

# PROLOGUE



## THE GRAVEYARD

If you come this way, not knowing where to look for it, you will probably walk past the graveyard. It is hidden behind a high and impenetrable hedge of yew that looks as if it had been designed to keep out casual visitors. No sign points the way in, and when you succeed in finding it, it looks more like an untidy gap in a thicket than an official entrance. When I was here as a boy, a lifetime ago, the way into the graveyard was wide and clear. It had to be, because this was where we brought our dead in solemn procession to lie in this earth, and here they lie still. The leaflet published by Newark and Sherwood District Council calls the path that takes you there King Charles Walk, because of the tradition that Charles I strolled here while he was held at Kelham Hall in May 1647, after surrendering to the Scots during the Civil War. When I lived here 300 years later, we called it not the King's but the Apostles' Walk, after the clipped yew trees, twelve on each side, which lined the way. We knew the story of the house, but we weren't much interested in what had happened here before our arrival, so intent were we on our own purposes. Kelham Hall was by then the mother house of the Society of the Sacred Mission, an Anglican religious order that trained uneducated boys for the priesthood in a monastic setting that was its own world, self-sufficient, entire

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unto itself. Hoping to be a priest one day, I had been sent here at fourteen from a Scottish back street, and I fell in love with the place and the high purpose it served. After a probationary term in civvies, we were dressed in black cassocks and blue scapulars that set us apart from life outside the great oak gates of the old hall. Our life was military in its discipline and dedication, but it was also full of kindness and laughter. It is the laughter I remember as I walk here again today, taking the path I took so often then, now given back to the memory of the broken king. Change hurts. Or is it deeper than that: is it Time itself we mourn? Time has certainly wrought painful changes here.

The Hall in which Charles was held was rebuilt in 1728 by Bridget, the heiress of the Sutton family, the original owners. When the house Bridget built was gutted by fire in 1857, her descendant, John Henry Manners-Sutton, commissioned George Gilbert Scott to build him a replacement. Presented with what Mark Girouard described as ‘an empty site, a compliant patron, and what seemed a long purse’,<sup>1</sup> Scott went to work, and the present Hall was built between 1859 and 1862. The building Scott erected was a smaller, less manic version of Saint Pancras Hotel in London, built a few years after Kelham, and its hard red brick and surprising silhouette still dominate the flat Nottinghamshire landscape for miles around. When Manners-Sutton died in 1898, the mortgage on the property was foreclosed and it came into Chancery.

In 1903 the Society of the Sacred Mission acquired it as their mother house, where they trained boys and young men for the priesthood. In the 1920s, to accommodate increasing numbers, the Society added a new quadrangle, including a massive chapel, the outline of whose huge dome added a softer note to Scott’s

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jagged skyline.<sup>2</sup> Internal difficulties within the Society, and the external pressure of Church of England politics, led to the closure of the college in 1972, and the Society left Kelham. Purchased by them in 1973, it is now the headquarters of Newark and Sherwood District Council, who use the great chapel as an events venue, described in their publicity material as the Dome. When they sold Kelham, the Society retained possession of their graveyard in the grounds, and members of the gradually diminishing order can still elect to be buried there. In their leaflet, Newark and Sherwood District Council describe it as the Monks' Graveyard. Coming across it unexpectedly must be like coming upon a corner of a foreign garden that has been set aside for the burial of British residents, and feeling a pang of sorrow that they are so far from home. Though the graveyard does not feel entirely forsaken, it does feel hidden now, which is maybe why I always have difficulty finding it when I make one of my pilgrimages here.

I arrived at Kelham in 1948, aged fourteen, from a small town in the west of Scotland called Alexandria. Knowing little of its past and nothing of its future, the great house, given over to its sacred mission, seemed to be a place of timeless order whose life would go on for ever. Though I thought I wanted to stay here for ever, in the end I spent only six years at Kelham. In 1956 the Society sent me to West Africa to be secretary to the newly appointed Bishop of Accra, a member of the order and the last white man to hold that office. I was meant to stay for two years and then return to my studies, but I never did make it back to Kelham. While I was in Africa I withdrew from membership in the Society, so it was to Scotland I returned when my time was up in Accra. I had been wearing a cassock for years, and had no other form of outdoor clothing,

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so I got a streetside tailor in Accra to run me up a suit. Wearing this, I came back to Britain in March 1958 on a noisy old cargo ship, and headed, shivering in the cold, for Scotland. Yet Kelham continued to haunt me, and I dreamt about it for years. When the Society departed in 1972, and the place was taken over by the Council, I would turn up and wander disconsolately around the house and grounds, as though looking for something I had left there and could not find. During my visits in the 1980s and 1990s I was able to do this on my own, but security was tightened in the 2000s and on my last visit I had to be conducted round the house by a guide.

The advantage of having an official tour was that I was able to get into the Cottage, the servants' quarters of the old Hall, used by the Society to accommodate the boys who had been admitted for preliminary training for the ministry. The Cottage refectory was the way I remembered it, but the dormitory had been carved up into a warren of small offices and it conjured up little sense of what it had been like when thirty of us slept there, windows open in all weathers. Father Peter was Cottage Master throughout my time, and what had been his room was still intact, though now shared by four officers of the Council. The ground floor of the House, where adult students and members of the Society resided, was largely unchanged. Because of the disaster of 1857, the new house Scott built was designed to be fire-proof, so all the rooms on the ground floor were rib-vaulted in stone and brick, and the corridor and staircase floors were of marble, tiles or cement. The public rooms on the ground floor of the old Hall had not been altered by the Society during its seventy years' residence, though they had been adapted to different purposes. The carriage court, at first used by them as a chapel, became the Society's refectory, the dining room

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and drawing room became libraries, the billiard room a lecture hall, the morning room an office, and the grandest room in the house, the music room, became the common room. With a cathedral arcade and triforium gallery down one side, and an enormous hooded chimneypiece on the other, it managed to be both grand and cosy at the same time.<sup>3</sup> This was the domestic heart of the community. Newspapers were kept here, there were easy chairs, and a log fire burned in winter on high days and holy days, when the usual routine was eased slightly. None of this has altered much, probably because these are the rooms that are hired out for weddings and other functions by the Council.

I said little as my guide showed me round, though she must have been aware of the emotions that were charging through me. She said that few old students ever visited Kelham now, and I was the first in a long time. It was the visit to the Great Chapel that undid me. Dedicated in 1928, it is a huge space, sixty-two feet square in the clear, with four superb arches supporting a massive dome sixty-eight feet high, the second largest concrete dome in England, leading Father Hilary – one of the younger members of the Society – to claim, not entirely facetiously, that:

We give our life  
We give our all  
Inside this great big tennis ball.

Designed to instill a spirit of sacrifice and devotion in those who were summoned by bells to worship there several times a day, the chapel does not feel comfortable with its new purpose as an events venue, mainly because the dome overwhelms

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everything below it that does not acknowledge its own reach for transcendence. But that was not what did me in. Aware that I was holding back tears, my host led me into the narthex, which now contains the bar used during dances and other events in the Dome, wondering if I could solve a puzzle for her. There was a little door on the west side, just off the stairs to the gallery, which issued out onto the drive to the main gate just opposite the Fox Inn. Did I know what it was for? I shook my head, unable to speak. But I did know. This was the door through which a member of the Society left for work abroad, after a short service called missionary benediction. He would kneel on the step of the sanctuary, under the great rood arch, to receive the Director's blessing, and then he would walk alone to the door and into whatever the future held. I went through that door in March 1956, into a taxi that took me on the first leg of my journey to Africa, the final verses of Psalm 121 still echoing in my head:

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: yea, it is  
even he that shall keep thy soul.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming  
in: from this time forth for evermore.

There was a going out, certainly, but there was no coming in again for me, except this insistent returning to what is now an empty shell. I thanked my guide and made for the walk King Charles took on his last night here, the same walk that used to be taken by a member of the Society of the Sacred Mission to his grave, carried on the shoulders of students, in the certain knowledge that the sacred purpose of this place would endure long after they were dust.



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The path takes you south away from the Hall, with the River Trent on your left to the east, though you can't see it from here through the trees. At the end of the walk, down some steps, is the orchard, tangled and neglected now, though still bearing fruit, as trees do long after there's no one left to eat it. Though they fed us well at Kelham, I was always hungry and grateful for the windfalls that lay on the ground beneath these trees many autumns ago. A remembered scrap of verse from Helen Waddell increases my melancholy.

When I am gone  
And the house desolate,  
Yet do not thou, O plum tree by the eaves,  
The Spring forget.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the orchard, the walk intersects with another path. Turn right and you come out at the playing fields; turn left and you get to the Trent and Forty Acre, a great meadow along the side of the river. Father Peter used to come here every day to fill in a meteorological chart he kept. Sometimes, when he had to be away from Kelham to hear the confessions of the nuns at Belper, I did it for him. He left me a picture book of clouds, and I would go into Forty Acre to identify the formations and enter their names in the logbook. Apart from his interest in recording the weather, Father Peter used it as an opportunity to teach me a bit of Latin. In his chuffy pipe-smoker's voice, he'd point out that clouds were classified by using Latin words to describe their appearance as seen from the earth. I haven't thought about it for years, but I can recall the four basic types: *cumulus* from the Latin for heap, *stratus* for layer, *cirrus* for a curl of hair and *nimbus* for rain. Looking up into the almost

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cloudless July sky today, I see a few wisps of white: *cirrus*. Remarkable what sticks.

It is hard to get into Forty Acre now, unless you bushwhack over a ditch and an ugly snarl of fences. It was a park to us and the place we went to swim in the Trent. Swimming was only permitted if there was a qualified life-saver present. I passed the test by going into the water with another student, flipping him onto his back, placing his hands on my shoulders, and pushing him towards the bank while I did an awkward version of the breast stroke. No one drowned during my time, but I wouldn't have been much good to anyone in real trouble.

It was an early example of being theoretically qualified to do something I was actually incapable of performing, something that has been a bit of a theme in my life. From somewhere, I have been afflicted with the gift of confidence, of appearing to be knowledgeable about something I am actually making up as I go along. My improvisations were based less on knowledge than on self-confidence allied to an easy fluency with words. I can see now that I spent a large part of my life winging it, and that some of the things I made up, some of the roles I tried to fill, I did because I admired the idea of them. The toughest lesson life teaches is the difference between who you *wanted* to be and who you actually *are*. And it can take a whole life to teach it. Funny, where a meditation on my incompetence as a life-saver has taken me.

The hard thing about coming to this place is glimpsing the young man I was fifty years ago, brimming with ideals, taking this same walk, earnestly conversing with a companion – and completely unaware of the spring and drive of his own character and where it would lead him. He thought then he had chosen a high road and would walk it to the end, whereas I know now

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that roads choose us and what they unfold before us is not the person we want to be, but the person we already are, the person time slowly discloses to us. Yet in spite of trying to learn this lesson, I still regret roads not taken. Is that why I keep coming back here? Am I trying to discern the outline of an alternative past, the most futile of pursuits? What is certain is that I am so far into my own head at the moment that I am not paying enough attention to what's going on around me; so I have come too far and passed the graveyard. I turn back down the walk, identify the untidy gap in the tall yew hedge and enter.

The graveyard of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham is a shaded rectangle containing thirty-five simple grave-stones, irregularly spaced. From the gap in the

hedge	XXXXXXXX
that	XXX
serves	XXX
as an	XXX
entrance,	XXX
the	XXX
arrangement	XXX
of graves	XXX
faces you like this . . .	XXX
	XX
	X

Apart from two erected recently, the stones are all covered in lichen and are hard to read, but I am able to decipher most of them.

I pause before the ones I remember. Here is Father Peter Clarke, my old Cottage Master, an ardent pipe-smoker who

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grew his own tobacco at Kelham – inevitably called ‘Nobby weed’ – to amplify the community ration of an ounce and a half a week. He taught history to the boys in the Cottage, very boringly, it has to be said. In fact, I do not remember any stimulating teaching at the elementary level, which may be why so few of the boys who went through the Cottage actually made it to ordination. It is hard to blame the Society for this, however. I doubt if they had a single trained teacher in their midst. They probably assumed that any educated man could pass on what he knew if he tried hard enough. It seemed to work for me, probably because, while I am not a teachable person, I am quite good at learning for myself if my interest is ignited. The teaching in the Cottage bored me, but the ethos of Kelham stimulated my imagination, which was probably more important in the long run. And what I remember about Peter Clarke, whose gravestone I am now trying to read, was his kindness and droll sense of humour – and that funny chuffy voice. His stone tells me he died on 25 November 1987, aged ninety-one, ‘in the 65th year of his profession’. That means he was seventy-six when the Society left Kelham, which must have been tough for him, because he loved the place. ‘Profession’ relates to the ceremony, a bit like a wedding, at which a novice, whom we might think of as engaged but not yet married to the community, professed his vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, and committed himself to the Society till death.

Each gravestone here tells how long the dead man had been professed in the Society. Most of the ones I remember were fortunate to die before the exodus from Kelham. I am particularly glad to see that Brother Edward did not live to see the move. He died in September 1965, aged seventy-eight, in the sixty-sixth year of his profession. Lay brothers in the Society,

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like non-commissioned officers in the Army, were the men who kept the system functioning. Edward was head gardener at Kelham, and a critic of sloppy work from the students. Since the Society hired no outside help, everyone pitched in to keep the place going. There were two types of work that no student escaped. ‘Departments’ were daily household chores, done after breakfast before study started, such as washing dishes, clearing up the refectory and sweeping corridors. ‘House lists’ were longer afternoon chores lasting a couple of hours, which might involve working for Brother Edward in the grounds, mucking out the piggery near Forty Acre, or scrubbing and polishing floors in the House. Two afternoons a week were dedicated to compulsory sport for everyone, football in the winter, cricket and tennis in the summer. The whole thing operated with military precision, though it was bells not bugles that summoned us to our duties. Suddenly I have an image of Brother Edward sitting on the big Atco motor mower, his spectacles glinting in the sunshine, going round and round the cricket pitch, getting it ready for the season.

Here’s Brother Hugh. He died at eighty-one in 1957, while I was in Accra, in the sixty-first year of his profession. Hugh Pearson spent his life at Kelham, and was its indispensable handyman. A small, bent, scuttling figure, he was an authority on the Victorian plumbing system of the old house. He was known as ‘Shoosty’, because of the sibilant way he talked through ill-fitting false teeth – not that he said much, though he chortled a lot. Father Peter, who considered him a saint, once claimed that when there was a full moon his temper was vile.

Here’s Father John Scutt. I remember him. He was a small, compact man, nimble on his feet. He taught us boxing in the Cottage, and gave us exercises to develop our biceps, feeling

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them at intervals to see how they were growing. I remember his verdict on mine after one examination: 'Small,' he said, 'small, but hard.' He died in October 1969, aged seventy-nine, in the forty-sixth year of his profession. Here is Richard Roseveare, the man I spent two years working for in Accra when he was bishop there. I am not sure when he left Ghana, as the Gold Coast became after Independence. Standing before his gravestone reminds me of Independence Day in Accra in 1957 and seeing Kwame Nkrumah hailed as the Great Liberator. Richard Roseveare, a great fan of Nkrumah in those blissful early days, later became critical of him as his megalomania turned him from freedom fighter into tyrant. That's when Richard was forced to leave and return to Kelham. A commanding figure, it must have been hard for him coming back, especially since his return coincided with the crisis that led to the departure of the Society. Anyway, here he is. His gravestone tells me he died in April 1972, aged sixty-nine, in the forty-fourth year of his profession, and three months before they decided to abandon Kelham. He got out just in time.

Stephen Bedale, died on 1 March 1961, aged seventy-nine, in the fortieth year of his profession. I revered him. He was Father Director while I was here. Tall, stooped, lean. The face of an eagle. 'Far ben wi' God,' they would have said of him in Scotland in the old days. And he had family connections with Scotland, with Inverness, according to my fellow student Aeneas Mackintosh, who came from there himself. I would conjure up a difficulty when I was a young novice, just so that I could take it to him and watch him look piercingly at me as he spoke. I remember wanting to be like him: austere, holy – a saint.

Implicit in all the devotional books I devoured at the time was the idea that sanctity was something I could achieve with

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practice: I could build myself into sainthood by my choices and actions. What I was actually good at was looking the part, staying in chapel longer than others and self-consciously cultivating what I imagined to be the unself-conscious demeanour of a saint. I thought that it would look like Stephen Bedale, before whose grave I am now standing. I think he liked me, the zealous young Scot. What would he make of me now, I wonder? Disappointed. He'd be disappointed in me. I hadn't stayed the course. I'd drifted, and not just from Kelham, maybe even from the Faith itself. I stay with him longer than with anyone else here. I scrape some of the lichen off his gravestone. Dead fifty years, and I can see his face, hear still his dramatic asthmatic delivery as he lectured on Paul's Letter to the Romans. An uncompromising man. Yes, he'd be disappointed in me. I'm disappointed in myself, despite knowing that – being who I am – I could not have done otherwise. I scrape off more lichen and move along.

Here's one whose funeral I clearly remember. Brian Sim's gravestone describes him as an 'associate', the term used to describe students and former students who were not members of the Society. He died in November 1954, aged twenty-five. I had been back in the House for a year after National Service in the army, and I can remember how alarmed we became at changes in Brian's behaviour as the Michaelmas term wore on. Normally reserved, he became uninhibited and talkative, before lapsing into a coma induced by a brain tumour. His death was a shock to the community, and he was given a full Society funeral, a solemn requiem mass that concluded with his coffin being shouldered out of the chapel by his fellow students, while we all chanted the Russian *Kontakion* of the Departed:

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Give rest, O Christ, to thy servant with thy saints:  
where sorrow and pain are no more;  
neither sighing, but life everlasting.  
Thou only art immortal, the Creator and Maker of man:  
and we are mortal, formed of the earth,  
and unto earth shall we return:  
for so thou didst ordain, when thou createdst me, saying,  
Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.  
All we go down to the dust;  
and, weeping o'er the grave, we make our song:  
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.<sup>5</sup>

The whole community, about a hundred and sixty of us, including the boys from the Cottage, followed Brian's body out of the chapel into the November mist drifting off the river, across the quadrangle, round the west side of the House onto Apostles' Walk, to lay him in the earth. Fifty-five years ago and remembered now by me in the penumbral quiet of this graveyard in the middle of England. Suddenly, I feel cold. But I am not yet ready to leave. There is another grave I must find, another death I remember.

I am pretty certain it was at Halloween 1950. I was well into my third year in the Cottage and was keeper of the Cottage Log or diary for that Michaelmas term. We had been informed that Father Kelly, the Founder of the Society, was dying. Even those of us who had never seen him in the flesh knew that he was still an important presence in the House, confined to his room on B corridor, looked after by student 'batmen', including Aeneas Mackintosh, the only other Scot at Kelham. A day or two before he died, a little printed card appeared in everyone's place in chapel, containing his last message to us: 'The angels



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will look after you.' Angels were God's messengers. The Society of the Sacred Mission kept its Patronal Festival on 29 September, the feast of Saint Michael and All Angels, because its work was training God's message boys.

Herbert Hamilton Kelly, also known as HK or the Old Man, who in old age looked a bit like George Bernard Shaw, was born in 1860, the third son of a Church of England vicar, described as a non-quarrelsome Evangelical.<sup>6</sup> After Manchester Grammar School, he trained as an army officer at Woolwich, but increasing deafness made a military career impossible. While at Woolwich he had an Evangelical conversion, which prompted him to go to Oxford as the first step to ordination. Like some other geniuses before him, he did not fit the Oxford system – or any system, for that matter – and came away with a fourth-class degree in history, thereby justifying the rumour that Oxford gives plodders a third, while keeping the fourth for flawed brilliance.

It took Kelly a while to find his purpose in life, but he knew always that it would involve organising the power inherent in community to achieve a great end:

ever since I was a cadet at Woolwich studying the art of war, I had been haunted by the dream of organised power . . . every part, large or small, grappling with its ever changing and different problems by its own independent intelligence and yet concentrating its determination under disciplined direction upon the attainment of one simple and common aim.<sup>7</sup>

The convoluted intensity of that passage says much about this complex man, who was always haunted by a sense of personal

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failure yet founded an institution that changed the lives of hundreds of boys and young men. Originally invited by the Anglican Bishop of Korea to train men for missionary work in the Far East, he was soon diverted into establishing a community that would, to quote the words of a Cambridge don at the time, ‘make clergy of the humbler classes’. Kelly was not romantically attracted to the monastic life for its own sake, as I was later to become, but he did think that a community of men, committed to the traditional vows of holding all things in common – poverty; celibacy, remaining unmarried so that they could concentrate all their efforts on their work; and obedience, the submission of their wills to a common purpose – was the best way to achieve the vision that had ignited his imagination. The Society of the Sacred Mission was inaugurated in 1893, as Kelly put it:

to start a college which would train for the ministry young men with no money and no special education . . . I was expected to follow the customary system. I never dreamt of doing so . . . These men were going to be teachers of a faith, given in a Creed. This is said to be correct, and that incorrect, but I do not care about these words. I would rather ask, why is this doctrine vital, and that fatal, to a man’s soul and capacity to live? Someone said it was, and he ought to know. Very well, we must go to him, and find out why he found it so; then each man must look into his own soul, find in his own life its questions and difficulties, its perplexities and diversities.<sup>8</sup>

The Society started its life in south London, and then moved from the distractions of the city to Mildenhall in Suffolk. When

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that was outgrown they found Kelham, dismissively described by Kelly in these words:

it is Gilbert Scott insanity on the model – or rather a previous model – of S. Pancras Hotel – one endless waste of paint, gilding, granite columns, vaulted ceilings and the *vilest* gothic. Extravagant, tasteless, unfeeling. Every capital throughout the house carved elaborately and vilely – with the sole object of spending money.<sup>9</sup>

HK always exaggerated, and there is little doubt that he came to love Kelham, though probably more for what was achieved in it, than for the setting itself. He called the community he had gathered together, which included boys and men from ‘the humbler classes’ as well as the professed members of the Society, ‘an idea in the working’, and it always had about it a sense of dynamic improvisation. Kelly had three characteristics that inhered themselves in the ethos at Kelham. A reverent agnosticism about all human claims, including morals; a tendency to teach and meditate in paradoxes; and a flippant attitude towards religion allied to a total commitment to the reality of God.<sup>10</sup> It all came together here at Kelham, where it took root, flourished gloriously for several generations, began to fade, and then was pulled violently from this ground. All that remains now is this graveyard and his gravestone, which I have just come upon.

Herbert Hamilton Kelly

Called to his Rest

31.X.1950

Aged 90

In the 57th year of his Profession

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I had remembered correctly: it was All Hallows' Eve. I stand for a minute or two longer before making my way out of the graveyard back onto Apostles' Walk. I am still not sure what it is that keeps pulling me back to Kelham, but I do know what it was that brought me here in the first place— a whole lifetime ago.

I

1940-56



## CARMAN HILL

My father always got up well before six. Sometimes, if I was sleeping in the kitchen, I'd watch him from the bed recess when he didn't know I was looking. I would notice how quiet and economical he was in his movements. The kettle goes on first to make a cup of tea, which he drinks standing up. Milk, no sugar. He takes nothing to eat. Fills his pipe with the wad of Walnut Plug he's rubbed up in his hands. Gets it going with one match. Then he stands looking out of the window, his left arm along his waist supporting his right elbow, his other arm upright, holding the pipe in his mouth with his right hand. I wonder what he's thinking as he stands there motionless. It's getting light. What's he seeing? He turns, opens the door quietly. With a sudden pang I realise what a considerate man he is. The door sneaks softly shut behind him. He walks swiftly down Random Street, left along John Street, right down Bank Street to the Leven, then north along the riverbank to the Craft.

This is where he is from, the Vale of Leven, twenty miles north of Glasgow; but he'd been away a long time, walking the streets of Glasgow looking for work in what my mother always referred to as the Hungry Thirties. He'd try anything then to put something on the table for the five of us, including carrying his own weight in cheap coal up tenement stairs. It was the war

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that rescued him and brought us back to the Vale and his job in the Craft, the United Turkey Red factory in Alexandria. War work, he called it. To begin with we sublet two rooms in Bridge Street, but my mother importuned the house factors Burgess and MacLean to rent us a dilapidated old room and kitchen in Random Street. And we were happy there. Glad to be employed again, my father worked all the hours there were in the early years of the war, and we didn't see a lot of him. I too was glad to be back in the Vale, back among hills. And walking them became a passion, a passion that never faded.

It was my mother who started it. During the long double-summertime days of the war, she took me, my wee sister Helen and my big sister Gertie exploring the hills that surrounded us, and Carman was her favourite. We'd walk in through the woods of Poachy Glen, on the edge of Renton, till the path steepened on Millburn Muir and led us to the top, 800 feet up. From up there we could see in every direction, but my eyes always went north first, to Ben Lomond and the great loch over which it presided. At over 3,000 feet, it was massive rather than craggy, and from Carman it looked like a purple ziggurat. It sat halfway up the east side of the loch at Rowardennan, along the road from Balmaha, both stops on the voyage of the *Maid of the Loch*, the paddle-steamer that plied the loch throughout the summer months.

By the end of the war the family walks had petered out. Years of energetic smoking began to tell on my mother; and Gertie, five years older than me, left school at fourteen to work in a chemist shop in Renton and moved out of my orbit. Helen, three years younger, sometimes came with me; but she had pals of her own to play with and didn't always want to join me. I had pals too, but walking was something I preferred to do on



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my own, so even as a boy I was a solitary walker. Sometimes I went up Staney Mollan, near the loch at Balloch, or Pappert Hill over on the east side of the river; but most of the time it was Carman Hill I returned to, back to an early love. And it was always to the north I turned first when I got to the top, always to the Ben and its island-patterned Loch. Yet the view to the south was just as dramatic. The Leven met the Clyde at Dumbarton, a few miles away, and from Carman Hill I saw it coursing into the bigger river at Dumbarton Rock, a plug of volcanic basalt 240 feet high, and since the fifth century a fortress of the British Kingdom of Strathclyde – *Dùn Breatainn*. At school it always struck us as funny that Great Britain got its name from as dismal a town as Dumbarton. Turning to the south-west, I saw the river spreading itself into the Firth of Clyde as it flowed on into the distant sea. The Clyde was a majestic river, but she was a worker as well as a queen, and wherever my eyes followed her, up river to Glasgow or down river to Greenock, on a clear day I could make out the cranes of the shipyards that lined both sides of her banks. And I knew that down below me in a few hours, workers from Denny's in Dumbarton and John Brown's in Clydebank would be getting off the train at Alexandria. Bank Street would be loud with hundreds of men in tackety boots clattering home for their tea after a long shift in the yards. But the Vale of Leven had its own industries, drawn there by the river that gave the valley its name.

From Carman I could see the Leven flooding out of the Loch at Balloch Pier and snaking its way to the Clyde. It is only five miles from Balloch to Dumbarton as the crow flies, but the Leven takes seven serpentine miles to get there. Just down there, due east of Carman, it twisted completely back on itself

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at Cordale Point and again at Dalquhurn Point. And it was swift. We were told that only the Spey was faster, so we should respect our river. The Leven was swift not only because of the colossal force of the water that poured into it from Loch Lomond, the largest lake in Britain, but also because it flowed down, descending twenty-six feet from its source at Balloch to its exit into the Clyde at Dumbarton. All five towns along the river were obvious to me from up here. On the east side, going south from the loch, Balloch – really only a village – was clear; then came the small towns of Jamestown and Bonhill. Coming back west over the river, I could make out the Victorian hump of Bonhill Bridge, the link to Alexandria, the newest and biggest of the five towns of the Vale, a creature of the bleaching and dyeing industries that had established themselves along the Leven early in the eighteenth century. On this side of the river, back up the way to the loch, was the factory where my father worked. It had a Gaelic name, *Croftengea*, after a mighty oak tree that was reputed to have been a gathering place for the local clan, but to everyone in the Vale it was known as the Craft, a rambling, dilapidated dye works owned by the United Turkey Red Company.

Up on my hill, I pictured my father in there, dyeing bales of cloth hour after hour; and I would wonder what colour he'd come home tonight. He'd strip to the waist and wash himself down at the kitchen sink, and I'd furtively examine his small, wiry body. Then he'd eat the meal my mother had cooked for him, and fall asleep in his chair by the fireside. Everyone called him Wee Arthur because he was only a couple of inches over five foot. He was admired by everyone. I admired him too; but I longed for a more heroic figure for a father, big and heavily muscled like our neighbour John McGlashan, a physical training

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instructor in the army and a champion welterweight boxer. Mammy had told me that Daddy had been a long-distance runner when he was young, and that he would walk twenty miles a day without noticing it when he was looking for work before the war. I liked to hear that, but I wanted him to be bigger. He was back in the factory in which he had served his time as a block-printer when he was a boy – but not now as a tradesman. They no longer printed cloth by hand the way he had been taught. Though his trade was obsolete, he'd held on to the short lead mallets that were the tools of his craft. They were kept under the bed in the kitchen recess, wrapped in a bit of cloth. Why did he hold onto them? I wondered. He was a labourer now, maybe what they called a skilled labourer, but he did not complain. Actually, he didn't say much at all, except when he had a drink in him; then he could be talkative and amusing. I liked him, knew he was a good father. He worked hard for us. It was only that I wanted a more heroic figure, larger in scale. But Wee Arthur he was, working all the hours there were, down there in the Craft or *Croftengea*.

Alexandria was not a Gaelic name like *Croftengea*, nor was Renton, down the road from it on the west side of the Leven, the fifth of the towns along the river. The dominant family in the area in the eighteenth century were the Smolletts, the most famous of them being Tobias, the novelist. We were told that our street was named after his most famous novel, *Roderick Random* – whether true or not, it was certainly true that our town got its name from Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Smollett, Member of Parliament for Dunbartonshire in the late eighteenth century, and the son of Alexander Smollett and Celia Renton, after whom Renton was named.

It was easy to make out Random Street from Carman Hill.

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All I had to do was find Alexandria Station, which was at the foot of the street, and trace it back up to where it met Mitchell Street, the crescent that linked Main Street with Bank Street. Random Street was one of the oldest streets in Alexandria. Bits of it went back to the early 1800s, and we lived in one of those bits, a row of red sandstone cottages, each habitation a room and kitchen, a 'but-and-ben' in local parlance. They went back to the days when farming was the only industry in the Vale. There was no lighting in the room at the back where the three of us children usually slept, apart from the window onto the back, but we had a gas light in the kitchen, above the fireplace. You turned the gas on with a wee tap at the side, applied a match flame to the white mantle in the lamp, and a quiet light suffused the room. That room was the scene of many sing-songs after the war. Uncle Harry, my father's favourite brother, was back from North Africa and working beside him in the Craft. They spent Saturday evenings together in the pub at the bottom of the street and brought a carry-out back to the house when the pub closed. The family told me I had a good voice, and I was urged to go through the repertoire of songs I had memorised from the wireless.

Yours till the stars lose their glory  
Yours till the birds cease to sing  
Yours till the end of life's story  
This pledge to you, dear, I bring.

Then there was, 'You Are My Sunshine', and 'Bless This House O Lord We Pray'. As an encore, and without embarrassment, I'd sing:

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My mother's name was Mary  
She was so good and true  
Because her name was Mary  
She called me Mary too.

My mother, whose name *was* Mary, would watch me fiercely, drawing deeply on her Woodbine, eyes brimming. But she was the real singer. Though untrained, she had a true and powerful soprano voice that years of heavy smoking never diminished. She came into her own on Hogmanay, when we gathered round the fire in the kitchen to bring in the New Year. When midnight came and our first-foot had sunk his dram, someone would say, 'Mary, gie us a song' and all eyes would turn to her. She'd stub out her cigarette and start, and it was always the same song she'd start with:

Bonny Scotland I adore thee  
tho' I'm far across the sea  
and when loneliness creeps o'er me  
my thoughts fly back tae thee  
and in fancy I can see ye yet  
your lovely heather braes  
reminds me o' departed joys  
brings back sweet memories  
Scotland, Scotland,  
Scotland aye sae braw  
my hairt is aye in Scotland  
tho' I'm sae far awa  
take me back amang the wildwood  
and roon the rowan tree  
oh take me tae my ain wee hoose

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that's aye sae dear tae me  
sae dear tae me, sae dear tae me  
that's aye sae dear tae me.

And there wouldn't be a dry eye in the room. It was a strange thing, missing Scotland when we were right there in the middle of it, being overwhelmed with homesickness when we were sitting in our own kitchen before a blazing fire. Wherever it came from, this sadness is rooted in the Scottish soul:

how strange was the sadness of Scotland's singing . . . the crying of men and women of the land who had seen their lives and loves sink away in the years . . . it was Scotland of the mist and rain and the crying sea that made the songs.<sup>11</sup>

The wee house my mother seemed to be mourning even as we lived there was 31 Random Street, and it became legendary in our memories. I have an old photograph of it, and am surprised to see that the pavement outside the cottage is not made up. Kerbstones separate it from the roadway, certainly, but the sidewalk is made of packed earth and crushed stones. On the opposite side of the street from us there was a terrace of two-storied tenements, with outside stairs round the back to the flats on the upper floor. They were characteristic of the town as a whole, and reflected its industrial growth. There were some handsome public buildings in the Vale, but most of the houses were in two-storied terraces like the ones in Random Street. Better-off people had bigger houses up the hill above Main Street – on Middleton Street and Smollett Street – but even here there wasn't much that was really grand or pretentious. And everything was near everything else. On a winter morning

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I went up Mitchell Street and across Main Street to Rennie's Bakery to buy rolls. The shop wouldn't be open, so I'd go to the bakehouse round the back, where I'd stand in the warmth and watch them pulling the trays of hot rolls out of the ovens with long wooden poles. There was a Co-op store in Mitchell Street, and a fishmonger's and butcher's on Main Street. We bought sweeties at Goodwin's corner shop at the top of the street, where you could pay into a club for presents at Christmas. There was a greengrocer's in Bank Street, and other shops at the Fountain, a memorial to Alexander Smollett, which sat in the middle of the road between Main Street and Bank Street. But I haven't yet mentioned the buildings that were of particular interest to my mother and me, the picture houses.

My mother was addicted to the pictures, a habit I inherited. She usually took me with her twice a week, and Helen sometimes came too. Gertie was now a working woman with a boyfriend serving his time as a joiner, and they were both keen dancers, so the movie habit never hit my big sister. I got it badly and it stuck. Mammy and I would check the *Lennox Herald*, the local weekly paper, for the listings, but I don't think we were very discriminating and would sit through just about anything. It was an escape into romance and fantasy for me; but what was it for my mother? I suspect now it was the same for her. There was always something eager and unsatisfied about her, as if she was trying to compensate for a great loss somewhere and was filling her pockets before the sweetie shop closed for ever. An attractive, volatile, charismatic woman, she was the emotional centre of my life and I can still recall her most frequent endearment. She told me repeatedly that I was her wee ton of bricks. I loved her and hated to be separated from her. I knew the outline of her history, of course, but it was only after her death that I was able to fill in the detail.

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At ten she had been orphaned and sent to Quarriers Home in Bridge of Weir, south-west of Glasgow. I have a copy of the page from the ledger of admissions that recorded her entry to the orphanage on 4 September 1917.

Mary Johnston Luke born 7th April 1907 at 12 Vernon Street, Glasgow & Violet Vallance born 30th January 1910 at 124 High Craighead Road. Presently in care of Mrs Docherty, 220 Possil Road, Glasgow. They were in contact with Whooping Cough and are just discharged from the Observation House, South York Street. Mary is by a former marriage but known as Vallance.

Father of Mary is James Luke, Iron Moulder, deceased. Father of Violet, William Vallance, No 8254 Pte. 46th Infantry Brigade B.E.F. France; presently in Stobhill Hospital.

Mother Christina Vallance, formerly Luke, M.S. Johnston, 37 years, died at 202 Possil Road on 6th Aug 1917 of Heart Failure. She had been drinking and pawned the children's clothing.

George, 3 years, is in Ruchill Hospital with Whooping Cough. He is to be cared for by Mrs John Kyle, 214 Possil Road by the father's arrangement.

The ledger states that there were no relatives willing to care for the three children, though the entry names an aunt and an uncle. The records at Quarriers note that Mr and Mrs Vallance had taken out an insurance policy against being unable to care for their children. Mr John Gray of the Hand in Hand Insurance



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Society, 150 Hope Street, Glasgow, made the arrangements for the children's admission and for the appropriate allowance to be paid to Quarriers, then known as The Orphan Homes of Scotland. They also record that before his return to France, Private Vallance arranged for George's admission to the orphanage. Violet is noted as having 'Hip Joint Disease', for which she was wearing a plaster cast and using crutches to walk.

A later entry in the ledger goes on to record that on 7 May 1919, Mary and George were discharged to Mr William Vallance, then living in a 'damp' basement room at 30 Kelvinside Avenue, Maryhill. His occupation was given as a Lead Works Labourer, but the recorder noted that he had been unemployed since coming back from the war and was receiving Unemployment Benefit. My mother can hardly have known her stepfather when she and George were released into his care a month after her twelfth birthday. He had been a regular soldier in the HLI or Highland Light Infantry, the famous Glasgow regiment of wee hard men, and he had fought in France throughout the war. She was never explicit about what life was like for her in the basement in Kelvinside Avenue, but we could tell it hadn't been easy. By the time Violet was released to Bill Vallance on 26 September 1926 my mother was long gone. At eighteen she had already met and married my father. Violet and Granda went on living in the room on Kelvinside Avenue till his death in 1959, and Violet long after that. We visited them frequently on trips to Glasgow from the Vale. I remember going to the back of the close, then down a few steps to the basement room, which looked out onto the back court. Violet, who used crutches all her life, kept it 'scrupulously clean', as my mother put it. My memory of those Maryhill visits was of the heroic quantities of Scotch broth Violet made to celebrate our coming.

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They were an unlikely couple, my parents, and not only because she was several inches taller. Where she was volatile, exciting, dangerous, Daddy was stoic, calm, uncomplaining, the steady parent. He was the third of eight children, five boys and three girls, born to Richard Holloway and Mary Buchanan, who had married in 1901. But there was a twist in his story, too. Sometime during the 1920s his father emigrated to New York, taking with him his son Dick and daughters Jessie and Beatty, leaving the other five – Tommy, Arthur, Joe, Gertie and Harry – in Scotland with my granny. There was a rumour that he had found another woman in America. Whatever the truth of it, he never came back, and for the rest of her life my granny was supported by the children who stayed in Scotland. Already intrigued by America from my movie habit, our own history made what lay on the other side of the Atlantic even more compelling. In fact, I sometimes felt I knew America better than Scotland.

What I knew, of course, was the America I saw on the screen at the Strand, the picture house in Bank Street to which I went too frequently, either on my own or with my mother. You could see what was presented on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, then go again when they changed the show for Thursday, Friday, Saturday. There were two houses each night, between which they cleared the cinema, though I sometimes managed to hide in the lavatory during the interval and see the show all over again. Most of my continuous movie memories are from the Strand. It was there I saw the Bud Abbott and Lou Costello comedies during the war, as well as the road movies featuring Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour, whose very name triggered mysterious longings in me. And it was to the Strand we went for the Saturday morning matinees, whose

audiences of children maintained a decibel level that drowned out the soundtrack.

There was another picture house in Alexandria, one that holds a particular memory. The Hall was down at the bottom of Bridge Street, directly opposite Bonhill Bridge. It was in the Hall that I remember clearly seeing *The Jolson Story*, because the event is attached to an electrifying memory. We were a group of twelve-year-old boys, but one of us was more developed than the rest of us and had a girlfriend, whom he brought with him to the Jolson film, and in whose hole, so he claimed later, he had kept his fingers throughout the film. You don't forget a boast as unthinkable as that, one that served to confirm the erotic complexity of going to the pictures. In a society that afforded little privacy, the darkness of the cinema was a good place for sexual exploration. A rigid protocol covered the moves, all of them made by the male: the arm casually draped along the back of the girl's seat; the dropping of the hand onto the girl's shoulder; if this is not repulsed, the hand clasps the shoulder and gently pulls the girl closer (easier if you are in the two-seat divans in the back row unofficially designated for necking couples). If you got that far, kissing could start, though it was years before I knew what else might follow. But the darkness of the cinema also provided scouting opportunities for sexual predators.

We were well equipped with picture houses in the Vale. As well as the Strand and the Hall in Alexandria, there was the Roxy in Renton, a fleapit of last resort entered only if there was nothing worth seeing elsewhere. It was Dumbarton that had the really classy places. Opposite the bridge that brought you into town was the Picture House, high above a grand staircase. It was there I saw *Blood and Sand* in the early years of

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the war, featuring Tyrone Power and Rita Hayworth, though it was Linda Darnell with whom I was smitten. At the other end of the town, in a vinnel opposite the Burgh Hall, there was the Regent, which specialised in Westerns. In the middle of the town, in College Street, there was the Rialto, which I associated with sword and sandal epics, though it was there I saw *The Outlaw*, a Western whose main interest lay in shots of Jane Russell's cantilevered breasts. Though I can't remember the film I went to see on the occasion in question, it was in the Rialto I encountered the darker side of going to the movies.

Dumbarton was a bus ride away, and one I often took on my own in my excursions to the movies. I was heading for a Saturday afternoon show on this occasion, and I was feeling excited about life. Our local weekly, the *Lennox Herald*, had advertised the formation of a children's pipe band. Interested candidates were to sign on the following Tuesday evening at Renton Primary School. I told my parents I'd like to join, and my father said he'd take me up to register next week. Excited, I ran to Main Street for the bus. I got to the Rialto when the house lights were going down, just in time for the film, found a seat on the central aisle, next to a man with a young girl at his other side, and lost myself in the movie. Soon the man had taken my hand in his and was whispering to me. It's cold now the winter's in. You should wear gloves. I'll buy you a pair. I need to measure your hand to find out your size. Then he rubbed my hand up and down his erect penis, which was sticking out of his fly. I pulled away and ran to the lavatory. When I got home I told no one and thought little of the incident, though it must have left its mark, because it is one of the few clear recollections I have of my pre-teen years. On the following Tuesday my father took me to Renton to register for the pipe

band. When we walked into the room I saw, behind the desk, the man from the Rialto. I turned and walked out. Ah've changed ma mind, Daddy, ah canny be bothered. My father didn't challenge me, and we went home. I never did learn to play the pipes, but nor did I ever tell anyone why I bailed out.

But it would have taken much more than that to stop me going to the movies. When I got my pocket money on a Friday it was a toss-up between Kinniburgh's bookshop and the Strand, both in Bank Street, though the movies usually won. I don't want to make pretentious claims about the impact of movies on young plastic minds, but I am certain they had an effect on mine. Maybe all they did was amplify a tendency to romantic daydreaming and discontent with the reality of my life, but they certainly did do that. More significantly, they increased a tendency to watch myself playing a role, rather than unself-consciously getting on with my life. And they instilled a sense that authentic life was a drama packed with struggle against adversity, in which only heroic figures emerged triumphant. Hardly surprising in an imaginative child feeding on a diet of emotional carbohydrates, served up as 'musicals, underworlders, westerners' and described thus by Vladimir Nabokov:

In the first, real singers and dancers had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned, and where, at the end, white-haired, dewy-eyed, technically deathless, the initially reluctant father of a show-crazy girl always finished by applauding her apotheosis on fabulous Broadway. The underworld was a world apart: there, heroic newspapermen were tortured, telephone bills ran to billions, and, in a robust atmosphere of incompetent marksmanship, villains were chased through

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sewers and store-houses by pathologically fearless cops . . . Finally there was the mahogany landscape, the florid-faced, blue-eyed roughriders, the prim pretty schoolteacher arriving in Roaring Gulch, the rearing horse, the spectacular stampede, the pistol thrust through the shattered windowpane, the stupendous fist fight, the crashing mountain of dusty old-fashioned furniture, the table used as a weapon, the timely somersault, the pinned hand still groping for the dropped bowie knife, the grunt, the sweet crash of fist against chin, the kick in the belly, the flying tackle; and immediately after a plethora of pain that would have hospitalized a Hercules, nothing to show but the rather becoming bruise on the bronzed cheek of the warmed-up hero embracing his gorgeous frontier bride.<sup>12</sup>

This was the imaginary world that dominated my inner life and its inchoate longings. The comedies didn't stimulate these identifications and projections to the same extent, but the thrillers and Westerns fortified a tendency, later amplified by religion, not only to hazard roles I was not cut out for, but also to see life in theatrical rather than prosaic terms. Of course, there was a consolatory side to the movie habit that was relatively benign. I think that's what drew my mother. It was the movies that afforded the poor their best way of escaping for an hour or two from grey normality into colourful fantasy. This experience was at its most therapeutically useful during and in the years immediately following World War II, when most of my early movie-going happened. Then something else happened. Not only was I going to a lot of films, I started pretending I had been to movies I hadn't seen.

We used to take two Sunday papers, the *Sunday Mail* and the

*Sunday Post*, the latter for the Broons and Oor Wullie. What drew me to the *Sunday Mail* were the dramatic advertisements for films showing in Glasgow. Glasgow loved the movies, and the city was populated with dozens of cinemas. From time to time, we went up to the city to shop at the big Woolworths and Lewis's stores on Argyle Street and to see the Christmas pantomime at the Metropole near Glasgow Green. Occasionally we went to the pictures. I loved the cinemas on Sauchiehall Street and Renfield Street; much grander than anything in the Vale. So I usually devoured the advertisements in the *Sunday Mail* for 'future presentations' in the Glasgow picture houses. One Monday morning I found myself describing to a group of boys an exciting movie I had not actually been to, but had seen advertised in the *Sunday Mail*. Soon I was locked into a playground routine on Monday mornings, as a group of boys gathered round me to hear about the movie I had 'seen' that Saturday. I became fluent at spinning stories based on the information I'd picked up from the previous day's paper; and I began to feel guilty about it. One night, in an agony of remorse, I woke my mother and poured out my difficulty. It's a' right, Dick, she said. You've jist got a good imagination. Don't worry about it. Go back to bed. And I went back absolved.

So maybe it was a true instinct that led me to choose a vocation that would make me a teller of stories that could be understood as containing their own meaning within them. What mattered to my friends in the playground on those Monday mornings was that I took them out of themselves with my fictions, not that I hadn't actually seen the movies I described to them. Implicit in my fraudulence was a theory of religion, though it would take me years to figure it out. I was to become fascinated by Saint Paul's description of Christian preachers as

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‘deceivers, yet true’. We become *true* deceivers when we understand the purpose of our deceptions, when we admit that the stories we tell carry their own meaning within them, even if there is no objective reality beyond them, no movie actually seen, no stone actually rolled away from the tomb. Trouble comes when we understand what’s going on and start feeling guilty about it. That’s when we become *false* deceivers. To be a true deceiver you have to believe your deception – the movie actually seen, the stone actually rolled from the tomb by an angel. Tell your listeners that there was no movie, no resurrection, but that the story itself has its own power to release them – try to stop deceiving them, in fact – and they will turn on you. This is why many preachers become imposters to themselves out of tenderness towards their hearers.

Some of the films I saw wrestled with these paradoxes, showing just how astute movies could be. One cinematic trope subverted the play-acting response that movies could provoke, by showing how a fraud could move to authenticity and end by filling the part he had started out counterfeiting: there was the adventurer in hiding, pretending to be a priest, who ends by sacrificing himself to save the community he was deluding; there was the man, fleeing from his reputation as a coward back home, who acts himself into bravery on a foreign field; there is the kidnapper holding a young woman to ransom, who falls in love with her and dies to save her life. These paradoxes are all known to religious leaders who feel they have trapped themselves in a role they find difficult to sustain. A time would come when I would nearly die of that covenanted deception, but for years I was to revel in the power of stories to challenge and console.

I don’t think my walking in the hills and my movie-going



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were unrelated. Both were prompted by a need for something that did not have a name, a longing for something that constantly eluded the searcher. How can you make yourself one with a landscape? You can tramp over it, become so familiar with its contours that you never need a map, but you can never possess it. It is always eluding your desire, just out of reach, beyond your possessing. I did not know the word at the time, or the idea that lay behind it, but on the hills I was experiencing *latency*, the sense of something hidden behind what is seen. How can you find words for what is beyond sound, make visible what vanishes when seen? Poets sometimes come close:

. . . did we see that day the unseeable  
One glory of the everlasting world  
Perpetually at work, though never seen?<sup>13</sup>

The hills prompted that yearning. I was looking for something beyond myself, something *out there* that would take me out of *in here* – the life that was going on in my head. I was looking for transcendence, the *beyond* that is sometimes encountered in the midst of things, usually when we are not looking for it. This is the stab of awareness that causes us to turn on our heels to catch the shadow that is behind us. It is the sense of a presence, beyond any knowing, that we reach out towards. And it can be experienced as loneliness. We are missing something, either because it is not there or because we have not yet found it. It was neither the movies nor the hills that gave me what I thought I was looking for. It was something else entirely. And it was a death that brought me to it.

There were a lot of health scares about children during the war, the one I remember being a polio outbreak that had

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everyone in a panic because they thought it might have been passed on in the swimming baths all the children in the Vale went to. A boy across the street from us died of it, the first death I can remember. Random Street fell silent. Mothers clustered anxiously on doorsteps, desperate to protect their children, not sure how to. Then my cousin Mary Ann died, of meningitis. Polio and meningitis killed children, so anxiety tightened, and the street fell silent again. Because my mother was close to Mary Ann's mother, whose husband Dick was away at sea, my mother took over. Come to Cousin Mary's during your lunch-break, she told me the day after the death, that's where you'll find me. I was still there, taking my soup, when the Rector of Saint Mungo's Episcopal Church called to comfort Cousin Mary and make arrangements for the funeral. When he was about to leave he turned to my mother. Who is that young man? That's my boy Dick, he's at the Academy. Can he sing? Dick's got a good voice. He turned to me. Dick, would you like to join the choir at Saint Mungo's? We need a good voice like yours. Aye, I said. Come on Sunday for ten thirty. There's a rehearsal before the eleven o'clock mass. The Rector was an extreme Anglo-Catholic. Tall and thin, with an elaborate comb-over hair style and a face that bore the residual lumps and scars of youthful acne, he was an unlikely hero for a movie-struck boy. Unmarried – and contemptuous of priests who married – he had turned his little red sandstone church into a Catholic shrine, heavy with incense and alive with lighted candles.

We weren't a church-going family. I knew the Holloways belonged to Saint Mungo's, but I can't recall ever going to the little church that sat on the edge of Alexandria at Burn Brae. I can remember school services in Main Street Parish Kirk that ignited no interest in me, and visits to little mission halls that

had midweek meetings for children and were quite good fun. One was called the Ebenezer, and if you kept your eyes shut during the long prayer that followed the lantern slide show of Jesus performing miracles in Galilee, you got a cup of tea and a Paris bun afterwards.

My father was quietly but firmly unreligious, but my mother suggested there was a story behind his present position. He had been very religious as a young adult, she told me, but ‘something had happened’ – something that sounded like the death of a good friend in a fire – and he would have no truck with religion thereafter. So I was pretty much a blank page the day I encountered the Rector in Cousin Mary’s kitchen in Mitchell Street.

On the following Sunday I turned up, as I said I would – and fell in love. It wasn’t with the wee church on the edge of town I fell in love, but with what it pointed towards. It was a place that suggested elsewhere. I had not realised what a lovely word that was, elsewhere. It hinted at a distant gate, slightly ajar, or a slit of light high up in a battlement, drawing me into the possibility of *something else*. And the compelling mystery of it all came with proud claims as to its efficacy and meaning.

I cannot remember much about any doctrine the Rector tried to teach me, though one detail lodged permanently in my imagination. He said that the Holy Catholic Church, of which St Mungo’s was an outpost, existed in three dimensions: militant here on Earth; expectant in Purgatory; and triumphant in Heaven. Thus was I initiated into a drama that chimed with the themes I had picked up in the movies, and with the longings I had felt in my long tramps on the hills above the Vale. Though a drink problem was to see him removed from the

## LEAVING ALEXANDRIA

priesthood long after he left Scotland for England – the reason I have a strong affection for broken priests – he painted a picture of the priesthood as a heroic calling, reserved for those with a *vocation*. A vocation was discerned by an inner troubling that became a summons to be set apart for a great work. It was a call to leave father and mother and all earthly ties and give oneself to a high and lonely task. The priestly vocation seemed a lot like the thrill and glamour of the movies that had captivated me, with their lonely heroes expending themselves to save the lives of others and bring them a contentment they themselves would never possess.

After that encounter in Mitchell Street, I spent most of my spare time at Saint Mungo's or working in the Rectory garden. I was less at home in the Rectory itself, which was often full of men, young and not so young, who came to take part in one of the Rector's festivals. He loved the sanctuary full of servers, of whom I became one, kneeling behind him to lift the corner of his chasuble at the moment of consecration in the mass. My imagination was kindled by the drama he had called me into. He was not surprised when I told him I had heard the summons and wanted to be a priest. Unlikely as it seemed for a boy due to leave school, he did not hesitate for a moment. There was a place in England that took boys like me, but he'd have to speak to my parents before trying to get me in. My mother was thrilled and took a job at O'Hare's fruit shop to pay for the new clothes I'd need for where I was going and the train fare to get me there. My father was compliant: 'We'll no' stand in his way.'

A few months later, not long after my fourteenth birthday, the Rector announced my departure in the parish magazine in his usual high sacerdotal style: