

AN  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## PREFACE

THE autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought. I have written this book to tell what I think worth telling about the story of mine.

Because an autobiography has no right to exist unless it is *un livre de bonne foi*, I have written candidly, at times disapprovingly, about men whom I admire and love. If any of these should resent what I have written, I wish him to know that my rule in writing books is never to name a man except *honoris causa*, and that naming any one personally known to me is my way of thanking him for what I owe to his friendship, or his teaching, or his example, or all three.

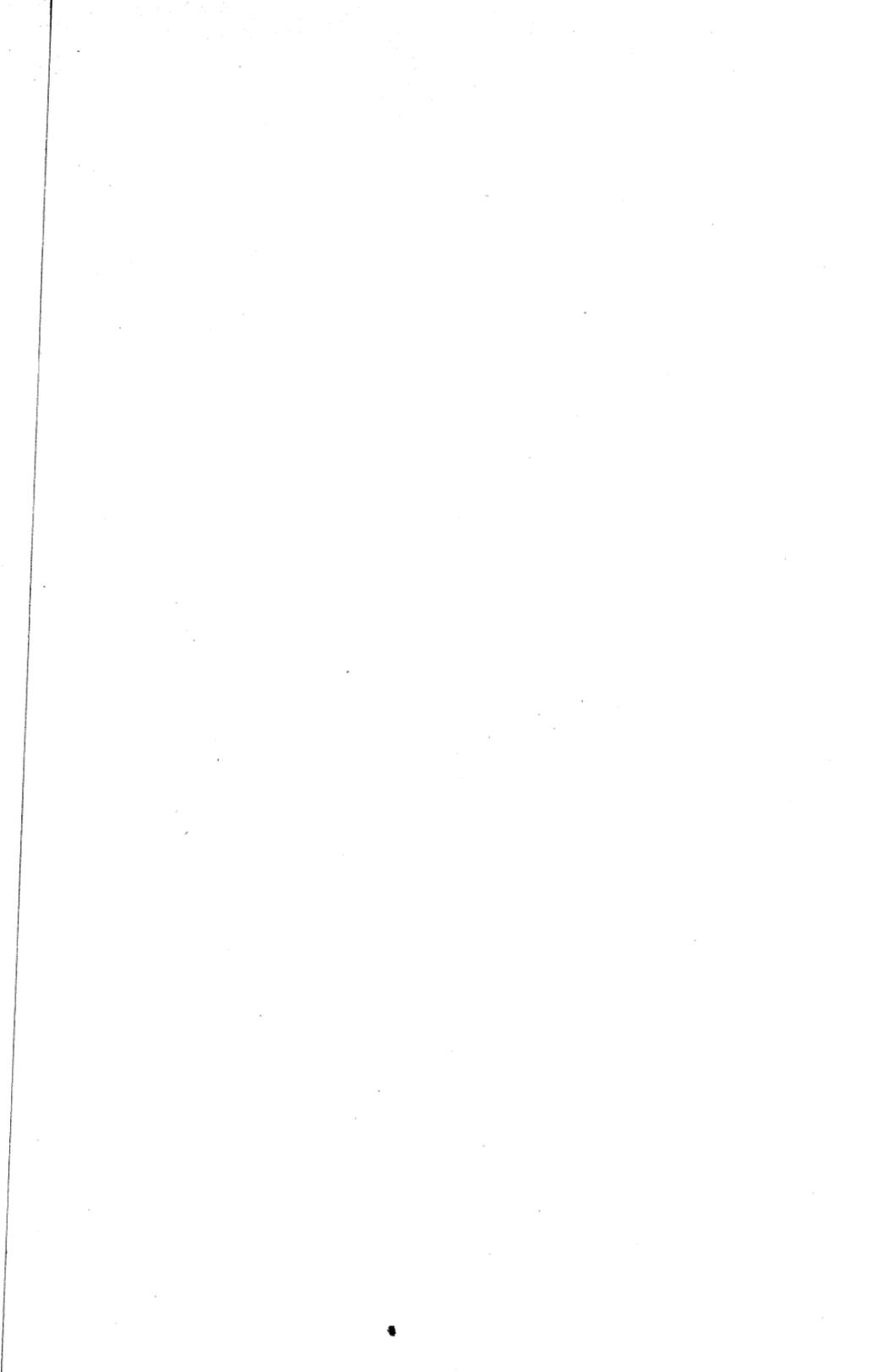
R. G. C.

CONISTON,  
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## CONTENTS

— I. Bent of a Twig . . . . .	I
II. Spring Frost . . . . .	7
— III. Minute Philosophers . . . . .	15
IV. Inclination of a Sapling . . . . .	22
V. Question and Answer . . . . .	29
— VI. The Decay of Realism . . . . .	44
VII. The History of Philosophy . . . . .	53
← VIII. The Need for a Philosophy of History . . . . .	77
IX. The Foundations of the Future . . . . .	89
* X. History as the Self-knowledge of Mind . . . . .	107
XI. Roman Britain . . . . .	120
o XII. Theory and Practice . . . . .	147



## I

### BENT OF A TWIG

UNTIL I was thirteen years old I lived at home and was taught by my father. Lessons occupied only two or three hours each morning; otherwise he left me to my own devices, sometimes helping me with what I chose to do, more often leaving me to work it out for myself.

It was his doing that I began Latin at four and Greek at six; but my own that I began, about the same time, to read everything I could find about the natural sciences, especially geology, astronomy, and physics; to recognize rocks, to know the stars, and to understand the working of pumps and locks and other mechanical appliances up and down the house. It was my father who gave me lessons in ancient and modern history, illustrated with relief maps in papier-mâché made by boiling down newspapers in a saucepan; but my first lesson in what I now regard as my own subject, the history of thought, was the discovery, in a friend's house a few miles away, of a battered seventeenth-century book, wanting cover and title-page, and full of strange doctrines about meteorology and geology and planetary motions. It must have been a compendium of Descartes' *Principia*, to judge by what I recall of its statements about vortices; I was about nine when I found it, and already knew enough about the corresponding modern theories to appreciate the contrast which it offered. It let me into the secret which

modern books had been keeping from me, that the natural sciences have a history of their own, and that the doctrines they teach on any given subject, at any given time, have been reached not by some discoverer penetrating to the truth after ages of error, but by the gradual modification of doctrines previously held; and will at some future date, unless thinking stops, be themselves no less modified. I will not say that all this became clear to me at that childish age; but at least I became aware from reading this old book that science is less like a hoard of truths, ascertained piecemeal, than an organism which in the course of its history undergoes more or less continuous alteration in every part.

During the same years I was constantly watching the work of my father and mother, and the other professional painters who frequented their house, and constantly trying to imitate them; so that I learned to think of a picture not as a finished product exposed for the admiration of virtuosi, but as the visible record, lying about the house, of an attempt to solve a definite problem in painting, so far as the attempt has gone. I learned what some critics and aestheticians never know to the end of their lives, that no 'work of art' is ever finished, so that in that sense of the phrase there is no such thing as a 'work of art' at all. Work ceases upon the picture or manuscript, not because it is finished, but because sending-in day is at hand, or because the printer is clamorous for copy, or because 'I am sick of working at this thing' or 'I can't see what more I can do to it'. In myself I found less aptitude

for painting than for literature; from an early age I wrote incessantly, in verse and prose, lyrics and fragments of epics, stories of adventure and romance, descriptions of imaginary countries and bogus scientific and archaeological treatises. A prolific habit in regard to such things was encouraged, demanded indeed, by the family custom of producing in manuscript a monthly magazine, circulated among a few friends and relations. My mother was a good pianist, and used to play for an hour every day before breakfast; sometimes in the evening as well, to a surreptitious audience of children sitting on the stairs in the dark; in this way I got to know all Beethoven's sonatas and most of Chopin, for these were her favourite composers, though not mine. But I have never been able to master the piano for myself.

My father had plenty of books, and allowed me to read in them as I pleased. Among others, he had kept the books of classical scholarship, ancient history, and philosophy which he had used at Oxford. As a rule I left these alone; but one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its spine 'Kant's Theory of Ethics'. It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave

of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical, but whose meaning baffled me. Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. It was not like the common boyish intention to 'be an engine-driver when I grow up', for there was no desire in it; I did not, in any natural sense of the word, 'want' to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.

There came upon me by degrees, after this, a sense of being burdened with a task whose nature I could not define except by saying, 'I must think.' What I was to think about I did not know; and when, obeying this command, I fell silent and absent-minded in company, or sought solitude in order to think without interruption, I could not have said, and still cannot say, what it was that I actually thought. There were no particular questions that I asked myself; there were no special objects upon which I directed my mind; there was only a formless and aimless intellectual disturbance, as if I were wrestling with a fog.

I know now that this is what always happens when I am in the early stages of work on a problem. Until the problem has gone a long way towards being solved, I do not know what it is; all I am conscious of is this vague perturbation of mind, this sense of being

worried about I cannot say what. I know now that the problems of my life's work were taking, deep down inside me, their first embryonic shape. But any one who observed me must have thought, as my elders did think, that I had fallen into a habit of loafing, and lost the alertness and quickness of wit that had been so noticeable in my early childhood. My only defence against this opinion, since I did not know and therefore could not explain what was happening to me, was to cover these fits of abstraction with some bodily activity, trifling enough not to distract my attention from my inward wrestling. I was a neat-fingered boy, skilful at making all sorts of things; active in walking, bicycling, or rowing, and thoroughly practised in sailing a boat. So when the fit was upon me I would set myself to make something quite uninteresting, like a regiment of paper men, or wander aimlessly in the woods or on the mountains, or sail all day in a dead calm. It was painful to be laughed at for playing with paper men; but the alternative, to explain why I did it, was impossible.

Whether it was this growing idleness that made my father send me to school, I am not sure. In any case he was too poor to pay for it himself, and my school bills (and later my Oxford bills) were paid by the generosity of a rich friend. Thus, at thirteen, I was put into a preparatory school with the aim of competing for a scholarship, and became acquainted with the treadmill on which middle-class boys in this country earn their own living by competitive examination, beginning at an age when their working-class fellow

children are debarred by law from exposing themselves in the labour market. My father's friend would, I am sure, as willingly have paid two hundred pounds a year for me as one; but to myself at least it was a point of honour that I should win scholarships, if only to justify the spending upon me of all that money; and, even had it not been, the specialism which is one chief vice of English education would not have spared me. The ghost of a silly seventeenth-century squabble still haunts our classrooms, infecting teachers and pupils with the lunatic idea that studies must be either 'classical' or 'modern'. I was equally well fitted to specialize in Greek and Latin, or in modern history and languages (I spoke and read French and German almost as easily as English), or in the natural sciences; and nothing would have afforded my mind its proper nourishment except to study equally all three; but my father's teaching had given me a good deal more Greek and Latin than most boys of my age possessed; and since I had to specialize in something I specialized in these and became a 'classical' scholar.

## II

### SPRING FROST

IN that capacity I went on, a year later, to Rugby; a school which then had a high reputation, owing (as I found out in time) to the genius of one first-rate teacher, Robert Whitelaw, a man who touched nothing that he did not adorn. Because one of my five years there was spent in his form, it would be untrue to say that my time at Rugby was altogether wasted. And there were other things. I was in the Sixth Form for three years and head of my house for two; thus for the first time I tasted the pleasure of doing administrative work, and learnt once for all how to do it. In addition to Whitelaw, whose obviously sincere assumption that you knew as much as he did stimulated his pupils to incredible feats, I worked for a time under one other good teacher, C. P. Hastings, from whom I learnt a good deal of modern history. Among those of the other masters who did not have to teach me I made a few good friends; and with my contemporaries my relations were always of the happiest.

These were benefits conferred by the school itself: others I obtained rather in spite of it. I discovered Bach, learned to play the violin, studied harmony and counterpoint and orchestration, and composed a great deal of trash. I taught myself to read Dante and made the acquaintance of many other poets, in various languages, hitherto unknown to me. These unauthorized readings (for which, in summer time, I used to

perch in a willow-tree overhanging the Avon) are my happiest recollection of Rugby; but not my most vivid.

That description must apply to the pigsty conditions of our daily life and the smell of filth constantly in our nostrils. Second to that comes the frightful boredom of being taught things (and things which ought to have been frightfully interesting) by weary, absent-minded or incompetent masters; then the torment of living by a time-table expressly devised to fill up the day with scraps and snippets of occupation in such a manner that no one could get down to a job of work and make something of it, and, in particular, devised to prevent one from doing that 'thinking' in which, long ago, I had recognized my own vocation.

Nor did I get any compensating satisfaction out of the organized games which constituted the real religion of the school; for at football in my first year I suffered an injury to the knee which the surgery of those days rendered incurable. This was a crucial point in my school life. The orthodox theory of public-school athletics is that they distract the adolescent from sex. They do not do that; but they give him a most necessary outlet for the energies he is not allowed to use in the class-room. Apart from a few eccentrics like Whitelaw, the public school masters of my acquaintance were like the schoolmaster in the *Dunciad*:

Plac'd at the door of learning, youth to guide,  
We never suffer it to stand too wide.

The boys were nothing if not teachable. They soon saw that any exhibition of interest in their studies

was a sure way to get themselves disliked, not by their contemporaries, but by the masters; and they were not long in acquiring that pose of boredom towards learning and everything connected with it which is notoriously part of the English public school man's character. But they must have some compensation for their frustrated and inhibited intellects; and this they got in athletics, where nobody minds how hard you work, and the triumphs of the football field make amends for the miseries of the class-room. If I had retained the use of my limbs I should no doubt have become an athlete and stopped worrying my head about the crack of that door and what was hidden behind it. As it was, I could not reconcile myself to the starvation imposed on me by the teaching to which I was subjected; and as time went on I learnt to devote my time more and more to music and to reading in subjects of my own choice like medieval Italian history or the early French poets, not because I preferred them to Thucydides and Catullus, but because I could work at them unhampered by masters.

These habits were not undiscovered, and I became a rebel, more or less declared, against the whole system of teaching. I did not rebel against the disciplinary system, and with my housemaster (my immediate superior in the disciplinary hierarchy) I remained on excellent terms; I did not even neglect my work to the extent of incurring punishment for idleness; but my masters were quite able to discern the difference between my abilities and my performance, and were

justifiably annoyed by it; especially, I seemed to notice, when they had to send up my compositions, or as we called them 'copies', to the headmaster for distinction. I could not prevent that from happening; for my plan was ca' canny, not sabotage, and I would not wilfully write bad 'copies'. But I could and did refuse to enter for the prizes which decorated the career of a good boy. To make this refusal more pointed, I would enter now and then for a prize that had nothing to do with my proper subjects of study: one for English literature, which I remember with gratitude because it introduced me to Dryden, one for astronomy, which entailed many nights with the four-inch equatorial and the transit instrument in the school observatory, one for musical theory and composition, and one (which I failed to win) for reading aloud.

The much-tried form-master of the Upper Bench made a bid for revenge when I proposed to enter for a scholarship at Oxford. He refused me leave to sit. I had no chance of winning one, he said, and he did not wish to have the school disgraced. I reported this to my father, who was an irascible man and wrote to the headmaster. My first choice was University College; to give myself another chance, I entered for a second 'group' of colleges, and thus spent two successive weeks inhabiting college rooms in Oxford. The first examination I took very seriously; in the second I decided to enjoy myself, and behaved disgracefully. In the verse paper I wrote neither Latin nor Greek, but the English verses permitted to those whose clas-

sics were shaky. In the 'general' paper I spent my whole time answering a question about Turner and another about Mozart; and what boyish nonsense I put into my essay I dare not try to recollect. But at the *viva voce* examination they asked me what I should do if I had to choose between the best scholarship in that group and an inferior one at University; and when I answered that University was my father's College and that I should go there if I was offered any scholarship at all, they did not seem like men who thought the worse of me.

But my form-master had the last word. There was a leaving exhibition confined to natives of my home county; and I told him, as the proper person, that I wished to enter for it. Time went by and nothing happened; and at last I spoke of it again. He answered that he had forgotten to send in my name and that it was now too late. So in due course that exhibition was announced with the formula 'no candidate'. This time I did not protest.

To apportion blame for mishaps is seldom worth doing. If my five years at Rugby were mainly waste, the fault lies partly with the obvious faults of the English public-school system; partly with Rugby as a bad example of that system, though among its faults I do not reckon the institution of fagging or that of government by members of the sixth form, both of which I count as virtues; partly with my father, who gave me an adult scholar's attitude towards learning while I was still a child, realizing, as I now think, what the results would be, but judging the game

worth the candle; and partly with myself, for being a conceited puppy and an opinionated prig.

To show that I mean these epithets seriously, I will describe one incident of the feud between that form-master and myself. Reading to his form a note by some modern scholar, as it might be Jebb, on a passage in a Greek text, he came to the word *floret*, and said 'Floret? I don't believe there is such a word. Has any of you heard of it?' All the rest held their tongues, and so should I have done if I had learnt to be a proper schoolboy; but something inside me whispered 'for God's sake, speak up and put an end to this silly game of hide-and-seek'; and I said 'It means one of the little things that make up a flower of the order *compositae*; I expect he got it from Browning's description of the sunflower, "with ray-like florets round a disk-like face".' And I still remember, with bitter shame, the contemptuous tone in which I said it, and the disconcerted face with which the poor man complimented me on my learning.

Going up to Oxford was like being let out of prison. In those days, before the anthology habit infected Classical Moderations, a candidate for honours was expected to read Homer, Vergil, Demosthenes, and the speeches of Cicero more or less entire, in addition to a special study of other texts, among which I chose Lucretius, Theocritus, and the *Agamemnon*. This was not only leading a horse to the water, but (hardly less important) leaving him there. The happy beast could swill and booze Homer until the world contained no Homer that he had not read. After long years on a

ration of twenty drops a day, nicely medicated from a form-master's fad-bottle, I drank with open throat. One hour a week I had to spend showing compositions to my tutor; and there were a few lectures which he had advised me to attend: otherwise my time was my own. Nor were these exceptions very serious. If I had shut myself up in my rooms for a week together, to do some work of my own choosing, my tutor would only have passed it off, when I emerged very apologetic, with an erudite but good-humoured joke. In short, I had come to a place where, even if it was not actually assumed that one had an adult attitude towards learning, at any rate one was not penalized for having such an attitude; and all I had to do was to forget my school life and let myself go.

Yet it was not quite so simple as that. The ill effects of my school years could not be removed by a mere change of environment. My long-baulked craving for knowledge was now almost morbid. I could think of nothing else. Perched in my tower in the garden quadrangle of University College, I read all day and most of the night. All the good easy social life that was going on around me I brushed aside. Even my friendships were few. Long experience of hostility between myself and the system under which I lived had made me cynical, suspicious, and eccentric; caring little for my relations with my neighbours; quick to take offence and not unready to give it. But, for all that, there were many long walks in the country, many idle afternoons on the river, many evenings spent playing and hearing music, many nights talking

until dawn; and more than one lifelong friendship in the making.

When the time came to begin 'Greats' I found the same method at work. I had now two tutors, one in philosophy and one in ancient history, each demanding a weekly essay: but otherwise, apart from a little advice about lectures, I was perfectly free to arrange my own studies in my own way; and I used my freedom. When I was supposed to be working at ancient history I spent much time reading reports of excavations at Greek and Roman sites; one whole long vacation went in studying everything I could get hold of about ancient Sicily; in philosophy, where our studies were supposed to end with Kant, I managed to acquire a rough and sketchy, but first-hand, acquaintance with most of the chief writers, in English, French, German, and Italian, from that time down to the present, and once I spent several weeks reading Plato from end to end. I mention these things not in order to boast of my industry; they are a fleabite to what a very ordinary eighteenth-century student of my years would have done; but, because they were all done without the orders and mostly even without the knowledge of my tutors, as evidence of the extent to which I was left alone to work in peace. My contemporaries knew hardly more about these doings than my tutors: I was always too busy to join the societies at whose meetings undergraduates exhibited their wits and their learning to mutual admiration.