



*A COVENTRY
JOURNALIST*

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BACK IN DIXIE

So long were the vacations (of six, six and sixteen weeks) that I had actually been at home more than at Oxford. And when I *was* at Oxford, Coventry was never very far out of mind, as anyone who has read all those letters must surely have noticed. When the last term was finished, I settled into my place in the train with some regrets, but also a sense of relief to be going home at last.

The train stood by the platform for a while. It was in no hurry to leave. I could clearly hear the mild conversation of two women in the next compartment, comfortably exchanging gossip in warm rural accents. I could not see them, but there were shopping baskets in their voices. My compartment was empty: no one came and no one went and I was very glad about it. It was an *Adlestrop* moment, the like of which comes rarely these days. When the journey began, I gazed out of the window at the remembered transitional glimpses of country scenes, with an empty mind.

My own transition was brief in time; but between *worlds*. Nevertheless, I did not fully appreciate how much Oxford I would be carrying with me; that I was not going to be fully at ease in the old dispensation, as Eliot's Magus puts it.

I knew well enough that, however greatly I wanted to be back in the home of my birth, life at close quarters with the family who expected so much of me would not be... relaxing. Despite all my warnings not to expect much of my finals, their hopes were still high.

Something drives most people to leave home finally and for ever; there must be an impulse to do it, aided by a little expulsion. Perhaps chaps leave mainly to conform with the rest of their contemporaries. This chapter should be where I examine the Coventry friends whom I knew well, to see what I can discover from them about this urge to go forth and multiply; but I do not think I would have much of value to relate... Me, I was back home with the family, in the place where I was born, 178 BBL.

But the family was soon to leave altogether.

Some years before, I had been strongly and sentimentally resistant to the idea of moving from our true home. (Permit yourself to call up briefly in imagination the spectacle of my father dragging me, a fifteen– or sixteen-year-old who was already bigger than he, away from some anchorage, the lilac tree for example, putting me screaming and kicking under his arm, to carry me off to a new residence.)

Oxford had made me readier to accept a move in 1956. I don't think it ever occurred to me that leaving a home they had occupied for 30 years might be a little hard for my parents too.

Nevertheless, they had been thinking of something better for several years. Now, in 1956, they had found it, in No. 15 Davenport Road. A more modern house, with a large garden, in a good neighbourhood, a step up socially. Not far and downhill all the way to walk into town, a short ride on the bus back up the hill. It was also handy for the bus to Warwick, where Jane was going to school.

We were going up in the world.

It now returns to me that I felt social or snobbish considerations were improper. The parish of St George Coundon ought to have been good enough for us. I have been forgetting what a leveller I was. Vestiges of this attitude remain, like the crumbs of a ginger biscuit, to make me slightly uncomfortable. But I had no right to stay progress any longer. That my Mother was excited by the move silenced any opposition of mine: that there was the opportunity of a much larger *garden* at the new house suppressed my regrets. It cannot be hard for my reader to understand that.

Davenport Road was quite short, running between the Kenilworth Road and Spencer Road. The immediate area included the open spaces of Top Green, the Memorial Park and Styvechale Common, the playing field of KHS – and the school itself. The houses were substantial, Victorian or Edwardian residences of successful lawyers, medical men, manufacturers.

I have described it and the inhabitants in the past tense. Sad to say, wealth and power has generally upped and left its source in Coventry for more pastoral scenes. My

Father once commented that in former times the great men had not withdrawn their presence, but had stayed within the cities, within walking distance of the workers. It's clear to me that he believed all this to have been for the better. I partly understand and agree – but am not able just yet to ask him to develop the argument. The big houses have been converted into nursing homes, flats, private hotels, consultants' rooms – or have been demolished altogether, to make room, with their big gardens, for more intensive exploitation.

Our new home was itself on the site of one of those grander dwellings. It had been demolished by an earlier developer, Adolph Hitler. Its name was The Grange. Our house, Number 15, had inevitably/appropriately been called Grange End. It was a small, post-war semi, hardly more spacious than 178, but with the advantages of location and a very much larger garden. A generous slice of the former acreage of The Grange, it provided scope for vegetables and new fruit trees to delight my Father's heart; room for me as well, to work out the horticultural ambitions which had been growing in my head for many years.

...I shall describe this garden in another chapter

The road was also remarkable for housing eminent clerics. Now, for better or worse, wealth and power have also abandoned the Church of England; but then, the homes of the Vicar of Holy Trinity, the Provost of Coventry and the Lord Bishop himself were there. It was a kind of redbrick Cathedral Close. I'm coming to them.

Neighbours first. Next door were Trevor Berrill and his wife Paddy. Trevor a general surgeon, consultant, Paddy a forceful personality, bridge player at the Coventry Golf Club. Two daughters and a son. I was to give the son a little help with an exam – but it did not take that to make the Berrills friendly people. Living in *The Mount*, on the other side behind high brick walls and dark laurels, was an old man called Norris, of the solicitors Goat Bullock and Norris. If Norris was the junior partner, the Goat and the Bullock must have been very ancient creatures. To my knowledge, I never clapped eyes on Norris. I did see his son on foot once or twice, shambling furtively off somewhere. 'Shambling'? 'Furtively'? I have scraped about in my head for a different,

nicer picture, but these words are the only vestiges that remain, sticking to the side of the bowl, so let the testimony remain, for better or worse. On both sides, the houses were large, detached and a bit remote from the new-comers, Nos. 15 and 17. Old Norris liked his privacy; the Berrills did not really care.

Living in the other half of the building were our closest neighbours, the Webbers: Joyce and Walter. Kind and good people. We got along well with them. An advantage was that the first length of wall which separated our gardens was quite high. So we did not have to talk to them if they happened to be relaxing out there, nor did they have to talk to us. The talking was done at the kitchen doors, which were immediately next to each other.

Mr. W. was a salesman. His firm sent him to sell things, in America. There he committed suicide.

Lower down Davenport Road was another medical man, Irish? And at the corner with Ken. Road were the Prices. John Price, 11 or 12, was discovered to be at the same school as Bill Berrill. Opposite them on the other corner was a Mr. Cotton, manufacturer of miles of carpet underfelt...

That's about as far as I can go with our neighbours – and much good it has done any of us – apart from those clergymen.

Still vaguely wondering if a positive call to offer myself for ordination would come, having an *interest* – some might say an unhealthy interest – in churchy matters, I took note of the clerical gentlemen who were to be our new neighbours. The private life and character of clergymen were always deeply interesting to spinsters, maidens of both sexes.

They have largely been replaced nowadays by 'celebrities', concerning whom whole magazines are published and eagerly scanned. Formerly, the interest in clergymen was quite often promoted by themselves. They had photographs taken to bestow on devotees, of themselves looking earnest, stimulating and clean cut, the low church variety, distinguishable by the all-round, glistening dog-collar, which could denote ministers of almost any sort or degree. The high church article peered shyly from

below the black shirt. Nevertheless, the priest might like to distribute images of himself in biretta and lace, looking rapt and holy.

Another class of person which was generous with photographs was that of Army officer. You must have seen them. If the warrior died in battle, his photograph became the centre piece of domestic shrines.

CANON CLITHEROE

He was the Vicar of Holy Trinity. I called on him once, when I was a reporter and had an interesting conversation with him... I was moved, on a later occasion, to talk to the boys about him. This is what I told them.

March, 1982

Just before I went to sleep the other night, a memory of Canon Clitheroe came into my head – I can't think why... Perhaps I shall find out if I keep talking. I don't expect you have ever heard of him. Let me tell you something about him.

When I first got to recognise him, he seemed a funny kind of chap, both peculiar and ha-ha. You know how it is with boys; they do find grown-ups rather funny. I suppose it's a good job they do, otherwise they would probably find them too frightening. Clergymen – Bishops and Canons and Archdeacons and the like – are especially funny to boys.

Anyway, we used to see Canon Clitheroe going about the town on his little motorbike. He had his long cassock on and that was not very suitable for motorbike riding, so first it had to be hitched up rather higher than is usual, (revealing-off white long johns perhaps, like Bp. Neville Gorton) then came a dirty old mac – with a belt, was it? One of those rubberised riding macs? I can't remember – then there was a little black crash helmet and goggles which he pulled down and finally great black gauntlets. It was a wonder he was able to see or to walk at all to get astride his bike, but he did, and off he went, pop popping away, looking neither to the left nor to the right – a great danger to all the traffic he was.

He was a little man and he spoke with a kind of high, strangled, frothy, upper-class voice.

Canon Clitheroe was the Vicar of Holy Trinity. That's the big church next to the Cathedral. We went there for the Service for Mr. Swallow, as lots of you will remember. It's a fine old church. Perhaps you remember, when the service was over and you had turned round to go out by the big door at the back, the West Door, you could see, high up over the door a very big, round stained-glass window. Well, Canon Clitheroe saw to it that that window was put in.

You see, the old window had been blown out by the bombs in the Blitz. My first memory of that window was of great ugly black boards nailed up across it. It was completely boarded up. And a real eyesore. The good Canon didn't make it any prettier either, because he used to put messages to the people of Coventry all over it in great black capitals. When I went by, I used to glance up at them at first. One was, I think, Be strong in the faith, Quit you like men.

Then after a while I tended to ignore them.

Sometimes things are too big to be noticed. I've found that you can ignore electricity pylons or giant cooling towers in the country scene – they are too big somehow. It can be the same with really big ideas. We can go on our ways underneath them, small as mice and they have little effect on our lives – or so it seems.

Another of Canon Clitheroe's messages was this 'It all depends on me and I depend on God'.

'Oh yes,' I used to reflect as I got back on my bike. You could ride your bike in Broadgate and Trinity Street in those days, but it was a bit steep up the hill of Trinity Street, without gears, bumping over the cobbles, so you usually got off to walk it. (*P.S. 2003 ...and you had to watch out for the remnants of the old tram lines, in Bishop Street. It could be awkward if your wheels became stuck in them.*)

It was only later that I asked myself why Holy Trinity Church was still standing – had not been burnt to the ground, like the Cathedral, by the showers of incendiary bombs that fell on the city in the great blitz. Then I found out.

Have you ever seen the roof of a great church like the Cathedral or Holy Trinity? Have you been up the tower perhaps and looked down? Well, it isn't one roof at all, it's

lots of them, some higher, some lower. Different parts of the building need different shaped hats. To get on to them all, you don't go up just one stair or one ladder and you need to be an expert climber to get from one to another.

Well, old Canon Clitheroe thought about all this and what might happen if there were bombing raids on the City. And he reckoned he would have to do something about it. So he got the advice of the Fire Brigade and he had ladders fixed so that men could get about from one roof to another easily, and he had water tanks and stirrup pumps and buckets and sand and shovels with long handles put up on the roof and he organised the men to be fire watchers and to stay up on the roof night after night – and you can guess who was up there all the time – Canon Clitheroe himself. And when the incendiaries fell on the roof of Holy Trinity, why, Canon Clitheroe and his men were there to meet them, with their buckets and their shovels – and they saved that great church from being burnt to the ground. Do you know, (I learnt this on the one occasion I actually met him to talk to him) when Canon Clitheroe had won the defensive battle, he wanted to go on the offensive. He wanted to attack those devils he said. He wanted to have an anti-aircraft gun put up there on his roof so that he could fire back at them – but the authorities wouldn't let him... It wouldn't have been very Christian after all, and possibly more dangerous to the people of Coventry than German bombers.

It all depends on me and I depend on God. That was his message. And you can see he really lived up to it. There was a job to be done and he didn't look round for someone else to do it – he did it himself. And he was full of faith that God would be helping him.

You know that is perhaps the difference between being a child and being grown-up. Now, it is a very good thing to be a child and there are lots of ways children are better than grown-ups. They are more open, usually, and less arrogant. Jesus said that we must all be like little children and I think he meant in their humility and simplicity. But he did not say that we must not grow up.

And the difference between a child and a grown-up is that a child has things done for him, by his parents, his elders, who protect him and cherish him, but a grown-up has

faced the fact that he is the one responsible and he has to see things through himself. It all depends on him.

So the Canon did his duty and saw the war through and he guarded his church through the years of conflict. It was quite simply, and certainly for him, a battle against the forces of wickedness, and, glory to God, the end of the war came; the right prevailed.

On to the next task, the window was to be restored; no easy matter, not done as soon as said, but requiring time and effort and a lot of money. But it must be done. Work went on. The ugly black boards were taken down at last and there it was.

A picture of Christ on the Cross – not hanging there, defeated, but in Glory and triumph having vanquished sin and death and reigning as King and Victor. That's the way Canon Clitheroe saw him, and sees him now I trust.

We, naughty children, used to laugh at Canon Clitheroe and his funny way of speaking and his funny get-up, and the way he used to go charging about pop popping on his motor-bike. If only we had had the eyes to see, the angels, the armies of them, the horses and the chariots of fire, that accompanied him as he went.

It all depends on me and I depend on God.

NEWSPAPER REPORTER

...My attentive reader will have noticed that just a while ago, the clause 'when I was a reporter' slipped into the narrative. I had better explain.

Since coming down from Oxford, I had been in slack water. Moreover, the boat was, shall we say, rudderless, and lacked an engine. My double third in Mods and Greats, not achieved without effort, was evidence enough that I was not a scholar. I was no athlete, either; and my juvenile acting ambitions had evaporated like morning mist over a pond. Self-confidence and drive are needed to compensate for a small talent in that activity.

There were few pointers to the course into which I should direct my future life. I had learnt very soon after leaving school that it was no one else's job to direct it for me...

...Correction: I still quite firmly believed that He would make it plain. He was maintaining silence on the matter, it seemed, but would get round to it, I trusted...

Meantime, I had to do *something*, to earn a regular wage.

The notion that I might become a newspaper reporter floated up to the surface, like some dead thing. It had been inflated by that single piece of reportage I had persuaded the BBC to use in my last term.

Why not try newspapers? Might be good at it, I thought.

In the days of his youth (1920s), my Father had been acquainted with Vaughan Reynolds, who was to become editor of the *Birmingham Post*. Now he wrote a nice letter to him, securing an appointment.

Like the man Boot in *Scoop!* I knew nothing at all about the reporting business. The great man received me kindly in his impressive surroundings and spoke grandly of *leader writing*. His preconception had obviously been 'Oxford leader writer'. As I never took much interest in the outside world, the interview probably disabused him, for he hastily explained that he had nothing to offer. The best place to start was at the bottom (as it is). So we parted. I think I already knew I was not cut out for the work.

He must have made a few telephone calls however, for very soon afterwards I was being interviewed by the editor of the *Coventry Standard*, part of the group of papers to which the Post belonged, owned by Lord Iliffe. It was a weekly broadsheet, a very *local* paper, complementary in its way to the daily *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, which was much more important and of much wider circulation, though described by smart elements as the most boring paper in Europe.

The *Standard's* offices – and press – were housed in wonderfully antique quarters in Greyfriars Lane, overlooking the rear of Waters Wine Merchants. In my memory it smells of printer's ink. To this imagination might add pleasant beery or vinous odours from Waters', instilled through cracks in the windows. Imagination and likelihood, not memory, has twisty stairs, small rooms and dusty windows that admit little light. Not that there was much light outside, during the cold, wet days of the autumn and winter I spent there.

The reporters' room was at the top of the house. It was occupied by two apprentice lads who, although younger and without an iota of classical learning, knew far better than I how this business works. They were making their way in the trade, attending classes, learning shorthand & typing, making a compilation of all the 'stories' they had had printed and sticking them in books which would accompany them when they sought to impress prospective employers and gain elevation to the next rung of the journalist's ladder.

They understood no better than I what I was doing there – and I guess they rather resented my sudden arrival through channels unknown to them, till they realised that I was going to be no threat or obstacle to their own progress, so they could sit back and wink at each other over my simplicity. But they were willing to explain to me elementary facts which any fourteen year old office boy has at his fingertips in a week or so after leaving school.

What was the *Chapel*, for instance, and who was its *Father*?⁶⁵ Once again, the matter of union membership entered as a factor of employment. A union card was essential, if one intended to become a journalist proper. For some reason I did not qualify. I would not have been keen, anyway, or was advised against. Perhaps it was that I was still on trial, still deciding for myself – and able to be dismissed without any fuss. So I missed all that fun. Nevertheless, I descended from time to time to the dark and inky bowels of the house, where the chapel rules prevailed most strongly, to fetch copy from the printers for editing. (I think they were called pulls.)

Inky themselves, they were taciturn, rather than surly. It was a small establishment and I guess that they had questioned my employment too, though I believe the printers and the journalists had separate unions. It is likely that class rivalry came into it. The editorial staff thought themselves a cut above; but the printers knew they did all the real work. And truly the Compositor's skills were very great, type setting by hand and making the antique press to function.

As a treat, and because he had not yet informed himself of the extent of my talents, Edgar Letts sent me to report on a grandiose and interminable conference on the

⁶⁵ The newspaper's branch of the Union, and its convenor, I suppose.

West Midlands Conurbation. It was highly narcotic and unmemorable. Nevertheless, never having heard the word before, I *did* form an idea of the concept, *conurbation*.

I returned to produce a report in which I attempted to make sense of it all. Having read it through, Edgar patiently tried to explain how to go about writing a story.

One must select something startling which might appeal to or alarm a local readership of elderly persons and cowherds whose interests did not usually extend beyond the end of the street; put this nugget into the first paragraph and then go on writing until the requested number of column inches was done. Hardly anyone would/could read beyond the first paragraph.

Dear reader, I still cannot accept the arrogance of this position. What do the buyers of newspapers want, other than to get real value from reading? Besides, as you must have judged, it is not as if I have complicated thoughts or express myself in any other way than simply.

I expect that Edgar was quite right about his readership: I know that I was not prolific, efficient, adaptable enough to be much use to him.

What else did I do, after the editor had discovered my real capacity?

I contributed a few short sticks (a newspaper term: the reporter's product is valued and measured in column inches) on items of local interest – the Wyken Pippin apple, for example, which is said to be a parent of the Cox and used to be commemorated in the name of a pub on the Walsgrave Road (the name has probably been changed to something more in keeping with swinging Coventry). Coventry God Cakes, which are to be eaten at Trinity tide, triangular in shape, to inform children about that Mystery, made of puff pastry filled with a kind of mincemeat, very like Banbury cakes. Once they were so well known that those triangular bits of land which are left at the tee junctions of lanes used to be referred to as *god* cakes. That sort of thing.

Edgar used to send his reporters out into the streets to '*gather news*'. This meant button-holing passers-by, questioning them. 'Everyone has a story', he said; possibly with some truth; but the ones to whom I spoke were reluctant to impart theirs and I came back empty handed. My colleagues had better luck.

There was a regular feature with some such heading as ‘Fifty Years Ago’ – or ‘A Hundred...’ I was called on to write this from time to time. It meant going into the Library, to find something interesting that had happened. These visits were entirely delightful and always far too brief.

The Library was kept in the most peaceful room of the whole place, smelling of very old newsprint and leather bindings, soundless but for the noise of trapped flies buzzing against the grimy window panes, falling dust. Stored on tall shelves against one wall were bound volumes of the precursors of the present paper – the oldest was called *Jopson’s Mercury* and dated back to 1710. As sources of history, they are priceless, and I wonder if anyone has yet studied them. One day, if I am spared, the truth about my fabled ancestor, Coventry Joe, the swimmer known throughout the canal network, who rescued people from drowning, or fetched out their bodies, may be discovered in those yellowing pages.

Edgar devised a scheme. A basket of delicacies was offered to anyone who could prove they were the oldest/longest married couple in the city. Claimants sent in and we had to interview them, travelling to the far corners. Thus we fished inexpensively for their ‘stories’. The Hunt for the Oldest Married Couple continued for weeks before Christmas that year...

I even wrote a story, of my kind, about one encounter – I had been disturbed by the manner of the Wife, *should scan it* – which was taken for the first edition/issue of ‘*The Umbrella*’, a new magazine for the arty kind in Coventry. E. M. Forster was present for the opening party. I was introduced to the old man; but he did not have anything to say about my piece. Why should he even have read it? I did not think of asking him; had never read anything by him either. Could not get past his atheism.

I was regularly sent to the lunch time meetings of the Rotary Club of which Edgar was a member, to report on the talk. The fare was... unimaginative? The seating was uncomfortable, numbing even (I always seemed to get the legs of the trestle table) and the talk was usually rather short of matter, also numbing. I would return racking my brains how to develop it. Lack of shorthand was a continuing obstacle.

There were long periods of boredom – though one evening I remember, when I was still there, finishing something, alone, as I thought, a secretary came in, interrupting. She perched on the desk where I was working and engaged me in conversation. There was something purposeful, disturbing about that...

...The telephone would ring in the reporters' room on, say, Tuesdays, Wednesdays. My colleagues would lift the receiver, pencil in hand, listen, make a few notes.

One day, I picked up. A rural voice was at the other end announcing the market report from Stratford Stock Sales, or Rugby. 'Are you ready?' A stream of incomprehensible details then issued – 'Slow trade in lambs, down on last week' (giving the number) 'lightweight tegs sold to w shillings, average x shillings, medium to y shillings, average z ' and so on through all the categories of animals on sale. I scribbled away, filling in sheets of notebook – frequently interrupting to ask for repeats.

'He will never print all that,' was the comment, when I had finished.

For the future, while the flow of information continued, I learnt to make encouraging grunts of assent, while noting down nothing except the general remarks on the state of the market. It got by; but I still wondered if our reporter on the scene was disappointed to discover what had become of all his effort, and what the readers in their remote farmsteads made of it, as they pored over their paper by the light of smoky oil lamps. It was, after all, the sort of thing they bought the paper for.

You will have seen it coming, my final interview with the editor. To do him justice, he had been making room to please someone else for a reporter the paper did not need, could not afford. We were both rather relieved to see the end of my short career in journalism.

But ever since, I have always treated newspaper reporters (esp. local ones) with an insider's lack of respect; caution too, knowing that anything I tell them will be misheard or re-invented, for the sake of a 'story'.

I was still ambitious to write... Something wanted to get out of me. I did know that for me this endeavour would mean more than mere aspiration and the unsought luck which had seemed to serve me through schooldays.

Writing requires very firm self-belief and a kind of brute strength. I did indeed spend long hours over it, finicking about words and phrases, suffering the tedium of typing and re-typing. Possession of a word processor in those days would have helped me enormously; also probably have increased the great heap of mediocre fiction.

I spent long solitary hours scribbling down *ideas* for radio plays, books and, very occasionally, poems. Some were taken to Nicholson, who seized them with gratifying alacrity, went through them critically with his usual deep concentration. I tried to carry out this analytical process for myself, rarely coming to satisfactory conclusions. It was only after the lapse of many years that I could see some of the deep faults. Such discoveries have made me even less certain; most specially about anything extended.

As for publication, I went to the bankside from time to time, a lonely rain soaked angler, dangling his bait. But usually the Editors and Producers, like old carp deep below the surface, nudged, but did not take the lure. The rare gudgeons of success I hooked, and some kind letters of encouragement accompanying the rejection of one or two submissions to the BBC were sufficient to keep ambition alive.

I must write at greater length somewhere about the *Stroud Guide Book*. This book was well furnished with brown photographic illustrations, so as a young boy I used to pore over these.

In the (not so idle, perhaps) times after I left Oxford, I became much taken by a project to devise a kind of play for radio based on this book. The supposed personalities behind the charming, period adverts for the shopkeepers of Stroud who had helped pay for the publication were developed to become our guides to the district. I remember causing Dan Brown, who advertised his Sports shop, to introduce the golf courses, 'Freedom from whins etc'. became a mantra. I used the exact words of the guide book text and of the adverts. Dan's imagined bluff and boozy character was balanced by that of the nice lady who had the costume shop. They were guiding a young couple called Gresham and Julie. (Sounds of the wind on the tops of hills and Dan's motor bike and side car.) After dashing hither and thither to view the attractions of the neighbourhood, delays for refreshments in what Dan and the Book term 'hostelries', and occasionally losing their way as a result, they and the production reached the grand

conclusion when they came to a famous spring at Bisley which bore the inscription from the Psalm. ‘O ye Wells, Bless ye the Lord, Praise Him and magnify Him for ever.’ (Angelic choirs.)

It was before its time for the BBC producer, who saw only the idea in outline – and I did not manage to see it through to completion, typing and re-typing⁶⁶.

But a series of six short, wistful, wispy romantic tales *were* published, under an assumed name to avoid the shame, in that polite national magazine *The Lady*⁶⁷. The Editor was evidently won over by them and even suggested that they should be rehashed and published in book form. That was a non-runner. Maybe I was simply too easily beaten, not hungry enough. I bowed before the forceful comment of a publisher’s reader. (I wonder who she was...) Her employer helpfully passed it on to me. She had written that such ability as I had was not sufficient for any substantial work.

‘John Phipps

Until this author has evolved a clearer, stronger line theme, characters, construction, I don’t think he will make a novelist. These are a series of delicate stories recording the courtship (if I can use so crude a word) of a young girl, Belle, and a young man, Richard, who wishes to become a clergyman, at Oxford. The first one is excellent – sensitive and evocative; but this delicate form suits the short story form and will not stand up to longer treatment; the following stories, which continue the courtship, sag and do not hold.

A novel is a large structure and needs a strong form. This author’s talent is fragile and glancing, not equal to novel form as yet.’

The ‘as yet’ was kindly, but it sounded pretty final to me.

I kept all this to myself, as far as possible, as I did not want people at home to share, and so magnify, the disappointment. But now, looking back, I know that I had never seen myself as a novelist. Whatever was in me would come out as something rather different from a novel or a play. (Less J.S. Bach, more Fredk. Delius.)

...But reporting had been a cul de sac, and far less engaging than this scribbling. There were other important activities too: gardening; going to see my friends; golf, (new passion), singing (very old); going to church...

...Ah yes, church again.

⁶⁶ I’ve copied an article about the Wells of Gloucestershire from the www. It’s in the computer, not far away.)

⁶⁷ See ‘the Virgin and the Unicorn’; appended.