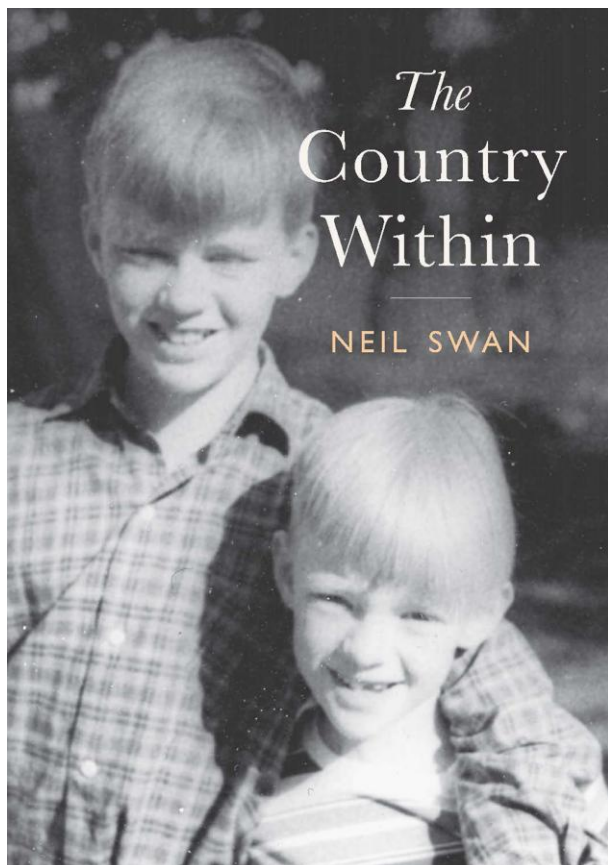


Neil Swan

Born 10.9.1953.

Autobiographical life story.



The following account of his parents and his early childhood by Neil Swan is archived, with the permission of the author and his publisher, from the first two chapters of his autobiography 'The Country Within' published in 2020 by Birlinn Ltd.

Swan writes by way of introduction:

Within each of us is a country made up of memories of people and places. That country within is our country for the whole of our lives.

Chapter 1 Burma

Should a memoir begin at birth? If a memoir is supposed to be an account based on personal knowledge, the description of an event about which one can have no possible recollection would seem to be an immediate breach of trust. Granted there are people who claim to remember their births, but they live on the edge of sanity.

The benefit of starting in the delivery room, either in hospital or at home with jugs of hot water and towels, is that it gives context for the person's life. Did they take the silver spoon, melt it down, squander the cash and end up destitute, or did they rise to great heights, having been born to a poor unmarried mother uncertain of her child's paternity? True the account will be hearsay, but it is still part of the influence that helps to shape us.

The question, though, is whether the delivery room is early enough. To say that you were born in a particular place is no more interesting than saying that a Mars Bar is made in Slough. You want to know, why Slough? What was it that appealed to Forrest Mars back in 1932? Was Slough somewhere he could find people with relevant research and development skills? Was it because Slough was near a large market in London? Did a site become available with an existing factory which Forrest could adapt? Once you know the answer to the question, Slough stops being a fact and becomes a story.

I was born in Burma, a country to which my parents had come by very different routes.

My father, Norman Swan, was a Scot who had grown up in Peterhead, a fishing village in the north-east of Scotland where my grandfather, Douglas, an Irishman from the north and a minister in the Church of Scotland, had charge of a parish for over fifty years.

As a preacher, Douglas was an imposing figure. He filled the pulpit with his tall, broad frame and had the useful asset of an Ulsterman's penetrating accent, though fortunately in his case he had lost the indignation that can turn an Ulsterman's mildest observation into a final demand. Instead he had evolved a style of speaking that suggested he was on the edge of a deep belly chuckle.

For all his amiability, there was a darker side to him. When, in his twenties, he had boarded a ship to Scotland, he had made sure to take with him his cherished prejudices against Catholics, even sharing them with my grandmother, Lizzie, a sweet Edinburgh lady educated at George Watson's, a school whose pupils prided themselves on the perfection of their gentility. Unlike his intolerance, hers never rang true. When she talked of Catholics



Douglas with his children in height order; Norman, Dodie, Norah and Harold.

breeding like rabbits and having shifty eyes, it was as unconvincing as the lashes of a seaman ordered to flog a friend.

The people of Peterhead do not appear to have demanded much from their minister beyond a reassuring benevolence. Long after Douglas retired, Norman found a tin trunk which contained every sermon he had ever preached, neatly wrapped up in quarterly bundles and tied with pink tape, like title deeds to property. In the hope that they might give some insight into the social changes that had occurred in the first half of the twentieth century, Norman read them, but discovered they contained little more than pious

platitudes. Not even the world wars merited a mention. His ability to shield his congregation from unpleasantness might well have explained his popularity.

Norman must have had a happy childhood, though I infer that on the same basis that I might conclude that a house that is still standing has good foundations. He was a balanced adult, comfortable in his skin, and he never harboured any grudges about his upbringing. Whenever he gathered with his siblings, they reminisced in the light-hearted way of people who had been content with their friends, their community and each other.

At the local school, he was fortunate to be in a year of bright pupils. A distant cousin was married to a senior Scottish judge who encouraged him to apply for a scholarship to Fettes College in Edinburgh. The scholarship, which he sat for and won, was available only to boys from state schools and covered the cost of the fees and the uniform.



Norman (right) at Fettes College

The transition to the private school system went smoothly, though he had to adjust to a world without girls, and his north-eastern accent made him conspicuous. During an English lesson in his first term, the class was asked what punctuation mark should be inserted to show words written in parentheses. When he replied, 'A curly bracket,' rolling the 'r's as he spoke, the class dissolved in laughter.

Soon his accent was blended with standard English to become that of a high caste Scot; sufficiently anglicised to establish his standing while retaining the trace Scots necessary to protect his egalitarian credentials.

After Fettes, he went first to Edinburgh University to read classics and then to Peterhouse College, Cambridge to read History. In his final term, he obtained two job

offers; one from Tootal Ties and the other from the Burmah Oil Company. Fearing he might sound ridiculous if he had to tell his friends he had a job with the former, he headed to Burma, a country Douglas struggled to find on the map.

He spent a month travelling out by ship, eking out the meagre five pounds of expenses that the company had advanced, my grandfather not having thought to add to it. His first hint at the subtle social gradations of life out East came on the day of departure when, in a crowded passageway, a woman declared loudly that there was positively no one on board.

At Simon Artz store in Port Said, he went ashore wearing a trilby hat and a grey suit and emerged with prickly heat powder, thin cotton pyjamas, a specific against dysentery, sunglasses and a khaki coloured solar topi.

Within the first week of arriving in Rangoon, he had rooms in a shared bachelor house or 'chummery', a third-hand Plymouth motor car and driver, a servant and a rich sporting and social life largely centred on the club, but which also included the racy 'Silver Grill' nightclub.

As a single man, he was sent on assignments up country and developed friendships with Burmese and Indians, in the process earning the nickname 'Abnorm'. Unwisely, at a public meeting of expatriates he let his feelings be known about the ban on Burmese and Indians joining the two main European clubs, the Pegu and the Gymkhana. He was duly dressed down by the General Manager for providing 'political ammunition' to agitators and feared he might be sent home. To his relief, as he rose to leave the room, the General Manager told him not to take the carpeting too seriously and that his attitude might well be right.



Norman's graduation from Cambridge University

Before the war, it was safe to walk anywhere in the country and at weekends they would set off to the jungle, climbing mountains and returning to Rangoon from a wayside station on the night train. To a boy from the north-east of Scotland, the smell of woodsmoke at dawn, the sound of cocks crowing at dawn and the stirring of jungle life in the brief cool before the heat of the day rolled in, were as exciting as they were alien. He was mesmerised and utterly infatuated.

After the fall of Singapore, when it became clear that the oil installations were likely to fall into the hands of the Japanese, Norman helped destroy them.

Without a job and aware of his duty, he joined the army for the duration of the war. As a soldier, he will not have been a great asset as he had a gentle nature, though one day that did change.

He had developed a close friendship with a fellow officer who came from a town near to Peterhead. When they were heard talking to each other in their local dialect, the Doric, it was decided that they could be used to pass messages in a semi-secure form over the radio. If the British troops had no idea what they were saying, it was unlikely that the Japanese would.

One day, on a patrol, Norman came across his friend's severed head on the parapet of a bridge. From that moment on he wanted to kill.

Before he could commit some reckless act of revenge, he was hit on the head by a long wooden pole during a training exercise and invalided away from front line duties to recover from severe concussion and loss of memory. Until the end of hostilities, he was stationed in India working on a programme for the post-war reconstruction of Burma. After VJ day, he re-joined the Burmah Oil Company in Rangoon and set about repairing the damage he had helped cause to its plant three years earlier.

My mother's history of how she came to be in Burma at the end of the war had more twists and turns. Like me, Nancie was born there but had spent her years between birth and courtship mostly in England.

Her father, Val Powell, was a railway engineer. Privately educated as a day boy at Harrow School, he had left secondary education without going to university. His ambition was to complete an engineering apprenticeship at the railway works at Crewe, but his father wanted him to work in a bank. They came to an arrangement, normally the stuff of novels, whereby Val would work in the bank for two years but would be free to start an

apprenticeship if he found the prospect of easy riches disagreeable. At the end of the trial period, he turned his back on wealth.

After completing his training, he had to choose between job offers from Tanganyika Railways and Burma Railways. As neither company had a name that sounded ridiculous, he was forced to spin a coin. It fell for Burma Railways Company, an outcome he consolidated by marrying the daughter of a director of the company shortly after he arrived there.

In 1924, Nancie was born in Mandalay, a city which at that time still had a splendour that matched its name, the British not having yet bombarded it; and she remained in Burma until she was sent to boarding school in England, aged five. For more than a decade, she saw her parents only every three or four years when they returned to England on leave. She did not go back to Burma until December 1940 when she sailed with her younger sister, Daphne, and brother, Dennis, on the *Stratheden*, a recently launched liner that had been converted for use as a troop carrier.



The moat round the Palace of Mandalay with gatehouse and bridge

Original Dufay Colour transparency taken by EVMP 1957

The moat round the Palace of Mandalay. Photograph taken by Val Powell

Aged sixteen, she was old enough to know the danger posed by U-Boats but was reassured by the convoy's evasive zig-zag course and by the destroyers that busied themselves dropping depth charges. Had she known that the Admiralty codes were routinely being broken by the Germans who had advance warning of nearly every convoy's course, and had she realised that the U-Boats could not easily be detected, she might not have been as relaxed as she was in her cabin below the waterline.

The presence of the ship's orchestra gave a comforting illusion of peace; the crooner sang of nightingales in Mayfair; and passengers dressed up as if for the Ritz. The young men on board were a distraction too, at the morning dances, which were the only ones to which Nancie was entitled to go, evening dances being for First Class passengers only.

The convoy made its way across the Atlantic, soon leaving the protection of the Sunderland flying boats, and sailed down the east coast of the United States before crossing back to Sierra Leone where it paused to refuel before heading on to Cape Town and Bombay.

On arrival at Bombay, Nancie travelled by train across India to Calcutta where she boarded a Qantas Empire Class flying boat, the *Coorong* (VH-ABE), on the River Hooghly and flew to Rangoon with a single stop at Akyab.

At the end of the second leg of the flight, she glimpsed the gold of the Shwedagon Pagoda as they turned to make the final approach before alighting on the Rangoon River in a cloud of rainbowed spray. At the quayside, she stepped from the airline launch into the arms of her parents, and collapsed, exhausted.

The following year was blissful. There might have been war in Europe and anxiety about Japan's intentions, but Burma was still at peace and Val had been posted to MyitNge, a remote place accessible only on foot or by rail, where goods vehicles and passenger coaches were sent for repair.

There was no blackout and no rationing. For the first time since the age of five, Nancie experienced family life, walking in the countryside, identifying birds using the helpfully titled book *Birds of Burma* and swimming in the unpainted concrete pool that Val had built, funding its construction by issuing shares to friends and using a decommissioned First Class carriage as a changing room. For a while she became interested in architecture and considered enrolling to study it at Rangoon University, until she discovered that it did not have a faculty of architecture.



Daphne, Nancie, Kathleen and Dennis at MyitNge

After the disgrace of Singapore in February 1942, nervousness of the Japanese turned to fear. Val prepared the family for evacuation to India as refugees, insisting that they cram all their worldly possessions into a single suitcase. He himself was determined to stay until the last possible moment in order to keep the railways running.

The suitcase contained mainly clothes and sensible shoes, but each family member was allowed to put in a treasured object. Nancie chose a Chinese enamelled hairbrush and mirror she had been given the previous Christmas. My grandmother, Kathleen, packed the children's birth certificates and her marriage certificate together with six silver teaspoons which, in addition to their strong sentimental value, also had a value that could be weighed. Before she left the house, she removed the marriage certificate and left it for Val on his desk. Why she did so she could never explain, but it was a deliberate act.

The family bade farewell to Val twice. The first time they left the house to fly from Magwe airfield but were forced to return after it was bombed. The second time, a few days later, they took the train from Mandalay to Shwebo airfield, not travelling in the luxury of their usual inspection carriage coupled to the end of the train, but in Third Class, the hard seats a reminder of their changed status. It was a calendar month since the surrender of Singapore.

On arrival at the transit camp, refugees had their names added to a list and waited in huts where they sat on mats which demarcated each family's territory. Everyone was flown off in the order of their position on the list. The list could not be jumped. The list would not negotiate. The list could not be bribed. The list was inviolable. The list kept the peace.

On the fourth day, Kathleen was awoken to find an Air India Airspeed Envoy had arrived with the mail. After being weighed with their luggage, the family were told they could take

the flight, though one of them had to sit on a cushion as there were only three seats for passengers.

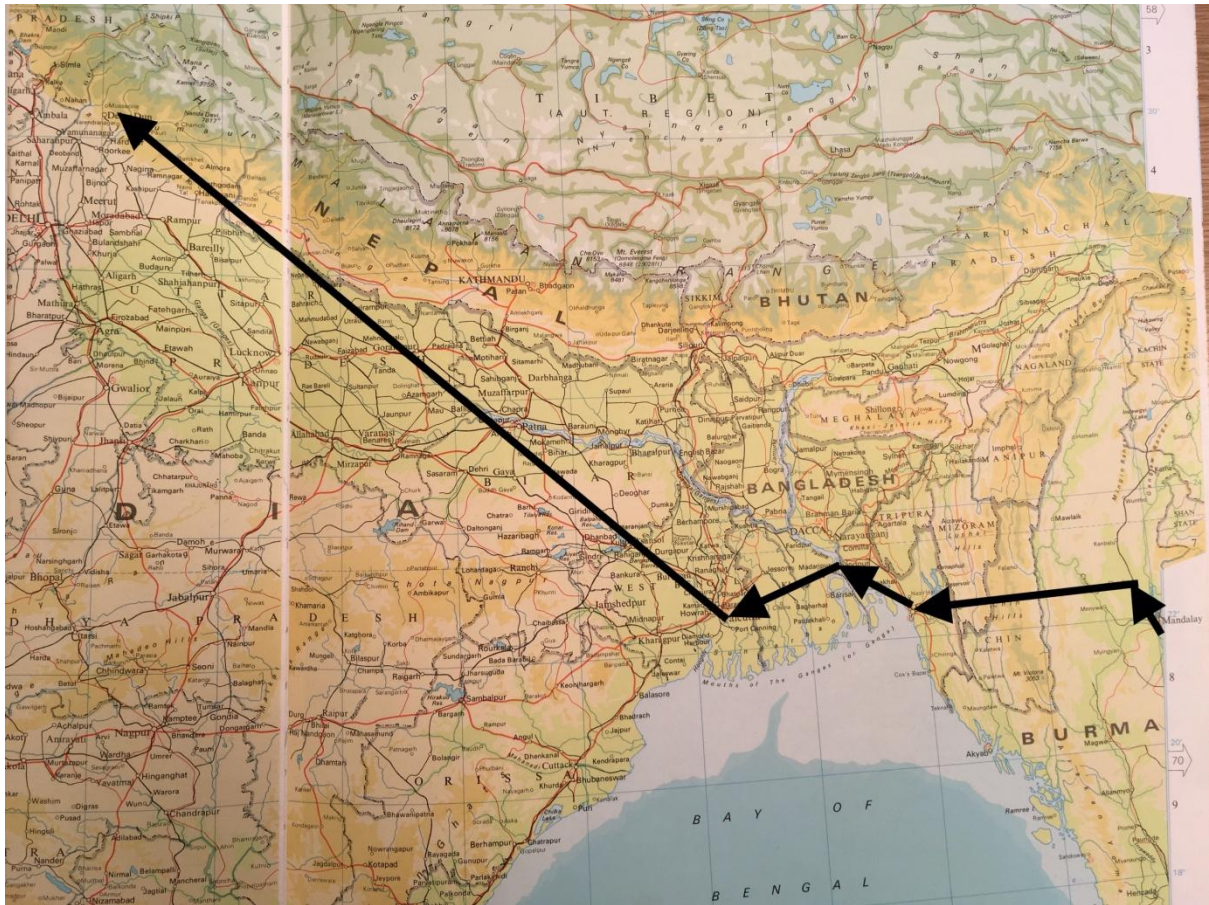
When they landed at Chittagong, the pilot told them that the small aircraft had been operating at the limit of its range. There had been little fuel left in reserve.

They were taken to a club which had been turned into an evacuation centre. The following morning, they caught a train to Chandpur where they boarded a river steamer to take them upriver to a railway connection at Goalanda. As they scrambled up the bank from the ferry terminal to reach the station, they were smothered by a sandstorm which added a biblical feel to their flight. From Goalanda they took the train to Calcutta and spent the night in a convent. There was no food and no water for the bathrooms or lavatories, the hand-pumped water tanks having run dry, but there were rows of camp beds. Exhausted, they slept.

The following morning a member of the Evacuation Committee, set up to maintain order in a chaotic situation, asked Kathleen if she knew anyone in Calcutta. She gave the name of some friends; a phone call was made, and they were taken in as guests. Val had transferred money from his bank in Rangoon to Grindlays in Calcutta, so they now had shelter, food and cash. Although still refugees with an uncertain future, they had escaped immediate danger and were able to catch their breath.

Through the Evacuation Committee, Kathleen was able to establish that her sister-in-law, Dulcie, and infant son, Colin, had escaped and were in Calcutta, though her brother, Cyril, remained in Burma. The two women made contact and resolved that the families would stay together.

My mother's family could not remain with their friends for more than a few days as the house would be needed by other refugees. Dulcie recalled that her husband Cyril had enjoyed a stay at Dehradun, over a thousand miles away in the foothills of the Himalayas. On the basis of this slender recommendation, Kathleen contacted a Thomas Cook agent who booked rooms for them at the Savoy Hotel in Mussoorie, a town near Dehradun, though higher in the mountains. They arrived on 1 April, just two weeks after leaving their home in Burma, and immediately started to look for permanent accommodation.



The evacuation route from Burma

An experienced traveller might be wary of any hotel called the Savoy that did not have a postal address in the Strand. While the rooms of the Mussoorie Savoy were comfortable and had views of snow-capped peaks, often brilliant against a clear blue sky, the food was dismal, consisting of re-cooked meat and little else, there being no cultivable ground in the area. Kathleen's complaints now seem petty set against the suffering of those interned by the Japanese, but she did not yet realise that the iceberg had been hit.

The next weeks were taken up finding somewhere to live. All the while Kathleen worried about the plight of Val and Cyril as news seeped out about the evacuation of Mandalay and the advance of the Japanese.

Her misery came to an end unexpectedly when Val rang her, triumphant that he had finally tracked her down and explaining that he too was in Mussoorie.

Compared with others, he had been fortunate, though his escape had not been without alarm. He had been told by those in charge of the evacuation that because he had a double hernia, he had the right to fly out on one of the RAF or USAAF Dakotas that were shuttling officials and refugees to Assam. However, he had found it impossible to obtain a seat

because others kept appearing who were deemed to have a greater need than he. Fortunately, a Chinese airliner made an unexpected refuelling stop on its way to Calcutta. A seat was available, albeit at a price that reflected the fact that he would be buying his life. He bought it without hesitation.

Cyril succeeded in escaping overland. For three weeks he had survived on half a cigarette tin of rice per day, a little Bovril and weak tea. A week after he arrived in India, he died from cerebral malaria.

His widow's trip back to England was as remarkable an escape as his own and might go some way to explaining why after the war ended, for many of their generation the height of tolerable excitement was to drive to the coast and read the Sunday papers.

Dulcie and her baby son Colin sailed from Bombay on the *SS Cairo*. On 6 November 1942, while on passage from Cape Town to Brazil, the ship was brought to a stop by a torpedo fired by a U-Boat on the surface.

The U-Boat's commander, Karl-Friedrich Merten, waited while the passengers took to the lifeboats before firing the torpedoes that sank the ship. Speaking through a megaphone, he offered to take on board the submarine anyone who wanted to be interned, but his offer was declined. Before departing he added to their supplies and pointed out that they were two thousand miles from Brazil, one thousand miles from Africa and five hundred miles from St Helena. His final words were, 'Goodnight. Sorry for sinking you.' Unlike most of the U-Boat commanders, Karl-Friedrich Merten survived the war, living until he was eighty-seven. He deserved to enjoy every day of his life.

Dulcie and Colin spent two weeks in an open boat before being rescued by fishermen off St Helena, severely sunburned and desperate for water. Not everyone in the boat survived.

Meanwhile, in the calm of India, Nancie joined the Women's Auxiliary Army and ended the war in Delhi when victory was declared over Japan.

You might expect that as the clouds of war were blown away, Norman and Nancie, both now in India, would meet, their eyes locking in burning intensity, knowing that they had each found the soulmate for whom in some unspoken way they had been searching all their lives. You would be disappointed.

Nancie didn't help the speed of the narrative when in January 1946 she became engaged to a man who was a printer with the Baptist Missionary Press in Delhi. A month later she sailed to England with her parents, leaving him behind. She broke off her engagement by

letter that autumn. She has no recollection of the moment she let the envelope slip from her fingers into the pillar box. She said he was dull, but not to remember pulling the trigger on the relationship shows an uncharacteristic callousness.

In the middle of the severe winter of 1947, Nancie travelled back to Burma with her family on a ship that left from Glasgow. After a thirty-hour rail journey from London during which the train was frequently brought to a halt by snow, she found herself sitting next to a woman of her own age on the coach that took them to the quay where their ship was moored. The woman was to become a lifelong friend. It was she who introduced my parents to each other after a rugby match in which Norman had been playing. Covered in sweat and dust, he must have stirred her feelings more than a printer of Baptist missionary tracts.

There was one final hurdle to be cleared. After VJ Day, Norman had been given home leave for a month. As soon as he was ashore, he made contact with a teacher he had met in 1937 when he had been in his final year at Cambridge and with whom he had corresponded throughout the war. He had to move quickly, having only a little month. Within a week they were engaged and days later they were married.

The wedding night turned out to be a disaster and his bride discovered that, in the language of the day, she did not like men. It was a terrible blow to both of them. She remained in Britain while he returned to Burma. Norman had no desire to hurt her which made the apparent irrationality of their decision to separate hard to explain, as it exacerbated the embarrassment and humiliation.

In the gentlest of ways and with great sadness, they sought a divorce, though to obtain one they knew the law required one of them to admit having done something wrong. That fiction was satisfied by her agreeing to have deserted the marriage.

Norman only talked to me of his first marriage once, when I was fifteen. He had waited until then because he was worried that at a younger age I might in some way have been disturbed by the revelation. For that reason, he had also chosen a year in which I was not sitting an external exam. He need not have worried. He was talking of a person I did not know. If I felt any emotion, it was love for a man who could still describe his ex-wife as intelligent and highly attractive.

The divorce was granted in November 1948 and a month later my parents were married in the Scots Kirk in Rangoon.



Norman and Nancie's marriage at the Scots Kirk Rangoon

A year later my elder brother, Alasdair, arrived. Two years after that my sister, Deborah, was born. Two years after that it was my turn to clip on the umbilical cord, wait for the green light and descend.



Nancie (holding Neil), May May and Norman. In the foreground, Alasdair and Deborah.

We left Burma before I developed the ability to remember anything, though I was often reminded that I was baptised by the Bishop of Rangoon, as if episcopal involvement was recognition of an elevated status.

Although I passed through it like a sleeper train in the night, Burma remains the land of my birth, the place I write on immigration forms. I have even learned to call it Myanmar, though Yangon is a step too far.

Chapter 2 India

From Rangoon we moved to Digboi in Assam, a town where oil had been found in the final years of the nineteenth century, not as the result of careful survey and test drilling, but in the way that water makes itself known in a flood. So close was the oil to the surface that it turned mud black when it was churned by elephants' feet as they worked on construction projects. As if the visual clue was not enough, the smell was overpowering.

There is debate about the etymology of the town's name. Some say it derives from the words shouted by an English engineer to exert the local labourers to greater efforts as they dug to find the source of the oil. If true, its continued use is an eternal reproach. Others argue that if oil flows to your feet, you have no need to coerce others to find it, though they offer no alternative suggestion as to how the name came into being.

When we first arrived, we lived in a brick-built house, but the chimney collapsed in an earthquake and destroyed it. The earthquake is possibly my first memory because I remember the strange feeling of lying on the grass as the ground moved under me.

We moved to Bungalow 51 which looked onto the golf course. In India, a bungalow was understood to be a house occupied by a single family and there was no assumption that it should be built on a single storey and filled with a pensioner.

Ours was two storeys high and of standard earthquake-proof design with a metal frame and thin timber walls. There were covered verandas on both floors, so deep and broad that, viewed from the side, they gave the house the profile of a capital letter 'E'. At the back of the house, connected by a covered pathway, was the cookhouse, a place to which bearers hastened and from which they emerged at equal speed, but to which I never went.

By day, the weather was sunny and warm, and at night the rain often pounded on the corrugated iron roof above my bedroom, as thunder crashed, lightning flickered, and the electricity supply failed. I used to look forward to these dramatic events as I lay in my bed, safely under my mosquito net. On quiet nights, I would ask to go downstairs to look at the white moon flowers which twined round supporting pillars of the balcony and opened magically after dark.

Once, I was awoken by my mother and taken by the light of a torch to a Land Rover parked outside our house. In the back of the vehicle lay a tiger that had just been shot, its

tail hanging out of the back. It had been troubling local villagers and the man who was now showing us his trophy had been asked to kill it. I was invited to lift its tail to feel its weight, but even in death the creature overawed me, and I dared not touch it.

If I was timid, Alasdair caused consternation when he was seen by Nancie stroking a krait, a deadly snake. Speaking calmly, she told him to leave the nice snake alone and come to her. The snake was dead, but from that moment on we children were put through what was called 'snake drill'. If we saw a snake, we were to leave it alone and call a servant who would come along with a machete and chop it into hundreds and hundreds of little pieces. I never did see a snake though I saw plenty of their sloughed off skins in the garden near the swing; a warning that I was on their turf.

Between the house and the golf course we had a swimming pool little bigger than a rubbish skip, made of rough, unpainted concrete. Deborah and I would run naked round the garden and then jump in to cool off. There were always frogs in the water which, to shrieks from Deborah, I would catch in my hands and put into the grass, my first experience of having a skill that others valued.

I have no memory of Alasdair at that time because he was rarely at home. At the age of five he had been sent as a boarder to a pre-prep school in Winchester. It had been recommended by a friend and was also conveniently close to Lymington where my maternal grandparents had retired by the sea.

Deborah and I were looked after by our nanny called May May, a Karen from the south-east of Burma who had first worked for us in Rangoon. She was a loving woman and had a daughter in Burma whom she had to leave behind to be brought up by her grandmother. My parents never knew if May May had a husband. In the six years she lived with us, she never gave away the slightest clue and no one asked.

My personal debt to May May is possibly great. There was at one point an epidemic of polio in the area and a boy in a nearby house had caught it, suffering dreadfully. May May detected that I had a fever and put me to bed at once. She and Nancie nursed me carefully and I recovered to full health. Although I will never know if her prompt action influenced the outcome, the fact that she was credited with saving me from permanent injury is a testament to the love our family had for her and their relief at my full recovery.

On Sundays we went to the club, where there was a Sunday school. If there was any spiritual instruction, it was less memorable than the paper cones of peanuts we were given

before going through to the club dining room to watch Tom and Jerry cartoons projected onto a screen rigged up on a table. Later we would use the club swimming pool where I would jump fearlessly off the top board, especially if someone was racing up the ladder to save me from myself.

From time to time we would set off with friends in a convoy of cars and drive out into the jungle to walk across rope bridges, ride elephants or assemble aluminium boats and paddle down rivers.

In the autumn of 1958, we came home to Scotland, flying on a Qantas Super Constellation with its three distinctive tail fins and a kangaroo painted on the upper surface of its wings. Living in Edinburgh was to be my first experience of the mother country. My life in colour was about to switch to black and white.
