

NOWELL SMITH AND HIS SHERBORNE:

A Memoir

by

OLIVER HOLT

1955

AT Sherborne, whenever I had something of moment to write, I would go to the Library and sit in the window-seat in the far right-hand corner. There, facing down the long room, with my left leg tucked under me and an exercise-book with marbled covers on my knee, I would jot down the thoughts that came to me out of the stillness. Nowell Smith and his Sherborne! To write on such a theme I must return in fancy to that nook, hoping that as the associations gather about his name the magic of the old room will work once more.

Already, memory detects the feel of the roughened leather of the seat and the strands of horsehair jutting from a hole in the side; the mingled odours of floor polish, worn bindings and faded pages; the partnership of sunshine and shadow in the little green below me and the glint of light on plaster cast and painted shield; the crooning of the pigeons and the clap of their wings, and now the first notes of the Abbey organ rolling beyond those stalwart walls. If I go to the opposite window I may even see—yes, he is standing at the open window of his study looking out over the bed of scarlet geraniums; and there on the lawn is Mrs. Nowell Smith diligently excavating plantains, and Celia chasing white butterflies across the grass.

The notes of the organ swell. It is Edward Wearden playing, and the sounds that he evokes bear me back to my earliest days in Sherborne, before the First War had ended and I was at the Prep. For Wearden would come there every week—perhaps twice—to take a singing-class, when with pouncing hands and pursed lips and a merry gleam in his eye he would try out our young voices in tunes from the National Song Book, or jauntily throw in the refrain of “The Keeper” and “I’m Seventeen come Sunday.”

It was in those days that as a Prep. boy I first enjoyed the privileges of the Big School. In summer, on the stroke of noon, down the hill and across the road we would rush to the Bath, waving kickers in the air and shouting “What’s the temp?” and Arthur Scott would be waiting to give us our first swimming-lessons, dangling us in the green water (it was ever a livid green in those days) from a belted rope which he bore back and forth across a wooden bridge. It was then that I first went to the Field to cheer at School matches, and our high-pitched wail would inter-penetrates the deeper-toned ululation of our seniors—much as the jackdaw’s yelp pierces the roar of flocking rooks. It was then that I first made my way up the stairs to the Art School, where, among bottle-green curtains and plaster casts of gods and senators, of dismembered hand, or foot or ear, Henry Hudson, of the curt moustache and swooping pencil, reigned. “Quite good, quite nice, BUT . . .” he would say; and, swept from my stool, I would watch my drawing vanish in a flurry of india-rubber particles

to emerge in a few ferocious pencil strokes as something I had not intended. It was then, too, that on Sunday mornings I first went to the Chapel. Our service was early, for we had to be finished before the School service began, and I remember the awe with which we entered the Cloisters (those hallowed precincts of our elders) and how our boots struck the pavement with alarming resonance. We would glance across the sunlit Courts to the slender, battlemented Gate and the German guns beneath the lime trees, and then climb the steps and turn to the left on to the open balcony which at that time fronted the west door. That open spot had something of the exaltation of an eyrie, for there one seemed to be on a level with tiles and chimneys, and one could look down not only over the Courts but into the Close, where the white pigeons strutted on the brilliant grass and the old almshouse-women in black, white-frilled bonnets and scarlet cloaks hobbled out from the shade of the yews. Then the door would be opened by Arthur Scott, now sober-suited, and we would take our seats in the front pews of the nave. The Vicar of Sherborne took our service, and Littleton Powys, the Headmaster, read the lesson, and I dare swear no other group of boys heard the sublime words of Prayer Book and Scripture read by two finer voices, the one so caressing and melodious, the other so sonorous and strong.

Yet again, it was in those days that I first took part in the Commemoration Service in the Abbey and the beauty of that marvellous building first coloured my mind. In short, black jackets and narrow, striped trousers, our heads clamped between the upper dishes of our straw hats and the nether basins of our broad, white, gleaming collars, we would march chattering, but sedate, through the bright morning air to the Close, each with a buttonhole of sweet peas. I can smell that fragrance now, just as I can hear the ringing of the Abbey bells and see the fluttering pennant on the tower. Within the building the coolness of the stones would strike our cheeks and the sound of the bells grow dim and we would make our way to our seats in the south transept. There, beneath the blank marmoreal gaze of periwigged nobles and high-bosomed dames in their monuments, we would watch the big boys file in, column by column, or let our eyes roam among the intricate glories of the roof, as rich in colour and carving as some palace in the fairy-tales that we had not yet outgrown.

The Service would begin. Sentences, murmured prayers, responses; glad chants and hymns; and presently I would be listening to a new voice—a voice measured, quiet, and without rhetoric, yet with a sober melody of its own. It was the voice of the Headmaster of the Big School reading the prayer of thanksgiving for the School's founders and benefactors. The prayer cannot have meant much to me, but I understood enough to grasp that the school I hoped one day to go to cherished long and noble traditions and that it had been served and loved by great men in the Past who had bestowed upon it great benefits. Later I learnt to love that voice; for as I grew older it seemed to speak in my mind's ear for all the good and gracious things,

just as from time to time its actual tones would commend such things to me by word. So it is fitting that I should first have heard it uttering that tribute of honour and gratitude in the Abbey long ago.

When I came to the School in the summer term of 1923 I landed straight in IVA(1). G. M. Carey was the form-master, and his imperious ways and potent discipline had won for the form the minatory nickname of "Paradise Lost," lying as it did between the "Paradise" of IVB(1) (F. J. S. Moore) and the "Paradise Regained" of VB(1) (H. R. King). It would be sentimental to suggest that "John's" pupils enjoyed their time under his command; at the same time it was not the reign of terror that many people tried to make out. He set a high standard and he was determined to keep us to it. We knew that, and we felt it a point of honour, if not of common prudence, to try our best to reach it. I was more fortunate than most of my fellows in that through one of his sons, with whom I had become very friendly at the Prep., I had gained a sort of inside view of him: I had made acquaintance with the "private" man before I came into contact with the "public" schoolmaster; thus, while I yielded to none in awe and admiration, I could not always believe in the depth of the storms that rocked us. The wide mouth might chaw at the fingers, and the left hand shred the hair, but a disconcerting glint of laughter would lurk at the corners of those magnificent eyes. And when good work had been done, how warm was the praise, whether conveyed simply in the rare "Good work" scrawled on the page, or in the single word "Good," uttered in that woodwind voice of his! It was a voice of penetrating gentleness; and if it seemed to come strangely from such a Zeus-like spirit, it betrayed much of the inner man. In pointing out the special use of two familiar words in a line of Virgil he would add that it contained a prophecy. He was right.

Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit.

At School House, for all but the last of my sixteen terms there, the house tutor was Edward Parry-Jones. My acquaintance with him followed an opposite course to that noted in the foregoing remarks about his exemplar, John, for I did not perceive the real man in "P-J" until my last year. I confess that at first I could not see behind the master, extremely strict, swift to anger, intolerant of the least softness or slackening of effort, fanatically eager (so it seemed) that we should harden our limbs and stifle the pleadings of the flesh. How he would goad us on the rugger field, or in the boxing ring, or at that implacable instrument of correction, the shoving-machine in the Gym! How he appeared to delight in sending us on training walks before breakfast on February mornings, when we would return with

the ridges which the comb had made in our shower-wet hair frozen into stiff "colpons"! Our failures seemed actually to wound him; and few men could launch a more withering look or discharge so contemptuous a snort. But at length I saw clearly enough that his true aim was the *mens sana*. Here again the voice should have bewrayed him, for who that ever heard him sing could not have guessed the true temper of his mind? During those last terms, in his room high up beneath the rafters of the Headmaster's House, with his books and photographs of trout streams around him and his pipe in his mouth, we would have long talks together; and as the conversation led on imperceptibly from the minor, if pressing, topics of the House to matters of graver import, I found myself in the presence of a man humble, courteous, fair-minded, capable of deep affection and acutely sensitive to the graces of life. Thus, as I look back now, I can dwell with a smile on the scowl, or the rebuke, or the petulant toss of the head, and displace it with some other recollection: perhaps of him half-sitting, half-lying, on the scarlet blanket, or "jimmy," of a bed in the upper dormitories, when, as the chimes of the Abbey clock break in upon the last sentence of a Kipling short story, he ends a spell of reading aloud to the youngest of us by reciting almost in a whisper—"Nod."

"His are the quiet steeps of dreamland,
The waters of no-more pain,
His ram's bell rings 'neath an arch of stars,
Rest, rest, and rest again."

The combination of Chief and P-J in the School House of those days was a strong one. "Chief," it will be noted, not "The Chief." I never liked the article and never used it myself; nor, I think, did any of my House contemporaries. It seemed to imply a lack of intimacy, a chilly aloofness, proper enough to members of the out-houses or to certain masters who wished to show a due sense of respect, but not to us to whom he belonged as housemaster. I suppose that as such he did not play a very active or conspicuous part in the day-to-day activities of the House, but he was always there and we knew that we were directly under his eye. It was an eye perceptive and penetrating, quizzical and fundamentally kindly. A quiet, almost hesitant, manner held disconcerting alliance with a quick, hawk-like habit of pouncing with reiterated interrogatives upon the motives of speech or action, and no weak place in an explanation would escape the swift "stoop" of his enquiry. "What? Why? How? What d'you mean? Why d'you say that?" he would repeat, without raising his voice and shifting from one foot to the other, while the nose and lips would jut and the eyes would open wider beneath the raised eyebrows to thrust the questions home. But he was the last man to take a malicious joy in the discomposing effect, or to trade upon it; it was as if, having discovered that we really didn't know why we had said or done something, he realised at once that he must help us to understand and show that he understood himself. His reasons may not

always have been ours, but at least we did not leave him humiliated or aggrieved. Indeed, most interviews ended with his hand on one's shoulder. What particularly vexed him were slovenliness and mere silliness. He would look over a piece of written work, holding between the finger and thumb of his left hand the lens of his rimless spectacles, the nostrils slightly dilated as if he could scent a lazy fault. When correcting, he was fond of the word "blunder" (we were urged to "eschew" all such). He made it sound reprehensible enough on its own, but when linked with an epithet its implications rose in a *crescendo* of infamy through "foolish" or "stupid" to "careless". As for silliness it was only to be expected that he could not suffer it gladly, and I always connect such words as "fritter," "vapid," and "jejune" with impatient observations of his on this score.

I have alluded to the gentle quality of his voice. With it went a clear and beautiful enunciation: consonants were never clipped, nor vowels elongated. The most he would do was to invest a favourite word with a slight glow of emphasis. For instance, when he spoke of a landscape, a picture, a poem, or a piece of music as "lovely," the word carried all the commendation needed; we felt we must needs love too. "Whatever things are lovely." He read that lesson in Chapel with ringing conviction and indeed its message was the main-spring of his teaching. He had a horror of materialism and the choice between God and Mammon was the theme of more than one sermon. Does not the principal architectural monument of his headmastership bear the legend NISI DOMINUS FRUSTRA? Yet on reflection I fancy that he himself saw the choice as one a little less obvious than that between those two deities, and to be expressed in different terms. The people whom Matthew Arnold called Philistines and Barbarians are not necessarily very wicked, but it is their rival lures which most closely beset the wavering path that leads to "sweetness and light"; and, unless I mistake, that celebrated phrase comes near to defining one of Chief's ultimate aims.

With sweetness goes unselfishness and with both the spirit of service. He never wearied of showing us that in our school community we were "members one of another." In all our dealings with him we recognised him of course as our master, but he never left us with a feeling of his superiority. We were there to learn from him, but he was also there to teach us, and our relationship with him was enriched by the half-conscious recognition that in preparing us for the business and battle of life he was our minister. The House in those days was small enough to have the characteristics of a large family and as he had boys and girls of his own it was not difficult for him to be a father to us.

I think one little anecdote, trivial and rather absurd in itself, may illustrate how even in practical ways he would do us small services. If we had no stamps for our Sunday letters home, we had only to put them on a ledge outside his study door with the requisite coins and he would provide the stamps from his own store and lick them

on himself. I shall never forget my indignation when this practice was made fun of in public after he had left. It might well seem laughable to a stranger (and looking back I admit it is hard to credit), but to us *then* it seemed perfectly natural—as natural as I am sure it seemed to him. He was not above doing such a thing and he could find the time to do it. In short, the action was symptomatic.

Certainly, of all the servants of the School, Chief was the most active. In retrospect, I associate one master with this activity and another with that, but Chief is connected with nearly all.

My happiest indoor hours at Sherborne were spent in the Art School, and I looked forward eagerly to my periods of extra drawing. There a minor revolution took place in 1923 with the arrival of Leonard Davies. He vastly extended the field of subjects for pencil, pen and brush. He also introduced us to the arts of wood-engraving, lino-cutting and, most exciting of all, dry-point. This last was a lengthy and elaborate process, demanding the skill of both artist and craftsman. Moreover, when the design was finished, the real thrills began. I recall vividly the tremors of awful expectancy which shook the tiro when, having warmed the plate on an "oven," inked it, wiped it, "coaxed" it with soft muslin, laid damp paper upon it and wheeled it through the press, he would lift the blanket and the paper to scrutinise the result. Nor did he perform the operation single-handed; it was a case of all hands to the wheel; and on the fringe of the excited circle beamed Davies. A concomitant pleasure of those winter evening sessions was the heavy smell of turpentine and printer's ink; it clung to my hands as I rushed back across the Courts in the starry darkness to tea; it transferred itself to the bread and butter and remained with me through Hall; and it has lived across the years within the sense it quickened. Chief took the keenest interest in our designs, shrewdly appraising their points, and he was the first to join the new Sketch Club, founded in 1926. At the time, I believe, no other school could boast a club quite like it, for it was open to masters, boys and O.S.S. Chief contributed to the club's exhibitions some of his own lucid, careful water-colours. In the summer, of course, we worked outside when we could. Sometimes when we were busy at a sketch among the School buildings or in the Close, we suddenly found him looking over our shoulder; a wise amendment would be suggested, and he would be gone.

Music he specially delighted in. At Concerts a performance he approved would be greeted with a prompt "Bravo!" or, rather, "Vo!"—a sort of spoken cheer; and visiting artists were introduced and thanked in brief speeches rather haltingly spoken but full of grace and humour. The Pro Arte Quartet, the Harrisons, Clive Carey, Steuart Wilson, Harold Samuel, the English Singers, Adela Fachiri

and Jelly d'Aranyi were among our visitors. Miss D'Aranyi was a special favourite of Chief's and could always persuade him to allow as many encores as she chose to give. He walked with rather a long, springy stride, and it was always worth watching him cross the Courts to the Schoolroom with the mercurial Jelly, dressed in some brilliant colour, dancing and skipping to keep up. Her recitals were the high-lights of the musical year, and as a critic in *The Shireburnian* once aptly remarked: "How good it was to be able to enjoy the music without having to close one's eyes!"

At the same time, we made plenty of music ourselves. In my first years the vocal talent among the staff was conspicuously high, with P-J's baritone, S. K. Hunter's tenor and L. B. Hornsby-Wright's *basso profundo*. With the appointment of B. J. F. Picton as Director of Music in the autumn of 1924 the productions of the Musical Society became more varied and ambitious: madrigals, motets and other part-songs for all voices, solos with choruses and choral works of different kinds (including such diverse compositions as Bach's "Phœbus and Pan" and Parry's "Blest Pair of Sirens"). The peak was reached with the performance of the Brahms Requiem in the spring term of 1926. Singing in that great work was an experience I shall never forget. I remember feeling in the middle of those tumultuous choruses as if I were part of some throbbing power-house; and there were always the incidental excitements of coming in plumb (if one did) at a bass lead, uncharitably wondering whether the tenors for all their strained necks could sustain those top A's, or waiting for the sudden reinforcement flung into the ranks of the altos by the Director's siren *falsetto*. If some of the performances of the School Orchestra might be described as painstaking, praiseworthy but hardly pleasurable, the School at that time had three highly-gifted pianists: George Weldon, K. D. Findeisen and R. E. Woodham; and if any additional accompaniments were needed the faithful Wearden was always at hand, jovial and forthright, to supply them.

An integral part of the Concerts were the School Songs. They were not great poetry, they were not great music, criticism was busy with them even then; but just as the verses were a quarry for apt quotation, so did the music provide tunes that lay within the compass of the least musical, and the classrooms, studies and cloisters of those years echoed to many a whistled, hummed, croaked or shouted rendering. In a word, they inspired affection. I cannot forbear to allude to another aspect of these concerts. Each was something of a social occasion and to suit it more than one chorister's dinner jacket saw the light for the first time.

What of acting? I am not sure that this was not the greatest fun of all. I have ever delighted in greasepaint and spirit gum and their smell always takes me back to the days of my initiation. A Shakespeare play was produced every spring term and the five productions that I saw, or took part in, were done in the Schoolroom—at the south end beneath the balcony. The five were *Henry IV Part 1*, *Julius Caesar*,

Macbeth, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, in that order. Unhappily, I was too young to play in the first, too ill for the fourth and too busy for the fifth, but *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* yield a harvest of memories. As a Prep. boy I saw K. B. Tindall's productions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (how my tears flowed when Jack O'Hanlon's Macduff mourned for his pretty chickens!) and, later on, the presentation of *Macbeth* by O'H's form, VA(1)—an astonishing *tour de force*. The impresario of those days and the President of the Dramatic Society was Armine Fox, in the classroom an artist in oblique satire, but on the boards a most talented comic actor. He had delighted us more than once at the Prep. with his fruity renderings of such folk-songs as "The Derby Ram" and "As I was going to Banbury," which he would give disguised in a shepherd's smock and round cap and a pard-like fringe of beard: how he tickled us with his nudges, winks and buoyant gambols! I had seen him, too, in Tindall's days, as the First Gravedigger, demolishing hunks of cheese, and working (as he would work again) a rich vein of weirdness as the First Witch. But the full panoply of his humour was unrolled as Falstaff. In fact quite a small man, he contrived to enlarge visibly into that "great bombard of sack," or rather he seemed to steam and swell like some immense boiled pudding from which the jokes could be picked like currants. What was our surprise, then, when he cast himself for the part of Antony in *Julius Caesar*! We wondered what on earth he would do about his moustache; not until the very day of the first performance was it sacrificed on the altar of Art and thereafter in the cold light of the classroom his upper lip "showed like a breach in Nature". The part was not one of his successes; nevertheless, he made the Forum scene exciting enough.

This was exciting for another reason, since the First Citizen was none other than W. J. Bensly. Clad in rent sackcloth, his bald pate and bare arms scored with angry smudges, "Benner" was the embodiment of mob-violence. One had to be nimble to elude those stamping feet and thrashing arms. If he did inadvertently clout anyone, he would rap out under his breath "Beg pardon," or "So sorry," only to burst out afresh with howls of "The Will! The Will!" (or "Rhubarb! Rhubarb!" or whatever other loud cry the producer demanded). So carried away was he by the end of the scene that as he fairly spat out the lines

"We'll burn his body in the holy place

And with his brands fire the traitors' houses,"

and led the crowd yelling into the wings, the very Courts and studies seemed in peril from this furious firebrand. He was no less menacing as the Second Murderer, "incens'd" (I hear his accents now) "by the rude blows and buffets of the world" and reckless what he did "to spite the world". He and John Carey and J. W. Kelway, the Fifteen's leading forward, made a pretty trio of cut-throats.

But the outstanding piece of acting of that time was O'Hanlon's *Macbeth*. I have no hesitation in saying that it was the finest, because

the most complete, interpretation of the part in my experience. I have since weighed many eminent professional performances against his and found them wanting, usually in sheer poetic quality—by which I mean imaginative understanding of the character and of the words Shakespeare has given *Macbeth* to say. R. S. Thompson and J. H. Randolph were other luminaries of our stage, but a later generation must speak their praise.

More opportunities for acting were provided by the Sophists, a combined dramatic and debating society. Having no power of argument (then or since), I did not figure in the society's debates, but in its productions of plays I appeared often enough. The plays were of every sort and description. They were always read, so that only a few rehearsals were needed, and I can remember storming through the baleful prophecies of Cassandra in a Gilbert Murray translation, with the book clutched precariously between my manacled wrists; while as a suave crook in a modern crime play I had my hands literally full, with a revolver in one and the text in the other.

Acting was always said to interfere with our work, and very possibly it did, but the knowledge of Shakespeare that it imparted, and the varied pleasure that it gave at the time and in retrospect brought ample compensation. It was educative in the best sense; Chief saw that, and he encouraged and enjoyed our performances.

Art, music, drama: and so to books. Books! At the Prep. we had been singularly fortunate in the eagerness with which the Headmaster and one particular English master had fostered a taste for literature, especially poetry. We were to be no less lucky at the Big School—as indeed was natural when the Headmaster was the distinguished scholar and editor of Wordsworth, Nowell Smith. Other influences were at work at other levels. It was surely rather a dull horse that could go through the VB(1) and VA(1) of those days, be led so often and so enticingly to the brink of "Helicon's harmonious springs," and still refuse to drink—or, having drunk, dislike the flavour. H. R. King, as I have said, was in charge of VB(1). His knowledge of poetry was celebrated, and I forget how many thousands of lines he was reputed to have by heart. "Crusoe," as he was universally called, attached great value to the good speaking of verse and he would urge us, when we were out in the country, to try our voices on the cows. "They make such attentive listeners," he would say, ruminatively. He was an old man when I knew him, and his voice had a slight quaver, but at the height of a recitation it would take on a vibrant, chanting tone, and as fire flashed from his blue eyes and the light caught his silver hair, he looked like some minstrel of old romance. He created an ineffaceable impression of horror with the lines:

"I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With HORRID warning gaped wide . . ."

Again, in the play scene in *Hamlet*, when, impatient at our pulings, he would read every part himself, the climax would burst with tremendous effect as he swept from his desk to the classroom door, shouting "Give me some light. Away! Lights, lights, lights!" He was no less effective in lighter vein: in "Betsy Lee," or "The Jackdaw of Rheims," or in a home-made parody of Canning's Sapphics, in which the words were deliciously minced. Or in such prose passages as Polonius's "fantastical-comical" speech, the account of Mr. Fezziwig's ball or David Copperfield's description of his childhood home: there before our eyes waddled the "geese with their LONG necks". Very occasionally his memory would fail him. These would be desperate moments, when he would plunge the forefinger and thumb of his left hand beneath the white folds of his moustache as if to pluck the elusive words from between his teeth.

If his versatility was remarkable, so was his vitality. I must give one glimpse of it. He habitually kept his classroom locked. If he happened to be late for a period (which was rare) he could be seen whirling down Hospital Hill on his bicycle, one hand on his mortar-board, his gown spread like a sail behind. Round through the Gateway he would swoop, fling his leg over the saddle, dismount at a run, leaving his machine to come to rest against the wall on its own impetus, sprint up the stairs and break through the crowd on the landing. Then, having extruded the key from some recess of his person, he would make several jabs at the keyhole before thrusting the key in it. Only when he had gained the rostrum at a final bound and removed his bicycle clips would he pause for breath.

A spirit so unquenched demanded respect—a respect which survived even in the most pained victim of his idiosyncratic methods of marking. "I could make little of it," he would complain, handing back a paper with hardly a correction noted; and of three identical Latin proses (for regrettably there was sometimes collusion) he would say: "X got 12 out of 15; Y, 7; and Z—NOTHING." Such caprices could in part be explained by his detestation of untidiness. His own calligraphy was exquisite, and doubtless one boy's most brilliant thoughts were tarnished in his eyes by a scribble, while another's misuse of the subjunctive appeared less heinous in a careful hand. Mention of handwriting reminds me that at intervals he called upon us to devote a period to addressing notices to members of the O.S. Society, of which he was the founder. Then indeed blots and erasures provoked the plaint of "Feelthy!" But at last the envelopes would be done to his satisfaction and if we managed things skilfully another period would be curtailed by sorties into Cheap Street to the post.

O'H must pardon me if in recalling the happy terms spent in VA(1) I emphasise the stimulus he gave to my love of English rather than Latin or Greek literature. I was already deciding that I was not a "classic" at heart, and when I got into the Sixth I deserted to

History. If, therefore, I did not catch all the fire I should have done from his own enthusiasm for the classical authors he so persuasively put before us, the fault was mine, not "Teacher's". This was the name we knew him by and it was wholly apt. His *forte* as a teacher was that he was never erratic; there were no tantrums or lethargies in his periods, no favourites or victims among his pupils. The atmosphere was clear and cool, the pace brisk yet unhurried. If some particularly stupid mistake were made he would project upon the perpetrator a glare of mingled pity and abhorrence, or burst into what I must disrespectfully term a loud and delighted cackle. Moments of *ennui* on his part were beguiled by scratching his head or lifting a thin strand of hair with one side of his horn-rimmed spectacles. He was invariably accompanied into school by his spaniel Susan, a blonde, and later by her dark-haired daughter, Judy, or by both. I cannot recall that he sat down for more than a few minutes at a time. He was wont to propel a high, wooden lectern back and forth on its clubbed feet, reading and expounding from the book upon it. His tall, spare figure and Roman countenance expressed the dignity of the man. He had that in him which, in the words of one of his favourite Shakespearian characters, one would "fain call master".

I remember, of course, reading Juvenal, Lucretius and Horace with him and in particular Lucian's *Vera Historia*: this last he made deliciously comic by finding choice modern parallels for the old jokes and puns. But it was our study of *King Lear* and our readings from Chaucer and Keats that I specially enjoyed and can never forget—the Keats above all. I cannot liken my reactions to Keats' poetry at that time precisely to those of "stout Cortez" on a different occasion, because I had read some of the shorter poems at the Prep., but I did not until then quite breathe its "pure serene". Through Teacher's influence I fell completely under the spell. The book prescribed for the School Certificate—for that was the mundane purpose of it all—was the Clarendon Press Selection of Poetry and Prose, and this narrow little volume in dim green covers became, as it has remained, one of my treasures. I would slip it into my blazer pocket on summer afternoons and it would either while away the tedium of "nets" or accompany me to some more harmonious spot of "hidden greenery". My favoured retreat was Almshouse Copse, a mile or so along the Thornford road. In the centre of that magical little wood stood a giant Scots pine, and I would lie at its foot among the bluebells, the primroses and the bugle, reading or dreaming, while the notes of a live nightingale poured from the encircling hazels. Lest I be thought to paint too precious a picture, I must add that I was always delighted to be discovered there by my friend Frank Barry, bearing with him a couple of long buns and a tin of loganberries.

Praise from Teacher for some verses I wrote for him as an exercise induced me to venture farther up the slopes of Parnassus and I competed twice for the English Verse Prize. Chief was pleased at having an aspiring poet in the House, and took the trouble to go

through both my efforts with me, bestowing generous praise where he could and gently noting faults of weakness or excess. He also took a keen interest in the competitions for the Longmuir English Literature Prizes, in which there were usually a Shakespeare paper, a General Knowledge paper, and two others on set books. I have some of the papers still and should not care to sit down now to answer some of the essay questions. I do not remember thinking them very formidable at the time. Perhaps we were too proud to admit such a thought and felt secretly flattered that we could be supposed to have read so much; anyway, these competitions gave an impetus to still wider reading.

I may refer in this connection to another prize, which encouraged in a different way a love of fine language: the Barnes Elocution. I have kept my copies of the prose pieces set in two successive years: passages from Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* and Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*. The former is beautifully written out in Chief's elegant, rippling hand. I like to think of him sitting down to that small task of transcription: it looks as if he enjoyed it, and I am sure he did.

It was natural that in the Sixth books should become ever more constant companions, and in the Lower Library, where H. H. Brown taught history, they looked on from every side. But before leaving classics for history, I spent one term with R. W. Macfarlane-Grieve and I must say a word about that fine scholar and generous benefactor of the School. "Biscuits" (the derivation is clear) was not an easy man to get to know; he seemed to look for affection and yet to ward it off. Highly sensitive, often nervous, he would veer away just when you thought you were getting close to him. Irony was at once his weapon and his shield. The drawled exclamation "Oh!" was the quintessence of disdain, which the tilt of his pince-nez set off. But beneath the fastidious exterior there beat a most tender and generous heart, which prompted many an act of unobtrusive kindness and warmed the hospitality so often extended in his own study or on afternoon drives into the country. As a near neighbour of ours at School House, he often joined us for lunch, for before the Lady Chapel was added to the Abbey he inhabited a beautiful room beneath the fan-vaulting and thereafter took up residence at the Bow House. To sit next to him then was always a treat, especially to collectors of his corrosive comments. A dog he had—a portly black retriever called Pilot; they went everywhere together and it would be hard to say which knew most about the other.* I can speak only from hearsay of his wit and learning as Logothetes at meetings of the Interpretes and I expect that the half was not told me.

The Lower Library was the perfect setting for the display of H. H. Brown's far-ranging mind. A rapid, omnivorous reader himself, he

encouraged us to come to grips with good books of every sort. Up went the signposts pointing in all directions and he was never more delighted than when we struck off on tracks of our own—so long as they led to individual viewpoints. He was a stickler for facts, but abominated their dull narration. As for dates—oh dear, yes, there must be dates; but where were our *ideas*? And would we never learn to "make a phrase"? His own verbal coinage was of glittering metal and he would follow the chink of his well-milled epigrams with a rich, seismic chuckle. His mind had a don's cast rather than a school-master's; he encouraged not only questions, but questioning; and if he did not go into open battle for the intellectuals—he was at once too timid and too kindly—he thoroughly enjoyed a little surreptitious sniping. Enthroned in his leather-cushioned, high-backed chair, with the finger-tips of both hands pressed together and wagging, or his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, he would talk fluently and with eloquence on almost any subject; but he never showed off and he never "talked down". Moreover, he was a good listener; he urged, he almost begged, us to speak; and even when he could not muster much enthusiasm for what we had said, he made us feel that it was more worth while to have said it than to have kept silent. Silence always disappointed and irritated him. I believe I may now be getting near to defining his genius as a teacher. It was not so much that he was an adept (which he was) at turning a clever boy into a scholar, as that he brought out the best in a boy of average attainments, but with a *mind* of his own. He helped one to feel, and to become, adult. Who can forget his "toys"? A later day has seen his cameras, mine listened to his wireless (a fresh marvel then), while both, and those intervening, have travelled in his cars—and have sympathised with, tut-tutted over, suggested a cause for, or failed to hear "that little rattle" in engine or chassis. He did not deny the appeal of the flesh-pots; he would have thought such denial hypocrisy; he was as open as he was amusing about his little self-indulgences. But in school he was unsparing of himself; no one worked harder for his pupils or took more trouble over the work they did for him; and in later life they meet his memory at many points and hear his words with gratitude.

No reference to books or to literary life at Sherborne can omit reference to "The Duffers," but as that Society has received such recent and full appraisal elsewhere, I will only make the briefest allusion to it. Membership was regarded as an honour in the full sense of the word; it was not automatic, it was earned. Those Sunday afternoon meetings in the drawing-rooms of the various School houses were not just English periods with a difference, they were opportunities for social intercourse. Manners needed polish no less than literary style. It was objected that the click of knitting-needles mingled ill with "the feast of reason and the flow of soul". I cannot remember that it did; but the day came when it was heard no more. Some of us who keep gracious memories of the charming Sherborne hostesses

*Dogs were a feature of that era: I have spoken of O'H's, and Armine had a turbulent, oddly-assorted brace, which could make havoc of a study of French irregular verbs.

of that time cannot but feel that the Society deserved its name when it banished the ladies.

I have spoken so far mainly of indoor activities. Every boy enjoys himself most out of doors and I was no exception. But my happiest hours were not, I confess, spent on the Playing Fields, but in the lovely Sherborne countryside. Thanks largely to Littleton Powys, I came to the School with a lively interest in birds, butterflies and wild flowers and I was already familiar with the country round Sherborne from walks under his guidance or from excursions with my parents, who in our first years always drove out with my brother and me in a landeau or a wagonette hired at The Antelope.

The Field Society, which sent parties of naturalists to Melbury Park or sometimes as far afield as the Abbotsbury Swannery, was under the aegis of Clephan Palmer. I could claim him as an old acquaintance, for at the Prep. he had opened our ears to some of the more familiar bird-songs and given us a few simple lessons in botany; the terms calyx and corolla, androecium and gynaeceum, as he pronounced them, linger in my memory as a sort of incantation. "Clapper" was familiar to all as master in charge of the Pound (will the initials C.P. ever lose currency?), but less so as curator of the Museum, lamented victim of Nazi terrorism. He would show off its treasures with quiet pride. He had a gentle manner that matched his love of natural beauty, and now and again, and more often as one got to know him better, a joke would rise like a fish to dimple that placid surface.

The Archaeological Society also sent forth parties: to Sandford Orcas, Trent and Nether Compton; to the Cadburys and Compton Pauncefoot; to Marston Magna and Queen Camel; to Bradford Abbas, Cerne Abbas or Milton Abbas; to Glastonbury and Wells—what names to conjure with!—and after much labour and many delays it produced a Guide to Sherborne and the District. If I remember right, non-members could take part in the longer expeditions on payment of a small fee (usually put down on the bill). Each house would make up a party and proceed separately. The charrs-à-bancs would draw up outside the School Gateway just before the end of morning school, or earlier on three-quarter holidays. These vehicles, if a surviving photograph is to be believed, resembled a long hip-bath or cattle-trough poised on solid wheels. Into them we would cram ourselves, our various impedimenta and our lunch, of which the liquid part consisted of Seymour's assorted mineral waters in bottles and the solids of bananas, chocolate, slab cake and clumps of a formidable three-decker meat sandwich known as a "trireme". Chief and Mrs. Nowell Smith would usually come to see us off and a crowd of onlookers would set up a cheer as the cavalcade mounted Hospital Hill

in a cloud of its components' exhaust. The outward journey would be silent, save for chatter, but the return was one long sing-song.

Even so, what I most enjoyed were the private expeditions, on foot or bicycle, by myself or with one or two kindred spirits. I had six summer terms in all and it was at the beginning of my fourth that P-J in despair made to me a remark of hallowed memory: "You are no good at cricket, Oliver, you never have been and you never will be. You are much better employed going out into the country." So away I went on those long afternoons, in sunshine or rain, to the Park and its Lake, to Honeycombe, to the Prairie; along the deep-hedged lanes that thread the brown villages of Blackmore, on to the chalk heights and beyond; seeking the haunt of butterfly orchid and herb paris, of nightjar and wood warbler, of silver-washed fritillary in some sunny glade; listening, looking, learning . . .

Sometimes round a corner would come the sharp tinkle of a bicycle bell and Mrs. King, erect upon her saddle, would ride into view and pass well to her left with a gracious nod—the precursor by at least fifty yards of her husband, who, bent low over the handlebars and reckless alike of intrusive car or waving schoolboy, pressed on in majesty along the crown of the road. During our rides we would call—despite the illegality of the proceeding—at many a village shop for sweets and lemonade. Sometimes, if there were cash to spare, we would persuade a friendly farmer's wife to provide tea. Better still, we would receive an invitation from dear old "Mrs. Gay" to her house in Longburton, whither she had retired after her long years of devoted service as matron of the San. There she would preside at a mighty spread and dispense tea and tales of the old times and beg for news of ours.

Of outdoor life in the winter and spring terms, of puntabouts and games and matches of all sorts, I write with diffidence. Were it not that a sketch of Sherborne life would be out of balance without some mention of rugger I should be tempted to leave the Field clear to abler chroniclers. But I cannot quite do so for another reason: *amour propre* forbids. I recall with intense pride the epic contests in Thirds and Two-Cock and Three-Cock matches when against hopeless odds the School House of my time did battle with the hosts of Midian! How sharp were the emotions that thronged the breast of every participant and onlooker, how wide was their gamut! If sheer will-power could have driven his teams to victory, P-J would have seen that mantelpiece in the School House dining-hall gleaming with a double row of cups. The road to a house match led uphill all the way; often did his touchline rebukes sting and rangle, and the cries of "Get in," "Heel," "Let it out," "Break," "Go low," fell like hail about our ears. But on match days he sent us into action with a smile and if at half-time the conclusion were already foregone, those brief "confabs" with him would unite every sense of shame and honour in a fierce resolve that when the whistle blew for "Time" the glory, if not the points, should be ours. No, those matches were never the pathetic

walk-overs that the scores implied. Now, it seems, the whirligig of time has brought in his revenges and one or other of those coveted cups stands regularly at the feet of King Edward.

If School matches did not arouse the fervid passions of inter-house conflicts, the excitement they provoked was keen enough. Save the Abbey bells, no Sherborne sound echoes more persistently in memory than the long-drawn cheers of "School!" as they ebbed and flowed along the touchlines of the Upper, while John's "Feet, feet, feet!" from the pavilion rode lightly out over the billowing roar. The mind's eye, not to be outdone, roves to the familiar figures on the balcony, where Chief sits in pinched felt hat and dark grey-green overcoat; to the knot of eager townsfolk by the gate; over the pale lines of straw hats that hem the churned field with its contending players and active ball; on to the tawny beeches of the Slopes and the dark crown of Honeycombe; away to the line of distant Toller, whence the low sun flings long shafts eastward to light up the Abbey tower.

The usual epilogue to matches and games, or to any bout of strenuous activity, was a visit to the Tuck Shop. Hair sleeked by a shower (warm this time), limbs snug in dry clothes, shins perhaps a little aching and shoulders rather sore, one would stroll across the Courts in the sharp dusk, chattering and laughing with some companion in the agreeable pastime of "going to the 'Toey'." If one happened to be a "blood" one could stalk past the rabble at the counters in the outer room and turning to the right sit down beneath a flaring gas-mantle at one of two or three tables reserved for the quality. Thence, through a hatch, one could give one's order in dignity and peace. The restaurateur was Mr. Ford, a man of ample girth and with a bristling grey moustache, and his chief assistants were his small, smiling wife and large, imperious daughter. Except that I do not recall a Master Ford they might have been one of the Happy Families. In the inner room, there were many other tables to which boys of less exalted station fetched and carried plates and provender. At the far end was a long table where visiting teams were entertained, or form teas eaten. On the walls hung serried lines of photographs of bygone Elevens and Fifteens. Outside, the hurly-burly at the right-hand counter was at times terrific: it must have been a feat of endurance and dexterity on the part of the assistants, beneath that palisade of arms and that barrage of cries, to single out and meet each separate demand for "Two bananas," "One poached egg on toast," "Two cups of tea," "Three long-buns," "Four doughnuts," "Two sausage-and-mash'ds". When the hubbub subsided, the usual courtesies were resumed; the time of day would be passed and a little school or local politics discussed. As time went on, it became a mark of distinction in the school to be addressed by Miss Ford by name;

but one of her colleagues never got farther, even with the most distinguished, than "Thank you very much, Mister-Er". The sweet counter on the opposite side, surprising as it may seem, had a quieter tone. The mouth waters in retrospect at its heaped riches. Among these were long-obsolete species that the antiquarian in confectionery would do well to record: notably, raspberry noyeaux (a rosy, nutty nougat of surpassing succulence), cho-hones (chocolate-coated turkish delight) and nut cracknel bars (slabs of milk chocolate enfolding flakes of crisp toffee). Nor will Mr. Ford's strawberry cream ices ever be forgotten, unique as they were in "quality and flavour," especially when taken from the side door of the pavilion and consumed in sunshine on mown grass.

The "Toey" also supplied fresh eggs—others were obtainable *sub rosa* at the Mill or Kiln Farm—and we would sometimes return to the House with one for tea. To this end a certain ritual had to be observed. Having written one's name on the shell, one would deposit the egg in a basket outside the kitchen door on the way to the dining hall; thence it would be taken by the cook, Mrs. Plenty, and, when boiled, restored to the consumer by William Cox, the butler, or one of the "nebs". As the nickname somewhat loosely suggests (it is short for nebulae), these boys were subordinate to William in various household duties. William was indeed a world or system in himself. An integral part of the House, he yet seemed—so homely and sweet was his character—to be clothed with the atmosphere of an environment beyond school. He made one think of some old coachman or gardener or shepherd one had known or read of long ago. As new boys were told that he had been there with Alfred, and there was in truth something historic, even legendary, about him; he was a benevolent oracle, to whom one could look for counsel in perplexity and good cheer when all else was hostile. His grey head, his one eye and his sturdy figure radiated comfort, and there was a touch of the Homeric about him when at House Suppers, the silver loving-cup having gone the round of the tables, he took it from Chief's hands and bowing to him and to us all drank it off as the final pledge. He it was who woke us in the mornings with the two-syllabled clang of a hand-bell borne the length of the long range of dormitories and who in the summer term stood at the foot of the stairs and handed out bars of chocolate to sustain us during Hall before breakfast. He it was who saw that we had buns in break; who closed the dining-hall door while grace was said at the beginning and end of lunch; who presided at the tea-urn and slipped us extra tit-bits; who stood by at supper while house announcements were made at the big black stove in the centre; and to whom none of us omitted to say "Good-night, Willie," when we dispersed after evening prayers.

It was in the evening that in the brief walk across to the studies the full beauty of the Abbey tower as it soared against the sky on our left would sometimes make us pause—its pinnacles steeped in the honeyed light of summer or blanched by the silver of a winter's moon. Most of the studies in those days were tiny cubicles, barely large enough for two to sit down in, but their very number meant early promotion from the day-room and this was one of the advantages over our contemporaries in the out-houses which we specially relished. Parents and elders generally might make offensive remarks about dust and fag, but our health never seemed to suffer. To us Englishmen those studies were our castles where we could receive guests, work, read, play the gramophone (within prescribed hours), eat tinned fruit or bread and pickles, blow birds' eggs, set butterflies, keep fossils and stamps, develop photographs, indulge our taste for interior decorating or act impassioned dramas to a full house of two. In the summer there was always French cricket on the VA and Sixth Form Greens, or an odd kind of squash with a tennis ball between the buttresses of the Big Schoolroom; and in winter the green baize cover would be taken from the Schoolroom piano and parties of enthusiasts would sing every air and chorus from the Savoy Operas. The vogue for Gilbert and Sullivan inspired a three-act comic opera (as yet unperformed), complete with lyrics, dialogue and full orchestral score, by George Weldon and myself, and earlier a more direct parody by my brother and others. One refrain from the latter on a celebrated model neatly hit off the dichotomy of the school's academic life at that time. It went something like this:

I often think it's comical, fal la la, fal la la,
 How Nature strives with all her might, fal la la, la,
 To see that every boy and gal
 That's born into the world aright,
 Is either a little Classical,
 Or else a miniature Modernite.

But I fear I am becoming parochial and dwelling overmuch on associations particular to the House. Thus I must do no more than wave my hand in affectionate and respectful greeting to Matron, brisk, thorough, competent, as quick to smiles as to reproof, reminiscent in speech, manner and even dress, of Chaucer's Prioress. Yet of one figure, who was peculiarly ours and yet of course belonged to the whole School, as did her husband, I must attempt some sketch, if it be only in pencil and light wash.

Mrs. Nowell Smith was always, so to speak, just at the back of the foreground. She did not obtrude, but neither did she efface herself. She owned that she had no aptitude for domestic concerns; she was interested in boys—not their ailments, their underclothes or their food, but in their manners, their everyday doings, their personalities, their multitudinous little idiosyncracies. When Chief's retirement approached and it was known that they were going to set up house in a country village, she was heard to sigh: "I have

loved and lived among boys for so long that I don't know how I shall content myself with cabbages". We quickly got to know her as new boys, for she sat at the head of the day-room table at lunch and we took it in turns to sit next to her. We soon found that she knew all about us: where we were in form last week, whether we had been kept in for Maths, almost what our batting average was and what were our prospects of getting our "doubles". It was as if, like our Nanny of old, she had eyes in the back of her head. Not that she always got her facts quite right, and this justified our suspicion that some of her tales of our predecessors' sayings and doings had gained embroidery in the telling. She always said exactly what she felt and the abruptness of a rebuke or an opinion would be accentuated by a nodding of the head and that little hesitation of speech which as we grew older we came to love as a characteristic part of her. She dearly loved a joke, especially one at her own expense. She used to serve the second course at lunch and the plates would be passed from hand to hand right along the table. When it was the turn of cake pudding she would lean over to her neighbour on either side and say: "Pass up, 'Eat it in your fingers'." It was not long before some wag a little farther up would whisper the same password on chocolate blancmange days. This was repeated for some weeks and the reason for the suppressed mirth successfully kept from her, but at length some "silly ass" explained. There was a dreadful pause (while his shins were kicked under the table) and then she burst out laughing. It was the kind of "naughtiness" that tickled her. It was part of the fun of it all, and that was why she liked to know everything. There lay the secret of her success and of her charm. She was quite artless: in her manner, in her dress, in the way she did her hair. The hair was grey, but the complexion and the smile in her blue eyes were a girl's. In her drawing-room, which was just beyond Chief's study, her hands might be engaged with some piece of sewing or knitting, but her mind was alert to every word and glance that passed between her young guests. I see her thus as we rehearsed the Glee at her piano; or discussed House affairs after dinner, or toiled in the throes of some word game; or just lay in the lamplight on the carpet after Sunday tea playing with Celia and her marbles and toys until it was the little girl's bedtime, our signal to go . . .

It is not quite time for "Chapel": the jangling "fiver" will not go for some minutes yet. But I will leave my corner in the Library and get to my seat early for the service. As I go down the steps and through the Cloisters and up the Ante-chapel stairs, the years and seasons slip back and forth and merge with each other in my mind. One moment it is winter and the fog hangs ghostly in the Undercroft; the next I see the shadows of the mullions etched in sunny spaces on

the floor and hear the scream of the tireless swifts; now Holy Communion is over and the morning air is warm and fragrant with Spring. Now I am in my seat, and it is good to be back in the Chapel after more than a term's absence, even though the panelling looks new and strange and "the insinuating green snake" has gone from the East Window. Is that Crusoe's voice intoning the responses, or speaking one of his favourite prayers—"yet let the pitifulness of Thy great mercy loose us"? Now it is Benner's fervent *staccato*—"Kindle, we pray Thee, in the hearts of all men, a true love of Peace". The notes of the new organ swell and shake; we are singing "Lift up your hearts" in the tune rehearsed at Friday's congregational practice and, as that dies away, the voices rise again in full-throated relish for "sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb". Soon, Arthur Field's strong, gusty tones repeat the theme of one of his most eloquent sermons, "Deus afflavit et dissipati sunt". A moment's silence, and into it steals the reedy note of the whistle which on organless days announced the plaintive chanting of the Latin Hymn. It fades and a school prefect is faltering among the intricate sentences of the School Prayer. I see the building decorated for Easter, the primroses massed in the windows and daffodils thronging the pulpit—and for a moment their scent takes me to the Oak Room, where Mrs. Chief, Mrs. Carey and others are tying up the spring flowers as we bring them in. The sunshine fades, and in the gloom of a November afternoon another voice is saying "Defend, O Lord, this Thy Child and this Thy Child with Thy Heavenly Grace . . . until he come into Thy Everlasting Kingdom". Last, above the rest, measured and distinct, I hear Chief's voice in the lesson and he is reading St. John's description of the New Jerusalem. One by one the splendid names of the stones of the City's foundations come marching out—jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald—each word clear-cut and gleaming:

"The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst."

The scene grows dim; the voice recedes; the years intervene. May it not be thought too daring a fancy which sees some image of that visionary brightness among the foundation-stones of our Sherborne temple not made with hands.

September, 1952.