

**Benedict
Anderson**



***A Life Beyond
Boundaries***

A MEMOIR

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Preface

The origin of this book is quite unusual, and I hope may therefore tickle the curiosity of English readers. It began around 2003 when Ms Endo Chiho, a fine editor for Japan's NTT Publishing Company, happened to read earlier Japanese translations of my works, in particular *Imagined Communities*. She felt that young Japanese students had little idea of the social, political, cultural and epochal contexts in which Anglo-Saxon scholars were born, educated and matured. Many biographical and autobiographical books were available about 'Western' politicians, artists, generals, businessmen and novelists, but few about Western scholars. Her idea was to publish a short book about my education in Ireland and Britain, academic experience in the US, fieldwork in Indonesia, Siam and the Philippines, together with some reflections on Western universities and on my favourite books. But I knew no Japanese. What was to be done? She realized that I would have to be persuaded to write some simple kind of English-language text. But the crux was to find a distinguished Japanese scholar who knew English very well, was a close friend of mine, and was willing to work on a translation.

Kato Tsuyoshi (aka Yoshi) had come to Cornell University in 1967 to study sociology and anthropology. This was the year that I finished my PhD (on the Japanese Occupation of Java during the Second World War and the subsequent Indonesian National Revolution) and became a very junior professor of political science. Because Yoshi was determined to do fieldwork on Indonesia's western Sumatra I was appointed as one of his three mentors. We quickly became close friends, not least because of his lovely sly sense of humour. He was a fast learner of academic English and of Indonesia's national language. After completing a very original PhD thesis, he returned to Japan and taught at the Jesuits' 'international' university in Tokyo, later moving to Kyoto University, which was the centre for Japanese scholarship on Southeast Asia, where he became a great teacher. We met there often and became even stronger friends.

He told me that he thought Ms Endo's general idea a good one, and that he had worked out a useful systematic plan, if only I would accept it. He said that too many Japanese students and teachers had little understanding of scholarship abroad because of their poor knowledge of English, French, Chinese, etc. Professors also adopted a patriarchal attitude towards their students, which made the youngsters needlessly

timid.

My first reaction was embarrassed rejection. Professors in the West rarely have interesting lives. Their values are objectivity, solemnity, formality and – at least officially – self-effacement. He replied that I had been educated in Ireland, Britain and America, and my fieldwork covered Indonesia, Siam and the Philippines. Even though I taught in America, my outlook was far from that of many American social scientists. All this would help Japanese students to think in terms of useful comparisons. We would work together, he hoped. I would write a rough manuscript following the guidelines created by Ms Endo and himself, and he would translate what I wrote. He would come to my home for a month to ask me about passages that were difficult to understand, correct any mistakes, give me better paragraphs, and teach me about Japanese education.

Finally I gave in, because Yoshi was one of my best friends, had worked so hard, and was the only Japanese scholar capable of carrying out the plan. I consoled myself by saying silently that at least I would never read the forthcoming book. But in a distant way I would be chatting directly with the Japanese students. The book was published, very elegantly, in 2009, and Ms Endo and Yoshi were pleased.

From the start, my brother had urged me to publish an English-language version, and every time I refused. But by 2015 I changed my mind for various reasons, not least of which was the fact that I would be eighty the following year. The work I had been doing since my retirement in 2009 had little to do with my ‘career’, including a study of brilliant Thai filmmakers, *The Decay of Rural Hell in Siam*, the role of folklore in the Philippine Revolution, the changing meaning of advertisements, and so on, as well as various translations and a projected biography of a great Sino-Indonesian journalist and historian. None of this had much connection with education in Japan except in regard to the decay of universities in Britain, America, Europe and elsewhere. To say nothing of the miserable condition of the world as a whole.

Then the problems of ‘English’. I would have to take responsibility for all the mistakes, forms of prose, memory lapses, follies and sometimes silly jokes.

This rather wandering book has therefore two main themes. The first is the importance of translation for individuals and societies. The second is the danger of arrogant provincialism, or of forgetting that serious nationalism is tied to internationalism.

Chapter 1

Shifting Youth

I was born on 26 August 1936, in Kunming, on the eve of the massive Japanese invasion of northern China, and just three years before the Second World War broke out in Europe. In the summer of 1941, just before my fifth birthday, my ailing father decided to take the family back to neutral Ireland via the United States.

After our ship docked in San Francisco, however, my father realized that the intensive submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean made a return home impossible. So we stayed in California and, later, Colorado till Nazi Germany was defeated. Then, in the summer of 1945, we sailed to Ireland on a ship still mostly filled with American soldiers heading for Europe. I was almost nine years old. My father died the following year; my English mother nonetheless decided that we would stay in Ireland.

The years during which I attended primary school, high school and (undergraduate level) college were those of the Cold War and the rapid collapse of the once vast British Empire. So far as I can remember, the Cold War did not then affect me much. But if I had not been lucky enough to reside in Ireland, I could have been conscripted at the age of eighteen (1954) to fight for the dying Empire in Malaya, Kenya or Cyprus, and might have been killed or gravely wounded.

I also grew up in the age before television. We did, however, listen a lot to the radio – a medium that allows for some entertainment while doing household chores, tackling homework, and playing cards or chess. In the evenings, we would regularly tune in to the BBC, where great novels were serially read aloud by very good actors, so that our imaginations were filled with figures like Anna Karenina, the Count of Monte Cristo, Lord Jim, Uriah Heep, Tess of the D’Urbervilles and so on.

Travelling theatre groups were also very important to us, and Ireland was full of excellent performers. We got to see not only many Shakespeare plays (before we read them as textbooks), but also the works of world-famous Irish playwrights like Shaw, Wilde, Sheridan, O’Casey and others. American popular culture came to us only marginally, in the westerns and Disney cartoons shown at the local cinema.

It could easily all have been otherwise. If my father had delayed leaving China till the Pacific War broke out, we might have ended up in a Japanese internment camp, and perhaps died there. Had my father not been Irish, I might have been raised in England and fought overseas for the Empire. If I had been born later, I could have become addicted to the television set, and too lazy to go the local theatre.

Both my father and my mother were excellent parents, warm-hearted, interesting and broad-minded human beings to whom I, along with my younger brother, Rory, (today very well known as Perry) and my little sister Melanie, were deeply attached. I could say that we were very lucky to have such parents.

My father, Seamus (James) O’Gorman Anderson, was the product of a remarkable mixture of lineages. His mother’s male ancestors were Irish, as their family name, O’Gorman, indicates. They had a long history of political activism against English imperialism and colonialism in Ireland: two O’Gorman brothers, my great-great-grandfather and his younger brother, were involved in the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, which was inspired by the French Revolution. They spent time in prison for their pains. In the 1820s, both were key members of Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association, which worked hard to end more than a century of legal, political and economic discrimination against the Irish Catholic majority. A nephew of theirs joined the failed uprising of 1848, which took place in the middle of the ‘Irish Potato Famine’, fled to Paris and Ottoman Istanbul, and then migrated to America, where eventually he became a member of the New York State Supreme Court.

My father’s maternal grandfather, Major Purcell O’Gorman, was elected to the House of Commons in 1874, sitting for the small city of Waterford, and becoming an important member of the Home Rule for Ireland bloc led by Charles Parnell. (He is said to have weighed more than 300 pounds and been the fattest man in the Mother of Parliaments.) But he married a Protestant Englishwoman. In those tolerant days, which would soon disappear under the reign of Pope Pius IX, the problems of mixed marriages across religious lines were sensibly solved by the local rule that sons followed the religion of their fathers, and daughters that of their mothers. So my grandmother was a Protestant, though her elder brother was a Catholic.

The lineage of my father’s father was almost the opposite. It was ‘Anglo-Irish’, referring to the Protestant descendants of the seventeenth-century Scottish and English invaders who seized the lands of the indigenous Irish, settled down as local gentry, and over many generations came to feel themselves to be rather Irish. There were many military officers in the lineage of my paternal grandfather, some of whom fought in the Napoleonic wars, served in Afghanistan and Burma, or were stationed in Hong Kong and India as the British Empire expanded.

My Anglo-Irish grandfather, who died long before I was born, also made his career in the British Imperial Army. (In those days an Anglo-Irish first-born son inherited the father’s properties, and younger sons usually became clergymen or military officers.) He was schooled at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, which specialized in creating engineers, and served in India, Burma and Malaya. In Penang, where my father was born, he built a clean-water reservoir which still functions today, as well as an up-to-date port. Today, one can still observe on the Penang Heights the remnants of the little Irish-style house he designed for his wife, daughter of Purcell O’Gorman, and my grandmother. He was among the first to become interested in cryptography, and during the Great War successfully headed the War Office’s secret code service. Sometimes I wonder if I inherited my lifelong addiction to crossword puzzles from his genes.

Much of this ancestral history I discovered only in the mid-1960s, when I began to

ponder over which citizenship to choose for myself and, finally, decided to apply for Irish citizenship. During my childhood, I had travelled abroad on my mother's British passport and later on my own British one without much thinking about it. In growing up, it was understood that we had soul and character, yet we were seldom troubled with identity. Identity was mainly connected with mathematics or the forensic investigation of a corpse.

There were political as well as personal reasons for my choice of Irish citizenship. The Vietnam War was raging, and in nearby Indonesia the anti-communist army had seized power and massacred about half a million communists and their sympathizers. These events hardened my leftist sentiments. The other reason was more personal. My brother and sister had already decided to maintain their British citizenship. I felt that I owed it to my father, who on my birth gave me the 'tribal' O'Gorman name, to apply for Eire citizenship.

Irish citizenship could have been easily achieved if I could prove that at least one of my parents or grand-parents had been born in the country. (My father was born in Penang, where my grandfather was stationed, and my mother in London.) Unfortunately, during the Easter Uprising of 1916, in which Irish nationalists revolted against the British, the rebels burned down the building where the Irish birth records were kept. Luckily, however, my mother had a friend whose hobby was researching the genealogy of families in the County of Waterford, and he dug up most of the information mentioned above. I took it to our local member of parliament and gained his help. So, in 1967, I received my first Irish passport.

My father was a restless, intelligent youngster. In 1912, at the age of twenty-one and before finishing his time at Cambridge, he volunteered to join the strange institution known as the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS). Originally set up by the British and French imperialists, it was designed to make sure that the Ch'ing dynasty paid the huge indemnities imposed on it after the 'successful' assault on Peking in 1860 during the Second Opium War. In effect it took control over the taxation of imperial China's maritime trade with the outside world. Over time, it diversified its membership to include Russians, Germans and even Japanese. Gradually, too, its outlook changed, so that it increasingly tried to serve what it saw as China's real interests, especially after the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1911 and the onset of the age of the warlords.

My father proved to be a first-class linguist and was always top of his class in the rigorous program the CMCS created to ensure its employees were fluent in spoken and written Chinese. He became very attached to China and the ordinary Chinese, if not to their governments. He also read widely in Chinese literature. After he died, my rather prudish mother was shocked to find among his books a set of volumes, with pictures, published by the first generation of (radical) Chinese sexologists, rebelling against forced prostitution and the miserable status of many Chinese women.

In 1920, after the Great War was over, he met the impressive figure of Stella Benson, a determined feminist, as well as a gifted modernist writer of novels, short stories and travel accounts. She had come to China in order to work at a school and a hospital set up by missionaries. They married while on leave in London, and for their honeymoon decided to drive across America. My father was especially fascinated by

American history. From there they sailed to China, which in turn fascinated Stella.

Stella died in China in 1933, aged only forty-one, leaving my father devastated. In 1935, however, he met my mother in London, married her, and took her back with him to China. My father hated sitting in big-city offices, so chose to spend most of his service years in remote posts where he could be his own energetic boss. From Amoy he had commanded a small fleet of speedboats to intercept cunning South Chinese smugglers. But now he had to face Yunnan's local warlord, who controlled the production and sale of opium. My mother enjoyed telling us children about the hills and mountains near Kunming covered with bright pink Oriental poppies. I like to think that it was the Irish in my father that made him so independent-minded and adventurous. My memories of him only go back to the time when he was already very ill, and in and out of hospitals. But he was always warm, loving and very amusing.

My English mother, *née* Veronica Bigham, was also an unusual woman, from a successful upper-middle-class professional background. Her paternal grandfather, John Bigham, came from a Lancaster merchant family, but made a very successful career as a jurist, specializing in commercial and maritime law. He became briefly famous as the judge who presided over the inquiry into the sinking of the *Titanic*. About that time he was made a baronet for his services and was titled Lord Mersey.

Her father, Trevor Bigham, was a studious 'second son' who won a scholarship to Eton College, England's most well-known 'public school' (actually, a boys-only private school), practised law, and then joined the Metropolitan Police. He eventually became the no. 2 man at Scotland Yard and received a knighthood, but he disliked the job and retired early. I remember him as a rather stiff, formal man, who did, however, teach me to do the harder crossword puzzles, for which one had to be widely read. He was married to Frances Tomlin, a semi-bohemian and a fine pianist. My sense is that the marriage was not very happy, and she died of cancer in 1927 when still quite young.

Her death may have been the main reason why my mother suffered from severe anorexia, so ill-understood at that time that she was removed from school to be tutored at home. In those days it was still fairly rare for a girl to go to Oxford or Cambridge. Late in her life she often said how unlucky she was to be born in 1905. If she had come into the world fifteen years later she would almost surely have become an Oxbridge student and had an independent career of her own. But she was a great reader of all kinds of books, and fluent in both French and German.

It would not be correct to say that my parents were intellectuals in any strict sense, but they jointly gave their children a home library unequalled in the town where we lived. They also encouraged in us the habit of reading about the lives, experiences and thoughts of people who spoke other languages, inhabited different classes and regions, and came from different historical periods. I remember reading, quite fascinated, my father's copies of English translations by Arthur Waley of the *Tale of Genji* and the *Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* when I was about fourteen or fifteen.

The habits of our house were unusual in Ireland in those days. We ate rice more than we ate the national vegetable, potatoes. We were served fish as often as meat, while our neighbours ate fish only on Fridays when Catholicism told them to suffer a bit for Jesus. The house was full of Chinese scrolls, pictures, clothes and costumes,

which we would often dress up in for fun. I remember how appalled I was when my mother showed me a beautifully embroidered cloth shoe smaller than my hand, and explained that it was worn by Chinese women, whose feet were agonizingly bound from childhood. My parents were both keen photographers, so the house had many albums of pictures taken especially in China, and in French-colonial Vietnam, where they would go for occasional holidays. One day, pointing to a photo of a very beautiful little Chinese girl about two years old, my mother said, 'This is Celia Chen, your first best friend.'

After I was born, it was decided to hire an amah to look after me. They found a young Vietnamese girl, with a small boy of her own, who had left an unpleasant arranged marriage to find work in Kunming. She became very close to my mother and was taken to Ireland when the family went home on leave. Years later, the locals remembered her very well. She, a Catholic who spoke French, always wore elegant traditional Vietnamese clothes, with a black turban, teeth carefully lacquered, and a wonderful smile. She used to go to church on Sundays in this attire. My mother once told me that the first words I spoke were Vietnamese, not English. It is sad that children, so quick to pick up languages, also quickly forget them.

When my father decided to take us all home in 1941, this young Vietnamese woman, whose name was Ti-hai (Miss no. 2 said her parents, concerned mainly with sons), was all set to go with us, because she enjoyed seeing the world. But California, our landing point, was drumming up racist anti-Asian policies, and the American consulate in Shanghai refused to give her a visa, so she had to return to Vietnam. After the war, my mother tried to find her through diplomatic channels, but without success.

My first memory of schooling dates from about 1942. My father was in and out of hospitals in San Francisco, and my baby sister was born in 1943. My mother was too exhausted caring for her husband and the new baby to cope with two energetic little boys who, at that time, quarrelled constantly. So we were packed off to The Country School, a boarding school run by two grim Scandinavian women outside Los Gatos, at the edge of present-day Silicon Valley. The school is still there, but the town has become so big that today it's near the centre. America was quite unfamiliar to us, we missed our parents badly, and we were often physically punished. I had the misfortune to wet my bed, and the school rules forced me almost every day to miss a class so I could wash my sheets, for which I was mercilessly teased and bullied. I do not remember learning anything there.

After the family returned to Waterford and managed to buy a house at the edge of the town, my brother and I were put into a Quaker primary school. Cars were then a rarity in our town, so we went to school in a donkey-cart driven by my mother's elderly and extremely kind gardener. I had my first experience of a traffic accident when I rushed out of the school gate and ran into just such a donkey-cart which happened to be passing by. Had it been a car I would probably have been killed, but as it was, I only broke my shoulder-bone.

When we boys were given bicycles to go to school, we were introduced to the class struggle and religious conflict. We had to ride down through a Catholic neighbourhood of relatively poor people. The boys there took us to be snobby, half-English and Protestant, and were usually ready for a fight. The way down was not that

bad, as we could ride very fast and arm ourselves with hockey-sticks. But going home uphill was when we ‘got it’ from these lads. At the time I did not understand why we were hated, but it was a useful lesson in the effects of religious, class and racial bigotry. Today, I don’t remember much about the Quaker school except that I was so afraid of a red-faced mathematics teacher that I often played truant, lying to mother. I was also a member of a little gang headed by a tough, athletic girl called Fiona.

The most important piece of luck for me was another key decision made by my mother. Irish law made it compulsory for small children to start learning either Irish (nationalism) or Latin (Catholicism). My mother saw no point in my learning a nearly extinct language spoken fluently only in the far west of the country, so Latin it was. She found a private tutor for me, Mrs Webster, a wonderful middle-aged woman who was the best teacher I have ever had. It may be hard to believe, but she made me fall in love with Latin, and realize that I had, from the start, a gift for languages.

Later I asked my mother: ‘Why Latin? It is even more extinct than Irish.’ Though she did not know Latin herself, she knew the right answer: ‘Latin is the mother of most Western European languages – French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian – so if you know Latin, you will find all these languages easy. Besides, Latin has a great literature which every well-educated person should know.’

It turned out, however, that my mother had another reason for her decision. She believed that Irish schools of those days were not very good, and she wanted her two boys to go to a fine boarding-school in England which might help them get into a good ‘public school’ and later a university. In these educational institutions, Latin (and Greek) were essential elements in the curriculum.

So off we went, myself first and my younger brother a year later. It was quite an experience to go to England. We had to take a steamship for seven hours across the notoriously rough Irish Sea, with people vomiting all over the place. We would land at the little Welsh seaport, Fishguard, at about 2 a.m., trying to keep warm with cups of hot cocoa or Marmite, and then leave by the 4 a.m. train for London, getting there around ten o’clock. After a day or two at grandfather’s house, we would be sent by train to Scaitcliffe, our little school southeast of London.

I was only at this new school for two years, but they were intense because it specialized in ‘cramming’ little boys to get into the top ‘public schools’. The pressure also came from my mother, who told us that since she was a widow living mainly on a pension, we would not be able to go to one of these elite schools unless we could win scholarships. I duly took the nationally competitive exam for thirteen vacant scholarships at Eton (where my maternal grandfather had also won a scholarship towards the end of the nineteenth century), and to general astonishment came in at no. 12. My younger brother, more energetic and competitive, took the examination later and did much better than I.

Eton was a strange place for me. The vast majority of the pupils came from the English aristocracy and very rich business or banking families, with a scattering of brown-skinned ‘princes’ from the ex-colonies and the living protectorates. The scholarship boys mostly came from middle-class families; they lived together in a separate building, ate together, and had a special ‘medieval’ outfit they were obliged to wear. The majority, who lived in handsome ‘Houses’, we met only in class. These

boys, whose backgrounds guaranteed them a comfortable or powerful future, saw no need to work hard, and openly despised the scholarship boys as ‘bookworms’ who were socially well below them. The scholarship boys, mostly intelligent, responded by mocking the ‘stupidity’ and snobbishness of their enemies. They had their own (intellectual) snobbishness, too, and bonded closely. I had never been in classes with so many intelligent boys.

It was a strange place in other ways too. Even in winter, we had to get up very early, take ice-cold showers, and then go to our first class before finally being allowed to eat terrible English breakfasts. Class followed class every morning and afternoon, interrupted only by regimented sports and evenings full of homework. One reason for this intensity, we came to realize, was the teachers’ firm belief in the old saying ‘The Devil finds work for idle hands’. They knew that in an all-boy environment, hormone-tossed teenagers would fall into different kinds of love and sexual relations unless they were constantly monitored and kept physically exhausted.

The curriculum was especially tough for the scholarship boys, who were aware they would probably have to win scholarships again in order to get into Oxford or Cambridge. But it was still quite old-fashioned. The core element was always language, Latin, Greek, French, German, and later a little Cold War Russian. But languages were backed by classes in ancient history, art history, bits of archaeology, and a lot of comparative modern history, with Britain at its heart. No anthropology, no sociology, no political science. Aside from the above, there was a lot of mathematics and, rather feebly, smatterings of chemistry, biology and physics. But no sex education, of course.

I remember only two teachers. One was Raef Payne, a young man who taught English literature and had the temerity to introduce us to T. S. Eliot (by then an old man, and a Nobel Prize winner). This was our only taste of post-Edwardian literature at all. The usual English literature syllabus mainly covered up to the late nineteenth century, and the teaching of poetry in class stuck to certain set patterns like rhyme with limited length. It was highly unusual then to be taught the poetry of Eliot, which did not follow the standard conventions. The young English teacher also managed the annual school play, usually Shakespeare, and handled well the whistles and screams that always came when a boy was assigned to play any of the female roles. ‘Don’t be idiots,’ he would say. ‘In Shakespeare’s time all actors of female parts were boys like you.’

The other memorable teacher was our intimidating Head Master, Sir Robert Birley, who, surprisingly, taught an excellent class on poetry that greatly increased my appreciation of verse. Rather than simply comparing several poems and analyzing their different lengths or rhyming styles, he would pick a poem by Kipling, for example, analyse its composition and explain its historical background. It was also he who taught me that beauty and virtue need not be the same and that poets who wrote splendid poems were not necessarily wonderful people.

In this environment, my brother and I moved in different directions. He concentrated on modern history, mainly but not entirely European, while I focused on language and literature. The eye-opener for me was a systematic, if conservative, study of French literature, from late medieval times up to the end of the nineteenth century.

It is a notorious fact that French and English are the two European languages hardest to translate into each other. I felt the difficulty right away, and was enthralled by being allowed to enter a completely un-English world.

Rather massive reading in the literature of antiquity had a different effect. It felt like bathing in two grand non-Christian civilizations. Because we scholarship boys were regarded as the school's intellectual elite, we were allowed to read almost anything, even erotic passages, though the teachers often skipped them out of embarrassment. The ancient cultures we were trained to admire and the contemporary culture into which we were being educated were miles apart. While we were taught to be ashamed of, and hide, our bodies, the statues of ancient Greece were almost entirely and unashamedly nude, and very beautiful. Homosexual behaviour in 1950s England was still a criminal offence, and could put people in prison for years, but ancient mythology was full of stories about gods falling in love with human boys or young men. Ancient history offered plenty of examples of young lovers going bravely to war together and dying in each other's arms. Then there was a gorgeous goddess of love, and a naughty little boy-god with a bow and arrow to back her up. Christianity seemed dull and narrow-minded in contrast.

One other notable aspect was that we were seriously taught how to write. We had to practise writing poetry of our own in Latin, and translate English poems into Latin. We also studied carefully the great masters of English prose from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. Finally, we had to memorize and publicly recite many poems in different languages. To this day, I still have in my head poems in Latin, Greek, French, German, Russian and even Javanese.

I did not know it at the time, but I was lucky to be among almost the last cohort to have these experiences. By the late 1950s, the practice of memorizing poems had almost died out. Classical studies in the old broad sense, considered as the basis for a humane education, was also being pushed aside by subjects thought more useful for careers, the professions and modern life in general. Moreover, coarse Anglo-American was becoming the only 'world language', at a great loss to the planet.

I did only one thing at Eton of which I am still proud. The teachers regularly used corporal punishment, which was supposed to 'toughen us up'. Worse, however, was that the boys in the senior class were permitted to beat smaller and younger boys. With the help of some close friends, I persuaded my classmates to break with this tradition. When we became seniors we promised all the young boys that there would be no more beatings – naturally, we were, for a while, quite popular.

Strict as Eton was, it made plenty of room for holidays. When I won the scholarship to Eton, my loving aunt took me to Paris for a week of sightseeing. I bought a French comic at a kiosk near our hotel, and in it came across a scene in which Tarzan was making Jane some sexy jungle clothes, which surprised me very much. I had always assumed that Jane sewed her own clothes, never imagining that Tarzan would do such a thing. When I raised this with my aunt she laughed aloud, so I had to fight back a bit: 'The French have the best designers in the world, and they are all men!' Later on, I went bicycling in Holland with some schoolmates, and spent summer holidays with my mother's best friends, one who lived in Austria, and another who kept a villa near the border between Switzerland and Italy. So I had plenty of

opportunities for adolescent fun outside Ireland and England.

If Etonians could make brief trips abroad, high-ranking foreigners could also visit Eton. In June 1953 came the spectacular coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, to which all monarchs or their representatives were invited. Japan's Emperor Hirohito was not acceptable to British public opinion because of his role in the Pacific War, but Akihito, his very young son, was deemed fit to attend. We scholarship boys were told that Akihito would visit Eton, and that we should be well behaved and respectful. Actually, we were rather hostile in principle, since the war had ended only recently. But when Akihito arrived we were stunned. He was a small young man, only a little older than us, wearing simple dark clothes and walking between two gigantic Scottish soldiers, almost as if he had been arrested. He was almost silent, timid, insecure and very gentle. Suddenly, many of us felt that in some ways he was just like us.

In my senior year at Eton, I won a scholarship to go to Cambridge University. In those days, youngsters studied intensively to get in, but once there they were not expected to study very hard, and most of them (then mainly boys) spent their time drinking, playing cards or sports, going to the movies and looking for girls. Drugs, I think, did not feature at the time. Later, in America, I was surprised to find quite the opposite: high-school students do little work, while college students have to study hard if they are to do well in later life.

Cambridge in the 1950s was still quite conservative. Sociology had only recently been introduced as a discipline and was highly controversial. There was no political science, and anthropology was still in its infancy. The scholarship I had received was in the field of classical studies, but I soon decided I should switch to a field more useful for the future. Since Cambridge boasted a number of world-famous economists – Keynes, who already had passed away by the time I arrived, had studied and taught there – I chose to study economics. I quickly discovered that I had no talent for the subject, was easily bored, and did not do well in the final examinations for the first year. Rather weakly, I resolved to return to classical studies, learning from my seniors that the final examinations for the bachelor's degree were easier than the competitive examination I had taken to get into Cambridge in the first place.

So I spent most of my last two years in college reading whatever interested me. Mostly literature and history. I still have the notebooks in which I recorded everything I read. Though embarrassed by some of my choices, I am still impressed by the sheer number of books listed. Maybe this behaviour stemmed partly from my social immaturity: I was a shy boy with no social graces. I did not drink much, hated dancing (pre-rock-and-roll days), and had no idea how to talk to girls.

But Cambridge was important to me for two quite different reasons. Even though it was located in a small provincial town, it had what one could call an art-house repertory cinema. This was a revelation to me. At Eton we were not allowed to go alone to the movies, and in Ireland the available films were mostly westerns and gangster pictures. Now, in college, I was offered only the international best. I was overwhelmed by Japanese cinema, then at the height of its global prestige: Kurosawa, Mizoguchi and Ozu, of course, but also other directors of the same generation. This is where my lifelong love affair with Japanese culture began. Revolutionary Soviet films from the 1920s and 1930s were another revelation, though not so sharp, since I had

started learning Russian at Eton with the hope of reading Turgenev, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Goncharov and Leskov (my favourites) in the original. It was a refreshing experience to compare what I read in Russian novels with what I saw in revolutionary Soviet cinema. France, Italy, Germany and Sweden (Ingmar Bergman) were also well represented. One of the best things about the Cambridge art-house cinema was that it showed a lot of black-and-white films, which came to form the base of my cinematic aesthetic. Even today, I find black-and-white much more real and alive than colour.

Frequent attendance at this cinema also initiated my political awareness. In those days, after every film, the audience had to stand to attention while the national anthem was played to accompany Technicolor images of poor young Queen Elizabeth on horseback. This was a real ordeal. With tears in my eyes from *Tokyo Story*, or fire in my blood from *The Battleship Potemkin*, it was torture to endure this authoritarian monarchical nonsense. Quite soon, I learned how to make a dash for the exit just as the national anthem started, with plenty of irate patriots ready to grab me or hit me on the way out. So I became a naive but committed republican.

My second formative Cambridge experience occurred during the Suez Crisis of 1956, when British and French troops, colluding with the Israelis, invaded Egypt to block General Nasser's attempt to nationalize the body that regulated international traffic along the great French-built canal. I was not in the least interested in this crisis. However, one afternoon, as I was walking back to my room across one of the university's athletic fields, I noticed a small crowd of brown-skinned students making indignant protest speeches. So I stopped by to listen, simply out of idle curiosity. Suddenly, out of the blue, the protestors were assaulted by a gang of big English student bullies, most of them athletes. They were singing 'God Save the Queen'! To me this was incomprehensible, and reprehensible.

The protestors, mostly Indians and Ceylonese, were much smaller and thinner, and so stood no chance. Without thinking, I tried to intervene to help them, only to have my spectacles snatched off my face and smashed in the mud. I had never been so angry in my life. For the first time I had encountered English racism and imperialism. When, many years later, I came to write about nationalism for an English audience in *Imagined Communities*, I poured out, in the form of sarcasm, irony and innuendo, some of the rage I still felt. This was surely one reason why later I was attracted both to Marxism and to non-European anti-colonial nationalism.

Travel was also an expected part of university life. I visited Generalissimo Franco's Spain with friends and had the unusual experience of being arrested for indecent behaviour. We had gone swimming off the north coast in the usual English boy's swimming trunks. When we returned to land to dry off, two members of the Guardia Civil ran up and arrested us for showing naked chests and backs. Pleading that we were innocent tourists, we finally persuaded the policemen to let us go, but not before they had marched us down to a clothing shop where we had to buy hideous one-piece swim-suits, covering our bodies from the shins to the neck. My first experience of puritanical dictatorship!

Another strange experience occurred just after the bloody Soviet invasion of Hungary. The British Communist Party had chartered a train to take hundreds of

young communists to the famous International Youth Festival of 1957 in Moscow. But general indignation over Hungary had affected the cadres, so that large numbers left the party, and of course pulled out of the trip. Since the BCP had invested a lot of money in the venture, they were forced to offer tickets to more or less anyone, regardless of party membership. My brother (by then at Oxford) and I leapt at this extraordinary chance to see fabled Moscow, the capital of the communist world. The package included free tickets to the opera, the ballet, the museums and many famous historical sites. The BCP leaders were not interested in having outsiders attend the endless political meetings, so I had a marvellous week with Mussorgsky, Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov. I also managed to practise the little spoken Russian I had acquired.

The time finally came for me to leave Cambridge. My senior friends had told me that the examination for a BA in Classics was easier than the entry examination three years earlier. So I was given useless first-class honours. There followed a difficult six months at home. My brother tells me that I actually rejected an offer to teach classical studies at the University of Edinburgh. That this incident never registered in my memory was a sign of how little I wanted to pursue the Classics, or indeed to stay in Britain.

But I had no idea of what work I should pursue. My mother did her best to help. She had set her heart on my becoming a British diplomat, but I had no intention of ever working as a civil servant, let alone for the declining Empire. She then used the network of my father's surviving friends (with commercial interests in the Far East) to look for a job for me in business. This prospect was even more unwelcome. As the months passed she became more and more impatient, and the tension between us steadily increased.

Then, once again, I had a stroke of luck. I had kept in touch with a number of my Eton scholarship friends, and one day received a letter from one of them, Richard Kennaway, who held a position at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He told me that, while waiting for a summons from the British colonial service the following year, he had found temporary employment as a teaching assistant in Cornell University's department of government (i.e. political science). Would I be interested in taking his place? I knew my mother would be supportive, if only to get me out of the house and into a job, even a temporary one. But I had never taken a single course in politics, and had no teaching experience at all. With cynical laughter, my friend replied that this would not matter. American students would be impressed with my English accent, and if I read intensively I could stay ahead of them by a week or two.

At this point I talked with my brother, who had long been very political, and who knew much more about America than I did. Definitely I should go, he said. I should also read the newspapers and watch some television. A civil war was about to break out in Indonesia, where the local communist party (PKI) had the largest membership in the world outside the communist-ruled regions. However, the CIA was backing anti-communist warlords, and conservative regional politicians were trying to overthrow Soekarno, the left-leaning nationalist president. By chance, Cornell's department of government employed a young professor, George Kahin, who was the world's leading expert on contemporary Indonesia, and had been an active supporter of the anti-colonial armed struggle of 1945–49.

So I decided to give Cornell a try, and Kennaway quickly secured me a post as a teaching assistant. I was just twenty-one years old.

The trip to the United States was something special. I took the huge liner Queen Mary, on one of her last five-day Atlantic crossings. On landing in New York, I took the train to Ithaca. It was early January 1958, and the town was waist-deep in snow.

There is no need to recall all the good luck that befell me in the first twenty-one years of my life. My only real, though major, misfortune, was losing my poor father when he was only fifty-three years old, and I myself just nine. But there is perhaps a larger picture, to which I have alluded only in passing. I would be inclined to say that this picture had both geographical and temporal aspects.

Geographically, I was being prepared (without realizing it) for a cosmopolitan and comparative outlook on life. On the brink of puberty I had already lived in Yunnan, California, Colorado, independent Ireland, and England. I had been raised by an Irish father, an English mother and a Vietnamese nurse. French was a (secret) family language; I had fallen in love with Latin; and my parents' library contained books by Chinese, Japanese, French, Russian, Italian, American and German authors.

There was also a useful feeling of being marginal. In California I was laughed at for my English accent, in Waterford for my American idioms, and in England for my Irishisms. One can read this negatively, as indicating a life without roots, without a firm identity. But one can also read it positively, by saying that I had multiple attachments, to Ireland, to England (in some ways), and, through literature and cinema, to many other places around the globe. Hence, later on, it was easy for me to become deeply attached, through language, to Indonesia, Siam and the Philippines.

Although the Thai and Indonesian languages have no linkages and belong to quite different linguistic ancestries, both have long had a fatalistic image of a frog who lives all its life under half a coconut shell – commonly used as a bowl in these countries. Sitting quietly under the shell, before long the frog begins to feel that the coconut bowl encloses the entire universe. The moral judgement in the image is that the frog is narrow-minded, provincial, stay-at-home and self-satisfied for no good reason. For my part, I stayed nowhere long enough to settle down in one place, unlike the proverbial frog.

I should explain here why I prefer to use 'Siam' rather than 'Thailand'. The traditional name of the country was always Siam – which explains why (in English) we speak of 'Siamese twins' and 'Siamese cats'. It was changed to 'Thailand' in the late 1930s by the nationalist military dictator Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram. After the end of the Second World War, civilians were briefly returned to power, and reintroduced 'Siam'. In 1947, the military seized power again, and held it for the next twenty-five (Cold War) years. This time 'Thailand' was thoroughly institutionalized.

Controversy over the name still continues. Critics of 'Thailand', mostly liberals and moderate leftists, dislike the identification of the land with the 'Thai', who are only one of the over fifty ethnic groups in the country, though the dominant one. They believe that the name encourages narrow-minded and repressive attitudes towards minorities, especially the Malay Muslims in the far south. Those who dislike 'Siam' argue that it is too identified with the pre-modern, undemocratic, feudal era. I share the

sentiment of the former critics and thus use 'Siam' as the country's name, with some exceptions for well-established names of organizations.

I grew up in a time when an older world was coming to an end. I took my fine, old-fashioned education for granted, having no idea that I was a member of almost the last cohort to benefit from it. This education was designed, quite conservatively, to reproduce, if you like, a bearer of an upper-middle-class tradition. With this kind of general education, a boy could still expect eventually to become a senior civil servant, a member of the political oligarchy, or a respected teacher in the old style.

But the peaceful social revolution inaugurated by the postwar Labour governments was to create a mass of new high schools and universities much better adapted to the Cold War, American domination, commercial globalization and the decline of Empire. Youngsters needed to learn economics, business management, mass communications, sociology, modern architecture and science (from astrophysics to professional palaeontology). There was little use anymore for amateurism. Even the language was changing. The kind of old-fashioned BBC English I had learned to speak was under attack as class-ridden, and was gradually being replaced by more demotic versions. No one any longer saw much point in memorizing poetry at all, let alone poetry in languages other than English.

Schools were changing too. The era of regular beatings, by teachers and older boys, was coming to an end. All-boy schools were under increasing democratic pressure to become coeducational, with the obvious consequences both positive and negative. I think that I was in the next to last cohort educated (and self-educated) through books, radio and black-and-white films. No television, almost no Hollywood, no video games, no internet. Not even typing, which I only started to learn in America after reaching adulthood.

In a dim way, I could even sense this change in my own family. My brother was educated the same way as I had been. But my sister, seven years younger, and eventually a graduate from Oxford, was part of a new world just coming into being. Even between me and my more politically advanced and intelligent brother there was a marked difference. One measure of this was America. Until I actually went to the US, I had absolutely no interest in the place at all. I knew no American history, read almost none of the great American novelists, was increasingly bored or annoyed by American movies, and, as an ardent classical piano player, had only scorn for American pop music, about which I knew nothing. My brother, however, who had to endure my banging away at Bach and Schubert, retaliated with fortissimo playing of records of Latin American rumbas, and later Elvis Presley. I have to admit that even today, in spite of long residence in the US, many wonderful American friends, and an attachment to Black music of all sorts, I still feel, if not alienated, at least detached from American society and culture. But ... my father had left behind a 1920s edition of *Moby Dick*, fantastically illustrated by the brave communist Rockwell Kent. Herman Melville is still my no. 1 great novelist.

There is one other, more professional, sense in which I was part of a 'last cohort'. I arrived in the US in 1958, just before American university life underwent a fundamental change, analogous to what occurred in the UK. In the early and middle 1960s, the great machine that we call 'theory' was beginning to become visible. It