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Diary

AGM

Annual Luncheon

22nd October 2005

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

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The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

I must begin by apologising for the delay in producing this copy of Author. This was caused by my loss of enthusiasm; my willingness to spare time from many other pursuits, following criticism of my editorship. Let me explain.

Our chairman wrote to advise me that he and other members of Poetry Workshop took offence at my last editorial. As I do not accept that there is any justification for this reaction, I have asked Terry to find a new editor who can better deal with such P/W sensitivity. Anyone willing to take on the role should contact Terry urgently, as I am not prepared to delay my departure for long. Anyone requiring details of what is involved can contact me.

I said that we were pleased that many P/W members remained SCPSW members and raised the issue in the hope that they would offer more to Joyce Thornton for inclusion in Author. As I have subsequently received nothing from Joyce I assume my words did indeed offend, rather than persuade them to offer her work for inclusion in Author. Since my previous pleas produced little better response, I hope the new editor has more success, as many of us get much pleasure from reading such work.

On a lighter note. Have you noticed the modern trend in art? It appears that success principally depends upon being different. Innovative is the term commonly used to justify the lack of skills traditionally required of a successful artist. I thought of rescuing the dead mouse from my cat's mouth, putting it in a glass jar of vinegar and calling it death after life, or making triangles of wood with cross lathes, on which I would fix slates and call it a new slant on life, but I didn't spend a few years enjoying myself at an art college, so I would undoubtedly not attract the Royal Academicians, or their like. With pretence of being a writer, perhaps I should write a story, beginning in the middle and working alternately backwards and forwards to the end and the beginning. Perhaps I should write a story that begins with something interesting enough to persuade a reader to continue reading, expand my characters and theme until reaching a climax that was justification for all that preceded it, perhaps something that was not anticipated. Somehow I doubt that such would be a contender for the Man Booker Prize.

However, members have an opportunity to exercise their imagination with our current Froud Memorial competition and I hope many will enter. If you haven't already done so, sit back, close your eyes, dream a little and put pen to paper. Put this magazine away for later and do it now, later may be too late, something might divert you. Have you started yet?

On the 18th February 2006, SCPSW, or SCSA as we were long known, will be celebrating 70 years since its inaugural meeting. Beryl Jones has been working for some time on the history of our Society, the first chapter of which is contained in this issue (space permitting) or the next. It makes fascinating reading and I look forward to the next. I'm sure everyone will join me in thanking Beryl for her valiant efforts and the quality of the work produced.

Please continue to send me items for Author until a new editor is appointed.

Members' Successes:

Early this year Beryl Jones was invited to be Author of the Week on a local community radio station.

Here she describes the experience. At the initial interview the interviewer and I were so nervous it had to be repeated. Strangely enough it was not so nerve wracking when I came to read the stories. The first one was quite funny as it was in script form, adapted from a short story, and several members of the radio community were co-opted to play the various parts - needless to say there were several takes of 'Albert.' As well as 'Albert' I read three other stories which went on air at 6-45pm each evening just before the news. Incidentally 'Albert' was my first foray into script writing and had been short listed in a competition just before Christmas. 'Albert' has now been extended and sent off to another short film production company - hope springs eternal, otherwise we would never put pen to paper ever again.

[I'm sure we are now all hoping soon to see Beryl's story as a film at our local Odeon. – Ed]

THE S.C.P.S.W. ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2004/2005

(Details provided by Ron Jeffreys – Competition Secretary)

The Lewis Wright Short Story Competition Results

Number of entries 21 and the judge was Dr. Vivian Edwards.

First Prize: ‘Rosa Mundi’ by Norman Bissett, Edinburgh

Second Prize: ‘Letter From Alfred’ by Bill Douglas, Ayshire.

Runners Up:

‘The White Knight’ by Maureen Mills, Fareham Hants.

‘The Debt’ by Jenny Chamier Grove, Kew Surrey.

‘Home From Home’ by Ethel Corduff, South Norwood, London.

‘Trance Of A Lifetime’ by J.Lancster, Chorley, Lancs.

‘Final Step’ by Don Nixon, Wolverhampton.

(As none of these winning entries reached me I have been unable to include them in this issue of Author. Will winners please let me have copies so that I may do so in future issues. Preferably as attachments to e-mail, or by post for those who do not have access to such. – Ed)

Vincent Brennan Travel Competition Results.

There were 7 entries for this competition. The judge was Alan Watts, assisted by his daughter Fleur Hogarth. In their report of the competition they said that...”On the whole the general standard of the entries was very good indeed and it was a difficult task to differentiate between them...”

First Prize: ‘Winchester Experience’ by James Lancaster of Chorley, Lancashire.

Second Prize: ‘The Monkey That Pulled a Fast One’ by Jenny Chamier Grove of Kew, Surrey.

Third Prize: ‘Westcliffe, My Second Home’ by Ethel Corduff of South Norwood, London.

The Results of the George Farley Light Verse Competition.

Report from Ron Jeffreys, Competition Secretary.

There were 22 entries for the competition which was judged by Pamela Farley and her sisters, who report now follows:

We were very impressed with the excellent standard of entries this year, well done, let's keep on seeing the chuckle value in Government Service. The winner exactly caught the essence -light, succinct, and cheeky; and above all, it made us laugh. So many good ones; the subjects chosen were often so topical and relevant; several were quite serious subjects given a light treatment, words were rich and diverse; rhymes often gorgeous.

It seems a shame that we have to select one out of so many good entries. We do hope that no one will lose heart, and that next year will be as fruitful and distinct as this time.

The Winning Verse.

Hoyden

Norman Bissett

A voluptuous young hussy from Bude
had her bosom and buttocks tattooed.
Looking quite pornographic,
she stopped all the through traffic
to Bodmin, where chaos ensued.

Runner-up.

The Dilemma

Jenny Chamier

I've felt out of spirits, of late,
And the question I often debate,
Is, now I'm mature
Have I lost my allure?
If I have, have I left it too late?

Should I pluck out a hair on my chin,
And diet to make myself trim?
Or should I just splurge on
A good plastic surgeon,
An exercise bike, and a gym?

Now it really is time to sum up,
So I'll cheer myself up with a cup
Of fine Ceylon tea,
A large Gin - or three
And just watch my weight - going up.

The Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition

Thirty poems were entered for the competition, the adjudicators were Joyce and Albert Thornton and their report and the results now follow:

It was disappointing to find several well written poems in which competitors had not observed the forty line limit rule. It would be helpful if the rules specified that the forty lines include the title and line breaks between stanzas.

Our adjudication has been carried out by teamwork. Because of Albert's blindness each entry had to be read aloud to him several times and after much discussion we eventually agreed on our order of merit.

The prize winners are:-

1st 'Coping' by Ann Froggatt, Birmingham.

This poem remained the first choice after several readings and stood the test of being read aloud very well. Despite a morbid subject it is treated with utmost humanity and sympathy and is intelligently handled by multi layering. The associations with animal behaviour intensify the irony of the situation. The sustained rhyme scheme is suggestive of a sonnet but without a resolution, which is appropriate to the subject matter.

2nd 'Way of Life' by James Lancaster, Chorley, Lancs.

This entry, Way of Life, remained in the short lists throughout the adjudication process. Its formal style with its open rhyme scheme conveys the analogy of the progress of summer cricket matches and the eventual close of play and end of life in a simply stated last line.

3rd 'In the Gorbals' by Norman Bisset, Edinburgh.

Written in hard hitting short lines using acceptable vernacular this poem paints a graphic description of urchins in this inhospitable environment.

Highly Commended

'Small' by Andrew Millican, East Didsbury, Manchester.

The use of rather juvenile expression in this poem put an edge on it even though it is in the context of the description of abnormal behaviour brought about by alcohol/drugs. The strong ending mitigates these tendencies. 'and my unimportance in it all/ makes me smile, being me and being small' A memorable poem.

'The Sniper' also by Andrew Millican

This is well constructed in open rhymed quatrains, attempting to portray what must have been a second hand experience. A striking poem which relates easily to present day news items.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

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2005 Poetry Workshop Weekend

By the time this article appears, the Poetry Workshop Weekend will have taken place. Held at the Conference Park, University of Birmingham, over the weekend of 29-31 July, the programme schedule included workshop sessions, poetry readings and talks on American Poets and Edward Lear. The AGM of the Poetry Workshop was also scheduled to take place during the Weekend. A report on the Weekend and the minutes of the AGM will appear in the autumn issue of **wavelengths**.

Waves 2005

A message from Liz Rowlands, editor of Waves.

'Thank you to all those who have sent or e-mailed me poems for Waves 2005. I am pleased to have received contributions from so many members who have not appeared in the anthology before, as well as from long-standing contributors. Once again, I am keen to ensure that the poems in the anthology are as varied as possible in both form and subject-matter. I am aiming for the anthology to be printed before the end of July - hopefully sooner - in time for the PW weekend.'

Members Publications

Earlier this year, PW member Bill Douglas published a collection of poetry in memory of his son, Scott. Sales of the book have now made over £1,100 for Cancer Research. The collection is called "**Unfinished Story**", and copies can be obtained from Bill Douglas, 47 Walkerston Avenue, Largs, Ayrshire, KA30 8EP, the price being a donation to Cancer Research UK (please make cheques payable to ("Cancer Research UK").

Wavelengths

The Autumn issue of **wavelengths** is due out on 1 September. It will include news from the Birmingham Weekend, the minutes of the AGM, the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham, an article on the poetry form, the "cinquain" and the regular Poetry Workshop Newsletter which will keep you

up to date with events in the Poetry Workshop. **Wavelengths** is available to all members of the Poetry Workshop. If you are not a member, see what you are missing! Details of how to join us are given in the next paragraph.

Bill Barnes Competition 2005

The rules for the 2005 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition, which is open exclusively to members of the Poetry Workshop, appeared in the spring issue of **wavelengths**, and will be repeated in the autumn issue. Deadline for entries to the Competition is 30 September 2005. Don't forget that if you want an acknowledgement of your entry, an advanced copy of the results and/or your entries returned to you, please enclose a SAE for each eventuality with your entry. Good luck!

Subscriptions 2005

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2005. The cost of membership remains unchanged at £3 for yet another year. Existing members should have received a subscription form with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. Cheques/postal orders and enquiries about membership should be sent to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year, including a bumper Competition Special issue
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the address at the head of the page.

The Silver Sandal

Daphne Darking

“Excuse me, but that’s my shoe”. The voice came from a man standing at the bar. Alice was on a high stool and the bartender was just serving her her third drink of the evening.

The bar was decorated with coloured lights and prominent among the bottles and optics a purple shoe, a male person's shoe, not larger than a size 9, Alice estimated. She had been interested in the shoe because she had lost a shoe herself the previous evening; a favourite high-heeled diamante studded sandal. Size 3 to be exact She was wearing the other one in hope. Also she had on a bright blouse and short black skirt. Alice did not usually wear flamboyant colours but this scarlet top would give her confidence, or so she thought. It was not her colour and did not suit her pale skin but the bright blue eyes and mascara blackened lashes, made her modestly attractive. So the signals Alice was giving out belied her inner shyness. She looked down at his feet and sure enough on one foot was a brown leather shoe and a green woolly sock on the other.

Unsteadily she slid off the bar stool, Nick rescued her drink as it tilted on the bar, and she looked up into the eyes of a most gorgeous, tweedily dressed tall man. Her chin bumped into him about mid chest and he steadied her with a firm hand at her elbow,

As Nick handed the shoe down from the bar, it seemed that the magical purple became subdued to a peaty greyish brown but still a handsome shoe.

The stranger put it on while Alice watched.

Straightening up he looked her full in the eyes and said---

“Perhaps, we could have dinner---,”

Slightly drunk she said “When?...”

He said...”Now...?”

Ignoring a warning look from Nick...Alice slid off the stool and mumbled “Ladies... going to.....” and began to weave her way through the tables to the toilet.

Once there she dabbed her forehead and tried to collect her thoughts. Realising she had on only one shoe’ her silver sandal, she had to resort to the trainers in her bag.

He was waiting near the door of the Ladies. He gave her feet only a cursory glance, extended his hand and said...

“Mike James,” and glanced down at his feet. A flash of mutual recognition, of a shared sense of humour made them both sense what came next.

I'm...in er...Shoes" and for some unaccountable reason, they both laughed.

“I sell shoes” he added “Marriotti's” of Sydney Street”.

“Never heard of them,” she replied.

“And...?” A questioning look from his gorgeous brown eyes.

“Er...Alice Bell, I’m into ...Fashion". It was the first thing that came into her mind.

They shook hands formally.

Meanwhile she was still counting. 109 since she'd left Nick at the Bar, and she had staggered it out to 9 between each table from the Bar to the Ladies, but now she had to adopt a different strategy.

It did not seem at all strange to walk out of the Bar on Mike’s arm and make for the bustle and noise of the street. Once there she counted 20, silently as always at the back of everything she did, between each parking meter that lined the road. They walked, looking to find a suitable restaurant, and she felt safe with him. They had not realised it but they must have walked a quarter of a mile before they came to a small Italian one. He had been telling her about the occasion of losing his shoe. Apparently during a quiz game in the pub the previous night there had been forfeits.

“How did you get home without your shoe?” She quizzed him. “Were you drunk?”

“No, of course not" he declared. Well a little tipsy, perhaps”.

They had a lovely relaxed evening. Alice let him do most of 'the talking. She loved the way his expression changed so rapidly as he talked about his 'job, and how he was so interested about what her life was like, and how he asked her opinion of things, and how he looked at her with such close attention. He could have been talking about the third law of dynamics for all she cared. She did, however, in one short gap in the conversation ask..."I don't suppose you have found a silver sandal?"

“No, I’m afraid not. Why? Have you lost one?”

“No it doesn’t matter” she replied, and felt hardly a pang of disappointment. But it did matter... a little bit... well, he wasn’t the one then.

“Anyway, what’s with this Cinderella thing" she said to herself. “Grow up girl” and she politely refused a second glass of wine.

Meanwhile she resumed counting. She stopped at 486 on the way to dinner. Somehow a little of the magic of the evening had gone. He had not found her silver sandal; for a man interested in shoes he had not been even a little interested. The dinner was being deliberately stretched out to include coffee, and refills of coffee; the waiters were hovering, flapping serviettes, folding them, beginning to remove the condiment sets from the tables... Alice realised she was having the best time she had had in ages. Mike seemed equally loath for the evening to end, but finally as she opened her purse to pay her share and he gently closed it, she realised she must make a decision... what did a single girl do next, these days?

They went out into the now quiet street and as he put her jacket round her shoulders, he said seriously...

"This is a one-off isn't it? We are not going to see one another again, are we?"

"No Mike" she murmured, allowing herself a little snuggle against his chest...(after all, she had started counting again.)

"It's been a wonderful evening, Alice," he whispered into the top of her head and turned her face up to him. Gently he kissed her. Alice floated on the moment. It would be so lovely if this could last, if she could put her trust in a complete stranger; but the counting went on.

"Well, you haven't got my silver sandal, have you?" She joked, and the spell was broken.

Mike put Alice into a taxi, and 9, 18, 27, she counted on the way back to the Bar. It did not close until 1 a.m. Nick was still on duty and quickly wiped the look of surprise off his face when he saw her.

Alice hoisted herself onto the bar stool in front of him.

"The usual?" said Nick, handing down the vodka bottle.

"No, I'd like a lemonade, please" she said.

"How long have I been coming here, Nick?" She asked.

"Well," he said cagily, "Well... about four months now.. since..."

"You mean, since that bastard left me?" she finished for him. The bitter inflexion of her voice on the word bastard hung in the air.

"Yes, about that" Nick said.

It was quiet now, in the bar, only a few late-nighters with almost empty glasses, hung on, clinging on to the light and the company it afforded.

Alice watched Nick as he set her drink in front of her, noticed his laughter creased face, his ordinary blue eyes, his solid shape.

She had been taken out, she had met someone who seemed to be able to share in her fantasy world in which beautiful things, such as shoes for instance, could be enjoyed as simple pleasures, yet with no material baggage added. Everything nowadays was so calculated, so commercial. It was hard to get away from it. Also there was her fable...her feeling that she was a Cinderella, and would be recognised as a special person in her own right one day.

Mike had seemed to fit the bill but in the end it was evident he was an ambitious type.

He wanted to sell shoes.

Up 'til now, since she had returned from the restaurant, Alice realised she had been counting the beer mats, evenly spaced on the tables. Now Nick was collecting them up; it had come to a small pie of 27 which he placed before her.

“What about the silver sandal Nick; did you see it?” she asked quietly.

The young man looked down at his hands, then up at her...

“I did see it; I did find it...that’s why the other one, the purple one, looked magical... it was all a fable; I threw it in the bin, the silver one, I knew you had to come to it... to realise for yourself that you cannot live in a make-believe world..”

He looked at her appealingly. “I love you, you see Alice...have done since you walked in here four months ago.”

“And you never let on, never said, never talked me down...you entered into my dream, you didn’t laugh at me or take the...”

Alice leant both arms on the counter. A great sense of peace and relaxation was spreading from a layer of her consciousness deep down beneath the counting and the anxiety and the hurt with which she lived.

“And I nearly went off for good” she said.

“I thought you had, with Mr Marriotti...” he interrupted.

“Mr Marriotti? Who’s he?” said Alice.

“The shoe, the purple shoe” said Nick.

“Oh it wasn’t purple, it was just brown”, laughed Alice. It was only the lights of the bar—only we saw the purple magic”.

The manager came in, keys in hand.

Nick and Alice were clasping hands over the bar, gazing steadfastly into each other’s eyes as if they had just met.

In a way they had.

The Piggy

Beryl Jones

Presented at the SCPSW New Year Party.

'Billy go and get your Uncle Nat from the Piggy, his tea's ready.'

'O.K.Mam.' Billy would run round to the little pub on the corner and worm his way through a sea of corduroy covered legs and hob-nailed boots until he reached his Uncle Nat .

'Me Mam said your tea's ready.'

'Right Billy lad I'm coming.'

Billy never queried why he had to fetch his uncle, his mother's much older brother, from the pub each evening but he was curious about its name.

'Well Billy lad. Some people say it's short for Pigmeal because the beer tastes like pig swill, others call it the Pygmy because it's so small which in turn becomes the Piggy. But the pub's real name is the Victoria Vaults.'

Billy's mates were not interested when he told them about the names they were more interested in hanging on to the back of lorries as they moved slowly down the road towards the docks.

One summer's day when Billy was eight his life changed completely. He had been in the park all afternoon playing cowboys and Indians amongst the rocks when he asked a passer-by the time. 'Quarter to six son.' Billy panicked. His mother was out and he had completely forgotten about Uncle Nat. Taking to his heels he flew down the road. 'She'll kill me' he shouted to his friend Robby as he drew level with the last in the line of lorries just as it began to move.

Without thinking he grabbed hold of the back, his legs swinging as it accelerated. He had to get to the Piggy as quickly as possible.

The next thing Billy was aware of was waking up in hospital with a bandaged head, a leg in plaster and his mother by his side in the process of wiping her eyes.

'Am I dying Mam?' he croaked.

She took hold of his hand. 'Don't be silly of course you're not.'

'Why've you been crying then.'

'I wasn't just something in my eye.'

'Am I in trouble for being late fetching Uncle Nat?'

'The only trouble you're in lad is for jumping on the back of that lorry and then falling off, you could've been killed and then we'd have lost both of you.'

'What do you mean Mam?'

She stroked his hand. 'Billy son, your Uncle Nat's had an accident.'

'Like me Mam. Is he in hospital as well?'

'No son. Your Uncle Nat's dead.'

The family emigrated shortly after Billy left hospital and it was to be many years before he heard the whole story from his mother, although at the back of his mind there was always the nagging doubt that he had in some way been responsible.

'Your Uncle Nat, Billy, was a lovely man but he had a fatal flaw. He was fine if he had no more than two pints but after that he didn't know when to stop. It was putting such a strain on your poor Aunty Florrie that I came up with the idea of getting him out of the Piggy by half-five and giving him a sandwich and a cup of tea before he went home.

'So it was my fault he died? It happened on the night of my accident didn't it?'

'There was such a to-do over your accident no one thought of Nat until it was too late. He was legless when he left the pub, tripped over the kerb and hit his head on the pavement. He never recovered consciousness. But you must never blame yourself son. If anyone's to blame it's me. I should never have given you such responsibility without telling you why. No it was never your fault.'

So fifty years after the two accidents Billy was once again in the Piggy, only this time standing at the bar rather than squirming his way through a sea of legs.

'You look puzzled' said the landlord as he pulled a pint.

Billy smiled. 'It's strange how things change in perspective from memory to reality isn't it?'

The landlord raised an eyebrow.

'I used to come in here when I was a nipper to fetch my uncle. The place appeared enormous to me, I battled my way through dozens of legs to the far corner over there.' He indicated the corner where his Uncle Nat always sat. 'But it's really very small isn't it?'

The landlord nodded. 'I think we can claim to be both the oldest and smallest pub in town. We haven't even room for a darts board.'

'I was surprised to find you still here. I thought you'd have been demolished years ago. Do you still get called the Piggy?'

'Yep. The clientele may have changed but we're still very busy.' He laughed 'Put six people in here and it's crowded. We've also got a resident ghost which is an added attraction. I've seen him quite a few times since I came here over twenty years ago. Always in that corner you mentioned and usually around this time of year. Seems to be waiting for someone. Of course I was very sceptical but now accept him as part of the fixtures and fittings. I'll just go and get your sandwich. Won't be a tick.'

Billy turned to face Uncle Nat's corner and almost dropped his pint with shock. There was Uncle Nat as large as life looking at him and smiling as he raised his glass. Billy ever after swore he heard him say. 'Right Billy lad I'm coming.' Finishing his beer Nat stood and made his way across the floor touching Billy's shoulder as he passed before disappearing through the door.

A quiet voice spoke behind Billy. 'I reckon we won't see him again. I think it was you he's been waiting for all these years.'

Wild Shropshire

Brian Jones

After years of exile in London my thoughts turn more and more to my home county of Shropshire.

Shropshire is the fabulous country. So much of the shire is mysterious and other-worldly and particularly in the Welsh Marches there is sense that, apart from telephone wires and a few pylons, that the land is sleeping in the past and nothing much has changed over long centuries.

Shropshire is a county set apart from other English shires. To me it is a magical domain, a green and precious place. Cross the River Severn, or one of the four bridges linking it to the Midland plain and you will find yourself, enclosed between sweeping hills rocks, in a land of desolate castles and abbeys, of ghostly sites, of a vast forests, of huge expanses of moorland, of civilisation buried under the mounds and standing stones and now deserted uplands, of dead industry marked liked a tombstones by the chimneys and ruined engine - houses of derelict mines. Paradoxically, although Shropshire is now one of the most rural and unspoiled of counties it was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution and as in Telford, one of the newest of the new towns.

Everything about Shropshire is fabulous. For example near to the tiny village of Acton Round is one of England's largest oak trees, maybe 800 years old., the old Roman town of Viroconium has (perhaps!) strong links with the legendary King Arthur and the village of Winnington was the birth place of Thomas Parr, the oldest man ever to walk on this planet. He lived from 1483 to 1635, yes 152 years.

This region is different from anywhere else in England there is always the sense that it is a borderland, a bridge between the Celtic and the Anglo Saxon. It is relatively neglected and unknown, and therein lies its fascination.

Shropshire is a kingdom of myths and legends. There are over 500 haunted sites here, most of them passed down the ages by word of mouth, surviving the centuries in the telling.

I like the tales of the Stiperstone Hills. On hot summer nights on the top of the Stiperstones, the smell of brimstone warns the wary traveller that the Devil himself, with the trident and crown, sits balefully on a high peak called the Devil's Chair, surveying his Kingdom. He dislikes Shropshire more than any other country - brings rock continually, hoping that it will sink into the sea.

The Stiperstones are also the location for wild Edric, the rebel knight imprisoned underground as punishment for siding with William the Conqueror. On moon lit nights, mounted on phantom horses he and his followers ride continually to war, up and down the rugged hills.

Shropshire has, recently, been associated with the most famous legendary King Arthur. According to the authors of 'King Arthur: The True Story' Arthur was a 5th Century Welsh war lord, Owain by name. King Arthur and his followers are not linked to West Country, as is usually supposed but to the Roman town of Viroconium (Wroxeter), near Shrewsbury.

Shropshire, in its own way, is just as beautiful as Cornwall, and the great wild plateau of Clun Forest and such mountains as the Long Mynd and the Stiperstones make a perfect setting for Arthur's wondrous world.

The success of the book has led to King Arthur now being incorporated in some of the local guide books and to an article in a local newspaper featuring a proud headline King Arthur was a Shropshire lad.

Camelot has actually been in Shropshire since 18th century. You can see it in Hawkstone Park with its dramatic rocky landscape. Here can be seen all kinds of 18th century 'follies' - red sandstone castle, a hermit's cave, grottos and tunnels; also fine modern golf courses. Hawkstone fell into decay but now everything has been restored for visitors.

Shropshire is extremely rich in botany and wild life. Red squerrels are still. believe to exist in the extensive forest of Clun, also badgers, stoats and weasels. Clun forest's most, distinctive bird is the nightjar and the rarer species include the hen harrier, woodcock, sicken and redstart.

The deep, encroaching wood of Habberly, Clun and Flawkestone, ripple and wave away into the distance as far as you can see. Some woods of oak and chestnut are immeasurably old, preceding Celts and Saxon, where there are trees like pillars and narrow paths where it is

almost night at noon. They soar in a green mysterious daylight that is at once peaceful and unnerving. A vague, primeval world.

On the limestone soil of Wenlock Edge, in great profusion, grows the bilberry - known locally as the 'wimberry', producing the dark purple fruit so favoured for the pies, puddings and jellies. Of wimberries Mary Webb wrote, 'In spring, the leaf green is splashed a beautiful red like the colour of a ladybird; then come pink flowers, honeyed and waxen, and above their sweet acres the large, almost black bumble-bees of the hills coast to their deep murmur, like far off seas in a dream.'

The greatest features of Shropshire are perhaps its castles and its hills. Of its fortresses only Ludlow could be deemed as majestic looking ruin, most of the others survive in fragments. Bridgenorth Castle keep, for example, leans over at a greater angle than the Tower of Pisa. Poets have written of knights in gleaming armour, fair ladies and gaudy tournaments, but a stranger would need to exert a great deal of imagination to bring these fragments to life, where the bleating of sheep or mooing of cattle is about all that disturbs the long haunted silence. In full sunlight the crumbling walls shine with a radiant whiteness; at sunset their exteriors are bathed in scarlet, reminiscent of ancient warfare.

The memory of early struggles is handed down in the husks of the ruins such as Wigmore, Clun, Ludlow and Hopton, which stand as mute witnesses to a century of turmoil and violence that abated only after the Civil War.

Of the hills it must be said that they are all, different and have their own distinct character and personality. The Wrekin is a lonely, solitary giant, the Clees are friendly and inviting, the Stiperstones are the blackest and most sinister. They are best seen, in all their majesty, from the long plateau of Wenlock Edge. This is a wild and wind swept lonely place of grassy uplands, where sheep are scattered like toys all about, and the grey stone walls cross like braids in all directions.

Yet in spite of clear differences, the spirit of the landscapes is one of high Celtic dral-na, pervaded by the sound of wind and birdsong.

The Welsh border and the Wrye Forest encompass the Shropshire Hills. These outbreaks of the prehistoric rock - some a thousand million years old - present a spectacle of bold grandeur and untamed power as they near the Welsh border. Buzzards and ravens soar above the heights

of the Long Mynd and the Stiperstones, skylarks, trill and dippers bob above trout streams and pools - the home of stonefly, mayfly and dragonfly.

More than anyone else the writer who immortalised this was Mary Meredith Webb, in novels like 'Gone to Earth' and 'Precious Bane'. Her sympathies were always with the poor and the oppressed. She had a great hatred for blood sports and the 'Huntin' and Shootin' Set'.

Mary Webb's one best seller was 'Precious Bane' published in 1924.

Ellis Peters is the penname of Edith Pargeter. Her birthplace was a small struggling village near Wellington. She lived with her family in a tiny, simple cottage with few amenities. She lived most of her life in the county.

In 'A Bloody Field by Shrewsbury' she describes the battle with great fidelity. 'The Heaven Tree' and its sequels is set in western Shropshire, especially along the old Roman road on the flank of the long mountain.

Shropshire is very much a presence in most of her novels. Sometimes the influence is shadowy, sometimes clear and strong as in 'City of Gold and Shadows', a wonderful evocation of the Roman Town of Uniconium.

Had Mary Webb live to a great age she would not have found that her beloved Shropshire had altered so much. There is the new town of Telford and the busy dual carriageway that leads to it, but the quaint, irregular, grey-stone villages and hamlets, the mysterious, green 'Lost and Forgotten' hills, the sinister rocks and crags, the legend - haunted meres and lakes, the ancient moorlands and forests have altered little since her lonely and questing childhood.

Among the valleys and hills I laid the dreams of years of years of solitary exploration. A region where I could always calmly ponder and mediate, I seem to see them sleeping there still, veiled in a milky mist that ripples and flows like the sea between the distant peaks of the Welsh mountains.

(There are a few errors in the above and some might point out such matters as the rock's age, as this is no more nor less than the rocks in the rest of the world, but I found this mixture of memory and imagination most enjoyable – I hope you all do – Ed)

A History of The Society of Civil Service Authors:

The Early Days

Beryl Jones

The seeds for the formation of a Society of Civil Service Authors first germinated in the mind of A.A.Rayner during the latter part of 1935. This idea was mulled over with two of his colleagues, I.O.Evans and Bernard Newman, firstly in the office (Office of Works later to become the Ministry of Works) and later in the comfort of the aptly names pub The Two Chairmen, which was situated in nearby Dartmouth Street.

However, it was not until the 18th February, 1936 that the first recorded meeting of the Society took place, and this was held at 6pm in Conference Room 'A' of H.M. Office of Works, Storey's Gate, Westminster. Those present at this inaugural meeting were:

A.A.Rayner I.O.Evans

Bernard Newman J.R.Barker

James Laver E.M.Keate

W.H.Chappell C.C.H.Borley

Vincent Brennan Jackson Budd

I.A.Campbell Grierson Dickson

Charman Edwards M.Knight

H.E.L.Melhuish L.A.Pavey

D.A.Shephard Miss Mary Codd

Miss A.M.Paterson C.Harwood Gibbs~Smith

Charles Neilson Gattey (a young man not yet out of his teens).

Bernard Newman, was in the Chair at this initial meeting and spoke of the two main aims of the proposed new Society as: 'The development of the social possibilities of such a corporate body of authors, and the practical assistance which might be rendered one to one another amongst them.'

Membership was open to both serving and ex-Civil Servants who had had at least one book published (not at their own expense), whilst Associate Membership was extended to all Civil Servants who were free-lance journalists, contributors to periodicals, plus other aspiring authors.

A twelve member Executive Committee was proposed comprising a nucleus of seven or eight, with power to co-opt as necessary. The following nucleus were elected:-

Grierson Dickson/J.R.Barker Ministry of labour
Jackson Budd Customs & Excise
Charman Edwards Dept.of Overseas Trade
H.E.L.Meluish/1.A.Pavey Inland Revenue
Bernard Newman/A.A.Rayner Office of Works

It was suggested at this meeting that in order to meet initial expenses those present should contribute 2/- as a first instalment of an, as yet, undecided annual subscription. It was an indication of the interest generated by this first meeting that the majority of those present paid up on the spot. (Although it has also been suggested that no doubt there were some Civil Servants, then as now, who did not have a couple of bob to spare).

The second meeting of the Society was held at The Two Chairmen pub in March 1936 and it was during this meeting that the following rules were drafted:-

- 1) The Society shall be called 'The Society of Civil Service Authors'.
- 2) Objects:- To foster friendly relationship among the members, to furnish mutual assistance, and to further the interests of the members generally as authors.
- 3) Membership: Full membership shall be open to Civil Servants and ex-Civil Servants who can substantiate to the Committee their standing as authors, and to the Editors of Civil Service periodicals. Associate membership shall be open to all other Civil Service writers at the discretion of the Committee.
- 4) Subscription: The annual subscription shall be 10/6 for full members and 5/- for associates.
- 5) Committee: The Committee shall consist of, the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and nine other members. The Committee shall have the power to co-opt. Five shall form a quorum for the transaction of business. Alteration of Rules: These Rules may not be altered except by a two-third vote at a General Meeting.

It was agreed that Humbert Wolfe (Director of Establishment at the Ministry of labour) should be asked to become the first President of the

Society, and James Laver of the Victoria and Albert Museum to be invited to serve on the Committee. The official address of the Society would continue to be that of H.M. Office of Works (subject of course to obtaining official permission).

The first General Meeting of the Society was held at The Two Chairmen on the 21st May, 1936 with Bernard Newman in the Chair, and about fifty members and prospective members present. (Presumably there was a room in the pub large enough to cope with the influx of extra customers). It was during this meeting that the decision was taken to hold future meetings at the Camera Club in London's Adelphi W.C.2., and a list was prepared of members willing to offer their services as lecturers to the Society.

In November 1936 a new Committee was elected (as the six month term of office of the former Committee had expired). All members were re-elected with the exception of Grierson-Dickson, whilst three new members were appointed, thus bringing the new Committee to the full twelve allowed under the Constitution.

The new members were:

Miss E.M.Neate Foreign Office

Vincent Brennan Air Ministry

Mr Harris Dept.of Trade

In April of the following year (1937) H.E.L.Melhuish of the Inland Revenue was appointed Treasurer, and in April 1938 Grierson-Dickson was re-elected to the Committee; whilst Charles Neilson Gattey replaced A.A. Rayner. Also in April 1938 Jackson Budd was elected Chairman following the resignation of Bernard Newman; Grierson-Dickson became Vice-Chairman and Charles Neilson Gattey was appointed Publicity Officer.

The Society however suffered a double blow in 1940 when the President, Humbert Wolfe, died on the 5th January at the early age of 54, and the Camera Club, home to the monthly meetings of the Society, was bombed during the blitz. Vincent Brennan recalled that in response to a rumour he visited the site only to find that: 'Our beloved H.Q. had completely disappeared.' (He also well remembered the double scotch needed as a reviver).

Notwithstanding the loss of both their President and meeting place, the Society was kept alive during the war years by the energy and

enthusiasm of the Chairman, Jackson Budd, the Secretary, Miss Maude White and the Treasurer, H.E. Bull.

Jackson Budd commented at that time that although: 'The Society was in cold storage, work was going quietly and new members joining.' Part of this work was to keep in touch with members who were on active service and: 'Presents of cigarettes and tobacco at Christmas reminded them that the Society had not forgotten them.'

One such member was Peter Jackson a successful author of boys' adventure stories and, writing to the Secretary of the Society, he commented amusingly on black-outs:

'Ours at sea are complete, not even steaming lights, though the blacker the better then -moon as well. Ashore I am a dismal failure, I have already fallen down an area to land upon a number of empty dustbins. The resulting noise frightened me more than the fall. I have also stepped clear over the top of a bridge, low parapet, landing on a light railway below. My best effort was to walk off with a man's wife on my arm. I thought it was my sailor pal, the lady thought it was a kidnapping and the husband – who originally had hold of her other arm - thought it was an earthquake.'

Sadly Peter was lost on the 'Dunedin' in 1941. In 1945 a poetry competition was held in his memory, the theme being the 'Sea'. The prize was donated by Miss Maude White and the winner was Mr W.A.R. Mason (Assistance Board) for his poem 'Men of the little Ships.' Occasional lunches and meetings of the Society were held during the war years and it was in this period that the first competitions were organised.

According to the Civil Service Author of October 1969, the earliest competition winner on record (1945) was Kathleen Bird (later Kay McManus). However the Society leaflet announcing the winners of the 1945/46 Competitions lists the winner of the Short Story Competition as a Mr W.R.Ormerod for his story entitled 'Cresendo', Miss Bird winning third prize with 'Interlude'. But there is also mention in the archives of a Poetry Competition held in May 1940 being won by Mrs Phyllis D.James for her poem 'Mr Dalglish.'

Lord Vansittart became President in May 1940 and it was said at the time that: The Society was proud to have so distinguished a man at its head, he had shown a warm sympathy that makes him very popular with

the membership.' (Tommy Martin) It was also at this time that James Laver became Vice-President.

As well as holding lively meetings to which guest speakers were invited, the Society also held Annual Dinners with prominent guests of honour -although the Dinner of 1948 was cancelled- 'due to the austerities of the day and would remain in abeyance until times improved.'

During the early days the Society also had a flourishing social side to its activities which included outings to numerous places of interest, visits to the theatre and many enjoyable garden parties held at the homes of various members.

Two further Vice-Presidents were elected, namely I.A. Pavey in 1946 and Charles Neilson Gattey in 1948; the latter whilst still holding the position of Publicity Officer (a position he was still holding in 1951).

Up to 1948 a distinction had been made between Full and Associate Members, with full membership being restricted to the published author; whilst the latter paid a smaller subscription. However, in the light of experience, this distinction was abolished during that year. 'No Civil Servant serving or retired may not join, irrespective of his writing community of interest does not depend on success in authorship but on likeness of mental tastes.' (Tommy Martin -Summer 1948).

It was during the early history of the Society that 'Open Nights' were introduced, in which examples of work were read out. The aim of these friendly gatherings was apparently to merely interest or amuse and any criticism was quite informal. In later years however, these 'Open Nights' became more regulated whereby members could profit from the comments made by a panel of critics. In addition to the 'Open Nights' a postal criticism scheme was introduced in 1950 organised by Miss J.P. Winn; in which small groups of members circulated a folder of their manuscripts for criticism and comments.

Also at this time (October 1950) a Members Sub-Committee was formed, apparently inspired by a Mr Bristow. This Sub-Committee started ambitiously and energetically but collapsed after one month due to the failure of the Secretary (Mr Bristow) to issue notices re November meetings etc. Mr Bristow blamed his typist but this was not acceptable to the other members of the Sub-Committee and in the ensuing discussion he resigned from both the Sub-Committee and the Society.

In 1952 the Post Office Art Club held an exhibition at the South London Art Gallery. Exhibitors paid half a crown per volume and around fifty books and plays by Society members were on show; also on display was the Vansittart Drama Trophy. For some reason this exhibition was not a happy event although it is not known why.

The first Lord Vansittart Drama Festival was held in the spring of 1949, the winners of which were awarded the Lord Vansittart Drama Trophy, donated by Lord Vansittart to encourage playwrights. Six Festivals were organised up to 1970 when the Trophy was withdrawn due to lack of support by Civil Service Drama Societies to produce plays by members of the Authors' Society.

A two page leaflet had initially been published which listed the President, Chairman, Secretary and Committee members; this leaflet also laid out the aims and principles of the Society together with an application form for prospective members. It was not until January 1948 however, that the 'Civil Service Author' made its first appearance, a quarterly magazine of modest size supplied free to members. The magazine's first Editor was Tommy Martin who had had thirteen years experience as Editor of 'The Journal' (Customs and Excise Federation); which had during his tenure been published weekly. The magazine continued to be issued in this format (16 pages Vx5P) for almost ten years; the first issue dated New Year 1948 and the last, Spring 1957. Due to a rise in printer's costs this format gave way to a stencilled 8 page 6"x8" magazine issued monthly (except June/July/August).

At one stage a Society member, George Farley, devoted a great deal of time and effort in an attempt to publish an anthology of short stories by Civil Service authors. Unfortunately the project was abandoned in 1958 as no publisher was willing to risk the capital required for the venture.

Despite the losses and set-backs, occasioned by the war and post-war austerity, the Society continued to grow and celebrated its twenty first birthday in 1956. At the time Tommy Martin wrote:-

'With pardonable pride, the Society of Civil Service Authors has reached its twenty-first birthday. In spite of violent disruptions and unprecedented displacements of Government Departments occasioned by World War Two, the Society had held together and to-day is in a sturdy condition worthy of its "majority".'

Jubilee

Alan Watts

My wife's brother is the most argumentative man I've ever met. He's a nice chap in many ways. He likes small children. Well — until they begin to argue back. He's very fond of dogs because they too accept what he has to say. But with friends and relatives and customers in the Travellers' Rest he only wants to pick an argument. However, it has to be an argument he's confident of winning.

He's a well-read man is my wife's brother. Don't underestimate him. He's spent more time reading racing papers, and Wisden, and the scores at past Cup ties, than doing anything else. So if you see him in the Travellers' Rest with a pint in front of him and a cigarette between his lips, don't contradict anything he says. He plans his arguments in advance. You don't know what he might have in mind. So keep quiet, and don't let him draw you into making statements you're not sure about.

Poor Joe Hardcastle fell right into his trap the other year. We were talking about the Queen's forthcoming Jubilee. I'm not sure how we got onto this, but I have a suspicion my wife's brother had engineered it.

"What is a Jubilee anyhow?" he asked.

"It's fifty years," said Joe. We call him Holy Joe because he used to attend the Salvation Army Citadel now and then. He was hoping to get into their band, and was disappointed when they took someone else.

"And why is it fifty years?" asked my wife's brother.

"Half of a hundred," said Holy Joe.

"But you can have a silver jubilee — twenty-five years — and that's not half a hundred."

My wife's brother was smiling now, ready to pounce.

"You don't know what a jubilee is," he said.

"Course I do."

"No, you don't."

"Course I do. Everybody does."

"Suppose I was to tell you that you can't even spell it."

“How d’you mean?” protested Holy Joe. “Can’t spell it?”

“Well, go on. Spell it.”

“J-u-b-i-l-e-e.”

“Wrong,” declared my wife’s brother.

“Wrong! What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s spelt properly — J-U-B-I-L-E.”

“Go on!” said Holy Joe in derision, but one or two of us wondered what my wife’s brother might have up his sleeve.

“J-u-b-i-l-e,” he repeated. “Want a bet anyone?”

“Come off it,” said Holy Joe. “What’s your game?”

“I say it’s properly J-u-b-i-l-e.”

“And,” said a voice from the far end of the bar — a woman’s voice, “he’s right.”

“There we are,” said my wife’s brother. “This lady knows. She’ll tell you.”

“No,” said the lady, coming forward. “You can tell us, or rather — you can show us.”

“Yes,” said my wife’s brother. “It’s in the Bible, see.”

The little lady who had come forward was in Salvation Army uniform. She was the lady who collected at the Travellers’ Rest every Saturday.

“Yes,” repeated my wife’s brother, “it’s in the Bible.”

“Well, show us,” said the little lady. “Here’s my Bible. Just look up Leviticus twenty-five, verse eleven.”

My wife’s brother held the battered black book loosely in his hand as if he were afraid it might explode and was ready any moment to throw it away.

“Could you look it up for me,” he asked. “I haven’t got my reading glasses with me, I’m afraid.”

The little lady didn’t even bother to find the page.

“A jubile (One ‘e’ at the end) shall that fiftieth year be unto you,” she recited.

“Who was right?” asked my wife’s brother triumphantly.

“Not much to be right about,” said the little lady. “And now you can go around and shake the collecting box under everyone’s nose.”

“What me?” asked my wife’s brother.

“Why not? You know what it says in Verse thirty-five of Leviticus twenty-five?”

“Well, of course.”

“And if thy brother be waxen poor, then thou shalt relieve him. Am I right?”

“Absolutely.”

“So be a bit generous tonight. Not a twenty-pee piece as normal. What about a note. Eh?”

My wife’s brother reluctantly got out his wallet. As he did so, the little lady turned to Holy Joe.

“And you might do the same, Mr Hardcastle. It’s a pity you haven’t been to the Citadel recently. We needed a trombone like yours in the band, and without one, I’m having to learn that instrument as well as my cornet.”

Juvenile Delinquent

Brian Scott

Nobody was more surprised than me when I passed the ‘eleven plus’ exam and gained a place at Harrow County Grammar School (a.k.a. ‘Horror County’).

I was less than a star pupil and struggled along in the ‘D’ classes, rather unhappily. When I was fourteen or fifteen I began to realise, correctly, that my academic achievements would be modest, so I decided that I would have some fun before I left and I joined the ranks of the bad boys. A succession of detentions and letters home (to at least one of which I forged my father’s signature) followed, and I became moderately notorious.

One day I was ‘hopping the wag’, in other words playing truant, waiting to meet some fellow truants so we could go to the ‘pictures’

together. The meeting place was outside a long-vanished bookshop in Harrow.

I waited and waited but nobody else turned up. Suddenly, to my horror, a police car stopped and two policemen approached. It transpired that they had driven past several times and, seeing me still there, suspected that I was ‘loitering with intent’. I was far too scared to lie, and when they learned the truth they roared with laughter, drove me to school and took me up to the headmaster’s study. Dr. Simpson, the Head, was livid with rage! My first humiliation was to be identified as Scruton, who was a year younger than me and a relatively minor member of our group. I’m afraid I cracked very quickly and squealed on all the pupils who were supposed to have joined me. Would you believe that every one of those lily-livered cowards was in school? I could have waited for them all day long! They deserved everything they didn’t get

Dr. Simpson then asked what position I had come in class last term. Now, it just so happened that instead of my usual 27th or 28th place out of thirty or so I had been 8th or 9th. The Head commented, “So! An intelligent criminal! The most dangerous kind!” There followed some remarks about “casting pearls before swine” and I was given a caning, a week’s detention and a letter for my parents.

It was worth it all for my enhanced standing within my circle. True, I had grassed on them, but they were in no position to throw stones because of their own treachery.

My subsequent school career continued along much the same path, which is why I left with only three GCE ‘O’ levels — no sixth form for me. My last day at school was an adventure in itself, but that is another story.

We moved house shortly after I left school, and at sixteen I had just enough sense not to maintain contact with my former schoolmates, although they doubtless all grew up to become solid citizens, as of course did I. Yet I did achieve one goal in my final years at school; I remember at the end of one hilariously unruly lesson the ruffled maths teacher shouted, “You fools! You’ll regret this later!” to which I replied, “Yes, sir, but it’s such fun now!” And indeed it was.

The End

No Author Listed

Later he remembered the day well. Or thought he did. He couldn't be sure.

He went with her to the hospital. They didn't speak to each other. They were too frightened. They kept smiling at each other and squeezing hands, but each knew the other was frightened. To keep his mind occupied he tried to work out why he was frightened. After all nothing was going to happen to him. He was not going to experience any pain, he was not going to have to understand and obey the instructions of doctors and nurses who, despite their professional neutrality, must be condemning or sympathising or feeling superior or cynical. He didn't know if he felt responsible or relieved. He gave up trying to analyse his fear.

At eight o'clock in the morning the waiting room was full of miserable women and girls and a few sheepish men, some of them little more than boys. There were posters all over the place about contraceptives, safe sex, sexually transmitted diseases, counselling services. He noticed a poster about baby food incongruously pinned on a notice board along with details of local church services, the Samaritans, vitamin pills. Someone with a black sense of humour, perhaps? Or someone determined to drive home their own view of what the clinic was all about.

A nurse called her name and told him to come back at five o'clock. He was dismissed. She didn't look back, just followed the nurse down the corridor. A few of the men were slumped in uncomfortable chairs with their eyes closed, asleep or pretending to be or wanting to be. Were they really going to stay there for the next eight or nine hours?

He went into a museum. Afterwards he couldn't remember which one. He looked at things. A sword, a shield, the remains of a boat, a statuette of a god or goddess. He read little cards which gave him dates, the names of civilisations, described battles, victors, captives. He even talked to an attendant. No, there weren't many people about. Yes, it was rather early. They were trying out earlier opening times. Experimentally. For the tourists. There were a lot of middle-range hotels in the area and a survey had revealed that a lot of people, despite being on holiday, take an earlier breakfast and want somewhere to go immediately afterwards. Interesting, wasn't it? No, it wasn't, but it passed the time and helped him cope with being frightened.

He bought a postcard. Immediately after he bought it he forgot what it depicted. He wasn't going to send it to anyone. It would stay in a little paper bag in the pocket of his jacket until he came across it again and threw it

away. Or he might become sentimental and keep it and look at it from time to time. He didn't know.

He spent a long time in the underground cafeteria of the museum. He read all the newspapers he found there. Wars, politics, murders, letters to the editor, what we ought to do, what will probably happen, why people should be sacked for not doing their job, congestion, racism, the railways, the underground, the buses, the weather. All this was frightening too. Problems, but no answers. The whole world was living a problem. And it was dying a problem.

Back at the hospital there were fewer women and girls in the waiting room but more men. Some the same men he had left. Husbands, fathers, brothers, boyfriends, perhaps just neighbours. There was no knowing.

A nurse appeared pushing her towards him in a wheelchair. Her eyes were closed. Neither said anything. Learning that he had no car, the nurse insisted he call a taxi and stood by until it moved off. For the first time he asked her if she was okay.

She just nodded without opening her eyes.

He took her back to her flat, made her tea, put her to bed. She said that all she wanted to do was sleep. She wasn't in pain, but she ached all over. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, but he knew that might make her open her eyes and look at him. He didn't want her to look at him. If he said he loved her, how could she possibly say she loved him too? The worst and the best he could expect from her was silence.

He watched her fall asleep in bed and in the middle of the night he went home. There was no comfort there, just the reproach of everything being exactly as he had left it. His unmade bed with its musty, yellowing sheets. A sink full of unwashed crockery. Letters lying on the mat behind the front door. A telephone with a blinking red light and an insistent, intermittent bleeping noise. Dirty windows. Old newspapers waiting to be put out for recycling.

He couldn't sleep. He was too tired. A neighbour's television was on, despite the late hour. Normally he could ignore it. Now it was an irritation, a reminder that other people knew nothing of what had happened to her, to him. He got up and went out on to his tiny balcony and sat on a collapsible picnic chair that a previous tenant had left behind. He sat surrounded by an abandoned exercise bicycle, an enormous wicker armchair, piles of empty boxes, last year's computer, dead plants in pots.

Curious pigeons fluttered by him. He didn't move them away. Now he slept.

Ken

Brian Lockett

Ken Baxter looked awkward and moved awkwardly. He loped. When he first joined the office, we all looked at each other. He was a tall, thirty-something year old with a permanent, premature stoop. He never managed to shave properly. His face was usually expressionless, except when something amused him (and usually no-one else). Then it would break into a great beaming ball slashed with a gap of yellowing teeth. He never wore any colour except brown, which matched his already thinning hair. He spoke slowly and carefully, his sentences tailing off as he let his thoughts continue their train. It was an annoying trait which suggested that we would or should guess what he no longer saw any need to convert into speech.

“I’ve just been dealing with this man who said he was coming to visit his daughter at Birmingham University, but ...”

We learnt never to wait very long for him to finish. Eventually most of us just walked away. If someone new to the office politely asked, “But ...?” he would turn away and move over to a typewriter.

“I’ll put a copy of my report in your pigeon hole.”

And he would.

We never read each other’s reports. We were too busy. In any case, our own were the only ones worth reading.

We grew to treat him as a nonentity. He was, we concluded, totally without character. He never talked about football or girls or even the ignorant people who were in charge of us all — normally good for a story or two. He never told jokes. It is true he listened to jokes. Studiously. Intently. He rarely laughed at them. They seemed to puzzle him. In fact, I think we puzzled him. Perhaps life puzzled him.

I was therefore surprised when he approached me one day.

“I’m getting married on Saturday,” he said. “I’d like you and Audrey to come along. I’ve noticed you’re off duty.”

“That’s kind of you, Ken. We’d be delighted. I didn’t know you were engaged.”

“There’s been no engagement. We’ve been seeing each other for some time. I think you’ll like her.”

My wife said, “Ken who?”

“I’m as surprised as you are. I’m not a particular friend of his. Come to think of it, I don’t think he has any friends. Certainly none at the office.”

“Do we give them a present? Is there a list?”

“I’ve no idea. I’ll ask.”

There was no list. Ken explained that they did not expect presents from their guests. They wanted it to be a low-key affair.

The only other guests at the wedding were Ken’s parents and Jan’s widowed father. He was not in good physical shape and when I stole a glance as the pair entered through the west door I had my doubts that he would make the whole length of the aisle. It was with a great sigh of relief that, having given his daughter away, he settled himself in a front pew, where he promptly closed his eyes, keeping them tightly shut until he was resurrected by the trumpets from the organ as the ceremony came to a close. There was no best man.

Jan was older than Ken, and my wife and I never got a clear idea of how they met. I think it had something to do with WEA lectures on the Maya and Aztec civilisations.

Outside the church Ken asked us back to their flat, where Jan had arranged refreshments. We were given beans on toast, which did not go down at all well with Ken’s parents, but which provoked no surprise in Jan’s father.

“My daughter,” he said, as he opened the can of Guinness alongside his plate, “is not much of a cook. Neither was her mother.”

There was a choice of dessert. Jan placed a large plate of mixed jam tarts, chocolate mini-rolls, Eccles cakes and sliced Battenberg on the table in front of us.

“Help yourself. We’ve got lots more in the kitchen.”

For the first time Audrey and I were able to look at her properly. She was as tall, but not quite as stooped as Ken. She had a strong, craggy face and equally strong, unwavering blue eyes. She spoke briskly and decisively. Ken gazed at her admiringly rather than adoringly and was

clearly pleased that she had effectively put herself in charge of the day. In fact, it seemed to Audrey and me, she had put herself effectively in charge of their lives.

We invited them to dinner from time to time. They ate ravenously and accepted offers of seconds with no hesitation. Ken explained.

“We lead busy lives. We don’t really have time to feed ourselves properly. We don’t go hungry, you understand. It’s just that there’s no time for preparation or planning. We grab whatever comes to hand.”

“Which is usually in a tin or a jar,” added Jan, as she accepted another helping of sherry trifle. Jan and Ken seemed to have slipped into a relationship which suited them both. They regarded each other with amused tolerance, each smilingly indulgently when the other spoke and occasionally adding a snide but affectionate comment.

Audrey asked them about their busy lives.

“I go to a lot of *auctions*,” said Ken.

“Ken, you go to every auction.”

“Well, let’s agree I go to 90% of the auctions I see advertised.”

“Ken is a great collector.”

“Of what?”

“Almost anything.”

“Pay no attention. It’s books mostly.”

“And stamps. And fobs. And commemorative plates ...”

They were not difficult people to entertain, since they would be happy talking to each other for hours on end. They never seemed terribly interested in what my wife and I had been doing or what opinions we might have about the issues of the day. One or other of them — usually Jan — would unequivocally indicate when they had tired of our company and had it in mind to embark on something more interesting.

“Look, Audrey, it’s about time we went home. Thank you for an enjoyable evening. Ken ...”

And they would go.

The evenings we spent with them were not very different from those they spent with us. Apart from the food. On the way home Audrey and I usually called in at a restaurant for supper.

“Why us?” my wife asked me once. “Ken must have latched on to something I’ve missed. Are you close at the office?”

“Not particularly. I’m probably kinder to him than most of the others. Not that he’s objectionable. He’s just, well ... he’s not anything, really.”

I was eventually shown Ken’s collection of auction acquisitions. One small room was crammed from floor to ceiling with books. Some of them had exquisite bindings, some were limited editions, some were antiquarian treasures. They were all in or about foreign languages — Greek, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew.

“I didn’t know you were a linguist, Ken.”

“I’m not.”

“So, why ...?”

I could have sworn I saw a look on his face which I could only interpret as embarrassment.

“You won’t say anything to anyone at the office, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“I would like to speak at least one foreign language. But I am hopeless. I never even managed French at school. But languages fascinate me. And, I hope you’ll agree, that this is a fine collection.”

“It is.”

He hesitated.

“Could I ask you to tell me what they’re about? Well, some I know from the catalogues and some I can guess. I know you’re something of a linguist, so — could you help me with the rest some time?”

“Of course. I don’t know all these languages, of course, but I could find out, probably more easily than you. Do you keep the other stuff in here, too?”

More embarrassment.

“I’ve had to get rid of it.”

“What, the stamps, fobs, plates and so on?”

“Well ... Jan’s put her foot down. I’m allowed, it seems, only one major eccentricity. At least, only one that costs money.”

My wife did not at first believe this story.

“Am I to conclude that he has been cultivating us just because he wants help with his collection of foreign literature?”

“I don’t want to believe that myself but it very much looks that way.”

We decided, however, that we were not mortally offended and that, largely out of curiosity, we would continue to remain on good terms with them both. I kept my word and helped Ken to catalogue the collection. I also put him in touch with book dealers with similar interests and, over the years, he became a respected figure in what he had made his speciality. My input decreased as his experience grew, although he never learnt to speak or read any of the languages represented in his collection.

About six years after his marriage he announced that they would be spending five or six weeks in Paraguay. Linking this to their interest in South American culture generally I expressed little surprise. On his return he invited us round.

“To meet the baby.”

The look on his face combined amusement with pride.

“Baby? I didn’t even know that Jan was pregnant. Congratulations. You’ve kept very quiet about this. Was it a difficult birth?”

“I’ve really no idea. I don’t suppose that Jan has either. Would Saturday be OK?”

“A baby?” said my wife later, as surprised as I had been.

“I suspect that there’s more to it than that. Still, there’s only one way to find out.”

We went to dinner, having eaten well earlier in the day.

Jan opened the door. She was as brisk as ever.

“Come upstairs and look. Then we can eat and talk. South America is fascinating, believe me.”

We went into a bedroom and looked at a baby in a cot. We then looked at each other. Even Jan smiled. Ken clapped a hand on our shoulders, the first ever physical contact either of us had had with him. He laughed.

“This is one we bought in Paraguay. It’s not really a long story. Come downstairs and I’ll tell you.”

Jan served us fruit juice in our armchairs.

“We thought we’d have a child,” said Ken. “There were difficulties.” He waved a hand deprecatingly.

“Ken, we don’t need to go into all that.”

“I’m not going to, dear.”

“What Ken means is that we decided to cut through a lot of red tape. We saw a piece in the newspaper about unwanted babies in Paraguay. We went there, inspected, haggled, handed over money. And now we have Rebecca Victoria. Which reminds me. We’d like you to be godparents. At the christening. On the twenty-third. No presents. Just the ceremony. Without my father. Did we tell you he died?”

Neither of them seemed to spend any time learning about small babies or how to be parents and from time to time, particularly during the first months, Ken reported trips to the doctor to deal with various phenomena which came as a constant surprise and irritation to them both: feeding, crying, teething — in fact, any number of, as far as we could judge, normal manifestations of child development which more run-of-the-mill parents take in their stride.

Some months later Ken left the office precipitately in circumstances which were never fully explained. I learnt of his departure only on return from a summer holiday.

“Ken’s gone, by the way,” someone said. “He’s left a parcel for you.”

It was a finely bound book of Russian verse printed in St Petersburg in 1823. There was a short note: *Thanks for all your help. Love to you and Audrey from both of us.*

“Where’s he gone? What’s happened?”

“No idea. I think the police were involved. Child neglect of some kind I shouldn’t wonder.”

This morning I came across an announcement of the Wigmore Hall debut of Rebecca-Victoria Baxter, ‘an exciting young Anglo-Paraguayan pianist of enormous talent’. She would be about eighteen or nineteen now, I suppose. Audrey and I are thinking of going along. Should be an interesting evening.

A Lot of Bowls

Adrian Danson

With a small space available I thought I might use it to offer a few facts on my principal time-consuming pastime, the sport of lawn bowls.

Although my youngest son and many others persist in referring to bowls as an old man's game, in fact there are almost as many ladies participating and the World Champions are commonly aged little more than twenty.

What people rarely realise is just how old the sport is, but the fact that the first bowls club was registered to play the sport in 1298 will give you some idea. This was in Southampton and the fact that this was one of the main Royal Navy ports at the time is surely no coincidence.

At one time the sport was confined to the aristocracy, ordinary mortals were banned after it was found that archers were forsaking their practice to play bowls. Agincourt might so easily have gone to the French if this has been allowed to continue.

The early bowls were made of wood and an Earl, whose name I do not remember, having broken one of his bowls (still commonly referred to as woods) took the round sphere from the end of his stair case as a substitute. The fact that it had a flat side meant that it was unbalanced and thus did not run in a straight line. This led to the introduction of intentionally unbalanced bowl that produced the curved run of woods, known as the bias, to this day.

A game of bowls usually involves walking about two miles and it "keeps me off the streets".



**SCPSW Annual Statement of Income & Expenditure for Period 15 April
2004 to 31 March 2005**

<u>Income</u>	2004-2005	2003-2004
Subscriptions	2454.00	2869.50
AGM Receipts	138.00	78.00
NY Party Receipts	133.00	214.00
Luncheon Receipts	621.00	616.00
Competition Receipts	406.50	219.50
Sponsorship Receipts	300.00	175.00
Donations	241.50	271.45
Bank Interest	1.27	1.41
Bank Charges Reimbursed	-	4.00
'Author' Sales	-	16.00
Poetry Workshop	153.00	-
Sundry Income	92.00	-
	4540.27	4464.86
<u>Expenditure</u>		
'Author' Printing & Distribution	2438.86	2373.08
Subscription Refunds	82.00	30.00
Subscriptions to PW	165.00	153.00
Room Hire/Refreshments*	1213.03	1322.71
Committee Expenses	109.95	118.33
Competition Prizes	162.00	504.95
Bank Charge/Unpaid Cheque	-	26.00
	4170.84	4528.07 (63.21)
Income less Expenditure	369.43	

Balance W 31 March 2004	1798.87
Receipts	4540.27
	6339.14
Payments	4170.84
Balance cf 31 March 2005	2168.30

Treasurer Account	
Bank Statement	2186.43
Unpresented Cheques	18.13
Cash at Bank 31 March 2005	2168.30
Business Money Manager	
Balance @ 31 March, 2004	64.91
Balance @ 31 March, 2005	66.00

Notes	
Room Hire/Refreshments AGM	288.95
Luncheon	660.50
Committee Meeting	57.78
New Year Party	205.80

Auditor: C. Jones A.C.I.B.
20th April, 2005