

# The Memoirs of Bruce Watson

## Contents

Foreword.....	2
Awakenings .....	4
The River Ferries .....	11
The City .....	24
Place names.....	33
“Swizzles”.....	41
The Nanny.....	44
Kites.....	50
Getting There .....	55
Albion: The Plantation.....	69
William Henry Watson .....	77
Chronology .....	111
Photographs .....	112

## Note

These memoirs were transcribed by Roger B. Austin during May 2005 from the original typescript. Only minor changes were made to correct spelling and punctuation. Notes on the typescript indicate that the author had not edited all the text to his satisfaction.

## Foreword

For the romantic historian the Caribbean Sea - its northern and Eastern limits defined by the necklace of West Indian Islands - was a time and place of active colonising.

Three hundred years of swashbuckling heroes, of ships spreading and filling their sails between hot tropical sun above, and the deep blue Caribbean sea beneath their keels. Or nights under clear countless stars, and a full tropical moon above.

The names that fill the pages of my boyhood history books, were those of the then young Nelson, of Drake, Rodney and Raleigh. Of Cortez and Bolivar, Bluebeard and Morgan. There were treasures plundered, found, buried and never found again. Of boarding parties and swirling cutlasses and thick smoke from cannon and musket fire.

Those men and their countries, England, France, Holland and Spain, claimed, lost and often reclaimed, territories in the names of their Kings and Queens. Three hundred years of wars and treaties of settlements and trade agreements, pacts made and pacts broken; until at last the dust settles early in the 19th century. National flags flew over territories that were finally acknowledged, grudgingly or otherwise.

While the colonisers shared more or less equally in claims of the islands, it was the British, Dutch and French in that order from west to East that staked out the three Guianas on South Americas north eastern shoulder. The western most and largest of the three Guianas, officially and legally became the colony of British Guiana in 1815. The transaction was made as a purchase at the peace settlement that ended the Napoleonic wars. The formation of the new country was made up by combining a districts of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice.

On a subsequent voyage in 1498, Columbus sighted at the country's coastline as he sailed past the massive estuaries of the Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo rivers. He did not bother to stop. And it was Sir Francis Drake who came there are looking for the mythical El Dorado, whose streets were said to be paved with gold. Ironically, modern-day Guyana (the spelling of changed when it became a Republic in 1966) does produce gold and diamonds.

The indigenous natives of the country had given the name Guiana to that whole area, Guyana and meaning 'Land of Many Waters', referring to the many rivers, large and small, that conjoined or individually made their natural ways from the hinterland to the Atlantic Ocean. The Demerara River is geographically central to the country and

the coastline either side of it define places as 'East Coast' and 'West Coast'. Nine-tenths of the population lived along that ten mile strip of coastline.

During the wars from 1780 to 1815, mostly between the French and the British, it was the French that started a settlement on the East bank of the Demerara River, where its more than three-mile wide estuary meets the Atlantic. They named the place Longchamps. But their occupation was to be brief, due to a successful invasion by the British who promptly named the budding town, Georgetown.

Not to be left out of things the Dutch took their turn at occupation and succeeded in booting the British out. They in turn and changed the name yet again to Stabroek. But the tenacious British returned in 1796 and once more reclaimed the territory, resurrected the name Georgetown and that was finally that.

It was during a Dutch and British occupations, that some order of planning for the city-to-be began. Georgetown from a then to now evolved sensibly with streets and avenues running north to south and east to west. Many Dutch place names survive to this day. Stabroek remains as the name of the large and lively market at the southern end of the city's main commercial street.

The native and Amerindians called 'bucks' (derivation unknown) have survived into modern times, but all others such as the Arawaks and Caribs, was decimated from the time of Columbus, as much from the invader's diseases as from their swords.

The conquering colonisers have left their marks in their own distinctive ways. The British legacy has been justice, education and the parliamentary system of government. The legacy from the French was mainly language and culture. The Spanish left their severe Roman Catholicism while the Dutch established banking and commerce.

In 1815 the district of Essequibo included today's Pomeroon, though my limited research us sources are vague about that.

Before 1815 Stabroek was a vast area that reached from present day Surinam in the east, to the Essequibo river itself in the west.

## Awakenings

About the time of my second birthday, my mother took up residence in the city.

She had by then borne eleven children in fifteen years, the fourth and fifth births being twin girls. Large families were not uncommon in those days, though I would say that eleven was well above the average.

There were events that happened just after that time that are imprinted on my mind and memory that serve my recollections to this day. Experiences that stirred my virgin senses.

The first seems to have been the sensation of joy analogous to the first bleep of the electronic heartbeat readout.

The friendly man was tossing me in the air and catching me again. This took place in the gallery of the East Street house. There was the sound of laughter and the general excitement of many people present. I had touched base with conscious emotion for the first time.

I have researched this incident with one of my elder sisters who pinpoints the friendly man as my Uncle Cecil, who was about to emigrate to Canada and the year was 1928. My birth date being at the very end of the year, this happening took place when I was not yet three years old; an early time for conscious recall but apparently not impossible.

Later, when I was about four or five years of age the experience was that of melancholy. It was my first experience of how quickly emotions can be stirred by music, and in this instance accompanied by sympathetic words.

The house to the south of us was a smaller single storied one, elevated off the ground on the usual pillars. A wedding reception party was in progress with dance music coming from gramophone. From one of the passage windows of our upper bedroom floor, I was able to look down on the crowded dance floor where the dancers were packed shoulder to shoulder. The sound of their shuffling feet wafted up to my young ears. The melody was mournful and in heavy waltz-time and I can still remember the opening lyrics:-

Oh I'm dancing with tears in my eyes

For the girl in my arms isn't you

Dancing with somebody new....

I was moved by the singer's heartbreaking sorrow and the sadness of the moment lay on me like a heavy blanket. No doubt there was gay music to follow but I don't remember, so overwhelming was the poignancy of that sad waltz.

My brother Geoffrey was party to my next memorable experience.

Geoffrey was twenty-three months my senior, which seemingly, gave him license to those privileges that superior beings enjoy over their inferior siblings. I had enough experience of life at the time to know that this state of affairs was a fact of life. This is not to say that he was a bully, but on those occasions when I was obnoxious he felt it necessary to be the enforcer. These were the days of being seen and not heard, and although I'm sure I exploited situations when they seemed gainful from being the baby of the family, I was more often than not wiser to keep my mouth shut.

Geoffrey was half a head and half everything else taller than me, a disadvantage I was never able to overcome. But I must have heeded his senior-ness most of the time because our growing up together was quite amicable.

Once again the wedding house next door is the focus of attention.

As the two 'babies' of the family, we were not allowed to linger for long downstairs after we had had our dinners. It was not that our older brothers and sisters were intolerant of us, for they had the same discipline when they were our ages. The family disciplines of the post-Victorian era placed great emphasis on a junior's awareness of seniority; the inherent message was unmistakably respect your elders, they are wiser.

But I stray.

Geoffrey (always addressed by his full name) and I were where we should not have been; out of bed. From the same passage window upstairs, we were listening to the sounds of voices and music coming from the house next door. Because of the voices I sensed we were not listening to their gramophone. I was up on tip-toe again, grasping the window sill with both tiny hands, barely keeping my chin on the sill.

"What's that?" I asked, banging my chin on the sill with each word.

"What?"

"That - sound?" I asked again. I didn't know how to ask the question when I didn't know what the question was. "It's a radio."

"Radio?"

"Yes radio. It has crystals in it." Geoffrey delivered this as a flat factual statement that everyone in the world understood. Except me of course.

“How do you - how?” My difficulty was his opportunity to be the sage. But patiently.

“You don’t wind it up. It doesn’t need winding.”

“But...”

“You just turn it on.” This time not quite so patiently.

“We have to wind.”

“That’s because we don’t have a radio. I heard John telling Mummie we must buy one.”

“But how - if you turn it on?”. I was unable to finish the rest of the question as I was still wrestling with the comprehension of it.

“It’s electric. You have to use one of those plugs in the wall for it.” Irritation now. But now I could sense that he was not altogether sure of the understanding of the workings himself. My own confusion was enough to try and cope with, and if John said we should get - a radio - I would understand then. I hoped it would be soon as I was already excited at the prospect.

I didn’t want Geoffrey to have all of the triumph, as we turned away from the window for bed.

“Oh” I said, with that oh-I-know tone unmistakable in my voice. But I hadn’t.

This incident dwells happily in my bank of memories. It was my first confrontation with things scientific and I’d lost the first round.

“If you don’t learn to behave yourself I’ll give you away to Mr. Nelson!” This from my mother.

Mr. Nelson was an old black man that my mother patronised because he was poor and lived alone. When he came to our backdoor to socialise with cook sitting on the kitchen stoop, it meant that he would not refuse something to eat at lunchtime if ‘cookie’ offered some to him. My mother saw to it that he was offered some lunch. In those days, even in the mid-day heat, lunch was a hot cooked meal that some would consider heavy.

“Mr. Nelson eats bad little boys.” My mother again.

Mr. Nelson of course, would do no such thing. Old Mr. Nelson was the gentlest, kindest old man that walked the face of the earth. But I was five years old young enough and impressionable enough to be persuaded by my mother’s frightening words. From my diminutive point of view, everything was up, not least of which was Mr. Nelson’s towering height. His bushy grey hair and eyebrows quickly transformed

his innocent countenance to that of a stalking monster in the eyes of a now thoroughly frightened little boy.

This episode is my first recollection of true fear. My mother of course was using it as a form of discipline, forgetting that her five year old might perceive her threat to be a real promise. This form of discipline was standard practice in the post-Victorian era. Discipline was commonplace even if deep down inside me I must have known that my mother would not have fed me to Mr. Nelson, or that Mr. Nelson would not have eaten me. The outcome was the sewing of the seed of fear which was easy enough to build on in the ensuing years, a condition that was to prevail well into my teen years. A period of keeping a dark secret until my age of reasoning was able to put those fears to rest.

What naughtiness I had been up to to so provoke my mother's patience, seems not to have warranted a place in my memories.

To be a colonial member of the British Empire was to be the inheritor of the Empire's traditions, especially traditions of a military nature. Such was Remembrance Day every November 11<sup>th</sup>, when forces of the local militia and police paraded with their bands before our war memorial.

Like any young boy, I was thrilled by the sound of blaring music, the pounding of drums and that unique sound that only marching feet can make. The police band was a sight to behold in their impressive uniforms of red-striped black trousers, set against silver buttoned white tunics and silver topped white pith helmets. The drummer would pound for all he was worth as he flailed away with both arms, leaning back to take the weight of his great drum against his body. He added more colour by wearing a long leopard skin apron that hung from his neck to his knees, draped between tunic and drum. Leading the band was the bandmaster with his bright scarlet shoulder-to-waist sash. But it was his great silver topped mace with its long shaft of brightly polished mahogany, that always drew the attention of the crowds. I could feel and hear onlookers catch their breaths in wonderment as he tossed his mace high and swirling into the air and recapture it confidently as it fell into his white gloved hands.

The short wet season from mid December to early February was far enough off to be sure of a bright sunny day for this ceremonial parade.

Gathered around our Cenotaph, troops at attention, the respectfully silent crowds were lulled by the band's muffled dirge as the wreath laying progressed. This was led off by the colony's Governor, resplendent in his bemedalled white tropical uniform. Crowning his white pith helmet was a waterfall of black and white feathers that looked to tumble and flutter from the slightest breeze.

The war memorial was situated at the southern end of Main Street, undoubtedly the most impressive street in the city.

Main Street should properly have been called an avenue, for that was what it **was**. It was split into two parallel streets by a central pedestrian walkway that was wide enough for four strollers abreast. At either end of the avenues were semicircles of waist high stone pillars that were formed like pawns from a giant chess set. The walkways grass shoulders, down from the path and then up to street level, were divided by a narrow drainage ditch. Growing from this area were beautiful flamboyant trees, umbrella shaped in their forms. For a good part of the year they were liberally covered with exotic scarlet blooms that gave the tree its name.

Main Street proceeded north from the Cenotaph for four city blocks, where it met with bisecting railroad tracks. From there Main became High Street, which was now one wide street that raced north for half a mile to join the seafront. From the Cenotaph to the seafront these streets were lined either side with large private homes resplendent in their gardens. In between them were two hotels that but for their signs, blended into the setting unnoticed by unfamiliar eyes.

The memorial itself was a plinth-mounted four-sided grey granite column that tapered upwards to form a pyramid at its top. Circled around its base was a graveled path with an outer collar of grass. The whole was surrounded by a tasteful wrought iron fence, creating a traffic roundabout.

Behind the cenotaph and separated by a canal, rose the lofty Assembly Rooms handsome in its tropical Victorian architecture.

Closing off the eastern corner where Church Street joined the scene, was the Carnegie Library, its upper second floor housing the Museum. It was one of the not so many non-wooden buildings of Georgetown, Diagonally across from the Library and the

Assembly Rooms, and separated by a small beautiful public gardens, rose the massive white painted walls of St. George's Cathedral. The cathedral was relatively immense and its wide descending steps straddled the full width of its front. We locals boasted that St. George's was the largest wooden building in the world. Allowing for a colonial penchant for exaggeration, there might well have been a grain of truth in that prideful boast.

In its Gothic bowels were tattered dust covered battle flags. I so clearly remember sitting in the great pews during my eldest sister's wedding, gazing up at those banners as they hung lifeless from their outward angled staffs, and wondering amusedly if they were present at the slaying of the dragon.

Tall Gothic windows and the large central rosette window high above the altar, spilt warm colours from their stained glass surfaces, to splash against the inner walls and arches. In spite of the many wedding guests present, there was no mistaking one's insignificance in such vast inner spaces. Hollowness has its own sound.

It wasn't just that it seemed the longest two minutes ever, it was more like an eternity and it was high drama.

This was Remembrance Day, 1930, and my mother had informed her two youngest sons, my brother not yet seven and I, not yet five, we would conduct ourselves 'like two good little soldiers'. We had some foreknowledge of this event because I remember feeling apprehensive; a tense seriousness. The experience was a sort of journey into new emotions. Those of respect for sacrifice, which was about 'the laying down of lives'. Death.

We equated death with fear. We had looked through Mr. Davis's two large volumes of The Great War many times - he had soldiered through it - and they excited us by their pictures of tanks and guns, muddy trenches and barbed wire. But there were no pictures of death. Death was fearsome and abstract and had not yet touched our family.

As instructed, we were now standing together, head to shoulder in the enclosed porch of our East

Street house, gazing unseeing through the glass window. This was minutes before zero hour waiting for the signal gun to fire. The Remembrance Day ceremony had started earlier that morning of November 11th, and the two minutes of silence - the remembering - always commenced at exactly 11.00 a.m. The time for everyone to stop and bow their heads.

Standing six paces behind us was my mother and our nanny Pamela, a coloured young woman whom we loved without knowing it.

"At any moment now" said my mother. "Listen". Her voice was calm and understating, which underlined the drama of these moments.

BOOM!! The glass panes rattled from the shockwaves; the boom was more like doom by now. Maybe the end of the world. Our rigid little bodies became more so as we snapped our arms up in salute like true British soldiers. Everything was stiff, everything rigid and crisp. All the city was silent, everything seemed to be self and thought and prayer. I don't think I prayed. I don't think I knew how to pray. We stood there transfixed not understanding what we were feeling.

The spell was broken by a titter from Pamela, so loving of her young charges, quickly followed by an admonishing "Shhh" from my mother.

BOOM!! Again the cannon, again the rattle of window glass, the signal for a return to normalcy, just two little boys again. goodbye the soldiers.

This dramatic introduction to the fears of life was a milestone in my own life. Most of it subconscious but I believe, in retrospect, that it was a starting place from which I began to understand that there were circumstances and considerations outside of my self-centered self. Things that were of greater importance. Whatever my mother's motives were for this experience, the lesson went further than she realised.

I am to this day critical of Victoria and her era for its narrow minded and unbending rigidity, and its reinforcement of the class system. **As** I've said before the era did not die with her, as my youth can attest to. But there were character values inherent in that era that I learned at the knees of my betters, for which I am grateful.

## The River Ferries

The ferry boat 'Queriman' - so named for a large, a local edible fish - casts off from her moorings in Georgetown harbour to cross the Demarara River. The tide is falling in a hurry, heading out to sea. 'Queriman' now points her bow into the tide's force. In that un-nautical attitude it will slide sideways all away across the river. The bow must be pointing against the tide if it is to make a safe and proper landing.

The 'Queriman' was already an old boat up when I was a boy. It was a wood burner with a voracious appetite for our local wallaba wood, which was in plentiful supply and fit only for burning. It was a dry, brittle wood that had a nasty habit of leaving splinters in the hand. The 3 ft lengths of it are neatly stacked wharf-side and more than once a day 'Queriman' replenishes its supply of fuel when it returns to home moorings. Two black Africans, one wharf-side and the other the ferries stoker, throw or hand down the logs, according to whether the tide level is up or down. The job is done quickly by the two men in their sweat- and dirt-stained undershirts and dull brown khaki trousers. Their calloused hands seemed to be impervious to the wallabies splinters.

The 'Queriman' is about 80 ft long and almost half as much in her ungainly beam. Its superstructure is half the overall length. The upper deck for first-class passengers is roofed over and mostly open to the scrub to wood decking. There is a closed in lounge for those who prefer to be sheltered from the windows and heat. The furnishings are sparse, a plain table whose polished up mahogany surface has seen better days and care. Fixed contoured wood slatted benches are against the bulkheads. Comfort was not a consideration from the builders, for the journey across the river will only be something like twenty minutes. If there is a sudden downpour that there are canvas blinds between the roof stanchions that can quickly be untied to let fall and made fast to the boats railings. It is a quick change of mood as the passenger deck becomes dark, and the pelting rain on the overhead roof sounds more like hail than raindrops. If I peek between the blinds I see the muddy brown river becalmed from the merciless pounding of the rain.

Against a lounge but outside it, 'Queriman' substantial funnel is protectively encased in its iron plated housing; it is warm and wet to the touch. As a boy I touch it.

Above, the ferry's African captain and his helmsmen are cosy in their small wheel house. Behind them and on either side, two life boats are slung between their davits. They look very permanent.

The main deck has narrow passageways that run the full length of the superstructure on either side of the vessel. The main deck forward continues flush and uninterrupted, but is covered over with the roof where a forecabin would otherwise have been. Above that is a winch to operate a boom from the boat's mast at this forward end.

On this deck is the colourful spectacle that tells part of the story of our colonialism in that time and in that place.

Deck passengers are vying for space with not only the half dozen vehicles that have come on board for the crossing, but also with a mixture of goats, pigs and chickens. Some of the chickens (locally referred to as fowls) have their feet tied and dangle alarmingly upside-down in the hands of their owners. One such owner is conversing with another passenger, gesturing with the same hand to the squawking consternation of the bird. But mostly the chickens - the lucky ones - are in makeshift rolled chicken-wire cages; they look lost for words. Some of the deck passengers find a protective corner where they can sit on their luggage, but most are standing. A deckhand is 'talking up' a young African woman, their mutual flirting produces laughter from her. Others lean over the ferry's side smoking cigarettes. People are watching other people and free with their advice; there is a constant hubbub and movement of bodies and animals is never ending. There is a merciful breeze coming in from the open river estuary. It is a normal happening on an average day. Bright coloured dresses contrast with the work-dirty under shirts, caps are tilted back at bravado angles, sleeves are rolled up a highly if the arms are muscular.

The sound and feel of hissing steam from somewhere mixes with the baying of billygoats. A pig voices an objection as only a pig can when and someone steps on its toes. Many people are staring off to either shore line which they have seen a hundred times before. The deckhand is pleased with himself as he gets another rise out of the young woman.

The 'Queriman's' engine goes into high gear as she faces into the brunt of the brisk falling tide; the thumping engine vibrations can be felt all over the boat. She growls her way across the river giving off occasional puffs of steam as if she has a runny nose. The once smart black and white sides and cream coloured funnels are now on dulled by age and some neglect and even birthmarks of rust on her ironsides. There is not much time for scraping and painting when the work day is from 6 a.m. to midnight. Perhaps at her next overhaul.

The 'Queriman's' destination across the river is Vreed en Hoop, a pinch under two miles distant. The captain is casual in displaying his expertise by gradually increasing the angle of the bow in to the tenacious tide, the closer the approach to the Vreed en Hoop stelling.

Wary eyes from the pilot house scan the river for any impeding traffic.

Apart from ocean-going ships that may be leaving or entering harbour, there are small launches of perhaps 30 ft in length that ply passengers and the occasional billygoat across the river. Almost all of the launch is covered over to accommodate passengers who are seated across from each other on wooden benches that run the length of the boat. They too have rolled up canvas blinds against the rain. A primitive diesel engine powers the launch and spews blue-black smoke from a vent in its side. A stout bollard protrudes from the centre of the very brief foredeck. But the billy goat tethered to it stares straight ahead like a live figurehead. The colours of the once gaily painted launch are now dulled from wear and neglect.

There are also occasional river barges to be wary of. They are some 40 ft long, flat bottom with squared double ends. Their cargoes can be anything from up river and their free boards can be as high as seven feet or as low as two feet. Two Africans skillfully man huge oars in primitive oar locks in the waists either side. Wearing short trousers, they walk slowly forward and backward on narrow packs as they sweep their six inch thick oars. They are skilful in using the tide.

Under a bright tropical sun, the contrasting colours of the mud brown river, mangrove shores, clouds and sky and the ever busy traffic, is as a living postcard.

The 'Queriman' is now almost safely across the Demerara. The captain has allowed the tide to carry her above the stelling towards the open sea, but now brings the ferry's bow square into the tide. The you can feel the tension mount aboard as conversation increases by a few decibels and mixes with the sudden sound of the telegraph bell ringing in the bowels of the old vessel. The half forward speed is sufficient to counter the push of the tide. Laying off the bow a little the 'Queriman' comes in at the shallow a tangent to the forest of greenheart piles that are the legs of the stelling. A little off the centre of the sterling is its floating ramp which is now at its a sharpest angle down; the ebbing tide will shortly change from ebb to slack before it decides to go on the rise up river again. The oarsmen on those barges know these moods of the river, and they have timed their arrival in Georgetown perfectly.

Bumpers are lowered overside in preparation for the give and squeeze of the ferry against those of the iron-strong greenheart piles of the stelling. Their sucking mud bottoms give the piles the sway they need.

Thirty feet out, deckhands, bow and stern, throw their coiled lines, which are attached to heavier mooring ropes, to their counterparts ashore. Any slovenliness is accompanied by jovial but pointed abuse. The shorelines are run around bollards easing and taking as the captain skillfully lines up at the ferries open deck with the stelling's ramp. He achieves this as 'Queriman' rubs and pushes against the piles. The

captain leans out of his wheelhouse window as the shore crew finally makes fast for the thousandth time. Satisfied, he looks over his shoulder and orders the helmsmen to ring down shut engine. The captain is a heavy-set African who rests his weight on the windowsill on his beefy forearms. His braided cap and is pushed back slightly and reveals some greying of his hair. The gold rings of rank on his shoulder epaulettes are somewhat tarnished and he leaves them that way with pride. There is the making of a smile on his large face, as if to say to the moving masses below “There, I’ve done it again”.

Many things now happen and almost all at once.

Two five-foot wide landing boards are thrown to straddle the ferry and ramp; they are set wide enough apart to allow the vehicular traffic to drive across. But passengers are already pushing their way ashore to the frustration of the drivers who are now impatiently sounding their horns. Balancing bundles on their hips, the shore-bound people ignore the protests or make rude signs of their own. Some move aside but not many. The captain has seen this before and calls on his deck crew to restore order and they do so in no uncertain manner. At the top of the ramp a gathered crowd waits their turn to come aboard, but there is no hurry because they know the ferry will not depart from its time schedule and they can see the captain is not hurrying. They make way for the vehicles and the human mass to climb up the angled ramp to their level. However, before that is complete some are already making their way down and trickling aboard.

Somewhere in that departing mass of people is the young woman that our deckhand had been trying to make time with, but now she has more important things to distract her ashore. Clear of the stelling there are a few home made buses waiting on the shoulder or of the red dirt road and she joins others to find a seat on one of them.

Aboard the ferry the crew take a few moments to put their feet up and smoke a cigarette. Ceasing their duties it is as if they are attuned to the slacking tide as they relax.

Across a narrow gangway that connects the first-class deck to the stelling’s main level, passengers have also been disembarking. The captain waves to an acquaintance by just raising one forefinger from his clasped hands, his smile fixed and unchanged. It is relatively quiet under and the slackening tide makes that familiar sound of river water fussing itself between piles and the waterline hull.

I’ve always thought it sounded like a thousand cats lapping milk.

The ‘Lady Northcote’ ferry plied the Berbice river running across that estuary from Rosignol on West Bank to New Amsterdam, the capital of the Berbice district, on the

East bank. The vessel was named for the wife of the then governor of the colony. The 'Lady Northcote' was much the same size as the 'Queriman', but lacked those charms of character that the older vessel had.

The 'Northcote' was a new ferry when I was a boy. She was powered by twin diesels turning twin screws, which no doubt made for better handling. It really growled under acceleration and when combined with vibration, made for a thrilling ride.

The Berbice tides were no less brisk than the Demerara's. But the colourful characteristics of the river's passengers were the same as the Demerara's, including all those billy goats and pigs.

But the 'Basra' was a quite different story.

The 'Basra' was pure pedigree, she was an ancient stern-wheeler. 'Basra' was a classy lady that took the mighty Essequibo in stride. Her great stern wheel paddles slapped and thrashed at the river like a child in a wading pool. Her upper and lower decks ran almost the full length of her shallow-draught hull. There was slight sweeping dip of her lines from stem to stern, which gave her a look of elegance. It also gave a look of snootiness from the slight raise of her bow. The foredeck was relatively small and had been was little more than a quarter of her some 100 ft length. 'Basra' was not as large as the classic Mississippi paddle wheeler's. It was said that the 'Basra' once carried British troops up-and-down the Nile from Cairo to Khartoum, and that she was partly dismantled and carried across the South Atlantic to British Guiana. Believable, considering the Arabic for 'Basra', Al Basrah, is situated on the Euphrates river before it empties into the Persian Gulf.

'Basra' not only ran the 27 miles across the Essequibo's estuary, from Suddie on the west bank to Parika on the east, but ran another 80 miles up river to Bartica. With the many stops along the way, it took two days to complete the return journey. Characteristic of paddle wheeler' shallow draught, 'Basra' always seemed to sit on water rather than in it, which only added to her appeal.

I came to experience the 'Basra' when I and my brother Geoffrey were part of a major scout camping trip into the hinterland. We had these camps about every two years. There were some 50 or 60 of us in Troop 39, and we no doubt thought we looked spiffy in our uniforms, which were accented by our red and blue scarves, our colours.

Early in the morning, we crossed the Demerara from Georgetown to Vreed en Hoop on the 'Queriman' there to start the second leg of the journey by train. The hissing, soot-covered engine and four wood-panelled carriages, a deep sombre red in

colour with a hint of more soot, sat chaffing at the bit. This train line ran only for some 30 miles, a few miles inland following the west coast. It would pass by the sugar estates (plantations) of Leonora, Uitvlugt and De Kinderen, and with a few other wayside stops, would take the better part of two hours to complete the journey to Parika.

The back of the Vreed en Hoop stelling served to partly protect the carriages from the rain and heat and from direct sunlight. On the left, the red dirt road widened to accommodate the local buses that seemed to vie with determined weeds for precious space.

Like good scouts we set off ashore in an orderly manner but the swelling numbers of people disembarking from the ferry swept us along with them, some heading for those windows seats on the train, the others for any seat at all on the overburdened buses. Our group became a tangled mass tripping over our own burdens of staves, haversacks, skillets, kettles and furled-up bell tents. For myself, I too was thinking windows seats but I don't remember if I succeeded. But I do remember stepping over weed-ridden and rusting tracks whose sleepers were spattered with oil stains. Eventually, and with the help of patrol leaders, we were settled in. This west coast train did not provide luxury accommodation; the seats were often the familiar type of wood, contoured benches, which were not that uncomfortable if you're an adult with something like an endowed rear-end.

With the carriages now filled with humanity, the temperature started to mount in spite of it being just morning. But mercifully, with a sudden long screaming whistle we started off, at first jerkily and then smoothly as the engine leaned into a steady pulling. Under full acceleration and clouds of puffing steam, the engine's piston wheels would skid and hold and skid again until there was enough traction.

At each plantation station there were crowds of East Indians and Africans, the labour forces from the estates and surrounding villages, standing and milling about on the covered single platforms. A mass of vulgar colours intermingled with most everyone talking, the loudest coming from vendors hawking wares that are balanced easily on their heads. Fresh tropical pineapples, mangoes and bananas are everywhere. You can tell that the white man in their midst is an overseer from that estate by his son bronzed face and arms - and white forehead.

The breeze from the moving train is welcome through the open windows, but with it sometimes comes soot particles from the engine's prominent stack and all of them seem determined to find their way into our eyes. After all the stops and starts along the way, we pulled into Parika's station which was also part of the stelling. It took the

better part of two hours to make the trip. Our detraining was more orderly than our entraining at Vreed en Hoop.

As our troop gathered together on the Parika stelling, we could see the 'Basra' coming around one of the larger uninhabited mangrove islands on the Essequibo's estuary. 'Basra' was swaying a little into the turning tide, making quite a picture of herself in the forenoon sunshine while her stern paddles left a churning wake behind her. She was indeed an impressive sight.

After 'Basra' was moored alongside, passengers from Suddie disembarked and then we crossed by a gang plank from the stelling to her upper deck. There was ample deck space up here but unlike the 'Queriman', 'Basra' had some cabin accommodation and a modest lounge area. Both boarding and departing traffic in these parts is noticeably less rushed than the 'Queriman' as we are now truly in the country, and looking up river, you can see nothing but on-coming jungle. Most of us hurry to the upper decks stern railing to gawk at the huge stern paddle wheel. The outer axles either side are embraced by two long piston-driven steel arms. We are all pointing and speaking at the same time with excitement.

Navigating the Essequibo is not for the faint of heart. Like all mighty rivers, sandbanks shift and change with the tides. But captains are familiar and experienced and pridefull of their expertise.

All through the early afternoon the 'Basra' plies the river inland. The shoreline changes noticeably as we leave saltwater and pass through brackish waters for a while, before reaching the higher up river's fresh water. The river's banks are no longer fronted with mangroves with their tall stilt-like roots reaching down into the mud banks below. Now there are scrubby trees and wallaba trees, greenheart and mahogany trees I've never seen before. Halfway to our destination of Parika, we cross over to the opposite west bank to release and take on passengers. A little further up on that side we tie up to a skimpy landing above which a wooden V-shaped chute descends from the upper shorelines, which is now about 40 ft above us. We are to take on wood fuel here and the captain has brought 'Basra' alongside so that her bunker door lines up with the chute. Above, two men, both black men, each empty a bucket of water down the chute. This is quickly followed by a procession of short logs of wallaba which fly through the bunker door into the dark bowels of the 'Basra'. A few missed the target and land in the passageway outside. The loading is soon completed and 'Basra's stoker gathers up and tosses them down below. We cross back over to the East bank of the river and remain there for the rest of the journey.

This far up river, the colour of the water is now that of strong tea.

We come to a clearing on shore from which a small holding farmer paddles about in his coorial towards 'Basra' whose paddle wheel is barely turning over as she glides through the water at slow speed. Our lessening bow-wake is little more than a ripple on the glass a smooth surface of the river, and joins with that of the coorial as the farmer comes alongside. A deckhand hands down the small coarse-wrapped parcel, a few letters tied together and has small wire cage holding two or three chickens. The cage is delicately balanced in the round bottom of the very tippy coorial, which is no wider than 15 inches. The birds are understandably quiet about their precarious position. But the East Indian farmer has done all this many times before and heads for his safe landing at his river-front dock. But 'Basra's' wheelhouse telegraph has long since rung down for full ahead and the slight vibrations from her engines does not dull the sound of the slapping stern wheel behind. The ferry makes half a dozen or more of these slowdowns during the voyage.

We were less than an hour from Bartica when 'Basra' slowed for what was to be the last clearing along the east bank. This time two coorials with two paddlers each came out to meet us. They remained spread apart at a distance the length of the ferry itself; the reason soon became obvious. We hurried to the forward railing in time to see some deck hands who were having a time of it trying to force three cows over the side. This idea did not sit well with the cows and with a chorus of more moaning than mooing, and with bulging eyes, the cows were holding their own. Deck passengers began laughing at the vain attempts while being a vocal with unhelpful advice to the determined pushers. Leaning out of the wheelhouse above us the captain called out to the deck passengers to lend a hand. At the same time we could hear the telegraph ringing down to reverse engines, for we were already getting too far beyond the farmer's landing. 'Basra's' paddle wheel sent waves of river water splashing against her stern hull and a stream of boiling water down each side of the vessel as we started to power our way backwards.

But with a painful twist to each of the cow's tails, the heaving and pushing of now-determined shoulders was too much for the panicking cows. In quick succession they belly-flopped into the river still voicing their outrage. 'Basra' is now stopped opposite the clearing and immediately the two coorials go into action by becoming outriders. The cows have a distance of about 200 ft to swim to the little beach area, and the paddlers close ranks on them ; the animals get the idea and head for the beach. There is an extra concerned that is felt by all the onlookers for the safety of the cows, and that concern is not that they may drown; they are good enough swimmers and can cover the distance. The fear is real, for this is piranha country and cows have been known to lose a hind leg before reaching shore. But this time there is no sign of a school of these tigers of the river, and the animals drag themselves up on land with

that never-again look on their faces and bound inland. The telegraph has already rung down and 'Basra' is once again thrashing her way up river.

My memories of by Bartica are skimpy. The sprawling village cum town had one or two large homes, a questionable hotel (it was owned by my uncle-in-law) and perhaps a head count of 800 to 1000 residents. The town is a gathering place for ranchers and farmers in need of the company of others. Its distinction is that it sits between, and that the confluence of two rivers, two large rivers; the Essequibo, still almost a mile wide this far up river, and the Mazaruni; between two and three hundred yards wide. But we are not to loiter for the sun is in descent and we have an hour-and-a-half of hacking and trekking through the forest before we reach our camping destination at Lake Iturubisi. But we have not said goodbye to 'Basra' yet; she will take us back down river to Parika when we return to Bartica. And the Essequibo continues inland until it peters out where Guiana's southern border ends at the juncture with Brazil.

Just before we enter the forest, our two Troop Leaders call a halt to instruct us. We must make it to camp up before dark to set up our tents and a cooking fireplace prepared. We will trek in single file and there is to be no loitering. Patrol Leaders will see to their patrols. One Troop Leader will bring up the rear, while the other Leader, and one other, will wield and slash with their cutlasses. A compass or two is brought out. The Leader explains that every so often they will make a slashing mark on a large tree, and only on our right hand side. This is to ensure that if we get lost, we will search out these marks. If they are on our left, then we are headed back to Bartica. With a last admonishment against straggling we set out.

Except for the constant sound of slashing cutlasses up ahead, there is only the sound of clumsy feet in the dense undergrowth, and the strange noises that strange birds and animals make in the jungles. We are sobered by the first thought to of possibly getting lost, though we need not have worried. Ahead of me, a young scout like myself mentions lions and tigers. A nervous laugh from another says - a little too loudly - that there are no lions and tigers in South America. Just jaguars. Little comfort, though our patrol leader says jaguars are solitary predators and shy away from people. And I think, so you say.

With less than an hour of daylight, we break out into a sudden and large sandy clearing, and out before us was a breathtaking view of the Iturubisi. It is calm and peaceful and the silence is deafening. Our site is elevated about 60 ft above the dark mirror-calm waters.

But there's work to be done.

Half a dozen tents are raised, a fire pit dug and ringed with stones, to or more Y forming branches are driven into the ground on which to spend the skillets from crossbars. The fires are got going, water and rice on for boiling, and large cans of bully beef are opened. It is going to be a great ten days of camping.

It would be remiss of me to end of this chapter without telling about an incident in that occurred on the third day of our camp-out.

Early to rise on a tropical morning is not a difficult thing to do. Due to the year around consistency of the climate, early rising is not irksome. Excited boys on a scout camp are enthusiastic and we were up and at it by 6 a.m. We took turns by Patrols, to perform necessary chores of the day the first by getting the breakfast fires going. Mostly we were swimming in the lake right after the first day's meal; which was light. We did various things during the camp to earn new badges of proficiency, but it was standing orders that a period of quiet between 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. be maintained for those who felt the need of sleep. You did not have to sleep, but you had to remain within sight of the camp's clearing. During those few hours of the day the heat is at its worst, so the shade of the bell tent could be very seductive for a lie-down and sleep. Also, during these hours, the sand hill we were camped on becomes very hot; we were mostly barefoot throughout the whole camping.

The camp had just settled down at the start of the rest period when, first one voice and then another, and another, soon had all of us gathering to see what was afoot. As if out of nowhere and by magic, there in the centre of our compound, stood two Buck Indian boys. These are aboriginal Indians we called Bucks. I have no idea why they came to be so called, just that that was the usual reference to them.

The bigger of the two look to be about twelve years of age. The small one - a brother perhaps - stood shoulder high to the other. Except for G-strings they were completely naked. The bigger boy carried a bow that was his own height, one end of it in the sand by his little toe. He also had an animal skin quiver slung over his shoulder, which held a few arrows that were some three feet long.

The Bucks are light skinned and with a thick look to their skins. They have broad, flat features, dark Asiatic eyes and thick blue black hair. Their hair was cut short and evenly all around their heads, which just covered the tops of their ears. They both have fairly large bellies which is a common feature of Bucks. It was said that this was from eating too much starch; their main diet, other than meat and fish, was root vegetables such as cassava. But that may be myth.

Our visitors stood quietly side by side, as if waiting for some reaction from us. We did so by gathering excitedly around them, which did not unnerve them. We had seen Bucks in Georgetown on very rare occasions, which was always amusing. This was

because they would put on shoes for the first time, that made them throw their feet upward and outward as they walked. What was doubly amusing was that even in the city they walked in single file; which they do in the jungles out of necessity. The habit died hard.

Of course, these boys could not speak English and we were probably the first white people they had ever seen. But, boys are boys and it is soon apparent both parties are friendly and curious of each other. We are goggle-eyed and fidgeting, they are still and smiling. Simple indications from us quickly indicate to them that we are interested in the bigger boy's bow and arrows. He pulls an arrow with easy grace from the quiver and shows it to us. It seems to be made of some sort of dried reed, or perhaps a young shoot from a bamboo cane. Strangely, I have no recollection of the manner or material of the arrowhead.

Of course, we want him to demonstrate his prowess with the weapon. I should mention that both our Troop Leaders are men with considerable experience of the country's hinterland and its peoples. They both stand back to let that naturalness that comes easily to boys that are curious of each other, have its way. It is a rare chance to practice an even more rare opportunity of communication.

One of our group produces a stick that is little more than an inch wide, and some 6 ft long. The buck nods and the smile is still on his face. A way is cleared as the rest of us step aside to give him room. The boy jams the stick in the sand (it is a grey white sand) at twenty paces. Our troop leaders are now responding to their responsibilities and call to give more room and to fall back some more. We do so. The bow man indicates with the back flipping of his right hand, to move the stick a little further back, which is moved back by another five or six paces. The arrow is held, in the meantime, across the bow by the crooking of the fore finger of the other hand. And there's a chorus of our voices that are certain the Buck boy can hit the stick or cannot hit the stick. Either way we are tense with excitement.

Now the complete source of our attention, the young Buck lets fly four arrows. He does not hurry but from start to finish it has been one continuous action, smooth, with no jerking. The first arrow is a very close miss, the second hits but with a glancing blow only. The third and fourth are both solid hits. There are lots of 'whews' of approval from us and the boy who found the target stick, pulls out the last two arrows, finds the other two and hands them back. He then takes out the stake and carries it another five paces away. The bigger Buck boy collects the retrieved arrows, but the smile is almost gone from his open face. His small companion is expressionless, but he stands on one foot and touches it with the toe of the other. Both feet are dirty with some dried mud and sand on them. He has an equally dirty forefinger of one hand in

his mouth, as he glances up at his brother, the expression on his face saying exactly nothing.

The shootist now lets fly with all five arrows in the same smooth manner of the first time. There are four of near-misses and one solid hit. We applaud his expertise, but you can tell from his expression that he had expected to do better.

One of our group, a bigger boy by the name of Desmond Smith, is two or three years older than me, often has a bravado attitude, and is sometimes a bit of a bully. Smith indicates that he would like to try shooting a few arrows. The Buck willingly hands them over. Our Senior Leader calls for care and caution. Smith shoots all five arrows and does fairly well at it, but does not hit the target.

The two Buck boys showed keen interest in our scouting sheath-knives and other knick-knacks of our gear. One of the more generous scouts gives him his pocket knife and he shows a wide grin of appreciation. His teeth seem quite good. We go back to the bow and arrow as we look for other targets for the Buck to shoot at. At this point Desmond Smith, in a rash act, takes the scout hat - which he knew was a new purchase by the younger owner - and indicates to the Indian to try and hit the hat as he tosses it in the air. The young owner reaches out with both hands to try and retrieve his hat, but Desmond will not be dissuaded. With a smile and a nod from the Buck, Desmond throws the hat frisbee-like in the air and when it is about 30 feet up and away, the boy lets fly an arrow from his bow, but its speed of flight is almost too fast to keep track of. But the blur of the shaft hits solidly into the crown of the hat, just above the band. Both hat and arrow accelerate into a high arc that continues well into the surrounding jungle as it descends.

The distressed owner is the first away in pursuit of his hat. Many of us follow and are quickly joined by one of the Troop Leaders. Both Buck boys join us and we are hardly into the trees proper - some ten of us - when the elder of the two Bucks suddenly throws his arms out, and with concern on his face indicates the ground just ahead of us. We all stand transfixed - totally mesmerised - as a very large carmoodie snake quickly uncoils and moves away at great speed as it slowly and rhythmically speeds off.

The carmoodie is a large snake of up to twelve to fifteen feet long, and at least six inches in girth. That snake's rapid motion of alarm and escape is something to be seen to be believed. They are often found near water in the jungle and they kill their prey by strangulation, after quickly wrapping themselves around the victim. Very lucky for us in this incident, as it had coiled up in the shade of the trees for a quiet sleep in the midday heat. Our numbers and voices frightened the huge snake, and reacting on instinct, it made off as quickly as it could. But had not the native kept a wary eye we

would, I'm sure, have stepped on the beast with who knows what results. It was very sobering indeed.

When our now saviour was satisfied that it was safe to proceed, we went a little further into the great trees, and there, half way up, or half way down, was the precious hat with the arrow still firmly run through it. Not to be left out of any display of expertise, the smaller buck, who up to this point had shown no emotion, is quickly up the tree like an overgrown monkey, clambers out onto the slim branch and retrieves the precious hat - and arrow I'm sure. We return to camp, quickly and without encouragement, probably to dream of snakes that night. Actually, it was a source of concern and because where we actually stumbled on the carmoodie was hardly more than 100 yards from our tents. You begin to think of home and its security at times like this.

The two Buck boys departed from our camp a short time later; their coorial was beached at our swimming place at the foot of the hill. Their village was on the opposite shore of the river, well over a mile away. They had seen a cooking fire as it seems.

That was certainly the high point of our camping trip even taking the wonderful journey on 'Basra' into consideration.

Around the campfires that night, a discipline hearing was held - before then likely sing-song - when 'S M', what we called our senior Scout Master, declared that Desmond Smith, through a petition to his father, would replace one very 'shot' scout hat to the now placated owner - who got the last laugh.

It is a pleasurable thing that I can think back to these times, in that place, and long for the purity of its innocence.

## The City

The memories I draw upon here are those of the capital city of Georgetown, of the British Guiana of my childhood, the only British colony in South America. I try to give some idea of the society into which I was born in 1925. This is a place that has gone through many changes, all of them for the worse. Its society has done a complete about face with disastrous results. Mine was of a way of life that is gone forever.

The Demerara river is one of four major rivers of the country that snake their way north from the forested hinterland into the Atlantic ocean. The true coastline of the country is submerged for some thirteen miles out to sea, whose mud bottoms colour the waters muddy-brown. Measuring some two miles across, the Demerara runs inland for 160 miles, 104 of which is navigable to ocean going ships. It is the smallest of the four rivers but by far the busiest in mercantile traffic. By comparison the Essequibo is 27 miles across its estuary and contains islands as large as Manhattan island of New York city.

The Demerara - which gave its name to the world's finest sugar and rums - is almost geographically central to the country and for this reason, plus its commercial importance, became the reference line separating the west coast from the east coast. Georgetown is located on the east bank of the river at its estuary. It was not the first settlement in the country.

The Caribbean area of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was rife with opportunists other than serious colonisers. Privateers and cut-throat pirates roamed the area at will and the sacking of communities was commonplace. With this in mind, settlers often made landings as many miles up river as it took to be out of sight of off-shore marauders. The climate of Georgetown and indeed all of the coastal plain, is of high temperatures and humidity and heavy rainfall, with little seasonal difference. Daily temperatures range from 74° to 86°F (24° to 30°C). The average annual rainfall is 90 inches (2,290 mm). The constant heat and humidity is often tolerably tempered by the northeast trade winds coming in from the sea. The intertropical doldrums account for the heavy rainfall which comes in two wet seasons, the first from April to August, and the shorter second season from December to early February.

The discomforts of the climate were hard on visitors from northern climes, taking them many months to acclimate to. Some thought it and were miserable for the duration of their stay, but the majority adapted and made life pleasanter for themselves. Some, recognising the good life, opted to remain as permanent residents

and were made welcome. Air conditioning was unknown and still well into the future. But those of us born to these conditions knew them only as the norm and with birth came inborn tolerances. This was remarkable considering we were active year round in outdoor sports in our eternal tropical summer.

Mosquitoes were a pestilent presence during the wet seasons. Where we natives were nonchalant - many times unaware - of being bitten, visitors slapped and scratched at them which sometimes resulted in infections. For the most part they in turn developed their own tolerances in time. In the countryside communities and on the sugar plantations, it was necessary to sleep under mosquito nets that unfurled from racks above our beds, but in the city this was seldom necessary. Although I speak of the pre-DDT era, the government did send men around the city to spray an oily concoction on the surfaces of stagnant and casual pools of water that formed as a result of a past shower of rain. The oil deprived the mosquito larvae of oxygen. Where the mosquitoes were there was always the threat of malaria fever. Three of my brothers and myself were victims of this fever which we contracted from scout camps deep into the hinterland, or from places of work many miles up-river: quinine was the only antidote.

Perhaps my memories are a little biased as childhood recollections can be sympathetic in the telling, but it is my recall that most afternoons and nights were comparatively pleasant, made so by these gentle breezes that came in from the sea; in spite of the doldrums.

When I was a boy the population of Georgetown was 72,000 people of mixed races. For the country as a whole, the breakdown of the races was recorded as 51% East Indian, 24% African, 13% mulatto. The indigenous natives - Amerindians whom for some reason unknown to me we called Bucks accounted for 4%. The remainder were made up of Chinese, Portuguese and British. We took for granted - and enjoyed - the privileges of the white Anglo-Saxons, sat atop the social and governing ladder according to the racial traditions of the time; yet we only accounted for 3% of the population. We took for granted - and enjoyed the spin-off privileges this status established, according to the British class rules we inherited.

The diversity of the races was a result of 'available' labour forces and no little amount of political power.

From the time of Dutch possession a seawall had to be constructed along the coast to prevent intrusion by the sea. Great drainage canals had to be dug to drain away water from the swampy land strip, some five miles wide, that ran the length of the coast. The canals also controlled flooding from heavy rainfall and occasional breaches of the seawall, which were caused by vigorous springtides and general erosion.

All the hard work of digging the canals and building the wall W&8 done by African slaves. When the British took over final possession of the colony in 1796, they continued where the Dutch left off. By 1796 there were already some 100,000 African blacks in the country, and it was also that very year that the home government prohibited any further importation of Africans.

Between this period and the emancipation of slavery by the British in 1834, it was found that rice and the sugar cane crops were best suited to the climate, the seasons and the soil that resulted from drainage, which was acid but fertile. This resulted in farms of rice and sugar, the latter rapidly expanding to become large plantations. The plantations in particular required large labour forces which the emancipation complicated. With their freedom won, many Africans left the plantations and gravitated to the developing towns and settlements.

Many Portuguese immigrants came some time in the late 19th century during the labour shortage. But many of them became merchants while many more became part of the upper social structure through their example of commercial leadership — and the colour of their skins. They also introduced Roman Catholicism, which resulted in the building of churches and a cathedral and an educational system.

The labour shortage problem was finally solved by the importation of large numbers of east Indians, who were persuaded to emigrate as a free workforce. They became the mainstay of labour on the sugar plantations and the owners of smallholding rice farms. Their immigration began in 1861 while the last arrivals are recorded in 1917.

The layout of Georgetown was very sensible in that its streets ran north-south, east-west. There were no streets that snaked aimlessly, no crescents, no developments such are prevalent in modern times.

There was congestion.

Building lots were small as a rule so that the stilt raised houses built on them took up almost all of the lots. As with anywhere else, those who could had large lots that left room enough for a grand house in the middle with gardens fronting on to the street. Some of the older homes had a small two-room cottage in the rear as live-in servants' quarters, but this was discontinued by the turn of the century. Almost without exception, properties were fenced in by white painted palings or shrub hedges, which were invariably of either white, pink or red hibiscus.

The houses themselves were not so much an architectural conception as they were the result of climatic evolved function. Their outward appearance - all wood - was a defiance of the unwelcome elements typical of the tropics, heat, humidity and rain.

Wooden louvered windows that pushed out, swung out or slid up and down, predominated. Closed to the mid-day heat, they allowed air to circulate while keeping out the worst of the heat - and rain. The common glassed sash windows that slid up and down, often had louvered shutters for the bottom half which would be closed to keep out the rain, unless the accompanying wind was strong enough to force the lowering of the glass windows. Normally, all windows would be opened by 4 o' clock to welcome cooler breezes, or spontaneous 'drop-ins' by friends. Unannounced visiting friends was commonplace and welcome (unless and aspiring boyfriend was unwelcome).

Houses were raised some eight to ten feet from the ground on pillars of wood. or brick, which was a tradition from the earliest times to escape from the worst of the mosquitoes, and better to catch any cooling breezes coming in from the sea. Many of the houses had closed in accommodations in the under-house, which would be recessed under and behind the gallery front of the floor above. Otherwise, the under-house was either left open or closed off by a tight lattice work.

Large wooden vats at the rear of the property collected rainwater run-offs, which supplied water for drinking or a shower bath. I speak of the days when refrigeration was virtually an icebox. Once a week or so, ice carts threaded their way through the streets selling ice from the city's ice house. I have clear images of them with their precious cargoes bundled up in mounds of burlap and sawdust. They left trails of dripping water behind them as they casually moved along. A twenty pound block of ice in the zinc-lined upper chamber of the icebox, was enough to let the cool ice temperature to settle on foodstuffs in the chamber below. Domestic refrigerators did not make an appearance until about the second half of the 1930's. Milk and water had to be boiled before drinking. Collected rainwater ran into gutters from roofs that were covered by corrugated galvanized sheets or large slate tiles.

The development of the country's commerce, both importing and exporting, centered in Georgetown, situated as it was to advantage where the Demerara came to meet the sea. Commercial businesses sprang up along the river, their rear ends projecting over the water on pylons to become wharfs that soon crowded each other. Here were stored for export, the fruits of local labours as end products. Vast quantities of jute sacks bulging with unrefined brown Demerara sugar, and an equal number of sacks of rice. Here to would be large casks of rum or mounds of dressed lumber from the mahogany forest in the hinterland. Under such burdens, I have often felt and heard the creaks and groans of those wharfs as the vigor of the rising and falling tides of the huge river, rocked their pyloned legs in their sort, sucking mud bottoms.

Shipping was limited to some 9,000 tons because of the peculiarities of the incoming channel. The port was colourful noisy and busy. As youngsters my brother and I spent many a Saturday morning on the wharfs, fascinated by the activity of sweating black stevedores, stripped to their waists, went about their business of loading and unloading the slings of cargoes that appeared from or disappeared over the side of the ship tied alongside. There was a sound and a smell to the activity that was peculiar to itself. The ships came from different corners of the world, but mostly from Britain or Canada or America.

The 'Lady-boats' of the Canadian Steamship Line were the most popular because they were primarily passenger carriers. Although the ancient Sikorsky Flying boats of Pan American Airways made their precarious landings in the muddy waters of the Demerara twice a week, travel to and from the colony in the 1930's was by ship. The 'Lady-boats' 'Lady Nelson', Drake, Rodney and Chomody, were joys to behold with their red, white and blue striped funnels contrasting with their white painted slab sides. Friendly crews catered to passengers that numbered one hundred or more.

I have vivid memories of emotional upheaval of my brother and I at ages five and seven, too overcome to wave goodbye as members of our large family sailed on the 'Lady Nelson' for a distant - and meaningless - place called Winnipeg. It was the custom of the line to have stewards pass silver trays laden with packages of coloured streamers among the departing passengers, after visitors had been 'gonged' ashore. The stewards would weave their way in and around the crowded promenade deck striking gongs, whose ominous sound told of the coming of the end of the world. With the ship's band gathered at the head of the gangway, the streamers were thrown outward and downward to the solemn music of auld lang syne. As the great behemoth drifted away from wharf side for mid-river, the music drifted in and out on the fickle wind while the streamers lathered the side of the ship; many broke loose snatched by the wind and seemed to defy gravity as they drifted like curling snakes until they were finally snagged by the white caps of the river. The unfolding scene was a distress that was too much for a child to bear.

**As** a sad footnote, all the 'Lady-boats', one by one, were lost to the torpedoes of German U-boats that hunted both the Caribbean sea and the south Atlantic in World War I

As I said before, we of the 3% WASP population, sat atop the social and political system. Considered in its time the system worked. Everyone seemed content with their lot, emphasis on seemed and contentment being relative. These were not the days of demonstrations and bravado unions. Had they been I daresay things would have been different.

The colonies were a world unto themselves, which had the unfortunate effect of making us inward looking and an opinionated people. Everyone had an opinion about any and everything, which was often expressed with vigor if not passion. This was true of all the races. In small worlds characteristics are infectious. The saving grace was the sanity of humour. Opinions were physically expressed, ultimately with the pointing of fingers and standing on both firmly planted feet. But when couched in that rarest of local patois, vigorous opinion became a laughable pantomime. Neither party suffers a change of mind but no matter. We could not have suffered from suppressed argumentative emotions. Maybe it was the climate.

But democracy prevailed even in the British class system. While we did not socialise with the Africans, East Indians and Chinese, we went to school with them and rewarded their scholars with scholarships to the best schools in Britain, from which they entered the professions or government. Respect was mutual at all times.

There were two colleges in Georgetown.

St. Stanislaus was the Roman Catholic institution whose staff and students were all white. My brothers and I attended Queen's College, where the staff and student body were of all mixed races of that Anglican institution. There were never any racial problems at Queen's; for one thing the disciplines of the day would not tolerate it, and for another - well, it was not the normal way to behave.

Not many miles away in the island of Barbados, there were two boys and one girls schools that were exclusively whites only, many of their students coming from surrounding islands, and even mainland South America.

In Georgetown, the girls' education was a parallel of that of the boys. Girls of mixed races went to Bishop's High school, while the Ursuline Convent educated the girls of Roman Catholic families. There were a few exceptions at the Convent, such as one of my sisters who attended there.

Only in the case of both girls' schools were uniforms mandatory. At Queen's the school tie was compulsory. If ever one of our school prefects caught us during or after school hours not wearing our ties, a stiff detention would result. The quality of education as a whole was solid and rounded, as was the British way. There was no local higher education; for that, students — boys - went to Universities in Britain or North America. Some of the white girls went to 'finishing' schools in England or on the continent.

The social life was full and very pleasant for those of us atop the ladder. But even a small privileged society tends to create social divisions within itself. Where British

aristocracy reined, snobbery was sure to follow, although I'm quick to say there was a minimum of that behaviour.

British colonies were figure-headed by a Governor appointed by the Home Office in London. So were other key appointments such as Colonial Secretary, Supreme Judges and Principal Educators. These upper echelon position holders, tended to limit their socialising among themselves. The Chairmen and Managing Directors of commercial firms, were all appointees out of England. But local men of ability also attained those senior posts in time. Some Britishers remained aloof for the duration of their stay, and tended to complain about our climate conditions. But for the most part others were quick to recognise the good life and quickly adapted to local conditions.

Our climate of course, dictated or influenced pursuits of interest. One long never-ending summer meant outdoor activities that would be affected only by the seasons of wet and dry. Georgetown was liberally blessed with playing fields. Men involved themselves in private clubs that were central to sports such as cricket, soccer, rugby, tennis

and field hockey. And there was the Demerara Rowing Club which rightly made its claim to being the oldest private club in the British West Indies. The club provided fours, pairs, tubs and sculls, beautifully made of mahogany. Regattas were strenuous affairs against the vigor of rising and falling tides. For dances the upstairs floor required extra support poles under the otherwise sagging floorboards.

Women were very active in field hockey and tennis, often playing them in company with the men. There were other clubs where work-weary men went to sit and read and play bridge. but central to all activities - and there were many dances - was the cheap and plentiful supply of alcohol especially whiskies and many brands of the local rums. Gins were usually reserved for Sunday mornings and served up as 'pink gins'. Rum swizzles were to be tossed back to 'stimulate' the appetite before evening dinner. Like the local fevers, it was thought that there was also an inbred tolerance for alcohol - and perhaps there was.

Local boy married local girl with the same results as anywhere else in the colonial world, and the band played on. World War II was an uninvited intrusion indeed.

Relatively few young men and women owned and drove their own car. When you first started out in the working world, you bought a bicycle with your first paycheck, a Raleigh, a Rudge or a Hercules, for less than fifty dollars local currency. In 1938 my eldest sister bought a red and black two-door Morris 8, for less than eight hundred dollars; that wasn't the showroom price. I'm not sure there were easy monthly payments in those days.

You rode your bicycle to and from work. A light tea and a quick shower and you mounted your bike and off you went to either a social call or your preference of sport activity. Darkness came between 6:30 and 7:00 o' clock. These hours came earlier in the 'winter' months of December and January. It was a rigidly enforced law that bicycles had to have a headlight in front and a red reflector on the rear fender. Before the days of generator electric lights, we had kerosene oil lamps only. It was a smelly/messy business to maintain; wicks had to be regularly trimmed or else they smoked horribly and covered the lamp's glass with thick soot.

The dinner hour - usually 7:00 p.m. was sacrosanct. Any lateness meant the servants would also be late getting to their homes, which was usually a long walking distance away. Keeping dinners warm meant keeping a fire going in wood burning stoves. In almost all homes, electric ranges did not make an appearance until after the war, in the late 40's. Once we were working young men, my mother insisted on jackets and ties at the dinner table. If you were late from tennis or cricket, just a blazer was tolerated. I believe this was the custom in most homes of the time. Particularly in a family as large as ours, humour and jocularly and lively conversation was tolerated, but you minded your manners.

For the most part, young men and women finished their schooling then 'went out to work', to become secretaries and young bosses. With diligence came promotions. Changing jobs was viewed with suspicion. Loyalty to a firm - your employer was a given. For all that they were unwritten, there were rules. Pursuance of higher education was not expected except for those that wanted a profession, and that meant going overseas; there were no Universities in the West Indies at that time. A good job - and there were always good jobs - were to be had, and a guaranteed future came with them. You may quarrel and even disgrace yourself, those things could be forgiven; but good manners was expected always.

Being a costal country the sea - the Atlantic - was right there, yet it was not really a part of our lives. It was there when we walked, sat or went courting at night along the seawall, but other than that the sea did not play an influencing part in our lives. Those thirteen miles or submerged coastline, dropped abruptly away into the deep blue abyss of the Atlantic. At this point the muddy brown costal waters met the blue of the sea, neither one mixing with the other; a remarkable sight for mile after mile. The beaches therefore, where an equal mixture of sand and mud, and you could walk for half a mile away from them when the tide was out, before coming to waist-high water. You could feel little tiny creatures crawling between your toes and see 'four-eye' fish that were mudpuddle jumpers.

Rainy seasons were not often insidious as they so often are in the northern hemisphere. When it rained you were aware of it immediately. Overly extended downpours could have dramatic results in a country with a coastline such as ours. I have memories on the playing fields at school, when a soccer match had to be halted due to sudden difficulties with breathing. The rainfall could be so dense as to push the air - and consequently oxygen - away from your area. But rain meant instant muddy conditions and what could be better for kids playing soccer. Getting soaked posed no dangers of taking a chill; the temperatures were too warm.

But in 1935/36 one such wet season was heavy and prolonged. It rained for ten days without much letting up and the city streets were some three feet under water. With such conditions an outbreak of typhoid soon followed, from which many hundreds of people died. There were no miracle drugs to combat the disease.

1935 was the silver jubilee year of the reign of King George V.

The colonies being no less eager to celebrate the occasion we took our Kings seriously - went about the business of decorating all government buildings with strings of lights and gay bunting. The festive air became even more so, when commercial buildings along Water Street joined in with their own patriotic efforts. Each tried to outdo the other with sumptuous displays. Flags were crossed beneath a portrait of the bearded Monarch over doorways. Thousands of loyal subjects thronged the down-town area both day and night, to delight at the extravagance.

But not for long.

With the death of the King in the following year, the previous year's gaiety of red, white and blue, was replaced by heavy drapes of black cloth. As if orchestrated by playwrights, the Monarch's death was played out over several days. We huddled around our Philcos and Atwater Kents as hourly bulletins broadcast by the BBC from London, mournfully announced that the King was 'resting peacefully' and 'slipping quietly away', while dirge-like music swelled in the background.

When 'the King is Dead, long live the King' did finally come, we and the world were led into that shocking bone of contention between Edward - the Successor, his Mrs. Simpson and the British government, as they washed their embarrassing laundry before the whole world.

There was a brief period of peace and calm when the accession of George VI displaced the irritations of Edward and his abdication; but it was just the calm before the storm of the now rapidly approaching World War.

## Place names

When I was a boy in British Guiana In the 1920's and 30's the names of places were just that, just names that identified places. I don't think it occurred to many people to think about those names in terms of historical significance. Many of those place names are in Dutch, and we know the historical. reason for that.

However, as I got further and further into this memoir, I became curious about them. Historical romance weaves its way through these names, and that's enough to set me off. And not just the names of places, but rivers too, of which we had an abundance ('Guiana' is aboriginal for 'Land of many waters').

If I may diverge a little, I have always been very interested in early American history, and from the beginning been enamoured of the names of the rivers east of the Mississippi. The names of the rivers of British Guiana, and those of the eastern United States, were given by the respective native Indians. in that ease you have to remember that both these groups of Indians did not have a written language. They both bestowed names according to their impressions of the physical state of the rivers. Example, dry, red, white, snake and troubled (rapids) and so on. Without a written language, you tend to keep things simple, fundamental.

The rivers' names are written down after the coming of the white man, and all he can do is translate the spoken sound into phonetics. And where this happens for the first time, the written names tend to stick. Not often names are changed years later. Which poses the question of how educated were the men who first wrote down those names. There were no rules of spelling before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In any case, I've always thought the American Indian names for the rivers east of the Mississippi, beautiful. One of the most beautiful words I've ever heard, is Shenandoah; its a one word poem. The rivers of British Guyana retained their Indian names, except in a few instances.

So, I decided to make a brief list for comparison, arid came up with the following, chosen at random:-

<u>American</u>	<u>Guyanese</u>
Potomac	Siparuni
Rappahannock	Barima
Pamunkey	Cuyuni
Mattaponi	Mazaruni

Rapidan	Waini
Shenandoah	Potaro
Mississippi	Rupununi
Monongahela	Essequibo
Allegheny	Mahaica

I think it is interesting how many times ‘ni’ appears in the Guyanese list, and then twice only in the American list. The ‘ny’ of the Allegheny, should also probably have been ‘ni’. I will not get into all the interesting questions this list of comparisons provokes, as that is a matter for another time.

As I have explained before, the history of British Guiana is the story of ownership changing hands. French, British, Dutch, British. Hence the juxtaposition of place names foreign to each other. Being predominately in British hands those names, other than British, became corrupted (not always) in both pronunciation and spelling, in due time. Even the English language was in like manner victimised. The average Englishman could manage that himself, but the addition of African slaves, was the perfect recipe for a local patois.

The Dutch language suffered some from this corruption. Translating Dutch words into English can be tricky, but with the help of Dutch transplants from Holland to Eastern Ontario, I was helped.

The majority of place names I mention hereafter, are those given to Plantations, or Estates as they became to be known later. A vast majority of these endeavours failed and in many cases the defunct Plantation names remained as the names of villages or communities. From as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these names are bestowed in what was then, an unexplored, exotic and altogether primitive corner of the New World. Not a few of them with tongue-in-cheek.

Some of the names speak for themselves, others I try to interpret. Regrettably I have never known the meanings of the native-named rivers of Guiana. The only exception is Kaieteur Falls on the Pataro river. Kaieteur (Kai-a-ture) is 822 feet of sheer drop, and is about three to four hundred feet wide, depending on the seasons. The name Kaieteur is the aboriginal for ‘Old Man’. Legend has it that, when a man of the tribe became useless and a burden to his fellow villagers, he was put in a curyall, with all his possessions, and sent over the falls. The legend does not say what the fate of elderly women was, when they were considered useless and burdensome.

The Dutch penchant for commerce was instrumental in attracting pioneering developers into the Guianas on mainland South America. In 1742, the Director

General of what was then Stabroek - present-day Surinam and part of Guiana up to the Demerara river - was a gentleman with the impressive name of Laurens Storm van's Gravesande, who sent forth word that developers of all nationalities were welcome to the area. The carrot was that they would benefit from his declaration of a tax-free holiday, for the first ten years. The offer was successful and many Nationals came seeking their fortune. The result was that, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were some 80 plantations (only 21, mostly very large, remain today) just inland from the coastline, and along both banks of the major river's running inland from the sea. These early beginnings were probably more like Farms in acreage, compared to today's multi-thousands of acres Plantations. A greater number of them failed for different reasons; for the present I'm only concerned with the names.

These place names, in whichever language, speak of their owners' impressions of the locations; some are humorous, some are named for sentimental attachments elsewhere, and probably a touch of homesickness. The juxtapositions of some of these names can be in sharp contrast. For instance, the coastline leading up to the west bank of the Essequibo river, sweeps around in a great southern curve. The three place names along that curve are Charity, Hampton Court and Anna Regina. Other women's names are sprinkled around, such as Kitty, Anne's Grove, Henrietta and Leonora.

As far as whims go, I find no record of there having been a Faith Plantation, but there is a Providence, Hope and Charity.

And then there is this amusing similitude.

As a maiden, my mother was Governess to the children or the Manager of Plantation Hope. Two Plantations west of there, my father was a bachelor head overseer on Plantation Non Pareil which translates to mean 'Without comparison' or 'Exceptional'. They met at a social function at the in between Estate, Enmore, in 1911, and were married the following year.

Almost all the English names are of familiar places or other names. Such as Rose Hall, which recurs again in Jamaica. Again, Enmore, Skeldon, Bath, Fort Wellington, Wales, Diamond, Farm, Cane Grove, Springlands, Blairmont and Port Mourant.

I save the name of the Plantation on which I was born for last, which was Albion. I have since found out that Albion is old English for England.

Here is a list of Dutch names with their translations:-

Goedeverwagting\* - Best chances/perhaps endeavours or even Great Expectations.

Vreed en hoop - Good Hope

Schoon Ord - Beautiful Place/Area/Acres

Uitvlugt - Retreat/Escape

Ruimveldt - Wide Fields/Broad Acres

De Kindren - The Children

Tuschen de Vrienden - Between Friends/Friendship

Zeelugt - Sea Breeze/Wind/Air

Vryheids Lust - Quiet Desire/Secret Hope

\*The spelling of this place has been corrupted to Beter ver Wagting, and is locally pronounced as 'better-for-wactin'.

In my previous chapter 'The River Ferries', I referred to the Ferry Docks - wharfs - as Stellings. That was because Dutch word is still in use there exclusively. The translation for Stelling is scaffolding. The derivative comes from a similarity between scaffolding and the many pile legs (forest of) that were driven into the mud to support the wharf above. It is a loose translation, but the analogy is recognisable.

For the French Plantation names that have survived, these;-

Plaisance - Pleasure/Pleasing Place

Chateau Mangol - Mr. Mangol's Palace/Mansion/Country seat

Lusignan - Seems to be just a name

Non Pareil - none Such/None better/Exceptional

La Bonne Intention - Good or Best intention

Ressouvenir - Remembrance/Reminiscence

Versailles - After the Palace outside Paris

Belair - Seems to be a combination English/French

Nouvelle Flanders - New Flanders

Belle Vue - Beautiful View

I don't know what to make of the Plantation that was named Cromarty & Nigg, other than it was a business partnership. Perhaps Mr. Cromarty was Irish.

Plantation Dantzig I suspect is a personalizing by its German owner, who was a native of Dantzig, Germany.

But it brings a smile to my face when I remember that there are two Plantations that are side by side, somewhere in the Essequibo District that are called, Bachelor's Adventure and Maiden's Despair.

I know that my father started overseeing (he always referred to his occupation as Planter) in Essequibo District, but no one seems to know exactly which Plantation, and he is no longer here to ask. As an incurable romantic I would like to settle for Bachelor's Adventure. The year would have been in 1896/97 exactly one hundred years before I started this childhood memoir.

On the following three pages the estates with foreign (non-English) names and the English translation of the names are given. The information was reproduced by the author from the British Guiana Directory for 1882.

Amersfort	A town in Holland
Beau Voisin	The good or pretty neighbour
Bel Air	Fine air
Belle Plaine	Handsome level field
Belle Vue	Fine prospect
Bostandigheid	Constancy, Consistency
Blankenburg	The White Castle, the name of an estate in Holland
Chateau Margot	This Chateau is north west of Bordeaux
De Kinderen	The Children
De Willem	The William
Goodland	Goodland
Goedverwagting	Good expectation of Hope
Groenveldt	Greenfield
Guilderland	Province of Holland on the Zuider Zee
Haags Bosch	The Park (Bush) at The Hague
Haarlem	An inland town near Amsterdam
Hague	The metropolis and seat of Government in Holland
Hamburg	Name of the Hanseatic city in Germany
Herstelling	Restoration, recovering from ruin
Hoff-van-Aurich	The court of Aurich, name of a city in East Vriesland, Hanover
Hoff-van-Holland	The Court of Holland
Huis te Dieren	Famous Country seat in Amsterdam, Holland
Klien Pouderoyen	A baronial castle in Holland.
La Belle Alliance	The Friendly League (of Waterloo Notoriety)
La Bonne Intention	The Good Intention.
La Bonne Mere	The Good Mother
La Grange	The Barn - the name of Dutch farm
La Heureuse Adventure	The lucky adventure
La Jalousie	Jealousy
La Parfaite Harmonie	Perfect Harmony
La Penitence	Penitence, Penance
La Prudence	Prudence

<b>Estate name</b>	<b>English translation of estate name</b>
La Retraite	The Retreat
Le Desire	The Desire
Le Resouvenir	The Recollection
L' Esperance.	Hope
Malgre Tout	In spite of all
Ma Retraite	My retreat
Mes Delices	My delight (pleasure)
Met-en-Meerzorg	With more and more care
Mon Repos	My resting place
Non Pareil	The Unrivalled
Noigtgedacht	Never thought
Nouvelle Flanders	New Flanders, Belgium
Nismes	Manufacturing city in France
Onderneeming	Undertaking, Enterprise.
Pouderoyen	A baronial castle in Holland
Providence	Providence
Ruimveld	Extensive Field
Sans Souci	Without care
Schoen Ord	Beautiful spot
Sophienburg	Sophia's Castle
Standvastigheid	Constancy, Consistency
Tenez Ferme	Hold Fast
Toevlugt	Refuge
Turkeyen	Turkey
Tuschen de Vrienden	Between the friends
Uitvlugt	A flight to a country house, country seat
Vergenaegen	Contentment's pleasure
Versailles	Versailles, nr. Paris.
Vilvorden	A village nr. Brussels, Belgium
Vive-la-Force	Glory to Power
Vreed-en-Hoop	Peace and Hope
Vreed-en-Vriendschap	Peace and Friendship

<b>Estate name</b>	<b>English translation of estate name</b>
Vriesland	Province in Holland
Vryheids Lust	Liberty's Delight
Waterloo	The famous village in Belgium
Wissell Vallegheid	Vicissitude, liable to change
Witkomst	Result, Revenue
Zeeburg	Castle on the sea shore
Zeelandia	Name of a province in Holland
Zeelugt	Sea breeze, sea air
Zorg	Care or anxiety

## “Swizzles”

As I was growing up in our Georgetown house from the second half of the 1920's and into the 30's, I became aware of patterns and rituals in our large family's everyday lives. Such a ritual was the drinking of swizzles before the evening meal. There was no ceremony, but it was a ritual its predictable regularity.

In and of itself, there is nothing exceptional or remarkable about this habit, but I remark on it because it says something about our social customs at that time and place.

By way of custom and colloquial quaintness, we had different references for some everyday things. Example, we did not telephone to order a taxi. We 'rang up' for a 'drop-car'. The association was that the car called for you and dropped you off at your destination. Sometimes this was referred to as a 'hired car'.

Similarly, you were invited to have swizzles instead of cocktails.

The swizzle was a mixture of any of the Demerara rums with 'a dash' of Angostura Bitters added, which gave a bite to the taste. Bitters comes from the bark of either of two trees native to Brazil. Some partakers of the swizzle, my mother and grandmother included, liked 'a pinch of sugar' added, I think to dull the bite of the bitters, in modern times the completed mixture, along with crushed ice, is put into a cocktail shaker and shaken vigorously with both hands. A conscientious bartender would make a performance out of this.

But in my early childhood, before the appearance of the modern refrigerator, the making of a swizzle was a little more primitive - and romantic.

The nightly ritual of the pre-dinner swizzle was a shared enjoyment between my father and mother, all through their plantation years. I was too much of a baby to remember swizzles at Albion. I remember swizzles in our Georgetown house after my mother transferred permanently to the city from Albion, after my third birthday. She was needed in the city to take charge of our upbringing and schooling. Hitherto, my maternal grandmother supervised my older siblings in the city as they became old enough to attend school. We always returned to Albion for the school holidays. Both my mother and grandmother continued the habit of swizzles before dinner.

The swizzle was served in 'a shot-glass' and the drinker 'tossed it back' in one gulp politely and with finesse - which was sometimes referred to as 'bolting'. The original intention of the drink was an appetizer, but could also be served at social gatherings such as bridge parties; which more than likely livened the bidding, which I know to be the case with my father.

To tell of the making of a swizzle is to begin with a dray cart. Drays are two wheeled flat bed carts pulled by a horse. In this instance the cart had short sides to contain slabs of ice, and was often as not, pulled by an indifferent donkey as by an equally indifferent horse.

The ice came from The Demerara Ice House at the northern end of Water Street astride the river, and surrounded in that area by the business houses of import merchants. I had no reason to be often in that area, but when I was the dry, stuffy aroma of bagged grain and flour, would stir images in my imagination of exotic far-off places.

At that time, before we had our first refrigerator, cold storage for foods in the home was only possible with an icebox. A typical domestic icebox stood about five feet in height and about thirty inches wide. Two doors hung on stout plated hinges with the smaller chamber above for ice storage, the larger one below for storing food and drink. Both chambers were lined with zinc. The ice chamber was large enough to hold about twenty five pounds of ice, often in one slab. Built-in drainage ran off melting ice to a concealed tray at floor level. Carefully located openings allowed the heavier cold air to settle in the food chamber below. The ice was packed in burlap and sawdust. I believe a twenty five pound slab of ice would last for a week to ten days. The iceman called once a week. The iceman of my memory was a short brisk-moving little black African. He was animated by nature and sported a short unkempt beard, which was an unusual sight at that time. He sat balanced on the left arm of the dray's horizontal yoke - or tree - the reins slack in his hands. Jumping off his precarious perch was signal enough for his horse to come to a stop. Calling out "Iceman missie, Iceman", our pantry maid would call back the poundage of ice we required, whereupon he would set to work with his small hand axe. His movements were quick and dexterous. Re-covering the rest of his precious cargo in its burlap sacking, he would jump to the ground, grab the cut piece with a pair of short tongs, and head for the picket gate.

It was often the custom, if not tradition, to have picket gates set into large double gates. The style harked back to earlier times as the best way to keep stray animals out.

With the drips of melting ice starting to form a puddle in the dust of the street, the iceman (I don't think we ever knew his name) would climb through the picket gate without breaking stride, which for him were brisk paces that were almost a trot. Mounting the kitchen stairs with a "Mornin' missie", Effie the cook admonishes him to "Keep ya wet sawdust self out of my kitchen". Taking the tongs from him, she carries the ice in her strong hands to the icebox then returns them to him. In the meantime my mother, with a brief pleasantry, pays him off. The going rate at the time being about six cents a pound. With a courteous "Thank ya missie" with two fingers

to the forehead, he retraces the way he came, leaving a small pool of water on the kitchen landing. Effie ignores it. There is no time for him to loiter for the tropical heat is having its way with his precious cargo.

The making of a swizzle starts with a simple metal alloy ice shaver. Its two halves fitted comfortably in the palm of the hand, and it was hinged at the back. Functioning like a carpenter's plane, it gathered 'crushed' ice inside as you slid it across the flat surface of the ice a few times. Care had to be taken to brush aside lingering sawdust. The contents were put into a glass pitcher and a tot of rum for every drinker plus one for the pot to compensate for the melting ice - plus the required number of dashes of bitters. Lastly a pinch of sugar if required. The whole was then vigorously worked with a swizzle stick between the palms of the hands. These swizzle sticks were made - or cut - from a local shrub and served their purpose perfectly. The swizzling action and our soft water produced a 'head' of rum-tinted foam on the surface, which no civilized swizzle would be caught without. Swizzles that appeared without a head were sent back to the pantry for remixing. but this seldom happened; some pride was involved. The drink was then poured through a silver tea strainer and quickly served while the head remained.

With the introduction of the electric refrigerator, the icebox became redundant and so did the shaver, ice cubes from the refrigerator were instead wrapped in a kitchen towel and pounded on the window sill with a wooden mallet. The pounding sound was a rude interruption into the otherwise civilized way of making swizzles.

But the real loss that came with the redundancy of the icebox, was the disappearance of the iceman who no longer called at our back gate with his woebegone horse and dray. I still see him resuming his perch which, with a 'Git', was enough to move them off, starting a fresh trail of drips behind them.

Cocktails anyone?

## The Nanny

One of the better things we in the colonies adopted from the old country, was the tradition of Nannies.

Our Nannies were coloured women, mostly young, who, like their counterparts of the American south, became peripheral members of the family.

Nannies were more than just women who bathed, dressed, and fed the children in their care. They were the stewards of their charges' characters, their supplementary teachers of right and wrong. They were sources of affection and caring; the instrument of admonishment and discipline. They were the surrogate presence that was the extension of parental law. The best of Nannies were all of these things.

Pamelia was Nanny to my brother Geoffrey and I. We loved her without knowing that we did. As I've said before, these were the post-Victorian years when love and affection was not demonstrated except in subtle ways; which in itself was another inherited tradition. But we knew cared for us as if we had been her very own. Only the innocent can bask in those human emotions they do not understand.

Pamelia's colouring was 'light skinned', not at all black. She stood barely five and a half feet tall, a young woman of perhaps twenty years. My brother and I did not see her in terms of age, so much as we saw her as protector and authority outside the purview of our mother. I cannot recall an occasion when my mother had cause to correct Pamelia's conduct or judgment.

Pamelia's patience could be tried. To persist with disobedience after her appeals, was to be disciplined by a smart slap on an arm or the seat of the pants. We earned these punishments when we were disrespectful of her - or others - or had behaved in such a manner as to jeopardize our safety. She did not like us to 'vex' her.

I think of those years in her care for most of the day from Mondays to Saturdays, and remember how physical we were. A force of life itself. The sounds are of laughter - hers and ours - and her young voice. When Pamelia laughed all her face became involved, her cheek muscles making slits of her eyes, her parted lips revealing perfect white teeth.

In the West Indies of my youth, humour and wit was the common thread that bound the fabric of all our lives. All the races were so afflicted. It was infectious. I believe it was the Africans who were the source of this gift. In spite of the hardships of slavery - and perhaps because of - them they found a way to wit and laughter that persisted and grew through and after emancipation.

Pamelia's day with us began at about two o' clock in the afternoon. We were bathed and dressed for our afternoon walk by three o' clock. We were allowed to bathe ourselves in the shower, but this often turned into splashy games that she would have to step into to restore order. After a light tea we would set out on our walk by half past three.

In appearance we were as two 'Little Lord Fauntleroy's'. Our shirts were made from a tissue silk-like material the colour of pearls. They were long sleeved and full at the wrists, with wide, flat, round collars. With two large buttons front and back, they were buttoned into navy blue serge short trousers. These were always made-over hand-me-downs from our elder brothers, often with a large new seat sewn into them due to previous wear. With ten surviving children to feed and clothe, economy was always a priority. Knee-high white socks - that we constantly tugged at when the elastic bands that held them up became stretched - were slid into 'little girl' buckled-over brown shoes. Lastly, a short narrow brown tie, held in place by a tie clip, completed the appearance of what surely must have seemed to be two 'Angels'. As the guardian of those two 'Angels' Pamelia would be dressed in a plain white dress, with a nurse's cap on her head. In those days in the tropical heat, white clothing was synonymous with coolness and comfort.

Our mongrel house dog Puppy (for want of interest or imagination, he died at a very old dog's age still with the name Puppy), would try his best to include himself in our walks, but was always driven back home by Pamelia.

Our afternoon walks to the seawall were some of our happiest times. They were adventures on those bright and breezy afternoons, filled with impatient enthusiasm. It was perhaps a distance of two miles from our East Street house.

Pamelia held firmly to us through East and Middle streets, as we were at close quarters with traffic along those streets. Bicycles were as much a danger as motorcars. But once we reached the safety of the central avenue of Camp Street, we were released with the admonishment to 'Stay close'. Camp Street ran north and south and like Main Street, just two streets to the west, came abruptly to the railroad tracks at Lamaha Street. Like the avenue of Main Street, Camp Street's avenue was lined both sides of its walkway by Flamboyant trees. The seasons after those of its exotic red blooms, produced large, hard seed pods that eventually fell to the ground. Geoffrey and I were quick to pick them up to swat stones with; they were nearly two feet long. But a quick order from Pamelia to 'Stop that at once', brought such pranks to an end.

Many times the railroad gates were closed to us as the last afternoon train emerged from the city's train station close by on our left. The soot-blackened engine, like a yoked ox at the plough heaved and strained, spewing clouds of steam as it huffed and

puffed its way towards us. Pamela, with arms spread protectively to keep us away from the gathering traffic, would herd us against the gatepost. There, clinging to the lower rounds of the gate, we thrilled to the feel of moist steam in our faces as the thundering monster roared by, dragging its carriages away to Kitty Station in the far distance, taking its screaming whistle with it.

Camp Street continued straight north to the seawall now a mile away, the wind bringing the smell of the sea with it. With residential homes ending at Lamaha Street behind us, we were now in open country. Except for some low scrub trees at its borders, the fields to the east of us were open and fallow. Every year for the week of Easter, Pamela brought us here to fly the beautiful kites our brother Joe made for us.

Just north of them was the Ladies Tennis Club, where my sisters were active members. But massed along the other side of Camp street, were long two-storied barracks of the local Militia. They formed a back 'L' around a small parade square with a few scattered coconut trees between smaller buildings.

Just north of the barracks on the one hand, and the tennis club on the other, we left the safety of the sidewalk of Camp Street to turn left on a red dirt road that came quickly to the main grassed parade ground. A narrower red dirt road, closed to traffic, ran north then west around the parade ground, where it suddenly widened as it passed between the Officers' Mess. Here, Pamela released us to the safety of the traffic-free pathways. The Officers' Mess was actually two handsome two storied buildings painted white and fronting on each other. They were pseudo Grecian in pretence and had Corinthian columns supporting blank friezes, creating an open verandah. From there, wide stairs led down to ground level where they were surrounded by palm plants in wooden tubs. Another dirt road running east to west behind the two Messes, had some tall, elegant Royal Palm trees along its shoulder, which made for a rather beautiful backdrop to the whole setting.

Once a year the parade ground was the scene of thrills and excitement, when the Mounted Police Sports were held there. The expert horsemanship of the black policeman riders, thrilled the large crowds gathered on all sides. With their long lances they spiked wooden pegs from the ground at full gallop, threaded bracelet rings dangling from gibbets with fierce concentration. Drawn sabres slashed at stuffed scarecrows as divots flew in the air from their horses' hooves. The roar of the crowds was never ending.

Our destination, the bandstand area at the seawall, was now in sight a few hundred yards ahead. Yet another pathway, which was raised like a railroad bed, led directly to the bandstand. A small fallow field was to our right with another on our left. On the other side of the fence of the latter, was another large Police Barracks compound, with

the usual parade square nestled in the midst. Sometimes we would be passing at the time of bugle-call, summoning the troops for roll-call. The bugle-call was a brisk staccato that was repeated two or three times. Pamela had taught us words to sing along with the bugler's music, words I think were her own concoction:-

Soldier boy, soldier boy,

Leave your wife

And come to-the-war.

But on a beautiful breezy afternoon, it was a joyous song to sing along to.

Sometimes we would pass the barracks before roll-call. When this happened some troopers hung over the fence or from a window, from where they whistled and flirted with passing Nannies. Pamela got her fair share, and although she would 'chips her teeth' and look straight ahead, there was no mistaking her pleasure. Geoffrey and I understood the game. Sometimes, on our return journey home, the comedy was repeated. The seawall was a solid, massive stone-constructed wall put there when the Dutch possessed the country in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. A necessary precaution to keep the sea from flooding inland. They knew the real coastline was thirteen miles out to sea. The deposited silt from incoming tides was a constant threat to cover everything up. The government dredger was forever at work to keep the shipping channel open for those thirteen miles.

Finally, we would arrive at our destination, the seawall itself. Here, on its west to east course, the wall did a short jog north, where it immediately did another jog toward the east. Wide concrete stairs and a sloping grass shoulder, led some ten feet down to road level and the bandstand. The road that came east from High Street in the left distance, continued eastward paralleling the seafront, but also did a graceful turn around the bandstand before rejoining itself. On the other side of it, across from the bandstand, was a closed-in shelter from those times of sudden rain. Later as we grew older, the shelter was used as a changing room for the many times we swam in the sea and had mud-ball fights on the beaches.

To the south from the bandstand was the second police barracks that accompanied the other that we had passed just before arriving at the seawall.

Just a few feet below the seaward shoulder of the road that came from High street, was a tramcar roadbed. I must have been a toddler at the time, for I do remember us arriving and leaving the seawall with Pamela in the tramcar. I have no memory of where we joined it or where the line ended. But I remember the thrill of the ride in the open-sided 'Jolly-Trolley' and the wind in my face. The conductor used the outer running board while holding to the roof support posts with one hands to collect his fares; probably one English penny. And just as probably, showing off his expertise for

the benefit of the Nannies. The tram ended its journey by making a sweeping curve to the left, its wheels making a low moaning sound as it came to a halt behind the bandstand and where the stairs leading down from the promenade above ended at road level. I can still hear the conductor slamming each seatback to face in the opposite direction for the return journey. Sadly, the line was discontinued at about this same time. The tracks are gone but the roadbed is still there.

The bandstand was hexagonal in shape, with low wrought iron railings that were interrupted by slim fluted iron columns. Its red painted metal roof rose gracefully from its outer extremes to a point that was capped with a weathervane like decoration. The police band, led by the waving baton or Major Hendron, perched on his raised dais, added colour to the cheerful martial music. Highly polished instruments caught the afternoon sunlight, and the music rose and fell on the gusting wind.

The road that circled around the bandstand, created a triangular grass lawn by the time it rejoined itself. Heavy white painted chains hung in graceful half loops from posts to confine the area. Within it, children chased each other while others attempted to dance to the music. It was a time and scene of innocence and mirth. The noises, of wails and laughter, of anxiously searching Nannies competing with the sounds of heavy breaking surf against the seawall at high tide.

On that part of the seawall above and behind the bandstand, and sitting on long benches facing the sea, more nannies gently rocked wailing infants in their prams. They enjoyed these few hours each afternoon when they gossiped with each other and passed along the news. This part of the wall was wide enough to be a promenade where other children played and young show-off boys (myself included a few years later) roller-skated between them, to the annoyance of the Nannies.

Finally, well before sunset, the playing of the national anthem was a signal for Nannies gather up their charges. Pamela was always close at hand. It was a trying time for the Nannies who had to be firm with children whose tired legs and bodies made them irritable and unwilling to leave their playmates. Admonishments of 'Stop that' and 'Behave yourself' did little to placate those now dedicated to resistance. Bandsmen, now putting away their instruments, seized on their first opportunity to engage in flirtations with the already distracted Nannies. The general scene was a series of disconnected cameos that would have appealed to Norman Rockwell.

These afternoons at the seawall were as a child's paradise, where it never, never rained, and the rich blue of the sky was daubed with small cotton wool clouds, blown across the impressionist scene by fresh breezes from the sea. A scene that remains happily vivid in my mind, these many decades later.

As we retrace our way home we are as the head of an arrow, A patient Pamela in the lead trailing two youngsters by the hand and on either side. She would cheer us up by singing one of her church songs, to which we knew most of the words. Her favourite, and the one that lingers best in my memory, is sung to a simple melody:-

A little more oil in the lamp  
Keeps it burning,  
A little more oil in the lamp  
I pray,  
A little more oil in the lamp  
Keeps it burning,  
Keeps it burning till the break of day.

Occasionally there would be some light applause from a trooper leaning out from a barracks window.

Later, when dark descended and the moon rose, we would give over our seawall paradise to the courting couples arriving in their silent cars. There were no car radios then but they would be content with the wind in their faces and the sound of breaking surf washing up on the beach. It was a time of innocence in limbo for World War II was less than a decade away.

Arriving home by half-dark it was a familiar drill for Pamela to sit us down to our suppers. Sometimes she would go straight to the medicine cupboard to return with the iodine bottle to daub cuts and bruises. An unpopular act but she would brook no resistance. After half an hour's freedom, it was teeth brushing time, ablutions and pyjamas and bed. It was a long day for her.

Later Pamela married and had several children of her own, one of her sons becoming a lawyer. She was a pillar of both her church and community.

## Kites

Every year, the flying of kites during the week of Easter, a tradition that all youngsters of my time looked forward to with excitement. It began the Monday following Easter Sunday and ended on the following Saturday. During that blissful week hundreds of kites could be seen in the air. Most of the flying was done from the open field to the east of Camp Street, bordered by the railway tracks to the south and the Ladies' Tennis Club to the north. It was the ideal place from which to raise your kite because there were no trees or telephone wires in the immediate area. Brisk breezes coming from the sea were at our backs. But popularity meant congestion, so that great care had to be taken to avoid entanglements.

Even though Easter time was the beginning of the longer wet season, my memories of kite flying are of happy pictures of sunny afternoons of not-too-strong breezes that puffed at familiar clouds that drifted across rich blue skies. We were youngsters of all races in common camaraderie, many of whom were from families whose religions were outside of the Christian Faith. I doubt that many of us associated the raising of a kite with the resurrection of Christ. We innocently enjoyed the thrill of our expertise to successfully raise our kites to join others already in the air.

Some kites flew quietly and sedately while others swerved and pitched in mischief. We knew that the rigging of the kite determined either behaviour.

Every year before Easter our elder brother Joe whose proper name was Raymond - made the most beautiful kites for my brother Geoffrey and me, for it seems that the kites from the year before did not survive for the year to follow. Kites were fragile and given to punctures of their paper surfaces. We were always repairing them, patching their beautiful coloured designs that Joe had created, with care and tear-stained faces.

Joe was thorough and careful in making our kites. I have a distinct memory of my fascination with the very movements of his hands as he worked. I was to relive that fascination fifty years later as I watched - with detachment - my own hands at work in my sculpture studio. Our kites were about two feet tall and fifteen inches wide. By running strings within the frame - which was pivotal at the centre to form an asterisk - Joe created geometric star-shaped designs. The bright glossy papers were fixed to the stringed outlines with a glue made from mixing flour and water.

There were boy-kites and girl-kites; we of course wanted boy-kites. Whereas girl-kites had a flat surface throughout, a boy-kite had a 'nose' which started from a point at the centre of the kite's frame, to a pronounced curved 'forehead' at the top centre.

Glued to a string behind the 'forehead' was a 'bull', which was a half circle of carefully chosen brown paper. Two larger 'bulls' were fixed to both sides of the hexagonally shaped kite. The 'bulls' made aggressive male noises that could even be heard from the ground when the kite was in the air.

Girl-kites were one flat hexagonal plane. The other difference was that instead of 'bulls' on the upper sides, we attached frills of coloured tissue paper which the wind blew as it would the long tresses of a little girl running. Girl-kites flew silently.

Whether a kite flew sedately or mischievously was determined by the length of its tail, usually of cord and tied to a 'V' loop that hung from the bottom frame. For a touch of colour and animation, we tied bright coloured little strips of cloth every eight inches or so along its length. The comical appearance was that of so many 'bow-ties'.

Last but not least was the loops that Joe tied to our kites. You could have a pulling loop or a belly loop and every boy knew belly loops were for girls and sissies. We - Geoffrey and me - insisted of course on pulling loops. In 1931, when I was still some months short of my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, my pride literally went before the fall because I wanted that pulling loop. Growing up being reminded that you are the baby of a large family, and in particular Geoffrey's baby brother, does much in the way of developing an early ego.

That afternoon we were on the same open field where we had raised our kites high in the air to the full extent of their strings, the ends of which were tied to the now empty baller sticks by clove hitches. The wind was medium and steady and although I was holding my own against the pulling loop, it took all of my concentration to keep it that way. With the help of Pamela, our nanny, we had been sending 'messages' up to our kites. These were little circles of paper with a hole at the centre and by tearing a slit to the centre, were able to fit the papers on to the string. By jiggling the string the 'messages' were soon caught by the wind and, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, they slid all the way up to the loops of the kites.

Our kites were high, high in the sky, or so it seemed to two small boys, and they were flying quietly at safe distances from the many other kites around them. Geoffrey was ten paces to my right and Pamela nearby between and behind us. Pamela was never far from her precious charges.

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, the wind freshened alarmingly so that I nearly lost hold of the baller stick. Just as suddenly what was a tolerable pull on my kite string, now became a tug of war. Suddenly my beautiful kite became a demon possessed. I distinctly remember that particular kite because that year Joe had opted to try a change from the star patterns to replicate the Union Jack flag. It was red and white with a very dark blue, and I was thrilled with it. But now it was behaving more like a

'Jolly Roger' that was now pulling me forward. Everything - typically - began to happen very quickly. To make matters worse, the field was lumpy because it had probably never been tilled., and the wild grasses were only occasionally cropped by grazing animals.

Lurching forward now in a state of panic, I cried out for Pamela and had no sooner called her name, than I tripped and fell as I stubbed a shoe on one of the fiendish lumps. Letting go of the baller stick and with all of my anxiety focused on my waving-goodbye-union-jack, I must have experienced. something like a flashback of my life, which I also suppose, must have been brief indeed.

When a kite in full flight is suddenly let go, its behaviour changes dramatically, for it wags itself from left to right in disbelief as it loses its poise, drifting farther and farther away. The tail is no longer a straight line of bowties, but a curling snake seemingly in search of the nearest power line or tree. But at that instant there is a blur of movement over my shoulder as dearly beloved Pamela, first wrap one arm around my body, then grabs the baller stick with the other. We form a straddled heap on the ground a little dirtier for wear, but who cares, my kite is halted in its flight I remember the mixed emotions of gratitude and affection.

We balled in our kites then as it was near enough time to head for home anyway.

I remember being somewhat quiet and reflective on the way home and that night when Joe changed my pulling loop to a belly loop, I voiced no objection. There's no lesson like the one learned the hard way.

With too many kites flying from the same field, entanglements were inevitable. We always kept a wary eye on other kites in our immediate area. A freshening breeze, a sudden puff of wind, is enough to make the quiet flying kite next to your own suddenly become agitated. To move your own away from the other that now threatens to entangle itself with yours, must be done slowly and carefully, otherwise you cause your kite to become unstable in the air. Once the tail of his kite entangles itself around the string of your own, both kites become crazed in their behaviour. Calm heads and co-operation, which does not come easily to alarmed youngsters, is called fore if total loss is to be avoided. I have seen these entanglements involve three and four kites at the same time. The only remedy is to give ground slowly while hastily balling in the strings of both kites. Patience does riot come easily either.

And then there is always the trouble makers who rig their kites to fly wildly and to pitch in hurried full circles. Look carefully at the ends of their tails and the sunlight will glint in reflection off the razor blade that is tied there, Geoffrey was in such a danger one afternoon when a teenaged black boy raised such a kite not far from his. The boy's intentions were clear, for we had seen the razor blade. He might well have

had his way with cutting Geoffrey's kite adrift, had he not made the error of discounting the ever-watchful Pamela. With hands on hips and her fierce expression "Hey you boy, what you think you doing?", was enough for him to move off. But later that afternoon he succeeded in cutting someone else's kite adrift at the far end of the field.

When this happens, the kite that is set adrift by a razor blade, or even by the sudden snapping of the string seizes you with a disbelieving paralysis and an indescribable sense of loss.

But my most poignant memory of the loss of one of my beautiful kites, did not take place on the flying field.

Before we set out from our East Street house with Pamela, Geoffrey and I would carefully loop the tails of our kites then pass the baller of string through and over the loops a couple of times. Paying out some slack we would then drape our kites over our shoulders against our backs, and hold firmly to the ballers against our chests, it was the most practical way to carry your kite.

East Street did not have a sidewalk so we walked along the curb against a mounded shoulder of grass that separated the street from the parallel canal. Pamela walked between us and passing traffic, which sometimes stirred up little dust clouds, much to our annoyance. East Street, like many others in the city at that time, was not paved, instead they were a sort of mosaic of broken stones compacted into the surface of whatever material made up the rest of the street. As such, these streets weathered very well, but they collected gathered dust in their curbside from wind and rain and passing motorcars.

Before we could reach the end of our street where it joined with Middle street, calamity struck.

I heard the pitter-patter of running feet - paws actually coming from behind me; I happened then to be bringing up the rear. I think I knew before I turned the source would take the form of a galloping 'Puppy' making his great escape once again. 'Puppy', our mongrel dog who died at a dog's old age with the ridiculous name of 'Puppy', never really gave up in his attempts to join us on our outings. The sight of what he considered his personal playmates going for their afternoon walks without him, was too much for him to bear; even though he knew Pamela would turn him back. Pamela's prime concern was the care and safety of her precious 'Angles', so that she did not need such extra distractions as the unpredictable 'Puppy'.

Everything happened very quickly.

I turned to see the joy-smearing face of 'Puppy', complete with lolling tongue, sending puffs of dust behind him as he raced forward to announce his presence. He probably thought we would welcome him with open arms; kites meant nothing to him. As I turned, my kite slipped from my shoulder to dangle at my side, and I caught sight of the outstretched paws of 'Puppy' as they, and most of his head, tore through my beautiful kite that Joe had made just the day before.

Strangely enough I have no recall, no memory whatsoever of what transpired after the calamity. It is still unbelievable for me to this day. About the only thing I can be certain of would be tears - my own. And vexation, especially from Pamela. I can only hope we were not too hard on him and that somehow 'Puppy' understood if we had been. The other certainty would be we would be friends again the next day.

I mean dogs can be so forgiving!

## Getting There

Our train station was much the same as others elsewhere, except it had only one platform. Behind that was the usual ticket window and a counter for parcels and general freight. There was a large clock set high against the back wall, whose sooty arms and Roman numerals told the time. The rafters were high and dark under the corrugated roof that rose to a peak to fall away again as it came down the opposite side of the two parallel tracks. There was a gloom to the place as nothing seemed to escape the years of soot-ash patination.

Although the two ends of the station were mostly open, direct sunlight did not penetrate to the inner station and there were no skylights. A few hardy weeds grew against the cement wall that supported the front edge of the platform, and on the sunny side of the footings of the great 'I' beams that rose between the tracks to support the lofty ceiling. Sometimes I gathered a mixture of soot and dust into little piles with my shoes, then tip them through the gaps between the floorboards to fall into the darkness below. The sleepers and earth floor of the track-bed were layered with a skin of mixed dirt and oil. The tracks came into the station from the yards, which were just to the west of it and close by the river. They exited east into the far distance like a pointing finger. But I always loved the smell of steam-heated oil that lingered everywhere; the odours were synonymous with riding the train, a journey that excited any boy. And the train journey meant going to Albion

The thought of going to Albion for the holidays - which was twice a year - was a time of building excitement, for although I was happy enough living and going to school in Georgetown, Albion was always where I wanted most to be. To be there with my brothers and my father was a very special excitement, and Daddy was quite generous in giving us the freedom to roam the Plantation. In the city my mother was somewhat restrictive, saying she had to be because "Your father spoils you too much at Albion". If it was true, and perhaps it was, it must have been because he could still remember his own boyhood. Besides, he was by nature a generous man.

Of the years I travelled to Albion - from 1929 to 1938 - my memories are mostly of just myself and Geoffrey journeying there together. I do have memories of my older brothers, Joe and Peter being with us. I have a memory of my eldest brother John with us at Albion, but none of him actually travelling there with us. Perhaps he had become a young working man and had to attend his job instead. Either way, my mother sensibly packed all we would need to take with us in one large trunk that Joe and Peter carried between them. We would arrive at the train station in a 'drop car' and

one of the older brothers would produce the carefully counted fare to purchase our tickets. We always went first class, which meant we had a private compartment to ourselves.

We usually caught the eight o' clock morning train.

My brothers and I stand as a small group formed like circled wagons around our trunk, as if waiting for Indians to attack. We are almost the only whites waiting for the train to arrive. This is the dry season and although it is but eight o' clock in the morning, the day promises to be another scorcher. We take no notice of what the day is like, it is like this every day of the year; unless it is raining. The fidgeting of the young and restless suddenly ceases as the unmistakable whistle of the train comes at us from the left. All my early morning excitement has been building toward this moment, an excitement that will be little tempered by the journey, to peak again at the ferry crossing of the Berbice River, and the drive from New Amsterdam to Albion.

The train slowly came to a halt along our platform, but not before I could feel the heat from the passing engine and almost taste the moisture from its spewing clouds of steam.

Behind the engine and its wood-laden tender was the freight carriage, half of its floor covered with straw as a sanitary consideration for taking on animals. The three or four carriages behind it were for passengers. Usually one, sometimes two of them, held four private compartments of two opposing, upholstered, bench-like seats, overhead hand luggage racks, full width mirrors and two windows. They were actually two windows in one, a louvered window on the inside and glass on the outside. You pulled on the leather strap to raise or lower the outer glass window, while the shutter had a brass finger insert for raising and lowering. The passageway side was mostly glass, including the sliding door. The rest of the carriage was of the usual contoured, wood-slatted benches. The second class carriages were entirely of the same bench type. A comfortable seat was prized, because although the distance from Georgetown to Rosignol - the end of the line at the Berbice River - was only 69 miles, it would take four hours to get to Rosignol. There were just too many stops along the way. All the carriages were painted a dull, muted red that years of soot had tinged a smoky-grey.

Joe and Peter hefted our trunk and led the way to our reserved compartment. There was a scramble for the two window seats but the losers would get their turns at them, for restless youth found it difficult to sit in one place for four hours.

The station was still a hubbub of human noises and the hissing steam of an impatient engine. Geoffrey and I hung out from two of the passageway windows that were ringside seats to the comings and goings of people, the late arrivers scurrying to

get aboard. The platform guard's whistle is quickly followed by that of the engine and a moment later we start to move. The great wheels spin and hold as the engine leans into its task with determination, showering clouds of steam among those waving goodbye at the far end of the platform. A final scream from the engine's whistle fades to a whimper as it passes from under the shelter of the station into the open air outside.

From our passageway windows Geoffrey and I watched the city limits of Lamaha Street pass by, the Lamaha Canal separating the train tracks from the street. Quickly we came to the Camp Street crossing, the one we used for our afternoon walks to the seawall with Pamela. Kitty will be the first stop just outside the city's eastern boundary, and we are already slowing as we approach it in a sweeping curve towards the seafront.

Time was in abundance during the four hour journey. Until we reach the halfway point at Mahaica, our excitement is now tempered for flat countryside is not beautiful and the passing villages take on a sameness. Between stations Geoffrey and I are obstructing nuisances in the passageway, or sitting across from each other in our compartment, we kick at each other with our feet and ultimately earn a stern 'stop that' from Peter. When we tired of playing with the sliding door, we spent time on the outside platforms watching the blur of rail-bed sleepers pass below us. We hung on with both hands as the bumpers of our carriage rubbed against those of the carriage behind us. Soon, Joe or Peter would come to check on us and order us back to the compartment. It will be a chance - if we hurry - to 'hog' a window seat. If you have four older brothers you have to make your own opportunities.

The communities we pass along the way are of such a size as to be too large to be villages, or too small to be towns, even small towns. I cannot call up images of Mahaica and Mahaicony that would classify them as small towns, but they would be the exceptions; they are both located on creeks of the same name. By the standards of any other country those creeks would properly be called rivers. The importance or size of a community was reflected by their train stations, which varied from banked-up earth platforms held together by lengths of squared logs, wood floored platforms with some protection from rain, and finally proper single platform stations. The same applied to the fronts of Plantations.

Coming into each stop was to be entertained by the same 'Theatre' as the stop before, except there was more of it at the larger stations. Vendors hawked their wares - tropical fruit and vegetables - on wide, flat wooden trays balanced on their heads as they passed beneath our carriage windows. They were almost always women, some Africans but mostly East Indian women. Because of the burdens on their heads, their movements were graceful from their swaying hips to their unshod feet. East Indian

women wore several bracelets about their arms and ankles that jingled melodiously as they paced. Reaching down from our window with proffered pennies, we bought four Julie mangoes for ourselves when we stopped at Enmore, one of the larger Plantations. The seller was a young Indian woman, her pretty face adorned with a silver star-like button on her nose and a red dot of her Hindu religion at the centre of her forehead. Her smile changed to a frown from the overhead sunlight as she looked up at us. Other passengers were about the same business from other carriage windows. The delicious 'Julies' supplemented our sandwiches from home.

The arrival of the train is always an event in the daily lives of people in the communities, who turn out in numbers to witness the comings and goings of their neighbours. As if agitated by the heat of the day, people seem to move around and speak in loud voices, the vulgar colours of the Indian women's saris counter pointing the visual picture. The juicy colours of pineapples, custard apples and bananas parade below our windows. Cud-chewing goats scavenge for anything that takes their fancy, a donkey grazes nearby, indifferent to everything going on around it. Having urinated against a post, a malnourished mongrel dog scratches at his ribcage, his head hangs low and there's almost a set grin to his open mouth. The walls of the small station are splattered with playbills announcing the latest productions from India now playing in the local 'Picture House'. The new bills are hurriedly pasted over older ones whose shredded edges hang down as if in shame. The idle curious are there, the young boy who leans against a post, his left foot resting against his right knee, his right arm around the post while the left hand plays with a long stem of grass in his mouth. His eyes are wide open and staring, missing nothing.

I never tired of these scenes yet had no sense or thought of storing them.

Familiar names of villages and Plantations pass by our windows; they are as old friends come to visit. We brothers compete with each other to be the first to call out their names, Ogle, Plaisance, Beter ver Wagting, Lusignan, Buxton. Then Non Pareil where my young father met and married my even younger mother, who was Governess to the children of the manager of Plantation Hope, just the other side of Enmore. Next came Ann's Grove and beyond there would come the two highlight thrills of our train journey, the iron bridges of Mahaica and Mahaicony.

These were indeed sizeable rivers, their tides perhaps not as vigorous as those of the Berbice or Demerara rivers, but their troubled waters were just as muddy and brown. Their shorelines and riverbanks sported the same continuous mangroves.

The bridges were perhaps fifty feet above both the Mahaica and Mahaicony, their bow-shaped arches of iron decorated with rivet heads. As we slowed for the passing over we strained for positions at the windows, mesmerized by the sloping beams of

iron that passed close by like fearsome shadows, all the while feeling the vibrations of the bridge's mid-air span, while the groaning of the wheels add a sense of fear.

I was unaware at this time that my earliest family history in British Guiana, began not many miles up the Mahaicony River. My maternal grandmother had been born on a farm outside of Aberdeen, when circumstances brought her to the colony as a girl of nine years of age. She told me once that she arrived 'On a four-mast Clipper, and Georgetown was little more than a mud-flat.' Her mother and father, my great grandparents, were visiting their grandparents on their Plantation (by today's standards it was more likely a farm) when they discovered they were expecting my unborn grandmother. The owners of the Farm/Plantation, my great-great-great-grandparents, were proud of having given their slaves their freedom before the emancipation of 1834. After a visit of a few months my great grandparents returned to Aberdeen for the expected birth of my grandmother, when, suddenly he died and was buried at sea. Nine years after her birth, my grandmother and her mother returned to British Guiana. A few years after my great-grandmother was married to a Doctor Reed.

There were apparently four 'Plantations' up the Mahaicony River; Anjou & Hamlet, Perth, Strath Campbell and Champagne. Which was my ancestor's Plantation is unknown, but with our Scottish connection - and given the French suggestion of the other two - it is likely that it would have been either Perth or Strath Campbell. The romance of it is quite poignant.

There were 'Plantations' not many miles away on the 'East Coast' whose names speak of adventurers with a sense of humour. As a sample: Two Friends & Nog Eens, Glazier's Lust, Harmony Hall & Rebecca's Lust and Now-or-Never.

Dunedin was the only stop between Mahaica and Mahaicony (it was pronounced locally as Micony) to be followed by Letter Kenny, Drill, Abary, this time a wooden bridge over the smaller Abary river. Finally Fort Wellington, Bath, Rosignol and the end of the line on the west bank of the mighty Berbice River.

Restless with the confinement of the train, Geoffrey and I spent periods of time hanging out of the windows of our compartment. Unable to see the train's wheels I thrilled - with fear - as the train made sweeping turns over parapets, the carriage seeming about to leave the track and shoot off into space, only to turn at the last moment to follow the carriage ahead of us. We enjoyed the feel of the sun and the rushing wind in our faces, even though we occasionally catch bits of soot in our eyes. It is not yet mid-day but our impatience for Rosignol will soon be rewarded.

There was not much evidence of Rosignol village as we pulled into the station. There was actually no station. The concrete platform we stepped down to was brief,

whereupon the gravel surface of the public road came up to it at the same level. But the stelling was immediately behind the sturdy buffer that straddled the railway line, literally marking the end of the line.

With Joe and Peter toting our trunk at either end, and Geoffrey and I on either side between them, we must have given the appearance of a poorly funeral party, except our uplifted spirits were the very opposite. I was on the nearside as we passed by the train engine which seemed to be heaving and steaming like an angry broken mustang, rebellious at being harnessed. Like a sweating beast it stood not twenty feet from the end-of-line buffer. I can still hear the hissing of sudden jets of escaping steam as we make our way into the pleasant shade of the stelling's high corrugated, galvanized roof. The sun is at its zenith and a brisk breeze is coming in from the nearby sea to stir up little whitecaps on the river's surface. New Amsterdam's low skyline across the Berbice is a little further up the river than Rosignol, some three and a half miles away. Between it and us the ferry is half way across, her freshly painted upper works brighter in the sunshine. The river's tide is in the early stages of falling and as the ferry starts her turn to face up-river and come at us from the seaward side, we recognize her as the Lady Northcote. Her diesel powered engines throw up bow waves as the stem cleaves its way through the whitecaps. Other than turning into the Albion gap for the first time, nothing, no other sight, can so stir my joy and excitement which is now at its own zenith.

We have joined the still gathering crowd of mixed races that have also come by train, now supplemented by locals who also want to cross the river. The usual noises and gesticulating conversation that surrounds us go unnoticed as all eyes are on the Northcote, for no matter how many times the repeated scene is witnessed, it never ceases to hold fascination for everyone.

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We did not always go by train.

Every Estate was provided with a car for the use of the manager and deputy manager and it was garaged under the manager's great house. When the manager was away on leave, the garaging was under the deputy's almost equally great house. It had become the custom that Anglo-whites living and working in the fetid tropics, needed an extended opportunity to spend their leave in the northern climes for it was thought that 'a good winter' would purge the tropical 'nasties' from blood and body. Many an Englishman contracted malaria fever in the early years. It was called 'long leave' and was anything from three to six months absence.

On other occasions the Estate car would be in Georgetown on Estate business and would call at our house for mail and packages for my father. In the spirit of economy,

once a month my father packed a large tin trunk with fresh vegetables grown in the ample vegetable garden behind our house at Albion, which was then sent by train to us in Georgetown.

At one time my father had a black model 'T' Ford of which I have only a fleeting memory. The license plate was 1010 and its high, framed canvas roof left lots of open space for air to pass through, as it puffed and chugged noisily along on its slim tires. But the car of my fond memories was the brown Buick of the early 30's, whose boxy sides actually had glass windows that could be rolled up to keep out dust and rain. A single upper mounted windscreen wiper was electric powered, making it unnecessary for the driver to manually operate it.

'Mack' MacKenzie was the designated chauffeur of the Buick, a black man not quite middle-aged, mild and pleasant of manner, a quiet man with a quick smile and a passion for care and protection of his precious Buick. The garage under the kitchen of our Albion house was a place of fascination for me. Its emptiness - when the Buick was garaged under Mr. Bee's house - (James Bee the manager, of whom more later) was a lure for exploration, drawn there by the musty smell of oil and grease, by its sticky tins and bottles on the shelves and small clumps of cotton-waste. The country roads were quick to dirty the cars that travelled over them at any time of the year, and the Buick was no exception. Almost every morning when the Buick was in its garage under our house, Mack could be found washing and drying and polishing 'his' precious Buick. I have spent not a few mornings sitting on a disused wooden crate, elbows on knees, chin in hands, watching him swabbing the Buick down from his bucket of water. There was mostly silence between us but he always tried to give sensible answers to my silly questions. My brothers and I were genuinely fond of Mack and he responded in kind.

On those occasions that Mack called at mid-mornings at our Georgetown house for the drive to Albion, none of the happiness of being in the company of my brothers and Mack has little diminished in my memories. Pleasant greetings are exchanged between my mother and Mack, and in an exceptional way he makes no effort to flirt with either our cook or maid. Quiet Mack was a man that was easy to respect, and whether I ever asked or knew, I do not remember if he was married.

Whether we went by train or road it still took four hours to get to Rosignol. In my youth the unpaved country roads were notorious for their potholes, and straying animals and careless children were an inclusive caution.

The road from Georgetown to Rosignol was the only one between those two points - it was known as the east coast road - and more or less paralleled the train line. Although it was hardly more than a mile or two from the Atlantic, we never saw the

ocean. Whereas our British Landlords were thorough in most things, road building was not one of them; other than steamrollers, road building was a sort of bucket and spade affair, and although there was no shortage of a labour force, they were not exactly energetic in their toil. The red soil came from a vast belt of iron ore that ran through the Guianas and Venezuela, the ore from which our Bauxite was produced. It was not uncommon to see neat, rectangular mounds of red earth set on fire - smouldering really - roadside, when constructing or repairing was in progress. I don't know how the firing was done but the reasoning behind it was a hardening of lumps of that earth when cooled. Keeping in mind that nine tenths of the population lived along the sea coast, roads going inland were - brief. Between the traffic and the rains the unpaved surfaces soon gave way to the notorious potholes.

My memories of being driven to Albion in the Buick by Mack, are only of my brother Geoffrey and myself; though there must have been times when Joe and Peter were also with us.

The automobiles of the day had an external luggage space that was itself shaped like a trunk and was actually part of the bodywork. The allowance was almost token, so that our (famous) trunk was something of a snug fit. Whereas it was a mad rush to see who would first claim to sit in the front passenger seat with Mack, and a clear view of the road ahead, I did not mind very much on those occasions when I lost out. Because then I could stand on the floor and lean over the back of the front seat and have an even better view of the road ahead. Apart from the potholes and wandering traffic, I must have been an additional distraction for Mack, what with all my pointings and questions. He never once said sit down and be quiet in the back seat; he was not that sort of man. When I tired of standing I would kneel on the back seat and look out the small oval shaped rear window and watch all the splashes the Buick's wheels made from the rain-filled potholes, or the swirling of the red dust when conditions were dry. The scenery that went past our windows was very familiar and we were quick to see who would be the first to notice any changes. I don't remember if Geoffrey and I ever exchanged seats, but if Joe and Peter were with us I can imagine irritating problems from restlessness. Little boys can be trying and the automobiles of the day had nothing of the inner spaciousness of today's models.

Whereas the train tracks skirted the communities, the single coast road ran right through them. For the most part, villages followed where road and track had gone before. A seemingly endless stream of villages and smallholding farms sped by the Buick's windows, the farms being mostly flooded rice paddy fields. The Hindu religion's reverence for the cow was no less an entity here in British Guiana than it was in India, and there would be more than one occasion when Mack would be confronted with the stupid, cud-chewing face of an immovable cow in the middle of

the road. When blowing the Buick's horn failed to disturb the animal (there were no pneumatic horns in these days), he would call on one of the ever-present boys at the roadside to use a switch on the defiant one, which usually worked. Less visible, the sudden crossing of the road of stray pigs, goats and dogs, were yet more added dangers to our safety and Mack's vigilance.

There were occasional stretches of road where attempts were made to pave the surfaces, but these were almost never maintained and became victims of overburdened British Bedford or Austin lorries (we seldom referred to truck), laden with jute bags of rice or flour or brown sugar. As a rule the road was banked up earth on top of crushed rocks, sometimes narrow enough that passing cars might run their offside wheels on the sloping shoulders. All of which did little to discourage speeding drivers. To the young East Indian male, driving a car was a symbol of prowess to be shown-off. Not so our sober-sided Mack, conscious of his responsibilities in the back seat - and his precious Buick.

The habitations were mostly those of East Indians who, since the beginning of their migration in 1851, accounted for 51% of the total population. Their modest dwellings, lifted comically into the air atop spindly stilts, were as often as not unpainted, their exposed sides patinated a muted grey by the elements. There were occasional small attempts at decoration by fret worked wood trims, otherwise their appearance was dictated by expense and function. Their outside stairways ran from tiny landings to the ground, front and back of the house. Their windows were a mixture of both glass and louvres, and the under house open to the whims of the winds. Prayer flags of white and sun-bleached red flew atop spindly bamboo poles.

Whether high off the ground or low to it, the houses sat on small properties facing the public road whose sloping grass shoulders came down to a drainage ditch before a boundary picket fence. A simple plank or two straddled the ditches, leading to a small front gate. Sometimes there were no fences.

Young children were everywhere. Sometimes the very youngest would be dressed only in a plain, collarless shirt that hardly reached past their navels. Barefooted, with a dirty finger of one hand in the mouth, the other hand subconsciously holding their genitals, they stared with naked curiosity at our passing. There was that unspoken communication between us that recognised the huge gulf that separated our social lives and fortunes.

Every village had its well that supplied water for washing and drinking. The tradition of women and girls filling buckets of water from the well's hand-pump was ever familiar. The younger girls struggled with the weight of it, changing the burden from hand to hand to ease the strain on their young backs, the inevitable splashes

wetting the ends of their shabby skirts and tiny toes of their bare feet. The women were more successful as they balanced the heavy buckets on rolled cloth pads on their heads, sometimes steadying them with one hand. Like the vendors at our train windows, the heavy loads produced a graceful, hip swinging walk that sent their long skirts swaying like Hawaiian hulas. Whether gathered around the wells or on the banks of creeks or canals ('trenches' in the vernacular), the same women did the family laundry by beating the soaped, wet clothing with time-worn wood paddles, sitting naturally in a crouched position for hours on end. My young eyes saw these scenes as a way of life and not as hardship, for their demeanour was one of good-natured acceptance.

The wood bridges we crossed over at the Mahaica and Mahaicony rivers, were lesser thrills than their iron counterparts further down river. But it was at the Mahaicony that we would come upon the road trip's highlight in the form of 'halfway tree'. My memory fails me as to what tree it was, but its great presence was honoured by the road splitting itself to go around the deeply gnarled trunk, to once again rejoin itself on either side.

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The noise and excitement of making the Lady Northcote fast is finally completed, and the narrow, double-planked gangway is thrown across from the upper deck to the stelling level. It straddles the great weathered twelve-by-twelve wood beam that runs the full width of the stelling, the only gesture of guardrails. Because of its dangerous position, our gangway has handrails on either side. At the same time I can hear the slapping sound of the thrown loading planks below us, which is set to accommodate both foot and motor traffic from the angled down floating ramp to the ferry. The loading and unloading of the human masses and occasional animals, clash and jockey with the equally determined motor traffic, the honking of impatient horns adding to the waves of human cacophony. I love every minute of the excitable ordered confusion.

This time docking the Northcote at the New Amsterdam stelling will be easier because we are heading into the falling tide, and the crossing from Rosignol to the town is at an upriver angle anyway. Unlike the sweaty, steaming of the old Queriman on the Demerara River, the Lady Northcote grrrowles her way across the Berbice, pushing tidy bow-waves aside. The ever-flat mangrove shoreline makes the distance we have to cover deceptive, but I watch the closing of it and start to pick up some details from the town's low skyline. My brothers and I are huddled against the upper deck's forward railing, our precious trunk close by. Three cars and a lorry are parked

starboard to port across the thirty foot deck below us, ready for disembarking because we will tie up against the stelling on our port side.

We are close enough to the stelling now that the grrrrrowing diesel engines reduce power to half speed, and the ferry's bow is pointing at just a few degrees left of straight ahead. Geoffrey points toward the finger-like roots of the mangroves where a zillion crabs are scurrying sideways across the wide mud banks that become more and more exposed as the tide falls. The New Amsterdam stelling's pylon legs are like a forest as they run out well over a hundred feet from the shoreline, where it finally reaches deeper water. Water that is the ever familiar mud-brown and restless.

Having come by train we search eagerly for sight of Mack and the Estate car, which we quickly spot parked in the shade of the stelling's vast roof. We wave to him and he waves back. The moments that follow now are the sounds of engine telegraph bells riding on the increasing waves of mixed human sounds, everyone shuffling for positions of advantage for quickest disembarking. The stelling itself, at the end of the extension from ashore, is barely large enough to accommodate the sudden river of baggage-toting humanity. Mack has parked the Buick so that it faces toward the town, away from the river. The exodus of passengers soon surround and engulf the Buick, like so many ants bearing food to their nest. We force our way across the human tide, using the trunk to advantage. Our trunk is stowed and we are all speaking excitedly and at once as we scramble for the best seats; I'm ordered by my elder brothers to take a back seat, where I end up squished in the middle; I am near tears in frustration but soon swept up in the gaiety of the holiday mood and Mack's beaming happiness at having us around him.

There is a separated walkway for pedestrians on one side of the long covered shed that extends ashore, the wider area just wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other. The squared beams that form the flooring have, with time, become loose around their spikes from years of trampling traffic, and as the Buick passes slowly over them they make their familiar melodious sounds as if they were the wooden notes of a giant harpsichord. Music to my ears.

These times with my brothers are highest on my list of happiest memories and recalling them from time to time, has caused me to conclude that happiness is wasted if one does not consciously recognize it at the time of its happening.

As we come off the last of the warbling floor beams on to firm land, the main street of commerce runs across us as we come to its junction. To our left is an open area where Estate lorries and home made busses are gathering goods and passengers. The busses are vulgar in their bright, clashing colours, their roof-racks already straining with mounting sacks and baggage. Sitting on hard wooden seats, the crowded

passengers are angrily urging their driver to get going, anything to get fresh air into the cramped interior. A elderly East Indian woman leans her head against the buss window to fan a handkerchief across her wearied face. It is between one and two o' clock in the afternoon when the heat of the day is at its worst.

The lorries are stacking their flat-beds with sacks of flour and rice and other goods that have been ordered from the residents of communities and Plantations along the Corentyne road. The heavy mounds of cargo are severely testing the lorries' rear suspensions, but no one pays attention to them. A few riders are climbing atop the mounds of sacks for a free ride home, ignoring the danger of their precarious positions; theirs will be a cool ride. One of those lorries now loading is bound for Albion, its portly but jovial driver volubly giving orders to all and sundry. His name is Dalhsingh and he is also the owner of the burdened beast he drives. On one occasion it was he that met Geoffrey and I at the stelling, surprising us by being a last minute change in transporting us to Albion. It was an adventurous ride, for he had taken both doors off the cab of the lorry, so that the road noises was something new to our experiences, noises that his sonorous voice easily rose to overcome. Dalhsingh was a happy natured man, quick to laugh and share a joke, some of which he told us were not proper for our young ears.

The Corentyne road runs for fifty miles from New Amsterdam to Plantation Skeldon near the estuary of the Corentyne River, an even greater river that is the boundary with neighbouring Dutch Guiana. The Plantations along the way from New Amsterdam are Rose Hall, Albion, Port Mourant and Skeldon.

The busiest street of New Amsterdam - its main commercial street - is a teeming mass of bodies, bicycles and motor traffic, the ringing bicycle bells compete with rising, irritated voices and noisy car horns. The potential mayhem is one of orderly chaos. Accidents are minimal because of an evolved sense of anticipation, rather than an orderly obeisance of the law. The wide unpaved street is fronted either side by the business houses of various Merchants, Dry Goods Stores, Rum Shops, Hardware, Drug Stores and places that store sacks of flour and other grain. The shops are old, some with heaving floors, their dark interiors lit even during the day. Their odours tell of exotic corners of the world in my young imagination, their high, broad counters tended mostly by pleasant African or East Indian women, or intermixtures between them. Sometimes Portuguese attend who are likely relatives of the owner-merchants. I am aware that I am far more stimulated by this colourful poor-cousin city, than I can be by Georgetown. I love its hustle and chaos, its very quaintness. It must be like a Rancher's town in far away Texas, or like comparing New Orleans with New York City. Its mostly narrow streets are lined either side by open drainage ditches, unpainted modest houses juxtaposed by others of more prideful owners. A city of

some twenty-five thousand, its one hospital does its best to care for fevers and broken bones. Here lives one of my mother's sisters, Norah, whom we call just plain Auntie. Her husband, Uncle Colin, is a quiet, humble man whose hidden sense of humour can be tickled. He spends his long working day stooped over the large, thick ledgers on his crowded desk of the largest Dry Goods Store in town. He wears green eyeshades on his forehead and bends over the ledgers that are poorly lit by the lamp on his desk. There is a small white community in the town, half of whom are Portuguese.

Mack carefully turns the Buick left on the busy street and we quickly come upon the better residential part of town, where a few great houses display their beautiful gardens and tall Victoria Palms accent the area. The roads are unpaved and re-earthed.

With Albion just ten miles away, my brothers and I are impatient to get there and our incessant questions now change to urgings. Ever the man to remember his responsibilities, Mack placates us with the assurance that "We'll soon be there now."

Almost as quickly as we clear the city, we come to the iron swing bridge that flies in a high arc over the Canje Creek, yet another local misnomer for a proper river which is perhaps eighty feet wide. Coastal shipping uses the Canje to load brown sugar from nearby Rose Hall Plantation. Looking out the rear window I have the thrill of the sharp climb up the approaching ramp to the hollow drum sound of the bridge's bowed iron sides. I hang on to the back of the seat as we go down the shoulder on the other side, seeing only the sky out of the rear window. We are hardly on level ground when the road turns right, heading east. Had we continued straight on instead we would have come to the main gate to the Colony's Mental Asylum, which sprawls in plain view in front of us. I never passed there without a sense of trepidation.

A mile ahead of us are the first visible cane fields of Rose Hall where our road turns sharp left, heading north towards the unseen ocean. Just before the turn we pass a village that straddles the the short half mile gap into Rose Hall Estate. The roads leading into the Plantations are always known as gaps.

Having made the turn north we again urge Mack to increase speed because, for the next mile and a half the red dirt road runs absolutely straight, and we can see there is no oncoming traffic. Mack relents and indulges our childish excitement. The Buick shows her strut by throwing up red dust devils behind us, and the nine feet high sugar canes whiz by us on the other side of the trench that separates the field from our road. On our left, the Mental Hospital grounds soon disappear. As we come quickly to the approach of the next turn in the road, Mack reduces speed because this turn is well known for its suddenness and is a place where daring drivers have lost control and wound up in the ditch. Standing well back from the corner is Mr. Hayley's big house

at Bramfield. The Buick makes the turn safely and although we are closer now to -the sea, we can neither see nor hear it. The flat countryside is now open all the way to Albion Front, seven miles away, interrupted occasionally by smallholders rice paddies and scattered scrub and coconut trees.

We quickly leave the cane fields behind us and enter the area known as East Lothian on our right. The great house of Doctor Fraser - a veterinarian - looms stark and isolated by all the engulfing space around it; it sits well back from the road at the end of a gravelled driveway leading to it from the front gate. Once, Dr. Fraser held a fancy dress party for the white children of the surrounding Plantations, of which, strangely, I have but a fleeting memory; except that as you came to the head of the enclosed front stairs, a great big stuffed brown bear stood like a fearsome giant on its hind legs, its forepaws raised as if to strike. I was not the only child to scream in terror at first sight of it. Many years later in 1974, when visiting Guyana with my wife, we were taken to the great house at East Lothian by my sister Elaine and her husband Stan Howard, who happened to be in his last year before retirement as manager of Rose Hall. Coming up the same stairs some fifty years later, we were greeted by the same brown bear that I had long since forgotten about. For a few moments the encounter revived my startled confrontation with the stuffed beast of fifty years before.

Along the seven miles from the Hayley's house at Bramfield to Albion Front, were tiny, scattered villages in regions with such preposterous names as Bohemia and Gibraltar. There were also five or six drainage canals running north to the sea, two miles away. Speeding over the small wooden bridges that spanned them produced the same marimba-like sounds of New Amsterdam's stelling; Geoffrey and I called them 'singing bridges' whose happy sounds complemented our already high spirits. There always seemed to be hangers-around whose idle hours were spent sitting on the guard rails, but were quick with a smile and a wave as we sped by.

But finally - though it seemed to us that it would never come - came Albion Front, marked sentinel-like by the newly erected Gaiety Cinema - 'Picture House'. One more wooden bridge is crossed, then we come to a near stop to carefully make the tight turn right onto the gap, raised high and banked like a railroad bed, running for just over a mile into the Plantation. To come to this place is a very special thrill and joy that I have always kept to myself.

## **Albion: The Plantation**

When Mack made that slow, tight turn from the public road onto the Albion gap - that first time of the first day of our holidays there - the excitement I experienced was a thing that was full and complete, a sense of total belonging. Of course there was no conscious analysis of the overcoming; I was too young and too silly, not to mention too full of self. The business of imprinting is still a mystery to me, except to repeat what I've just said, a sense of total belonging. Security perhaps.

And it obviously has nothing to do with scenic aesthetics. As I've said before, the entire coastline of the country is as flat as well, Holland. All I can say is that Albion - the plantation imprinted itself upon me, from which I derived a sense of pure innocent joy.

Unlike the red earth of the public road, the gap into the estate was greyish in colour, possibly originally surfaced with crushed cinders. It was raised on sloping shoulders like a railroad bed and ran ramrod straight into the estate. There were drainage ditches on either side of it and narrow enough that two passing cars did so with care. The two storey wood-framed 'Picture House' - the Gaiety I think it was called - was set back as if pivotal to the turn into the gap from the public road. Apart from it and across the road were a few of the typical modest houses such as I described in the chapter Getting There; except for one that sat close to the ground that was hardly more than ten feet square, that was actually a tailor's shop. Some mothers in the area sent their boy-children there from a young age to learn tailoring.

The land on the right of the gap was marshy for quite a bit before there was firm ground. Upon which - in the distance - was a two storey frame building that was the business place of the Singh brothers who were tailors. They lived upstairs while the downstairs was laid out with counters and shelves, the latter filled with bales of cloth for suiting. There were three brothers, the two eldest of whom never seemed to be without a tailor's measuring tape draped around their necks. The youngest brother however, was a handsome young rake who devoted his life to rum, women and fast cars. He - Jug Singh - played a part in our young lives because he owned a new, brown Chevrolet, which in 1935 showed the first signs of modern design, its daring instrument dashboard oval-shaped and lit at night by red and green recessed lights. A swirling dust of cloud seemed to follow the Chevrolet wherever it went. On those occasions when my father wanted to be driven to the New Amsterdam Club for an afternoon of bridge playing, when the estate car was not available, he would send for Jug to take him there. But I get ahead of myself.

On the left side of the gap the drainage trench was mostly covered by water lily pads that lay flat of the surface, its accented white blooms vying with weeds and reeds for living space. There was an open fallow field that ran inland from the public road on this side which ended where the thick foliage of Guava Bush began. Guava Bush - so named because there many Guava fruit trees in the bush - was a village within the plantation that was something like a half mile square in spread. Some of the labour force of the estate lived there with their families, mostly East Indians but also African blacks.

The gap was just over a mile long but at about the halfway point the Guava Bush ended and the fenced-off cleared land gave way to Overseer (staff) housing. A high white-painted picket fence separated the Overseer compound from the lily covered trench, which continued to follow alongside the gap.

The first house, larger than the row of Overseers' cottages that followed, was that of the Assistant Engineer, Andy Grant. Mr. Grant was Guianese born and epitomised, in my eyes, the concept of an engineer. He was handsome, stockily built and had a seaman's way of walking. His hands were big and meaty, often with a trace of dirt under his fingernails. He was quick with a smile and a friendly greeting and was a favourite with my brothers and I. Mr. Grant was a man's man, though one year he returned from one of his long leaves with a German bride.

There were half a dozen substantially built Overseers' cottages that stood perched in the air on pillars and posts, on neatly guttered land, each having their own rainwater vats. The cottages were divided down the middle by a common partition wall about nine feet high. As was the custom, none of the estate houses had ceilings, so that the high jalousied gable-end windows allowed air to circulate freely throughout the house, while keeping out the rains at the same time.

About one hundred feet back of the cottages were what was called the range quarters. That is to say one continuous building, also high off the ground, that was divided equally into living quarters. In both cases outside stairs descended to the ground from small enclosed porches, front and back.

Unbelievable as it may seem today, Overseers were not encouraged by the plantation owners in England, to marry. To a man they were bachelors; a ruling that remained until 1941. They dined and breakfasted in the Overseers' Mess, their diet and feeding at the 'courtesy' of the Estate Manager's wife. This practice might well have been an opportunity for said lady to make some extra money on the side, but I have no memory of Overseers complaining about their meals at Albion. Food seemed to be plentiful everywhere.

Immediately beyond the compound's picket fence and running the length of it, was a narrow roadway of crushed black cinders, no doubt a by-product from the estate's factory. Each cottage had its own gap that led to the foot of the front stairs. Everything was kept clean and tidy and open, except for some scattered Casuarina trees in the background. The grass was kept down by scythe cutting or grazing animals. The last Overseers' cottage ended at the ever-familiar narrow drainage ditch, which was the boundary marker between it and my father's big house - the Deputy's house.

The estate gap passed between our house and the Overseers' Mess on the other side. The Mess was two separate one storey buildings that were linked together by a closed in porch. The whole was raised high off the ground by brick pillars, and the usual outside stairs descended to the ground, just short of the gap itself. The Mess building to the right was the billiard room, while the other was the kitchen, pantry and dining room. Everything was painted white, including the brick pillars.

There were three 'big' houses at Albion, those of the Deputy's, the Chief Chemist and the Chief Engineer. After my father's house came that of Mr. Landels, the Chemist, about three hundred feet south of us, where a narrow roadway branched off left from the gap at right angles, and ran for another two hundred yards to the playing fields. The big house of Mr. Young, the Chief Engineer, was between Mr. Landels' and the playing fields, the latter at middle distance behind my father's house. The yard of our house, like all the other big houses, was covered with finely crushed shell. Before the fence that separated our house from Mr. Landels' house, was a large garden area that I'm sure my mother oversaw with her gardener, but I was too young to have a memory of this. So that after my mother transferred to Georgetown permanently - after my third birthday - her garden became somewhat neglected for my father had no interest in it. Men didn't in those days. I know my mother's preference was for dahlias, forget-me-nots and zinnias, but my memory of our Albion garden is of a sea - one huge area - of self-seeding zinnias in all their beautiful pastel shades. There was such a large area of them that they swayed in the wind as would a field of wheat; no doubt continuing to seed themselves.

Just before the fence that divided our yard from the gap and the Overseer's Mess, was what could have been called a slave cabin at one time; it was a small two room overnight servants' quarters raised a few feet off the ground. Two brief pairs of steps led to two separate doors and the whole cottage was clad in cedar shingles. Behind the cabin were three very tall Casuarina trees, a tropical pine needle tree that was often used locally as a Christmas tree. Many was the time that we brothers and the three sons of Mr. Young, the Accountant, played pick-up cricket in that spacious yard, while the wind blew its way through the limbs of the Casuarinas, making that

beautiful melodious sound that only the wind and pines can make together. Although I paid no conscious attention to that lovely sound, I never, to this day, hear it without being pleasantly transported back to that time and place and the excited sounds of energetic boys playing cricket.

Another canal ran immediately behind the Overseers' Mess, its dark waters separating the Mess and staff housing from the 'Coolie yard', the large area that contained the modest dwellings of the labour force. The canal continued for another two or three hundred yards where it joined with a water basin that surrounded the crane hoist and the estate's large factory. There was a simple arched bridge that spanned the canal and the gap did a sharp right turn to meet with it. It continued on from the other side dividing the Coolie yard from the houses of the estate's Accountant, another Mr. Young, and the Factory Manager, Mr. Yearwood. After Mr. Yearwood's came the hospital which was a long single storey building raised on the usual pillars and posts, its descending outside stairs sprouting from a central hallway. Just about all the buildings on the estate were painted white with a dark dull red for the trims and roof-tops. Across from the hospital was a small Hindu temple. Peering through one of its windows one day, I was awed at the sight of a half life size cow painted in gold on the altar. I could not make sense of a cow on an altar. Before the gap took its right turn came Mr. Bee's great house, the Manager's house. A high, wide wooden bridge spanned the trench to face a great white double picket gate, behind which Mrs. Bee cared for a large beautiful garden that occupied almost all of the acre or two that was the grounds of the great house.

The road that turned left towards the factory before the Accountant's house, fizzled out to become the general compound of the factory. The two smaller buildings in front of the factory was a small two storey pay-office, followed by the chemistry lab. The loose dry dust of the ground all around this area was forever sprinkled with the peelings of the hard outer husks of the sugar canes. It was a common sight to see young boys strip the canes with their strong young teeth to get at the softer, juicy heart of the canes. My brothers and I did this as a matter of course, attracted as we were for mouthfuls of the sweet juices. Having done so you simply spat out the chewed bagasse onto the ground.

The 'Doctoring' at the estate's hospital was done by a qualified East Indian male nurse by the name of Narine, who was popularly addressed as 'Sick Nurse'. He was a personable man and a thorough gentleman, always clean and neat in appearance, his trimmed silver hair and moustache complimenting his immaculately tailored white linen suit. Nurse Narine was quite capable of setting broken bones, prescribing medicines and caring for high fevers. A quiet genial man, I have pleasant memories of him and his frequent answerings to my father's summonses to come and attend to

one or other of his children. 'Sick-nurse' could often be seen mounting his bicycle to make his calls, taking care first to snap on bicycle clips around his trouser legs just above the ankles.

In size Albion was 28,000 acres, 25,000 of which was planted out in sugar canes. Every field in crop was surrounded on four sides by canals, the back end of the estate being a dammed water conservancy. There were approximately 400 miles of canals grid-like between the cane fields. When field workers and Overseers went about the fields on working days, it was called 'going aback', or going 'back dam'. The Overseers did so on mule-back, the field workers on foot. An Overseer was sometimes responsible for more than one field. On the many occasions that my brothers and I accompanied our father 'back dam', we would cover several fields my father chose for that day's supervision of the work of both the field hands and the Overseers. Those were the happiest of days for us.

There must have been over one hundred mules on the estate, many of which were frisky as well as stubborn. They were large muscular animals that were impotent as a result of their breeding between horses and Jack Donkeys. Some were black or shades of white, but mostly they were a dark chestnut in colour. It could be quite difficult to hold your mule in check once you pointed him in the direction of the mule pen at the end of the day's ride. The animal's stubborn determination to roll in the dust of the pen with his pals, was the highlight of their day. It was really a pleasurable sight to see several mules rolling in the dust of the corral, happy to be rid of saddle and girth. Once pointed for home they wanted to gallop and their determination to have their way with a young lightweight rider, such as myself, required all my strength - such as it was - to maintain some control over him. On more than one occasion my mule attempted to 'unhorse' me by seizing the bit and heading for the nearest low branch of a tree. My father on the other hand, rode 'Prince', a grey-white mule that was aged and placid by nature, he being wise in the way of experience. The mules were bred and imported from the States of Alabama and Louisiana.

The harvested canes were loaded into iron punts that were four feet deep, twenty-eight feet long, both ends forming a curve. The bottoms were flat. One mule could pull eight or ten fully loaded punts. It meant unhitching them from the punts that glided with momentum to pass under open, wooden fly-over bridges that linked one field with another. The mule would wait on the other side of the bridge until the gliding punts caught up with him. The animals knew the work routine as well as their controllers did.

In 1934/35 the old single boom crane that lifted the chained bundles of canes from the punts, was replaced by a larger dockside type of crane. That resulted in increasing

tonnage that could be lifted, which was an increase from five tons to nine tons. The canes were wrapped in chains that were hooked on to the lowered wooden boom of the crane that spanned the length of the loaded punt. Two men quickly unhooked one end of the chains which were pulled upwards and free by the crane operator in his high perch. The boom was lowered again and the dangerously swinging chains were removed. The dropped loads were moved by semi-enclosed conveyors up a sloping ramp that ran all the way to the top of the factory, where they fell into a series of paired - and I think - tripled steel rollers, four sets in all, that squeezed every last drop of juice out of the canes.

Whereas the mule pen was behind and to the left of the factory, to the right a long low building housed huge wooden vats of aging rum. The vats were in two rows, eight or ten in number. The 'rum house' was one of the few places on the plantation that my father strictly forbade my brothers and I from going into. It was a very dangerous place to be in for it took just one spark to explode the spirit vapours.

There was one other member of the staff, the entomologist Doctor Moore. A cadaverous looking man he seemed always bent over in thought; which he was. Geoffrey and I were somewhat in awe of Dr. Moore. Whenever we passed by him going the opposite way, we were fearfully silent but amused at his habit of humming a tuneless song. He walked head down oblivious of his surroundings, seeing only the ground immediately ahead of his shoes, the ever-present frown of concentration on his forehead. But there was that day when he took us into his laboratory to show us his research with insects. He had glass cases covered by mosquito netting that contained winged insects he was breeding in the thousands to be released later among the cane fields. His flies attacked the borer worms that did great damage to the canes. His experiments proved to be so successful he was encouraged to publish a paper on the subject. My father was respectful of Dr. Moore and considered him important to the sugar industry.

Excluding the Managers, Chemist, Engineers and Factory Manager, there were about eighteen Overseers at Albion. Initially, they were all young men when they came to the Colony from England, mostly, though Scotland, Wales and Ireland were well represented. They came for reasons of adventure, to experience the tropics, or because they did not want to stay in the old country for long periods. Some were embarrassments to their families and 'encouraged' to leave home and hearth, while a few of those 'required' their families to make it worth their while to forever remain on distant shores; they were known as 'remittance men' who drew on their accounts from Barclay's Banks. No doubt some came to escape the law. Whatever their reasons they were a cross section of men at different levels of education and culture. Most of them remained forever in the Colony, some eventually dying of the fevers. It was a hard life

for them to adjust to, especially in those months - twice a year - when the canes were harvested and brought to the factories for 'grinding'. Not a few of them resorted to East Indian mistresses as a result of the Company's stringent - and stupid - rules of bachelorhood. But there were the good sides to their living conditions, being waited on hand and foot while relaxing in their quite comfortable cottages with rum and whisky mixes close at hand and in plentiful supply. And then every four years those that did, took their long leave vacations of four months at home, or anywhere else abroad. Generally speaking they were content with their lot or moved elsewhere if they were not. They were all subject to my father's rulings, which went so far in the grinding season, as to require his permission to be absent from the plantation. More often than not their requests were denied. My father was a hard, loyal worker all his working life and expected no less from others under his jurisdiction.

In the vernacular of the time the 'grinding' season referred to those months, twice a year, when the canes were harvested in the fields, loaded in the punts that were dragged in trains by the mules to the factory; to the water basin around the crane/hoist.

Harvesting the canes was hard work, as often done by women as men. Giving themselves sufficient room each field hand wielded sharp cutlasses that sliced at the bottoms of the eight foot canes, which meant spending half their day bent from the waist. The edges of the long leaves could be as sharp as razors that sliced at the fingers. But there was a precondition to all of this that called for drastic measures.

Where there's water - and there was plenty of that surrounding the fields - there would be water rats, who in turn appreciated the sweet juices of the canes. Then came the rattlesnake that had no interest in the canes, but was certainly interested in water rats. The snakes took care of the rats but something had to be done about the snakes. The solution was a simple one that was twofold. Set the fields on fire. The fires roasted the snakes - except for those that got to the canals in time, and also burned those razor sharp leaves - most of them anyway. The outer husks of the canes were hard enough to protect the inner canes from the fire. The fires were set up-wind, so that they moved very quickly. It was quite a sight to see several fields burning in the night.

Harvesting was twice a year, the first crop from February to May, the second from July to November. In spite of my familiarity with every square foot of Albion's large and complex factory, I never really understood the chemical machinations of its goings-ons. I understood that from the extracted juices came molasses and from molasses came brown crystal sugar, and somewhere in between rum. The factory was three storeys high, filled with great (and dangerous) turning wheels, filters, evaporators, pans and vats everywhere. I shudder to think that as boys running after

each other, we did so in absolute confidence - confidence of the young - on single catwalk planks between those great wheels and open boiling vats.

An Overseer's day - and my fathers - began at half past four in the morning, at which time my father came stomping down our upstairs passageway as we lay in our beds, now no longer asleep. He would be dressed in a collarless white shirt, white cotton jacket, khaki jodhpurs, polished leather leggings, boots and spurs. He walked across the gap to the Overseers' Mess where he joined them for breakfast, after which he gave them their orders for the day. Sometimes he would return home to have his breakfast alone. By 6:00am his mule boy rode Prince bareback to the bottom of our kitchen stairs, then he would come up to the first floor level to take down my father's saddle from its tree in the passageway and saddle the ever-patient Prince, ready and waiting. My father had more orders to give and things to check on in and around the factory before taking to the saddle for the rest of the day. And in the grinding season, that often meant 11:00 o'clock at night before returning home. It was the same for the Overseers. Sometimes he, and they, walked to the mule pen, where their saddled mounts awaited them. At the end of the day a mule boy trotted behind his rider all the way home, where he would clean and polish boots, leggings and saddle before returning the animal bareback to the corral. Normally hot lunches were packed from the Mess kitchens for each Overseer (and my father) when boys would run them to their particular master in the back dam fields. The runners would repeat the chore at tea time. This meant running something like ten or twelve miles a day, taking care not to spill the contents he carried on his head. My father sometimes required a message runner to accompany him and that would be another boy to run from one field to another. These were the days before mechanization and radios.

It was a hard working life for everyone. By example my father set the standards and in this way knew exactly what was going on on the estate at all times. Drivers (foremen) from various field hand gangs reported to him every day, as did most of the Overseers depending upon situations. He was approached by anyone whose problem required his decision, being always accessible. My father made decisions, big and small, every day of his working life. Responsibility was taken in stride.

## **William Henry Watson**

William Henry Watson was born out of wedlock in 1877, an event that today would go un-remarked but hardly so in mid-Victorian times, especially in a small, white colonial community that accounted for 2% of the population. If there was a scandal the event was probably heightened because of his parentage.

The young Governess that was my mother, a creature of the morality of her times, must have indeed loved my father for she agreed to marry him on condition that his mother's name never crossed both their lips in the company of friends or their future family. A promise she must have known would be hurtfully difficult for him for my father's close affection for his mother was known to her. Yet not many years later she would practice indirect kindnesses towards her 'mother-in-law'. They were so successful in keeping the word mum, I actually grew up - in my young self-centered world oblivious of my paternal grandparents, a thought that astonishes me today. But one day when my sisters were responsible teenagers, my mother gathered them together in her bedroom and told them 'the story'. She must have selected her daughters only, knowing their instincts of womanhood would better understand.

It is not for me to sit in judgment of my mother's determinations for my adulthood is spread out over a long period of society's decline in morality and values. As I said, she was a creature of her times; times when a shame in the family was an unrecoverable wound.

To identify my father's father I must turn to the British Guiana Directory for the year 1860. Which states:

Henry WATSON - Justice of the Peace for Demerara Attorney at law

Commissioner for administering oaths to affidavits.

This gentleman later became Chief Justice for the Colony. It is my sisters' claim that Henry Watson was Chief Justice but I suggest that Justice of the Peace for Demerara, is not the same thing as Chief Justice for the country; a matter of definition no doubt. However, it is this honourable man's son that is the focus of attention, for it is he that sired my father - for which I am eternally grateful.

The Chief-Justice-to-be would not have his present and future station - and reputation - sullied by the irresponsible rashness of his son's passions, whereby he would father a child with a young woman - no matter her background - whose singular appearance on the scene was enhanced by a reputation. Marriage was out of

the question and the young buck was quickly banished back to the auld sod in England. In those days sons obeyed their fathers.

Either before (which is the likelier) or after, there is/was the establishment of a branch of the Watson's in Long Island, New York.

As I think I mentioned earlier, my father received a letter of enquiry from a firm of Solicitors in London in 1934/35. The Solicitors were searching for the rightful and legitimate heir to a substantial estate in Britain, who eventually turned out to be my father's half-brother in Long Island. On the occasion of my parents' wedding that half-brother sent them a wedding present of a very large carpet which covered most of the central drawing room of our Albion house. But my mother's insistence of silence prevailed and communication between the two families ceased.

Which compels me to tell of an event that happened to me in 1974. I believe that must have been the year.

I had picked up the Globe and Mail newspaper in Toronto one day and had pushed aside the business section, having no interest in it. The casual push had left the section facing me squarely and on the front page a large photograph caught my attention. It was a photograph of a Board of Directors meeting in New York City, and the Chairman and some twelve or fifteen Directors were turned to face the camera. My attention was riveted on the Director directly to the Chairman's right for I was looking at an absolute 'clone' of my father, complete with short cropped grey hair and horn-rimmed glasses. Searching the list of names under the picture, I was astonished to read the name Watson. I thought to let sleeping dogs lie and did not follow up on the discovery.

And who was my father's mother?

She was a Miss Gore who first appears on the scene in the West Indian island of St. Kitts. By coincidence the same British Guiana Directory of 1860 lists the following:

Augustus Frederick GORE - Lieutenant-Colonel of the Militia

Assistant Government Secretary

According to my mother the above gentleman was not related to the Miss. Gore that arrived alone in St. Kitts. And it would be a safe assumption that if she was the daughter of the above Augustus Gore and the affair with the son of Henry Watson had produced my father, a quick marriage would have been the order of the day. They were two different families.

I keep saying 'Miss. Gore' because to this day we siblings do not know her Christian name; perhaps our mother was behind this.

At the time of my mother's gathering with her daughters in her bedroom, she mentioned only the name Gore; this was sometime during the 1930's and it was during that decade that the name Ormsby was hyphenated to the name Gore, becoming Ormsby-Gore. It was also during that decade that the family received a Peerage, making the head of the family Lord Harlech. This is also the same Ormsby-Gore family from which a contemporary was appointed British Ambassador to Washington during the Kennedy Administration.

'Our Miss Gore' (there were other liaisons) was a kicker-upper misfit of her times. We today do not know the circumstances that would have led her to be that way, so we should perhaps temper any condemnation. It is my contention that she came into our lives as my father's mother, and that we are here because of her. What is most important of all is that there forever was a close bonding affection between mother and son. And that must surely speak of those finer qualities about her - and him - that was never advertised. To the best of our knowledge Miss. Gore was never encouraged to return to the family hearth and died somewhat alone but for my father's support - in British Guiana during the 1920's.

There is a touching story of a happening that took place a short while after Miss. Gore's death that illustrates the bonding between mother and son.

Auntie 'B' Birtles (my mother's closest friend since their school days) - and I believe - her husband, (Uncle Bertie) were having afternoon tea with my parents at Albion. Uncle Bertie was the Manager at Plantation Skeldon, thirty miles further east of Albion on the Corentyne river, which was the boundary with neighbouring Surinam. My father was speaking when he was interrupted by Auntie B. She said "Will, excuse me but there's a lady standing beside you, her right hand is resting on the back of your chair and she's looking down and smiling at you". It is not surprising that Auntie B would not have recognised Gore; for one thing the Birtles', like my father, were moved three or four times during their careers and were seldom in Georgetown; for another Gore spent some years in Barbados and possibly other islands. And her good friend - my mother - would not have occasioned them to meet. Needless to say my father was taken up short and asked Auntie B to further describe the apparition, which she did. Soberingly, my father confirmed that she had described his mother. The story does not go on to describe the follow-up, but I can well imagine the poignancy of the moment. Auntie B was occasionally psychic like that.

My father was educated in Georgetown - British Guiana - at Trinity Methodist School, a solid but fundamental education. Things cultural were minimal in the Colony and totally absent in our education at that time. Armed with his wits, common sense and a desire to apply himself, he went out into the working world to become a

Planter. If he was eager to be a wage earner in order to support his mother, then it is reasonable to think he would have been only 18 years of age; certainly no older than 19. Which would be the years 1895/96. His retirement in 1938 was his 61st year which may seem a little early for retirement, and while I am not aware of a fixed retirement age as a policy in his profession, I think it was up to the individual to call time. It was a hard life that took its toll on the body and it must be remembered that the fetid fever-ridden tropics of his day was drug-free by today's standards; in fact quinine was first introduced in 1897. But armed with a strong constitution and sense of humour, he 'completed' what was then the expected lifespan. His death was brought on by his third stroke. Between his retirement in 1938 and his death in 1945, his well-being noticeably declined. When you've spent your hard working life getting out of bed at 4.30 most every morning, it is almost impossible to suddenly adjust to a relatively idle retirement.

Daddy - our address of him - rose at dawn while the rest of the household slept on, did his ablutions and, dressed in his white linen suit, conservative tie, two-tone shoes (black-white, brown-white) and grey homburg, set out for his morning walk to the seawall, some two and a half miles distant. Sitting alone on a bench facing the sea I cannot help but wonder at the thoughts that must have passed through his mind. At other times he took his walks later in the mornings to the down-town streets of the business area. He always walked. Still, his decline was rapid; he was out of his element.

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In the sophisticated sense, culture was an absentee in our Colonial lives. In Georgetown there were a few cinemas, a Carnegie Library and a modest theatre in the upper second floor of the Assembly rooms. In New Amsterdam, just two cinemas.

So it is no wonder that my father let our Albion garden go to seed. As I said in the previous chapter, this neglectful attitude backfired by producing a vast expanse of multi-coloured zinnias whose thick self-seeding growth permitted nothing else to grow in their midst. I can still see that sea of colour moving in waves from the blowing winds. From my first memories of Albion there was a beautiful Bougainvillea shrub-tree that grew in the embrace - as it were - of the outside front steps of our house; that is to say there was a landing halfway down, before the stairs turned outward ninety degrees to end at ground level. The Bougainvillea was always covered in blooms of shades of purple and red. In my revisit to Albion in 1974 the tree was still there, still lathered in colour. I think perhaps my mother was responsible for its planting.

But being a practical man my father did instruct that a large kitchen garden be planted out back of the house. As I mentioned before, once a month fresh product from that garden was packed in a large tin trunk and sent by ferry and train to our Georgetown house. It was a helpful supplement for the feeding of so many mouths in the family. There was an irrigation ditch all the way around the many beds in which Geoffrey and I fished for Patwa. A short stick, a length of string, a bent common pin and a still wriggling earthworm, was too much for the Patwas to resist. If the catch was large enough we would give it to cook to make into curry. But the kitchen garden is gone now, replaced by a beautiful garden, through which a gravelled path leads as the new front entrance.

My father would not have thought of such changes. He was a hard working man who came back to his house at the end of his day to rest his 'tired-out' body. To put his feet up along the extended arms of his Berbice chair, relax with a whisky and soda and enjoy the laughter and conversation with his sons. Daddy was never happier than when he was surrounded by all of his children.

Our Albion house was actually back to front. The large double gate, with a high step-through wicket gate set in one half, faced on to the gap which separated our house from the Overseers' Mess on the other side of it. Because of its convenience it was this gate that was continually used as the front entrance; except that it led straight to the outside kitchen stairs. The kitchen faced the gap. The true front stairs was to the back, far right side of the house, for which I have no memory of its formal use. I don't think Daddy ever used it after my mother transferred permanently to Georgetown. With our father's influences and habits rubbing off on us, we thought all this quite the normal thing to do.

The front gallery on the far side of the drawing room actually looked out over the kitchen garden and the playing fields in the near distance. Any stands of trees were in the far distance. As I describe the new entrance in the previous chapter, is the way I found it in 1974. Except a semi-modern, roofed veranda was added for sitting out. Architecturally it is a little out of whack but not detrimental to the appearance. I'm sure Daddy would have liked it. I repeat; the kitchen garden is gone, replaced by a pleasant garden, the proper front entrance now coming through it and directly to the original front steps.

But my beautiful field of zinnias was gone.

From the large grey painted kitchen a wide passageway led directly to the drawing room, but before it the steps leading upstairs branched off abruptly from the right. Just before that on the same side was my father's saddle tree. Every staff house on the estate had one and the mule-boys who hung their masters' saddles on them every

evening, made sure they were clean and polished for the following day's use. As were discarded leggings and boots, polished and set neatly under the saddle tree. Ah yes, those were the days. Don't feel sorry for the mule-boys. Theirs' was a wage income needed by their families and I assure the reader that they took pride in performing their labours.

The large drawing room was surrounded on two sides by closed in galleries, the large wedding present carpet almost filling the drawing room. The dining table was at the left end of it. There was no wall-to-wall broadloom in those days. One proudly displayed those beautiful, highly polished mahogany floors; before the days of machines you got down on your knees to rub in the floor wax and then polish the surface by hand-rubbing or a weighted mop. On a Plantation there was an abundance of cost-free labour. All household and living expenses were taken care of by the Company in London. My father was paid a handsome salary for those days, and for his valued labours, everything else was free. Because of the mostly exposed hardwood floors, open rooms (better ventilation) and high ceilings, I was always conscious of the hollow sounds made when walking in those great houses. If you were alone they kept you company. Whenever I came to Albion I listened for that sound as if needing its reassurance.

The steps leading upstairs did a sharp left turn halfway up. Although outside of the main house it was entirely enclosed. At the halfway landing was the telephone. Of an evening, once a week, we sat on the stairs gathered around the 'instrument' for Daddy's call to our mother in Georgetown. He would crank the little handle on the right vigorously then lift the receiver. The indifferent voice of a woman in New Amsterdam would answer 'exchange'. My father would ask for 'trunk line' (no please, the unwillingness of the woman's voice always angered him). When trunk line finally came on - it could sometimes take a long, cross-purposes time - he would call out "Georgetown 574" - still no please. My father's life was spent giving orders that were instantly obeyed. Finally my mother or one of my sisters would answer the telephone at the other end.

These were battery assisted instruments that had to be mounted against a wall and you raised your voice to speak into them - or felt you had to. Often you shouted into them. It could sometimes be an hilarious experience. My father always addressed my mother by the endearment 'Kid' (he was almost 12 years her senior) and the conversation was mostly about answering my mother's questions of concern for the welfare of her sons. Sons in the care of a spoiling father. Sometimes she spoke with one or all of us, needing the reassurance from our own mouths. In the latter years when it was only Geoffrey and me, she would speak with both of us each time.

For reasons unknown to me there were only three bedrooms upstairs but they were quite large. The upper storey over the kitchen consisted of the toilet, bathroom and a smaller bedroom. Since my mother transferred to Georgetown when I was three years of age, I have no memories of us as a complete family at Albion, only with my brothers and mostly just Geoffrey and myself. It was traditional on all Plantation houses that bedrooms were without ceilings, the walls being nine or ten feet high. The underside of the roof itself was painted the same colour as the walls, which in our house was always in cream. This architectural oddity of no ceilings, allowed for excellent - or better - circulation of air that came in and out from bedroom windows and high end-gable windows that were jalousied.

The end bedroom that faced towards Mr. Landels' house, with windows on two sides, was large enough to contain two doubles and a single bed with room for more. We were always under mosquito nets. With five brothers of boundless energy, settling down for a night's sleep took time, cross chatter continuing after lights out. But when Daddy called out to be quiet and go to sleep, we were ready to oblige.

The nights could be quite dark after lights out at Albion. You're in open country, no street lights or passing automobile lights, or even lights 'from across the way'. These dark nights were accompanied by astonishing silences, so that I spent many a night before sleep came, listening to the cacophony of frogs and crickets competing with each other. If I stole out of bed I could peer out a window and see the sparkling world of fireflies. But the dark meant starlight and moonlight, either of which could splash that soft glow across the floor, making shadows as they did so. Before sleep came you could often hear the soft wining of a mosquito hovering close-by, waiting for the opportunity of catching a face or any part of your exposed body against the netting. We never felt the bites.

There were many nights during those tender years when storms of thunder and lightning crashed so fiercely that even the house shook. I have these memories only when it was just myself and Geoffrey up for the holidays, though one of the Sadler boys sometimes came with us. We would be from four or five to seven or eight years of age, lying there terrified of the storm, neither moving nor speaking as accompanying winds forced the rain through the open windows. But suddenly, there would be my father come to let the windows down, momentary flashes of lightning playing frightening images with his face. "You all right boy?" He always said this with the hint of comedy in his voice, and he had a way of saying 'boy' so that it sounded more like 'by' in his broad Guianese lingo. Frightful attempts of answering 'yes' came out more like brief, fearful grunts as he made his way back to his own room, perhaps remembering his own childhood fears of storms. I thought he was the bravest man in the whole wide world.

Finally sleep, only to be awakened shortly after 4.30 in the black morning as Daddy paced down the passageway on his way to the Overseers' Mess to give them their orders for the day. Awakened again an hour later when he returned to shave and shower and have his breakfast. My father made no attempt to soften his walking along those hardwood floors. This was his house and all in and outside of it was the world under his authority, - which was quite acceptable. His orders were as sensible and practicable as he was himself.

I do not know when the great houses at Albion or other Plantations were built, but my guess would be shortly before the turn of the century - 19th/20th. Unbelievable as it might seem, they were built devoid of cupboards, even linen cupboards. The only place they could be found would be in pantries and kitchens and sometimes bathrooms. It was felt they were not needed in bedrooms because it was de rigueur to have large wardrobes made of beautiful, highly polished woods; in Guiana that meant our dark mahogany. Wardrobes varied in design functions. Some were double doored, the total emptiness for the hanging of suits or dresses. There would be a shoe rack across the bottom which often times had one drawer running the full width below, probably for linens. My mother had a very handsome one in which the left half was the empty space for hanging dresses, which also had a shoe rack at the bottom. A full-length mirror was set into the outside of this door. The other half was a two door, shelved cupboard, while the bottom half was a series of three or four drawers. These large, magnificent pieces of furniture were beautifully handcrafted and when their doors were opened they gave off a faint aroma of years of polishing care.

When my mother transferred to the city from Albion, she took most of the furnishings with her out of necessity. This left the Albion house rather - spartan - which did not bother my father one bit. He had his own wardrobe and dresser and double bed in his bedroom at the opposite end of the upper floor. Actually all three bedrooms upstairs were the same size, except his included the space taken up by the passageway that passed along the other two bedrooms. In that space was a small, plain table under the window that faced the Estate gap, where he had his afternoon teas - if he was home for that hour from his rounds of the Estate. Kayo, a butler from the Overseers' Mess, would bring the tea tray over from the Mess, wearing a gold buttoned white tunic. The tea service was of pewter. My father would perhaps have one or two crust-trimmed sandwiches with his tea but nothing more. Many is the time when I make myself a cup of tea late at night, that the brewing aroma reawakens that picture I have of Daddy having his tea.

But ever the man for an eye of opportunity for the maintenance of the Estate, he had the large shuttered window pushed outward (that is to say also upward from its top hinges) so he could see who or what was passing by on the Estate gap. If it was

anyone he wanted to question he would call them by name and they would come through the picket gate, cross the yard to stand two high storeys below his window. Removing their hats they would address him as 'Manja' (Manager) and remain respectfully so until the discussion was ended. He either sought their advice or gave them his. My father gave praise where it was due, but woe betide the careless and the lazy for his wrath was an unwelcome reward.

The centre bedroom was virtually empty but for a heavy iron safe and two clothes horses over which Daddy draped trousers, a shirt or two and a few neckties. The safe contained some cash for any emergencies that arose concerning the Estate. There was also another piece that fascinated me, which was two carpentered polished boards (three wide slats actually) held together by chrome-plated steel straps and pivotal wing nuts. The function was to place one or more trousers between the slats which, when the wing nuts were tightened, maintained the creases of the trousers. Suiting materials were coarser in those days and there was no such thing as 'permanent pressing'.

There was another reason for those hollow sounds that area carpets were not enough to dampen. Few, if any, of all homes in the city or on the Plantations ever had inner facings, such as created by wall boarding today. For one thing we had no need of insulation against cold temperatures, while for another it denied hiding places for mice. On the main floor of any house horizontal and vertical joists were exposed, and you were looking at the inner face of the outer clapboarding. Everything was painted in one colour and paints - oil based paints - gave off pungent odours for the three or four days it took the paint to dry.

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The parameters of the world of my youth were clearly defined through unmistakable discipline, and as it was in his youth, my father enforced it upon us. You respected your elders and rudeness was not tolerated by anyone. There was a premium on good behaviour. When, as challenging youngsters we breached those limits, we both expected, and got, follow-up punishments. Everyone knew where everyone stood. To challenge my father in such a climate was doubly dangerous, for we well knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of his temper.

On one such occasion during one of our August school holidays, Geoffrey and I had invited Nelson Sadler to come to Albion with us. Nelson was Geoffrey's age. On this particular day my father instructed us to have an afternoon nap after lunch, passing on one of my mother's strictures. My mother was near obsessed with the idea that little boys needed a rest after mid-day (only in the holidays it seems, for this was not possible during school days) to recover spent energy from growing too quickly in our

energy-sapping climate. Sensible from the adult point of view but for excitable youngsters on school holidays, to sleep during the best time of day for exploration was tantamount to torture.

Whereas my father did not make it his business to enforce this wish of my mother's, he had reason for doing so on this particular day because he was in need of a mid-day rest himself. More often than not he was never home between his early morning departure to the evening dinner hour. He sometimes came back for an hour's rest if he knew the remainder of his day was going to be a longer, taxing one. Unfortunately for us this was one such day.

We were - the three of us - lying in one of the double beds, which only contributed to our giggling rough-and-tumbles. Daddy called out for us to be quiet and let him get his rest - which we were for hardly more than seconds. But we were absolutely, rigidly quiet when we heard the dreaded footfalls of a now fully angered father coming down the passageway. Futilely we turned face down on our stomachs pretending to be asleep. Daddy always removed the belt from his riding jodhpurs whenever he bed-rested, and this familiar item of clothing was now in his hands as he came around the door to our room. Our pretence of sleeping on our stomachs conveniently provided the desired anatomy for a flailing belt; from which we each received two or three of the hottest best. We were all tears and howls as he lectured us on the advantages of listening to and obeying his orders. We were crying more from shock than the awful stinging of our backsides, when he called out once more from his room to "Stop crying at once or I'll come back there and give you some more". It is a very difficult thing for a severely spanked (belted yet!) child to stop such crying, but some how we did. We were still as quiet as mice when an hour later we heard his footfalls coming down the passage once more, but this time he went down the stairs which was on the right just before the door to our bedroom.

When my father returned home later that evening, it was as if no such thing had happened earlier, and we resumed life with the usual camaraderie. Like most men with short - sometimes unpredictable tempers, my father's was quickly spent, to be replaced by his better natures that we also knew well. My father was a fair man very giving in generosity and always helpful to others at his own expense. You might not like having your backside smacked, but you could not stay resentful of or angry with such a man as I describe him. A man, as I said, who thought he had the best sons and daughters in the world.

My parents had eleven children in almost fourteen years, including identical twin girls, Marjorie and Elaine. Their first born, Mavis, died at the age of two, the remaining ten children evenly split as five boys and five girls. Their first three

children were born on Plantations Non Pariel and Hope. The last transfer of my father's career was to Albion in 1915, when in the following year the twins were born. The birthings ended with my own arrival at the very end of the year 1925. We were all born at home (as most people were in those days) via the competent hands of midwives. A nurse Downer was the most 'popular' choice and from the time of the first birth my father booked her for the following year's event. Nurse Downer's appearance was an annual performance, right up to my brother Geoffrey's arrival when she was not available. A nurse Mearns attended him and a nurse Stokes for myself. A scenario of some impressiveness and wonder.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that there were three places on the Estate that my father strictly forbade us (his over-curious sons) to be. One was the rum storage building which was highly dangerous. Another was a section of the factory where two banks of very high speed rotary bins were located. Thick molasses was converted in these bins by centrifugal force into brown sugar crystals. Each bin was powered by overhead leather belts which were known to slip off occasionally, in one instance beheading an operator. But truth be known, anywhere in that large complicated factory was dangerous. But being young, daring and foolishly self-confident, we were forever exploring the factory. In retrospect I think a boy's inner sense of timing and balance must have saved us from grave harm.

The third place of banishment was from my father's Monday afternoon court sessions. On these occasions an almost throne-like chair was brought from the pay office building and placed outside in the afternoon sunlight, where there was sufficient space for a crowd to gather. Daddy strictly forbade us from these sessions because the things said at them were 'not for the ears of the young'.

My father was very much respected by the labour force, particularly by the majority East Indians, for several reasons. If their labours in the fields were hard, they recognised that he laboured just as hard to carry out his responsibilities. They respected his sense of fairness in all things concerning them. But their highest respect for him was flavoured with fondness, for he literally spoke their language.

The East Indian immigration came mostly from north-west India and from the State of Punjab. These Indians were very impressed that my father could both read and speak their language(s). He was fluent in Urdu and Hindustani, the former language differing in that there were many Turkish words in its composition. He could also speak to them in one or two 'corrupted' dialects. It must have touched him many times when they would address him as 'Punjab' or 'Punjabi'. It was a respectful endearment. The ultimate respect came about from a nasty incident that took place one day.

East Indians will suddenly go to extremes of rage when there are violations of their traditions, particularly those where honour is involved. Once enraged they become completely irrational. On such an occasion a husband, learning that his wife had been unfaithful to him, wrapped her long, black hair around his forearm, pulled her head backward and mortally cut her throat with his field cutlass. Many people witnessed this horror, including my father. To the astonishment of all, my father walked up to the outraged killer and speaking calmly to him in Urdu, got him to surrender the cutlass to him.

I'm unsure if my father's Monday court sessions began before 1925 for it was in that year that he was made a Justice of the Peace for British Guiana. Daddy had the power to banish anyone from the Estate, enforcement of the ruling carried out by the policeman who lived permanently at Albion; he blended into the community for I seldom ever saw him in uniform, other than appearing as a witness at my father's sessions, or accompanying an arrested offender to prison in New Amsterdam. I think my father's reasons for his Monday sessions was to nip problems in the bud before they became really serious.

From time to time Geoffrey and I lingered around the periphery of these court sessions to try to see and hear what we could of the goings on, curiosity getting the better of us.

On one such occasion a larger crowd than usual formed a wide circle four or five people deep around 'Manja', whom we could not see but knew would be there ensconced. Something major was happening and our young ears may have been tender but there was no mistaking a charge in the air. We ran as one to sneak our way into the crowd, all caution now thrown to the winds. Two drivers - foremen of work - gangs - were speaking as accusers and defenders of a member of their respective gangs who were in serious trouble. We were worming our way between the legs of the attentive crowd to get a better view of the happening. Another driver in the midst leaned down to me and said, "Stan quiet now or your Daddy will see you and give ya a lickin". Two bodies to my right someone else was restraining Geoffrey with his own warning, "What you doin' here, Manja will see you!" I could just glimpse 'Manja' from between all those elbows and legs, indeed ensconced on his throne, dressed for the working day in white pith helmet, collarless white shirt, white cotton jacket, jodhpurs, leggings and ankle boots; his ever-present stout walking stick hooked to the arm of the 'throne'. Daddy was somewhat 'worked-up' about the growing tension of the crowd for there seemed to be equal numbers for and against the drivers' arguments. Calling them to order the crowd, as crowds will when suddenly silenced, stood quite still; except for the two little pairs of white legs that stood out among the darker ones.

“BOY !!!”

How do you describe the alarm at being discovered, in disobeying full view of the most serious of your father’s rules, and in ‘thousands and thousands’ of people.

Halting the proceedings my father called to another driver to ‘Bring those two boys here’, pointing to the space immediately in front of him. We did not know about ‘holes in which to hide’ at our ages but even if we had, none could have been deep and dark enough. “Did I not tell you never to come here?” Even if we could have thought of any sort of response, we were quite incapable of any utterings. I would give anything to have seen the priceless expressions on our faces, but I only remember trying to hold my breath while subconsciously covering my rear end with both hands, palms outward. With further admonishments about obeying his orders, Daddy rose from his throne and quickly gave both of us two hard smacks on the backside with his open hand. Selecting another driver from the crowd he ordered him to ‘march’ us home at once, warning us to remain there until he came home later. I don’t remember tears though I suppose we must have shed some, but I do remember wanting to get home as quickly as possible, away from being the obstacle of shame and embarrassment. It was also a demonstration to the people that he did not stop short of applying punishment of his own family, although I think Daddy was too angry to have considered that at the time.

A few hours later we saw him walking home with his walking stick as usual. The Managers and Deputies always carried walking sticks with them during the working hours of their day, more as a badge of authority than anything else. And my father had a way of leaning on his wide-handled stick when he spoke with someone for any length of time, the right leg crossed in front of the left leg. He passed us at the foot of the kitchen stairs and in his kindlier tone said, “Go and telephone the picture house and tell them we’re coming to the pictures tonight”. Grinning from ear to ear we ran to see who would get to the telephone first. The evening show was usually at 8 o’ clock but when my father called to say he was coming, the manager there knew ‘damned well’ he dared not start the show until William Henry was in his seat! We would walk the mile and a half there and back and you could not hurry him either way, though Daddy was always punctual, often to a fault.

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I make little reference to Mr. Bee, the Manager of Albion, for the simple reason we saw very little of him. He seemed a nice enough man to us, but having no children of his own I think we sensed that he was uncomfortable when we were around him. Speaking only for Geoffrey and myself, we were somewhat fearful of him and gave him a wide birth whenever we could. All of which might well be unfair of us.

Mrs. Bee was pleasant with us but we were a little fearful of her too. She was a little 'heavy' in stature and had a direct sort of way of speaking down to us. When you are little, bigger people seem even bigger. Mrs. Bee was born in British Guiana but educated in England or one of the 'finishing schools' abroad and spoke with an English accent; as did he, but he was English born. As I mentioned before, she took great pleasure in improving her beautiful garden. I remember her taking us for a walk through it on occasion.

Mr. Bee first met my father when Daddy was transferred to Non Pareil from Golden Fleece in 1909/10, perhaps even a little before that. Daddy came to Non Pareil as head overseer, where Mr. Bee was either deputy manager or manager. Either way he quite quickly spotted my father's worth and that he was easy to work with. They became good friends and when London transferred Mr. Bee to Albion (a much bigger Estate) with the promotion to manager there, he as quickly asked that W. H. Watson be transferred there at the same time as his deputy. London agreed. In the meantime my governess mother at Plantation Hope - two Plantations away - had met and married my father in 1911, and he had moved from Non Pareil to Hope in 1913/14. The two families moved to Albion in 1915.

The Bees' great house of my memories was large and lavishly furnished, the mahogany floors glowed where they were exposed between the area carpets. It could be said that Mrs. Bee had 'good taste'. The light from floor and table lamps complimented the drawing room and closed galleries. It was a place of dramatic shadows. The Bees often had my father over for swizzles and bridge; I speak of the times after my mother had moved permanently to Georgetown. On more than one occasion Geoffrey and I would walk over to the Bees' house to meet Daddy there, when we would walk back to our house for our evening dinner. Either Mr. Landels or Mr. Young (the chief engineer) would make up the four at these bridge sessions. Mrs. Bee would pull a couple of poufs around the card table for us to sit on, from which we watched with rapt attention. Swizzles were a one-gulp drink which tended to cause them to be served more often than a longer mixed drink. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bee were as fond of swizzles as my father was, so that animation accompanied the bidding of the game. Daddy had a propensity to be daring in his bridge game and the added stimulation from the ever appearing swizzles livened up the evening. Mrs. Bee would feign anger with my father for his over-bidding, but it was clear she enjoyed the problems Daddy's bidding was creating. Quiet Mr. Young would chuckle with amusement while Mr. Bee would do his bit to keep the pot stirred; a raised forefinger for 'the boy' to serve another round of swizzles. They enjoyed these evenings with each other just as we youngsters looked forward every year to the lavish Christmas

parties Mrs. Bee gave every year for us children and others coming up from Georgetown for the festive season.

Mr. Bee (James Bee) seldom went riding aback so that whenever he did his saddle-soreness was evident for a day or two afterwards. He consulted with my father on a daily basis and paid perhaps a weekly visit to the pay-office and the factory. He retired in 1937, the year before Daddy did, and died in England the year before my own father's death in 1945.

When I was a boy growing up, there were various customs, traditions and disciplines that I would have to meet or contend with. One such custom was that a boy did not wear 'long pants' until he had finished school and was ready to go out into the manly working world. It had become a rite of passage and the prideful, yet tentative transformation of the initiated, when first at large, was sympathetically amusing. The head seemed to be a little higher and the stride a little longer; attempts to appear to be natural and even casual with the new self, were really sad failures.

Such was the case in 1936 with my brothers Joe (Raymond) and Peter (Duncan), when their respective ages were 17 and 16. Peter had always been tall for his age, growing so much quicker than his brothers. At 16 he was comically too tall for short trousers. I think our climate played a role in the custom.

It was also a sometime custom of my father to shower and dress 'for going out' after his afternoon tea. Except the going out went no further than standing at the front entrance of our house, short of the gap itself. As always in his pressed, spotless white suit and tie, two-toned shoes and that magnificent grey homburg; immaculately natty. Daddy was of average height, little more than five feet ten inches, weighing perhaps 160 lbs, yet he seemed taller because he always stood erect; later, in his retirement, there was a little rounding of his back at the shoulders, but he was never 'bent'. I have never known him to be anything but totally grey-haired, which he always kept quite cropped, definitely what you would call in modern times a crew cut. He had dark brown eyes over a full but firm mouth. He wore dark horn-rimmed glasses over a sun-weathered face. I remember thinking he had beautifully formed hands. I think my mother found him to be a handsome man in his younger years. The reason he took station outside the gate on these occasions, was to make himself available to any of the many passers by, including the overseers, and to hold discussions with them. Little grievances and problems were often settled this way. We, his sons, always joined him on these afternoons, a thing I think he took pride in.

It was on such an afternoon - in 1936 - that Joe and Peter wore their long trousers for the first time. As a family of men we must have looked scrubbed and ready, as we were indeed. In time we were joined by two of the young East Indian butlers from the

overseers' mess, a 'Kid' Ciarker and Kayo. These were spirited young men the same ages as my elder brothers and who were often in our company. They liked to be around my father and he tolerated their presence. I think Daddy had a preference for 'spirited' people, people who met life head on. We would stand outside our front gate until just before dark, when Daddy would turn and say "Time to go in now"; and we would. We would sit around him in his favourite Berbice chair, where as I say, with legs up on the long arms of the chair, he would sip a whisky and soda or a rum and water. Finally the butler would appear with a rum swizzle for my father, which was the signal that dinner would be served in a few minutes.

However, I omit the telling of an incident that happened out at the gap before we came in that particular afternoon.

Daddy had noticed - as indeed I had not - that I was fidgety and scratching myself irritatingly.

"What's the matter with you boy (bye)?"

"Nothing"

"Why you scratching so much. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing". A little weaker this time because I sensed he was on to something, something I knew he would not let go of.

"When last you had a bath boy?"

No response, guilt written all over my face.

Raising his voice to that higher octave of authority, Daddy turned towards Kayo.

"Kayo!" It was almost a shout.

"Yes sir".

"Take this boy upstairs and give him a bath."

"Yes sir", with unmistakable glee in his voice.

"Scrub him all over and put on his pyjamas"

"Yes sir"

I must admit the itching not only stopped but I felt delightfully clean and energetic afterwards. Kayo never stopped laughing during the procedure and I made sure I splashed him a few times. When I came downstairs afterwards my brothers were speaking animatedly with Daddy, seated around him in the gallery, the windows opened to the evening breezes. Daddy welcomed me into the group with that

mischievous smile I was so familiar with. If my father thought he had the best sons in the world, his sons thought they had the best father in the world.

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There are three things you should keep in mind if you intend to ride a donkey. First, you should know where to sit on him and second, walk him, canter him but never trot him. Third, save yourself a lot of bother by not riding him at all.

The donkey's spine is sharper than those of a mule or a horse. It is like the ridge-pole of a house and since donkeys are ridden bareback, this makes for a very uncomfortable ride. The place to sit is on his rear end over the hind legs, its more comfortable there. The donkey's propensity for bucking is made almost impossible since he needs to push up with his rear legs to do so. A donkey very seldom gallops unless he's young and frisky. They're lazy and stubborn by nature and reluctant to expend the energy. If he is resigned to carrying a rider he will trot. Within seconds the rider will experience someone beating the underside of the top of his skull with a hammer. You're really better off leaving the stubborn brute alone. But it is all a waste of breath if young boys are determined to ride this donkey on this day.

It was on the last but one summer we would ever spend at Albion, so it was just Geoffrey and I up for the August holidays. And for the first time the two Minshall boys, who were nephews of Mr. Grant the assistant engineer, were also up. They were a year or two younger than we were but like all their family, they were big and beefy for their ages. Derek, and I think, John. They were robust and somewhat daring by nature, otherwise nice enough.

I do not recall just how the donkey came on the scene, but it was abducted by the Minshall brothers from wherever the animal was grazing nearby. It had been tethered, so that there was already a makeshift halter around its head. The single strand of rope was brought around the neck and tied to the other side of the head to form a rein. Even with our persevering we could not wear down the donkey's stubborn refusal to be ridden. Someone, it may have been Geoffrey, had the bright idea to win the animal's favour by bribing him - sweeten him literally - with molasses mixed with grass. There was a bucket (Mack's bucket for washing the Buick) in our garage, while hanging on a nail on the garage wall was a hand scythe for cutting grass. The donkey was tied to one of the posts that supported the outside steps leading to the upstairs of our house, and I was delegated to run with the bucket to the factory to fill it with molasses. Caught up in the excitement, I was quite willing to do my part in the scheme of things, little realizing how heavy that bucket of molasses would be. I did and it was.

In the meantime the others had to go to the playing fields area to find grass long enough to satisfy one agitated donkey, who was expressing his anger at being tied up by the constant switching of his tail. Eventually, in full view of him we spilled the cut grass on the ground, let him smell the fresh molasses, then poured the thick brown sweetness over the grass, mixing it as we did so. The switching of the tail continued as the animal pounced on this food of the Gods that no one had ever given him before. It was probably more grass than he would have eaten for the rest of the day, but the sweetness of the molasses was too much for him to resist.

The over-stuffed animal allowed us to ride him, making half-hearted attempts at throwing us; until we went too far. Michael Minshall said that if you rubbed the dark stripe that ran down either side of his shoulders with a stick, the donkey would really start bucking. Derrick made a thing about the dark striping, but of course bone and muscle and tendons came together at the shoulders and rubbing there with a stick would be painful to either man or beast. It meant sitting on the donkey's mid-back instead of his rear end, resulting in each of us being thrown a time or two before we decided we had had enough. No doubt the animal was wandering how these angels of the sweet-grass could suddenly turn into punishing devils. There was considerable braying.

Finally, we opened the double gate and let the animal go. Without hesitation the liberated beast bore left and was last seen actually galloping towards the canal bridge and the native yard, his halter trailing between and behind his legs, throwing up clumps of dust as he sped.

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Social habits such as bridge parties, standing at the gap, or going to the 'picture house', depended very much on whether or not it was the grinding (harvest) season. For those months - twice a year when the canes were brought to the factory for grinding, the work days were long and tiring and Overseers and field workers alike gave it their full attention. I should point out that there was little socializing between the Overseers and my father. For one thing I think they were a little in awe of him, his 'power'. For another they were all too tired at the end of a long day. But sometimes Daddy would go across to the Mess and mingle with them as they played billiards and snooker in the billiard room. Bridge was my father's favourite relaxation and if a swizzle or two spiced his bidding, well then all the merrier. He enjoyed his games with the Bees, but his favourite haunt for the game was in New Amsterdam. He was a member of The New Amsterdam Club. which was a quaint two storey, Colonial-Victorian building in a quiet corner of the equally quaint town. It was a place where the men who were the managers and deputies from surrounding Estates mingled with

the white merchants of the city. It was the usual sort of club with a reading room, card room, billiards and dining room. There was no bar to sit at for there were suitably attired waiters at hand to fetch your drink(s). The rooms would no doubt be filled with the smoke of pipes and cigarettes and perhaps, a cigar or two with after-dinner brandies. Pukka British. (I'm uncertain if Overseers were allowed membership, although I don't see why not).

We boys enjoyed these Saturday outings with our father to New Amsterdam, because it meant going to the old Globe cinema to see a 'picture'. It is not my recollection that these outings were every Saturday afternoon, but they were often enough. Daddy would order the Estate car for one o' clock in the afternoon when, five minutes before the hour Mack and the immaculate Buick would appear outside our front gate. Mack knew to be early for my father was always early - very early - and impatiently ready for his appointments .... often to the irritation of others.

On this occasion the Estate car was in Georgetown, so young-blood Jug Singh was sent for. He too knew to be early and was ready and waiting with his new, modern 1936 Chevrolet, which was a darker brown than the Buick. Neatly attired as usual, Daddy and we four brothers piled into the car for the half-hour drive to New Amsterdam. It was a distance of only nine or ten miles to the city, but if my father was your passenger you took all of half an hour to get there. With the extra bodies in the car the Chevy seemed to roll on clouds. Because of the special ness of the outing the usual bright afternoon seemed brighter, and with the side-vent windows open to the onrushing wind, the early afternoon heat was pleasantly tempered.

People recognizing the Chevy knew to stand clear of the shoulders of the already narrow gap. They always waved politely, young and old alike, and sometimes you could hear them call out 'Manja' as they added a smile to the wave. We could see that Jug was already gaining speed as the passing people were becoming blurred, and out the back window there was no mistaking the ever-present building cloud of dust. Slow driving was as abhorrent to Jug as speeding was to my father which only produced a clashing of wills, out of which there never seemed to be a clear winner.

"Stop driving so fast boy. Slow the car down!"

"Yes Manja - not driving fast".

"Stop it I say".

"Yes sa". We slowed. We were about to slow down anyway (Jug's idea of slow-down), for we were approaching the tight turn from the gap on to the public road. At which time our trailing cloud of dust caught up with us, wafting past the windows. A quick acceleration after the turn left the dust was behind us again, but not before we

threaded our way through gathering crowds of people who were besieging the ticket seller of the Gaiety cinema. They were there for the afternoon matinee of the latest release from the prolific film makers of India. The Chevy had a baritone sounding beep horn, Jug using it more to draw attention to himself and his passengers. We earned scowls for his trouble - and few waves.

The familiar flat countryside sped past our windows as we looked for the familiar landmarks, first on our left for the isolated great house known as the Hickin(g?) House. For the second half of my holiday years at Albion it was Dr. Fraser's house, but before him a Mr. Hickin lived there; I do not remember what Mr. Hickin's occupation was, but he held large fancy-dress parties once a year for the children of the surrounding Plantations, which my elder brothers and sisters attended. I was either not born yet or Mr. Hickin had expired by the time I was. But I did attend a party there on one occasion when Dr. Fraser owned the house. Soon the Hayley house rushed to meet us on the right hand side of that tight turning corner that even Jug respected. The verbal fencing between him and my father continued, the automobile slowing only to speed up again. It was high comedy but could be scary at times. But soon we were over the Canje bridge and at the outskirts of New Amsterdam. As we drove into the town I experienced that special indescribable feeling I always had for the ambience the town's quaintness provoked in me. I liked New Amsterdam more than I did Georgetown. It was a romancer's place, like a large outdoor stage setting that was saved from dilapidation by an air of respectability.

The routine was always the same, the car would drop my father off at the club and then proceed to the Globe cinema; we would be in good time for the two o' clock matinee. I do recall one occasion when we were extra early (Jug must have been driving) which we used to pay a short visit with Uncle Colin MacLean, the accountant/bookkeeper of Wrefords General Store. The gentlest and most harmless of men, he seemed to spend his life stooped over those ledgers that he managed with meticulous care. Uncle Colin had a fetish for cleanliness, washing his hands several times a day. He had a quiet little sense of humour. His wife, whom we called just plain Auntie (Norah, one of my mother's two sisters who lived to be 101 years old), was always travelling somewhere abroad while he stayed behind slaving over those books; we never liked her for that though she was likeable enough otherwise. I don't think I visited her modest but comfortable home more than twice. She was very proud of her baby grand piano which, admittedly, she played quite well. But I better hurry or we'll be late for the matinee.

The Globe was a bare-bones, two storey, wood-framed building that was twice as long as it was wide. It was quite primitive in its construction, the hard wooden seats of the house and balcony sections being subtly curved as a gesture of comfort. There was

no upholstery. The pit section was filled with benches but you only paid six cents to sit on them. The house seats - on the main level - were twelve cents. Balcony seats were one shilling, twenty-four cents. In Georgetown, tickets for the same seats was double those of New Amsterdam, but they were 'posher' and more comfortable. We referred to balcony as 'upstairs' more often than not. We always sat 'upstairs', leaving the lower floor for the 'riff-raff'. In some ways Colonials were no less snooty than the homelanderers.

In both cities the cinemas had rows of windows on both levels, cross ventilation being important in the tropics, but they had to be closed if the theatre was to be dark enough to show the film. Of course, for the eight thirty evening shows they were always left open. In the newer cinemas in Georgetown the windows were closed by the usher pushing one handle which controlled a single bar attached to all the windows. At the New Amsterdam Globe the downstairs usher had to use a long pole with a hook on the end to undo the pull-cord of each window, which swung in and down with a bang. This performance sometimes amused the impatient audience whose applause and laughter increased with each closing window, so that by the end of it the house was uproarious. Yes, humour was everywhere and it took very little to get it going. Of course the usher played to the house!

Because of Daddy's visits to the New Amsterdam Club, I was hardly four or five years old and already a knowledgeable patron. I have memories of semi-talkie movies like 'Wings' with the very young Gary Cooper, some singing semi's with Charles Farrel and Janet Gaynor. And one of the very first Technicolor films that featured the very young and handsome Maurice Chevalier. On this particular day the 'picture' was 'Rio Rita', with John Boles and Bebe Daniels. There was a lot of singing from both of them and the boy got the girl in the end, much to everyone's delight. It took very little to excite me and Joe and Peter often had to restrain me, actually pull me back into my seat. Sometimes Jug - or Mack as the case may be sat with us for the show. Before the house was darkened a boy would come around with a tray filled with locally made candies and small prepared bags of unshelled peanuts. We would each have a bag of 'nuts' and make an unholy mess on the floor, made worse when trampled underfoot. On this occasion Jug did not stay for the movie, opting to visit a friend instead, which I suppose meant one of his many lady friends. He would return with the Chevy to meet us at the end of the show, and he was always on time.

On these occasions you could always smell rum on Jug's breath, which would only serve to prime him for the drive back. We warned him not to let Daddy smell his breath or there would be 'hell to pay'. "Oh your Daddy won't smell me 'cause he got whisky on his own breath". Which was true enough. We drove around town for a while then returned to the Club, where we would sometimes have to wait for another

hour for my father to come out. It would be getting dark by then, but we didn't seem to mind the waiting. Someone was always saying something and the time passed with sprinkled laughter.

My father finally made an appearance and walking down the few steps, came over to where our car was parked nearby. We made room for him in the right corner of the rear seat where he always liked to sit. He asked us if we liked the 'picture' and what it was about, receiving detailed animated versions from each of us, Geoffrey and I trying to outdo each other. By the time we got through with the telling we were down the other side of Canje bridge, watching the Chevrolet's main beams play their yellow lights against the red dirt of the road ahead. We lapsed into silence, mesmerized by the red indicator needle of the speedometer as it continued its upward curve. Jug almost missed the tight right turn in front of the Hayley's isolated house at Bramfield. I thought we had taken the corner on two wheels. I think Jug was somewhat frightened by his own recklessness which was underscored by a sharp reprimand from my father. But by the time we 'flew' over the third or fourth 'singing' bridges, the pretty-lights speedometer needle was back to seventy miles an hour. That was a reckless speed for those pot-holed country roads at night. The tight turn into Albion's gap was made with considered care, and there was a general sense of relief when we finally arrived outside our front gate. During dinner we asked Daddy if he knew how fast Jug had been driving the car on the way home; suspending a spoonful of rice pudding he said, "Oh forty miles an hour". But we thought he knew it was more than that.

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The Estates supplied night-watchmen for the houses of managers deputies, these being 'perks' due their stations in the scheme of things. Instances of break-ins in these homes were few rather far between. There was never such an instance at Albion, but my father did have that iron safe in the middle bedroom upstairs. Whatever sum of money was in it would be little more than a 'kitty', but to someone of meagre means it would have been a considerable sum.

There were two watchmen during my childhood, Jhodi and Henlal, both in their late fifties or early sixties. They came to 'work' before dark, at which time they laboured at the hand pump at the foot of the kitchen stairs, to top-up the rainwater header tank on the roof above the bathroom, from the large nearby vat. Falling rain was collected by down-pipes from the roofs of the house. Most of my memories are of Henlal, whose character was quite the opposite of Jhodi's. Jhodi was quiet and seemed to lack a sense of humour, whereas Henlal was gregarious, quick to laugh and animated in

conversation. Where Jhodi was tall and slightly built, Henlal was short, pudgy and bow-legged. Both men were Hindus.

Henlal was always dressed in his white dhoti which, when wound around him left his legs bare below the knees, the surplus winding tossed over his left shoulder. His head was shaved clean except for a topknot at the centre that was all of three feet long. He kept this religious symbol lightly oiled (coconut oil) and was very deft at coiling it like a snake around the top of his head, which he would then - again deftly - wind and cover with a white turban. He carried a wood stave that was at least a foot longer than his five and a half foot height. A badge of office no doubt, though I think that if he had been confronted by a burglar in the middle of the night he would have died of fright. Perhaps I'm being unfair. It was sheer comedy to see Henlal walking barefooted with his stave, his bowed legs rocking him from side to side, made funnier by his short, quick steps. He had a grey walrus moustache and spoke in a hoarse, raspy voice. I was fond of him which his jollity returned in kind.

Henlal was a potter.

I have spent more than one day at Henlal's modest, stilt-raised cottage watching him work his magic with those un-artistic looking hands. A clump of clay expertly thrown with a thump upon the wheel, would be pulled upwards and outwards by his ever-wet pudgy fingers. Where today's potters sit on a high stool over a kick-wheel, Henlal squatted for hours on the bare ground under his house, straddling his cunningly balanced wheel that was recessed in the earth. He turned it periodically with a short, stout stick, fitted into a slot in the wheel. There was always a small crowd of picknees (children) around, who watched with quiet fascination. Henlal did not pretend artistry, though his hands moved with great sensitivity. He made goblets small and large with well fitted lids, purely for holding cool drinking water. Some had various shaped spouts and handles. All were without decoration and unglazed, bisque-fired in his small adobe oven outside his house, a wood fire generating sufficient heat for a successful firing. He earned a liveable income from his labour of love, supplemented by what he earned as my father's night watchman.

Henlal needed his sleep in order to have the energy to make his goblets, and this he got aplenty at night under Manja's house. I cannot remember if he was our watchman every night of the week or what sort of schedule may have been involved; I just remember him being there for ever and ever.

I also remember being wakened in the middle of those dark nights by my father's voice calling down from his bedroom window, "Watchman!" An interminable pause before a drowsy response came from Henlal reassuring me that I was the most

protected boy in the world. It would not surprise me if my father - being sleepless himself - used this ruse to wake Henlal.

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There were many things we did together as brothers in those formative years at Albion, though Geoffrey and I sometimes went off on our own because of the closeness of our ages.

Our favourite enjoyments were riding back dam with our father, or paddling a borrowed coorial along the canals (we always called them trenches), or making nuisances of ourselves in and around the huge factory. Sometimes we wandered through Guava Bush village where the sunlight was kept out more than it was let in. In the last two years before Daddy's retirement, the two of us would cross the Berbice river in a river launch, directly across to Blairmont Estate where they had installed a swanky new swimming pool. The high diving-board was formed into a sweeping, modern curve, from which we both did our share of showing-off. We would return in time to catch Dalf Singh's truck on its daily run of supplies to Albion in the mid-afternoons. It would be waiting in the parking lot next to the ferry stelling in New Amsterdam, or sometimes outside Wreford's store. The hustle-and-bustle of vehicles and bodies was a confusion of snarling movement, counter-pointed by the noises of bicycle bells, car horns and the profanity of the offended. God, I loved it; it made you feel alive! Then there were the drives into the city for Daddy's bridge and the latest showing at the Globe cinema. There was no need for censorship ratings in those days.

Daddy was not always willing to accommodate us in riding back dam with him. In his rounds in and around the office and factory before climbing on the saddled Prince, someone might well have displeased or angered him, so that while we lingered in the ever-busy mule pen yard, his lateness in arriving there (he hated being late of course) did little to abate his irritation. We stood around describing arcs in the loose dust of the mule pen with the toes of our already dirty shoes. We would not dare to have four mules saddled without Daddy's permission; more so the driver in charge of the pen. Typically, he would stride in and engage the driver in discussing whatever problems there were with the animals, leaning cross-legged on his heavy walking stick as he did so.

"Daddy can we go back dam with you?"

"No boy." You allowed a strategic period of time to elapse, weighing carefully the urgency of his discussion with the driver. If you're going to be a pest your timing at interrupting has got to be just right. We knew the drill.

"Daddy", this time gently tugging on a sleeve.

“I said no boy.” The original conviction was now lacking. Usually the third or fourth try either got him to surrender or become angry; you had to be prepared for that. Sometimes it was expected of me to start a pitiful crying; you were really going for broke then.

“Oh God (whatever his name was) go saddle four mules for these boys. Get two quiet ones for these two”, pointing at myself and Geoffrey. “And stop crying boy.” You had to know how to reach the ‘Pussy-cat’ in Daddy. But tears be damned, we were all smiles and laughter as we scattered to ‘bags’ (choose) our favourite animals; sometimes two of us wanted the same mule for whatever reason. There were always spare saddles at the corral. The picture of our five-mule caravan leaving the corral is still crystal clear in my mind, short legs into shortened stirrups, heads bare and unbothered by the beating overhead sun. The one thing we knew never, never to do was to let our frisky mules upset the sedate but aging Prince and her rider. Daddy always walked his quiet mount and that suited the old mare’s idea of a day’s ride. There was one occasion when the old girl stumbled coming down the other side of one of the fly-over canal bridges, throwing my father. No bones were broken by either party, whereupon the ride was resumed. But I do remember in my last year at Albion that life had become too much for the ancient Prince, so it was decided to put her down. A great hole was dug off to one side of the mule pen. Prince was stood in front of it and a gun fired into her temple at close range. She died before she fell, which she did conveniently into the prepared hole. My father was deliberately absent from the execution and I rather think that his long friendship with that animal, and now in this his final year before retirement, must have weighed heavily on his mind. Prince and my father understood and trusted one another.

The coorial was a joy to go paddling in for you could move at great speed with very little effort. The ever smooth surface of the dark water made small, soundless ripples on either side of the bow, like liquid arrowheads spreading to both banks of the trench. I think they were made from the Balata tree but I’m not certain of that. Whichever it was it was a tight-grained wood. The core of the felled tree was gouged out with narrow adzes, assisted by burning out with red-hot coals. The perfectly rounded, barkless outside of the tree became the hull. The average coorial was about twelve feet long, twelve to fifteen inches wide and drew a few inches of water. A short, blunted stem was at either end of the canoe. Getting into them was not a feat to be taken lightly because their rounded bottoms would tumble as easily as a log in water. You paid attention to step lightly in the very centre of the coorial, whichever foot first, followed by the other. But with the sense of timing and balance of youngsters it was second nature to us. A paddler in the stern and bow was all that was needed.

Over the years we spent wonderful days paddling back dam, stopping for a quick swim in the cool, dark water. I have never seen an alligator in the back dam of Albion, though I have seen them on neighbouring Estates, sunning themselves on the banks of the cane fields. Perhaps we were just lucky. For lunch we would choose a field planted with #625 canes, their outer bark easy to peel with our strong young teeth. The inner cane was soft chewing which we spat out after swallowing its plentiful juices, which often dribbled from the corners of our thirsty mouths. The Diamond 10 canes had the sweetest juices that made the best sugar, but they were so hard they were almost impossible for us to peel and chew. They were also hard on the roller crushers in the factory. We feasted to our full on these canes as the sun dried our wet bodies.

For most of our roaming on the Plantation we were, more often than not, dressed only in bathing trunks. By the end of the two month holidays our bodies were the colour of mahogany. When we returned to Georgetown, and before the start of the next term of school, my mother purged us with a cup of senna herb tea every morning before breakfast. For the tenth morning we faced the coup-de-grace, castor oil, almost in its raw state, the vilest of the most vile. To keep it down my mother slapped a half of orange - already prepared for the ordeal - over our mouths. Being synonymous with castor oil, it took me a decade or two to be able to enjoy eating an orange again. My mother felt that the purging - severe as it was - was necessary to 'clear out' all the bad eating habits we developed during our Albion holidays. Now we could face the school term ahead. We could not shake her from this silly conviction.

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My boyhood years at Albion and indeed the whole Berbice district, were my halcyon years when I could have wished that time would stand still. It is my experience that such happiness is enjoyed by the very young who are not yet aware of analysis, and in that state of blissfulness do not realise they are experiencing happiness. The conscious analysis comes much later in life with hindsight when, in a sense, the valuation is wasted.

My brothers and I were never bored, time never weighed on our hands; we were always doing something, never idle, always curious and discovering. For things unplanned we invented without realising we were inventors. Our imaginations developed, my own serving me well to this day.

And, in retrospect, I have come to realise that the halcyon experience that was Albion, was a gift from my father, William Henry Watson, who gave us, and trusted us, with the freedoms of our Albion childhood. I can't speak for my sisters for gender was even more of a disadvantage then compared with today.

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## The Visit of 1974

In the summer of 1974 my wife Joanne and I flew down to (the now) Guyana. It was to be the last chance for me to show her the places I had talked about for years, most importantly Albion. 1974 was to be the last year before my brother-in-law Stan Howard and my sister Elaine, were to retire to England. Stan was a sugar engineer who was also the manager of Plantation Rose Hall, just a mile or two outside of New Amsterdam.

I should mention that when the country became a republic in the late '60's, the government expelled the British owners of the sugar industry, the Canadian owners of the huge bauxite and electric power station operations, and the Americans in mining. Needless to say local incompetence necessitated the pleading recall of the previous owners whose knowledge and expertise could not be duplicated. The sugar industry suffered most of all when a production high of 330,000 tons, fell to an appalling 125,000 tons.

The Howards and their son Derek met us at the airport some twenty miles up-river from Georgetown; it was quite late at night and we would have to hurry if we were to catch the last midnight ferry out of Rosignol for New Amsterdam. Somehow we managed to clear our baggage through Customs and the utter chaos of the crowded airport. Climbing into the Estate car I was dismayed, though amusingly so, to see our driver was a young East Indian, just about the same age as the Jug Singh of my Albion childhood.

The roads were improved thanks to the Americans a few years before and what was once a four hour drive in my youth, was now less than two hours. There was much conversation for a while in the car but I was braced for what I knew would be something of a hair-raising ride, mid-night ferry or no mid-night ferry; and so it came to pass, for what was the usual drive for the Howards, was a hair-raising, tongue-biting experience for Joanne and myself, she being very stoic about it. We tore through those villages I wrote of in 'GETTING THERE' where, in spite of the lateness of the night, there were still some people about at the roadsides. Our headlights cut through them with warning but they stood their ground with the usual curiosity. Although most of the road had been paved, inattention to maintenance was already evident in potholes; which did not seem to bother our driver - who made the journey in an hour and fifteen minutes!

We 'arrived' at the Rosignol stelling in time to see a brilliantly illuminated ferry already one third of the way across my affectionately remembered Berbice river. No more the LADY NORTHCOTE, this ferry was twice the size and capacity. While I

was most grateful that we had arrived without having had an accident, I was not concerned that we had missed the last sailing. For it was a most beautiful night, that sort of beautiful night that can only be experienced in the tropics. There was a bright, full moon and, as if to jog my memory, a cooling breeze coming in from the nearby sea. The moon-washed river was just on the rise and the lit-up ferry looked for all the world like a Christmas tree adrift, now disappearing ever-quicker toward the low skyline lights of a gone-to-bed New Amsterdam. I took it all in with a swelling feeling as my memory raced back some fifty years. Perhaps - sometimes - you can go home again.

It was half an hour after mid-night and we were stranded; well not really. It was time for 'plan B', as they say, and I knew exactly what that would be; a very short drive along the bank of the river into Plantation Blairmont. We would use the Blairmont launch to cross the Berbice, leaving the Rose Hall Estate car there for the night.

This would take me on another journey back in time, because this was the same launch that Geoffrey and I had crossed in when we came over for a swim in the then new swimming pool. It was a short walk from where we had parked the car under someone's house, to the launch that was moored alongside a short dock that stuck out into the river. To make the crossing we would have to wake the 'Captain', who was asleep on one of the hard benches in the stern of the boat.

With most of its thirty feet of hull under cover of the overhead roof, there was a very brief transom deck in the stern, with another in the bow that was six or seven feet at most. This was an old launch when we were boys and the primitive single cylinder diesel engine amidships was still there, in place. The 'Captain' was as the 'Captain' we had known before (I refused to believe he could be the same person, for the moonlight alone and the passage of time made it difficult to be certain. This 'Captain' of the night would have to be in his late seventies). He looked like the same black African, the same build, the same bushy hair. Following my memory I looked at his feet and found what I expected to see, bare feet that were spread and swollen from never having worn a pair of shoes, ever.

The good-natured 'Captain' (I'm sure he could neither read nor write) rose willingly to his task, which he must have done a thousand times before. With our baggage stowed on the benches under cover, the six of us stood on the brief foredeck, taking care not to trip over the stout bollard at our feet, while holding on to the hand-holds that ran across the front of the launch's roof. Our footing was fairly secure for a tide just on the rise is quite smooth, even though it may be swirly just under the surface. These great rivers were never really a placid body of water.

The puffy, smoky diesel thumped itself to life whereupon our car driver let go the bowline from the foredeck bollard. The 'Captain' positioned himself amidships on the port side where the wheel was, one forearm resting on the cockpit combing. We were off, our bows pointing more-or-less straight across river. As I said before, New Amsterdam is a bit up-river from Rosignol and the rising tide was not yet pushing hard. We stood in our little group making idle chatter as that off-sea breeze combined with the glorious moonlight for one of those too-rare moments of life's better enjoyments. But the enjoyment came to a sudden halt as the unexpected happened, the world's most dependable engine quit. We were not quite at mid-river.

Conversation ceased and my brother-in-law told our driver to go below and see what he could do to help. There was no panic and I did not expect one; everyone's reaction said this sort of thing had happened before. And the Captain knew his motor like a father knows his son. He might not be able to read and write but he knew the idiosyncrasies of his precious launch. I also took comfort from knowing the tide was on the rise and not the other way around; after all, we were barely inside the river's estuary.

After some kicking and coaxing the engine came to life again and we resumed our crossing, still enjoying the night as we did so. Two thirds of the way across the engine quit once more, the tide noticeably a little brisker in its pace. But once more it was restarted and we pointed our bow a little more down-river this time, into the tide, preparing for our broadside landing against the stelling's floating ramp. I was somewhat surprised at how low the tide had been before its turn around. The exposed mud-banks around the stelling's legs were much more than I could remember them having ever been, and the ramp floating at a steeper angle as a result. Finally we were skilfully brought alongside, an awakened shore-hand taking our tossed mooring line and making us fast. The experience was quite different from any ferry ride. We enjoyed it.

Another motorcar was procured from somewhere and we made the short drive to Rose Hall and the manager's great house. I silently thrilled as we crossed over Canje bridge on the way out from the slumbering town.

Joanne and I had a huge bedroom with its own dressing room and bathroom to ourselves, complete with our own covered-in veranda. The next morning I woke with alarm, for I'd forgotten how screamingly noisy our blue-sackies and kiskadees could be. We got out of bed and went to the veranda and looked out on an endless panorama of cane fields, for as far as the eye could see. A little yellow aeroplane swooped and turned in the distance as it went about the business of spraying.

One afternoon Stan and Elaine had arranged for the four of us to visit with Dr. Fraser at his house at East Lothian, about halfway to Albion. It was just yet another beautiful afternoon with a light wind coming in from the unseen Atlantic, barely stirring the air of the flat open country. As always, the big house stood well back from the public road, stark in its isolation. The veterinarian and his wife greeted us at the head of the stairs, behind them, standing on its hind legs, forepaws outstretched, was the great big stuffed, brown bear from my childhood. Of course I had forgotten about the bear, which was still standing in the same place when it frightened me to tears as a small child. The memory and sensation from those many decades before came back with quite a jolt. We spent a pleasant afternoon visiting with this man who was a legend in my time. He had just returned from his horseback journey in the country's Rupununi hinterland. Both father and son (also a veterinarian) had trained and studied at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

But most of all came the visit we had really come for, the run up to Albion a day or two later.

It was an afternoon to be prepared for shock and disappointment, for things seldom stay the way you left them, the way you always want them to be. The first shock came as we approached the tight turn (still tight and dangerous) at Bramfield, for there stood what was left of the Hayley house, in the process of falling down. It seemed to be waiting for one last strong wind to blow the haunted looking skeleton down. Siding and floorboards hung everywhere, evidence no doubt that it was being cannibalized. But the 'singing bridges' were still there making their marimba sounds.

Strangely enough I do not recall if the Gaiety 'picture-house' was still there when we came to Albion Front. But the tight turn on to the gap was unchanged, as was the gap itself with the familiar countryside either side of it, including Guava Bush village. As we came to the Overseers' quarters they were much the same, except that half of them had been torn down along with the very old range quarters behind them. In the empty space that was left was a swimming pool! The incongruity of this modern thing in the midst of what remained of the old, classy respectability, jarred me offensively. Would my father have approved? the answer is I really don't know.

But worst of all our house - outwardly unchanged - now stood starkly isolated, made more so because the Overseer's Mess was no longer standing; it was gone, disappeared. It had been a place central to a lot of activity. It was here at tea-time every weekday that Dalf Singh's overburdened truck wallowed its way down the gap; the Mess was the first stop. People jumped off to roadside, even before the dust had settled. A small crowd would gather around the 'Girl Pat', which was the name it came to be known as from a national incident that had occurred a few years before.

This was when we received the two daily papers from Georgetown, or mailed packages, or ordered purchases from New Amsterdam. But no doubt Dalf Singh was no longer alive and that important daily event no longer continued. The missing Overseers' Mess was hard for me to take in and understand.

But our house and those of Messrs Landels, Bee and Young, were still there, untouched. Our front gate was permanently closed and a new entrance came in from behind the house, from the side road that branched off from the gap to lead to the playing fields. Our kitchen garden had been replaced by a lovely garden (my mother would have approved), and a roofed, louvered, sitting-out veranda had been added on to the gallery that ran all along that side of the house. I'm quite sure my father would have approved that change. The beautiful old Bougainvillea shrub-tree was still in place in the elbow of the old formal front steps, and as usual it was in bloom.

There had been a change made inside that displeased me. The area where we had our dining table had been partitioned off to make an additional bedroom. Everything else was unchanged and I pointed out my father's saddle tree - now unused - to Joanne, at the foot of the stairs leading to the upper floor. The telephone at the halfway turn was gone. The upstairs was as it had always been. I asked our kind hostess (her husband and children were off elsewhere for the day) whether I might show Joanne the end room that faced the Landels' house across the way - and the now non-existent sea of Zinnias. It was in this room that I and so many of my brothers and sisters had been born, brought into the world by the competent and caring hands of nurse Downer. But the emotion of it was lost to the shocking assault of magazine pin-ups that were plastered everywhere on the walls. I took this as a desecration of all those now-precious memories that room held for me. My brothers and I would never have done such a thing, and I'm quite sure both my parents would not have permitted it. I said nothing. But the room did rouse a forgotten memory. For a year or two, in one of those windows that overlooked the distant playing fields, I kept a caged song bird, a Kidouri. A Kidouri is a plain little all-black bird the size of a house sparrow, its only colour coming from an all-white seed splitting beak. But what the Kidouri lacked in colour it more than made up for in its glorious song. I do not remember what happened to it, but as we descended the stairs I rebuked myself for having caged any bird, especially such a wonderful songbird. I hope my father made me set it free.

The factory seemed the same; we did not go into it. But those wonderful Alabama mules were gone and the mule pen with them. I truly felt their loss. Overseers now went back dam in Land Rovers and there was now an extensive service yard for their care and maintenance. There was too much change. I cared not for the reasons only that the changes had slammed the door shut in my absence. It was as if Albion had lost its soul, my father perhaps. The romance was gone.

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A Correction:

Since completing this memoir I have stumbled upon the notes of the British Guiana Directory for the year 1904:

WATSON W.H. - Overseer, Plantation Hope, East Coast, Demerara.

I came by the British Guiana Directories through a dear and close childhood friend, Joy Evelyn Hunt, now in retired residence with her husband in Barbados. Joy's mother, of whom I was also very fond, had come by a collection of these Directories, which are now in Joy's possession.

This information now changes the timing of the first meeting between my mother and father, for it was understood that my father transferred from Golden Fleece to Non Pareil about 1908/09. Now we know that he had been transferred to Plantation Hope as early as 1904 and maybe even sooner.

It is doubtful that my mother was governess to the children of Mr. Mearns at Hope at that time, because she would have been only 16 years of age in 1904. What seems likely is that she came to Hope at say age 17 or even 18, which would have been at least one year before my father was transferred to close-by Non Pareil. The conclusion is that they certainly would have met for the first time at Plantation Hope, marrying later in 1910.

## A Footnote:

Traditionally the training of Engineers for the sugar industry was taken at 'Fletchers' in England. I do not know its proper name [Fletcher & Stewart, of Derby, not in existence by 2005] but it was a firm of engineers that provided extensive training for would-be aspirants of the profession, especially for the sugar industry. As an aftermath of its degradation, the sugar industry suffered as a result of local government handling; said government could not, or did not see fit to send young East Indian men to Fletchers in England. Somehow it was decided instead to set up a training facility for these local young men at Plantation Port Mourant, the next Plantation up (east) from Albion. An English instructor or two came out to help staff the Port Mourant school, the training lasting for three or four years; I'm uncertain of the number.

One afternoon Derek Howard, Joanne and I paid a visit to this training centre, where we were given a conducted tour. We were very impressed with the classes we visited, with their discipline and firm desire to become good engineers. Which they would need to be for all the arts and skills of engineering are necessary for the

maintenance of a very large and complex sugar factory. It is hard work that sometimes meets with crisis, which my brother-in-law, Stan Howard can attest to.

Joanne and I talked about the school and the impression it had made upon us, searching within ourselves to see what we could do to encourage those earnest young men and the school as a whole. At first we thought that something could be done to boost their woeful library. The solution came to me on our flight back to Canada a week later. After consultation with my siblings, it was agreed that an annual scholarship prize be set up, to be awarded to a deserving student of the administration's choice in our father's name. Today the W. H. Watson Memorial Award is presented to the most promising student at the end of his second year of training. The original capital investment was given by my brother Peter, and is administered by Barclay's Bank, in Georgetown.

I think it is most befitting that our father's name remains alive in that District of Berbice - and Albion - where he gave so many hard-working years to the profession and way of life he cared so much for. He made Albion a better place. For myself he gave me a place to love with a strong sense of belonging.

In memoirs you can go home again.

## Epilogue

In the 1960's when communism came to be the wave of the future, local intellectuals of both the lower and middle classes were quick to exploit their influences to get the country out from under the heel of the British boot. Red causes were tailored and championed in the name of independence. When it finally came in 1966, greed and corruption replaced law and order. With the swing of the pendulum came decay and decline. At its pinnacle the head prefect of my Queen's College days - already the Prime Minister - declared himself President of the Republic of Guyana for life. The best minds were already leaving the country - minus their capital - and the remaining populace of thieves and corruptors began the bankruptcy of the country.

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With my father's retirement in 1939 coinciding with the beginning of World War II, my passions for Albion were diverted by the unfolding events of that global conflict. Like any youngster in his mid-teens, my world quickly became excitable and self-centered. It is now, in my twilight years, when the course of one's life has become history that the times of reflection brings that life full circle. The early passions of imprinting return to awake the memories of 'those happy days', days that are gone forever, days that you can't go home to again. That's when memories become special.

## Chronology

Isabella Wilhamina, SMITH: Born 1867. On a farm outside Aberdeen, Scotland. Came to British Guiana in 1876 with widowed mother. Died British Guiana, 1964.

Married

Charles FRANCIS: Born 1860. 25 Duke Street, Grosvenor Square. London, England. A Civil Engineer. Died Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, 1941.

William Henry WATSON: Born 1877. Georgetown, British Guiana. A Sugar Planter. Died 1945, Georgetown, British Guiana.

Married

February 22nd, 1911

Daisy Muriel FRANCIS: Born 1888. Georgetown, British Guiana. Died 1973, Belleville, Ontario, Canada.

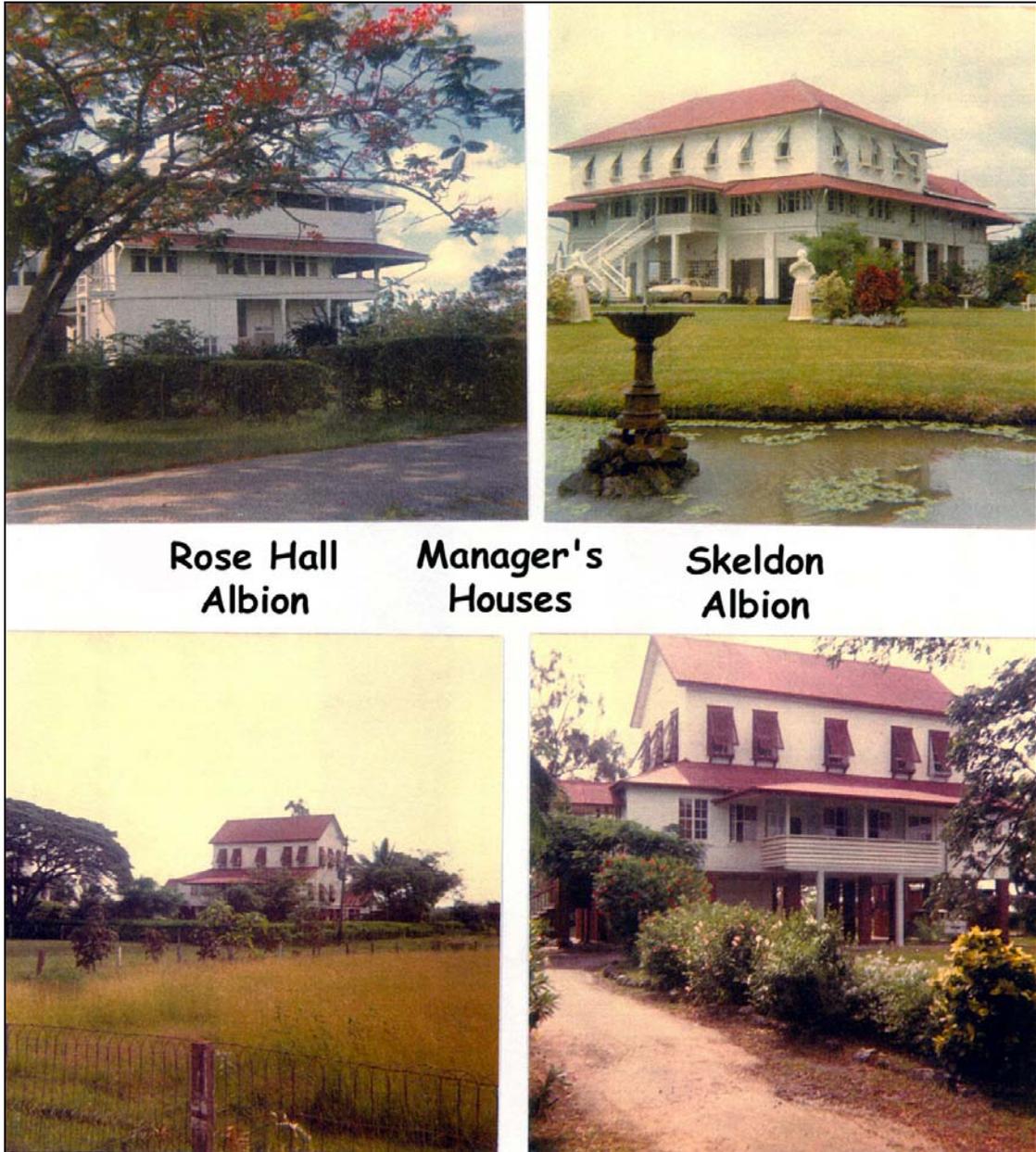
## Photographs



The Wedding: - The 1941 wedding of Audrey to George Scott of Linlithgow, Scotland. Bridesmaids all sisters. Front row L/R Marguerite, Phyllis. Back row L/R, the twins Elaine, Marjorie. Front row left, father William Henry Watson, right mother Daisy Muriel Francis/Watson. The Minister, Dean Hughes of St. George's Cathedral had himself proposed marriage to Audrey the year before and here he has to marry them. As Joanne said, the picture is right out of F. Scott Fitzgerald.



On the Front Steps: - Front steps of our house at Plantation Albion taken 1928. The widow is Auntie B (Birtles). Daddy, Mummie, Audrey who would be 15 years old here.



**Rose Hall  
Albion**

**Manager's  
Houses**

**Skeldon  
Albion**

The Houses: - I took these pictures in 1974. The upper two are the Managers' houses of Plantations Rose Hall, left, and Skeldon, right. The colourful tree in front of the Rose Hall house is a Flamboyant. In her childhood memoirs in Kenya, Africa, 'The Flame Trees of Thika', Elspeth Huxley refers to them as Flame Trees. Lower two of our house at Albion. Look carefully through the great Saman tree left, you can see some of the Landel's house across the way.



The Bandstand: - This picture was taken in 1954 of the bandstand at the seawall. See chapter THE NANNY. You can see some Nannies at far left. In my childhood, the chains were heavier, painted white and cared for and the grass was kept neat and cut. You can tell by the coconut trees that there's a brisk wind coming in from the sea just out of the left picture. Some of police barracks on the right. The low bridge at the left leads to the pathway we took with Pamela, off to the right.