Out of the Burning House

Out of the Burning House: Political Socialization in the Age of Affluence

By

Sandy Hobbs and Willie Thompson

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the third issue of *The New Reasoner*, the socialist journal founded by Edward Thompson and John Saville when they left the Communist Party, there appeared a translation of a poem by Bertolt Brecht[1]. Brecht relates how Gothama the Buddha answered pupils who asked questions about Nirvana with a parable of men who, when told that their house was on fire, asked if it was raining outside and if there was another house they could go to. One reader attracted by this poem was Sandy Hobbs, co-author of this book, who at the time was eager for change and involved in left-wing politics. He was struck by Brecht's use of this a metaphor for political discussion and quoted it often. Seeing the need for a new society, like Brecht he was impatient with those who asked what "savings books and Sunday suits" would be like in that society. It was to crop up in discussions with Willie Thompson, the other author of this book, when their political paths began to separate.

The authors of this book met as students at Aberdeen University in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They shared, and continue to share, a deep commitment to socialism. They remain friends, even although over the years they have expressed that commitment in different ways. They both believe that, although they were socialists before attending university, their years there had a major influence on how they conducted the rest of their lives. In this book they look at how their student experiences impacted on them. The accumulated years they spent at university cover roughly the period dealt with by Dominick Sandbrook's book *Never Had It So Good*[2]. He characterizes it as "from Suez to the Beatles". Despite his claim to the contrary in his introduction, Sandbrook's book is essentially about politics seen from the centre of affairs. It is London-centred, often indeed Westminster-centred. In contrast, our aim is to depict events as experienced in a place which at the time seemed quite far from the centre of big events, be they political, social, cultural or industrial, in the era of Macmillan's "never had it so good". North Sea Oil had not yet been discovered and Aberdeen had not reached the national significance it was later to attain.

Although some of the book is written autobiographically, it is not what is conventionally thought of as an autobiography. There are two equal authors (not a celebrity and a ghost). What we have written has some features in common with oral history. Although neither of us has been interviewed as would be the case with informants of the oral historian, each has responded to questions raised by the other about drafts we have written.

We have interpreted politics very broadly, essentially because we believe that other aspects of society cannot be separated from politics. After our student days we have both followed academic careers, although in different areas, history and psychology. It may be that the contrasting preoccupations of these disciplines will have contributed to our understanding both of our own development and the wider processes in society and politics.

A student does not enter university as a *tabula rasa*. In our cases, we were already predisposed towards the politics of the left. For that reason we have each written a chapter on our lives up to the point that we entered Aberdeen University. Insofar as these pages are autobiographical, they may raise the potentially embarrassing question of whether our lives have been important enough to merit such treatment. When around 1970 the young Theresa Hayter published her autobiography *Hayter of the Bourgeoisie* (the pun must have been irresistible), her left wing friends mocked her mercilessly. They pointed out that even Trotsky, for all his achievements, had felt diffident about writing an autobiography, since he repudiated any celebration of his own personality. Though they had a valid case, our answer is simple. The rationale of the book is different from one in which the development of someone of obvious achievements seeks to explain his or her own life. Neither of us would wish to suggest that the recital of our life stories in the conventional sense would be of interest to a wider readership. We have referred to our experiences so far as we believe they reflect upon wider developments and trends, illuminating the large through the small. Like E. P. Thompson, we believe that history is not just about the powerful and although we do not pretend to be as neglected as the poor stockinger to whose view of affairs Thompson famously sought to give a fair hearing[3], we are self consciously acknowledging our position on the periphery of the politics of the time.

This is not a rejoinder to Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good*. However, we hope that in providing some details on our political development in Aberdeen at the time, we help to create a more nuanced picture of the period than emerges in his book. Both of the authors see their lives as showing the influence of their time as students in Aberdeen. However, we

do not suggest that this operated in a crude deterministic way. The fact that we have both made our living as academics, engaged in teaching and research, was obviously made possible by our education in Aberdeen University. As students we were part of a small elite who went to university in Britain. Soon after we graduated higher education began to expand, which meant that people of our educational background were likely to be drawn into universities and colleges as teachers.

We cannot ascribe our shared life-long commitment to socialism to Aberdeen's influence but our experiences at the university probably had a big impact on the particular forms that commitment took. By this we mean not simply the academic courses we followed, psychology and history respectively, but also the people we met and the political experiences we underwent while students. Willie studied history and became a professional historian, but the Marxism which was to characterize both his political activism and his academic writing played little part in the teaching of the subject in Aberdeen at that time. Thus the sources of that side of his intellectual development must be sought elsewhere. Sandy's studies as a psychologist brought him into contact with Behaviourism[4], an intellectual tradition of which most people on the left knew little. Insofar as Behaviourism coloured his worldview, it may have made him less willing than he might otherwise have been to accept some of the common assumptions of his colleagues on the left.

There are certain striking differences between the world today and the world half a century ago. Some of these might have been predicted. Others have taken us by surprise. If we lacked foresight, we can only claim that we have not been alone in failing to predict some of the ways in which the world would develop.

Nationalism: While we were students, we came across nationalist ideas, but considered that they were trivial in comparison to socialism. Scottish Nationalism was politically weak at the time. It did not hold a single parliamentary seat. Fifty years on, Scotland has a parliament and is governed by the Scottish National Party, albeit one without a parliamentary majority. This change is indeed a striking one but even more striking has been the power of nationalism worldwide. Yugoslavia is a much more significant case history in this respect than Scotland.

Religion: Both of us had rejected religion well before becoming university students. Our basic reason was the same. We just could not believe the claims of religion to be true. On the whole we saw religion as the enemy of progress. Our primary image of religion was the Christianity which seemed to dominate the Scotland of our childhood. Sandy, for a time, was actively involved in the secular humanist movement, but

eventually became only a passive supporter. We probably both agreed that, whatever the faults of religion, capitalism was a much more dangerous force. The advocates of Christianity whom we met seldom impressed us with their intellectual powers and this probably encouraged us to believe that we were living in an age in which religious belief would gradually weaken and wither. From the perspective of the early 21st century this may seem a particularly naive point of view. Fundamentalist religion, both Christian and Islamic, is extremely powerful in the world today. Contemporary Russia, amongst other things, shows how unsuccessful were the attempts by the Soviet Union in its campaign to facilitate the withering of religious belief. Our fundamental misjudgment was to overlook the fact that religions take their strength from irrational forces. The intellectual limitations we noted in the spokesmen for religion were not necessarily signs of their ultimate failure.

Science: The status of science today is probably linked to that of religion. Although there are some exceptions, on the whole religious belief is a barrier to scientific enquiry. It has been no surprise to us that science has made enormous progress in the last fifty years. However, even greater progress might have been made if respect for the methods of science had not been limited by the irrational beliefs to be found amongst the adherents of all religions, including the so called "New Age" variety.

Feminism: The modern Women's Movement is generally thought of as beginning in the late 1960s. Thus it is hardly surprising that feminist issues were not central concerns for politically aware students in the late 1950s and early 1960s. That they had any significance at all is perhaps something which is worth noting. It will be seen that we were confronting feminist issues before there was any sense that feminism existed as a movement. Here is an example of where an examination of the local will throw up trends that a "national" perspective might overlook.

Capitalism: One aspect of the world that has not changed is the supremacy of capitalism. Needless to say, this is a matter of great regret to us, and evidence of the failure of the community of socialists to which we have belonged. Capitalism has seen the world economy grow enormously, but injustice and exploitation still exist on utterly unacceptable scale. Capitalism seems incapable of allowing the growth of the liberty, equality and fraternity which the French revolutionaries proclaimed as their goals. We see no reason not to continue to seek these goals. However, since successes so far have been so limited, a constant re-examination of how socialist ideas and strategies are formulated is necessary. This book offers a look at how the approaches of two minor socialists developed. We hope

it may contribute in some small way to an understanding of how past failures may be avoided.

Since this is a book about political socialization, the interpretation of the events and actions described would be greatly assisted by having some knowledge of the outcome, in other words, what happened to the two people who are the central focus of the book. When reading about the youth of a celebrated figure, we may interpret the early life in the light of what we know of the later life. As we have said, we do not consider ourselves particularly well known outside quite small circles of acquaintances, so we thought it might help the reader if we were to give a short introductory account of our later careers.

Willie Thompson

After completing the training for secondary schoolteachers at Jordanhill College of Education, I worked for two years in that capacity in Glasgow schools, but found that occupation failed to suit my temperament. Therefore, following a brief period employed by the Scotland-USSR Friendship Society, I entered Strathclyde University to pursue research for a PhD in economic history, which I completed in 1970, having the previous year been appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in Wigan Technical College, or, to give it its full title, The Wigan and District Mining and Technical College.

An interesting sidelight on the period in Wigan is that I was elected secretary of the further education union branch, then the ATTI (Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions). However, in 1970, after the campaign against Barbara Castle's intended union legislation, at the best-attended branch AGM ever, I was overwhelmingly voted out for too publicly supporting that campaign. In addition I was rebuked by the Principal for a reader's letter in the local paper on the death of Les Cannon, the anti-communist leader of the electricians' union, who lived in Wigan. The Principal even issued a press notice declaring that the College was in no way responsible. I also helped to produce an anonymous leaflet attacking Joe Gormley (whose local ground was the Wigan area) when he was being opposed by Mick McGahey in 1970 for the presidency of the NUM, over which Gormley threatened legal action if he ever discovered who was responsible.

In 1971, with the opening of the Glasgow College of Technology as a polytechnic-type institution I secured an appointment there to teach history and remained working in that institution through its changes of name and status, eventually to Glasgow Caledonian University, until retirement in

2001. The institution gained a somewhat unenviable reputation for the fact that its first three heads were forced out during the eighties and nineties by crises which resulted in their resignation, the first voluntary, the second coerced and the third by sacking.

From joining the Communist Party towards the end of 1962, I remained an active member (during the first three years mainly with the Young Communist League) until the party disbanded itself in 1991. At the time we joined, the CP was repairing – numerically at least – the drastic loss in membership it had suffered in the crisis of 1956-57, and by the middle of the decade had recovered them, but thereafter the membership figures went into steady decline, at first slowly, then continuously accelerating. This was despite specific and sometimes quite significant successes, such as leadership of the UCS work-in and participation in the direction of the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. In addition, the area I was directly involved in during my time as a postgraduate student, the communist student organisation, made considerable advances in both numbers and presence on university and college campuses, and was successful in gaining a leading role in the student unions both in England and Scotland.

During the seventies my main Party responsibility was editing an irregular publication, *Scottish Marxist*, and I was also persuaded towards the end of that decade, to take on the editorship of the monthly newspaper of the Scottish Old Age Pensions Association, *Scottish Pensioner*. I used to joke that I was getting my old age over with early, but one of the things which astonished me was the degree of personality conflicts, infighting and factionalism within this elderly collective. SOAPA was virtually a Party fief, for, having been set up by the veteran communist miner Abe Moffat, it was supported by the Scottish NUM, which at that time was dominated by communists – though the party was careful to ensure that it kept itself in the background and the Association was fronted by suitably respectable labour movement figures. Subsequently in the mid-eighties I was the Scottish member of the editorial board of the controversial CP monthly *Marxism Today*, edited by Martin Jacques, which evoked a lot of opposition from its opponents within the party – then in a state of severe division. The journal's critics accusing it of undermining the party's working class credentials with its bourgeois-intellectual approach and commissioning of articles from anti-socialist authors such as Michael Heseltine.

I also in this decade became closely involved with the CP's History Group, which following the party's disbandment converted itself into the Socialist History Society. I've continued since in that role. In addition, in

1992 I published a historical sketch of the history of the British Communist Party from foundation to demise.

Since the early 1990s, I have published a number of books, the titles of which will indicate my interests. *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1990-1991*[5], *Glasgow Caledonian University: Its Origins and Evolution* (with Carole McCallum)[6], *Postmodernism and History*[7] and *Ideologies in the Age of Extremes: Liberalism, Conservatism, Communism and Fascism*[8].

Sandy Hobbs

During the 1960s, I spent relatively short periods either teaching or researching at Queen's College, Dundee (later the University of Dundee), the University of Strathclyde, and Edinburgh College of Commerce (later Napier University). Academically, I did not particularly enjoy my time there and I doubt if an impartial outsider would consider my work there of any particular merit. I had not been keen to leave Aberdeen when I took up the post of "Assistant" in Dundee, but it was probably valuable in the long run to broaden my horizons. I formed a number of long standing friendships there and, through my involvement in CND, got to know the cartoonist, Leo Baxendale. I wrote some scripts for his new comic *Wham!* and for a time considered the possibility of making that my full-time occupation[9]. Although I think I was not likely to have made much of a success of that, I was always glad to have had that insider experience of working in popular culture.

My move to Glasgow coincided with the beginning of a Labour Government led by Harold Wilson. For several years I worked in the Labour Party but became progressively more and more disillusioned with it. Norman Buchan, whom I had met through the New Left, became a member of the government and our friendship made it hard for me to give up on the Party, but eventually I did. For a short time I was a member of the International Socialists, forerunner of the Socialist Worker Party, but found the atmosphere of that organization uncongenial. I achieved much more satisfaction working on the small, short-lived independent newspaper, *Glasgow News.* It was a time when awareness of health and safety issues in the workplace was gradually building and my contribution was to write a column as "Job Spy"[10].

By that time I had joined the Psychology Department of Jordanhill College of Education and was pleasantly surprised to find myself in an environment where I could be more effectively involved in research. Furthermore, I was able to collaborate with two fellow behaviourists. First,

I was part of a team studying primary school pupils of Pakistani origin. This resulted in the book *The Immigrant School Learner*[11]. This work was followed by the Classroom Interaction Project, which involved the then fashionable technique of classroom observation. More important to me, however, was the fact that I was now able to adopt the stance of radical behaviourism which I had come to believe is the main hope for a scientific psychology. We cannot claim to have had the impact on primary school teaching methods that we had intended, but we published some papers which I felt honestly represented my standpoint[12]. While at Jordanhill I initiated research areas which I continued to explore when I moved to Paisley. Virtually everything that my collaborator, David Cornwell, and I wrote was either explicitly or implicitly behaviourist in orientation. Much of it could be considered to be in the field of the social psychology of knowledge. Sometimes we were concerned with folklore such as urban legends, jokes and children's panic, but we also looked critically at out fellow psychologists. We found that some psychology differed little from folklore[13].

In 1975, I made another move, this time to lecture at Paisley College of Technology. For a period in the early 1980s it looked as if I might have to make another move, because a minister in the Conservative government decided he would like to close down the teaching of social sciences at the college, which was then directly answerable to the Scottish Office. We fought a successful campaign to resist his plans and social sciences steadily grew as the institution expanded. Going to Paisley turned out to be my final move as I continue my connection with that institution to the present. It is now part of the University of the West of Scotland. Although I retired as from teaching in 2002, I am now an honorary research fellow there.

During these years my main fields of research have been Contemporary Legend and Child Labour. The similarity of the initials sometimes leads to filing problems! I had first written about contemporary legends in the 1960s but there was hardly any academic interest in such an apparently trivial subject and I maintained my interest essentially as a hobby. However, in the early 1980s I became aware that it was developing as a recognizable field of study. Thanks to the books of Jan Harold Brunvand[14], public awareness of these stories grew rapidly. Thanks to the organizational effort of Paul Smith and Gillian Bennett a series of international conferences began to be held, resulting in the formation of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. I was an enthusiastic participant in these developments and found these scholars provided a remarkably congenial academic ambience.

I might have found myself specialising almost exclusively in this field had it not been an initially chance development arising out of my interest in the social psychology of knowledge. A basic question I asked was apparently simple. Since child labour is so common around the world, why are there hardly any psychologists studying it? David Cornwell and I wrote a conference paper on this, which was eventually published in the *International Journal of Psychology*[15]. This might have been the end of the matter had it not been for a chance meeting in the streets of Aberdeen with a former student of mine, the sociologist Michael Lavalette. He expressed an interest in undertaking post-graduate research and I suggested child employment as a topic. We soon discovered that, although many politicians denied the existence of any problem, there were some people campaigning for stricter protection of young workers. Thus our first short book on the subject, *The Hidden Workforce*, was published by the Scottish Low Pay Unit[16]. We soon found ourselves in regular contact with politicians, most of whose interest lasted only briefly until they moved on to some other issue. Our research was predominantly concerned with Britain, but my colleague Jim McKechnie and I soon found ourselves collaborating with international scholars and campaigners. We were invited to compile the final report of the International Working Group on Child Labour[17]. Research in this area is interdisciplinary so it is not surprising that our academic articles have appeared more frequently in journals of Social Policy than of Psychology. Another result of the breadth of approaches that we have encountered and adopted was our invitation to write the *World History Companion to Child Labor*[18]. We have constantly struggled to find funding for our empirical research although were eventually successful in obtaining the financial support of the Scottish government for a large scale national study. My involvement in this field continues and a number of projects are planned and, if funding can be scraped together, will eventually come to fruition.

I have not forgotten my commitment to radical behaviourism and in recent years have formed closer ties with the behaviourist community, which is primarily based in the United States, of course. I am particularly satisfied to have become involved with the organization Behaviorists for Social Responsibility and the journal *Behavior and Social Issues*. Thus late in my working life I have had better opportunities to comfortably combine my espousal of scientific psychology and socialism.

CHAPTER TWO

ABERDEEN AND ITS UNIVERSITY

Until the mid-1960s, Scotland had four universities, all of them "ancient". In 1949, two of Aberdeen University's geographers published a study of the "normal residence" of its students in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1913–4, 95 percent came from the north east of Scotland. In 1938–9 it was 92 percent. By 1948–9 it had fallen to 82 percent, but that still made it overwhelmingly a "local" university[1]. A study by H. A. Moisley published in 1960,[2] comparing the Scottish Universities of the time, demonstrated the special nature of Aberdeen's relationship with its catchment area. Considering students entering Scottish universities for the first time in 1956, Moisley found that Aberdeen city sent more students to university than any other city or county in Scotland (0.75 per thousand, the next highest figure being 0.68). Edinburgh was 0.63, Dundee 0.50, Glasgow 0.40. Moisley confirmed O'Dell and Walton's finding that Aberdeen University (like Glasgow and Edinburgh but unlike St Andrews) had a distinctive catchment area. Moisley's finding was that Aberdeen students entering the university made up 1.05 percent of the 16-19 age group (as measured by the previous census).

With a city population of around 180,000 and a university student body of over 2,000, just over one in a hundred of those resident in Aberdeen during term time would be students. That may not seem a striking proportion, especially given that so many of the students were locals. However, staff and students made a disproportionate impact on the city's life. The main theatre, His Majesty's, was taken over for a week each year for the "students' show", sketches and songs with topical and local references. A similarly light-hearted event was the annual students' charity week, culminating in The Torcher, a fancy dress procession around the centre of town. To many children in the town, a "student" was someone in fancy dress rattling a can and demanding money. In the period which concerns us, a rather remarkable bringing together of the university and the city took place when Rev. John M. Graham, the Professor of Systematic Theology, served as Lord Provost, from 1952 to 1955, and again from 1961 to 1964.

The University had two main sites centred on King's College and Marischal College. Historically these had been two separate, and small, institutions dating from 1495 and 1593 respectively, but they were amalgamated in 1860. Amongst ordinary citizens, the fact of this "fusion" about a century before had not necessarily been clearly understood. Students would often be asked whether they attended "King's" or "Marischal", giving location an inflated importance. Certainly, departments tended to be in one location or another, but students who attended classes in King's were quite likely to find themselves later in the day in the environs of Marischal, where the University Union was to be found. Local people also tended to stress the vocational character of university education, as expressed in the question "What are you coming out to be?" Traditionally, that question would have had a certain appropriateness. Those taking the Master of Arts might well frequently find themselves as teachers unless they went on to study Medicine, Divinity or Law, in which case they would hope to "come out" as doctors, ministers or lawyers. However, the University now also had a substantial Faculty of Science, which taught degrees in the sciences but also Engineering, Forestry and Agriculture. Chairs of History and Psychology, subjects of particular significance for the present authors, had been founded in 1911 and 1946 respectively, so they were by no means part of the "ancient" tradition of the University. They were both in the Faculty of Arts. Social Sciences were not strong in the university at time. It was not until 1964 that a Chair of Sociology would be founded.

Economically, the Aberdeen of the time was mixed. It was the centre of the rich agricultural region of North East Scotland. It was famous as a fishing port, although. according to the Aberdeen volume in the *Third Statistical Account of Scotland* (1953)[3], the fishing industry, with around 2300 employees, was far behind shipbuilding and engineering, which employed 8500. Despite being rightly known as the Granite City because of the prominent use of that stone in major buildings, the granite industry employed fewer than 800 workers. Aberdonians did not find it easy to forget their position at the heart of a farming and fishing region. The smell of fish lingered over much of the town centre. Cattle and other livestock were driven through the streets to the slaughterhouse after arriving by train or boat. The runaway cow or pig was a familiar sight.

The impact of large capitalist institutions was increasing at the time. Although most large concerns were owned by local companies, many of which had interlocking directorships, large national companies such as ICI and Unilever were also present. Some local department stores such as Esslemont & Macintosh and Isaac Benzie's were locally owned, but Watt

& Grant and Falconer's had become part of larger combines. The North of Scotland Bank had merged with the Clydesdale, which in turn was controlled by the Midland Bank. The Northern Cooperative Society was an important institution for many families for whom the dividend paid to members was in effect a simple method of saving. The announcement of the rate of the next "divie" payment was major news in the local press. Unlike most Scottish cooperative societies, the NCS was not affiliated to the Scottish Cooperative Wholesale Society. However, like all Scottish coops, its was already coming under the threat of competition from supermarkets.

The mixed nature of the Aberdeen economy gave some protection against the worst effects of the vagaries of the capitalist economy. In 1935, when unemployment in Glasgow was over 28 percent and in Dundee 27 per cent, Aberdeen's was "only" just over 20 per cent. On the other hand, housing conditions did not compare favourably with other large towns. In 1938, residents in 58 per cent of houses had to share toilets with other families, compared to a figure of 32 per cent for urban Scotland generally. In 1951 it was estimated that 10,000 new houses needed to be built for the population to be "adequately housed". This inferior position was eventually to become widely known at the time of the Aberdeen Typhoid Outbreak of 1964, when inadequate hygiene was seen as a major reason for the spread of the disease[4].

Aberdeen changed in several obvious respects during the period covered by this book. Particularly conspicuous were transport and entertainment. In 1950, Aberdeen was a city of trams and cinemas. By 1960, trams had gone completely, public transport in the city being taken over by buses. Private car ownership was also growing. Cinemas, which in 1950 had contained one seat for every ten members of the population, had cut back considerably due to the growth of television as a major medium of mass entertainment. BBC television first came to Aberdeen in 1954. By 1961, commercial television was also a local phenomenon, Grampian Television having its headquarters in the city. The first multi-storey flats were built at Ashgrove. Around the same time The Bamboo, Aberdeen's first Chinese restaurant opened in 1961. In 1963 the quaint old building known familiarly as the Wallace Tower was removed from its site in the centre of the city to allow for the development of a Marks & Spencer store. It was re-erected in the Tillydrone area, but stood alone as a private residence. It now had lost most of its former character. On its original site it sat on the corner of two ancient streets and housed an old-fashioned pub in its ground floor.

In terms of parliamentary politics, our period is one of remarkable stability. There were two city constituencies, Aberdeen North and Aberdeen South. The North was held for Labour from 1945 until 1966 by the flamboyant Irish lawyer, Hector Hughes, with majorities which never fell below 15,000. The South constituency was held by the Unionist Lady Tweedmuir, who won the seat as Lady Grant at a by-election in 1946, and held it until defeated by Donald Dewar in 1966. Throughout these years there seldom seemed much chance of either seat changing hands. Local government was slightly less stable and more complex. There was a tradition of keeping party politics out of the town council, a tradition which the rise of the Labour Party challenged. When local elections were restored after the Second World War, the main protagonists were Labour and "Progressives", the latter regularly campaigning for low rates and supported primarily by people who voted Conservative in parliamentary elections. In our period, although the Progressives had won in 1951, Labour was generally in power, except for a few occasions when there was no overall majority.

The surrounding parliamentary constituencies in Aberdeenshire and Kincardineshire were also politically stable at the time, North Angus and Mearns, West Aberdeenshire and East Aberdeenshire were all held by Conservatives with substantial majorities. One of the most colourful figures to stand in these constituencies around this time had probably been the actor, James Robertson Justice, who was the unsuccessful Labour candidate in North Angus and Mearns in 1950. However, even more colourful was the Conservative, Sir Robert Boothby, who held East Aberdeenshire until created a Life Peer in 1958. Most local people at the time were probably unaware of the irony that the Prime Minister recommending the peerage was Harold MacMillan, with whose wife Boothby had a long standing relationship.

The result of the by-election which was necessary due to his move to the House of Lords was not remarkable, in that the Conservatives retained the seat. Of greater significance was the fact that Patrick Wolrige-Gordon, the successful candidate, was an Oxford undergraduate aged only 23 years old. He became the youngest member of the House of Commons. His candidature represented to their opponents clear evidence of the class nature of the local Conservative Party at the time. He was the son of a local landowner and grandson of Dame Flora MacLeod, Chief of the Clan MacLeod. His twin brother later became Clan Chief. Patrick Wolrige-Gordon was more clearly a representative of his class than of his age group! Some local Conservatives soon came to regret their choice, as be

became an enthusiastic supporter of the Moral Rearmament movement. His MRA activities will be discussed later by Willie Thompson.

A glance at the timeline of major events could lead to the conclusion that nothing of importance was happening in Aberdeen at this time. However, as we shall see, many of these events did have reverberations in the city and the university.

TIMELINE

This timeline consists mainly of events significant in the political and social history of Britain, interspersed with events of particular significance to the authors of this book.

1954

April	Nasser becomes Prime Minister of Egypt
July	End of rationing in Britain
October	Sandy Hobbs enters Aberdeen University

1955

April	Eden becomes Prime Minister of Britain
May	Warsaw Pact signed
May	First Wimpey Bar in Britain
May	British General Election
July	Ruth Ellis hanged
September	ITV begins in Britain

1956

February	Khrushchev makes speech denouncing Stalin
March	Makarios departs from Cyprus
May	H-Bomb tested, Bikini Atoll
July	Suez Canal nationalised
August	Calder Hall, first British nuclear power station
October	Hungarian Uprising
October	Israel invades Sinai peninsula

1957

January	Eden resigns as Prime Minister
February	Bill Haley starts first tour of Britain
July	Macmillan makes “Never had it so good” speech

September	Little Rock school desegregation crisis begins
October	Sputnik I
October	Windscale nuclear accident
Winter	Brecht's Burning House poem published in *New Reasoner*

1958

January	Explorer I, first British earth satellite
March	Last debutantes presented
April	First Aldermaston March
September	Notting Hill Gate riots
October	Willie Thompson enters Aberdeen University
October	First life peers enter House of Lords
December	Preston by-pass, first British motorway opens

1959

January	Castro overthrows Batista regime in Cuba
January	De Gaulle becomes President of France
May	Cod War between Britain and Iceland
June	First Polaris submarine
September	Lunik II lands on moon
October	General Election in Britain

1960

February	Macmillan "Wind of change" speech
March	Sharpville massacre
April	Civil Rights Bill, USA
May	Betting Shops legalized in Britain
October	Lady Chatterley trial
November	Kennedy elected US President
November	MacDiarmid Rectorial Campaign
December	"Coronation Street" begins

1961

January	Contraceptive pill on sale in Britain
April	Eichmann trial begins
April	Gagarin orbits the earth

April	US failed invasion at Bay of Pigs
August	Berlin Wall erected
September	*Private Eye* published
October	Sandy Hobbs moves to Dundee

1962

January	Hanratty trial begins
February	"Sunday Times" colour supplement
February	Glenn orbits the earth
June	First legal casino in Britain
July	De Gaulle signs declaration of Algerian Independence
July	Telstar first communications satellite
Summer	Willie Thompson moves to Glasgow
October	Founding of Amnesty International
October	Cuban missile crisis
November	Glasgow Woodside by-election
November	"That Was The Week That Was" broadcast

CHAPTER THREE

MY BACKGROUND: SANDY HOBBS

In October 1954 at the age of not quite 17 years and 2 months I entered the Arts Faculty of Aberdeen University, with the stated intention of studying for an Honours degree in Psychology and English. I considered myself a socialist and an atheist, but why? And why that choice of subjects? It is difficult to avoid beginning by looking at the clichéd answer – family background.

My parents, Davidina (Ena) Blacklaw and Alexander (Alick) Hobbs, were both Scots. Each had emigrated to the United States, where they met each other. However, they found that life in Detroit during the depression was not so attractive, and returned to settle in Aberdeen. My mother's parents lived in Dundee, so we saw them only at holiday times after what seemed to me as a young child a very long and anxiety-provoking journey. How did we know it was the right train? How did we know it was going in the right direction? My paternal grandfather, who had borne the same name as my father and myself (Alexander) had died a couple of years before I was born. His wife, my grandmother, Georgina Hobbs, nee MacPherson, lived in Aberdeen. I was born in her spare bedroom, and she naturally had a substantial influence on me.

My earliest memory of anything religious was my grandmother's injunctions on being good. "Papa", my grandfather, was with God now and, like God, he could see what everyone on earth was doing. So if I were bad, even in secret, Papa would know and be very sad. I suppose I must have accepted this but all I can remember for sure was coming to doubt it. How could God see everybody at the same time? How could you live after you died?

My grandmother was a regular churchgoer, my parents much less so. My sister Andrea and I were sent to Sunday School. It gradually occurred to me that my parents never made any reference to religion. For my grandmother, much of her social life revolved round the church. My parents seemed to conform to please her. After she died, when I was a

teenager, links with the church were allowed to drop. I found this a great relief. Church had come to bore me. I suspected the sincerity of many members of the congregation and the intellectual level of the sermons was low. One that struck me as particularly silly was a comparison of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Christianity came out on top because, whereas the symbol of Islam was a crescent (something incomplete), the symbol of Buddhism was a tree (which will wither and die), the symbol of Christianity is a cross, which reaches out to the four corners of the world.

I have a few happy memories of church, mainly hymn tunes which I particularly liked. Sunday school teachers were unimpressive. One took every opportunity he could to turn from religion to football, or, in other words from God to the Dons, Aberdeen Football Club. The fact that our church had a strange name, Albion and St Paul's, and was Congregational Union rather than Church of Scotland, were minor pleasures too. It is perhaps a sign of the relative superficiality of the people I met in the church that it was not until many years afterwards that I was able to form any clear impression of what was distinctive about the Congregational Union, namely the stress on the authority of the members of the church as opposed to any hierarchical structure. (The nature of the Congregationalist movement only became clear to me many years after I had severed connections with it when I came a cross a second-hand copy of Escott's *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*[1].) I had previously worked out that the name of my grandmother's church arose from the merging of two congregations neither of which wished to abandon its own name. Albion church had begun as a mission in one of the most deprived areas of the city.

Sabbatarianism was the norm at the time. Cinemas did not open on a Sunday. Both work and leisure on the Sabbath were discouraged. My grandmother pretty much went along with this to the extent that she wanted no outward sign of work or pleasure on a Sunday. However, she seemed happy enough at, say, the playing of cards or dominos, especially if children needed to be entertained. There was a story that some people did home improvement work on a Sunday, using (silent) screwdrivers but not (noisy) hammers, but I don't think my granny was as hypocritical as that.

There was little sense that the church had any clear social philosophy. Missionary work was praised and funds were constantly sought for the London Missionary Society. However, the stress naturally was on bringing the true faith to people who had never heard of Jesus rather than concern for the material welfare of those people. My granny was active in the British Women's Temperance Society, as I think it was called, which ran