

Family background

[Originally written as an introduction to the collected First World War letters of KM Mylne to his mother, under the title *My Dearest Mother*]

Human life is a lottery. Sometimes the most significant card we are dealt by Lady Luck is the date of our birth. In this respect, the difference between my father and myself makes a striking contrast. I was the fourth in our family, born in April 1927 just twelve and a half years before the dreadful day on 3rd September 1939 when Britain declared war on Nazi Germany. My memory of that day is etched into my mind, especially the effect it had on my father. He seldom even mentioned World War I, although we all knew he had been back on his own in the 1930s to revisit some of the places in France he had known as an officer in the Worcestershire Regiment of the Territorial Army, especially to pay tribute at the War Grave sites where his two brothers, killed in action, were buried, the eldest and the youngest of his mother's seven sons. On that day in 1939, in the library of Dalhousie Castle in Midlothian, where he had realised his life's dream of establishing the boys' Preparatory School of which he was Headmaster, the family all gathered to listen to the Prime Minister's announcement that "a state of war" now existed between us and Nazi Germany.

I remember looking out of the tall library windows across the woods and parkland of the Dalhousie estate in the valley of the South Esk, which had been for my brother and me a peaceful playground for fishing, tree-climbing, bird-nesting, and other adventures. In the middle of the school summer holidays, it was a peaceful scene which now suddenly seemed threatened. We knew little of politics, so my father's outburst at the radio's grim news was unexpected. His grief, almost despair, was clearer than I had ever heard before: "Not that all over again! What is it all for? Was their heroism and sacrifice all for nothing? Poor mother!" I couldn't bear to see him so distressed and went out, as was my wont at that age, for a quiet walk on my own up the steep path by the river to the Beech Avenue, a remarkable double-line of giant beech trees between whose grey trunks a mossy green path ran straight for a full quarter of a mile. Below me ran the river, and I listened either for the harsh screech of the kingfisher which we often heard there or the cheerful song of the dipper singing from a favourite stone mid-stream. About noon, suddenly an air-raid warning siren started wailing and I felt my whole world had suddenly changed. I knew how my father would feel hearing it. But I remember wondering how 'Little Granny', as we affectionately called my father's mother down in Worcester, must feel after losing two sons in the first World War only twenty years previously. At that stage in my life, of course, I didn't know about the remarkable promise my father had made to her, before he left for France in 1915, that he would write to her every day he was away from home, nor that he had actually kept his promise and that she had faithfully preserved those letters – all 585 of them – in a cardboard box.

I did not know then how lucky I was to be. At first, I was disappointed. Destined to follow in my father's footsteps as a Classical scholar, I had been prepared by him to sit the scholarship exam for Eton. I had to pass, as the full fees without the financial boost of a scholarship were beyond his means. He wanted nothing but the best for me and I knew entry to Eton was a challenge, although it was one that, as a Major Scholar of my preparatory school, Cargilfield, probably the best in Scotland, I clearly had a good chance to achieve. But as soon as the threat of air-raids on London became a reality, my parents took the wise choice of sending me to Sedbergh in the comparative safety of the Yorkshire fells. So I sat and won a Major Scholarship there, instead of Eton. There, my school-days from 13 to 18 were spent almost as though World War II was on another planet. Of course, we watched the news, dug for victory, saved for victory, and studied largely under the tutelage of retired teachers who returned to the job to fill the place of those younger teachers who enlisted for active service. One impact of the war which really affected us was when we heard the news that some of them would never return. Aggression was not part of my character. I was useless at rugby and hated boxing in a school that worshipped the manly sports. How would I cope

with modern warfare?

My 18th birthday in April 1945 was followed soon after by VE Day, which we celebrated with a whole day's extra holiday in mid-May. During my last term, when I knew full well I would be conscripted into the armed forces, I went to the nearest Recruitment Centre and volunteered for the army, putting down as my preference the Royal Signals, as I had become fascinated in the Junior Training Corps with the technical challenges of wireless and line telegraphy, which seemed a more humane and rewarding occupation during my army service than learning how to kill my fellow men. I was trying to compensate for my inherited hatred of war and of course the apprehension we all felt at the prospect of fighting someone else's war half-way round the world, against what was now known to be one of the most ruthless and deadly enemies, the Japanese.

And then Lady Luck stepped in. I left school at the end of July. I was due to join the army at Bodmin Primary Training Centre in Cornwall a fortnight later, when one morning I heard on the radio that American planes had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Soon after, Nagasaki met the same awful fate. The fact that the USA had more than one atomic bomb, and recognising that Tokyo was the obvious next target, persuaded the Japanese accept the unacceptable and surrender. Churchill announced two days public holiday as VJ Days. On the first, I left Glasgow on the express train to Cornwall, and on VJ2 I arrived at Bodmin Camp to commence my army career. I had been born on exactly the right date to avoid the horror of being made a legitimate murderer.

I found myself in a squad consisting of all those who had passed a strenuous weekend of tests of their suitability for Officer status, which included an ability to think positively and use their initiative. On our first day of Weapon Training, the sergeant started with the textbook description: "The object of all training in the use of weapons is to kill the enemy". When Private Mylne piped up, politely of course, "Please Sergeant, what enemy?", the instructor was not amused and said so in no uncertain terms. But the support of the squad and the sense of relief we all felt was real enough.

By complete contrast, my father, Kenneth MacNaghten Mylne, was born in 1890 at Malchar Hill, Bombay, Maharashtra, India. Like his father, he was sent home to England to be educated, first at Malborough College, the public school with the famous motto "Manners Makyth Man", where he was a keen member of the Gymnastics Eight. He went on to read Classics at Keble College, Oxford, where his father had been a tutor and which offered special terms for the sons of clergymen. At the outbreak of war with Germany, he was a teacher of Classics at a boys' preparatory school called Rimpleton. This was a 'reserved occupation' considered important enough as part of the war effort to excuse him from conscription when it was introduced in 1915. With the tradition behind him of an illustrious family of architects and engineers, dedicated to creative lives of public service, war must have seemed anathema. But Britain was a hotbed of patriotic fervour, never before so openly and so enthusiastically embracing the idea of duty to the nation first, so that recruitment was the order of the day, and to be left out of the rush to enlist rapidly became a matter for shame, even disgrace. How he must have wrestled with his situation, doing what he loved best, putting into practice all his ideals derived from his love of the Classics coupled with a new enthusiasm for the Boy Scout movement. But as the grim news of casualties in horrendous numbers filtered back to a disbelieving public, the problem of his sheltered life at Rimpleton must have become gradually untenable, especially as he was the middle son of a family of seven sons, with his three older brothers already in active service.

I have often tried to put myself in his position and wonder what I would have done in the circumstances he confronted in 1914. To understand what finally persuaded him to abandon the life of his dreams and ambitions, training the young to be valuable citizens, and to enlist in the Territorial Army as an officer in the Worcestershire Regiment, we must consider the kudos of his membership of a rather remarkable family, and the weight of responsibility this must have imposed

on him. I have no idea how much he knew then of the long history of public service of the Mylne family, but he would certainly have known of his immediate forbears and not least of his own father, my grandfather, who died in 1921, aged 78, just six years before I was born.

Bishop Louis George Mylne was born in 1843 into a colonial family in Bombay, son of a Major in the Bombay Army. As was the custom, he was sent back to the home country to be educated, first at Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh. He went on to graduate in Theology at Corpus Christi College, Oxford and was subsequently ordained in 1867. After serving as a Curate in a parish in North Moreton, and then as a Tutor at Keble College, Oxford, he was elevated to become Bishop of Bombay in 1876. He stayed in that diocese for 21 years, establishing a reputation as a great preacher and an academic writer of a dozen books on the church and theology. But what caused an unexpected sensation in Bombay was his marriage in 1879 at the age of 36 to Amy Frederica Moultrie, the petite and beautiful nineteen year-old daughter of an established Bombay family. Their firstborn was Edward Graham (known as Graham) in 1883, followed by Alan in 1886, Ronald in 1887, and my father Kenneth in 1890, who turned out to be the middle son of seven. Nobody in the closing years of the 19th century would have guessed that Amy would in 1918 receive a letter from the King of England congratulating her on being the mother of seven sons all on active service for their country at the same time, and consoling her on the deaths of two of them, the eldest Graham and the youngest Euan, in the final stages of the war.

In trying to understand how my father resolved his dilemma in 1915, it has been helpful to remember our family's long history of service to the public good and to the Crown in particular. The most illustrious branch of our Scottish family goes back to John Mylne of Dundee, born in 1481, who was appointed Master Mason to King James III at a comparatively young age. His son Robert was Provost of Dundee, but his grandson also excelled as an architect by being appointed Master Mason to Mary, Queen of Scots. There then followed three generations of John Mylnes in a period when it was the custom for the firstborn son and heir to be named after his father. Such was their reputation for excellence in the design and upkeep of the buildings of the royal estate that the title of King's Master Mason of Scotland was passed from father to son, covering the reigns of James VI, Charles I and Charles II. When the third John Mylne died in 1667, the title passed to his nephew Robert, who died in 1710, so that for 230 years the buildings of the Crown had been the responsibility of one family throughout. The title derived in part from the Masonic Lodges in which the family played a prominent part, but the work they did was as the senior architect for the Crown. They were often paid fixed sums on an annual basis for the upkeep of particular royal buildings, but their reputation was gained especially for the design of new buildings like Holyrood Palace, first proposed by Charles I and then finally executed after the Restoration by Charles II. For five generations after this, alternately Williams and Roberts, they are described in the 'Pedigree' as 'Architect' or 'Engineer' or both. One notable design reflecting their skills was the famous crown steeples, elaborately sculpted out of stone on the greatest churches – St Giles in Edinburgh, St Nicholas in Newcastle, King's College, Aberdeen and St Michael's in Linlithgow, next to the Royal Palace there. All four were constructed within a 30-year period at the end of the 17th century.

The descendants of John Mylne of Dundee became the Mylnes of Mylnefield in Angus when Thomas Mylne (1655–1726) bought an estate called Kingudy and renamed it Mylnefield, making it the family home for five generations. My great, great, great grandfather Thomas Mylne (1785–1836) was the third to call himself 'Mylne of Mylnefield', as was the custom at the time, the title passing to the eldest son. His great grandson, however, oldest of a family of ten (also a custom of the time!) had no children and decided to emigrate to Australia, and sold Mylnefield in 1838 in order to help finance his future in the colonies. But that line ended in tragedy when two brothers and two sisters of the same family were lost when their ship, the "Dunbar", was wrecked in a storm off Sydney in August 1857. In spite of this disaster, the Mylne family did establish a line in Australia resulting in a present population of Mylnes there that is far larger than those of us in the

original family in Britain.

So it was from Thomas Mylne, third laird of Mylnefield, that my grandfather Bishop Louis George was descended, while the direct line from Robert, King's Master Mason to Charles II, William and Mary and Queen Anne, three generations later produced the most famous of them all, Robert Mylne, architect and engineer born in 1733. It was this Robert Mylne who at the age of 26 won, against all the best architects in Europe, a prestigious prize in Rome which established his reputation for the rest of his life. On his return five years after leaving Edinburgh, he moved his practice to London and there made his most famous design for a new bridge over the Thames at Blackfriars. A new biography of him by Robert Ward, published in 2007 and entitled rather unexpectedly "The Man Who Buried Nelson: The Surprising Life of Robert Mylne" tells the whole story of, how amongst many other brilliant successes such as building the Embankment of the Thames through London, he prepared the sarcophagus for Nelson's coffin in the crypt of St Paul's. His bridge has now gone, though a tiled representation of its building remains in the Underground station near the site. Professor Richardson's book about Robert Mylne, published by Batsford in 1955, includes extensive diaries of his frequent journeys between Edinburgh and London and portrays an astonishingly active and creative life. So his reputation as an engineer and architect lives on, celebrated by these two biographies in the last sixty years, both full of fascinating detail of professional life in the 18th century. St Cecilia's Hall in Edinburgh remains an example of his genius, still in use; and many bridges and handsome houses still show his versatility and energy as an architect.

This was the background of a family with prestige in its history against which my father had to measure his own decision in 1915. His father, now returned from India, had a parish in Alvechurch on the edge of Birmingham, undoubtedly chosen partly because it had a very large Rectory suitable for a retired Bishop with a wife and seven sons to accommodate. Two of these were still at school, as a photograph of the whole family taken in the garden clearly shows. This, and his congenial job as a schoolmaster, was what he had to be prepared to give up if he was to live up to the expectations of family, friends and colleagues and decide to go to 'the front'. As the middle son of seven, he seems to have had a very special relationship with his mother. He had three elder brothers to look up to for inspiration, Graham in the Irish Guards, Alan a Padre, and Ronald a Medical Officer in the Indian Army. He also had three younger brothers who would look to him for an example in making his decision. He really had no choice. But once the decision was made, and he was actively preparing for this momentous change in his life, he thought primarily of his mother and how she would cope with yet another absent son to worry about. So in April 1915, when the day of parting approached with a date for sailing across the channel with his Regiment to France, he made a promise to his mother that he would write to her, however briefly, every single day he was away. That promise was fulfilled as closely as was humanly possible, and resulted in one of the largest collections of letters from the Western Front ever submitted to the Imperial War Museum in London. All are preserved, complete with their envelopes addressed to Mrs Mylne, The Rectory, Alvechurch, or sometimes only Mrs Mylne, Alvechurch, and all opening with the words "My Dearest Mother". Some are very short. Some have no words but only tick alternative brief messages on an official army form. Some are very long, vividly descriptive and quite often tell much more than was really permitted by the rules of army intelligence, especially for an officer one of whose duties was to censor the letters of the men under his command. All in all, they tell a remarkable story.