

A Haddington Boyhood

Although I admire Robert Burns very much, by far my favourite poet is William Wordsworth, and the poem to which I turn most often is the ode on *Intimations of Mortality*. As I read the words "the thought of our past years in me doth breed perpetual benedictions" and the lines which follow, my mind always calls up to memory the three years of childhood which I spent in my hometown of Haddington, when my brother and I came to know every inch of the River Tyne between Clerkington and Amisfield Park.

I have no clear recollection of what we did during those miserable winters but from April onwards we fished, we persecuted the eels in the Poldrate Mill lade, we hunted for moorhen's eggs and, as the river warmed up, we dog paddled in the stretch of water known as the Cram, where generations of Haddington boys had learned how to swim. Near the foot-bridge on the south bank of the river, we discovered a partly submerged clay deposit and there we modelled primitive figures. When we tired of that we headed upstream where we made a rope swing upon which we would launch ourselves from the high bank clear across the river.

Within the Clerkington estate there was a partly ruined bridge and we would swing across the remaining iron work, hand over hand. The gamekeeper knew us but we were unafraid of him because he was an old man, spared war service, and we could easily outrun him. Once when he nearly caught us carrying home a moorhen's nest with a dozen eggs, he shot his twelve-bore above our heads which only made us run faster. Our poor mother with two baby girls to look after knew very little of what we got up to, but was kept busy mending our socks and sewing up the tears in our trousers.

Across the ancient bridge lay the Nungate, the mediaeval quarter of Haddington. Bitter fights took place at school between Nungate boys and the town boys and occasionally we would gather in large numbers on the Haugh and menace each other with sticks and catapults.

On VE day we had a temporary end to hostilities and boys from all over the town built a huge bonfire by the river. It did not surprise me then, but it astonishes me now to recall that the shops produced fireworks - bangers and crackers - so that throughout the day the streets resounded with the celebratory explosions and our nostrils were filled with the exciting smell of gunpowder, a smell which even now reminds me of our victory celebrations.

Our family left Haddington in 1946 and I did not come back - except as an occasional visitor - until nearly 50 years later. Now I walk the banks of the Tyne somewhat arthritically, but I still have accurate memories of everything I discovered as a small boy - the stones under which loaches and caddie-flies may be found, the small spring where the bigger trout lurk and the quiet places where the moorhens nest,

My Scottish home is at Tynninghame, six miles downstream from Haddington, and I often enjoy walks by that tranquil and picturesque Trust property, Preston Mill, with its red pantiled buildings and the charming mill pond which is home to ducks and geese. There has been a mill on this site for centuries - the River Tyne at this point is subject to occasional flooding and it is interesting to see the marks on the outside wall showing the dates and depths of the floods. A pleasant short walk away is Phantassie Doocot which once housed 500 birds for winter meat supplies.

In Haddington the Nungate is now a small and decorous suburb; the east nave of the great church of St Mary's is restored and my hometown retains some of its historic role as a Royal Burgh and market. I was lucky to spend my formative years here, and luckier still to come home to this prospect of river, haugh and collegiate church in East Lothian, which is and always will be, my favourite place.

Sir Alistair Grant

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