MEMORIES OF SCHOOLDAYS, by C.

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These are the recollections of a pupil who entered the school in the middle of the 20th century, written down some 45 years later, when it seems that the scholar's world was changed in many respects — except for the need to acquire knowledge, show ability and find a career.

The average pupil, entering the gates of 'The County School' on a certain day in September, probably experienced something of a shock. He came from a primary school where he might well have been the favourite of a headmistress who had picked him out and encouraged him to greater things. He had shown himself to be 'scholarship material' and it was hoped that he would secure a place at the Penge School or, failing that, at the 'County', which, as it proved, was indeed the ultimate destination. Prepared to be very loyal to his new School he stood now in the playground, anonymous in a sea of grey-suited boys and addressed by everyone only by his surname which seemed a blow to his individuality. All the schoolteachers were male, and the only female faces to be seen were those of the headmaster's secretary and the chief cook with her helpers.

It all seemed designed to impose a uniformity complied with academic, rather as the Army might deal with a mass of recruits. And in the same way the new pupil was encouraged to develop a team spirit by holding allegiance to Form 1, 2, 2A or 2 Alpha (there were three streams), presided a Form Master, who at the start of each day after the register had been called, might treat his charges in a friendly way rather than as faceless objects. Other masters tended to keep aloof, and learning their ways could take a long time.

It was all a little daunting but inexorable. We were being groomed for university and National Service (though not necessarily in that order). The shades of uncles and cousins who had attended the school in the past looked over our shoulders, and on the walls of the Assembly Hall in serried ranks were lists of

prizewinners, scholars and sports captains as an inspiration to greater effort. Cambridge and Oxford could be a possibility, or perhaps a Red Brick university. Alternatively there were the professions, the Forces, Local Government, the Civil Service or a post somewhere in our still surviving Empire. It all depended on 'O' levels, then on 'A' levels. Meanwhile the ideal pupil would be good at sport, follow a public school ethos and acknowledge that the Greeks and Romans probably had an answer for everything.

We were embroiled in a Grammar School tradition. Years later we realise how privileged we were; then we never gave a thought to our secondary school contemporaries, rather in the same way as Cambridge undergraduates and graduates had scant regard for the citizens of the town.

Our parents were almost literally from Duke to dustman — certainly they included Cambridge University professors, immigrant scholars from Eastern Europe, lawyers, shopkeepers, bowlers, doctors, farmers, agricultural labourers, commuting workers in London — the catchment area was wide and all-embracing, once our perceived potential had been shown on paper. Some boys came from remote rural or fenland villages, relying on chancy bus services or branch lines, which must have made for a very tiring existence — one which their town colleagues failed to appreciate.

Our school days were closely monitored by gowned masters and self-assured prefects, who had power to impose detention after school or the writing of 'lines' — a visit to the Headmaster for caning was the ultimate punishment. Most masters gained our respect automatically but some had weaknesses which might be exploited to advantage, with lessons being interrupted, diverted or abandoned to clamour. At intervals throughout the day a strident bell rang out all over the school to announce the end of lessons, followed by the swarming of boys in all directions as they changed classrooms and sets according to the timetable.

[insert ✱ on Page 3 between paragraphs 3 & 4, i.e. between 'of each term' and 'In the classroom']

We were too callow to be able to evaluate the worth of our mentors themselves, accepting whatever they threw at us, including on a few cases doses of sarcasm or pomposity. Several were Cambridge graduates and most of the others had good degrees. A couple had written the text books which we used in class, and one had translated Madame Bovary into English for the Penguin Classics. They must have been good at their jobs in their various ways, because the results were evident in the steady stream of pupils destined for university and the professions every year. And they seemed more than willing to devote private time to the school, running the clubs, societies, sports and theatrics, to such an extent that one almost forgot that they had wives and families at home.

Of course they had differing techniques for imparting information. Some entered the room and dictated facts for an entire lesson, which filled up our exercise books, but left little room for discussion. Others talked non-stop and left it to us to note down anything we might find relevant for future use. Or a lesson might consist of nothing more than general chat, far removed from the real subject but helpful to our youthful development. Finally there were a few speechless, gifted teachers who inspired and enthused us to such an extent that we have been enriched all our lives — I think particularly of mine, European literature and history, but I am sure that there were other subjects outside the Arts side too.

Each day started with Assembly in the Hall, where the Headmaster and a pianist would be on the dais, facing the boys in their ranks of seniority, with juniors at the front progressing backwards to the sixth formers in dim regions beneath the far balcony. The hymn singing was often enjoyable, and made more so by the fine singing voice of the Head, Mr. Newton John. Later the Hall would revert to its alter ego as the Gym, where Mr. Eckersley 'Rubbersuits' would encourage his charges (some most reluctantly) to shin up ropes or vault over horses, to the accompanying slap of his hand on the bare back of his victim. Yet this same master, donning another hat, could talk most movingly of English literature and modern authors, as if undergoing a complete change of personality.

One could list the names of masters of that time, and mention anecdotes of them. Central to these would be 'Snap' Hollingworth, who taught English Literature in a desperate, jerky kind of way, expecting always, as well he might, that his authority was about to be undermined. He seemed to have been at the school for ages and no one quite knew when he had elegantly said 'I watch the (black) board while I run through it' or 'Every time I open my mouth some fool speaks'. He had written text books but what interested us was the rumour that he had published dirty novels such as 'The Body on the Bus' and 'Death Leaves us Naked', the proof of which we intended to find at the University Library but never got around to. Meanwhile the blasting of the word 'Snap' in class was guaranteed to produce an explosion of rage.

But this was just a piece of light relief in an existence which was [illegible] and serious. The years passed by, slowly it seemed at the time, but swiftly in retrospect, with plenty of tests and examinations, and our progress duly noted in black and gold report books, when the masters revealed their true feelings about us at the end of each term.

In the classroom we sat in our wooden, flap-top desks in alphabetical order. Sometimes life friendships were formed in this arbitrary way, solely because of the first letter of our surnames. One could feel particularly sorry for boys doomed by this system of

selection to be forced to sit at the front of the class, and be subjected to persistent and searching attention by the master. Light relief might be provided by some joker in class, and in particular from an anarchic fellowcadet, who apart from trying to set fire to a tree in the playground, rigged up a system of strings and pulleys along the beams of a hut classroom, so that a cardboard figure appeared to bob up and down on the far wall, mocking authority. These same cross beams might have sticks and threads laid along them, which could be pulled to ~~it~~ noisy effect in quiet moments. Masters as victims had to be chosen with care.

Homework was a serious burden and might take from one to three hours to complete. We may have been the first generation to master the vital art of reading and writing while listening to the radio or with half an eye on television. It was a knack which parents saw as a dangerous lack of commitment — nowadays it is thought normal or even necessary!

As we progressed towards 'O' levels, and then on to 'A' levels we found ourselves in full stretch, and it was as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud and life at school became meaningful. We became seniors and prefects, and masters called us by our Christian names. We might become heads of school societies, N.C.O.s in the Corps or heads of table in the dining room — all giving us scope for leadership. We treated the well-stocked Library as a Common Room, where we might do the daily crossword or have animated discussions of great intensity which seemed vital at the time.

While not neglecting our schoolwork and imminent final exams it must be confessed that we fitted in up to 3 visits per week to the cinema, often queuing for half an hour or more. Cambridge boasted 7 cinemas, including the Arts, and we were living in a period of great film production, with new titles every week — musicals, Westerns, light comedies, Hitchcock thrillers, the social realism of films from France and Sweden, the acting of Brando, James Dean, Audrey Hepburn, Doris Day and Grace Kelly, to name a few. Then on Saturday afternoon we went to live theatre at the Arts,

as members of the Theatre Club, where we saw the classics or the new 'kitchen sink' dramas pioneered by 'Look Back in Anger' and often saw the debuts of actors and actresses who later became famous nationally. One must also mention the smart ambience of the new-fangled Espresso coffee bars (with their juke boxes and sounds of rock and roll) where we might be seen later in the evenings — at that time pubs were not regarded as comfortable places to ~~spend~~ relax in, unlike nowadays.

By the standards of the late 20th century we were incredibly naive about the opposite sex, vice and the double dealing of the world in general. Occasionally a master in an unbuttoned mood in class would give a hint about the darker side of life, causing a frisson of apprehension amongst his eager but green audience. One could point out that it was all to be found in the classic plays and novels that we were studying so seriously, or in the living and art lessons that we had attended over the years: yet somehow the full meaning had escaped us. A Grammar School education had informed us with notions of Truth, Beauty, Fairness and the playing of a straight bat. All this would change dramatically if Fate decreed that one would be going directly into two years National Service. Apparently Universities on the whole preferred undergraduates who had had two years practical experience of life in the real world, which presupposes that grammar school life was rather cloistered and narrow. This was probably true, as our education was treated very seriously: we had traditions to uphold and the need to do ourselves justice, and it helped to acquire a knack of passing exams, which did not come easily to some of us.

The time came when we seemed to be revising, taking finals and entrance exams without end, and then suddenly we had only a few weeks of schooling to undergo -- Then it was off to holidays, University or the Armed Forces. Our red-brick second home for eight years at Hills Road had fulfilled its function. We had extracted all we could, and vice versa, with a few lasting friendships made along

the way and a feeling that the building, its staff and its teaching methods would continue forever, producing replicas of ourselves ad infinitum.

In conclusion I offer a few more recollections which, in the nature of things, are now period pieces.

One lunchtime in February 1952, having eaten our meal in the dining ~~hall~~, two or three of us decided to go for a short walk over the railway bridge towards Cambridge town centre. As time ran out and we retraced our steps over the bridge I noticed unaccountably that the Union Jack was flying at half mast on Foster's Mill beside the railway station. On our return to school we found ourselves swept up in a general move to the Assembly Hall, where the Headmaster announced the death of the King, George VI, and having said a few appropriate and solemn words, dismissed us all to our homes to ponder the significance and drama of the event. A couple of days later many of us went down to the end of the playground, where the railway line to London passed within a few feet of the fence, and were rewarded with a sight of the royal funeral train, travelling slowly from Norfolk to the capital, prior to the lying in state in Westminster Hall.

I used to walk about a mile to school and back each day, and even after nearly fifty years I can visualise the route along Mills Road and the buildings with their evocative smells. Passing the striding soldier on the war memorial at Station Road I soon came to the cavernous entrances of the Eastern Counties Bus Garage, where I had to wait if vehicles were emerging and then walk past the strong, ~~strong~~ smell of oil and petrol. Then on to the Prince Albert Almshouses and over the road at Brooklands Avenue to Fry's Chocolate depot with its smell of cocoa, followed immediately by the smell of bananas in Fyffe's warehouse. From over the road came a ~~coal~~ farmy smell emanating from Winter's coalyard. I then walked up the slope of the railway bridge with its impregnated smell of coal grit, soot and smoke from the innumerable steam trains that had

passed beneath it. Coming down the slope on the other side I passed Hawkin's Cake Shop, which we used to visit in lunch breaks to buy sticky buns as an enjoyable supplement to school dinners. Buying a bun and making a choice was like asserting one's independence in the midst of a prescribed school day.

We were put under some pressure to join the Combined Cadet Force, otherwise known as the Corps. Memories of two World Wars, the existence of the Communist 'Threat', the maintenance of a far-flung Empire and the imminence of National Service were all arguments in its favour, plus the character-building, pseudo Public School image it presented. But it was also an excuse for masters and prefects to impose still more petty authority and arbitrariness on their charges as they marched and ordered them about. Anyhow I and a group of friends elected not to join the Corps, and like conscientious objectors we were assigned to the task of gardening, which involved the cutting of grass, potting of plants, digging of soil and sweeping of leaves, and sometimes the chance to slope off to the library to do a little homework. Meanwhile our fellow scholars were marching, counter-marching, reading manuals or learning about the parts of a gun.

For me it have proved to be a great irony in all this, because upon leaving school I and my gardening friends were all declared fit and able for National Service, which we entered without fanfare or all understrained or inexperienced in military matters, while another friend who had embraced the Corps and became an N.C.O., was rejected for service at the medical interview and went to University immediately.

The other amusing irony concerning the Corps which I remember was the sight on parade days of Wagstaff, the school caretaker and Mr. Newton John, the Headmaster. Because of ranking held by the two men in the R.A.F. in the past the caretaker now displayed a higher rank than the head of the school!

One morning I was summoned to the Headmaster's office, and I approached the door near the entrance-foyer with some

apprehension. Behind his desk sat Mr. Newton John, who wanted to inform me that he had heard of my decision to drop Latin and study Geography instead, which carried the implication that I would not be going to a major University (where Latin was required for entrance). Each of us had been given the opportunity of choice, and in my case I was genuinely interested in Geography (as I still am) and found Latin difficult. Mr. Newton John tried a gentle approach, appealing to reason and to ambition. But I was unwilling to change my mind. His tone changed to annoyance, and then to anger, and finally he pronounced me to be a "miserable, little piddler".

Perhaps I should have stuck to my guns; it would have been a test of character, no doubt — but those unteachmasterly words must have unnerved me — in due course I went to Oxford.