

Martha Harris: a biography

by Meg Harris Williams with the help of Nancy Holt

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Mattie with her sisters Peggy and Nancy at Nether Grae

Martha Harris was born Martha Gemmell Dunlop on the 13th April 1919 at her parents' farm, Nether Grae, at Beith in Ayrshire. She was the first child of Gabriel Dunlop and Margaret McLure, who then had three more children in rapid succession, two girls and a boy: Agnes (Nancy), Margaret (Peggy) and John (Jack). The McLures were of the Clan McLeod, and intermarried with the Howies, who were of Huguenot descent; centuries earlier they had established a haven from religious persecution in the moorland farm of Loch Goin, in north-east Ayrshire. Margaret McLure was the fifth in a family of ten children, all born neatly two years apart. Their father, Mazzini, a stonemason, had been named in honour of the Italian revolutionary, and he himself had partisan opinions of a somewhat eccentric nature. Thus, after quarrelling with the minister over a point of theology, he never entered the church again, and it was left to his wife Martha to shepherd the children over Bygholm hill to the church on Sundays from their home at Mill o' Beith. It was also Martha who ran the smallholding and drove the trap into town to sell their produce. Unlike her husband who was fierce and bigoted, she was

calm and strong. One child, a boy also named Mazzini, died in infancy, and Lizzie, a young girl who had been brought in to help look after him, stayed on and was adopted by the family. The young McLures all grew up independent-minded; four members emigrated to Canada, and one to South Africa, retaining nonetheless a strong sense of family identity. Three of the elder girls Jean, Martha and Margaret, beautiful and always strikingly dressed, were much admired and were known as 'Mazzini's lasses'. Mazzini ruled there was to be no cardplaying in the home, and the boys were allowed dancing lessons but not the girls. His wife, for her part, said it was allowable for him to hit the boys but never the girls. Mazzini died aged 40, from a lung disease associated probably with his trade: only re-entering the church 'feet first' as he had vowed. At this point Margaret, then 20, became the mainstay of her family through the thriving tailoring company she ran in Beith, which employed six apprentices. (Other members of the family were either still children or had emigrated.) They moved nearer the town, to Townhead.

Margaret was 30 before she responded to Gabriel's persistent suit and agreed to marry. She was a better-known figure in the town than her husband, who was disconcerted to discover that he was referred to as 'Maggie McLure's husband', especially since from an early age he had been accustomed to being the person in charge. His own father died when he was nine and he was trained in agriculture by his uncle. By age 16 Gabriel was running his own farm, meanwhile looking after his mother, invalid sister and younger brother (both of whom also died young, of tuberculosis and diabetes respectively – shortly before the general availability of insulin). Gabriel was a man of quiet authority, far from loquacious, who expected to be obeyed in his own house; yet despite strongly held opinions was never tyrannical. He had the unusual quality of allowing his point of view to become modified by reality – and by his sister-in-law Catherine, who a few years later came to live with the family, and whose opinions were equally strong but frequently opposed to his own. It was his custom to keep a rolled-up copy of the *Glasgow Herald* by his side during dinner, to deliver a bop on the head to anyone who misbehaved. My mother described him as 'a good man' – her highest expression of praise.

Ten months after their marriage Martha – always known as Mattie – was born, and proved not an easy baby to manage. She refused to stay asleep at night, so her father fastened a string to the cradle so that he could rock it from his bed when she woke up. It wasn't long before a young girl was brought into the household whose sole task was to carry the baby around while her mother was busy with the full-time work of the farm and dairy. Mattie's particular brand of idealism is illustrated by an incident that all the family consider characteristic, and which occurred when she was one and a half (about the time her sister Nancy was born). Mattie was carried outside to look at the moon, which she immediately named 'Daddy's tick-tock'. When she discovered that she was not able to have it, she burst into inconsolable wailing. A friend of her parents, listening from the house, said, 'Why don't you just

give the bairn what she wants?’ to which they replied, ‘We can’t – she is asking for the moon!’ For years after the death of her father, Mattie wore his gold watchchain in the form of a necklace; it symbolised for her the kind of internal link with objects that Milton intuited in his poetic image:

And fast by hanging in a golden chain
This pendent world, in bigness as a star
Of smallest magnitude close by the moon. (*Paradise Lost*, II. 1051-53)

When she was a little older Mattie pestered her parents to be allowed one evening to be allowed to stay up after her usual bedtime of 7 o’clock, utterly convinced that there must be magic in the air after this time. She was exceedingly disillusioned when finally this request was granted and she discovered that the mysteries of the universe were not after all revealed.

Mattie did not appear openly jealous of her sisters, whom she frequently led into mischief; though she did seem jealous of her brother, whose birth – unlike that of the girls – was announced in the newspapers because he was a boy. (A farm, as a business, depended on having boys in the family.) After Jack’s birth their mother fell into a prolonged severe depression. It was at that point that Catherine, the youngest McLure sister, came to live with the family and from then on the children in effect had two mothers. Mattie described the family dynamics with her Jane-Austen type aunt in one of her newspaper articles about family relationships:

In one family I know, the mother’s health was seriously damaged after the birth of a fifth child when the eldest was barely six years old. For the next fifteen years she had bouts of depression and physical illness which made her an unpredictable support for the family. Although she was fundamentally upheld by her husband, he had to work long hours to keep them going and had relatively little time to spare for the children in their early years. The mother’s unmarried younger sister, who worked in a neighbouring town, came to spend nearly every weekend with the family, and took a great interest in the growth and upbringing of each of the children. In time they began to regard their aunt as a second mother, and one to whom it was safer to bring confessions of misdeeds and worries which would have been too much for their real mother to bear.

It was the kind of situation where the aunt might well have alienated the family’s affections if she had been disposed to triumph, to compensate for her unmarried state and less obvious attractions, by stealing her sister’s children from her. The bond between the two sisters, despite some inevitable degree of rivalry and jealousy, was nevertheless one of essential love and respect. It was rooted in common appreciation for their own parents. The aunt not only helped the children with their own problems, but also to take a more sympathetic and tolerant view when they felt that their mother had failed them by collapsing when they most needed her.

‘The Family Circle’, *New Society*, June 1967; reprinted in *The Tavistock Model: papers of Martha Harris and Esther Bick*, (2011)

Aunt Cathy could type and had been working in an office in Glasgow; she had very decided views about the independence of women, saying she would have liked to have been a suffragette, and described herself as ‘a suffragette in spirit’. She was much courted in her youth, but in her own words, was ‘chary of marriage’, and was in any case, before long, irrevocably attached to the Dunlop family. Later she explained that she was not by nature someone who doted on babies, but she stayed with the family because the children were ‘so interesting’. As Mattie grew older she sometimes took on a reciprocal role as confidante for her aunt, as is suggested by this description in the ‘Family Circle’ article (representing herself characteristically as a teenage boy):

To one of the boys in his adolescence the aunt confided that she had found it easier to bear their worries than if she had actually been their mother, responsible for bringing them into the world in the first place. She felt very secure in her capacity to earn her living; she was very sympathetic to her sister (who in her own childhood had been something of a second mother to her); she had felt unable to leave her in the lurch with five small children, inadequate help and little money. She said that she herself had had the chance of marrying and had been tempted. But by that time she realized that her nieces and nephews had grown dearer to her than the man who wanted to marry her and she hardly thought it fair to him. She added that her nephews and nieces must never be bound by guilt towards her, for had she indeed cared more for her friend she would surely have placed them second and married him. (‘The Family Circle’, 1967)

By the time Cathy joined them, the Dunlops had moved from their original rented farm at Nether Grae to one at Lugtonridge, which although rather less profitable was owned by Gabriel Dunlop. The Lugton Burn ran alongside and there was constant worry that the children might fall in. One day when the river was in spate in the spring, Mattie led the other children across it on top of the wobbly storm-gates, placed there to catch debris. Another time the adults were struck with panic when Peggy, aged two, wandered in and announced dreamily that ‘Nancy was in the river and sinking fast’. It was said of the three girls that Peggy just didn’t know when to stop; Nancy knew when to stop and did; Mattie knew when to stop but wouldn’t.

The children were taught that to be discourteous to a guest was the gravest crime. On occasion, before going out to tea, they were lined up and plied with bread and butter lest they could not control their greed in another house. Contrary to contemporary custom, they were rarely smacked, apart from the taps with the newspaper or an occasional spontaneous brief skelping:

Someone once amended the self-righteous Victorian recommendation ‘Never hit a child in cold blood’ to ‘Never hit a child except in hot blood’
(*Your Teenager*, 1969; 2007, p. 257)

And the children rarely came to blows themselves. Their inventiveness was put to work to find other modes of venting their exasperation: thus they would hiss, ‘I’ll scream in your ear!’, or Mattie would make the pigs squeal, by chasing them with her hands on their backs – a noise that got on her sisters’ nerves. The children were given tasks on the farm as soon as they could manage them. Taking tea out to the harvesters was one of these; and in warm weather, when she was thirsty, Mattie would stop in the field on the way and milk a cow for a drink.

Mattie’s most obstinate exploits however were probably verbal ones. She had always been precocious in her speech and learned very early to argue relentlessly. After a heated debate in adolescence about the King and Mrs Simpson, she was told: ‘You’d argue all night that a black crow was white!’ to which she replied ‘Yes, and before dawn, I would prove it too!’ One day when she was small, Mattie was rebuked for demanding of a visitor who always brought them sweets, ‘What have you got for us?’ ‘You mustn’t *ask*’, she was told. So next time he came, she twisted the formula into one which she thought would appear acceptable: ‘I’m no *asking*, Tam, I’m no *asking*!’ Despite the requirements of obedience, she was determined to find a channel for getting her message across.

Yet outside the home she adhered strictly to her father’s precepts. From the age of six, she was entrusted with escorting Nancy every day along the two-mile walk to school and back again. Coming home one rainy afternoon, a friend of their father passed by in a car and offered them a lift. But she had been told never to accept lifts, so they struggled on in the torrential rain.

My mother’s memories of starting school have been recounted, faintly disguised, in her book *Thinking about Infants and Young Children*, when she and her best friend were taken to school for the first time by their mothers and they heard the disturbing sound of the Lord’s Prayer being chanted in assembly. Her mother tried to reassure her by saying they were ‘talking to the teacher’, but the child thought, ‘I’d never heard anyone talking like that before and I had a vague feeling of something extraordinary going on.’ Then she noticed her mother was ‘shaking slightly, all upset’, so she started to howl and said she wanted to go home:

My mother and father must have talked about it that night because the next morning Father announced that he would take us both to school that day and our mothers would come to fetch us when school was over. I looked at his face and knew better than to protest. He handed us over to our teacher without a murmur from either of us and as far as I remember that whole day seemed strangely eventful and interesting. It never seemed to occur to me to start crying for my mother. From then on I liked school a lot.

(*Thinking about Infants*, 1969; 2011, p. 84)

Another story from this period of early childhood may be found in the same book, in the form of a six-year old’s fantasy about her night-time parents. It was

Christmas time and Mattie was thinking with ‘a kind of awe’ of Santa Claus coming with his sledge from the frozen north, and also of the Snow Queen who stole Gerda from little Kay – a story that she had recently been told by her mother, who was expecting her next baby imminently. Mattie did not manage to explain her disappointment with the doll she had received for Christmas (for not being a real baby), and this seemed to end her fantasy of a fairytale romance with her mother:

My father came, all concerned to find out what was the matter with me. I couldn't explain, but he kept on asking me and finally, just to stop him asking, I told him that my big cousin hit me, which wasn't true. (p. 97)

The following Christmas morning – with her baby brother now solidly established on terra firma – Mattie was discovered bumping about downstairs where the children had hung their stockings:

This woke my father and mother. I told them I'd come downstairs to see whether Santa Claus really did exist. They laughed at each other and said, ‘How like her!’ – then became rather irritated and said, ‘Now don't you go and spoil it for the others – give them time to find out for themselves.’ But I couldn't keep the secret. I took both my sisters aside that Christmas Day and whispered to them that there was no Father Christmas. My little sister, who must have been three at the time, didn't register I remember her sucking her thumb and looking at me stolidly as if she knew much better. My five-year-old sister evidently pondered on it and went to ask my mother, later in the day, if it was true. My mother was annoyed with me and I felt obscurely guilty, as if I had spoiled Christmas Day for everybody. In some kind of way it was the end of my childhood, at least one period of childhood.

In a way it was the end of the child who had cried for the moon, for Daddy's tick-tock. In one sense those shadowy figures from the eternal world, Father Christmas and the Snow Queen, became ‘only Father and Mother’. In another sense they were relegated to some mysterious place amongst the blue hills and lochs of the north from which she was soon to be weaned away, but which remained firmly established in her imagination as her personal vision of ‘that immortal sea/ Which brought us hither’ (Wordsworth, *Immortality Ode*). From childhood on, she said, she felt that whoever looked at her intently would see the hills in her eyes.

For when she was eight years old, in 1927, what was probably the most dramatic event of her life occurred: the family left Scotland, to stand – like Keats's Ruth, in a passage which Aunt Cathy cited to describe the move – ‘in tears amid the alien corn’ (*Ode to a Nightingale*). My mother told me that the book which captured most poignantly the quality of her life in Scotland was Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (the first part of his *Scots Quair*) – a book which, incidentally, Aunt Cathy considered very unsuitable reading for the girls, and was hor-

rified when Mattie recommended it to Peggy. My mother, however, quoted with approval Hugh MacDiarmid's judgement that it was 'the best thing that ever came out of Scotland'. The move south seemed to colour my mother's perception of things for ever afterwards: wherever she was, was always in a sense temporary, until eventually she would return to Scotland, even if this were to take the form of a spiritual rather than an actual journey. All her life she had a great sympathy and fellow-feeling for exiles. And she was devastated at the time by the prospect of abandoning her namesake and best friend from infancy, Martha McBride. But in the words of the tract *A Psychoanalytical Model of the Child-in-the-Family-in-the-Community* (written with Donald Meltzer in 1976):

The 'couple' family is felt to be mobile potentially, even though it may be tenderly attached to the home or landscape or community of friends and neighbours. If opportunity glows on the horizon, a pioneer atmosphere begins to scintillate, akin in feeling to the times when the mother is pregnant.

(reprinted in *Your Teenager*, 2007, p. 257)

(The 'couple' family, one of various types of family groupings described in the *Model*, moves under the benign but not soft aegis of a mother-and-father 'combined object': something that denotes a mental constellation and atmosphere that encourages development, not a literal matter of whether a family has one, two or more parent-figures.)

At that time there were special incentives for Scottish farmers to come to southern England to improve the backward dairy industry. So after the death of his mother, Gabriel Dunlop made a journey of reconnaissance and leased Withy Pitts Farm at Turner's Hill in Sussex. He was a pioneer, like others of his neighbours. Despite the heartfelt protestations of the rest of the family, in May 1928 they made the nightmare journey south by train, dismal and sick, and early next morning packed themselves and their belongings into two taxis at Euston station. At this point, Mattie perked up at the prospect of driving through London, and started to demand unceasingly, 'Is this Buckingham Palace? ... Is this Buckingham Palace?' Needless to say, here were inevitable grounds for an archetypal encounter with disappointment. So that when they eventually passed in front of it: '*That* is Buckingham Palace!', she could only respond in a tone of ultimate disillusionment, 'Oh'. For the rest of the journey she did not say a word. With that 'oh' she felt she had exchanged innocence for experience.

At first the children, like their mother, were very miserable at Turner's Hill. They found themselves in a more primitive, semi-feudal society where the village school had no ambition beyond turning out farm labourers and domestic servants, and where in effect the Dunlops were foreigners, barely speaking the same language as the natives. Mattie was too depressed to shepherd the other children

around as she had always done in the past. It was left to Nancy, then age six, to defend the flock against the yokels of Sussex, which she managed fairly effectively by taking off her double-breasted overcoat, which had large saucer-like buttons, and swinging it about her head so that the buttons left the enemy battered and bruised. The children were frequently ill. Mattie began to grow tall at an alarming rate, which she converted into another weapon to use against the foreigners, in particular against the headmaster of the village school, since she became subject to fainting fits and knew that she had only to close her eyes and she would faint. The rule at school assembly was to stand completely still with eyes shut. But eventually, after carrying her out over his shoulder once too often, the headmaster exempted her from restraint and allowed her to fidget as much as she pleased. As for Sunday school, she argued herself out of it, while Jack achieved the same goal by arranging to be expelled. Later when Peggy complained that she had to go to church and Mattie didn't, she was told that this was because Mattie knew her Bible from cover to cover.

After the initial period of transition to their new surroundings, when the family became firmly established in the community and closely linked with some other Scottish immigrant families in the area, the later childhood and adolescence of the Dunlop children became an exuberantly happy time, in which the usual rawness and angst was played out in a containing framework of busy activity and comradeship. Each member of the family had his appointed tasks in the house and on the farm:

Such an expectation is paying respect due to [the child] as an individual who is valued for what he is able to do at whatever particular stage of development he has reached. 'To each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities.'

(Your Teenager 2007, p, 115)

Unlike the others Mattie tended not to have pets, although she always wanted a pony and never had her own; she preferred her animals to be either wild or working. (And perhaps it was the same with human beings.) The children used to jump into an old pony trap lying around in the yard and push it down the slope to see how far it would go; Mattie always gave it the final shove before jumping in herself. She was also a great tree-climber and cyclist. She loved singing and dancing, especially the airs and reels of her native Scotland, and would persuade Peggy to play the melodeon or piano while they sang, or organize carol-singing expeditions at Christmas. When a mother herself, she organized us into playing the recorder and singing to while away long car journeys. She used folksongs as lullabies, and she always treasured the fantasy of learning 'a little instrument' herself. And from

early on she was a voracious reader, devouring any scrap of print that crossed her field of vision: sometimes – she said – as a form of escapism; at other times, penetrating her mind ‘like wine through water’ – to use a favourite metaphor of hers taken from *Wuthering Heights*, which she read aged eight, propped up near the stove whilst she was stirring the porridge for family breakfast.

Withy Pitts Farm became a centre of attraction for young people who came and stayed with the family. They were allowed to wander for hours in the woods of neighbouring Balcombe Forest, playing and debating, and unhindered by contemporary notions of what it was proper for young ladies and gentlemen to be doing together, since the adults saw that it was not necessary to curtail any of their activities through imposing moral strictures. Mattie imbibed not opinions, but values, from her three parents. As she wrote herself:

Playing with ideas is as important to [the adolescent] as free imaginative play is to the three- to six- or seven-year-old. (*Your Teenager*, p. 100)

We may hold broad and generous views meanly, and stern opinions with tolerance. (p. 154)

They were a family in which stern opinions were held with tolerance, as distinct from bohemian liberalism. Despite the strictness of the domestic rules about manners and appearance, their father was enlightened regarding their need for freedom to explore friendships with the opposite sex. He would say something like, ‘And who is this young man coming to visit?’, while puffing away at his pipe, to which the girls would reply ‘Oh, nobody in *particular*, Daddy’ – particularity being lost amidst three girls of nearly the same age. The girls shared dresses and jewellery, and had to fight for indoor privacy where none of them had a room of her own. Their mother made or superintended the making of their clothes with her usual fine dressmaking taste, so they were well and often slightly unusually dressed, although in individual terms their wardrobes were small.

Mattie was renowned for dreaminess, untidiness, and lateness – frequently holding up the school bus, or even occasionally taking the wrong one. Perhaps there was also an element of rebellion against the impeccable standards of her mother, of whom Aunt Cathy said that ‘When Grandma made something, it was as neat inside as out.’ Once when Mattie was heard to use a swear-word, she was made to wash out her mouth with soap and water; and though she never swore audibly again, she still refused to be neat inside and out. It was characteristic of her that on the day of her first ball, she broke a front tooth playing hockey, but nonetheless went to the dance with half a tooth missing and a red swollen nose. She was not above subterfuge. When she and Peggy were forbidden for a while to

go to the swimming baths because their mother said they were spending too much time in the water, they used to throw their swimming costumes out of the front window each morning, then say their goodbyes and leave for school from the back door, retrieving the costumes from the front lawn as they went.

At age eleven, Mattie (and later the others) went to the county grammar school at East Grinstead which had only opened the previous year. Throughout her time there she was engaged, probably without realizing it, in a kind of unilateral conflict with the headmaster, since for practical purposes she ran the place, being captain of all the sports teams, organizing most of the school clubs and finally becoming Head Girl. She was very popular because she never treated anybody with condescension, nor did she create any sense of elitism. Out of school her hockey stick was a constant companion, and once she used it to severely wop somebody who was stalking her down the road from the bus.

Mattie had few enemies but she knew how to deflate the opposition. In this context the headmaster sometimes felt his control was not quite as complete as it might be. In misogynistic times, he vaguely sensed impropriety somewhere, and tried to ensure that Mattie didn't know her own cleverness, even to the extent of trying to conceal from her the successful results of a scholarship exam, until Aunt Cathy ferreted them out of him. Implicitly or explicitly, Cathy supported her niece's war against the 'head' (emblematic of rigid patriarchy); she once said that she had seen too many women marry purely for the sake of finding a home. Mattie was always surprised by her academic success although nobody else was. She got the news about passing her Higher School Certificate while she happened to be out on an errand to the village shop, and her excitement was evidenced by the bag of squashed bananas she brought home. When she wanted peace at school, she used to clamber up on the roof to read a book.

The only subject at school for which she could not summon up any enthusiasm was domestic science, and she was expelled from the class after rolling her pastry along the floor. She never cooked or sewed until the end of her first year at university, when during the vacation she decided to make a shirt and culottes for each member of the family, and completed this project from start to finish without any supervision. (In later years, she was pleased when a professional chef complimented her on her cordon-bleu standard cookery – which had developed owing to her desire to provide abundantly for her students.) She also loved to act in plays, and amongst others, produced a version of P. G. Wodehouse's *If I Were You*. She wanted to be an actress until a point suddenly came when she said she became selfconscious and lost interest. This sort of internal change was described by her in her *Teenager* books:

Most of us can remember how, after protesting that we were determined to become a fireman or a ballet dancer, these particular careers suddenly dropped out of our ambitions – we did not want to any more, or we knew we could not. An ambition that is wrong for us will drop out if it is not artificially sustained by rebellion against parental pressure or ridicule. (*Your Teenager*, p. 92)

The change applies not only to careers but to sexual identity; as a tomboy herself she describes how a ‘sense of reality’ painfully dawned that she was destined to be a woman:

It is harder for the little girl who has been rather a tomboy and who has tried to beat the boys at their own game to change over to being an admired young lady than it is for the one who has always been neat and pretty and noticeable for her appearance rather than her actions ... To grow into a woman after all, is rather a delicate business. You may not even be too sure that you will like being one, but nevertheless, a sense of reality convinces that the best must be made of a bad job. (p. 55)

Although her values and relationships were nurtured in the family home, her extreme passion for reading, together with her desire to formally study psychology, went in a sense beyond the family traditions and indicated the emergence of her own individuality and innate talents. As she wrote in ‘The Family Circle’:

The core of the family unit – parents and child – is the foundation on which all else rests. The parents, initially the mother, can help the child to develop the necessary security and confidence to venture forth to enlarge his experience and to find different aspects and means of expressing himself in different relationships.

Parents’ generosity can with a good grace allow the children to grow away from them when it is wise and safe to do so, and let them get from others the experiences which they cannot provide.

Her own parents had this kind of ‘generosity’ and it formed the background to her own educational principles as both teacher and psychoanalyst, and as parent herself. It was clear to everyone that Mattie ought to go to university, but her headmaster had decided that this was not necessary for girls, so had excluded the girls at his school from Latin lessons – essential in those days to pass university entrance. Encouraged by Aunt Cathy, Mattie succeeded in doing the Latin course on her own in six months, and passed the admission exam to University College in London, which she chose because it was the most mixed and cosmopolitan that she knew of. She applied to do Psychology but the professor advised her to read English instead because psychology was ‘all about rats’ – a piece of advice which she remembered with gratitude, although she later also tackled the rats.

This happened in 1938. Mattie was slim and attractive with a lovely figure although her mother despaired of her slouching deportment. Her friends were in love with her, both then and later, including my father, whom she met at university but did not marry for another eleven years. He was of a retiring and studious disposition and his combative energies were bound up in intercollegiate chess tournaments. The students stayed in London for the first two years, then the college moved to Aberystwyth for the rest of the war. My mother was in France the summer that war broke out. Her family were waiting for her at Newhaven as two ferries docked, loaded to the gunwales with returning tourists. Her mother, fraught with anxiety, dissolved in hysterics when Mattie finally appeared and slowly and dreamily wandered ashore, one of the very last stragglers to disembark. Years later my mother reflected on the mistaken youthful idealism which had convinced her at the time that Hitler could never get anywhere if he tried to invade Britain; the head girl was still dreaming that Nazi imperialism could be defeated by hockey sticks and team spirit. She might like to argue that black was white and ‘prove it before morning’, but she could also connect with her ‘sense of reality’.

Later during the war she worked as a teacher, while her sisters were training as nurses in London. Once, on the way back to her job at Southgate, she was caught climbing over the wall at Guy’s Hospital at 6 in the morning after visiting Nancy. She took under her protection a German Jewish girl who had been at college with her and who, in wartime, suddenly found herself destitute; this girl spent a summer at Withy Pitts before becoming a teacher and then marrying. Inspired by this, in a characteristically passionate and headstrong manner, Mattie herself married in 1941 her first husband, Harry Thompson. He had been a fellow university student, an ecologist, and at that time was a conscientious objector working for the Forestry Commission (he later wrote the standard text on *The Rabbit*). Her parents advised her to wait before marrying but she insisted, using the war as an argument, and got her own way, backed up by Aunt Cathy in this act of rebellion. Nancy too was cautious, quoting the teenage advice the sisters had shared: ‘Beware beware the flashing eyes, the waving hair!’ [*Kubla Khan*]. She thought him ‘too handsome’. Mattie, she felt, fell for Harry despite her own precepts.

For the next seven years Mattie and Harry led a peripatetic existence, and from the material point of view, somewhat spartan. For a while they lived in Scotland in a commune, into whose spirit she entered zealously, with a mixture of hilarity and fervent dedication. My mother taught in a series of Dickensian schools, and then in a Froebel teacher-training institute. She was also the one whose earnings as a teacher constituted the group’s primary source of income. When Harry started to conduct his research on rabbits, they moved down to Oxford and lived in a caravan at Whitam Wood. Mattie took a job feeding the rats in the psychology

department; then thought she may as well use the opportunity, finally, to do an M.A. in psychology. Harry urged her on in this, but was less keen on having children. My mother said she would not have left him had they done so. Their sense of humour was certainly incongruent; Mattie's once awakening Harry – sleeping late in the caravan – with a pail of cold water was not appreciated.

One day, she re-encountered my father Roland, a mutual friend of both of them from university days. They met by chance on a staircase and shook hands, and at that moment (she told us) she realised that this was the man she should have married. It was a moment recorded in one of his poems:

We are of those blessed lovers
Who loved before they knew,
Without pursuit or fleeing;
And met as pilgrims do,

Whose eyes, bent on the going,
Turn once to ask the day
And find their end's companion
Travelling the same way.

I did not pass through sense to touch
The spirit in you shrined;
You took my hand, my dear, but when
Your love had made it kind.

Both of them were inwardly driven, and though they were old friends, they eventually 'recognised' one another only when they noticed they were travelling the same way. My father had, like Harry, started as a sincere conscientious objector. During the first part of the war he worked on a farm under 'the wisest man he ever knew', an internal father-figure (evoked in his poem 'The Lark'); a practical sensitivity to the poetry of farming was one of the things he and Mattie had in common. For the rest of the war Roland served in the Friends Ambulance Unit, with whom he entered Belsen two days after its liberation, to work in the refugee camps. After the war he travelled over Europe and was involved in the reuniting of displaced persons, with a considerable degree of success. His own goals had changed. Although his chess set retained pride of place in the living room, he refused to teach us (his children) to play, saying it wasted too much intellectual energy. Many close friendships dated from that period – as with Ursula Tarkovsky, Alastair Steven (founder of the Clunie Press), my father's friend Werner Wolf, a German Jew who was sent to Canada and interned immediately after finishing his final exams.

In 1949, to the consternation of all at Witherby Pitts, my mother announced

that she intended to get divorced. This was considered an act of dubious morality with dire social consequences. It was Aunt Cathy who objected most stoutly, on principle, because she had supported her niece the first time round and felt it was too much to be required to do a volte face – though later, she and Roland became the best of friends. After prolonged and heated family debate, the generally quiet Gabriel finally proclaimed: ‘Mattie’s *my* daughter, and she will marry who she likes!’ After that, objections ceased. Divorce proceedings at that time were both difficult and expensive. Although my mother was scarcely bothered about the social stigma, she anguished over the pain caused to the three protagonists. (The only legal ground for divorce available to them was adultery, and this had to be formally witnessed by private detectives hired to hang around hotel entrances, etc.). Meanwhile she contrived to rearrange a marriage which she deemed a more suitable match between her ex-husband and a close friend who taught at the same school.

My parents’ marriage was witnessed only by Nancy and her husband Bruce Holt, a civil engineer, whom she met during the war in India. My father was the only child of a talented but somewhat unstable and ultimately penniless violinist – ‘ruined by success’ my mother said – and a once-beautiful but rather helpless and clinging mother, who had little help from her husband with the upbringing of their son, whom she worshipped possessively. In a poem my father described ‘a clinging wife taking/ Submissively all his strength from him’, in a way strongly reminiscent of his own mother, though he never criticised her. Soon after my parents’ marriage Roland’s father (a heavy smoker) died from cancer of the face; and a few years after that, moved by my father’s compassion and sadness (and the distance into Wales), my mother insisted that my grandmother come to live with our family in London, permanently. This arrangement, though it lasted till my grandmother’s death when I was a teenager, turned out a severe trial to Mattie since my grandmother instinctively sabotaged her authority, which led at one point to my sister having a serious accident. Things would have been very different, she said, had it been her own mother residing with the family.

When my parents married they had a debt of a hundred pounds (a considerable sum in those days) and some furniture made of orange-boxes. Accommodation was hard to find at that time and after temporary lodgings in several places they took up residence in a flat in Kensington that was vacated by Nancy and Bruce, and remained there for two years. Like her own mother, my mother was 30 when she fell pregnant for the first time. Hospital consultants were not informative, and during the monitoring of her first pregnancy she picked up a stray word from the gynaecologist who was addressing some students, and on returning home found it (or something like it) in a medical dictionary borrowed from the library, only to discover that it referred to a condition that was ‘generally fatal to the mother or

baby or both'. I was born in 1951 at University College Hospital, where the nurses drew the curtains around my mother lest other women should see the bad example she was setting by breastfeeding at irregular hours. According to an ironic account written by my father, Mattie was 'badly disciplined and incurred many of Hygeia's severest frowns' (Hygeia being the goddess who rules the hospital). She was a bad patient, he said, 'especially when she was not ill'. So my sister Morag was born at home. Regarding the context of this second confinement, my father wrote that 'not anxiety and relief but tenderness and joy coloured all our feelings': at home amidst 'bookshelves, familiar paintings, window and wireless', and a fire 'fed by the learned, dolorous book of the strayed word'. Of the birth itself, he wrote:

Perhaps you have opened the door at night, expecting someone – and there is a stranger whose face you do not know. That was one shade of the feeling – the powerful presence of an unknown spirit. I cannot tell you how violently, though so far off, the force of the still child's spirit intruded into the room, which had for hours been sensitive to approaching change. Blue-grey, pallid, the child lay, its puckered head sideways, frail. Hadn't we asked too much? We knew the brutality of our wills' insistence. And we waited irresolute for some gesture from the child. All this no clock would have registered; the mother had not yet seen the child at all; there is no measure for such a time. Neither were we anxious, nor confident. I do not think that at that moment we should have felt sorrow had the child been dead, or joy at its life, or any feeling. The moment was outside humanity. We awaited a sign.

It is a moment of catastrophic change, 'on the ridge' between life and death – like Hamlet's 'To be or not to be', or Keats's 'beyond the bourn of care' in his journey to Burns country. The account continues:

I remember once facing the steep ridge of a Swiss mountain: on one side, the sun burned on the rock's skin; on the other, a swirling mist checked steeply back and up, chilling and vertiginous. Grey-blue, like a wet and curious stone, the child lay outside any slope of time, on the ridge. Then gradually but quickly, her colour changed to the colour we call flesh, though mottled yet; the stone breathed in the sun. An immediate and overwhelming rush of gratitude, and sympathy, of welcome and tenderness, swept over us and enfolded the child.
(Roland Harris, *Hygeia and the newcomer*)

The bourn or ridge is a metaphor for the brushing of spirit against flesh. In fact, my mother died one day after the anniversary of this birthday (17th November), exactly 32 years later; just as my father's mother died on his own birthday (28th June).

By the time of Morag's birth in 1954 we had moved to a larger flat in Westbourne Terrace where we lived for seven years, together with my grandmother

and a succession of au pair girls (thirteen in total); and like all guilty working mothers, ours always maintained we were fond of at least some of them. My father was teaching in secondary schools, poorly paid, while over the next ten years my mother did first the Tavistock child analytic training with John Bowlby and Nusia Bick and then the Psychoanalytic Institute training for both adults and children. Here she had supervision with Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, both of whom she much admired and remembered with great affection. James Gammill, her co-supervisee, said Mrs Klein described her to him as ‘one of the best people I have ever known for the psychoanalysis of children’:

‘With her there is always a veritable discussion of the material of the sessions, an authentic dialogue. And she has *a mind of her own*.’
(Melanie Klein, cited by James Gammill; in *Enabling and Inspiring: a tribute to Martha Harris*, 2012)

Her own analysts for the training were firstly Beryl Sandford and then Herbert Rosenfeld. Later, in the 1960’s, she persuaded Roland to have analysis with Bion, envisaging a marriage of true minds; and in the 1970’s she was instrumental in encouraging Bion to return from California, initially by arranging some lectures at the Tavistock. (When Bion – who had himself taught at the Tavistock – inquired who was running it these days? everyone laughed and said, ‘Mattie does!’).



Passport photo
(late 1950’s)
wearing her father’s
watchchain

Until the end of her analysis and training however (c. 1960) our parents seemed constantly preoccupied with money and the lack of it. In the early days they used to take one child each on the back of large black bikes to Portobello market on Saturday mornings. Then they got a car – first a Standard 8 (which my father kept trying to explain to port officials was ‘the same as an Austin 7’), followed by a Ford van, windowless at the back (since there was a tax concession

on absence of windows – rather like the 18th century window tax which nobody considered was a health hazard). In these modest vehicles the family went on rigorous camping holidays in Scotland or on the continent; only on one night did we ever seek shelter in a hotel, when rain flooded the trenches dug around our tent by the side of Loch Doone, where we were camping alongside friends whose family of boys determinedly endured the deluge under canvas. After this there was a Dormobile which served not only for holidays but also for my father to transport a group of teachers regularly to school. Regular trips were also made down to the farm at Withy Pitts, a second home for all the expanding group of cousins. We were the only city children, and it was my mother's psychoanalytic career that kept us in London. A Heinkel bubble car was purchased exclusively for her use; she used to park it outside the Tavistock Clinic (at its original site in central London) at right angles to the kerb, whence its tail would regularly be knocked off by passing traffic, and the door pockets of the vehicle were stuffed with ten-shilling parking fines. My father never went in it; he couldn't bear to watch my mother drive. It was one of the few ways in which she could ruffle his equanimous temperament and stir despair and rage.

Indeed she always maintained an obstinate and deliberate incomprehension of things mechanical, whilst using them with a cavalier disinterest; for she liked to have all the household machines on at once – television, record-player, cooker, typewriter, sewing machine. She herself pointed out the contrast with her own mother's dexterity, admiring the way she could take her sewing machine to pieces and put it back together again. Her own style, however, was not imitable. She never gave matter-of-fact instructions about modes of procedure; her recipe for gardening, impossible for anyone else to put into practice, was 'Plant so many flowers that the weeds can't grow'. Neither she nor my father required peace and quiet in a study, with the children out of the way, before intellectual work could begin. Such work got done semi-invisibly amidst the hubbub of existence. Only the annual preparation of the school timetable (for which my father built a special table the length of the bedroom) was honoured by seclusion and undivided attention. He was determined that every individual child in the thousand-strong school should have an unrestricted choice of syllabus – unrestricted at any rate by administrative inadequacy. He also encouraged my mother to write, which she had found easy in her schooldays but much more difficult later owing to an increased sense of responsibility toward the reader. Once free from the requirements of writing qualifying papers, her true professional writing began with the *New Society* articles for the general reader in 1967, which led to the Dickens Press commissioning the more detailed *Understanding Infants* for ordinary parents (as an antidote to ever-fashionable Spock), followed by the series of mini-books which she collected and edited for Corgi – the first of their kind; she oversaw and helped with them all and

herself wrote those on the teenage years. She wrote with a Hermes baby typewriter on her knees, sitting in the middle of the 'garden room' which was the focus of family life at Ferncroft.

Meanwhile, in quiet collaboration, my parents were developing innovative educational tools – including initiating a counselling service in my father's school (unheard-of before), and working out how to establish a Child Psychotherapy profession that would enable the ideas of Melanie Klein and Esther Bick to survive in the world. This ongoing struggle coloured indelibly the background of family life, like 'wine through water', or like Donald Meltzer's description of the perpetual 'pregnancy' of a pioneer atmosphere – whose impact on children is never unequivocally positive. There is a hint of the complicated emotionality in her own mind in an episode recounted by one of her students, who on first beginning baby observations, felt uncomfortable at the idea of mothers leaving their own small children in order to observe others:

In a both naïve and arrogant way I raised this problem with Mattie... [She] looked at me very gently and said, 'Has it ever occurred to you that you are lucky because you enjoyed being at home with your babies until they were five? Has it ever occurred to you that these mothers will be better mothers when they go home because they have done something that enriches them?'

It had not occurred to me and it transformed my attitude. It also affected my clinical work. When patients spoke angrily of how other people in their life did X or failed to do Y, I almost repeated Mattie verbatim: 'Has it ever occurred to you that you are lucky because ...'
(Valerie Sinason, 'Memories of Mattie', in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

Mattie, from the time she took over Mrs Bick's course, became one of those riven mothers, at the same time unfortunate and enriched. Meltzer, also teaching at the Tavi with Mrs Bick, wrote of the stress of those times:

Nothing was more foreign to [Mattie's] nature than the administrative requirements that eventually devolved upon her at the Tavistock. If ever anyone had 'greatness thrust upon them', it was the reluctant Mattie at the time when Mrs Bick left the Clinic and it was up to Mattie either to take over or to let the infant Child Psychotherapy Course fade away.

The way in which she came to terms with this crisis in her life – and here Roland's encouragement and help was essential – was by framing a radical pedagogical method.

('Martha Harris and the Tavistock course', in *The Tavistock Model*, p. 345)

The 'radical pedagogical method' was later described by her student Margaret Rustin as so revolutionary by comparison with current psychoanalytic ideas on training that 'in retrospect, this shift of gear still takes one's breath away' ('Mattie as an educator', 1987; reprinted in *Enabling and Inspiring*). The shift of gear was taking place in the early 1960's, and the cross-fertilization of schoolteaching and psychotherapy-teaching was an active implementation of the concept that Bion formulated as 'learning from experience'. As Meltzer put it:

The central conviction, later hallowed in Bion's concept of 'learning from experience', was that the kind of learning which transformed a person into a professional worker had to be rooted in the intimate relations with inspired teachers, living and dead, present and in books. (pp. 345-46)

My three parents all expressed in various ways the view that it is inspiration more than 'reparation' which is the key to mental development, and that it depends on the individual's capacity to recognise and evaluate the role of internal teachers.

When we were aged ten and seven respectively, my mother got what she had long pined for: a house with a garden. The weeds did of course grow; and my mother's fantasy as she weeded, she said, was that she was putting people at the Tavi in order, dead-heading the obstructions to growth and development. Although she was sometimes thought of as a natural democrat, it was rather than she did not have preconceived solutions; she did not 'take advice' but she genuinely listened to others' opinions, in order to extract the relevant information. Then she took responsibility for the decision and implemented it by whatever means necessary. Mattie became 'an impressive negotiator', Don said, 'even a politician, in the interests of the Course', by means of preserving a split between 'Christ and Caesar'. He describes how she tempered mercy with judgement:

Here again Bion's teaching about groups, and later about the structure of the personality, with its endoskeletal structure and its social exoskeletal carapace, played a central role in her thinking. In keeping with the differentiation between Christ and Caesar, Mattie worked out her method for meeting the requirements of the Establishment without sacrificing the ethos of the learning work-group. But it cost her a lot, which only the support of Roland made it possible for her to sustain. (p. 346)

The emotional 'cost' certainly had a transferred impact on us as children and teenagers. How greatly we envied those whose mothers went to school meetings, made birthday cakes and collected them by car from late-night parties. Material circumstances had indeed improved for the family after our mother finished her training analysis and our father became the deputy head of a large comprehensive

school. The house at Ferncroft Avenue in Hampstead was comfortable, hospitable and well-kept, with the help of a devoted Portuguese housekeeper (Monica de Jesus, who returned faithfully to help nurse my mother after her accident in 1984). My mother made her own clothes, and ours, until we learned to use the machine ourselves. She also made the household furnishings. She had a passion, indeed a lust, for both furnishing and dress materials and at sales times would descend on John Lewis and Liberty's like a locust. Among the many close friendships established during that era were those with Dina Rosenbluth, who died before she did (she wrote an obituary), and whose father (a Minister of Justice in the early days of Israel) she also greatly admired, Irma Pick, and Elizabeth Hunter who later helped to nurse my mother in her final illness.

For meanwhile, my father wanted a boat as much as my mother wanted a garden, and had done ever since he had made model yachts to sail on the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. So it came to pass that much of our family life, during half the year at least, was conducted on a sailing boat in the middle of the North Sea. Roland treasured this 'baby' and spent winter evenings like a 19th century fisherman dovetailing ropes, mending sails and carpentering wooden varnished fittings for its interior. Though at the same time, he was among the first to use the technological aids that were just beginning to be available to small vessels such as depth-sounders and radar. He knew the sea was a dangerous place – it was one thing to live 'on the ridge' himself, another to entrust his family to it. Summer holidays entailed dripping into one coastal cinema after another at the end of a hard day's battling against wind and tide, to watch *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific* or *A Hard Day's Night* yet again and dry off.



Mattie and Roland
on the family
boat, Wand, at
Rotterdam, c. 1967

My mother was not a keen sailor for her own part, though certain features of boating appealed to her – such as visiting other countries from a waterfront viewpoint. She was always interested in other lifestyles, particularly the homely ones of Denmark and Holland with their uncurtained windows allowing glimpses into

family sitting rooms (not paranoid about privacy), and she also liked the English villages with their craft and tea shops. She became an avid collector of chinaware and vases from the places we sailed to. Not least, she loved the wild expanse of water. Sometimes when we arrived at our boat on the east coast, late on a Friday night, she would dive into the dark waters and swim around it; and when on our road travels we might stop for a picnic at some sufficiently wild and beautiful place with deep water, she would strip and dive into it, any time between April and October. (Anyone who didn't feel up to following her incurred her mild disapproval for being a sissy – not quite contempt but equally uncomfortable.) She could also relax with gusto, sunbathing on the deck in the least glimmer of sunshine while devouring at speed every new novel that had appeared on the market. She was fascinated by the new brands of instant foods like Vespa paellas – there was no cordon-bleu cooking on the boat (or indeed on weekdays at home).

An acute Keatsian awareness of the intermingling of joy and sorrow that enhances the experience of life lay behind her own philosophy, and indeed helped to formulate her own ideas on both psychology and teaching. Thus in another of her articles on the 'Family Circle', she described the death of her own mother, which occurred around 1965:

An old woman of eighty, once beautiful, now gaunt and emaciated in the last stages of a fatal disease, was saying goodbye to her family and to the grandchildren who had been brought to see her before she died. One of them, a ten-year-old girl, vividly alive, hung back fearfully, unable to recognize her grandmother in this near-skeleton.

The old woman understood why the child hung back, smiled with loving appreciation and whispered, 'You're bonny. I wish I could say the same for myself now.' The little girl then recognised the grandmother she knew, kissed her and cried. Afterwards she said, 'I won't ever be so afraid of dying any more. Grandma wasn't and she wanted us all to be happy and not to cry too much when we think of her.'

This little girl was responding to the grandmother's sadness at leaving life and her own long-past beauty, together with her ungrudging love at seeing these live on in one of her own descendants. The capacity to love and let go has its final test in old age and death, but is founded on the infant's first relationship with the mother during the first year when it begins to be sufficiently a whole person to realize that the person it relies upon and loves most dearly is the one who also frustrates and evokes hatred.

('The Family Circle', 1967)

The ten-year-old child who could not at first ‘recognize’ her maternal ancestor or see the beauty that still lay behind the ugliness was her daughter Morag, and on another level Mattie herself. The ‘depressive position’ (which she proceeds to define, for the non-psychoanalytic reader) has the same roots and emotional aura as the ‘aesthetic conflict’ (as Meltzer later termed it). Revisiting in memory the scene of her mother’s death became for her an emblem of the dying and regeneration of the human condition, whose beauty flickered through successive generations in an image of ‘catastrophic change’ (in Bion’s phrase).

In December 1969 Roland died suddenly and unexpectedly from a cerebral aneurism. In a paper written about her brief treatment shortly after this of a six-year-old child whose father had suddenly died, we can see how the wisdom gained from her firm grasp of the ‘combined object’ (the loved-and-hated internal parents) enabled her to re-establish the child’s internal stability; she herself became ‘a voice from inside him’, clarifying confusions, and then gradually withdrawing the transference, all in a minimal seven sessions. Before any personal tragedy struck her, she understood on the pulses the intimate relation between the psychoanalytic process and the mourning that underlies all our ‘catastrophic changes’ and that begins on the day we are born. She concludes her account of the therapy:

If a lost and loved person is to remain as a good and living memory we have to let ourselves be reminded of him continually in our daily life, to remain open to recollection. The closer and more intertwined the relationship the more frequent, the more painful the reminders, until the very pain becomes cherished as part of the precious internalized object.

But each person remembers at his own pace, and has to face again and again the fact that the person once inextricably woven into his daily life – the constant companion in mind if not in body, of his every activity – no longer exists in the external world. The fact that we shall never see him again, when this can finally be accepted and omnipotent possessiveness relinquished, can drive us to turn inward to make better use of the experiences we had with him when he was alive, and thus add a dimension to ongoing experiences of living which comes from identification and dialogue with a loved and admired internalized person who lives on in us.

(‘The complexity of pain seen in a six-year-old child following sudden bereavement’ (1973), in *The Tavistock Model* (2011))

One of her students has described her personal learning experience with Mattie in this area, and how her own idea of psychoanalysis became more refined and realistic as a result:

In one seminar, I was presenting with another student some work we had done jointly with a family who had been bereaved; it was thought a rather novel venture at the time. We had somehow strayed into taking a moralistic attitude, as if there were good and bad ways of experiencing bereavement. Mattie said sharply, 'Look, people get through something like this just however they can.' I'm sure I was mortified at the time but it also helpfully cut through some misconceived way of being psychoanalytic. I felt stripped of some pretensions to knowledge and set down to try again. Over the years I have often had cause to remember and to be grateful for that moment and for having come into contact with Mattie as a teacher who gave me something enduring to aspire to.

(Judy Shuttleworth, 'Remembering Mattie', in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

In the weeks after my father's death, although she said that she would 'never again be lonely', my mother became dangerously ill with what was eventually diagnosed as aplastic anaemia. Reading *War and Peace* in hospital, she said, made her realize she did want to go on living, reinforced by a dream-message from Roland. During the last year of the boat, the family had acquired a quaint little cottage in West Mersea called St Botolph's, which my mother planned to use as a home base while my father went sailing. After his death she noticed for sale the large and dilapidated Old Rectory on East Mersea with its neglected garden, and bought it because it had views of the sea – where we used to sail – from both sides, and she saw potential in its ruined state. She scattered Roland's ashes over its soil and created a wonderful garden, and researched the history of the house which had once belonged to Sabine Baring-Gould, who wrote his *Wuthering Heights*-like novel *Mehalah* there. (His novel, she said, like Bronte's, was imbued with the spirit of its landscape and this was a quality in writing that she especially admired.)

Shortly after this her life with Donald Meltzer began, to continue for 17 years until her own crippling car accident in 1984 and subsequent death in 1987. Over the course of two years she gradually replied to the hundreds of letters she received after Roland's death. In one (never sent) she wrote:

Then most unlikely but wonderful development – last winter I did fall in love and am marrying again a colleague and friend of Roland's and mine. He was really closer to Roland than to me and hoped to collaborate with him on some work on linguistics. (letter, 1971)

They took a walk one night by the River Thames and concluded they had internal 'objects in common' without which no marriage could succeed. Our Hampstead house was sold, and during our student years the main family homes became the house at Mersea, and Buttermilk Hall at Brill near Oxford – a busy and crowded setting for profuse and diverse projects, entertainments, arguments and hospitality, not unlike Withy Pitts of the previous generation. Meanwhile Don and my

mother gradually rebuilt and planted Mersea together. It became the setting for the annual Tavi students' garden party, where it was always fine weather, and high tide for swimming. Yet for my mother (with no boat to escape to), its primary significance was as the home with most space for private life – for refuelling the inner soul in the midst of the vast expansion of their work empire. Not long afterwards they bought a crumbling stone ruin in chestnut woods amid the hills of northern Tuscany, that they discovered on a work visit to Bagni di Lucca. Gromigana, according to Don, was 'the best thing they ever did', and later, the Italian side of the family (my sister's children especially) became much attached to it. My mother liked the place but also found it added to her work; after our childhood she never had any household help other than the family and some of the guests. My mother herself did not particularly require or desire company, but she enjoyed providing an ambience of general enjoyment and vitality:

The slight soft Scottish furriness of her voice tempered her vehemence in debate and her laugh chimed out in a most infectious way. While easily entertained by wit, she was not witty or entertaining herself, but her gaiety could fill a room and encourage the sallies of others, keen for her admiration.

(Meltzer, 'Portrait', 1987, in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

Visitors were always welcomed at all their houses; but at Buttermilk especially, the impingement of the farm and its managerial problems, and the extended family, together with the lifestyle of continuous entertaining, took its toll. Weekends and holidays filled this way did not provide much of a break from a full week's clinical and clinic practice. And, as Don said one day at Buttermilk after some blazing family row, 'There's trouble even in paradise.' Mersea was the only place, she said, where she experienced peace.



Don and Mattie at
Mersea, 1972
(photo: Marja
Schulman)

She delighted however in her grandchildren as they came along; in a vignette of Mattie as a new grandmother, Meltzer described how the archetypal power of the madonna-and-child image is resurrected:

One can see its power repeated in later years when a grandmother holds her distressed grandchild, waiting for its mother to return to feed it; thirty years drop from her visage as the bliss of success in calming the child spreads throughout her being.

(*The Apprehension of Beauty*, 1987, p. 26)

This period was also the beginning of Clunie Press, the publishing arm of the family's educational Trust, established in commemoration of Roland. Don bought from Heinemann the remaindered stock of his first book, *The Psychoanalytical Process*, which – to my mother's great indignation – had been denounced by the Kleinian establishment as being 'not truly Kleinian' (as were his later books). My mother said she had been told she was the only person who could 'keep the Kleinians together', but it was a choice between taking on that political role and marrying Don; and Jim Gammill has described how as a result of this, the Meltzers became *personae non gratae* in the Psychoanalytic Institute. She had been prepared to engage in politics to ensure the survival of her Child Psychotherapy course; but not to ensure the harmony of the Psychoanalytic Institute at the expense of her personal happiness and ideals. She encouraged Don to read Bion seriously (whose later works had also been dismissed by the establishment), and Bion's thinking lies behind the theoretical structure of many of the subsequent Clunie books. She wrote less, as he wrote more – but would certainly have written more herself had she lived longer. She was delighted when, on a government pay review towards the latter end of her NHS career, in about 1979, she was awarded the top salary grade 'with uppage' when they learned the hours she worked at the Clinic (nothing else being measurable) – a grade created especially for her.

The books were produced at Ballechin House, Ballinluig, in Perthshire, stored at Mersea, and distributed by the family to bookshops in cars crammed also (before long) with babies, sofas, peripatetic casseroles, etc. In certain practical matters Don and Mattie did not always see eye to eye; they had not 'grown up together' as Don put it; but their 'objects in common' inspired the values of the 'couple family' in the wider world of psychoanalytic teaching and that became established in many groups, both formal and informal, in Italy, France, Scandinavia and South America. Both as individuals and together, they believed psychoanalysis – especially in its educational aspects – could help to build a better world.

Didier Houzel has described how in their group seminars for the *Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Psychoanalytiques pour le developpement de l'Enfant et du Nourisson* (GERPEN) Mattie would 'moderate [Don's] standpoint if she felt it to be too cut-and-dried, too indicative of a masculine desire to take a firm stand on things':

Don and Mattie were a well-balanced and creative couple who gave the impression that they were constantly and deeply in love with each other and shared a real passion for psychoanalysis.

(Didier Houzel, 'A psychoanalytic revolution', in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

She herself worked with a light touch, never rolling out a cannon to squash a fly. Nobody could bully her. In the midst of cooking she would sometimes be mentally preoccupied with her tactics for disposing of the enemy: 'yip yip yip' she would mutter in a sing-song way, bopping the imaginary heads of overgrown infantile despots with a wooden spoon just as her father had done with the *Glasgow Herald*. In counterbalance, in both speech and in writing, she paid perspicuous attention to any genuine (non-tyrannical) response or communication from others, whether from group or individual, whether verbally explicit or merely detectable from the atmosphere:

Mattie had a particular way of talking that often seemed at first a stutter but was in fact a complicated process of accommodation between the complexity of her thought and the minute responses of her audience. A typescript from a tape looked terrible, but the effect on a listener was like standing well back from the brush-strokes of a Van Dyke, amazed to see that the mass of wiggly lines suddenly fused into silk and lace and jewels.

(Donald Meltzer, 'Portrait')

It was her own innate talent for eliciting the hidden vital spark in others that underpinned her psychoanalytic work also, and enabled her to bring out the beauty obscured by ugliness. For as she wrote of the trials of analysing a typical latency child who might sit week on week 'everlastingly drawing similar geometric patterns' until the analyst was blinded by boredom:

The recollection that so it was yesterday and the desire – somewhat hopeless – that it should not be thus tomorrow, can so cloud one's perceptions that they are unable perhaps to receive some intimation of anxiety or emotionality peeping out from the confines of the pattern today.

(Martha Harris, 'The individual in the group', in *The Tavistock Model*)

Like Bion, she selected latency rather than adolescence as a metaphor for the state of hidden turbulence that needed to be sought and engaged with, owing to its potential for either development or destructiveness. She knew that aesthetic reciprocity depended on observational finesse and that in terms of personality development, a frog may turn into a prince, a tomboy into a mother, or a mass of

wiggly lines into silk and jewels. She is thinking again of her internal parents and her own (internal) latency self when she uses the example of a boy climbing a cliff as a model for the developmental process:

It is hard for the parents to decide just how far to let the child go with his experiments. The boy climbing the cliff is seriously tasting a little of the flavour of death. He is no longer resting on the safety net of fantasy as a younger child might. When he gets to the top it is as a man, and it is the sort of climb that, in one form or another, all our children have to make.

(*Your Teenager*, 96-97)

The climb to the clifftop pictures her own life, encircled by her father's watch-chain, no longer a safety-net and not untouched by the flavour of death, without which there can be no achievement.

Perhaps my mother always remained in one sense the baby who cried for the moon. Yet her brand of idealism did not consist of idealising either persons or institutions (though it was sometimes misinterpreted in this way); and she could diagnose people's deficiencies with laser-like accuracy, though not necessarily immediately, and she was quite often astonished by their lack of fibre. Sometimes her concern for nurturing others was taken as an almost excessive selflessness; however this was not really what lay behind it and (as her marriages show) she did not willingly neglect her own needs. Rather, she was a kind of visionary. Other people were a part of her vision for a better world and she wished to enable them to know themselves so they could bring out the best in their potential. Meltzer concluded his 'Portrait' with:

She was devoted to children, but I never saw her dote on a child, or talk over his head, or violate his privacy. Her warm reserve was almost paradoxical, charming without effort, generous without being indulgent. She seemed always to mean what she said, but never said all she meant and when something hurtful had to be spoken, she could 'tell the truth, but tell it slant', as Emily Dickinson would say.

(Meltzer, 'Portrait', 1987; reprinted in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

She had a strong sense of being privileged – not worldly privilege but spiritual – derived from her internal image of 'wide-embracing love', whose richness looked outward to those who she sensed were more needy, vulnerable and uncertain than herself. Her missionary spirit strove to create circumstances which would make it easier for people to be true to themselves; hence the revolutionary system that she tried to set in place of 'self-selection' for psychoanalytic candidates, as formulated in her papers on the Tavistock training and philosophy. This

meant self-selection based on acquiring self-knowledge, not the commonplace narcissistic substitute. One of her students has described listening to Mattie resisting pressure from a colleague to accept someone whom she evidently felt lacked this potentiality:

I remember once being in a supervision with her when her phone rang and I heard her discussing a possible candidate for the CP training. I understood that the caller was an analyst who was trying to convince Mattie that she should accept the candidate. She was not to be persuaded and firmly stood her ground.

(Evanthe Blandy, 'Reflections on working with Mattie', in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

Another student has described how she was helped to understand the true nature of her 'probationary' status and thereby learned to develop her psychoanalytic capacities:

After only a few months of the Course I felt uneasy about my probationary status. I knocked at Mattie's door. Always generous, she asked me in. I asked her whether she could give me any information about my probationary status. For instance, how long might it continue? Could I know the criteria on which she or they would decide whether I was accepted or not? Forty-three years later I imagine I still remember her thoughtful pause before she replied. Mattie (always 'Mrs Harris' to me then) said to me that this work did not suit everyone. It required the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. If I found it difficult to tolerate uncertainty, then perhaps it was not the right work for me. I withdrew from her room, deeply embarrassed, but also deeply affected. I may have been in the first weeks of my personal analysis. With her help, I had begun learning from experience, which continues, thankfully, though not always as dramatically, to this day.

(Ann Cebon, 'Mattie's teaching methods', in *Enabling and Inspiring*)

The fact that self-selection is not practised at present (nor aspired toward) does not mean that it is not the most accurate way of selecting candidates who will last the course – not in temporal terms but in terms of 'learning from experience' – and that ultimately society may learn to appreciate this. Only self-selected workers will climb the cliff rather than the greasy pole. My mother felt that hierarchical pressures perpetuated the lie-in-the-soul, as in Bion's (or Blake's or Money-Kyrle's) Platonic view of 'the lie' as something that covers over a hidden truth, rather than a distinct entity in itself. She was sorry when the Tavistock became so popular that experienced clinicians from other places applied to work there, rather than struggling on with their own good work in what might appear to be a less congenial

ambience. She wanted jobs to go to young people who would, she hoped, fling themselves into the fray and ‘kill themselves’ as she put it – following her example in spirit, rather than seeking comfort amongst likeminded colleagues.

One of her favourite anecdotes from Bion was his account of a psychoanalytic trainee who was anxious that his patient would realize he was ‘only a student’; his response was: ‘What are you when you cease to be a student of psychoanalysis?’ which tallied with her own life-view that ‘Every teacher must be continually learning or he has no immediate experience to share’ (*The Tavistock Model*, p. 31). This view is foundational also in her books for parents; her advice was always that there is no external advice that can be uncritically relied upon – only self-scrutiny and continued learning. It was part of her view of the human family as a wider entity which is united primarily by the striving for growth and development, and divided by tyranny and negativism.

This visionary picture is modelled on the ordinary, familiar scale of the ‘family circle’, whose qualities she summarised at the end of her 1967 series of articles:

The claims of the poor relation and of the black sheep are traditionally a persecution. Yet those family members who have enough sense of individual and of collective responsibility to contain and mitigate the condition of their own unfortunate or delinquent relatives are the necessary foundation of a healthy community...

Life in a family which has breadth and continuity – brothers, sisters, cousins, grandparents, uncles and aunts – and which can also assimilate the foreigners, the in-laws – is the best preparation for that communality of spirit, founded on responsibility, of which Donne’s words remind us: ‘No man is an island unto himself.’ It prepares us too for that part in history and mortality which is our own and all the human family’s: ‘Never ask for whom the bell tolls – it tolls always for thee.’

(‘The Family Circle’, 1967)

She was convinced, as stated in the *Child-in-the-Family-in-the-Community*, that the growth of ‘all members’ of a family is necessary to maintain its ‘sense of security’ – all, including the black sheep and the ‘foreigners’ (rather different from society’s conventional notion of security). Each member needs a sufficient sense of security to climb their own cliff. And she made less of a distinct division than Meltzer between the nuclear or extended family, and the more diffuse relations in society as a whole. ‘There was never anybody as much loved as she was’, he said after she died, adding that those were the fifteen happiest years of his life.

Her wish was to be buried rather than cremated, because she liked the idea of being eaten by worms and gradually sustaining other forms of life. Certainly Marvell, one of her favourite poets, said ‘The grave’s a fine and private place,/ But none, I think, do there embrace.’ However as part of her living mindview, this

wish may be seen as a metaphor for the secluded stillness that enables contemplation, as in her description of reading:

Reading... can bring fantasy and reality closer together than anything else – it can widen experience and allow the privacy that, in the end, can exist only in the mind.

(*Your Teenager*, p. 98)

Despite the quantity of love that attached itself to her, she valued the deeper implications of what Melanie Klein described in her last paper as ‘a sense of loneliness’ – the essential inviolability of a mind at home with itself, in communion with nobody other than internal objects: the mind being an entity that no Hitler could invade and (as with her Covenanting ancestors) no religious persecution could stamp out. Without this internal stability the mind cannot make constructive links outside the egocentric self or ‘body’, and continue to live in other selves. The paradoxicality of this ancient religious truism has found expression in many fields outside the official religions, including poetry and psychoanalysis. No man is an island; yet an ability to savour loneliness with its foretaste of the grave sets in motion what Keats called the spinning of a ‘tapestry empyrean’, whose invisible threads might make mankind into ‘a grand democracy of forest trees’:

Any man may like the spider spin from his own inwards his own airy citadel – the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting... Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in numberless points, and at last greet each other at the journey’s end.

(Keats, letter to Reynolds, 19 February, 1818)

She saw her life as part of a wider process of growth and decay, the crucible for hopes of spiritual continuity. As in the ending of several of her favourite novels, the house or body crumbles into the landscape as, proportionally, the spirit survives in the love of those remaining. This was her wider view of the aegis of the ‘couple family’ – the human family itself. It corresponded with her picture of the reader, the lover, the parent, the teacher, and the psychoanalyst. As Bion put it:

What are we to say about this spirit, this ‘soul’ or ‘mind’? That is what we are supposed to be dealing with... Our view is close up, microscopic, a small part of the whole; what is the real pattern?... Is there some seer who could detect the germs of the future? What is a psychoanalyst? What does he do? what has he become?

(*Bion in New York and São Paulo*, pp. 123-24)

One hopes that it was some such tapestry of the meanings contained in the 'grave's privacy' that accompanied her decision in November 1987 to suffer an unexpected heart attack that would end her disabled life, the day after a final family gathering and thanking Don for looking after her. Her 'sense of reality', as formulated years earlier in the books for parents, both sustained her life when it was possible, and enabled her to leave when it was necessary. To quote the end of the *Scots Quair*:

She still sat on as one by one the lights went out and the rain came beating the stones about her, presently feeling no longer the touch of the rain or hearing the sound of the lapwings going by.



Photo: Gianna Polacco Williams

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