1

Invading the Study

> There is something v. nice about pigs. 'As snug as a pig in pease-straw', 'pigs in clover', 'lucky little sucking pig', 'on the pigs back', 'a regular porky boy', 'Little Pigs sleep in the sweetest of straw' etc., etc. I think I'll buy one of those mobile homes called 'Porky's cabin'.
>
> RM

The old roll-top desk at which my father worked was never shut. Its wooden slatted top was firmly wedged back in its casing. It was a man's desk and beware the woman with the temerity to polish it. On this account my father had few worries as far as my mother was concerned; I can't recall seeing her with a duster in her hand. For our daily helps, the desk was forbidden territory.

But my father had reckoned without his elder daughter. Full of insatiable curiosity, like Rudyard Kipling's Elephant's Child, time sometimes hung heavy on my hands as a little girl. 'Use your initiative!' was a frequent suggestion. So I did – tidying, cleaning, polishing and rearranging rooms, sheds,

stables, lofts and outbuildings where these activities were apparently neglected. Part of the pleasure was unearthing treasures and secrets. These were not the diversions my elders and betters had in mind. Like the Elephant's Child I was sometimes spanked for my pains.

Should I appear in the study on some pretext when my father was working, I was dispatched with 'Make a noise like a bee and buzz off' or 'Make a noise like a hoop and roll away'. The study, always an upstairs room, was his sanctuary – though not a silent one. The landing echoed to the repetitious clatter of typewriter keys as my father vigorously tapped out his thoughts for books, articles and letters. His typewriter was perched, somehow securely, on an unstable leather inlaid panel with a hinge missing at the centre of the roll-top desk.

My father and his typewriter were so inseparable a team that it sometimes seemed as if this machine might be one of his limbs, like an arm or a leg. Black, metallic, inky and cumbersome, his first typewriter was, I think, a Remington. I was still of tender age when he discarded this magic monster and handed it over to me as he settled down with his new model, an Olivetti. I was overjoyed with the sudden power this machine bestowed upon me. By tapping one small finger over those lettered keys I could produce PRINTED words on paper.

In each of our family homes, my father's study was arranged identically: the desk positioned alongside a window framed by curtains invariably featuring the colour maroon. Extending from a wall would be a single bed, for his study also served as his bedroom. When weary, he had no hesitation in lying down with a book and drifting off into 'a good zizz'. He might announce, 'I'm off to my zimmer for a bit of Egyptian PT on my bracket [bed]', or sigh as he mounted the stairs, 'I'm off to let demon doss embrace me in his hairy arms.'

'The Miller's House
[1980s]

My bed here is only just preferable to a Bengali fakir's bed of nails and I intend to jump on it to alter the contours. Because of the lumps and chasms, I have been a bit short of Egyptian PT. It's odd how elderly individuals, who cannot be all that far off death, fuss about insomnia. After all they are going to get plenty of the other thing before long.'

His study shelves were packed with bloodstock catalogues and racing reference books. A bedside table would support a radio and lamp, around which novels, biographies and works in progress would be piled at random, nearly concealing ring marks from uncountable sticky coffee mugs which had rested on its surface. Sporting and military prints hung on the walls and among the framed black-and-white photographs was one of Roger on horseback, soaring over a fence at a 1930s point-to-point. We could never believe it was him.

Animal mascots being a big thing in our family, a special position was reserved in the study for the most successful present I ever chose for my father. I had purchased it in the early 1960s with my pocket money francs in Mortain, a little provincial town in France. 'Droopy' was a small, squidgy rubber dog with a lugubrious expression.

'The Miller's House
1 June 1990

Life has not been all crumpets and honey but I look back on some happy days at the seaside, particularly when we

shared out the loot on the final day. Shopping at Mortain and St Lo!

Best Love

xx D'

My father and my mother, Cynthia, shared a personal emblem in the shape of a pig – should my parents have been honoured with a coat of arms, two prancing pigs, arm in arm, would have fitted the bill.

A gingham fabric pig hung behind my father's bed, an easier expression of his love for my mother than her conjugal presence. Their silver wedding in 1972 was celebrated by a little pair of silver pigs who sat on the sitting-room mantelpiece. Marriages have been based on stranger pleasures. One birthday, my father was given a huge notepad of pink pig-shaped paper – he slid its pages into the typewriter to bang out letters to his children, economically using both sides. Letters on his porcine paper did not necessarily grunt with good cheer: the growls of a grizzly bear were as likely.

At the beginning of each school holidays, the study assumed a dark, Dickensian demeanour, when we were summoned there individually to apply our attention to paternal admonishments. Gravely, school report in hand, the catalogue of criticisms would be recited. Our father reminded us, rightly, of the 'hard-earned cash' with which he parted for our benefit. Soberly, we left the room promising to do better, our heads bowed. The holidays would pass and, all too often, good resolutions would pass with them.

Over time, a writer's room can emanate a very particular atmosphere, reflecting the essence of its occupant. Orderly and meticulous with his paperwork, my father made regular clearances of documents and memorabilia, and discarded incoming correspondence – including all his children's letters.

He was proud of his claim that all letters from the breakfast delivery would be answered by the midday postal collection.

'Budds Farm
[1973]

I have been going through old family papers, destroying much. Would you like this cutting from *The Times*? The next time I get a mention in that publication will be when I appear in the 'Death' column. Unless I forget myself one day and you see a paragraph headed "Well-known journalist faces serious charge. Alleged incident in Reading Cinema."'

A decade later, he wrote, 'As you are the keeper of the family archives and mementoes, I enclose some odds and ends. I have been tearing up and burning things all morning.' Fortunately, his folder of wartime letters was not destined for the incinerator. He entrusted it to me five years prior to his death. 'You can do what you like with these after I've gone,' he instructed.

When my father's final hour came, his roll-top desk was found nearly empty bar the odd paper clip in a dusty cubby hole. But his typewriter – by then electric – still held a few paragraphs of a half completed racing article between its rollers. He was eighty-two years old.

There is no record of what his correspondents had to say to him – their letters were long ago crumpled into wastepaper baskets – but we know a good deal of how he responded. How astonished he would be now to know that the litany of thoughts, gossip, jokes, chastisements, advice and love that he had dispensed to his children in the last century would have a second life in the twenty-first century.

Less surprisingly, the real, living presence of such a characterful, entertaining father etched as many memories on the heart as he endowed on paper. My father's impromptu performance of the dying swan from *Swan Lake*, as he twirled his fifty-year-old self lightly but with tragic demeanour around the drawing room of our childhood home, was an unforgettable tour de force. I ended up as a heap of uncontrollable laughter on the floor whereas my father, throughout his silent, solo dance, retained his decorum, making it all the funnier.

Earnestness was anathema to my father, but instinctive though his humorous response was to any circumstance, there was a real depth of feeling and sensitivity at the core of his nature. There were emotions to be dealt with, values to be adhered to and a code of conduct to be respected, as his letters – never heavy no matter what the content – increasingly revealed as both he and I grew older.

As an impressionable child, there was one occasion which shines out for me as the seminal moment when first I became aware of the profounder aspects of my father and how history had shaped the man he had become – as you will discover.

2

A Beach for Heroes

One late summer's day in 1960, on a family holiday in France, my father decided that we should make an expedition to a big beach that was of particular interest to him. On arrival, my parents, brother, sister and I, aged ten, carried our beach bags down from the car and selected a nice picnic spot for ourselves. The beach was enormous, stretching out from east to west on either side of us. In front of us, as far as the eye could see, curled and frothed a deep band of sea, the English Channel.

My mother and I were soon in our bathing suits and as we set off towards the sea, my father quipped, 'Buzzing Bee and Fiddling Flea went down to the sea to bathe.' His version of 'Adam and Eve and Pinch-me went down to the sea to bathe, Adam and Eve were drowned, but who do you think was saved?' Buzzing Bee, generally abbreviated to 'The Buzzer', was my mother's nickname at the time – one of many bestowed upon her. Fiddling Flea was my nickname, mercifully only on the beach.

Everyone was hungry after our swim and once we were dry and dressed, the picnic hamper was opened and hunks of crusty baguette were shared out, along with butter, pâté,

slices of *saucisson*, sardines, Camembert and peaches – all fresh, French and quite delicious. I had little inclination to run around and play games halfway through lunch, unlike my younger brother and sister. Food interested me much more. My mother had promised to explore the beach with the younger ones if they would sit still and eat lunch, and as soon as the picnic had been devoured the three of them set off together.

My father and I remained at our little encampment near the sand dunes. Between us on the rumpled tartan rug was the empty picnic hamper. My father looked at me. 'Well, little Jane,' he said. 'Do you realise that we are in a very remarkable place?'

I cast my gaze around and saw that the beach was not merely an expanse of sand that stretched into infinity but that if you looked to left or right, it was punctuated by curious, irregular shapes. 'Not so very long ago, this was possibly one of the most important beaches in the whole of France,' continued my father.

This was intriguing information. My father always enjoyed sharing his knowledge and this was clearly a prelude to further facts concerning the beach. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be boring. He did not bother to say things unless they made you think or laugh. Preferably both. I looked at him expectantly as he lay there on his side, propped on one elbow, his long legs crossed over. This was a habitual position for my father on a beach, one which he found comfortable for reading, his preferred activity. Above his faded aertex shirt, a jaunty red and white spotted kerchief round his neck blew gently in the sea breeze. Unusually, on this occasion he seemed to have neither book nor newspaper to hand.

'How long do you think this beach is?' he asked, before answering the question himself. 'Five miles long – which is one of the factors which made it ideal as a beach for an invading force to land on. It is why it became one of what

are known as the Normandy Landing beaches.' Not wishing to appear dim, always a concern in conversations with my father, I responded cautiously to this information.

'It's probably impossible to imagine now but this beach – Omaha beach it is called – was where, on a bloody awful day in June 1944, in appalling weather, American forces landed to launch the last big push against Hitler. If they teach you anything at school, you will come to learn that this was the D-Day invasion of France. It was a gigantic undertaking. Of course, our own troops played a major role, staging their invasion on other landing beaches here in Normandy. If D-Day had not succeeded, things would have turned out very differently for all of us,' he pronounced with grim satisfaction.

Amazed, I sat in silent wonder. My father, on the other hand, was warming to his theme and starting to expand upon it. As he spoke, I gradually began to take in the surrounding scene from a different perspective. It was not just a beach for gentle holiday pastimes. If you looked hard enough, remnants of the multiple rows of defences installed by the Germans were still in place, now softened and veiled by the shifting sands. As the child I was, it was not an easy thing to envisage that only sixteen years earlier, this beautiful beach had been a bloody and brutal battleground, the site of one of the most dramatic chapters of our recent history. Now, people in bright and cheerful colours seemed to be enjoying their holiday pursuits all around us; there were no bombs exploding, no tanks weighing through the sands, no guns firing; there were no soldiers fighting for their lives, encumbered by battledress sodden by the sea from which they had waded on to the beach; there were no moans and cries from wounded or dying men.

My father's emotional and eloquent description of D-Day was gathering pace, weighted with a history that could not lightly be dismissed. With his keen sense of the meaning of place and of the past, I could start to grasp why this Omaha

Beach might move him to memories of the world war in which, after all, he had played his own part.

In 1939 my father was a regular, professional soldier. He had been in the Army since leaving school – a classic progression of Eton, Sandhurst and the Coldstream Guards. At the outbreak of war, he was Captain Roger Mortimer, thirty years old. As I listened to him describing the military action in Normandy, following D-Day, it became clear that he had not played a part in this crucial allied invasion or in the subsequent Battle of Normandy. I inevitably started to wonder where he had been in the war, which battles he might have fought in. Now full of curiosity, this question rapidly became pressing. I may even have asked that classic question: 'What did you do in the war, Daddy?' However I phrased it, the answer I received was comprehensive and devastating.

My father spoke gravely: 'I had the misfortune, possibly the ineptitude even, to be wounded in action in Belgium in May 1940. I was knocked out and when I came round, I found I had been taken prisoner by the Germans.'

I can remember the sound of the sea resonating with my father's voice as he unfolded too much his personal story from his capture in 1940 until his liberation in 1945 – how he spent five whole years in prison. To him, it had been a seemingly interminable period of time. To me, it was unimaginable – nearly half my own lifetime at that point.

His revelation had a powerful impact on me. This was my father's own real story which started before the one I knew, the one in which he had met, fallen in love and married my mother, become a writer, had children, bought a house in the country, made a garden, enjoyed friends and told jokes.

It was an awakening for me in my little, self-absorbed world. I had never felt true hunger, serious cold, discomfort or fear. My life was just about perfect. I would never complain again.

As he talked, I would chance a question when I could, anxious not to break the spell and bring my father back to the present, when he might get up, shake himself down and make his customary parting shot – 'Well, there we are, my dear child' – before wandering off to find the rest of the family. Warmed by a new and intensely loving admiration for my father, it struck me that he too was someone's child, the only son of his parents. What worry they must have endured in the war, fearing that they might never see him again.

'What was it like when you came home again?' I ventured.

Frowning, my father said, 'Well, it was all very difficult.'

I had already conjured up a heart-warming picture of his homecoming, scenes of the welcome and joy which would embrace the long absent and exhausted son, who though over six foot had weighed well under eight stone on his return. How thrilled my grandparents must have been to have him home again.

'I'm afraid being thrilled to see me wasn't really my mother's style. Rather the reverse, in fact. I was made to feel like a major inconvenience because I had not given her enough advance warning of my arrival and it put the servants out. Food was rationed and there was something about shortages of soap!'

I was incredulous.

'There was not all that much pleasure in being at home. I was fond of my father and we got on well. He spent the greater part of his leisure hours at his club or on the golf course.'

He added, 'I can remember in one of the worst winters of the war, getting letters in prison from my mother full of emotion about one of her pet poodles being ill. There we were, prisoners – hungry, cold, with very few parcels of provisions getting through at that point – with no knowledge of what the future held.' A silence fell upon us both.

As the air grew cooler and the tide pulled out into the further distance, my father's memories were still in full flow. How proud I felt of his endurance – and yet how angry and how sad. Where had people found the strength and courage to stand up to Hitler's tyranny? I knew that people called out to God in terrible circumstances, that praying to him might help. I also knew that my father was not remotely religious. Perhaps in wartime though, God might have had a meaning for my father?

'No,' he laughed, without amusement. 'God was not important to me, neither then nor now. What mattered most of all in prison was comradeship – the friendships with your fellow prisoners. That is what saw me through.' Finally, he smiled.

The hurly-burly of family life soon resumed its usual patten and we were happy enough to see my mother, brother and little sister reappear, damp, sandy and a little weary. The sun had gone in and the Mortimer family gathered up their things and set off to the car.

But I ended my day looking at the world rather differently from how I had seen it on arrival at Omaha Beach. In the years to come, I would sometimes think back to that afternoon, recapturing the scene in my mind, sitting with my father and listening to his dear, familiar voice, his turns of phrase. As a child I often infuriated my father and as a teenager I concerned him constantly, but that afternoon we had initiated a quality of communication together, father and daughter, that would often renew itself as I grew up.

That father of mine went on to teach me a great deal more about life in all its aspects over the coming thirty years, often through his letters. In that autumn of my eleventh year, I was sent off to boarding school. From that moment, and for the

rest of his life, my father wrote to me regularly – some 450 letters, unique and extraordinary in content, fizzing with his bon mots.

Before Roger became a parent at thirty-nine, he had already lived nearly half his life and had the experiences which shaped the man he became: Roger the racing writer; Roger the husband; Roger the father; Roger the friend. And throughout, Roger the wit.

Let's go back now and meet the young, bachelor Roger as a soldier abroad – latterly as a prisoner of war. From the late 1930s, my father's letters home to his own parents and others illuminate this key period of his story.

In July 1937, Roger was a twenty-seven year-old officer in the Coldstream Guards, embarking on his first overseas assignment.

He set sail in 'a small white vessel' of the British India Line. In his earliest existing letter home, he describes the ship passing smoothly through the Bay of Biscay, a beautiful dawn as they sailed into Gibraltar and how, in Malta, he was captivated by the island and its people. His final destination was Alexandria in Egypt.

His battalion had been dispatched to the Middle East on a peace mission to curb and contain the civil unrest and terrorism, rife in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine. At the core of the conflict was the resentment and anger of resident Arabs at the waves of Jewish immigrants arriving as they fled persecution in Europe.

Roger was English by birth and in taste and habit. Committed to the life of a professional soldier – a career initiated by his father who regarded him as a somewhat shambolic character who could only benefit from military discipline – Roger did not have the instincts or outlook of an

adventurer. He responded with great pleasure to the charms of civilized watering holes in Europe, but ultimately he was at his happiest and most at ease in his own country. I will not say 'at home' as that was a place of only intermittent enjoyment for him, controlled as it was by a mother for whom warmth meant something generated from a heater.

His letters home from this period introduce us to some of the qualities that Roger later distilled into his epistles to his children. Restless and bored in the company of anyone who took themselves too seriously, he yawns at the tedium he is subject to: the Royal Egyptian Yacht club, dreary guests at formal social occasions, pompous and inefficient Army officers, aggressive nationalists, political fanatics . . . dictators. All could be laughed at – along with himself – sometimes lightly, at other times with a sharp twist of the lemon.

Roger's easy capacity for friendship was always coupled with a need for regular retreat into solitude. Company was all well and good, but he relished quiet periods in which to read, reflect and enjoy his own thoughts. Sometimes, though, it is not the solace of solitude but loneliness which percolates through those letters. There is no mention of a girlfriend, significant or otherwise. Maybe he just chose not to permit any girls to dance across the pages of letters to his parents.

Roger was not constrained by the stiff upper lip of his generation. He was not inhibited in expressing his feelings about unpleasant, uncomfortable or fearful experiences; and the period he served in Egypt and Palestine provided its share of them. Finding himself in a region of terrorist attacks, bombs, shoot-outs, assassinations and road ambushes, there was more than a chance that Roger might not have survived to tell these tales. Addressing the downside of things, sympathetically, mischievously or caustically, added further spice to his letters to his mother, father and other relations.

Alexandria
Winter 1937

The weather here is perfect – very hot and sunny with a pleasant sea breeze and not too cool at night either. I have left off my vests and never wear a waistcoat before dusk.

The chief trouble is the mass attack by flies and bugs; every Wednesday is a day set apart for de-bugging every conceivable article of furniture and apparel and even so they continue to thrive.

At present Alexandria is rather like Le Touquet in mid-winter – all the amusing places closed till the spring – but the locals are very hospitable and entertain a good deal. Never have I seen people drink more; apparently the climate is suitable for soaking and you can certainly put down a packet here without any ill-effect.

Would you like some Jaffa oranges? Do let me know and I'll send you some after the Christmas rush. I've sent off some Turkish Delight but God knows if it will ever get there, they're so hopelessly inefficient here.

Social and recreational life in Alexandria occupied the time whilst awaiting orders, as Roger told his father, Pop, in a number of letters:

We've been pretty tense and anxious lately but on the whole life is quite enjoyable. I sail most afternoons in the harbour, being a very nautical and seamanlike member of the Royal Egyptian Yacht Club – extremely smart and exclusive (I don't think). We usually go out in a boat which holds four or five people (it's called a 'Fairy' I believe) and cruise round the harbour watching the boats come in and out and meeting

the Imperial Airways Seaplanes. It's usually rather rough outside the harbour so I find I enjoy myself more if I exercise a certain discretion and refrain from committing myself to the mercy of the waves and my own very limited nautical abilities. There are races in the harbour three days a week and although I sometimes take an extremely minor part as portion of the crew in these events, I find them rather a strain owing to the intense seriousness with which they are taken by the local yachtsmen.

My social outings have been severely limited – I'm afraid I'm not a popular success with the local 'gens chics'. However, I toiled off to a very stiff lunch party the other day (invitation card 6" × 4") and paid for my temerity by undergoing a three-hour ordeal sandwiched between two of the dreariest bores I've ever met. One of them would lean across to talk to me and perspired most liberally on to my plate. I nearly covered my food with my handkerchief whenever I thought he was going to address me.

Best love,
Roger

I went up to Cairo this week to do some work there; it's far worse than here, very much hotter and terribly dry and dusty. The Nile has reached a record height and people are beginning to get nervous of a flood. This is really an extraordinary country: even at the main bookstall at Cairo Central Station it is quite impossible to buy anything but literature of a highly pornographic description!

Best love,
Roger

I'm just off to motor down to Moascar (military garrison) about two hundred and twenty miles away in the desert. I'm not taking the Vauxhall as I know it would never make it on the ghastly roads out here, and it is far too valuable to me for running about town. I leave at midday in an Austin 7 (military) and drive from the Canal road to the Pyramids (about 120 miles) and I'll spend the night out there in the open. The next day, I leave the road and drive cross country over the desert, my only guide being a compass whose accuracy has been more than questionable since a cow stood on it at Sandhurst! I expect the last 100 miles will have to be done at about 10 mph and I shall be lucky if I don't stick in the soft sand. The country is hideous the whole way except for occasional bursts of wild flowers.

I went for a picnic with some pretty tiresome girls at Aboukir Bay, a most lovely place for bathing and sailing, and prawns the size of small lobsters. I very rapidly tired of the party and spent the day with some native fishermen who were far more amusing and rather better mannered. I think I shall have to hire a very small boat next summer and just cruise quietly about in it.

Best love,
Roger

An awful dinner party last week – 34 people and I sat next to a fabulously wealthy and exceedingly vulgar old bitch who was in the back row of the chorus of a Greek cabaret before marrying the richest man in Egypt. I told her a lot of shocking lies and asked her to come on a cruise on my 100-ton yacht to the Aegean Islands; she has accepted and is I think looking forward to it.

Best love,
Roger

There is not much to do in the evenings here – but there are good places where you can eat yourself silly on excellent food for about half a crown; the cinemas are indifferent and all the films are cut and they adhere to the odious French habit of having a long interval in the middle of the big film. Thank God for Penguin Books!'

Best love,

Roger

Then Roger found himself caught up in a modern Battle of Jericho. There were plenty of military challenges in the area. When my father later described his days in Palestine to me, it was clear that over and above the conflict, he personally liked both Jews and Arabs for their different qualities, not least in the Arabs' readiness to always laugh at a joke.

Dear Pop,

I have just returned from a short trip to Jericho where we were dispatched to restore order and re-establish the police who have been turned out by the rebels over the last three months.

We had another of those bloody night drives – a convoy a mile long, leaving billets at 2.45 a.m. and getting to Jericho at 9 a.m. I thoroughly enjoyed it: You go down a twisting, precipitous road with the hills rising sharply up on either side. The whole 25 miles can have changed very little since biblical times and the only signs of modern civilisation were the ashes of burnt out Jew lorries, driven up without escort from the Dead Sea Potash Company and meeting with the inevitable fate on what must be the world's best road for ambushes.

Bethany is a charming place, without any of the unfortunate

traces of tourist-catching vulgarity that mars so many places in Jerusalem.

After 20 miles or so downhill, we reached the Dead Sea, with Jericho in the distance. It's a very small town, appalling hot and stuffy in summer and full of mosquitoes – with plenty of trees and surrounded by banana groves. The inhabitants are mainly of Sudanese extraction but periodically the place gets overrun by the gangs who come down from the hills and raise hell.

We met with very little opposition but a few natives were shot trying to break the cordon. British HQ was established at the Jordan Hotel, kept by a club-footed Greek whose trade has been ruined by lack of tourists and non-paying gangsters. I enjoyed my stay there as I had my first night in a bed since we left Alexandria. The bugs were rather more annoying than usual and all had to swallow quinine every day to avoid malaria.

One afternoon there, an old Arab rode into our HQ on his donkey and asked if we could spare him some iodine for a couple of scratches. On examination, we found six bullet holes right through him, all stinking and gangrenous; apparently the poor old boy had been shot up about two days before by an aeroplane which also polished off about fifty of his goats.

God knows how long we shall be out here – I should imagine about another six months. I don't mind living in mild discomfort but its rather boring, never getting out of uniform, having no books to read, and never seeing anyone at all except soldiers.

The more I see of the Palestine Police, the more I realise how incredibly idle and indisciplined they are. They cause us endless trouble by letting all their rifles get stolen, spreading secret information and getting pissed and shooting up harmless people.

The more I see of the Army on semi-active service, the more hopelessly inefficient they seem to be: thank God there wasn't a war! Some of the British regiments out here are absolute jokes, like the Ws who have lost five trucks, several Lewis guns, shot up their own patrols and run like Hell whenever they meet an armed gang of more than one. Then there are the KO who are nothing more than an armed gang themselves and the RS who are absolute savages. The Buffs and Black Watch, though, are both first class as are the 11th Hussars.

Best love,

Roger

'Thank God there wasn't a war'! Oh my dearest father, don't hold your breath.

This letter to his sister Joan indulges in one or two more gentle pleasures beyond the debris and squalor of poverty and strife in Palestine.

I rather enjoyed Jerusalem, firstly because it was mildly exciting, secondly because the Old City is a most intriguing place, partly fascinating and beautiful, partly squalid and repellent. Some of the Arab hovels I went into were deep in excreta, with human beings, goats, donkeys and chickens all squatting silently and miserably in the same room; once or twice I've had to light my pipe to avoid being sick. On the other hand, some of the convents and hospices are beautifully clean and very attractive indeed and run by the most delightful people. I lived in a very high building on the edge of the city wall and at five o'clock in the morning, with the sun rising beyond it, it was a very beautiful sight, especially as there was complete quiet owing to the curfew. Most of the city has

altered but little since Our Lord's time; Pontius Pilate's house can still be seen.

I am at billets in Ramleh at present and would be very comfortable if the electric light hadn't been cut off and if either the bath or the lavatory worked. There is a lovely view across the plain to the hills which seem to change colour every hour of the day.

I caught a big chameleon here and kept it for a day or two. They are very tame and settle down in no time. I let this one go when I went off to Jaffa for four days work.

It's rather dull when one's not working here as you can't leave camp at all or you are likely to get kidnapped or shot.

The following letters bring up all kinds of intriguing points: the state of my father's wardrobe, terrorist attacks, British officers misbehaving . . . the deteriorating world situation.

Life continues its uneventful round out here: I haven't been outside the city traffic checks for nine weeks and my work doesn't seem to get any less. We're all waiting anxiously for the Government policy to be outlined and that may give us some idea of the duration of our visit here. As we were originally prepared for a two-month visit, I only brought very few clothes here and I am attending social functions among the Jerusalem elite in grey flannel trousers with a patched seat and a coat that was donned with pride for the first occasion in my Sandhurst days.

Forty Arabs were blown up just down the road last week by Jews who had placed a bomb in the Arab market, skilfully concealed in a basket of carrots. One unfortunate gentleman was squatting on the basket when the bomb blew up and was completely disintegrated except for his legs

which were paraded up and down the street all that day by his female relatives, accompanied by piercing and incessant lamentations. The same night, an infernal machine, which would have almost destroyed Jerusalem, was discovered on a roof by a British policeman who luckily heard the machine ticking. Most of the Arab assassinations are now done by boys under fourteen who are handed the weapon and shown the quarry by a terrorist.

I'm glad I'm not in England at present, there seems to be so much squabbling, wind and national hysteria about. It may be dull here but we don't worry much about Europe and there are worse conditions to be in than mine – a nice, dull, peaceful groove.

Manoeuvres in Egypt have been very severe this year – very strenuous and in dreadful weather. The new mechanised brigade – pride of the Near East forces – returned to its base in sad ignominy on the train, all the mechanism having been rendered useless by two days in a sandstorm!

I hope to take four days leave to Egypt next month or in May, which I feel I am now entitled to.

Best love,

Roger

The Conference has provided no solution to this squabble over here, so I suppose we're stuck here T.F.O. [till further orders]. We're all beginning to get rather browned off as we're given no clue as to our future except the knowledge that there's no leave going this year. However, an ugly world crisis seems to be brewing up so there's a chance we may get shoved off to Egypt to keep the Italians quiet. What a truly bloody world it is at present and not the remotest sign of any improvement in the future. And to think I'm doing it all for

about the same wages as my grandmother gives her 2nd or 3rd gardener.

Quite a lot of murders outside the hotel this week, one of which was seen by Guardsman Newash who pursued and captured the assassin. The popular method now is to hand the gun to a boy of about ten or eleven, who actually does the dirty deed, knowing full well that his youth precludes him from the gallows.

The flowers out here are lovely and the hill country has been miraculously transformed into a vast rock garden. At one place I saw about two acres of the most magnificent lupins I've ever seen, and even the Jerusalem suburbs are less nauseatingly hideous than usual.

I have employed a tutor for the evening hours and learn Arabic from him with almost humiliating difficulty. I think I'm beginning to improve and can now occasionally startle some particularly annoying yokel with some acid remarks in his native tongue.

Some regiments have been having trouble with the officers and I'm rather glad to hear the Buffs, who I think are rather priggish, are having to court-martial one of their officers. He was in command of a platoon post on the railway and unfortunately his sex urge was stronger than his sense of duty. Tiring of the boredom of isolation, he used to sneak off at night and bed down with some alluring Rachel in a Jewish colony. Unfortunately he used to make his journey in the wireless lorry so that when his post was attacked in his absence, no SOS could be given to HQ and a disaster was only just averted. An RAMC [Royal Army Medical Corps] Major is also durance vile [restraining order] for calling the CO of the 5th Fusiliers an old bastard to his face! Well I hope this finds you less browned off than it leaves me.

Best love,

Roger

Christmas in Palestine, 1938: Roger was as near to the birthplace of the Messiah as he would ever be, but not on a pleasant Christmas break to the sound of the merry organ and sweet singing of the choir. He was not away in a manger, but often caught up night-time alarms and excursions.

The situation here remains static: even if we get back to Egypt, the European situation rules out any hope of leave to the UK. These bloody dictators never let up on one for a second; they have almost entirely ruined soldiering as a pleasurable profession and in spite of rumours, I do not believe their power shows any sign of being on the wane.

Very busy here lately: only one night in bed out of the last ten, owing to these windy generals being scared stiff of being thought inactive ('lacking in drive' or 'not a live wire' is the usual term used). Consequently we are shoved out at midnight every day to go and inflict moderate hardship on some perfectly peaceful village.

We did however have a good raid on Hebron: it was two days of hell, very cold, very arduous and well carried out. With the help of informers we picked out several hundred terrorists, having rounded up and questioned 800 men in 36 hours. Then, if you please, the bloody staff, having urged us on, makes us release all but a hundred as 'they hadn't expected so many and don't quite know what to do with them'. The big bunch of cloth-headed saps! No wonder we all get browned off.

We've moved after nine weeks in the open to real comfort at this excellent German hotel in Jerusalem. The comfort of a bed, carpet, electric light and other kindred amenities that I was beginning to forget are more than welcome. Well, a Merry Christmas to you all, and a peaceful new year.

With the instability in Europe and increasing threat posed by Hitler, my father's next destination turned out to be in the cooler climes of Birkenhead, in preparation for war. He described this period years later.

The Miller's House
Kintbury
21 July [1980s]

Dearest Jane

As you know I was on leave from Egypt when the Hore-Belisha expansion of the Army took place. I was a junior captain and found myself suddenly in command of a Searchlight Militia Battery, RA, in Arrow Park, Birkenhead. My junior officers tended to be moth-eaten old dug-outs from World War I. The other ranks were Merseyside teenagers. We had no searchlights, no rifles, no NCO instructors, no parade ground, no snacking irons, no kitchen utensils, no clerks, no cooks, no uniforms. We were riding on the rims. Belisha thought that as long as he assembled individuals there was no need to fuss about organisation, training, standard of living. He was a flat-catching shit backed by the *Daily Mirror* and the radical press. The Merseyside teenagers were basically OK and I grew to like them, and vice versa I think. I was very moved by the send-off they gave me when I left to rejoin the Coldstream at Pirbright. A lot of them had no religion and when I filled in their particulars they gave as their religion 'The Prudential' or 'The same as you sir, if you don't mind'. I eventually got a Battery Clerk from the labour exchange. A cynic, highly efficient, he had been quite a nob in the local communist party. We got on very well. My BSM was a very smooth riding instructor from the RHA. By far the

best young officer I had was John Garnett, Marlborough and Royal Welsh Fusiliers, killed in 1940 as soon as the fighting started.

Best love
xx D

Roger didn't have much time for Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War better known today for pedestrian road safety due to his 'Belisha beacons' at road crossings. His appointment was not a popular one with Parliament or the top ranks of the Army. Hore-Belisha gave some highly regarded generals the sack, a downgrading he himself received in the early months of 1940.

I'm delighted that Hore-Belisha was sacked. In my opinion he was a self-advertising careerist, a liar, not over-scrupulous, and a sucker up to the vulgar press.

Between the declaration of war in September 1939 and Hitler's invasion of Belgium and the Netherlands in May 1940, British forces were engaged in constant military manoeuvres, training exercises and preparation for action. It was a time of unsettling hiatus – the Phoney War. As part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), Roger was sent to northern France with his Coldstream battalion in early 1940.

I was detailed to come up here at four hours notice from the Base: I was rather relieved in a way at not going to the 2nd Bn where my memories are not of the happiest; moreover, the Commanding Officer used to be Riley's right-hand man

and I'm afraid I never treated him with the respect due to his seniority and spent a good deal of time and ingenuity in making him 'the butt': the fact that we have not had to meet in the tenser atmosphere of war is a matter of mutual relief and if I'd been in his place I should have been very loathe to receive me into his fold!

I'm a fairly junior captain in this Bn and I am doing duty as 2nd in command to Jerry Feilden which suits me well especially as I have a hell of a lot to learn about this sort of soldiering. Jack Whittaker is our Brigadier, I'm glad to say, as no one could be nicer. Arnold Cazenove is almost unknown to me; he is very serious, painstaking and industrious and demands (rightly, I think) a very high standard indeed. I bet there isn't a better Battalion in the BEF as regards turnout; we work like blacks, digging every day from dawn till dusk with occasional variations in the shape of 15-mile marches. I find myself very tired when my last duty is done and more inclined to sleep than anything else. I had a bloody journey up, taking 48 hours with two minor train accidents. I arrived at 4 p.m., very tired and dirty and with the worst cold I've ever had and shivering in a tremendous blizzard. At 8 p.m. we did a night drive, yours truly sitting in an open lorry with no windscreen, and then proceeded to walk back some 16 miles, getting in at dawn. I felt like death when I started but 100 per cent better at the end. Could you please send another issue of kippers and a cake from Mrs Tanner would be welcome. Our billets are easily the best in the BEF: we have a very good company mess, central heating, good WC etc: sleep in the next door house in a very classy mansion owned by a rich industrialist. I have a delightful bedroom and get ragged a good deal by the seven children, who I frequently see sitting in a long row on jerrys.

Best love to Mummy and I'll write when I get time. Am unlikely to get leave before the end of June.

Roger would not get leave in June. The Germans had other plans for him. In the meantime, February 1940 found him lulled into tranquillity, living in a French arcadia.

Fine warm weather here with very sharp frosts every night. I wish there was a golf course near, as it's just the right time of year for that sort of thing. I only wish I could hop down to the NZ on Sunday and play a round and a half, no doubt exceedingly badly, with a large lunch in between.

I had arranged to go to Paris last Sunday with Rupert Gerrard and Tommy Gore Browne, but at the very last moment on Saturday morning, just as we were setting off, some dim old bore of a general announced his intention of inspecting us at 11 a.m. on Sunday. This was equally tiresome for the guardsmen, as on Saturday afternoons we hire three buses and take a trip to the nearest town. Consequently they had no time left to get cleaned up and everything swabbed for this singularly ill-timed visit. We duly paraded on Sunday, but after a tedious wait a message came through to say we would be an hour and a half late; I suppose we should have expected this but nevertheless, our feelings towards the general were scarcely improved by this announcement. However, I felt it my duty to give him a civil reception, so I posted some drummers with French 'Cors de Chasses' on the balcony of the turret and when he emerged from his staff car, they blew a loud and highly original fanfare – the sort of thing that precedes the entry of Prince Charming in a provincial pantomime. The general was visibly shaken so I seized the initiative and had him well under control the whole time. He proved to be a dim, pleasant sort of Belisha general: he inspected the men 'standing easy' if you please, and asked them all well-meant but fairly silly questions, such

as 'Does your family write to you often enough?' I think he was pleased with his visit and he was very complimentary afterwards.

We have a padre living with us which is a pretty fair bore as he is obtuse and foolish, even for his station in life, which is saying a good deal. He's not a shit in any way, rather to the contrary, but he's appallingly ignorant and out of touch with reality to such an extent that he really shocks me. Also he is apt to make rather sly, smutty remarks to show what a jolly, broad-minded sport he really is!

Deep in the winter of early 1940, he wrote to his uncle.

1st Reinforcement, 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards
1st Infantry Base Depot
BEF
9 February 1940

Very many thanks for your most welcome letter. I should be most grateful if you would be kind enough to send me some 'mental nourishment'. I am quite content to rely on your selection and any preference I have would be between David Cecil's 'The Young Melbourne' and Franklin Luckington's 'Portrait of a Young Man'.

My life here continues to be distinguished solely by the completeness of its rural quietude: my former companion has moved on and though I miss the conversation, the joint attack on *The Times* crossword and the general knowledge papers we set each other every night, I am very happy in complete solitude as long as the post arrives occasionally and I have something to read. By good fortune I managed to get hold of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace', which I had always shied away

from formerly: I enjoyed it more than anything I've read for years and it kept me quiet for almost a week.

The best of this sort of existence is that one is able to do all sorts of things that in more normal times one never think of doing – at any rate, I wouldn't. I have become rather a keen naturalist in a primitive sort of way and spend a good many afternoons watching birds and I think I shall shortly be able to publish a small brochure dealing with the life and habits of the little owl in this part of France! Now that the thaw has set in, I'm going to buy a rod and do a little coarse fishing in the canal.

Little owls, thoughts of fishing and not a hint of conflict in that early spring air – how removed that little corner of France seems from a time of war. In a letter to me in the 1980s, he recalled that halcyon interlude.

I have seldom been happier. There was no other officer there, it was too cold to work, and I had a snug room with a huge stove and piles of books sent from kind friends in England. In those days books cost 7/6d, not £10.

I still find the following letter about the turn of events in 1940, written to me in 1970s, to be one of the most poignant I ever received from my father.

Dampwalls
Burghclere
May [early 1970s]

Dearest Jane,

Yesterday, listening in the garden to the melancholy sound of church bells, my mind went back to a beautiful May morning in Belgium in 1940. The Germans had attacked the Low Countries and started the Blitz. My battalion moved up to Belgium from Lille and we assembled at a sort of Belgian Virginia Water, large well-kept houses with children and dogs playing on the lawns. It did not seem much like war. Suddenly a motorcyclist appeared with a message for all company commanders to meet the commanding officer at a church some miles away. Off we went – I rode a motorcycle – and as we reached the little church the locals were going into morning service in their best clothes just as they did every Sunday. They took no notice of us.

The Colonel told us that the German armour had broken through the first line of defences and we were to counterattack forthwith. The war really had started: for some of us it had ended before the day was done.

Best love to you all,
RFM