Catholic childhood
Chapter 1: Ladycross

I was born in March 1942 in a Catholic nursing home in Sevenoaks, a Kent market and commuter town which, like the others, has never been what you'd call a hotbed of revolution, though "Royal" Tunbridge Wells a few miles away has form. The first English anarchist paper, *The Anarchist*, was founded in 1885 by a man from Tunbridge Wells called Henry Seymour, who was also local secretary of the National Secular Society*, and in the 1960s the town certainly had an anarchist group because I was the invited speaker at one of their meetings.

**The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists,* John Quail, Paladin, 1978

My mother was a devout and active member of the local branch of the Church of Rome, particularly its choir and the Catholic Women's League, which did good works, while my father energetically supported the Church of England. A lifelong Conservative, he was chairman of the local association in Clapham and then for many years in Sevenoaks. Once in the 1930s he was almost an MP. The man who narrowly beat him for the Sevenoaks nomination was Sir Charles Ponsonby (Eton, the Guards etc) who was the choice of the landed gentry and the upper class in general while my father stood for the town, business and the city of London, where he worked in insurance as an actuary, having left school at the age of 14. The most prominent local Tory was of course Sir Winston Churchill, who lived at Chartwell near Westerham, a few miles from Sevenoaks, when he wasn't occupying Number 10.

I made my first public appearance at the age of four at the Conservative summer fête in the grounds of Knole, the Sevenoaks stately home; its owner, Lord Sackville, was the local party president. My father must have bought an awful lot of tickets for the raffle because the winning one had my name on it. The prize was a gigantic stuffed rabbit – far too big to be a cuddly toy – and I had some difficulty collecting it and carrying it back to my parents. I remember being a bit miffed that the sunshade the rabbit was holding in the display turned out not to be included in the prize.

My parents disagreed fundamentally about religion but it was the difference between their ages that really stood out. When I was born my father was already a grand old man of 70 whereas my mother was a sprightly 30-year-old. As I started to grow up my father's health gradually went downhill and he died when I was six. That was in November 1948. My mother lived on for almost 70 years, until March 2018, when she died aged 105. I should also mention that my sister Monica was born in June 1945 so my mother had two of us to look after.

The shock and pain of my father's death caused my mother to have a nervous breakdown, so she found dealing with a boisterous six-year-old impossible. After Christmas I was sent to a kind of hostel-cum-boarding school in Bexhill, Sussex, which seemed to specialise in children whose parents had been posted abroad by the military or the diplomatic service. It wasn't a particularly happy time for me but I don't remember being overwhelmed by grief. I suppose I just got on with things. What helped was that I wasn't surrounded by people competing to express their sympathy. And in the late 1940s you didn't have to explain to everybody how you came to be fatherless since plenty of other

children no longer had fathers – a simple matter of war damage. So I didn't have the difficulty of having to admit that my father had been too old to be conscripted to fight in the first world war, never mind the second. By contrast, my mother for the rest of her long life remained embarrassed by the fact that she'd married a much older man. I think that first separation between my mother and me had a long-term consequence: we were never particularly close during my childhood or in later life.

In the late 1940s we were all, adults and children, men and women, soldiers and civilians, to some extent "war damaged". This was the official, and estate agents', term for things that were bombed or blasted and might remain unrepaired for years afterwards in those parts of Britain, like Kent, that had suffered during the battle of Britain and subsequent air raids, attacks by flying bombs etc. One of my childhood escapades was organising an obstacle-course race for the six-year-olds of the neighbourhood through our war-damaged greenhouses. My right hand still bears a faint scar from a jagged piece of glass that dropped into it after the optically challenged and careless clown standing above me had put his head into one of the few panes that remained unbroken.

An earlier exploit of mine was dropping an onion down the well at a farm where we were staying in Cornwall to avoid the bombs that Kent had to put up with. There was no bottled mineral water in those days so I suppose we all had to drink a lot of cow's milk afterwards.* Then there was my assault on one of our beehives using a bucket of water (the bees certainly got their own back) and my teasing of the cockerel who proceeded to chase me down the garden. As you see, I was an early convert to the theory, fashionable in the 1960s, of "learning by doing rather than thinking" or as it used to be called, trial and error. There was a lot of error, from which I suppose I learnt, eventually.

*Since writing this I've found a reference to the incident in the baby book my mother kept until I went to prep school: "He is up to his tricks again. He threw an onion in the well and we had to pay a man £1 to extricate it."

I don't remember much about my stay in Bexhill – except spending my seventh birthday in bed with mumps. But I do remember a boy called Stanley who made a strong impression. He was always in trouble, most of it self-generated. Inevitably he became the butt so that when anything went wrong and a grown-up asked "What's happened? Who did this?" poor Stanley was automatically blamed. But it was a useful negative lesson to learn: in difficult circumstances don't show off; keep your head down; stay out of trouble.

After Bexhill I spent the summer term as a boarder in a proper prep school, Catholic of course, called Whispers, which was near Wadhurst, also in Sussex. There I remember learning to box and play cricket and in the wolf cubs how to tie a reef knot – not much else, though my schooling continued, obviously. That had started in September 1945 when I was three and a half at Granville school in Sevenoaks, founded by a remarkable woman called Miss Ena Makin and still going strong, catering to the commuter classes. It had opened just a few months before on 8 May 1945 – VE day – with a school crest of V for victory superimposed on a dove of peace, or the other way round.

Miss Makin's sidekick, Miss Westwater, was my first teacher, one of three – all women – from whom I learnt my letters as a small boy. The second was Mrs Rathbone at St Thomas's in Sevenoaks, another new, but this time Catholic, school which now occupied the premises of the nursing home where I'd been born. I spent the school year 1949-50 there as a day boy. And the third was Miss

Harnett at Ladycross, Seaford, Sussex, the Catholic boarding school where I went to begin my conventional (for boys whose parents could afford it) passage through childhood and adolescence: five years at prep school, then another five at "public school", which is what independent fee-paying schools were traditionally called. Miss Harnett would have been a star in any schooling system: she was Irish and eloquent, kind and inspiring. In her English classes I didn't feel I was working: even spelling and grammar were fun.

My mother by the way was in no doubt about my need for boarding school: here's her very last entry in my baby book, dated September 1950: "Wynford is now 8 ½ and is about to go to his prep school as a boarder. It will do him a world of good. He is v noisy & disobedient at home & needs discipline..."

But why particularly Ladycross? After her death a letter found in her papers was evidently a reply to her request for advice on which Catholic boarding schools I should be sent to. Written in 1949 by a man called Randon Gilman whose son was a monk and priest at Ampleforth*, it says of Ladycross: "Excellent reputation....I think it is the best-known Catholic prep school." He goes on to recommend as a follow-up either Stonyhurst or Downside, which in terms of prestige he says are "about equal"; then he adds that Ampleforth "has taken 1st place *amongst Catholics* , as it is now the largest of all the Catholic boys' schools – altho' not YET quite so well-known as the others to Protestants".

* The son, Father Aidan Gilman, died there in 2018 aged 91.

Over the years various schools have been called "the Catholic Eton" including Downside, Stonyhurst and The Oratory while Beaumont, a Jesuit school and near neighbour of Eton in the Thames valley, but now defunct, once seemed to have a stronger claim than the others. According to the Jesuit poet (and Stonyhurst schoolmaster) Peter Levi, Beaumont's first challenge to Eton for a game of cricket "had been met with the response 'Harrow we know, Winchester we have heard of but what is Beaumont?' to which the reply had been 'Beaumont is what Eton was, the school for Catholic gentlemen'."* Note the "the": *the* school for Catholic gentlemen. But there can be little doubt that increasingly after 1949 the "Catholic Eton", if there was one, was assumed by many people to be Ampleforth. There's even a book about it including that phrase in the subtitle**. And a private tutorial company seemed to confirm that status by placing Ampleforth first among Catholic schools in a survey of the top independents according to the number of their entries in *Who's Who****.* Today, though, there's more than a doubt about Ampleforth which has been accused of extensive sexual abuse and banned from taking on new pupils.

**Beaumont 1861-1961*, André Deutsch, 1961

***Ampleforth College: The Emergence of Ampleforth College as "the Catholic Eton"*, Peter Galliver, Gracewing Publishing, 2019

*** *Does Alma Still Matter?*, Keystone Tutors, 18 November 2020

In any case there's now a simpler and more logical answer to the question. Surely the "Catholic Eton" can only be Eton itself, as it was in the first place. Founded in 1440 by the devout Catholic King Henry VI, Eton has had a Catholic chaplain since 1985 and is said, by the St Nicholas Society, to have over 250 Catholic pupils. In 2021 its most prominent alumnus, Boris Johnson, who had abandoned Catholicism as an Eton schoolboy, apparently returned to the faith in a spectacular reverse ferret so

he could marry a Catholic. Although he'd previously been married and divorced more than once as a mere Anglican, those marriages apparently didn't count because, once baptised by the Catholic church, you're theirs for life. A "lapsed Catholic", in the eyes of the church, is still a Catholic with all that entails.

Which brings me neatly to "privilege", one of the two classic objections to private, paid-for education; the other, which applies particularly to boarding schools, is the question of "abuse", sexual and sadistic, as documented in Alex Renton's excellent blend of memoir and reportage, *Stiff Upper Lip** . So let me say, simply, that yes, I was greatly privileged to be schooled at Ladycross and Stonyhurst, but no, I was never "abused", unless you count as abuse the corporal punishment that was routine at boys' and many girls' schools, state and private, day and boarding, in the 1950s, as it was in many of the children's own homes – and in the state institutions euphemistically called "children's homes". At neither of my schools was there much bullying and I was certainly never bullied (I was big for my age and I boxed in and out of the ring); as far as sex is concerned there were some mildly erotic encounters between boys at Ladycross but none that I knew of at Stonyhurst; at neither school, as far as I knew, was there anything untoward between boys and masters (or mistresses, a recent development, undreamt of in the 1950s, at least by me).

*Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017

One incident, though, is worth recording: a clever boy called Clay who was evidently highly strung once erupted hysterically during supervised evening prep. Mr Holmes, the master in charge, simply lifted him up and deposited him out of the open classroom window onto the ground (we were on the ground floor, obviously). The defenestration of Clay became one of those stories we told and retold (Clay survived the encounter and left with a scholarship to Downside).

Seaford in the 1950s seemed to be a magnet for prep schools. I can't say how many there were, though one was our nextdoor neighbour: Tyttenhanger's playing fields were divided from ours by a hedge. Another school, Chesterton, was opposite – just across the Eastbourne Road. In practical terms this meant that inter-school sports matches were pretty routine affairs: for football and rugby we often walked to the other school, wearing our sports kit; at half-time there was a slice of orange each; then we walked back to school. At least for cricket matches there was some kind of tea between innings – if only a sugary synthetic-tasting powdered lemon drink and a bun or a couple of biscuits.

But think how energy-efficient and kind to the planet this was. Instead of what happens now when the affluent parents of today's private day-school children charge round in people carriers on Saturday mornings or after school from one child's judo to another's football and a third's ballet, we just walked. And the unwoke facts have to be faced: we were naturally leaner and fitter then – school food wasn't that bad, and except for the mumps and measles epidemics which punctuated the school year, we didn't need much medical intervention (beyond compulsory doses to avert constipation). Most important and healthiest of all, our consumption of sweets was strictly controlled. Government-imposed rationing was in force when I started at Ladycross in 1950 and after it was abolished, the authorities merely changed our weekly sweet ration from "six ounces" to what you could get for one and sixpence. So of course we gained nothing. "Chiz, chiz", as Nigel Molesworth of that 1950s classic *Down with Skool*, would certainly have put it.

Since we weren't allowed cash at school, sweets were currency. One year in March I decided to make a book for the Grand National. I worked out cautious odds on the fancied horses so I wouldn't take a beating, realising that the novelty of the whole thing would encourage schoolboy punters. Part of the fun was calculating how many sweets were equivalent to a Mars or Crunchy bar. When race day came it turned out I was safe so I did the whole thing all over again in June for the Derby. Even the odd master came up with a toffee or two for a bet. I think afterwards I was quietly told not to make a habit of it but looking back, it's a wonder that I was allowed to do it at all. Did somebody in the staffroom say "Why not? It's practical maths." I should point out that in the 1950s measuring the playground by walking round it hadn't been invented; those were the days of endless arithmetical calculations called "problems" such as "If it takes two men four hours to cut a cricket field using two mowers how long will it take three men using one?"

But there was some severity and some arbitrary behaviour by authority. I said "Shit!" once – I thought under my breath but obviously within the hearing of the master in charge. He gave me a disapproving lecture and, just when I thought that was the end of it, he said: "I'm sending you to the headmaster with this note." Lecture two followed and so did the next referral: "This is serious: I'm sending you to the school chaplain." And after that it was back to the original master who couldn't resist a final admonishment. It was bewildering: four tellings-off for one four-letter word.

Also weird was the occasion when, for some reason, I somehow contrived to miss boxing. I honestly can't remember why this happened – probably I just forgot. Ridiculously I was being beaten for "disobeying school rules" which meant three strikes on the hand with the ferula, a 12-inch leather-covered strap. But – I need to say this – however offensive the punishment sounds now, we did not feel brutalised or terrorised. Afterwards we stoically refused to blub and we put our hands into hot water to mitigate the pain – in fact I don't remember anybody crying – and we did not live in fear. This may be difficult to understand now when, quite rightly, beating naughty boys is no longer the done thing. But then it was universal so we accepted it.

Of course we were nervous at first: as eight-year-old new boys we didn't know what was going to happen to us in this strange new environment. My first memory at Ladycross is of bonding with another new boy, who was close to me on the alphabetical list because of his surname, Hamilton (his father was the publisher Hamish Hamilton). AAH revealed that his trio of Christian names, Alistair, *Ansulda*, Hamish, included one he was very worried about – the second obviously. Having an unusual name made you vulnerable to teasing, like any other deviation from the norm. I was similarly worried about "Wynford" and started telling people I was to be called "John", chronologically my first name after all.

But I can't say it was difficult to avoid your Christian names being widely known since at school we were always called by our surnames. For brothers, this meant not being Rodney or Charles but Smith ma (short for major, the elder) or Smith mi (minor). This Latinate labelling system could easily accommodate a third and a fourth brother – in which case the sequence went "maximus, major, minor, minimus" – which was handy because one particularly fecund French family, the de Montalemberts, kept sending their sons to Ladycross.

In fact we had quite a few French boys – Seaford was/is near the Channel ferry port of Newhaven, just as Stonyhurst in Lancashire was handy for boys travelling from Ireland via Liverpool – and there were other exotics like Vittorio Manunta, the Italian child film star of *Never Take No for An Answer*,

Prince Amedeo, the Italian Duke of Aosta (1943-2021), who came for just the summer term, and Nicolas Gereda de Borbon, who was said to have a Vatican title as well as his Spanish one. Among the predominantly middle class intake there was a sprinkling of English aristos and one or two MPs' sons – but the boy whose father we most admired was Michael Reid, the son of the second world war hero and prisoner escaper Major Pat Reid, himself a Ladycross old boy and author of *The Colditz Story*, published in 1952, the year that Michael joined the school.

Most of the teachers were competent and kind but there were one or two characters who came straight out of Evelyn Waugh. "Major" Mallet, who had a military moustache and was timetabled to teach my class both English and history for a while, delivered sonorous lectures which he obviously got out of a book because of the way he pronounced the words he used. "Case, sea-mile and meet-aphor," he once intoned. He was an early convert to the trendy doctrine that history should be recent and "relevant" – so the 1940 Dunkirk fiasco occupied weeks of dictated narrative with the major implying that he'd been a participant in the events being described. However, he didn't stay long at Ladycross and after he left it was rumoured that he'd spent the war in the Home Guard on the Norfolk coast.

In my last year I had personal tuition from an old Ladycross boy called Patrick Early who was marking time between Downside and Cambridge. He later described the schools as "an awful, unheated place with bald playing fields and terrible food, set on the cliffs above Seaford"*. We met for tutorials in the school library; he complimented and corrected my essays, chatted amicably and taught me poker. Later he worked for the British Council, wrote poetry and translated the Spanish Republican poet Antonio Machado.

*quoted in the *Times* obituary of another ex-Ladycross boy, Mark Sykes

In my time at Ladycross (1950-5) there was something of a regime change. The owner and headmaster, Tony (ex-Downside) Roper, retired and sold the school to Michael (ex-Stonyhurst) Feeny, and there were various changes, gradually introduced. Cold showers first thing in the morning was one Feeny innovation. Another was academic streaming. In the old Roper days you moved up a class if you were obviously ready for the next one. After my first week at Ladycross I was moved up and confronted by a fierce schoolmaster called Mr Pontet (who was inclined to twist and pull your short hairs from behind) with "mensa, mensa, mensam..." – my first Latin lesson – and so it went on until I reached the top form, where for a year I had to compete for prizes with boys a year older than me. But Feeny was a moderniser, set on dividing boys from the beginning into sheep and goats: two academic streams – there weren't enough boys for three.

In terms of how we practised the Catholic religion, there was little noticeable difference between Roper's Ladycross and Feeny's. There was chapel, a chaplain, weekly Sunday mass, a boys' choir, grace before meals, an annual "retreat", which consisted of listening to homilies, prayer, meditation and uplifting reading.

Once the priest giving the retreat, who was German, tried to explain the complicated Catholic doctrine of "giving scandal", which is defined as an attitude or behaviour which leads another to do evil. The basis of the doctrine is a letter by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians referring to eating meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols: although it wasn't in itself wrong for a Christian to

eat the meat – since a pagan sacrifice could not "change" anything – by eating it they could "give scandal", so cause offence, to those ignorant of the correct theological position.

Critically this means that you can give scandal by performing an act which is not in itself immoral but can be misinterpreted. The priest illustrated the point by saying that in Germany he could go to a café and drink a glass of beer without anybody objecting – but in England doing so could "give scandal" because many Protestants saw drinking alcohol, particularly by the clergy, as sinful.

I remember thinking then that this wasn't a very good argument in my opinion: surely Catholics should do what they thought was right irrespective of other people's views. Indeed the scandal (in the ordinary English sense) of sex crimes committed by Catholic clergy being covered up by the church is surely made worse by this conscious policy of avoiding "giving scandal". In the end your public image will be a worse disaster when the cover-ups are discovered, as has been demonstrated time and again in recent years. The sex crime followed by the cover-up seems to implicate the institution in the first offence as well as the second.

Under Feeny, in my time at least, Ladycross remained a relatively warm and friendly place whereas the Stonyhurst I went on to was something of an extended ordeal. I don't know how many times I reflected on my good luck in *not* having been sent to a Jesuit prep school. Maybe if I had, I would still be "one of theirs" and another example of the popular saying attributed to the Jesuits, "Give me a child of seven and he's mine for life".

By the way, there is no evidence that the Jesuit founding fathers such as Ignatius Loyala ever said this or anything like it. Still less would he or they have used the words "Give me a child UNTIL he is seven...". This is the silliest cliché applied to the intensely intellectual Jesuits since they've never been known for specialising in crèches, playgroups or nurseries. Schools and universities are their thing – and they've been pretty good at it.