HAROLD MACMILLAN

Charles Williams

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1

‘The Old Rogue’

It was the kind of ceremony that the English feel they do particularly well. On 10 February 1987 the full panoply of political Britain was on display in Westminster Abbey in dignified remembrance of the recently deceased Prime Minister, Maurice Harold Macmillan, the first Earl of Stockton. The morning, unusually for a London February, was bright and crisp. The colour in the Abbey – a multitude of flowers, careful illumination of the high altar and sanctuary, the red coats of the band of the Grenadier Guards perched in the organ loft, the flamboyant purple of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s cassock and mitre as well as the gold of the minor clergy’s vestments – all contrasted well with the black dresses and suits worn by the distinguished mourners. Without a doubt, it was a splendid scene, and one of which, as was generally agreed, Macmillan himself would have approved without demur.

Nor would Macmillan have been disappointed by the quantity and quality of the attendance. Three former Prime Ministers, seventeen Cabinet Ministers, 234 Members of Parliament and 141 Peers, including three Dukes, graced the occasion. The Diplomatic Corps was there in force, as were representatives of all the many organisations, not least Oxford University, to which he had been, in one way or another, deeply attached. Above all, the Queen was represented by the young looking Prince of Wales, escorted from the Great West Door of the Abbey by the Dean of Westminster, first to meet the clergy of the Chapter and then to make his way past the assembled crowd – the seating in the Nave divided into two opposite sides for the occasion – to his place in Quire. Other distinguished mourners had preceded him on his voyage – not least the Prime Minister of the day, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, in a black dress and a resplendent wide-rimmed black hat. For the outside public their entrance, and indeed their every movement, was recorded by television cameras to the accompaniment of a solemn commentary from Mr David Dimbleby.

As might be expected, the service itself followed a predictable pattern. It was not a time to take any risks. After the band of the Grenadiers had played familiar pieces by J. S. Bach (‘Sheep may safely graze’, ‘Air on a
G String’, ‘Jesu, joy of man’s desiring’) and the ‘Nimrod’ from Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, and after the Choir had sung their Sentences, Macmillan’s Order of Merit was carried — albeit somewhat nervously — through the Nave and up to the Sanctuary by three of his great-grandsons. There followed the Bidding, a fanfare and then the National Anthem. The hymns, starting with ‘I vow to thee my country’ (written, as Mr Dimbleby helpfully informed the viewing public, by a former High Commissioner in Ottawa), continuing with ‘He who would valiant be’ and ending with the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ (in honour, it was explained in case there was any doubt, of Macmillan’s American mother), were beyond any reproach.

The lessons and prayers, too, followed a conventional pattern. The address by Lord Home of the Hirsel recited the facts of the Macmillan life, reporting that he was ‘always, in whatever role he was cast, a man of style’. After prayers, a Blessing pronounced by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Last Post, and the ‘Grenadiers’ Return’ from the flute and drum section of the band, the company made their way out into the bright sunlight to the accompaniment of more *Enigma Variations* (oddly, as it happened, ascribed in the Order of Service to Handel).

All in all, political Britain left the Abbey on that day with satisfaction that honour had been done to one of their own. Nevertheless, there were some discordant voices. It was noted that since Macmillan had died during the Parliamentary Christmas Recess the tributes in both Houses of Parliament were delayed until the New Year, leading one journalist to point out that the gap between his death and Parliamentary tributes allowed the press to start printing ‘debunking material’. But, he went on, ‘the old rogue had seemingly taken account of that. [The memorial services (one in Oxford and one in London)] . . . will provide an opportunity for rebunking.’ Others pointed out that Lord Home’s address, delivered in his dry voice and read with the aid of his half-moon spectacles sitting uncomfortably on his nose, was uninspiring to the point of boredom and that even Mrs Thatcher was caught on camera apparently on the verge of sleep, although her head was obscured, as was fitting, by her extensive hat. More to the point, however, was the stark criticism levelled at the whole event by left-wing tabloids. It represented, as one unkindly pointed out, ‘the last gasp of Tory England’.

In fact, there was some truth in the jibe. By 1987 the ‘Tory England’ which Macmillan had cherished had been for some time under severe bombardment from the Thatcherite political artillery – as he himself had pointed out in a speech made not long before his death. But whatever the complaint from the proponents of what passed for ‘Tory England’,
it was hardly noticed that their archetypal Englishman, in spite of the bright colours of St George in which in his latter years he had wrapped himself, was not more than one-quarter English. He was, in fact, give or take the odd accident of blood, a quarter Scottish, a quarter English, and fully half American.

In both his family and his political life Macmillan made great play of his Scottish ancestry. Sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters were dragged up to the Cock of Arran (Macmillan himself was taken there at the age of eight) to view the ruins where his Scottish ancestors had apparently led their altogether humble but dignified life as crofters. They were held to be a paradigm of how the sons of modest parentage could succeed in the wide world by nothing more than their own efforts. Nevertheless, romantic as these notions were – and Macmillan played on the theme with the greatest skill – they turn out to have had little to do with the facts. By way of a small instance, such was Macmillan’s idealised view of his Scottish family history that he kept in his office a photograph of the ruin on the Cock of Arran where he claimed his ancestors lived. On more exact research, however, it turns out that the ruin in question was, of the two on the site, the wrong one.

Furthermore, the Cock of Arran itself is by no means the most important site in his family history. The McMillans (such was the spelling of the name at the time) came from the peninsula of Kintyre in Argyle, crossing the narrow channel to the Isle of Arran in the early seventeenth century. The island on which they settled and spread – the name seems to be derived from the Gaelic ‘island of the mountains’ – was fertile grassland on the coasts and in the glens leading to the steep and barren hills. Farming was almost entirely of livestock – ‘not a gay life to the superficial eye of a stranger’ – cows, sheep and goats. In winter, when the sun rarely shone, there were indoor jobs to be done – nets to be made for the herring catch and yarn to be spun. In spring, the soil had to be tilled and the animals turned out. Summer was the time for collecting peat, fishing, collecting kelp and, above all, for building and restoring the dry-stone houses with their heather thatch.

Life was certainly hard, but it was far from unbearable. In many respects it was preferable to life in the industrial towns and cities of mainland Scotland. Nor were those living on the island – some five thousand by the end of the eighteenth century – simply ignorant peasants. As was written at the time, ‘the whole inhabitants belong to the Established Church and are sober and well disposed people.’ In fact, Arran, lying as it does between the Kintyre peninsula and the Ayrshire mainland, was in the middle of the shipping lanes running in the Firth
Harold Macmillan

of Clyde. Many young men went to sea and, when they returned, the sailors brought news of the outside world – and of territories on the other side of the Atlantic which promised a better life. Some even took up the challenge. In 1829, for instance, a group of islanders (including a group of McMillans) left to settle in Quebec.

The first of Macmillan’s ancestors to be traced in Arran is Daniel, who died in 1751 and is buried in the churchyard of Sannox, on the eastern shore of the island. Daniel’s son, Malcolm, was born in North Sannox in 1734, a settlement in the hills above Sannox itself, and lived the first forty-two years of his life there as a tenant of the Duke of Hamilton before, in 1776, being granted the lease of the Cock (west division) – a similar settlement owned by the Duke, although of even greater natural beauty, in the north of the island overlooking the Firth of Clyde. Malcolm developed into a much respected figure, not only becoming one of the principal lessees (the ‘tacksman’) of the settlement but also an Elder of the Church of Scotland in the nearby (in other words, within two hours walking distance) fishing port of Lochranza. He also fathered ten children, the sixth of whom, Duncan, also born in North Sannox, spent no more than his childhood and early adulthood at the Cock before marrying and settling down on the eastern coast of the island at Achag in 1793.

In 1816 Duncan and his wife Catherine Crawford left Achag and moved to Irvine on the Ayrshire mainland, together with four of his six children – two daughters having died in infancy or early childhood in 1813. The leases at Achag had expired and, on the advice of his former surveyor John Burrel, the Duke had decided to alter the size and shape of the holdings available for let. Moreover, Irvine was, after all, both safer for the children’s health and offered much more for their education. It was in those days exceptionally prosperous, a Royal Burgh, with a population of over three thousand, enjoying its position as the largest seaport in Ayrshire and the main port for Glasgow and the coal mines of the Scottish Lowlands. Besides, two of Duncan’s other surviving children, the elder sons Malcolm and William, were already working there as carpenters. It was no great matter to arrange for Duncan a job as a carter, transporting coal to Irvine harbour for shipment to Ireland.

Daniel, the three-year-old who had come with his father from Achag, and Alexander, a new son born in Irvine in 1818, were thus brought up in circumstances far removed from the isolation of the island life of Arran. Irvine was prosperous and sophisticated, the height of Ayrshire society of the day. The Church of Scotland was substantially in evidence, not only providing spiritual comfort and corrective instruction for the
undoubtedly lamentable sins committed by its flock but also the highest standards of education for its younger lambs. Both Daniel and Alexander benefited. Not only was the education in the Church of Scotland school of the highest quality but the lessons were in English rather than Gaelic. (Alexander claimed that he could not understand the Gaelic Bible his father read to him out loud.) Finally, and conclusively, their surname had been anglicised to ‘Macmillan’.

At the age of ten, in the year after his father Duncan died, Daniel was apprenticed to a bookseller in Irvine High Street by the name of Maxwell Dick – also, as it happened, member of the Burgh Council, treasurer and later Grand Master of the Irvine Freemasons Lodge, the proprietor of the *Ayr and Wigtownshire Courier* and a founding member of the local Burns club. Daniel completed his apprenticeship in 1831 and left Irvine to stay with his brother Malcolm, by then minister of a Baptist congregation in Stirling. But he soon left after showing all the symptoms of tuberculosis – necessitating a period of convalescence in Irvine with his mother and even in Arran with his aunt and uncle.

Undeterred, in September 1833 Daniel crossed Scotland and took ship from Leith to London. After wandering about looking for a job he concluded that his search was hopeless and set off for Cambridge, where he found a post with a bookseller. For the next four years he read everything that came to hand – Milton, Voltaire, Gibbon, Virgil, Carlyle, Landor, Hume, Fielding, Swift, Shelley – as well as joining a Baptist congregation in the hopes that the consequent self-improvement would help with his illness. But London was soon back on his agenda, to join up with his brother Alexander – who had lived an equally peripatetic life, not least in sailing to America and back before the mast. Their early efforts were unpromising. It was only after seven miserable years that Daniel met Augustus and Julius Hare, both Sussex clergymen, the latter at the time Archdeacon of Lewes. The two reverends were so taken with him that they lent him money to set up shop in London with Alexander as manager. Soon thereafter, the Archdeacon advised him to return to Cambridge and open a bookshop there. This turned out to be spectacularly successful, so much so that the brothers were able to buy one of the established bookshops in Cambridge. The Archdeacon’s money, it was by then clear, had been well invested.

One thing, of course, led to another. Daniel, in spite of continual bouts of ill health, in 1850 married Frances Orridge, the daughter of a Cambridge chemist. (In 1851 Alexander took the same step, marrying Caroline Brimley, the sister of the librarian of Trinity College.) The brothers then set about publishing in earnest. The works they accepted were generally moralistic – but they sold well. Daniel was guided in his
choices by Archdeacon Hare’s brother-in-law, the Reverend Frederick Denison Maurice, the founder of the movement known as Christian Socialism. *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* and Maurice’s own *Theological Essays* were all uplifting – as well as commercial successes. By the end of the 1850s the reputation of the publishing house was established. By 1857, moreover, Daniel had fathered four children: Frederick was born 1851, Maurice in 1853, Katherine in 1857 and Arthur in 1857. In fact, Daniel only just lived to see Arthur’s birth. Attacked by pleurisy in May of that year, he lasted only a few weeks before he died on 27 June, at the age of forty-three. Maurice, his middle son and Harold Macmillan’s father to be, was himself left fatherless, to be brought up by his uncle Alexander and sent, as was customary, away to school and then to Cambridge. Maurice did well there, achieving a first in Classics. He first thought of going into the Church (his father Daniel had converted late in life from the Baptist Church to the Church of England), thought better of it, and taught Classics for six years at St Paul’s School in London before finally accepting the familial duty and joining the Macmillan publishing house. It was early in his career there that he went on a visit to Paris – where he met his future wife.

Helen Artemesia Tarlton Belles, to give her full name (although the spelling of ‘Tarlton’ and ‘Belles’ has varied over the years), was born in the state of Indiana – more precisely in Indianapolis – some time in the first half of 1856 (the exact date is not known, since the state of Indiana did not record births until the early 1880s). Generally known by her nickname ‘Nellie’ (she was named after her grandmother but the second name, Artemesia, proved too difficult to handle and quickly became ‘Artie’), she spent her early childhood in Indianapolis – but in the shadow of her mother’s death and of the early deaths of her siblings. Nellie was, in fact, the only surviving child of her father’s first marriage.

Dr Joshua Belles, her father, had followed the example of many of the time in moving from here to there as opportunity beckoned. He was born on New Year’s Day 1826 in Kentucky, but his own father – his mother died soon after his birth – crossed what was then an uncertain boundary between the states to settle in the relatively fertile plains of the sister state of Indiana, where he died in 1839. Joshua, then aged thirteen and an orphan, was taken in charge by his aunt and moved back to Kentucky. Undeterred, at the age of twenty-three he returned to Indianapolis. There he studied medicine at the Indiana Medical College, the medical department of Asbury University (a Methodist foundation later named DePauw University in honour of a particularly generous benefactor) and settled in Indianapolis as a newly qualified doctor.
‘The Old Rogue’

But even before he had graduated, Joshua had, on 22 February 1850, married Julia Reed – for him, although perhaps not for her, a socially advantageous union, given that her family had been one of the earliest settlers in Indianapolis. As it turned out, the marital home in Indianapolis was suitably blessed, if that is the right word, with five children. None of them, apart from Nellie, survived to adulthood. In fact, the death in 1854 of a daughter, Emma, was sad enough to provoke yet another move. The Belles family uprooted themselves again and took the long trail to California, where the weather was more clement and there were good possibilities for a doctor, in the settlements after the manic pursuit for Californian gold, to make a good living. Disappointed, yet again, in this, the Belles family headed back to Indianapolis a year later. By way, as it were, of compensation for the Californian failure, Julia again became pregnant and Nellie, her last child, was born.

On 11 December 1862, when Nellie was six years old, Julia herself died. The cause was, and is, unknown, but it takes little imagination to believe that Joshua Belles must have thought that he had been cursed with some sort of plague. Be that as it may, in 1864 he decided to move again. This time it was to be to the small settlement to the south of Indianapolis by the name of Spencer. Perhaps coincidentally, his decision to move came at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War. If it was not coincidence, it was a sensible decision. Joshua Belles was a known supporter of the Union against the Confederacy, and such was the division of opinion in Indianapolis over which side to support, his move out of town made good sense. More happily, it also coincided with his second marriage (although the plague was to continue – of his four children by his second wife only two reached maturity). Nellie, at the age of six, thus acquired a new home and a new stepmother.

The town of Spencer, such as it was, had been laid out in 1820. Like Owen County, of which it is the main town, it had been named after yet another fallen hero of the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe, which had secured Indiana from the threat of the Indian chieftain Tecumseh – Captain Spier Spencer. Since then, however, there had been little development. When the Belles family arrived there in 1864 the town had not yet been incorporated by the Indiana State authorities. That was to come in 1866. The population of the place was no more than could be expected in an equivalent English village – some six hundred. There was no railway, no street lighting and no buildings of consequence other than the brick-built courthouse, a log-built (Methodist) church and a log-built tavern with the widely displayed title of ‘The Old Indian’. The residents of the town made do with ‘dilapidated frame based buildings’. True, it was an attractive enough place, on the banks of the White River as it slowly
made its way towards the Ohio and thence to the Mississippi, but the amenities for living were not, to say the least, of great comfort.

As it turned out, Dr Belles had chosen wisely. In 1868 the Indianapolis and Vincennes Railroad was connected to Spencer. The coming of the railroad gave Spencer, as in so many other places in the United States, the lift which was needed. Not only had the property which Dr Belles had acquired – substantial, as it happened – suddenly become very much more valuable with the arrival of new and hitherto unimaginable industrial projects – but it also allowed those who benefited from the upsurge in the local economy to become great figures in the land. Dr Belles became a Freemason, an enthusiastic temperance worker, a Government Examining Surgeon, a leading member of the Methodist congregation and generally a dignitary of some considerable standing. Known for his ‘above medium height … a beard, not a heavy beard … a very pleasant voice with a ringing tone … [and] a rather ruddy complexion’, he was by all accounts a popular doctor in the town.

Nellie, too, obviously took to life in Spencer. She ran around the streets with her little dog and joined in whatever fun was going. As she grew into adolescence, she went out with the local ‘beaus’, such as they were, borrowing a garnet ring and brooch for the purpose from her friend Emily Drescher. But she had to grow up, and, such was her father’s wealth and standing that it allowed him to send her to a much grander school in Indianapolis – Miss Henrietta Colgan’s School for Girls.

The question then was where Nellie would stay in Indianapolis, since it was unthinkable that she should be left on her own. As it happened, this was easily resolved. The Belles had by then become part of an extensive network of Indiana interrelated families owning property in Indianapolis and the subsidiary townships – Sanders, Wallace, Bayless, Fletcher – who formed a solid source of candidates both for Indiana State positions (including State Governors) but also for social preferment. It was therefore a simple matter for Dr Belles to request a berth for his daughter. Quite where she lodged is not known, but it would certainly have been in a house of one of Dr Belles’s acquaintance.

Nellie studied singing – she had a gift for music as well as a fine contralto voice – and painting. She sang in the choir of the Methodist church and went out sketching in the streets of Indianapolis. So far, as it were, so good. But Nellie by that time was near to being a mature woman – ‘tall, dark’ and no doubt with the flashing eyes of a somewhat rebellious temperament. In short, what Dr Belles had not expected was that Nellie, once there, might spread her romantic wings. While still at
her school she met a young portrait painter (with several – although to
the modern eye indifferent – portraits of Governors of Indiana to his
credit) by the name of John Bayless Hill and, perhaps rather suddenly,
agreed to marry him.

Her decision once accepted by her father – whether reluctantly or not
is not known – she then proceeded in June 1874, at the age of nineteen,
to marry ‘Jackie’ Hill, as he was known, in the Methodist church of
Spencer. After their honeymoon the couple settled down in Indianapolis.
But the marriage was not to last long. After only five months Hill
unexpectedly fell ill and died in November at his father’s house in
Indianapolis (quite what he died of and why he died in his father’s house
are still unsolved mysteries). Undeterred, after her brief – and childless –
mariage Nellie stayed on in Indianapolis for a year or so with the widow
of a former Indiana Governor, singing, as usual, in the choir of the
Methodist church. Life seemed to go on as normal. Nellie, after all, was
used to bereavements. But it was far from satisfactory, and in 1876 Nellie
took another decision. She wished to go to Europe. Her ambition was
to study music, to improve her voice and, last but by no means least, to
learn about the world beyond Spencer, Indiana. Dr Belles was persuaded,
and Nellie took off on her own on a paddle steamer from New York.
Her final destination was to be Paris.

Little is known about how Nellie spent her years in Paris, apart from
the fact that she became fluent in French and went with friends for
summer visits to the Normandy coast. Macmillan himself reported that
she exhibited at the Salon and that ‘she sang in concerts and at the
Madeleine’. He was almost certainly echoing his mother’s (inaccurate)
reminiscences since, while she may have sung in private houses (she was,
in fact, still studying painting and music), there is no record of her in
the programmes of public concerts during the years she was in Paris and
she certainly could not have performed at the Church of the Madeleine
(which did not allow women to sing ‘even in the choir’). Nevertheless,
she fitted well into the Paris of the belle époque, with its salons, its glamour
and its eccentricities. Eight years in the Paris of those days turned an
unsophisticated widow from Spencer, Indiana, into a worldly wise – and
by then beautiful – young woman. There were many friends and, no
doubt, many suitors. But the one she met at a party, and to whom
she found herself attracted, was the diffident publisher from England,
Maurice Macmillan.

Maurice Crawford Macmillan and Helen Artie Hill were married
on 22 November 1884 in the parish church of St Mary’s, Shortlands,
in the presence, among others, of Alexander Macmillan. Nellie had
been staying in Shortlands, now part of the London suburb of Bromley
but then a village in its own right, for the purpose, while Maurice
gave his address as Upper Tooting, his uncle Alexander’s house. In
spite of her Methodist convictions Nellie was required to accept
marriage ‘according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established
Church [of England]’—a special licence having been arranged to
allow this to happen.

Their – extended – honeymoon took them all round the world. They
called in at Spencer and continued westwards. By September 1885 Nellie
was writing to her father from Australia. Finally, the long honeymoon
over, the couple settled in No. 52 Cadogan Place in London. The house,
along with others in Cadogan Place, had been built in the late eighteenth
century as part of a development of a hitherto rural area owned by the
heirs of Sir Hans Sloane and had been built on upwards in the early
nineteenth century. The result was a row of tall and narrow houses on
the eastern side of Sloane Street, from which they were separated by an
extensive and attractive garden. The somewhat forbidding shape was
accentuated by there being no bow windows – unusually for the date –
and a pair of large columns supporting a balcony and a balustrade to
form a handsome porch. Unlike the larger, more aristocratic residences
of Mayfair and Belgravia, the houses in Cadogan Place were for the upper
middle class, in other words bankers, stockbrokers – and publishers. No.
52 was thus admirably suited to the social status of the newly married
couple.

Nellie threw herself into London social life with transatlantic deter-
mination. She quickly lost her American accent, gave up singing other
than on very special occasions and devoted herself to amassing a sub-
stantial acquaintance. There were large dinner parties, soirées and teas.
Whether she truly made friends is open to question. The parties seem
designed more in pursuit of a well-defined social ambition, partly, of
course, for her husband and his career but perhaps more indirectly for
herself. Those invited therefore were either rich or titled – or could in
the future be of use. That being so, the social occasions in Cadogan Place
were not widely known to be the stuff of relaxed gaiety.

If there was little gaiety in social life there was hardly any at all in
family life. In 1886 Nellie gave birth to her first son, Daniel. He was
followed in 1889 by a second son, Arthur. Finally, on 10 February
1894, a third son was born, christened Maurice Harold in the church
of Holy Trinity, Sloane Street. All three boys were brought up in
conditions of strict discipline, as was the custom of the time. They
saw more of their nanny and the cook than they did of their father or
mother. Nellie herself was a demanding mother, particularly towards
Harold, giving the impression that, having borne him at the advanced
'The Old Rogue'

age of thirty-seven, she had done all that she could reasonably be expected to do other than push him relentlessly towards a suitably starry career. Certainly, affection for her sons was not Nellie’s strong suit. Throughout his childhood, Macmillan later wrote, ‘there was always a feeling of unease’.

Nevertheless, whatever Nellie’s failures in affection, the education of her sons was high on her agenda. Apart from the occasional treats – visits to the Zoo, watching the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, the Drury Lane Pantomime, summer holidays by the sea in north Norfolk and so on – the day for her youngest son was carefully regimented. There was the ‘ordeal’ of lessons with his mother after breakfast. There was then a session at Mr Macpherson’s Gymnasium and Dancing Academy, which the young boy dreaded since he was useless at all the required exercises, and an almost endless succession of French nursery maids teaching him to speak French – the mandatory language of the Macmillan household as dictated by Nellie. Finally, there was Mr Gladstone’s day school, near Sloane Square, where, at the age of six or seven, he spent two years learning Latin and ancient Greek.

At the age of nine, Harold Macmillan, as was the custom of the day, was packed off to preparatory school. The chosen school was Summer Fields, then, as now, situated in attractive meadows on the northern fringes of the university city of Oxford. His father and older brothers had been there before him and it was an obvious choice. But for those who have been subjected to the experience of a boarding school at an early age, it is not difficult to understand his dismay at being dumped with his trunk at the gates of a strange and fearsome establishment. But it was worse than that. One of his father’s clerks had been told to take him with his trunk to Paddington station and consign him to the care of a junior master deputed to shepherd a group of pupils on their way to their new home. It is little wonder that after his initial tea of bread and milk he broke down in tears. Even after that, he kept himself to himself – a clever, shy and at times sickly boy.

Summer Fields had been founded in 1864 unashamedly as a preparatory school for the social and intellectual élite. Its motto, taken from the Latin poet Juvenal, more or less sums up the school’s vocation: *mens sana in corpore sano*. ‘We believe in the Three Cs: Chapel, Classics and Cricket . . . [and] a fourth C: Cold Baths.’ Its founder had been an enthusiastic gymnast. Fortunately, however, he had married a classical scholar. The combination of the two set the stage for one of the most successful preparatory schools of the Edwardian era – and, indeed, thereafter.

By the time Macmillan arrived, there was slightly less emphasis on
gymnastics and cold baths – both of which he loathed – and more on academic achievement. Sitting behind large six-seater desks in the cavernous New Room, the boys – some one hundred and twenty of them in all – would be instructed, under penalty of the cane, in Latin and Greek. Since they were all boarders, there was nowhere for them to escape. The resulting claustrophobia led, as might be expected, to all sorts of pranks, many of them very much less than delicate. Since the boys were allowed to go swimming – naked, of course – in the River Cherwell which ran along the edge of the school's grounds, the opportunities were more or less endless. In spite of all that, however, there is no doubt that the main purpose of the school, defined by the redoubtable Dr Cyril Williams ("[I am] against all change, even change for the better"), was to ensure that the pupils won scholarships to the major public schools of the day – and, in particular, to Eton. This the young Macmillan proceeded to do.

It was not quite as good as he had hoped. His elder brother Daniel had won the top scholarship and Harold could only manage third. Nevertheless, it was something to be proud of and, after the formal process of Election in July, he was deposited with his trunk – and a new uniform – at the gates of Eton College on 18 September 1906. Henceforward he was to be known simply as M. H. Macmillan KS.

Supporters of Eton College, and some critics, have maintained that the school in the period leading up to the First World War was in something of a golden age. Of course, it is a judgement which is easily made in retrospect. Nevertheless, the school was certainly blessed with some truly outstanding teachers – not least the Head Master who had replaced the terrifying Dr Edmond Warre in 1905, the more accommodating Honourable and Reverend Edward Lyttelton, and the young Master in College, Cyril Alington. The standard of scholarship was high and in general the school "gives to each as little and as much as his abilities and tastes demand."7

That said, the entry of a new King's Scholar was, to him, full of perils. For a start, only his gown was provided by College. The rest of his uniform, tailcoat, starched collar and all – let alone a black top hat – was to be provided by his parents. On his arrival M. H. Macmillan KS was taken in charge by his seniors and subjected to a world quite different from the one he had known in the relatively benign world of Summer Fields. Newcomers in College, for instance, were regularly beaten by their seniors, the College Sixth Form, who met regularly after night prayers to summon any boy who had offended any of them for suitable chastisement. There was bullying, too, and juniors were required to
'The Old Rogue'

serve their seniors as what were known as 'fags'. Behaviour was strictly supervised – Matron in College was in charge of washing and cleaning teeth. The dormitory in College was dark and full of possible threats. Lessons, for juniors, were not even meant to be any sort of fun. Early School, at a quarter past seven in the morning, was a matter of course. Almost worse for scholars was the ribaldry those boys who were not scholars directed at what they regarded as their social inferiors. Furthermore, nobody who was uninterested in sport was of consequence in the wider School.

None of this was, to put it mildly, to the taste of M. H. Macmillan KS. He was not interested in sport. Nor had he ever been – or ever would be. He made an effort at the bizarre and brutal encounter known as the Eton Wall Game but was clearly far from happy about it. Nor is there any record of any musical achievement of any description – nor would there ever be. In short, he was not one of the general crowd. He obviously found it difficult to fit in, other than with his immediate friends in College.

In his first – Michaelmas – school-time (as the 'half' was known in those days) he apparently fell ill. Later, Macmillan asserted that he was a victim of a 'serious attack of pneumonia'h. That may or may have not been so, although there are, reasonably enough, no surviving medical records of the event. Yet Macmillan's version in his memoirs has to be treated with caution. In the days before the arrival of modern drugs the only treatment available for the sufferer was a long, perhaps up to three months, period of isolation since at the time it was believed that pneumonia was infectious. In spite of this, however, M. H. Macmillan KS appears in the D1 Division lists (the first port of call for new King's Scholars) throughout the three school-times in the year 1906–7, studying Classics, English Grammar, Mathematics, Elementary French and, on Monday mornings, Divinity.

Macmillan's school career continued in a predictable – and predicted – pattern. From the lower Divisions of D1, always in the top class, he moved in Michaelmas school-time 1907 to C1, thence to B1 in 1908 and on to A1 in 1909, achieving membership of the First Hundred – achieved by academic rather than sporting merit – by the beginning of the Michaelmas school-time of that year. But at this point, there is a mystery. M. H. Macmillan KS suddenly disappeared from the A1 Division lists before Christmas 1909.

It was certainly not unusual in those days for boys to leave Eton early. But in most cases some explanation was offered to the school authorities. In this case, none is recorded. Macmillan himself claimed, 'I suffered from growing too fast, and a bad state of the heart was
diagnosed. This led to my leaving Eton prematurely and spending many months in bed or as an invalid.\textsuperscript{19} His explanation has at least one detectable element of truth. He had grown physically, and his eyes were giving him trouble. On the other hand, whatever the ‘heart trouble’ may or may not have been, there is little record of this in his later life.

There is an alternative explanation for Macmillan’s early departure from Eton. In his diaries, Woodrow Wyatt – later Lord Wyatt of Weeford – recounted how on 4 June 1936 he was telephoned by a friend who said ‘... you told her a very good story about Harold Macmillan being expelled for buggery from Eton’. Wyatt replied, ‘it is quite true. J. B. S. Haldane wrote it to me. He was in the same house at Eton. Harold Macmillan has never been back as a former Old Boy who had become Prime Minister would have been.’\textsuperscript{20}

It is certainly true that John Haldane was an exact contemporary of Macmillan in College at Eton. In fact, he arrived before Macmillan in 1905 with the First Scholarship and stayed the full course to 1911. As such, he would without a doubt have been aware of what was happening in the cubicles of the College dormitory. Furthermore, homosexuality was commonplace – John Maynard Keynes had, after all, been in love with Macmillan’s elder brother Daniel. Moreover, Macmillan, judging from the photographs of the time, was a singularly attractive boy, and in those days both the granter and the recipient of such favours were regarded as equally culpable. On the other hand, Haldane had his own streak of particular malice, and by the time he was writing to Wyatt had been somewhat brutally rebuffed by Macmillan on two occasions. To add to the confusion, Haldane was plainly wrong on one count: Macmillan did go back to Eton on many occasions.

M. H. Macmillan KS finally ended his career at Eton in April 1910. The date is recorded in the College Book (an annual account of College events kept by Captains of the King’s Scholars) of the summer of 1910. The book also records that ‘throughout [the year] College has lived at peace with itself and with the authorities’.\textsuperscript{21} It therefore seems unlikely that Macmillan was expelled. Nevertheless, there is no ‘obituary’ of him in the book, as was customary for leavers. The most likely explanation is that his mother decided to withdraw him, whether for illness or to avoid trouble is impossible to tell. Nellie certainly thought not that he had done anything wrong but that it was Eton which had let her son down. Whatever the truth of the matter, Nellie was determined that her son should go to Oxford University.

She therefore canvassed for tutors who would instruct him in the necessary skills. Many names came up in the search, and a number were
tried. In the end, Nellie fixed on a young man, Ronald Knox, who had been First Scholar at Eton – leaving in 1906, the year Harold arrived. As it turned out, it was not an altogether happy choice. The young Harold was about to fall under the spell, not just of the continued possibility of homosexual relationships, but of the highest of all the high varieties of Anglican Christianity.