found under his father's bed came in. Inside the box was his great-grandfather's will, an insurance policy and a receipt for a safe deposit box held in a bank in Kingston-upon-Thames in England dated 1897. As the existence of the will suggested, the safe deposit box had not been reclaimed during the sixty or seventy years since Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Foy's immediate attempt to reclaim the safe deposit box proved futile. No such bank existed in Kingston. It turned out the small bank

had eventually been taken over by Barclay's Bank, sometime around the Second World War I think it was. Upon enquiry, Barclay's absolved themselves of any responsibility, initially claiming lapse of time and then referring to some records having been destroyed in a fire. A friend of Foy's teaching Law at the University of Bombay dismissed such disclaimers. The hunt was on.

I cannot now remember the order in which Foy's story unfolded, chapter by chapter, between lunch and nightfall. He was clearly aware of its length and its conclusion. He did not wait for the bank to decide to take its legal responsibilities seriously but began, in those pre-internet days when telephone directories ruled, to seek out likely Nissens the world over. In time they became an extended family.

I am sorry now I never wrote anything down at the time of Foy's story-telling. Perhaps he expected me to: after all, he had in the intervening years taken to calling me, however ironically, Panditji. But the story was his, he had already shaped it, and perhaps his oral telling of it that afternoon was its once and for all publication. It required but a teller and a listener – or two.

Foy, as a longtime British Council employee, was entitled to one paid leave in Blighty and he took advantage of this to see if there were any Nissens in England aware of the fate of the family safe deposit box and its contents. I do remember one of his most promising leads took him to the door of a Nissen somewhere in the Midlands: Nottingham, was it, or Northampton? Here he knocked, he could hear people inside but, for some strange reason or no reason at all, they refused to answer the door. Foy returned to Bombay unenlightened.

It was very late on that Barclay's, appraised of their legal obligations by Foy's law-abiding friend at the university, began to do the research that revealed what had happened to the safe deposit box. They found that at the time of the take-over they had put notices in the British and Danish newspapers in an attempt to trace the legal

heirs and assignees of Foy's great-grandfather. When no immediate heir was discovered, the box was assigned to a distant relative in Denmark's Jutland.

Some years later, apprised of Foy's search, it was the Royal Danish Police who located the exact whereabouts of the box. Foy somehow raised funds to make a further journey to Europe, precariously overland this time. The happy ending to this episode was that the newfound distant cousin readily acknowledged Foy's prior claim to the box and was prepared to hand over the entire contents.

And what contents. Foy was overjoyed to find the box contained a treasure trove of beautifully made and quite priceless desi jewellery given to his great-grandfather at a ball in Baroda in the 1860s. Local Jute (not Jat) celebrations there were as this oriental tale passed from mouth to mouth but the legalities were still to be observed. It took time for a court in Jutland to straighten out the tangle concerning ownership caused by the defaulting British bank.

Not that Foy wished to take it all: just a share. What the long hunt for the safe deposit box had unwittingly given him was something more precious than jewellery: it had given him a family, present and past. Was it some other Nissen who put him on to, of all things, U.S. Coastguard logs? I cannot now remember or imagine how, but for some reason Foy's successful pursuit of his great-grandfather began with those most unlikely faraway records.

Was it those or other shipping records showed his great-grandfather jumping ship in Bombay, close by to where Foy was telling us his story? His head for heights as a sailor on the old three-masters made him an ideal candidate for building bridges on the new Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway. When the line and its trains eventually reached Baroda, he took the opportunity to marry the station-master's daughter.

Thereupon great-grandfather settled down and joined the Maharajah's largely ceremonial army. Rising through the ranks, he

was eventually rewarded with the cache of jewels by a Maharajah famous for his collection, the popular Khanderao. His eldest son would one day command the army of the succeeding Maharajah, the even more progressive “shepherd boy” renamed Sayajirao.

Foy’s father had never spoken about his own father or uncle, let alone his grandfather. How exactly Foy pieced their stories together in the end escapes me but no doubt the old Baroda records helped a great deal. Foy was delighted to learn of the Baroda connection since the place had always held a special attraction for him.

Nothing gave Foy greater delight than a grainy old photograph that came out of the safe deposit box. His great-grandfather had taken a picture of a country bungalow in the Girnar forest, in a far-flung and detached part of Baroda State over in the many-kingdomed Kathiawar. Foy, a keen photographer, was astonished to realize he had once taken a photograph of the very same bungalow from the very same angle.

Desi coincidence? There was more. On a further visit to the forest site, on closer inspection, Foy came across two graves in the overgrown grasses. These turned out to be those of his great-grandfather’s two wives, one of them his hitherto unknown great-grandmother.

Foy the person? Once on descending from Olympus to find our ailing infant daughter Anita in Worli Naka being treated unavailing with homeopathic pills to check a dysentery, he exclaimed: Have you given up all hope? and bore her swiftly back up to Breach Candy and the allopathic care of Dr Meher Homji.

The last time I telephoned Foy he could not remember me and the name Cambridge meant nothing to him. I should have persisted and didn’t. May his memory be done some small justice by this brief record of how, casting about the wider world after finding a box under a bed in Bombay, he came upon his family’s discovery of India.

2: The Lost Story

There comes a time in life when you feel you'd like to re-read stories you first read and enjoyed long ago. Sometimes the re-reading delights you, sometimes dismays you, but what of those stories you remember but frustratingly can't find again?

There is one story I thought was by Somerset Maugham but that may be because it begins with a group of men from a bygone age at leisure in their London club listening to a tale one of them tells. This is the setting Maugham chooses for his story *The Facts of Life*.

A crestfallen father relates how he has allowed his young son to go off to play tennis in a tournament in Monte Carlo just so long as he doesn't gamble, lend money or have anything to do with women. Haply, he does all three and, as it turns out, comes home with a small fortune...

Not many people now want to read stories about those stuffy patriarchal days but by chance, when young, I fell for the story-telling of that master of the art, Joseph Conrad. His set of similarly ageing menfolk, bound together by their experience of the sea, frame yarns of a more far-reaching dimension. The story I have lost is neither so early nor nearly so brilliant as to be Conrad's but apparently it is not by Maugham either, I have searched his collections in vain...

The lost story does begin with that familiar group of self-assured professionals at ease in their gentleman's club. Unsurprisingly, they are exchanging world-weary stories about their amorous affairs. There is one odd man out among them, the Hermit. He is said to have been at school with one of the others who occasionally dines him at the club.

In trying to recall the outlines of this story that once made such an impression on me, I shall omit all atmospheric descriptions, it being quite beyond me to reproduce the style in which they may have been

elaborated. It is the human interest I am intrigued by and even then there are so many gaps in my memory I shall be guilty of a good deal of infilling in my sketchy retelling.

The Hermit, apparently so named at school since his peers assumed that was the only calling in or outside of the Church he might pursue, had deviated from that trajectory just enough to become an art historian. Incarcerated in one of Italy's suitably medieval and hermetic universities, he had surprised both himself and his peers by developing some fresh ideas on Renaissance Art and then, to give the gilding its lily, by marrying a lovely Italian wife.

Removed to various economical lodgings in south London, the Hermit discovers that a growing reputation as an art historian does not feed a growing family, for indeed he and his dearly beloved wife soon acquire several children. For some years, we are to understand, they are kept afloat by a small annuity from a doting aunt and the largesse of indulgent friends.

This is just a bit of background to a story the Hermit is urged to tell at the club. One of the more cynical voices among the leathery armchairs – we might almost see him as a shadow self of the Hermit's – turns to him and takes it for granted he would not have had any affair to tell about. The Hermit agrees: he never had any affair before the grand affair of his marriage and he supposes none since.

There is, however, an inflection in the word 'supposes' that the Cynic picks up on and it is this that leads the Hermit to tell his story. The scene of it is one of those small liberal arts colleges in New England, Middlebury or Marlboro or some such, where there are but a couple of hundred students and almost as many faculty as students.

The Hermit's publications on Italian Renaissance Art, don't ask me for details, has won him a niche following that quickly spreads across the Atlantic to an academic niche in New England. An opening coming up on account of somebody's study leave leads to

his being invited to teach in the college for a couple of years, together with an invitation to write regularly for an art journal.

The salary is fantastical by London standards and passage to and fro across the Atlantic is offered to the Hermit's family. Ironically, the family has become peculiarly settled into genteel poverty in south London and are reluctant to risk the middle passage. Not without dismay, the decision is made that the Hermit should forage in the wilderness for a couple of years and bring back enough money for them to buy a flat.

The die is cast. Taking ship from Southampton for New York, the Hermit is soon translated to the pastures green of New England. There he adapts so well to his surroundings he lives a Thoreauesque existence lodged quietly in a wooden frame house owned by an old professor.

Colleagues are not unfriendly, far from it, but they have their own lives and soon discover that the Hermit does not look for company. Teaching he finds he can do well: he enjoys it and his students respond to his mix of erudition and simplicity. He writes weekly letters home to his wife and children, describing not only the America he hardly encounters outside the classroom but his own loneliness and desolation at being away from them.

Fortunately, his new work teaching and writing so absorbs him the two years pass quickly and the story he has to tell at the club only really begins when he is but a month or so away from sailing home, having turned down without a second thought two or three attractive offers to stay in the United States, a nugget of information that brings growls of approval from deep in the armchairs.

There is one colleague of the Hermit's he occasionally comes into contact with on account of their courses having enough in common they share a number of the same students. It being a small college, close attention is given to each and every student and the Hermit and the colleague, Yeva, are obliged to compare notes.

The Hermit has become an earnest and committed teacher. Yeva, who is described as being trim and intelligent if a trifle remiss, is less concerned with college teaching than with doing research for the books she intends to write. From a notable Armenian family whose fortune permits them not only to cultivate but to patronize the arts, she spends more time in New York than in New England.

Whenever in whichever town beginning with M it is, Yeva holds midday Sunday dinner parties in her hotel suite. The Hermit knows nothing of this until nearly at the end of his time there she approaches him one day to invite him to her next weekly dinner. She has invited a couple of students, a brother and sister, whose father had been American Consul in Florence and she thinks that given the Hermit's scholarly interests, it would be nice for them to meet and talk with him.

The dinner is a disaster. A dozen or so guests are seated at a long table. Yeva holds court at the head, sitting tête-à-tête with her confidante. The Hermit is seated at the lower end where he can comfortably engage with the two preppies who have lived in Florence.

Alas, alack, it turns out Italy had impressed the preppies even less than it had Mark Twain, who at least graces his more caustic observations with wicked wit. Henry James is clearly unknown to the young Americans. They have imbibed only the most dismal prejudices concerning Italy's dirt and its people's dishonesty.

The Hermit turns away from the insufferable siblings to engage with the guests on his other hand only long enough to wonder how quickly he can make his escape from such uncongenial company. Unpractised in the art, he determines that he will invent some excuse to leave, some other unlikely engagement, as soon as the dessert is done.

In the event, he is on the point of rising to his feet and making his awkward if heartfelt departure when he becomes aware the whole

table is turning in his direction. A silence has fallen and Yeva is making a grand declaration. To his amazement, it is that he is the most wonderful man in the world and she is desperately in love with him.

The writer does not give us to understand whether or not other of Yeva's Sunday dinners have ended in similar fashion but the supposition will occur to the Hermit once recovered from his astonishment at this bewildering turn. The guests, including the confidante, evaporate as quickly as Prospero's visionary masque in *The Tempest*, leaving the Hermit to ask Yeva what the devil is the meaning of her outburst.

The Hermit's wife, we are told, will later object he was careless of her in not departing along with all the other guests, a response that draws further growls, if not howls, from the leathery armchairs. The Hermit, secure in his utter disbelief, tells himself it would be equally careless to walk out in scorn, particularly of a colleague with whom he has to work closely before he can sail home.

The story does not ignore a further factor. The Hermit, however well anchored in the weight and experience of being a family man, is said take pleasure in the experience, novel to him if not to his listeners in the armchairs, of having a woman throw herself at him, albeit theatrically.

Yeva upbraids him for failing to see she has long been in love with him and, when scouted concerning this, claims it originated with the patience he showed in dealing with several of the more tiresome students they have shared. Evidently this does not include the insufferable pair at the dinner.

Many of the details of this story are now gone from my mind, one reason why I wish to re-read it, but enough to say Yeva insists she wants to take him to bed with her, he can do anything he wants with her, she will take him with her to Honolulu, Hong Kong or anywhere

he chooses to go. A concert pianist, she tells him she has foregone her lessons as never before in order to be with him.

One particular detail I recall is that Yeva, an exponent of the tarot, plays a card of her own. She deploys a photograph of herself taken together with her four sisters, all appearing to be identical on account of sporting the same outfit and massed curly hair-style, this to determine whether a putative initiate can divine which one of them is her. This last causes the Cynic to snort that such tricks of the trade are as old as Eden.

The story makes clear that in the days that follow, as self-assured in his own way as are his listeners at the club, the Hermit brings Yeva down from her dizzy flights with stories from Ancient Greece of the good philosophical life: of the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, we might suppose, or of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*.

In the short time of term remaining the two together assess the work of their students as congenially as if they were at a candlelight dinner in Cracow or lying on a beach in Cannes. *The Arabian Nights* offers no greater make-believe. This academic work done, the Hermit prepares to depart for home. The evening before he is due to take an early train for New York, Yeva sends him a message asking if he is not coming over to say goodbye.

This he does, saying by way of valediction he hopes she now understands how so very different are their temperaments and that, quite apart from his deep family commitment, he is so much a stick-in-the-mud as she quicksilver no relationship between them could ever have lasted a minute. To this she ruefully assents, gives him a long hug and he leaves.

The Hermit's story draws an assortment of further grunts and growls from his audience at the club, some a tad derisory, others affectionate enough, all agreeing that, no, he has not had what any of them would

call an affair. Man or mouse as they may think him, they assure him he has seen off a woman and her wiles.

One of the company is about to call for another round when the Hermit indicates he has not quite finished. There is, he tells them, just one other occasion he has been struck dumb by a woman's behaviour. With a laugh, his audience settles back. What now?

Just this. The Professor in whose house the Hermit has been lodged has thoughtfully offered to take him in his car to the railway station, the train scheduled to leave shortly after daybreak. As they emerge from the house into the early morning mist, they are surprised to see an indistinct figure standing at the end of the drive. Surprise turns to astonishment: it is Yeva.

Yeva insists on coming to the station to see the Hermit off. On the platform as passengers board the train, she drapes herself round him in a last, lingering hug, and whispers - with a note of triumph rather than consolation in her voice – that she has had an affair with him such as his wife can never have: a Platonic affair.

Life is short, art elusive. If I am trying to track this story down again now it is to determine whether, in its telling, the rather quaint account of the impasse between the Hermit and Yeva simply elicits a sardonic smile in the manner of Maugham or, as I like to imagine, has about it an almost Conradian aura of existential mystery.

3: Memories are Made of This...

“Memories are made of this...” So goes the refrain of a schmaltzy old love-song crooned by Dean Martin: love full of kiss and bliss and, how very ‘Fifties, life-long marriage.

When we grow old, memory plays an increasingly important part in our lives. We are all familiar with grandpa and grandma reminiscing about what life was like when they were young, how things have changed. One or other or both of them may also start to experience a noticeable, sometimes total, loss of memory.

A flood of memories, then, or a drought of them, either good reason to consider the place memory has in our lives.

Thirty years ago, our beloved family cat Polly died. Our family was scattered at the time and a tenant was living in our house in Cambridge. Two of our children living not far away remember coming back to the house to give the cat a burial in the garden. They do not remember our third child or their mother being there. Conversely, the third child and the mother both remember that they were.

For my part I think probably only two of the four were there but I cannot say for sure. Does it matter? Perhaps what matters is that, at a significant time in our family lives, each wanted to be there? If so, then memory has duly obliged and granted their wishes. Perhaps this happens a good deal more in the operation of memory than we might care to admit?

The most significant event in my life was getting married to my wife: a memory so vivid every detail is imprinted clearly on my mind. It happened this way. A student in (then) Baroda and hearing of the Prime Minister Pandit Nehru’s death, I took a train to New Delhi, intending to look up Rani, a young Punjabi lady I had encountered there very briefly six months previously before travelling all over India. *Annus mirabilis*.

Staying with a fellow passenger's family in the refugee colony of Rajendra Nagar that first morning in the capital, I woke up early with a strong sense this was my day of destiny, crossed town and went to the All-India Women's Hostel on Barakhamba Road where Rani and her sister Pamy were staying. In the dim light of their room, Pamy greeted me - as if they had been expecting me - with the news that Rani was out but would be back within the hour. She added that Rani was looking particularly beautiful.

As I remember it, when Rani came back we went to join the crowds lining the streets to watch the funeral procession of Pandit Nehru. Since there were some two million other people who had the same idea, as the cortège passed by I picked Rani up so she could see it. Later that day, when we went to see a film, *Shehar aur Sapna*, I held her hand in the cinema and, as we walked back along Panchkuin Road afterwards, we decided to get married. Romantic story?

Well, yes, it is a romantic story unparalleled since the dawn of time, let alone in a sentimental Dean Martin lyric, and now, at the end of our lives, I can say I have been very lucky it has remained that way for more than sixty years, the children we rather prematurely talked about on Panchkuin Road, whether or not all three were to be present at our cat's funeral, an unmitigated blessing. Destiny.

Well, yes, destiny but recently I happened to unearth a journal entry I made at the time and have discovered that memory has not only telescoped three days into one but has craftily excised one whole day that could easily have upended this fairy tale.

I was actually in Delhi on my way to Kashmir. It was only after my arrival in the capital that news came through of Panditji's death. Though we all respected him greatly, the behaviour of the three of us that day was totally out of keeping and, I'd like to think now, out of character. Singing and laughing infectiously, we made our merry way uptown into Connaught Circle, the two sisters running rings round this hapless stranger unfamiliar with Punjabi *boliyan* and *tappe*.

Enough to say the teasing, no doubt fuelled by sexual frisson, got a bit out of hand: I shall continue to draw a veil over the details of that day as my memory has done ever since. Enough to record that the evening ended with farewells on a rather subdued note and I would have gone on to Kashmir by myself next day had not Pamy by chance asked me to find out an address for her.

Though I wasn't able to get the address, it gave me an excuse to return next morning and, haply, the fairy story resumed its wondrous course, if a shade less boisterously. It was that second day we went to the funeral. We did not go to the film or get engaged until the third day.

Thereafter followed a mandatory visit to see the Taj Mahal in moonlight, love-song in marble matching that in the heart, and, after the *granthi* in a small suburban gurdwara had been found ready to marry a forward young lady with unkempt foreigner in tow, honeymoon in Kashmir. The Valley, though overshadowed by the threat of war, was for us the Paradise on Earth perennially celebrated in the cultural memory of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims alike.

So where does this leave Memory? Clearly at best, individuals and whole cultures use memories selectively to construct a narrative, usually happily agreeable to themselves. Is memory then a cultural construct, if not always the sparkling necklace elaborated above, at least a series of images strung together into a continuous movie that is really made up of discrete or disconnected moments?

The philosopher Heraclitus once said that you cannot step into the same river twice. To which a clever-dicky student of his is supposed to have rejoined that you can't step into the same river once. The Buddha, whose concept of enlightenment is actually disillusionment, asserts that not only is everything in flux but is actually empty: there is not only no river but no you to step into it. Maya: illusion.

Most of us, finding that a bit too hard to take and live by, opt to use memory to succour our illusions and, if old enough to remember him, listen to Dean Martin. Nonetheless, the question remains of which is more real, closer to our essential fleeting condition: a neatly composed memoir or a total loss of memory?

