

Chapter 4

Oxford / Camp

1936–1937



1936

Peter was awarded an upper second. He had enough grade 1 papers to earn a first class honours degree, but his absolute fail in his Middle English paper cancelled out one of the grade ones, so dropped him a class. He had a session with his tutor, Blunden, and decided to stay up in Oxford to read for a B.Lit on *The Uneducated poets of the Eighteenth Century* and managed to arrange for a grant to last two years. Then we cycled to Pangbourne by the Thames to help with a Camp for Unemployed – half of them Welsh miners, the rest unemployed East of London clothing workers. We students were expected to sleep eight to a bell tent and of course strictly sex-segregated – so Peter and I huddled together in the enormous marquee which, having no ground-sheet, forced us to sleep under our sleeping bag on the cold, cold grass after the nightly camp fire.

In those days, before the war, the English were entirely unmusical, so while the Welsh sang nightly round the fire, the East Enders could only recite *Christmas Day in the Work-house* and similar pieces. One of them went mad suddenly, I presume he was manic depressive, and six of the students including Peter had to sit on him all night to prevent his running amok, until they could get a couple of doctors in to certify him. Peter said that he raved in half a dozen languages brilliantly, reminding him of James Joyce's *Haveth Childers Everywhere*. We had an interesting visitor, who was a refugee from Nazi Germany, incognito – a composer friend of Brecht. Peter managed to write down the words and music of two of his compositions – *The Comintern* and *The Miner's Song*. Much later we discovered that his real name was Hans Eisler.

I don't remember at what stage of that holiday we found ourselves camping in a small tent at Pangbourne again, having run out of money. We had company. A tent full of young men invited us to share food and drink with them and we finally got to sleep very late on that moonlit night. As a result, we slept until lunchtime and by the time we got ourselves dressed and packed our rucksacks the banks were all shut. We had sixpence, were out of fags and very hungry.

Hopefully, we went to the police station in the vain hope that they would cash a small cheque for us – which of course they couldn't. There was no such thing as cheque cards in those days. However, they did offer us innumerable slices of bread/butter and blackcurrent jam – nice doorsteps of slices – and several large mugs of very sweet strong tea.

We hadn't mentioned our sixpence, so were able to feed it into a cigarette machine for ten Players.

Now we had to get back to London! Our best plan seemed to be to walk out of town to find a lorry drivers' pull-up, to see if any of the drivers would give us a lift. It wasn't far and the place was full – but sadly they told us that there was a police trap just a few miles away on the London Road and it was more than their jobs were

worth to take us. Then a little man drinking tea in the corner piped up. “If you are stuck for a bed, come with me,” he said, “I’ll ask my wife.” He led us back into town and round several streets of council houses, and stopped outside one which was particularly clean, painted and polished. He left us outside while he consulted. He had been told we had no money. Out he came to fetch us, and we were made welcome. After a late tea we were shown to a highly polished double room. The wife was obviously embarrassed and I wondered if she were going to ask me if we were married – but it was not that. She hated having to say that there was only a metal pot under the bed. Her husband wouldn’t have a china one – not since their daughter had broken hers when she sat on it and got a nasty cut.

Once we had got over that difficulty we became very confidential and I was treated to sight of framed photographs of all her nearest and dearest. Finally, after large mugs of milky cocoa to help us sleep, we were escorted up to bed – a high double one into which one sank as if into a cloud.

After breakfast next morning Peter went into town to find a branch of Westminster Bank. His account, such as it was, was in Oxford. Years and years before the days of cheque cards, life could be very difficult. He had a great deal of trouble in persuading the cashier to phone Oxford to allow them to speak to Peter and cross-question him to make sure he was himself, before he was allowed to cash a cheque for £5. We were able to pay our kind hosts and get a lift back to London, the police trap having been cleared.

Most of the rest of that vacation we spent with our families. Students did in those days, unless they were rich. It was a time of very high unemployment and very low unemployment pay – Dole! Most students then came from well-off families and there were no opportunities anyway for them to earn.

Arthur and Florence, Joan and Bill had now moved to Bexley. Arthur was very firm. He didn’t mind what his sons got up to as long as they didn’t do it UNDER HIS ROOF. So we lived a very open air life, especially after dark. As we wandered from churchyard to allotment, from allotment to the heath, Peter would tell me ghost stories, a practice in his family who liked to scare one another. This had absolutely no effect until he began to frighten himself in the middle of the mile-wide stretch of grass on Blackheath one very dark night when I became quite anxious to reach the lights of Blackheath village.

That summer too, I went to a League of Nations Conference in Switzerland. It was marginally interesting and I discovered Swiss ice cream – quite different from the watery English stuff. I wasn’t sure why I was there and was very homesick for Peter. Bernard Flood was the only other Oxford Sstudent. After one social evening he kissed me, what, for him, was passionately – then

asked me how he could know I wasn't pregnant with Peter's child!! This left me even more speechless than usual. When I got my breath back I answered "Of course you can't," and left him. Thereafter I kept close to a father-like figure called Henderson, confided how much I was missing Peter, and showed him Peter's photograph. When I got home Peter was there to meet me. He had been working and sunbathing in his family's Bexley garden and was brown and healthy looking. We had a wonderful reunion.

That past term, as I have said, the Labour Club (Socialists) and the October Club (Communists) had joined together to form a United Front Labour Club with nearly 1,000 members. Now we returned to Oxford to attend an International United Front Student Conference. Peter was, of course, one of the organizers and often took the chair at the meetings. Meanwhile, I tended to be working on the Gestetner copier, the most advanced bit of office equipment in those days. First someone typed a skin to make a kind of stencil. The machine was then inked up – a very messy job – the skin was fitted carefully onto the machine and a pile of paper put into position. Finally, as the handle was turned, a sheet of paper was printed from the stencil, and then another, and another, until the ink ran out and had to be renewed.

Half way through that week Franco and his followers attacked the democratically elected Spanish Government, and the Spanish Civil War began. Of course, the delegation of students from Spain packed up at once and went home. A friend of Peter's, a Cambridge student called John Cornford, went with the Spanish to help defend democracy. Later he was joined by others to form the International Brigade. Germany and Italy supplied arms and support to Franco – Britain adopted a non-intervention policy and denied arms to the people of Spain and their elected Government.

For a while Peter felt he should go to Spain, but I persuaded him that he wouldn't be an asset to any army. We had a drink with John when he came home on leave that Christmas. A month later he was killed in combat.

When Peter and I had a few minutes free from politics, work and sex, one of our pleasures was to browse in a record shop. You were then able to take your chosen records into a little listening room to see if you really liked them. Every so often we felt that we should actually buy one as a kind of "rent" for our pleasure, but we had no gramophone, so we had to give them to Tony, one of our friends, who did have one, and let us listen to them sometimes. One in particular that gave us a lot of pleasure was called "Little Buttercup".

I mustn't give the impression that we actually spent 24 hours a day together. I did attend lectures and tutorials and had long, late discussions with my friends in St Hughs. Peter was a member of

the Cole Group – a select group of undergraduates and graduates who met in GDH Cole’s rooms for learned discussions to put the world to rights.

We went together to see Margot Fontaine dance Swan Lake, and a famous male dancer whose name escapes me dancing practically naked in the Rite of Spring. Cinemas in Oxford often showed foreign films. We saw “M” with Peter Lorré and “The Testament of Dr Mabuse” – brilliant but terrifying old German films (pre-Hitler). There was a great difference of opinion among students – should we sit down for “God Save the King”? Most of us compromised and either half stood, or rushed out just before the end of the film, thus missing the climax.

1937

From Peter’s diary, 1937:

New Year’s Resolutions

1. Write something every day.
2. Specifically, novel to be finished by March. Twenty poems to be ready by mid-February.
3. Refrain, under whatever provocation, from narking at all at D re men, because if wrong, unjustified: if right useless.
4. Manage money to enable me to give D occasional v. good time – e.g. splash dance in London, theatre
5. Pay off debts as soon as poss. esp. D.
6. Take up pipe again.
7. Start swimming soon, and play tennis in spring.
8. Make good start on thesis next term.

Pages from Peter’s diary:

January 7th: Made a vague and probably useless decision to keep a sort of scrappy diary here occasionally. Main advantage is that it tidies the mind and promotes new growth, like clearing the sour round an old clump of perennials. Well, what has happened so far this year? I’ll tabulate, not heirarchically, but as I think em up:

1. Spain getting more *serious* i.e. more finalistic every day. Many of my friends are there: Phillip is back, and Esmond Romilly, but Ralph Fox is dead. The new line-up, real democracy with communists as the keystone, v. fascist internationalism. No better justification of Stalinism and 7th Congress decisions has yet appeared. Democracy is nowhere more than a temporary concession provided by a prosperous capitalism. *I’m now quite convinced I should have gone*, though I would have been scared to hell; if I’d popped off it would have been a neat and sensible way out, and if not I’d have got things straight and felt completely solid and foursquare, without liquid intestines.
2. Finished last year apparently completely in love with D, with whom I went to a New Year’s dance. There are still big sections of my life that she doesn’t touch, but its not a position I can encourage; she insinuates herself into more and more of my affairs, and I find myself increasingly unable to make major decisions without taking her into account. This is a good thing, developing the essential link-up between

Note: I am a little unsure as to the Greek word as transcribed by my grandmother, but a Greek-speaking friend of a friend suggested this word meaning “approachable, welcoming”. SW

personalities and society, but I shall never allow myself to become dependent on her. She lacks some very necessary things: notably in my eyes προσαιτος [see note]: but she has a sweet understanding and a sweet nature. More important, I find the *mutualité* increasing, the

“we that were two are one”

or “l’egoisme à deux”.

I have always felt lust towards her, since I first met her, and she has a supremely lovely body, though I think her less *beautiful* than many people – her eyes and cheek-bones are the best – and a magnificent verve. But nowadays I want her about and need her friendship and presence always. Affection plus lust is the ideal in my view, and I think we’re getting it. As to her line on me, I’m still not very certain. I’m pretty sure she’s contentedly in love with me, but she is still pretty wild and irresponsible, and needs admiration so desperately that she risks certain intellectual reserves in providing herself with a circle of admirers. She thinks she has her money’s worth out of the change-over, but she’s very young indeed – it surprises me vastly every time I see her – and finds growing up very trying, and in a very secret way regrets the passing of the “super-sports-Spikes” days. Also my being poor as a church mouse has a considerable effect, partly psychological, because it makes her underestimate me, and partly physically, because she is a lively soul and likes good times, and I can’t give them to her. I don’t blame the poor kid a bit for this, and I think at her age she deserves a damn sight more gadding about and seeing people and things than I can give her, but it’s here that there’s likely to be complications. I hope I shall be wide-minded enough to understand them if they happen.

3. Re career, professions, etc: Present position:–

- a) £6 owed me by Lawrence and Wishart. Have written a strong letter demanding this, but it won’t come in time for me to go to Oxford with my darling.
- b) Edgell Rickwood wants to see me re *Poems 1936*. I’m convinced he owes me some cash on this, and I’m a bloody fool not to have made some definite financial arrangements at the outset. The book is still selling, and Edgell has promised to bring it out in paper covers for 2/6d, which will sell another 200 or so, but I shan’t let him until he agrees to pay me or make some arrangements. He’s also apparently quite anxious to bring out another book of mine, even if it’s only 15 or 20 poems. MUST GET THEM WRITTEN BY FEBRUARY. Think he must want to discuss money – can’t think of anything else. Shall see him Tuesday, together with the Oxford–Cambridge Joint Party meeting.
- c) Pennay-Rowell of Frederick Muller Ltd shows definite interest in my detective story, and wants a first look at it when its finished. If it’s good I don’t think I’ll let them have them, but I’ll try someone else – even Gollancz if necessary.
- d) I’m doing some articles, probably unpaid, for Eric Cook’s General News Service: will spread me a bit anyway.
- e) Very shadowy – have met West, Day Lewis, Blumerfield, Goldman, Cook, Edgell, Madge, Randal Swingler and others at a meeting and want very much to start going to their wretched parties. I came down to Blackheath with Charles Madge.

f) Jack Cohen tells me I am fancied for the editorship of a S. African People's Front weekly newspaper – with a good wage. If it wasn't necessary to sign a long contract I believe I'd go tomorrow. But I'm not quite sure whether I've got pluck enough: and Diana, who seems to be my only really important link with England, comes into the picture rather insistently.

g) Very shadowy again: Old Spikes is trying to push me into a proleptic job in a new school's sort of Left Book Club – which would be a peach if it came off, but I feel pretty certain it won't.

That's all for now. The novel is beginning to recover, and I think there's some life in it. Only wish I could find more time to write big chunks of it. Diana regards it as an almost dead horse, which is a pity; in an obscure way I respect her judgements quite a lot.

Must be lurv.

January 9th: Very Late. Must go to bed. Had a very pleasant two days at Diana's place. Saw a nice film and wrote quite a spot of the magnus opus, but tragically had to get up at 5.45 to see D off to Oxford which I loathed, wanting very much to go with her, and I don't think she liked it very much, poor kid. I love her.

January 16th: Came up last night. Last week strange in many ways, mainly re. D who holds some strange intellectual inferiority complex – a development of "sic transit gloria mundi" into rationalist channels. Think I've helped clear them up or at least to make her examine more clearly the logical basis of her assumptions. Very tragic scene – which somehow drew us much closer together. There are all sorts of unplumbed depths in Diana. I get fonder of her every day. For the rest, had a tiff with L and W over the booklist job and got paid for it by post this morning. Also saw Emily Barns and got detailed information i.e. South African editorship. £20 a month, passage paid, no contract. Looks jammy but I'm very dubious about it.

January 18th: Several things though nothing of tremendous importance. My Party jobs this term are Cole Group fraction, Colonials, secret members, Org. Com and a few odd jobs – much more free than ever before since I joined the student Party. There is a faint chance of getting digs belonging to a fresher who has been given rooms in college, in which case the coll who would have to pay compensation would subsidise me to take them (Oriel St).

D in the news again. Phillip Toynbee and Bernard Flood made a shattering attack on her work in Geneva much to my alarm, though I naturally said nothing, as I knew nothing about her work. Had a word with Toynbee this morning on the subject and he explained in detail – bad work and slackness last term – too open – crude socialist contact work and general bad behaviour re Conference in Geneva where she displayed no interest, was miles too open and flirted with Henderson most of the time. All very trying. I raised these points with her this afternoon and although she was very hurt and cried a lot her defence wasn't very good. I don't really think she's got any initiative or perhaps it's because she can't do fraction work at all. Bernard and Timbers are both to some extent being malicious, but D thinks that if she wasn't *told*

to do this or that it is sufficient defence. On the other business, Henderson, I tried not to make a fuss, and I'm convinced that I must not worry her about her wretched little affairs – I am increasingly certain that they are a fixture. I hate it but I can't do a single thing about it – so I'm going to accept it, expect it, and give up bothering about it. I haven't got time and neither have *we*: and I shall have to adjust the idea of *training* poor D to improve and just let it slide and hope she manages under her own steam. It's all bloody and all ludicrous, but we must stop having long hideous arguments too.

Thank God I've got other things to do. I'm beginning to get the contents of my new poetry book clear in my head and I hope to see Blunden tomorrow and get down to my thesis this week.

It is very strange to read for the first time in 1998 Peter's diary written in 1937! He was quite right. I *was* very young, in particular when compared to Peggy who was four years older than I was. But he was completely wrong about my needs. I never minded in the least his having no money and was quite content just to be with him. I didn't, in fact, have "wretched little affairs" of any kind once we were, as they now say, "an item", and only one meaningless but comforting one before then. But my reputation had suffered from my first term's round of tea parties and Oxford was a hot-bed of gossip. Above all, Communist Party members who had been up before 1935 resented me as Peggy's replacement. She had been a wonderful dedicated organiser, whole-hearted in everything she did. I was just Peter's girlfriend.

It was a busy year. We collected money for Spain: the Blind Hunger Marchers came through Oxford and spent the night in a church hall. For some reason I don't remember Peter was "gated" that week, which meant he had to be in his lodgings by 9 pm, so he was not with us when we helped with evening meals and read their letters from home and wrote back to their families for them.

The political climate at universities had changed radically since Peter went up in 1933. We knew that if Franco won in Spain helped by Hitler and Mussolini the second world war would soon follow. However, many in Britain supported Franco and rather approved of Hitler and Mussolini. Ordinary people didn't travel in those days so they were easy to fool. We students did get around a bit and knew what was going on. But unless we joined the International Brigade and went to Spain to fight on behalf of the Government there was little we could do except collect money for the Basque children's milk.

That Summer term I passed my Maths Mods (Mathematics Moderations). I had another two years of my degree to do as it was a four year course.