Stars in a Western Sky

Glyn Court

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About the Author

Dr Glyn Court is a historian, linguist, musician, local preacher, former County Councillor, Liberal Parliamentary candidate, and winner of BBC Brain of Britain 1973.

He was brought up and educated in West Somerset, where he developed a strong connection with the history and heritage of the county. He began studying French and German at University College Exeter in 1942, before pausing his study to serve in Burma between 1943-1947. After returning from the war, he completed his degree in 1950, and completed a PhD in music and languages in 1961.

With an unusually wide range of interests he has written about military history, music, languages, and on Somerset life and characters, ranging from famous to little-known. He excels in bringing to life the stories and lost cultures of everyday characters and traditional societies.

He was the chairman of Somerset County Libraries and Museums Committee between 1973-1977, 83-91, a District councillor between 89-93, and vice-chairman of the County Council, 1991-93. In recognition of his distinguished service to Somerset, he was awarded the title of Honorary Alderman of Somerset County Council in February 2018.

I'll sing you twelve, oh!
Green grow the rashes, oh!
What are your twelve, oh?
Twelve for the Twelve Apostles,
Eleven for the Eleven who went to Heaven,
Ten for the Ten Commandments;
Nine for the nine bright Shiners,
Eight for the April Rainers,
Seven for the Seven bright Stars on high, and
Six for the Six Proud Walkers;
Five for the Symbols at your door, and
Four for the Gospel-makers.
Three, Three alive – o!
Two, two the Lily-white boys,
clothe them all in green –o, for
One is One and All Alone, and
ever more shall be so.

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1 Margaret Trevelyan

Gentlewoman

For four hundred years Nettlecombe Court, near the eastern edge of Exmoor, was the home of the Trevelyan family, represented in the 1640s by George and Margaret and their children. George, born in 1613, had married Margaret, daughter of Sir Robert Strode, of Parnham, Dorset in 1637, and although she had come from a distance, she already had a link with the neighbourhood in that her mother was a Wyndham from Orchard Wyndham, only a mile from Nettlecombe, and Thomas Luttrell, of Dunster Castle, was her uncle.

Life for a landowning family with young children in the late 1630s should have been very pleasant, as it was for the Trevelyans, with a growing family and a flourishing estate in a sheltered and well-watered valley; but then the Civil War broke upon them. George Trevelyan had already been charged with the task of raising a regiment of foot for the king and now he was commissioned as captain of a troop of horse in Sir Charles Berkeley's regiment.

It would take a bonfire of historical novelettes and costume films to erase from the popular mind the stereotypes of the gallant, impetuous Royalist and the sour, envious Roundhead, for in the maze of misconceptions the genius of Cromwell and Milton, the intrepidity of Blake, the culture and moderation of Fairfax and Hutchinson, count for nothing. But a clearer eye can discern, above the smoke and turmoil of those years, a common restraint from the worst excesses of war and a chivalry in which the palm often went not to those trained in military exercises from boyhood upward but to those who were "but warriors for the working day." At all events, Margaret, a devoted Royalist and even more devoted wife, had the tenacity which distinguished her Roundhead kindred.

Like so many Royalists, the Trevelyans gave unsparingly to the king's cause, looking for no early return realistically when dealing with the Stuarts. But the little ready cash of a country estate did not last long. More had to be raised, and the duty fell to Margaret. Ancestors of the Trevelyans had acquired lands in Glamorgan centuries before, and some still remained in the family, and in June 1643 she obtained a pass from her uncle, Thomas Luttrell of Dunster Castle, to allow her to travel to Wales to dispose of the remaining property "for the service of the King and Parliament". (Thomas Luttrell was strong for Parliament, but humanely refused to let his convictions embitter family feeling; and although "King and Parliament" was the Roundhead watchword against the Cavaliers' "for the King", both could consent to the first half). So Margaret took ship, most probably from Watchet or Minehead, sailed over to Wales, transacted the business and returned with enough money to defray the expenses of the troop raising and keep the Royalist cause going in those part for a year or two more.

By then, however, the king's war was manifestly lost, and even his most zealous supporters were acknowledging defeat. George, now a colonel, took Thomas Luttrell's advice and reluctantly submitted to Parliament, but he was, in Parliamentary language, a "principal malignant" and they levied a fine on him a standard one of one twenty fifth of the value of his estate, or £1000. Thomas Luttrell did what he could and preserved the estate from plundering until his kinsman had submitted and the Parliamentarian representatives had guaranteed its safety. But in the later stages a detachment of Colonel Popham's horse, perhaps to settle a private grudge, plundered the house and also made off with "twelve plow oxen, two fat oxen, one hundred sheep and two horses". (They missed the family plate, as Margaret, anticipating such a raid, had had it concealed under the floor of the nursery, where it was found a century later).

The Committee, to do them justice, supported Mr Trevelyan in his complaint and gave him all the help they could to recover the goods, but without success.

Meanwhile, a pardon still had to be obtained for the "delinquency", and the estate had to be brought out of sequestration. Lengthy operations both, and family counsels pointed to Margaret as the likelier of the two to

carry them through. One can imagine with how heavy a heart she accepted, for the eldest of her children was only twelve years old and her youngest a matter of months, and they needed her. But duty was imperious, and the difficulties were great. Country families lived mainly on the produce of their home farms, money rents were low, capital was scarce, few facilities existed for raising loans and Nettlecombe was already exhausted by the earlier gifts to the king.

As a first step the corn stored in the barton had to be threshed and sold, and then, early in 1646, Margaret set out on her journey to London.

The estate horses had been carried off by the raiders, and so they had to yoke six of the remaining farm draught oxen to the family coach to take her to London. It would be a painful ten or twelve day journey in normal winter times, jolting endlessly along rutted tracks or floundering in seas of mud, a journey lightened only by the hospitality of great houses along the road, and now some of those - Basing House, for one - had suffered the ravages of war, and inns could be unwelcoming and innkeepers rapacious. But she survived the hazards, arrived safely and set about presenting her petition to the Committee for Compositions sitting at Goldsmiths' Hall.

Then she encountered the law's delays and even a Cromwell, try as he might in the next decade, could not reform the legal system. Penned in London, while down in the West the hills were taking on the fresh green of spring, she tendered document after documents to the Commissioners, and on through a weary summer, until in August they yielded to her perseverance and the House of Commons resolved "to accept the sum of fifteen hundred and sixty pounds of George Trevelyan as a fine for his delinquency", grant him a pardon and discharge the sequestration of his estate. Two months later the Bill went to the Lords and Margaret could now attend to the unfinished business: to try to obtain redress for the failure of the authorities to recover the plundered goods. The law moved ponderously but early in December she was allowed to enter an affidavit.

Sir Walter Trevelyan, 200 years later, wrote, "It must be admitted that great forbearance was shown by those who managed the matter on behalf of the Parliament, among whom were the well known regicides Ludlow and

Martin. But a more general observation is called for. With the exception of the plunder of the house, which may be suspected to have had its origin in a private grudge, these transactions, abnormal and irregular as they were, were tempered by a spirit of equity, order and exact attention to business, characteristic of a law loving people."

Margaret's work in London for her family and home was complete and she set off for home with eager anticipation of a joyful reunion for Christmas among those from whom she had been separated so long.

But a different, sadder Christmas was reserved for the Trevelyans. Margaret travelled one stage, but at Hounslow she was overtaken by a messenger whom every man and woman feared. For seven days she fought against the small pox, but in vain, and a memorial tablet erected by her sorrowing husband in the parish church of Hounslow bears witness to his grief and her sacrificial love. Some years ago, returning home from London, I turned aside to Hounslow and visited the church. It had been demolished in the 1840s but they had set up the tablet again in the new building. A hundred years later this also was destroyed in the blitz, but again they rescued the tablet and set it up in the new church, and it reads:

'Here lyeth Mrs Margaret Trevelyan, the wife of George Trevelyan of Nettlecombe in the County of Somerset, deceased December 24, 1647, leaving issue eight sons and three daughters, viz.George, John, Robert, Henry, Alexander, Francis, Amyas, Anthony, Margaret, Susan and Katherin. For her Vertuous Life and Godly Death hir Mortallity shallbe made Immortally Glorious."

And surely, in a story of great misfortunes bravely borne, of duty faithfully fulfilled to the end of life and strength, there is matter not of sorrow only but of inspiration, and in the words from 'Samson Agonistes' by one of the greatest poet of her age:

> "Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble."

2 Susanna Musgrave

History as an art has, with a few dishonourable exceptions, outlived Gibbon's censure of it as "the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind", and to say that it is a record written by the winners strikes nearer the mark.

But if the winners have the history, the losers have the legends, and no single year in the West Country's past from the days of King Alfred to the Second World War has given birth to more stories - part true, part imagined - than the Monmouth Rebellion: It may be a mere episode in the history of England, but in the lore of the West Country, and of Somerset, Dorset and East Devon in particular, it occupies the central place. Those three counties gave most of the volunteers to Monmouth's army and bore most of the suffering and agony of that foredoomed enterprise. The slaughter and misery of that July night 300 years ago still speak to local people with meaning, and the tales of heroism and tragedy, of the Maids of Taunton, the "push of pike" at Philips Norton, Jan Swaine's Leaps, Dame Alice Lisle, Squire Plumley's little dog, young Mary Bridge and her sword, still strike a reverberant chord.

The men who marched with Monmouth were not, as used to be thought, merely a horde of ignorant ploughboys and clodhoppers. True, the countrymen were there in some strength, but many others were craftsmen, artisans and weavers - townsmen accustomed to hearing and discussing the news, keeping abreast of the rapidly changing political situation at the court of King James and keenly aware of the threat to religious freedom looming from the persecution of Protestants in France. They were, echoing Cromwell's phrase, "men who knew what they fought for and loved what they knew", and if the Duke amounted to less than they took him for, that was no discredit to them.

As to their wives and daughters, they did not, of course, enlist as a brigade or even a platoon of Amazons to fight alongside the men. There was no Joan of Arc, no Phillis de la Charce in Monmouth's command, nor even a Polly Oliver, and if there had been, most likely his Puritan army would soon have packed her off home again. Nor did he have the customary complement of camp followers, and it is striking evidence of the unique sexual discipline obtaining among the rebels that although they lodged in Taunton 4,000 strong for ten days in June 1685, the parish registers for nine months later record no increase in illegitimate births.

Still, the women of Somerset and Dorset did not lag behind their menfolk in zeal for the Cause, but happily none of them except Dame Alice Lisle suffered the extreme penalty of the law, and two, Susanna Musgrave and Margery Parminter, were heroines of story with unexpected "light relief" and happy endings.

In all the saga of the rebellion there is nothing more winning than the episode of the Maids of Taunton, which brought Susanna Musgrave into trouble but gave her a claim on the memory of posterity.

With Miss Mary Blake (a name revered in Taunton since the siege of forty years before) and Sarah Longford she ran a young ladies' academy whose pupils gave the Duke an unforgettable welcome. They formed a little procession, about forty in all, Miss Blake leading them in Cromwellian fashion with a Bible and a drawn sword. The girls carried colours, twenty-seven of them, and a girl named Mary Mead proudly held the best, with a crown and fringes and letters in gold: J R - Jacobus Rex . Each of the girls, when she handed over her flag, was saluted by the hero of the hour with a kiss - and given Monmouth's charm, courtesy and good looks, it would have been a very untypical Somerset maid who hung back.

Six months after the slaughter of Sedgemoor and the butchery of the Bloody Assizes, the king proclaimed a general pardon, but he excluded 178 rebels, among whom were George Speke of Whitelackington, one of Monmouth's colonels, and his wife Mary, their daughter Mary Jennings, of Curry Rivel, Mary Ball of Wrington, and the 39 Maids of Taunton,

whose ransom had not yet been paid, and of course their mistresses, Sarah Langford and Susanna.

Mary Blake's name was missing, but she had already passed far beyond the king's vengeance. She had escaped from Taunton, but had been caught and imprisoned in Dorchester jail, and there she died. What became of Sarah Longford is not known, but Susanna, at least, escaped the worst rigours and even found friends to take her part. She fled westward from Taunton, apparently beyond Dulverton and into the recesses of Exmoor, though where she can have eventually found shelter is a mystery. Perhaps her magistrate namesake, George Musgrave of Combe Sydenham, contracted a merciful case of legal blindness and took her in - but the location makes it unlikely.

After a few months, however, as Spring came to Exmoor, she felt she must bring her exile to an end. She had no means of knowing whether the proscription had been lifted, but optimism asserted itself and she set off for home.

She came into Dulverton on 11th May 1686, and evidently her presence in the neighbourhood was no secret. She dined at the Red Lion with Joseph Chadwick, a Nonconformist minister, and with some dozen Dulverton and Taunton friends, and then went on to spend the afternoon at the house of Arthur Case. But George Sydenham, a leading gentleman of Dulverton, was on the trail, and together with the vicar, Parson Lloyd, and the parish constable, Thomas Wilson, he tracked her down and called about five o'clock to arrest her. They found the party "making merry with good liquor and sweetmeats" and in no mood to go quietly. The company led the intruders along: "Seize the person if you know her," they said, and Chadwick, whose calling as a minister must have frequently subjected him to harassing by the law, moved to the attack and told them that if they arrested her they would have to carry her away on their backs - Susanna would not stir a step to oblige them. Then the others joined in with what the vicar called "impertinent discourse". Arthur Case challenged him with "It were fitter you were in your study" and Chadwick in a heated argument called him a Papist.

But the bullseye for this verbal fusillade was a hapless constable Wilson. Chadwick told him he was "old enough to have had more wit than to meddle in such proceedings," and then, to preserve Susanna from this now weakened arm of the law, he put her on a settle beside Mrs Chadwick, sat down by Susanna's other side and called out that the constable should not touch her. The intruders retired discomfited and made a report to the magistrates, but nothing more seems to have been done to bring Susanna within the iron grip of the law - a happier outcome than could ever have been expected.

3 Margery Parminter

Behind most of the legends of the Duking Days one can find solid fact. They date back to the year of the battle itself, and though they may have acquired ornaments over the centuries, the basic facts admit of no doubt.

One story, however, that of Margery Parminter of Withypool, in Exmoor, seems never to have been written down till much later, but that disproves nothing, for in that district the telling of old tales round the fire of an evening - I speak from personal experience - kept them alive from generation to generation.

Not many Exmoor men were reported as having been away with the Duke, but fourteen rebels were hanged in Dulverton, Dunster and Minehead, and so it seems likely that a few Exmoor hearts had been in the right place - if an unwise one - and that John Parminter and a handful of men from Withypool, Winsford and Dulverton shouldered their scythes and tramped off to serve the man whom they saw as the last if not the best of hope the Good Old Cause.

The story goes that Parminter escaped from the battlefield and tried to make his way home, but in Winsford he was captured by a troop of horse and condemned to death, the sentence to be carried out in Dulverton in order to strike terror into as many hearts as possible. His wife Margery had just been delivered of a child. (And what, one may ask, was her husband doing, gallivanting around the country when so painfully needed at home? - but that is a modern question which would probably not have occurred to either of them in 1685).

At any rate, the news reached her while John was still in Winsfordl, and with her new-born child in her arms she climbed up to Winsford hill and sat by the roadside to wait for the escort.

Soon the troop appeared, with john among them, bound, and Margery begged the captain for her husband's life. "Ask me again in Dulverton," answered the captain with refined cruelty, "and I will spare his life" - for he could see only too clearly that Margery, carrying a child, could not keep up with his troop and reach Dulverton before her husband was hanged; and so they rode on.

But the officer had not reckoned with a woman's determination. Margery followed them, half-running, half-stumbling, putting forth all her weary strength to keep up, but soon being left behind.

Then the youngest trooper, riding at the rear, took pity on her and let her hold on to his stirrup, but even with this help she felt herself weakening. At last the trooper drew rein on some pretext and told her to mount behind him.

They trotted on in this way as far as Court Down, two miles from Dulverton, but here the horse went lame and Margery had to dismount and stumble with her babe the rest of the way on foot, watching the troop fade in the distance.

When at last she arrived in Dulverton she saw a public execution already in progress, with three rebels swinging from the gibbet and her husband about to hang beside them. But Margery summoned up her last reserves of strength, pushed through the crowd and cried, "Captain, I am here - in Dulverton - to claim my husband's life."

"Egad," said the officer admiring despite himself, "if these be your West Country wives, I'd liefer fight the men. Turn him loose, boys."

And they did.

4 Tom Faggus

"Gentleman of the Road"

All the world loves the idea of the honest rogue, unless they find themselves at the pointed end of his activities, when they revise their opinion rather smartly. In the ordinary way there is a world of difference between an honest rogue and a scoundrel. The latter makes his living by cheating, often within the law; but when the honest rogue breaks the law, he does it with panache. He observes certain restraints, and he only takes from those who, in his view, can afford to give.

It is a sad commentary on our society that while scoundrels still flourish, honest rogues seem to have gone out of business, but the West of England has known them in plenty, and never was a better one than Tom Faggus.

By all that is known of him, Tom deserved national fame much more than mohocks of the highway as Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, but by a quirk of history he has dwindled to the dimensions of a character in a romance. There are, of course, those nigglers who challenge his very existence on the ground of lack of written evidence, but life teaches that every legend rests on a basis of fact. A stone in an Exford cottage inscribed "Thomas Fugars 1674" was linked with him by tradition, but a more promising lead comes from Johanna Faggus, who in the 1840s was found as a weeping, deserted little girl in the hillside village of Atherington, between Torrington and South Molton. She was taken home by a Mr Graddon of Eastacott, who learned that Johanna was descended from a highwayman whose family had had property in Bath. Since then the name Faggus seems to have vanished into limbo, but in the convincingly Devon form of Vaggers it still survives and flourishes around Bideford and South Molton.

With the half certainties one fact is sure, that Tom Faggus was known to the people of Exmoor long before Blackmore brought him into Lorna Doone. Indeed, the written sources for his life were the same as for the

Doones, in a manuscript book prepared in 1839 and containing three stories, De Wichehalse, The Doones and 'Tom Faggus and his Strawberry Horse. The stories were told to the Rev Matthew Mundy, vicar of Lynton, two of whose friends helped him collect notes from Ursula Fry (born in 1776) and Aggie Norman (born in 1777). Mundy wrote the stories up, and the senior girls of the National School made a number of copies under the direction of the headmistress, but the manuscripts never found their way into print.

Even so, the sources can be traced further back still to Ursula Babb, who was born in 1738, within the lifetime of those who had been children when Tom was riding the tracks of Exmoor. The Babbs were servants with the Wichehalse family, and Ursula's grandfather John played a small if regrettable part in history when, it was said, he shot and captured the rebel Major Wade fleeing from Sedgemoor.

Tom came from the village of North Molton, on the southern fringe of Exmoor. In those days it was, as Jan Ridd straight-facedly remarks, "a rough rude place at the end of Exmoor, so that many people marvelled if such a man was bred there."

In his youth Tom practised the trade of a blacksmith in the village, and his skill made him a man of property with land worth £100 and gained him a reputation only too envied. But, in Blackmore's words, "being left an orphan (with all those cares upon him) he began to work right early, and made such a fame at the shoeing of horses, that the farriers of Barum (Barnstaple) were like to lose their custom. And indeed, he won a golden Jacobus for the best shod nag in the north of Devon, and some say that he never was forgiven. But whether it were that or not, he fell into bitter trouble within a month of his victory, when his trade was growing upon him, and his sweetheart ready to marry him. For he loved a maid of South Molton, Betsy Paramore, and her father had given consent; and Tom Faggus, wishing to look his best, and be clean of course, had a tailor at work upstairs for him, who had come all the way from Exeter. And Betsy's things were ready too, when suddenly, like a thunderbolt, a lawyer's writ fell upon him."

In short, Tom fell victim to a lawsuit instituted by Sir Robert Bampfylde, who "could pay for much swearing". He lost his goods, his farm, his smithy, he lost Betsy, who was married off the month following. Of all he owned he kept only a suit of clothes, a brace of pistols and his favourite mare, but they were enough. Worsted for the moment by the machinery of the law, Tom turned robber or in more courteous terms, became a gentleman of the road, with truer claim to the title than most.

His skill and adroitness served him as well in his new career as in the old. Levying toll on all those whom he reckoned able to pay, he worked sometimes with a man called Penn, but generally alone, and very soon he had repaired his losses and more. To quote Jan Ridd again,"His name was soon as good as gold anywhere this side of Bristol. He studied his business by night and by day, with three horses all in hard work, until he had made a fine reputation: and then it was competent to him to rest, and he had plenty left for charity."

To tell the truth, though, Tom was having his revenge for the injustice he had suffered. He was selective in his choice of victims and kept up the ancient Robin Hood tradition of taking from the rich to give to the poor. "And all good people liked Mr Faggus when he had not robbed them and many a poor sick man or woman blessed him for other people's money; and all the hostlers, stable boys and tapsters entirely worshipped him. And so the landlords did; and he always paid them handsomely, so that all of them were kind to him and contended for his visits."

Besides all that, Tom never shed blood, and never insulted a woman.

One of his earliest exploits was very properly to waylay Sir Robert Bampfylde, who was accompanied by only one serving man. Tom never blustered. His eye and a firmly held pistol were enough. Sir Robert, after the briefest hesitation, handed over his purse and jewellery. Tom took them and immediately gave them back with a bow and the comment,"Sir Robert, 'twould be against all usage for me to rob a robber."

All the traditions of his exploits show his resourcefulness, his humour and ready wit, and moreover they all have the ring of truth, even when the locations assigned to them differ.

He ranged far afield to relieve the rich of the burden of their wealth, and as his fame spread, so did that of his mare Winnie. She was a strawberry roan, "wonderfully beautiful, with a supple stride and soft slope of shoulder, and glossy coat, and prominent eyes full of fire," and gifted with an almost human intelligence. (And incidentally, in the 1870s an Exmoor farmer wishing to sell a mare to Squire Luttrell of Dunster described her as "Faggis coloured, your honour").

More than once Winnie's sagacity saved Tom from capture and death. He was discovered in Barnstaple and attempted to get away, but on the Long Bridge over the Taw he found himself trapped between his pursuers and a new party. But at a whispered word in her ear Winnie cleared the parapet, leapt into the river, swam to the bank and so brought Tom clean away. (The same story was also located, more plausibly, at Exebridge, where the mare leapt into the meadow several feet below and galloped away across the fields).

On another occasion Tom was trapped while dining at an ale house in Withypool, but his shrill whistle reached the ears of Winnie in the stable. She kicked down the stable door, bit and kicked her way through the crowd surrounding the house and bore her master off in triumph.

A similar tale is told of Porlock, where Tom was again surrounded in a house by a hastily armed mob shouting "Faggus is taken! Faggus is taken!" But a Faggus taken was not a Faggus held, and audacity carried the day. The door was flung open, and Tom dashed out on the strawberry mare and away through the crowd before a shot could be fired.

Over on the west of the moor he waylaid a party of farmers who had agreed to ride home together from Barnstaple market and thus avoid an encounter with him. They were ambling along near Bratton Down when Tom appeared out of nowhere, snapped "Stand and deliver!", made them drop their purses by the roadside and ordered them to ride on while he made off with his takings.

A few miles from there Tom lived for a time at Yeoland, near Swimbridge. One Sunday morning when most of the folk were at church he returned home; but one old man caught sight of him, hobbled up to the

door of the church and piped, "Tom Vaggus be come hoame," whereupon the congregation left parson to preach to himself and rushed out to arm themselves and surround the house. Tom saw them coming, too close for him to make a dash for it, but they were no match for his quick wits. He put his hat on his fire fork, the long support for his musket, and pushed it at arm's length up out of the chimney. A shout went up: "There he be, tryin' to get out o' the chimley!" They loosed off a volley at the hat, which dropped, and they ran for the front door. Tom slipped out the back, mounted his mare and, before any of them could reload, was well away.

He showed as much ingenuity when hard pressed in Alcombe, near Minehead. At the top of Marsh Lane, now the site of the village hall, was a smithy kept for several generations by the family of Chappell. One day Tom rode up in a lather. He had outdistanced his pursuers, but time was pressing, and by dint of gold or pistols he prevailed on the smith to re shoe Winnie "back end vore" and thus send the posse on a false trail. (Other outlaws, notably Hereward the Wake, are supposed to have adopted the same stratagem, but that makes the tale more likely than less).

At Exford though some say Doniford, near Watchet his adversaries displayed a degree of imbecility delightful to behold. The hue and cry had been raised, and as Tom was expected to pass through, an armed posse with magistrates assembled to secure him. After a while they caught sight of a stranger of grave demeanour riding slowly down the hill toward them.

He stopped, raised his hat most courteously and asked them what they were waiting there for.

"Tom Faggus," they said, "he'll be here soon."
"What sort of arms have you got to shoot with?" asked the stranger. They showed him.

"I don't suppose they've been fired for a long time, have they?" he said critically. Then looking at two or three he said again, " No, I didn't think they had. You won't be able to fire those things in a month of Sundays," whereupon, to prove him wrong, they all fired off their muskets.

Tom whipped out his pistols, held them to two of the magistrates' heads, collected all the valuables and made off, leaving the faint pursuers far behind.

Another time, in his guise of gentleman, he persuaded the posse, which included six J Ps, that he held a commission "to make cease a notorious rogue, Thomas Faggus" and that, as before, they ought to fire off their muskets to make sure the priming was not damp when needed (a nice Cromwellian touch there). They accordingly obliged, and Tom and his pistols relieved them of their ready money and scattered it to the poor folk standing around. Then he bade them all "Good morning" and Winnie carried him out of range before any musket could be reloaded.

As to Tom's end, there are two stories, and since neither can be proved, we may take whichever appeals as poetic or other justice.

By tradition he fell victim to his kindheartedness and sense of hospitality and was captured by a low trick in an ale house at Exebridge. An officer of the law entered disguised as a beggar and squatted down in a corner of the room, but Tom, out of the kindness of his heart, invited him to "draa vore", gave him alms and ordered him some food. Now that the highwayman was off his guard the officer repaid his kindness by tipping over his chair from behind, slipping a noose round his feet and hoisting him up to the ceiling; and this time Tom whistled his mare in vain. The lawmen outside had shot Winnie in her stable. So Tom was tried at the next Taunton Assizes and hanged.

It has never been proved, though, and Blackmore is just as likely to have been right when he made Tom, who had been ruined by the lawyers, use them in his turn to "purchase from old Sir Roger Bassett a nice bit of land to the south of the moor, and in the parish of Molland. When the lawyers knew thoroughly who he was, and how he had made his money, they behaved uncommonly well to him, and showed great sympathy with his pursuits. He put them up to a thing or two; and they poked him in the ribs, and laughed, and said that he was quite a boy, but of the right

sort, none the less. And so they made old Squire Bassett pay the bill for both sides; and all he got for 300 acres was £1,050, though Tom had paid £1,500." So Tom, now Squire Faggus, with King William's pardon in his pocket, and Winnie's assistance, built up a stud of Exmoor ponies for the London market, acquired a second fortune, became a good husband to the lovely Annie Ridd, "lived a godly (though not always sober) life, and brought up his children to honesty, as the first of all qualifications."

And if this ending is not true, it ought to be, for "since Tom Faggus died, there has not been such a man to be found, anywhere round these parts."

5 Bampfylde Moore Carew

Bampfylde Moore Carew, King of the Gypsies, might demur somewhat at enlistment in the cohort of Somerset heroes, for, like Tom Faggus, he was neither born nor bred in the county, and he cared as little for heroism as Falstaff did for honour. Still, Somerset set the scene for some of the most ingenious of his mystifications, and so he must briefly show his scampish self again for diversion's sake, but not that alone.

Besides, his birthplace was only a comfortable hour's ride over the border; and if one looks for a riverside Paradise Garden, where in all England will to be found a more enchanting spot, a more delightful Arcadia, than Bickleigh, Devon?

Green lawns by the river, a noble old stone bridge with an inn nearby, the rushing and splashing and dashing of the waters over the weir, this if you can ignore the cars and lorries and delivery vans will transport you in the imagination to a simpler, more leisurely age than our own.

"Here," one may think, "is a place that no one can ever have wished to leave. Here every prospect pleases, and even the human element comes pretty well up to scratch. This surely would be Everyman's home from home."

But humanity is a perambulating contradiction, and for every Adam or Eve cast out of a rural Eden by poverty, another has broken away in search of adventure or fortune, led on by a wanderlust that would not be denied. Thus little quiet Bickleigh once produced a son who would not be confined within his parish but took the world as his fairground and roistered happily through the whole kingdom and overseas.

"The Noted Devonshire Stroller and Dogstealer, the Accomplish'd Vagabond, the Compleat Mumper" is not an encomim that everyone would desire, but they pay a tribute to the skill of Bampfylde Moore Carew in living on his wits and profiting by any witlessness ready to hand.

He first sidled on to the world's stage in the reign of William III, and with a gentle push from destiny might have become either a cleric, like his father, or else a second John Law, winning a fortune from a gullible public and retiring into private life laden with "honours"; and as sure as day he would have been forgotten within ten years. But since Carew brought artistry and inventiveness to his trickery, memory has dealt kindly with him.

The name of Carew served as an introduction anywhere in the West Country, and when the babe was baptised "there never was known," said his biographer, "a more splendid appearance of gentlemen and ladies of the first rank and quality at any baptism in the West of England than at his."

His father sent the boy to be educated at Blundell's, and for a time he worked hard and "contracted an intimate acquaintance with young gentlemen of the first rank" and perhaps these employments did not match too well.

In an incautious moment he and three other boys went out with the school hounds and the pack caused so much damage that farmers came to the school to complain. To escape punishment the boys ran away and took up with a party of gypsies. They seem to have fallen in with them some time before when they were celebrating with much jollity and feasting, and "such was the air of freedom, mirth and pleasure that characterised them" that now the young fellows "conceived an inclination to enlist into their company." They made this known and eventually their wish was granted. They went through the requisite ceremony, took an oath of fidelity and were admitted to the company.

Two of the lads soon tired of it baked hedgehog and roasted squirrel are after all acquired tastes but young Bampfylde seems to have said to himself, "This is the life for me, i' faith" and taken to it with zest. Whatever the adventure, high or low, he would be the lad for it, and he went off with

his new found friends, leaving his parents in utter ignorance for eighteen months of what had happened to him.

At length he drifted back home again, but found it impossible to settle down, so much did he yearn for the life and company of the gypsies. Once more he took to the road.

He developed a quite remarkable talent for trickery and deception, and his skill in outwitting and outfacing even those who knew him personally was, in more senses than one, imposing. He was always devising new methods and stratagems for extracting money from people, playing on their sympathy or credulity, and taking advantage of them in all sorts of disguises, and so he acquired a reputation as a trickster throughout the West of England and further afield.

It all sounds very reprehensible, but from Carew's point of view the game was the thing. More often than not he revealed his true self to his victims afterwards, and they seem to have borne him very little ill will. And as a gentleman's son he would not have dreamt of insulting them further by offering to restore the spoils!

Even the slow moving justice of early Georgian England could not tolerate him indefinitely, and either the interest of the enforcement officers or his innate restlessness drove him to Newfoundland. He soon found it anything but a land flowing with milk and honey for mumpers, horse copers or anyone else, and he came home again, pretending to be the mate on a vessel, and eloped with an apothecary's daughter from Newcastle. To give him due credit, he married the girl and maintained a rough faithfulness for the rest of their wandering life.

He was only a gypsy by adoption, with no trace of Romany blood, but few of the nation could outdo him in craft and skill. But not for this only he won their respect, and when Clause Patch, a king of the gypsies, died, Carew was chosen in his stead.

Perhaps they also appreciated that his literacy would give them an unsuspected advantage when dealing with the gorgios. Other less tolerant

persons, however, showed no appreciation of his rank, and they packed him off as a vagrant to the plantations in Maryland.

To dump an unwanted king of the gypsies in the plantations was one matter; to hold him there, the Marylanders found, was quite another.

He escaped. They recaptured him and forced him to wear an iron collar. He escaped again, and this time fell into the hands of friendly Indians. Whether he taught them the three cup trick or learnt new japes from them is not clear, but they removed his iron collar, and thus freed he came into Pennsylvania, land of Quaker virtue and honesty unparalleled!

But Bampfylde, far from being overawed, found devious inspiration in this. He made himself out to be, of all persons, a Quaker, and as such he rode or footed it back to New York and thence to New London, Connecticut, where he took ship for England. He may have had the honest colonists fooled, but now he came up against a tougher lump of humanity, the press gang, as ready to believe the worst of a man as the Quakers would the best, and even though his dress proclaimed the Friend, the gang would have quickly unmasked him.

He had to think fast and act faster. Ever inventive and at his best in a emergency, he pricked his hands and face all over, rubbed in salt and gunpowder, and there, for all the gang world to see, was as pestilent and devastating a case of smallpox as might be met with in a month's sail, one dreadful enough to keep the whole Royal Navy a cable's length away.

In England again, he sought out his wife and daughter, wandered up into Scotland and then down to Carlisle and Derby with the '45, no doubt relieving the Scots of some of their unaccustomed plenty though the Highland Scots behaved impeccably toward the English, a kindness which the English repaid with signal brutality the following year and after.

Carew seems to have escaped any accusation of involve- ment, and if he had given any thought to the matter he would certainly have chosen a prosperous, stable society with unlimited possibilities of loot rather than a Jacobite cause doomed from the start.

Over the next few years he enjoyed more jaunts and jollities than Jorrocks ever did, among strange lands and nations whom he diddled proficiently, and the people of the West Country, his boyhood home, supposedly sleepy but shrewd, proved as gullible as any other. Spacious living does not entirely depend on the rolling prairie or the trackless wilderness, and 250 years ago the 500 square miles of the Exmoor country offered as many opportunities for a man of ingenious mind as the 500,000 of the American colonies.

That, at least, seems to have been Bampfylde's view, and for one who had taken the whole of the English speaking North American seaboard as his oyster, the time he gave to the pleasant pastime of extracting pearls from incautious natives of the West Country was quite out of proportion to their numbers or the area. But perhaps the West Country should take it as a compliment, for Carew, in his tricks and drolleries, possessed that inimitable quality: style.

True, he had a living to earn and a family to support if a little erratically and when the wolf howled at the door of his caravan, no doubt he took whatever, wherever and from whomsoever he could. But I suspect that this hunger driven, tight-corner Carew was rarely forced to show himself, for he and his companions had long perfected the art of living off the land; and if he returned time and again to the West Country, he was probably drawn not only by the familiar scenes of childhood, but also by the challenge of familiarity.

Pulling wool over the eyes of an unsuspecting stranger would shoe Carew's horse and grease the axles of his waggon, so to speak, but it was poor stuff and unworthy of a King; but to persuade a man of many years' acquaintance that he had never seen you before and hoodwink him again in a different guise a day or two later that showed the artist!

Unquestionably his family name helped him much more than he had a right to expect. Any lustre that he was adding to it must have seemed irremediably tarnished in the eyes of the respectable members of the clan, but others forgave him much for the sake of the name.

Some time after his return from Newfoundland his travels took him to Watchet, and he decided to pay a visit to Sir William Wyndham, at Or-

chard, two miles away, but not as the scion of a friendly family: that would have been unpardonably simple and straightforward. He must act the shipwrecked mariner.

He donned a jacket and pair of breeches and made his way over to Orchard Wyndham. Lady Luck, the patron of successful "wide boys", had put in an hour's warming up on Carew's behalf, for instead of being obliged to work out some devious route from the servants' quarters to the Presence, he fell in with Sir William in the park, walking in company with Lord Bolingbroke and several other gentlemen and clergy and captains of vessels a fairly awe inspiring conglomeration for most petitioners, but for Carew a spur to ingenuity.

With a convincing show of timorous respect he approached Sir William and engaged him with a yarn that he was from Silverton, near Exeter, and the son of one of Sir William's tenants named Moore. (Sir William owned a substantial part of this parish, which adjoined Bickleigh, Carew's birthplace). Carew went on to say that he had been to Newfoundland and that on his passage home the vessel had been run down by a French ship in fog and only he and two others had been saved. An Irish vessel had taken him to Ireland, and thence he had crossed to Watchet.

So far the story was typical of any vagrant who had taken the trouble to enquire into Sir William's connections, and he was not to be lured into believing an easy tale.

He tested the "shipwrecked mariner", asking him a great many questions about the inhabitants of Silverton and the principal gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and with Carew's local knowledge these gave him no trouble at all. At last, coming nearer home, Sir William asked him if he knew Bickleigh and its parson. "Very well, your honour," replied Carew, solemn as twenty judges (he did not add, "'Tis my own father.") "And what family has he?" asked Sir William. "Has he not a son named Bampfylde? And what has become of him?" "Your honour means the mumper and dog stealer," replied the virtuous Carew. "I don't know what has become of him but" censoriously "it is a wonder he is not hanged by this time." "I hope not,"

replied Sir William good naturedly. "I should be very glad, for his family's sake, to see him at my house."

A common trickster, one without Carew's artistry and sense of timing, would have taken up Sir William there and then, made him justifiably offended and, for the sake of a petty triumph, spoilt the story.

Bampfylde knew better. After a few more questions Sir William relieved his imagined distress with a guinea, Lord Bolingbroke followed suit, and the rest of the company contributed according to their rank, being all the more inclined to do so as the captains found he could give a very exact account of all the settlements, harbours and most noted inhabitants of Newfoundland.

Sir William then ordered him to go up to the house and tell the butler to provide for his entertainment. So away he went, conveyed the message and sat down with considerable relish.

At that moment Lady Luck, feeling she had done quite enough on his behalf for that day, signed off but not before ushering in another character, a foot postman from Silverton, of all places, with letters for Sir William.

Like the guests in another drama, Carew waited not upon the order of his going, and made haste to put several miles behind him before anyone should raise the hue and cry. In fact, no one did, and only the chanciest of encounters betrayed him; and even then the affair turned out better than he could have reasonably hoped.

A little while after his hasty departure he met a Dr Poole, who was on his way to Orchard Wyndham but knew Carew and stopped to speak to him naturally without eliciting any compromising information. Later that day at Sir William's he happened to mention this encounter, and his description made it clear that it was none other than the Silverton mariner the gentlemen had generously helped.

To their credit, the episode raised a storm not of annoyance but of laughter! But Sir William was not finished with Carew yet.

About two months later, of course knowing nothing of the doctor's revelation and perhaps a little over confident, he returned to Orchard Wyndham,

this time in the dress and character of a grazier who had fallen on hard times.

He met the baronet and his lady as they were taking the air in a chaise, in a meadow where hay was being mown. His approach was all honest simplicity, and he began a moving account of the misfortunes he had met with in life. But Sir William cut short his eloquence by calling on the haymakers to seize him and hold him fast, and in an instant the farce seemed likely to turn to tragedy.

Sir William, however, gave him a choice: he must either confess his true name and profession or be committed to prison.

Bampfylde chose the first and confessed that he was Moore Carew, "sovereign of the whole community of mendicants", and thereupon Sir William, with a good deal of humour and good nature, treated him with the respect due to royalty, entertained him generously at his house and made him a very handsome present on his departure, inviting him to call again whenever he passed that way.

Perhaps the King of the Beggars went away in a slightly more sober and reflective mood than when he came.

Perhaps.

He practised his tricks at other places in the West. Once he and a companion were dared by the landlord of an inn near Porlock to spend a night in a haunted house. Bampfylde could not resist a wager, and this one offered him lodgings free of cost, together with a good meal.

They went to the haunted house with a farmer's son who had taken it into his head to tag along, and Carew gave good value for his part of the wager. By various contrivances he nearly frightened the farmer's son out of his wits but in the end convinced him that he had exorcised the ghost! And on this account, they walked away next day richer by their lodging, a good meal and 20 shillings in ghost layers' honorarium!

Another time in Porlock he sat for his portrait to William Phelps, a local artist of fair celebrity. From there he went on to Minehead and in his true self called on various gentlemen, including the doctor and the parson, who treated him very kindly.

That was no insurance. Some days later at Timberscombe he met a gypsy woman he knew who had a young child with her. He borrowed the child and one of the woman's gowns and a petticoat, put them on and went back to Minehead with the child in his arms, among the gentlemen he had recently visited, and pretended to be an unfortunate woman whose house had been burnt down. Coughing violently during his appeal and making the child cry for good measure, he got money and victuals from his benefactors, and they seem to have had no suspicion whatever.

We may wonder, why go to all this elaborate pretence? But Carew would quite shamelessly have answered, "The play, the play's the thing."

Thoroughness was his hallmark, never more than in another chapter of the "shipwrecked mariner" saga when, happening to be near Portland, in Dorset, he heard one evening of a ship driven on to some shoals and in imminent danger of breaking up.

Early in the morning, before broad daylight, Carew stripped off his clothes, flung them into a pit and swam out to the vessel unseen by anyone. He found only one member of the crew alive, clinging on to the side of the vessel and hanging between life and death.

In grave danger himself, Carew kept his head, expertly combining humanity and profit, offering the sailor his help to get ashore and, in the same breath, enquiring the name of the vessel and master, and what cargo was on board, whence she came and whither bound.

The sailor gasped out these details, but even as Carew was urging him to let go his hold and entrust himself to his care a large wave crashed over the ship and swept the sailor away. Carew could do no more. With great difficulty he struggled to land and, with one arm injured, was thrown violently on to the beach.

By this time a crowd had gathered, and when they saw Carew naked, spent with fatigue, injured and apparently the sole survivor, he raised "a tender feeling of pity in them all" especially in a certain lady's housekeeper, who pulled off her own cloak to give to him, bound up his wounds with her own handkerchief, took him home and seated him before a good fire with two large glasses of brandy with loaf sugar in it.

She then went off to tell the lady of the house, who, no less affected than her housekeeper, ordered a bed to be well warmed for the "shipwrecked sailor" to be put into and taken the best care of. Carew lay there quiet for three or four hours genuinely, one may guess then waking, he seemed much disturbed in mind, groaning, tossing from one side of the bed to the other but nowhere finding ease.

The good people then brought him a suit of clothes and he got up. They told him that the bodies of his shipmates had been washed ashore, and he seemed greatly affected and tears started from his eyes. A visiting J P, a Mr Farewell (an apt name, in the circumstances) gave him a guinea and a pass for Bristol. The local people collected some £10 (equal to several hundred to day), Farewell lent him his own horse to ride as far as Dorchester, and the parson sent his man to show him the way.

The well wishers were not to know that Dorchester was not in Carew's way of thinking at all. Only five days earlier he had appeared there in the character of a ruined miller and raised a contribution from the mayor and corporation; but with a guide at his elbow there was nothing to do but ride in and trust to brazen impudence to bring him away in one piece.

It did. As soon as they arrived, the guide presented the pass on behalf of Carew to the mayor, who ordered the town bell to be rung and assembled some of the members of the corporation.

Whether they were short sighted or short memoried one cannot say, but with Carew in different dress and provided with a pass from Justice Farewell certifying that he was a shipwrecked mariner, not one of them recognised the broken down miller of the week before... They treated him with great kindness and relieved him very generously, and he went on his way cheered with a great many good wishes for his safe arrival in Bristol.

But having tried his luck thus far he knew better than to tempt it Bristol wards, where a messenger might catch up with him. He steered his course toward Devon, raising contributions on the way from various squires and officers. At last he settled down at least, he seems to have, though no one is quite sure. A relative is said to have offered to provide for him if he would give up his wandering life.

He refused, the call of the road was too strong. But eventually he won some prizes in a lottery, apparently enough to bring him a small but adequate income. Maybe he thought over his long career of dishonesty. Maybe he thought over his long career of dishonesty and formed a lower opinion of himself than before. Maybe the thought that "the play's the thing" no longer guarded him against an attack of conscience.

Or maybe, in spite of it all, he did not settle down but went on with his wandering life, a bedraggled king of the gypsies and beggars, until his skill deserted him and he sank into obscurity among the vagrants and homeless.

He is said to have died in 1770 at the age of 76 or 77, but who knows? One suspects that he would really have wished to end 'sensationally', as did Rex Harrison's Rake in a wartime film , 'The Rake's Progress' (1945).

Conway, a rake in the 1930s, could have had access to documents excusing him from military service, but instead he enlists in the army, and in the campaign for Normandy steers his armoured car straight at a German strong point, not counting the cost. The film ends with his body lying in a dressing station, and a senior officer remarks, "We owe it to men like him that we have made it through Normandy."

Sergeant (peace-time friend): Yes, sir. He died as he liked to live, driving a car he hadn't paid for."
General: I consider that remark in very poor taste, sergeant." (Exit)
Sergeant (to body) : Well, you 'ld have appreciated it, wouldn't you, old son?

6 Old Sir Hugh

Night Rider

In the hamlet of Five Bells, close by the 'kirk upon the hill' of the Ancient Mariner, there lived in the 1820s and thereafter a lonely man known to his neighbours as Old Sir Hugh (almost certainly of the Popham family, as witness the deeds of his cottage, but nobody mentioned this.). He need not have lived this solitary life, for other Pophams lived sociably enough in the neighbourhood. William, for example, as wheelwright in Roadwater. Nevertheless "Sir High" had cut himself off from them – or so it was widely believed. Certainly he was a hard man to approach. The blame was not entirely his: a natural reserve had been taken amiss by people less sensitive than he. They shunned him, and he in his turn withdrew even further, so that to their superstitious minds, dark deeds and dark thoughts hovered around him, spells and charms lay hidden in the least of his few words, and a dark power was his unseen companion. He grew morose and resentful of his neighbours' suspicions, but his isolation bred a sharpness of tongue which kept open disrespect at bay. (The 'Sir', may I add, was a popular honorific without heraldic sanction).

His very appearance inspired awe. Gaunt of face, sunken-eyed, with black, lank hair hanging to his shoulders, he rode a skinny grey mare, with a huge black hound for companion, and took his secret ways from farm to farm in the light of the conspiring moon. If he were not the devil in person, he must be in his close counsels, so much was the common belief. But the gossips knew nothing of the deep places of his spirit, and even those he stealthily aided and served could only guess.

For Sir Hugh had a mission, and when he rode out of a night, it was not to a meeting with the powers of evil but on an errand of mercy. These were hard time, the years after Waterloo. After poor harvests, the scarce corn was locked in barns to keep up the price, and famine stalked the land. One

resident born in the year of the battle remembered that in his family the Sunday dinner was often no more than a herring between six with a few potatoes. Certainly there was bread for the rich, but the poor starved and "rioted" round the baker's van, and their old folk and children died. The iniquity of it pierced Sir Hugh's soul. Since there was corn in the barns, why should not some of it go to the families who had laboured and sweated in the fields to plant it and harvest it into those same barns? - Yet to take from the rich to give to the poor was to risk hanging or at least transportation, and there would be informers and denouncers even among those whom he sought to help.

His agile mind and a grim humour pointed the way. Did they suspect him of a pact with the devil? Very well, their pitiful suspicions should serve his purpose, and when he rode out his form should chill them with terror, make their hide their faces and bar their doors against his approach.

Painstakingly he made heavy skeleton keys which would turn the locks of all the barns round about and strung them on a leather thong. Then from the vault of the nearby church he took a skull, and in it, behind a flink of glass, he fixed a candle, and mounted it on his old beaver hat. Thus accoutred the strange knight-errant rode out, grim and erect, with a black dog at his heels, and when the ghostly crew passed along the winding lanes of Nettlecombe or over the windswept uplands of Cleeve Hill, with the keys clinking and jangling like the chains of hell, terror seized those who dwelt in lonely cottages. They locked and bolted their doors and put up prayers with more than usual fervour, and all who happened to be out and abroad and glimpsed the spectral form in the distance trembled and fled.

All, that is, except one man.

A few of the people, here and there, had shrewd doubts of the genuineness of the apparition but they kept them to themselves. The night-rider was no enemy of theirs. 'Best leave 'en be,' they said. But this one man was more venturesome than the rest; less credulous, maybe, certainly less wise. He would waylay the ghostly horseman, he would reveal a creature of flesh and blood, he would challenge him by name. Accordingly, at the turn of a chill, still, starlit night in midwinter, he waited by a five-bar gate near

Tumbland, a mile from Sir Hugh's cottage, listening for the clip-clop of a horse making the long ascent of the hill leading from the Williton road to Fair Cross and thence to the barns of Huish and Wood Advent. Suddenly the sound of hooves was upon him, and the padding and panting of the great hound, the chinking of the keys and the eerie glow of the skull. For all his boldness a shudder ran through him, but he stood his ground and called out, "Good night, Sir Hugh".

The figure raised its head. Starlight flooded the hollow cheeks, and the watcher saw in the deep-sunk eyes a wholly human anger, and a human voice, heavy with menace, returned, "Who the devil are you? Try that trick again and by heaven, you'll regret it!'

Scarcely checking his pace, the rider moved on up the hill; but his challenger, all courage drained out of him, fled headlong, anywhere to be out of reach of the curses and terrible anger of Sir Hugh; and never, till the old man's death, did the watcher speak openly of that midnight encounter. And so, through that cruel winter and for years beyond, Sir Hugh went on with his errands of mercy; and if the squires, the parsons and the farmers cursed him both loud and deep when they found their corn-bins low of a morning, blessings were rained on his head by the poor who, for a while, could eat bread and be satisfied.

As Sir Hugh had grown, so he remained, solitary, silent, withdrawn. Did any of those he had helped come to offer him their halting thanks? We do not know. We may guess that he would, as before, have turned them away with a brusque word. But he received his belated reward; for in the minds of the people of his 'country', till prosperity dulled the edge of gratitude, there lingered for many years the poignant memory of Old Sir Hugh.

Postscript

And perhaps in a more visible if irrational way Sir Hugh has not ended his travels even now. His cottage at Five Bells still stands, externally little changed, but sometimes footsteps are heard in an upper room, though they cause no fear or distress. The deeds still show the name of the family

from which he was cut off, and a gold coin from the time of Sir Hugh has been found in the garden, where workmen have unearthed the unsuspected foundations of an outbuilding which may have been his stable . But in the 1990s nothing of this, nor anything of the story of Old Sir Hugh, was known to the little girl who came running into the cottage from the garden to ask, "Grandma, who is that strange man with old-fashioned clothes and a funny hat?"

7 Jan and Nathan Palmer

Hucksters and Originals

'Colourful' is not the word one might have given them when seeing them in the flesh. Their clothes were worn and demoded, and even if they travelled over a wide area they led mentally restricted lives, They never created a stir, and never buckled a single swash between them. It was what they unwittingly or at least unquestioningly did that earned them a place in legend.

The parish registers of 19th century Luxborough, in the Brendon Hills of West Somerset, are an Araucanian forest of family trees, and the Palmers grew as close and impenetrably as any. Most of them followed the usual village trades, blacksmith, mason, dressmaker, servant, others emigrated; but two left their mark on the popular legend of this neighbourhood.

John Palmer, locally Jan, and his son Nathan were fellmongers, traveling a wide area of the hill country collecting skins, furs, rags and scraps of various kinds. More importantly, and justifying their claim to recognition by posterity, they had a vein of independence which, no matter how crudely expressed, showed that in an age when a labouring man hardly dared, as they said, "call his soul his own" they were willing to stand up, in their own way, to "the petty tyrant of the fields"; and for that, at very least, they deserve to be remembered.

Jan Palmer was born in 1752 or 1753 at Uplowman in Devon, and some time in the 1780s had come up with his donkeys to Luxborough, in the Brendon Hills of West Somerset, and "squatted" outside the churchyard, where in an angle of the wall he built a house in the form of the letter D, frequently bringing home stones from long distances for its walls. His mansion was known as Palmer's Castle. The squire of the day, Sir John

Lethbridge, did not see Jan as an architect quite in the class of Wren and tried more than once to persuade him and, later, his son to move to another cottage so that the Castle could be demol-ished; but Jan looked down his nose and stayed put. He had squatter's rights.

Laudably obstinate though he was in this matter, however, another incident recounted by William Thornton, vicar of Exmoor, shows Jan in a very poor light In his trade he travelled the district with a distressful string of donkeys, and he was a hard master to his beasts:

"There was a certain archdeacon residing in this part of the world, a man of 70 years of age or thereabouts, an old public school boy, an old-fashioned, orthodox clergyman, fond of theology and not averse to port wine, a man vigorous for his years and a general favourite. One day, while riding in a lane in the Milverton direction, he encountered a string of donkeys laden with ruddle to sell to the hill country farmers for marking their sheep. The donkeys were thin and overloaded, and behind them walked a wretched, dirty, emaciated old man with a heavy knobbed stick in his hand.

"The last donkey had a large open sore on one of its quarters, and just as the archdeacon rode by, down came the knob of the stick right on the running sore.

"You cruel old rascal," cried the archdeacon, "if you beat that poor brute like that, I'll beat you." "It'll take a better man nor you to do that, I reckon," said the other, and whack came the stick again upon the sore. The archdeacon said no word, but rode to the first gate, dismounted, tethered his horse, walked back, and went for the donkeyman with a will. "No one was there to chronicle the bout, but it got wind, and report said that at seventy, beef, port and science had prevailed over potatoes and poverty." The archdeacon's popularity increased; the donkeyman's did not : a matter which gave him no concern whatever.

One day the carpenter at Dunster said laughing to the doctor, "I've had an odd order to day, sir. A living man, an old fellow from Luxborough, has been to my place and ordered a coffin. I told him to lie down on the floor that I might take his measure, and then I chalked round him."

"A little more room for the shoulders, sir," he said, "if you please. I might grow a bit stouter before I die." Shortly afterwards the old man came with a donkey and took the coffin away, and when the doctor next called he discovered that some of the stones had been shifted from the wall, and the earth, which was higher inside than out, had been removed and the aperture lined with slates. There the coffin was thrust in, and was used as a drawer to contain bacon, old nails, twine, mouse traps and "other sweetmeats".

Not everyone, though, was disposed against Jan, and he would sometimes get a night's lodging for himself and donkey in the stable of the Green Dragon, Bilbrook, where lived William Symons, apothecary, tradesman, stage-coach entrepreneur, Methodist class leader and unofficial adviser to the neighbourhood. Jan, for his part, was not one to "presume", and although invited to spend the night in the house he would curl up in the stable in the company of Nicholas Nye, content with a bundle of straw for a bed; but knowing the Methodist attachment of his host he would serenade the household with hymns and psalms before retiring. In later years he had an unsuspecedly religious side to his character, and in his will he directed that his house should always be available for religious services, and for a time the Bible Christians held meetings in his house, though he was not of their persuasion.

It was William Symons who prepared Jan's will. It contained at least one curious provision, that his most prized possession, a brass kettle - it was actually copper – should be shared among his four sons, the vatically named Samuel, Daniel, Joel and Nathan, and he directed that it should be used by each of them in turn! (Perhaps it was to forestall doubts as to his mental competence that he sang from memory the Hundredth Psalm.

Coincidence it may be, but more than a century later a strange sequel emerged. An old cottage, little more than a shed, near Palmer's Castle had been used as a primitive club house but had fallen into neglect and disrepair, and in the mid-1980s a heap of rubbish was cleared out. Among this rubbish was an old, blackened and grimy kettle, but when a lady living nearby had worked on it and restored its pristine gleam the lineaments of the late eighteenth century kettle were clear to see.

Some of the actions credited to Jan may, I feel, have been the work of his son Nathan, but no matter; and if heredity has any meaning, no man deserves all the credit for what he does. Both Jan and Nathan had a mind to defend the use of rights of way and the innumerable tracks which even then were being barred at the whim or for the convenience of the landowner; and this is more or less the exchange that ensured when Jan, taking a short cut through the squire's private grounds, had marched more than half way when the squire caught him:

"Palmer, you're trespassing. Go back to the gate."
"Aw, I ha'n't come more 'n a vew yard, zir."
"Nonsense, man, you're more than half way through now."
"Wull, zir, if I be more 'n haaf-ways dru, best I sh'd go all the way, 'cause if I do go back now, I'll ha' went vuther 'n if I'd a-went vore. You let I go out t' other aind, then I 'ont ha' went zo vur as if I'd a-went back, zir."

On the other hand, and in the public interest, not merely his own, Jan is supposed to have carried out in his old age one imaginative feat which, simply on account of the date, I think should be credited to Nathan, but no matter. The circumstance was the building of a new road in 1829 from Luxborough to near the village of Roadwater, running along the valley floor and replacing an old hillside track which served two cottages but was fit only for horse and foot. The squire wanted the new road, but the village wanted to keep the track open for the sake of the cottages, and Jan took this to heart. He had heard that when the case came to a tribunal, the track could only be saved if wheeled traffic had passed along it within living memory, and unfortunately even the Methuselahs of Luxborough had no such recollection. But for Jan, to believe was to act. He took a pair of wheels off a light cart, strapped them on his back and walked the three-mile length of the track to the parish boundary; and when the new road was built, the old one was at least left unblocked.

Jan died away from home and his body was brought back on his donkey and buried in the house. When Sir John offered the old man's son a cottage in exchange for the Castle, it was accepted, and the son took up the body without troubling for permission and removed it to the churchyard, but kept

the coffin lid, with its inscription, as a memento and an ornament to the walls of his new home.

Nathan Palmer was born in 1792 and survived until 1887, the last man in the neighborhood to wear the traditional countryman's smock. Old age came early to the labouring poor, and Nathan bore the marks of hard living. Dr Francis G. Hayes of Dunster, four miles over the hill from Nathan's home, left a speaking portrait of the old man and his steed: "He was a wiry, hard featured old man, with a grey beard and a withered up, parchment-like face, with very marked senile rings around the coloured part of his eyes that gave him a peculiar expression. He was a familiar object on the roads, and one that would instantly attract attention. He used to ride an old screw that he called his 'hackney', which was a mere bag of bones, encased in a tight-drawn skin."

The pony was, in the local phrase, pumple-footed – it had virtually a club foot. 'The hoof of one of the forefeet was enlarged and deformed, and could not be shod, and naturally the poor wretched old creature went almost entirely on three legs. The old man was as bony as his steed, and they made a good match. His riding costume was completed by hay bands wound from ankle to knee around his legs in place of gaiters. His weight was very little, and the pony used to hobble round the hill-country with him all day, Nathan collecting the skins of rabbits and hares, and sheep that had become casualties. I have seen him well loaded toward evening.'

An unprepossessing figure, then, but it would be best not to judge by appearances. Nathan was no fool, and his sense of independence found vent in sly humour. Like his father, he trespassed serenely, and one sunny afternoon as he progressed along the squire's drive the peace and calm of the scene so worked on him that he tethered his 'hackney' to graze on the rich grass and sat down on a bank by the roadside. Before long he fell asleep and rolled down the bank, but woke just as the squire came up:

"Trespassing, eh, Palmer? I shall have to prosecute you, man, you have done this too often."
"Oh, you 'ouldn' do thik, would 'ee, zir? Jus' think o' the shame o' t."
"You should have thought of that before you came trespassing on my land,

Palmer."
"Oh, tidnn' fer old Nathan to be 'shaamed, zir, he ha'n't done nort wrong. But if you was to summons me, whatever would 'em think down Wullit'n (the magistrates' court) if I was to tell 'em squire do leave his drive get in such a state that a pore ole feller on his 'oss valled down hile he were only tryin' to pass en. I 'ouldn' want fer to putt 'ee to shame, not fer the worl', zir."

Nathan used the same technique when the squire caught him taking home a rabbit:

"Poaching this time, is it, Palmer? Well, it's the maistrates' court for you."
"Oh, come on, zir, you 'ouldn' grudge I a li'l rabbert, would 'ee?"
"It's not one rabbit you've had, Palmer, it's a dozen, as you well know."
"Well, zir, maybe I did vind thease li'l chap layin' in top field an' pick en up, like, but you 'ouldn' have me up in court, now, would 'ee? Whatever would 'em zay down Wullit'n if they knawed squire up yere were too minjy fer to let ole Nathan have a li'l rabbert to his Zunday dinner? Giddon with ee, zir, you 'ld never live it down."

No doubt about it, Nathan was a grainy character, and perhaps the grain here and there was a little "thrawn" in the growing. At all events, two of the stories about him show a degree of perverseness which can hardly be put down to independence.

Dr Abraham, in practice with Dr Hayes in Dunster, was also well versed in the manners and customs of the country, and he told a tale which put the old rascal in a sinister light.

One morning Jan called at the surgery in Dunster asking for some medicine for his wife, who was suffering severe internal pains. The doctor gave him a bottle containing a considerable number of doses of a sedative, probably laudanum, and instructed him to repeat the dose at the intervals stated on the bottle as long as the pain persisted, and report again if his wife were no better.

Late in the afternoon a message came from the "big house" in Luxborough and the visit took the doctor past Nathan's cottage. Having heard nothing, he assumed that Sarah was on the mend but naturally called to enquire. He rode up to the door and knocked on it with his whip, and the old man opened it.

"Well," said the doctor, "how's your wife? Better, I hope." "Naw, doctor," replied Nathan calmly, "her's daid, her've bin gone these dree four hour."
"Dead?" exclaimed the doctor. "Did you give her the medicine as I told you?"
"Oh iss," said Nathan. "When I got home I gi'ed her the bottle an' her never come round arter."
"Do you mean to say your wife is dead, and you have not called the neighbours?"
"Well," said Nathan, "they keeps theirselves to theirselves and I keep meself to meself, so I just put two penies on the old woman's eyes and laid her out meself, tidy."

The doctor, apprehensive, hurried into the house and found the old woman still alive, though exhausted. "Run, you villain," he cried to the old man, "run for your life and get me a drop of spirits. You have laid your wife out and she is still alive. Run quick, or I'll have you hanged."

Nathan, spurred into unwilling activity, shambled off and procured the spirits; and when the doctor had administered them to Sarah she spluttered and came to (in fact she outlived her villain of a husband and at last died in Williton workhouse).

The doctor taxed Nathan with his stupidity or worse. "You rogue, you know you had some fine young woman in your eye when you laid out your poor old wife like that."

"Wull, sir, I considered her were daid, surely; but when your honour rode up I was jus' thinkin' o' Susan Floyd (or other name). I was thinkin' the ole woman's clo'es would fit her 'zackly, like, an' wouldn' require no alterations."

But as for any admission of guilt, Nathan was too fly a bird to be caught. Folk had their doubts, but he must be given the benefit of them.

On another occasion he was involved in a more comical misunderstanding with the medical profession, and this time he was not to blame. Dr Hayes had been to Taunton, leaving another partner, Dr Clark, in charge, and on his return he heard that a messenger, Nathan's grandson, had called in to ask him to come over to Luxborough at once, as "old Nathan Palmer had tumbled down dead in a fit."

The messenger had been quite certain that the old man was dead , so Dr Clark, a busy man, had seen no point in making a special journey to see a dead man, but he had said he would tell Dr Hayes, who might then be able to issue a certificate.

Hayes said that he indeed knew Nathan well but had no reason to anticipate a sudden death in spite of his age. Clark then agreed to walk down to the police station and tell the superintendent, who in turn would inform the coroner; and a day or two later the coroner announced he thought an inquest quite unnecessary for such an old man in circumstance devoid of suspicion.

That seemed to close the matter, but a week after the "melancholy event", the grandson appeared in Dr Hayes's surgery in the morning.

"How is it," he said, "that you ha'n't bin out to see Granfer? 'Tis a week now since I comed in to fetch Dr Clark. Do ee plaise come to-day. "What in heaven's name," queried the doctor with some annoyance, "is the good of coming over to see a man who 's been dead a week!" "Er idn' daid! Er's mortal bad, but er idn' daid. Do ee plaise to ride awver." "Why on earth did you bring in such a fool's message?" "Mother told me to be sure to get the doctor, as Granfer was tarble bad, and I was to tell en to make sure he come"; and on his way over the hill he had concocted a message which he felt certain would bring the doctor flying to the rescue. And when Hayes rode over late that evening he could find "little wrong with the old jackass", who got completely well and lived to ride the countryside for years afterward. As old age came upon him, however, he gave up his distant journeys and spent more time at home with his (presumably) beloved wife

Sarah; and the tale of one of his encounters with authority leaves a much more honeyed taste on the tongue.

Deafness had come upon him, but some of his neighbours wondered whether it might be less an affliction than an invention of his ingenuity. Once – several times, in fact, but this one was special – the squire caught Nathan trespassing and soundly berated him for the offence.

Nathan, not in the least put out, and feigning deafness, cupped his hand to his ear as if he could not hear a word the squire was saying. When the latter had done, Nathan beamed and said, "Thank ee, zir, 'tis real kind of ee." "Confound your impudence, Palmer, you're trespassing yet again, and I won't have it!"

"That's jus what I bin tellin' 'em, zir, an' thank 'ee very much I knowed you 'ouldn' forget old Nathan,and I han't had a brace o' pheasants in a long while. Shall I come down for 'em or will 'ee zend 'em up 'ouze?" And what could Squire do but haul down the flag and admit defeat?

Even after all this time it is a puzzle to analyse Nathan Palmer. Was he a none too agreeable fellow with the saving grace of humour? Or an ignorant donkey-driver with occasional flashes of shrewd wit? Who knows? The authorities saw him as little better than a scrounger but they ignored his tenacity and dedication to a free, open air life of travel; and others, notably William Symons, glimpsed in him and his father an independence which lifted them out of the toil-worn rut and won their acceptance.

And after all, to be remembered by posterity for one's verbal passages-at-arms and rubs and clashes with unjust authority is a reputation much to be desired.

8 Jack Froude

Hunting Parson

At the head of one of his stories of life with the British Army, André Maurois quotes the historian Justin McCarthy: "The ideal of the Established Church has been to secure one resident gentleman in every parish and there have been worse ideals." Besides, the ideal was a reasonable and attainable, and the parsons who fulfilled it, living peaceably in their habitations and exerting an influence for good, were happily too many to be named. There were others, however, who illustrated the ideal only by their unremitting failure to live up to it, and who, human nature being as it is, have strutted in the limelight and entertained us ever since. So having paid a brief tribute to parsonical worth, may I now invite your indulgence for the far from Reverend Jack Froude.

Knowstone, in North Devon, is a pleasant little spot nowadays, within easy reach of the Bampton Barnstaple road yet quiet and unhurried; but in Froude's time it was regarded as remote with inhabitants half civilized. Parson Froude ministered, or ruled, or terrorised, there from 1803 to 1852, only one year short of a half century, and the parish suited him well, for the remoteness from bishops and their visitations gave him freedom to act pretty well as he wished.

His character is puzzling. He came from a distinguished family, with one brother a famous historian and another a divine, but he himself, not to gloss over the matter, was a ruffian and a bully, though a courageous rider and physically as hard as chilled steel. Perhaps he represented a throw back to a coarser, more brutal age. But then his character had another side, for he was shrewd and keen witted and possessed considerable intellectual ability

for which last he found little scope, and maybe this also explains something of his character.

While still a young man he gained the reputation of a leading sportsman, even if sportsmanship did not figure prominently among his virtues. He was an excellent judge of horse and hound, and as he had private means he kept his own pack and hunted whenever, wherever and whatever he could find. Few men dared to challenge him on this ground or any other. Some had tried, but quickly learned that it did not pay. Inexplicable accidents happened.

Froude was his own law. He ruled the roost and had a gang of almost feudal retainers who would carry out his wishes unquestioningly. He had no need to issue direct commands, he had only to say thoughtfully, "Well now, wouldn't it be a terrible misfortune for Farmer Huxtable if his hayrick should catch fire and burn down. I shouldn't like for that to happen to the poor old chap," and next morning the rick would be a smoking ruin; or he might say, "What a shame 't would be if Thomas Galley was to lose his old sow," and soon after Galley would find his stock depleted.

As mentioned above, Froude was an excellent judge of horseflesh and a horse coper no more burdened with scruples than the rest of the trade. But to be fair, it seems that the game of hoodwinking a customer meant more to him than the money he gained. The speech of Devon was his natural mode, and he enlivened his rascality with so much humour that his victims could not long nurse a grudge. They ruefully confessed that anyone who dealt with Froude had better keep his wits sharp, eyes open, purse buttoned and fingers tightly crossed.

According to H.J.Marshall, a former vicar of Porlock, Froude once sent his boy of all work, George Slocombe, to Bampton Fair with an old, broken down horse. "Jarge," he said to him, "you be gwain' take th' ole 'oss to Bamp'n Fair an' zell en. He bain't zound, ner nort else to spaik of, zo don't 'ee say he be, mind. If they do ax 'ee about en, jis' say, " If thik 'oss idn' zound I'll varveit a sovereign.: Then 'tis all fair an' 'bove board. Ax twenty pun fer en, not a penny less."

George was not over bright in most of daily life, but to compensate he was doubly shrewd in money matters. He set off early next morning. The horse was old and stiff, and George rode him at a walk all the way to Dunster to take the stiffness out of his joints. Then, on the outskirts, he woke Dobbin up and trotted him into the middle of the fair.

By this time the horse had taken anew lease of life. He had been a good fellow in his prime, and now that the walk had limbered him up and stirred his blood, the bustle and excitement of the crowd made him fell young again and he trotted to and fro looking and feeling like a four year old.

Even the shrewdest and most cautious dealers thought there was promise in him, and at length one of them said, "What's the price of him, boy?" "Twenty pun, sir," said George. "Maister says he wadn' to go fer less." "Is he sound, though?" "If thik ther 'oss bain't zound," George returned solemnly, "I'll varveit a sovereign." A satisfied buyer handed over £20, and George walked back to Knowstone, carrrying saddle and bridle, and recounted the events of the day to "passun".

There the matter rested until a few days later, when the buyer appeared on Froude's doorstep and demanded angrily to see him. He was conducted to the room where Froude was sitting, and demanded, "Have you a boy called George Slocombe living in this parish?" "Yes," said Froude. "What d'ye want of him?" "The young rogue sold me a lame horse down Bampton Fair and claimed he was sound. I want my money back." "Oho!" said Froude, "this needs looking into. I"ll send for the boy and hear what he's got to say for himself. Will 'ee have a drop o' gin?"

George was sent for, the uninvited guest was lubricated, and a mellow atmosphere took the place of anger. Enter George, stolid and unperturbed. "George," said his master, " this gen'leman says you sold en a 'oss in Bamp'n Fair t' other day. Is it true?" "Iss, zir," said George. "Did you guarantee he was sound?" "No, zir, I did not." "Tell me, then, what exactly did 'ee say to the gen'leman? "I said, "If thik ther 'oss bain't zound I'll varveit a suvvereign." "So that's how 'twas, then," said Froude. "Well then, George, hand the gen'leman awver his sovereign."

On another occasion Froude advertised a pony for sale, and a prospective buyer came a considerable distance to inspect the horse. Froude insisted that they should dine first. "We'll tot up," said he, "with a drop of something hot first, and then my huntsman shall show 'ee the horse." (It hardly needs saying that his huntsman, Jack Babbage, was a willing accomplice, but more of him later).

During dinner Froude regaled his guest with mug after mug of his own home brewed, and after lengthy treatment he was at last fit, as Froude saw it, to judge the horse, and they went out to a field where stood some hurdles "feathered" with furze bushes. Burge urged the horse over the hurdles in fine style, shouting whenever he neared the jump, and the visitor, content with what he had seen and in no state to try for himself, made out a cheque and drove away, pleased with his purchase.

A week later came a letter. It went straight into the fire unopened. A second and third letter came, with the same result. Finally the buyer himself appeared, furious. His horse was blind. "Not my business, sir," said Froude unabashed. "You wanted a hunter that could jump, and that's what I sold you. There's no denying it. You didn't ask if he could see. When you ride him, take a knife, and when you come to a fence, jump off and cut a furze bush. Lay it down before the fence and canter up to it, and shout as you heard Babbage do, and so soon as he feels the prickles about his legs he'll jump right enough!" "Take him back, sir," shouted the buyer.
"Certainly, sir."
"And give me my money back."
"Certainly not, a deal's a deal. I've done my part, cashed my cheque and paid the butcher, and there's an end on 't."

Unlike Ralph Allen of Bath, who did good by stealth, and blushed to find it fame, any good done by Jack Froude was generally accidental, and blushing was a practical impossibility for one of his port wine complexion. As for stratagems and the thrill of the chase, neighbours, servants, fellow parsons, foxes and bishops: all were fair game.

The Bishop of Exeter in Froude's later years was Henry Phillpotts, a formidable disciplinarian whose sarcasm awoke trepidation in ninety nine out of a hundred of his clergy. The hundredth was of course Froude, but even he viewed a visitation by Philpotts with disquiet, and when the bishop came to South Molton and summoned him to attend, he sent his excuses. The bishop was not to be fobbed off and decided to call on him instead.

Froude had prior knowledge of this and posted look outs along the lane to warn him of the bishop's approach, but he had not counted on Philpott's promptness or energy. He was talking to the huntsman, and the hounds were prowling round the rectory lawn, when the look out boy ran in with the news that the bishop's coach was coming up the lane. Babbage hastily removed the hounds and Froude even more hastily removed himself and dived into bed, hunting coat, boots, breeches and all.

Moments later the doorbell rang, and Jane, the old housekeeper, went to answer and informed the bishop that her master was ill in bed. "In that case," said the bishop, "I shall visit him in bed."

Jane showed him in, sat him down and went to Froude for instructions. "Tell his lordship," said Froude, "I don't rightly know what I"ve got, but 'tis zummat catchy for sartin: scarlet fever, I reckon."
Jane relayed the news, but Philpott brushed the warning aside, went up to Froude's room and sat down by his bedside.
"What'll your lordship take?" Froude greeted him, huddling down under the bedclothes so that only his head showed. "Cruel cold 'tis to day. A drop o' hot brandy an' water to keep off th' infection?" "Nothing, thank you."
He paused. Then "I am sorry to say that strange stories about you reach my ears, Mr Froude."
"Whisky with a slice of lemon, then?" said Froude, unconcerned.
"I beg you, no," answered the bishop with some heat. " I want the truth of these stories about you."
"Why! I've heard some strange stories about your lordship!" retorted Froude. "But there! Us gentlemen don't give heed to all thik tittle tattle. You'll excuse me, my lord, I be turr'ble bad. Pleased to have seen 'ee. Good bye" and with that he tucked his head under the blankets and vanished from sight, and the bishop retired discomfited.

He did not give up easily, though, and some time later he wrote announcing another visit and fixing a day and time. Froude could obviously not play the same trick again, but nor would it pay to offend the bishop a second time. He consulted with the churchwardens, and together they concocted a scheme.

The lane from the Barnstaple road crosses the stream called Crooked Oak, a small tributary of the River Mole, but in those days it formed a ford, shallow enough in dry weather but often impassable after heavy and prolonged rain, and a curious observer might have noticed that after the interview with the churchwardens some unusual activity had deepened the bed of the ford.

It was pure coincidence, of course, that as the bishop's coach came trundling along the lane the churchwardens were working with teams of horses in the fields alongside. The carriage reached the stream, drove on in, reached the middle and there stuck fast, with a fuming bishop marooned inside.

Along came a solicitude of churchwardens, intent on rescuing him with the minimum of disturbance to the rector and the maximum delay and fuss. After long discussion as to the best way to "draa his lardship out o' thik ther stream", they went in search of their teams. These they hitched on both sides of the carriage and the fun began, with the coach horses pulling in one direction, one team at right angles to it and the other team opposite to it that is, south, west and east, with more than a touch of nor' west and nor' east and the bishop shaken and tossed about like a cork in a whirlpool.

At long last they brought the coach safely to land but on the side it had come from, and then they assured the bishop that there was no other road to Knowstone. Phillpotts may not have believed them, but this time he knew when he was beaten and retired to recoup his forces and fight again.

He could never bring himself to countenance Froude's hunting, but the rector was incorrigible. The bishop, meeting Froude one day when he was

exercising a greyhound or "long dog" in Devon speech inquired, "Pray, Mr Froude, what sort of dog may you call that?"

"That?" said Froude. "Oh, a long dog, me lord; an' if you was to shake your apern to en, off he 'd go like a dart." * Macaulay, a contemporary of Froude, once wrote, "A taste for severe practical jokes may be pardoned in a boy, but when habitually and immediately indulged by a man of mature age and strong understanding, it is almost invariably the sign of a bad heart." Be that as it may, Froude certainly relished the discomfiture of others.

He did not object to his maidservants having "followers", but insisted that they come in openly and that he be told. Some of the young countrymen, however, found his banter hard to take, and they slipped into the kitchen by the back door. But Froude was not to be outwitted, and one evening, when Dick Gathercole was being entertained by his sweetheart and the other maids, they heard Froude's footsteps in the corridor.

As quick as thought they bundled Dick into the huge furnace in which the family brewed the ale. In strode the master and called, "Mary, light the furnace, or the puppies'll die. Look sharp. 'Tis bitter cold."

Mary could not disobey. She fetched faggots and stoked up the fire as Froude looked on with inward amusement. Dick remained hidden until he could stand the heat no longer and clambered out.

"Ah!" said Froude, "I thought you were there" whereon Dick knocked him down.
That at least was Dick's story, though according to Froude he tickled Gathercole up with his riding crop so that he sped from the kitchen at a speed of which any of his master's "long dogs" could well have been proud."
Jack Babbage, his huntsman, henchman, groom and retainer, had always obeyed his orders with a fidelity worthy of a better cause and let his conscience ride with a easy rein. But one day he fell ill and seemed like to die. Concerned at last over his soul's possible destination he sent for the rector. Froude was taken aback but fortified himself with brandy and water and strode off to visit the sick man. "Do 'ee think I'll get to Hev'n, sir, or t' other place?" Babbage enquired anxiously.
"I couldn't rightly say, Jack," returned his master. "Let's see, though. Have

'ee broke any o' the Commandments?"
"All o' 'em, zir, I reckons, 'part vrom murder." "Oh." Froude pondered. "Wull, Jack, seems 'tis a bad look out fer 'ee. Tull 'ee what, 's know, us had best see if there's ort wicked thee hassn' never done. Look yere, now, have 'ee ever zhut a vox?" Babbage's face brightened. "Naw, zir, wicked I may ha' bin, but not zo wicked I 'd zhut a vox." "Wull then, Jack lad, I reckon there's hope fer 'ee 'itt."

9 George Matthews and Thomas Slade

Masters of the King's Musick

Exmoor, for most of its history, figured in foreign minds as a wild, barbarous place and the people who lived there as dull, unpolished rustics a hundred years behind the times; but in reality those rustics were perfectly capable of keeping up with the rest of England when they found it worth while, as for instance in the making of music. Some time in the 1660s, the authorities of the Chyrch of England had felt the need to improve the music in their churches, and to achieve this they set about using local instrumental and vocal talent when it could be found; and so in due course many villages, if not all, came to have a small band (mainly wind instruments) and **male** chorus ("Let the women keep silent in church!").

In the Exmoor area they flourished in Cutcombe, Winsford, Exford, Dunster, Bridgetown, Luxborough, Withycombe, Rodhuish and Leighland. Musicians' galleries were erected in the west end of the church, and local singers and players were drawn in to form a 'quire' to lead and encourage the congregation to sing, though the first solid, four-square psalm tune cannot have appealed like the country dances. The innovations took root, performers improved, the music evolved and became livelier and more varied in style and metre. The quire – especially the players – became men of note in the neighbourhood and were called on to perform on week-day occasions as well.

Their reign lasted two hundred years, and while their music and manner of performing changed considerably over that time, it reflected, perhaps surprisingly, not the modal and freely rhythmic tradition of folk songs and dances but the style of the recent past among professional musicians. With this, in the late-eighteenth century, pehaps due to the rival Methodists

with their love of vigorous congregational singing, their desire for greater refinement of thought and behaviour, and Charles Wesley's incomparable outpouring of religious verse, a search for self-improvement in rural life, not least in music, became evident. (Quite apart from this, an Anglican quire could not let itself be outpaced by Dissenters...)

But to savour the pleasure that the quires took in their music-making and to sppreciate their importance to their communities one must look away from Exmoor for a moment and into deep Wessex, and read of them in those passages of delight in which Thomas Hardy, recalling the traditions of his family, depicted the village musicians of his youth. There they stand, in Under the Greenwood Tree, Far From the Madding Crowd,Two On a Tower and The Mayor of Casterbridge, and they speak and reminisce and contend with a decent regard for the exigencies of their profession and a modest pride in their status and in the virtues of "men of note" who have gone before.

'One Sunday I can well mind – a bass-viol day that time, and Yeobright had brought his own. 'Twas the Hundred-and- thirty-third (Psalm) to Lydia,.

and when they'd come to "Ran down his beard and o'er his robes its costly moisture shed", neighbour Yeobright, who had just warmed to his work, drove his bow into them strings that glorious grand that he e'en a'most sawed the bass-viol into two pieces. Every winder in church rattled as if 'twere a thunderstorm.'

But even as Hardy wrote, these living ghosts were fading before his very eyes, dissolving into oblivion as at cock-crow along with the rest of the self-contained and self-sufficient life in which the English village had thriven since time out of mind. Town manners were filtering into country churches. Parsons influenced by the High Church Oxford Movement disapproved of the robust style of music and the vigorous, earthy performance, and being endowed with dictatorial powers they dismissed the bandsmen and replaced them with a barrel-organ or harmonium and choirs of surpliced men and boys.

The bandsmen felt the blow keenly, not least the manner in which it was delivered : '"All we thought was, that for us old ancient singers to be choked off quiet at no time in particular, as now, in the Sundays after Easter, would seem rather mean in the eyes of other parishes, sir. But if we fell glorious with a bit of a flourish at Christmas, we should have a respectrable end, and not dwindle away at some nameless paltry second-Sunday-after or Sunday-next-before-something, that's got no name of its own."' The harm done to the self-respect of these servants of the church by the church itself cannot be measured, but it was the first step in the alienation of country folk from the church, and one might say that the "reforming" parsons had only themselves to blame. Exmoor villages, despite their remoteness, inevitably suffered likewise at the hands of the improvers, and even this land of long memories could not preserve the names of the violists and clarionettists and serpent-players who created a rugged harmony and the men who led them, nor was there a Hardy to record – or invent? - the dialectal riches of their communing together. But not all was lost, for it so happened that two of the local leaders, it seems, had talents of initiative, organisation and originality which established them as "characters" and won them a reputation in their neighbourhood which lasted till long after their death and almost into living memory. These two were George Matthews and Thomas Slade.

George Mathews (ca 1790-1840), band and choir master and composer, lived at Leighland, on the eastern fringe of Exmoor and Brendon Hill, near Roadwater. His home, back in the days of King William IV, was Pitt Mill, in the valley of the stream which flows down from Brendon Hill to the sea at Watchet. He lived by milling, but lived for music, and if his quickness of temper might be counted a fault, he could have protested that it only burst forth when provoked by false notes and discord.

Six days of the week he toiled in the mill or fields, and at night, by the flickering light of a tallow candle, he would sit at the kitchen table with his music manuscript book before him and write in arrangements of popular songs and dances, of anthems, psalms and carols ("pricking in the notes", they called it). On the seventh day he would make his way across the fields or up a steep lane to the little whitewashed church on the hillside and lead

his orchestra in the music he had arranged or composed : and there was more to this than met the ear.

The music and musicians were well matched, for George had written specifically for his happy few : two clarionets, flute, key bugle, two horns, trombone and the leathern serpent he played himself. A country bandmaster did not send away to London for other men's arrangements ; he wrote for whatever instruments were to hand, and if the Leighland Union Band was an eccentric combination by concert standards, the congregations did not cavil. Besides this, the psalms were not chanted, they were sung in the rhyming, metrical version of Tate and Brady, so that the band were always master and did not have to adjust to the irregular rhythms of a chant.

Their duties were not burdensome. They sat in the west gallery, their privileged position, and at the start of the sermon they would slip out of the gallery and down the outside steps to a little 'tib shop' across the way, kept by a widow, and return – more or less steadily – only when a little "tacker", told off to keep watch, warned them that "passon" was coming to the end of his sermon. But again, they would be called out for jollifications during the year and particularly in mid-September for the village revel at Roadwater, to play for the dancers. Here again George's skill was evident, for the band played not only his arrangements of The Rising of the Lark and Rule Britannia but also his own compositions, the Roadwater Quick Step and the Somerset Waltz.

Whatever the players'degree of skill, George was not the man to let them disgrace him, and he trained them rigorously. On summer evenings he would stand them in a field on the hillside above the mill and conduct them from the opposite slope. If all went well his face would light up with pleasure, but if a false note were heard or a entry mistimed he would career down to the valley bottom, leap the stream and go coursing up the other side like a "long-dog", and the offending bandsman would feel the rough edge of George's tongue.

But with all this, the crown of the year was still Christmas, the only week-day holiday (apart from the revel) for working men and women; and then the band would play and the singers sing the carols proper to the neighbour-

hood, music springing from the eighteenth century, sonorous baroque or Handelian anthems with a vigorous beat that carried you irresistibly along. Such tunes were performed all over England, and their radiance was captured by Hardy even as it was fading away. It is worth while turning to his pages to recall, however dimly, the feeling of those days of simple, artless art, with their 'ancient and time-worn hymns, embodying a quaint Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations.'

With all that, however, George might seem no more than a run-of-the-mill musician, if an energetic one, but there was another, creative, side to him, for among the music he wrote on the old kitchen table were not only arrangements of popular songs but also dances of his own: the Somerset Waltz and the Roadwater Quick Step, which he and his band would play at the revel down in the valley. As well as that, he composed hymn tunes, some of which were included in a copious collection (some 800 in all meters)printed in Watchet and published by Thomas Hawkes, the land surveyor and agent in Williton, and intended as a musical vade mecum for all Wesleyan Methodist missionaries abroad; and so some of George's music was heard even in far-off Canada.

In due time George died and it seems that the band ceased with him, for not only had he set an example that few could live up to, the church authorities demolished his chapel-of-ease and replaced it with a parish church in Victorian Gothic style, with room for a organ and choir but no musicians' west gallery. Perhaps it was just as well for George's peace of mind that he did not live to hear the declension from his group of sturdy tenors and basses to the high-piping trebles that had replaced them.

10 Thomas Slade

bandmaster and carol leader 1831 – 1907

But again, not all was lost, for while the villages of these western vales might not show another band leader with all of George with his multifarious skills, rescue came at length, and the rescuer could well have served as a model for Samuel Smiles's 'Self-Help'.

Born in Roadwater in 1831 as one of ten children, Thomas Slade started with almost nothing but an inborn love of music, for his father, a farm labourer, had been so crippled by work in all weathers that he was reduced to cracking stone for a shilling a day. It was back-breaking and heart-breaking work, but one day a travelling Bible Christian minister stopped and said something which aroused his sense of human dignity and gave him hope. "Things" improved for him, and eventually he could afford to have young Tom apprenticed to a blacksmith. Young Tom slaved away for the seven long years and then bought the goodwill and set up as a smith himself. But all the time, music sang in his head, and he and his brother William determined to buy and learn the bass viol or 'cello, for, said Tom, "'tis the queen of music, she can play the melodies and fill in the harmonies as well". And so, one morning early, he left the forge with a few sovereigns in his pocket, walked the twenty up-and-down miles to Taunton, bought the viol complete with bow and case, strapped it on his back and walked the twenty miles home again, arriving in the early evening; and then, to show that he was not a weakling or an idle workman, he lit the fire and put in a couple of hours in the forge before going to bed.

This must have been in his mid-thirties and the 1860s when the iron ore industry was beginning to bring a little unaccustomed prosperity to the neighborhood, and with prosperity a little leisure for enjoyment. With Tom to lead, the old Christmas tradition of the 'waits' going the rounds of the farms was maintained and continued long after it had ceased nearly

everywhere else in Somerset; and as an spur for Tom and his men, some of the Cornish miners of Bredon Hill had brought one or two carol tunes unknown in George's day.

This carolling came at a price, however, as Tom, though not without humour, had a vein of sternness derived from the hard times of his boyhood and he kept a firm hand on his musicians. As Christmas approached he rehearsed them, and year after year, just before midnight on Christmas Eve, the musicians with their instruments would come along the village street to Tom's door and into his 'parlour' for cordials and cakes to build them up for the long, cold round. (In folk memory there were no rainy or misty or thoroughly wretched Christmas Eves. . .)

Then they would set out up the village street. Friendly talk and a chuckle made pleasant harmony in the night, but as they drew near the first stop, the quarry-owner's residence, Tom would caution them with such words as, "Quiet now, friends. Number Six : Mortals awake! Take your places , but not a sound till I give the cue," – for he knew how precious a part of music is a well-prepared silence, and he felt that while speech and laughter are the unique human privileges, music is divine, and the sleepers should not be awakened by idle chatter but by a noble harmony, "a concourse of sweet sounds." As William Dewy phrased it, "Keep from making a great scuffle, but go gently, so as to strike up all of a sudden, like spirits." And so, with the quire forming a semi-circle, Tom would beat four, would say "Mortals, awake!", the players would sound the major chord, and in a stentorian voice he would announce: "Mortals, awake! Rejoice and sing The gloaries of your Heavenly King". Soon they would catch the glimmer of a candle in an upstairs window and then a female form, perhaps not the enchanting vision of Fancy glimpsed by the Mellstock quire but still promising a reward for their efforts. The lady of the house would open the door and invite them in for hot cider and cake and perhaps a half-sovereign to be shared among them all; then on to the next house for another carol, and on again, and so move on through the starry silence until at three in the morning they returned to the village to play in Christmas Day with,

> Once more, behold, the day is come, The bright and glorious morn : Let every tongue on earth rejoice For Christ the Lord is born ;

'and what more entrancing, wrote Lewis Court, who heard it every year as a boy, 'than to be awakened by the strains of Christmas music stealing in upon one through the silence of the night, or on the clean air of a frosty morning! – the deep, full tones of the bass viol, the celestial notes of the clarinet, the suave, appealing plaint of the flute, and the blend of good human voices."

In the morning the musicians played again in the gallery of the chapel (the village had no Anglican church), but after Old Chrismas Day, 6th January, no more carols were played or sung until the Christmas season came round again, for Thomas, and many like him, held that everything had its due season, and a carol out of its proper time was an overturning of the universal order that he could not abide.

He died on Boxing Day 1907 and the tradition of the 'waits' faded away. His village and others of Exmoor had their musicians, but the old rustic instruments had fallen out of favour, and as for the singers, rural depopulation carried them away .But in a few places – Cutcombe, Exford, Winsford, Roadwater, and Odcombe in south Somerset, the manuscripts survived together with some memories of the tradition, and the spread of the West Galley movement since its inception in 1991 has given the old carols a resurgence that no one a hundred years ago could possibly have foreseen.

11 Dan'l Nethercott

Scenes of a vanished England

Only very recently, as the pace of change and built vandalism has quickened to headlong speed, have we come to value the work of the commercial photographers who in thousands of pictures recorded the scenes and people of Victorian and Edwardian England.

As to the local photographers, professional or amateur, who worked alongside the great firms and in healthy competition with them, I cannot say whether Somerset was more generously provided than other counties; probably not, but in the western corner of it we may look over a century of their work, naming almost at random the Hole family for three generations in Watchet and Williton, Alfred Vowles in Minehead and over most of Exmoor, and before them,William Vickery in Luxborough, John Palmer in Skilgate, William Bryant in Brompton Ralph, James Date in Watchet, and here, there and a dozen places else, Daniel Nethercott.

"Dan'l" came very early on the scene, but not only for that reason is he taking the centre of the stage. He was reckoned, in the classic phrase, "a good workman that needed not to be ashamed", but his life also had more than a touch of romance, and that is an element which may not guarantee an immortal memory but offers a better hope of it than any amount of dull duty dully done. He came into the world in the 1830s at Drucombe, (nowadays most often, though for no valid reason, written and pronounced "Druids' combe", as if a hang out for those hierarchic hatchetmen rather than simply a "deep or narrow valley"). Anyway, Drucombe, halfway between Roadwater and Luxborough, lies in the valley of that musical stream which rises above Luxborough and flows north through the two villages and Washford to the sea at Watchet. Daniel's family had long been connected with Luxborough and enjoyed much respect, but by one of those quirks of parish boundaries so frequent in these parts irrational at first sight but eas-

ily explained Drucombe Farm stands in the furthest corner of Carhampton parish, and it was then an outpost of the Dunster Estate.

Daniel's father seems to have combined the roles of tenant farmer and keeper, and he was a man to be trusted, hardworking and thrifty, and therefore better able than most to give his son a "start in life"; and so, when Daniel's working life began he was not sent to the endless work of the ploughlands and fields. He ran errands, took charge of small commissions and so on, at a ha'penny or a penny a time, and soon he had saved enough to buy a donkey. With this working partner he went further afield, increased his takings, and bought a little cart with which he set up as a carrier of small goods.

So far, nothing marked him as greatly different from other young fellows of his class; but Daniel kept his eyes open and his mind alert, and as he drove over the hill country and down the long lanes to the farms he was struck by their isolation and the solitary lives of the people who lived in them. "Suppose," he seems to have thought, "suppose I can think of something to give them interest, to take them out of themselves. Let me see what I can do." He was a handy lad with something of the artist in his make up, and so he painted a backcloth and set it up in his cart. Then he made puppets or maybe Punch and Judy and their partners in crime, and with these he treated his farming public to a raree show, and the pennies clinked pleasantly in the tin as he passed it round.

At the same time he trained as a mason, for so he described himself, but at some time probably in his early twenties he hit on the great idea. He had heard of the new method of "taking likenesses" of the human face by the power of light and imprinting them on sensitised paper, and the magic of it appealed to his imagination. There was a practical side, too. These "photographers" practised in the towns, where there were enough people to ensure steady patronage. Why should not he, Daniel, set up a practice in the country? His patrons might be fewer, but they would come to him where they could not have afforded an expensive excursion to town, and the takings would supplement the income from his other work.

Still, he could hardly expect another Somerset photographer to coach a potential rival in the art. He must go to London, where he could learn the latest methods and stay with relatives for the short time needed.

Imagine him, then, striding down the valley and over the hills on the 20 mile trek to Taunton with a £5 note from his father for the expenses of tuition folded in his pocket book, and see him again a day or so later, a rustic but self confident figure in the West End, bearding a photographer in his den.

The photographer was evidently a decent, helpful man, by no means inclined to take Daniel down a peg or foist him off on an assistant. I cannot quote their exchange word for word, but it went something like this:

Daniel: "I should like for you to learn me to take likenesses, sir. Do 'ee think you could do it?" Photographer: "Certainly, but" (with a smile) "I'm afraid it might cost rather more than you would expect." Daniel (with an air of victory won and laying his £5 note triumphantly on the counter): "More 'n that, then, sir?" Of anyone else the photographer would have asked four or five times as much, but he was "tickled" by Daniel, as they would have said, for the young man appealed to his sense of humour. He chuckled to himself and said, "Well, I expect we could manage something for that, but," as he looked more closely at the banknote, "I'm afraid that note is of no use to me. I don't know the bank" for the note had been issued by one of the Somerset banks, either Stuckey's or Fox and Fowler's, as safe in their local sphere as the Bank of England, but not known to the benighted metropolitans.

Daniel, crestfallen, left the shop and went to look for a policeman to direct him to the address of his relatives. Within a few minutes he found a helpful one how London has changed since those days! and his question was answered in the unadulterated accents of West Somerset. Daniel's rescuer came from Cutcombe! He took him back to the studio, guaranteed the note as genuine, and the lessons went ahead.

The photographer kept his word. He gave his pupil a thorough grounding in the art (or craft? or trade? something of all three, perhaps, though early photographers such as Julia Cameron and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson were

firmly convinced of the first definition and acted upon it). At the end of the course Dan'l bought a camera and equipment with another draft and came home. In the wood near his home he built a little studio and fitted it up with a few pieces of furniture and a backcloth. There he practised his art and I use the word after due thought, for though Daniel would never have constructed theories of art for himself or paid attention to the aesthetic word spinning of others, he was an artist. He would not have recognised himself in the role, but he was no less genuinely an artist for being unconscious of it.

Daniel, for sure, only set out with the aim of "taking likenesses", of starting a side line which would "tap" a market and attract the custom of neighbours who, in the few years of comparative prosperity, 1855 – 1875, had a few more pence than usual to spare; but it turned out differently.

Over thirty years there came to him men and women of almost every calling that made up the society of rural Somerset: the farmer, the shepherd, the inkeeper, the labourer, the thatcher and his family, the carpenter, the tailor, the smith and innumerable others, and Daniel "took" them all; and perhaps because he lived so near to them, both physically and mentally or spiritually, he succeeded as no stranger could have done, in rendering their inner selves in visible form.

Daniel, in fact, was a thorough countryman and a country craftsman. Art as practised by the professionals was a world outside the experience and understanding of our Victorian labouring folk. The word itself was too "big" to find a place in their speech, and artists such as the distinguished trio of painters drawn to West Somerset by the beauty they saw all around appeared almost as extra terrestrial beings without visible means of support and noticeably casual in their Sabbath observance.

But they did not need to talk about art. Without knowing it, the craftsmen the carpenters, wood carvers, blacksmiths and bladesmiths, the cordwainers and saddlers, coopers and wainwrights followed in the steps of the ancient Greeks, for whom "techne" was both art and craft.

His art, though, could not keep him fully employed, because the few years of prosperity locally (1855 – 1875) were followed by decades of rural depres-

sion and whole families left the district for the industrial areas or oversea, and so he also worked at his trade as a mason. But he photographed every scene and event that appealed to him, sometimes regardless of whether it would readily sell, and he created a veritable gallery of portraits of his neighbours, almost as if he were unconsciously laying up for posterity a treasure of memories of a way of life which, though harsh and unjust, bred men and women who would work and strive and endure to the uttermost. .

In his late middle years he moved down the valley, settled in Roadwater and he built his Model House overlooking the meadow where the village revel and sports were held; and there he lived on into a green old age.

He grew more and more patriarchal and dignified in appearance, and this dignity, far from unnerving his rustic clients, struck an answering chord. As we look back across the gulf of a hundred years littered with the wrecks of dreams and innocence, we may at first sense a humorous incongruity in the stolid, unpretentious figures posed against a Renaissance balustrade or Italianate arches; but if we ponder them they take on new, transfiguring lineaments, and we see them not as simple, perhaps quaint figures from the past but as men and women endowed with a dignity which we in our centuries have lost. ‘

Nowhere is this seen to better advantage than in his portrait of Robert Rowe, the thatcher from Hayne, "In appearance," as was written of him long ago, "a simple, rugged child of Nature:his massive head well poised on a body of moderate height, and a fine forehead arched into a high dome and with what powers of thought had be but received tuition! There was a full, clear depth in the eyes that reminded you of the one in whom was no guile. You looked into them and saw something that was not of this world, "a light that never was on sea or land." The long furrows on either side of the nose and mouth had the curve of kindliness. The mouth itself was expressive of a strong will, and the lips were wonderfully mobile and sensitive. It was a rugged, weather stained face, but illumined with a gracious light, like a rough granite crag seen in the splendour of the morning sun."

That physiognomic study, to my mind, was captured and rendered almost in its entirety by Daniel's camera, but I have noticed something else in his

seated portraits: unlike us who perch on an upright chair as if impatient to hop and flutter off, these men and women sit in it as if they belong. They almost sit into it, as if nothing can disturb them until the work of posing for the likeness is done.

Right folk in the right places

There is something deeply indicative in this, and deeply moving. This solidity and stability transcend the classes of the sitters: the smiths and carpenters and labourers have it as well as the farmers. Poor and oppressed though they often were, and ill rewarded their work, they knew their value to the world's affairs, they knew they had a place in the world that only they could fill, and a task that their brain and hands alone could carry through. Nothing can excuse the wage slavery and exploitation they endured for so long, but they retained a pride in their work and sense of being needed individually, and these were qualities that the countrymen who went into the mills and factories all too quickly lost. The outside world, then as now, brimmed with violence, bloodshed and oppression, but they heard little about it. Life moved with the deliberation of eternity, and by the same rhythm they governed their daily lives. Whether prosperous or poor, calmness and strength reside in their faces, and we still see them standing erect and certain of their place in the world, or seated foursquare with the confidence of unquestioned wealth, the riches of a contented mind.

Even that was not all. Thanks to Daniel and such early photographers, these men and women were the first of their kind to be able to transmit a record of their physical appearance to posterity. A landowner might contemplate with mingled pride and discomfort the portraits of ten generations of his ancestors, but the face and gestures of a ploughman could not survive beyond the memory of his grandchildren. Now that was changed. Even a labourer could hope to be remembered, and Richard Jefferies' lament that "the faces fade as the flowers, and there is no consolation" would lose a little of its poignancy. So it is not surprising that the "old people" approached the taking of a "likeness" with something of a sense of occasion,

a matter to be undertaken with forethought and solemnity. "Well, Annie," one old man was heard to say, " us'll have the likeness, an' if I do die fus', thee shall have en, an' if thee d' die fus', I shall have en."

It is sad to record that much of Daniel's work was lost or, worse, jettisoned as so often in the Edwardian village by a posterity that did not value what it stood for. In late middle age he moved down the valley from Drucombe and, with his mason's skill, built himself a "Model House" in Roadwater. He trained his son Rudolph in photography and one or two of the son's photographs still exist. Whether the son predeceased him I do not know, but Daniel died in 1918, full of years and, one would have hoped, honour, but hundreds upon hundreds of his precious glass plates were thrown out, used for cloches or tipped into a ditch. A few were saved by a minister home on leave, but they cannot represent more than a small fragment of the work of the best part of a lifetime.

Even so, enough remains for us to value what was done by Daniel Nethercott and others of his art to raise the dignity and self respect of a class who for the first time could call more than their souls their own in such quiet places as the valley of the Brendon stream.

12 "Lordy" Holcombe

Prince of Poachers

The old-time poachers on Exmoor and the Quantock Hills were sportsmen to their finger-tips, totally unlike the destructive, town based marauders of to day, and if landowners and keepers detested them as distributors of their private property among the lower orders, those poverty stricken working people made no complaint. One such agent of rural enterprise, looking back on his life, wrote, "It must be remembered that (in mid 19th century) hard work did not pay. Farmers were bent on making money, and if the labourer received seven shillings a week, it was considered as much as he was worth. The villages were bursting with folks. Nearly every cottage was clogged with boys and girls growing up. And they all had to live somehow. The price of bread was high. I have known it up to thirteen pence a loaf. As for meat, it was an unheard of luxury. What was more natural than that puzzled chaps, with no brains for making their way in the world, should help themselves now and again to wild creatures, both birds and beasts? Things are different now, but if you had lived fifty or sixty years ago, and seen with my eyes, you might not be so hard on the poor poacher."

"Lordy" Holcombe was born and bred in Dulverton and was proud of it. His family lived in a low lying street just off the Little Bridge and known as Duck Paddle; (later generations, less susceptible to the picturesque, renamed it Chapel Street, but no matter). The father was a shoemaker by trade but, like a good many others, eked out a tight living by poaching. As young John grew up, he helped his father occasionally, but he never became a proper shoemaker: the thrill of poaching and pitting his wits against his natural and unnatural adversaries got into his veins and took over.

Dulverton at that time had a schoolmaster who made "miching" a pleasure to be paid for with a beating. Old Keen really was keen, and Holcombe remembered him as “a big, smart man, who shot, fished and played on the

fiddle and cared nothing for our feelings". On winter mornings, with the thermometer degrees below zero, there was no fire in the schoolroom, and if the boys wanted warmth they had to bring sticks with them. The only other warming came from the hand of Keen, who also brought a stick and used it with indiscriminate zeal, making their hands tingle for hours.

On leaving school John tried broom making, followed by railway construction down at Starcross and Powderham Park, but, in his own disarming comment, "as a boy (he) was not partial to work, and it happened that a man employed on the works was of the same kidney." They both belonged to Dulverton, and between them they bought a dog, "a noble looking animal, a lurcher," which they reckoned would maintain them, at least on the way home. On nearing Dulverton they observed quite a dozen hares on Helverton Knap. Holcombe's partner marked one of them and held up the dog, who marked her too. Away flew the hare, but the dog was too fast, and caught her and brought her back. Holcombe flattered himself that he had a fortune between that dog's jaws, but the lurcher let him down with a peculiarity: nothing would induce him to enter the same field twice. Eventually the partners sold him to some gypsies for a sovereign but John Holcombe had started on his adventurous road.

From early days he was known as "Lordy"; but if we imagine that he acquired his nickname for some unexpected stateliness of demeanour, he will quickly set us right. It was, he said, "all along of an old song."

He and several mates were in the New Inn, Dulverton, when one of them proposed that he should sing. He knew one ditty he had learnt of some old fellow, a highwayman's song, and two of the verses ran as follows:

I took a kind and loving wife,
I loved her as dear as I love my life:
And to maintain her both fine and gay
To all the world my life I'll pay.

I robbed Lord Mansfield, I do declare,
And left him on St James's Square.

I bade him good night and the best of cheer
While I ran to spoil with my comrades dear.

Lord Mansfield was probably the famous 18th century judge and friend of John Wesley, but it is unlikely that his fame persisted in remote Dulverton 60 or 70 years later. Still, the name caught the attention of one of Holcombe's boon companions, a tailor and bugler in the cavalry, who surnamed him "Lord Mansfield", and the title in shortened form stuck with him ever after.

Oddly enough, John was not the first of the family to be ennobled in this way. His great uncle was old "King" Holcombe of Zeal Farm, Hawkridge, though like many other farmers he dressed roughly, in breeches and stockings, with no gaiters. John solemnly maintained that with a king in his ancestry he had a vein or two of royal blood, and that explained his fondness for the "the royal game, the royal venison."

One evening soon after this Lordy, who had drunk more than a drop and become "a bit elevated", offered to bet that he would go and kill a hare and return within the hour. No sooner said than taken. He left the inn, made his way up the High Street and on to a hillside plantation. The hares, though, seemed disinclined to oblige him and he was turning for home, rather crestfallen, when it happened.

Unknown to Lordy, two keepers were waiting for him, and the moment he jumped over the gate on to the road they collared him and marched him off to give account of himself to 'Squire Bisset.

This Master of the Devon and Somerset Staghounds had no love for poachers, especially deer poachers who interfered with his own pleasure, and he rarely erred on the side of leniency. Neither then nor ever did he show Lordy the slightest favour, and the poacher had every reason to look on him as a personal foe: yet he could not refrain from saying that his opponent was "as fine a man as has been seen in our country: tremendously heavy one of the heaviest men that ever rode hunting but active and good all through."

Lordy walked along the high road a captive. The keepers, one on each side, held him by the collar, and the more he reflected on the situation the less he liked it.

Suddenly he sprang. broke free and ran off toward the town; but as Lordy's luck would have it, the keepers had a big mastiff with them and let him slip. He was muzzled, but Lordy could make no headway against him: the dog kept beating him down with his paws.

Presently they reached the squire's house and he was ushered in. The keepers went off to speak to their master, leaving Lordy alone in the kitchen. In the cupboard was a supply of beer, to which Lordy helped himself with a persistence which spoke of an urgent desire to lay in supplies against a season of drought in Taunton jail. All too soon the keepers returned with Bisset, and his tone was stern and his manner contemptuous.

"Ah!" said he to the keepers, "so you've got him, and a good job, too."

His manner and weight would have intimidated a common overnight poacher, but Lordy was not so easily cowed. Besides, the liberal refreshment was taking over and he fired off a salvo of names at the squire, but Bisset was in no mood for play.

"Let him go," he said to the keepers, "but watch him out of the park. He'll hear more of this." And he did. Summoned for trespassing in pursuit, he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. An occasional spell in "chokey", as prison began to be known about this time, was a poacher's occupational hazard, and Lordy accepted it philosophically enough. His "old lady", in fact, rather welcomed it, on the ground that when he was behind bars he could not get into more trouble. Besides this, conditions inside, though harsh, were probably no worse than those endured by a farm labourer day in day out. The consequences, of course, fell punishingly on the wife and children left at home, in terms of the felt "disgrace" and the privation to be suffered, but a sturdy bachelor might get through his time not greatly the worse for it.

With Lordy, at any rate, the pleasure of poaching, of pitting his wits against landowner, keeper and game, outweighed the virtual certainty of being caught from time to time and packed off to Taunton for yet another

spell. The regulations provided for prisoners to be transported the 20 miles to jail, and in winter a cold coming they had of it; but if they walked to prison a comfortable day's stroll if they were not fettered they were allowed seven shillings, the equivalent of trap hire. I suspect that officialdom found ways of deducting a "bob" here and a "tanner" there for breakages, clothing, caution money and what not, but seven shillings, as four days' wages on the land, was worth walking for, Think not, however, that the privilege of working for Her Majesty, as an unwilling guest at her presumed pleasure, came automatically. The prisoner had to sit an examination though on reflection, "stand" would be a better word. He was stripped like a recruit, and if the doctor found him to be a healthy subject he would report, "This man's sound: he's fit for the wheel." Thereupon the prisoner donned his uniform, a short round jacket with no pockets, coarse dark breeches, shoes and a cap shaped not unlike an old nightcap, but knitted. He also wore an odd little necktie with two strings, a minute concession to elegance and human dignity.

The chief warder in Lordy's youth, Bill Dinner, was a hard hearted, sarcastic fellow, or so at least he seemed to his charges. When the time came for them to go on the treadmill he would enter and say, "Come, my little lads, be ready. There's a beautiful instrument, a pianner, out here for you to play with." But when they came to it they found an instrument not for delicate finger fingering but for laborious trampling, and so contrived as to benefit neither their souls nor their soles. Then Billy's tone would change and he would say sternly, "Go and tread that for seven hours," and tread it they did, apart from two and a half minutes' rest every twenty minutes. The wheel of the treadmill was of wood, and farmers, labourers and townspeople brought grain to be ground.

When the treadmill was running "leary", they called the process "grinding wind", and the lack of resistance offered by the wheel, with the knowledge of the futility of the exercise, made the work repugnant. They much preferred to grind corn, as the wheel then went more slowly. But all in all, the treadmill galled the spirit more than any other one of the purposeless conditions of prison life. Lordy deeply resented it, but the love of poaching was

stronger than any fear of punishment; and even with the risk, it paid better than farm work, and the excitement of the thing suited his constitution.

For a short time he was impressed by a remark of the prison chaplain, that "poaching leads to other things: first a hare, next a fowl, next sheep stealing, next highway robbery, next murder!"; but it seemed a pretty unlikely succession of misfortunes. He felt he had to go through a good many rubs before he came to murder.

Quite apart from that, he saw himself as carrying on a tradition sanctioned by long usage. When he was a young man, deer, in a sense, were like rabbits, four-legged pensioners whose fate depended on the farmer on whose land they had taken up quarters. If the farmer's first thought was to please the gentry, he would preserve the deer; but if his corn and turnips loomed larger in his mind thoseother people's pleasure, he would send for his irregular Lordship or at least connive at what the poacher did. Add the fact that while the law protected the "rights" of the landowner, including game, those rights were the sum of several centuries' wrongs and the extinction of common rights by the power of the law, and one can appreciate that the poacher was only exercising the rights of which his forefathers had been cheated; and he ventured out always at considerable risk to limb, liberty and life.

Back to Dulverton came Lordy, and straightway set up in business again, this time in a strangely assorted trio with Harry Liscombe, "a sawyer and a fine fellow" but not over strong on dash, and tailor Marley, a little splinter shinned fellow who wore a box hat and swallow tail coat. Innocent he seemed to all the world: he might almost have been taken for a Bryanite preacher, but his sombre garb covered, if not a multitude of sins, at least a frequent brace of pheasant in his box hat.

One afternoon the three of them set out to go wiring for pheasants on Sir Thomas Acland's allotment close to the keeper's lodge on Winsford Hill. They had set up their wires round the fences when they began to suspect that a man was creeping around watching them; but whoever he was, he kept under cover, so they shrugged off their unease, and with evening coming on they made for home.

Next morning they were out again before daybreak, looking across the same field in the half light, and again it seemed a man was creeping about in the "vuzz". After a while the watcher got numb and was forced to stand up and reveal himself.

"There!" said Marley, "I told 'ee they was watchin' us." The game was up for the moment and the wires as good as lost. "Let's move on and get out of this," said Lordy, and they walked off up the hill.

They had not gone far when, looking back, they saw their pursuers, seven or eight of them. These were nimble fellows and soon one of them pounced on Lordy and triumphantly announced, "Breakfast for you down Winsford." Marley and Liscombe were told the same, but it soon became clear that this un looked for bonus was meant to be earned by whatever rigours the magistrates could eventually devise.

Still, a breakfast was a gift horse not to be scrutinised with too critical an eye, so off they went down to Winsford, and sure enough it was no barmecide feast the landlord of the Royal Oak set before them, and Lordy and friends did it quite as ample justice as any of the more painful variety they expected would follow.

But then, for the keepers, came the hitch. The magistrate, who was the Winsford parson, the Rev Mr Mitchell, was not at home, and in this pretty how d'ye do, one solution commended itself to both captives and captors. They stayed on drinking at the Royal Oak at Sir Thomas's expense till two o'clock, when they were treated to a excellent dinner of fried meat and beer, as much as they cared to have. "Old Sir Tummus" was noted for his Liberal politics and liberal hospitality, but whether he envisaged anything on this scale is less than likely.

Soon after this they were told that the magistrate had come home, so off they trooped to the vicarage, and the magistrate began to question the keepers somewhat as follows with discomfiting results: " "What have you seen?" "These three fellows." "When?" "Last night and this morning." "Can't you be more precise? At what time?" " When 'twas gettin' dimpsey, sir." "Was it light enough to see clearly?" "We saw them clear enough." "What were they doing?" "Layin' wires, we think." "Can't you be sure?"

"We know them all right." "Did you catch them in the act?" "Can't say as we did, exactly." "Did you see them touch any of the wires?" "Well, no." "Hum." (Turns to the three): "You're suspicious characters. You ought to be had up as rogues and vagabonds for wandering about the country." (To Marley): "You, what were you doing there?" (Marley): "If you please sir, I'm asthmatical, and I was gatherin' a little agrimony and wood betony for my complaint." "Humbug!" rapped the magistrate, but he was beaten, and he knew it, and so did the keepers. There was no real evidence and he had to dismiss the case.

The hospitality of the Royal Oak was now exhausted and they were sent about their business, but totting up the events of the day they reckoned they had come out pretty well, in credit to the tune of an excellent breakfast and their substantial share of the forty quarts of beer that they and the little army had battled their way through and that Sir Thomas would have the privilege of paying for. To cap this, on the way home they found a brace of pheasants caught up in the wires. These they commandeered, made a good price of them and spent it in carousing at the Nightingale. Finis, as the poet said, coronat opus.

Luck, however, was as capricious with Lordy as with anyone else, and as time went on he was sentenced to one, two or three months in jail so often that at last it became a joke or so he assured the world. How he managed to enjoy the joke is something of a mystery, and his being careless of the consequences gave him a dash which carried him further still.

As for the right or wrong of his depredations, he strenuously maintained that he had as good an entitlement to game as anyone else, and taking the long view that the ancestors of such and such a landlord had probably acquired the estate by conquest or legalised robbery, it would take a tortuous and toadying moralist to prove Lordy wrong.

From pheasant he progressed to deer, and had his first lessons in the craft from a North Molton man, Tom Bell. Most folk knew Tom, or strongly

suspected him, but he poached with an accent on "craft", calculating the risk and taking immediate action if an affair looked likely to go wrong.

He was a labouring man who had married a farmer's daughter and lived in. His father in law was one of the few who knew nothing of his poaching, or doubtless he would either have refused him permission to marry his daughter or laid down the law pretty forcefully.

Be that as it may, one day Bell was shooting on an adjoining farm when somebody saw him. Perceiving this, he pelted off home, took the pony out of the stable and galloped hell for leather to Winsford. Arriving in the village he walked into the Royal Oak with no appearance of haste and said to the landlord, "Mr Paull, do tell me what time 'tis. I want to know particular." The landlord obliged, and Bell downed a leisurely pint, mounted the pony and rode home again.

A day or two later a summons was served on him for trespass in pursuit of game. He appeared before the bench and called as witness to his innocence the landlord of the Royal Oak, who proved that near enough to the time in question he had been in Winsford.

"How could he be poaching when he was at my house?" asked the perplexed host., and the no less perplexed if suspicious magistrates could only yield to the evidence.

Lordy learnt much from Tom Bell, but not, unfortunately for him, the knack of keeping out of trouble, and only a certain native caution kept him from an activity which would have earned him not three months' in Taunton jail but transportation for seven years of his life. He sniffed the wool, so to speak, but left it on the sheep's back.

Once he was asked by a poor man living in a lonely cottage, with no land of his own, to go night hunting and stay a week or a fortnight. Lordy went with a friend, and as there were plenty of hares about, the first night provided some pretty good sport.

When they came back in the early hours, the friend observed that he could smell meat, but they took no further notice and all three went to bed. Their host, a labourer, had to go to work at seven, but the poachers

were under no such constraint and slept on, and during the day the wife brought them breakfast and dinner.

The man returned about five o'clock, and when it began to grow dark they had supper, smoked a pipe and held a discussion as to the best coverts to visit. About eight o'clock they sallied forth, again with success. They came home and went to bed, but the two poachers were struck, this time more than before, with the pervading smell of meat.

Something had to be done. They got up, lit a candle and began searching, and at last Lordy's friend found the meat, and plenty of it, too.

"Come over here," he said quietly. Lordy crossed the room, and there he saw a barrel half full of something salted in. He said, "This won't do, you know. This is mutton, "sheep's collar unbuttoned". They'll be searching the house, that'll be the next thing. I shan't stay here" for he felt certain the man could not have bought the meat out of his mere seven shillings a week.

"We may as well stay one night more," said his mate, "we've had good sport." "Just as you please," said Lordy, "but I don't like the look of it." The following night they went out again, and again enjoyed "very good sport", but Lordy felt increasingly uneasy. They passed no remark to the man or his wife about the contents of the barrel, but the thought of seven years' transportation loomed larger and large in Lordy's mind, and on the way back he said, "We're thinking it's about time we went home. If we bide round here too long we may get caught." They returned to the cottage, lit the fire, shared out the money, picked up their "ragged shirts" (their nets) and prepared to carry home the hares, accompanied by their faithful dog. On taking leave they promised to come again some day, but Lordy knew in his bones he never would. Quite apart from the risk, sheep-stealing, somehow, was not in his line . Still, he posed a growing problem to the landowners and game "preservers" of the neighbourhood, and in the end they dealt with him by the method summed up in the phrase. "If you can't beat en, use en." Mr Barnett. of Morebath House, just over the border into Devon, offered him the post of gamekeeper not at Morebath but on an estate near Honiton, well out of harm's way, they thought. But a law

abiding, law enforcing existence made for anything but ease. and at the Three Tuns, in Honiton, Lordy was beaten up and could not use his hand or pull a trigger for weeks. After fourteen years with the Barnetts "splendid masters, all three" he returned to Dulverton and finished his working life as a water bailiff on the River Barle, and felt he could "say without fear that the post was never held by a better."

13 Worthington Sutton

Lime-burner and Salvationist

The wags might chuckle at Worthy Sutton's 'moker car', but unlike the new fangled automobiles it would never let him down. As long as one of his three donkeys, Traveller, Jacker and Jimbo, could pull the little contraption, Worthy could travel from his cottage in Bilbrook to the kilns at Warren and home again six days a week, and his four footed fellow travellers never suffered ill- treatment or neglect.

The dates of his life are unknown to me, though I imagine he lived from about 1840 to 1920. Be that as it may, he made his mark on the neighbourhood and impinged for good on many lives. Once you had seen Worthy, you would never forget him, and familiarity bred only respect. "In stature," wrote an admirer, "he was just above the average height and of spare build, with a weather beaten face of pronounced features. From the hard life he had lived, exposure to the weather and the fierce heat of the kilns, his skin had become parchment like and his eyes were filmed, one being nearly blind. His whole career had been one grim fight with necessity and the elements, and so at first sight he impressed one as being a hard man, with a snap of the jaw that showed great determination. But closer acquaintance revealed his true nature.

"Far from the shrivelled and unyielding type his outward form suggested, he was really a responsive soul, with a great vein of tenderness and much pure gold of moral quality. I have seldom known a character whose countenance more belied him. His hands too were horny and burnt by the lime he handled, until to all appearances little of the human touch was left in them; but we who knew his story could form a juster estimate of the man.

"His week day clothes were also far from attractive. An old green jacket that once long ago had been black, a pair of stiff fustian trousers and an apron made of sackcloth, such was his workaday attire and what did it

matter when he stood at his dusty work by the kilns? But on Sundays and special days the transformation was remarkable, though the better attire only served to accentuate the parchment like features and the hard and grimy hands. But week day or Sunday, the surprise of the man with that hard exterior was his gentle and almost feminine voice which conversed with you in a quiet and forceful manner that set you quite at ease and inspired confidence and esteem; and more remarkable still, whatever the subject might first have been, the conversation was soon made to serve the purpose of religion for Worthy was an intensely religious man", and in the light of his experience he put into practice the maxim, 'What we have felt and seen, With confidence we tell.'

Not for Worthy, however, a cassocked and strait-laced religion. His village. a mile distant from the parish church, 'had never had one of its own, but in the 1850s his widowed mother had opened her cottage for preaching, probably to the Wesleyans, even though harbouring Dissenters meant the risk of losing employment and the certainty of social estrangement; and services continued there for half a century.

But the Wesleyan services, earnest but respectable and conventional, left Worthy dissatisfied. "His heart," it was said," was bigger than his sect, and.as he grew up he desired a greater freedom of spirit than some of his co religionists were prepared to concede;and so when first the Salvation Army found their way down into our quiet countryside with their red jerseys and their warm hearted appeals, the movement captured Worthy and held him."

Other influences, meanwhile, had also helped to mould him, and a friend surmised that while the harsh nature of Worthy's employment had formed his outward appearance, the splendour and freedom of his surroundings had worked no less decisively on his inner life. The place of his employment lies off the main coast road from Watchet to Minehead and can only be reached by a track; but this is how, in Worthy's time, it impressed the friend:

"It was a romantic spot, the great limestone cliffs towering up some 300 feet above the shore and exposed to the fury of the storms that would sweep up channel from the south west. A century or more ago it was well inland,

but so serious has been the erosion of the coast line that two whole fields have disappeared, so the ancients used to tell me, leaving the great kilns on the very edge of the cliffs... Often in my boyhood I would wander out to that breezy promontory and watch the lime burner at his work.... And how the larks would sing above those rugged cliffs and the white seagulls wheel in and out the cavities below, while across the broad reach of Severn the coast line of Glamorgan for fifty miles shone bright in the sunlight, and far beyond the Cambrian mountains lifted their dark grey masses into the sky!

"It was an inspiring scene for a thoughtful man, with a seventy mile stretch of the sea beneath him, a rare vision of the Exmoor and Quantock hills, and all the enchantments of Nature in the wild. There she tried her many moods, from the soft Spring breezes to the mighty raging storm. I have seen the butterflies sporting on those cliffs in the sunshine and I have seen them swept with tempests which smote terror to the hearts of the old sailors living at the foot of the hill and drove ships up channel with their canvas torn to shreds, and scarce a living thing could stand before the ale. It was a great place for a man to earn his daily bread in ... and Worthy was not insensible to the appeal of it."

One can almost believe that, while he observed the beauty of sea, earth and sky and their inhabitants on the cliffs of Warren and pondered their evidence of creative power, the winds blew away whatever in him was trifling and formal. If the somewhat predictable Wesleyan services had left him dissatisfied, he responded readily to the early Salvationists in Watchet and greatly admired their courage and vigour. Soon he bought a red jersey, and at the risk of his neighbours' ridicule he wore it, an unconventional act among a then most conventional people. Hard work and he had always been the best of friends, not to be separated even on Sundays, and that so called "day of rest" found him as busy as on any other, travelling a large area to visit the aged and sick, to cheer them up and, at need, pray with them.

No one now will recall the person of Worthy Sutton even as a distant childhood memory, but a few years ago his nephew, the late Mr Ernest

Binding, told me one of those little tales which bring men and women of the past vividly to life.

It must have been in September 1914, and young Ernest had gone over to Bilbrook, as he often did, to visit his old uncle and read the newspaper aloud to him. They were anxious days, for both the British Expeditionary Force in France and the French army were being pushed remorselessly back by the German onslaught, which had now reached a point only forty miles from Paris. There were no doubt local boys in the B.E.F., and something of the anxiety must have crept into in the lad's voice, for suddenly the old man said, "Now don't you worry, Ernest my son. The Germans won't take Paris. I've been talking to Father about it" ('That was the way he spoke,' said Mr Binding) "I've been talking to Father about it, and they won't take Paris." "And sure enough they didn't,' Mr Binding added "A few days later they were held at the battle of the Marne."

14 Richard Slader

Poet and Pedlar

He was known in North Devon as a “proper character”, a phrase common in his day but now perhaps a little outdated.

At any rate, “characters” have this in common with rebels ; they go their way regardless of popularity or unpopularity: but with this difference: the rebel acts out of a sense of duty; the "character" is as he is because he cannot be any way else. Duty and conscience can make rebels by the hundred, but the true "character", the genuine eccentric, is a man or woman in a thousand. Eccentricity is a natural phenomenon: those who consciously play the eccentric make themselves laughing stocks: all the world knows that they are clamouring for recognition, even if it takes the form of disapproval. The genuine “character” is made in a superior mould. He cares for neither praise nor blame. Such a man was Richard Slader.

That, no doubt, was just as well for him, because by no means everyone in the Exmoor country early in the 20th century approved of Richard; but in his 69 years he outwore disapproval. His limitations, like his virtues, became accepted as parts of the man himself, as he became accepted as an almost timeless part of the Exmoor landscape.

That at least is how it seems eighty years on, and people with a clear memory of him must be few. If not everyone liked him, that is in itself a recommendation, for there are certain people whose approval would be an insult. The clever ones thought they saw through him, but they did not see half way. The wise knew that he hid far more than he revealed.

His reputation as a "character" was purely local until late in his life, when he appeared under the name of Richard Tiler or "Urchard" in W. Joyce's Echoes of Exmoor. Some readers felt that the author was out of sympathy with his character and it must be confessed that he gave

this impression when writing of men and women of a different religious persuasion from his own. "Urchard" was portrayed as an eccentric, certainly, but devious, lachrymose, avaricious, petty minded and in an indefinable way rather ridiculous. This caricature was corrected by Richard's great nephew, J.M. Slader, but his delightful little book, Dicky Slader:: Pedlar Poet, has been out of print since the mid 1960s. Owners of copies cling on to them, and not all libraries have them, but perhaps these words will encourage readers to seek them out.

Be as 'twill, as Dicky would have phrased it, he was Exmoor born and bred, and he came into the world at Hunnawins, near North Molton, the tenth child and sixth son of William and Mary Ann Slader. Exmoor in 1857 was still untouched by industry, and their yeoman family had been settled in the neighbourhood for centuries. William was churchwarden to North Molton. The six brothers were all different in character, from John, the upright, hard working eldest who became a Methodist minister, to Thomas, intelligent, sensitive and the inseparable companion of Richard, youngest son of all.

Exmoor life was hard, and grew still in the 1860s, and over the next 20 years over the next hundred, even men and women drifted away to easier and better paid work in the towns and industry. But Dicky would never be drawn. From childhood he loved country life, and country people fascinated him. His great-nephew said that as soon as Dicky could walk he was "anxious to wander, and it became increasingly difficult for his mother to keep him within the bounds of the farm, let alone the house."

A happy child was Richard, and keen of mind with a country brightness. He always had an answer for anyone trying to stop him, and often it was a humorous one. By the time he was ten he had begun to gain the reputation of a character in embryo. Every cottager and farmer in the parish knew of young Dicky, and at school in North Molton "it was known, and almost expected, that he would stroll in just when it took his fancy". How this free and easy attitude squared with Victorian school discipline is hard to explain, but maybe the status of churchwarden's son conferred a degree of

immunity from the cane; or maybe a ready tongue and disarming innocence saw him through.

In his early teens he went with his brother Thomas to the Wesleyan chapel at Molland Cross, which was nearer home than the church, and the habit stayed with him ever after. Quite apart from their religious content, Sundays offered a respite from the otherwise endless routine of the farm; but other breaks in monotony were market days, to which his father often took him, and the bustle and excitement sparked off his comments.

One day in South Molton he was introduced to Parson Jekyll, from Lynton, who did not take over kindly to yeomen in general and had little time for their sons, either; but the twelve year old Dicky was not in the least disconcerted.

Jekyll was a "sporting" parson almost in the class of his colleague Jack Russell for devotion to hunting, and he was correspondingly well mounted, but he did not overawe Dicky. "That be a fine lookin' 'oss you 've got there, passon," he exclaimed in his best Exmoor.

"The finest horse about these parts," replied Jekyll incautiously, taken off his guard by this unlooked for praise. "From a gentleman's stables up Somerset way. Catch the fastest fox west of Dunster." "Really now," commented young Dicky. "Well, me veyther has a gurt 'oss, bred vrom yeoman stock, get 'ee to Barum (Barnstaple) quicker than it d' take your 'oss to catch thik fox." And Jekyll could find no more convincing repartee than advise him to run and look for his father in case it were time to make for home.

Young Richard delighted in country life, in its colour, beauty, variety, the stir and excitement of social life and markets and, as he grew to manhood, the interplay of conversation and bargaining in petty trade; but farming made no appeal to him. He often "michied off" from the farm and his parents could never depend on finding him. "Just like the other Richard,"I hear someone say, "Dream a day Dick Jefferies on his farm near Swindon only a few years before." How like but how unlike in the end. Richard

Jefferies, living in a world of his own imagination, derided by his family, but filling his mind with the sights and sounds of Nature and dreaming dreams of what he might do, then fulfilling those dreams, becoming our greatest writer on Nature, but at the cost of exile from his native countryside, illness and an early death. And Richard Slader, happier in the absence of derision, dreaming his dreams also for a while, and finding some little talent as a writer, but kept from discontent and the penalties of fame by the call of his open air life, his parish, his chapel and his Exmoor home.

The brothers moved away one by one till only he and David remained. They did not get one very well. David took over the farm on the death of his father, and Dicky lived there more as a labourer than a partner. But maybe David had some reason and saw himself as having been deprived of at least part of his birthright without a compensatory mess of pottage.

He had always been a loyal son, even if the attractions of the Poltimore Arms had sometimes been too great for him, but his father's will had been, well, tampered with. Once when the father was ill a lawyer was sent for, and Richard was worried lest David might get a larger inheritance than he did; and as David was in the house when the lawyer came he might influence the father at the critical moment.

"Never say die," thought Dicky, and took action. He ran to a field in another part of the farm where sheep were grazing, and drove some of them into a field of corn. Then he hurried back to the farmhouse to raise the alarm, and David had no choice but to come out and round them up.

In his absence Dicky put in some powerful persuasion, and when after the father's death the family gathered for the reading of the will they heard with astonishment that Elizabeth had been left £50, Susanna £50, John £25 (if he came from America to claim it), William and Michael £100 each, but Richard £300. David had all the rest and was named sole executor, but evidently in the eyes of both brothers 300 greenbacks in the hand were worth any number of beasts in the shippon.

Dicky stayed on at the farm for some ten years until one night when it caught fire. David was away at the Poltimore Arms and his wife and children had little time to save anything. As for Dicky, he brought away, as he said, only "me top hat, me Bible and me verses".

Verses! Can one imagine that as a product of an Exmoor farm in the 1880s? In fact, it was no more improbable then than now. A French visitor to England in the 1850s, Taine, I think, noted with appreciation the culture of the wives and daughters of many farmers and ruefully contrasted that to the state in his own country. This was twenty or thirty years later, and by then North Devon, thanks largely to such schools as Shebbear College, Edgehill and West Buckland and of course the village schools from 1879 onward shared fully in this popular culture. Dicky had been composing his "verses" for quite a few years, a collection of 50 poems which he set to well known hymn tunes. He had a pleasant light tenor voice and could sing without prompting evert tune in his hymnal. In 1892 he had his collection published, "printed by W. C. Coles at his machine printing works, Grenville Street, Bideford". He dedicated the verses to the various churches which abounded in North Devon, for in those days most people in the Devon countryside, unlike the great cities, went either to chapel or to church.

Dicky did likewise, but not too docilely or uncritically. While still a lad he took one of his ministers to task for what he thought an unnecessarily long sermon.

At the close of the service he complimented him “That was a right good 'un you preached, sir. 'Bout the best I've a yeard in this yere chapel."

"I'm glad you think so, Dicky," replied the minister, who had noticed him taking in every word, "Only one trouble," returned Dicky, after a suitable pause, "'twas too long. I could ha' said what you said in half the time. Me backside's proper sore now, jus' as if I'd a rode a 'oss from yere to Bristol."

Whatever the cause of it, his way of life changed around his fortieth year. He and David had little in common and although the farm was being rebuilt, Dicky would often wander off. He travelled around the neighbourhood, stopping for a chat with the farmers' wives and finding that he was welcome. This gave him the incentive to earn his own living in the way that most

appealed to him: travelling his beloved Exmoor and North Devon. He took a little roadside cottage near Molland - it still stands to recall his memory - and set up in trade as a pedlar.

That designation, 'pedlar, does him scant justice. Something in him kept him raised above a lowly, pedestrian status, some sense of innate worth which surmounted the petty shifts of his trade and gave him an essential dignity.

As a Slader he had a proper pride in his yeoman ancestry and in the stories of their activities on the Moor long ago. "I should be up to Lunnon wi' a crown 'pon me 'aid," he remarked; and although certain honoured friends might address him as "Urchard" or "Dicky", to the rest of the world, and to everyone on Sundays, he was, and insisted on, "Mr Slader". He wore rough clothes for the rough work of tramping from door to door, but for the markets and fairs in South Molton, Bampton and as far away as Braunton he would don a faded, old fashioned, high crowned bowler hat and a tattered long tail coat, and he would announce his coming by fanfares on a hunting horn given him by the Master of the Exmoor Foxhounds.

His first stock in trade was produced from his cottage garden and nuts "nits" to the initiated and as will be seen, to appreciate the true value you needed to be conversant with the uses of the peddling world.

A hundred years ago nuts formed a staple food, and as they grew plentifully they cost Dicky time and patience but no pence. He carried them around in a sack slung over his shoulder and in a large 'maund', together with a pair of scales which were always on the ground beside him by the time the housewife came to the door.

"Fine nits, missis," he might say. "Tull 'ee what, now, you 'on't find wan nit in a poun' that's deeve (empty or withered inside)" and if you paid the right price of ten pence a pound you could be sure of good value. But if you took a chance and bought the eightpenny sort, well, chance didn't enter into it. You were sure to be "had". One day at Braunton Fair a Barnstaple man a townie, say no more bought a pound of the 'eightpennies', cracked them open one after another and found every single one 'deeve'. He complained angrily. "Whatever did 'ee 'spec?" chuckled Dicky. "They 'm

all the swimmin' kind." He sorted his "nits" by the simplest of meththod: dropping them in a bowl of water. Those which floated were "deeve", and these he put aside for selling to bargain hunters. His "regulars" knew better.

To help him on the long round he had a donkey, bought from the rector of Mariansleigh "bred by passon, so he mus' be proper," said tongue in cheek Richard. He grew fond of the donkey, which served him faithfully for twenty years and became almost as well known as Dicky himself. He would extol its virtues. Such a donkey, he declared, came of a royal line in Jerusalem and had to have seven names in this case Eva Minnie Mona Frances Adelaide Hamilton Jessie, and therefore referred to as "he". The small boys of South Molton plagued both master and beast unmercifully, but other people treated them with decent respect. At one South Molton fair day Dicky asked the bank clerk if he might bring Eva Minnie inside while the transacted his business. The clerk called the manager, who amiably agreed, "Certainly, bring him in, Mr Slader." Banks in those days, need I say, selected and accepted their clientele with care from a narrow stratum of society, and in South Molton they all thought they knew Dicky and his ways, but the nuisance created made the manager and staff wish they had never set eyes on the animal. But having won the point, thereafter Dicky often led Eva Minnie into the bank and shops on the market square, laden with baskets and all the accoutrements to "his" master's trade.

He had little success with the troublsome boys, however : they were too nimble to be caught. He could only protest plaintively and to no avail whatever: "Yere! Yere now! Tull 'ee what now! Don't 'ee go gwain doin' thik there now! You'll frighten me ole donkaay. You bess wy picky yer wy home along now! You bess wy michie yer wy homeward!"

Generally Eva Minnie could fend well enough for himself, feeding on the roadside hedges except in winter when food was scarce. Then, he would sometimes climb through a 'shord' in the hedge and feast on the better grass beyond. One farmer, annoyed by these irruptions, warned Dicky, "Nex' time I see your ole donkey in my fields I'll zhut en daid on the spot."

"Aw, don't ee go doin' thik there, maister," exclaimed Dicky fearfully. "Don't ee zhut me ole donkaay, zir! I' d zo zoone vor ee zhut me a braace

o' rabberts an' zend 'em down!" Or maybe: "Aw yere, maister, you 'ouldn' grudge me poor ole donkaay a bit ' o' grass, would ee? Tull ee what now, I"ll bring missis up zome blackberries zo's er kin make some jam. Sure 'nough I will. But don't ee carr' on zo about me pore ole donkaay. He 'on't do it again, I promise 'ee."

He made his home in the wayside cottage near Molland Cross, and there, as his reputation grew, he received many visitors. The enterprising photographer of South Molton, Mrs Elizabeth Askew, suggested to Dicky that such a smart man as he should have his 'likeness' taken for all the world to see. He liked the idea, and a few days afterwards Mrs Askew and her family came up and took a series of photographs showing him at his fireside or out feeding his chickens or working in the garden. "All that for a pedlar!", some will have thought; but Dicky possessed that quality, so hard to identify or define, which commands attention. He was a "character", and the portraits, made up into postcards, sold in their hundreds over the next few years. Visitors took them home as mementos of a Devon countryman at home; but more significantly, local people bought them too, and although they may not always have consciously realised what they were doing, they kept and valued them, in the word of his grand nephew, "as something to the talked about, something to be preserved from the days when Victorian England was being quickly left behind."

Richard's cottage was plain and unadorned, but it was all he needed though as to simplicity, this soon gave way to all the multifarious stock in trade of pedlardom. He may have started out with "nits" which cost him only the time and labour of stripping them from the hedges, but he soon moved on to articles of necessity which he could buy cheaply and re sell at a small but dependable profit, and so his bedroom became his store for candles, lanterns, soap, chamber pots and pitchenware, together with country brews such as nettle pop and potato or parsnip wine. In season there would also be blackberries and sloes, or potatoes from his own garden, and even a basket of eggs: "I know they 'm fresh, me dear, I laid 'em mezelf."

"In his early peddling days," his great nephew wrote, "he would return early to his windswept cottage, and there he would sit by his wood and peat fire surrounded by his wares, penning his verses, cleaning his nuts for his trek on the morrow, and counting his taking for the day. Before retiring up the stairs he would hang up his hat behind the door, kneel down in front of the stone hearth and say his prayers. His bed was of iron, with two heavy blankets and a pillow covered in serge: "Devonshire serge," he would say, "Vicary serge of South Molton, dyed with Exmoor lichen."

So simple a mode of life accorded completely with the remoteness and quietness of Exmoor a hundred years ago, and although the portrait of the bachelor pedlar, carefully counting over his small daily takings, had little that can be recognised as romantically attractive, there is an element of wistful melancholy that some will find appealing. Richard was a Victorian, and he carried the quietness and unquestioning certainty of the Victorian countryside into the frenzied new century though in truth the frenzy made no impact on Exmoor for many years.

The pattern he established served him for the rest of his life. For year after year, six days of the week, he followed the simple round and unchanging task (never "trivial" or "common", as the poet incautiously dubbed them, for they satisfied Dicky). Season merged into season, and the fresh green, glowing gold or russet brown of the beechen hedges were his calendar; and although the world outside might be careering toward the precipice of 1914, Exmoor seemed to keep herself inviolate; and if ever Richard had given a thought to it, he would have felt secure from every danger and alarm. But seclusion, even in those days, could not guarantee complete safety, and in time it betrayed him and left him defenceless.

He never married, and as he clearly spent little on his cottage and even less on his clothes, then in the minds of the village gossips he "must be worth a mint o' money", quite regardless of the fact that he earned a hard and scanty living in shillings and ha'pence. But for gossips and the ill intentioned generally, truth is the least concern and ultimate disappointment; so to their envious minds Richard was a millionaire: his furniture was stuffed with bags of sovereigns, the lonely cottage was lined with coins, and the precious metals it contained weighed more than the fabric itself! However

preposterous the rumours, they came to the ears of two tramps who believed enough to determine to get the wealth for themselves..

One morning in 1912 they set out from South Molton and Lynton respectively and met somewhere near Molland Cross, and that night Richard's faithful old watchdog died "poisoned by them blasted ruffians," he said later, though at the time he put Sammy's death down to old age, and its suddenness, perhaps a reminder that he himself at 55 was no longer in his prime, depressed him. He buried Sammy, "best pal ole Richard ever had," in the garden and consoled himself with the thought that his donkey, Eva Minnie, would never let him own.

Two nights later, as he sat alone in the cottage, the tramps broke in. They bound and gagged him, threatened him with an iron bar and strapped him to the settle, with the warning that his only chance of staying unharmed was to help them. He of course had nothing to say, and although they ransacked the place and made off with all the money they could find, it came to only about £75, which even in those days amounted to no more than a year's wages, certainly not a fortune. The police caught them, and Dicky had his word about the family of one of them: "They was all a rough lot. His brother could eat whit pot till he could touch it wi' his finger, an' drink zider till it urned out both zides o' his mouth", but this gave small comfort for the loss of £75.

Loneliness came over him as he grew older, and as he took less care over his appearance, strangers hesitated to engage him in conversation to their loss. But he was not deserted: Lord and Lady Poltimore often called when passing this way, for they had great respect for the survivor of a historic Exmoor family. Sometimes Lady Poltimore would tidy up the cottage or mend or patch Dicky's clothes, and when the mood took them, she and Richard would sit and talk for hours together.

Occasionally, moved by some secret emotion, he would reveal an inner, unsuspected Richard to others. A stranger at Heasley Mill once asked him whether his "poor donkey" could pull his little cart up the steep hill. Richard replied with dignity, and in "stranger's English" (for he had two languages, "My donkey's not so poor as you think, and you can tell by his eyes he's

not as old as I am. Anyhow, even if he is poor, old and blind, he'll still follow his master home."

In 1925, his 68th year, ill health curtailed his travels, but sometimes in the hot summer he would tramp across the moor to Lynton or down to South Molton market; but his strength was giving way to diabetes, and sensing that this would be his last summer, he mellowed into tranquility, looking forward with "complete happiness and satisfaction" to his last days on earth and his first beyond.

He died in April 1926, and with him there went a vital link with a simpler, rougher but surer world. Since then a few critics have seized on petty details such as his carelessness of dress and appearance or his "keenness" in trade, but who of us would like our petty weaknesses proclaimed to the world? Truer words were written in the obituary written by one who knew and prized him not for the virtues he might have possessed but for the sterling qualities which underlay his quaint characteristics and garb:

"There passed away on Tuesday a figure long familiar throughout this district in the person of Mr Richard Slader of Molland Cross. His originality and exceptionally retentive memory he was never at a loss for a birthday or wedding day of any member of the royal family, and could recite the chief events in the history of many prominent people with remarkable accuracy made him an outstanding personality..... He followed current events carefully, and his opinions, though often quaintly phrased, showed much keenness of perception. As a young man he sang tenor tolerably well, and in 1892 he published a readable booklet of verses.

In order to hear visiting speakers, whether preachers or politicians such as the Hon. George Lambert, "he tramped all over the district at one time or another, and would give an outline of a speech years after he had heard it."

Such qualities, in a wider sphere, might have brought him somewhat patronising recognition. But to what purpose? Exmoor gave him all the life he wished for: the chance encounters of farm, cottage and market place, the sun and storm on the heathland, and the speaking silences of the lonely moor and the quiet companionship of man and beast.

How capricious are celebrity and fame! Thousands labour lifelong to "make a name" by creating works of art, composing music, covering ream upon ream with words, all for the uncertain end of transmitting that "name" to following generations. Richard Slader achieved it without even trying.

15 General John Mole

Soldier - Sailor – Grand Old Gentleman

The Good Soldier, said Paul, must be "able to endure hardness", and to many young men caught up in the conflicts of the twentieth century, hardness was an unfamiliar companion and endurance a virtue to be learnt. Not so for John Moles: he knew poverty and hard living from the cradle onward. He was born in September 1852, the son of John and Elizabeth in the parish of Exton, on the western slope of Brendon Hill overlooking the Exe Valley. He started out in the traditional hard way for the son of a labourer, bird-scaring at the age of eight for three-ha'pence a day or ninepence a week; and since any crow unable to down nine pennyworth of seed in a week must have been suffering from avian beri-beri, clearly some farmer was doing very well out of John.

A few years' work drove the lesson home pretty thoroughly, and in 1870 he joined the Army at Shorncliffe. Why so far away from his West Country home I do not know, and the 34th Regiment of Foot, into which he was apparently drafted, recruited largely in East Anglia at this time, but was shortly to become the Border Regiment – that regiment whose valour in the Burma Campaign 75 years later has been so vividly recalled in George Macdonald Fraser's 'Quartered Safe Out Here'. But perhaps the '34' was merely the reporter's mis-remembering when he came to write up his interview back in the office; and neither of the two Border battalions served in Ireland at this time. Much more likely – for reasons that will appear later – his regiment was the (Royal) Berkshire, the 66th of foot, who in that same campaign in 1944 shared, with the Royal West Kents and the Queen's Royal Regiment, the defence of Kohima and at dreadful cost, turned the tide of war towards victory.

But those men, of whom the enemy commander said, "We could not break the British soldiers" were mostly not professional or volunteers, but

enlisted "for the duration" of the war, and not beyond; and service for the soldier of the Victorian empire was very different.

For John Moles in 1870, India lay years ahead. First he was drafted to Ireland and stationed in several towns, and then, somewhat later, they sent him with a draft to India, probably for the usual tour of seven years. The regiment was there already: it had been sent in 1870 for an eleven-year stint.

Eleven years! Imagine all the changes back home during that time: year after year of wet summers and poor harvests hastening the decline of agriculture from 1877 onward; set against this the coming of electric light in 1878, the telephone in 1879, electric tramcars in 1883, agitation for Home Rule in Ireland, and the replacement of the old home-based patriotism by an unattractive jingoism as Great Britain became involved in one war after another . The England of the mid-1880s may have worn an air of greater pride and prosperity than ten years earlier, but not all the changes were for the better, nor would John Moles have necessarily found himself straightway at ease.

Besides, in foreign service he had other questions to occupy him, and the most urgent were to keep his vital spark undimmed, his "pecker" up and his skin in one piece. On two of these counts he scored full marks; on the third, well, he was a soldier of the Queen. He fought with the regiment in the Afghan War of 1879, taking part in Roberts's celebrated march from Kabul to Kandahar; and later, he said, in a two-month war with Tibet he went with a detachment that forced its way to the Forbidden City, Lhasa.

Even to-day with all the evidence of the courage and suffering of British soldiers in Afghanistan, there are certain critics to whom one has only to breathe the words "imperial soldier" to raise a cloud of condemnation. "It was such men as Moles," they cry, "who by making war on less advanced nations helped to create the spirit of imperialism we now deplore."

But much more should be said. Imperial expansion undeniably took place to provide cheap raw materials and new markets for developing industries, and the Opium War inflicted on China was the most flagrant and shocking of these, but that is only part of the story. The Victorians, in the main,

were convinced of the superiority of Western culture, art or morality over those of Africa and the East, and while they were slow to recognise child labour in their own factories as an evil, when convinced they put a stop to it. To their simple minds, then, ritual mass slaughter in Ashanti, suttee and thuggee in India and cannibalism in Africa and Melanesia were also evil, and they saw good reason to put a stop to them likewise; and if, as they believed, Zulu kings had compassed the death of a million people in Africa, that also seemed an evil that should be ended.

As always, the right and the wrong were inextricably mixed; but whichever predominated, the Army had, regardless, to carry out the decisions of men who sat at home and enjoyed the comfort of an immaculate conscience or a maculate but pleasurable bank-balance. And it was men like John Moles in the Old Contemptibles who, thirty years later, in the last hours of the old familiar world, "held the sky suspended and saved the sum of things, for pay."

In The Road to Mandalay the seven- or ten-year soldier who had returned to Blighty from peace-time Burma, remembered inconsolably "the sunshine and the palm trees and the tinklin' temple bells", but many British private soldiers in India had other memories, other tales to tell. Their existence in overwhelming heat in a garrison or cantonment , as summed up by Kipling, made for misery. "All their work was over by eight in the morning, and for the rest of the day they could lie on their backs and smoke Canteen-plug and swear at the punkah-coolie." (He might have added the torture of prickly heat). ". There was the Canteen, of course, and the Temperance Room with the month-old papers in it; but a man of any profession cannot read for eight hours a day in a temperature of 96 degrees or 98 in the shade, running up sometimes to 103 by midnight. Very few men, even with a pannikin of flat, stale, muddy beer hidden under their cots, can continue drinking for six hours a day. One man tried, but he died, and nearly the whole Regiment went to his funeral because it gave them something to do... It was too early for the excitement of fever or cholera. The men could only wait and wait and wait, and watch the shadow of the barrack creeping across the blinding white dust." – and endure, as Other Ranks, the lack of any contact with a woman of their own nation or race.

In the other kind of station, guarding the North-West Frontier and the Khyber and Bolan Passes leading to Afghanistan, there was no time for indolence, and inattention could mean death. The regiment normally occupied quarters in a border town such as Peshawar and only went up into the mountains on punitive expeditions, to "persuade" the resident tribesmen to keep out of the plains. But even the town gave no safety, for by night a tribesman might creep in to steal a superior British rifle and cut a sentry's throat on the way. Fighting in the mountains was a skill quickly acquired or else, and standing up to the flashing knives, holding the line, and then driving back the attackers, that came from steadfastness and trust in the mate standing next to you. But lastly, from knowing that surrender could not be thought of.

British soldiers in Afghanistan in recent years have had to face not only the age-old hazards of shellfire and bullets, but also the new peril of hidden mines detonated by enemies at a distance but inflicting blindness, scarring and loss of limbs. But a wounded soldier of the Empire was also disabled, and frightfully and permanently. "They cut 'em up 'orrid," snapped the drill-sergeant in 'Stalky & Co'. There was only one way out, and Kipling, again, told it:

"If your officer's dead and the sergeants look white, Remember it's ruin to run from a fight; So take open order, lie down, and sit tight, And wait for supports like a soldier. Wait, wait, wait like a soldier, Soldier of the Queen.

"When you're wounded and left Afghanistan's plains
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jes' roll to your rifle an' blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier,
Go – go – go like a soldier, Soldier of the Queen.'

But far from demoralising the British infantry, the sight of their slaughtered wounded when they were brought to close quarters with Afghan knives man-to-man, gave them a desperate strength to drive back the attackers, so that discipline and years of training prevailed over mad hatred and fa-

naticism. And after a very few years the action moved the 66th from the Frontier into Afghanistan itself.

In 1879 the British army in South Africa had begun the year with an unforgettable disaster, when a whole a whole battalion of the 24th Foot was wiped out by a Zulu army of some 10,000 at Isandlhwana. But courageous and highly trained though the Zulus were, and merciless in battle, they were seen by the British as Men, not as devils, and even the official report on the disaster admitted that the Zulus were not guilty of torture.

Later in the year, the British-Indian government, alarmed at the growth of the Russian empire and its nearness to the North West Frontier, sent an expeditionary force into Afghanistan, displaced the Emir, installed their own nominee, signed a treaty, left a very visible presence in the capital, Kabul, and then withdrew to India. Soon, however, the representative, Sir Louis Cavagnari, and his escort were murdered. A rewvolt broke out and spread wide, and the British sent in the largest force yet, some 90,000. commanded by General Frederick Roberts, VC, a brilliant general, bold, and confident in his soldiers, who in their turn trusted him and saw him, unlike almost any general up to Slim and the Fourteenth Army, as their trustworthy leader and friend.

Roberts marched to Kabul, defeated an Afghan army and occupied Kabul early in October 1879. Rebellion broke out and some 10,000 besieged British troops in Sherpur, near Kabul, attacking with ferocious courage but failing in the end. Another Emir was installed, and again rebellion headed by the governor of Herat, Ayub Khan, who felt he had a stronger claim.

In June 1880, when he headed for Kandahar with a force of 30,000 and another 4,000 Ghazi fanatics, a small brigade of 2,500 men commanded by Brigadier Burrows, with the Berkshires as British regiment, was detached from Kandahar to oppose him, and advanced to Helmand. There they were deserted by Afghan levies These were defeated, their guns were captured, and Burrows fell back to a position where Ayub Khan could be intercepted wherever he was heading. And here at Maiwand the little contingent waited in the stifling heat of late July till the 27th brought in a day written in blood and horror, and ever to be remembered in the British army as a disaster

redeemed only by steadiness under devastating fire and, at the last, the self-sacrifice of eleven men.

Early in the morning Afghan horsemen were sighted, and the brigade deployed for battle with the 66th and an Indian infantry forming the front line.. A shelling duel went on until the British ran out of ammunition, and during this time, unknown to the British, the whole Afghan army was approaching under cover of deep nullahs and then, with the Ghazis at the head, launched a massive attack on the Indian regiment, rolling it in a great, irresistible wave into the Berkshires. So tightly were they crammed that they could not defend themselves or use their weapons, and their involuntary retreat became a bloody rout. Later, Kipling's Tommy remembered: 'I 'eard the knives be'ind me, but I dursn't face my man, Nor I don't know where I went to, 'cause I didn't wait to see, Till I 'eard a beggar squealin' out for quarter as 'e ran, An' I thought I knew the voice an' – it was me!' But when the pressure of bodies eased, they rallied around the regimental Colours and fought with their customary professional discipline under heavy fire. Then 56 of them fought their way down to an enclosure in a garden to make a last stand. The Afghans shot them down one by one, but they fired steadily till only eleven of them were left.

Then these eleven came out to fight their last fight man to man, and all died. An Afghan artillery officer paid them this tribute: 'These men charged out of the garden and died with their faces to the foe. Their conduct won the admiration of all who witnessed it'.

The regiment had lost 286 dead (including 14 officers) and 32 wounded, but the scattered survivors, no doubt with John Moles among them, had re-assembled by the nest morning. They set out on the exhausting 35(?)-mile trek to Kandahar, harried by snipers, until they met a relief force sent from Kandahar. Ayub Khan's confidence was somewhat shaken by the loss of 3,000 men in the battle, but he besieged the town until General Roberts brought a force from Kabul in an epic march and defeated him on 1st September. The Berkshires stayed another month in Kandahar and then returned to India; and in 1881, with their eleven years completed, they were brought home. And the war ended with

The returning soldier with a full tour of India and Afghanistan behind him could fairly hope for as long a home posting, probably in the regimental town, in this case Reading, and no doubt this was the base for John Moules, though in this same year the sadly depleted 66th was paired with the 49th (Hertford), still under the old title but now forming two battalions. But the old Berkshires had little rest, for in the next year they were deployed to Egypt to help put down a rebellion against the Khedive, but also to override French influence and make the country, with the Sudan added, a virtual protectorate. It seems that after the brief rebellion the regiment settled down to the usual peace-time role, but down in the Sudan, smarting under Anglo-Egyptian rule and resentful of reforms, thousands led by the Mahdi, a 'prophet' with mesmeric power, rose in powerful revolt, besieging Khartoum, where the English General Gordon governed the Sudan. The British government ordered him to leave, but he refused, and after long delay the Government ordered an expedition to rescue their recalcitrant servant; and the bugles blew for the Berkshires again.

This Field Force of 13,000 men started in early March 1885 from the port of Suakin, but unlike the little army at Maiwand, the Berkshires were not the only British regiment, for they had good company from the East Surrey Regment and those Shropshire Light Infantryman (to whom A. E. Housman paid such moving tribute: 'It dawns in Asia – headstones show, And Shropshire names are read: And Nile spills his overflow Beside our Severn's dead.') Their trekking should have been straightforward, even if exhausting, because of the knowledge of the Mahdist moods and intentions won, at great personal risk, by the Intelligence Officer assigned to them – none other than Horatio Herbert Kitchener.

In 1884 the future field-marshal was a middle-rank officer of the Royal Engineers, but his disciplined energy had already marked him for promotion. His first independent command had taken him to Palestine with an archaeological and surveying team, and he had worked his men twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and they responded to his demands and completed the survey several weeks in advance. His total dedication to his profession and his refusal to relax in the company of his fellow-officers distanced him from them but made him the favourite of the higher command, and they had new

and important work for him. An officer of his ability was urgently needed down in the Sudan, and he was instructed to move among the Mahdists and find whatever was known about their intended movements – for Kitchener, with his other military accomplishments, had mastered Arabic, spoke it "like a native "and excelled in negotiations with the Arabs. In the summer of 1884 he was at Korosko, negotiating with certain sheiks with a view to an advance across the desert to Abu Hamed. Both of these towns on the Nile were traditional points of departure for caravans crossing the desert to the south.

A picturesque little legend in Moles's account was that Kitchener ventured among the dervishes disguised, it was said, as a date-seller to learn their plans, and Moles went along with him, presumably as his servant, his Englishness obscured by ten years of tropical sun and half a gallon of walnut juice. Maybe so. If true, he must have shown the qualities of a senior N C O to have been selected as a companion for such a man on such a task. But perhaps a tall tale was worth telling for its own sake.

On 21st March the Berkshires, as part of a contingent 3.000 strong, with 1,500 camels and their drivers, marched out, heading for the rebel headquarters twelve miles away; but 'they quickly found themselves struggling through a dense jungle of mimosa bushes whose low-level branches covered in sharp thorns slowed progress and created havoc among both troops and transport animals.'

This trek needed two days, and after eight miles they halted to build a 'zariba', a laager formed from thorny mimosa bushes. 'Mimosa trees had to be cut down, arranged in line to form the walls of the enclosure, their trunks tied together to prevent them from being dragged away by the enemy. . . Construction was the responsibility of the Engineers, with British and Indian troops cutting the trees and dragging them into position. . . Others were tasked with unloading water and stores and with protecting the working parties from attack.' Half the Berkshires were guarding the camels and mules, while the other half were defending a redoubt. There was still work to be done, but just before three o'clock the Mahdists – 2,000 of them – launched their frenzied attack, and the Berkshires learnt that a dervish with spear or knife was as formidable and fearless of death as any Ghazi.

A horde of them forced their way into the south redoubt, and the half-battalion of Berkshires formed a square; but their devastating massed volleys were not enough; they came to the cut and thrust of close quarters, and Moles had a triangular piece of flesh knocked out of his head by the butt of a spear. But discipline told in the end against fury, and the dervishes were driven out, leaving more than a hundred dead and wounded.

But in the meantime the main body of Arabs 'succeeded in stampeding the transport animals into the central square, gaining cover for themselves as they attacked from the east. A British officer recalled, "Everything seemed to come at once: camels, transport, ammunition mules, Indian infantry and Sappers, sick-bearers, Cavalry and Arabs fighting in the midst. The dust raised by this crowd was so great that . it was impossible to see who was standing or what was likely to happen. The men behaved splendidly and stood quite still. It was the highest test of discipline I shall ever see" In fact, of the British and Indian, 70 soldiers and 34 "followers"died, and 130 soldiers were wounded – but of the 2,000 Arabs, as many as probably 1,000 died. In fact this "orgy of destruction" took only 25 minutes, but the steadiness of the Berkshires in the Battle of Tofrek won them the title 'Royal'. Next day they buried their dead, and then returned to Suakin and then to Egypt.

The Sudan had not finished with them, however, for the victory at Tofrek had not affected the Madhi's power, and when the British began to build a railway, they had to be guarded all the time. The Berkshires were sent back in Grenfell's Field Force, and on the last day of the year they took part in the capture of Ginnis, a fortress in northern Sudan occupied by the Cameron Highlanders and besieged by the Mahdists, and won the battle after considerable street-fighting. It was the last battle in which scarlet uniform was worn; then khaki took over.

John Mole had endured many hardships marching and fighting in the wilderness and the scorching heat. Forty years later he still had a rash from marching through the desert sand, and by the irritation he could tell if the weather was going to change.

He completed his twenty years and was discharged in Italy. His rank is not known, but an event later on showed him as probably a senior N.C.O,

a man trusted for his capability and command. But now he took up a seafaring life, which would give rest for his marching feet if for little else. He shipped before the mast in a barque and sailed to Brazil, Australia, Spain and wherever the winds took him. He went to South America, worked on plantations and became a trader, and then mixed in politics and took part in several revolutions - always on the winning side, apparently, which argues an exceptional eye for the main chance. In Haiti he helped the revolutionaries in a successful coup d'etat -probably that of 1908, and was made a general, and for a time he sat near the top of his particular military tree. But three years later another revolution shook the branch and deposited General Moles at the bottom again.

The time came, however, when a quieter life beckoned. He returned to England, settled down near his birthplace and took up the trade of mole-trapping with a brother from Dublin. For a time it proved quite lucrative, but one by one his relatives died off and he fell on hard times, though he earned a shilling or two picking and mixing herbs to cure his neighbours' ills, thereby gaining a reputation as a "wise man" of proven ability. Well into his seventies he kept his upright, soldierly bearing, and his bronzed complexion, perfect hearing and eyesight bore testimony to his healthy open-air living.

In his working retirement he acquired a new if modest fame, for he became not only one of Exmoor's acknowledged "characters" but also that rarity of rarities, a sociable hermit. He took up residence in a cave in a disused quarry near Slade Corner, Timberscombe, in a steep hillside facing the main road from Minehead to Exeter. There in his 78th year he was visited by a reporter from the Daily Chronicle, and the visitor found a cheerful old countryman contented with his lot.

His "mansion", as he called it, was the size of a large room, invisible from the main road and dry even in the worst weather. He had furnished it with a wooden box as seat, a teapot, tin mug and plate, a few cooking pots, a candle and a calendar and several mouse-traps (or were they mole-traps?). A screen of bushes kept the draught from his bed of bracken, straw and sacks. He fetched water from the stream down in the valley and bathed there even in wintry weather.

Such elemental simplicity had its advantages. As he remarked cheerfully, "I pay no rent or taxes." Life had taught him a working philosophy: "There is nothing like roughing it. I would not exchange my mansion for any house in the country. I never worry about anything, and I am as happy as the day is long. It's worrying that kills most people. Here I am with a real dry home, good bed, no rent, rates or taxes to pay. Occasionally I get a little job of work from the neighbours, who are very good to me."

Only a few weeks after those words, alas, he was evicted from his 'mansion' by a new landowner, and the 'union' eight miles away in Williton seemed inevitable. But John was still a fighter, and in the spirit of Browning's "one fight more, the best and the last," he found a shed in an old quarry at Timberscombe. A Mr J Jeffery looked after him as far as possible, and thus, eking out his old age pension in various ways, he struggled on for two years more.

At last nature, with whom he had so long lived in harmony, took him out of the struggle. A "seizure" paralysed him from the waist down. They took him to Williton Infirmary and there in November 1930 he died. He was buried in St Decuman's churchyard, Watchet, and no stone seems to have been raised to record his name or mark his grave. But here and there in a few minds, even to day, the childhood memory of John Moles the Exmoor Hermit lives on.

16 Aubrey Herbert

The Uncrowned King

Of all the perversions of plot that film-makers have foisted on a tale of adventure, none strains belief more than the sight of Richard Hannay in The Thirty-nine Steps shackled to an unwilling lady companion , trudging over the mist-laden moors for a weary day and bedding down for a drenched night without either of them apparently needing to attend to either of the humblest needs of nature. But there, as John Ford said of his Stageoach, "If the Indians shot the horses, you wouldn't have a movie'" and so John Buchan and the Steps keep their popularity. Fashion decrees a suave hero in his twenties, while the real Hannay, turning forty, was a tough mining engineer with a hard-won fortune and connections with men of power and influence – and as tough as himself.

Buchan's heroes, Hannay, Lord Lamancha, Sandy Arbuthnot and the tragic and admirable Afrikaner, Pieter Pienaar, to whom must be added the real-life Aubrey Herbert, move in a world now almost vanished. They are directed by a code of honour all the more compelling for never being spoken aloud; and if their ideals seem alien today, the misfortune is not theirs. In times of peace they enjoyed a life of ease chequered with the cares of country estates; in war they governed or fought, but often they were sent on hazardous missions, disappearing for weeks and months at a time.

Such a man was the hero of Buchan's Greenmantle, which appeared in the dark year of 1916, soon after the disastrous expedition to Turkish Gallipoli. Greenmantle is Sandy, the brilliant linguist, working in disguise as a charismatic figure in eastern Turkey to foil German plans for a vast Muslim uprising – and the timing was perfect. Those who read The Thirty-nine Steps of the year before remembered that Hannay's adventures had started when he gave refuge to Franklin P. Scudder, 'who acted as correspondent

for a Chicago paper, and spent a year or two in South Eastern Europe ... He was a fine linguist, and had got to know pretty well the society in those parts. He spoke familiarly of many names that I remembered to have seen in the newspapers,' and 'told me some queer things that explained a lot that had puzzled me. – things that had happened in the Balkan War, how one state suddenly came out on top, why alliances were made and broken, why certain men disappeared, and where the sinews of war came from'. It all went to confirm Hannay's idea that 'Albania was the kind of place that might keep a man from yawning', and when Scudder, in half an hour, transformed himself from the eager, amiable American into a captain of the Gurkhas who had clearly seen 'long service in kharab stations,' wore a monocle, 'carried himself as if he had been drilled' and shed every trace of an American accent from his speech, the new figure was near enough – saving the gimlet-like blue eyes – that of a hero familiar by name to the public for his recent adventures in Albania and the Balkans.

And so, when in the following year Sandy Arbuthnot appeared as Greenmantle, they surmised that he might not be a wholly imaginary figure but a Scudder naturalised, so to speak, and re-born : T.E. Lawrence, perhaps, but more probably – and with reason – Aubrey Herbert, nominally of Pixton Park in West Somerset but just as likely to be anywhere between Gibraltar and the Persian Gulf.

The Honourable Aubrey Nigel Henry Molyneux Herbert had come into a self-confident world in 1880 amid the palatial splendour of Highclere, as the second son of the fourth Earl of Carnarvon, with the world open wide before him. But the silver spoon held a drop of gall, for his eyesight was so weak that he could only read by placing the page close to his right eye. This virtual blindness exposed him to bullying and ill-treatment at Eton, but he wasted no time in idle complaint, and threw himself into life with the vigour of one with perfect health. But before going up to Oxford he was taken to Wiesbaden where Professor Piel , the leading eye-surgeon of Europe, operated to give him distant vision in his left eye. From then his career at Balliol followed a familiar pattern of baiting deans and proctors, mainly by scaling the walls of university buildings and climbing up on to the roofs or taking or risking his neck in impossible leaps; but he was also

awarded a first class history degree, and a list of the men who gave him their friendship indicates the kind of man he was to become: Hilaire Belloc, John Buchan, Raymond Asquith and Carton de Wiart. As a boy he had travelled over much of Europe and thus, according to his obituarist, "developed the wanderlust that dominated his whole life."

But Aubrey Herbert was no mere globe-trotter. He had extraordinary qualities – perhaps inherited qualities if considered in the light of the involvement of his half-brother Lord Carnarvon in Egypt and its ancient civilisation – and these qualities and talents, courage, vision and a remarkable gift for languages, fitted him for an extraordinary career.

After Oxford he went into the diplomatic service and was appointed at the age of 22 honorary secretary to the British Embassy in Tokyo, but never felt at ease there. Two years later he was transferred to Constantinople (modern Istanbul), and there he learnt Turkish, Arabic and Greek – the first of these so well that when after the 1914 – 1918 War he accompanied a Turkish envoy to Germany, he was taken for a Turk belonging to the mission. He twice visited and toured in Albania, and conceived a great enthusiasm for that turbulent little country and its redoubtable people. He learnt Albanian, Greek, Turkish and Arabic and spoke them all fluently, so that in his travels in the Balkans and, later, Asia Minor, he could talk and question freely without having to depend on an interpreter.

"Effortless mastery" is the phrase commonly applied to such men as Aubrey Herbert, but Nature, it seems, exacts an inexorable if delayed price from them, as if acquiring mastery of knowledge without labour does not fit in with the scheme of things. And after all, if physical achievement inevitably takes its toll of the body, why should it not of the mind as well? An old Roman proverb asserts that "those whom the gods love die young". Like much of proverbial wisdom it can be disproved as often as proved, but tragically it held firm for Auberon Herbert.

In 1910, at the age of 30, he married Mary, daughter of the Viscount de Vesci, nominally a member of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland but actually a Catholic. To start them off in married life Herbert's mother gave him a country house and estate of 5,000 acres at Pixton Park, near Dulver-

ton on the fringe of Somerset Exmoor, and a substantial villa at Portofino, and his mother-in-law gave them a fine house in Grosvenor Square. Then, as a landed Somerset gentleman, in November 1911 he entered Parliament as MP for South Somerset, but even a happy marriage could not keep him away from adventure. In the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 – a trial run for the slaughterhouse, so to speak - he took part in the fighting between the Turks and the Albanians, most probably because he was friendly with the young reformers of the ramshackle Ottoman empire.

The Albanians captured him, but so completely did he win their confidence that, strengthening their bid for independence from Turkey, they offered him the crown of Albania, For family and estate reasons he could only refuse and then the affairs of Albania were swept into the maelstrom of the European war. .

Long before this he was back in England and held a commission in the yeomanry, but when war broke out he volunteered for service overseas and nine days later he was in France, not with the yeomanry but with the Irish Guards.

This was not a simple cross-posting. To his chagrin, the Army had found his eyesight too poor for the death-or-glory department and he had no mind for a safe staff billet; and so he bought a service uniform, waited for a draft of the Guards to embark, slipped casually in among them and crossed with them to France. It says much fo his charm and self-confidence – and not a little for his social influence – that the Guards accepted their unexpected recruit with hardly a word of protest, and got round the problem of his presence by appointing him interpreter and therefore not taken on the active strength. But “not active” was only a form of words, for even in these early days of the war the mass attacks and industrialized slaughter set the pattern for the next four years. The British army waged a fighting retreat day after day until they reached the defensive line of the River Marne, and their losses were such as no one could ever have contemplated. Th Queen's Royal Regiment, for instance, landed in France on 22 August, 800 strong; after two months only 38 were left.

Herbert, thrown into his maelstrom, survived and more. He interpreted and fought and rode with battlefield messages as if his eyesight were normal. He was wounded at Mons, expected to be bayoneted but was treated with rough kindness by a German sergeant and taken prisoner. He was soon exchanged and sent home to recuperate, ...

This time the Army was not to be circumvented, even in this patriotic cause. But the high command,for once, recognised what a weapon they had in their hands, removed him from the bloody stalemate of the Western Front and sent him to where he could be most useful and beneficial to Britain: to the Middle East, and in the next two years he ranged over Gallipoli, Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia ruffling the feathers of self-important garrison officers but winning hearts and minds to favour the Allied cause. .

He had to be allowed to work in his own way, and his attitude to the people of that part of the world was far from typical of his nation. To this he owed the success of his missions, though, like T. E. Lawrence, with whom he collaborated, he and they were betrayed by the politicians who had sent them out. His friend Desmond MacCarthy said of him, "He had little personal ambition . . . He loved to serve and be "in it", but to be "in it" with – the contradiction suggests him – a devoted detachment. It was impossible that such a man should not have been up to his neck in the war, and that he should not have instantly put his life and energies at the service of that cause and seen it through. But. . . . he reserved independence of thought and feeling, the right to admire and even love an enemy, to appreciate, when he saw it, his point of view, and, on the other hand, to criticize anything he deplored in the attitude of his own countrymen. He was the antithesis, therefore, of the "party man", even in patriotism and war." And more than once, when he met men he had known in Turkey or the Balkans before the War, his generous open mindedness reached out across the gulf of war and found an understanding response.

"No one could ever doubt his good faith ; it was a talisman he carried with him into all companies and into different parts of the world. . . . . Only where his candour encountered a self-protective duplicity did it fail. He took it for granted, until evidence to the contrary was overwhelming, that everyone, whoever he was, with whom he had to deal was what is often

called "a gentleman". This supposition worked better in old semi-civilized communities, in Turkey and Albania at that time, for instance, than at Westminster; and better in rural than in commercial England."

One may mark as one example, probably the best, of his humanity in war and the response of the Turkish enemy, both soldiers and civilians, to one who treated them as equals. Herbert was appointed liaison officer with the ANZAC troops at Gallipoli, where the enemy commander was Mustapha Kemal, later known as the founder of modern Turkey. Herbert had met him before the war, and they agreed on an eight-hour truce on Whit Sunday 23 May for the burial of the dead of both armies, but it was Herbert's task to oversee the truce and guaranee the safety of the burial teams by his presence. He wrote: "There was some trouble because we were always crossing each other's lines. I talked to the Turks, one of who pointed to the graves. "That's politics," he said. Then he pointed to the dead bodies, and said: "That's diplomacy. God pity all of us poor soldiers!" "Much of this business was ghastly to the point of nightmare. I found a hardened old Albanian chaoush (sergeant) and got him to do anything I wanted. Then a lot of other Albanians came up, and I said : "Tunya tyeta." I had met some of them in Janian. They began clapping me on the back and cheering while half a dozen funeral services were going on all around, conducted by the chaplains. I had to stop them. I asked them if they did not want a Imam for a service over their own dead, but the old Albanian pagan roared with laughter and said that their souls were all right. They could look after themselves. Not many sins of fanaticism. . . .

'I retired their troops and ours, walking along the line. At 4.7 I retired the white-flag men, making them shake hands with our men. Then I came to the upper end. About a dozen Turks came out. I chaffed them, and said they would shoot me next day. They said, in a horrified chorus, "God forbid!" The Albanians laughed and cheered, and said, "We will never shoot you." Then the Australians began coming up, and said, "Good-bye, old chap, good luck!" And the Turks said, "Smiling may you go and smiling come again." Then I told them all to get into their trenches, and unthinkingly went up to the Turkish trench and got a deep salaam from it. I told them that neither side would fire for twenty-five minutes . . .A couple of rifles went off a few

minutes later, but Potts and I went hurriedly to and fro seeing it was all right. At last we dropped into our trenches, glad that the strain was over . . . . . I got some raw whisky for the infection in my throat, and iodine for where the barbed wire had torn my feet. There was a hush over the Peninsula."

One cannot in these few pages give an account of all his travels and missions, but one can at least say that whenever affairs in the Near and Middle East demanded a skilled negotiator needing no interpreter, the British Government chose Aubrey Herbert – even if, knowing his honour and incorruptibility, they either did not tell him what had been decided behind the scenes or challenged the report he made on his return to Parliament.

The meeting with the old chaoush at Gallipoli had kept clear in his mind the needs and ambitions of the people of Albania, briefly free and independent after the Balkan war but since then occupied by foreign armies. In November 1915, after sick leave in England, he was sent to Paris and Rome on a secret mission related to Albania, though six months earlier, to persuade Italy to join them in the war, France and Great Britain had signed the secret Treaty of London, deciding, among much else, after the war. Central Albania could exist as a rump state, but that Northern and Central Albania could be divided between Serbia, Montenegro and Greece, and that Italy would not object. He seems to have been kept completely in the dark about this, and quickly tiring of the futility of his role here, and relieved by the War Office, he took up an offer from to serve as Captain of Intelligence in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and the Gulf.

Mesopotamia was roundly cursed as "Messpot" by the British soldiers suffering with their Indian Army comrades the appalling consequences of an ill-provisioned and incompetently conducted campaign. In brief, an Indian Expeditionary Force of British and Indian troops including the 1/4 Somersets and 1/4 and 1/6 Devons and commanded by General Townshend, had advanced from Basra up the Tigris to try to capture Baghdad, but following defeat by a Turkish army they had been under siege in the town of Kut-el-Amara since December 1915 and two relief expeditions had failed. The War Office, seeing no rescue possible, offered Herbert's services to General

Townshend to negotiate with the Turks, assisted by Lawrence and a colonel of the Indian Intelligence.

Lawrence wrote with mingled admiration and bitterness, and Herbert would have agreed – and the words have lost none of their bite: "I went up the Tigris with one hundred Devon Territorials, young, clean, delightful fellows, full of the power of happiness and of making women and children glad. By them one saw vividly how great it was to be their kin, and English. And we were casting them by their thousands into the fire to the worst of deaths, not to win the war but that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours."

To salvage whatever might be brought out from the disaster, the rescue team were instructed to oversee the exchange of prisoners and wounded and eventually offer the Turkish commander up to £2 million to give up the siege. The Turks, though, were not to be bought. Too few boats could be had to evacuate the wounded, and the defenders of Kut were taken prisoner. Of the nearly 12,000 who left Kut on 6 May 1916, 4,250 died from brutal treatment or debilitating illness on the march to Anatolia or of hard labour in the prison camps awaiting them there. Herbert, was outraged by the brutality of these rear echelon Turkish troops, so different from those he had known in the front line at Gallipoli, but he was just as indignant at the Allied mismanagement of the campaign, and he sent a telegram reporting what he had seen and heard and condemning the incompetence, to Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India. The Government of India ordered a court martial, but the War Office, with determination and wisdom, refused to give him up. He came back to England for a short leave and recuperation, but idleness was not for him and he returned to Parliament for a few months to make his voice heard in persistent demands , eventually successful, for a Royal Commission on Mesopotamia.

By October the authorities had found a plausible way to be rid of this troublesome but prominent officer critic for a while and he was appointed liaison officer with the Italian army in Albania, which was in he Italian front line against against Austria. .. The post should have been ideal, and he for the post, but what he did not know was that Albania was already betrayed. In the secret Treaty of London in April 1915 the major Allied Powers, to

bring neutral Italy into the war on their side, had promised her certain areas of the Austrian Empire as a reward afterwards; Serbia and Montenegro would also gain;, but as for the nascent state or Principality of Albania, the carvers were at work , and Article 7 stipulated that "if " - the very word breathed treachery - :"if the central portion of Albania is reserved for the establishment of a small autonomous neutralised state, Italy shall not oppose the division of Northern and Southern Albania between Montenegro, Serbia and Greece". When this came to light, it was too much for Herbert's honour. He resigned his post and was back in England in December, after less than three months away.

One can only assume that his parliamentary status allowed him such freedom of action and movement. Presumably he prevailed on the War Office to allow him to return, or else he would surely have been court-martialled, and any "ordinary" officer allowing himself to be ruled by his conscience would have jeopardised his career and his commission. But again, Herbert was a far from ordinary soldier, and the War Office, far from being the club of dug-out dunderheads that critics supposed, contained many senior officers who had learnt the hard lessons of an unfamiliar war and valued rightly the service that this Irregular of genius could provide.

At this time he also heard of the death of his cousin Bron, the son of the pacifically minded Auberon Waugh, and from then on he consistently supported the idea of a negotiated peace, though how Germany could be persuaded to give up her conquests and not use an armistice to re-arm. was a problem demanding more than "the best will in the world", a quality difficult to find on either side in 1917.

For the time being Aubrey Herbert's Balkan wanderlust had to be stifled as he worked with the Director of Intelligence, General MacDonogh, on plans for a separate peace with Turkey. On 16 July he conducted a series of negotiations with Turks in Geneva, but this promising venture petered out in the stress of Turkish internal politics. turmoil of Turkish internal rivalries. Mustapha Kemal, whom he had met in Gallipoli two years before, had become a military hero but with political ambition and a commitment to reform which would soon be realised; but for the moment power rested with the Sultan's chief minister, Enver Pasha, who, on the evidence of he

Western Front, could gain nothing by breaking from Germany. Six months later, when General Smuts was sent to Bern to meet Turkish representatives, his chief negotiator, Philip Kerr, warned him, 'Enver is a pure militaristic Germanophile, having no ideas on the future save that Germany will win the war and recover the Turkish empire, of which he will then be Dictator or Sultan. Talaat Pasha, (the Grand Vizier and prominent leader among the Young Turks), is also Germanophile but is now in an uncertain frame of mind and willing to go along with the winning side" (Lloyd George: War Memoirs, II, p.1504). In the long run defeat in war decided for them both.

Just before the above negotiations , in November 1917, Herbert was again sent to Italy, where he was in charge of the British Adriatic Mission, co-ordinating special intelligence in Rome. And now Albania came again into life, Over in America expatriate Albaniana , leagued as 'Vatra', proposed raising an Albanian regiment that Aubrey Herbert would command. This promised well for the little state, but the matter was somewhat delicate in that as Italy's interest in a post-war Albania seemed to be becoming more proprietorial than benevolently neutral, 'Vatra' became more and more anti-Italian. Eventually, on 17 July 1918, the proposal was ratified in Boston, and the Italian Consulate accepted, on condition that the Albanian regiment served as a unit in the Italian army. By that time, of course, the European was was dragging to its bloody close. Herbert finished the war as commander of the British mission to the Italian army in Albania with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He felt obliged to turn down the temping offer,and the plan foundered in the mire of postwar confusion and broken promises.

The armistice of November 1918 with Germany brought no genuine peace or reconciliation, and the Paris Conference Conference of the next year might be seen as a continuation of warfare by other means. Certainly it brought bitter disappointment and frustration to the British agents in he Near and Middle East and to the Arab tribes and families whom they had persuaded to revolt against the Turks with the prospect of Arab rule for Arab lands, only to find that those lands were denied independence and became "sones of influence", British in Iraq, Transjordan, Palestine and Egypt, and French in Syria and Lebanon.

By May 1919, however, the Directorate of Intelligence had been turned over to Scotland Yard Special Branch because of the perceived threat of Communist activity in the industrial areas, and thus Herbert found himself conducting interviews with foreigners in the somewhat unreal guise of a Scotland Yard inspector.

In February 1921 he was sent to Berlin to interview Talaat Pasha, the former Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, who had escaped from Constantinople in a German submarine and had remained in Germany ever since. An court-martial trial of 120 Turkish politicians in Constantinople had condemned hum to death in absentia. He had held untimate responsibility for the deportation and massacre of the Armenians in 1915, but the British were more worried by his present activities He might be in exile, but changes were taking place in Turkey which might let him return home. The country, under Kemal's leadership, was recovering self-confidence, the government refused to accept the terms of a peace treaty which would deprive Turkey if its foothold in Europe and hand over Smyrna to Greece, and the army was 'spoiling for a fight'. These were encouraging signs for Talat Pasha, and he was known to be seeking support from Moslem countries to raise serious opposition to the Allies .On top of that, he "dared threaten that he was going to incite the Pan-Turanist and Pan-Islamist movements against England, unless she signed a peace treaty favourable to Turkey.x Herbert interviewed Talat in Wiesbaden for three days, thoroughly enjoying the conversations in Turkish and the sparrring matches with the eminent enemy, for the openness and affability that were his very nature made all thought of a cold interrogation unthinkable. They were on the best of terms, and this led to a curious and significant encounter. They wee travelling by rail and conversing amicably until the train stopped at a station and a third passenger, a German, got in. After a while, recognising Tallat, he told him – in German, of course – that he had served with General Sanders's mission in Turkey four years before. Tallat replied politely in German and a conversation ensued, edging aound to all the ills that Germany had since suffered. Herbert gave no sign that he understood the German and took no part in this converation other than a few remarks to Tallat, always in Turkish. The German, quite convinced that both his companions were Ger-

many's former allies and that he need not fear betrayal to the Occupying Power, loosened his tongue and let his indignation speak unbridled : "Germany has been beaten by England and France . The English fought well and I do not complain of them. But the French – they won by treachery. They can never, never be forgiven. Yes, we are beaten now, but we will be strong again, and we will return to France and be revenged!" Then the train stopped and he got out with a few words of farewell.. "You see," said Tallat. " You speak Turkish like a Turk, you convinced him you are one of us. He would never have spoken openly else.". As for Tallat's fate, however, nothing came out of Herbert's interviews to counteract the decision already taken behind the scenes – and surely unknown to the honourable interviewer – that Talatt should be deleted. And only a week later, when he returned from a short visit to Stockholm, he was conveniently murdered by an Armenian in revenge for the atrocities he had witnessed six years before.

Together with these activities Herbert had returned to Parliament, though not with the clear run that his record of service, both in Parliament and in the Army, should have given him. Indeed, it was his freedom from political sectarianism that caused the trouble. By upbringing and inclination he was a Conservative and sat under that label, but he had many friends among the Liberal MPs and the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and his family, and he voted freely as his conscience directed him, regardless of the party whips. Back in 1916 he had outraged the civilian warriors in his constituency by his support for the idea of a negotiated peace with Germany, and it had taken all the courage, steadfastness and determination of his Mary to fight them off. Fortunately she was equal to it, but for the new election it was only with difficulty that he managed to obtain his party's endorsement of his candidature. When the new Parliament assembled he surveyed them with sinking heart : so few of his old friends, whether Tory or Liberal, had survived the war and the election, and their places had been taken by the infamous "hard-faced men who had done well out of the war."

In his twelve years as M P he spoke or asked Parliamentary questions more than 450 times, a quite remarkable record considering his long absences from the House and country on national business., but not likely to endear him to whips who, far from counting on him "voting at his party's call", knew that

he was just as likely either to abstain or vote with the Opposition . For a number of other reasons he never made the name of a great Parliamentarian : Members as independent in mind as he were few, far too few to form an alternative power base; and the matters which most concerned him, the fate of the defeated nations and the broken promises of the victors, meant little to the others. He took no pleasure in Parliamentary debating, either. One-to-one persuasion by the charm of his manner, by his eagerness and conviction, that was his forte ; he had no relish for scoring petty debating points or humbling rivals. To be devious or ruthless was beyond him, beyond his understanding and beyond his desire.

After a year or two he seemed able to be reconciled to the tragic losses among his family and friends and to accept the changes in the new world as not wholly bad. The lavish hospitality he offered to scores of friends – and some enemies – at Pixton Park caused financial problems, but they were overcome by the ingenuity of his mother and Mary, and his popularity in Dulverton and indeed the whole county and even among party members offended by his independent thought and action - was secure. Besides, his social eminence, his generosity, his perfect manners, his transparent honesty, were such that "malice domestic" hid its head. and only one identified enemy could bring him down. But that enemy, having bided his time for twenty years, struck early in 1923.

Herbert was making a speech on one of his favourite topics when suddenly a veil of darkness came down over his eyes and he had to be led from the platform. He became totally blind. Someone very unwisely told him that having all his teeth extracted would help restore his sight, but the dental operation resulted in blood poisoning and he died in London on 26 September 1923.

On all sides his sudden severance from a busy world, this ruthless cutting-short of an active and, in the truest sense, romantic life, brought a feeling of irreparable loss : to his immediate family, naturally, and to the men and women whose daily work and living depended on him; to the scores of friends and acquaintances who, viting Pixton, enjoyed a wealth of hospitality which he provided without stint – even to his own disadvantage; to the "faithful few" in Parliament who shared his deep concern for the good name of

Britain in the emerging world and, as they saw it, for Britain's failure to honour promises made to the men in the Near East who had helped her in her hour of need.

And in all honesty, what was there left for him to do? Blindness barred him from the traditional sports of the landowner – not that he had cared for them over much before, and he had now played his part in a greater game altogether ; nor could he have retired into anonymity as Lawrence had done (and nor would he have considered such retirement as anything but a defeat). He had already written of his travels and military service in the Balkans and the Levant? Could he give the rest of his time to distilling his knowledge of those lands and presenting it to the public, and particularly to statesmen who would value and act upon his expertise? But who in government, apart from a few clear-sighted realists, cared about them? - In the disjointed world of the early 1920s every prospect for him, apart from the life of the family and the estate, must have seemed a declension, a sad falling-off, from the life of adventure, initiative and responsibility which had filled the past twenty years and given him such satisfaction and pride.

And yet, even after his death, something of his gallant personality lived on, to be renewed in the next generation. His son Auberon seemed in his early manhood to be of quite a different mettle from his father – not inferior in any way, but different. Whereas Aubrey Herbert had been the soul of sociability, expansive, venturesome, supremely confident, able to converse on equal terms with all classes and in half a dozen languages, and always ready to make a stir in the world. His son was just as affable with those he met, but he did not seek out acquaintances and, lived quietly at home for the most part and gave his mind and energy to the running of the estate and serving his county as a district councillor.

When war came in 1939 he volunteered for the army, but like his father, was turned down on medical grounds - but for the prosaic reason of flat feet. Disappointed but not deterred, he cast around for another service and enlisted in the Free Polish Army, a choice which for its initiative and and acceptance of a linguistic challenge would surely have delighted his father.

Epilogue

Aubrey and Mary Herbert had four children. Laura married the novelist Evelyn Waugh, who featured the Italian villa in his war trilogy Sword of Honour. Herbert was a slim man of more than average height and contemporaries described him as having perfect manners.

It is widely believed that Herbert is the inspiration for the character Sandy Arbuthnot, a hero in several John Buchan novels. The series starts with The Thirty-Nine Steps, but Arbuthnot's first appearance is in Greenmantle, hence the title of his grand-daughter's biography of him, The Man Who Was Greenmantle. Herbert's Italian family villa is the model for that in the Sword of Honour trilogy by his son-in-law Evelyn Waugh. The cameo character of the 'Honourable Herbert' in Louis de Bernieres's novel Birds Without Wings is clearly based on Herbert. He appears as a British liaison officer with the ANZAC troops serving in the Galipoli campaign. A polyglot officer able to communicate with both sides, he arranged the burial of the dead of both sides, achieving great popularity and trust with both sides.

17 Ernest Farmer

95 as far as "young GI"

Up in the far corner of Somerset, Ralph Allen 'did good by stealth, and blushed to find it fame', but there was nothing stealthy about Ernest Farmer's philanthropy. Day by day he was highly visible at his work, which involved making King George's highway, for a stretch of three miles across Brendon Hill, a little less perilous for man, beast or vehicle. He did not gain much honour or security from it, in blatant contrast to his counterpart in France, the cantonnoier, who had also had a length of road to maintain but was provided with a hut, hammer, stone gauge, hard-wearing uniform and peaked cap and a small right of toll. He was recognized and valued by the community, so much so that when Napoleon praised a sergeant for gallantry and asked what his reward should be, the man replied, "Make me cantonnier for life in my own village" It was done.

Ernest, working for the council highways department, received no such regal recognition, nor indeed any but of an occasional inspector and of course his neighbours. Even they were few, for his parish, Withiel Florey, was lightly populated . He had no known relatives in the neighbourhood and no cottage of his own, but lived in a hut on the south side of the Brendon Hill ridge road a little east of the turning for Gupworthy.

A mystery surrounded his birth – or was it that the more charitable tended to forget what was whispered by the scandalmongers? Be that as it may, in 1939 he was working to maintain his stretch of road, lay the hedges and keep the ditches clean and well drained, and war did not make the impact on his daily life that it did on city dwellers. Cars and vans were fewer, and mainly connected with farming , forestry and trade – though there were also individuals, too many, who managed to circumvent the fuel rationing system. The war only erupted in 1940, when German bombers flew over from Brittany and Normandy to attack the cities of South Wales. Then the

searchlights at Leighland and Doniford would shaft up into the blackness, and the sky to the north glowed threateningly night after night with the fiery destruction in Cardiff and Swansea.

But at last, in the summer of 1944, Brendon Hill was invaded, and the occupiers were American soldiers, and not in single stragglers but in battalions, 15,000 of them, all of them waiting for the signal that would send them to the invasion of Europe. They were held in two separate camps, white GIs on Langham Hill, coloured on Treborough Common. They were here for several weeks, and in their off-duty hours the whites descended on Roadwater, made their presence felt, spent freely, organised parties and socials, gave their rations to help with the scanty civilian diet, and were generally appreciated. They can hardly have seen much of Ernest or given him more than a friendly wave from a jeep, for their evening trips took them away from his stretch of road.

But the evening hours in the village, where the GI s gave so muc of themselves, were far outnumbered by those spent in the harsh preparation for D-Day, with marches of fifteen to twenty miles in battle order, along the ridge road to Cutcombe and beyond, and then back again, running at the double with a 60-pound pack from Wheddon Cross to Langham Cross and on past Ernest's working place, and none of them now had the time or the energy to give him a wave.

Marches of this length were the lot of the infantryman in every nation, but his "curses not loud but deep" were balanced by his pride and satisfaction in beating whatever the army could fling at him. Fitness and a strong heart would carry him through.

But the heart of one young American had a weakness that none of the army doctors detected, and on one of these marches, near Ernest's dwelling, he collapsed by the roadside and did not rise again. They gave him a temporary burial in the camp until a place could be found elsewhere.

Ernest took very much to heart the tragedy of this lad dying so far from home with nothing to show for the years of hard training and physical exertion , and with all the promise of his life unfulfilled. A few days later he appeared at the gate of the camp and asked the sentry to take him to the

commanding officer. The sentry was inclined to turn him away, but Ernest explained his errand and he was escorted to company headquarters. The captain listened at first incredulously, then with sympathy and appreciation, and they took Ernest to the grave of the solder and another who had died of pneumonia, and he laid on the graves a bunch of flowers he had picked that morning.

Soon the invasion began, and the 15,000 soldiers and their equipment and tents were all moved out by truck, with near-miraculous efficiency, in a single night; but Ernest went on tending the graves until a work party came to remove the bodies for reburial elsewhere. Some time later, when these events had moved away into the background, something happened to show Ernest that the Americans had not dismissed him as just a simple English countryman. The captain, writing the customary letter of condolence to the young soldier's parents, had told them of Ernest's kindly thought and action, and they, as moved by this as the captain had been, wrote him a letter of sincere thanks, with a gold watch in memory, followed in due course by a substantial sum of money.

To set a seal to this story, it emerged that the boy had died in the very parish from which his ancestors had emigrated to the United States generations before: and as his compatriot T S Eliot had written of another place in Somerset only three years before, "In my beginning is my end : In my end is my beginning", no less true was this for the young American soldier.

18 "It Snowed, it Hailed: They Never Failed

'Neither rain nor sun, nor heat nor gloom of night, stays these couriers from their appointed rounds". Those words of the old Greek, written in honest admiration of the couriers of an enemy, have always appealed to me. They can have meant no less to Benjamins Franklin when he adopted them as the motto of the nascent U.S. postal service, and time has proved his trust.

The Exmoor postmen of my boyhood days would have shifted uneasily at such outspoken praise, but they earned it - leaving Apaches, outlaws and dust storms out of the equation - almost as fully as any heroes of Wells Fargo or the Pony Express; and the comparison is not fanciful, for I remember them coming back to the office from their rounds in winter with faces and hands blue with cold, and stories of struggling through driving rain and howling storms, wading thigh-deep through snow-drifts or even walking on top of the hedges to deliver the snowbound Brendon Hill farms.

The Somerset post office in which I grew up took the responsibility, in fact, for an unusually wide area - perhaps uniquely so in Southern England. It must have covered at least 150 square miles. Two postmen on bicycles did the round of the village and immediate neighbourhood - two deliveries, of course, morning and afternoon - and two others went very far afield. One in a Morris Cowley van served the post offices of the Roadwater Valley and the farms of Brendon Hill, while the other delivered to the offices of the east side of Exmoor - Dunster, Timberscombe, Wheddon Cross, Exford, Winsford and Withypool - and some of the most cherished memories of my boyhood are bound up with such post office string and sealing wax. We did not handle thousands of letters, but all the mail to and from the moorland villages up to twenty miles away passed through our hands for distribution

in the Exmoor villages and farms by local letter-carriers such as Mrs Mary Elizabeth Hooper of Withypool, who served 33 years from 1916 to 1949, never failing even during the appalling winter months of early 1947.

Looking back on it, I realise that our sub-office under Taunton employed quite a team : my mother at the head, with two office girls to carry out some of the postal business and serve the shop, and no fewer than five postmen - if not all at the same time.

At the head of the outdoor phalanx marched Silas Locke. With many years' service and then, in his early sixties, approaching retirement, he had carried over into the 1930s something of the dignity of his profession in more spacious days. He had been born at Frogwell, Upton, on the Brendon Hills in the early 1870s, and he brought down to the valley something of the breezy tang of the heights, with humour never very far from the surface.

In his heyday he had driven the post office pony and trap, which I can just remember, but about 1930 this was superseded by a motor van and he ended his career on a very aptly named "push-bike" which took in the 1200-foot climb to Brendon Hill. But whatever the weather, we always knew he had returned when we heard his cheerful whistle of the Lincolnshire Poacher. Maybe he had other tunes stored in his capacious memory, but I never heard any, and certainly none could have better expressed his sturdy, cheerful independence.

When off duty he wore a cloth hat, tweed suit and leather leggings polished mirror-bright, and walked the village street with sprightly step on one of his errands - to cut a neighbour's hair for a "tanner", say, to lend a hand in the harvest field, or to enjoy a chat with kindred souls on the bridge over the old mineral line and hold forth on the failings of the feckless younger generation:(though I must regretfully edit) "They bain't wo'th a hounce o' hoss-dung.

He delighted in cricket, and in his retirement he often went by 'bus or train to Taunton to watch the county team, and on Saturdays he umpired in local matches with good-humoured firmness:

"'Owzat?" roared an exultant bowler at Roadwater.
"Out l.b.w.," pronounced Silas.

"I weren't l.b.w., and I bain't out," protested the batsman.
"Now don't ee arguy wi' me, young man. When I say you'm out, you'm out; an' if you don't believe me, read nex' week's Free Press ."

After Silas Locke, two other postman, Jim Ridgway and Sam Taylor, shared the local deliveries. Jim was of the same generation as Sam and his round was restricted to the village, but although he limped badly, as his right leg was as stiff as a broomstick, he covered the ground as fast as a man half his age. To accommodate him in his customary place in chapel the stewards had sawn out the lower part of the pew in front, so that he could sit with his leg stretched out in comparative comfort, and that little alteration remains to this day.

Jim gave his off-duty hours to his garden of which he was rightly proud, but not only his own, for with a little financial encouragement from the owner of Washford mill, Arthur Badcock, he took over a few yards of steep road-bank at the foot of Tom Smith's (or Station) Hill and made it into an attractive rock garden bright with summer flowers, and so it remained for many years.

Sam, in his younger days, had played half-back for the village, and a group photograph shows him, shortly before1914, as an alert, already soldierly figure with a waxed moustache worthy of an R S M. By the 1930s he had lost some of that martial aspect, but the war had left memories not easily erased. One day, I remember, the conversation turned to one of the perennial topics, the two sisters who lived in an old cottage nearby, in such squalor and so fetid an atmosphere that it drove you back from the open door. Annie was harmless and dominated by her sister, but Rhoda was a vixen. After one of her outbursts I heard Sam growl , "I've killed better men than her."

His rounds by bicycle took him to the outlying hamlets for two to three hours in the morning and a shorter time in the afternoon, and so it was not too demanding by post office standards and left him time for other work

in his allotment. I am sure he was as mindful as his masters of the rule forbidding drinking while on duty, and if he showed an inordinate liking for violet-flavoured cachous, perhaps a sweet tooth explained it.

These reverend seniors still covered considerable distances, but the longer rounds by postal van were in the hands of younger men, both ex-Army and just as dependable as their elders.

Jim Leigh and Tommy Atkins were very dissimilar in character, Jim tall and easy-going, Tommy diminutive and very much of a stickler for the rules - but with good reason, knowing that with the strict discipline of the service a postman's career was balanced on a knife-edge - and so it was with Jim that I was sent as a boy on the unofficial and magical journeys over Exmoor. I have never forgotten them. I think I never shall, for more than any other experience they revealed to me the wonder and mystery of the world.

Not that I experienced for myself the harshest conditions in which the moorland postmen worked, but I would see them in mid-winter, when the snow lay drifted on the hills, coming back to the office with hands red and raw with cold, and hear them speak of wading thigh-deep through the snow or walking along the tops of the hedges to deliver the mail to the farms on Brendon Hill, or floundering in drifts as high as the five-bar gates. A boy of nine or ten would have been a nuisance, but on other days, just occasionally, I was allowed to travel in one of the vans, and those were great mornings.

Bundled into the front seat of Morris van, I would set off with the postman through the still sleeping village. At half-past six the winter darkness lay heavy on the land, but as we rumbled through the streets of Dunster, gleams of light showed above the castle in the east; so we wound our way, the van protesiing and boiling over, up to the high moorland and the Rest and Be Thankful, a thousand feet above sea level. Then Dunkery Beacon might catch the early light and stand out proud and clear, and as we sped along the straighter roads over the moor the beech-leaves still clinging to the hedgerows turned from grey to sombre brown, and from brown to a rich russet. After nearly an hour we would drop down into Exford, simpler then

than now, and in Mrs Wensley's post office tea would be waiting and I would hear, sometimes, talk of strange happenings on the moor, mysteries of birth and death, or strayings, of disappearances that were disturbing and inexplicable. Then we would go on in the daylight to other places, Chibbet's Post, Withypool, Winsford, which to a village boy might have been at the ends of the earth but for the mail van which in this unforgettable way opened up the world.

On other days we travelled the Brendon Hill route, shorter and at that time less exciting, but in the long run it has meant even more. Wherever you travel in West Somerset you must go up hills, and on this round we climbed to 1300 feet, most of that height in a couple of miles; and ever since I travelled with Jim, the hlls have drawn me inescapably. Our first three miles were ordinary enough, for I knew the valley; but then the adventure began, and the new names, new to me but old with history - Pittiwells Lake, Langridge Mill, Holywell, Greenland, Culverwell, Luxborough, Chargot, Swansey - struck a chord in me which has never ceased to vibrate. The road led along a hillside through a sombre pine forest. Jim would stop to deliver to the mill, and I would hear the soughing of the wind in the pine tops and the murmur of the invisible stream down below, and Jim would come back and say, "That's the way up to Greenland", and my imagination would pictures that abode of ice and snow up on the hillside.

Then, as he prepared to coax the van up the one-in-five hill to the summit, he might say, "This is Veller's Way - some say 'tis Felon's Way, when they hanged them in the old days," and I wondered vaguely who the felons were and what their crime had been. "Sheep-stealing," said Jim to my unspoken question.

After that we came to the strange world of the Brendon uplands, the wide beech-lined roads, the lonely farmsteads down their long, long lanes. the reserved, deliberate farmers and their wives, the measured but genuine welcome, the log fires and the home-made bread : all so far removed in every way from our life down in the valley. It was only eight miles away but a far country - and yet one in which, inexplicably, I was made at home.

In time the Exmoor round was taken away from our office and Jim and Tommy were moved, but to take charge of the Brendon Hill deliveries Will Bellamy came along - and to know Will was the beginning of a liberal education.

With his active mind he might have gone far in life, and far also from this quiet corner of Somerset; but Will had a widowed and invalid mother to care for, and opportunity passed him by. They lived in a thatched cottage dating from Elizabethan days and formerly a farmhouse, with internal pargeting and plasterwork which, for those who could see though the layers of whitewash, spoke of ampler fortunes. With a kitchen garden to supply some of their needs, he made do for them both on the modest postman's salary. I doubt whether he had much left over for the purchase of books, but his chief interests were politics and foreign affairs, and in those days the News Chronicle served as almost the only outspoken daily guide to such matters for the thinking person (man, woman and child). Almost alone, while the rest of the press bowed to Hitler and Mussolini, snatched at every conciliatory crumb from their tirades, and hoped, with little evidence, for "peace in our time", the News Chronicle warned the British people of the threat of the unholy Axis of Germany, Italy and Japan, .

How well I remember Will's keen, intelligent, generous face, quickening with indignation as he denounced the latest humiliation suffered by the democracies; and his manner of speech had this peculiarity, that indignation and resentment of the folly of our political masters did not bring an outburst of anger: instead, he spoke urgently and rapidly but almost in an undertone, as if the disgrace to the name of our country should not be spoken abroad. Indeed, not only in Central Europe but very near home he felt cause for concern, as he recounted his visit one morning to a nearby manor farm occupied by a naturalised German. Will, conversing with the son of the house about "old Hitler" and his broken promises, was taken aback when the son peremptorily and teutonically interrupted him with "You must not say such things about our Führer!" And when the father, a year or so later, was given commanded of a platoon of the Home Guard, there were others than Will who wondered just how much resistance that particular unit would have been allowed to offer to an invader.

Will's interests went beyond Europe, however, and every week he tuned in to the "Letter from America" broadcast by Raymond Gram Swing. I am sure he rejoiced in Roosevelt's drive and reforms, and he also listened with an ear for language. "It's interesting, the different ways that we and the Americans have of saying the same thing, " he remarked. "We say "biscuit", they say "cookie"; we say "lorry", they say "truck"; they say "viewpoint", we say "point of view"." He would have enjoyed the American Usage of his North Devon contemporary Herbert Horwill, but it probably never came his way.

For all his awareness of the darkness at noon gathering over Europe and the free world, he kept a firm faith in the future of mankind. Once on my way home from school I bought a book by H. G. Wells from the station bookstall - I forget the title, but it was published in the self-styled "Thinker's Library", hot - or ice-cold, rather - from the rationalist press. I lent it to Will, and a few days later he returned it in great agitation: "That history by Wells, he's so pessimistic, and he's no right to be."

Soon after, like most of the other young men in the village - for none of us were scientists - I left home for the Forces. Six years went by before Will and I met again, and then it was for the last time, when he brought me a wedding present of a water jug and set of glasses, which I have treasured ever since for the memory of a man whom, above many, it was good to have known.

There were of course many more "gentlemen in blue serge" known to me only slightly, if at all; but they all gained and retained an enduring place in the memory of their fellows, whether for some feature of character or because of what they contributed to the life of their community outside their working hours:

Jack Marlow at Roadwater, for example, the ex-sergeant who took his martial bearing and strict discipline and Old Bill moustache into his civilian career, and even in his last illness sat upright in his bed and grasped his walking stick with masterful hand; and in another mould and another sphere, Albert Coles of Luxborough, like his father, the legendary Sammy, an indefatigable walker and preacher. Six days of the week his round took

him fifteen miles on foot, but most Sundays, instead of lounging at his ease, he would be off over the hill country, climbing the 1200 feet of altitude and walking perhaps the ten miles to Exford or twelve to Dulverton, conducting two services and preaching two sermons, and then ten miles home again for a late supper and short night's sleep before another toilsome week.

Different again were four postmen-musicians, part-time but dedicated, William Venn of Williton, violinist and orchestral leader in every concert in the days when village folk made their own entertainment and melody ruled; Fred Bond of Timberscombe, violinist and leader in the many concerts organised by yet another postman, Jim Slade of Roadwater, and his successor Walter Lile, tailor by trade, far from robust after being gassed in the First World War, but still good for ten foot-miles a day, a competent violist, devoted follower of Gilbert and Sullivan and chapel organist, without fee or reward, for nearly half a century;

On the seaward slopes of Exmoor Frank Glanville tramped his daily round. He entered post office service at Cullompton in 1910, but the War put a stop to that and he could not pick up the thread again till 1920. Then he resumed his career at Porlock and travelled the moor for fifty years."My duty round," he said, "was officially sixteen miles : it started up Porlock Hill and continued in a series of ups and downs, never many miles from the sea. Some years later a colleague brought along a pedometer, and we found that the real distance was a few yards over twenty miles. But I was used to an outdoor life, and so much walking made me very robust, so that I thought nothing of walking as much as thirty miles a day, carrying on my delivery route in spite of snow, ice, rain and wind. Many is the loaf of bread I have taken out to dwellers on the moor cut off from supplies by the weather."

A lowlander by birth, he learnt the ways of the moor, knew which sheep belonged to which farmer by its markings and was able to tell the owners if any were in trouble or had been killed. The wild animals, too, engaged his sympathy: Once he helped a hind whose calf was stranded on the other side of a high fence. Gently Frank picked up the calf and placed it down beyond the fence, then walked backwards and watched. The hind smelt the calf, licked it, and looking at her helper, gave a short, sharp bark. as it to thank him.

The Second World War gave him rough and trying times with the military training on Exmoor. Hardly a day passed without shells hurtling overhead, and once, when he misunderstood the instructions of an American artillery major, he came under fire from shells bursting about fifty yards away; and he also recorded, with some indignation, a massive stag-shoot, when jeeps drove the deer across the moor to rougher ground where men with guns were hidden.

Still, the memory of all he had seen on the moor - the abandoned cub he had rescued and fed, the badger digging out a wild bees' nest, the man in black above Culbone who vanished before his eyes - might have been lost, but that he wrote it down while it was clear in his mind, and his notes, brief but telling, appeared under the name of "Afghan" in the local press and the Exmoor Review. Best of all, he had a true ear for the local " way o' spaikin' " and preserved such gems of wisdom as this heard after threshing, "Zider do make 'ee go vor, an' beer 'll make 'ee go back. I bin drinkin' both o' em, zo I reckon I'll bide."

That should be the right note on which to bring this chapter of wayfarers, and this book, to a close; and looking back at those far-travelled postmen I am struck by the fact that all were men of character. Perhaps it was something in their work that made them so, for while the discipline learnt in the army bred in them self-reliance, self-discipline and self-respect, the freedom of their open-air life was controlled by the responsibility they bore for the mail entrusted to them and for the reputation of a great public service. At all events, they were men held in respect and to know them and learn from them was a privilege I have always valued.

Why, after that, I have left Jack Lyddon to the last I cannot explain, unless it is because, more than anyone, he exemplified an old type of countryman, trustworthy, independent, salty of speech, and down to earth but not to be trampled on.

When he retired after thirty-five years of sixteen miles a day - the equivalemt of walking nearly seven times round the globe - they paid tribute to his devotion to duty and his strict adherence to regulations. That was fair enough, but let it not be thought that this strictness was reflected in Jack's

everyday dealings with his clients; indeed, I hope I am not wronging him in suggesting that, whether consciously or not, the punctilious fulfilment of his duties was a kind of insurance policy to safeguard his job when he dared to stand up to some insolent "petty tyrant of the fields". He spoke his mind and feared no man - and no woman, either, which was a tougher proposition, for one or two who made their lairs in the big houses might have persuaded Attila to slink furtively by.

A public servant Jack may have been, but servile and mealy-mouthed he certainly was not.

This was back in the days of King "Teddy", and whether the Major ordered his daily paper by post to make certain of getting one (one could be sure of delivery in those days) or simply to annoy and "aggravate" the postman, was not known, but Jack believed the latter, and when, one warm, drouthy day in summer he toiled up the long drive with the Major's pennyworth of Fleet Street blue, he was in no mood to put up with brusque orders or peremptory commands. The Major, though, knew no other way. He came out holding a letter. "Here, my man," he barked. "Stick a stamp on this for me." Jack glared

"I bain't your man, for one thing, maister," he growled, "I be me own; an' for another, I bain't goin' to lick the king's backzide for ee, thee'st can lick en theezelf."

Inevitably the Major complained, but Jack, interviewed by the postmaster, denied meaning to offend. "I didn' say nort out o' plaace, you. A stamp have got a front zide an' a back zide, hab'm er? Whatever 's thik feller gettin' upzot about? Can't zee it mezelf."

That seems to have been the end of it, and I guess that by the time the rabbit came along he had acquired something of the status of an ambulant philosopher and jester to whom a certain latitude is allowed.

In those days freshly shot rabbits could be sent by post, unwrapped, simply with a label tied round their necks, and the goods, as I remember, could be messy.

Generally the dispatcher, not the deliverer, was to blame, but the lady receiving the rabbit seemed not to realise this. "Oh, postman," she complained to Jack, "that rabbit you brought yesterday was in a terrible state. He must have been a long time in the post and he bled all over the place."

"Very sorry to hear that, ma'am," said Jack peaceably, "I'll zee what us can do nex' time."

Rabbit the Second duly arrived, a nifty specimen in more ways than one, and Jack kept his word.

He rang the bell and the lady came to the door.

"Yere 's another rabbut fer 'ee, ma'am," said Jack, "an' I 've putt stickin'-plaister awver the nawse an' eyes o' en an' stuck a cork up 'is aass-'ole . You 'on't have no trouble wi' he."

It astonishes me - though on second thoughts it should not - that the ladies in charge of those scattered Exmoor post offices should have made so strong an impression on my mind that even now, sixty years on, I can see them standing clear in the golden light of morning.

To tell the prosaic truth, though, it was in the haggard grey of early winter mornings that by travelling in the mail vans I first made acquaintance with Exmoor, for that was about the only time when the driver could be reasonably sure of not encountering an inspector and suffering at least a severe reprimand for carrying a passenger, even a small boy.

The office at Roadwater was kept by Mrs Selina Mear. She had been a widow for more than thirty years, but while long hardship had fortified her native determination it had not hardened her heart or changed her cheerful welcome.

Before her marriage in the early 1900s she had been lady's maid to the wife of Dr Glyn Handley Moule, Master of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and later Bishop of Durham, and to the Misses Rashleigh of Menabilly, Cornwall, and the good breeding she had observed in those houses had left its mark in her manner and speech.

At Luxborough, little, busy Mrs Shopland reigned in the front room of her cottage, which you reached by a footbridge across the stream, and although we arrived very early with the van, it was never too early for her to offer a cup of tea.

The comptrolleress of His Majesty's mail at Exford, Mrs Wensley, ran her office as efficiently, in the main, as to satisfy that most captious and curmudgeonly of inspectors, the Man from Minehead - but for one detail.

"Well, Mrs Wensley," he said at the end of a long inquisition, "you have a well-run office, but just one thing needs attention."
"And what may that be, sir?" she enquired courteously.
"Well," said he, "the only fire-fighting equipment you have is a bucket of sand. What would you do if your telephone switchboard caught fire?"
"Du? Du?" cried the lady, exasperated by the recollection of weary hours at that same exchange putting through futile two-o'clock-in-the-morning calls from late revellers and hunt ball drunks, "I'll tell 'ee what I'd do: I'd let the darn thing burn!"

It remains a mystery and a regret for me that I do not clearly remember Mrs Veysey, the postmistress of Winsford, but I am sure a few others will.

19 Epilogue

Over many years of writing to recall the vanished men and women of my neighbourhood, I have been, as it were, torn between two duties: the first: to praise famous men and our fathers that begot us – and the duty is easy – and the search for those "whose bodies are buried in sleep and have no memorial" , no written or sculpted word, nor even a weather-worn stone raised over a mound in a churchyard. And it may be that infrequent (and often inaccurate) entries in a parish register simply are their only written memorial -and these few words ought to be re-recorded and treasured from generation to generation. These ancestors did not move the earth – but they would not themselves be moved, and they hung on, and in long course of time, from an ironmonger's in Bristol, brought forth one of England's great captains and commanders, and for the men who served with him, the most admired, trusted and humane:

"Uncle Bill" from Bristol Lt-General (later Field Marshal) Sir William Slim, G.O.C.XIV Army, Fourteenth Army, Assam and Burma, 1943 – 1945

When General Slim came to speak to us, the Queen's Royal Regiment 1st Battalion in Burma, before our return to action after a period of rest in the hill station of Shillong, I straightway, at the very first sight , felt greatness embodied in him and making itself unquestionably known and conveyed to us and drawing us in as never anyone before - or, for that matter, since. But the greatness and power were not simply the effect of his rocklike stance and firm jaw and commanding eyes: they came from the unshakeable certainty of victory that he held and conveyed to us. But it was the way he spoke with us, not to us, that marked him off from all the rest.

I repeat, the very sight of him inspired trust and beyond that, confidence, and I remember saying at the time, "He's not going to throw us away."

Later, we learned his history. He had not come from a military family (his father was an ironmonger in Bristol), and unlike the commanders drawn from the aristocratic and landowning classes, and perhaps all the more readily for that, understood the nature and needs of the private or rifleman who, after whatever the artillery might throw in to help, had to go in at the sharp end, achieve the impossible and then hold fast. Unlike some of the others, our general could not be accused of fighting to maintain the supremacy of his class or family when the fighting was over. And if , miming an invalided veteran, we sometimes sang , 'I'm one of Lord Louis' broken toys', no one, not even the most resentful conscript, would have dreamt of linking such derision to General William Slim.

He did not come from a family with military traditions, and perhaps understood all the better the nature and the needs of the private soldier or rifleman who, after the artillery had thrown in a few shells to help him, still had to go in at the "sharp end" and achieve the impossible and then hold fast.

And our General had lived the army life at our level, not in engineers (though that could be perilous enough) or Service Corps or Ordnance, but in the p.b.i., one of the 800 rifles and bayonets of the Warwickshires, the 800 whom all the rest existed to supply and serve. Thirty years earlier, in his first command, he had led from the front at Gallipoli and had gone on leading in "peacetime" defence of the North West Frontier of India against the continual incursions of Afghan masters of ambushes and sudden raids - with the added terror of the Afghan women's attention to our wounded. And in every rank he attained he led. (And though no one "let on", even now our General was still risking his life - wrongly, we would have thought - in aerial reconnaissance to see for himself. I say again, the very first moment I saw him, I knew that he would not throw any of us away; and for the rest of us in the Fourteenth Army, there was little if any of that dreadful sense of fatality that weighed upon many soldiers in the 1914 – 1918 War. Expected casualties in a battle or campaign – not necessarily fatal - were ten per cent, and I remember talking this over with my pal David Cook and optimistically reckoning that we therefore had nine chances out of ten of coming through , whether whole or not. Some of us – one in ten, but we hoped no worse

than that, would not make it home, but we also knew without question, in our heart and minds and aching feet, that we could trust General Slim when he took us where we had to go, and play straight with us and look out for us along the way. Alternative paragraphs to work on: He had a plan for victory, he had the resources, he had soldiers who had beaten the Japanese man to man time and time again, but he (we) had to advance from static positions and the jungle into the open plain of Central Burma , trap the Japanese army by a brilliant manoeuvre of deception and smash it in a hundred irrecoverable fragments – of desperate and starved but still defiant men. Before the decisive advance he called us together, from riflemen and cooks to brigadiers and major-generals and explained, simplicity itself, "This is what we are going to do" : and it all went as he had promised, it all came true. But afterwards "we" became "What you have done" – "you" not "we", certainly not I, General Slim.". Was any other great captain so mindful of the unspoken need of gratitude and dignity of his fellow-soldiers? George MacDonald Fraser has said of him, "The thought of him was home and safety" - because he knew what must be done, and took us into his confidence; ew recognized this, that was the way of it. CODA All General Slim's warfare, basically, was conducted not to massacre the Japanese by thousands – though that was the way that so many of them chose – but to break their will to fight on; and to accomplish this not by frontal attacks on bunkers – often more costly to the attackers than the defenders – but by learning and practising the encircling movement where intelligence, in both senses, and anticipation paid off. Inevitably, great battles erupted such as at Mandalay and at Pyawbwe, where the Japanese were surrounded and, refusing to surrender, could only die in frenzied devotion to their Emperor - a devotion which elsewhere compelled repeated obedience to catastrophic orders issued in ignorance of the local situation and blinded them to military sense. The British soldier recognised the military efficiency and discipline that had won the Japanese an empire in a matter of months and had dragged hundreds of thousand of unprepared British soldiers into slavery. But on the jungle-clad hillsides of Assam the British drew a line and said "No further". And for a long month in May and June 1944 the 1500 men of the Queen's Royal Regiment and the Royal West Kents staved off 15,000 Japanese. At the height of the battle of Kohima the front lines off the

two armies, scene of hand-to-hand and close quarter grenade fighting, ran along the "tramways" of the District Commissioner's tennis court , and the 250 British wounded, who could not be evacuated, lay out in the open with no more protection than the canvas walls of a dressing station. After 40 days the British Second Division, flown from India, broke the siege and the survivors marched out with fixed bayonets – but only 27 of them.. The Fourteenth Army had taken the measure of the once-victorious Japanese, and never again was superiority in doubt. Many years afterwards a Japanese general said ruefully, "We threw everything we had at them in Kohima – but we could not break the British soldier".