

Quite a Good
Time to Be Born

Also by David Lodge

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Quite a Good Time to Be Born

A MEMOIR: 1935–1975

David Lodge



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To Mary, with love

FOREWORD

I drew my first breath on the 28th of January 1935, which was quite a good time for a future writer to be born in England, especially one belonging to a lower-middle-class family like mine. It meant that I would have plenty to write about and an education that, though patchy up to secondary level, gave me the skills and motivation to do so. Four and a half years old when the Second World War began, and ten and half when it ended, I retained some personal memories of that epic struggle, the hinge on which twentieth-century history turned. My generation was the first in Britain to benefit from the 1944 Education Act, which established free secondary education for all, and free tuition with means-tested maintenance grants for those who competed successfully for admission to a university. Like many others I was promoted by education into the professional middle class, and lived through an extremely interesting period in English social history, when the stratified classes of pre-war Britain gradually melded to create a more open and fluid society.

I was brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, which had not significantly altered in its beliefs and devotional practice since the Counter-Reformation and had successfully resisted the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity, but which from the 1960s onwards underwent a series of momentous changes and internal conflicts. Catholicism has stimulated my imagination as a novelist both before and since that upheaval. Over the same period there were several technological developments which have transformed social and cultural life, such as ubiquitous access to television, affordable global air travel, the contraceptive pill and the microchip.

This last invention, which enabled the production of the personal computer, the laptop, the internet, email, mobile phones and ebooks, has had a powerful but ambivalent effect on the production of literature. These tools have undoubtedly made the work of writers easier. Information that could only be retrieved in the past by hours or days of research in libraries can now be obtained in seconds with a few keystrokes, and word-processing software has made revision, which is at the very heart of literary composition, physically effortless. On the other hand the same developments now threaten to dissolve the connection between writing as a profession and the book as a mechanically reproducible commodity which has existed since the invention of the printing press, and to render obsolete the interlinked system of publishers, agents, printers, booksellers and copyright law that for more than a century has provided a relatively firm framework within which writers have pursued their vocation and earned income from it. I was fortunate, I think, in having the major part of my career as a writer in that more stable milieu.

This memoir describes how I became a writer, principally of prose fiction and literary criticism, beginning with the early experiences and influences that fed into my work later, and it covers what is, at the time of writing, the first half of my life, up to the age of forty. I hope to write another book about the second half, in added extra time.

D.L., September 2014

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I was the first and, as it turned out, the only child of my parents. When I was born, a little over two years after they married, they were living in a flat in Grove Vale, East Dulwich, then as now the poorer part of that south London suburb, very near the terraced house where my father – also an only child – had grown up and lived with his parents until he married. The birth certificate states, rather surprisingly, that I was born at 5 Brunswick Square, in Bloomsbury. I remember being told I was born in a ‘nursing home’, but why it was deemed necessary to go into central London for that facility, I do not know, and now, like so many other questions that arise from an exercise like this one, it is much too late to find out. My father’s name is given as ‘William Frederick Lodge’; he was known as ‘Will’ to his family, ‘Bill’ to his friends, and for a time he called himself professionally ‘Bryan Lodge’. His profession is described rather grandly on my birth certificate as ‘orchestral musician’. He did play in bands that described themselves as ‘orchestras’ – Jay Wilbur’s, Maurice Winnick’s, Arthur Roseberry’s

– but they played popular, mainly jazz-derived music generically known then as dance music, and he usually described his profession as ‘dance musician’. If he had been born in 1935 instead of 1906 he would probably have become a violinist in a symphony orchestra. He had a natural talent for the violin, and had some private lessons on that instrument as a boy, and on the saxophone and clarinet which he took up later, but he had no formal musical education and was largely self-taught.

His parents were not well off. My grandfather, also called William, but known familiarly as ‘Pop’, was a shopwalker in the drapery departments of various big London stores. He was said to be an expert on silk fabrics, and he would have been a master of sales patter. For a time he and a colleague had a semi-professional telepathy act which they performed in music halls. I’m not sure how it worked, but it would have required a quick wit and a ready tongue. Unfortunately he had a weakness for drink and a passion for pubs, and was dismissed by several employers on this account. At those times my grandmother, Amelia, or ‘Milly’, whom I called Nana, and loved dearly, would have been the main source of income for the household, being a skilled furrier who took in work at home, cutting and sewing the pelts which were a staple component of female attire. She was the youngest of thirteen children fathered by John Bush, a bookbinder. After my father died in 1999, I found his birth certificate and the marriage certificate of Nana and Pop among several similar documents in his desk, and was astonished to discover that they were married on 13th July 1906, only six weeks before he was born on 26th August. What story – what drama and distress – was hidden in those bald dates? Why was the marriage

delayed till such a late stage in my grandmother's pregnancy? Did she fail to tell Pop of her condition until it could no longer be disguised? Did he have to be persuaded to make an honest woman of her? Or was she perhaps reluctant to marry him, in spite of the stigma that attached to unmarried mothers in those days? The wedding took place in a registry office, not a church, and the bride's age was given on the certificate as twenty-one, though in fact she was only nineteen. My first thought was that this was done to avoid having to get parental consent, but Milly's mother Henrietta was one of the witnesses, so presumably approved, or at least accepted, the marriage, and Nana's father was by then deceased. Another insoluble enigma.

Finding this document prompted me to do some research into my ancestry, helped by a former student who became expert in genealogy. I was particularly keen to verify, if possible, a tradition – so tenuous that one might more properly call it a rumour – that my paternal great-grandfather or great-grandmother was of Jewish extraction. I have always enjoyed Jewish humour and the work of Jewish, especially Jewish-American, writers. I am flattered that my comic writing has sometimes been compared to Woody Allen's, and one of my best-known fictional characters, Morris Zapp, was created out of that empathy. I liked the idea that this strand in my work might have a genetic origin. The Lodge family came from Huddersfield in Yorkshire, and were mostly connected with the wool trade in one way or another, as weavers, cloth dressers and millwrights. In the middle of the nineteenth century a James Lodge moved south to London, found employment as a clerk and married a servant from the West Country. One of their sons, Frederick, also a clerk, married a dressmaker and was my

great-grandfather. There was no discoverable Jewish strain in the Lodges of Yorkshire, or the spouses of James and Frederick. My grandmother's line seemed more promising, since her father's name might have been the anglicisation of a European name, but again research drew a blank. The Bushes of the nineteenth century (servants, clerks or craftsmen by occupation) and the spouses they married in Anglican churches were all English, or in one case Irish. The quest for a Jewish ancestor ended disappointingly.

I couldn't help wondering whether Dad ever discovered the circumstances of his birth, and if so, how and when. It was something that must have been known to members of the extensive Lodge and Bush families, but people in the first half of the last century were practised in concealing such secrets. Was it perhaps not until he obtained his mother's marriage certificate after her death in 1981, at the age of ninety-two, that he learned the truth; or did he not examine the document closely and so never discovered that he was nearly born out of wedlock? Certainly no hint or rumour of it ever reached me, but I was conscious that Pop was a marginalised member of our six-person, two-generation family. There wasn't the same affection in Nana's relation to him as she showed towards Dad and me, and my father's attitude to him was always cool and dismissive. He was more of an absence than a presence at our meetings and visits, generally referred to with an ironic grimace or shrug, and when he did join us, usually from the nearest pub (even on Christmas morning he would go looking for one that was open and get back only just in time for the turkey dinner), he adopted a kind of bluff, hearty mask which made intimacy impossible. He was more in his element at the larger Christmas parties of the Lodge clan in Dulwich, seated at

an upright piano with a glass of ale to hand, singing a comic song to his own vamped accompaniment. He was a music hall artiste manqué.

Marriage forced on the couple by pregnancy, and the absence of any further children (unusual in that class, at that time), suggest that the union was somewhat lacking in mutual love, and in the course of a long tape-recorded conversation with my father, late in his life, I heard for the first time a story which tended to confirm that supposition, and to explain why Pop was always treated as a quasi-delinquent member of the family, on parole as it were. When the First World War broke out, he and two of his brothers volunteered patriotically to join a local regiment, as so many did. His elder brother Ernie was awarded the Military Cross for Valour, but Pop was invalided out of the Army after a year because of a hernia. It was an unheroic discharge which probably made him an object of envy to fellow soldiers, and certainly of suspicion to civilians. ‘Coppers were always knocking on our door asking to see his papers,’ Dad recalled. Pop went to work at Woolwich Arsenal, where he met another woman, began a relationship with her and moved out of the family home for a while. Pop and Nana were eventually reconciled, but perhaps he was never really forgiven. ‘It was rather a sad time,’ was Dad’s understated memory of the episode. He also said, regretting his lack of paternal guidance in adolescence, ‘I didn’t have a proper father. My mother was the sole sustaining force in the household.’

At his elementary school Dad was evidently identified as a pupil with potential. He remembered a teacher explaining to the class the meaning of the phrase *a dark horse* and saying by way

of illustration, 'William Lodge is a dark horse.' He was interviewed for a scholarship to a grammar school, but didn't make the cut. The interviewer mocked his pronunciation of 'geography', a subject in which he had professed an interest. 'What's that – jogging the boy next to you?' the man enquired, enjoying his own joke. Dad moved to another, commercially oriented school for the last two years of his education where he learned among other things shorthand and some French. A former pupil called Fred Haydon, who had won a scholarship to the Guildhall School of Music, returned one day to play the violin to the assembled students, and imparted to my father the desire to be a musician. 'I remember thinking, *I'd like to do that.*' He began to take lessons in the violin from 'an enthusiast' who ran a local music shop, probably paid for by his mother until he left school and got a job as an office boy with an insurance company in the City for £1 a week. He could not remember whether he was fourteen or fifteen at the time. A year later he got a job as messenger with a sugar company in Mincing Lane at £2 a week. But he had no ambition to rise to a higher position in the firm, or any firm – he dreamed only of becoming a professional musician. For several years he was a 'semi-pro', working in the City by day and playing in the evenings, beginning as a violinist in the silent-film cinemas of Dulwich and environs. In one of them he encountered Fred Haydon, whose musical career had not perhaps fulfilled its promise. 'I met him in the pit. He wore glasses, glasses like beer bottles. Talk about drink. He worked in a small cinema in Rye Lane – those were silent days of course. They had a six-piece band there and he was first violin – lovely tone. But he must have killed himself with drink.' Dad's anecdotes of his professional life were invariably laced with stories

of lives and careers ruined by excessive drinking or womanising, vices of which he himself could not be accused, though he enjoyed a drink in moderation (mainly beer and sweet sherry) and had a keen appreciation of female beauty.

That a small cinema in south London could afford to employ a six-piece band gives some indication of the meagre rate of pay for musicians in the 1920s, but it was more than Dad could earn from his low-level position in the City, and as soon as possible he 'gave up the day-job' (a phrase which I heard at home long before it entered into common parlance). Apart from playing in cinemas, 'gigs' – one-off engagements for dance bands – were the main employment opportunity, and in the Jazz Age instruments such as the saxophone and clarinet were more in demand than strings. When silent films gave way to talkies in the next decade, skilled violinists were often reduced to playing in the street. My father, who responded enthusiastically to the rhythms of jazz like most of his generation, adjusted early to this trend, learning to play a borrowed tenor saxophone when he was still in his teens, and later acquiring an alto sax and clarinet. He took lessons, but in an incomplete, unsystematic way. He never really learned how to read music expertly, and could be embarrassed when faced by a difficult, unfamiliar score. He relied on his natural instinctive ability, a good memory for tunes, and his 'tone'. He was always admired for his tone on all his instruments. With these attributes he got a steady job playing at a nightclub called the 43 Club whose proprietor was eventually sent to prison for selling liquor illegally, and another later run by her daughter called the Silver Slipper, a venue favoured by the Bright Young Things, including Evelyn Waugh. 'But I wasted the opportunity to improve my technique.

I was a bloody fool. I had the tone but not the technique. I did my practice but it was the wrong kind of practice. I should have studied the practical, technical side, not the flamboyant, emotional side of playing, which I was very good at. I could play the violin like a concert platform player, but I couldn't play the music! A lot of it I couldn't read. I never had a musical education of any kind.' Then with a characteristic swerve away from despondency he added, 'But would I have been better off?' He was probably remembering those stories of concert violinists playing in the street. Perhaps because his instrumental ability had its limits, he began also to exploit his talent as a singer, which he inherited from my grandmother, who had a lovely, pure soprano voice with which she would delight those large Christmas gatherings in Dulwich even in her sixties. Dad himself had a high, light tenor voice of the kind one often hears on scratchy recordings of popular music in the thirties, and towards the end of that decade he began a promising career as a singer on the radio, which was cut short when he joined the Royal Air Force in 1940. But long before that, at some point in the 1920s, when he was working as a professional musician and still living at home, Dad met at his local tennis club a young woman who satisfied his exacting standard of good looks. Her name was Rosalie Mary Murphy, and in due course they got engaged. Her family was very different from his: half Irish, half Belgian, and Roman Catholic.

I have no memory of my maternal grandparents, since they died at the beginning and end of the same year, 1936, when I was only one year old. My mother's father was Tom Murphy, the son of an immigrant from Cork. On my mother's birth certificate (she was

born on 11th May 1903) his profession is given as ‘corn sampler’. Subsequently he became the licensee of a public house in the dockland district of Rotherhithe, and later of the Imperial Hotel in Southwark Street, near London Bridge, one of which establishments was popular with well-known boxers and their entourages. Tom Murphy was by all accounts well fitted to be a pub landlord – charming, witty and much liked by all who knew him; but he was a gambler, and a less reliable tradition suggested that he was for a time involved in smuggling tobacco.

My maternal grandmother was called Adèle Goddaert. Her parents had emigrated from Lille in Belgium in the early 1860s and ran a grocery shop in the Docklands on the south side of the Thames, where Adèle, the younger of their two daughters, was born in 1865. I possess a remarkable group photograph of the wedding of Tom and Adèle which took place around the turn of the century, when both of them would have been in their early thirties. The bridal couple are posed in a garden or yard with trellised walls, surrounded by some twenty relatives and guests whose smart clothes, especially the ladies’ elaborately trimmed hats and gowns, suggest they enjoyed a comfortable standard of living above that of the contemporaneous Lodges and Bushes. Tom, in a morning suit, is tallish, slim, good-looking, with a wide, tapered moustache, and stands with his long legs apart, gazing quizzically into the camera. Adèle beside him, in a long white dress and holding a large bouquet, has a smooth oval face, a shapely figure, dark eyes and a slightly anxious expression. The sun is shining on the group but no one is smiling, perhaps a consequence of the long exposure time required for outdoor photography at that time.

On the whole my mother seemed to have happy memories of her childhood, when the family lived over the pubs Tom Murphy was managing, and the children derived some interest and excitement from the social buzz that goes with such a business. Tom prospered sufficiently to send his three children to private day schools – my mother and her sister Eileen to a Sacred Heart Convent school in (I think) Bermondsey, and their brother John to St Joseph’s Academy, Blackheath, where I would in due course be a pupil myself. At some point, however, probably in the late 1920s, Tom Murphy lost a great deal of money through gambling and he retired from pub management to live on what was left, with some help from his daughters. Adèle became depressed and, I was told in adult life, attempted suicide once. The general narrative of the family which I imbibed from my mother and aunt over the years was one of prosperity followed by decline into genteel poverty. They were a cut above my father’s family on the social scale – the most obvious index of this being their speech: my father could adjust his accent adroitly to the company he was in, but his natural speech had a perceptible cockney flavour, whereas the Murphys had been brought up and educated to ‘speak nicely’, and my aunt Eileen in particular prided herself on her elocution. I suspect that she and John always felt that their sister had, in the old-fashioned phrase, married beneath her; but Dad was innately more gifted than any of the Murphys, and I owe most of my creative genes to him.

To judge from their parents’ wedding photograph, my mother ‘took after’ her mother, and Eileen and John after their father. Rosalie (whom my father nicknamed ‘Pat’) had Adèle’s womanly figure and soft, symmetrical features, whereas both Eileen and

John had Tom's lean frame and sharply modelled nose and chin. Temperamentally I suspect they followed the same parental patterns. My mother was intelligent but unassertive. She trained to be a shorthand typist and had a secretarial job which made a valuable contribution to the family budget until she married, and did part-time clerical work later, but she was content to be primarily a housewife and mother. Eileen also worked as a secretary, but she was more ambitious than her sister, and had the personality and social poise to become her boss's personal assistant. When my mother left home Eileen became responsible for looking after the parents in their sad old age, and had to suspend her career for a while – a source, understandably, of some discontent on her part. John was no help to her in this situation. He was always described to me by his sisters as being an unruly and unreliable sibling, given to teasing and annoying them in childhood, and a constant worry to his parents when grown up because of his inability to settle into a career or hold a job. He was, however, admitted to be highly entertaining in company, and I found him so when I encountered him in childhood and afterwards. He had a gift for clowning when the mood was on him, and possessed a repertoire of extremely funny walks long before Monty Python invented a Ministry for them – in fact, he looked not unlike John Cleese. When swimming in the sea he would entertain family members sitting on the beach by slipping off his trunks and hoisting them like a flag on the end of one elevated foot. Eventually he joined the Royal Air Force, which seemed to suit him. He flew as navigator and wireless operator in biplanes in India before the Second World War, and trained younger airmen during it. The war changed the direction of his life and Eileen's

in unexpected ways that would in due course significantly broaden my own experience.

Dad recalled that he was in no great hurry to get married: 'You know me – "put it off, put it off". I was more interested in getting into a gig network. I remember one day Pat gave me an ultimatum. "When are we going to get married? Mum and Dad want to know." I had to agree on a date then and there.' It was 17th December 1932. According to the marriage certificate, the wedding was 'solemnised' at the Catholic church on Lordship Lane, Dulwich, but it would not have been a nuptial mass because Dad was a 'non-Catholic', as the Roman Catholic Church designated all Christians who had not been baptised into it. It frowned on 'mixed marriages' and actively discouraged them. The Catholic party had to obtain a dispensation to marry a non-Catholic, who was required to attend a series of instructions in the Catholic faith, and to promise formally that any children of the marriage would be brought up as Catholics. These regulations are still in force today, but applied in a more welcoming fashion. My father would have received a basic Christian education from his elementary school and the Sunday School he attended for a time, but Pop and Nana were not churchgoers, and neither was he. In adult life he professed a vague belief in God, and respected the Catholic religion, but showed no inclination to join it. My mother was a dutiful but not devout Catholic. She taught me Catholic prayers, took me to mass every Sunday, and placed me in Catholic schools, but she never got involved in parochial life. In consequence my Catholicism was almost entirely shaped by education. The ambience of home was essentially secular – there were no crucifixes, plaster statues

or holy pictures on the walls and shelves. The fact that I was an only child also made me an untypical Catholic.

In the course of his instructions Dad would have been told that the Catholic Church forbade the use of artificial contraception, though moral theologians conceded that the Catholic partner could submit to it if to refuse would endanger the marriage. Catholics, especially Catholic women, who married non-Catholics were often meanly suspected by their co-religionists of seeking such partners deliberately as a way of planning their families without guilt. I have no reason to suppose that was part of Dad's attraction for my mother, but the fact that I was born two years after they married, and that she was not pregnant again until 1939 (she lost the child through a miscarriage), suggests that my father took care of birth control.

In 1936, when I was about one and a half, they bought a small house, with a mortgage of course, which apart from interruptions in wartime would be their home until they died, and mine until I married. It was in Brockley, a few miles east of Dulwich in the Borough of Deptford, where the first range of hills rises from the London plain south of the Thames. Its principal park is called Hilly Fields, and from another park, spread over the top of Telegraph Hill, on a fine day there is a panoramic view of London as far as the landmark buildings on the north bank of the Thames and beyond. Brockley was developed as a residential suburb in the course of the nineteenth century with a wide range of housing, from enormous villas and substantial town houses to humble terraced cottages. After the First World War the larger properties were increasingly divided into smaller units, as their owners migrated to newer, leafier suburbs, and the demographic became

predominantly lower-middle and working class, a process that continued after the second war with a growing immigrant element. Although the Southern Railway gave fast direct access from Brockley to London Bridge, its cultural and socio-economic development was hampered, like most of south-east London, by the lack of Tube connections: the only line terminated at New Cross or New Cross Gate, and its trains shuttled back and forth through the Docklands only as far as Whitechapel. When I was growing up there after the Second World War Brockley was a declining, unfashionable suburb, though I did not perceive it as such. After I ceased to live there in 1959, as Goldsmiths College in New Cross grew in size and status it began to attract more sophisticated residents – teachers, artists, actors – and lately it has become almost trendy.

The house my parents moved to was a new one – in fact they bought it ‘off plan’, while the street to which it belonged was still under construction. Millmark Grove was something of an anomaly in its late Victorian architectural setting: just under a hundred houses with red-tiled roofs, timbered gables, casement windows and pebble-dashed facades, resembling millions of homes built in England between the wars, but terraced, not semi-detached, in order to squeeze as many units as possible on to a sliver of land situated between a deep railway cutting and a main road that ran along the backs of grey, grimy Victorian terraced houses from Brockley Cross to New Cross. The new street bent sharply at one end to join the main road, thus creating gaps for side passages between a few houses, of which ours, number 81, was one. This was a great convenience – it meant that dustbins could be emptied by the garbage collectors, coal and coke delivered, and bicycles

stored in the back garden, without having to be carried through the house – but at the cost of having a smaller back garden than those further up the street. The fence at the end of our garden was no more than a dozen paces from the back of the house. But you couldn't see anything over it or be seen, because the houses and gardens were built on raised foundations and landfill some twenty feet deep, and this, helped by the rambling roses my father grew on trellises between us and our neighbours, created a degree of privacy.

The street was named after the developer and his wife, Mark and Milly. The designation 'Grove', weakly justified by the flowering cherry trees planted at intervals in the pavement, was no doubt meant to signify that it was a cut above the drab surrounding streets. But it was successful inasmuch as most of the owner-occupiers took a pride in their houses, and kept them well maintained, regularly repainting the woodwork, often in two colours. Every house had a tiny front garden, usually with a neatly trimmed privet hedge behind the low boundary wall, a patch of grass or crazy paving, and perhaps a flower bed and shrubs. As a child and youth I always felt when I turned into our street that it looked cleaner, brighter and more inviting than its environs. It still has that character, though the cars parked nose to tail at the kerbs on both sides make it seem less of a tranquil backwater. Dad was one of the first residents to own a car, but he chose the site initially because all-night trams ran to Brockley from central London, allowing him to get home from nightclubs and similar venues in the West End in the small hours with his bulky instrument cases. These cases were objects of fascination to me as I grew up: drab and scuffed on the outside, they opened up to reveal moulded

recesses lined with richly coloured velvet in which the gold-coloured alto and silver tenor saxophones safely nestled.

One of the things which drew me to write about the life and work of H.G. Wells was his consuming interest in domestic architecture, and his conviction that people's health, happiness and behaviour are crucially affected by good or bad design in their habitat. So I will describe my parental home, and other spaces in which I subsequently lived, in some detail. Internally the houses in Millmark Grove were built to the pattern of most small new homes of the period: a short hallway, giving access to a sitting room at the front of the house, and a dining room and kitchen at the rear; a flight of stairs leading to two bedrooms, front and back, a 'spare room' at the front that could accommodate a cot or small bed, and a bathroom and separate lavatory at the back. Because we had a side alley, there was a window at the angle of the stairs which shed welcome light on the small landing, and the telephone, essential tool of Dad's trade, rested on the window ledge next to his diary and thumb-indexed notebook of musicians' phone numbers. All but one of the rooms were meanly proportioned, and the two most-used rooms were least adequate for their purposes, though I did not really register these facts until long after I had left home and formed higher expectations of domestic comfort and convenience.

The largest and most attractive room was on the ground floor at the front, which we referred to as 'the lounge' or sometimes simply 'the front room'. It was about fourteen feet square, with a shallow bay window, a rather handsome fireplace with deep purple ceramic tiling and a black lacquered mantelpiece, with bookshelves

and display cases to each side. It contained a comfortably upholstered three-piece suite which took up much of the floor space, and in my childhood an elegant HMV cabinet gramophone, with a wind-up handle on the side, and a pair of doors on the front. These opened to reveal a kind of wide-mouthed tunnel that tapered and curved as it descended to the inscrutable source of sound, intriguing me much as it did the white fox terrier hearing His Master's Voice in the famous painting adopted by the manufacturer as its trademark. And there was one genuine antique in the room, probably of the French belle époque, which my mother had inherited from hers. A narrow rectangular table made of polished, richly inlaid wood, with legs on wheels splaying out from an elaborately carved central column, it seemed purely ornamental, but its top swivelled and unfolded on hinges to make a card table lined with red felt. It was seldom used for that purpose, and the room itself was seldom used, being reserved for special occasions like Christmas or visits from relatives and friends, and occasionally for listening to records on the gramophone. The dining room, about twelve feet square, was actually our living room, where we not only ate, but also relaxed, sat round a coal or electric fire in the hearth, read, wrote letters at the bureau desk in one corner, listened to the radio, and in due course watched television. It contained an oak sideboard, a small dining table with extendable leaves and upright chairs, and a couple of small easy chairs, so to get from the door to the French windows required something like a ballroom dancer's nimble shuffle. The kitchen was even more crowded and cramped, not more than six feet wide, and accommodated a coke-fired boiler for hot water as well as sink, draining board, electric cooker, larder and wall-mounted

storage cupboards. Somehow a small table and chair were squeezed in under one of the cupboards, where we took breakfast individually at different times. It was not surprising that one day in this congested space, when I was about two, the contents of a saucepan of boiling milk on the hob of the electric cooker was accidentally tipped on to my foot, and I bear the scar of the consequent blister under my ankle bone to this day.

Number 81 Millmark Grove no doubt seemed a bright, attractively modern home to the young couple when they took possession in 1936, contrasting favourably with the rented flat, carved out of some older house in East Dulwich, from which they had moved – and as a first step on the property ladder it was not a bad choice. But for reasons of history and personal character they never moved to a more commodious house, nor did they significantly improve or modernise the one they stayed in. This I find very sad to contemplate, especially as it affected the life of my mother.