CHAPTER I

# A Provincial Childhood

*Grantham 1925 to 1943*

My first distinct memory is of traffic. I was being pushed in a pram through the town to the park on a sunny day, and I must have encountered the bustle of Grantham on the way. The occasion stays in my mind as an exciting mixture of colour, vehicles, people and thunderous noise – yet, perhaps paradoxically, the memory is a pleasant one. I must have liked this first conscious plunge into the outside world.

As for indistinct memories, most of us probably recall our earliest years as a sort of blur. Mine was an idyllic blur in which the sun was always shining through the leaves of the lime tree into our living room and someone – my mother, my sister, one of the people working in the shop – was always nearby to cuddle me or pacify me with a sweet. Family tradition has it that I was a very quiet baby, which my political opponents might have some difficulty in believing. But I had not been born into a quiet family.

Four generations of the Roberts family had been shoemakers in Northamptonshire, at that time a great centre of the shoe industry. My father, who had wanted to be a teacher, had to leave school at thirteen because the family could not afford for him to stay on. He went instead to work at Oundle, one of the better public (i.e. private) schools. Years later, when I was answering questions in the House of Commons, Eric Heffer, a left-wing Labour MP and regular sparring partner of mine, tried to pull working-class rank by mentioning that his father had been a carpenter at Oundle. He was floored when I was able to retort that mine had worked in the tuck shop there.

My father had a number of jobs, I think most of them in the grocery trade, until in 1913 he was offered the post of manager of a grocery store in Grantham. In later years he would say that of the fourteen shillings a week he received, twelve shillings paid for his board and lodging, one shilling he saved, and only then did he spend the remaining shilling. The First World War broke out a year later. My father, a deeply patriotic man, tried to enlist in the army no fewer than six times, but was rejected on each occasion on medical grounds. His younger brother, Edward, did enlist, and died on active service in Salonika in 1917. Few British families escaped such a bereavement, and Remembrance Day after the war was observed throughout the country both strictly and intensely.

Four years after arriving in Grantham my father met my mother, Beatrice Ethel Stephenson, through the local Methodist church. She had her own business as a dressmaker. They were married in that church in May 1917 and my sister, Muriel, was born in 1921.

My mother was quite a saver too, and by 1919 they were able to take out a mortgage to buy their own shop in North Parade. Our home was over this shop. In 1923 my father opened a second shop in Huntingtower Road – opposite the primary school which I would later attend. On 13 October 1925 I was born over the shop at North Parade.

That same year, my father expanded his business further, taking in two adjoining buildings in North Parade. Our shop and house were situated at a busy crossroads and the main railway line – Grantham was an important junction – was just a hundred yards away. We could set our clocks by the 'Flying Scotsman' as it thundered through. What I most regretted was that at this time we could not have a garden. Not until the end of the Second World War did my father buy a house with a long garden further along North Parade, on which the family had set our hearts some years previously.

Life 'over the shop' is much more than a phrase. It is something which those who have lived it know to be quite distinctive. For one thing, you are always on duty. People would knock on the door at almost any hour of the night or weekend if they ran out of bacon, sugar, butter or eggs. Everyone knew that we lived by serving the customer; it was pointless to complain – and so nobody did. These orders were, of course, on top of the regular ones. My father or his staff – we had three staff at North Parade and someone else at Huntingtower – would generally go out and collect these. But sometimes my mother would do so, and then she might take Muriel and me along too. My sister and I knew a lot of people in the town as a result.



There was, of course, no question of closing down the shop for long family holidays. We used to go to the local seaside resort, Skegness. But my father and mother had to take their holidays at different times, with my father taking a week off every year to play his favourite game, competing in the bowls tournament at Skegness. Living over the shop, children see far more of their parents than in most other walks of life. I saw my father at breakfast, lunch, high tea and supper. We had much more time to talk than some other families, for which I have always been grateful.

My father was a specialist grocer. He always aimed to supply the best-quality produce, and the shop itself suggested this. Behind the counter there were three rows of splendid mahogany spice drawers with sparkling brass handles, and on top of these stood large, black, lacquered tea canisters. One of the tasks I sometimes shared was the weighing out of tea, sugar and biscuits from the sacks and boxes in which they arrived into 1lb and 2lb bags. In a cool back room we called 'the old bake house' hung sides of bacon which had to be boned and cut up for slicing. Wonderful aromas of spices, coffee and smoked hams would waft through the house.

I was born into a home which was practical, serious and intensely religious. My father and mother were both staunch Methodists; indeed, my father was much in demand as a lay preacher in and around Grantham. He was a powerful preacher whose sermons contained a good deal of intellectual substance. But he was taken aback one day when I asked him why he put on a 'sermon voice' on these occasions. I don't think he realized that he did this. It was an unconscious homage to the biblical message, and quite different to the more prosaic tones in which he despatched council business and current affairs.

Our lives revolved around Methodism. The family went to Sunday Morning Service at 11 o'clock, but before that I would have

gone to morning Sunday School. There was Sunday School again in the afternoon; later, from about the age of twelve, I played the piano for the smaller children to sing the hymns. Then my parents would usually go out again to Sunday Evening Service.

This I found somewhat too much of a good thing, and on a few occasions I remember trying to get out of going. But when I said to my father that my friends were able to go out for a walk instead and I would like to join them, he would reply: 'Never do things just because other people do them.' In fact, this was one of his favourite expressions – used when I wanted to learn dancing, or sometimes when I wanted to go to the cinema, or out for the day somewhere. Whatever I felt at the time, the sentiment stood me in good stead, as it did my father.

My father's sense of duty, however, always had its gentler side. This was not true of everyone. Life for poor people in the years before the Second World War was very difficult; and it was not much easier for those who had worked hard, accumulated a nest egg, and achieved a precarious respectability. They lived on a knife-edge and feared that if some accident hit them, or if they relaxed their standards of thrift and diligence, they might be plunged into debt and poverty. This precariousness often made otherwise good people hard and unforgiving. I remember a discussion between my father and a church-goer about the 'prodigal son' of a friend who, after running through his parents' savings, had turned up penniless and with a young family on their doorstep. The church-goer was clear: the boy was no good, would never be any good, and should be shown the door. My father's reply is vivid in my mind. No, he said. A son remained a son, and he must be greeted with all the love and warmth of his family when he turned to them. Whatever happens, you must always be able to come home.

As this suggests, my father was a man of firm principles – 'Your father always sticks to his principles,' as my mother would say – but he did not believe in applying these principles in a way which made life wretched for everyone else. He showed this in his dealings as a local councillor and later alderman with the vexed question of what could be done on the Sabbath. In those days in Grantham and in most places cinemas were closed on Sundays, but during the war – adopting a utilitarian rather than a dogmatic approach



– he supported Sunday opening because it gave the servicemen stationed near the town somewhere to go, without disturbing others who wanted a quieter, more contemplative Sabbath. At the same time he strongly (though in the end unsuccessfully) opposed the opening of the parks for the playing of games, which he felt would ruin other people's peace and quiet. He wanted to keep Sunday a special day, but he was flexible about how it should be done. For my own part, I was unpersuaded, even as a girl, of the need for these restrictions: but I can now appreciate how much this highly principled man was prepared to bend on the matter when circumstances made it sensible.

These upright qualities, which entailed a refusal to alter your convictions just because others disagreed or because you became unpopular, were instilled into me from the earliest days. In 1936, when I was eleven, I was given a special edition of *Bibby's Annual.* Joseph Bibby was a Liverpool food manufacturer who used part of his considerable self-made fortune to edit a religious magazine which was an odd combination of character building, homespun philosophy and religion; it also contained beautiful reproductions of great pictures. I was too young at the time to know that the underlying approach was Theosophist;* but the *Annual* was one of my most treasured possessions. Above all, it taught me some verses which I still use in off-the-cuff speeches because they came to embody for me so much of what I was brought up to feel.

> One ship drives East, and another drives West,
> By the self-same gale that blows;
> 'Tis the set of the sail, and not the gale,
> That determines the way she goes.
>
> ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

Or again:

> The heights by great men reached and kept
> Were not attained by sudden flight,

* Theosophy was a mixture of mysticism, Christianity and the 'wisdom of the East', sense and nonsense.

But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.
HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Whether it was that early exposure to ***Bibby's Annual*** or just a natural bent, I was soon fascinated by poetry. Aged ten, I was the proud winner of a prize at the Grantham Eisteddfod for reciting poetry. (I read John Drinkwater's 'Moonlit Apples' and Walter de la Mare's 'The Travellers'.) One day soon afterwards, when I called at a door to collect an order for groceries, I was given an edition of Milton by someone who knew how much poetry meant to me: I have treasured the book ever since. In the first years of the war I would go out as part of a concert party to the surrounding villages and recite from my *Oxford Book of English Verse* – another book which even now is never far from reach. Methodism itself, of course, has, in the form of the Wesley hymns, some really fine religious poetry.

Religious life in Grantham was very active and, in the days before Christian ecumenism, competitive and fuelled by a spirit of rivalry. There were three Methodist chapels, St Wulfram's Anglican church – the sixth-highest steeple in England, according to local legend – and a Roman Catholic church just opposite our house. From a child's standpoint, the Catholics seemed to have the most light-hearted time of all. I used to envy the young Catholic girls making their first communion, dressed in white party dresses with bright ribbons, and carrying baskets of flowers. The Methodist style was much plainer, and if you wore a ribboned dress an older chapel-goer would shake his head and warn against 'the first step to Rome'.

Even without ribbons, however, Methodism was far from dour, as people are inclined to imagine today. It placed great emphasis on the social side of religion and on music, both of which gave me plenty of opportunities to enjoy life, even if it was in what might seem a rather solemn way. Our friends from church would often come in to cold supper on Sunday evenings, or we would go to them. I always enjoyed the adults' conversation, which ranged far wider than religion or happenings in Grantham to include national and international politics. And one of the unintended consequences



of the temperance side of Methodism was that Methodists tended to devote more time and attention to eating. 'Keeping a good table' was a common phrase, and many of the social occasions were built around tea parties and suppers. There was also a constant round of church events, organized either to keep the young people happy or to raise funds for one purpose or other.

It was, I confess, the musical side of Methodism which I liked best. We sang special hymns on the occasion of Sunday School anniversaries. The Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School (KGGS) carol service – and the weeks of practice which preceded it – was something I always looked forward to. Our church had an exceptionally good choir. Every other year we would perform an oratorio: Handel's *Messiah*, Haydn's *Creation* or Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. We would have professionals from London to sing the more difficult solo parts. But what made an impression on me was the latent richness of musical talent which serious training and practice could develop. My family also belonged to a music society and three or four times a year there would be a chamber music concert.

We were a musical family. From the age of five my parents had me learn the piano: my mother played too. In fact, I turned out to be quite good, and I was fortunate enough to have excellent teachers and won several prizes at local music festivals. The piano on which I was taught was made by my great uncle, John Roberts, in Northampton. He also made church organs. When I was ten I visited him and was thrilled to be allowed to play one of the two he had built in a cavernous barn-like building in his garden. Sadly, at sixteen I found it necessary to stop music lessons when I was cramming for my university entrance, and I still regret that I never took the piano up again. At this time, however, it was I who played the piano at home, while my father (who had a good bass voice) and mother (a contralto) and sometimes friends sang the old favourites of an evening – 'The Holy City', 'The Lost Chord', Gilbert and Sullivan, etc.

Perhaps the biggest excitement of my early years was a visit to London when I was twelve years old. I came down by train in the charge of a friend of my mother's, arriving at King's Cross, where I was met by the Rev. Skinner and his wife, two family friends who were going to look after me. The first impact of London was

overwhelming: King's Cross itself was a giant bustling cavern; the rest of the city had all the dazzle of a commercial and imperial capital. For the first time in my life I saw people from foreign countries, some in the traditional native dress of India and Africa. The sheer volume of traffic and of pedestrians was exhilarating; they seemed to generate a sort of electricity. London's buildings were impressive for another reason; begrimed with soot, they had a dark imposing magnificence which constantly reminded me that I was at the centre of the world.

I was taken by the Skinners to all the usual sites. I fed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square; I rode the Underground – a slightly forbidding experience for a child; I visited the Zoo, where I rode on an elephant and recoiled from the reptiles – an early portent of my relations with Fleet Street; I was disappointed by Oxford Street, which was much narrower than the boulevard of my imagination; made a pilgrimage to St Paul's, where John Wesley had prayed on the morning of his conversion; and of course, to the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, which did not disappoint at all; and I went to look at Downing Street, but unlike the young Harold Wilson did not have the prescience to have my photograph taken outside No. 10.

All this was enjoyable beyond measure. But the high point was my first visit to the Catford Theatre in Lewisham where we saw Sigmund Romberg's famous musical *The Desert Song*. For three hours I lived in another world, swept away as was the heroine by the daring Red Shadow – so much so that I bought the score and played it at home, perhaps too often.

I could hardly drag myself away from London or from the Skinners, who had been such indulgent hosts. Their kindness had given me a glimpse of, in Talleyrand's words, '*la douceur de la vie*' – how sweet life could be.

Our religion was not only musical and sociable – it was also intellectually stimulating. The ministers were powerful characters with strong views. The general political tendency among Methodists and other Nonconformists in our town was somewhat to the left wing and even pacifist. Methodists in Grantham were prominent in organizing the 'Peace Ballot' of 1935, circulating a loaded questionnaire to the electorate, which was then declared



overwhelmingly to have 'voted for peace'. It is not recorded how far Hitler and Mussolini were moved by this result; we had our own views about that in the Roberts household. The Peace Ballot was a foolish idea which must take some of the blame nationally for delaying the rearmament necessary to deter and ultimately defeat the dictators. On this question and others, being staunchly Conservative, we were the odd family out. Our friend the Rev. Skinner was an enthusiast for the Peace Ballot. He was the kindest and holiest man, and he married Denis and me at Wesley's Chapel in London many years later. But personal virtue is no substitute for political hard-headedness.

The sermons we heard every Sunday made a great impact on me. It was an invited Congregationalist minister, the Rev. Childe, who brought home to me the somewhat advanced notion for those days that whatever the sins of the fathers (and mothers) they must never be visited on the children. I still recall his denunciation of the Pharisaical tendency to brand children born outside marriage as 'illegitimate'. All the town knew of some children without fathers; listening to the Rev. Childe, we felt very guilty about thinking of them as different. Times have changed. We have since removed the stigma of illegitimacy not only from the child but also from the parent – and perhaps increased the number of disadvantaged children thereby. We still have to find some way of combining Christian charity with sensible social policy.

When war broke out and death seemed closer to everybody, the sermons became more telling. In one, just after the Battle of Britain, the preacher told us that it is 'always the few who save the many': so it was with Christ and the apostles. I was also inspired by the theme of another sermon: history showed how it was those who were born at the depths of one great crisis who would be able to cope with the next. This was proof of God's benevolent providence and a foundation for optimism about the future, however dark things now looked. The values instilled in church were faithfully reflected in my home.

So was the emphasis on hard work. In my family we were never idle – partly because idleness was a sin, partly because there was so much work to be done, and partly no doubt because we were just that sort of people. As I have mentioned, I would help whenever

necessary in the shop. But I also learned from my mother just what it meant to cope with a household so that everything worked like clockwork, even though she had to spend so many hours serving behind the counter. Although we had a maid before the war – and later a cleaning lady a couple of days a week – my mother did much of the work herself, and of course there was a great deal more than in a modern home. She showed me how to iron a man's shirt in the correct way and to press embroidery without damaging it. Large flat-irons were heated over the fire and I was let in on the secret of how to give a special finish to linen by putting just enough candle wax to cover a sixpenny piece on the iron. Most unusually for those times, at my secondary school we had to study domestic science – everything from how to do laundry properly to the management of the household budget. So I was doubly equipped to lend a hand with the domestic chores. The whole house at North Parade was not just cleaned daily and weekly: a great annual spring clean was intended to get to all those parts which other cleaning could not reach. Carpets were taken up and beaten. The mahogany furniture – always good quality which my mother had bought in auction sales – was washed down with a mixture of warm water and vinegar before being repolished. Since this was also the time of the annual stocktaking in the shop, there was hardly time to draw breath.

Nothing in our house was wasted, and we always lived within our means. The worst you could say about another family was that they 'lived up to the hilt'. Because we had always been used to such a careful regime, we could cope with wartime rationing, though we used to note down the hints on the radio about the preparation of such stodgy treats as 'Lord Woolton's potato pie', an economy dish named after the wartime Minister for Food. My mother was an excellent cook and a highly organized one. Twice a week she had her big bake – bread, pastry, cakes and pies. Her home-made bread was very famous, as were her Grantham gingerbreads. Before the war there were roasts on Sunday, which became cold cuts on Monday and disappeared into rissoles on Tuesday. With wartime, however, the Sunday roast became almost meatless stew or macaroni cheese.

Small provincial towns in those days had their own networks of



private charity. In the run-up to Christmas as many as 150 parcels were made up in our shop, containing tinned meat, Christmas cake and pudding, jam and tea – all purchased for poorer families by one of the strongest social and charitable institutions in Grantham, the Rotary Club. There was always something from those Thursday or Sunday bakes which was sent out to elderly folk living alone or who were sick. As grocers, we knew something about the circumstances of our customers.

Clothes were never a problem for us. My mother had been a professional seamstress and made most of what we wore. In those days there were two very good pattern services, Vogue and Butterick's; and in the sales at Grantham and Nottingham we could get the best-quality fabrics at reduced prices. So we got excellent value for money and were, by Grantham standards, rather fashionable. For my father's mayoral year, my mother made both her daughters new dresses – a blue velvet for my sister and a dark green velvet for me – and herself a black *moiré* silk gown. But in wartime the ethos of frugality was almost an obsession. Even my mother and I were taken aback by one of our friends, who told us that she never threw away her tacking cottons but re-used them: 'I consider it my duty to do so,' she said. After that, so did we. We were not Methodists for nothing.

I had less leisure time than other children. But I used to enjoy going for long walks, often on my own. Grantham lies in a little hollow surrounded by hills, unlike most of Lincolnshire which is very flat. I loved the beauty of the countryside and being alone with my thoughts in those surroundings. Sometimes I used to walk out of the town by Manthorpe Road and cut across on the north side to return down the Great North Road. I would also walk up Hall's Hill, where in wartime we were given a week off school to go and gather rose hips and blackberries. There was tobogganing there when it snowed.

I did not play much sport, though I soon learned to swim, and at school I was a somewhat erratic hockey player. At home we played the usual games, like Monopoly and Pit – a noisy game based on the Chicago Commodities Exchange. In a later visit to America I visited the Exchange; but my dabbling in commodities ended there.

It was, however, the coming of the cinema to Grantham which really brightened my life. We were fortunate in having among our customers the Campbell family who owned three cinemas in Grantham. They would sometimes invite me around to their house to play the gramophone, and I got to know their daughter Judy, later to be a successful actress who partnered Noël Coward in his wartime comedy *Present Laughter* and made famous the song 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square'. Because we knew the Campbells, the cinema was more acceptable to my parents than it might otherwise have been. They were content that I should go to 'good' films, a classification which fortunately included Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals, and the films of Alexander Korda. They rarely went with me – though on a Bank Holiday we would go together to the repertory theatre in Nottingham or to one of the big cinemas there – so usually I would be accompanied by friends of my own age. Even then, however, there were limits. Ordinarily there was a new film each week; but since some of these did not sustain enough interest to last six days, another one was shown from Thursday. Some people would go along to the second film, but that was greatly frowned on in our household.

Perhaps that was a fortunate restraint; for I was entranced with the romantic world of Hollywood. These were, after all, its Golden Years. For 9d you had a comfortable seat in the darkness while the screen showed first the trailer for forthcoming attractions, then the British Movietone News with its chirpy optimistic commentary, after that a short public service film on a theme like *Crime Does Not Pay*, and finally the Big Picture. These ran the gamut from imperialistic adventures like *The Four Feathers* and *Drum*, to sophisticated comedies like *The Women* (with every female star in the business), to the four-handkerchief weepies like Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas* or Ingrid Bergman in anything. Nor was I entirely neglecting my political education 'at the pictures'. My views on the French Revolution were gloriously confirmed by Leslie Howard and lovely Merle Oberon in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. I saw my father's emphasis on the importance of standing up for your principles embodied by James Stewart in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*. I rejoiced to see Soviet communism laughed out of court when Garbo, a stern Commissar, was seduced by a lady's hat in *Ninotchka*.



And my grasp of history was not made more difficult by the fact that William Pitt the Younger was played by Robert Donat and, in *Marie Walewska*, Napoleon was played by the great French charmer Charles Boyer.

I often reflect how fortunate I was to have been born in 1925 and not twenty years earlier. Until the 1930s, there was no way that a young girl living in a small English provincial town could have had access to this extraordinary range of talent, dramatic form, human emotion, sex appeal, spectacle and style. To a girl born twenty years later these offerings were commonplace and, inevitably, taken much more for granted. Grantham was a small town, but on my visits to the cinema I roamed to the most fabulous realms of the imagination. It gave me the determination to roam in reality one day.

For my parents the reality which mattered was here and now, not that of romance. Yet it was not really a dislike of pleasure which shaped their attitude. They made a very important distinction between mass- and self-made entertainment, which is just as valid in the age of constant soap operas and game shows – perhaps more so. They felt that entertainment that demanded something of you was preferable to being a passive spectator. At times I found this irksome, but I also understood the essential point.

When my mother, sister and I went on holiday together, usually to Skegness, there was always the same emphasis on being active, rather than sitting around day-dreaming. We would stay in a self-catering guesthouse, much better value than a hotel, and first thing in the morning I went out with the other children for PT exercises arranged in the public gardens. There was plenty to keep us occupied and, of course, there were buckets and spades and the beach. In the evening we would go to the variety shows and reviews, very innocent entertainments by today's standards, with comedians, jugglers, acrobats, 'old tyme' singers, ventriloquists and lots of audience participation when we joined in singing the latest hit from Henry Hall's *Guest Night*. My parents considered that such shows were perfectly acceptable, which in itself showed how attitudes changed: we would never have gone to the variety while Grandmother Stephenson, who lived with us till I was ten, was still alive.

That may make my grandmother sound rather forbidding. Again, not at all. She was a warm presence in the life of myself and my sister. Dressed in the grandmotherly style of those days – long black sateen beaded dress – she would come up to our bedrooms on warm summer evenings and tell us stories of her life as a young girl. She would also make our flesh creep with old wives' tales of how earwigs would crawl under your skin and form carbuncles. With time on her hands, she had plenty to spare for us. Her death at the age of eighty-six was the first time I had ever encountered death. As was the custom in those days, I was sent to stay with friends until the funeral was over and my grandmother's belongings had all been packed away. In fact, life is very much a day-to-day experience for a child, and I recovered reasonably quickly. But Mother and I went to tend her grave on half-day closing days. I never knew either of my grandfathers, who died before I was born, and I saw Grandmother Roberts only twice, on holidays down to Ringstead in Northamptonshire. Less stately than Grandmother Stephenson, she was a bustling, active little old lady who kept a fine garden. I remember particularly that she kept a store of Cox's orange pippins in an upstairs room from which my sister and I were invited to select the best.

My father was a great bowls player, and he smoked (which was very bad for him because of his weak chest). Otherwise, his leisure and entertainment always seemed to merge into duty. We had no alcohol in the house until he became mayor at the end of the war, and then only sherry and cherry brandy, which for some mysterious reason was considered more respectable than straight brandy, to entertain visitors. (Years of electioneering also later taught me that cherry brandy is very good for the throat.)

Like the other leading businessmen in Grantham, my father was a Rotarian. The Rotary motto, 'Service Above Self', was engraved on his heart. He spoke frequently and eloquently at Rotary functions, and we could read his speeches reported at length in the local paper. The Rotary Club was constantly engaged in fund raising for the town's different charities. My father would be involved in similar activity, not just through the church but as a councillor and in a private capacity. One such event which I used to enjoy was the League of Pity (now NSPCC) Children's Christmas party, which



I would go to in one of the party dresses beautifully made by my mother, to raise money for children who needed help.

Apart from home and church, the other centre of my life was, naturally enough, school. Here too I was very lucky. Huntingtower Road Primary School had a good reputation in the town. It had quite new buildings and excellent teachers. By the time I went there I had already been taught simple reading by my parents, and even when I was very young I enjoyed learning. Like all children, I suspect, these days remain vividly immediate for me. I remember a heart-stopping moment at the age of five when I was asked how to pronounce W-R-A-P; I got it right, but I thought 'They always give me the difficult ones.' Later, in General Knowledge, I first came across the mystery of 'proverbs'. I already had a logical and indeed somewhat literal mind – perhaps I have not changed much in this regard – and I was perplexed by the metaphorical element of phrases like 'Look before you leap'. I thought it would be far better to say 'Look before you cross' – a highly practical point given the dangerous road I must traverse on my way to school. And like other children before and after I triumphantly pointed out the contradiction between that proverb and 'He who hesitates is lost'.

It was in the top class at primary school that I first came across the work of Kipling, who died that January of 1936. I immediately became fascinated by his poems and stories and often asked my parents for a Kipling book at Christmas. His poems, themselves wonderfully accessible, gave a child access to a wider world – indeed wider worlds – of the Empire, work, English history and the animal kingdom. Like the Hollywood films later, Kipling offered glimpses into the romantic possibilities of life outside Grantham. By now I was probably reading more widely than most of my classmates, doubtless through my father's influence, and it showed on occasion. I can still recall writing an essay about Kipling and burning with childish indignation at being accused of having copied down the word 'nostalgia' from some book, whereas I had used it quite naturally and easily.

From Huntingtower Road I went on to Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School. It was in a different part of town, but what with coming home for lunch, which was more economical than the

school lunch, I still walked four miles a day back and forth. Our uniform was saxe-blue and navy and so we were called 'the girls in blue'. (When Camden Girls' School from London was evacuated to Grantham for part of the war they were referred to as 'the girls in green'.) The headmistress was Miss Williams, a petite, upright, grey-haired lady, who had started the school as headmistress in 1910, inaugurated certain traditions such as that all girls however academic had to take domestic science for four years, and whose quiet authority by now dominated everything. I greatly admired the special outfits Miss Williams used to wear on important days, such as at the annual school fête or prize-giving, when she appeared in beautiful silk, softly tailored, looking supremely elegant. But she was very practical. The advice to us was never to buy a low-quality silk when the same amount of money would purchase a very good-quality cotton. 'Never aspire to a cheap fur coat when a well-tailored wool coat would be a better buy.' The rule was always to go for quality within your own income.

My teachers had a genuine sense of vocation and were highly respected by the whole community. The school was small enough – about 350 girls – for us to get to know them and one another, within limits. The girls were generally from middle-class backgrounds; but that covered a fairly wide range of occupations from town and country. My closest friend, indeed, came in daily from a rural village about ten miles distant, where her father was a builder. I used to stay with her family from time to time. Her parents, no less keen than mine to add to a daughter's education, would take us out for rural walks, identifying the wild flowers and the species of birds and birdsongs.

I had a particularly inspiring History teacher, Miss Harding, who gave me a taste for the subject which, unfortunately, I never fully developed. I found myself with absolute recall remembering her account of the Dardanelles campaign so many years later when, as Prime Minister, I walked over the tragic battlegrounds of Gallipoli.

But the main academic influence on me was undoubtedly Miss Kay, who taught Chemistry, in which I decided to specialize. It was not unusual – in an all-girls' school, at least – for a girl to concentrate on science, even before the war. My natural enthusiasm for the sciences was whetted by reports of breakthroughs which were occurring – for example in the splitting of the atom and the development of plastics. It was clear that a whole new scientific world was opening up. I wanted to be part of it. Moreover, as I knew that I would have to earn my own living, this seemed an exciting way to do so.



As my father had left school at the age of thirteen, he was determined to make up for this and to see that I took advantage of every educational opportunity. We would both go to hear 'Extension Lectures' from the University of Nottingham about current and international affairs, which were given in Grantham regularly. After the talk would come a lively question time in which I and many others would take part: I remember, in particular, questions from a local RAF man, Wing-Commander Millington, who later captured Chelmsford for Common Wealth – a left-wing party of middle-class protest – from the Churchill coalition in a by-election towards the end of the war.

My parents took a close interest in my schooling. Homework always had to be completed – even if that meant doing it on Sunday evening. During the war, when the Camden girls were evacuated to Grantham and a shift system was used for teaching at our school, it was necessary to put in extra hours at the weekend which were religiously performed. My father, in particular, who was an all the more avid reader for being a self-taught scholar, would discuss what we read at school. On one occasion he found that I did not know Walt Whitman's poetry; this was quickly remedied, and Whitman is still a favourite author of mine. I was also encouraged to read the classics – the Brontës, Jane Austen and, of course, Dickens: it was the latter's *A Tale of Two Cities*, with its strong political flavour, that I liked best. My father also used to subscribe to the *Hibbert Journal* – a philosophical journal. But this, though I struggled, I found heavy going.

Beyond home, church and school lay the community which was Grantham itself. We were immensely proud of our town; we knew its history and traditions; we were glad to be part of its life. Grantham was established in Saxon times, though it was the Danes who made it an important regional centre. During the twelfth century the Great North Road was re-routed to run through the town,

literally putting Grantham on the map. Communications were always the town's lifeblood. In the eighteenth century the canal was cut to carry coke, coal and gravel into Grantham and corn, malt, flour and wool out of it. But the real expansion had come with the arrival of the railways in 1850.

Our town's most imposing structure I have already mentioned – the spire of St Wulfram's Church, which could be seen from all directions. But most characteristic and significant for us was the splendid Victorian Guildhall and, in front of it, the statue of Grantham's most famous son, Sir Isaac Newton. It was from here, on St Peter's Hill, that the Remembrance Day parades began to process en route to St Wulfram's. I would watch from the windows of the Guildhall Ballroom as (preceded by the Salvation Army band and the band from Ruston and Hornsby's locomotive works) the mayor, aldermen and councillors with robes and regalia, followed by Brownies, Cubs, Boys' Brigade, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Freemasons, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, Working Men's Clubs, trade unions, British Legion, soldiers, airmen, the Red Cross, the St John's Ambulance and representatives of every organization which made up our rich civic life filed past. It was also on the green at St Peter's Hill that every Boxing Day we gathered to watch the pink coats of the Belvoir Hunt hold their meet (followed by the traditional tipple) and cheered them as they set off.

1935 was a quite exceptional and memorable year for the town. We celebrated King George V's Silver Jubilee along with Grantham's Centenary as a borough. Lord Brownlow, whose family (the Custs) with the Manners family (the Dukes of Rutland) were the most distinguished aristocratic patrons of the town, became mayor. The town itself was heavily decorated with blue and gold waxed streamers – our local colours – across the main streets. Different streets vied to outdo one another in the show they put on. I recall that it was the street with some of the poorest families in the worst housing, Vere Court, which was most attractively turned out. Everyone made an effort. The brass bands played throughout the day, and Grantham's own 'Carnival Band' – a rather daring innovation borrowed from the United States and called 'The Grantham Gingerbreads' – added to the gaiety of the proceedings. The schools took part in a great open-air programme and we marched in perfect



formation under the watchful eye of the wife of the headmaster of the boys' grammar school to form the letters 'G-R-A-N-T-H-A-M'. And, appropriately enough, I was part of the 'M'.

My father's position as a councillor, Chairman of the Borough Finance Committee, then alderman* and finally in 1945–46 mayor meant that I heard a great deal about the town's business and knew those involved in it. Politics was a matter of civic duty and party was of secondary importance. The Labour councillors we knew were respected and friendly and, whatever the battles in the council chamber or at election time, they came to our shop and there was no partisan bitterness. My father understood that politics has limits – an insight which is all too rare among politicians. His politics would perhaps be best described as 'old-fashioned liberal'. Individual responsibility was his watchword and sound finance his passion. He was an admirer of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Like many other business people he had, as it were, been left behind by the Liberal Party's acceptance of collectivism. He stood for the council as a rate-payer's candidate. In those days, before comprehensive schools became an issue and before the general advance of Labour politics into local government, local council work was considered as properly non-partisan. But I never remember him as anything other than a staunch Conservative.

I still recall with great sorrow the day in 1952 when Labour, having won the council elections, voted my father out as an alderman. This was roundly condemned at the time for putting party above community. Nor can I forget the dignity with which he behaved. After the vote in the council chamber was taken, he rose to speak: 'It is now almost nine years since I took up these robes in honour, and now I trust in honour they are laid down.' And later, after receiving hundreds of messages from friends, allies and even old opponents, he issued a statement which said: 'Although I have toppled over I have fallen on my feet. My own feeling is that I was content to be in and I am content to be out.' Years

* Aldermen were indirectly elected council members – elected to serve a fixed term by the directly elected element in the council; a highly honoured position which has since been abolished.

later, when something not too dissimilar happened to me, and after my father was long dead, I tried to take as an example the way he left public life.

But this is to anticipate. Perhaps the main interest which my father and I shared while I was a girl was a thirst for knowledge about politics and public affairs. I suspect that we were better informed than many families. We read the *Daily Telegraph* every day, *The Methodist Recorder*, *Picture Post* and *John O'London's Weekly* every week, and when we were small we took *The Children's Newspaper*. Occasionally we read *The Times*.

And then came the day my father bought our first wireless – a Philips of the kind you sometimes now see in the less pretentious antique shops. I knew what he was planning and ran much of the way home from school in my excitement. I was not disappointed. It changed our lives. From then on it was not just Rotary, church and shop which provided the rhythm of our day: it was the radio news. And not just the news. During the war after the 9 o'clock news on Sundays there was *Postscript*, a short talk on a topical subject, often by J.B. Priestley, who had a unique gift of cloaking left-wing views as solid, down to earth, Northern homespun philosophy, and sometimes an American journalist called Quentin Reynolds who derisively referred to Hitler by one of his family names, 'Mr Schicklgruber'. There was *The Brains Trust*, an hour-long discussion of current affairs by four intellectuals, of whom the most famous was Professor C.E.M. Joad, whose answer to any question always began 'It all depends what you mean by . . .'. On Friday evenings there were commentaries by people like Norman Birkett in the series called *Encounter*. I loved the comedy *ITMA* with its still serviceable catchphrases and its cast of characters like the gloomy charlady 'Mona Lott' and her signature line 'It's being so cheerful as keeps me going.'

As for so many families, the unprecedented immediacy of radio broadcasts gave special poignancy to great events – particularly those of wartime. I recall sitting by our radio with my family at Christmas dinner and listening to the King's broadcast in 1939. We knew how he struggled to overcome his speech impediment and we knew that the broadcast was live. I found myself thinking just how miserable he must have felt, not able to enjoy his own



Christmas dinner, knowing that he would have to broadcast. I remember his slow voice reciting those famous lines:

> And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
>
> And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'*

I was almost fourteen by the time war broke out, and already old enough and informed enough to understand the background to it and to follow closely the great events of the next six years. My grasp of what was happening in the political world during the thirties was less sure. But certain things I did take in. The years of the Depression – the first but not the last economic catastrophe resulting from misguided monetary policy – had less effect on Grantham itself than on the surrounding agricultural communities, and of course much less than on Northern towns dependent on heavy industry. Most of the town's factories kept going – the largest, Ruston and Hornsby, making locomotives and steam engines. We even attracted new investment, partly through my father's efforts: Aveling-Barford built a factory to make steamrollers and tractors. Our family business was also secure: people always have to eat, and our shops were well run. The real distinction in the town was between those who drew salaries for what today would be called 'white collar' employment and those who did not, with the latter being in a far more precarious position as jobs became harder to get. On my way to school I would pass a long queue waiting at the Labour Exchange, seeking work or claiming the dole. We were lucky in that none of our closest friends was unemployed, but naturally we knew people who were. We also knew – and I have never forgotten – how neatly turned out the children of those unemployed families were. Their parents were determined to make the sacrifices that were necessary for them. The spirit of self-reliance and independence was very strong in even the poorest

* From *God Knows*, by Minnie Louise Haskins.

people of the East Midlands towns. It meant that they never dropped out of the community and, because others quietly gave what they could, the community remained together. Looking back, I realize just what a decent place Grantham was.

So I did not grow up with the sense of division and conflict between classes. Even in the Depression there were many things which bound us all together. The monarchy was certainly one. And my family like most others was immensely proud of the Empire. We felt that it had brought law, good administration and order to lands which would never otherwise have known them. I had a romantic fascination for out-of-the-way countries and continents and what benefits we British could bring to them. As a child, I heard with wonder a Methodist missionary describing his work in Central America with a tribe so primitive that they had never written down their language until he did it for them. Later, I seriously considered going into the Indian Civil Service, for to me the Indian Empire represented one of Britain's greatest achievements. (I had no interest in being a civil servant in Britain.) But when I discussed it with my father he said, all too perceptively as it turned out, that by the time I was ready to join it the Indian Civil Service would probably not exist.

As for the international scene, everyone's recollections of the thirties, not least those of a child, are heavily influenced by what came later. But I recall when I was very young my parents expressing unease about the weakness of the League of Nations and its failure to come to the aid of Abyssinia when Italy invaded it in 1935. We had a deep distrust of the dictators.

We did not know much about the ideology of communism and fascism at this time. But, unlike many conservative-minded people, my father was fierce in rejecting the argument, put forward by some supporters of Franco, that fascist regimes had to be backed as the only way to defeat communists. He believed that the free society was the better alternative to both. This too was a conviction I quickly made my own. Well before war was declared, we knew just what we thought of Hitler. On the cinema newsreels I would watch with distaste and incomprehension the rallies of strutting brownshirts, so different from the gentle self-regulation of our own civic life. We also read a good deal about the barbarities and absurdities of the Nazi regime.



But none of this meant, of course, that we viewed war with the dictators as anything other than an appalling prospect, which should be avoided if possible. In our attic there was a trunk full of magazines showing, among other things, the famous picture from the Great War of a line of British soldiers blinded by mustard gas walking to the dressing station, each with a hand on the shoulder of the one in front to guide him. Hoping for the best, we prepared for the worst. As early as September 1938 – the time of Munich – my mother and I went out to buy yards of blackout material. My father was heavily involved in organizing the town's air raid precautions. As he would later say, 'ARP' stood for 'Alf Roberts' Purgatory', because it was taking up so much time that he had none to spare for other things.

The most pervasive myth about the thirties is perhaps that it was the Right rather than the Left which most enthusiastically favoured appeasement. Not just from my own experience in a highly political right-wing family, but from my recollection of how Labour actually voted against conscription even after the Germans marched into Prague, I have never been prepared to swallow this. But in any case it is important to remember that the atmosphere of the time was so strongly pacifist that the practical political options were limited.

The scale of the problem was demonstrated in the general election of 1935 – the contest in which I cut my teeth politically, at the age of ten. It will already be clear that we were a highly political family. And for all the serious sense of duty which underlay it, politics was fun. I was too young to canvass for my father during council elections, but I was put to work folding the bright red election leaflets extolling the merits of the Conservative candidate, Sir Victor Warrender. The red came off on my sticky fingers and someone said, 'There's Lady Warrender's lipstick.' I had no doubt at all about the importance of seeing Sir Victor returned. On election day itself, I was charged with the responsible task of running back and forth between the Conservative committee room and the polling station (our school) with information about who had voted. Our candidate won, though with a much reduced majority, down from 16,000 to 6,000.

I did not grasp at the time the arguments about rearmament

and the League of Nations, but this was a very tough election, fought in the teeth of opposition from the enthusiasts of the Peace Ballot and with the Abyssinian war in the background. Later, in my teens, I used to have fierce arguments with other Conservatives about whether Baldwin had culpably misled the electorate during the campaign, as was widely alleged, in not telling them the dangers the country faced. In fact, had the National Government not been returned at that election there is no possibility that rearmament would have happened faster, and it is very likely that Labour would have done less. Nor could the League have ever prevented a major war.

We had mixed feelings about the Munich Agreement of September 1938, as did many people who were opposed to appeasement. At the time, it was impossible not to be pulled in two directions. On the one hand, we knew by now a good deal about Hitler's regime and probable intentions – something brought home to my family especially by the fact that Hitler had crushed Rotary in Germany, which my father always considered one of the greatest tributes Rotary could ever be paid. Dictators, we learned, could no more tolerate Burke's 'little platoons' – the voluntary bodies which help make up civil society – than they could individual rights under the law. Dr Jauch, of German extraction and probably the town's best doctor, received a lot of information from Germany which he passed on to my father, and he in turn discussed it all with me.

I knew just what I thought of Hitler. Near our house was a fish and chip shop where I was sent to buy our Friday evening meal. Fish and chip queues were always a good forum for debate. On one occasion the topic was Hitler. Someone suggested that at least he had given Germany some self-respect and made the trains run on time. I vigorously argued the opposite, to the astonishment and doubtless irritation of my elders. The woman who ran the shop laughed and said: 'oh, she's always debating.'

My family understood particularly clearly Hitler's brutal treatment of the Jews. At school we were encouraged to have foreign penfriends. Mine was a French girl called Colette: alas, I did not keep up contact with her. But my sister, Muriel, had an Austrian Jewish penfriend called Edith. After the Anschluss in March 1938,



when Hitler annexed Austria, Edith's father, a banker, wrote to mine asking whether we could take his daughter, since he very clearly foresaw the way events were leading. We had neither the time – having to run the shops – nor the money to accept such a responsibility alone; but my father won the support of the Grantham Rotarians for the idea, and Edith came to stay with each of our families in turn until she went to live with relatives in South America. She was seventeen, tall, beautiful, well-dressed, evidently from a well-to-do family, and spoke good English. She told us what it was like to live as a Jew under an anti-semitic regime. One thing Edith reported particularly stuck in my mind: the Jews, she said, were being made to scrub the streets.

We wanted to see Hitler's wickedness ended, even by war if that proved necessary. From that point of view Munich was nothing to be proud of. We knew too that by the Munich Agreement Britain had complicity in the great wrong that had been done to Czechoslovakia. When fifty years later as Prime Minister I visited Czechoslovakia I addressed the Federal Assembly in Prague and told them: 'We failed you in 1938 when a disastrous policy of appeasement allowed Hitler to extinguish your independence. Churchill was quick to repudiate the Munich Agreement, but we still remember it with shame.' British foreign policy is at its worst when it is engaged in giving away other people's territory.

But equally we all understood the lamentable state of unpreparedness in Britain and France to fight a major war, and during the Munich crisis war had seemed so close at one point that when the settlement was announced we were simply relieved not to have to fight. Also, unfortunately, some were taken in by the German propaganda and actually believed that Hitler was acting to defend the Sudeten Germans from Czech oppression. If we had gone to war at that point, moreover, we would not have been supported by all of the Dominions. It was the Germans' subsequent dismemberment of what remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 that finally convinced almost everyone that appeasement had been a disaster and that war would soon be necessary to defeat Hitler's ambitions. Even then, as I have pointed out, Labour voted against conscription the following month. There was strong anti-war feeling in Grantham too: many Methodists opposed the official recruiting

campaign of May 1939, and right up to the outbreak of war and beyond pacifists were addressing meetings in the town.

In any case, the conflict was soon upon us. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. When Hitler refused to withdraw by 11 a.m. on Sunday 3 September in accordance with Britain's ultimatum we were waiting by the radio, desperate for the news. It was the only Sunday in my youth when I can remember not attending church. Neville Chamberlain's fateful words, relayed live from the Cabinet Room at No. 10, told us that we were at war.

It was natural at such times to ask oneself how we had come to such a pass. Each week my father would take two books out of the library, a 'serious' book for himself (and me) and a novel for my mother. As a result, I found myself reading books which girls of my age would not generally read. I soon knew what I liked – anything about politics and international affairs. I read, for instance, John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power*, which had first appeared in 1932. The contents of this fashionable communist analysis, which predicted that capitalism was shortly to be superseded by socialism, seemed to many of my generation exciting and new.

But both by instinct and upbringing I was always a 'true blue' Conservative. No matter how many left-wing books I read or left-wing commentaries I heard, I never doubted where my political loyalties lay. Such an admission is probably unfashionable. But though I had great friends in politics who suffered from attacks of doubt about where they stood and why, and though of course it would take many years before I came to understand the philosophical background to what I believed, I always knew my mind. In this I can see now that I was probably unusual. For the Left were setting the political agenda throughout the thirties and forties, even though the leadership of Churchill concealed it during the years of the war itself. This was evident from many of the books which were published at about this time. The Left had been highly successful in tarring the Right with appeasement, most notably in Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, the so-called 'yellow books'. One in particular had enormous impact: *Guilty Men*, co-authored by



Michael Foot, which appeared under the pseudonym 'Cato' just after Dunkirk in 1940.

Robert Bruce Lockhart's best-selling *Guns or Butter?* appeared in the autumn of 1938, after Munich. Lockhart's travels through Europe led him to Austria (now Nazi-controlled after the Anschluss) and then to Germany itself at the height of Hitler's triumph. There the editor of a German national newspaper is reported as telling him that 'Germany wanted peace, but she wanted it on her own terms.' The book ends with Lockhart, woken by 'the tramp of two thousand feet in unison', looking out of his window onto a misty dawn, where 'Nazi Germany was already at work'.

A more original variation on the same theme was Douglas Reed's *Insanity Fair*. This made a deep impression on me. Reed witnessed the persecution of the Jews which accompanied the advance of Nazi influence. He described the character and mentality – alternately perverted, unbalanced and calculating – of the Nazi leaders. He analysed and blisteringly denounced that policy of appeasement by Britain and France which paved the way for Hitler's successes. Written on the eve of the Anschluss, it was powerfully prophetic.

*Out of the Night* by Jan Valtin – pen name for the German communist Richard Krebs – was lent to my father by our future MP Denis Kendall. It was such strong meat that my father forbade me to read it – but in vain. When he went out to meetings I would take it down from the shelf on which it was hidden and read its spine-chilling account of totalitarianism in action. It is, in truth, an unsuitable book for a girl of sixteen, full of scenes of sadistic violence whose authenticity makes them still more horrifying. The appalling treatment by the Nazis of their victims is undoubtedly the most powerful theme. But underlying it is another, just as significant. For it describes how the communists set out in cynical alliance with the Nazis to subvert the fragile democracy of Germany by violence in the late twenties and early thirties. That same alliance against democracy would, of course, be replicated in the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 to 1941 which destroyed Poland, the Baltic states and Finland and plunged the world into war. The book undoubtedly contributed to my growing belief that Nazism (national socialism) and communism (international socialism) were but two sides of the same coin.

A book which had a particular influence on me was the American Herbert Agar's *A Time for Greatness*, which appeared in 1944. This was a strangely powerful analysis of how the West's moral failure allowed the rise of Hitler and the war which had followed. It urged a return to Western liberal democratic values and – though I liked this less – a fair amount of left-wing social engineering. For me the important message of Agar's book was that the fight against Hitler had a significance for civilization and human destiny which exceeded the clash of national interests or spheres of influence or access to resources or any of the other – doubtless important – stuff of power politics.

Agar also wrote of the need, as part of the moral regeneration which must flow from fighting the war, to solve what he called 'the Negro problem'. I had never heard of this 'problem' at all. Although I had seen some coloured people on my visit to London, there were almost none living in Grantham. Friends of ours once invited two American servicemen – one black, one white – stationed in Grantham back to tea and had been astonished to detect tension and even hostility between them. We were equally taken aback when our friends told us about it afterwards. This sort of prejudice was simply outside our experience or imagination.

Like many other young girls in wartime, I read Barbara Cartland's *Ronald Cartland*, the life of her brother, a young, idealistic Conservative MP, who had fought appeasement all the way and who was killed at Dunkirk in 1940. In many ways her most romantic book, it was a striking testament to someone who had no doubt that the war was not only necessary but right, and whose thinking throughout his short life was 'all of a piece', something which I always admired. But the sense that the war had a moral significance which underlay the fear and suffering – or in our family's case in Grantham the material dreariness and mild deprivation – which accompanied it, was perhaps most memorably conveyed by Richard Hillary's *The Last Enemy*. The author – a young pilot – portrays the struggle which had claimed the lives of so many of his friends, and which would claim his own less than a year later, as one which was also being fought out in the human heart. It was a struggle for a better life in the sense of simple decency.

A generation which, unlike Richard Hillary, survived the war



felt this kind of desire to put things right with themselves, their country and the world. As I would come to learn when dealing with my older political colleagues, no one who fought came out of it quite the same person as went in. Less frequently understood, perhaps, is that war affected deeply, if inevitably less powerfully, people like me who while old enough to understand what was happening in the conflict were not themselves in the services. Those who grow up in wartime always turn out to be a serious-minded generation. But we all see these great calamities with different eyes, and so their impact upon us is different. It never seemed to me, for example, as it apparently did to many others, that the 'lesson' of wartime was that the state must take the foremost position in our national life and summon up a spirit of collective endeavour in peace as in war.

The 'lessons' I drew were quite different. The first was that the kind of life that the people of Grantham had lived before the war *was* a decent and wholesome one, and its values were shaped by the community rather than by the government. Second, since even a cultured, developed, Christian country like Germany had fallen under Hitler's sway, civilization could never be taken for granted and had constantly to be nurtured, which meant that good people had to stand up for the things they believed in. Third, I drew the obvious political conclusion that it was appeasement of dictators which had led to the war, and that had grown out of wrong-headed but decent impulses, like the pacifism of Methodists in Grantham, as well as out of corrupt ones. One can never do without straightforward common sense in matters great as well as small. And finally I have to admit that I had the patriotic conviction that, given great leadership of the sort I heard from Winston Churchill in the radio broadcasts to which we listened, there was almost nothing that the British people could not do.

Our life in wartime Grantham – until I went up to Oxford in 1943 – must have been very similar to that of countless other families. There was always voluntary work to do of one kind or another in the Service canteens and elsewhere. Our thoughts were at the front; we devoured voraciously every item of available news; and we ourselves, though grateful for being more or less safe, knew that

we were effectively sidelined. But we had our share of bombing. There were altogether twenty-one German air raids on the town, and seventy-eight people were killed. The town munitions factory – the British Manufacturing and Research Company (B.M.A.R.Co., or 'British Marcs' as we called it) – which came to the town in 1938, was an obvious target, as was the junction of the Great North Road and the Northern Railway Line – the latter within a few hundred yards of our house. My father was frequently out in the evenings on air raid duty. During air raids we would crawl under the table for shelter – we had no outside shelter for we had no garden – until the 'all clear' sounded. On one occasion, coming back from school with my friends, carrying our gas masks, we made a dive for the shelter of a large tree as someone called out that the aircraft overhead was German. After bombs fell on the town in January 1941 I asked my father if I could walk down to see the damage. He would not let me go. Twenty-two people died in that raid. We were also concerned for my sister Muriel, who was working day and night in the Orthopaedic Hospital in Birmingham: Birmingham was, of course, very badly bombed.

In fact, Grantham itself was playing a more dramatic role than I knew at the time. Bomber Command's 5 Group was based in Grantham, and it was from a large house off Harrowby Road that much of the planning was done of the bombing raids on Germany; the officers' mess was in Elm House in Elmer Street, which I used to pass walking to school. The Dambusters flew from near Grantham – my father met their commander, Squadron Leader Guy Gibson. I always felt that Bomber Harris – himself based in Grantham in the early part of the war – had not been sufficiently honoured. I would remember what Winston Churchill wrote to him at the end of the war:

> For over two years Bomber Command alone carried the war to the heart of Germany, bringing hope to the peoples of Occupied Europe and to the enemy a foretaste of the mighty power which was rising against him . . .
>
> All your operations were planned with great care and skill. They were executed in the face of desperate opposition and appalling hazards. They made a decisive contribution to Germany's final defeat. The conduct of these operations demonstrated the fiery gallant spirit which animated your air crews and the high sense of duty of all ranks under your command. I believe that the massive achievements of Bomber Command will long be remembered as an example of duty nobly done.
>
> Winston S. Churchill



In Grantham, at least, politics did not stand still in the war years. Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 sharply altered the attitudes of the Left to the war. Pacifist voices suddenly became silent. Anglo-Soviet friendship groups sprouted. We attended, not without some unease, Anglo-Soviet evenings held at the town hall. It was the accounts of the suffering and bravery of the Russians at Stalingrad in 1942–43 which had most impact on us.

Although it can now be seen that 1941 – with Hitler's attack on Russia in June and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor which brought America into the war in December – sowed the seeds of Germany's ultimate defeat, the news was generally bad, and especially so in early 1942. This almost certainly contributed to the outcome of the by-election held in Grantham on 27 February 1942, after Victor Warrender was elevated to the Lords as Lord Bruntisfield, to become an Admiralty spokesman. Our town had the dubious distinction of being the first to reject a government candidate during the war. Denis Kendall stood as an Independent against our Conservative candidate, Sir Arthur Longmore. Kendall fought an effective populist campaign in which he skilfully used his role as General Manager of British Marcs to stress the theme of an all-out drive for production for the war effort and the need for 'practical' men to promote it. To our great surprise, he won by 367 votes. Then and later the Conservative Party was inclined to complacency. A closer analysis of the limited number of by-elections should have alerted us to the likelihood of the Socialist landslide which materialized in 1945.

Unusually, I took little part in the campaign because I was working very hard, preparing for examinations which I hoped would get me into Somerville College, Oxford. In particular, my evenings were spent cramming the Latin which was required for

the entrance exam. Our school did not teach Latin. Fortunately, our new headmistress, Miss Gillies, herself a classicist, was able to arrange Latin lessons for me from a teacher at the boys' grammar school, and to lend me her own books, including a textbook written by her father. The hard work helped keep my mind off the ever more dismal news about the war. In particular, there was a series of blows in the Far East – the loss of Malaya, the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the fall of Hong Kong and then Singapore, the retreat through Burma and the Japanese threat to Australia. One evening in the spring of 1942 when I had gone for a walk with my father I turned and asked him when – and how – it would all end. He replied very calmly: 'We don't know how, we don't know when; but we have no doubt that we *shall* win.'

In spite of my efforts to get into Somerville, I failed to win the scholarship I wanted. It was not too surprising, for I was only seventeen, but it was something of a blow. I knew that if I was not able to go up in 1943 I would not be allowed to do more than a two-year 'wartime degree' before I was called up for national service at the age of twenty. But there was nothing I could do about it, and so at the end of August 1943 I entered the third-year sixth and became Joint Head of School. Then, suddenly, a telegram arrived offering me a place at Somerville in October. Someone else had dropped out. And so it was that I suddenly found myself faced with the exciting but daunting prospect of leaving home, almost for the first time, for a totally different world.

CHAPTER II

# Gowns-woman

*Oxford 1943 to 1947*

Oxford does not set out to please. Freshmen arrive there for the Michaelmas term in the misty gloom of October. Monumental buildings impress initially by their size rather than their exquisite architecture. Everything is cold and strangely forbidding. Or so it seemed to me.

It had been at Somerville during bitterly cold mid-winter days that I had taken my Oxford entrance exams. But I had seen little of my future college and less still of the university as a whole before I arrived, rather homesick and apprehensive, to begin my first term. In fact, Somerville always takes people by surprise. Many incurious passers-by barely know it is there, for the kindest thing to say of its external structure is that it is unpretentious. But inside it opens up into a splendid green space onto which many rooms face. I was to live both my first and second years in college, moving from the new to the older buildings. In due course, a picture or two, a vase and finally an old armchair brought back from Grantham allowed me to feel that the rooms were in some sense mine. In my third and fourth years I shared digs with two friends in Walton Street.

Both Oxford and Somerville were strongly if indirectly affected by the war. For whatever reason, Oxford was not bombed, in spite of the presence of the motor works at Cowley which had become a centre for aircraft repair. But like everywhere else, both town and university were subject to the blackout ('dim-out' from 1944) and much affected by wartime stringencies. Stained-glass windows were boarded up. Large static water tanks – as in Somerville's East

Quad off the Woodstock Road – stood ready for use in case of fire. Most of our rations were allocated direct to the college which provided our unexciting fare in hall, though on rare occasions I would be asked out to dinner. There were a few coupons left over for jam and other things. One of the minor benefits to my health and figure of such austerities was that I ceased having sugar in my tea – though only many years later would I deny my ever-sweet tooth the pleasure of sugared coffee (not that there was over-much coffee for some time either). There were tight controls over the use of hot water. For example, there must be no more than five inches of water in the bath – a line was painted round at the right level – and of course I rigidly observed this, though coming from a family where the relationship between cleanliness and Godliness was no laughing matter. Not that we ever felt like complaining. After all, we were the lucky ones.

Moreover, though I was not the first member of my family to go to university – my cousin had gone to London – I was the first Roberts to go to Oxbridge and I knew that, however undemonstrative they might be, my parents were extremely proud of the fact. Before I went up to Oxford, I had a less clear idea of what the place would be like than did many of my contemporaries. But I regarded it as being quite simply the best, and if I was serious about getting on in life that is what I should always strive for. There was no point in lowering my sights. So, excellent as it was, particularly in the sciences, I was never tempted to opt for Nottingham, our 'local' university, even though I would have been able to live so much nearer my home, family and friends. Another aspect of Oxford which appealed to me then – and still does – is the collegiate system. Oxford is divided into colleges, though it also has some central university institutions such as the Bodleian Library. In my day, life centred on the college (where you ate and slept and received many of your tutorials) and around other institutions – church and societies – which had more or less a life of their own. As a scientist, my life probably revolved more around university institutions and facilities, such as the chemistry laboratories, than did that of students in other disciplines. Still, my experience of college life contributed to my later conviction that if you wish to bring the best out of people they should be encouraged to



be part of smaller, human-scale communities rather than be left to drift on a sea of impersonality.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which wartime conditions affected the 'feel' of university life was the fact that so many of us were very young – only seventeen or just eighteen, and at that age an extra year can mean a great difference in outlook and maturity. Later, from 1944, the feel of Oxford changed again as older people, invalided out, started coming back from the services either to complete a shortened wartime degree or to begin a full degree course. They had been through so much more than we had. As Kipling wrote (in 'The Scholars') of young naval officers returning to Cambridge after the Great War to continue their studies:

> Far have they steamed and much have they known, and most
> would they fain forget;
> But now they are come to their joyous own with all the world
> in their debt.

By the time I left I found myself dealing with friends and colleagues who had seen much more of the world than I had. And I gained a great deal from the fact that Oxford at the end of the war was a place of such mixed views and experience.

I began by keeping myself to myself, for I felt shy and ill at ease in this quite new environment. I continued, as in Grantham, to take long walks on my own, around Christ Church Meadow, through the university parks and along the Cherwell or the Thames, enjoying my own company and thoughts. But I soon started to appreciate Oxford life. My first years there coincided with the end of the war; so it is perhaps not surprising that my pleasures were the slightly Nonconformist ones I had brought with me from Grantham. I was a member of a Methodist Study Group which gave and attended tea parties. My mother would send me cakes through the post and on a Saturday morning I would join the queue outside the 'cake factory' in north Oxford for an hour or so to buy the sustenance for tea that Sunday. I joined the Bach Choir, conducted by Sir Thomas Armstrong (by a nice coincidence Robert Armstrong's father), whose repertoire was wider than its name suggested. I especially remember our performance of the

*St Matthew Passion* in the Sheldonian Theatre, which Wren might have designed for the purpose. We also sang *Prince Igor*, Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande*, and Holst's *Hymn of Jesus*. Sometimes I went to listen rather than to sing: I heard Kathleen Ferrier in Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*.

With the end of the war and the return of the servicemen, the pace of entertainment quickened. Eights Week was revived and I went down to the river to watch the races. It was at this time that I first went out to dances and even on occasion drank a little wine (I had previously only tasted sherry and did not like it; nor do I now). I smoked my first cigarettes. I did not like them much either, though I knew I would get the taste if I persisted. I decided not to, to save the money and buy *The Times* every day instead. I now went to my first commem ball, and like the girl in the song danced all night. I saw Chekhov and Shakespeare at the Playhouse and the New Theatre. (Christopher Fry's first plays were being performed at that time.) And I saw a wonderful OUDS (Oxford University Dramatic Society) production which was performed in a college garden and featured Kenneth Tynan, Oxford's latest dandy. I cannot remember the play, partly because it was always difficult to distinguish Ken Tynan on stage from Ken Tynan in everyday life.

I might have had a more glittering Oxford career, but I had little money to spare and would have been hard put to make ends meet if it had not been for a number of modest grants secured for me from the college at the instance of my ever-helpful tutor, the chemist Dorothy Hodgkin. I was also assisted by some educational trusts. I might have been able to supplement my income further from such sources if I had been prepared to give an undertaking to go into teaching. But I knew I had no such calling; and I did and do believe that good teachers need a vocation which most people just do not have. In fact, I did teach science for one vacation at a school in Grantham in the summer of 1944: this earned the money for that luxury in Grantham but near-necessity in Oxford – a bicycle. It was while I was teaching there that Paris was liberated. The headmaster called the school together, announced that Paris was free again and told us how the brave Resistance fighters had helped the Allies by rising up against the German occupiers.



It was a thrilling moment. The war was evidently being won; I felt somehow less guilty for not being able to play a larger part; and I shared the joy of the British people that the French Resistance had restored French honour and pride. We may have had an exaggerated view in those days of the universality of resistance – we told each other stories of how the customers of a café would tap out 'V for Victory' in morse code on their glasses when a German soldier entered the café – but we had no doubt that every true Frenchman wanted to be free.

I threw myself into intensely hard work. In Dorothy Hodgkin the college was fortunate to have a brilliant scientist and a gifted teacher, working in the comparatively new field of X-ray crystallography. Mrs Hodgkin was a Fellow of the Royal Society and later made a decisive contribution towards discovering the structure of penicillin, the first antibiotic – work for which she won the Nobel Prize in 1964. (Penicillin itself had been discovered and given its first trials in the Radcliffe Infirmary, which stands just beside Somerville, two years before I went up to Oxford.) In my fourth and final year (1946–47) I worked with a refugee German scientist, Gerhard Schmidt, under Dorothy Hodgkin's direction, on the simple protein Gramicidin B as the research project required to complete Part II of my chemistry course. Through the Cosmos Club and the Scientific Club I also came across other budding young scientists and heard many well-known scientists speak, including J.D. Bernal. His politics were very left wing, as indeed were those of many other scientists at that time. But they would never have dreamt of carrying their politics over into their professional relationships with their students.

Religion also figured large in my Oxford life. There are many tales of young people entering university and, partly through coming into contact with scepticism and partly for less wholesome reasons, losing their faith. I never felt in any danger of that. Methodism provided me with an anchor of stability and, of course, contacts and friends who looked at the world as I did. I usually attended the Wesley Memorial Church on Sundays. There was, as in Grantham, a warmth and a sober but cheerful social life which I found all the more valuable in my initially somewhat strange surroundings. The church had a very vigorous Students'

Fellowship. After Sunday Evening Service there was usually a large gathering over coffee in the minister's house, where there would be stimulating discussion of religious and other matters. Occasionally I would go to the University Church of St Mary the Virgin to listen to a particularly interesting university sermon – though that church has about it a certain 'official' formality which makes it a somewhat cold place of worship. Sometimes I would go to the college chapel, especially when I knew that Miss Helen Darbishire, who was Principal and a distinguished scholar of Milton and Wordsworth when I first went up to Somerville, was preaching.

Generally speaking, though, I did not go to Anglican churches. But oddly enough – or perhaps not so oddly when one considers the great impact he had on so many of my generation – it was the religious writing of that High Anglican C.S. Lewis which had most impact upon my intellectual religious formation. The power of his broadcasts, sermons and essays came from a combination of simple language with theological depth. Who has ever portrayed more wittily and convincingly the way in which Evil works on our human weaknesses than he did in *The Screwtape Letters*? Who has ever made more accessible the profound concepts of Natural Law than he did in *The Abolition of Man* and in the opening passages of *Mere Christianity*? I remember most clearly the impact on me of *Christian Behaviour* (republished in *Mere Christianity*, but originally appearing as radio talks). This went to the heart of the appalling disparity between the way in which we Christians behave and the ideals we profess. One of C.S. Lewis's messages was that the standards of Christianity are not just binding on the saints. As he put it:

> Perfect behaviour may be as unattainable as perfect gear-changing when we drive; but it is a necessary ideal prescribed for all men by the very nature of the human machine just as perfect gear-changing is an ideal prescribed for all drivers by the very nature of cars.

Similarly, I was helped by what he wrote of the application of that sublime principle of Christian charity which seems to most of us so impossible of fulfilment. Lewis did not for a moment contest



or diminish the sublimeness; but he very helpfully set out what charity is *not*.

> . . . what [does] loving your neighbour as yourself [mean?] I have to love him as I love myself. Well, how exactly do I love myself? Now that I come to think of it, I have not exactly got a feeling of fondness or affection for myself, and I do not even always enjoy my own society. So apparently 'Love your neighbour' does not mean 'feel fond of him' or 'find him attractive' . . . I can look at some of the things I have done with horror and loathing. So apparently I am allowed to loathe and hate some of the things my enemies do . . . Consequently, Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery . . . Even while we kill and punish we must try to feel about the enemy as we feel about ourselves – to wish that he were not bad, to hope that he may, in this world or another be cured: in fact, to wish his good.

Such words had a special poignancy, of course, at this time.

The main contribution one can make as a student to one's country in peace or wartime is to study hard and effectively, not to daydream about what else one might be doing. But we all also tried to do something more directly. For my part, I would serve one or two evenings a week at the Forces canteen in Carfax. British soldiers and American airmen from the nearby bases at Upper Heyford were among our main customers. It was hot, sticky and very hard on the feet. But the work was also good fun, with plenty of company and wisecracking humour.

Reports of the D-day landings in July 1944, though, brought both apprehension and anxiety. The deadly struggle on those exposed beaches, carried on by so many of about my own age, made us deeply uneasy. For perhaps the only time I wondered whether I was right to be at Oxford.

In fact we were now within a year of the end of the war in Europe. There were still the battle of the Bulge and the tragedy of Arnhem to come. But slowly the emphasis came to be on preparing for

peace. And among the peacetime activities which began to take an increasing amount of my time was politics.

Almost as soon as I came up to Oxford I had joined the Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA), which was founded in the 1920s under the inspiration of a don at Christ Church – Keith Feiling, the historian of the Tory Party and later biographer of Neville Chamberlain. Although the national agreement to suspend party political electoral contests for the duration of the war had no direct implications for politics at the universities, in practice political life in Oxford was a good deal quieter than it had been in the 1930s. But, for all that, OUCA activities quickly became a focus for my life. In those days the Oxford Union, in which star speakers would come to debate issues of the highest importance as well as ones of unbelievable triviality, did not admit women to its membership, though I used sometimes to listen to debates. But I would never have excelled in the kind of brilliant, brittle repartee which the Union seemed to encourage. I preferred the more serious forensic style of our discussions in OUCA and of the real hustings. OUCA also provided a further network of acquaintance and often friendship. It was, indeed, an effective forum for matchmaking, as a number of my OUCA colleagues demonstrated.

Oxford politics was a nursery for talent. I made friends in university politics who, as in the novels of Anthony Powell, kept reappearing in my life as the years passed by. Much the closest was Edward Boyle who, though he moved easily in a sophisticated social and political world which I had only glimpsed, shared with me a serious interest in politics. At this time Edward, the wealthy and cultivated son of a Liberal MP, was himself a classical liberal whose views chimed in pretty well with my own provincial middle-class conservatism. Although we were later to diverge politically, we remained dear friends until his tragically early death from cancer.

William Rees-Mogg, whom I knew in my final year, was a distinguished editor of *The Times* from a very early age. I was never as close to William as I was to Edward, but one sensed that there was something formidable behind his somewhat formal exterior and that he was marked out for higher things.

Robin Day was a prominent Liberal. Like Edward he was a



leading light in the Oxford Union, and we later met as lawyers in the same chambers. One sometimes wondered what career would be open to the brilliant wits of the Union, until Robin Day invented a new one by pioneering television interviewing – after which our paths and our swords crossed frequently.

Another star was Tony Benn, at that time still rattling his full complement of syllables as the Hon. Anthony Wedgwood Benn. From start to finish he and I have rarely agreed on anything, but he was always a courteous and effective debater, an English patriot, and as time has made socialism more and more a thing of the past, even a traditional figure. But perhaps we enjoy a sympathy based on our religious roots. When Tony became President of the Union I was invited to a celebration, attended by his father Viscount Stansgate, which, true to Tony's Nonconformist principles, was teetotal.

Kenneth Harris was another leading debater, who along with Edward Boyle and Tony Benn spent several months touring the United States giving demonstration debates. He subsequently had a distinguished career in political journalism. We met again many times, notably when he wrote my biography.

As an officer in OUCA I was naturally taken up with the 1945 general election campaign. In Oxford I was busy campaigning for the city's MP Quintin Hogg until term ended, when I returned to Grantham to work for Squadron Leader Worth in his attempt to dislodge the sitting Independent Member, Denis Kendall.

In retrospect, we should all have known what to expect. By some mysterious but inexorable law, wars always seem to advance state control and those who advocate it. My husband Denis's view, which he explained to me after we were married, was that in the services people from totally different backgrounds mix in an unprecedented way and that the result is an acute twinge of social conscience and a demand for the state to step in and ameliorate social conditions. But, in any case, the Conservatives had done uniformly badly in the limited number of wartime electoral contests, and there was a general tendency for our share of the vote to fall. Nobody paid much attention to opinion polls then: but they too told the same story. As I have noted, the Left were extremely effective after Dunkirk in portraying the Conservatives

as exclusively responsible for appeasement, and managed, by skilful sleight of hand, to distance Churchill from the party he led. Nor did people remember that Labour had opposed even the limited rearmament carried out by Baldwin and Chamberlain.

But there were also other influences at work. The command economy required in wartime conditions had habituated many people to an essentially socialist mentality. Within the Armed Forces it was common knowledge that left-wing intellectuals had exerted a powerful influence through the Army Education Corps, which as Nigel Birch observed was 'the only regiment with a general election among its battle honours'. At home, broadcasters like J.B. Priestley gave a comfortable yet idealistic gloss to social progress in a left-wing direction. It is also true that Conservatives, with Churchill in the lead, were so preoccupied with the urgent imperatives of war that much domestic policy, and in particular the drawing-up of the agenda for peace, fell largely to the socialists in the Coalition Government. Churchill himself would have liked to continue the National Government at least until Japan had been beaten and, in the light of the fast-growing threat from the Soviet Union, perhaps beyond then. But the Labour Party had other thoughts and understandably wished to come into its own collectivist inheritance.

In 1945, therefore, we Conservatives found ourselves confronting two serious and, as it turned out, insuperable problems. First, the Labour Party had us fighting on their ground and were always able to outbid us. Churchill had been talking about post-war 'reconstruction' for some two years, and as part of that programme Rab Butler's Education Act was on the Statute Book. Further, our manifesto committed us to the so-called 'full employment' policy of the 1944 Employment White Paper, a massive house-building programme, most of the proposals for National Insurance benefits made by the great Liberal social reformer Lord Beveridge and a comprehensive National Health Service. Moreover, we were not able effectively to take the credit (so far as this was in any case appropriate to the Conservative Party) for victory, let alone to castigate Labour for its irresponsibility and extremism, because Attlee and his colleagues had worked cheek by jowl with the Conservatives in government since 1940. In any event, the war effort had involved the whole population.



I vividly remember sitting in the student common room in Somerville listening to Churchill's famous (or notorious) election broadcast to the effect that socialism would require 'some sort of Gestapo' to enforce it, and thinking, 'He's gone too far.' However logically unassailable the connection between socialism and coercion was, in our present circumstances the line would not be credible. I knew from political argument on similar lines at an election meeting in Oxford what the riposte would be: 'Who's run the country when Mr Churchill's been away? Mr Attlee.' And such, I found, was the reaction now.

Back in Grantham, I was one of the 'warm-up' speakers for the Conservative candidate at village meetings. In those days, many more people turned out to public meetings than today, and they expected their money's worth. I would frequently be speaking at half a dozen meetings an evening. Looking back at the reports in the local newspapers of what I said at the time, there is little with which I would disagree now. Germany must be disarmed and brought to justice. There must be co-operation with America and (somewhat less realistically) with the Soviet Union. The British Empire, the most important community of peoples that the world had ever known, must never be dismembered. (Perhaps not very realistic either – but my view of Britain's imperial future was not uncommon in the aftermath of victory.) The main argument I advanced for voting Conservative was that by doing so we would keep Winston Churchill in charge of our foreign policy. And indeed perhaps if Churchill had been able to see through the July 1945 Potsdam Conference the post-war world might have looked at least a little different.

Like many other members of OUCA, I had received lessons in public speaking from Conservative Central Office's Mrs Stella Gatehouse. Her emphasis was on simplicity and clarity of expression and as little jargon as possible. In fact, at election meetings, when you never knew how long you would have to speak before the candidate arrived, a touch more long-windedness would have been very useful. Most valuable of all for me personally, however, was the experience of having to think on my feet when answering questions from a good-humoured but critical audience. I recall a point made by an elderly man at one such meeting that

had a lasting effect on my views about welfare: 'Just because I've saved a little bit of money of my own, "Assistance" won't help me. If I'd spent everything, they would.' It was an early warning of the hard choices that the new Welfare State would shortly place before politicians.

Three weeks after polling day, by which time the overseas and service votes had been returned, I went to the election count at Sleaford. As we waited for the Grantham result, news trickled in of what was happening elsewhere. It was bad, and it became worse – a Labour landslide with Tory Cabinet ministers falling one after the other. Then our own candidate lost too. I was shocked and upset. I returned to Grantham to see more results coming through on the screen at the Picture House cinema. The prospect did not improve. I simply could not understand how the electorate could do this to Churchill. On my way back home I met a friend, someone who I had always thought was a staunch Conservative, and said how shocked I was by the terrible news. He was not shocked at all. In fact, he said he thought the news was rather good. Incomprehension deepened. At the time I felt that the British electorate's treatment of the man who more than anyone else secured their liberty was shameful. But was it not Edmund Burke who said: 'A perfect democracy is the most shameless thing in the world'? In retrospect, the election of the 1945–51 Labour Government seems the logical fulfilment of the collectivist spirit that came to dominate wartime Britain. It was to be about thirty-five years before this collectivism would run its course – shaping and distorting British society in the process, before it collapsed in 1979's Winter of Discontent.

At the time, it was clear to everyone that fundamental reassessment of Conservative principles and policies was required. We felt this as much in Oxford as anywhere else. It lay behind the preparation of a report of the OUCA Policy Sub-Committee which I co-authored in Michaelmas term 1945 with Michael Kinchin-Smith and Stanley Moss. The report contained no more profound insights than any other Tory undergraduate paper. And its two themes we have heard many times since – more policy research and better presentation.

There may have been some merit in this recommendation.



Perhaps the main problem as regards what we would now call the 'image' of the Conservative Party was that we seemed to have lost our way and, to the extent that our policies did have coherence, they seemed to be devised for the wealthy rather than for ordinary people. As our OUCA paper put it: 'Conservative policy has come to mean in the eyes of the public little more than a series of administrative solutions to particular problems, correlated in certain fields by a few unreasoning prejudices and the selfish interests of the moneyed classes.' The accusation was, of course, unfair. If the Conservatives had won in 1945 we would still have had a Welfare State – doubtless with less immediate public expenditure and certainly with greater scope for private and voluntary initiative. But the idea that Conservatism was simply that – conserving the interests of the status quo against change and reform – was immensely powerful at this time.

In March 1946 I became Treasurer of OUCA and later that month went as one of the Oxford representatives to the Federation of University Conservative and Unionist Associations (FUCUA) Conference at the Waldorf Hotel in London. It was my first such conference and I enjoyed it hugely. When I spoke it was in support of more involvement by people from working-class backgrounds in university Conservative politics. I felt that we had to get away from the perception of Conservatism as both stuffy and frivolous. It was not so much that I wanted a classless society, as the socialists (somewhat disingenuously) said they did, but rather that I could not see that class was important. Everyone had something unique to offer in life and their responsibility was to develop those gifts – and heroes come from all backgrounds. As I put it to the FUCUA Conference: 'We have heard all about this being the age of the common man – but do not forget the need for the uncommon man.' Or, I suppose I might have added, 'woman'.

In October 1946 I was elected President of OUCA – the third woman to hold the position. I had done my final exams that summer and was now beginning the research project which constituted the fourth and last year of the Chemistry degree, so I had a little more time to spend on politics. For example, I attended my first Conservative Party Conference, held that year in Blackpool. I was

immediately entranced. So often in Grantham and in Oxford it had felt unusual to be a Conservative. Now suddenly I was with hundreds of other people who believed as I did and who shared my insatiable appetite for talking politics.

The Conference had a most extraordinary atmosphere. From my humble position as a 'representative', I had the sense that the Party leadership – with the notable exception of the Party Leader – had arrived at Blackpool prepared to reconcile itself and Conservatism to the permanence of socialism in Britain. A perceptive observer of the 1946 Conference, Bertrand de Jouvenal, wrote of our Front Bench: 'These great, intelligent thoroughbreds, trained from their earliest years to prudent administration and courteous debate, were in their hearts not far from accepting as definitive their electoral defeat in 1945.'* This was decidedly not what the rank and file wanted to hear. Indeed, there was open dissent from the floor. A request on the first day for a general debate on questions of philosophy and policy was refused by the chairman. There was a lukewarm reaction to the consensus approach of speeches from the platform, though these became notably tougher the longer the Conference went on, as Shadow ministers perceived our discontent. My instincts were with the rank and file, though I had not yet fully digested the strong intellectual case against collectivism, as I was to do in the next few years.

Back in Oxford I had organized a very full programme of speakers. Lord Dunglass (Alec Douglas-Home) urged support for Ernest Bevin's foreign policy – support we readily gave. Bob Boothby – a wonderful speaker, with great style – declaimed against the 'revolutionary totalitarian absolutism of Moscow'. David Maxwell-Fyfe, whose daughter Pamela was at Oxford at the time, attacked nationalization and urged a property-owning democracy. Peter Thorneycroft put forward what seemed the very advanced views of the 'Tory Reform' wing in a debate with the University Labour Club at the Union. Lady (Mimi) Davidson told us how it felt to be the only Conservative woman Member of the House of Commons. Anthony Eden charmed and impressed us all over sherry. Each term we had a lively debate with the other political

* *Problems of Socialist England* (1947).



clubs at the Oxford Union, particularly the Labour Club, which at the time was very left wing and included some famous names like Anthony Crosland – who even in those days could condescend to a Duchess – and Tony Benn. Generally, however, OUCA met in the Taylorian Institute on a Friday evening, entertaining the speaker to dinner beforehand at the Randolph Hotel. So it was there that I first rubbed shoulders with the great figures of the Tory Party – and, in fact, I kept in touch with many of them over the years.

Such activity, though, was insignificant as regards the overall position of the Conservative Party nationally. Looking back, one can see that there were two alternative strategies for the Party to have followed. Either it could have accommodated the collectivism of the times, though seeking to lessen its impact where possible, trying to slow down the leftward march through our institutions and to retain some scope for individual choice and free enterprise. Or it could have fought collectivism root and branch, seeking to persuade national opinion that 1945 represented a wrong turning from the country's destined path. In fact, it sought to do both. Voices were raised in favour of a radical onslaught against collectivism, but in opposition the predominant view was that pragmatism represented the best path back to government.

The Party document which came nearest to embodying the pragmatic approach was *The Industrial Charter*, which appeared in May 1947. In a sense, it was no new departure: indeed, continuity and consensus were its underlying themes. Just as the wartime 1944 Employment Policy White Paper represented a compromise with Keynesianism – combining the emphasis on counter-cyclical public spending to sustain demand and employment with more orthodox observations about efficiency, competitiveness and mobility – so *The Industrial Charter* represented a compromise between corporatism and free enterprise. *The Industrial Charter* defended economic planning, industrial 'partnership' and workers' 'consultation'; but it continued to emphasize the need for fewer controls, fewer civil servants and modestly lower taxation. And this tension continued in the Conservative Party throughout the 1950s and sixties. *The Industrial Charter* gave us all something to say, and it kept the Party

united. But such documents hardly made the pulse beat faster. Nor were they important in returning the Party to power. It was, in fact, the economic failures of the Labour Government – in particular the February 1947 fuel crisis and the devaluation of sterling in 1949 – rather than Conservative Party initiatives which turned the political tide in our favour.

Documents like *The Industrial Charter* gingerly avoided the real battleground on which socialism ultimately had to be defeated. In the end, Churchill was right. Whether socialism needed a 'Gestapo' as it did in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, or just those banal and bureaucratic instruments of coercion, confiscatory taxation, nationalization and oppressive regulation employed in the West, ultimately depended only on the degree of socialism desired. In diminishing economic freedom, the socialists had embarked on a course which, if pursued to its ultimate destination, would mean the extinction of all freedom. I had no doubt myself about the truth of this proposition. But for some Tories it was always a difficult argument to take. The traditional economic liberalism which constituted so important a part of my political make-up – and which Edmund Burke himself embraced – was often alien and uncongenial to Conservatives from a more elevated social background. It was, after all, none other than Harold Macmillan who in 1938 proposed in his influential book *The Middle Way* to extend state control and planning over a wide range of production and services. Other Conservatives were inhospitable to theory of any kind. They took J.S. Mill's appellation 'the stupid party' as a compliment. Not surprisingly, therefore, the most powerful critique of socialist planning and the socialist state which I read at this time, and to which I have returned so often since, F.A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, is dedicated famously 'To the socialists of all parties'.

I cannot claim that I fully grasped the implications of Hayek's little masterpiece at this time. It was only in the mid-1970s, when Hayek's works were right at the top of the reading list given me by Keith Joseph, that I really came to grips with the ideas he put forward. Only then did I consider his arguments from the point of view of the kind of state Conservatives find congenial – a limited government under a rule of law – rather than from the point of



view of the kind of state we must avoid – a socialist state where bureaucrats rule by discretion. At this stage it was the (to my mind) unanswerable criticisms of socialism in *The Road to Serfdom* which had an impact. Hayek saw that Nazism – national socialism – had its roots in nineteenth-century German social planning. He showed that intervention by the state in one area of the economy or society gave rise to almost irresistible pressures to extend planning further into other sectors. He alerted us to the profound, indeed revolutionary, implications of state planning for Western civilization as it had grown up over the centuries.

Nor did Hayek mince his words about the monopolistic tendencies of the planned society which professional groups and trade unions would inevitably seek to exploit. Each demand for security, whether of employment, income or social position, implied the exclusion from such benefits of those outside the particular privileged group – and would generate demands for countervailing privileges from the excluded groups. Eventually, in such a situation everyone will lose. Perhaps because he did not come from a British Conservative background and did not in fact ever consider himself a Conservative at all, Hayek had none of the inhibitions which characterized the agonized social conscience of the English upper classes when it came to speaking bluntly about such things.

Hayek was unusual and unpopular, but he was not quite alone in root and branch criticism of socialism. I also read at this time and later the polemical journalist Colm Brogan's writings. Where Hayek deployed philosophy, Brogan relied on withering irony and mordant wit. In 1943 in *Who Are 'The People'?* Brogan wrote the unthinkable – namely that it was precisely the 'progressive' Left which had created the circumstances for Hitler's rise to power and been most thoroughly duped by him. The progressives did not by and large come from, and had little real claim to represent, the 'working class'. They applied the most blatant and culpable double standards when it came to the Soviet Union. The real interest which they represented was that of a burgeoning bureaucracy determined to exploit every opportunity to increase its numbers and enlarge its power. In *Our New Masters*, which appeared in 1947, Brogan widened his attack on socialism. He refused to see the 1945

election result as anything other than a collective loss of common sense.

> [The people] have been deceived, most certainly, but they wanted to be deceived . . . they have voted against that modest expectation in life which is all that a sober public man can ever strive for. They have voted to eat their cake and have it, to save it for a rainy day and to give it away. They have voted for high wages and low production and a world of plenty. They have voted like the courtiers of King Canute who planted his seat before the encroaching waves and commanded them to retire by authority of the royal and unimpeachable will. The people are able to fill the seat with the sovereign of their own choosing. Nobody denies their right. But the tide keeps coming in.

Brogan therefore saw the disillusionment with Labour, which was already manifest at the time he wrote, as being the socialists' inevitable nemesis for raising so wildly expectations which no one – let alone they with the wrong policy prescriptions – could fulfil. As Brogan said in a classic attack: 'Wherever Sir Stafford Cripps has tried to increase wealth and happiness, grass never grows again.'

But Brogan also saw socialism as a force for disorder and disintegration, a kind of poison threatening to corrupt the whole body politic, and the Labour Party as 'a feeble and querulous thing, equally unfit to govern because of the intemperance of its mind and the childish unreality of its view of life'. They were sentiments which many of us felt, but which it generally seemed imprudent to express with quite such vigour.

The tension between these two possible approaches to resisting collectivism – gradualist and radical – would be played out throughout my time in active Conservative politics. But the specific issues which meant most to me in these early post-war years concerned foreign rather than domestic affairs.

I was in Blackpool visiting my sister (who had gone there from the Birmingham Orthopaedic Hospital) when I learned from the radio news on that fateful 6 August 1945 that an atomic bomb had



been dropped on Hiroshima. It had been known for some time that we were on the eve of a breakthrough in the technology of weapons of mass destruction. My own academic study and the fascination exerted on me by issues relating to the practical application of science probably meant that I was better informed than most about the developments lying behind the manufacture of the atomic bomb. The following year I was able to read (and largely understand) the very full account contained in *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes* published by the United States. Yet – cliché as it may be – I was immediately aware on hearing the preliminary reports of Hiroshima that with the advent of the A-bomb 'somehow the world had changed'. Or as Churchill himself would put it in his majestic memoirs *The Second World War*: 'Here then was a speedy end to the Second World War, and perhaps to much else besides.'

The full scientific, strategic and political implications of the nuclear weapon would take some years to assess; moreover, like the science involved, they would continue to change and develop. But the direct human and environmental consequences of the use of atomic weapons were more quickly grasped. In the winter of 1946 I read the American journalist John Hersey's report on Hiroshima, first submitted to the *New Yorker* and subsequently published as a Penguin Special. Oddly enough, even more affecting than the accounts of the hideous injuries, the fire, the fall-out and the radiation sickness was the bitter-sweet image of weeds and wild flowers sprouting through the ashes – their growth unnaturally stimulated by radiation from the bomb.

Yet neither on that first evening reflecting on the matter in the train home from Blackpool, nor later when I read accounts and saw the pictures of the overwhelming devastation, did I have any doubt about the rightness of the decision to use the bomb. I considered it justified primarily because it would avoid the losses inevitable if Allied forces were to take by assault the main islands of Japan. The Japanese still had 2½ million men under arms. We had already seen the fanatical resistance which they had put up during the Battle of Okinawa. Only the scale of the Allies' technological military superiority, demonstrated first at Hiroshima and then at Nagasaki, could persuade the Japanese leadership that resistance was hopeless. And so one week after Hiroshima, and

after a second bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered.

Britain had, of course, been closely involved in the development of the bomb, though because of the breakdown of Anglo-American nuclear co-operation after the war it was not till 1952 that we ourselves were able to explode one. Churchill and Truman, as we now know, were duped by Stalin at Potsdam when the American President 'broke the news' of the bomb to the Soviet leader, who knew about it already and promptly returned to Moscow to urge his own scientists to speed up their atomic programme. But the fact remains, as I used to remind the Soviets when I became Prime Minister, that the most persuasive proof of the essential benevolence of the United States was that in those few crucial years when it alone possessed the military means to enforce its will upon the world, it refrained from doing so.

If the atomic bomb raised one set of questions about Britain's role in the post-war world, the situation in India raised another. The subject retained its fascination for me. I knew that Churchill, for whom my admiration by now knew no bounds, had fought ferociously against the moves to appease nationalist opinion in India, which had been implemented in the Government of India Act of 1935. The situation in India had deteriorated sharply in the war years and it seemed highly unlikely that even the earlier prospect of Dominion status would seriously lessen the pressure for independence. This was, moreover, against the background, which we did not yet all fully understand, of a much less significant world role for Britain after the war. The two material circumstances which had allowed us to fight Hitler all but alone – the existence of huge accumulated overseas investments and the most successful and extensive empire the world had seen – had been lost or greatly diminished as the price of victory in that great struggle.

For all that, people of my age – even those committed to the links with Empire developing into a Commonwealth – took a more positive view of what was happening in India than did many of our elders. I myself read at about this time two books which emphasized the role of Britain, not just as guarantor of sound administration and humane justice in our Imperial territories, but rather as a kind of midwife for their birth, growth and maturity as



responsible members of the international community. Leo Amery's *Thoughts on the Constitution* (lectures delivered at Oxford) emphasized the crucial need to ensure Imperial 'unity of thought and purpose' through free co-operation: such thinking also, for a time at least, attracted me towards ideas of Imperial Preference as a means of sustaining our community of interest. I also read Lord Elton's *Imperial Commonwealth* which saw our evolving Empire as an example of unity and co-operation:

> To have spread organized political freedom across the world; three times to have saved Europe, and twice the world as well, from a tyrant; to have ended slavery, and taught other nations to end it too; to have been so reluctant to acquire territory, and so often to have acquired it in the interests of others; to have learned wisdom from adversity and to have held a giant's power without using it like a giant . . . all this has richly earned the Empire survival hitherto, and has given it abundant titles to the gratitude of mankind . . . And it may well be that the island from which the world learned the art of freedom will yet teach it the art of unity. It may well be that her present sufferings have finally fitted Britain for that role.

In retrospect, much of this was self-deception. We could not both give independence to the colonies and continue to determine their future afterwards. At that time, however, such ideas seemed to promise a continued world role for Britain, without either the burden or the guilt of empire.

Between the spring 1946 mission of Stafford Cripps to India to seek agreement among Indians on the future of their country and the summer of 1947, when the Government finally endorsed a settlement based on partition, I followed events closely. I felt that there was much to criticize in the means, but that the ends of our policy were right and in the direction of progress for Britain, India and the wider Commonwealth. But the Labour Government and Mountbatten as Viceroy undoubtedly tried to move too fast. In a tragic sense the civil war which now broke out, in which a million people died, showed the degree to which British rule had been the guarantee of Indian unity and peace.

These thoughts, however, seemed out of place in a post-war world in which the new global institutions were the UN, the IMF and the World Bank, and in which the European colonial empires had a very limited future. Indeed, we have still not achieved a full and successful transition from a stable colonial to a stable post-colonial world. As crises like Somalia demonstrate, there are parts of Africa and Asia where order cannot be provided locally, but for which the international institutions have no remedy – certainly no remedy as effective as colonial rule was a century ago.

But the greatest transformation affecting Britain at the time – and the one which would have a great impact on my political life – was the change of the Soviet Union from comrade in arms to deadly enemy. It is important to stress how little understanding most people in the West had at this time of conditions within the USSR. True, many of the facts were available if anyone had cared to investigate and report them. But by and large and for a variety of reasons they did not. As I have described, I was never tempted to sympathize with communism. But my opposition to it was at this time more visceral than intellectual. It was much later that I thought and read more deeply about the communist system and saw precisely where its weaknesses and wickednesses lay. And it is interesting to note that when Hayek came to write a new preface to *The Road to Serfdom* in 1976 he too felt that he had 'under-stressed the significance of the experience of communism in Russia'.

So too, by and large, did the newspapers. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* gave little prominence to Stalin's purges of the 1930s, and even after the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in August 1939 oddly interpreted the Russian invasion of eastern Poland as a sign of 'tension' with Hitler. In wartime, Anglo-Soviet friendship societies bloomed. Smiling, soft-hearted Uncle Joe, the creation as much of Western wishful thinking as of Soviet propaganda, concealed the reality of the paranoid tyrant. Douglas Hyde's *I Believed* (which appeared in 1950, and which I read) reveals the extent to which British communists infiltrated, manipulated and distorted so as subtly to shape political debate. Hyde's account shows too how the war of disinformation in Britain was as ruthlessly and directly controlled from Moscow as were the communist movements which worked in Eastern Europe alongside the advancing Red Army to impose Stalin's grip on countries whose liberties we had fought the war against Hitler to defend.



A strong case can be made to mitigate Churchill's and Britain's role in the abandonment of Central and Eastern Europe. The famous half sheet of paper on which Churchill scribbled his proposals for shared spheres of influence in the Balkans when he met Stalin in Moscow in October 1944 does indeed have a whiff of cynical *realpolitik* about it, as Churchill himself accepted when he described it as a 'naughty document'. It clearly flies in the face of the proclaimed principles of the 1941 Atlantic Charter. But it recognized the reality that the Red Army had occupied a large part of Eastern Europe – and it may have helped to preserve Greek independence. Churchill at least saw, as the Americans did not, that the precipitate withdrawal of our troops in the face of the Red Army would leave the central zone of Germany in Soviet hands and effectively remove any chance at all of our being able to influence the fate of Eastern Europe.

That said, there is a difference between recognizing reality and legitimizing it. For legitimacy tends to set injustice in concrete. So the Conservatives who abstained or voted against the Government on the issue of the Yalta Agreement of February 1945 – among them Alec Douglas-Home – were right. My own unease was transformed into opposition on hearing a powerful speech by Lord De L'Isle and Dudley to OUCA in the Taylorian. It would certainly have been difficult, and perhaps impossible, to force the Soviets to respect democracy and the right of national self-determination in the countries which they now occupied. It was understandable that weary and wounded American and British forces wanted to put the horrors of war behind them and not to risk some new conflict with their former ally. But to set a seal of approval on agreements which we knew in our hearts would not be honoured – let alone to try to force the exiled non-communist government of Poland to accept them – was wrong.

Yalta made me begin to think hard about the military aspect of the communist threat. Little by little, I was also piecing together in my own mind other features of the reality of communism. For example, I read Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* with its poignant

account of a communist show trial. Unlike Valtin's description of Gestapo brutality, Koestler's book allowed me for the first time to get inside, as it were, the mentality of the communist. Even more subtly, it showed that through the eyes of the communist *himself* the communist system makes no sense. Koestler's character, Rubashov, reflects:

> The Party denied the free will of the individual – and at the same time it exacted his willing self-sacrifice. It denied his capacity to choose between two alternatives – and at the same time it demanded that he should constantly choose the right one. It denied his power to distinguish good and evil – and at the same time it spoke pathetically of guilt and treachery. The individual stood under the sign of economic fatality, a wheel in a clockwork which had been wound up for all eternity and could not be stopped or influenced – and the Party demanded that the wheel should revolt against the clockwork and change its course. There was somewhere an error in the calculation; the equation did not work out.

Years later, when as Leader of the Opposition I met Koestler, I said how powerful I had found his book. I asked him how he had been able to imagine Rubashov and his tormentors. He told me no imagination was required. They were real.

As with the whole question of the atomic bomb, so with the (alleged) theoretical basis of Marxism: the fact that I was a scientist gave me a somewhat different insight into some of the arguments. It was in fact after I left university that I read Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Popper, whose analysis in many ways complemented that of Hayek, approached Marxism from the point of view of the philosopher of the natural sciences. This meant that he was ideally equipped to expose the fraudulent claim of Marxists to have discovered immutable laws of history, social development or 'progress' – laws which were comparable to the laws of natural science. It was not just that the 'inevitable' course of events which Marx had prophesied had not occurred and showed no signs of occurring. Marx and Marxists had not even understood the scientific method, let alone practised it in their analysis. Unlike the



Marxists – whether historians, economists or social scientists – who tried to 'prove' their theories by accumulating more and more facts to sustain them, 'the method of science is rather to look out for facts which may refute the theory . . . and the fact that all tests of the theory are attempted falsifications of predictions derived with its help furnishes the clue to scientific method'. The political consequences of this basic error – perhaps more properly described as basic fraud – were summed up by Popper in the dedication of his later book *The Poverty of Historicism*: 'In memory of the countless men, women and children of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.'

With such a background of reading, it is therefore easy to imagine how I reacted to Churchill's speech of 5 March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri. It is, of course, rightly famous for its powerful warning that 'from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent', and that in these Russian-dominated states 'police governments' were prevailing. But no less significant in my eyes was Churchill's evocation of the special relationship between Britain and the United States, and of the idealistic 'message of the British and American peoples to mankind' which lay behind it. The ideas of liberty found their fullest development in the political traditions and institutions of our two countries. The speech is now rightly seen as extraordinarily prescient. But at the time it was bitterly criticized as warmongering hyperbole by commentators on both sides of the Atlantic. It would not be long, however, before their tone started to change, as Soviet intentions in Eastern Europe and Greece became unmistakably clear.

By the time I left Oxford with a second-class degree in Chemistry under my belt, I knew a great deal more about the world and particularly about the world of politics. My character had not changed; nor had my beliefs. But I had a clearer idea of where I stood in relation to other people, their ambitions and opinions. I had, in short, grown up. And, by that mysterious process which leads people to every kind of prominent or obscure vocation, I had discovered what I really wanted to do with my life.

Shortly before my university days came to an end I went back

to Corby Glen, a village some ten miles from Grantham, to a dance. Afterwards a few of us gathered for coffee and a sandwich in the kitchen of the house where I was staying. Not unusually, I was talking about politics. Something I said, or perhaps the way I said it, prompted one of the men to remark: 'What you really want to do is to be an MP, isn't it?' Almost without thinking I said: 'Yes: that really *is* what I want to do.' I had never said it before – not even to myself. When I went to bed that night I found that I had a lot on my mind.

CHAPTER III

# House Bound

*Marriage, Family, Law and Politics 1947–1959*

## MY POLITICAL APPRENTICESHIP

If going up to Oxford is one sort of shock, coming down is quite another. I had made many like-minded friends at Oxford, I had enjoyed my adventures in chemistry and I was passionately interested in university politics. It was a wrench to leave all that behind.

The newly created Oxford University Appointments Committee, which helped new graduates to find suitable jobs, arranged several interviews for me, including one at a Northern ICI plant, I think at Billingham. We hopefuls were interviewed by several managers whose written comments were passed on to the general manager, who gave us our final interview. The remarks on me were lying on the table at the interview, and I could not resist using my faculty for reading upside down. They were both encouraging and discouraging; one manager had written: 'This young woman has much too strong a personality to work here.' In fact, I had three or four interviews with other companies and, though I was unsuccessful, I enjoyed them all. Not only was I given entry to a new world of industry, but the interviewers in those days were invariably courteous and interested in one's own hopes and ambitions. Eventually I was taken on by BX Plastics at Manningtree just outside Colchester to work in their research and development section. BX produced a full range of plastics both for industrial use and consumer use, including for films.

Very few people greatly enjoy the early stages of a new job,

and in this I was no exception. It had been understood when we originally discussed the position that it would involve my being in effect Personal Assistant to the Research and Development Director. I had been looking forward to this because I thought it would allow me to get to know more of how the company as a whole operated and also to use the talents I had, over and above my knowledge of chemistry. But on my arrival it was decided that there was not enough to do in that capacity and so I found myself donning my white coat again and immersing myself in the wonderful world of plastics. The Research and Development Section had only just been created as a separate unit and its teething troubles compounded mine. But by the time Christmas 1947 was approaching I had made one or two friends and things became easier. My supervisor helped me along. The Section moved into a separate and rather pleasant house in nearby Lawford. Like many others at the company, I lived in Colchester – a town which I increasingly came to like and where I had found comfortable lodgings. A bus took us all out to Lawford every day.

And, as always with me, there was politics. I immediately joined the Conservative Association and threw myself into the usual round of Party activities. In particular, I thoroughly enjoyed what was called the ''39–'45' discussion group, where Conservatives of the war generation met to exchange views and argue about the political topics of the day. I also kept in touch, in so far as I could, with friends like Edward Boyle, who was later adopted for a Birmingham seat in the 1950 election. It was as a representative of the Oxford University Graduate Conservative Association (OUGCA) that I went to the Llandudno Conservative Party Conference in October 1948.

It had originally been intended that I should speak at the Conference, seconding an OUGCA motion deploring the abolition of university seats. At that time universities had separate representation in Parliament, and graduates had the right to vote in their universities as well as in the constituency where they lived. (I supported separate university representation, but not the principle that graduates should have more than one vote; my view was that graduates should be able to choose to vote in one or the other constituency.) It would have been my first Conference speech, but in the end the



seconder chosen was a City man, because the City seats were also to be abolished.

My disappointment at this was, however, very quickly overcome and in a most unexpected way. After one of the debates, I found myself engaged in one of those speculative conversations which young people have about their future prospects. An Oxford friend, John Grant, said he supposed that one day I would like to be a Member of Parliament. 'Well, yes,' I replied, 'but there's not much hope of that. The chances of my being selected are just nil at the moment.' I might have added that with no private income of my own there was no way I could have afforded to be an MP on the salary then available. I had not even tried to get on the Party's list of approved candidates.

Later in the day, John Grant happened to be sitting next to the Chairman of the Dartford Conservative Association, John Miller. The Association was in search of a candidate. I learned afterwards that the conversation went something like this: 'I understand that you're still looking for a candidate at Dartford?' (In fact, Conservative Central Office was becoming exasperated at Dartford's failure to pick someone to fight the seat in an election that had to take place in 1950 and might be called before then.)

'That's right. Any suggestions?'

'Well, there's a young woman, Margaret Roberts, that you might look at. She's very good.'

'Oh, but Dartford is a real industrial stronghold. I don't think a woman would do at all.'

'Well, you know best of course. But why not just look at her?'

And they did. I was invited to have lunch with John Miller and his wife, Phee, and the Dartford Women's Chairman, Mrs Fletcher, on the Saturday on Llandudno Pier. Presumably, and in spite of any reservations about the suitability of a woman candidate for their seat, they liked what they saw. I certainly got on well with them. The Millers were to become close friends and I quickly developed a healthy respect for the dignified Mrs Fletcher. After lunch we walked back along the pier to the Conference Hall in good time for a place to hear Winston Churchill give the Party Leader's speech. It was the first we had seen of him that week, because in those days the Leader did not attend the Conference

itself, appearing only at a final rally on the Saturday. Foreign affairs naturally dominated his speech – it was the time of the Berlin blockade and the Western airlift – and his message was sombre, telling us that only American nuclear weapons stood between Europe and communist tyranny and warning of 'what seems a remorselessly approaching third world war'.

I did not hear from Dartford until December, when I was asked to attend an interview at Palace Chambers, Bridge Street – then housing Conservative Central Office – not far from Parliament itself. With a large number of other hopefuls I turned up on the evening of Thursday 30 December for my first Selection Committee. Very few outside the political arena know just how nerve-racking such occasions are. The interviewee who is not nervous and tense is very likely to perform badly: for, as any chemist will tell you, the adrenaline needs to flow if one is to perform at one's best. I was lucky in that at Dartford there were some friendly faces around the table, and it has to be said that on such occasions there are advantages as well as disadvantages to being a young woman making her way in the political world.

I found myself short-listed, and was asked to go to Dartford itself for a further interview. Finally, I was invited to the Bull Hotel in Dartford on Monday 31 January 1949 to address the Association's Executive Committee of about fifty people. As one of five would-be candidates, I had to give a fifteen-minute speech and answer questions for a further ten minutes.

It was the questions which were more likely to cause me trouble. There was a good deal of suspicion of women candidates, particularly in what was regarded as a tough industrial seat like Dartford. This was quite definitely a man's world into which not just angels feared to tread. There was, of course, little hope of winning it for the Conservatives, though this is never a point that the prospective candidate even in a Labour seat as safe as Ebbw Vale would be advised to make. The Labour majority was an all but unscalable 20,000. But perhaps this unspoken fact turned to my favour. Why not take the risk of adopting the young Margaret Roberts? There was not much to lose, and some good publicity for the Party to gain.

The most reliable sign that a political occasion has gone well is



that you have enjoyed it. I enjoyed that evening at Dartford, and the outcome justified my confidence. I was selected. Afterwards I stayed behind for drinks and something to eat with the officers of the Association. The candidate is not the only one to be overwhelmed by relief on these occasions. The selectors too can stop acting as critics and start to become friends. The happy if still slightly bewildered young candidate is deluged with advice, information and offers of help. Such friendly occasions provide at least part of the answer to that question put to all professional politicians: 'Why on earth do you do it?'

My next step was to be approved by the national Party. Usually Party approval precedes selection, but when I went to Central Office the day after to meet the Women's Chairman, Miss Marjorie Maxse, I had no difficulties. A few weeks afterwards I was invited to dinner to meet the Party Chairman Lord Woolton, his deputy J.P.L. Thomas, Miss Maxse and the Area Agent, Miss Beryl Cook. Over the next few years Marjorie Maxse and Beryl Cook proved to be strong supporters and they gave me much useful advice.

After selection comes adoption. The formal adoption meeting is the first opportunity a candidate has to impress him or herself on the rank and file of the Association. It is therefore a psychologically important occasion. It is also a chance to gain some good local publicity, for the press are invited too. Perhaps what meant most to me, however, was the presence of my father. For the first time he and I stood on the same platform to address a meeting. He recalled how his family had always been Liberal, but that now it was the Conservatives who stood for the old Liberalism. In my own speech I too took up a theme which was Gladstonian in content if not quite style (or length), urging that 'the Government should do what any good housewife would do if money was short – look at their accounts and see what's wrong'.

After the adoption meeting at the end of February I was invited back by two leading lights of the Association, Mr and Mrs Soward, to a supper party they had arranged in my honour. Their house was at the Erith end of the constituency, not far from the factory of the Atlas Preservative Company, which made paint and chemicals, where Stanley Soward was a director. His boss, the Managing

Director, had been at my adoption meeting and was one of the dinner guests: and so it was that I met Denis.

It was clear to me at once that Denis was an exceptional man. He knew at least as much about politics as I did and a good deal more about economics. His professional interest in paint and mine in plastics may seem an unromantic foundation for friendship, but it also enabled us right away to establish a joint interest in science. And as the evening wore on I discovered that his views were no-nonsense Conservatism.

After the evening was over he drove me back to London so that I could catch the midnight train to Colchester. It was not a long drive at that time of night, but long enough to find that we had still more in common. Denis is an avid reader, especially of history, biography and detective novels. He seemed to have read every article in *The Economist* and *The Banker*, and we found that we both enjoyed music – Denis with his love of opera, and me with mine of choral music.

From then on we met from time to time at constituency functions, and began to see more of each other outside the constituency. He had a certain style and dash. He had a penchant for fast cars and drove a Jaguar and, being ten years older, he simply knew more of the world than I did. At first our meetings revolved around political discussion. But as we saw more of each other, we started going to the occasional play and had dinner together. Like any couple, we had our favourite restaurants, small pasta places in Soho for normal dates, the wonderful White Tower in Fitzrovia, the Écu de France in Jermyn Street and The Ivy for special occasions. I was very flattered by Denis's attentions, but I first began to suspect he might be serious when the Christmas after my first election campaign at Dartford I received from him a charming present of a crystal powder bowl with a silver top, which I still treasure.

We might perhaps have got married sooner, but my passion for politics and his for rugby football – Saturdays were never available for a date – both got in the way. He more than made up for this, however, by being an immense help in the constituency – problems were solved in a trice and all the logistics taken care of. Indeed, the fact that he had proposed to me and that we had become engaged was one final inadvertent political service, because unbe-



known to me Beryl Cook leaked the news just before election day to give my campaign a final boost.

When Denis asked me to be his wife, I thought long and hard about it. I had so much set my heart on politics that I really hadn't figured marriage in my plans. I suppose I pushed it to the back of my mind and simply assumed that it would occur of its own accord at some time in the future. I know that Denis too, because a war-time marriage had ended in divorce, only asked me to be his wife after much reflection. But the more I considered, the surer I was. There was only one possible answer. More than forty years later I know that my decision to say 'yes' was one of the best I ever made.

I had in any case been thinking of leaving BX Plastics and Colchester for some time. It was my selection for Dartford that persuaded me I had to look for a new job in London. I had told the Selection Committee that I would fight Dartford with all the energy at my disposal, and I meant it. Nor was I temperamentally inclined to do otherwise. So I began to look for a London-based job which would give me about £500 a year – not a princely sum even in those days, but one which would allow me to live comfortably if modestly. I went for several interviews, but found that they were not keen to take on someone who was hoping to leave to take up a political career. I was certainly not going either to disguise my political ambitions or agree to drop them; so I just kept on looking. Finally, I was taken on by the laboratories of J. Lyons in Hammersmith as a food research chemist. There was a stronger theoretical side to my work there, which made it more satisfying than my position at BX had been.

I moved into lodgings in the constituency. Indeed, Dartford became my home in every sense. The families I lived with fussed over me and could not have been kinder, their natural good nature undoubtedly supplemented by the fact that they were ardent Tories. The Millers also took me under their wing. After evening meetings I would regularly go back to their house to unwind over a cup of coffee. While I was still working and living in Colchester I would stay at their house at weekends. It was a cheerful household in which everyone seemed to be determined to enjoy themselves after the worst of the wartime stringencies were over. We regularly

went out to political and non-political functions, and the ladies made an extra effort to wear something smart. John Miller's father – a widower – lived with the family and was a great friend to me: whenever there was a party he would send me a pink carnation as a buttonhole.

I also used to drive out to the neighbouring North Kent constituencies: the four Associations – Dartford, Bexley Heath (where Ted Heath was the candidate), Chislehurst (Pat Hornsby-Smith) and Gravesend (John Lowe) – worked closely together and had a joint President in Morris Wheeler. From time to time he would bring us all together at his large house, 'Franks', at Horton Kirby.

Of the four constituencies, Dartford at that time was by far the least winnable, and therefore doubtless in the eyes of its neighbours – though not Dartford's – the least important. But there is always good political sense in linking safe or at least winnable constituencies on the one hand with hopeless cases on the other. If an active organization can be built up in the latter there is a good chance of drawing away your opponents' party workers from the political territory you need to hold. This was one of the services which Central Office expected of us to help Ted Heath in the winnable seat of Bexley.

It was thus that I met Ted. He was already the candidate for Bexley, and Central Office asked me to speak in the constituency. By now Ted was an established figure. He had fought in the war, ending up as a Lieutenant-Colonel; his political experience went back to the late 1930s when he had supported an anti-Munich candidate in the Oxford by-election; and he had won the respect of Central Office and the four Associations. When we met I was struck by his crisp and logical approach – he always seemed to have a list of four aims, or five methods of attack. Though friendly with his constituency workers, he was always very much the man in charge, 'the candidate', or 'the Member', and this made him seem, even when at his most affable, somewhat aloof and alone.

Pat Hornsby-Smith, his next-door neighbour at Chislehurst, could not have been a greater contrast. She was a fiery, vivacious redhead and perhaps the star woman politician of the time. She had brought the Tory Conference to its feet with a rousing right-wing speech in 1946, and was always ready to lend a hand to other



young colleagues: she spoke all around the country. She and I became great friends, and had long political talks at her informal supper parties.

Well before the 1950 election we were all conscious of a Conservative revival. This was less the result of fundamental rethinking within the Conservative Party than of a strong reaction both among Conservatives and in the country at large against the socialism of the Attlee Government. Aneurin Bevan's description in July 1948 of Conservatives as 'lower than vermin' gave young Tories like me a great opportunity to demonstrate their allegiance in the long English tradition of ironic self-deprecation. We went around wearing 'vermin' badges – a little blue rat. A whole hierarchy was established, so that those who recruited ten new party members wore badges identifying them as 'vile vermin'; if you recruited twenty you were 'very vile vermin'. There was a Chief Rat, who lived somewhere in Twickenham.

Of Clement Attlee, however, I was an admirer. He was a serious man and a patriot. Quite contrary to the general tendency of politicians in the 1990s, he was all substance and no show. His was a genuinely radical and reforming government. The 1945 Labour manifesto was in fact a very left-wing document. That is clearer now than it was then. Straight after the war much of the talk of planning and state control echoed wartime rhetoric, and so its full implications were not grasped. In fact, it was a root and branch assault on business, capitalism and the market. It took as its essential intellectual assumption that 'it is doubtful whether we have ever, except in war, used the whole of our productive capacity. This must be corrected.' The state was regarded as uniquely competent to judge where resources should and should not be employed in the national interest. It was not solely or even primarily on social grounds that nationalization, controls and planning were advanced, but on economic grounds. Harmful monopolies were seen as occurring only in the private sector. So nationalization of iron and steel was justified on the argument that 'only if public ownership replaces private monopoly can the industry become efficient'. Most radical of all, perhaps, was the Labour Party's attitude to land, where it was made clear that compulsory purchase by local authorities was only the beginning of a wider programme,

for 'Labour believes in land nationalization and will work towards it.'

As regards the specific promises of the Labour manifesto, the Labour Government had been remarkably bold in giving them effect. No one could have questioned Labour's record in implementing socialism. Rather, it was the economic consequences of socialism – devaluation and a return of inflation – which were the obvious targets for attack. Very heavy public spending had kept the standard rate of income tax almost at wartime levels – nine shillings in the pound. Far from being dismantled, wartime controls had if anything been extended – for example rationing was extended to bread in 1946 and even potatoes a year later. It was therefore possible to fight the 1950 election campaign on precisely the kind of issues which are most dangerous for a sitting government – and ones with which I personally felt most at ease – that is, a combination of high ideological themes with more down to earth 'bread and butter' matters.

The 1950 Conservative manifesto was a cleverly crafted document which combined a devastating indictment of socialism in theory and in practice with a prudent list of specific pledges to reverse it. It stressed the effects of inflation, the evidence of economic mismanagement and waste and bureaucracy. I was particularly pleased with its robust statement on foreign affairs, which noted:

> Socialism abroad has been proved to be the weakest obstacle to communism and in many countries of Eastern Europe has gone down before it. We are not prepared to regard those ancient states and nations which have already fallen beneath the Soviet yoke as lost for ever.

But Conservatives were careful not to promise an immediate end to rationing, large-scale reversal of nationalization, or anything too controversial on social security or the Health Service; and there was a positively cloying reference to the trade union 'movement', which was described as 'essential to the proper working of our economy and of our industrial life'. All of us knew that the three areas on which we were likely to be most vulnerable were



unemployment (where the voters remembered the high unemployment of the thirties, but not that it had risen under the second Labour Government and fallen under the National Government), the Welfare State (which many people thought we wanted to dismantle) and alleged 'war-mongering' (where there was a danger that the Labour Government's robust line would make Churchill's Cold War rhetoric seem extreme rather than prescient, as it was). I found myself dealing with all these questions at public meetings in the course of the 1950 and 1951 campaigns.

The 1950 election campaign was the most exhausting few weeks I had ever spent. So much was new to me; and novelty always drains the stamina. Unlike today's election campaigns, we had well-attended public meetings almost every night, and so I would have to prepare my speech some time during the day. I also wrote my letters to prospective constituents. Then, most afternoons, it was a matter of doorstep canvassing and, as a little light relief, blaring out the message by megaphone. I was well supported by my family: my father came to speak and my sister to help.

Before the election Lady Williams (wife of Sir Herbert Williams, veteran tariff reformer and a Croydon MP for many years) told candidates that we should make a special effort to identify ourselves by the particular way we dressed when we were campaigning. I took this very seriously and spent my days in a tailored black suit and a hat which I bought in Bourne and Hollingsworth in Oxford Street specially for the occasion. And just to make sure I put a black and white ribbon around it with some blue inside the bow.

Quite whether these precautions were necessary is another matter. How many other twenty-four-year-old girls could be found standing on a soapbox in Erith Shopping Centre? In those days it was not often done for women candidates to canvass in factories. But I did – inside and outside. There was always a lively if sometimes noisy reception. The socialists in Dartford became quite irked until it turned out that their candidate – the sitting MP Norman Dodds – would have had the same facilities extended to him if they had thought of asking. It was only the pubs that I did not like going into, and indeed would not do so alone. Some inhibitions die hard.

I was lucky to have an opponent like Norman Dodds, a genuine

and extremely chivalrous socialist of the old school. He knew that he was going to win, and he was a big enough man to give an ambitious young woman with totally different opinions a chance. Soon after I was adopted he challenged me to a debate in the hall of the local grammar school and, of course, I eagerly accepted. He and I made opening speeches, there were questions and then we each wound up our case. Each side had its own supporters, and the noise was terrific. Later in the campaign there was an equally vigorous and inconclusive re-run. What made it all such fun was that the argument was about issues and facts, not personalities. On one occasion, a national newspaper reported that Norman Dodds thought a great deal of my beauty but not a lot of my election chances – or of my brains. This perfect socialist gentleman promptly wrote to me disclaiming the statement – or at least the last part.

My own public meetings were also well attended. It was not unusual for the doors of our hall to be closed twenty minutes before the meeting was due to start because so many people were crowding in. Certainly, in those days one advantage of being a woman was that there was a basic courtesy towards us on which we could draw – something which today's feminists have largely dissipated. So, for example, on one occasion I arrived at a public meeting from another in a different part of the constituency to find the visiting speaker, the former Air Minister Lord Balfour of Inchrye, facing a minor revolution from hecklers in the audience – to such an extent indeed that the police had already been sent for. I told the organizers to cancel the request, and sure enough once I took my place on the platform and started to speak the tumult subsided and order – if not exactly harmony – was restored.

I was also fortunate in the national and indeed international publicity which my candidature received. At twenty-four, I was the youngest woman candidate fighting the 1950 campaign, and as such was an obvious subject for comment. I was asked to write on the role of women in politics. My photograph made its way into *Life* magazine, the *Illustrated London News* where it rubbed shoulders with those of the great men of politics, and even the West German press where I was described as a '*junge Dame mit Charme*' (perhaps for the last time).



The slogans, coined by me, gained in directness whatever they lacked in subtlety – 'Vote Right to Keep What's Left' and, still more to the point, 'Stop the Rot, Sack the Lot'. My speeches, even then, pulled no ideological punches. I told a meeting in the Church Hall, Lowfield Street:

> We are going into one of the biggest battles this country has ever known – a battle between two ways of life, one which leads inevitably to slavery and the other to freedom. Our opponents like to try and make you believe that Conservatism is a privilege of the few. But Conservatism conserves all that is great and best in our national heritage. What is one of the first tenets of Conservatism? It is that of national unity. We say one nation, not one class against another. You cannot build a great nation or a brotherhood of man by spreading envy or hatred.
>
> Our policy is not built on envy or hatred, but on liberty for the individual man or woman. It is not our policy to suppress success: our policy is to encourage it and encourage energy and initiative. In 1940 it was not the cry of nationalization that made this country rise up and fight totalitarianism. It was the cry for freedom and liberty.

I felt that our hard work had been worthwhile when I heard the result at the count in the local grammar school. I had cut the Labour majority by 6,000. It was in the early hours at Lord Camrose's *Daily Telegraph* party at the Savoy Hotel – to which candidates, MPs, ministers, Opposition figures and social dignitaries were in those days all invited – that I experienced the same bitter-sweet feeling about the national result, where the Conservatives had cut Labour's overall majority from 146 to 5 seats. But victory, as yet at least, it was not.

I should recall, however, one peculiar experience I had as candidate for Dartford. I was asked to open a Conservative fête in Orpington and was reluctantly persuaded to have my fortune told while I was there. Some fortune tellers have a preference for crystal balls. This one apparently preferred jewellery. I was told to take off my string of pearls so that they could be felt and

rubbed as a source of supernatural inspiration. The message received was certainly optimistic: 'You will be great – great as Churchill.' Most politicians have a superstitious streak; even so, this struck me as quite ridiculous. Still, so much turns on luck that anything which seems to bring a little with it is more than welcome. From then on I regarded my pearls as lucky. And, all in all, they seem to have proved so.

## MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND LAW

As I have said, the 1950 result was inconclusive. After the initial exhilaration dies away such results leave all concerned with a sense of anti-climax. There seemed little doubt that Labour had been fatally wounded and that the *coup de grâce* would be administered in a second general election fairly shortly. But in the meantime there was a good deal of uncertainty nationally. For me too in Dartford it was inconvenient. If I were to pursue my political career further I needed to set about finding a winnable seat. But I felt morally bound to fight the Dartford constituency again. It would be wrong to leave them to find another candidate at such short notice. Moreover, it was difficult to imagine that I would be able to make the kind of impact in a second campaign that I had in the one just concluded. I was also extremely tired and, though no one with political blood in their veins shies away from the excitement of electioneering, another campaign within a short while was not an attractive prospect.

I had also decided to move to London. With a little more money to spend from my job with J. Lyons, I had found a very small flat in St George's Square Mews, in Pimlico. Mr Soward (Senior) came down from Dartford to help me decorate it. I was able to see a good deal more of Denis and in more relaxing conditions than in the hubbub of Conservative activism in Dartford.

I also learned to drive and acquired my first car. My sister, Muriel, had a pre-war Ford Prefect which my father had bought her for £129, and I now inherited it. My Ford Prefect became well known around Dartford, where I was re-adopted, and did me



excellent service until I sold it for about the same sum when I got married.

The general election came in October 1951. This time I shaved another 1,000 votes off Norman Dodds' majority and was hugely delighted to discover when all the results were in that the Conservatives now had an overall majority of seventeen.

During my time at Dartford I had continued to widen my acquaintanceship with senior figures in the Party. I had spoken as proposer of a vote of thanks to Anthony Eden (whom I had first met in Oxford) when he addressed a large and enthusiastic rally at Dartford football ground in 1949. The following year I spoke as seconder of a motion applauding the leadership of Churchill and Eden at a rally of Conservative Women at the Albert Hall, to which Churchill himself replied in vintage form. This was a great occasion for me – to meet in the flesh and talk to the leader whose words had so inspired me as I sat with my family around our wireless in Grantham. In 1950 I was appointed as representative of the Conservative Graduates to the Conservative Party's National Union Executive, which gave me my first insight into Party organization at the national level.

But it was always policy rather than organization which interested me. In my holidays I would attend courses at Swinton College,* where the Director, Reggie Northam – a man of great generosity of spirit and a friend of John Maynard Keynes, who in the 1930s had gone to South Wales to experience for himself the life of the unemployed – would instil into us that the real political battle was for 'the hearts and minds of the people'. At Swinton and at the various Conservative Political Centre (CPC) meetings in different constituencies, to which I was frequently asked to speak, I was made to think through the real implications for policy of such widely toted concepts as 'One Nation', 'the property-owning democracy' and 'the safety net' (of Social Security benefits).

The greatest social events in my diary were the Eve of (parliamentary) Session parties held by Sir Alfred Bossom, the Member for Maidstone, at his magnificent house, No. 5 Carlton Gardens.

* The Party's staff college in Yorkshire, where everyone from ordinary Party members to Cabinet ministers attended courses and discussions on policy.

Several marquees were put up, brilliantly lit and comfortably heated, in which the greatest and the not so great – like one Margaret Roberts – would mingle convivially. Sir Alfred Bossom would cheerily describe himself as the day's successor to Lady Londonderry, the great Conservative hostess of the inter-war years. You would hardly have guessed that behind his amiable and easy-going exterior was a genius who had devised the revolutionary designs of some of the first skyscrapers in New York. He was specially kind and generous to me. It was his house from which I was married, and there that our reception was held; and it was he who proposed the toast to our happiness.

I was married on a cold and foggy December day at Wesley's Chapel, City Road. It was more convenient for all concerned that the ceremony take place in London, but it was the Methodist minister from Grantham, our old friend the Rev. Skinner, who assisted the Rev. Spivey, the minister at City Road. Then all our friends – from Grantham, Dartford, Erith and London – came back to Sir Alfred Bossom's. Finally, Denis swept me off to our honeymoon in Madeira, where I quickly recovered from the bone-shaking experience of my first and last aquatic landing in a seaplane to begin my married life against the background of that lovely island.

On our return from Madeira I moved into Denis's flat in Swan Court, Flood Street in Chelsea. It was a light, sixth-floor flat with a fine view of London. It was also the first time I learned the convenience of living all on one level. As I would find again in the flat at 10 Downing Street, this makes life far easier to run. There was plenty of space – a large room which served as a sitting room and dining room, two good-sized bedrooms, another room which Denis used as a study and so on. Denis drove off to Erith every morning and would come back quite late in the evening. But I found that I had plenty to do: this was the first time I had had to keep house. We quickly made friends with our neighbours; one advantage of living in a block of flats with a lift is that you meet everyone. By the end of the month I knew most of my neighbours, some of whom were rather distinguished. Late at night there was always the possibility of hearing Dame Sybil Thorndike's unmistakable contralto booming around the courtyard as she returned from a show. During the time we were there we did a good deal



of entertaining, with drinks in the evening or supper at the weekend.

To be a young married woman in comfortable circumstances must always be a delight if the marriage is a happy one, as mine was. But to be a young married woman in those circumstances in the 1950s was very heaven. I am always astonished when people refer to that period as a time of repression, dullness or conformity – the Age of Anxiety, etc. The 1950s were, in a thousand different ways, the reawakening of normal happy life after the trials of wartime and the petty indignities of post-war austerity. Rationing came to an end. Wages and salaries started to rise. Bananas, grapes and fruits I had never heard of suddenly reappeared in the shops. After the drabness of Utility clothing, fashion recovered its confidence and colour with Dior's wide skirts, strapless evening dresses, and Ascot hats. Italian restaurants popped up where boarded-up shop fronts had been before. Coffee bars, selling cappuccino, instantly christened 'frothy coffee', spread down high streets. Teenagers were invented. Ordinary homes began to accommodate fridges, Hoovers and electric washing machines. Billboards sprouted fewer Government notices and more commercial advertising ('Murray Mints, Murray Mints. Too-good-to-hurry mints'). TV aerials multiplied across the rooftops of England. Hollywood responded to the expansive mood of those years with the invention of wide-screen Cinemascope and big films to go with it, whether biblical epics like *Quo Vadis* or picturesque musicals like *South Pacific*. And people who had never thought to afford a foreign holiday discovered Spain.

It was the age of affluence, and with affluence came a relaxation of all the restrictions that had marked English life since wartime and, even beforehand, the Grantham of my youth. I cannot pretend to have liked, or even understood, all the expressions of this new popular freedom. When rock and roll was imported from America, along with names like Bill Haley and Elvis Presley, I assumed it would be a nine days' journalistic wonder. (It has never eclipsed *The Desert Song* in my affection.) The Angry Young Man and kitchen-sink drama also appeared to challenge the West End. Again, I assumed that this too would disappear in short order and, besides, I had had too much of kitchen sinks in real life to want to visit them on my night out. I little imagined that I would one day read John Osborne with approval and become a good friend

of Kingsley Amis, grateful for his support in the culture wars of my administration. And as Ascot, the Derby, Henley and Wimbledon recovered their old style in those years, the gossip columnists who lived off them re-emerged from their post-war hiding places in Obituaries or Garden Notes. Reading them was a somewhat shameful taste, like gorging on liqueur chocolates. But I have to admit it was a taste few could resist. Readers made the acquaintance of new household names like Lady Docker, Aristotle Onassis and Stavros Niarchos; and Monte Carlo once again became a synonym for high life.

People felt that after all the sacrifices of the previous twenty years, they wanted to enjoy themselves, to get a little fun out of life. Although I may have been perhaps rather more serious than my contemporaries, Denis and I enjoyed ourselves quite as much as most, and more than some. We went to the theatre, we took holidays in Rome and Paris (albeit in very modest hotels), we gave parties and went to them, we had a wonderful time.

But the high point of our lives at that time was the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in June 1953. Those who had televisions – we did not – held house parties to which all their friends came to watch the great occasion. Denis and I, passionate devotees of the monarchy that we were, decided the occasion merited the extravagance of a seat in the covered stand erected in Parliament Square just opposite the entrance to Westminster Abbey. The tickets were an even wiser investment than Denis knew when he bought them, for it poured all day and most people in the audience were drenched – not to speak of those in the open carriages of the great procession. The Queen of Tonga never wore *that* dress again. Mine lived to see another day.

Pleasant though married life was in London, I still had time enough after housework to pursue a long-standing intellectual interest in the law. As with my fascination with politics, it was my father who had been responsible for stimulating this interest. Although he was not a magistrate, as Mayor of Grantham in 1945–46 my father would automatically sit on the Bench. During my university vacations I would go along with him to the Quarter Sessions (where many minor criminal offences were tried), at which an experienced lawyer would be in the chair as Recorder. On one such occasion



my father and I lunched with him, a King's Counsel called Norman Winning. I was captivated by what I saw in court, but I was enthralled by Norman Winning's conversation about the theory and practice of law. At one point I blurted out: 'I wish I could be a lawyer; but all I know about is chemistry and I can't change what I'm reading at Oxford now.' But Norman Winning said that he himself had read physics for his first degree at Cambridge before changing to law as a second degree. I objected that there was no way I could afford to stay on all those extra years at university. He replied that there was another way, perfectly possible but very hard work, which was to get a job in or near London, join one of the Inns of Court and study for my law exams in the evenings. And this in 1950 is precisely what I had done. Now with Denis's support I could afford to concentrate on legal studies without taking up new employment. There was a great deal to read, and I also attended courses at the Council of Legal Education.

I had decided that what with running a home and reading for the Bar I would have to put my political ambitions on ice for some time to come. At twenty-six I could afford to do that and I told Conservative Central Office that such was my intention. But as a young woman candidate I still attracted occasional public attention. For example, in February 1952 an article of mine appeared in the *Sunday Graphic* on the position of women 'At the Dawn of the New Elizabethan Era'. I was also on the list of sought-after Party speakers and was invited to constituencies up and down the country. In any case, try as I would, my fascination for politics got the better of all contrary resolutions.

I talked it over with Denis and he said that he would support me all the way. So in June I went to see Beryl Cook at Central Office and told her: 'It's no use. I must face it. I don't like being left out of the political stream.' As I knew she would, 'Auntie Beryl' gave me her full support and referred me to John Hare, the Party Vice-Chairman for Candidates. In the kindest possible way, he told me about the pressures which membership of the House of Commons placed on family life, but I said that Denis and I had talked it through and this was something we were prepared to face. I said that I would like to have the chance of fighting a marginal or safe seat next time round. We both agreed that, given my other

commitments, this should be in London itself or within a radius of thirty miles. I promptly asked to be considered for Canterbury, which was due to select a candidate. I left Central Office very pleased with the outcome – though I did not get Canterbury.

The question which John Hare had raised with me about how I would combine my home life with politics was soon to become even more sensitive. For in August 1953 the twins, Mark and Carol, put in an appearance. Late one Thursday night, some six weeks before what we still called 'the baby' was due, I began to have pains. I had seen the doctor that day and he asked me to come back on the Monday for an X-ray because there was something he wanted to check. Now Monday seemed a very long way away, and off I was immediately taken to hospital. I was given a sedative which helped me sleep through the night. Then on Friday morning the X-ray was taken and to the great surprise of all it was discovered that I was to be the mother of twins. Unfortunately, that was not the whole story. The situation required a Caesarean operation the following day. The two tiny babies – a boy and a girl – had to wait a little before they saw their father. For Denis, imagining that all was progressing smoothly, had very sensibly gone to the Oval to watch the Test Match and it proved quite impossible to contact him. On that day he received two pieces of good but equally surprising news. England won the Ashes, and he found himself the proud father of twins.

I had to stay in hospital for over a fortnight: indeed, one was expected in those days to wait three weeks before coming out. This meant that after the first few uncomfortable days of recovery I found myself with time on my hands. We had, of course, been expecting only one addition to the Thatcher household. Consequently, the first and most immediate task was to telephone all the relevant stores to order two rather than just one of everything. Oddly enough, the very depth of the relief and happiness at having brought Mark and Carol into the world made me uneasy. The pull of a mother towards her children is perhaps the strongest and most instinctive emotion we have. I was never one of those people who regarded being 'just' a mother or indeed 'just' a housewife as second best. Indeed, whenever I heard such implicit assumptions made both before and after I became Prime Minister it would make me



very angry indeed. Of course, to be a mother and a housewife is a vocation of a very high kind. But I simply felt that it was not the whole of my vocation. I knew that I also wanted a career. A phrase that Irene Ward, MP for Tynemouth, and I often used was that 'while the home must always be the centre of one's life, it should not be the boundary of one's ambitions'. Indeed, I needed a career because, quite simply, that was the sort of person I was. And not just any career. I wanted one which would keep me mentally active and prepare me for the political future for which I believed I was well suited.

So it was that at the end of my first week in hospital I came to a decision. I had the application form for my Bar finals in December sent to me. I filled it in and sent off the money for the exam, knowing that this little psychological trick I was playing on myself would ensure that I plunged into legal studies on my return to Swan Court with the twins, and that I would have to organize our lives so as to allow me to be both a mother and a professional woman.

This was not, in fact, as difficult as it might sound. The flat at Swan Court was large enough, even though it was not ideal: being on the sixth floor, we had to have bars put on all the windows. Without a garden, the twins had to be taken out twice a day to Ranelagh Gardens. But this turned out to be good for them because they became used to meeting and playing with other children – though early on, when we did not know the rules, we had our ball confiscated by the Park Superintendent. Usually, however, it was the nanny, Barbara, who took Mark and Carol to the park, except at weekends when I took over. Barbara had been trained at Dr Barnardo's and turned out to be a marvellous friend to the children.

The fifties marked the start of a major change in the role of women. Until then they tended to be well into middle age when the last child of an often large family fled the nest; work within the house, without the benefit of labour-saving devices, took much longer; and home was also a more social place, visited throughout the day by a wide range of tradesmen, from the milkman to the window cleaner, each perhaps stopping off for a chat or cup of tea. Consequently, fewer women had the opportunity or felt the need to go out to work. The fifties marked the beginning of the end of

this world, and by the eighties it had changed out of recognition. Women were younger when the children left home because families were smaller; domestic work was lighter owing to new home appliances; and home deliveries were replaced by a weekly visit to the mall or supermarket. And the 1980s saw yet another twist: the trend whereby women started to remain at work in the early years of marriage, but to leave the workforce to have children for a time in their thirties.

These changes led to a powerful and largely middle-class lobby for tax allowances for child care – either nannies or play groups or, in educational disguise, nursery provision. As Prime Minister I resisted this pressure. I did not believe that working wives, who would presumably be bringing more money into the family anyway, should in effect be subsidized by the taxes paid by couples where the woman looked after the children at home and there was only one income. This was a straightforward matter of fairness.

Of course, these general arguments were not ones which affected my own decisions as a young mother. I was especially fortunate in being able to rely on Denis's income to hire a nanny to look after the children in my absences. I could combine being a good mother with being an effective professional woman, as long as I organized everything intelligently down to the last detail. It was not enough to have someone in to mind the children; I had to arrange my own time to ensure that I could spend a good deal of it with them. As regards being a barrister after I had become qualified, I would have a certain amount of latitude in the cases I took on, so I could to some extent adjust my workload in line with the demands of family. As regards politics, we lived in London, my husband worked in the London area, Parliament was in London – clearly, I must seek a constituency which was also in or near London. It was only this unusual combination of circumstances which enabled me to consider becoming an MP while I had young children.

Not long after I had the twins, John Hare wrote to me from Central Office:

> I was delighted to hear that you had had twins. How very clever of you. How is this going to affect your position as a candidate? I have gaily been putting your name forward; if you would like me to desist, please say so.



I replied thanking him and noting:

> Having unexpectedly produced twins – we had no idea there were two of them until the day they were born – I think I had better not consider a candidature for at least six months. The household needs considerable reorganization and a reliable nurse must be found before I can feel free to pursue such other activities with the necessary fervour.

So my name was, as John Hare put it, kept 'in cold storage for the time being'. It was incumbent on me to say when I would like to come onto the active list of candidates again.

My self-prescribed six months of political limbo were quickly over. I duly passed my Bar finals. I had begun by considering specializing in patent law because I thought I would be able to make use of my industrial and scientific knowledge. But it seemed that the opportunities there were very limited and so perhaps tax law would be a better bet. In any case, I would need a foundation in the criminal law first. So in December 1953 I joined Frederick Lawton's Chambers in the Inner Temple for a six months' pupillage. Fred Lawton's was a common law Chambers. He was, indeed, one of the most brilliant criminal lawyers I ever knew. He was witty, with no illusions about human nature or his own profession, extraordinarily lucid in exposition, and a kind guide to me.

In fact, I was to go through no fewer than four sets of Chambers, partly because I had to gain a grounding in several fields before I was competent to specialize in tax. So I witnessed the rhetorical fireworks of the Criminal Bar, admired the precise draftsmanship of the Chancery Bar and then delved into the details of company law. But I became increasingly confident that tax law could be my forte. It was a meeting point with my interest in politics; it offered the right mixture of theory and practical substance; and of one thing we could all be sure – there would never be a shortage of

clients desperate to cut their way out of the jungle of over-complex and constantly changing tax law.

Studying, observing, discussing and eventually practising law had a profound effect on my political outlook. In this I was probably unusual. Familiarity with the law usually breeds if not contempt, at least a large measure of cynicism. For me, however, it gave a richer significance to that expression 'the rule of law' which so easily tripped off the Conservative tongue.

From my reading at university and earlier I had gained a clear idea that what distinguished free from un-free regimes was that law ruled in the first and force in the second. But what was the essence of this 'law'? By what process had it evolved? And why did it have such deep roots in Britain and, as recent history showed, such shallow ones elsewhere? The legal textbooks that I now studied were not by and large intended to provide answers to such points. But the principles of law which they expounded continually raised in my mind these questions. Similarly, as I read about the great judges of the formative periods of English law, I was increasingly fascinated by the mysterious and cumulative process by which the courts of England had laid the foundations for English freedom.

But it was A.V. Dicey whose writing – above all his classic textbook *The Law of the Constitution* – had most impact on me. It had long been fashionable to attack Dicey for his doctrinaire opposition to the new administrative state, and there are plenty of learned commentators still inclined to do so. But I found myself immediately at home with what he said – it is not perhaps without significance that though Dicey's was a great legal mind, he was at heart a classical liberal. The 'law of the constitution' was, in Dicey's words, the result of two 'guiding principles, which had been gradually worked out by the more or less conscious efforts of generations of English statesmen and lawyers'. The first of these principles was the sovereignty of Parliament. The second was the rule of law, which I will summarize briefly and inadequately as the principle that no authority is above the law of the land.* For Dicey, writing in 1885, and for me reading him some seventy years later, the rule

* A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (8th edition, 1915), pp. 465–6.



of law still had a very English, or at least Anglo-Saxon, feel to it. It was later, through reading Hayek's masterpieces *The Constitution of Liberty* and *Law, Legislation and Liberty* that I really came to think of this principle as having wider application.

When politics is in your blood, every circumstance seems to lead you back to it. Whether pondering Dicey, poring over the intricacies of tax law or discussing current issues with other members of the Inns of Court Conservative Society, political questions insisted on taking centre stage in my imagination. So when in December 1954 I heard that there was a vacancy for the Conservative candidature in Orpington – which of course, being next to my old constituency of Dartford, I knew, and which was not too far from London – I telephoned Central Office and asked to have my name put forward. I was interviewed and placed on the short-list. Sitting just outside the selection meeting with Denis, I heard Donald Sumner, the local candidate (and Association Chairman), advancing in his speech the decisive argument that in Orpington what they really needed was 'a Member who really knows what is going on in the constituency – who knows the state of the roads in Locksbottom'. Denis and I roared with laughter. But Donald Sumner got the seat.

I was naturally disappointed by the decision, because Orpington would have been an ideal constituency for me. It seemed extremely unlikely now that a similarly suitable seat would become available before what looked liked an increasingly imminent general election. So I wrote to John Hare to say that I would now 'continue at the Bar with no further thought of a parliamentary career for many years'. Knowing me better than I knew myself perhaps, he wrote back urging me at least to reconsider if a winnable seat in Kent became available. But I was adamant, though I made it clear that I would always be available to speak in constituencies and would of course be active in the general election campaign.

Although I was in general a loyal Conservative, I had felt for some time that the Government could have moved further and faster in dismantling socialism and installing free-enterprise policies. But it had not been easy for them to persuade popular opinion – or indeed themselves – that a somewhat stronger brew would be palatable. In fact, by 1955 a good deal of modest progress had been

clients desperate to cut their way out of the jungle of over-complex and constantly changing tax law.

Studying, observing, discussing and eventually practising law had a profound effect on my political outlook. In this I was probably unusual. Familiarity with the law usually breeds if not contempt, at least a large measure of cynicism. For me, however, it gave a richer significance to that expression 'the rule of law' which so easily tripped off the Conservative tongue.

From my reading at university and earlier I had gained a clear idea that what distinguished free from un-free regimes was that law ruled in the first and force in the second. But what was the essence of this 'law'? By what process had it evolved? And why did it have such deep roots in Britain and, as recent history showed, such shallow ones elsewhere? The legal textbooks that I now studied were not by and large intended to provide answers to such points. But the principles of law which they expounded continually raised in my mind these questions. Similarly, as I read about the great judges of the formative periods of English law, I was increasingly fascinated by the mysterious and cumulative process by which the courts of England had laid the foundations for English freedom.

But it was A.V. Dicey whose writing – above all his classic textbook *The Law of the Constitution* – had most impact on me. It had long been fashionable to attack Dicey for his doctrinaire opposition to the new administrative state, and there are plenty of learned commentators still inclined to do so. But I found myself immediately at home with what he said – it is not perhaps without significance that though Dicey's was a great legal mind, he was at heart a classical liberal. The 'law of the constitution' was, in Dicey's words, the result of two 'guiding principles, which had been gradually worked out by the more or less conscious efforts of generations of English statesmen and lawyers'. The first of these principles was the sovereignty of Parliament. The second was the rule of law, which I will summarize briefly and inadequately as the principle that no authority is above the law of the land.* For Dicey, writing in 1885, and for me reading him some seventy years later, the rule

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of law still had a very English, or at least Anglo-Saxon, feel to it. It was later, through reading Hayek's masterpieces *The Constitution of Liberty* and *Law, Legislation and Liberty* that I really came to think of this principle as having wider application.

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made as regards the removal of controls and, even more modestly, returning nationalized industries to the private sector. The rationing of food had finally been brought to an end. Large steps had been taken towards restoring the convertibility of the currency. Iron and steel nationalization had been halted and a start made in selling road haulage. Above all, the proportion of GNP taken by the state had been reduced steadily in the years from 1951. And there was one development of great importance for the future: the breaking of the BBC's monopoly of broadcasting and the beginning of commercial television.

## SUEZ AND AFTER

Conservative thinking about policy matters was also becoming more self-confident and more radical. This can be illustrated by a comparison between the two most influential publications produced by the Party over these years – *One Nation* (October 1950) and *Change is our Ally* (May 1954). Both were written by an overlapping group of remarkably gifted young Members of Parliament, including Enoch Powell, Angus Maude, Robert Carr and (*One Nation* only) Ted Heath and Iain Macleod. Admittedly, *One Nation* dealt with social policy which, particularly at a time when it was clear that a Conservative government would have to rein back on public expenditure, was a tricky topic. But still the relative blandness of that document – which emphasized (soundly enough, of course) Conservative commitment to a 'safety net' of benefits securing a living standard below which none must fall, and to Anthony Eden's notion of the strengthening of the weak rather than the weakening of the strong – suggested a defensive exercise and indeed a defensive mentality.

*Change is our Ally* is a far more exciting document which, when I re-read it in the late 1980s, I found to contain very much the same analysis as that we had adopted since I became Party Leader. It began by tracing the growth of collectivism in the British economy between the wars. It then boldly attacked the notion that the planning of the Second World War economy could appropriately



be extended into peacetime. It even pointed out – what everyone knew to be true, but what for years after the war went largely unsaid – that the wartime system of planning had been inefficient, wasteful and bureaucratic, however necessary in the emergency the nation faced at the time. The follies and absurdities of the economic plan, with its detailed predictions and quantified targets, were further exposed by retrospective comparisons between the assumptions made in Lord Beveridge's unofficial study *Full Employment in a Free Society*, published in 1944, and the situation a decade later. It was all admirably commonsensical. What the authors of *Change is our Ally*, and indeed those of the following year's Conservative manifesto, did not do – and I certainly claim no credit for thinking at the time that they should have done – was to propose the root and branch dismantling of collectivism in industry or fundamental reform in the Welfare State. But in the mid–1950s the Conservative Party was at least playing with a consistent free market analysis which would, in due course and given the opportunities of government, have led to free market policies. This, however, was not how matters were to develop.

In April 1955 Churchill resigned as Prime Minister to be succeeded by Anthony Eden, and there was in quick succession a snap general election, a new Conservative Government, the débâcle of Suez and the arrival at No. 10 of Harold Macmillan, the wizard of change.

During the general election campaign of May 1955 I spoke in a number of constituencies. But for me it was generally a dull affair. Once you have been a candidate everything else palls. Moreover, there was very little doubt of the outcome on this occasion. Sure enough, the Conservatives won an overall majority of fifty-eight. But the Eden administration's political honeymoon turned out to be a short one. It quickly appeared that Rab Butler's pre-election Budget had been too loose, and there followed a much tighter emergency Budget in October, which badly damaged Butler's reputation – he was replaced as Chancellor by Harold Macmillan six months later – and seriously dented the Government's. But it was, of course, to be foreign affairs which would be Eden's real undoing.

The background to the Suez crisis of July to November 1956 has been much discussed. At the time the general feeling, at least among

Conservatives, was that Britain was a great power which should not be pushed around by Nasser's Egypt and that the latter needed to be taught a lesson, not least *pour encourager les autres*. Many of the details, for example the degree of collusion between Britain and France on the one hand and Israel on the other, were not available to the wider public at the time. To us, therefore, it appeared almost incomprehensible that first Anthony Nutting and then my old friend Edward Boyle should resign from the Government in protest at the intervention. Now their actions are more understandable, though even all these years later I could not endorse them.

The balance of interest and principle in the Suez affair is not a simple one. I had no qualms about Britain's right to respond to Nasser's illegal seizure of an international waterway – if only action had been taken quickly and decisively. Over the summer, however, we were outmanoeuvred by a clever dictator into a position where our interests could only be protected by bending our legal principles. Among the many reasons for criticizing the Anglo-French-Israeli collusion is that it was bound to tarnish our case when it became known, as it assuredly would and did. At the same time, Suez was the last occasion when the European powers might have withstood and brought down a Third World dictator who had shown no interest in international agreements, except where he could profit from them. Nasser's victory at Suez had among its fruits the overthrow of the pro-Western regime in Iraq, the Egyptian occupation of the Yemen, and the encirclement of Israel which led to the Six Day War – and the bills were still coming in when I left office.

As I came to know more about it, I drew four lessons from this sad episode. First, we should not get into a military operation unless we were determined and able to finish it. Second, we should never again find ourselves on the opposite side to the United States in a major international crisis affecting Britain's interests. Third, we should ensure that our actions were in accord with international law. And finally, he who hesitates is lost.

At the time, I fiercely supported the Suez campaign in argument. I was repelled by what seemed to me the opportunism of the Labour Party in turning against the operation after initially supporting it. Denis and I were among the thousands of readers who cancelled the *Observer* and pledged never to read it again because of its opposition to Suez. This is not to say that I had no misgivings. Even though in those days I was much less conscious of international legal niceties than I later became, I did think it slightly rum that the evening paper which I dashed across Chancery Lane in a downpour to secure blared out the headline 'Ultimatum!' Britain and France were demanding that the Egyptians and Israelis withdraw from the canal and allow an Anglo-French force to separate them and protect the waterway. It was not quite clear to me how the British could issue an ultimatum to the Egyptians to withdraw from their own territory. Still, I swallowed my hesitations and supported Eden.

Politically, the failure of the Suez operation came as a body blow. Although it took many years for the full picture to emerge, it was immediately clear that the Government had been incompetent, and that its incompetence had been exposed in the most humiliating fashion. For a Conservative government – particularly one led by someone whose reputation was founded on the conduct of foreign affairs – the outcome was particularly damaging. There was a mood of dismay bordering on despair among Conservative supporters. Denis's reaction, as an ex-officer in the Royal Artillery, was sharpened by anger that our troops had been let down when the operation was halted close to completion. As he said to me: 'You never announce a ceasefire when your troops are out on patrol.' I would remember this: politicians must never take decisions in war without full consideration of what they mean to our forces on the ground.

We also blamed harshly the conduct of the United States. Some Conservatives never forgave the Americans, and the fact that anti-Americanism lingered on in some generally right-wing circles when I was Prime Minister must be in part attributed to this. I too felt that we had been let down by our traditional ally – though at the time, of course, I did not realize that Eisenhower felt equally let down by the Anglo-French decision to launch military operations on the eve of a Presidential election in which he was running on a peace ticket. But in any case I also felt that the 'special relationship' with our transatlantic cousins had foundations too solid to be eroded by even such a crisis as Suez. Some people argued that

Suez demonstrated that the Americans were so hostile to Britain's imperial role, and were now so much a superpower, that they could not be trusted and that closer European integration was the only answer. But, as I have argued, there was an alternative – and quite contrary – conclusion. This was that British foreign policy could not long be pursued without ensuring for it the support of the United States. Indeed, in retrospect I can see that Suez was an unintended catalyst in the peaceful and necessary transfer of power from Britain to America as the ultimate upholder of Western interests and the liberal international economic system.

I was not so preoccupied with Suez as to be unconscious of the wicked ruthlessness of the Soviet Union's behaviour in crushing the Hungarian revolution in November 1956 – even under bouncy Nikita Khrushchev, who had visited Britain with his amiable wife just a few months earlier. I never imagined that communism even with a human face could somehow generate a human heart. But at the time it seemed extraordinary to me that the Soviet Union should be prepared to undo all the efforts it had made since the death of Stalin to improve its image by such a crude and barbarous affront to decency. Some years later I discussed my reaction with Bob Conquest, who was to provide me with so much wise advice when I became Leader of the Opposition and whose *The Great Terror* in the late 1960s first fully exposed the scale of Stalin's murders. He said that the classic error we all made in dealing with the Soviets was in assuming that they would behave as Westerners would in their circumstances. They were shaped by a very different and much more brutal political culture. It was my recollection of all this that led me, after Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, to ask our Intelligence Services to look back over events like Hungary, which we had not foreseen because we had failed to penetrate the psychology of the aggressor, and draw out any conclusions for future action.

Yet there is little we could have done to prevent the Hungarian tragedy – and no way that NATO would have risked a major war for Hungary, with or without Suez. But many Hungarians thought that they had been encouraged to think otherwise, which added to their bitterness at our betrayal. I remember a Sunday newspaper interview with a Hungarian woman sheltering in a basement. She said: 'The West will not come and help. Freedom is very selfish.' I burned at the reproach. Whatever we were or were not in a position to do, it seemed to me that a world divided into spheres of influence which condemned this woman to live under communism was one which had to be changed.



After the fiasco of Suez it was clear that Anthony Eden could not remain as Prime Minister. He fell ill during the crisis and resigned in January 1957. There was much speculation in the circles in which I moved as to who would succeed – in those days, of course, Conservative Leaders 'emerged' rather than being elected. My Conservative friends in Chambers were convinced that Rab Butler would never be summoned by the Queen because he was too left wing. By contrast, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time of Suez, Harold Macmillan, was considered to be the right-wing candidate. All of which shows how little we knew of the past and present convictions of both men – particularly the brilliant, elusive figure who was shortly to become Prime Minister.

Harold Macmillan had the strengths and weaknesses of the consummate politician. He cultivated a languorous and almost antediluvian style which was not – and was not intended to be – sufficiently convincing to conceal the shrewdness behind it. He was a man of masks. It was impossible to tell, for instance, that behind the cynical Edwardian façade was one of the most deeply religious souls in politics.

Harold Macmillan's great and lasting achievement was to repair the relationship with the United States. This was the essential condition for Britain to restore her reputation and standing. Unfortunately, he was unable to repair the damage inflicted by Suez on the morale of the British political class – a veritable 'Suez syndrome'. They went from believing that Britain could do anything to an almost neurotic belief that Britain could do nothing. This was always a grotesque exaggeration. At that time we were a middle-ranking diplomatic power after America and the Soviet Union, a nuclear power, a leading member of NATO, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the centre of a great Commonwealth.

Macmillan's impact on domestic affairs was mixed. Under his leadership there was the 1957 decontrol of private sector rents –

which greatly reduced the scope of the rent control that had existed in one form or another since 1915 – a necessary, though far from popular move. Generally, however, Macmillan's leadership edged the Party in the direction of state intervention, a trend which would become much more marked after 1959.

Even at the time some developments made me uneasy. When Peter Thorneycroft, Enoch Powell and Nigel Birch – Macmillan's entire Treasury team – resigned over a £50 million increase in public expenditure in January 1958, Macmillan talked wittily of 'little local difficulties'. I felt in no position to judge the rights and wrongs of the dispute itself. But the husbanding of public money did not strike me as an ignoble cause over which to resign. The first steps away from the path of financial rectitude always make its final abandonment that much easier. And that abandonment brings its own adverse consequences. Such was the case in the years that followed.

Yet in Macmillan the Party certainly had an immensely shrewd and able politician. As early as the summer of 1957 he had understood that the living standards of ordinary people had been rising fast, and that this offered the best hope of political success. It was then that he observed that 'most of our people have never had it so good'.*

The Labour Party and the critics pounced on this as an example of Macmillan's complacency and materialism. But in fact it was true and politically potent. There was a feeling that things never *had* been better, and that this was attributable to private enterprise rather than planning. The last thing the country wanted was to return to hair-shirted austerity. So the attacks on 'Super-Mac' rebounded.

That said, the political recovery was by no means immediate. At the time of the October 1957 Party Conference – one of the very few that I did not attend – the opinion polls were showing Labour at 52 per cent and the Conservatives at 33 per cent. On top of that,

* Admittedly he went on, as I used to point out: 'What is beginning to worry some of us is "Is it too good to be true?" or perhaps I should say "Is it too good to last?" for, amidst all the prosperity, there is one problem that has troubled us in one way or another ever since the war. It's the problem of rising prices.'



the Liberal Party dealt us a severe blow by winning the Torrington by-election in March 1958.

It was not until the late summer of that year that the Conservatives caught up with Labour in the opinion polls. By the time of the 1959 general election the two main parties were unashamedly competing to appeal to the nation's desire for material self-advancement. The Conservative manifesto bluntly stated: 'Life's better with the Conservatives, don't let Labour ruin it.' It went on to promise a doubling of the British standard of living in a generation. As for Labour, a few days into the campaign the Party Leader Hugh Gaitskell promised that there would be no rise in income tax in spite of all the extra spending Labour planned – even in that political climate of optimism, a fatally incredible pledge.

## THE FINCHLEY ROAD

Well before this I myself had re-entered the fray. In February 1956 I wrote to Donald Kaberry, the Party Vice-Chairman in charge of candidates:

> For some time now I have been feeling the temptation to return to active politics. I had intended, when I was called to the Bar, to concentrate entirely on legal work but a little experience at the Revenue Bar, and in Company matters, far from turning my attention from politics has served to draw my attention more closely to the body which is responsible for the legislation about which I have come to hold strong views.

I went to see Donald Kaberry the following month. There was no problem in my being put back on the list of candidates – this time to be considered for safe Conservative-held seats only. I was all the more delighted because I found in Donald Kaberry a constant and dependable source of wise advice and friendship – no small thing for an aspiring candidate.

I was less fortunate in the reception I received from Selection

Committees. It had begun at Orpington in 1954. It was the same at Beckenham, Hemel Hempstead and then Maidstone in 1957 and 1958. I would be short-listed for the seat, would make what was generally acknowledged to be a good speech – and then the questions, most of them having the same purpose, would begin. With my family commitments, would I have time enough for the constituency? Did I realize how much being a Member of Parliament would keep me away from home? Might it not be better to wait for a year or two before trying to get into the House? And sometimes more bluntly still: did I really think that I could fulfil my duties as a mother with young children to look after and as an MP?

I felt that Selection Committees had every right to ask me these questions. I explained our family circumstances and that I already had the help of a first-class nanny. I also used to describe how I had found it possible to be a professional woman and a mother by organizing my time properly. What I resented, however, was that beneath some of the criticism I detected a feeling that the House of Commons was not really the right place for a woman anyway. Perhaps some of the men at Selection Committees entertained this prejudice, but I found then and later that it was the women who came nearest to expressing it openly. Not for the first time the simplistic left-wing concept of 'sex discrimination' had got it all wrong.

I was hurt and disappointed by these experiences. They were, after all, an attack on me not just as a candidate but as a wife and mother. But I refused to be put off by them. I was confident that I had something to offer in politics. I knew that many others who had crossed my political path very much wanted me to get into the House. And most important of all, Denis never had any doubts. He was always there to comfort and support me.

In April 1958 I had another long talk with Donald Kaberry at Central Office. He told me about the constituencies which were likely to select soon and I, for my part, spoke frankly about the difficulties I had faced as a woman with the Selection Committees. Unfortunately, this is not one of the topics on which even the wisest male friend can give very useful counsel. But Donald Kaberry did give me advice on what to wear on these sensitive occasions – something smart but not showy. In fact, looking me up and down, he said he thought the black coat dress with brown trim which I was wearing would be just fine. His sartorial judgement would soon be put to the test. For I now entered my name for – and in July was called to interview at – the safe Conservative seat of Finchley, North London, whose MP was retiring.



Finchley was not an area of London that I knew particularly well. But like any enthusiastic would-be candidate I set to work to find out all there was to know about it. I was determined that no one would know the Finchley equivalent of Locksbottom better than I. But one advantage of an urban seat, particularly a London seat, is that you know that the most topical issues locally will correspond very closely to the most important political issues nationally. And that is not always the case with a rural or regional seat. So, for example, rent decontrol was bound to be controversial in Finchley, as nationally. Immigration too was just starting to figure on the political landscape – it was to lead to the first Notting Hill riots just a few weeks later. The state of the economy, and which party was more likely to keep living standards rising and services improving, were bound to be at the forefront of people's minds in Finchley as elsewhere. On all of these things I knew exactly where I stood and what I would say.

I was one of a 'long list' of some 150 applicants, which contained a number of my future colleagues in the House. I was also one of those called for preliminary interview by the Constituency Selection Committee. I could tell that I had a good deal of support, which was satisfying but hardly grounds for confidence. Being the most popular person on these occasions can sometimes be less important than being the least unpopular person. If, as the weaker candidates are eliminated, all their support goes to your opponent it is quite possible to fall at the last fence – and we were barely out of the paddock.

It was arranged that the final four of us – three men and myself – should go before the Executive Council of the Association. I knew I would have a large number of friends, but I was also pretty sure that I could expect some fierce opposition; it would be a fight.

I prepared myself as best I could. I felt reasonably confident

that I knew the constituency. I had no doubt that I could cope with even quite abstruse questions of economic or foreign policy, for I had voraciously read the newspapers and all the briefing I could obtain. I prepared my speech until it was word perfect, and I had mastered the technique of talking without notes. Equally important was that I should put myself in the right state of mind – confident but not too confident. I decided to obey instructions and wear the black coat dress. I saw no harm either in courting the fates: so I wore not just my lucky pearls but also a lucky brooch which had been given to me by my Conservative friends in Dartford.

There was, however, one piece of thoroughly bad luck. This was that on the date of the meeting – Monday 14 July – it was quite impossible for Denis to come with me. Indeed, so quick was the whole selection process that he knew nothing whatever about it. Every year he would go away on a foreign sales tour for a month or so, and at this point his whereabouts were only 'somewhere in Africa'. By contrast, the other candidates were accompanied by their spouses. So as I entered the packed meeting on that warm July evening and took my place beside the chairman I felt very much alone.

But as soon as I was on my feet the inhibitions fell away. As always, I quickly became too taken up with the thrust of my argument to worry too much about what other people were thinking. The applause when I sat down seemed warm and genuine. As I had expected, it was at questions that the trouble began.

Could a mother with young children really effectively represent Finchley? What about the strains on my family life? I gave my usual answers, and as usual too a section of the audience was determinedly unconvinced. And doubtless it was easier for them because poor Denis at that moment was absent. At least he did not have to hear it all. But I wished he were with me all the same.

I rejoined the other candidates and their wives, where the tension was only relieved by that over-polite inconsequential small talk which such occasions always seem to generate. Once the last of us had performed, it seemed an endless wait until one of the officers came through to tell us the result. And when he did, it was to me that he spoke. There was no time to feel relief, pleasure or even



exhaustion, because it was now necessary to return to receive the congratulations of the Executive.

It was only afterwards that I knew the precise result. The first round of voting gave me thirty-five votes as against thirty-four for my nearest rival. On the second round, when the two other candidates had dropped out, I had forty-six against his forty-three. It was then expected that, for form's sake and to show that there was no ill feeling, the Executive should unanimously vote to select me as their candidate. Unfortunately, some of those who opposed my candidature had no such intentions. So I inherited an Association which I would have to unite behind me, and this would mean winning over people who had not disguised their disapproval.

But that was for tomorrow. First I must break the good news to my family back in Grantham. Denis was entirely incommunicado, blissfully unaware of what I had been through at Finchley. I had written him a letter some time before about the prospects, but he never received it. A couple of days later he was on his way from Johannesburg to Lagos via Kano in northern Nigeria. On changing planes he picked up a copy of the London *Evening Standard* which someone had left behind, and as he leafed through it he discovered the astonishing news that his wife had been selected for the safe seat of Finchley. I always seemed to be giving him surprises.

My first opportunity to impress myself on the Finchley Association as a whole was at the Adoption Meeting early the following month. This time I again appeared in a plain black outfit with a small black hat. I received what I afterwards learned was an almost embarrassingly glowing introduction from Bertie Blatch, the constituency chairman, who was to be a great patron and protector. (It was an added advantage then and later that Bertie owned the most important local newspaper, the *Finchley Press*.) As I entered the hall, I was met with warm applause. I used the occasion to speak at some length about both international and domestic affairs. I pulled out every stop. I knew that though I was the only duly selected candidate, this adoption meeting was not, as it should have been, a mere formality. There was still some die-hard opposition to my candidature, centred on one woman and her little *coterie*, who were trying to have the contest re-run. I was determined to overcome this. There were no problems in dealing with the three

questions from the body of the hall. As Conservatives do on such occasions, they gave me a terrific reception. But at the end – and contrary to the newspaper report of the occasion – a few of those present refused to vote for my adoption, which was overwhelming but not (that magic word) 'unanimous'. I left the meeting knowing that I had secured my candidature and confident of the loyalty of the great majority of the Association, but aware too that some were still determined to make life as difficult as possible.

I went as far as to write to Ted Heath, then Chief Whip but previously my near neighbour in Dartford, about the problems I was having. Partly as a result of his assistance, and partly because I used my own personal contacts, I managed to attract a distinguished field of speakers to come and speak on my behalf between my adoption and election day. Iain Macleod, Keith Joseph, Peter Thorneycroft and John Boyd-Carpenter – all people around whom my future political life would soon revolve – were among them. Denis's belated but extremely welcome arrival on the scene also helped in a rather different way. Bertie Blatch gave me constant and unstinting support.

Finchley had been run with a degree of gentlemanly disengagement that was neither my style nor warranted by political realities. I intended to work and then campaign as if Finchley were a marginal seat, and I hoped and expected that others would follow my lead. From now on I was in the constituency two or three times a week and regularly went out canvassing in each of the wards, returning afterwards to get to know the Party activists over a drink in the local pub or someone's house.

By the time I arrived as candidate, there was a good deal of concern that the Liberals in Finchley were becoming strongly entrenched. They were always excellent campaigners, particularly effective in local government elections. A few years before, there had been a famous local scandal over the barring of Jews from membership of Finchley Golf Club, in which a number of local Conservatives had been involved: the Liberals never missed an opportunity to remind people of it. I simply did not understand anti-semitism myself, and I was upset that the Party should have been tainted by it. I also thought that the potential Conservative vote was not being fully mobilized because of this. So I set out to make it absolutely clear that we wanted new members, especially Jewish Conservatives, in our branch organizations. Though I did not know it at the time, I was subsequently to find some of my closest political friends and associates among Jews. What was clear was that the potential Conservative vote was not being fully exploited, and that however many feathers might be ruffled in the process it was vital to strengthen our branch organization. I also put a good deal of effort into strengthening the Young Conservative organization in the constituency: I was sure that it was by attracting energetic young people that we could most surely resist the challenge of activist Liberals. By the time the election was called in September 1959 the constituency organization was looking in better shape, and I had begun to feel very much at home.



I also felt that the Party was on course for winning the general election. There had been a large number of Tory gains in the local elections in May, and conditions looked increasingly favourable for a Conservative general election victory. In Finchley we got on with our final preparations. In fact, I was on holiday with Denis and the twins on the Isle of Wight when the general election was called, and so I hurried back to London. The campaign itself, though the issues of Suez and rent decontrol were thrown back at me, was largely about which party could better secure and manage prosperity. In the debates I held with the other candidates in the churches and synagogues of Finchley that was always the underlying question. This was favourable territory. For, as we claimed, life really was better with the Conservatives – in Finchley as elsewhere. On top of the sense of prosperity, there was an awareness that in Harold Macmillan Britain had a statesman capable of acting a distinguished role on the international stage, whether it was in the United States or the Soviet Union or Continental Europe.

My first general election polling day in Finchley in October 1959 was very much to set the pattern for the nine such polling days which would succeed it. Soon after the opening of the poll I would vote in my own home constituency – Orpington in 1959, Chelsea and Westminster in later elections – and then drive up to Finchley with Denis. I visited each of the polling stations and our committee rooms, breaking for lunch with Bertie Blatch and others in a hotel. There I rigorously paid just for my own food and drink, to avoid

the accusation of 'treating' electors, terror of which is instilled by Conservative Central Office into all our candidates. From five o'clock I carefully avoided visiting committee rooms, which should all be sending out workers to summon our supporters to the polls, just dropping into a polling station or two to show the flag. Then at close of poll Denis and I went to the Blatches for something to eat, visited the constituency offices to catch the latest largely anecdotal news, and finally attended the count – on this occasion at Christ's College, though later all nine constituency counts would be held at Barnet Town Hall.

At the school, I found that each of the candidates had been allocated a room where he or she with a select band of supporters who had tickets for the count could get something to eat and drink and where we had access to that miracle of modern political life – a television. The 1959 campaign had, in fact, been the first in which television played a serious part. And it was the television results service which now told me how the Party was faring in the country. I divided my time between watching the growing piles of ballot papers, candidate by candidate, on the long tables in the body of the hall, and slipping back to my room to catch the equally satisfactory results coming in across the country as a whole.

At about 12.30 a.m. I was told that the Finchley results were shortly to be announced, and was asked to join the Electoral Returning Officer with the other candidates on the platform. Perhaps some people in a safe seat when the Tories were on course for a national victory would have been confident or even complacent. Not me. Throughout my time in politics, whether from some sixth sense or perhaps – who knows? – from mere superstition, I have associated such attitudes with imminent disaster. So I stood by the side of Denis with a fixed smile and tried not to look as I felt.

The Returning Officer began: 'Deakins, Eric Petro: thirteen thousand, four hundred and thirty-seven.' (Labour cheers.) 'Spence, Henry Ivan: twelve thousand, seven hundred and one.' (Liberal cheers.) And finally we reached: 'Thatcher, Margaret Hilda: twenty-nine thousand, six hundred and ninety-seven.' I was home and dry – and not just with plenty to spare but with a majority of 16,260, almost 3,500 more than my predecessor. The



cheers, always more controlled from Tory than from Liberal or socialist lips, rose. I made my short speech of acceptance, thanked all my splendid helpers, received a warm hug from Denis and walked down from the platform – the elected Member for Finchley.

In an unguarded moment, shortly after I had been selected for Finchley, I had told the twins that once I became an MP they could have tea on the terrace of the House of Commons. From then on the plaintive request had been: 'Aren't you there yet, Mummy? It's taking a long time.' I had known the feeling. It had seemed so very long for me too. But I now knew that within weeks I would take my seat on the green leather benches of the House of Commons.

It was the first step.