

Beginning

I was born at the hinge of the twentieth century in September, 1942. Ten days after my birth, the 13th Guards Rifle Division crossed the Volga under fire to hold on to the small sliver of Stalingrad left in Russian hands. Six months later, Paulus' 6th Army trudged off to their long purgatory and the history of most of the second half of the century was, more or less, determined. As she began a protracted labour my mother worried about the outcome of the battle. "*You don't want to worry*" the woman in the next bed said, "*They'll fight back. They'll get the troops.*" This for my mother epitomised basic working class sympathy for the Soviet Union and she may have been right, at least up to a point. But she still had good reason to worry about the outcome of the Battle of Stalingrad. As a very public Communist married to another, her life might have been very different if the German armies had stabilised a front on the Volga and moved on to take Moscow and Leningrad. As so, it follows, would have been mine.

As it was, my mother left hospital as fast as she could not just to assist the cause but because, as she put it, "*I didn't want my son to stay under the roof of a fascist.*" I was born in Brockett Hall, an ugly red-brick pile in Hertfordshire, the seat of Lord Brockett who, smitten it was said by the death of his wife in childbirth, had opened part of it as a maternity hospital to allow London women to give birth away from the bombs. Lord Brockett was, however, a notorious supporter of Mosley, the British fascist, and his temporary philanthropy cut no ice with my mother. Within a few months I was in my pram, adorned with hand written placards, being wheeled along Crouch End Broadway protesting the release of Mosley from detention under the Defence of the Realm Act. The subsequent descent of Lord Brockett's heirs into drug-fuelled criminality culminating in being imprisoned for criminal deception in an insurance fraud was for my mother no more than a deserved retribution.

Home was a ground-floor flat in south Hornsey, nondescript red-brick terraces squeezed between the then slums of Finsbury Park and Islington and the large houses mounting up the hills to Muswell Hill and Highgate. Roughly speaking, in north London hills define wealth; the higher one goes, the bigger the houses and the bigger the price tag. Until the mid-50s, a branch train line ran from Finsbury Park main-line station up to Muswell Hill and Alexandra Palace after meandering around Highgate Hill; the Ally-Pally push-and-pull because it pulled the carriages up the hill then, with no turning space at the top it pushed them down again. I went to my first grammar school along this line and I walked the distance many times from the home of my first girl-friend after the last bus had gone. Down the hill from the comfortable Edwardian villas behind Alexandra Palace through the halfway houses around Crouch End until one reached the crowded mess around Finsbury Park.

I have only one half-memory of the war, of being under a table with my mother and of being very frightened. I learnt later as an adult that in houses without cellars, steel frames were put under the kitchen table to provide protection if the house collapsed. We had one and my mother would shelter with me under it when the V1's came over. Although most of the Blitz was over by the time I was brought back from Brockett Hall, there were occasional night raids and, in 1944, the brief bombardment by V1's, the buzz-bombs, which cruised along buzzing from their petrol engines until, when the fuel cut out, they fell silent

and dropped like a stone. Once over London, when they could no longer be tipped over by fighter-planes, one just waited and hoped the noise would keep on as it passed over. The second wave, the V2s, were true rockets and just arrived without warning. What I remember sheltering from was this gnat's whine droning overhead until it chose on whom to plunge.

In 1948, we moved from the small flat into the house in Mount View Road where my parents lived until 1999 and in which I still have a share. It was bought after much discussion for £3,000. The money for the deposit came from my father's old employers who had, on his return from the Army, refused to re-employ him. A law of the time provided that in such cases, the returning soldier had to be paid a year's money as compensation. The reason why the firm, Cossors — an electronics manufacturer with a factory in Highbury — refused to take him back was that he had been convenor of shop stewards until his call-up, taking in a hundred *Daily Worker's* a day towards the end so he said. Thus we had the money to move up the hill to the large houses in what is now, so I am told, one of the most desirable streets in newly fashionable Crouch End, well actually it is Stroud Green though not to the estate-agents.

It was much less desirable then. The bombing had been severe in the area and after the general flight to the suburbs the landlords had filled the houses with bed-sits rather than letting the houses whole. There was almost none of the structural conversions to flats which happened later on. Instead, tenants would take over floors or a room within the houses, usually sharing bathrooms and often kitchens. In the housing shortage after the war it was common for two or even three families to share houses rented from private landlords. Many houses had been left vacant, leading to a sustained squatting campaign led, naturally, by local Communists to house homeless bombed-out families. The house we moved into had a sitting tenant in place who, protected by law, occupied three rooms on the top floor, sharing our bathroom, for over twenty years. The area had, just like similar parts in Notting Hill or Kennington, gone downhill and would not begin to climb back up the social scale for twenty or thirty years when owner-occupiers began to buy the houses for single families.

The dereliction left by the bombing was an additional blight. A few hundred metres to the east, the main line out of Kings Cross passed through a narrow choke point and then opened up into huge marshalling yards. Nicknamed the Khyber Pass it had been a persistent target for night-bombers which had used a line of reservoirs to the north as convenient directions on even the darkest nights. As a result I could see three bomb-sites from the front door and the surrounding streets were all pock-marked with barely-cleared and hardly-fenced wastes which formed attractive though forbidden playgrounds. We played out versions of the Wembley Olympics of 1948 in these spaces mainly jumping and throwing chunks of brick and rubble.

The organising principle of my early life was the Communist Party. I don't mean by this that I was a juvenile Red Guard or not quite, but that my parents' involvement in the Party was such that all else seemed subsidiary. To understand this it is necessary to describe the nature of the Party in north London and, specifically, in Hornsey.

The Communist Party of Great Britain was formed as a unfortunate backwash of global Soviet foreign policy which insisted that independent Communist parties be formed throughout Europe. In Great Britain this meant that a small number of minor Marxist groups, based mainly amongst Scottish and Welsh

miners, formed a new party in 1920 dwarfed by the only significant working class party, the Labour Party. After its formation, the new party following agonised debates pressed for affiliation to the Labour Party, expelled those who opposed this and was then ignored in its efforts. In the succeeding twenty-five years the Party achieved very little except to build up a substantial influence in a number of trade unions and some intellectual credibility for Marxism in the aftermath of the Depression. Only in a few places, almost wholly in Scotland and Wales did it achieve a sufficient critical mass to create its own political culture comparable to the genuinely mass Communist parties in continental Europe. One of these isolated places however was the part of North London where I was brought up.

Mass socialist political cultures have now almost entirely disappeared even in those countries in Europe which can claim to have invented them. They sprang out of working class political organisation in the nineteenth century in trade unions and parties and climaxed in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 50s, they were in decline more or less uniformly all over Europe, a decline brought about partly by the transformation of the political process away from mass mobilisation and partly by the state providing many of the services once provided by the party. It is possible to provide theoretical descriptions of mass political culture in Gramscian terms as various forms of opposition to the ruling hegemonic culture which developed to sustain the central political thrusts of socialism whether industrial, electoral or military. In practical terms it means the coming together of many small, local initiatives to support political action into larger groups which take on their own dynamic and become self-sustaining. Trade unions develop certain kinds of welfare facility for their members which grow into holiday centres, schools and colleges, retirement homes, even hospitals. Political parties produce magazines and newspapers, specialist intellectual groups, training centres and fund-raising events such as bazaars; their youth branches have sports teams and organise outdoor activities such as hiking. Some of these acquire lives of their own, finally becoming commercial operations in their own right sometimes at odds with the bodies that spawned them. The proliferation of all these provide a complete social environment within which activists and their families can lead much of their lives outside the workplace.

In the 50s, the Communist Party in London had just about passed over the threshold of this kind of cultural completeness particularly if one added in the various trade union and progressive bodies which existed alongside it. It had its newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and various journals (on Sundays, we could read *Reynolds News*, a Cooperative paper); its shops – the Co-op; various kinds of intellectual and special interest groups; and a whole range of spin-offs such as hotels and guesthouses run by Party members, holiday camps,

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2nd Pictorial



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Editor—R. V. WARD.

even a Young Communist netball team which played in the league in Lincolns Inn Fields. Above all else, it had a central cadre of activists whose lives centred around spreading the political word of Communism.

My parents were particular examples of such activists. Both recruited in the 30s, primarily by direct experience of the impact of mass unemployment and of growing up in homes of sometimes grinding poverty. They had met when doing backstage work at Unity Theatre, the Kings Cross home of socialist theatre in London, married in 1941 in a quick ceremony timed to avoid disruption to *Daily Worker* sales and stayed together for fifty years despite

apparently incompatible temperaments. My father worked mainly in the trade unions where he was employed and in local welfare issues; my mother was a local political activist with a flamboyant manner and iron determination ideally suited to organising campaigns, getting publicity and harassing bureaucrats into submission. A clever, articulate and charismatic woman, it was really chance that took her into the Communist Party; if she had been recruited into the Labour Party she would almost certainly have ended up in Parliament. My father was a quiet, almost taciturn man, retiring but very determined and with a ferocious capacity for sustained organisational work. He also had the same capacity for love as my mother though less obviously displayed.

In the war, my father had organised in Cossors before being finally called up despite being blind in one eye. My mother had, after my birth, organised a series of local initiatives — a blood donors' centre, youth club and nurseries — which had gathered together a remarkable group of women Party members who formed the backbone of the local Hornsey Communist Party. I remember these women most of all; outspoken, determined, often flamboyant, who, I suppose, must have surrounded me with love when my mother was off at one of her meetings. The feeling I remember is not one of the absence of a mother but the presence of several.



This was for a child, as well as for many adults, the key part of involvement with the Communist Party — the way in which the Party functioned in effect as a large extended family with its own internal feuds, rebellions and loves, its rules about allowed relationships and the frequent breaking of these and its habitual closing ranks against all outsiders. I took part in 'political' activity as part of a normal way of life. There I am standing under the banner of the Hornsey Communist Party, Mum in a stylish white raincoat surrounded by vaguely familiar faces. It is 1949, the year that the annual May Day march was banned because, it was claimed, public order would be threatened if Communists marched whilst the Berlin air lift was taking place. Naturally, the Party met the challenge with zeal, organising a series of small marches which started from different parts of London to converge on Trafalgar Square. The

Hornsey march began, I think in Crouch End where the Party had its own offices above Broadway Parade. Nothing much happened of course, no arrests, none of the oppression probably desired more by the Party than by the police.

At elections I would recruit a couple of friends and we would leaflet entire wards with election addresses, jumping over the hedges and walls between front gardens, ringing the bells and turning it all into an extended game. At Christmas, the local Stroud Green branch organised a Daily Worker bazaar as part of the endless fundraising for the paper. In our cellar we kept a large Santa Claus complete with sleigh which, mounted on the back of a pickup van, would tour the streets publicising the event. I was small enough to squeeze into the space under the sleigh in the back of the van and could operate a wind-up gramophone connected to a loudspeaker which played suitably non-offensive though also non-religious music. *Jingle Bells* I remember clearly and *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*. The bazaars themselves were hugely popular in times of rationing with jams made from hoarded sugar and country fruits and cakes.

I do not think my parents ever deliberately tried to make me a Communist. I went briefly to Sunday School at the local Baptist Church, which I left because the stories were boring, and to the Cubs which I left because I didn't like the incense waved around in church, churchgoing then being a requirement for membership. I certainly played in Priory and Finsbury Parks, paddling and sailing toy boats. The point was that the political events were just more exciting than anything else on offer in what was a pretty grey time for leisure activity. The poster parades, bazaars, leafleting and public meetings were not for me political chores but rather daring and exciting ventures into an adult world. It helped that this world was a rather dangerous one — or so it seemed to a child.



In the late-40s, the world turned hostile for Communists. Not all the world, in Russia and China and eastern Europe, our comrades were building new and, in our estimation, better lives. I remember going to an exhibition organised by the Anglo-Bulgarian Friendship Society. It was probably a small and drab affair but this for a ten-year old was totally overshadowed by the free jam give away on little saucers. A country where jam was not just un-rationed but given away free seemed proof that communism was creating utopia. In Britain, Communists were sandwiched between the mass parties of the Continent who were almost on the edge of power and the overtly oppressed U.S. Communists whose oppression was minutely reported in the *Daily Worker*. There were recordings made of the examinations of the Un-American Activities Committee with Party members doggedly stating their patriotic case and refusing to name the names. These were played over and over on the big new radiogram in our front-room as the centre-piece of socials. In 1952, the Rosenberg's went to the electric chair for spying for the Soviet Union. Some Party members took part in a sit-down in Oxford Street the evening of their execution. The *Daily Worker's* headline was MURDER across the entire front-page and I felt that indeed they were out to get us.

In truth the oppressions of being a Communist in Britain were small enough; some exclusion from certain civil-service jobs, careers in business and universities curtailed to some degree, but little that would have seemed normal to an American as the ordinary day-to-day consequences of membership of the Communist Party. The main consequence for a child was the sense of 'otherness', of being part of a group which went against the grain of most social life, which did things such as street parades or leafleting which were simply not done by most of the rest of society. We believed in things which one shouted out to the world every way one could whilst others seemed to have no beliefs at all. Increasingly the things which were shouted did arouse hostility. A few years after a war in which the Russians had been allies and in which Communists supported the war effort, we were opposing, indeed denigrating, the involvement of British soldiers in a series of foreign conflicts. When the 'Glorious Gloucester's' held out on their isolated hill against the Chinese pouring over the Yalu River, we were a tiny minority actually supporting the Chinese. I sat in a cinema with my mother and cringed as, in the newsreel during a piece on the progress of the Korean War which showed rockets going over the lines into the Chinese, she very audibly showed her sympathy for the rocketed. In later, colonial wars, the bitterness became even more intense as we actively sided with the Malayan communists or the Cypriot EOKA or the Kenyan Mau Mau. These were small but very nasty conflicts; British conscripts bled to death in streets in Nicosia, white settlers were cut to pieces in Kenyan hill-farms, all well-documented and photographed in the *Daily Mail*. And equally the atrocity pictures on the British side were published in the *Daily Worker*. I remember in particular the heads of Malayan guerrillas being held up as trophies by British servicemen and the stories of atrocities in South Korean POW camps.

It came close, I suppose, to a kind of secular Jewishness; a feeling of otherness within society, a sense of potential danger never quite realised, a tacit exclusion from certain professions and a sense of righteous superiority. Even as I list these I recognise them as the main strands of my own personal disposition ever since.

I first went to school in a small, modern infant school in Rokesley Avenue then to an older junior school off Stroud Green Road in Finsbury Park. This school was the pattern for education in the 1950's. Three stories, slightly ornate with mock turrets and a white cupola with a weathervane, and separate entrances for boys and girls. Three stories because on the ground floor were the infants (5-8); the second story for juniors (8-11); and the top storey for seniors (12-15). You went in at the bottom and progressed as on an elevator until at fifteen you were dispatched into the world with modest skills in basic reading, writing and sums. In the final year it was normal for many kids to give up and find work in the various manual trades which would occupy them thereafter. Some became criminals, something of a local speciality, and one at least of my contemporaries in Stroud Green Junior reached the exalted heights of armed bank robber. I only found this out many years later when I read his obituary in the *Guardian* and I learnt that he had become something of a celebrity having reformed after a long stretch and become a kind of media-criminal, writing books and so on. The obituary revealed that Kingy, as I knew him, came from a "notorious criminal family", an odd revelation as I became a friend of his because his mother was for a time a member of the Communist Party recruited during one of my mother's campaigns, squatting I think in which the skills of making discreet forced entry were invaluable. Kingy showed me how

to break milk bottles against my shoe to make a weapon and once asked me to go out stealing lead from church roofs so I suppose he must have had more than the *Daily Worker* as his guide.

The only side-channel leading off this educational river was a small passage to a grammar school reached via a set of examinations when one was eleven in the final months of the junior school. In the school I attended, about a third of the top class of three, each with about forty children, were expected to pass this exam, one child in nine. There were, so I recall, three tests, English, mathematics and some form of IQ test, completing number sequences and suchlike. I remember my form-teacher at the time passing by and momentarily touching her finger on a spelling mistake. With such help I passed, sidestepped the third floor and took the exit to a grammar school.

Grammar schools set out to be as different from the third floor as possible. Their models were the private boarding schools whose practices were assumed to be the gold standard of education. Masters (there were rather few women) often wore academic gowns; pupils were placed in 'houses' which cut across forms and were supposed to generate some spirit of competition, particularly in sports; there was a school 'achievement' board listing the names of past head boy or girls, perhaps cricket captains; they had a school song, usually something in Latin, which was mis-sung at end-of-term assemblies; minor discipline was undertaken by prefects and sub-prefects appointed by the headmaster; above all, we wore uniforms of coloured blazers with a large school crest on the breast pocket, caps and school ties. Everything possible was done to differentiate the grammar school pupil from the secondary modern including the provision of facilities such as playing fields attached to the school, possibly a swimming pool, certainly things such as separate laboratories, all of which were unknown on the third floor.

I first went to a grammar school in Muswell Hill not the large boys' grammar just round the corner, a rather prestigious place named after the Stationer's City Guild, as it had a large Officer Training Corps which marched vigorously round the playgrounds and where my mother's standing as the local Communist candidate might have told against me. The British army was still dying in Korea at the time and I remember even in Muswell Hill being booed when at the debating society I stoutly and erroneously accused the South Koreans of invading North Korea in search of rich tungsten deposits. So I travelled up and down the Ally-Pally push-and-pull to Muswell Hill until it was closed and then by bus.

At the beginning of my second year I was increasingly troubled by stomach pains and, after a wrong diagnosis of appendicitis, it was discovered that I had tuberculosis. (They took out the appendix anyway). This caused something of a stir as by the 1950s, bovine TB had been virtually eradicated by the simple expedient of removing infected cows from milking herds. The story of why it took several decades and tens of thousands of deaths to undertake this obvious remedy in the face of determined opposition by farmers is worth looking up if only to discover the virtues of good local government. In this case, it was Manchester Corporation who discovered that they were allowed to enforce labelling of milk as to whether or not it came from tubercular-free herds. Consumers then, sensibly, stopped buying the stuff which killed you and very soon bovine TB disappeared. Or almost for occasionally an infected cow slipped through the net and passed on the disease. In this case to me.

In 1955, the treatment for TB was on a cusp. Previously all that was on offer

was that described in the *Magic Mountain* – you were put in bed, preferably in a place with reasonably clean air, and there you stayed until the disease went away or you died. So I went to one of the many sanatoriums which had ringed London though by then they were being gradually abandoned through lack of trade or turned over to other uses. In my case, I went to one near Alton in Hampshire. There I went to bed and there I had to stay. Literally. Bottles and bedpans stood in for lavatories; basins and bed-baths for a bathroom. Everything was or was not brought to you; food came on trays, snacks were stored in a bedside locker along with the books and comics which were the only diversion possible. A travelling tutor occasionally came by with suggestions for educational books, trolleys came part with comics or library books but mostly reading came with my parents who, finally, were bringing me two dozen books a week, their allowed limit of library ticket inflated by pleas to the local librarian. Visitors were allowed on Saturday and Sunday for two hours each day and each weekend day one or other them made the four-hour journey by two buses, rail and bus again carrying a dozen books for the reading machine which I became.

The TB was in my stomach which restricted my diet to non-fibrous foods interpreted by the hospital kitchen as either chicken or (usually) mince with mashed potatoes and pureed vegetable followed by steamed pudding and custard. My parents brought plenty of biscuits and cake to fill in the long nights. As the months rolled by I naturally lost muscles and put on fat. When finally I was allowed out of bed I weighed over thirteen stone and could barely walk twenty yards.

This was not a lot of fun and I was not, I think, a very good patient. For one thing, I hated what was for most children there – most of whom did not have TB and were allowed some time out of bed – the best thing about the ward, the company of other children. As an only child with a bedroom of my own, the constant exposure to other children was almost intolerable. I remember a Greek boy who had been horribly injured picking up an unexploded hand-grenade left by the British army. He had a foot and hand blown off and was hideously scarred. He spoke almost no English and was, understandably, bitter and malevolent. He moved around on crutches and, in the evening after most nurses had gone, he used to bully the other children, particularly the bed-bound ones, hitting them with his crutches. One evening I pushed him over on the floor where he screamed for help and, probably, in pain. Nurses rushing in did not take my side. Another time I tried to run away, getting about twenty yards in my pyjamas before being hauled back to bed. It was things like this which meant that I finished my time, by my choice, in a small cubicle on my own.

The thing which saved me from years of this was the magic bullet, streptomycin, just coming into use. It came as a viscous liquid which had to be slowly injected twice a day into a muscle. After three months it was difficult to find an unbruised patch. It cost, if I remember right, £60 a shot which in today's money would have mounted up to well over £100,000 for the 90-day course. In 1955, this kind of treatment had been free for just seven years. In a very real way, my life had been saved by the National Health Service.

So in the autumn of 1955, I was sent home, fat and much used to my own company, to return to my old school. I don't remember how long I lasted there but it was not long. Children are routinely cruel to the outsider and, unfit to do P.T. and so fat that there was no blazer large enough to fit me, I was clearly

just that. Taunted in the playground, I eventually ended up in a fracas in a classroom that broke several chairs and resulted in my expulsion. Headmasters, particularly of grammar schools, had almost unlimited authority to do this and, even though my mother was convinced that it was partly to do with political prejudice, expelled I stayed. It took several months to find another grammar school prepared to take me and my parents were driven to investigating various private schools before a school in Wood Green, another education authority entirely, accepted me.

Glendale was a step down the academic ladder from Tollington in Muswell Hill. It took a predominantly working class intake and had fewer of Tollington's pretensions. It didn't play rugby, for example, a big marker of academic pretension, and few of the teachers wore gowns. Expectations of pupils were relatively low but it had a decent headmaster with a reasonably humane outlook. I remember very little physical punishment at Glendale for example compared with the routine use of slipper and cane at Tollington. I was put in the bottom stream, which was unburdened with learning a second language, with girls whose main aim in life was to avoid getting pregnant before they married and boys whose ambitions mostly stretched to a clerking job of some kind. The level of bullying was quite low and, although I had something of a hard time at first, I learnt that, if one just keeps hitting the biggest boy in the group back, eventually he gives up out of surprise that anyone so obviously outclassed refuses to give in. The others then follow suit and one is left in peace.

I spent most of three years at Glendale before taking my Ordinary level GCE in the summer of 1958. I came top in almost everything. It was not that impressive an achievement; I could speed read and was crammed full of facts on almost everything from my months of consuming books in hospital. I got an English prize (the Collected Poetry of John Keats) and a Geography prize (*Log From the Sea of Cortez* by John Steinbeck). I also gained the unconcealed pleasure of my class at the fact that someone from the bottom stream had come top. I then went on to the sixth form to do Advanced levels in much the same kind of unpressured way given that no-one expected much of us. I must have taken O-levels, the June after the first Aldermaston March, the event which turned my life round.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed in January, 1958 by a disparate bunch of English intellectuals and priests; J.B. Priestley, Bertrand Russell, Canon John Collins are well-known examples. The lack of any prominent political figures amongst them reflects the fact that CND, like virtually all important British 'political' campaigns, was essentially a moral cause. It had one and only one central objective, that Britain should renounce its nuclear weapons. It would have been pleasing even, as the argument was subsequently elaborated, likely that this unilateral act would be followed by at least an easing of nuclear tensions and, possibly, by other acts of renunciation. But the heart of it was the demand that, unilaterally and without conditions, Britain should give up nuclear weapons. There are really only three things that need concern us now about this demand.

First, it was and remains uncontrovertibly something in the best material interests of the country down to the present day. The development and production of nuclear weapons has without any doubt at all been the single most negative factor in the sluggish economic performance of Britain since the war. It happens that these memoirs will intersect with demonstrations of the

truth of this at several points but, for the moment, just take this as read; that getting into the nuclear business was and continues to be the single most stupid policy of all British governments over the last fifty years. In 1958, this truth glistened as brightly as it has ever done.

Second, it was scorned and rejected by almost all serious politicians then and down to the present day. Politicians seldom like purely moral policies though they favour moral rationales for their policy once decided. Morality hedges them in and offers little room for manoeuvre. Aneurin Bevan famously showed this at the time when he shocked the Labour left by ratting on unilateral nuclear disarmament. On the brink, so he mistakenly thought, of power he would not let himself "*go naked into the conference chamber*". In other words, the simplicity of the moral position allowed no possibility for negotiation, *quid pro quo*'s or tradeoffs, the basis for a politician's existence. Bevan had no objections to unilateral nuclear disarmament apart from the fact that it made his job largely superfluous. And so for decades now, British politicians have kept nuclear weapons not in the expectation that they served any useful military purpose for that, clearly, was a stupid idea but in the belief that possession gave them a role in conference chambers from which they would otherwise have been excluded.

Third, and for these memoirs, the most important thing, the shining moral and, as if it mattered, economic virtue of unilateral nuclear disarmament, of banning the bomb, was that it gave us a mantle of moral righteousness that we were not to lose for thirty years or more. In 1958, the left was tarnished by the growing stain of the reality of Stalinist Russia and had lost its covering excuse of anti-fascism, the cause which had made the left's position morally supreme twenty years before. But the cause of getting rid of nuclear weapons almost overnight gave us back the heights of moral virtue. Inside ten years, this cloak would justify virtually closing down universities, in twenty it would cover any form of industrial action to bolster sectional interests, inside thirty it would disappear into the sands of public indifference. But for those thirty years, we would carry with us a sense of moral virtue which could sanction almost any action, personal or public, and would take a few of us right over the edge of legality.

The sudden emergence of CND coincided with, maybe was connected with, a much wider shift in society which also fashioned our view on life, the development of the first elements of a separate youth culture.

Up to the second half of the 1950s, culture was based on class. Pubs, cinemas and football were working class; theatres, concert halls and tearooms were middle class whilst the true upper class were just hidden away presumably bugging horses or drinking in gentlemen's clubs. A young man or woman of sixteen or so was just that a 'young' man or woman, dressed much the same as their parents and going to much the same places for entertainment. Popular music or films were aimed at sectional class niches rather than age groups; one film might be recognisably 'classier' than another and this meant just that, starring say, Lesley Howard or Greer Garson, it was directed towards a more middle class audience than an American western. Of course young unmarried people or childless couples went out more often than older married couples with children but where they went was not particularly youth-orientated. Watch Albert Finney in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* made just at this point of change. He is a young man pursuing young women but in places in which his father would be quite at home and wearing clothes

identical to his father's best kit. Subtly at first, then with a great rush in the 1960s, this all changed and cultural activity became less class and more age-fixed.

I probably joined CND in the summer of 1958 when I was nearly sixteen. I had been a rather nominal member of the Young Communist League since I was thirteen but I remember little of it save for one meeting where my childish amusement at the idea of a union for the unemployed showed up a bit too obviously. (I think the Young Communists did a lot of meetings about labour history and the like). I was not in any obvious sense political except for the fact of being surrounded by Communists. I don't even remember being particularly taken with the idea of banning the bomb though I do remember a beautiful girl from Southgate who was much taken with the notion. I joined, I suspect, in part because the Communist Party was not too keen on CND, at least at its outset. There was already in existence a body called, I believe, the World Peace Council run by the Party and they were suspicious of any rival which might turn out to be more popular. But by then my parents were regarded as politically unsound within the Party and they encouraged me to take a rather different frame for my politics. Anyway I went to a meeting or two then pitched up at a small office in an attic above Fleet Street to get some leaflets and literature to try my own hand at organising.

In a short time, CND would become a very structured body with local groups, regions and a carefully democratic constitution. It would also have elaborate and much-argued over policy statements on issues leading off from unilateral disarmament. But at the end of 1958 and in particular in its youth wing, YCND, it was all much simpler. What you did was get some leaflets and go back to where you lived and give the leaflets out. You then held a meeting at which you formed a local group, you informed the national office which duly listed you and then you got more leaflets and held a local demonstration.



There we are holding a demonstration. You can see the way of things; quite a lot of jackets and ties but also some defectors to other styles, posters but also something striking to grab the eye, a skeleton or, once I remember, a large black coffin on wheels. We made it in the back garden and it only lasted the one outing before collapsing in Wood Green High Street. We were good at things like that, the one-off political statement given the form of a kind of street theatre. Of course we had the art schools on our side. You can't see it here but often we had a band or two. Trad jazz, trombones and trumpets, the kinds of things which can play in marching bands. And if there was no band then we had the songs, the *H-Bombs Thunder* or *The Glasgow Eskimos*. We were good at that kind of thing too for we had the jazz and folk clubs.

We had these things for with the moral high ground came a virtual monopoly of most of the new culture. The folk and jazz revival of course, the art schools and the new dramatists like Osborne and Wesker and the writers like Sillitoe, all in one way or another were on our side. We were not just moral, we were sexy; we were not run by men in suits and there were nearly as many girls as boys at our parties.

So I got my leaflets and went back to organise. First the school. I have one of those long scroll photographs from the time and there, on the blazer lapels of the boys and the ties of the girls in the fifth and sixth forms, are the little white blobs of the CND badges, the slightly mysterious runic symbol which is the one undying legacy of the movement. About half, I guess, joined up, partly of course because it was the fashion, partly because it was exciting and, partly, because of the strange claim that soon, unless things changed, we would die.

Then with this band of recruits, we set out to convert the world around us. The great advantage of being new and disorganised and not too burdened with philosophy was that the youth CND was left largely to its own devices. We had contact with the adult groups; we had national conferences and structures but, mostly, we did what we wanted to do which was to get out and proselytise and have a good time doing it. We walked the streets leafleting, we marched in small parades and in the big demonstrations. We held public meetings and had open-air rallies. We did concerts and benefits. Sometimes it seemed as if we were half-crazy like the time we marched from Liverpool to Hull between Christmas and New Year.

This was I remember started almost as a joke, a dare based on the apparent blank in campaigning diaries in this week. But in the end, about two hundred of us did it, starting in Liverpool on Christmas Day and ending in Hull on New Year's Eve. At one point, going over the Snake Pass with a light snow falling, one police car at the front and one at the rear shepherding a song-less rabble it seemed a poor joke too. But, wittingly or not, we knew what we were doing. Every evening we limped into a northern town or city to be met by the local adult CND. In Manchester, we had beds but in the smaller places there were just school halls. Local Labour and Communist women came in with tureens of soup and pies; volunteer doctors and nurses patched up our feet; and in the morning, some of the adult members, maybe including a councillor or two or even the mayor, marched out of town with us. And in every town, the local newspaper had a photograph and a story and in every place we solidified the Labour constituency and union branch votes. In Hull, a long-time Quaker centre, the local group arranged each of us beds for the night. Along with two others I was called out to be picked up by a large Bentley and taken to a fair-sized mansion on the edge of town. A large local company, then Northern Dairies, now Northern Foods, was owned by two Quaker families, one of whom had taken us in. We had long hot baths and afterwards they served us dinner round a large polished-wood table. Then we were driven to a New Year's party and picked afterwards. In the morning, the Bentley took us to the station. We were, I now realise, showing witness, taking on our shoulders the sins of the world, suffering and showing the true path for those less zealous. When the members' votes were taken at the various small meetings which then added up to the votes at Labour or T.U.C. conferences, it would be done with the memory of the children and of their bloody feet.

We raised money either by shaking tins in the streets, sometimes running close to laws on begging, or by jumble sales. These would be held in a school hall, usually in Noel Park, a big council estate where clothes and furniture seemed to circulate endlessly round with the local political and social groups acting as the intermediate traders. We competed with the Scouts and Guides and with the churches but had the crucial advantage of being older and bigger and lacking any sense of decorum. We would collect clothes locally door to door and from the adult CND members in the area and store them in cardboard boxes for weeks. Then on the day, we would collect unwanted furniture — beds, mattresses, armchairs, sofas, cookers — haul them to the hall and pile them round the edges of the hall. The clothes would be piled on trestle tables arranged in a defensive rectangle in the centre. The doors would open at 1.30 and a couple of hundred or so people, largely women, would rush in and scrabble through the clothes. In the initial half-hour the main problem was to stop the best stuff being thieved, slipped into bags in the general melee, and to collect as much money from out-thrust hands as

possible. The coins were thrown into bowls on the floor inside the rectangular fort, a lesson learnt after tins on the tables were knocked over and the coins lost on the floor outside. After about an hour, things quietened down and we could sell the remaining stuff to the pensioners carefully sifting for trousers, shirts and pullovers and flog the big stuff, promising delivery in the evening. Finally, at around four, we would stuff the residues back in boxes and drag the furniture round to their new owners, sometimes taking away the old items for resale. Overall, it would add up to fifty or sixty pounds, about a month's wage from a decent job.

Over a couple of years, I moved from organising the local youth group to the regional and national offices; helping run the national magazine, organising action weekends, speaking at meetings and rallies. I would stand up on rickety wooden boxes to harangue passers by while the troops handed out leaflets; act as the warm-up man to the important speakers at rallies; give talks to groups such as the Young Socialists or Communists who were slightly suspicious of the upstart activists who seemed to have no theory nor much idea of any new world order. At one such, in East Ham so I remember, I finished my talk in dead silence. The chairman asked for questions and, after a lengthy pause, one young socialist said "*That's OK then. But what about the bosses. Are you for them or against them?*" Thus I ran up against the kind of knotty theoretical problems, such as the difference between a bosses' bomb and a workers' bomb, which would define groups on the left thereafter.

Should I begin to describe these? Probably not for the fact is that my automatic Communism, my adherence to an extreme cause largely out of birth and social habit, effectively insulated me from any need to examine texts and analyse theories in order to justify my politics which were in any case defined by a headlong activism based on moral rather than theoretical confidence. Reading Trotsky, or for that matter Marx, Lenin, Stalin or Mao, was not forbidden or inaccessible, simply irrelevant and dull. In some isolated spots, a few academics were fermenting what would become a wave of theoretical Marxism. Off Soho Square there was a coffee bar called The Partisan, notable, in my memory, for the somewhat ostentatious chess playing that occupied a few tables but which was also a London home for these fragmented socialists. But in the whole of this time of frenetic political activity I cannot recall any wider focus than the imperative to ban the bomb and, associated with this in some vague way, the need to build socialism.

In between all this I grew up, passed exams, got drunk at times, smoked cigarettes quite a lot and started to go out with girls.

I fell in love for the first time when I was sixteen on a camp in Tuscany. It was the third such camp I had been on organised by a school called Burgess Hill (though it was located in deepest Hampstead) run of the lines of Neill's Summerhill. My parents, anxious to get me back on track after TB, had seen an advert in the *Daily Worker* for children to join in their annual overseas camping holiday. I went for three such holidays, the first in Yugoslavia, the second near Naples and the third on the Tuscany coast near Carrara.

They were totally chaotic and disorganised with control very much on the Neill lines that one did pretty much as one wanted. We cooked on open fires and slept in ex-army bivouac tents, that is when we had tents and cooking equipment for it was normal for the gear to go missing for the first few days. Then we lived off bread and tomatoes and slept on the ground. We travelled by train, long meandering journeys, sleeping in the corridor or on luggage

racks. In Yugoslavia, I hiked off with a companion into the hills for three days, sleeping in the woods. On the Naples camp, I hitch-hiked off on my own and was picked up by an English vicar, travelling with three young parishioners in an open-topped pink Ford Zephyr round the cultural sites. Which is just what we did, going down to the temples of Paestum and the excavations of Pompeii. It was, I suppose, a more trusting time.

In Tuscany, being sixteen, I fell in love with an Anglo-German girl with an English mother and a father who was a German Communist who had been a refugee in Britain during the war. It is quite possible that she too had arrived in after reading the advert in the *Daily Worker*. We hitchhiked to Florence and to Siena to see the palio race. There we are with a bag of fruit at our feet. We lived on fruit and pasta with olive oil and, I suppose, love. At home in England, Margaretta wrote to me every day in green ink until, one day, she wrote to say that, alas, she had met someone else and had to break it off. I had sent to her as a birthday present, the three hardback volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is, I now know, something of a boy's book but I like to think that, when the film came out, she thought of me.

I never went off with Burgess Hill School again. I suspect that their disorganisation reached the point where they were unable to put together even a theoretical destination point for the camp. Instead I went on climbing and walking holidays to the Alps and, once, to Iceland where our party staying too late in the season became snowed in by unseasonal storms and had to be rescued by a small convoy of trucks.





This is as good a place as any to leave our hero, a person almost as far away from me as he is from you. He is eighteen years old and it is 1960, probably as good a date to be eighteen as one could have wished for out of the twentieth century. He has never had to kill anyone and, apart from a few early brushes, no one has ever tried to kill him. He has missed conscription by one year and has thus avoided the miserable skirmishes at the end of the British Empire. There is hanging over him a general threat of universal annihilation but this, rather than provoking fear and depression, seems rather to provide the base for an almost exhilarating sense of liberation. If the bastards are capable of even that then what then can be forbidden in response? The attitude with which he faces the world is almost like Neil's education system writ large; what you do is determined by your own moral constraints not by the laws laid down by those who can build nuclear bombs.

In the state nurseries where he went at one year old, they provided the fresh fruit and vegetables tightly rationed outside because the children got the best food first. In the state schools to which he went aged five, he got free milk and cheap good meals. He is consequently taller than preceding generations, physically stronger and with all his own teeth. He has had more than twelve years of decent free schooling and in the following decade will have six years of free high-class university education. A free state medical service has saved his life and still provides regular checkups to monitor his progress. Unemployment is as low as it will ever be and there seems no end to the demand for new graduates of any kind. He is in a way standing on a cusp which follows from that on which he was born. The victory of the 13th Guards Rifle Division could almost have been for him, that he should have this provided for him, except of course that he is a Communist in the wrong country from their perspective. He is a leader in a political youth movement which knows no bounds and which is supported by everything that is best in his country. It is little wonder that he looks so damn full of himself. It will become more complex, of course, and in the end fall apart but for the moment we can let him stand there so confidently.

