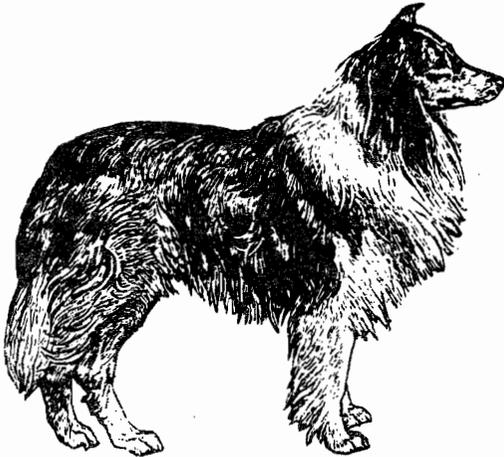


# Odd Boy In

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In the 1930's, London's *Daily Telegraph* ran a holiday contest inviting readers to send in short accounts of unusual events or the cute things said or done by children and animals. My mother sent them a card:

My little boy who takes a great interest in the New Testament watched the killing of some large and aggressive mosquitos about his bed one night. The next morning he said solemnly: "You know, I've been thinking, it isn't right to kill those mosquitos. There they are playing with their little friends and we go and kill them." It was explained that if the mosquitos were not so unkind by nature they would not be killed. "Yes, but what about love your enemies?" was the quick response.

While I had a very ethically strict upbringing, based on my mother's high regard for the unalloyed teachings of Jesus Christ, such beginnings do not necessarily lay the basis for a concern for nonhuman life. I was the only child of a very intelligent and imaginative woman who was herself an "only," and my father left us when I was six. Shrinks might say it was a recipe for

introversion and worse, and it probably is. But recipes do not always reach the table as one expects. By some early empathic response I came to identify, with an often almost unbearable acuity, with the suffering of others. There is no virtue about this. It was something that just happened in a small boy who in other respects was perfectly "normal." I do not think it was the Night of the Mosquitos that "started me off," but an earlier incident which I remember to this day.

In 1928 my parents and I moved from my birthplace at Gosport, Hampshire, to a fourteenth-century moated manor house in the flat fields of Bedfordshire. With us came my nurse, a stern Victorian whose formidable hats were held in place by a criss-cross of long and ferocious steel pins. This may give the impression that I enjoyed rather grand beginnings, but England of the 1920's was very different from today. My father was an RAF officer and my mother's earnings from her early writing paid for my live-in nurse. My father, recently returned from Iraq, had been stationed at Lee-on-Solent, and our Gosport home was the rented first floor of a house whose owner provided our meals. The manor house, close to Henlow aerodrome, was a residential hotel occupied by other Air Force officers and their families. Often, on clear days, the blue sky would suddenly fill with round white parachutes which drifted down behind the trees as silent and remote as the huge grey airships that from time to time passed slowly over the manor from nearby Cardington.



## AUTO- BIOGRAPHY

But the more important memory is of one of the many walks my nurse and I took across the fields to the village to post a letter or to buy something in the small shops that serviced the area. The path across the field led over a stile into a rough track leading to the center of the village. By the edge of the track was a wall, topped by the boarded side of farm buildings, and at the end of the wall were high green wrought-iron gates covered with sheeting that allowed no view of what went on behind.

We had posted something—perhaps an article by my mother for one of the national newspapers to which she contributed, or proofs of one of her novels—and were passing the gates when the air was shattered by blood-curdling screams. I halted, pulling on my nurse's hand. The awful noise stopped as quickly as it had begun. My nurse, a devoted and conscientious woman—for all that one of my most pleasant memories is of sinking my infant teeth into her ample bottom when she bent over our coal fire after some clash of wills—knew that an explanation was inescapable.

"It is just a pig," she said.

But she said it lamely, knowing it was not going to be enough. As we walked back to the manor I pressed her from every angle, allowing no escape from a satisfactory explanation. Then she admitted that the pig was making a fuss because it was probably not very happy. Asked why this should be so, she said she was afraid it might have had to be "put down." Unable to imagine down *what* it had been put (a well? A drain?), I wore her away to the bottom-line admission that it was possibly being killed—though "make it dead" was her apologetic euphemism. This reluctant honesty led only to my demand for an explanation of why anyone should want a nice, friendly, smelly, grunting pig "made dead." There was no logic to such a proposition, and logic was what I was after.

Poor well-meaning nurse! She had no option but to tell me about bacon. Well, something. Although she and I lived and took most of our meals in a small cottage in the manor's grounds, my father ate bacon at breakfast in the manor's dining room, and I had smelled its tangy saltiness. But the connection had escaped me. As it had with fish. I was a fussy eater from the year dot and had to be weaned by often elaborate means onto just about everything. Everything being boiled eggs, cooked peas and beans, bread and butter, fruit (preferably bananas), and fish steamed in (but not

accompanied by) milk. White, bland, almost tasteless fish, of course, such as plaice and dabs. Few parents and nurses knew anything about nutrition in those days, and mine, faced by a child who would not drink milk or eat cheese, compromised in desperation with fish. My grandparents had implicit faith in Empire and the roast beef of old England. Nuts were what you ate after lunch at Christmas, seasonal grace notes like crackers and tinsel. Things could have been worse than the "little bit of plaice" for which nurse would take her shopping bag on our walks to the village.

But although I hated the fishmonger's slab, with its glazed eyes and gaping, hopeless mouths, fixed by that last gulp of thin air that could only bring death, perhaps the very awfulness of the shop had anaesthetized me against making the link, as had the pig's head and the hanging corpses of rabbits and poultry in the butcher's shop we were thankfully always to pass. As for the relationship between abstention and reduction in such creatures' suffering, this was too sophisticated a concept at so tender an age. For most of us it may not arrive even in a lifetime. But "from little acorns...." and to give my nurse and mother their due, they realized from then on that life was not going to get any easier.

My mother, who some years earlier had "come into" Christian Science, when my father was stationed in Scotland, had in fact become a near vegetarian in 1926. Her compromise, again, was over fish. This was due less to a blind spot than to timidity built of her parents' belief that without the daily intake of flesh the human body must wilt and die. She looked forward to the day when, in the jargon of her faith, she could "unsee the necessity" to eat anything that lived. Meanwhile, the occasional fillet of fish kept her with us. Once in the dining room my father had made me taste a piece of bacon off the end of his fork, dipping it first in the yolk of his egg and pronging a corner of toast which dulled the sharpness and appearance of the pink and yellow fragment, but my mother was already strong enough in her convictions to forbid further induction. Indeed, it was my father's later attempt to make me eat an under-cooked lump of beef that triggered his final departure. My refusal earned me a clump over the head, at which my mother told him to leave the house and not return until he had mended his ways. As he was already deep into an affair with a brother officer's wife, this was the excuse he needed for flying into less demanding arms. From then on I saw him seldom throughout my childhood.

It is easier to remember the visual incidents that mould our thoughts and feelings, than the verbal indoctrination, whether intentional or not. Once my mother's inclination to a humane diet had been strengthened by my own concern for animals, she must often have helped my education into humane feeling by spoken suggestion and instruction. But I cannot remember any instances of this. Memories are of the visual moments, such as when I was trailing behind her along the Brighton esplanade and caught the sun-touched glass eye of the fox fur whose thin-jawed head rested on her shoulder, prompting me to think of it as still alive. Or when the big, slow oaf who delivered fruit and vegetables by horse and cart with the help of his small, sharp wife, began to hit the horse about the head because it would not pull away quickly enough, and he was so enraged because I told him to stop that his tiny spouse only restrained him from treating me like the horse by hitting his chest and screaming like an air-raid siren. Or the awful day when with a catapult I had used only against trees and other inanimate victims, I targeted a bush in which an unseen bird was singing. The singing stopped abruptly, and on walking over to the bush I found a small, colored bird warm and dead beneath it. I walked home, trying to fight back tears, feeling a remorse that was almost a physical pain, and threw the catapult away. Or when the mother of a school friend solemnly assured me that she liked hunting deer because the animals so obviously enjoyed the chase as much as she did, turning their heads from time to time as if to say, "Come on, catch me if you can, isn't this the most wonderful fun on such a lovely winter's day?" Is there any limit to the capacity for wishful thinking?

But in those pre-World War Two days there was little a schoolboy could do to help the animals whose suffering had begun to come home to him. There were few books, magazines, or societies actively concerned with the abuse of animals. I joined the RSPCA, whose Brighton office was a small room near the town's center, but this meant little more than another badge to pin to the lapel of my blazer, though I encouraged a few classmates to do the same.

It was the arrival of the war that began to bring home to me the sheer scale and enormity of human capacity and preference for violence and cruelty. When it broke out I was fifteen and on holiday with my mother from the hated public school that by the end of that summer's term had stepped up the preparation of its pupils to

accept and take part in the war that clearly was on the horizon. My mother had refused to allow me to join the Officer's Training Corps. This, like my walking home to lunch every day, singled me out as different from the majority. Had I not been a day boy, well-built and good at games—though hating everything done as a team—school life could have been more unpleasant than it was.

The one good thing I saw in the war was that it ended my school days. In 1939 my father rejoined the RAF, and my school fees could not be guaranteed. My parents had separated but not divorced, but my mother's allowance was very small. So instead of returning to our rented Brighton apartment after my summer holidays, she and I stayed on in the holiday bungalow at Selsey, and for the next year I enjoyed a lonely but blissful freedom. My formal education being far from complete, I gave desultory attention to a correspondence course from an Oxford tutorial college, but it was dully presented and I never even tried for an exam. In 1936 my mother had published her book *Prelude to Peace*, putting the case for an educational system that would prepare children for peaceful rather than competitive coexistence with their neighbors and other nations, and her despair over the idiocies and irrelevance of most of the orthodox school curriculum found a ready response in her son. But I gardened, did housework and shopping, collected driftwood from the beach, rescued (but seldom succeeded in saving) oiled seabirds, put much love into the care of a stray cat, and raised a small flock of chickens for eggs to supplement the increasingly sparse wartime diet.

One of the few residents of the bungalow village was a retired man who was keen on fishing. He showed me how to cast with a rod, how to set a fixed baited line along a shingle-bank submerged between tides, and encouraged me to spear fish with a nail set at the end of a broom handle at low tide in a nearby lonely harbor. It is difficult now to believe that I did such things, but because it was war time, because our income was very small, because I was assured that fish are cold-blooded and feel no pain, and perhaps because in his early teens a boy is most vulnerable to the appeal of adventure and new experience, I compromised with my instinctive feelings of pity for all things. But I certainly never felt a lust to kill or the "hunting instinct," and my guilt was invariably greater than any feeling of triumph when a fish was caught. I was told that it was kindest to hit them over the head,

and this I did, hating the jerking response to the blows, yet feeling that somehow I had to overcome my distaste for my actions because circumstances justified them.

In the summer of 1940 the so-called Battle of Britain began. Our bungalow lay on the German bombers' route to Portsmouth, Southampton, and the shipping that came up the English Channel. Life became livelier, with frequent air battles overhead. Falling planes, bombs, machine-gunning, and shrapnel were daily lessons in the depths of insanity of which human beings are capable. But, it must be admitted, they were more exciting and mind-challenging lessons to a lonely teenager than the absorption of doubtful historical facts and the principles of arithmetic and grammar from a remote tutorial college.

With this dramatic stimulus as a background I had time to think and question and read. My mother was by then in collaboration with the novelist J. D. Beresford, one of their wartime books being *The Gift*, an idealized story of the development of a boy of "instinctive virtue and radiant simplicity," unusually sensitive to the world's suffering. Published after the war, it was something of an embarrassment to me, the role model being all too apparent, however far removed in reality from the fiction. Although like all my mother's and JDB's collaborations, it got good reviews in leading papers, the critic in the London *Star* finding it "a novel of striking sincerity" in which "Luke Forman really lives the Sermon on the Mount," I was still immature enough to feel a sense of relief that it failed to make its authors' fortunes.

Although in those early war years I had even less companionship than before from people of my own age, the ever active, inquiring and imaginative minds of my mother and "JD" were a powerful substitute for the aridities of formal education. If their influence cannot be remembered for its specifics, it was nonetheless a reservoir on which to draw; as was my father's entirely different if seldom encountered view of life. I recall my mix of pity and burning anger after I had helped to drag the dead and wounded crew from the Heinkel bomber that had been shot down on a raid over Portsmouth, crash-landing on the beach near our bungalow. The navigator died by the side of the rough road to which he had been taken, his last words being a cry of help to his mother. I remembered my father saying how often he had heard that same cry from the wounded in the trenches of the first world war. I remembered how casually he spoke of dawn raids on

the German trenches when he would toss grenades into dugouts from which men were emerging still half awake, half dressed, and unarmed. The monstrous stupidity and wickedness of the whole filthy business of attempting to achieve anything of lasting good by means that could only add to the long-term evil and misery of the world, flooded in on me so powerfully that at times it was almost impossible to take it in and live with it. I was a healthy, normal young man in all outward respects, yet I many times wept in the night at the seemingly hopeless prospect of the human race ever attaining the peace and happiness any balanced young person is bound to suppose it must desire. My "bible" became the great Christian pacifist Dick Sheppard's fine book, *We Say 'No'*, heartening evidence that I was not entirely alone in a world in which everyone else seemed only too willing to say "Yes."

But it was not until 1942 when, after two isolated years in a rented villa northwest of Oxford, we moved to the West Country that the existence of like minds was, so to speak, "made flesh." We had gone to a small private hotel whose kitchen and garden staff consisted of conscientious objectors. They were conveniently cheap labor to the proprietor. The house was in the beautiful Wye Valley, and it was from there that I registered as a conscientious objector and in early 1943 attended the required "tribunal" in Bristol. I remember the joy of finding proof positive that other sane, thoughtful young people felt as I did about the futility of trying to achieve good ends by the evil means of killing other living beings. If that concern was less directed at the fate of animals exploited by man, and if vegetarianism was the most to be expected from a minority of pacifists, I was too happy to have found common ground and friendship to realize and regret the lack of that more holistic concern which has come in more recent years with the growth of environmental awareness and an understanding that cruelty is indivisible, not something that may be inflicted on one species and withheld from another. But how hard the notion dies that there should not be room in our hearts for any other species than our own!

Although I continued to be a vegetarian, and never lost my loathing of all cruelty to animals, even in the relatively more tolerant second world war climate it was a full-time job to "fight one's corner" as a C.O. A Christian pacifist was slightly more accepted than those with vociferous political and anarchic views, but whatever prefix you wore to your label you were at

the bottom of every heap in the minds of the Government and most individuals. This is not the place to recount the life of a WW2 pacifist, but there is no doubt that those years deepened my understanding of the psychology of violence and cruelty. Work on the land, much of it involving animals; social work with the Quakers; theater and ward orderly in a big London teaching hospital; coming near to my own and others' deaths on many occasions in the bombed and "doodle-bugged" ("doodle-bug"= the "V1" German flying-bomb) areas of London and southeast England—these and other experiences must have affected anyone brought up to know the mixed blessings of a free imagination and a strong line in empathy. Yet it was a good many years before the pieces fell into place and I realized just how vitally, inescapably linked was our species' treatment of each other to our behavior toward the so-called lesser creatures that share this planet with us.

In the 1950's most of my energies were focused on earning enough to stay alive and cope with the disaster of my first marriage. In the 1960's I at last found my feet and established a small book publishing firm, from whose backlist my second wife and I still get a helpful if not impressive income. By the 1970's I was able to make the time to write *The Civilised Alternative*, a book that, although (after much lobbying) well-received by the press, was ahead of its time. It broke the ice over waters in which others later swam, but its publication lacked the publicity machine to do for it what had been done for such less demanding works as those of Colin Wilson, whose sense of direction was less positively and basically educative, and whose concern with a more humane regard for the environment was (and I fear has remained) in its infancy. Although praised, it made uncomfortable reading at a time when "holism" had not reached first base in public consciousness. No North American publisher took it up, and no UK publisher made it a paperback, but it has appeared in some appropriate bibliographies, and I like to feel it was quietly if slowly effective.

*The Civilised Alternative* led to my being commissioned to write *Food for a Future*, which has established itself in the UK but was not encouraged to take off in the States, although published there. Writing this in turn made me aware of how many wise men and women have come to Schweitzer's realization that "until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace," and I knew

with a slightly sinking feeling in the stomach that some mutt had got to put together this immense body of forgotten wisdom, and that that mutt was probably going to have to be me. It took seven years to collect the material for *The Extended Circle*, but its reception convinced me that those years had not been wasted.

Now writing and other work in the field of humane education take most of my time. My children have their own families, and I can budget for the probable future. There are more novels and plays to be written than I can expect to live long enough to complete, but that is how it should be for a writer, and I am fortunate not to be cursed with the problem of what to do with my later life. Almost everything that I hope to write will have my major concerns at its core, and I am glad that this drive seems to gain strength and purpose every day. The task of encouraging humane awareness in the unevolved nature of *Homo sapiens* is enormous, and one sees why. It is a huge burden—draining and yet stimulating—to agonize every day of one's life about the suffering that fills every second over the entire world, so much of it totally unnecessary and inflicted by humankind. We do not enjoy facing uncomfortable facts, especially if it means a change of habit. But if we cannot adapt our lifestyles to our realizations, we shall have failed totally to justify our existence. And that adds up to a big minus.



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