

CHAPTER THREE – Durham

AT DURHAM women students were far outnumbered by men in those unequal days. Three out of some twenty in my classics year (1957) were female, and I took little notice of them. But as I began to come out of my shell, haltingly and bashfully, it was clear that gender numbers were far closer to equality among those students who socialised, at the students' union in particular. Very few females studied science subjects, which required constant attendance at the science labs, where males were very predominant in numbers: most women studied arts subjects. And there were, after all, whole colleges full of these wondrous creatures: if you were lucky enough to get to know one of them, you were likely to meet her friends as well. I tried without measurable success to get to know two or three girls better in my first year, but it was only towards the end of my time at Durham that I acquired enough confidence to get to know (in the non-biblical sense) one or two of them more closely. Sexual relationships were rare, as far as I knew, and something for which at least one couple was sent down when the girl became pregnant: the age of majority was then still twenty-one (where in my opinion it should have stayed), by which time most were about to graduate, which meant that the college authorities were legally *in loco parentis* and had what is now referred to as a special duty of care).

Without the slightest clue about what I wanted to do on graduation in three years' time, I volunteered in my first few days in Durham to write for the student newspaper *Palatinate* (the university's official colour is palatinate purple, in honour of Durham's erstwhile status as a county-palatine ruled by its prince-bishop in Plantagenet times, when the Scots were a constant threat; *plus ça change*). I did this

simply because I liked writing. I was blissfully unaware of Graham Greene's warning to his brother Hugh: "Beware of university journalism, fatal to firsts" - something I certainly lived up to. My first editor was Hunter Davies, who went on to a distinguished career in the national press and as an author: he was then in his post-graduate year, studying for a diploma in education (a back-stop for many in case one was forced to earn a living by teaching). In my final year I was a member of the triumvirate that ran the paper, with Brian Turner (formerly of the Vaughan) and John Aldrich, the editor, who went on to Fleet Street like me. It was enormous fun, and I soon started filing a gossip feature called "The Earl of Cork's Column" (whose full title, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery, I found enticingly bizarre).

One of the first things I did for the paper in my opening term was to write a mocking piece about the "Alien's Registration Certificate" which I was obliged, from age sixteen, to hold as a foreign-born immigrant. I still had a Dutch passport. It was a passport-like booklet with a grubby green cardboard cover containing my photograph and personal details with a record of my address, which had to be kept up to date. I was alien number 07360. It was a juvenile piece, but I enjoyed venting my spleen about the bureaucracy involved in being a foreigner in Britain. I went on about the separation of Britons and foreigners at ports and airports, which struck me as about as logical as dividing the world into duckbilled platypi and non-duckbilled platypi (it should have been platypuses or at a stretch platypodes). One or two readers managed to laugh at it.

One or two did not, specifically the Durham County Constabulary, who sent two burly detectives (they were bound to be big as the minimum-height standard for admission to the local police was then 5ft 10in) to my lodgings in Durham's North End suburb, to the considerable alarm of my landlady, Mrs Madison. I was out at the time, but they left a message requiring me to present myself at Durham police station. No reason was given, but I took my alien's certificate with me just in case.

I presented myself there the following morning. On the CID desk lay a copy of *Palatinate*, opened at the page containing my squib. I was told quite heavily that I had not presented myself to report my arrival in Durham as the law required. Why not? I diffidently produced my booklet and opened it at the last used page. I knew, I said, that I was supposed to report my change of address within seventy-two hours. There was indeed an entry to that effect, complete with rubber stamp from Putney station of the Metropolitan Police. I had gone there to report my move a couple of days *before* leaving my parents' home to save time, as this seemed more convenient. "Within seventy-two hours" meant *after* moving, not before, said the CID sternly, adding: "If you hadn't done that, we would have thrown the book at you after that so-called article." The "book" meant at that time a fine of up to £500 or six months' imprisonment - or both. I was relieved, if not verging on smug, when I left the nick a free man; on reflection it was not comforting to know that the police kept a close eye on *Palatinate*. A few years later I was able to write a postscript to this tale: when the government abolished the aliens' registration system along with the certificate, I was allowed to report the fact in *The Journal*, Newcastle, my first "real" newspaper - under the byline "Alien no. 07360". Meanwhile I had been able to reassure my

widowed landlady that she was not sheltering Interpol's most wanted man, and relations returned to normal.

But not for long. She was inordinately fond of banana custard, or at least of serving it up for her lodgers. Neither John Aldrich, with whom I was sharing, nor I could stand it, so we took it in turns to creep up to the lavatory at the top of the stairs on the first-floor landing and dump it. One of us - I cannot remember which - was caught *in flagrante banana*, and we were evicted when it was discovered the very next day that the local main drain was blocked. Fortunately, the Society's Principal, the Rev. Dr Alec Whitehouse, had a rich sense of humour and allowed us to stay in the college sick bay for the last fortnight of our first term. A week later we were vindicated by no less an authority than the blessed *Durham County Advertiser*, which reported that the body of a German shepherd dog had been found in the drain. Whitehouse's trusting acceptance of our indignant denial of the banana-custard theory of the blockage was thus gratifyingly justified, but our landlady was not unnaturally disinclined to forgive us for hurling her well-meant if nauseating dessert down the pan. Luckily, we found good lodgings just around the corner from her for the next two terms, which passed in relative residential calm.

Durham City is a most beautiful place. At its heart is a World Heritage site, perhaps the finest view from a train in Britain, with the magnificent Norman cathedral on its rocky eminence at one end of Palace Green and the perfectly preserved Norman castle, former residence of the prince-bishops, at the other. The rest of the buildings round the green belong to the university, including the students' union (now

absorbed by the library next door) with its very busy cafe and a mixture of lecture rooms and student lodging houses. The castle is synonymous with University College (known as Castle), some of whose students actually have rooms in the perfectly preserved keep. The river Wear executes a double bend through the city and round the dominant promontory, creating a "peninsula" encompassing Palace Green and a few neighbouring streets as well as many university buildings. These then included six of the colleges that formed the Durham division of the university, which at that time incorporated King's College in Newcastle (now the entirely independent Newcastle University). Palace Green is a short walk along South Bailey round the cathedral from St Cuthbert's, and between the two stands a terrace of tall, elegant Georgian houses, one of which was then the home of the department of Classics. The spacious cathedral close is on the other side of the Bailey. Though much smaller than central Oxford or Cambridge, both of which I got to know quite well later, the core of Durham city matches both in splendour and atmosphere. Alone among post-Oxbridge English universities, Durham has a collegiate system like theirs. The entire place was, and doubtless remains, a wonderful location for study (or to pursue distractions such as *Palatinates*, amateur dramatics, rowing and many other sports), even though there are now at least seven times as many students as there were in the 1950s.

To study there on a grant from the London County Council, which included all tuition fees plus means-tested maintenance, was my final and greatest educational privilege funded by the state. My parents did the decent thing and made up the maintenance grant to the official maximum: many students on partial grants did not receive the parental subsidy they were supposed to, but even they lived in the lap of

financial luxury compared with today's students with their huge fee burdens and loans. The dear old LCC even invited students to whom it had awarded a grant to a tea and biscuit reception at the County Hall before they went up to university. Now the LCC has gone, County Hall is in private hands and there is no reception for grant-holders - because effectively there are none. How lucky my generation was.

Durham is a hilly city - some say, unconvincingly, that it has seven hills like Rome - but it was small enough for most parts to be walkable, especially for a young man saving on bus fares. We Cuth's students were expected to lunch five days a week in the Society's newly expanded dining hall, where two sittings could accommodate everyone, and to dine in, wearing our undergraduate gowns, three times a week. Payment was exacted each term for all these meals, whether you ate them or not, so most people did. After a college dinner, if not side-tracked to the Junior Common Room bar, something of an institution, or a city pub or for coffee to the room of a fellow student living in college, I would walk home along the lovely bank of the Wear and up the steep Western Hill to my lodgings in my first two years. On other evenings I would dine there or go to a primitive cafe or tea-room (the first proper restaurant, a Chinese, opened in Durham only the year after I left) in the centre of town. The walk from college to the marketplace in the centre with its excellent fish and chip shop was about half a mile. At the three-way junction in the middle of the marketplace was a glass box, unique as far as I know but long since vanished, containing a policeman (I never saw it womanned), who was there to control the traffic lights.

In my first year the pubs closed at 9.30 pm, extended a year or so later to a louche 10 pm. An important element of my university "education for life" was meeting coalminers from time to time in the pubs, with whom we were lucky enough to enjoy very intelligent or at least lively debates on political and social issues as well as football. Many of us Cuthbertsmen had lodgings in one or other of the many mining villages within bus range of Durham city, and the miners in general, undereducated "rough diamonds" as they tended to be, were too nice to criticise our privileged existence as students, lively banter always excepted. I never lost a certain empathy for these men when I was working as a journalist in the North East, and long after. All the over 100 pits of the Durham and Northumberland coalfields are long gone, but the Durham Miners' Gala remembers them every July in satisfyingly large numbers, even though the character of the event has inevitably changed radically: yet it remains a cheery celebration of labour (Old Labour at any rate) and trade-unionism. I went "down the mines" many years later for a major feature on the industry and saw their working conditions (albeit in modern pits). It was a hard, dangerous job which one would not wish anyone to be forced to take - but the great community spirit of those villages cannot be gainsaid, and the fate of the miners and their families and communities during and after the great, suicidal national coal strike of 1984-85 was a real tragedy. Working for that feature in the late 1970s I went to Blackpool for the annual conference of the National Union of Mineworkers in its pre-strike heyday: I recall an invitation card to the NUM's lavish main dinner at the conference, which included the guidance, "5.30 for 8 pm". It was truly a fluid and unforgettable occasion.

Back at the university the academic staff who taught us classicists were a decidedly mixed bunch. The professor of Greek, Joseph Skemp, looked the part of the oft-caricatured "mad professor" with a wild fringe of hair round a bald pate. A thoroughly considerate and learned man, he sadly reinforced my lack of dedication by treating the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, widely advertised as one of the greatest plays ever written, as a concatenation of textual problems (very real but rather off-putting as an approach). As a result, we barely got through half the actual text by the end of the course and spent little if any time on its literary merits and indeed content. In his spare time Skemp was a devoted railway buff, who in the long vacation travelled the pre-Beeching British Rail network with Charlie Holmes, the Senior Tutor at Cuthbert's and one of the funniest orators I can recall.

Then there was Dr Gooding, who conducted one-to-one tutorials on Greek prose composition. This dreary exercise involved turning a piece of English into ancient Greek, trying to avoid all the pitfalls of grammar, syntax and semantics that lay in wait. It was an activity not so different from compiling or solving crossword puzzles, which no doubt helps to explain the prominence of classicists (and crossword fanatics) in the great assault on the enemy ciphers at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.

Unfortunately, Dr Gooding had discovered that I was (still at that time) a Roman Catholic, clearly a provocation and a challenge in his eyes. He was a member of the Exclusive Brethren (who make the Plymouth Brethren, from whom they derived and diverged, look like a bunch of debauchees). So I found myself engaged with him once

a week, not so much in analysing my compositional errors as in arguing the toss about religious theories and beliefs - one of the very few times my training in apologetics at school ever came in handy. The fact that the good doctor had the kind of eyes that show white all-round the pupils when excited did not help. He would have made a good Doctor Who. I performed badly in Greek prose exams.

Dr Derek Bargrave-Weaver took us for ancient philosophy. A keen member of the Territorial Army, in which he was a major, he had a delivery that was sometimes reminiscent of a parade-ground bark. His wife, a very pleasant and unpretentious woman, had been a barmaid before she married him, a fact that occasioned some extraordinarily snobbish gossip. Bargrave, as we called him, was enthusiastic and keen but very highly strung. Sad to say, when my wife decided to study for a PhD in pre-Socratic Greek philosophy ten years after we left Durham, she persuaded Bargrave to be her remote-control tutor (we were living in Cape Town at the time) - only to learn after a long silence from him that he had suffered a nervous breakdown. She was forced to give up the project.

Her favourite teacher at Durham was Dr Edna Jenkinson, a painfully shy, unmarried scholar from St Mary's college who taught us Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. She was also my wife's "moral tutor", a usually token role that entailed keeping an eye on the student and his or her welfare. The onerous duties included handing out a glass of sherry at the tutor's home or rooms once a year: mine distributed glasses of ouzo on a bright Sunday in the garden of his home in Sacriston village. It is not his fault that I loathe any drink containing aniseed.

Dr Ernst Badian was a small, dark-haired Austrian Jewish refugee of Armenian ancestry with spectacles and a shock of black, curly hair, and one of the most distinguished scholars to teach us at Durham (he moved on to Harvard, became a professor there and wrote some seminal books on aspects of Greek and Roman history). He taught us ancient Greek history and set a dauntingly high standard in the essays he imposed on us. Badian had a young family, whose pram was in constant use, not only for his brood but also to wheel great piles of books to his house near the top of the steep Western Hill. I would often pass him puffing laboriously as I made my way to my lodgings. He would refuse help with the load. Small wonder that he was very slight and slender.

His near neighbour on the hill was Dr Neville Collinge, who was the most inspiring teacher I had the good fortune to study under at Durham. I put him in the same inspirational category as John Richards at the Vaughan. He was Reader in classical philology, the subject I picked as my specialism for the third and final year, when we could choose from archaeology, history, literature, palaeontology, philosophy and other areas of special study. I managed to get alpha marks in my two final-year philology papers and was even offered a place to read for a higher degree on the strength of this feat. My eleventh-hour, restored educational enthusiasm, thanks to Collinge, undoubtedly saved my degree. I went so far as to learn the Russian alphabet so I could cite Russian words in essays on comparative etymology. Thanks to intense revision just before finals, I was actually able to identify any one of thirty-four ancient Greek sub-dialects from a short extract. I could diagnose them from the

half-dozen "symptoms" or linguistic foibles unique to each which I had compiled for myself: no textbook did this. I stayed up all night: I do not believe I ever prepared for anything so thoroughly again; I can remember absolutely nothing of all this information now. Encouraged by Collinge, I applied for a postgraduate place and approached the LCC for a new grant: they unearthed a special fund for postgraduate classics students. Both applications were approved; but, tempting though a fourth year at Durham was, I knew I was not cut out to be an academic, teaching while learning more and more about less and less, and decided to go elsewhere. Collinge meanwhile left Durham soon afterwards to become a professor at McGill university in Canada.

My lodging in the second year was the suburban private house of a foolishly trusting psychology lecturer who had taken a sabbatical year at Oxford. Five of us male students shared the house, in Fieldhouse Lane, North End, which boasted five bedrooms. I am still in touch with two of the others more than half a century later, even though both have spent most of their lives in Canada - notably Wilf Innerd, whose 80th birthday celebrations I attended in 2015. Inevitably the house became the setting for several massive parties, one or two of which caused neighbours to call the police. As I recall, one young constable told us to reduce the noise - and came back to join us for a drink or two. Academically the year was a disaster with so many distractions and a frenetic social life, but it brought me out of my shell to a considerable extent. At least I acquired some very necessary social, and one or two culinary, skills. The jazz player Jerry Mulligan and his band stayed overnight after giving a concert at the university and slept on the living-room furniture and floor. The wear and tear on the house was anything but fair: for example, towards the end

of the academic year, after the exams, we felt we should cut the heavily neglected grass in the back garden. One of us cut a small square before retiring exhausted. The next cut another - with a gap. The result as others added their pathetic efforts began to resemble a herbal chessboard. We had to have a whip-round for repairs at the end of an unforgettable year.

I met my first serious girlfriend during this year - Joy, the daughter of a Cumbrian vicar. She stayed with friends at Swiss Cottage in London during the vacations, so I was able to go out with her between terms as well as during them. But this budding relationship was soon superseded: the heady realisation that I could actually make friends with the opposite sex drove me, if not to distraction, then to several distractions.

But it was at a party at Fieldhouse Lane in the post-exam days of June at the end of my second academic year that I encountered another vicar's daughter (her father was the Rector of Prescot near Liverpool at the time, to be precise). I had actually known her for two years because she was one of the three girls in my classics year, but at this juncture I noticed her properly for the first time. We stood in the kitchen at one of the big parties and quoted Aristophanes and Horace at each other (this sounds effete, but we were meant to be studying them). I was leaning against the stove and I can remember my backside getting uncomfortably warm as I felt unable or unwilling to interrupt the conversation. I was, I think, truly mesmerised.

Christine Mary Ellis, known to all as Chris, was a little above average height at 5ft 6ins, with a slight overbite and curly dark brown hair, which she always wore short but full-bodied. She was a hard-working student but also keen on sport, specifically lacrosse, in which she played for her college, St Mary's, the university and finally English universities. One of her many attributes was energetic enthusiasm. She also played tennis and rowed. Her main non-academic activity was the theatre: she made feted, lively appearances in revues and plays put on by the Dramatic Society, supported by a gifted coterie of students, who provided not only performers but also producers, directors, stage managers and scenery builders. My *Palatinate* activities gave me an entree to this lively group.

The university registrar was called Ian Graham and he lived in a first-floor flat on Saddler Street, which runs from the end of North Bailey to the Market Place. An invitation to his place for Sunday afternoon tea was a kind of social accolade: he seemed to pick students who were prominent in the university's social and extra-curricular life. Probably on the strength of my *Palatinate* activities, I was invited twice. I went the second time, felt acutely out of place and uncomfortable out of shyness and never went again. Graham was killed in a car crash some years later.

I spent my final year in one of St Cuthbert's few residential rooms at 13 South Bailey, which after the wild times of Fieldhouse Lane was probably a good idea. The front door was assiduously locked at 11 pm each night, but the hidden back entrance unaccountably remained unlocked, perhaps another example of Dr Whitehouse's sense of humour. All the colleges applied a curfew with similar loopholes: Chris had

a room on the ground floor of St Mary's, which was used, with apologies, by some of her fellow students as a route back to their own rooms after hours. Parties aside, I cannot recall much of what we did when we were out late, with the pubs closing at 10pm (although the Cock of the North, a 1930s-style roadhouse on the A1 just outside Durham served late drinks - provided one bought some food. A single curly sandwich, untouched in the middle of the table, seemed to satisfy the landlord that the law was being properly respected). On some occasions some of us might go to an event, such as a jazz concert in Newcastle (Duke Ellington came once), which entailed returning to Durham on a late bus. This was out of bounds and could have led to "gating" or suspension. A comparatively sophisticated change of diet was offered by a Chinese restaurant in Newcastle called the May Kway.

I was not yet twenty-one when I proposed to Chris over a drink at the rambling old Three Tuns hotel in Durham at the end of our final term. It was a strange period, a limbo between the hard work of final exams and the promulgation of results on the notice boards on Palace Green. Chris had an uncle, Gordon Dobie, who lived in a large house in Tynemouth on the Northumberland coast and persuaded him to invite us to stay for part of the downtime. We watched Wimbledon on television to help while away the hours. I would have got a third but for my philological efforts, which hoisted me up to a 2:2; Chris got a well-deserved 2:1. There had not been a first in Classics at Durham since 1937, a deficiency that only came to an end the year after we left. Dr Whitehouse was either being kind or showing disappointment when he passed me in the street and remarked, "I thought you were 2:1 material." I blame *Palatinate*; or more honestly my own minimalist approach. Or the distractions of growing up...

During this last Durham phase, I found myself involved more and more in religious debates with Chris. I drew on my Catholic apologetics training at school once again while she would ask her father to provide her with Protestant ammunition. These arguments were serious but managed to draw us rather closer together all the same. I tried very hard - I prayed earnestly for the only time in my life - for the gift of faith. I had already given up going to church. Answer was there none. I think the light dawned (or possibly went out) when Chris asked, "Do you confess me?" She later became an atheist while I, more cautious as ever, defined myself as an agnostic, a position she always ridiculed. I have already observed that I developed a strong sense of the ridiculous even in childhood.

Our respective parents came to Durham for congregation, at which we were presented with our degree parchments by the Vice-Chancellor of the university and Warden of the Durham Colleges, Sir James Duff. In handing over my degree he asked, "Are you Dutch?" to which I wittily replied, "Yes." Our parents met warily over coffee with us at the County Hotel. Although engaged, we had no wedding plans or even a timetable. The religious complications were politely left in the background.

I returned to Durham on my own shortly after congregation to meet Dr Collinge to discuss postgraduate research. But during my last term I had been offered three jobs in newspapers as I had resolved at that time that I would go into journalism, whether immediately or after another year at university to read for the MA.

In those blissful times of full employment all I had to do was to get the degree. I was interviewed in Darlington by Harold Evans, who offered me a job on the Northern Echo (he was briefly my editor on *The Times* in 1981). I had an interview in Newcastle with the editor of *The Journal*, Eric Dobson, who also offered me a job. And I was in line for a graduate traineeship at the *Daily Express* in Manchester. Graduate trainees were the new vogue in journalism at the time: Reuters launched the idea, I believe; and the Thomson Newspapers group had initiated programmes in 1959 at several of their publishing centres in England and Scotland (later the group made Newcastle its only graduate training centre). The *Express* programme was due to start in 1960 so I would have been a guineapig or pioneer. Fortunately, however my father knew a senior *Express* executive in London, Donald Edgar, who advised him emphatically to tell me to have nothing to do with it. Edgar said there was no real programme at the *Express*, which meant I would probably be thrown in untried at the deep end and if I failed first time out I would be ignored or frozen out. So I chose Newcastle.

It should be clear from the foregoing how much I owe to my days in Durham. I did a lot of growing up there as well as getting my undistinguished but adequate academic qualification. I discovered I could write and had a little practice at it. I became proficient and unusually quick at typing with two fingers. I learned that I was capable of deep and speedy research when the spirit moved me. I made a few friends for life. I acquired some vital "mental furniture" for later life, enabling me to enjoy some intellectual pursuits such as literature in general and the highways and byways

of language. The older I got the more I valued my academic studies for their contribution to my two careers in writing: journalism and historiography. And above all I met my wife, the mother of our two daughters.

So much, so very much, for Durham.



Working hard on the Palatinate



Graduation with Chris