OLD MEN FORGET

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

DUFF COOPER
(Viscount Norwich)

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day.

Henry V

RUPERT HART-DAVIS
SOHO SQUARE LONDON
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CONTENTS

I CHILD AND BOY, 1890-1907 11
II ADOLESCENT, 1907-1913 26
III THE FOREIGN OFFICE, 1913-1917 44
IV THE ARMY IN ENGLAND, 1917-1918 63
V THE ARMY IN FRANCE, 1918 75
VI MARRIAGE, 1918-1922 92
VII PRIVATE SECRETARY, 1922-1924 110
VIII CANDIDATE, 1924 128
IX MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, 1924-1926 136
X IN OFFICE, 1926-1929 156
XI LITERATURE AND POLITICS, 1929-1935 168
XII SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR, 1935-1937 189
XIII FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY, 1937-1938 207
XIV RESIGNATION, 1938 224
XV THE RESPITE, 1938-1939 243
XVI THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR, 1939-1940 258
XVII MINISTER OF INFORMATION, 1940-1941 275
XVIII SINGAPORE, 1941-1942 289
XIX CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER, 1942-1943 306
XX ALGIERS, 1944 314
XXI PARIS, 1944-1945 337
XXII THE TREATY OF DUNKIRK, 1945-1947 359
XXIII THE END OF MY CAREER, 1947 374
INDEX 385
CHAPTER ONE

CHILD AND BOY

1890–1907

Among the many things old men forget are the disadvantages of childhood. The benignity of time lays, sooner or later, upon the noses of most of us a pair of spectacles, and when we look through them towards the past a rosy colouring affects the lenses, so that the world in retrospect appears more beautiful than it does today. My memory, however, is still sufficiently retentive to assure me that childhood was not the happiest but the least happy period of my life.

I divide life by decades. The first covers childhood, the second boyhood, the third youth. Then for thirty years a man is middle-aged, until he hears the clock strike sixty and knows that old age has begun. Of those six decades I can say with truth that I enjoyed each one more than the one that went before, nor am I sure that old age would not be the happiest period of all, if it were not for consciousness of failing powers and occasional reminders of the time limit.

Let it not be thought, however, that I was badly treated as a child. I was, on the contrary, what is commonly called “spoilt.” The youngest of my mother’s five children, and my father’s and mother’s four—she had been married before—I was the first boy, so that my arrival was very welcome. Being a delicate and docile child, I could do no wrong in the eyes of the grown-up people, and if ever I erred it was said that I had been led away by one of my sisters. This secondary rôle in crime was one that I resented, but I repudiated it in vain.

The poet Wordsworth wrote that “delight and liberty” were the “simple creed of childhood.” But in fact a child enjoys about as much liberty as a slave, and the delights of childhood are insipid and transitory, whereas its sorrows, also transitory, are fierce and desperate.

All children are snobs, and the aristocracy of childhood is age.
When the ten-year-old condescends to play with the seven-year-old the latter will cut his six-year-old friend on the playground. I was more than three years younger than the youngest of the three sisters with whom I was brought up, but she would be very kind to me when the two elder ones had no need of her.

This youngest sister I loved deeply and she had a great influence on my life. She was not an easy child to manage. She was wild and imaginative. She told me once that she was not my sister at all but that our parents had bought her out of a circus, a belief which I held for many years and which added romance to my affection.

As she became more unruly the decision was taken to carry out what had long been a threat and to send her to school. Girls were less frequently sent to school in those days, and my other sisters and most of their friends were educated at home by governesses. My youngest sister, Sybil, was therefore sent away to school at the age of twelve when I, aged nine, left for my first preparatory school at Westgate.

My sister returned from school for the summer holidays inspired by one of those excessive affections which girls conceive for a schoolmistress, and also possessed with the belief, strange and new to me, that it was a very good thing to be clever, and that the easiest way to become so was to read books, whether you understood them or not. We started straight away with the plays of Shakespeare, distributing certain parts and taking the others alternately. We learnt duologues by heart—Brutus and Cassius, Romeo and Juliet, Hubert and Arthur, and the final meeting between Macbeth and Macduff. After we had recited this last one to my father we were told that we had better forget it. Among some strong language, it refers to the circumstances of Macduff’s birth, the result of a posthumous cesarian operation. Years afterwards, when we were both grown up and she was married, I asked her whether she remembered the day we gave our performance. “Perfectly,” she said. “Father had a most terrible cough and went behind that screen in the drawing-room.” “Has it ever occurred to you,” I asked, “that he was roaring with laughter?” It never had.

My father was at that time a successful London surgeon. He had had a hard start in life, the youngest of four children whose father,
a barrister, had died before he could make much provision for them. He was educated at the Merchant Taylors' School. His two elder brothers had, like their father and grandfather, been called to the Bar, but my father had chosen medicine as his profession. He was not, I think, scientifically distinguished, but he had beautiful hands, was a skilful operator and much loved by his patients. "Throw physic to the dogs" was one of his frequent quotations, and when he saw me swallowing some tonic, he would say, "What the boy really needs is a pint of champagne and a mutton chop."

His father had had literary as well as legal ambitions. He wrote three plays, one in verse, which acquired the dignity not only of print but also of performance at the Theatres Royal of King's Lynn and Norwich. Having tried to read them, I cannot be surprised that they never made the journey to London. He published also a slender volume containing a sketch of his elder brother Henry's life and of their father's. This elder brother seems to have been a more distinguished barrister than my grandfather, William. Of their father he writes, "He was Charles, now better known as Old Counsellor Cooper, a remarkable man, who, like the late William Cobbett, though of humble origin, possessed one of those minds that will and must, as they have ever done from the time of Deioces of Ecbatana (recorded by Herodotus) till now, elevate the possessor and compel the homage, while exciting the no small envy of inferior intellects."

My grandfather certainly never acquired the simplicity of Cobbett's prose style.

This great-grandfather was admitted a member of Lincoln's Inn in 1782, when he was entered as "Charles Cooper of the City of Norwich, eldest son of Charles Cooper of the same place, merchant." In Norwich every member of the family, so far as I have record, including my father, was born, and when therefore I received the honour of a peerage I felt impelled by piety to take the name of that ancient and famous city.

My mother's family was more illustrious. The Scots take greater interest in genealogy than the English, and, their population being smaller, it is easier to trace relationships. The clan system also connects the humblest in the land with some great chieftain. Whether there ever was a clan Macduff is doubtful, as is the existence of the
Thane of Fife who slew Macbeth, and from whom my mother's family rashly claimed descent.

What is certain is that in the seventeenth century some people of the name of Duff in the neighbourhood of Aberdeen acquired wealth and land, that in the eighteenth century, after the Union, a member of that family sat in the British House of Commons, that he there rendered the sort of silent service which Sir Robert Walpole most appreciated and that he received as a reward for it an Irish earldom. Under the influence no doubt of the old legend, he took the name of Fife, although he owned not a square foot of territory in that county, nor did he ever visit Ireland or take his seat in the Irish House of Lords.

A century later further honour fell to the family, owing to Queen Victoria's affection for Scotland and to the fact that she bought Balmoral, where the Fifes, at Mar Lodge, were her near neighbours. The result was that my uncle, who had increased the wealth that he had inherited, married King Edward VII's daughter and was made a Duke—the last non-royal dukedom, so far, to be created.

What interested me more in my mother's descent than the Scottish noblemen was the fact that her grandmother was the daughter of Mrs. Jordan, one of the ten children that she bore to the Duke of Clarence, afterwards King William IV. Mrs. Jordan is an enchanting figure in the history of English comedy. Hazlitt wrote of her that "to hear her laugh was to drink nectar," and crabbed old Creevey when he found himself staying in the same house with her daughter Lady Erroll, my great-grandmother, described her as "playing and singing her mother's kind of songs in the evening—the merits inferior I must admit to the divine original—and yet certainly like her."

My sister and I were entirely devoted to the theatre at this time and had both decided that it was to be our profession. We were naturally glad therefore to discover that we had an actress and a dramatic author among our forebears.

My father, although he had no conception of the meaning of the word literature, had certain recitations at his command which his father had no doubt taught him. Every summer we spent in the Isle of Arran, where he owned a small house, and the 12th of August
was a day to which we looked forward. He would have been out shooting over dogs all day with his elder brother. His sister, older still, would be staying in the house. It was her birthday. The children all came down to dinner to enjoy the first grouse. There was champagne, but whether in honour of the grouse or Aunt Aggie we never knew. After dinner there were games—dumb-crambo always, charades rarely—and my father would recite the dagger speech from Macbeth, the murder speech from Othello, and the famous speech from the tragedy of Douglas, beginning “My name is Norval.”

I was now moving from the first into the second decade of life. Looking back, I think that my lack of enjoyment in childhood was very likely due to delicate health. I was nervous of other children, took no pleasure in outdoor games, preferring, until I could read to myself, to sit by the fire and be read to, or to look at pictures in books. Although I had probably hardly heard the word, I believe now that as a child I suffered, and that many children do suffer, from intolerable boredom.

But henceforth I had an overwhelming interest in life which centred itself upon the stage and which through the stage was to lead me further. It impelled my sister and myself to go in search of suitable subjects for recitation, so that not only on the annual occasion when my father took the floor, but on other evenings, which we sought to multiply, we could display our talents. In the search it was not surprising that we stumbled upon poetry. That great discovery, which most men never make, must be more precious to those who make it for themselves while they are groping through the forest of literature on an uncertain quest, than to those who are given a map, shown the road and perhaps led along it.

Rhetoric makes the first appeal to boys who have any literary bent. I was fortunate in finding Macaulay’s Lays of Ancient Rome and Ayton’s Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers. Macaulay both in prose and verse is the greatest rhetorician in the language. And who will say that he does not come near to poetry in such a stanza as this?

The harvests of Arretium,
This year, old men shall reap;  
This year, young boys in Umbro 
Shall plunge the struggling sheep;
And in the vats of Luna,
This year, the must shall foam
Round the white feet of laughing girls,
Whose sires have marched to Rome.

I knew the whole of "Horatius" by heart, and of Aytoun I learnt "Charles Edward at Versailles" and "The Execution of Montrose." I think it likely that this early getting by heart of long passages of verse served me well by enriching my vocabulary and so helping me later in public speaking.

There is no poem that lends itself better to the art of recitation than Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," full as it is from beginning to end of dramatic effects. I was naturally led on from learning "The Raven" to reading the rest of the slim volume that contains his verse. I found not what I was looking for, but I found poetry, and by some happy chance I was able to recognise it as such. Poe's place in literature is still difficult to determine. His fellow-countrymen have shown little interest in him; to the English he is the author of "The Raven," "The Bells" and some strange stories; to the French he is one of the great masters whom Baudelaire was proud to serve. To me he gave the key that opened the door into the richest palace in the world.

It was during the Christmas holidays of 1900 that I paid my first visit to Paris, where my eldest sister was finishing her education in a French family. I travelled with my father and mother, my two younger sisters having remained in Scotland. The war in South Africa had been going on for a year. I took little interest in it, and did not, as most boys did, follow the campaign with maps and little flags. When I was given for Christmas a box of soldiers in khaki, which was then a novelty, I deplored the drab colour and exchanged them for some knights in armour, which I found in the toy department of the Magasin du Louvre.

That was my first trip abroad, and the recollection of it is very clearly stamped upon my mind. We stayed at a hotel in the Rue de Rivoli, and the windows of our rooms overlooked the gardens of the Tuileries. My interest in France and French history had already been aroused by The Only Way (a stage version of A Tale of Two Cities), so that I expected to meet a sans-culotte at every street corner.

I can still remember the restaurants we went to and how long my
father studied the wine list. He was a fine judge of claret, but the de-
lay exasperated my mother as much as it perplexed me. I was also
appalled, as I suppose all children are, by the way in which grown-up
people sit round the table talking when the meal is finished. One day
I heard my father during one of these conversations discussing with a
friend the great ill-will and even hatred that then existed between the
English and the French. I was surprised, for I had seen no sign of it
and everybody had been very kind to me. I was taken shortly after-
wards to an entertainment which included what was called the
American bioscope— forerunner of the cinematograph. When
Kruger, the Boer President, appeared he was greeted with loud ap-
plause and enthusiastic cheers. To me he naturally represented the
incarnation of evil. I tried to register my protest by booing and hiss-
ing and shaking my small fist. I felt how right the English were to
hate the French, and I shared their hatred. Then my attention was
caught by the tall figure of a bearded man standing beside me. There
could be no doubt as to his nationality, but he was looking down at
me with an expression of so much amusement and such sweet bene-
volence that all my hatred melted, and I returned his smile.

It is more than half a century ago, but I remember it all very dis-
cinctly. I fell in love with Paris then, and I have been faithful. I have
loved London not less and I have never seen any reason why love
should be exclusive or why fidelity cannot be shared. The events of
my life bind me to these two cities. I have known them both in peace
and war. I have looked from my window in St. James’s Street down
the length of Pall Mall while the first enemy bombs were falling on
the town, and from the same window I have seen the President of the
United States and the Marshal of France who had commanded the
Allied armies driving by in the hour of victory. I have mixed with
the hilarious crowd cheering the outbreak of war in 1914 and have
felt my way through the black-out that fell upon the silent and awe-
stricken masses on the eve of the declaration of war in 1939. I have
known the rapture of arriving in Paris on leave from the front in the
first war, and in the second war I visited Paris in the perfect June
weather of 1940, a few days before the capital fell into the hands of
the Germans. I have lived in London when every night from dark-
ness till dawn the enemy was tearing her to pieces and slaughtering
her children, and have seen her emerge haggard and grim and dauntless from the ordeal. And I have been in Paris on the morrow of her liberation from four years of enslavement and seen the empty streets and bare shop-windows gradually putting on again their old garments of gaiety. I have worked and played in both, yet at the sound of their names I seldom recall these historic memories of the past, but think rather of clear spring mornings in Paris, and misty autumn evenings in London, when I have walked through the streets with causeless exultation in my heart.

Those Christmas holidays of 1900 were, unlike most of my holidays, full of events. On our return from Paris my mother and I went up to Arran to visit the two sisters who had stayed there. We found that they had had enough of that quiet life and were glad to travel back with us. On the morning of our departure the gardener, who came upstairs to carry down our luggage, told us that the Queen was dead. To us children it seemed a tremendous event. We could not have explained what we felt, nor could we know that it was in fact the end of a great epoch. Our minds were brought back to our own interests by the governess, who observed, perhaps spitefully, that all the theatres in London would be shut.

On account of my health I was first sent to school at Westgate for the bracing air, but after two years it was decided that the air was too strong for me and I was removed to Wixenford near Wokingham, which suited me better and where I was happier. But I have doubts about the preparatory school system. It seems a cruel thing to take a child of nine away from his home and the loving care of his mother. Boys between nine and thirteen have little to gain from each other's companionship. The influence of a good home must be better than that of the best school. I have known men who were spared the preparatory school or sent only to a day-school. I believe that they lost nothing and I know that they gained a few years of happiness.

In the life of an Englishman no period is more important than the years that he spends at a public school. He is a child when he goes there and he comes away a man. An older person takes him to the station when he sets forth for the first time, casting a regretful eye at the toy cupboard. When he comes back for good after four or five years he has a cigarette between his lips and the daily papers under his