HUGH CASSON’S EARLY CHILDHOOD

adapted from the biography by Jose Manser

Judging by early photographs, Hugh Casson was an exceptionally appealing child. Small and slight, with wide-set blue eyes and golden hair, he was a beautiful little boy, and it is sad, even shocking, to reflect that his own mother [Mary (May) Man] never saw him during the years when he must have been at his most attractive, between the ages of four and nine. At that time, his father was in the Indian Civil Service, working in Rangoon, capital of what was then the Indian province of Burma. But Hugh and his sister Rosemary, who was one year older, had been sent back to England. This was the common lot of children whose parents were colonial civil servants, but with the outbreak of war the Cassons were dispatched in August 1914, at an earlier age than they might have been. The British government of the day instructed that all children, regardless of whether they had reached the preparatory-school age of seven or not, must return home, with mothers leaving or staying as they pleased. Hugh's mother chose to stay with her husband, and the children travelled with a nurse. Their destination was Sandgate in Kent, the home of their maternal grandparents, Edward Garnet Man and his wife Catherine.

Were they refugees washed up by the tyranny of war, or simply middle-class children of professional parents leading a life which was shared by their peers and perfectly acceptable to all involved? With attitudes to family life and the upbringing of children now so vastly different, it is difficult to decide, and the temptation to view Hugh Casson's parents as an extraordinarily unimaginative couple who remained together but sent their children away to a country which had just entered a major world war must be tempered by the proviso that at the time everyone was certain the war would be over within six months.

However it is viewed, Hugh Casson, product of this seemingly puzzling act which resulted in his seeing neither of his parents for over four years, became the most sunny-natured and uninhibited man imaginable. People have described the difficulty in penetrating his surface warmth, and queried if there was anything within to discover. But who can be sure that this reserve, which seems to conflict quite sharply with an otherwise outgoing demeanour, was not the result of his childhood, the one adverse effect of being temporarily orphaned during his formative years? Depth of the sort referred to rather menacingly in the phrase 'he's a deep one' is not always an enviable characteristic. Some of those to whom it is attributed might also be described as warped by less sympathetic observers. Hugh Casson could never have been described in that way. He managed a public and successful life, well supported by a happy marriage and three daughters, without any such indication of murky depths. What we saw was what we got, and it was engaging. Both Hugh and Rosemary, it must be said, resisted any attempt in later years to

have their parents' actions questioned. Both insisted that, as children of a colonial civil servant, they took it for granted that they should have been sent back to England.

Hugh Maxwell Casson was born at a small private nursing home in north London on 23 May 1910, a delicate baby about whose survival there was considerable anxiety. At some point in the early weeks, he was given into the care of his mother's sister Josselyn, always known as Jo, because she was convinced she could rescue him from the brink of premature death, which she did.

His mother had made the three-week boat journey back from Rangoon for the birth, bringing Rosemary, who had been born the year before, but leaving her husband behind. For May Man, as she had been before her marriage, such long-distance travel, and periods of separation were perfectly normal. Her own parents had lived in both India and Burma, where her barrister father, Edward Garnet Man, had been posted as a member of the Indian Civil Service; and many members of her extensive wider family also spent a large part of their lives overseas in the service of the old Empire.

In the traditional manner, May Man had met Randal Casson on one of the P&O liners which at the time plied between Southampton or Liverpool and Rangoon and were witness to innumerable shipboard romances. Young men set to spend their working lives in the East, many of them well educated (as Randal was) and with a good future ahead of them in the Civil Service, were a reasonable catch. The catching process was not likely to be a difficult one. The prospect of a bachelor existence far from home meant they were susceptible to the attractions of pretty girls on board.

May was pretty. Randal, a lively and amusing man, liked women, and the romance developed satisfactorily during the time she was with her family in Rangoon. Only one letter home from Randal to his mother during his early years in Burma seems to have survived, but it is a long one. Written or 11 January 1904, he bemoans (not very seriously!) the rumours which were apparently rife about his amatory activities and his pursuit by various young ladies amongst the English community. One gave him particular trouble, and he described her as 'the kind of girl that deprives one of the power of speech altogether. Fortunately she has turned her attention to some body else and is running after him for all she is worth.' But Randal was not immune, and May had been the one to whom he was drawn on board ship.

Goodness knows what rumours are rushing round about May Man and me as we ride out nearly every morning. I enjoy these rides very much but Mrs. Heald informs me that May Man is in a most perturbed state as she imagines that I am doing it out of duty as her

brother-in-law's personal assistant[1]*. I hasten to remind you of my statement in my last letter dated January 14 1904 that May Man is the one with the already attached affections. I had always regarded myself as a rather retiring untalked-about sort of person, and it was rather astounding to hear news of oneself that had been spread out here, sent home, sorted out, sent out again and almost confirmed. I am much inclined to chuck up ladies altogether.*

Despite this very Edwardian disclaimer, he clearly had no intention of doing so, and whoever had first engaged May's affections failed to hold them. By the time she went back to England later that year, she and Randal had become engaged. But with the sensitivity his son Hugh was to inherit, the ticket Randal sent which would bring her from England to Burma for their wedding was a return one. He wrote, Hugh recounted later, that if when she arrived in Burma she looked down from the promenade deck of the liner and thought, 'It will be absolutely terrible,' she was to stay on board and return to England, and no offence would be taken. Perhaps he simply felt confident that this would not happen. Anyway, it didn't. They were married in Rangoon less than two years later on 13 November 1906, an event duly noted in a local newspaper, its description of the wedding gifts as 'numerous and costly' abhorred by the unassuming Randal. They

eventually bore two children, Rosemary and Hugh, and led a quietly happy married life, but one which was marked by none of the recognition and sophisticated social success their son Hugh was to enjoy.

It might have been different for them. May came from a family which was successful in its middle-class way. This, and the fact that his career in India was reasonably distinguished, allowed her father Edward to set up in some style at Sandgate when he retired, despite having brought up nine children. He was first Assistant Commissioner and a JP in Bengal, where he served with the 3rd Sikh Irregular Cavalry during the Indian Mutiny, before becoming Government Advocate in Burma (and acting as special

[1] May Man's brother-in-law was Cecil Champain Lowis who had married Jo Man.

correspondent to *The Times* during the Perak War). Her husband Randal, on the other hand, intellectual ability notwithstanding, somehow missed the route which would have led him to make his mark on the world. Genial, and with what a nephew later described as 'a wicked wit', he seemed content to forego the pressures which surround a public and socially ambitious life. After retiring from Burma at the early age of forty-four, he and May went to live at Southampton, where he became a part-time lecturer in Mathematics at the University, a job which can have made few demands on him.

The Cassons, originally from the Lake District, had lived in Wales since about 1800. Randal Casson, born in 1879, was a clever child. Like his wife, he came from a large family; he was the fourth son and fifth child of Thomas and Laura Casson, who went on to produce two more daughters. Laura, a religious woman and daughter of a Liverpool sea captain, had also been born in Wales. She was the more literary of Randal's parents, encouraging all the children to read widely throughout their childhood, and Randal was not the only one of demonstrable ability. His brother Will, who was killed in the First World War at the Battle of Loos, had a keen intelligence; Lewis[2] became a celebrated actor and director, and of course married Sybil Thorndike, whilst his sister Elizabeth (Elsie) was the first woman to graduate in medicine at the University of Bristol. But Randal seems to have been the most cerebral. Their father Thomas, worked in the small family Casson Bank as a young man, staying on to manage the Denbigh branch when it was taken over by the North and South Wales Bank, and it was here his children spent the earlier part of their childhood. However, Thomas's long-time passion for organ building, which he had been practising in an amateur way with some success in Wales, eventually took the family to London when he abandoned the bank to join an organ-building firm there. Randal stayed in Wales to finish his schooling and was clever enough to win a scholarship to St John's College, Cambridge, where he read Mathematics. Such was his ability that he became a wrangler.

A fine career must have seemed in prospect, and he yearned to be an astronomer. But by the time he graduated, his father had set up a new business to manufacture the Positive Organ of his own design. And despite the Positive Organ's recognized merits - it was installed in churches throughout Britain and in many missionary churches across the

---

[2] Sir Lewis Thomas Casson made his first professional appearances on the stage at the Court Theatre under the Vedrenne-Barker management from 1904 - 1907, playing mainly in Shakespeare and Shaw. In 1908 he became a member of the repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, under Miss Horniman, which he directed from 1911 to 1914. It was there that he met and married Sybil Thorndike, with whom he produced a season of Greek plays at the Holborn Empire in 1922. They also appeared together at the Little Theatre between 1920 and 1922 in seasons of Grand Guignol. Casson then devoted most of his time to direction, though continuing to act from time to time, notably as Stogumber in Shaw's 'St Joan' (1924) and Buckingham in 'Henry VIII' (1926), and in leading roles with the Old Vic in the 1927-28 season. With his wife he made many overseas tours in the 1920s and 1930s, and in 1940 accompanied her on a tour of the Welsh coalfields in 'Macbeth'. He was knighted in 1945 for services to the theatre. After the Second World War he again toured extensively with Dame Sybil in dramatic recitals, and gave some excellent performances in such parts as Professor Linden in Priestley's 'The Linden Tree' (1947), Sir Horace Darke in Clemence Dane's 'Eighty in the Shade' (1959), and Telyegin in Chekhov's 'Uncle Vanya' at the Chichester Festival in 1962. He made his last appearance (at the age of ninety) in a revival of Kesselring's 'Arsenic and Old Lace' (1966). In 1970 a Studio Theatre in Cardiff, named after him, became the home of the Welsh Theatre Company.

Empire - Thomas was no businessman, and money was always very short. It was imperative that Randal should establish himself in a profession. As his son Hugh commented many years later, there was no great demand for astronomers either, so Randal, with his first-class degree, took and passed the examination for entry to the Indian Civil Service. This was an elite body of men, open to a limited number of entrants, and respected for the efficiency and rectitude of its administration. Boys leaving public school were the main candidates and many of them attended crammers specifically directed to getting them through what was recognized to be a tough examination. Randal had no need of such extra tuition, and was soon dispatched to Burma, where le set about learning the language and, eventually, embarking on marriage and fatherhood.

Having survived the early sickly months of his infancy, Hugh -or Chappie as he was always called as a small boy went with his mother and sister to join his father in Burma. He retained only a few, scrappy memories of the three years he spent there, and even those were likely to have been the result of stories he heard related by his parents years later. Some eventually found a place in his own repertoire, because from earliest childhood Hugh Casson recognized the appeal of a good tale, particularly if it was expertly embroidered, changed in minor detail to suit the mood or credulity of his audience, and then delivered with dramatic flourish. Genuine memories of the big house and garden in Golden Valley in Rangoon included standing at the top of the staircase and throwing his toy wheelbarrow to the bottom with a satisfying clatter. But, sequestered with Rosemary and their nurse in the house and large garden where they lived, he probably only got fleeting glimpses of Rangoon. He retained no images of the beauty with which he was surrounded during the few infant years he spent in this most exotic of cities. He was, in any case, too young to have memories of the great golden Shwedagon Pagoda, encrusted with jewels and dating from 585 BC, which towered over Rangoon, of the graceful, good-looking people in their traditional ‘longyi’, the yellow-robed Buddhist monks, the tropical flowers and the many gilded pagodas and pavilions which were such dominant architectural features.

Life in Rangoon, with its wide, tree-lined streets built on a grid-plan by the Victorians after the country became completely absorbed in to the British Empire in 1886, was agreeable. Or it was for those compliant servants of the Crown who were not concerned about being in something of a backwater, away from the mainstream of events, in this least prestigious of the Indian provinces. There were sufficient servants, and there were ponies for Hugh's mother and father to ride, all typical of the lifestyle enjoyed by Colonial Civil Servants in Edwardian times. A photograph taken outside the house, when

Hugh and Rosemary were about three and four years old, shows the family complete with its full complement of servants, including an English nurse.

Entertaining at Government House was both lavish and formal, and was marked by intermittent visits from such minor members of the Royal Family as the Duke of Connaught, none of which the young Casson could have possibly remembered. Even then his life was fairly detached from that of his parents on a daily basis. His father, at first an Assistant Commissioner and finally a Divisional Judge, travelled the country administering British justice and spending nights under canvas *en route.* His mother, who liked the cosseted existence of a Colonial wife, was also extremely fond of this other aspect of Randal's work and usually travelled with him, attended by enough servants to ensure her complete comfort. Back in Ran goon they were busy with visits to the Club, which constituted such a major factor in the life of British Colonial Civil Servants, along with parties, polo matches, amateur dramatics and formal receptions, so that Hugh and Rosemary spent most of their time in the care and company of nurses. Like many wives of her generation who had little purpose to their lives apart from being adjuncts to their husbands, May Casson, small, pretty and reputedly flirtatious, was prone to fall in love with young men other than her husband, and was herself the recipient of long ardent glances from subalterns amongst their group, who were probably finding more appropriate targets for their affections thin on the ground. None of this nugatory activity affected the solidity of Randal and May Casson's marriage. It was more a case of them both being amusing, well liked and entirely acceptable in a small social milieu far from home.

Randal's older sister Frances came out to visit them not long before the First World War. Now in her late thirties and unmarried, Fanny, as she was known, was a schoolteacher in Derby, and she may have hoped, as did so many other young women, that she would acquire a husband in this land where bachelors abounded. She kept a diary, some of which has survived, of this adventurous journey, and it includes an account of a shipboard romance which sadly ended when her swain, whom she christened Prospero, left the ship at Port Said. Her good spirits and unflagging enthusiasm were revived when she reached Rangoon and Randal and May arrived to meet her. Fanny was an enthusiast, and she quickly succumbed to the pleasures of Rangoon, finding the Golden Valley where the Cassons lived 'charmingly pretty and close to real jungle. They say a tiger was killed in a compound near here only the other day. The house is on the side of a hill, near a little lake and is very pretty with its verandahs and balconies.' Arriving with Randal and May in a tum tum, she met the children, Hugh aged three, Rosemary four, 'who are looking bright and happy and well, and are very friendly and sweet' .After that, they figure little in her account of her stay, though she did peep into the nursery where 'there was a huge mosquito curtain over the

bed and the cots'. Walks in the jungle with Randal, tennis parties, a fancy-dress dance, sketching, punting on the lakes, a visit to a horse show and to the Wingabar Monastery, reached through lovely rose gardens 'where there is a colossal Buddha of brick', all filled her days. One afternoon she and May took the children, wearing topis as protection against the intense sunlight, to Dalhousie Park, but this was unusual, and there is no mention that Hugh and Rosemary went with them to the open-air swimming tank. 'It is a lovely spot in the jungle, and is a big one, very jolly... It is all protected from snakes by big sheets of iron at the side.' A garden party at the home of a very rich Burmese was held to meet members of the Commission on the ICS. 'I was not struck with any except Ramsay Macdonald, who has a beautiful face: he looks very, very sad...The Burmese, Parsi and Hindu visitors were most beautifully dressed and looked far more graceful than the English: the dresses were of exquisite colours in silk, but the most graceful were the Farsi women's: black or white embroidered in silver and falling in lovely folds. The garden seemed full of human flowers. Fanny enthuses frequently about the Burmese children whom she encountered in the streets, but saw little more of her niece and nephew, because by the time she returned from a trip to Mandalay which Randal had organized for her, it was mid March and 'the dear little children and May' were just about to depart for the cooler climes of Maymyo, the hill station to the north of Rangoon, some forty miles from Mandalay, where they would avoid the excesses of the hot season. Here in the summer capital of British Burma, 4,000 feet above sea level and on a gentle plateau unlike the precipitous terrain of most of the hill stations, they could enjoy fresh, comparatively cool air, and spend their days in a milieu reminiscent of Surrey or Sussex, with Victorian mock-Tudor houses, gardens full of flowers and pine trees, a clock tower with a chiming clock, and quiet, tree-shaded roads. 'We went down to the station with the children and Nanny. The trains to Mandalay are splendidly arranged and as comfortable as they can possibly be made. Rosemary and Hugh both were quite worried about the luggage. Just fancy that baby, Chappie, almost as soon as he was in the carriage saying "Mummie, is the luggage coming?" with a distraught and burdened air. We do miss them so.' She didn't see them again, although they too returned to England in the following year, and she died in 1915 at the age of forty-two.

Several of May's letters to her sister Jo have survived from these Burmese years, and though none is properly dated, the contents reveal all of them to have been written after the war, during the last years of her stay in Burma. Rosemary and Hugh never returned to the East, though, after the end of the war, their parents made the occasional visit.

Some of these letters to Jo were written in late 1922 and early 1923, when the Prince of Wales visited India in an effort to revive flagging Anglo-Indian relations, and when the Cassons encountered him in both Rangoon and Delhi. Randal had been sent to Delhi for several months early in 1923 in what appears to have been a move to a less demanding post than he had held in Burma, prior to his retirement. 'How the papers do lie about the

Prince's visit,' wrote May. 'It's done no earthly good. He says so himself.' There were riots in the streets by groups of disaffected Burmese, but there were also innumerable social occasions, some of which the Cassons attended, and which May found overwhelmingly exciting. There is a graphic description in one letter of the ball at Viceregal Lodge in Delhi to wind up the Prince's stay, which apparently ended in a riot of laughter.

The Prince is of course the Prince Charming of every fairy tale with his sunshiney hair and blue eyes, with that half-shy manner which is so captivating and always makes me cry. He looked really happy and jolly last night ... He danced with Lady Reading and all the stodgy members of council and their wives. Lord and Lady Rawlinson, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and his second wife and Lady Falmouth were all in there, and the rest of us climbed on chairs or went into the gallery to see it. I had a strong position standing on a sofa and saw everything. The Prince hadn't an idea how to dance them and Lady R is stone deaf which made it difficult for him to ask her. He suddenly began to laugh hopelessly, he caught the Viceroy's eye and it set the Viceroy off too and then Lady R began. I've never seen such a jolly scene. He wandered off absolutely at sea, Lady R hauled him back, he got mixed up with the ladies in one figure and in another stood quite by himself looking wildly round for Lady R whom he'd lost - he clung to her like a life buoy. He was laughing so much he couldn't stop and so was the Viceroy - the whole room shouted with laughter too. One lady near me laughed so heartily she stepped over the edge of the sofa and crashed heavily to the ground, which made me laugh more heartily than ever. At the end the whole room shouted 'Hooray'. Wasn't it dreadful!! Fancy, at Viceregal Lodge too."

There is much more in a similar vein. May was then, and remained to the end of her life, an ardent royalist, who derived immense excitement and satisfaction from her own glancing encounter with the man who was to become Duke of Windsor, and eventually from the working relationship and friendship which her son enjoyed with members of the Royal Family from a later generation.

When Randal retired later in 1923 at the age of forty-four, his career, which had been marked by no striving ambition, was over. During the war he had enlisted as an officer of the Volunteer Mobile Battery in Rangoon, where his lectures on ballistics and other technical subjects would, according to a fellow officer, 'have done credit to a proficient artillery man'. He used to say in later years that he had become deaf because of this service. It is not clear why, but maybe it was owing to his involvement with ballistics. Back home and installed in a modest post as part-time lecturer in Mathematics at Southampton University, he would explain that he had left Burma a little earlier than he

needed to because 'Justice is often blind but I don't think it should also be deaf'. It is uncertain, though, whether this was the precise cause of his retirement. The deaths in 1919 and 1920 of first May's mother and then her father, who had both been unstinting in caring for Rosemary and Hugh, may also have had something to do with bringing them home. Or maybe the punishing climate had finally become insupportable. There is nothing to indicate that Randal was suffering from the distaste for his job or the disillusionment with his imperial role that prompted George Orwell to resign from the Indian Imperial Police in Burma only a few years later. Although, since the war, pockets of unrest and hostility had begun to foment amongst the hitherto quiescent Burmese, Randal had always loved the place and its people. The return to England deprived him and May of many things of status, primarily, which May almost certainly mourned more than the equable Randal; of money, for their pension was reduced by his early retirement; and of the full social life and companionship which they had enjoyed in Rangoon.

Meanwhile, Hugh and Rosemary had spent the war years in England, staying for much of the time at Sandgate. Their wartime experiences had been largely undramatic. They some times heard the guns across the Channel, and there were occasional air raids on Folkestone, during which they were made to take shelter under the grand piano. They were once disconcerted to see spots of blood on the pathway leading up to the church porch at Hythe, where many tombstones had been blown awry and a verger killed in the previous night's raid. Two coastguards blew themselves to pieces trying to secure a stranded mine quite close to the Man house. But this was over a period of several years and, apart from such rare incidents, life was tranquil.

Edward Garnet Man and his wife Catherine lived at Halstead, a spacious house of great comfort though no architectural distinction. There was ample room to accommodate the children, together with their newly acquired governess, Miss Frampton. Their cousin Andrew, whose father was at that time the Vicar of Lydden, which is between Canterbury and Dover, said in later years that he remembered them as being spoilt. 'We lived at Lydden between 1912 and 1918, so we used to visit Halstead quite often. I know we resented these two in our grandfather's house which they seemingly regarded as their own. Rosemary used to greet us on arrival as though she was the daughter of the house. We didn't like that or the way our elderly relatives, particularly the aunts, fussed over them.' They seemed specially to dote on Hugh, who then and for the remainder of his long life was regarded as frail. Rosemary, only a year older, perhaps enjoined by her parents, also felt protective towards him.

Halstead was full of memorabilia brought back from India, including two figures in traditional Burmese costume which stood at the top of the staircase. Their wooden hands,

which were removable, sometimes fell off, and the small Cassons found them unnervingly realistic, especially on dark evenings when they were on their way to bed.

With its white-wood balconies, hung tiles and elaborate chimneys, Halstead was a typical Edwardian seaside house - of a fairly substantial order. Hugh found it quite imposing enough to boast about later on when he was at boarding school, and he was impressed by the painting of his grandmother in her court dress which hung in the drawing room. Surrounded by lawns, it faced directly on to the sea and it was possible to scramble over a low stone wall where there were tamarisks bent double by the wind, down steps and on to the beach for a swim. There was a large, heated conservatory with hot-house plants and an encaustic tiled floor where, according to his cousin Andrew, Hugh was often sent to play, protected from the dangers of the cold sea air. Mr. Prior the gardener spent a great deal of his time pushing a lawnmower over the hard, salty turf, on which a tent was set up in summer to shelter the family whilst they took afternoon tea.

The Casson children were happy here, but, despite the absence of parents and the affection with which they were regarded by their grandparents, this was an Edwardian household in which they certainly were not allowed to run wild. Rosemary remembered that even as a child she realized that civilized behaviour was imperative. Good manners became a way of life. There were prayers every morning, led by their grandmother and attended by all the staff from the cook to the scullery maid. Cousins came to the house too, either to stay for a while because their parents were also abroad or, as Andrew did, on family occasions. Edward Garnet Man was of an expansive disposition, with leanings towards eccentricity which became increasingly evident during his retirement. He would invite any likely person -man or woman -whom he met when he was out walking, or on one of his morning rides along the Lees at nearby Folkestone, back for lunch. Some accepted. These spontaneous bursts of hospitality were not very popular with his wife - nor were her husband's jokes, which verged on the risque - but their recipients were greeted with ostensible courtesy in the household. Like any gentleman of his generation, Hugh's grandfather wore a flat-topped bowler or a truncated topper when he went out; unlike most others, though, one of these hats was already on his head, atop a thick thatch of white hair, ready for the next engagement as he dozed in one of the tall dining-room chairs after lunch.

Edward was just the sort of character to appeal to children, and the crowds of cousins who came and went - Hugh Casson claimed there were thirty-two in all - had the happiest memories of him. Huge family Christmas parties took place where all the children were roped in to put on a play by their Aunt Dollie, the Mans' youngest daughter, who still lived at home. Dollie was as eccentric as her father, but since her mother suffered from painful and debilitating arthritis, which worsened as she got older, she cheerfully shouldered many household responsibilities.

Andrew Man may have thought the Casson children regarded Halstead as their own home, but they did not live here all the time. There were periods in lodgings where they were supervised by Miss Frampton or subsequent governesses. (Twin cousins, nicknamed Pink and Blue, were the focus of much envy because for a long time they

lodged with the milk man in Sandgate High Street and were allowed to handle his great zinc cans with their brass hinges.) Such random visits increased after their grandparents' deaths, although by this time both children had been sent to boarding school, Hugh aged seven, Rosemary eight. There were even periods at holiday schools, of which there were many along this part of the south coast. But generally, more agreeably, and certainly remembered by Hugh with more precision and enthusiasm in his old age, they were able to spend the school holidays with aunts and uncles - all on the Man side of the family -in various comfortable and well-staffed homes.

Hugh's mother's sister, Josselyn - Aunt Jo, who was credited with rescuing Hugh from death as a tiny frail baby - went on to become his favourite aunt, and some of the best holidays were spent at Ellesmere, the house where she lived with her husband, Cecil Lewis (recently retired from the Indian Civil Service), at Farncombe near Godalming. Jo, a tiny, good- looking woman with a great sense of humour, firm religious beliefs, and a swath of necklaces and chains around her neck, took in all the cousins at various times. Whilst Cecil wrote books about Burma in his study, she played hymns on the upright piano which they would join her in singing, rubbed Vick's into their chests at bedtime, and generally provided the stability, firmness and affection which was so lacking in many of their lives. Ellesmere, a rambling late-Victorian house with large garden, billiard room, tennis court and complement of servants, accommodated them with no apparent strain. Meals, to which they were summoned by a gong, were wholesome though unimaginative, and one of Jo's granddaughters remembers the pervasive smell of cabbage and carbolic soap which prevailed even during her own childhood in the thirties. But Hugh and Rosemary loved the schoolroom, with its large table hidden under a green chenille cover, and toast made on a steel toasting fork over the fire, and they instinctively felt at home .n this house with its liberal complement of artefacts brought home from Burma by Jo and Cecil.

The unmistakable streak of eccentricity which ran through the Man family was manifested here by the eldest daughter of the household, cousin Elaine, whose craving for fresh air was such that she removed her bedroom window to allow the wind and rain access at all times. Next came Stella, and then there was cousin Angela, a lively and

tomboyish girl of roughly Hugh's own age, to whom he was particularly close. All appeared to enjoy the invasion of their home territory by this group of itinerant cousins.

Miss Rope, the governess who generally accompanied the Casson children when they stayed at Ellesmere, took them for endless walks along the winding lanes around Charterhouse. One of May's letters to Jo, written from Burma just before they departed for Delhi in January 1923, starts, 'What a lovely Xmas you gave the children -thanks *awfully* for having them -I would have loved to see the play. They certainly have had much jollier holidays without us than they do with us!' She goes on to talk of the move to Delhi and the fall in pay it would incur, and then, 'Is Rosemary rough in manner~', blaming her school for not being particular enough. There are effusive descriptions of the Prince of Wales, 'who so reminds us of Chappie. I don't know why, his smile or his sunshiney hair, I think. You always said Chappie was just like the King when be was born!' Chappie, now thirteen, was certainly of a similar physical type to his future sovereign, and it is easy to comprehend the satisfaction this afforded his royalist mother.

It was when staying in Godalming with Aunt Jo that Hugh, as a small boy, helped by an older cousin, spent hours illustrating his own story of a one-legged submarine commander. It was here too, as he liked to recount later, that he joined in what the *Evening News* of the time described as 'The Great Sunday Hunt for Mrs. Christie'. This followed the disappearance of crime writer Agatha Christie after her husband demanded a divorce because of his love for another woman. Christie had driven from her home in Sunningdale late one December night, and her car was then found abandoned off the road at the well-known beauty spot, Newlands Corner. Because she was so well known, and because of intensive press coverage, Christie's disappearance captured the public imagination to the extent that hundreds of civilians joined the police in searching the local downs for the missing woman. Hugh was a Boy Scout at the time and, because all Boy Scouts had been asked to join the search, beat the undergrowth with enthusiasm, slashing the gorse bushes and watching whilst police dragged local pools and rivers for possible drowned bodies. Christie, in an appropriately mysterious manner, turned up in Bolton seven days later apparently suffering from amnesia. This whole bizarre episode took place in 1926, when Hugh was sixteen. By this time his parents were back and living in Southampton, so he was probably only staying with aunt Jo for a short visit.

Back in those early days, the children sometimes went to London and stayed with their Great Aunt Tory (Victoria), who was their Man grandmother's sister, and who lived in a tall terraced house in Montagu Street, Marylebone. Here they spent most of their time in the kitchen with three elderly maids, sending a china pig up and down in the service lift and making occasional trips to nearby Madame Tussaud's. Hugh especially liked going to Selfridges, where he spent as many hours as were allowed, roaming through the various departments and riding the handsome bronze lifts. There were visits to aunts at Chatham

or Aldershot or Putney; and an annual summer fortnight with a widower uncle [James Henry Matthews] - one of their grandmother's brothers - who lived at Sunbury-on-Thames and, as chairman of Grindlay's Bank, was amongst the most prosperous members of the family.

These holidays in Sunbury, Hugh was to write later, *'were prized beyond measure because life here was sybaritic. We went shopping in a plum-coloured Vauxhall driven by Guerney the chauffeur who wore a long dust-coat, and we had lemon squash with our lunch. In the afternoon we played tennis or went for a picnic in the punt. For hours Rosemary and I would paddle and punt up the backwaters, exploring creeks, and banging on the green canvas covers of boats which were moored along the banks to enquire in the friendliest possible fashion of couples locked in embrace within whether they were married. They never seemed to mind. On Fridays we used to drive to Bentalls at Kingston on Thames and a shop assistant would come out with a notebook in hand to take the order. We were always at Sunbury for Regatta Week and one year the prizes were presented by Jeffrey Farnol - who was at the time my favourite author. At the fair afterwards we watched entranced as he whirled past overhead on a Chair-o-plane in his brown knickerbockers.'*

If, viewed all these years later, Hugh's childhood seems lacking in the close parental ties which are usual now, it gives every appearance of having been a happy one. He always insisted there were no traumatic memories, such as the one endured by writer Raleigh Trevelyan who, in similar circumstances, once flinched on hearing a relation tell her sister, 'It's your turn to have Raleigh for Christmas.'

Preparatory-school days, when they arrived, were comparatively painless. Wotton Court, just west of the road which rail between Canterbury and Dover, took no more than thirty - thirty-five pupils. It was a happy, homely place, despite its share of young male teachers who had returned neurotic and sometimes shell-shocked from the war. At the age of seven games were already anathema to Hugh and so they remained all his life. His cousin Andrew, who had already been at Wotton Court for several years when Hugh arrived, remembered that he often disappeared into the rhododendron bushes to avoid games of cricket or football. 'In those days such behaviour was strange indeed. We were all expected to play games and to try to excel. I do not think, though, that Hugh was to suffer in any way for this abnormality.' That was because already his ability to mimic others, tell a good story and make people laugh was well developed. The years spent in various houses with a constantly changing group of relations were now to prove his salvation, and he never endured the abuse and contempt which were the lot of so many games-haters in boys' preparatory schools, especially those who were academically bright, as he was. Instead, the charm which he had consciously exercised when he was very small, in the well-founded belief that it would make him a welcome and loved visitor, now came into full play. He extended his repertoire of skills to include a facility for irritating masters, and found his popularity was ensured.

Rosemary, a tall slim girl who did not share Hugh's hatred of games (she was later to become a teacher of physical training), was shy and socially more awkward than her brother. She and Hugh always got on perfectly well together, but she never quite managed his easy relationship with the various aunts and cousins, and suffered as a consequence. He looked back on this childhood period with some remorse in his later years. 'She had more trouble with the constantly changing venues. I don't think I was as nice as I should have been. I didn't betray her, say "don't let's have her with us" or anything like that, but I don't suppose I was as helpful as I could have been, because if you have made yourself the sort of person who is good with others, you forget how uncomfortable it is if you aren't very good. 'In her old age, Rosemary told one of Hugh's daughters that she had always found it tough being relegated to the fringes of every group whilst her brother was the focus of attention. This was said without rancour, because she adored Hugh and was proud of his subsequent high-profile career. But, consciously or not, he dented her confidence to the end, making it clear, even when they were very old, that he was irritated by her attempts to talk about their childhood, and abruptly dragging their conversation back to the present - and future. Life was too busy for him to dwell on the past.

Wootton Court, small and felicitously bereft of bullies, became for Hugh a place where he could play the piano, sing (he had a fine voice and to the subsequent ribaldry of his family earned the Entertainment Badge in the Boy Scouts, draw- though not with any particular intent at this stage- and read voraciously: the usual schoolboy diet of P. F. Westerman, Ian Hay, and books about the Navy. Not so usual was his weakness for Angela Brazil, who wrote school stories for girls. Some boys made wireless sets and Hugh vividly remembered the silver wound coil, the cat's whisker and crystal, and the varnished bases with inexpertly champfered edges, though he never made one himself, being then, as he was to remain, 'bad with his hands'. There were weekly letters to the parents in Rangoon, and an annual photograph to show them how you'd grown, which in my case was not very much'. He was bad at Mathematics, which must have been a disappointment to Randal, who tried to coach him on one holiday from Burma, and found him quick in understanding and able to work out problems well, but careless because he wasn't interested. Otherwise, he did well, being above average at Classics, and eventually he became Head Boy. In that capacity, provided he polished the brass headlamps of the headmaster's car (an early Minerva limousine), he was allowed to go shopping in Canterbury every Friday with the headmaster's wife. More exciting were trips in a curious boat-shaped sports car (alleged to contain the engine of a Bentley) which belonged to the Latin master, who, despite his postwar neurosis, was an excellent teacher. It all sounds comfortingly homely, and in the holidays, the aunts (and Man grandparents during their lifetime) continued in their surrogate roles, providing the parental support which was lacking.

Illustrations

Page One Mary Man
Page Two Mary Man Josselyn Man (Aunty Joe)
Page Three Mary Man in Rangoon
Page Six Edward Garnet Man
Page Seven Catherine Jane (Matthews) Man
Page Eight and Nine ‘Halstead’, Sandgate.
Page Eleven Jo at her writing table at Ellesmere
Page Twelve Cousin Elaine (daughter of Josselyn)
Page Thirteen Victoria Matthew (Torie) in her Hans Place flat
Page Thirteen James Henry Matthews (Torie’s brother) and his daughter Edie
Page Thirteen Hugh with his mother and father.
Below Hugh Casson

HUGH CASSON
(1910 –1999)