



My
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PAPER CHASE

True Stories of Vanished Times

HAROLD EVANS

"My Paper Chase celebrates bygone glories and dwells on the truths of good journalism that still obtain." — NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

ALSO BY HAROLD EVANS

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Credits for endpaper photographs: taking an oath (top left): Dafydd Jones; with Tina on *Queen Mary 2*: Cunard; Rupert Murdoch (under *Good Times, Bad Times*): Jane Bown; caricature: Gerard Scarfe; with Tina (under Murdoch): George Brown; with Henry Kissinger: UPI; ship launch (bottom left): Colin Theakston; skiing: Bryan Wharton; sketch of St. Ann's (top right): *Manchester Evening News*, Bert Hackett; with President Clinton on Air Force One: Official White House Photo; thumbs up on winning Crossman trial, with Mrs. Anne Crossman and Graham Greene: Press Association; RAF office with German prisoner Walter Greis (next to *Traveler*): Herbert Gale; editing: Neil Libbert; St. Mary's Road Central School (bottom right): courtesy of Newton Heath Historical Society and Peter Charlton.



Copyright acknowledgments appear on page [549](#).

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Dedicated to my granddaughters, Emily and Anna

Contents

Copyright

BOOK ONE: Vanished Times

- 1: Grains of Truth
- 2: Getting Up Steam
- 3: First, Know Your Enemy
- 4: Hot Metal
- 5: How I Won the War
- 6: Non Nobis Solum
- 7: The Sting of Disraeli's Gibe
- 8: Stop Press
- 9: Why Aren't Their Women Wearing Our Frocks?
- 10: Adventures in the Land of Opportunity
- 11: From Delhi to Darlington
- 12: Just Causes

BOOK TWO: Scoop, Scandal, and Strife

- 13: The Rolls-Royce of Fleet Street
- 14: The Third Man
- 15: Children on Our Conscience
- 16: Space Barons
- 17: Death in Cairo
- 18: Divided Loyalties
- 19: Showdowns
- 20: My Newfoundland

Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Principal Sunday Times Books

Bibliography

About the Author

The Vanished Newspaper Office

If you had x-ray eyes and looked on any newspaper building in most of the years of our vanished century, this is what you'd have seen behind the brick facade: the stacked floors of worker ants and machinery transmuting the typewritten word into newsprint. Starting in the sixties in the United States but delayed until the eighties in Britain, computer terminals replaced the typewriters and editing pencils (1st floor) and the Linotype machines (3rd floor).

Basement

The reel room and the presses. One pressman is objecting to the shape of the plate he is supposed to fit on the rotary press and another is having too good a time to notice a coworker has disappeared.

Ground floor (left)

The foundry casts plates for the presses in between a hand of cards. Right, the newspaper bundles on the way to the world.

1st floor

On the left, the reporters and copy-takers; center, the subs; and right, the wire room collecting agency dispatches and photos. The big man in the subs room collaring a copy boy is the chief sub-editor, who designs the pages and gives orders to galley slaves of sub-editors who sit in front of him with their spikes and glue pots and perplexities of copy-fitting and headline writing. They feed edited copy to the pneumatic tube, sustained all day by infusions of tea.

3rd floor

Linotype operators

Top floor

Proofreaders

I've long treasured the drawing by an art student at Manchester University (who preferred to be known just as "Caesar"). Attracted by his work in the student publications when I was covering the university, I commissioned him to come to the *Manchester Evening News* to sketch the operations for my stint in the fifties as editor

of the spoof newspaper the *Manchester Guardian and Evening News*, put out during the university's annual "Rag" week of raising money for charity. "Caesar's drawing" prefigured Martin Handford's "Where's Waldo?" puzzle games—and, yes, I'm in there somewhere, in prominent spectacles.



Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own
governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

—*James Madison to W. T. Barry,*
August 1822

BOOK ONE

Vanished Times

1

Grains of Truth

The most exciting sound in the world for me as a boy was the slow whoosh-whoosh of the big steam engine leaving Manchester Exchange station for Rhyl in North Wales. Every year as summer neared I counted the days to when the whole family—six of us then—would escape the bleakness of northern winters, taking the train for a week at the seaside, buckets and spades in hand.

I was nearly twelve the summer I saw the bodies of the soldiers scattered about the sands.

The soldiers were so still, their clothing so torn, their faces so pale, they looked as if they had died where they fell. And yet they had escaped death, unlike thousands of their comrades left on the battlegrounds of northern France; thousands more were on their way to years in German internment camps. The men I saw were the lucky ones, a few hundred of the 198,229 of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) who just days before in May–June 1940 had fought their way to Dunkirk. Twenty-four hours before we saw them, they had been on that other beach, being hammered from the air by Stuka dive-bombers, strafed by the machine guns of Messerschmitts, rescue ships ablaze offshore, and every hour the German panzers closing the ring. They were a forlorn group, unshaven, some in remnants of uniforms, some in makeshift outfits of pajamas and sweaters, not a hat between them, lying apart from the rows of deck chairs and the Punch-and-Judy show and the pier and the ice-cream stands. Most of the men who were evacuated had been sent to bases and hospitals in the south of England, but several thousand had been put on trains to seaside resorts in North Wales, where there were army camps and spare beds in the boardinghouses. The bulk of the men sprawled on the Rhyl beach were members of the Royal Corps of Signals attached to artillery regiments; some sixty-four officers and twenty-five hundred other ranks had been sent to the Second Signal Training Center at Prestatyn, which shared six miles of sand with Rhyl.

When we set out for the family holiday, we had no idea that survivors of Dunkirk had just arrived in Rhyl. Nobody in Mrs. McCann's redbrick boardinghouse on the front said anything about the arrivals; they didn't know, and wartime censorship didn't encourage people to talk anyway. Our first day on the beach I bullied my younger brothers—ten, four, and going on two—into helping me build a huge wall of sand to keep out the advancing Irish Sea, while Mum sat in a deck chair knitting and Dad read

the newspaper. My father, a steam train driver, had worn himself out taking munitions trains through the blackness of wartime Britain, but he could never sit in a deck chair for long. He would inhale the salt air for ten minutes, then declare we should swim, kick a soccer ball, or join an impromptu beach cricket match. The next bright morning, when I hoped to build a bigger, better sand wall, Dad was restive again. He suggested we should all go for a brisk walk along the sands to work up an appetite for Mrs. McCann's lunch. My mother and brothers preferred to idle by the paddling pool, so with ill grace I fell in beside him. Not only could he not sit still for long, he was compulsively gregarious. Everyone else on the beach was getting on with their seaside relief from factory shifts and holding a family together in the stress of war. To my frustration, when we had gone beyond the pier, Dad saw these sprawling clumps of men, isolated from the holiday crowds, and he walked along to find out who they were. I can see him now squatting among them, offering a cigarette here and there. At thirty-nine, he must have been several years older than most of them, but you would never have known it, so weary and haggard were they. I was always embarrassed by Dad's readiness to strike up conversations with strangers, but Dad moved among the groups of soldiers most of the morning, and I tagged along.

We had been encouraged to celebrate Dunkirk as some kind of victory. A *Daily Mirror* front page I'd seen pinned up in our boardinghouse had the headline "Bloody Marvellous!" How was it, then, Dad found nothing marvelous, only dejection, as he moved among the men?

Only two years later, when my ambitions to be a newspaper reporter flowered, did I understand that Dad was doing what a good reporter would do: asking questions, listening. It never occurred to me to take a note and write it up in my diary, but to this day I remember the sadness of the soldiers who had seen such havoc on that other beach and who knew, too, that they owed their lives to the countless acts of heroism of the rear guard who fought to the last man to keep the escape corridor open.

"They said they had nothing to fight with," Dad told everyone back in the dining room that lunchtime. The men were not triumphant, he explained, as they were said to be—they were bewildered, bitter that the Maginot Line had proved useless because the Germans had bypassed it by coming through Belgium, bitter with the French Army, bitter with the Royal Air Force (RAF) they felt had left them so exposed to the German Luftwaffe as they lined up on the beach and scrambled for the shallow-draft boats that would take them to the bigger ships. (The histories suggest that the French and the RAF both performed better than it seemed at the time, but misperceptions are the common currency of war.) The newspapers we'd seen had given the impression that the survivors couldn't wait to get back into battle to avenge their defeat. Maybe thousands were, but not those prostrate on the Rhyl beach or the dispirited men who, according to the historian Richard Collier in his 1961 history of Dunkirk, flung their rifles away after landing at Dover.

Dad's account of the mood of the men compared well with the national archives records I checked years later. "We didn't deserve the cheers," said Albert Powell, a truck driver, of their reception after they landed in Ramsgate before entraining for Rhyl. Bert Meakin, a gunner with the Fifty-first Medium Regiment, was critical of the weapons they'd been given to hold back the Germans: "First world war 6-inch howitzers on iron wheels, pretty useless really!" His group fought south of the

Somme, then were told it was every man for himself; they abandoned the howitzers in the woods. He arrived in Rhyl with a seven-day leave warrant but without a penny. Powell, a Royal Signals truck driver attached to Third Corps Medium Artillery, got to La Panne on foot. “On the beaches,” he recalled, “we huddled together in the sand dunes for protection from the constant bombing and machine gunning from the air. The bombing was ineffectual, just blowing up loads of sand, but the machine gunning was another matter.” Once Powell reached a boat, it was swamped by a dive-bomber’s near miss, and he was flung into the sea. He swam fifty yards, “arrived at the ship completely knackered and found myself hauled aboard.”

Looking back on my boyhood snapshot memory of the difference between what I read and what I saw, I often wondered whether Dad and I were overly impressed with a firsthand experience and hadn’t seen the woods for the trees. Dad talked, after all, to a tiny fraction of the evacuated soldiers (and surely, newspaper reporters would have talked to hundreds). So it was interesting to learn later that Winston Churchill got so worried at the presentation of the retreat as a triumph, he felt it necessary to remind everyone that “wars are not won by evacuations.” Even more illuminating on the role of the press was Phillip Knightley’s authoritative account of war reporting in his book *The First Casualty*, first published in 1975. Of Dunkirk he wrote, “Above all, the stories stressed the high morale of the evacuated troops, itching to get back to France and into the fight again. It was not until the late 1950’s and early 1960’s—nearly twenty years after the event—that a fuller, truer picture of Dunkirk began to emerge.” Alexander Werth, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, confessed that after the fall of France he felt guilty at the “soft soap” he had been giving his readers.

The discordance between the waterfront and the front pages was bewildering, the first vague stirring of doubt about my untutored trust in newspapers. As a kid in short pants, I had hardly followed the events of the 1930s with the avidity with which I later read the histories, but I remember how troubled my father was on September 3, 1939, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany. It was so contrary to what we had been insistently told by the *Daily Express*, the newspaper my parents took at home. The paper had reassured its millions of readers that there would be no war with this front-page slogan: “The *Daily Express* declares that Britain will not be involved in a European War this year, next year either.” Everyone believed it. And why not? The *Express* was a brilliant broadsheet with a circulation of three million and a huge secondary readership. Most British homes were reached by one of the bigger newspapers: in 1939 some thirteen million read the *Express* newspapers, the *Daily Mirror*, the *News of the World*, or *People*, an audience that by 1948 reached twenty-two million. Newspapers played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. As the social historian Richard Hoggart noted in his study of the working class at this time, people often used to say as evidence of disputed truth, “Oh, but it was in the papers.”

But what if you couldn’t trust a newspaper to tell the truth and nothing but the truth? Which institution was more trustworthy, the state or the press? Later in adulthood, it was easier to understand how predictive headlines could turn out to be wrong than to reconcile what we experienced in Rhyl with the emphasis in what we

read as fact. How did newspapers come to conclusions? Were they acting at the request of government? Was there a deliberate and widespread gloss on Dunkirk? Would that have been justified as a means of sustaining the nation's morale at a crucial time? Should newspapers take account of such imperatives or just report things as they saw them? How did a newspaper decide these things?

Such questions still resonate with me after a lifetime in newspapers. There have been many times when I have found that what was presented as truth did not square with what I discovered as a reporter or, later as an editor, learned from good shoe-leather reporters. It was not so much that deliberate lies were told, though they sometimes were, and not always to conceal a villainy. "In wartime," Churchill remarked, "truth is so precious that she should be attended by a bodyguard of lies." We all understand in an age of terrorism that refraining from exposing a lie may be necessary for the protection of innocents. But "national interest" is an elastic concept that if stretched can snap with a sting. When, in the early 1970s, the *Sunday Times* began reporting the anger building among the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, a group of Conservative members of Parliament (MPs) invoked the national interest to demand that we stop. They came to tell me, as the paper's editor, that it was "treasonable" to continue. Actually, the real offense was failing to give Northern Ireland full attention in the early 1960s, when the violence was incubated.

A more common issue than outright lying is that people of good faith resent facts that run contrary to their beliefs and assumptions. The nineteenth-century American humorist Josh Billings said it best: "It ain't ignorance that causes all the trouble in this world. It's the things people know that ain't so." No institution has a monopoly of vice in these matters—not governments, trade unions, company heads, lawyers, academia, or the press. In what came to be known as the thalidomide affair in Britain, children were born with deformities—a shortened arm, or no arm at all, or no leg, or completely limbless—because the mothers had taken a prenatal drug prescribed by the National Health Service. They were left to endure their ordeal without help or compensation, a shocking situation that persisted for a decade because the government and the lawyers representing the families assumed that the children had been the victims of an unforeseeable disaster. The lawyers sincerely believed they were making the best of a bad case, but the argument for adequate compensation, properly investigated by the *Sunday Times*, was overwhelming. Revealing it brought furious lawsuits, led by the government of the day, with the attorney general accusing me and the newspaper of contempt of court, punishable by a jail sentence.

Independent reporting has a history of provoking denunciation. Take the legend that "unpatriotic" reporters lost Vietnam. It doesn't stand up to serious examination. Print and TV journalists supportively reported the war in the context of cold war ideology: they wanted the United States to win. What maddened them were the little deceptions of the U.S. government, the hubris of its generals, the corrupt incompetence of the South Vietnamese establishment, and the way the political military bureaucracy deceived itself into telling Washington what it wanted to hear. The corrective correspondents did a real service, and too many of them were killed doing it. Similarly, early in the Iraq War, the George W. Bush administration charged

that the reporters on the ground were being lazy, foolish, cowardly, and unpatriotic for reporting that the country was on a vicious downward spiral. It was. The administration deceived itself, and no good came of that. Indeed, a more accurate charge against the press on Iraq would be that it hadn't been patriotic enough before the war began. Faced with a secretive administration bent on war come what may and a popular clamor for post-9/11 revenge, the press forsook its true function. The real national interest required the most searching examination of the reasons for sending thousands of people to their deaths, and it did not get it.

The epiphany on Rhyl beach shook my faith in the printed word, but it did not make me averse to newspapers. On the contrary, as I entered my teens, I grew ever more eager to involve myself in their mysteries. Newspapers were clearly more important and more fascinating than I had imagined, reporting more than a matter of stenography. But how was I to become a reporter and learn the newspaper trade? I was a working-class boy who had already been branded a failure, having failed to qualify for grammar school (the English equivalent, roughly, of American high school). Was I reaching too far? Was I really fit for the work? What were the pitfalls, the ethical dilemmas, and the traps I could barely imagine? How could I equip myself to decode the complex, ever-changing, thrillingly dynamic mosaic of live news and bring it to the public with the raw integrity of truth?

So began my paper chase.

2

Getting Up Steam

When I was three years old, I was expected to die of pneumonia. My first fevered memory of life is staring at the colored counting beads of an abacus at the side of the narrow bed where I was confined in a room with the curtains drawn.

I was born in the summer of 1928 in one of the long rows of two-up, two-down terraced houses off the Liverpool Road, Patricroft, Eccles—part of the sprawl of the cities of Salford and Greater Manchester—and raised in the L. S. Lowry landscape of bent stick figures scurrying past sooty monuments of the industrial revolution. The Renshaw Street houses were so narrow that people shook their heads about how hard it was to get a coffin down the staircases.

Until antibiotics became widely available in England at the end of the 1930s, one in twenty infants died—mostly from pneumonia, meningitis, diphtheria, and tuberculosis. TB was always referred to in a whisper as “the consumption, you know. They’ll never rear him.” Indeed, it carried off my cousin Freddy around the time I had pneumonia.

During that family crisis my mother was up half the night nursing my brother, who had whooping cough; my father was working nights. I was mostly nursed by a neighbor, Mrs. Amy Roberts, who lived opposite us, had some nursing experience, and volunteered to sit with me through the nights of fever. In 1978, after I’d become known as a journalist, Amy told the *Eccles Journal* that when she visited my distraught mother, she found that “Harold had been put to bed with whooping cough he had caught from his brother, but was lying on his back, which is dangerous for a sick child.” She added, “Harold was a very tiny child with a small peaky face and was too weak to be bothered with anything. He did perk up towards the end of the week but even then he was very shy.”

The shyness is at odds with family folklore from when I was two. My mother, on a walk through a local park, stood my baby carriage behind a bench at the duck pond while she chatted with other young mothers. When she turned to go, my carriage was empty. The consensus among the calmest of the young women consoling my mother was that her blue-eyed son had been seized by an international gang of baby smugglers and was even then on his way across the Channel. In fact, the guilty party was happily ensconced in another baby carriage. I had undone my harness and climbed from my own pram into another, where eventually I was found cuddling a baby girl.

My brother Fred, who became the keeper of the family history, told me I was actually nursed through the pneumonia by another good neighbor, Mrs. Matthew

(Matt) Newstead, the wife of my father's best friend, which is how my second name came to be Matthew. Perhaps the two women took turns at my bedside. In any event, there are people who feel they both have a lot to answer for.

My grandfather on my father's side, John Evans, was born in 1854 at Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant in Montgomeryshire, a little village in Mid Wales, where the Bible was first translated into Welsh. He left school when he was nine years old to run errands for plate layers mending railway tracks around Crewe railway junction, the gateway to the north of England. (Compulsory schooling to fourteen was enacted only in 1918.) He later married Sarah Jane Collins, a girl eleven years his junior from Church Minshull, Cheshire, who gave birth to my father on August 1, 1900. She failed to register his birth within the six weeks required, and so fearful of prosecution, she registered Frederick Evans as having been born fifteen days later, on August 21. In this manner, my father acquired a distinction shared with the Queen—two birthdays, and we never knew which to celebrate.

Grandfather John sustained his family in a rented cottage in the village of Coppenhall, Cheshire, in North West England, by repairing shoes and cutting hair at the end of his day's work on the railway. My father told me, "He saved halfpennies so that we'd have Christmas stockings. Mine always had a twopenny mouth organ, an apple, a nut, and a shiny new penny. Nobody had a radio. It hadn't been invented. On Christmas night we blew out the candles and sat around telling ghost stories." Every Christmas in my own childhood, whatever else was in our stockings, there was always an apple, a nut, and a shiny new penny.

My father had little formal education. My grandfather had none—a family secret we didn't learn for fifty years. In 1981, when I was editing the *Times* of London, the paper was delivered to a cottage I had in Shoreham, Kent, where Dad and Mum were taking a break after retirement. "You know, Harold, it's a rum thing," he said, opening the paper. "What would people say if they knew the man editing this newspaper is the grandson of a man who couldn't read a word of it?"

I had six very different aunts and uncles from Dad's brothers and sisters. One of them, Wild Jack, was a gambler who lost everything betting on horses. The other older brother, Albert, was a railway chief detective superintendent, who slept in freight cars to catch thieves. Dick was a housepainter and Len a very quiet fisherman who didn't seem to have any work. Dad's two sisters were opposites in temperament. Aunt Beattie, the toughest of all my father's family, married a younger widowed farmer in Oswestry near the Welsh border and ruled him and the kids with a rod of iron. Mild Aunt Maggie, the youngest and plumpest in the family, helped in a shop in a backstreet in Crewe, and always fed me sweets when we visited. My first sexual thrill at the age of ten was when her teenage daughter and a giggling friend in another bed in the same room teased me about what might happen to "little Harold" if they came in bed with me. In retrospect, I regret they lost their nerve, but at the time I was terrified. They seemed like fully grown women to me, though they were probably around fourteen.

My mother, Mary Hannah (known to all as Polly), was one of thirteen children, of whom, so far as I could discover, only three survived to adulthood. She was born in

Stockport, Cheshire, in 1904, the daughter of Lucy Haselum (née Murray), which gave us a tinge of Irish blood to mix with the Welsh. The Murrays were connected to the Collinses. Grandmother Lucy's father captained ferryboats making the run from Merseyside to Ireland. My mother left school at the age of twelve and helped the family budget by chopping firewood in Eccles. At thirteen she was clattering down the street in clogs on the way to the card room of the local cotton mill. Her older sister, named "Big Eva" to distinguish her from her daughter and my cousin "Little Eva," married a cobbler who had lost a leg in World War I. Her younger brother, Arnold, was a dashing engineer and a Merchant Navy officer in World War II.

My mother always had ambitions for a better life. Childhood measles and scarlet fever left her without a sense of smell, and her hearing deteriorated in her thirties, but she never complained. Not only did she manage to bring up four boys with equal affection—five if you include Dad, who was lost without her—but in time she started a business that thrived on their relationship.

My father was the optimist; my mother was the worrier. She had a habit, when sitting in an armchair, of repeatedly running her hand along the fabric, smoothing it out in a rhythmic manner that the British scholar Richard Hoggart perceived (rightly I think) as an effort by working-class women of that generation to smooth out their anxieties. Unlike my gregarious father, she never struck up conversations with strangers and never talked politics. She reserved her energy for figuring out a future for everyone in the family. She hugged us and cared for us—all of us, including Dad—through accidents and sicknesses. Even when I had my tonsils removed at eighteen, she busied herself bringing to the sickbed every day some concoction of egg and brandy with a mystery ingredient I thought might have been brown beef sauce. It seemed to work.

Dad had not much of a better start in life than his father, punished like so many bright boys for being born poor. He was a good all-round student, top of his class in arithmetic and picked for advancement to high school in Crewe, but the family needed him to become a wage earner, so his schooling ended when he was eleven. At thirteen he stoked the furnaces making steel at Crewe Works. "It was a rotten time," he remembered. "We had no electricity in the countryside at Coppenhall; in winter we got up at four thirty to light the fire, thaw the taps. I ran the mile or two to Crewe to get there for six, just in time for a cup of sweet tea and a bun."

In 1916 he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps, passed some tests, and was downcast when they found out he was sixteen, not the seventeen he claimed, and therefore too young. The war ended before he could be sent to the trenches, but he joined the Territorial Army (Terriers), Britain's volunteer reserve force, the equivalent of the National Guard in the United States. For a time he trained as a boxer, modeling his footwork on a legendary world flyweight champion hardened in a Welsh coal mine—the skinny, five-foot-two Jimmy Wilde. Dad put boxing gloves on all his boys, one at a time encouraging us to take a swing at him and to learn to dodge and weave. "A good little 'un will always beat a big 'un," Dad assured us. It was one of his aphorisms I preferred not to test on the backstreets of Newton Heath, where I collected enough bloody noses simply protecting my marbles from predators.

My father was a bit of a puzzle about martial matters. He was the least belligerent of men, but he loved military ceremonies, like the changing of the guard at

Buckingham Palace, and spoke of John Philip Sousa's marching music with almost the same reverence as a run down the wing by his idol on the football (soccer) field, Stanley Matthews, the wizard of dribble. In his spic-and-span time in the Territorial Army, he learned to beat out an impressive tattoo on a kettledrum. He practiced it for years on our bedroom doors when we were slow to get up for school.

My mother was nineteen and my father twenty-three when they met at the "monkey run," as everyone called the Saturday evening dance at a social club on Liverpool Road. The stylish wedding picture of the slim, elegant couple at Patricroft Parish Church in September 1924 belies the bleakness from which they emerged. The newlyweds had to squeeze into a tiny house at 39 Renshaw Street with Granny Haselum and her dying husband, Adam, a laborer in a chemical factory.

My mother and father were lucky in a way: they had jobs when they married. Three million Britons did not. My father had been taken on by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS) to clean steam engines, and my mother worked in the cotton mill until I was born. They were then wholly dependent on my father not being sacked. The fear that they might have to go down to the labor exchange to register for unemployment money from the government filled them both with horror; they had a prideful revulsion at taking "dole money," which was still vivid in their minds when I was a teenager and they were secure. They radiated a quiet confidence that they were giving us a better start than they had. "I'll see you never wear clogs," Mum said often, and always with uncharacteristic fierceness. They both took it for granted their boys would climb Everest. "The railway's not for you," Dad told each of us.

They saved every penny in Renshaw Street, and with the birth of a second child (my brother Fred in October 1929) they rented an airier, better-built house, one of a row at 14 May Street, Monton. It was just across Liverpool Road, but it was a different world. On Renshaw Street you were in the living room as soon as you crossed the doorstep, so much so that families were judged by how freshly sanded they kept that front doorstep. On May Street, Mum didn't have to kneel every morning at the front door with a bucket of hot water and a pumice stone. Now we had a gate; we had a tiny front garden; we had leaves. In fact, after the abacus my earliest memory is of leaves on privet hedges. To my young eyes, as I was wheeled to a nursery school where we each had a cot for an afternoon nap, the neighborhood of May Street was a corridor of privet hedges—moats around semidetached castles of the English lower orders. Horticulturists value *Ligustrum ovalifolium* for its ability to survive industrial pollution; the self-consciously respectable working class in which I grew up cared more about preserving privacy than combating the then little-appreciated effects of pollution. How sedulously they tended their ligustrum defense against prying eyes! Such was the prevalence of the question "What will the neighbors think?" that I got the idea God had planted busybodies as prolifically as privets.

My father was a genius with numbers. If you named a date five, twenty, thirty-seven years ahead, in a flash he'd tell you what day of the week it would be. Or tell him the date of your birth, and he'd name the day you were born. I never knew him to get it