

The Experience of Expatriate English Language Teaching

The Experience of Expatriate English Language Teaching

By

David B. Wilson

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Experience of Expatriate English Language Teaching

By David B. Wilson

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2025 by David B. Wilson

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN: 978-1-0364-4603-1

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4604-8

SOME READERS' COMMENTS

"I read it ravenously in almost one sitting, laughing out loud at times. Wilson is absolutely right – that a history of TEFLers – as opposed to a history of TEFL – has yet to be written, and it's quite a different story altogether." (Scott Thornbury, Associate Professor of English Language Studies, New School, New York and award-winning author of methodology texts including *Natural Grammar* and *Teaching Unplugged*)

"I like the fusion of self-deprecatory humour and unassuming wide knowledge." (Alan Maley, former British Council English Language Officer and Chair of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL); author of resource books for teachers including *Drama Techniques in Language Learning* (with Adrian Duff))

"I find it very entertaining, insightful, erudite and poignant, and *important* in casting light on the human dimensions of TEFLing as a necessary antidote to too much applied linguistics." (Richard Smith, Professor of ELT and Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick; editor of *The History of Language Learning and Teaching* (3 volumes), and *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: Historical Perspectives*)

"An entertaining and erudite romp through the ages of TEFL, accompanied by a cast of disreputable and distinguished TEFL characters both real and imagined. Wholly engaging and highly educational." (Nicky Hockly, who has been TEFLing since 1987, and is currently Director of Pedagogy of The Consultants-E (TCE); she is also an award-winning author of multiple books for other TEFLers including *Focus on Learning Technologies*, *Digital Literacies* (with Mark Pegrum and Gavin Dudeney), and *50 Essentials for Using Artificial Intelligence*.)

"Very erudite and well-written. I can't imagine the dark and dangerous places David Wilson must have researched for such an eclectic collection of stories." (Ken Hyland, Honorary Professor, University of East Anglia; author of *Teaching and Researching Writing*; *Second Language Writing*; and *Feedback on Second Language Writing*)

"It rang bells and struck chords and chimed with experience ... and it made me laugh! And what a wealth of reading!" (Peter Brown, Associate Professor (retd.), University of Warwick; former TEFL teacher in Abu Dhabi, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia)

"Well and trenchantly written, and with remarkable scholarship and an acute series of literary observations. When published I think it would have a cult following in our world." (John Swales, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics, University of Michigan; author of *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*; *Episodes in ESP*; and *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (with C. B. Feak))

"Is there such a person as a TEFLer? David Wilson thinks so and in this very entertaining and engagingly written book, he convincingly presents the evidence for his belief. I really enjoyed reading the book. I wouldn't change a word of it (apart for the wrong ones, of course!). It is very well written and changed my view of many characters that I knew of, such as D.J. Enright and David Hicks, but had never met. I think it ends in the right place with the beginning of professionalism. Anyone who has taught English overseas will love this book, and although it will be unlikely to attract others into the profession, it will certainly entertain and inform those who read it." (Paul Nation, Emeritus Professor, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; author of *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*; *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*; and *Researching and Analyzing Vocabulary* (with Stuart Webb))

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by John M. Swales	ix
----------------------------------	----

Preface	xi
---------------	----

Part One

Introduction	2
--------------------	---

Chapter One.....	28
It Seemed the Best Thing to be Up and Go	

Chapter Two	57
The World is Your Lobster	

Chapter Three	102
What's So Funny about TEFLing?	

Chapter Four.....	145
Fictive or Fictional Accounts?	

Part Two

Chapter Five	172
The First Two Hundred Years	

Chapter Six.....	216
The Nineteenth Century Governess: Claire Clairmont and Sundry Others	

Chapter Seven.....	261
Berlitzers: The Joyce Brothers	

Chapter Eight.....	310
A Golden Age: William Empson and Harold Acton	

Chapter Nine.....	349
The British Council: Francis King, Olivia Manning and David Hicks	
Chapter Ten	403
International House: John and Brita Haycraft	
Envoi	423
Existential Cruising	
Select Bibliography	438

FOREWORD

David Wilson, the author of this original, scholarly and consistently entertaining volume, opens his concluding chapter with what can be taken to be a one-sentence summary of his topic:

“Expatriate TEFLing has always been a queer old business: taking oneself abroad with nothing but one’s mother tongue as one’s expendable capital in order to live a rootless, restless life engaged in a fickle occupation with limited, if any, career paths, a mode of life which might be characterized in Emil Cioran’s words as accomplishing ‘failure on the move’.”

TEFLers then are Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (more known in the USA as ESL teachers) who, for a host of reasons ably and amply discussed in an early chapter, seek new opportunities in “foreign parts” by offering themselves as tutors and/or teachers of English. As it happens, I was a TEFLer for the first five years after my undistinguished undergraduate career came to an end: two years in southern Italy, a year in central Sweden, and two years as a junior lecturer in commercial and business English at the University of Libya. As it also happens, after a postgraduate course in Linguistics and English Language Teaching at Leeds, hard work, and a couple of lucky breaks, I was able to have an academic career, and so it was in the early 1980’s that I was a colleague of David Wilson’s when we both worked for the excellent Language Studies Unit at the University of Aston in Birmingham.

David Wilson’s book falls into two main parts. The first five chapters offers, in essence, an alternative history of English language teaching to nonnative speakers of the language. Rather than the usual accounts that deal with theories of second language acquisition, theoretical and technical advances by major luminaries in the field, and landmark ESL textbooks, it focuses on the everyday experiences of “expat” TEFLers, as are depicted in fiction, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies. Much of this literature is, in a strong understatement, little known, but David Wilson has brought it to life in such a way that we can enjoy the foibles, feckless experiences and few successes of these far-flung purveyors of their native language. And of course, among these lowly practitioners of the TEFLing arts are some truly memorable “characters”.

The second part of the book deals with the history of the profession as revealed by the reported experiences of tutors, teachers and governesses, starting from Shakespeare's time, through the 18th and 19th centuries, and on to the twentieth. What binds the two halves together is the reliance on literary or quasi-literary sources. Among the occasional TEFLers investigated, there are some major figures of English literature, such as Charlotte Brontë, James Joyce, Wilfred Owen and William Empson. Then toward the end of the book, there is an excellent chapter on the British Council's literary members and memoirists and another on the language school empire established by Brita and John Haycraft.

The book is written with panache and style and displays its remarkable scholarship with a light touch, often enlightened by a wit that is at times playful and at others sardonic. And not to be ignored are the footnotes; while some merely offer the customary chapter and verse, others are full of fascinating detail. (There is a lot going on there, and you wouldn't want to miss it all.) Because of its unique characteristics, it will not have been an easy manuscript to get published, but I have a feeling that it may become a cult classic, especially among those legions of folks who have been TEFLers in their past, are currently toiling in the fields of TEFLdom, and perhaps even those who are contemplating such a future.

John M Swales¹
Ann Arbor
August, 2024

¹ John Swales sadly passed away whilst this book was going to press. It was exceptionally kind of John, in his illness, to insist on keeping to his early promise to write its Foreword. I have resisted the temptation to rewrite those parts of Chapter 4 where I have irreverently, though mildly, teased him. John was a very modest and kind-hearted man and it is to his credit that he took my jocular remarks in good part (even discussing my mock semiotic analysis with me) when he read the book in manuscript. I will miss him terribly, as will the whole applied linguistic community.

PREFACE

De quoi s'agit-il?²
(Henri Cartier-Bresson)

Teaching English overseas is a funny old business. Funny-ha-ha in that it has been a rich source of humour from the very beginning. Funny-peculiar in that it is a very queer occupation which defies definitive designation: although for some it might be thought of as a profession with a career, for others it is little more than a series of precarious, ill-paid jobs in the international gig economy. Other designations consider expatriate TEFLing as a form of “mendicancy,”³ or of “failure on the move”⁴ or a mode of “existential cruising.”⁵ (In my own case it might be summed up, in a parody of the titles of two famous novels, as “East of Sweden and Legless in Jeddah”.) It is an undertaking that has attracted some of our greatest literary minds but also its fair share of scoundrels and ne’er-do-wells. And the motives for becoming an expatriate TEFLer are so many and various, sometimes absurd and highly improbable, that they almost defy any categorization. Long-term expatriate TEFLing, as my book at one point argues, “is rarely the result of a vocation or a conscious career choice and far more often a case of doing a geographical – for who, in their right mind and in normal circumstances, would choose to detribalize themselves in order to lead the liminal existence of a fungible migrant worker belonging to a middleman minority?”

My study of this topic began in 2005 when, after giving a light-hearted talk to a group of Finnish school teachers of English, I was asked to write it up as an article for *Tempus*, the professional journal for language teachers in Finland. In the talk I had described the English language teaching experiences of three distinguished writers: James Joyce in Trieste, Christopher Isherwood

² Cartier-Bresson’s famous motto is usually translated as “What are we dealing with?”

³ Dennis Enright described his overseas teaching career as that of a “mendicant professor,” a designation used in the title of his memoirs.

⁴ Emil Cioran.

⁵ A designation of my own which is explored in the concluding chapter of this book where I elucidate on the “queerness” of expatriate TEFLing, taking “queer” in its more exact contemporary sense.

in Berlin and Helen Dunmore in Finland. I described their TEFLing careers and some of their (often eccentric) classroom practices from an ironic standpoint:⁶ here were three people, I argued, who obviously had great potential as language teachers, so why on earth did they give up a promising professional career for the uncertain and disreputable life of a writer? The Finns are not generally very good at irony, but my solidly respectable, middle-class audience seemed to appreciate their profession being humoured in this way. To end it all, I regaled them with some of the Finnish puns from *Finnegans Wake*, in particular the admonition that language teaching should be “Finny! Vary vary finny!” This was great fun and, because it didn’t seem to have been done before, I decided to research the subject of the TEFLer-writer in more depth. And here, twenty years later, is the resulting book, which, to borrow the feline expression a scholar once used in his review of a rival’s work, “fills a much-needed gap.”

It is indeed a funny old book about a rather queer subject. Not surprisingly, it was a book hard to find an academic publisher for as it didn’t seem to fit into any of their rather rigid categories – their so-called “lists”.⁷ Was it a work of applied linguistics or of literary criticism? But didn’t it also have psychological, sociological and historical perspectives? And what about the distinctly unacademic insertion of elements of personal memoir? It was certainly a real mish-mash. How to market it? Several of my rejection letters gave this indeterminacy as their often friendly but apologetic reason for not being able to consider it for publication. But there was also the occasional rather sniffy rejection – one of the leading university presses wrote back to

⁶ Something which always brought the house down was the version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that Isherwood used in his teaching: “A table doesn’t *mean* ein Tisch – when you are learning a new word, you must never say to yourself *it means*. That’s altogether the wrong approach. What you must say to yourself is: Over there in England, they have a thing called a table. We may go to England and look at it and say ‘That’s our Tisch’. But it isn’t. The resemblance is only on the surface. The two things are essentially different, because they’ve been thought about differently by two nations with different cultures. If you can grasp the fact that the thing in England isn’t merely *called* a table, it really *is* a table, then you’ll begin to understand what the English themselves are like. They are the sort of people who are compelled by their nature to think about that thing as a table; being what they are, they couldn’t possibly call it anything else. ... Of course, if you cared to buy a table while you were in England and bring it back here, it would become ein Tisch. But not immediately. Germans would have to think about it as ein Tisch, and call it ein Tisch for quite a long while first.” (Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 20-1)

⁷ It proved to be an “ungrateful” book in the sense that art dealers call a painting which is hard to sell “ungrateful.”

say that they “don’t publish this sort of stuff,” as if it had a bad smell about it or I was guilty of some terrible social impropriety.⁸ It is true that the book is hard to categorize and that is because it attempts something rather novel – to approach an applied linguistic topic (the history and experience of expatriate TEFLing) from the standpoint of its portrayal in literary source material.

There is another queerness or peculiarity of this book which John Swales noted in his perceptive and kind Foreword – that is, my rather idiosyncratic use of footnotes. “Footnotes know me well,” as the poet said.⁹ Mine are sometimes used to indulge in what German academics call an “excursus.” At other times they act as a sort of counterpoint to the main text and develop parallel, sometimes subversive narratives.¹⁰ Swales advises you not to miss them and Paul Nation, citing another great applied linguist, his mentor H. V. George, said that it is digressions like these that remain in the memory and that one often learns the most from. By way of analogy, it has been noted that for every painting on display in the National Gallery there are at least double that number stored in the basement. One day I hope to write a book with such a vast basement.¹¹

As the book grew, it had a sort of *samizdat* existence, individual essays being sent to applied linguists who I thought might be interested, even amused by them. The response was, on the whole, very positive and I am particularly indebted to two early recipients, Professor John Swales of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and Professor Richard Smith of the University of Warwick, for being very persistently encouraging (even nagging) and suggesting I should put the various essays into some sort of book shape and test the waters by sending it round some possible publishers.

⁸ To be published by this particularly prestigious university press was once described as like “going to bed with a duchess – the privilege is far greater than the pleasure.”

⁹ Actually, it is a misquote from a poem by John Agard about John Edmonstone, the freed black slave who taught Darwin taxidermy at Edinburgh and whose name is one only encountered in footnotes nowadays.

¹⁰ It is a habit I might have picked up from that great Romantic biographer Richard Holmes who had this to say about his frequent use of “the vertical footnote”: “While my main narrative moved forward in a largely conventional, chronological form, a ‘horizontal’ progress as it were, the footnotes provide sudden ‘vertical’ or vertiginous plunges *down* into past history, or *back-up* into contemporary science.” (Richard Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, 33.)

¹¹ The curious history of the footnote is well treated in Grafton (1999) and Zerby (2002).

But not all recipients were so encouraging. One celebrated applied linguist wrote back very pertinently:

I read through your piece about Wilfred Owen and found it fascinating and very well written – but it did seem to me that the TEFL connection was somewhat tenuous and I wonder how far a publisher would see it as likely to appeal to TEFLers. What they would probably want is a more focused commentary on how your samples exemplify different attitudes / assumptions about English learning/teaching.

This was intended as a helpful comment by someone who knew the academic publishing industry well, but it missed the point of what I was attempting. This particular applied linguist obviously found that my description of Wilfred Owen's personality traits, his interests and accomplishments, his family relationships and his life experiences were, from an applied linguistic perspective, irrelevant – rather, that one should only focus on what one knew of Owen in the classroom. But it is my contention that the reason why someone was engaged in this expatriate activity in the first place, knowing their previous life experiences and relationships, how they went about the job, such as knowing what their relationships with their students and colleagues were, and how they benefited (or otherwise) from this experience were important explanatory elements of their whole TEFLing personality. Expatriate TEFLing is not, I believe, an isolated and detachable part of a person's life, one which can be summed up solely in terms of a set of applied linguistic principles and pedagogical techniques, though these are obviously important as well. In brief, it is my contention that it is only by knowing the *whole* person that one can properly know them as a TEFLer. My helpful critic was, I think, taking a rather narrow and technical / intellectual view of what the "TEFLing experience" was; mine was a holistic and human one. I could not accept that a detailed description of two years of a TEFLer's life had only a "somewhat tenuous connection" to the study of TEFL. I found it significant that this applied linguist, as far as I could gather, had never actually TEFLed himself, so perhaps he didn't appreciate how all-encompassing the experience was. Nor do I believe he was right in what he said would "appeal to TEFLers." Other people have told me that my approach is exactly one that *would* appeal to practising or former TEFLers.

In the event, the Wilfred Owen essay is not included here. I had far too much material at my disposal and had to make difficult decisions as to what to include and what to discard. Should I concentrate on a handful of iconic figures or provide less detailed sketches of some 30 or 40 literary TEFLers who were perhaps not as illustrative of certain tendencies I wished to highlight? Those whom I decided to drop are not entirely neglected and do

get referred to in the text. Apart from Owen, they include Charlotte Brontë, Anna Leonowens, John Dover Wilson, Peter Quennell, Christopher Isherwood, D. J. Enright, P. H. Newby, Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Frank Tuohy, James Kirkup and Christopher Logue.

Why did I focus on literary figures? It was not that there was anything particularly special or unusual about the TEFLing environments in which they worked and the often unpleasant experiences they had – these tended to be fairly typical for the periods they lived in and the places where they worked: Claire Clairmont's situation as a governess in Russia was not very different from those of other governesses there, James Joyce's experiences and complaints as a Berlitz School teacher were much the same as those of his contemporaries, and so on. But what did set them apart, for my purposes, is the abundance of information that we have about them. Writers will write, and writer-TEFLers are far more articulate and eager to set down their experiences on paper than the general run-of-the-mill TEFLer. In many cases we have fictional accounts they provided of their TEFLing experiences and, in addition to all the biographies of them, we often have their memoirs, journal entries and letters.

For those who would like to question my reliance on prominent literary figures as subjects for my historical survey of TEFLing, I can only respond that I did try to remedy this to some extent by attempting to follow up on the Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns of the profession. But almost always I drew a blank. I could find nothing more about the Berlitz colleagues Owen and Joyce mentioned disparagingly, or Samuel Beckett's neighbour, the sapphic TEFLing novelist Miss Beamish, or the various English governesses Vladimir Nabokov provides tantalizing sketches of, or of André Gide's private English tutor, known only as "the worthy Mr W. W." who refused to believe that Gide had read the whole of *Paradise Lost*. The only nondescript and run-of-the-mill TEFLer I had any luck with was David Hicks, but that was only because he had been savagely fictionalized by Olivia Manning and for a brief period had been Iris Murdoch's fiancé. Though Hicks worked for the British Council for most of his career, they had practically nothing about him in their archives. I did, however, manage to piece his career together from scraps here and there and he is given some prominence in Chapter Nine as the exception – the maladroit TEFLer and a writer *manqué*.

Contrary to some publishers' misgivings, I *am* claiming that the present work is a serious and genuine piece of applied linguistic research. So perhaps I should conclude by mentioning another chapter I wrote that did not make it to the final cut. This was one on the subject of applied linguists,

an academic group I have strong feelings about. They, like their counterpart the TEFLer, came in all shapes and sizes – the good, the bad and the ugly. My discarded chapter took Malcolm Bradbury's wonderful fictional creation, the much put-upon Dr Angus Petworth in his novel *Rates of Exchange* (1983), and placed him alongside some real-life applied linguists whom I was personally acquainted with. (I should point out that my career has been bedevilled by contact and conflict with some absolutely appalling applied linguists and one of the reasons I decided to omit the chapter was that it was becoming too personal and toxic. However, some of its flavour can be briefly sampled below. And seeing as this is my book, not yours, you'll just have to bear with me for a short while.)

I almost dropped out of a particular Applied Linguistics M.A. course because I could no longer take the pretentious drivel we were being fed by the course director, who had proclaimed to the world that his current research interests lay

in developing an effective multi-perspectived approach to applied linguistics combining discourse, interactional sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis with textual/semiotic (functional grammatical/corpus-based, multimodal) description, linked to ethnographic/narrative accounts of participant behaviour informed by social theoretically-based studies of institutional structures. Such a reflexive and interdiscursive model implies collaborative and co-constructed research with participants, involving close links with academic disciplines and professional communities related to applied linguistics, for example, education, sociology, law, medicine/health care, social work, and management studies, but also with workers in a range of other professional fields.¹²

A display of sheer academic megalomania. This particular applied linguist was treated with awe by his many followers: like Nijinsky, not only could he leap just as high as any of his principal rivals but, they claimed, he had

¹² I can assure the reader that this is an entirely genuine quotation taken from the website of said applied linguist. It is not from "Pseud's Corner" of *Private Eye*, nor could I, with all my ingenuity, have made it up myself, though I wish I did have that kind of linguistic skill, useful for CV embellishment. Later, when I got an applied linguistic job of my own at a British university, I was rooting through the department cupboards for something and came across some old correspondence, amongst which was a letter from said multi-perspectived professor to my head of department describing me as "a very difficult person to get on with." I'm glad he had got the message.

the unique ability of being able to stay in the air far longer than any of the others.¹³

To those applied linguists who believe their work is on a par with that of a subnuclear physicist or an algebraic topologist, John Swales offers a mild corrective:

I do not work in a glamorous or high-profile field, one that might require brilliance and / or remarkable erudition on the part of its leading protagonists. Rather, my corner of Applied Linguistics is a field that rewards concentration, persistence, and an appropriate degree of educational self-questioning.¹⁴

In addition to these qualities, it appears that a poor first degree or academic failure of some other kind is a useful prerequisite for a successful career as an applied linguist.

Swales' own work, as befits someone who began as a common-or-garden TEFLer, tends to be bottom-up, beginning with a specific practical question or problem, rather than top-down and being theoretically driven, like that of our multi-perspectived friend. One sees the difference also in the teaching materials the two types produce: that which is theoretically driven has a tendency to look very grand and impressive but often turns out to be unteachable. I find, as a general rule of thumb, that it is those applied linguists who had previously worked as TEFLers who are taken most seriously by practising TEFLers, and not those, such as my former course director, who had never left university: Ken Hyland, for example, spent thirteen years (if I have counted correctly) as an expatriate TEFLer, John Swales five, Richard Smith fourteen before becoming academic applied linguists. And one could mention quite a few others, such as those who provided outlines of their careers in Rod Ellis' edited collection *Becoming and Being an Applied Linguist* (2016). Moreover, the previous careers of these applied linguists had characteristically been in challenging TEFL locations, not your Berlins, Parises and Florences (where TEFLing novelists were prone to hang out), but your Libyas, Afghanistans and Papua New Guineas. Unfortunately, "nobody can be prevented from claiming to be an applied linguist, however unqualified or unprincipled," said Alan Davies in his *An*

¹³ Isaiah Berlin had this to say about "genius": "I am sometimes asked what I mean by this highly evocative but imprecise term. In answer, I can only say this: the dancer Nijinsky was once asked how he managed to leap so high. He is reported to have answered that he saw no problem in this. Most people when they leapt in the air came down at once. 'Why should you come down immediately? Stay in the air a little before you return, why not?' he is reported to have said."

¹⁴ Swales, *Incidents in an Educational Life*, 202-3.

Introduction to Applied Linguistics (2007). I wouldn't mind betting that he probably had my Nijinsky in mind. And there, perhaps, one should leave it.

Needless to say, researching and writing this book was indeed great fun and I am assured that already, in its unpublished form, it has brought the occasional new insight together with some degree of amusement to applied linguist friends and colleagues. What more could one wish for? To be published by the prestigious and accommodating *Cambridge Scholars* is an unexpected bonus.¹⁵

It only remains to thank all the people who have helped me along the way. I am particularly indebted to those applied linguists who read my manuscripts in draft, made valuable comments on them, suggested further lines of enquiry, performed such menial tasks as checking for errors, misprints and infelicities, and, most importantly of all, encouraged me to continue. They were (alphabetically): Peter Brown, Nicky Hockly, Ken Hyland, Alan Maley, Paul Nation, Richard Smith, John Swales and Scott Thornbury. Of these, Richard Smith of Warwick University was especially helpful in scrutinizing my text in considerable detail, helping me to improve it in large and small ways, and also making me mindful of some important modern sensitivities. In addition, there were the many kind people who often went to considerable lengths to answer queries I put to them. With thanks and in remembrance: Sara Backer, the late Sybille Bedford, Lauren Billings, Peter J. Conradi, Angela Davis-Gardner, the late Helen Dunmore, the late Nils Erik Enkvist, John Gallagher, John Haffenden, James Hawes, Jennifer Jenkins, Thea Lenarduzzi, the late Herbert Lomas, Tony Lopez, the late Bill Mead, Dayna Miller, the late Adrian Mitchell, Peter Robinson, Kari Rydman, David Steinsaltz, Peter Viney, Henry Widdowson, Stephen Witkowski, Anne Wroe, Chantal Zabus and Clas Zilliacus. And, for considerable help with computer problems and formatting the text, I must thank Robert Buirski. Regarding copyright material, I have followed the academic convention of not requesting permission for passages of less than 400 words.¹⁶ Every effort was made to contact 'English Teacher X' for permission to use his material, but without success. I would be grateful to hear from any person who can help me with this or with any other possible copyright infringement that I am not at present aware of, so that the matter can be speedily rectified.

¹⁵ And also highly appropriate since I am a genuine Cambridge Scholar, having won an open scholarship in history to Cambridge. Funnily enough, so did John Swales who, also like me, left that esteemed institution with a poor first degree.

¹⁶ My authority here is the distinguished biographer Peter Stansky. (See Stansky and Abrahams, *Julian Bell*, Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 304.)

PART ONE

... thus I turn my back:
There is a world elsewhere.
(Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*)

There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't sit still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
(Robert Service)

He is not a gentleman, but a grammarian.
(Montaigne)

INTRODUCTION

I fear that our countrymen who live abroad
are not in the best moral state, however
much they may do in science or literature.
(Dr Thomas Arnold)

There was a time when, wherever in the world an English language teacher went, he would find that the French had got there before him, intellectually and morally superior. Robert Graves, who taught briefly in Cairo in the 1920s, remarked that his twelve or thirteen French colleagues, who patronised their English colleagues and intrigued against them, were “men of the highest academic distinction, but two or three English village-schoolmasters would have gladly undertaken their work at one third of their salaries.”¹ In the 1950s the poet James Kirkup found himself teaching alongside Michel Foucault in Uppsala and felt humbled by Foucault’s intelligence and the energy he put into his pedagogical duties, neither of which he felt he could match.² At much the same time the novelist, poet and literary critic Dennis Enright was teaching in Alexandria and he felt similarly awed by the brilliance of his French colleagues, noting that “there is a grain of truth in the odious insinuation that whereas France sent its leading intellectuals abroad, Britain dispatched its drunks and disorderlies – or, rather, left it to them to go.”³ (This is an opinion endorsed, in milder terms,

¹ Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 266.

² Kirkup, *A Poet Could Not But Be Gay*, 93-5. Foucault spent three years in Uppsala as *lecteur de français* and director of the *Maison de France* before moving on to similar postings in Poland and West Germany. Kirkup was particularly impressed by Foucault’s extensive connections, which included Albert Camus and Roland Barthes, also Maurice Chevalier, and by the energy he put into his student productions of plays by Labiche, Giraudoux and Anouilh.

³ “Towards the end of the 1940s the French department at Farouk I University, later renamed more worthily as the University of Alexandria, was a peculiarly brilliant one. The staff included Jean Grenier, Camus’s teacher and said to be the true architect of existentialism; Pierre Souyris, who later published a book called *Désintégration du verbe*; Algirdas Greimas, Lithuanian-born author of *Sémantique structurale*; René Etiemble, novelist, specialist in Rimbaud, and inventor-to-be of the term *franglais*; and (attached to the Lycée) J.-B. Pontalis, who was the grandson of Louis Renault, founder of the car manufacturers, and whose *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis* would be published by the Hogarth Press when I was connected with

by J. K. Rowling, who after spending two years in Porto noted that “teaching English abroad [...] attracts its fair share of misfits and runaways. I was both.”⁴ Nearer to our own time, Jeremy, the hero of Tim Parks’ novel *Europa* (1997), a lector at the university in Milan, had Christine as an intimidating colleague: she was the French lectrice who would read Chateaubriand in bed smoking Gauloises Blanc with an ice-cold Martini at hand and who would disparage her non-French colleagues for not being at her level, either intellectually or in bed.

It should be said that Dennis Enright was a notable disorderly who also liked a drink or two – though when he was working in the Far East he much preferred relaxing in seedy opium dens to tipping with the worthies of the local expatriate community, this to the obvious disapproval of his British Council superiors. (It was in opium dens that he found that exam papers could be marked “at twice normal speed and with rare equanimity,” though one had to be careful not to leave them behind or they would be used as spills for lighting pipes.) His response to suggestions of French pedagogical superiority was a staunch defence of Anglo-Saxon common sense and steadiness under fire compared with Gallic jumpiness and academic pretentiousness, which meant their teaching was way above the heads of their students, and anyway remarkably silly. (He took great delight in citing Jacques Derrida’s impenetrable deconstructions and sentences such as “*Proust se plait à désidentifier la nation après transsexualisé le sex*,”⁵ which he claimed was written in a language that doesn’t exist.) And, regarding Gallic unsteadiness, he relates how his colleague in Alexandria, the Rimbaud specialist René Etiemble, “an excitable character,” on hearing that war between Egypt and Israel was imminent, declared that to avoid internment by the Egyptians he would simply drop his trousers to prove he wasn’t Jewish,⁶ an act no Englishman would even contemplate.

the imprint. [...] Also on the strength was a newcomer, one Roland Barthes, perhaps more highly regarded for his good looks than for his mind, though viewed by our French colleagues as a rising star, assuming that he didn’t turn out to be an idiot savant. We in the English department were in no position to judge, being underprivileged intellectually as well as financially. (The French government topped up their people’s salaries while we lived on Egyptian wages.)” Enright, *Interplay*, 176-7.

⁴ Rowling, “Writing Home,” 9-12.

⁵ “Proust takes pleasure in disidentifying the nation after having transsexualized sex.” The sentence is by Julia Kristeva. Cited by Enright, *Interplay*, 200.

⁶ Enright, *Interplay*, 176-7.

The present study is the story of Dennis Enright and his like – the drunks and the disorderlies, the misfits and the runaways, the saints and the sinners, the charlatans and the consummate professionals who worked overseas, often for lengthy periods, as teachers of English as a foreign language (“TEFLers”). It considers both real-life TEFLers and fictional characters and covers the period from the sixteenth century up until the present and is based on a study of biographies, memoirs, essays, letters, novels, poems and plays.

My study began with a close reading of Anthony Howatt’s *A History of English Language Teaching*,⁷ a scholarly work for which I feel considerable respect, but also some exasperation. It is essentially the story of the development of language teaching theory through the ages, but I felt it lacked a human element. It tells us nothing about the *experience* of TEFLing or of *why* people took it up as an occupation, especially when it entailed such an extreme measure as expatriation, often long-term. One paragraph alone was devoted to an actual practitioner, the poet Wilfred Owen who, just before the outbreak of the First World War, had worked at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux where he had been overworked and underpaid and had written a long series of letters home describing in detail his daily life, his occasional triumphs and his otherwise shameless exploitation. Owen was far from being alone in providing a detailed personal account of the actual realities of TEFLing and I felt it unfortunate that his was the only one (briefly) referred to in Howatt’s study. Howatt’s treatment of nineteenth century TEFLing in Europe was also unfortunate in its mismatch between pedagogical theory and the actuality of what was happening on the ground – he devotes close on 100 pages to mainly continental theorizing, but if one reads the literature of the time one discovers that much of the actual work was being done by largely unqualified native speaker governesses and tutors, often using the same methods by which they had been taught English (as a mother tongue) themselves: alphabet recitation, learning the names of the parts of speech, reading aloud, essay writing, learning poems by heart, dictation, etc. One might come away from Howatt’s book assuming that what was actually happening at the chalk-face at any particular time mimicked the contemporary pedagogical theories as outlined by Howatt. Of course, it sometimes did, but only under certain rare and ideal conditions. In the general run of things there was inevitably a mismatch between theory and practice, between the ideal and everyday messiness. I was well-aware from my own career as a TEFLer that my own teaching procedures in any particular environment were usually only minimally informed by recent

⁷ Second edition with the addition of “A perspective on recent trends” by H. G. Widdowson, 2004.

theoretical considerations (which anyway changed with a Vicar of Bray or “flavour of the month” rapidity). Instead, they were largely determined by the practicalities of the situation and by prevailing (often common-sensical) policies; and these could often be at odds with the latest orthodoxy. What was far more important in terms of achieving a successful outcome was establishing a good atmosphere with the class – with good *rapprochement* one could get away with anything, at the same time accomplishing marvellous things. But how to achieve this was a mystery in itself and one which some teachers, however up-to-date their methods might be, never managed. (Certainly not by using the celebrated method of Maria Ouspenskaya, who entered the classroom wearing a monocle and carrying a pitcher of what looked like water but was in fact gin. Her opening line to the class, delivered without a smile, became famous: “Make for me friendly atmosphere, please.” But I digress.)

The sheer variety of TEFLing settings and activities, even within a single country in the same historical period, militates against considering TEFL as a monolithic activity. TEFLing is a capacious term. Nowadays each of its specialized varieties – English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, English as a Second or Other Language, English for Science and Technology, English as a Lingua Franca and many more – has its own acronym. In what follows I will attempt not to burden the reader with these unless it is absolutely necessary, but use “TEFLing” and “ELT” interchangeably as all-encompassing terms which take in, for example, the work, at one extreme, of an untutored governess from Galway teaching English to the children of a nineteenth century Russian family and, at the other, that of a twentieth century British Council lecturer teaching English for Academic Purposes to university students in Prague.

It would, of course, be unfair to criticize Howatt’s magisterial study for not being an entirely different book. But it did indicate to me an unfortunate gap in the literature – that of telling something of the history of TEFLing through the experiences of actual teachers. I felt much more in sympathy with a study by Rose M. Senior, *The Experience of Language Teaching* (2006), which “describes the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, behaviours and daily practices of language teachers, [...] the highs and lows of language teaching: the rewards and frustrations, the successes and failures, times when lessons flow smoothly and times when they do not.”⁸ Also, such matters as to why they had joined the profession in the first place.⁸ Howatt’s

⁸ Senior, *The Experience of English Language Teaching*, 1. This is a study of 101 Australian and British native speaker TEFLers working mainly within their respective countries and conducted over a 12-year period (1992-2004).

study is a diachronic one, Senior's synchronic. What if the best features of both were combined in an experiential study of TEFLing through the ages? For this reason the present study is divided into two parts – Part One is mainly synchronic, dealing with the present state of affairs and that of the recent past, whereas Part Two is a historical survey, centring around one or more prominent TEFLers for each era from the sixteenth century onwards.

Alastair Pennycook was obviously discounting Howatt's contribution when he complained that one of the abiding problems with Applied Linguistics is its lack of history. He cites the contemporary use of the term *lingua franca* as a good example of the erroneous use of a term with a solid historical pedigree.⁹ One might also mention the inaccurate usage of the Hegelian term *Zeitgeist* to characterize the ubiquity of ELF.¹⁰ The polemical nature of much applied linguistic writing means that every new development in language teaching theory and practice is often treated as a completely new start and the past is contemptuously dismissed and erased. But, as often as not, there are commonalities between past and present, both in terms of TEFL theorizing and TEFLing experience: for example, Owen's complaints were not so different from those voiced in 2004 by Sebastian Cresswell-Turner.¹¹ Or, to take a textbook example, I was delighted to discover that some seventeenth century ELT materials anticipated modern practice in teaching essential speech acts, including some forms which have now unfortunately gone out of fashion, such as prevarication, dissimulation and the judicious use of silence.¹²

At much the same time that I encountered Howatt's book I came across a provocative article by the novelist Doris Lessing entitled "Unwritten Novels"¹³ in which she bemoaned the lack of novels dealing with certain important aspects of our history or shared social or cultural experience – for example, novels about the hundreds of thousands of women who served in uniform during the Second World War. Amusingly, she relates how,

⁹ See, for example, Pennycook and Otsuji, *Metrolingualism*, 174-5.

¹⁰ For example, Mauranen, *English as a Lingua Franca*, 1.

¹¹ For example: "You spend your day rushing from one lesson to another, endlessly drumming the essentials and explaining the difference between, say, "I grovel" and "I am grovelling". [...] In my experience most language schools are miserable places, bucket shops whose owners shamelessly claim that the flotsam and jetsam they employ are highly qualified, hand-picked professionals." (Cresswell-Turner. "The Slavery of Teaching English." *The Telegraph*. January 17, 2004)

¹² Gallagher, *Learning Languages in Early Modern England*, 111, 201-2, 205.

¹³ Doris Lessing, "Unwritten Novels," *London Review of Books*. 12 (1). January 11, 1990.

addressing a meeting of businessmen in Toronto, she had mildly admonished them for not having provided us with novels about the life and work of the present-day industrialist. Such (unwritten) novels, she argued, would give the common reader a far richer understanding of their subject than the historian (or sociologist) ever could. Moreover, Lessing's own personal and political experiences had led her to observe that the historical events in which she had been a very active participant had been parcelled up by the historian into anodyne little stories, "as if these had about them something abrasive and raw and itchy that could not be included," and which a novelistic treatment would have revealed. One might misquote an observation made by Novalis to make the same point as Lessing's: "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history."

Reading Lessing's essay when it was first published, it struck me that the novel about the teacher of English as a foreign language might well be considered one of those unwritten novels. Certainly, novels dealing with the TEFL world seemed, at least at that time, very sparse on the ground, and those that I had encountered did not foreground the subject but tended to treat TEFLing as a convenient background setting, or something incidental, or a plot device for putting certain characters in a certain place at a certain time. Not, in other words, genuine TEFLing novels. Of course, Lessing had laid herself open to the obvious criticism that novels which she claimed had never been written did in fact exist, but she had simply not come across them. I wondered if, in my supposition, I might be equally guilty of this, so I began carefully looking and asking around.

One novel that early came to my attention was *One for My Baby* (2001) by Tony Parsons. When this novel was published, reviewers were quick to point out that it was essentially the same novel as his preceding best-seller, *Man and Boy* (1999), though with a slightly different cast of characters – the hero, a TV producer in the earlier book, had now gone somewhat down-market as a TEFLer in a seedy Oxford Street language school. Tony Parsons addressed this change of setting in a very informative Q & A session. It was put to him that *One for My Baby*, though it dealt with terrible personal loss and family breakdown, was nonetheless his funniest novel. Parsons replied that this was because the TEFL world "gives you a lot of scope for humour" of the kind found in the Seventies sitcom *Mind your Language* – the stereotypes of "the sexy French girl, the Chinese swot, the middle-aged East European with a family back in Warsaw." But, more seriously,

One for My Baby was written just at the turn of the century, when the UK was starting to get a lot of immigration, and I was always fascinated by the

language schools you saw everywhere in the West End. It felt like no-one else had written about them, and yet they were a wonderful microcosm of the world at the end of one century and the start of the next – all these young kids, and not so young kids uniting to master the English language. I went to quite a few of those language schools [...] and I saw the pathos in it too – some of these language students were coming to class after working a night shift. And of course they sleep with each other and fall in and out of love with each other or inappropriate people they meet in this new city.

Parsons's remarks touch on an important issue. The emergence of English as an international lingua franca, as both a by-product of and a facilitator of globalization, is one of the major socio-politico-economic events of the second half of the twentieth century – certainly not as dramatic and potentially devastating as the effects of climate change – but nonetheless one which is already affecting everyday lives in untold and diverse ways. One very visible aspect of it is the ubiquitous and intrusive global TEFL industry. Is this not exactly the kind of historical phenomenon which Lessing is talking about, crying out for novelistic treatment so as to reveal itself in all its abrasiveness, rawness and itchiness? Nonetheless, I am reluctant to characterize *One for My Baby* as a genuine TEFL novel since, like so many other similar novels, the ELT world is somewhat back-stage and not sufficiently foregrounded.

But I also had more personal reasons for undertaking this study. What began as not much more than a hobby (collecting books about the TEFL experience – useful for giving presentations to teachers' associations) became something of a mission. TEFL has become an occupation increasingly denigrated: what Oliver Goldsmith's hero described in the eighteenth century as "a genteel way of bread" had by the 1930s, in the poet Julian Bell's words, become "a genteel form of suicide." Bell's experience coincided with the beginning of thirty years of vilification and belittlement of the overseas activities of the British Council by the Beaverbrook press (the *Daily Express* and other papers).¹⁴ More recently the press has had a liking for articles such as Cresswell-Turner's which tell, for example, how one can be certified as a *bona fide* TEFLer simply by paying £1,000 for an

¹⁴ Lord Beaverbrook had been miffed by the appointment of Lord Lloyd as the British Council's first Director-General, feeling that by rights that job should have gone to him.

online four-week course and a liking for stories of TEFL as the last refuge of paedophiles, criminals on the run and other undesirables.¹⁵

I wished to give some dignity to TEFLing by showing it had a distinguished history which had been graced by some of our leading literary figures (Charlotte Brontë, James Joyce, Christopher Isherwood, Robert Graves, Anthony Burgess and many others who will be referred to in the course of this essay) and for several of these it had been a transformative experience. Also, there was the desire for self-knowledge – to learn how my own experiences during a forty-year largely expatriate career compared with those of my professional forebears. Being associated, albeit vicariously, with these great figures of the past might somehow justify, in moments of despair, my own rickety career in the Badlands of TEFLing.

Regarding the experience of TEFLing there are some obvious commonalities between past and present. It is and always has been a generally poorly paid occupation in which teachers are frequently over-worked and have to endure poor working conditions and no job security, such that they are the *precariat* of the teaching world. Wilfred Owen, who was an excellent amateur pianist, was peeved to learn that a piano teacher in Bordeaux attracted an hourly rate three times that of a freelance TEFLer. But being a TEFLer usually required no more than being a native speaker of English, and not even a particularly well-educated one, as Owen's scathing portrayals of some of his "mangling"¹⁶ colleagues indicated, whereas a piano teacher had many years of training and practice behind them. As Senior has remarked, "it is one thing to speak English fluently – and quite another to understand how the

¹⁵ And not just the tabloids. In 2017 the *Guardian* reported the story of Hans Binotti, 30, from Dumfries, who was suspected of killing his 47-year-old colleague Gary Ferguson in Myanmar in a fight whilst drinking. Both men taught English at the Horizon International School in Yangon. Would the *Guardian* have bothered with this rather mundane story if the two men had not been TEFLers? Episodes like this are two-a-penny in the UK and rarely get reported in the national press. Regarding paedophiles, much was made by the announcement of one such that on his release from prison he would make a new start as a TEFLer in Thailand. In the event, this former maths teacher who had had an affair with one of his under-age pupils got himself heavily tattooed and began a career as a wannabe rockstar. As Proust said, we end up doing the thing we are second-best at.

¹⁶ In both senses of the word. Owen described his colleague Miss Hewitt as a teacher "who goes on turning, turning out lessons as a Mangler mangles hour by hour." But "mangle" must also be taken in its sense of "mutilating" – presumably mangling the language. Miss Hewitt, we learn, was a Scouser and, as was school employment policy as the result of an earlier tragedy, "no great beauty." (Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 136, 146.)

language functions as a system.”¹⁷ I have worked alongside teachers who, bemused by students’ questions about all the irregular forms and the grammatical exceptions, confidently announce that “English has no grammar.” (But English *does* have a grammar: it consists of 3,500 statements and weighs two kilos, as David Crystal has reminded us.¹⁸) And don’t we all know those phonetically ignorant teachers who believe and proclaim that English has only five vowels? In her discussion as to whether TEFL can be considered a profession, Senior notes:

In view of the fickle nature of the profession and the relative lack of career paths, it is not surprising that many teachers are not particularly interested in working towards achieving a higher level of professionalism. After all, there are plenty of jobs to be had and, in the words of a contributor at a language teaching conference, ‘Casually employed teachers tend to teach casually’. [...] [T]he ease with which people can train as teachers and find jobs is reflected in the ongoing debate about whether or not ELT can be described as a profession. The overwhelming consensus of opinion is that it cannot.¹⁹

James Joyce gave English lessons to the businessman Ettore Schmitz (better known as the novelist Italo Svevo) in Trieste. Then, as now, both were aware of the low social status of Joyce’s work as a TEFLer. The two men came from remarkably similar social backgrounds and Joyce went to great pains to encourage Schmitz’s writing endeavours and to promote his neglected novels such that he later became recognized as one of the great modernist writers, but Joyce recalled that he never entered Schmitz’s house “except as a tradesman, a purveyor of gerunds,” and he was upset when

¹⁷ Senior, *The Experience of Language Teaching*, 42.

¹⁸ Crystal is obviously referring to the weighty *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Randolph Quirk *et al.* (London: Longman, 1985). Evaluating a book by its weight reminds me of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (*L’être et le néant*, 1943), 700 pages of it, which became a freak best-seller on its publication by Gallimard: “It turned out that since the book weighed exactly one kilogram, people were simply using it as a weight, since the usual copper weights had disappeared to be sold on the black market or melted down to make ammunition.” (Agnès Poirier, *Left Bank: Art, Passion and the Rebirth of Paris 1940-50*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

¹⁹ Senior, *The Experience of Language Teaching*, 59, 237. However, the subjects of Senior’s study tended to be committed, highly professional teachers and she concluded with the encouraging observation that “the intrinsic rewards of teaching far outweigh extrinsic rewards such as status or money.” (p. 246)

Schmitz's wife Livia cut Nora Joyce in the street.²⁰ Wilfred Owen was cannier than Joyce in overcoming these social prejudices. He managed to move in superior social circles in Bordeaux by the simple expedient of dropping the hint that his father was a baronet and that he was only teaching at the Berlitz as an eccentric whim before going up to Oxford. (However, he was almost undone when his father, a railway employee, decided to come out to visit him; Owen had to confess the deception to his father, who gracefully acted out his putative aristocratic role when introduced to Owen's French friends.)²¹

Another constant through the ages concerns motives for becoming an expatriate TEFLer. The push and pull factors are much the same nowadays as they were in the past: the pull of bettering oneself and/or the desire for novelty and adventure, the push of getting away from Mummy and/or, in Byron's words, of "putting water between oneself and one's embarrassments." Nor have the unconventional and eccentric reasons changed much. Enright sometimes worked for the British Council in London sieving through applications for TEFL positions in the Far East:

Many of these applications, I was told (and have since, as head of a university department, confirmed), were of a totally unsuitable kind, being really applications for professions and duties and activities which were not being advertised. The applicant wanted to go to Thailand, not to teach English, but because he was thinking of becoming a Buddhist; or he was keen to go to Japan, not to teach literature, but because he had gathered that the penalties against homosexuality were considerably lighter there; or as a sceptical Thai lady, lately my colleague, had put it, he just wanted to escape from the English climate or from mother.²²

Also, experiences as a TEFLer vary enormously from person to person, being in some cases personally enriching and liberating and in others impoverishing and enslaving. Both extremes will be encountered in what follows, including that self-destructive urge encapsulated in Kafka's famous aphorism, "A bird went in search of a cage": the predicament of those

²⁰ When John and Brita Haycraft started TEFLing in London in the early 1960s they found that things hadn't changed much: "We were almost the only university graduates in the field. Teaching English to foreigners was usually something undergraduates did for minimal pay. Having taught only in Spain and Sweden we didn't realise we were entering an area which most British people, respecting neither foreigners nor languages nor teachers, regarded with scorn." (Haycraft, *Adventures of a Language Traveller*, 182)

²¹ Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 34, 138.

²² Enright, *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor*, 110.

trapped into marriage abroad, burdened with children, consoled by alcoholism and condemned to a lifetime of TEFLing in much the same way that Evelyn Waugh's Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust* was condemned by his captor in the jungle to read Dickens aloud to him for perpetuity.

However, the commonalities which exist between past and present must be seen alongside the enormous changes which have taken place, especially in the last fifty or so years, and most obviously in the shrinkage and homogenization of the world. In my own case, my first TEFL appointment, in the 1960s, was to a commercial Berlitz-style language school in Helsinki. Getting there entailed a five-day trip on a Russian boat operating between Tilbury and Leningrad. (Flying would have been prohibitively expensive.)²³ This trip was an unforgettable cultural experience in itself – one's fellow passengers were a multicultural mix which included African students going on scholarships to study at Russian universities, returning Danish, Swedish and Finnish au pairs, an American socialist couple going to the Soviet Union in the hope of obtaining medical treatment they couldn't afford back home, and some Russian chess grandmasters returning from tournaments abroad (who would charitably give one a game and play discretely badly); tea-time was a ceremonial occasion with enormous samovars on each table and the bar had thirty varieties of vodka, scented, peppered and otherwise; there were concerts given by crew members (who had obviously been chosen for their seafaring roles because they were also excellent musicians) and there was a continuous film show – I remember a four-hour documentary made up of footage from the wartime German siege of Leningrad.²⁴ And then,

²³ In fact, the trip, with student discount and in a shared cabin for six but with all meals thrown in, cost £13. This compared very well with 1911 prices when the rail journey from London to St Petersburg (51 ¼ hours) cost £15.18s.3d.

²⁴ And it was not just the people who were memorable. In the Baltic, somewhere between Stockholm and Helsinki, I woke up as dawn was breaking and went for a stroll on the upper deck. Below, on the foredeck, a magical scene confronted me. A multi-hued, pulsating blanket of bird-life, all reds and greens and blues and yellows. If it were not for the ugly intrusion of the ship's railings framing this luminous composition it could have been a scene from a medieval illuminated manuscript depicting the parliament of the birds, or from an eleventh-century Persian miniature on the same theme. For, during the night, thousands of birds of every possible size and species had hitched a ride. Had it been because they were disoriented, or were they the stragglers and loners, or those who simply needed a rest and company? All huddled together, with no respect for size, status or species, as if they had remained exactly where they had landed and not attempted to seek out their fellows. There were some scattered white geese, tern duck, and a solitary osprey, and these dwarfed the blue throats, red-throated pipits, rose finch, tits, and all the other varieties of small birdlife that (I reflected) would be lucky to survive the eventual shotgun