

# TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

An Autobiographical Study  
of the Years 1900–1925

*Vera Brittain*

With an Introduction by Mark Bostridge  
and a Preface by Shirley Williams

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## *Foreword*

For nearly a decade I have wanted, with a growing sense of urgency, to write something which would show what the whole War and post-war period – roughly, from the years leading up to 1914 until about 1925 – has meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the War broke out. I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different groups of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes.

Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War. It is true that to do it meant looking back into a past of which many of us, preferring to contemplate to-morrow rather than yesterday, believe ourselves to be tired. But it is only in the light of that past that we, the depleted generation now coming into the control of public affairs, the generation which has to make the present and endeavour to mould the future, can understand ourselves or hope to be understood by our successors. I knew that until I had tried to contribute to this understanding, I could never write anything in the least worth while.

The way to set about it at first appeared obvious; it meant drawing a picture of middle-class England – its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics – as it was from the time of my earliest conscious memory, and then telling some kind of personal story against this changing background. My original idea was that of a long novel, and I started to plan it. To my dismay it turned out a hopeless failure; I never got much further than the planning, for I found that the people and the events about which I was writing

were still too near and too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction.

Then I tried the effect of reproducing parts of the long diary which I kept from 1913 to 1918, with fictitious names substituted for all the real ones out of consideration for the many persons still alive who were mentioned in it with a youthful and sometimes rather cruel candour. This too was a failure. Apart from the fact that the diary ended too soon to give a complete picture, the fictitious names created a false atmosphere and made the whole thing seem spurious.

There was only one possible course left – to tell my own fairly typical story as truthfully as I could against the larger background, and take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application. In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavour to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women.

I have tried to write the exact truth as I saw and see it about both myself and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest. I have also made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries, because it seemed to me that the contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous, of youth in the period under review were at least as important a part of its testament as retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge. I make no apology for the fact that some of these documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties. The mature proprieties of ‘emotion remembered in tranquillity’ have not been my object, which, at least in part, is to challenge that too easy, too comfortable relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history’s most grievous repetitions. It is not by accident that what I have written constitutes, in effect, the indictment of a civilisation.

The task of creating a matrix for these records has not been easy, for it is almost impossible to see ourselves and our friends and lovers as we really were seven, fifteen or even twenty years ago. Many of our contemporaries of equal age, in spite of their differences of environment and inheritance, appear to resemble us more closely

## FOREWORD

than we resemble ourselves two decades back in time, since the same prodigious happenings and the same profound changes of opinion which have moulded us have also moulded them. As Charles Morgan so truly says in *The Fountain*: 'In each instant of their lives men die to that instant. It is not time that passes away from them, but they who recede from the constancy, the immutability of time, so that when afterwards they look back upon themselves it is not themselves they see, not even – as it is customary to say – themselves as they formerly were, but strange ghosts made in their image, with whom they have no communication.'

It is because of these difficulties of perspective that this book has been so long delayed; even to be wise in my generation and take advantage of the boom in War literature, I could not hurry it. Now, late in the field and already old enough for life's most formative events to seem very far away, I have done my best to put on record a personal impression of those incomparable changes which coincided with my first thirty years.

Vera Brittain  
*November 1929–March 1933*

## PART I

‘Long ago there lived a rich merchant who, besides possessing more treasures than any king in the world, had in his great hall three chairs, one of silver, one of gold, and one of diamonds. But his greatest treasure of all was his only daughter, who was called Catherine.

‘One day Catherine was sitting in her own room when suddenly the door flew open, and in came a tall and beautiful woman, holding in her hands a little wheel.

“Catherine,” she said, going up to the girl, “which would you rather have – a happy youth or a happy old age?”

‘Catherine was so taken by surprise that she did not know what to answer, and the lady repeated again: “Which would you rather have – a happy youth or a happy old age?”

‘Then Catherine thought to herself: “If I say a happy youth, then I shall have to suffer all the rest of my life. No, I will bear trouble now, and have something better to look forward to.” So she looked up and said: “Give me a happy old age.”

“So be it,” said the lady, and turned her wheel as she spoke, vanishing the next moment as suddenly as she had come.

‘Now this beautiful lady was the Destiny of poor Catherine.’

*Sicilianische Märchen*, by Laura Gonzenbach.  
(Included in *The Pink Fairy Book*, edited  
by Andrew Lang.)

I

## Forward from Newcastle

### THE WAR GENERATION: AVE

In cities and in hamlets we were born,  
And little towns behind the van of time;  
A closing era mocked our guileless dawn  
With jingles of a military rhyme.  
But in that song we heard no warning chime,  
Nor visualised in hours benign and sweet  
The threatening woe that our adventurous feet  
Would starkly meet.

Thus we began, amid the echoes blown  
Across our childhood from an earlier war,  
Too dim, too soon forgotten, to dethrone  
Those dreams of happiness we thought secure;  
While, imminent and fierce outside the door,  
Watching a generation grow to flower,  
The fate that held our youth within its power  
Waited its hour.

V.B.

1932.

I

When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans.

To explain the reason for this egotistical view of history's greatest disaster, it is necessary to go back a little – to go back, though only for a moment, as far as the decadent 'nineties, in which I opened

my eyes upon the none-too-promising day. I have, indeed, the honour of sharing with Robert Graves the subject of my earliest recollection, which is that of watching, as a tiny child, the flags flying in the streets of Macclesfield for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Fortunately there is no need to emulate my contemporary's *Good-bye to All That* in travelling still further back into the ponderous Victorianism of the nineteenth century, for no set of ancestors could have been less conspicuous or more robustly 'low-brow' than mine. Although I was born in the 'Mauve Decade', the heyday of the Yellow Book and the Green Carnation, I would confidently bet that none of my relatives had ever heard of Max Beerbohm or Aubrey Beardsley, and if indeed the name of Oscar Wilde awakened any response in their minds, it was not admiration of his works, but disapproval of his morals.

My father's family came from Staffordshire; the first place-names bound up with my childish memories are those of the 'Five Towns' and their surrounding villages – Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, Newcastle, Longport, Trentham, Barlaston and Stone – and I still remember seeing, at a very early age, alarming glimpses through a train window of the pot-bank furnaces flaming angrily against a black winter sky. At an old house in Barlaston – then, as now, associated with the large and dominant Wedgwood family – my father and most of his eleven brothers and sisters were born.

The records of my more distant predecessors are few, but they appear to have been composed of that mixture of local business men and country gentlemen of independent means which is not uncommon in the Midland counties. They had lived in the neighbourhood of the Pottery towns for several generations, and estimated themselves somewhat highly in consequence, though there is no evidence that any of them did anything of more than local importance. The only ancestor of whom our scanty family documents record any achievement is a certain Richard Brittain, who was Mayor of Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1741. The others were mostly small bankers, land agents, and manufacturers on a family scale.

In 1855, when Victorian prosperity was flourishing on the pinnacle represented by the Great Exhibition of 1851, my great-grandfather gave up his work at a private bank in Newcastle, and



purchased a little paper mill in the Potteries from a Huguenot family of paper-machine inventors. Towards the end of the century, his growing firm, in which my father was now a junior partner, acquired another small mill in the neighbourhood of Leek. From this business – of which, in 1889, the weekly wages bill was under £12 – the greater part of the family income has since been derived. My father was one of the four chief directors until his retirement during the War, and even I am a capitalist to the extent of owning a few shares.

Out of my great-grandfather's experiment has now grown a large and flourishing concern which produces some exquisite fine papers from the most up-to-date plant and machinery, though the outlook of its directors – honourable, efficient business men, like the shrewd North-country manufacturers in a Phyllis Bentley novel – is still tinged with the benevolent commercial feudalism of the later nineteenth century. The collective psychology of the neighbourhood in my childhood may be deduced from a saying once proverbial in Staffordshire: 'Let us go to Leek out of the noise.' In those days my father, who even now regards my membership of the Labour Party as a strange highbrow foible, used often to boast to chance visitors that his firm 'had never had a Trade Union man on the place'.

When my father, who was the best-looking and the most reasonable of a large and somewhat obstinate family, married my mother in 1891, his relatives disapproved, since she was without money or pedigree, and had nothing but her shy and wistful prettiness to recommend her. Instead of being the prospective heiress of 'county' rank which my prospering grand-parents doubtless thought appropriate for their eldest son, she was merely the second of four daughters of a struggling musician who had come from Wales to take the post of organist at a church in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the remuneration brought in by this appointment was quite insufficient for the support of a wife and six growing children, he gave music and singing lessons, which paid a little, and composed songs and organ voluntaries, which did not pay at all.

As a young man my father fancied his voice and so took a few singing lessons from the kindly organist; thus he met my mother, then a graceful and exceptionally gentle girl of twenty-one, dominated by her more positive mother and sisters. After they were

married – rather quickly and quietly at Southport, owing to the sudden premature death of my charming but impecunious grandfather – my father’s family showed no disposition, beyond a formal visit on the part of his mother to hers, to see any more of these modest in-laws, and for some years the two families continued to live within a few miles of each other, but hardly ever to meet.

When I reached an age of comparative intelligence, I deduced from various anecdotes related by my young and pretty mother the existence of this attitude of initial disdain on the part of my father’s people towards her own. For some years it puzzled me, since to my hypercritical youth the majority of my paternal relatives, with their austere garments and their Staffordshire speech, appeared uncongenial and alarming, while my mother’s sisters, all of whom made their way in the world long before independence was expected of middle-class women, were good-looking and agreeable, with charming musical voices and a pleasant taste in clothes. But after I left school, I soon learnt from my brief experience of the fashionable ‘set’ in Buxton that a family’s estimate of its intrinsic importance is not always associated with qualifications which immediately convert the outsider to the same point of view.

## 2

During the early years of their marriage, my parents lived at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

They began their life together with a series of misfortunes, for their first child, a boy, was still-born, and shortly afterwards my father developed appendicitis, which proved a baffling mystery to the rough-and-ready provincial surgeons of the time, and left him prostrate for nearly twelve months. Eventually, however, I made my appearance at the decorous little villa in Sidmouth Road, arriving precipitately but safely during my father’s absence at a pantomime in Hanley.

In the early stages of that urge towards metropolitanism which I developed with adolescence, I used to believe that such a typically provincial suburb as Newcastle could never have produced any man or woman of the smallest eminence, and with the youthful confidence that characteristically prefers to dwell on

the fruits of success rather than to calculate their cost, I made up my mind as quickly as possible to repair that omission. But a few years ago I strangely discovered, through a chance meeting in a *wagon-lit* on the way to Geneva, that the small Staffordshire town – or rather, an adjacent village known as Silverdale – was at least the birthplace of Sir Joseph Cook, a former High Commissioner for Australia, who during our brief acquaintance at the League that summer habitually addressed me as ‘Little Newcastle’.

I must have been about eighteen months old when my family moved to Macclesfield, which was a reasonable though none too convenient railway journey from the Potteries. Here, in the small garden and field belonging to our house, and in the smooth, pretty Cheshire lanes with their kindly hedges and benign wild flowers, I and my brother Edward, less than two years my junior, passed through a childhood which was, to all appearances, as serene and uneventful as any childhood could be.

The first memories of my generation are inevitably of an experience which we all share in common, for they belong to dramatic national events, to the songs, the battles and the sudden terminations of suspense in a struggle more distant and more restricted than that which was destined to engulf us. Like the rest of my contemporaries, I began to distinguish real occurrences from fables and fancies about the time that the South African War broke out at the end of 1899. Before 1900, though animate and assertive, I could hardly have been described as a conscious observer of my background.

From the unrolling mists of oblivious babyhood, the strains drift back to me of ‘We’re Soldiers of the Queen, me lads!’ and ‘Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you’. An organ was triumphantly playing the first of these tunes in a Macclesfield street one cold spring morning when I noticed that banners and gay streamers were hanging from all the windows.

‘It’s because of the Relief of Ladysmith,’ my mother explained in response to my excited questioning; ‘Now Uncle Frank will be coming home.’

But Uncle Frank – a younger brother of my father’s who had been farming in South Africa when the War began and had joined the Queen’s forces as a trooper – never came home after all, for he

died of enteric in Ladysmith half an hour before the relief of the town.

I had quite forgotten him on a grey January afternoon nearly a year later, when I sat snugly in our warm kitchen, drawing birds and dragons and princesses with very long hair, while the old lady whose Diamond Jubilee had made such an impression upon my three-year-old consciousness sank solemnly into her grave. In front of the fire, the little plump cook read the evening paper aloud to the housemaid.

“The Queen is now asleep,” she quoted in sepulchral tones, while I, absorbed with my crayons, remained busily unaware that so much more than a reign was ending, and that the long age of effulgent prosperity into which I had been born was to break up in thirteen years’ time with an explosion which would reverberate through my personal life to the end of my days.

It seemed only a few weeks afterwards, though it was actually eighteen months, and peace with South Africa had already been signed, that Edward and I were assiduously decorating with flags the railing which divided the lower lawn from the hayfield, when my father came hurriedly up the drive with an anxious face and a newspaper in his hand.

‘You can take down your decorations,’ he announced gloomily. ‘There’ll be no Coronation. The King’s ill!’

That night I prayed earnestly to God to make the dear King better and let him live. The fact that he actually did recover established in me a touching faith in the efficacy of prayer, which superstitiously survived until the Great War proved to me, once for all, that there was nothing in it. To those who were twenty or more at the time of Victoria’s death, the brief reign of Edward – to whatever extent that indefatigable visitor to Paris and Biarritz may have been a factor in the coming of the deluge when it did – must have seemed merely a breathing space between the Victorian age and the German invasion of Belgium. To us, the War generation, it was much more than that, for in those nine years we grew from children into adolescents or adults. Yet of the King himself I remember nothing between his untimely attack of appendicitis, and the pious elegy in the best Victorian manner which I produced at school when my form was told to write a poem in memory of his passing.

Not only in its name, Glen Bank, and its white-painted semi-detachment, but in its hunting pictures and Marcus Stone engravings, its plush curtains, its mahogany furniture and its scarcity of books, our Macclesfield house represented all that was essentially middle-class in that Edwardian decade.

Following the long-established example of my father's parents, we even had prayers before breakfast, during which performance everybody – from my mother, who perturbedly watched the boiling coffee-machine on the table, to the maids who shuffled uneasily in their chairs while the postman banged at the front door and the milkman thundered at the back – presented an aspect of inattentive agitation. The ceremony frequently ended in a tempestuous explosion on the part of my father, since Edward was almost always late, and could never say the Lord's Prayer as rapidly as the others. As a rule he was still patiently pleading with the Deity to lead him not into 'tation, while the rest of us were thankfully vociferating 'Amen'.

Although my father, as a self-willed young man in his thirties, was somewhat liable to these outbursts of irritation, they never really alarmed me, for he was always my champion in childhood, and could be relied upon as a safe bulwark against the bewildering onslaughts of his practical-joke-loving younger brothers and sisters, who regarded a small girl as fair game for their riotous ingenuity. Far more disturbing to my peace of mind was the strange medley of irrational fears which were always waiting to torment me – fears of thunder, of sunsets, of the full moon, of the dark, of standing under railway arches or crossing bridges over noisy streams, of the end of the world and of the devil waiting to catch me round the corner (this last being due to a nursemaid who overheard me, at the age of five or six, calling Edward 'Little fool!' and immediately commented: 'There, you've done it! *Now* you'll go to hell!').

Parents and nurses had by that time outgrown the stage of putting children into dark cupboards as a 'cure' for this type of 'tiresomeness' – an atrocity once perpetrated on my mother which adversely affected her psychology for ever afterwards – but such terrors did appear to them to have no other origin than a perverse unreasonableness, and I was expostulated with and even scolded

for thus 'giving way'. There seemed to be no one to whom I could appeal for understanding of such humiliating cowardice, nobody whom I instinctively felt to be on my side against the mysterious phenomena which so alarmed me. Since I thus grew up without having my fears rationalised by explanation, I carried them with me, thrust inward but very little transformed, into adulthood, and was later to have only too good reason to regret that I never learnt to conquer them while still a child.

On the whole, in spite of these intermittent terrors, the years in which life is taken for granted were pleasant enough, if not conspicuously reassuring. For as long as I could remember, our house had always been full of music, never first-rate, but tuneful, and strangely persistent in its ability to survive more significant recollections. To the perturbation of my father, who never really cared for music in spite of the early singing lessons, there was always much practising of songs, or pianoforte solos, and later of violin exercises, and in Macclesfield my mother gave periodic 'musical evenings', for which Edward and I, at the ages of about seven and nine, used to sit up in order to play tinkling duets together, or innocuous trios with our governess.

My mother, who had an agreeable soprano voice, took singing lessons in Manchester; at musical parties, she sang 'When the Heart is Young', 'Whisper and I Shall Hear' or 'The Distant Shore' – a typical example of Victorian pathos which always reduced me to tears at the point where 'the mai-den – drooped – and – DIED'. I was much more stimulated by 'Robert the Devil', and whenever my mother, her back safely turned towards me, trilled 'Mercy! Mercy! Mer-russy!' in her ardent soprano, I flung myself up and down upon the hearthrug in an ecstasy of masochistic fervour.

My first acquaintance with literature was less inspiring, for in Macclesfield the parental library consisted solely of a few yellow-back novels, two or three manuals on paper-making, and a large tome entitled *Household Medicine*, in which the instructions were moral rather than hygienic. Lest anyone should suspect the family of being literary, these volumes were concealed beneath a heavy curtain in the chill, gloomy dining-room. My father was once told by a publisher's traveller that the Pottery towns held the lowest record for book-buying in England. Being a true son of his district,

which has an immense respect for 'brass' but none whatever for the uncommercial products of a poetic imagination, he remained faithful in Cheshire as in Staffordshire to his neighbourhood's reputation.

When I had exhausted my own nursery literature – a few volumes of Andrew Lang's fairy-tales, one of which was punctiliously presented to me on each birthday, and some of the more saccharine children's stories of L. T. Meade – I turned surreptitiously to the yellow-back novels. These were mostly by Wilkie Collins, Besant and Rice, and Mrs Henry Wood, and many were the maudlin tears that I wept over the sorrows of Poor Miss Finch and Lady Isabel Vane.

It was not till later, at the age of ten, that I discovered the manifold attractions of *Household Medicine*. The treatment of infectious diseases left me cold, but I was secretly excited at the prospect of menstruation; I also found the details of a confinement quite enthralling, though I had never shown that devotion to dolls which is supposed to indicate a strong maternal instinct. The whole subject of child-birth was completely dissociated in my mind from that of sex, about which I knew little and cared less. I was particularly impressed at the time by the instructions given to the child-bearing woman in the final stage of labour, though I can now only remember that she was advised to braid her hair in two plaits, and to wear an old flannel petticoat under her nightgown.

I must have been about eight when two solitary classics – probably neglected Christmas presents – found their way on to a whist table in the drawing-room. One was *Longfellow's Complete Poems*, bound in a bilious mustard-brown leather, and the other a copy of Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*. I soon had Longfellow's poems – including 'Tales of a Wayside Inn' and 'The New England Tragedies' – almost by heart, and even now, when I am searching through my memory for an appropriate quotation, 'Life is real, life is earnest', and 'Hadst thou stayed I must have fled!' will insist upon ousting A. E. Housman and Siegfried Sassoon. But I found *Sohrab and Rustum* even more entrancing than Longfellow, and over and over again, when I was sure of having the drawing-room to myself, I indulged the histrionic instinct which had derived so much satisfaction from 'Robert the Devil' by imitating in dumb show the throes of the unfortunate Sohrab,

*Lovely in death, upon the common sand.*

My mother did her conscientious best to remedy the deficiencies of our literary education by reading Dickens aloud to us on Sunday afternoons. We ploughed through *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* in this manner, which perhaps explains why I have never been able to finish anything else by Dickens except *A Tale of Two Cities*. Far more effective as compensations for the lack of external stimulus were the five 'novels' that I wrote before I was eleven, on special books patiently constructed for me by a devoted and intelligent governess out of thick waste paper from the mills, and the exciting legends of a mythical community called 'The Dicks', which from my bed in the night nursery I used to relate to Edward across the passage in the day nursery after we were both supposed to be asleep. I was always the inventor and he the recipient of these enthralling communications, which must have begun when I was about six, and continued until I reached the mature age of eleven and went to school.

Edward was always a good listener, since his own form of self-expression then consisted in making unearthly and to me quite meaningless sounds on his small violin. I remember him, at the age of seven, as a rather solemn, brown-eyed little boy, with beautiful arched eyebrows which lately, to my infinite satisfaction, have begun to reproduce themselves, a pair of delicate question-marks, above the dark eyes of my five-year-old son. Even in childhood we seldom quarrelled, and by the time that we both went away to boarding-school he had already become the dearest companion of those brief years of unshadowed adolescence permitted to our condemned generation.

## 4

When I was eleven our adored governess departed, and my family moved from Macclesfield to a tall grey stone house in Buxton, the Derbyshire 'mountain spa', in order that Edward and I might be sent to 'good' day-schools. His was a small preparatory school of which a vigorous Buxton man was then headmaster; mine inevitably described itself as 'a school for the daughters of gentlemen'. My brother's school, which certainly gave him a better grounding



than I received from mine, will always be associated in my recollection with one significant experience.

Soon after Edward went there I happened, on my way to the town, to pass the school playground at a time when the boys were uproariously enjoying an afternoon break. Seeing Edward, I stopped; he called several of his newly made cronies, and we spent a few moments of pleasant 'ragging' across the low wall. I felt no consciousness of guilt, and was unaware that I had been seen, on their return home along an adjacent road, by my mother and an aunt who was staying with us. At tea-time a heavy and to me inexplicable atmosphere of disapproval hung over the table; shortly afterwards the storm exploded, and I was severely reprimanded for my naughtiness in thus publicly conversing with Edward's companions. (I think it was the same aunt who afterwards informed me that the reason why our letters had to be left open at my school was 'in case any of the girls should be so wicked as to write to boys'. Probably this was true of most girls' schools before the War.)

The small incident was my first intimation that, in the eyes of the older generation, free and unself-conscious association between boys and girls was more improper than a prudish suspicion of the opposite sex. It aroused in me a rebellious resentment that I have never forgotten. I had not heard, in those days, of co-educational schools, but had I been aware of their experimental existence and been able to foresee my far-distant parenthood, I should probably have decided, then and there, that my own son and daughter should attend them.

I do not remember much about my day-school except that when I first went there I was badly bullied by two unpleasant little girls, who soon tired of the easy physical advantage given them by their superior age and stature, and instead endeavoured to torment my immature mind by forcing upon it items of sexual information in their most revolting form. My parents, who had suffered such qualms of apprehension over my entirely wholesome friendliness with Edward's riotous companions, remained completely unaware of this real threat to my decency and my peace. I never mentioned it to them owing to a bitter sense of shame, which was not, however, aroused by my schoolfellows' unæsthetic communications, but by my inability to restrain my tears during their physical assaults.

So ambitious was I already, and so indifferent to sex in all its manifestations, that their attempts to corrupt my mind left it as innocent as they found it, and I resented only the pinchings and wrist-twistings which always accompanied my efforts to escape.

Though my school took a few boarders, most of its pupils were local; in consequence the class-room competition was practically non-existent. At the age of twelve I was already preening the gay feathers of my youthful conceit in one of the top forms, where the dull, coltish girls of sixteen and seventeen so persistently treated me as a prodigy that I soon lost such small ability as I had possessed to estimate my modest achievements at their true and limited worth.

When I first went to the school, it was in charge of an ancient mistress who was typical of the genteel and uncertificated past, but soon afterwards a new Principal was appointed with an unimpeachable Degree acquired from Cheltenham. In Buxton this was regarded as quite a remarkable qualification for a headmistress, and in those days my parents' standards of scholarship were almost as unexact. They had never, indeed, had much opportunity to become otherwise, for my mother had received a very spasmodic and unorthodox education, while my father, after reacting with characteristic if pardonable obstinacy against the rigours of Malvern in the eighteen-seventies, had been sent to the High School at Newcastle-under-Lyme, where the boys' only consistent occupation was a perpetual baiting of the much-enduring masters.

During my father's uproarious days at Newcastle High School, a Hanley boy, two or three years his junior, named Enoch Arnold Bennett, was more profitably pursuing his studies at the Middle School in the same town. There was, needless to say, very little communication between the pupils from the Middle School, and the domineering young tyrants at the High School. Even after the author of *The Old Wives' Tale* had won his lasting place in English literature, my relatives still thought nothing much of the Bennetts, whom they characteristically described as 'very ordinary people'.

The education given to my parents, in both quality and quantity, was of a type at that time shared, and considered quite adequate, by

almost the whole of the provincial middle-classes. Its shortcomings were in no way compensated by the superior attainments of their friends, for throughout my childhood in Macclesfield and Buxton, I cannot remember that anyone ever came to the house of more interest to me than relatives, or mentally restricted local residents with their even more limited wives.

These families were typical of the kind that still inhabit small country towns; the wives 'kept house', and the husbands occupied themselves as branch bank-managers, cautious and unenterprising solicitors, modest business men who preferred safety to experiment, and 'family' doctors whose bedside manner camouflaged their diagnostical uncertainties. Schoolmasters were not encouraged, as my father found their conversation tedious. Always a staunch Free-Trader, he was ready to join issue against any supporter of Joseph Chamberlain in the topical controversy of Free Trade *versus* Tariff Reform, but he did object to being diverted from the enthralling discussion of paper manufacture to subjects of such remote interest as the bombardment of Port Arthur, the Turkish atrocities in Macedonia, or the policy of the Russian revolutionary party which was bloodily agitating for the establishment of a Duma.

To my own immature ears, hardly an echo of these or other far-off and rather more divine events ever succeeded in penetrating; even the elements of fiscal argument, though respectable enough, were regarded as beyond a schoolgirl's understanding. I suppose it was the very completeness with which all doors and windows to the more adventurous and colourful world, the world of literature, of scholarship, of art, of politics, of travel, were closed to me, that kept my childhood so relatively contented a time. Once I went away to school, and learnt – even though from a distance that filled me with dismay – what far countries of loveliness, and learning, and discovery, and social relationship based upon enduring values, lay beyond those solid provincial walls which enclosed the stuffiness of complacent bourgeoisdom so securely within themselves, my discontent kindled until I determined somehow to break through them to the paradise of sweetness and light which I firmly believed awaited me in the south.

I often wonder how many of my present-day friends were themselves limited by a horizon as circumscribed as that which bounded

my first thirteen years. Up to the time, indeed, that I was twenty-one, my sole contacts with life outside England were confined to a Cook's tour to Lucerne, where I developed mumps immediately on arrival and spent the rest of the fortnight in a sanatorium, and a brief visit to Paris, during which my father was knocked down by a taxicab and promptly insisted upon all of us returning to Buxton.

I believe that it is Albert Edward Wiggam, the American author of *The Fruit of the Family Tree*, who has calculated that half the world's distinguished men and women are produced by only one per cent of its population, and that all the teeming mediocre millions of the rest of mankind are required to contribute the other half of its leaders. But when I consider – and in my later teens I often used to consider – the incalculable advantages of heredity and early environment that are involved in merely being born a member of such families as the Huxleys, the Haldanes, the Frys, the Darwins or the Arnolds, what really seems remarkable is not that the undistinguished residue produces only half the sum of human talent, but that those who belong to it ever emerge at all from the blackest obscurity.

## 5

At the age of thirteen, small for my years and still very much of a child in spite of my mature Fifth Form associates, I was sent away to school at the recently founded St Monica's, at Kingswood in Surrey – a safe choice, because the eldest and ablest of my mother's sisters was one of the two Principals. Her partner, Louise Heath Jones, a brilliant, dynamic woman who had been educated at Cheltenham and Newnham, alternately inspired and intimidated both girls and mistresses by her religious idealism and the strongly individual quality of her teaching. The *tempo* at which her ardent spirit caused her to live wore out too quickly her fragile constitution; a premature breakdown led to her early retirement soon after I left the school, and she died in 1931 after many years of illness.

My aunt, level-headed and self-reliant, remained in charge from 1914 until the end of 1930, and though she possessed neither college degree nor technical training in education, her personal dignity

and her natural gift for organisation soon raised St Monica's to a high position, with a refreshingly enlightened and broad-minded régime among girls' private schools. It has recently passed out of this category into the hands of an exclusively masculine committee, and now ranks as a public school.

When, a few years before the War, I first went to St Monica's, the young school had not yet reached the high educational standards of its later days, and though my budding ambition to go to college – which developed as soon as I discovered that such places as women's colleges existed, and learnt what they stood for – met with real sympathy from both Principals and staff, it received no practical preparation for the necessary examinations, which were not then taken as a matter of normal routine. No doubt my father's persistent determination throughout my schooldays that I should be turned into an entirely ornamental young lady deterred both my aunt and Miss Heath Jones from the efforts that they would otherwise have made on my behalf; the most benevolent and aspiring headmistresses are, after all, singularly helpless in the hands of misguided but resolute parents.

My classroom contemporaries regarded my ambitions, not unnaturally, with no particular interest or sympathy. Many of them were fashionable young women to whom universities represented a quite unnecessary prolongation of useless and distasteful studies, and they looked upon my efforts to reach the top of a form, and my naïve anxiety to remain there, as satisfactorily exonerating them from the troublesome endeavour to win that position for themselves.

Socially, of course, I was quite without standing among these wealthy girls, designed by their parents for London or Edinburgh society, with their town addresses in Mayfair or Belgravia, and their country houses of which the name 'Hall' or 'Park' was frequently a part. My parents could not afford the numerous theatres and concerts to which many of them were taken by request of their families; my 'best' clothes were home-made or purchased from undistinguished shops in Buxton or Manchester; and the presents that I received at Christmas or on birthdays did not bear comparison with the many elegant gifts that my class-mates displayed for the admiration of contemporaries on returning to school after the holidays.

It is hardly surprising that few of the girls coveted the reputation unenthusiastically conceded to me for 'brains', or even envied my comparative freedom from refused lessons, but regarded these assets as mere second-rate compensations for my obvious inferiority in the advantages that they valued most. In those days as in these, girls' private schools attracted but few parents possessed of more than a half-hearted intention to train their daughters for exacting careers or even for useful occupations. Both for the young women and their mothers, the potential occurrence that loomed largest upon the horizon was marriage, and in spite of the undaunted persistence with which both the Principals upheld their own progressive ideals of public service, almost every girl left school with only two ambitions – to return at the first possible moment to impress her school-fellows with the glory of a grown-up *toilette*, and to get engaged before everybody else.

Although I was then more deeply concerned about universities than engagements, I shared the general hankering after an adult wardrobe which would be at least partly self-chosen, since all girls' clothing of the period appeared to be designed by their elders on the assumption that decency consisted in leaving exposed to the sun and air no part of the human body that could possibly be covered with flannel. In these later days, when I lie lazily sunning myself in a mere gesture of a bathing-suit on the *gay plage* of some small Riviera town – or even, during a clement summer, on the ultra-respectable shores of southern England – and watch the lean brown bodies of girl-children, almost naked and completely unashamed, leaping in and out of the water, I am seized with an angry resentment against the conventions of twenty years ago, which wrapped up my comely adolescent body in woollen combinations, black cashmere stockings, 'liberty' bodice, dark stockinette knickers, flannel petticoat and often, in addition, a long-sleeved, high-necked, knitted woollen 'spencer'.

At school, on the top of this conglomeration of drapery, we wore green flannel blouses in the winter and white flannel blouses in the summer, with long navy-blue skirts, linked to the blouses by elastic belts which continually slipped up or down, leaving exposed an unsightly hiatus of blouse-tape or safety-pinned shirt-band. Green and white blouses alike had long sleeves ending in buttoned cuffs at the wrist, and high collars covering the neck almost to the chin,

and fastening tightly at the throat with stiff green ties. For cricket and tennis matches, even in the baking summer of 1911, we still wore the flowing skirts and high-necked blouses, with our heavy hair braided into pigtails; it was not until after the War that the school went into sleeveless white linens for summer games. Only in the gymnasium class did our handicapped limbs acquire freedom, and even then the tight, long-sleeved blouses were worn under our weighty pleated tunics. In spite of these impediments, the games and drill did make us lithe and hard, and during the War I had reason to thank them for the powers of endurance of which they laid the foundation.

The only intimate friends that I made at Kingswood were a small, dark, half-foreign girl and a pretty, fair, sweet-natured Anglo-Saxon, whose names might very suitably have been Mina and Betty. Mina, a younger daughter in a large and wealthy family, displayed at school a real artistic talent, while Betty possessed intellectual possibilities which she was never sufficiently interested to explore, owing to a quite frankly acknowledged desire to marry and have children. In neither case did the intimacy long survive our departure from school.

Mina, during the War, developed under the stress of a perturbing love-affair a strong disapproval of my character, which led her to conclude that I had never been worthy of her friendship. When I was nursing in London in the early part of 1916, and she was cultivating her considerable gift for drawing at an art school, she made an appointment with me at – of all appropriate places for a moral condemnation – the Albert Memorial, in order to inform me that I was selfish, insincere, ambitious, and therefore no longer deserving of her affection. I can see her sturdy little figure now, conspicuous in a coat and skirt of strange pink cloth against the solid stone basis of the immaculate Albert, as she arraigned me for the harsh, unmelting bitterness into which I had been frozen by the first real tragedy of my experience.

‘You never really cared for Roland; you only wanted to marry him out of ambition! If you’d really loved him you couldn’t possibly have behaved in the way you’ve done the past few weeks!’

It was, of course, typical of the average well-to-do girl of the period to assume that the desire for power, which is as universal among women as among men, could only be fulfilled by the

acquisition of a brilliant husband. I do not recall the mood in which I spent the long 'bus ride back to Camberwell, but I probably minded dreadfully at the time. At any rate, we parted for good, and I cannot recollect that I have ever encountered Mina since that morning.

With Betty the association lasted longer and I owe far more to it; for nearly two years during the War we served by arrangement in the same military hospitals, and even after it was over kept up the kind of friendship that renews itself at Old Girls' Association meetings and exchanges of annual Christmas cards. But real intimacy between us became difficult as soon as we left school, for our homes were in different parts of England, our parents cherished different social aspirations, and our personal ambitions were not the same. Betty had no desire for a university education or the independence of a professional woman. The War, which frustrated individual as well as national hopes, caused her future to remain uncertain until 1922, when she married a man considerably her senior who soon afterwards became a Conservative Member of Parliament. To-day her two pretty children, a little older than my own, still provide a point of contact between lives which in other respects could hardly differ more widely.

## 6

I remember Kingswood very clearly as it looked twenty years ago, with the inviolate Downs stretching away to Smitham, and the thick woods unbroken by the pink and grey eruption of suburban villas which has now torn them ruthlessly into sections. On summer evenings one of our favourite rambles took us across the sloping fields, sweet with clover and thyme and wild roses, between Kingswood and Chipstead; there as twilight descended we looked a little nervously at the darkening sky for indications of Halley's Comet which was said to herald such prodigious disasters, or listened more serenely to the nightingales in a stillness broken only at long intervals by the lazy, infrequent little trains which ambled down the toy railway line in the valley. The thyme and the roses still blossom bravely about those doomed meadows, but I have never heard the nightingales there since the War, and the once uninterrupted walks have long been spoilt by barbed-wire