

From Earthtrack, Unpublished Memoirs

Written in the years leading up to 1993 and found among John Wain's papers on his death.

[From the Introduction:]

I have married three times. My first marriage, entered into when I was 22, ended in divorce when I was 30. My second, which lasted from New Year's Day 1960 to my wife's death in June 1988, was to a Welsh lady who was intensely devoted to the language, culture and landscape of Wales. I was already no stranger to North Wales – a glance at the map will show that no one growing up in North Staffordshire could be that – but during the 1960s and 70s I was pulled into a much closer relationship with the country and the people. In terms of the readership for these memoirs, I believe that just as there is an untapped reservoir of Midland readers who will take an interest in the Staffordshire memories of the early part, so the many thoughts and impressions and memories of Wales might easily reach out to a largely untapped Welsh readership. I say 'largely' because I wrote a novel, *A Winter In the Hills* (1970) which I think of as one of the most determined attempts by an English writer to write a novel about Welsh people that will not travesty them as funny little troglodytes but show them as living, breathing people living serious lives. It made its impact, but it has never come into its own, and was in any case 23 years ago. I intend to write freshly of all that rich, tangy subject, tinged with tragedy as the destiny of all minority nations is tinged, outlined for me by a hard black border of finality in that my living passport to inner recesses of Welshhood is gone.

I have said enough about the range of the book, leaving due elbow-room for hares that will start up suddenly during the period of writing – I shan't be afraid to follow them.

For a title, I thought of *Earthtrack*. Thomas Hardy's strange but very characteristic poem, *The Temporary the All*, contains the line,
Sole the showance these of my onward earth-track,
which when I first read it I found laughable in its quaint diction, but I have never succeeded in forgetting. I would like to write an equally unforgettable book.
JW, 1993

The early summer of 1940 was a particularly brilliant one. As Hitler's armies battered their way across North-West Europe towards their ultimate target, our island, that island was decked out, increasingly day by day, in her brightest and freshest colours: the varied tints of fresh green in leaf and grass-blade, the cream and pink of blossom, the sparkling of streams running over pebbles. In North Staffordshire as elsewhere, the chestnut trees put out their broad leaves and festive candles, the hawthorn blossom drifted in great suds along the hedges, the cattle from the small farms cropped the meadowgrass in what seemed to the human beholder like a trance of contentment.

As week succeeded week, it became increasingly obvious that Europe was being trodden down under those Nazi boots. All that was something the grown-ups talked about, and even they didn't talk about it all the time or with much confidence that they understood it. 'The War' had still not quite landed on our doorstep, as that doorstep was viewed from North Staffordshire. It was still, until Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, something that was happening in foreign parts, and foreign parts, at the beginning of 1940, were very foreign indeed. In any case, I was fifteen, which inevitably meant that whatever might be happening on the world stage, my attention was largely taken up by the increase in size of my own body and the development within it of new powers and new needs. I had to adapt to these changes behind a mask of silence and isolation, as most adolescents did in those days. The need for a female companion in bed, which had suddenly appeared in me without much warning and in a full-blown form, was something I had to deal with entirely out of my own resources, which were so limited that they might as well be bluntly described as nil. Within our family circle, I would have been expected to wash my mouth out with soap if I had so much as mentioned the matter. All my friends had the same experience. The attitude our parents uniformly presented to us on these matters, which was simply that they were unmentionable, faced us like an unscalable fence. The society we came from was inhibited and tongue-tied, governed by very deep taboos, to an extent that anyone born since about 1960 would probably find quite simply incredible. The problems and conflicts arising from this situation have been thoroughly aired in the English literature of the first half of this century: for instance, in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Even the absurd *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has something to teach us here. Otherwise it is a book too poor to be worth mentioning, since the characters are merely cardboard cut-outs behaving as the author has decreed that they must behave in order to demonstrate his thesis (the root cause of the badness of most bad novels). To think *Lady Chatterley's Lover* a masterpiece you must have been subjected to the same kind of sexual repression as I remember, plus some kind of social humiliation that left you with a grudge against the officer-and-gentleman class and a wish to take part vicariously in their humiliation. This latter I escaped, largely I think because my home background, though entirely unpretentious, was very comfortable in a large house and large garden.

All this meant that at the age of fifteen I had more than enough to occupy my attention without having much of an idea of the outside world, and though I am very sure that it was a fault in my family and our milieu in general that we were not better informed about international affairs and more intelligent about the probable course of the war, I think this was understandable (which is not quite the same thing as pardonable) considering two things. One was that the provinces, in those days, really were provincial. In North Staffordshire we had nothing imminent that brought the war physically close. If we had been living in Kent we would have had the Battle of Britain fought out in the sky above our heads. If we had been in Liverpool or Coventry, neither of them very far away, we would have suffered, or at any rate witnessed, appalling air raids. The long ordeal of the Londoners did not begin until 1941, but it must have been obviously in the wings. To us, the war largely meant rumours, shortages and red tape. Plus, of course, the immediate departure of the first wave of young men into the armed services, conscription being introduced only a few months before the war actually started. But, at fifteen, my thoughts were not yet directed ahead to that eventuality.

The other circumstance which helped to explain, without actually excusing, the blissful unawareness of our elders (let alone of us adolescents) was that the powerful and numerous pacifist movement had disseminated a great deal of wish-fulfilment and disinformation. For obvious enough reasons – the most murderous and destructive war in history, after all, was only twenty years behind us – there was an immense grass-roots movement of the never-again persuasion. Many men who had seen trench warfare in the First World War were still only in the early phase of their middle age in 1939, full of vigour (unless indeed they had been incapacitated by the war, which made their testimony more powerful in a different way) and threw themselves passionately into dissuading their countrymen and women from allowing a slide into another conflict, and with the same enemy at that. England, being an island and having a long tradition of political stability and free speech, is not a very politically aware country, and the grasp of most English people on history is still very sketchy; in the inter-war years it was even feebler. The common man had no understanding of the reasons why the 1914 War had broken out or what were the conditions that

made Europe a powder-keg in the early years of the century. The war was assumed to have suddenly blown up out of a totally blue sky, which was indeed how most people had experienced it. After 1917, when international socialism became a force in the world and the Communist Party of Great Britain was set up, left-wing opinion vaguely massed itself behind the notion that the war was simply a dirty trick played by silk-hatted millionaires on the working class. (Joan Littlewood evidently went on thinking this well into the 1960s; her immensely successful play, *Oh What A Lovely War*, seemed to be based on the belief that no officers were killed in 1914-18.)

Starting from that basis, it was not very difficult to persuade people that the way to avert a war was simply to declare publicly that you would refuse to take part in it. The general idea was that since politicians were madmen or criminals, the only way to control them was to refuse to follow their instructions if that meant war. A clergyman of the Church of England, H.R.L. Sheppard, initiated a vast movement called the Peace Pledge Union. All you had to do to join it was to write on a post-card the words, 'I renounce war, and will never support or sanction another.' You then sent this postcard to the headquarters of the organization. I don't know how many of these cards they received during the year or so prior to September 3, 1939, but it must have been many hundreds of thousands; millions, I dare say. The participants had an innocent faith that the piling-up of this Everest of pacific pledges would lead other governments to decide not to attack us, whereas, of course, it acted as a direct invitation to them to do so. Since the bulk of those who sent in their postcards were obviously decent and gentle people, and probably Sheppard himself was a nice man, it is easy to sympathize with the Peace Pledge Union up to a point, but since its effect was a determined effort to prevent our country from getting ready to repel a savage onslaught, it was plainly a potential disaster, averted only by the fact that the bulk of the populace had too much sense to go along with it. This should have been a lesson so obvious as to be easily learnt, but the fact is that it was not learnt, and exactly the same story was repeated some fifty years later, with CND in the place of the PPU and another deluded clergyman, Bruce Kent, inheriting the role of Sheppard. Once again wiser counsels prevailed, but once again it was only after the situation had been touched and gone for some time. Evidently it is a feature of the English mind to throw up structures like the PPU and CND for the same hidden reasons that make lemmings try to solve their problems by rushing down cliffs into the sea. One wonders what form it will take next.

Such, however, was the state of mind of many people at that time, in that flawless early summer of lyrical beauty, before the British Expeditionary Force had been broken and pushed out of France, and before that tiny force of fighter pilots took off from Biggin Hill. John Heath-Stubbs, in his memoirs (*Hindsight*, 1993) recalls how in the immediate pre-war period he was a senior pupil at an English boarding school and was, in time-honoured fashion, sometimes invited by the headmaster, when prominent people came to the school to speak to the boys, to meet them socially at his table. One such visitor was a well-known pacifist, a Quaker with all the authority of that austere sect behind him. In the year of Munich this man assured the company round the table, 'with absolute certainty', that war had come very close during the Munich crisis of a few months previously, and only two things had prevented it: 'One was the united prayers of all Christian people, and the other was that the ordinary Germans had lain themselves down on the railway lines in one of the Berlin stations, thus preventing troop trains from moving forward. This,' Heath-Stubbs goes on, 'was obviously a total fiction and a piece of wishful thinking. It was all too typical of the pacifists at that time.'

This was the intellectual atmosphere that surrounded me; faced with this kind of thing, what option had I but to attend to the things that I could discern clearly, though I had no idea what to do about them? The changes in my body were clear to me; so were my exploding sexual needs, though I had no more chance of having them explode in a manner that would be of any benefit to myself or anyone else than I had of going on a week-end trip to Sirius. That left only two things in my life. One was that my verbal sensibility, which had always been highly developed, had taken giant strides, simply because I had been reading rapidly and hungrily, had been absorbing some French and Latin as part of my routine school work, and was beginning to get the measure of our wonderful English language. Shakespeare made me drunk; I was lifted up to the clouds, as generations of English people before me had been lifted. (Will this work for the generations stretching into the future? Or has it all been too dehydrated, parched, bleached out, over-systematized, and generally smothered in poisoned droppings from the educational equivalent of laboratory white mice? Have they taken it away from us for ever? If so, I humbly thank God I was born early enough to have my share of it.) The other thing was that my body had become big and strong enough to shove a bicycle along for a good many miles without tiring. The bicycle made me free of the countryside within a wide radius of my home.

And what a countryside! When I see it today, I feel a humble gratitude that it is still undiscovered, so undisturbed by the hyperactive tourist industry. Since I shall never be a best-selling author, I have no fear of attracting the swarm of tour operators, journalists and brochure-writers to my native landscape. I should perhaps explain what I consider my native landscape. Stoke-on-Trent is a long narrow city, a chain of conurbation lying along the valley of the infant river Trent. In my youth it measured ten miles by two. Being too poor to afford any suburbs, it was a ribbon of mainly industrial buildings, and poor streets. If you faced to either side (it ran pretty exactly from south to north) and walked or cycled for a mile, you got into unspoilt, un-selfconscious countryside. Nowadays, after modest prosperity for so many years, there are suburbs, but nothing daunting. One more detail must be added. This city lies on a hinge. At the southern end it is set among typical Midland dairy-farming country, not very different from the landscape in which Shakespeare grew up. A few miles further on, you cross a geological barrier and enter the North. The Stoke-on-Trent area, with its multiplicity of small steep hills, is in fact the crotch of the Pennines. If I had been born and bred in Tunstall or Burslem, my native landscape would have had stone walls rather than hedges, the air would have been a degree or two colder, and I would think of myself as a Northerner. But my actual birthplace was Stoke itself, well within the southern sector (they go: Longton, Fenton, Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, and Tunstall) and the nearest countryside was more southern in character. Not only that. When I was three years old, in 1928, my family moved up to the crest of the hill overlooking Stoke, and our view on the non-city side was westward. When I got out my bicycle and pedalled out towards the green spaces, I went through the fringe of Newcastle-under-Lyme (a town much older than the Potteries and sniffy about their enforced proximity). Once I got through that fringe, I was to the west of the Potteries, in an area where Staffordshire almost touches Cheshire and both of them almost touch Shropshire.

The easiest way for anyone to appreciate the landscape which went to the forming of my sensibility, assuming anyone is interested in doing so, is to go to a place called the Dorothy Clive Garden at Willoughbridge, North Staffordshire. It is very easily reached, being on the A51 road midway between Nantwich and Stone. (Since I understand many modern people never go anywhere unless it is on a motorway, I will add that it is reached by Exit 15 from the M6, though I personally would like to dynamite the M6 and every other motorway in England.)

As you emerged into the countryside from Newcastle-under-Lyme, which does have suburbs (I went to school in one of them), your first impression, becoming progressively stronger, is of a series of high ridges. The pottery towns themselves are studded with with abrupt gradients as the Pennines finally run out into a rash of small hills; but once you turn your face to the west and move towards the Shropshire border, the hills give way to long natural folds. As you mount each one you come in sight of a fresh wide sweep of country, and you have a strong sense of liberation from urban chatter, a knowledge that if you go forward and mount the next ridge, and possibly the next one after that, you will be looking at the Welsh marches. The cosy, miniature landscape of the English Midlands, so domesticated, so dear to those who grew up in it, the landscape that stretches from Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire up to about South Derbyshire, gives way to the higher, more open, more dramatic landscape of wide views and you are climbing up on to the roof of England; over to the west is Wales, with its mountains and valleys and timeless unpopulated stretches of coast. And between you and Wales lie the wide green and blue spaces of Shropshire, where place-names – Ludlow, Clun, Wenlock Edge, Bredon Hill – take the mind back to Housman's poems, those few pages of artfully simple lyric verse that have been unwaveringly present to the English mind, resisting all changes of fashion, effortlessly outselling every new wave, for a hundred years. Housman, boldly staking out a personal claim, called his first collection *A Shropshire Lad*, deliberately importing into his work the suggestion that he was a native of the area he sang about. In fact, the actual historical Alfred Edward Housman was a Worcestershire lad. His birthplace was no nearer to the sacred area of that 'western brookland/that bred me long ago' than mine was, and though I have never tried to claim any special rights in that magic country I have exactly the same attitude to it as he must have had. Emerging from the Potteries to stand, usually with my bicycle leaning nearby, on the top of one of those long ridges, and gazing westwards in the general direction of Market Drayton and Shrewsbury and Oswestry and Llangollen, I felt I had the key to the Shropshire country in my hand, was indeed already treading on its edge.

The Dorothy Clive Garden did not exist in those days. The hill where it now stands was simply open farming country, crowned in this particular case by an abandoned quarry whose sides gave natural shelter to wild saplings and bushes. When Colonel Clive came to design this garden in his wife's memory, he made skilful use of the quarry. Skilful use, indeed, of the entire site. Go there sometime, if you like beautiful places. Mount, on foot or on wheels, to the highest point. Stand and look about. There,

stretching mile after mile, is the countryside I first learnt to love. Unsung by fame, largely unvisited by sight-seers (thank God), it has a beauty that will at once be acknowledged by everyone. And, since what goes in first goes in deepest, it has remained for more than half a century my fundamental notion of what a beautiful rural landscape should be. Not that I despise other kinds. Not that I have failed to become passionately attached to beautiful landscapes that do not at all resemble this one. But the country between Whitmore and Market Drayton, stretching out towards Woore and Pipe Gate, taking in on the way the hamlet of Black Brook and the more stately manorial village of Maer – blessed names, names loaded with a rural freshness and fragrance and with a beautiful old-fashioned clumsiness about them, like objects made in wood by a patient village craftsman – that country lies at the root of all.

That will do, for the moment, as far as the description of landscape is concerned. I must avoid, even so early in my narrative, giving the impression that I spend a major part of my time and energy gazing about me at my physical surroundings. Still, everyone does spend a fair amount of time doing this, and physical surroundings are important to us all, whether in fully conscious ways or not. To begin with a rough characterization of that Staffordshire-Shropshire-Cheshire area is as good a starting-point as any for an account of what has happened to me in seven decades on Planet Earth. And there are two additional circumstances that help to make the rural environment of my first youth particularly memorable to me. One is that the fateful early summer of 1940 was, as I have said, a particularly fresh, vivid, fragrant and physically delightful time. It would have been so in any case, simply for objective, physical reasons – the weather happened to be glorious. How much more did it seem so as Hitler's armies rushed towards us, armed and prepared for the fatal grapple which would destroy our hastily mustered and under-equipped military forces. At just turned fifteen years old, and deeply rooted in a provincial culture that by tradition took very little notice of what happened abroad, I was still not fully emerged from childhood and tended to leave these matters to the grown-ups; and this, though I think it disgraceful in a great lump of a boy nearly full grown, was an attitude that the same grown-ups had themselves fostered in me; it was very much their own attitude; only a few months earlier, the bulk of the British populace had listened with calm approval while Neville Chamberlain referred to Czechoslovakia as 'a far-away country about which we know little' – or did he actually say 'nothing' – without rising and thundering there and then a demand that the dunderhead be removed from office forthwith and the country placed under responsible leadership. The other circumstance that makes it tempting and delightful to look back on the May and June of 1940, and to linger there in day-dream, is that it brings back a time lost for ever. Factory farming had not come in. Grazing animals were out in the fields, pigs were in sties, chickens clustered around farmyards. Even horses were no uncommon sight, though already one saw far more of them in central London than in any country district – not that I ever went to central London. The mechanization of agriculture, begun in earnest in about 1917, had continued year by year, but it still had not reached the stage at which a workforce would be necessary. The combine harvester, for example, did not arrive in the English countryside till the mid-forties, after the war had ended. At the time I am speaking of, the average farm had a fair number of workers, though only about one-third as many as it would have had in 1900. Undreamt-of was the state of affairs we have today, when one can travel mile after mile through a rural landscape without once seeing a human figure – just endless vistas of land which, while obviously tended, planned for, organized and exploited, has been completely emptied of human beings.

It followed that one of the delights of being in the country, in 1940, was that you met country people there. This had always been so obviously the case that I neither marvelled at it nor had the slightest foreboding that I should one day look back on it with regret and nostalgia. There are evidently no agricultural workers now, in the 1990s. There are, I suppose, though I never see them, a handful of highly trained specialists, urban in their psychology, industrial in their skills, who service the country's agriculture. They don't live in the old tied cottages, but in the nearest towns, driving to to work in the early morning, when the inhabitants of the dormitory villages are getting ready to drive in the opposite direction, heading for town and their offices. In this way, as in just about every other way, the motor car has turned English life inside out.

For this kind of reason, it is all the more important to me, all the more dear to my heart, to look back at a time before this pulling inside out had come to pass. And, since we have gone far enough in these pages without meeting an actual human being and hearing his living voice, it is time for the entry of Mr Nutt. I met Mr Nutt in that wonderful summer, when he was ninety and I was fifteen. He lived at Black Brook, with his daughter Amy and her husband, Tom Cadman. These good people were small-holders, wringing a living from a patch of ground that would not have supported them without Tom's war pension. A German shell, some time between 1914 and 1918, had cracked open his skull, and in fitting it together they had had to insert a steel plate. It was the availability of countless Tom Cadmans, with their smashed

and split bones, that enabled orthopaedic surgery to make such enormous strides during those years. For this and other services to the public weal, Tom received a small weekly pension, on which he and Amy lived in a pretty cottage. I used to visit them there. It was much the same as a similar cottage would have been in the later years of Queen Victoria; it had, for instance, no electricity, being lit perfectly well by brilliant oil lamps which had highly polished metal plates behind the glass shades that contained the wick, to throw out the light by reflection. They were just as good as any lamp you can buy today; you just had to be careful not to knock them over.

Tom and Amy lived in the cottage, while Mr Nutt, who liked his own company, lived in a small wooden shed a few paces from the back door. I was not invited into the shed, nor was anyone else, but I could see from outside that it was about the size to contain a decent-sized bed and perhaps a chair and a dressing-table. But no, Mr Nutt would not have a dressing-table. He would have an ordinary table with a drawer, and probably a wash-stand, with a ewer and a pail. Under the bed would be a chamber-pot. In this domain Mr Nutt, aged ninety, lived when he was not in the cottage having his meals, or out exercising his craft.

The reference to Mr Nutt's craft brings a slight tremor of embarrassment to me after more than half a century, because it was the reason why my first conversation with him began with a gaffe on my part. Assuming that no man of of fourscore and ten would still be working, I began the dialogue by asking him, 'What did you do, Mr Nutt, before you retired?' He looked at me severely with his bright little button eyes from under the rim of his hard bowler hat and said, 'By goom, I anner retired yet.'

Mr Nutt was, and had been for more than fifty years, a trapper. In our time this word has an ugly ring. It makes one think of spoilt rich women who imagine that their sexual attractiveness will somehow be enhanced if they bedeck their human bodies in the skins of fur-bearing animals who have died an unbelievably cruel death, prolonged over many hours, or at best spent their life in a stinking cage and then been suffocated or electrocuted. The fur trade, as anyone knows who has a shred of sensibility or intelligence, is simply another, and sickening, atrocity in man's never-ending war on the animals. In Mr Nutt's case, though he would of course have been puzzled by any suggestion that wild animals should be treated with the kindness one shows to a domestic pet – in his world they were simply a resource – trapping had a different function. Rich women, bank accounts and fashion stores didn't come into it. The country people among who he lived and whose outlook he shared were accustomed to doing without many of the comforts and conveniences of town life. Naturally they made full use of the compensations offered by their rural setting – fresh fish from the lakes and rivers, rabbits and hares for the table, the humbler game birds (pigeons, for instance) in abundance. They were a world apart from the modern townsman who loads up his car with precision weapon and drives out into the countryside at weekends to blaze away at anything that flies or runs or paddles on water. Mr Nutt, in working as a trapper, was partly gathering food (rabbit pie or jugged hare, made by country housewives, helped to put 19th-Century English cooking on a level where it need fear no comparison with French) and partly helping the efforts of farmers, who would call him in to rid a field of some animal that was proving a pest: moles, as a rule, whose skins could then be made into those hard-wearing and comfortable trousers that Victorian workmen wore when they could afford them.

Being self-employed and not on anyone's payroll, Mr Nutt would obviously have no thoughts of retirement as long as he could walk well enough to get round his traps, see well enough to set them accurately, and bend and straighten with enough agility to operate them. He would receive the state Old Age Pension, ten shillings a week (50 pence in our money), and beyond that he would be self-supporting, with the anchorage of his wooden hut and the watchful care of his daughter and son-in-law. This was how it was, and how he would have wanted it to be, as I can appreciate now that I have become something of a Mr Nutt myself.

Working? Of course I'm still working! What else do you expect me to do with my life? And as Mr Nutt, inured to his own company and probably solaced by it, walked along the hedgerows and through the coppices to see if he had gathered anything in his traps, so I take solitary walks through the landscape of my mind to see what ideas, what images, what seeds of narrative, I might find have come to my baits. And sometimes in the actual landscape too, in those places where I can find any hedgerows in it. But there, of course, I touch on one of the great differences between Mr Nutt and myself. After ninety years in the English countryside, Mr Nutt's vision of the future, if he troubled himself to have any vision of the future, would, I am convinced, have been one of steady continuity. When he was gone, someone else would be there, doing the trapping. When the farmers who paid him were gone, other farmers would take their

place, living in the same or similar farmhouses. The woods, the lanes, the fields, the wild creatures, would still be there as he remembered them from the days when up in London people were talking about Palmerston and Mr Gladstone, and over in France they was having trouble with them Prooshians. What Mr Nutt could not foresee – and I have no idea how long he lived, for my life took me away from those woods and fields and lanes very soon, leaving them only as a bright indelible memory – was that the rural life he knew was nearing its end, and that the English countryside he probably expected to be eternal would have dwindled, in another thirty-five years, to a few strips of intensively farmed land to be glimpsed between the motorways, that the villages would have become suburbs, the quiet wayside inns turned into boxes of amplified noise, his whole kingdom not merely dead but buried?

For dead rural England is, and its memorial is that immense wave of country nostalgia that is everywhere in our Ersatz culture – in the souvenir shops, in the how-to-live magazines, in the coffee table books, in the educational system which ladles books like *Cider With Rosie* down the throats of children to whom the reality of life is a housing estate. The modern English can't even put up a new glass-and-plastic brewery outlet (I can't call it a 'pub') without calling it 'The Load of Hay' or 'The Dog and Partridge', so deep is the unassuaged longing in them for the land that used to be theirs – theirs to walk about in at least, and to work in, if not (once the Enclosures had taken effect) to enjoy a share in cultivation. Even the strident urban music of the Beatles, spawned in the coffee bars of the late 1950s where the youth culture was incubated, has, if you listen attentively to its melody lines, more than a hint of nostalgia for the tuneful ditties that were minted so easily and naturally in the old country times, the times of Mr Nutt in his youth.

I shall give here no specimen of Mr Nutt's conversation apart from those defiantly uttered six words, 'By goom, I anner retired yet,' because, truth to tell, I do not recall anything else he said. As a man with responsible work in hand, he had no time to squander in talking to a young whippersnapper who began by asking him a foolish question. I could invent conversations in which I gave Mr Nutt some lines to say, and I hope I may claim that they would be, in their way, passably convincing and believable. But if I did so I would be exercising my talent as a novelist, not my skill in the narrower and stricter form of autobiography.

Incidentally, what I think of the modern fashion for writing a bastard mixed form, in which seventy-five percent is a truthful record subject only to the inevitable distortions of memory, and the other twenty-five per cent blatantly invented, will be clear simply from my decisive drawing of the distinction between them. Memory is memory, invention is invention. Just because we are fallible human creatures, the second sometimes creeps in where we intended the first; but to muddle them up deliberately and call the result a new and liberated form of writing is foolishness, arising from complacent vanity. To attempt a symbiosis in which both forms co-exist can only result in tissue rejection and the ruination of both elements.

A pot-bank always makes a shawd-ruck. May we have that again, please? A what makes a what? A 'pot-bank', as many people know, is the familiar term in North Staffordshire for a pottery works. Traditionally, and I suppose in some altered form even today, the output of a pot-bank was inspected at regular intervals, (every evening, the way I used to hear it) and divided into Firsts, which were flawless as to firing, finish, glazing, every detail, and Seconds, in which an expert eye could discern, given sufficiently keen attention and a jealous regard for the firm's good name, some tiny fault which left them entirely serviceable but less than formally perfect. These were taken off to be sold, always clearly labelled as Seconds. I have used a fair proportion of them all my life.

The rest, in which even the least judging eye could see faults, were simply carted away to be smashed. They were dumped, in the same unceremonious way that the potters' sister industry, coal-mining, reared its spoils into conical hills that stood about everywhere, towering high above the terraces of dingy little houses. Pit-spoil, with its variegated composition, is inhospitable stuff, but over the generations the heroic perseverance of plants will find a way somehow: tiny roots dig in and cling, tiny green shoots peer up and gather the smokey sunlight, these decay in time into something like a mulch, and somehow a pit-mound (known to the English population at large as a 'slag-heap') becomes covered with patchy green in those areas where it is not daily smothered with a new layer.

Not so a shawd-ruck: we must pause over that word, which signifies a moutain made of broken pottery. I knew it for years before I ever saw it written down, and I have spelt it phonetically. The first syllable, as it

actually sounds in North Staffordshire speech, is universally pronounced 'shawd;' roughly, that is, rhyming with 'cord' or 'sword.' This must be simply a pronunciation-variant of 'shard', the usual English word (sometimes spelt 'sherd' but always pronounced 'shard', to rhyme with 'hard') for a piece of broken pottery. When, finally, in middle age I came across the word in print, it was, sure enough, spelt 'shardruck', but the pronunciation is as I have given, and in writing it I instinctively follow the sound I have heard for so many years. I don't mind spelling 'Derby' or 'Berkshire' or 'Cholmondeley' in ways different from the way I speak them, but 'shawd-ruck' is different. 'Shawd-ruck' is mine. It belongs to the old days of the Potteries, like the bottle-kiln with its ring of external fireplaces. Like Stoke City Football Club with their great players, led by the immortal Stanley Matthews, turning out in their trim dark shorts and their shirts with vertical red-and-white stripes, never an advertising slogan between them and never, from one year's end to another, any fights breaking out on the terraces.

A shawdruck, in the old days, was, like so much in the landscape of the Potteries, surreal. It never sprouted even the scantiest layer of vegetation, because it was made entirely of glazed material, rinsed down by every shower of rain, and therefore, without actually being clean (nothing that fell down through our smoke-heavy sky could be called that) kept the glazed surfaces slippery and ungraspable by any form of plant life.

As for the second part of the word, 'ruck', it is obviously a word that in the sturdy, conserving dialect of North Staffordshire, signifies a hill or protuberance of some kind. Even in standard English we say that when something (a pillow, a mattress, a tablecloth) is disarranged and has a ploughed-field surface where it ought to be smooth, it has been 'rucked up.'

In the autumn of 1947, I went to live in Reading, to begin work as a member of the English Department at the University there. That autumn is very clearly engraved on my mind. I was twenty-two and my wife twenty-three; we had been married a few weeks. Our marriage was not going well; it never did go well; but that was nobody's fault in particular. It was on a loser from the beginning, and I think we knew it. I remember that autumn as a time of high gusty winds and thick drifts of rich fallen leaves, still dramatic in colouring although they were dead. As a first step to 'finding somewhere to live', we had taken furnished rooms in Caversham, which in those days (I don't know what it is like now) was a dignified suburb across the river from the town of Reading and therefore in Berkshire. The left bank of the Thames, at that point and for some miles before it, is high and steeply sloping, so that as soon as you crossed Caversham Bridge and began to move into Caversham itself you began climbing, toiling upwards with large, stately houses on either side, their gardens full of established trees that made the area as leafy as North Oxford, which must have been partly why we found it attractive.

The house where we had rented some space was in a short, select and quiet thoroughfare named Derby Road. It was Victorian, or at the very least Edwardian - but no, surely only Victoria could have presided over an England confident enough to house her business and professional classes in such quiet, opulent dignity, amid such well-planned, well-tended greenhouses and stables. It was like a slighter, smaller but even more self-possessed, version of the house in Dresden [an area of Stoke-on-Trent where the writer first went to infant school] where my kindergarten had dragged out its bumpy existence. We had a sitting room on the ground floor and a tiny bedroom at the top of the house, just under the roof. We cooked our food in the shared kitchen and carried it into the sitting-room to eat it. Our immediate landlady was a woman in her thirties with a small daughter whose husband, we were told, was an RAF officer who had chosen to make the Air Force his career and would therefore not be demobilized; the couple were, like almost everyone in post-war England, 'looking for a house', though as he never appeared I sometimes speculated that they might have split up.

Such, setting aside my daily hours at the University, where I began my teaching career by taking a weekly class on Chaucer - was the setting of my outer life. My inner life concerned itself entirely with poetry. I thought poetry, dreamed poetry, ate and drank and read and considered and discussed poetry. As naturally as all these, I also wrote poetry. Mostly I was dissatisfied with the result, a healthy enough state to be in, at the age of twenty-two. I had yet, at that stage, to settle on a manner or a diction that seemed to me to contain naturally the kind of things I wanted to say. Since I was always reading one poet or another, it followed that the space thus left empty in my poetic mind was always being occupied by a presiding genius. Many of these did not last long, but at least an equal number passed into the deeper layers of my mind and entered the pantheon of my 'favourite poets', who now, as I look back on the threshold of old

age, number about a ten or a dozen. Most of these were passionately devoured and assimilated during those first months at Reading. No wonder Reading is an important place to me. A place of the mind, I should add, since it has changed virtually beyond recognition (even the University is not where it was when I used to work there), and I have never been back to Caversham since about 1950, for fear of what I should find. But the poets kept up their stately progression though my head. One after another, they took possession of my mind. In the summer before I went to live in Caversham, it was the work of Dylan Thomas that obsessed me. But in those first few Caversham weeks, in that blowy, leafy autumn, it was the time of Wilfred Owen.

I did not, in those days, approach poetry through biography. It was quite usual for me to become very familiar with a poet's work, to spend years, intermittently, concentrating on it and distilling out its essences, with only the sketchiest knowledge of the life of the individual behind it. After all, why should that be interesting? I knew that my own life wasn't interesting, yet I hoped that my mind, and one day soon my work, might reveal itself as powerful and original. In the case of Wilfred Owen, I became fascinated simply on the strength of a few poems of his I read in an anthology. (Most people who love poetry will admit readily that anthologies have been important to them in suggesting guide-lines and directions, which is why anthologies are important. I have always believed in them and have edited at least half a dozen myself.)

Owen's poetry made an immediate conquest of me. I knew of him only as a young poet of some thirty years ago, who had been killed towards the end of the First World War when he was about the age that I was at the time I began reading him. I used to murmur his poems to myself – for of course I immediately got large chunks of them by heart, simply by reading them so many times – as I walked about, if I happened to be alone...

The manuscript ends here.