

ECCENTRICS AND OTHER UNFORGETTABLES

NEVILLE

Rubicund avuncular, usually kind and friendly, seemingly profoundly interested in you, Neville was a man of fierce intellect and charm; all sadly undermined by his drunkenness.

He was a man who truly lived by the bottle. He was never very far from being drunk; indeed, my father used to say of him that he just needed topping up.

He owned Godfrey's antiquarian bookshop in Stonegate, York, one of the most beautiful streets in Britain.

The bookshop was housed in a wonderfully crooked fifteenth century building. The stairs to the upper floors were a challenge to one's equilibrium and not just because they were so twisted and bent but because the way was strewn with ancient tomes. I swear I once tripped over an original Froissart's Chronicles which revealed a gorgeous Book of Days beneath. We're talking incunabula here!

Neville was my godfather's brother. His money came from family shares in such firms as Yorkshire Copper Works.

He was a Quaker and had married a Quaker, and his son attended St Peter's private Quaker school in York.

He converted to Roman Catholicism and wanted a divorce to be able to remarry in that Church. Because he had married as a Quaker he was able to have his marriage annulled and thus marry his new love in the light of his new faith.

He drank more than anyone I have ever known. He usually quaffed two bottles of Courvoisier a day and then a few beers too.

I used to help out in the bookshop, aged fifteen.

Ramsey, Anglican Archbishop of York. One morning the Archbishop came in to pick up a book he'd ordered. Neville was in his office and I suspect he'd already put away his first bottle of brandy. Some hapless twit must have informed him of the Archbishop's presence because suddenly Neville intoned in his own very bishop-like voice, "Fuck the Archbishop!" He then staggered towards his Eminence, hand outstretched, "It's my old friend the Bish." And fell over. You can imagine how ashamed this fifteen year old felt.

He was very much proud of his new religion and took every opportunity to parade his beliefs and to discuss the most arcane theological points. I lunched with him and his son once at Betty's restaurant. It was crowded. We were about to tuck into the first course. Suddenly, in very loud oratory tones, "Stop! We must say grace. In nomine patris et filii et spiritu sancti." Everyone in the restaurant had stopped eating and was staring at him, at our table, at us. I wanted to hide beneath said table.

One Christmas Eve he called round to our house to pick up myself, my parents and my Uncle Jack to drive us to Midnight Mass at Ampleforth Abbey. He was totally smashed, but strangely, or perhaps luckily enough, he always drove impeccably.

Mass was well underway when Neville seemed to have dozed off to judge by some rather stentorian snoring. At the moment of transubstantiation (he was always going on about this great theological conundrum) he suddenly awoke and as the celebrant raised the host he stood up, intoned, "I believe in God." And collapsed.

We let him lie between kneeler and pew until Mass was over. My father, my Uncle Jack and I carried him out between us as he snored on, oblivious to his surroundings.

The last time I saw him we bumped into him down Stonegate outside The Punch Bowl. We hadn't seen him for a while as my father no longer compiled the bookshop's catalogue. "Champagne! This calls for champagne!"

Several bottles later we drove him home. We waited in the car as he wobbled down the drive. Suddenly an almighty crash and, "Oh fuck!" My father got out of the car and went to investigate.

"Is he all right?" I asked him on his return.

"Yes, he'll be OK. He's fallen into the dustbin!"

He lived next door to cricketer 'Fiery Fred' Trueman, the great England and Yorkshire fast bowler, and had many anecdotes both from and about the man. One day at the bookshop he told me he had arranged to meet Trueman in a pub on the Scarborough Road not far from where they lived. Trueman arrived late and explained:

"Sorry I'm late but I've just been stopped for speeding. When the cop pulled me over he recognised me. 'I'm sorry to have inform you Mr Trueman that you were driving rather faster than you bowl'. 'Tha's wrong lad. If I 'ad a been, tha'd never've caught me'."

While I never saw Neville again after the dustbin episode my father handed me his copy of the Guardian one day which carried an interview with him. He'd sold the bookshop to

Blackwell's and was now a man of leisure, leisure which seemed to sit uneasily on his shoulders. He'd placed an ad in the broadsheets offering, to the highest bidder, his many and varied talents. This was in the early seventies.

There were no takers, but I must add that, in spite of all, he had a brilliant mind and had gained a double first in Philosophy at Cambridge.

Shortly after the Guardian interview he died.

I remember him often with affection, and a smile.

CANON O'CONNOR

Still in York, going on seventeen now, our family attended mass at St Georges Catholic Church, in the graveyard of which lie the remains of Dick Turpin, the notorious 18th century highwayman. I served as an altar boy every Sunday.

There were two priests under the iron rule of the ancient Canon O'Connor. The Canon hated, with a deep and inexplicable loathing, the very idea of The Mothers' Union. Something out of the usual run of annoyances must have troubled the Canon and stirred his wrath this particular Sunday.

I was the altar boy that day at midday mass. As he turned to mount the pulpit steps he told me to go into the sacristy and bring out the box of crockery I would find there. It turned out to be the property of the Mothers' Union. He bade me bring the box up into the pulpit and then began his sermon or, I suppose I should say, his harangue.

He began to denounce the union as a perfidious time wasting bunch of idle women. With each insulting epithet he hurled a plate down from the pulpit where it would smash noisily against the marble floor.

Another Sunday he had it in for the men who would sneak out before the 'ite missa est' so as to get to the pub for noon opening. Before the final dismissal he turned (remember, in those days the priest celebrated mass with his back to the congregation), raised a hand and shouted to those at the back, "And you can shut those bloody doors 'cos nobody's leaving till I've finished."

PLONKY

David 'Plonky' Reeves, a traffic policeman, was a neighbour and dear friend.

We shared musical tastes, and we were also well versed in the obscenities of The Derek and Clive tapes. Derek and Clive being Peter Cook (from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Saturday Night Live*) and Dudley Moore (from *Beyond the Fringe* to an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe Award) in surreal scandalously scatological conversations, the filth of which could make your hair curl but which were often very funny.

Plonky and I got into the habit of greeting each other in Derek and Clive mode: "Now then you provocative fucker," and such like.

I cycled (still do) everywhere. Plonky was an inveterate practical joker.

He was on duty in his police car one day when he spotted me on my bike. Through his loud hailer he shouted, "You provocative fucker! Stop, you fucking fucking cunt!"

After a pause, I heard, "Keep away from this man. He's armed and dangerous!"

When he got back to the station at the end of his shift the Chief Constable wanted to see Plonky. It hadn't been me on the bike after all.

Many years before I knew him, Plonky had caused an accident which haunted him until his death just a few years ago. He'd finished his shift and was driving through the centre of Hull in his official car on the way home. He overheard a call on the car radio for officers to go in pursuit of some villain or other. Even though he was off duty he couldn't resist and joined the chase.

He raced through the town centre at such speed he was unable to avoid a mother and her pregnant daughter as they crossed at the lights. That he had caused their deaths haunted him always and may well have led him to hang himself.

The soubriquet Plonky? He was partial to a drop of brandy, not classy expensive stuff, just acceptable plonk.

AUNT EDITH

My aunt Edith was one of those who could be winningly charming or devastatingly bitchy. What made her especially difficult to deal with was that you could never predict which way she would turn.

She was my mother's youngest sister. She could perhaps be described as a flapper with thespian pretensions. She distanced herself as soon as she could from her family's lower middle class reality, adopting a rather embarrassing pseudo posh/cinematically influenced Brit-speak of the era.

She married Jack Hale, an attractive, almost dashing young man, who worked for NatWest Bank and later became manager at their branch in St Albans, and who played minor counties cricket.

History tends to repeat itself and, sadly, both Edith and Jack were open to a modest quencher rather more than most people. This led to the most awesome rows and love/hate slanging matches.

They lived in a beautiful, medieval cottage in Flamstead, and I recall one early morning, while staying there, Jack waking me up and insisting we go for a ride across the Downs in his vintage bullnose Morris, a frightening yet exhilarating experience. He was still drunk from the night before.

When Jack died in his fifties, Edith seemed at a loose end and drifted from village to village in and around the Lincolnshire and North Yorkshire Wolds. The restlessness was really due to her spectacular ability to annoy her neighbours. It was something in which she delighted to the extent that if her neighbours were, er, normal, quiet, peace loving folk she would go out of her way to provoke them.

I stayed with her for a few days when she lived in Folkingham village, and one night awoke suddenly. I happened to look out the bedroom window which gave out onto the back garden. Edith was there hastily, maniacally scrabbling up the vegetable seedlings which she had set so lovingly during the day. Bemused I returned to my bed.

I awoke again, this time to daylight and shouting. Edith was accusing her neighbours of uprooting her seedlings during the night!

This sort of provocative behaviour was to be repeated whenever she moved on to the next village, something which, of course, inevitably, happened with abnormal frequency.

MY GRANDFATHER

My paternal grandfather, George Lancelot Rumble, was not, perhaps, a true eccentric but he did have a most interesting time just before and during the First World War.

He was born in the 1880's and by 1913 was employed as a violinist aboard ocean-going cruise liners.

At the time he was engaged to his future wife, my grandmother, and regularly sent her postcards from the many ports of call made by the ship he was playing on. I know this because I have all those postcards.

World War 1 surprised him at sea. Once back on British land and called to army ranks, he was made a junior officer.

Details are scanty but he was reported missing in action in 1917. He had been taken prisoner and was held in an officers' camp. Again, I know this because I have his prisoner identity document issued to him by the German camp controllers.

This identity card includes a photo of him, a list of does and don'ts, and then a signed declaration that, as an officer and a gentleman, he will not try to escape when outside the camp for purposes of going for a bath and physical exercise.

I also have a letter to his, by now, wife (my maternal grandmother) from his commanding officer. The letter is written from a London hospital by the hand of said officer's wife as he had been wounded in the same battle in which my grandfather went missing. He expresses concern for the fate of my grandfather as they had become friends during their time in the trenches, sharing their love of music. He asks my grandmother to let him know should she have any news of her husband.

I remember my grandfather telling me that, on the whole, the Germans hadn't treated him too badly, but that there were occasions when they were driven by extreme hunger to eat rats.

My grandfather's grandfather, my great-grandfather, lived to be over a hundred having been born in 1863 and dying in 1964. And one of my great grandfather's uncles, born around 1800, was one of the British military attachment sent to guard Napoleon during his final exile on St Helena. So I can say that I knew someone who knew someone who knew Napoleon!

How far and wide you reach back in time if the protagonists are sufficiently long lived.

MY DAD

Well, I'm saying nothing new if I state that he and I had a complicated relationship but asked to define it I'd probably say he was a friend of mine, which ain't bad.

As for whether he fits into the category of eccentric, I wouldn't really know, but he definitely stands out in my life as a defining influence, probably for the good.

Back in the thirties, *entre deux guerres*, he clerked for Jack Sumries tailors in Leeds. In his leisure time he played rugby union for West Leeds Old Boys as an ex pupil.

One weekend, Hunslet Rugby League club asked him to play a home game as they were short. Rugby League has always been a professional game; Rugby Union, too, but they disguised it and hid it beneath indirect payments and benefits. Once the Union learned of my father's game for Hunslet, for which he was paid five bob, he was never again allowed to play Union.

During the thirties, in Leeds, he met my mum, mixed with the Whitelocks/Jubilee artistic, bohemian set which included Jacob Kramer, Hermann Schofield, Scrivener et al, signed up for the Spanish Civil War, and suffered the privations of the Aragon front in the Battle for the Ebro in the awful winter of '37 with temperatures of minus 20°C.

Then, out of the frying pan into the fire, he was called up for the Second World War.

British recruiting officers were rather more particular than those for the recruiting of the International Brigades so he was sent as a sergeant to Ayre, Scotland, in an administrative post because he was deaf in one ear.

He was restless in Ayre and somehow found himself on a few operations with Lord Lovatt's bunch and made the odd commando raid across to Norway in true Telemark style.

He was a friend of Dylan Thomas. He wrote Dylan Thomas style poetry. He was a bibliophile and knew his quarto from his octavo, and in the late fifties we moved to York so he could combine his teaching job with that of compiling the antiquarian catalogue for my uncle's bookshop.

His formal education had ended with the, then, equivalent of 'A' Levels but he ended up teaching at the University of Humberside with a doctorate for his work on Emily Bronte.

He was a womanizer. He drove my mum to distraction, but she still loved him, as he did her. He died too young of a heart attack at the age of sixty, a month after retiring.

It is to him I owe my love of literature. Thanks to him, at the age of fourteen, I was reading Graham Greene, Françoise Sagan, the *Evergreen Review* and so much more.

RUE NOT ROSEMARY, THAT WAS LIFE

My younger sister, Rosemary, was a rebel. She rebelled against our parents; would frequently run away from home, if only for a few hours; hated school and misbehaved accordingly until my parents sent her to a boarding school in Herefordshire.

Between sixth form and teacher training (which she abandoned after a year) she lived in Philadelphia with a family who were friends of my parents.

This family had a son who was seriously incapacitated both mentally and physically but Rosemary had shown how she was able to communicate with him and anticipate his needs. So when these friends returned from Britain to the USA they invited my sister to spend a gap year with them on the understanding that she would mentor their handicapped son.

A couple of years later, Philadelphia gap year and teacher training behind her, she returned to Philadelphia where she soon married. Her husband ran drugs and was also extremely violent and abusive of her.

Meanwhile, my elder brother, Godfrey, was killed in Sydney, Australia, in a motorbike accident.

Rosemary, now fleeing from her husband, came down to Mexico City, where my wife and I were living, and I was teaching English.

Once my contract in Mexico ended, my sister and I went our separate ways for a while, she to live in Wolverhampton with Linval, a Jamaican, er, entrepreneur and purveyor of hash. He was by nature a kind and charming man, but old habits die hard and he soon had my sister selling herself (expensively, it must be admitted) and working as an escort.

Their relationship was, to say the least, turbulent, and after a couple of years she left him to work in a nightclub in Tokyo. She later married the owner and had a son by him.

She had an affair with a Thai man, who had family in the US, and she left her husband and settled, briefly, in the US with the Thai man.

When she left him and came to stay with me and my wife in England, she was pregnant with twin daughters.

She subsequently had a couple of brief marriages, but never really settled to domestic bliss.

She trained as a social worker and did well. She went autonomous and formed her own company, working with local authority social services until her premature death from lung cancer a couple of years ago.

She was a feisty independent woman, and a fighter for women's rights, which could seem at odds with her time as, let's not be coy, a prostitute. But then I'm certain that she was always in charge and would never have allowed any man to dominate her. Perhaps she found her true vocation late, as a social worker, though she had glimpsed it early with that incapacitated boy from Philadelphia.

That's life.