

An Academic Skating on Thin Ice

For Rex, Holly, and Laura

An Academic Skating on Thin Ice

Peter Worsley



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Preface

Biographies are written by someone other than the subject, mostly from documents, not out of the consciousness of the person being written about. So they are usually linear and prospective constructions: they start with early childhood, then tell us about successive schools; then about whatever happens next.

'Memoirs' (or 'autobiographies') also have linear, chronological frameworks (as this one does). But being written by subjects, they frequently look backwards, and shuttle back and forth.

Memoirs, then, are more akin to Wordsworth's conception of poetry: 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', a take on the past that is necessarily retrospective. It hasn't all been tranquillity, though: everyone's life has passages they'd rather forget – in my case, episodes like the student revolution, for example.

The first thing you are taught in anthropology is the distinction between 'ethnography' – pure, dispassionate description of what happened or what life was like – and interpreting what you have seen within a theoretical framework. Memoirs, then, cannot be just 'ethnography', because the writer always writes from some point of view. Theoretical analysis has its problems too, for we can all recognise when the writer is giving us a Marxist or a Catholic version of what s/he is writing about: when their major concern is not really with tribe 'X' or nation 'Y' under discussion but with using that subject matter as an illustration of the power of their theoretical schemas: to show the dialectic in action (as everywhere else), and the underlying reasons why events unfolded as they did, by using the materialist method of analysis or by showing that it was all a matter of divine dispensation.

Even ethnographic 'what happened' can be problematic, if only because I have had to try hard to rescue some simple facts – the names of people, places, dates – from my memory, sometimes without success. Luckily, my wife can do all this brilliantly. But some things which I thought I had myself remembered very accurately, for the whole of my life, turned out to be quite wrong. And it is only now that I can make sense of innumerable postings from one military unit to another, which, at the grassroots, we experienced simply as the chaotic disbandment and amalgamation of regiments, and to which we reacted with ignorant resignation.

We usually attributed it to the bureaucratic incompetence of staff officers finding ways of filling in their time, or to the stupidity of individual generals. Only later were we able to see what had been going on: that men with great power had been shuffling their resources, managing the wholesale reorganisation of a war machine constructed to deal with the blitz according to the new requirements of the invasion of Europe. Those who did have the knowledge to explain all this not only resorted to ‘spin’, common enough today, under conditions of open government, but used their far stronger wartime powers of censorship to ensure that we were not aware of their strategies. When dozens of US troops were machine-gunned during invasion exercises at Slapton Sands in 1944, even civilian mail was censored, and we only found out fifty years later. Decades would often pass before even those in power were allowed to write their memoirs, and tell us what their strategies had been.

So I start by describing not just what happened as I saw it then but also with what I now know about what happened then. I begin, too, at the end, not the beginning of my life, and – having just passed eighty – had better write this before it is too late. I begin, indeed, precisely at 4.04 A.M. on the 31st May 2004, when, being old, I woke at cockcrow in the Japanese tea-house in the garden of my friend Alan Macfarlane, at Lode, just outside Cambridge, who finally induced me to write these memoirs.

He’s an anthropologist, like me, though very unlike me. He collects everything that has ever touched him: all the memorabilia of his life from birth in Assam on a tea plantation to his current distinguished professorship at Cambridge. Probably because of this overseas upbringing, Alan is very conscious of having to recover his English family roots. He is equally conscious of his intellectual roots, living as he does in the Front Court at King’s, which was eventually invaded by the social sciences, though only very recently.

Alan’s rooms were formerly inhabited by two other outstanding anthropologists (and ultimately bitter enemies), Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach. The successive generations which had built the College, though, had not been social scientists. Indeed, there weren’t such things, centuries ago, though when social scientists did eventually arrive, one of them, John Maynard Keynes, became better known to the general public even than Alan Turing, who unravelled the Enigma Code.

With his mother, Iris – whom I have never met – Alan has subsequently written a marvellous book on ‘the empire of tea’.¹ A fine writer and remarkable person, she won an Open Scholarship to

Oxford in the 1920s – an extraordinary achievement for a woman in those days, but one which her parents never told her about, so she spent nearly all her life as a ‘Mem’ on a tea plantation in Assam. But she did try to involve herself in the life of the plantation labourers – which explains in part why Alan became an anthropologist. So he collects everything on all these aspects of his life: rooms full of family memorabilia, but also a museum-full of objects made by the peoples of the area: the Nagas and other Assamese peoples, plus a library of thousands of books on everything from the philosophy of the social sciences to his long engagement with Asia, firstly with Nepal, from which he was ultimately driven out by Maoist guerrillas, to an obsession with Asian culture and society.

My life was very different and took me to quite other places. I started my adult life as an undergraduate at Cambridge when Nazi invasion seemed imminent. This made me into what others came to regard as a Dangerous Red; then (despite this Redness) into an officer in the African colonial forces during the Second World War; then into an anthropologist; then, in the McCarthy period, into a victim of that paranoia (none of which, however, landed me in prison or caused me actual physical grief); finally to a Professorship at a fine university, Manchester, and then to a lengthy involvement in the Americas.

An ethnography of what Merseyside was like in the 1930s would only interest people who want to find out about that place and time, or to indulge in nostalgia. I am more interested in writing an account of what the French call the *formation* of one particular person. But I do try to show how that formation – as for anyone else – is the outcome of one’s social context: in my case, growing up in a world seaport on the brink of a world war. And I try to adumbrate how it was that a Merseyside schoolboy became an anthropologist though, unlike Alan, I had no direct contact with the Third World.

Acknowledgements

Mervyn Jones and John Saville, fresh from writing their own memoirs, suggested I write mine, but I didn't respond for many years. However, I did eventually react to the rationale they provided: that it is the Great and the Good of the Establishment who write their memoirs, and – 'oral history' apart – ordinary folk don't. Nor does a minority like left-wing academics. So I gave in in the end.

The title was influenced, verbally, by Dirk Bogarde's *A Postillion Struck by Chain Lightning*, and visually by Sir Henry Raeburn's painting in the National Gallery of Scotland of *The Reverend Dr Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*, a picture which has always haunted me and so many people because he seems to glide on, serene and confident that he will come through safely, though there must have been dangerous patches in the ice all round him. There were dangerous patches in my life too, though I never went looking for trouble – as war-photographers do. Like any sensible person, I knew there wasn't much you could do about the worst things, and I did try to stop them happening to myself and to others. But I also tried to confront, intellectually, why such things happened – which is why I became an academic.

Avoidance, a favourite anthropological topic, is one, universal way of coping with trouble. But, while an Englishman may find the relationship with his mother-in-law difficult, it is not as serious as the mother-in-law avoidance described by one anthropologist who saw a grown man hanging by his wrists over the edge of a steep mountain path rather than come face to face with his wife's mother. So I have only deliberately left out a few things that, while very important to me personally, might hurt or embarrass people dear to me and who are still alive. My sex life may have started late, but it didn't cease as early as this manuscript might seem to imply. I have also omitted one or two things that might invite trouble from people I know to be litigious.

My practical thanks are due to Juliet Webster, Marika Sherwood, Paul Baxter, John Barnes, Martin Walsh, Eduardo Archetti, Len Goldstein, Kevin Morgan, Robert Poller and Bruce Kapferer, and to the greatest guidebook ever written, *The South American Handbook* (Trade and Travel Publications, Bath).

CHAPTER 1

Liverpool, My World

I grew up in Wallasey, Cheshire, in a middle-class environment. Liverpool, I ought to point out, is a shorthand for Merseyside; only, part of it. The south of the Mersey river, though economically dominated by Liverpool, is part of the Wirral, that quadrilateral bit of Cheshire which sticks out into the Irish Sea.

Liverpool might have been the greatest seaport in Europe, but its hegemony had always been challenged; initially by other new industrial cities, notably Manchester and Bristol. One cultural outcome was the rivalry between Manchester United (and even Manchester City), on the one hand, and Liverpool (and even Everton) on the other. More seriously, Manchester was the ‘cottonopolis’ of the world. But in the later nineteenth century a new threat to Liverpool developed in its very heartland, the Mersey itself, when an insignificant-looking cutting near Ellesmere Port, on the south side of the river, became the Manchester Ship Canal, the outlet for the huge new Trafford Park industrial engineering estate in Manchester. Liverpool, however, was predominantly a commercial centre; there were ‘Manchester men’ and ‘Liverpool gentlemen’.

The south side of the river then developed its own industry, inevitably based on tropical products, in the shape of Port Sunlight – which was not just a huge factory, using palm oil from West Africa to make Sunlight Soap and margarine, but a whole new paternalistic planned town with its own superb Lever Art Gallery, similar to the model estates developed by the Quakers at New Earswick, outside York (Cadburys), and by the Frys at Bournville, in the Birmingham conurbation. The competition with Liverpool increased when the south bank became a centre for the production of Vauxhall cars, rivalling Fords at Halewood on the Liverpool side.

Shipbuilding on Merseyside had been the first major industry south of the river, at Birkenhead, where I was born. In 1801, it had been pure countryside, with only one hundred inhabitants. A couple of generations later, it had grown to 45,000. It was a pioneering model of gridiron city planning (like Middlesbrough, another planned industrial city), with the first street tramway in the country, and with Hamilton Square, where my father had his last business, at its heart. When Frederick Olmsted visited it from the

United States in 1850, he was deeply impressed by the civic splendour of Birkenhead Park, modelled on Princes Park and its Palm House in Liverpool, both of which had been built by Joseph Paxton. In Birkenhead Park, he declared, ‘gardening has reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of’. Not only did he revisit it again eight years later but took it as the model for his subsequent design of Manhattan’s Central Park in New York City.² By the turn of the century, Harold Rathbone, scion of the great Liverpool Unitarian philanthropist, had developed his ceramic business, making the celebrated Birkenhead Della Robbia pottery (at the corner of Hamilton Square where my father had his last business), which he sold to Paderewski and Sara Bernhardt, but mainly to the business class which migrated across the Mersey to the new and more salubrious surroundings of Birkenhead Park.³

By my time, though, apart from the area round the Park, Birkenhead had become a predominantly proletarian city, dominated by Cammell Laird’s shipyards (where the *Ark Royal* was eventually built). We rented a house on the less prestigious side of the Park. It was respectable enough, but as my father’s business prospered – firstly, as an auctioneer, then as an estate agent – we moved to the adjoining, more unambiguously middle-class town of Wallasey: more specifically, to New Brighton, right near the seaside.

Up to the nineteenth century, that part of the river had been dominated by harbour defence – by the magazine near Vale Park where gunpowder for the ships was stored, but above all by the huge, thick walls of Perch Rock Battery (still there), where firstly cannons, then big guns controlled the harbour entrance.

Then came recreational development, as the ferry disgorged thousands of the despised ‘trippers’, who came with buckets and spades from Liverpool to New Brighton Pier, not for work but to seek fresh air and beaches. Right by the Pier was the huge Tower Amusement Park, which attempted to emulate Blackpool. By the 1930s, the promenade had been extended right up to Harrison Drive, where the Irish Sea began. We called it the ‘front’ – a word foreigners don’t know.

Trippers could drink beer, dance, have tea or sit on deckchairs and watch the Pierrots, and the children could ride donkeys. On the Pier, we had contracts which allowed us to go as often as we liked to hear the same acts – tenors singing the joys of the gypsy life on the open road; little soubrettes; magicians and acrobats; comedians like Billy Leo and Kathleen Hesketh, whose jokes we never tired of, even for the umpteenth time. The smart item for men to wear as they

strolled along the front was the straw boater. One bizarre game we children had was to lick our right thumb and plant it on the palm of the opposing hand every time we saw a straw boater, to see who got the most. We also collected old wooden spoons used for cardboard tubs of ice cream. And if you were really lucky, you could walk up to any man and challenge him: 'You are Lobby Lud', whereupon – if you were right – the newspaper which sponsored him would give you a money prize.

It was a wonderful life for a child. We had beaches and a park two blocks away from our house. We could roller skate along the huge prom, row in the Marine Lake and catch crabs with fish-heads bought for a penny. We could witness national and even international happenings: the arrival of the *Graf Zeppelin*, and the passage overhead of the British airship, the *R101*, which crashed in France the next day; the launching of the *Ark Royal*; the opening by the King and Queen of the Mersey Tunnel; or the tragic sight of the submarine *Thetis* sticking up out of the sea, with the bodies of dozens of men still on board her.

Near the Pier was the large, elegant park and entertainment area around the Floral Pavilion, where Frank A. Terry put on shows which were much more lavish than those on the Pier. Then, in the mid-1930s, Wallasey Corporation extended massive seafront walls right up to Harrison Drive, to make a new 'front', with seating and shelters, but looking inland, so that the beaches could no longer be seen. Fooling around with my friend on bikes, I chipped my front teeth on the new concrete. The dentist said they would rot, but they never did. There were new tennis and 'pitch-and-putt' courses. (In the process, they also destroyed our beloved 'Red Noses', small sandstone cliffs where I jumped off and bit through my tongue, sobbing homewards with blood pouring out of my mouth.)

But the heart of the new expansion was the New Brighton Baths, the second largest in Europe, which staged marvellous national-level swimming and diving competitions. (It's now a hole in the ground.)

As the family business prospered, we stopped renting and moved upmarket to a newbuild private housing development on Claremount Road. By 1938, my father could even afford a large, second-hand, square-shaped, Al Capone-type Oakland car, and we all went to the Boulevard Haussmann in Paris for a holiday. We also rented a chalet from the Corporation at Harrison Drive, right on the beach, where we had a marvellous collective life with lots of other children, and saw swimmers stricken with cramps carried in; we attributed it, though, to the red jellyfish we called 'bloodsuckers'.

But the family business was still in proletarian Birkenhead. So, moving between home in Wallasey and my father's salerooms in Birkenhead, I was very conscious of poverty in Birkenhead. One man stood outside the salerooms in Conway Street selling matches from a little tray slung round his neck, with his medals on his chest, and a notice saying 'Blinded at the Somme'. My father himself had been an infantry officer in the First World War. When he was wounded by a shell, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, which took him and his Sopwith Camel to Egypt. Like nearly all men who lived through the trenches, he never talked about it. He kept his .45 revolver, though, which I played with for hours, though I was hardly strong enough to squeeze the trigger. He even had some bullets, which he eventually threw down a grid in the street when an arms amnesty was announced. One night a ghost dressed in a white sheet came into my bedroom through the window, and made straight for the drawer where the gun was kept. I fled, howling, to my parents' bedroom; luckily, he never came back.

Wallasey was 'nice' – another all-embracing English word foreign speakers of the language never seem to acquire (apart from Borat). Birkenhead was poor. Today, my grandchildren only know about poverty from TV documentaries about Victorian times. When I asked my grand-daughter, six-year-old Laura, whether she would have liked to have lived in those days, she replied, like a flash, 'No!' When I asked why, she shot back, 'No Play Station – poor!'

Liverpool had been a singularly violent city, like Glasgow, and for the same reasons – ethnic conflict and class struggle. During the Police Strike of 1919 (for up to then, the police could join a trade union), the power and the authority of the State was so severely challenged – not just by the poor but by those who were supposed to keep the poor under control – that the battleship *Valiant* and the destroyers *Venomous* and *Whitley* turned their guns towards the city. During the Depression of the 1930s, the city's poverty fuelled another climacteric as pitched battles broke out between the police and the unemployed.

So, middle-class or not, one was aware of poverty and of ethnicity too, the division between Catholics and Protestants; and of the Irishness of that religious/national division. We had two magnificent cathedrals: Gilbert Scott's red sandstone masterpiece from 1904, and the riposte – the avant-garde Catholic cathedral dubbed by Scouse wits, 'Paddy's Wigwam', not finished until after the Second World War. Irish Catholicism had grown out of the centuries of brutal violence and rack-renting economic exploitation

through which the ‘Ascendancy’ had suppressed the Irish peasantry (though I didn’t know anything about all that then). The Merseyside Irish had flooded in with the Potato Famine, when one and a half million had died on the other side of the Irish Channel of hunger and fever, a history still embedded in the consciousness of their descendants. As middle-class boys, we were told to steer clear of the annual ‘Whit Walks’, separate processions of the Protestants and Catholics, even from ‘ours’, because, we were told, bricks could be thrown. (We also had to remember to raise our caps when we passed a Catholic Church.) By the 1950s, in Manchester, when I finally saw them from my window in the university in Oxford Road, Manchester, the Whit Walks had become sedate affairs.

Catholicism on Merseyside was, in fact, Puritanism – a rigid cultural resistance which had marked off the culture of the Irish peasantry from that of their rulers. The most shocking sin, for a Catholic boy, I eventually found out, was nothing to do with politics, or religion. When, later, my father mercifully allowed me to change from a Catholic to a Protestant school, in return I was made to attend Sunday morning classes run by the local nuns, together with other boys from ‘mixed marriages’. Their main preoccupation was with something called ‘concupiscence’. It was something so horrible that we never dared ask what it was.

I was only able to talk to my sister at playtime across the fence dividing the girls’ playground from the boys’. The only thing I remember actually learning in two years at my Catholic primary school was knitting, and how to make decorations from raffia and cardboard milk-bottle tops. A lively scamp called Gilbert Gore was expelled – from year two primary school! – for the crime of scrumping vegetables from a greengrocer’s shop.

My parents’ marriage was ‘mixed’ both in religious and ethnic terms, because my mother’s father was a very English Protestant immigrant to Merseyside from Northamptonshire, but her mother the daughter of a Greek family which made its money in Liverpool supplying other Greek immigrants en route to the US with whatever they needed. The result was that my grandmother, according to legend, spent Friday night counting the gold sovereigns in her pinafore. But I nevertheless thought of myself, and all of us, as thoroughly English (not ‘British’; we didn’t use that category much then, despite the presence of so many Irish and people from North Wales, which, I am sure, explains why Liverpool has its unique ‘Scouse’ accent, an amalgam of all these, plus Lancastrian dialect). There was a Worsley family in Yorkshire which produced a Lord

Lieutenant and gave a daughter in marriage to the royal family. And there is a place called Worsley on the fringe of Manchester, from whence came, possibly, the knight, Ralph Worsley, who secularised (stole) lands on the Wirral – including Birkenhead Priory, where the monks had operated the first ferry – and took the title of Lord of the Manor of Claughton.

But we were very humble Worsleys. Though my grandmother was the daughter of a Greek woman from Salonika, we never had anything at all to do with the Greek community. The only family connection ever mentioned was with an important Greek figure, Bishop Papandreou (her family name), an oil-painting of whom hangs in the Greek Orthodox Church near Toxteth. Apart from spoiling me with ‘Turkish’ Delight and olives, I knew nothing of Greek culture, though she did teach me that people with dark eyes and olive skins (for example, gypsies!) were beautiful. Despite my mother’s non-Catholicism, on her marriage to my father, there was no question of her being allowed to retain either her father’s Protestantism or her mother’s Greekness. Most importantly, she had to give up non-Catholic birth control practices, and was constantly pressurised to join in what, I later found, Québécois called ‘la lutte des berceaux’, to keep up the numbers of the Catholic population. This left her with plenty of suppressed dissent, though in fact, like many Catholic mothers, she was only to have two children.

But the dividing lines between Protestant and Catholic were by no means absolute. For all the efforts of the priests, there were lots of ‘mixed’ marriages. My father’s mother, for example, was of Ulster Protestant origins and had been forced to convert on marriage (and became a singularly bigoted Catholic), while somewhere along the Irish lines of descent were Catholic forebears as well.

After Catholic primary school, in Wallasey, I was sent to Saint Francis Xavier’s College (SFX) in Liverpool, which involved a huge disruption in my hitherto routine life. Now I had to go on an arduous three-stage journey (I was only seven) – firstly by bus from New Brighton to Seacombe Ferry, then onto the famous ‘ferry ‘cross the Mersey’. There were actually many ferries, bringing thousands of clerks and businessmen from middle-class, residential areas south of the river, and thousands of women, some secretaries, but, mostly office-cleaners – from Rock Ferry, Seacombe, Egremont and New Brighton. In winter, you could keep warm in the enclosed saloon if you could find room; in summer, most people, generally on their way to the city’s offices in bowler hats, preferred to walk round the