
Opening Extract from...

Climbing the Bookshelves

Written by Shirley Williams

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SHIRLEY WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER 1

A Chelsea Childhood

The earliest event I can remember is falling on my head from a swing on to the worn grass of the Chelsea Babies' Club playground sometime in 1933. I was three years old. I don't recall now whether it hurt or not, but I do remember the hours my mother spent trying to get the blood clots out of my hair.

The Chelsea Babies' Club was a determinedly progressive nursery school at the end of our road, Glebe Place. On the short way to school was a menacing poster nailed to a pole. 'If you don't like cats, don't have kittens,' it read. 'If you don't like kittens, don't keep cats.' The Club's founders believed in healthy exercise, year round, in the open air. In the winters, we skipped and frolicked, reddened and blued by the cold, in sturdy knickers and liberty bodices, an odd kind of vest with rubber buttons at the bottom end, presumably to link it to the knickers. The presiding enthusiast for this Spartan regime was a Miss Bunn, around whom glowing infants flourished like buttercups.

I must have been an irritating infant. Apart from falling off swings and trying to climb perilous objects, according to one member of staff, at three years old I talked incessantly. Since my

family were all given to talking, nursery school was probably my best chance of being heard.

My parents named me Shirley, not after the celebrated child filmstar of the time, Shirley Temple, but after Charlotte Brontë's 'gallant little cavalier' in her novel of that name, a champion of social justice. I never cared for the name, nor for the book, which I have never managed to read all through. Perhaps that was why my father called me 'Poppy', and 'Poppy' became my childhood name.

My brother, John Edward, two and a half years older than me, was a sensitive, gentle boy with dark-brown eyes and long eyelashes. As a small child, he closely resembled my mother's beloved younger brother Edward, killed in the First World War. She doted upon John. He was physically delicate, and had been born with slightly bowed legs, in consequence of which he was obliged to wear leg irons as a small child. He was protective and loving towards me, and I basked in his affection, while striving to outdo him. We were friends as well as rivals. Together we invented a private language and a virtual family, called the Dears, around whom we wove stories told late into the night until we finally fell asleep. John was a thoughtful, well-behaved child. He read a lot, and liked listening to music. He disliked sports, and tried to avoid the team games that took up at least two afternoons a week at his traditional Chelsea preparatory school. But he enjoyed swimming and climbing trees, an activity we enjoyed together when our parents bought a cottage in the New Forest just before the outbreak of the Second World War. When he grew into his teen years, he spent a lot of time painting and composing.

My parents, my brother and I, and my mother's dear friend Winifred Holtby lived in a long, thin house with a long, thin garden at 19 Glebe Place, Chelsea. Our street was much favoured by artists, actors and other Chelsea characters. It was an exciting place to grow up in, not just because of the jungle gyms and rope

walks at the nursery school, and the muttering bereted painters setting up easels in the street, but because our house presented all sorts of challenges. The house itself was four cramped storeys high, plus a cellar and an attic. There were lots of stairs to climb or to slide down. A favourite game was to see how many stairs my brother and I could jump down; four were easy, six daunting. Then there were my parents' bookcases, which ran from floor to ceiling like climbing-frames, with the added zest of forbidden books on the top shelf. Soon after I could read, I sneaked Havelock Ellis and Marie Stopes from that top shelf. I had learned from my brother that these were naughty books. They turned out to be very boring, but I was amazed by one illustration, a blurred spot underneath which was written: 'This photograph of a human egg is several times life-size.'

George Catlin, my father, was a slim, handsome, scholarly man and physically a little awkward. An only child, he had spent his lonely boyhood reading prodigiously. His erudition ran deep. He had studied the Greek classics, and also substantial parts of the works of the Christian fathers, from St Augustine to St Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, read in Latin. He was not, however, a man at ease in an ivory tower. He longed to be involved in public affairs, in the world of happenings and events.

My father gave me the single greatest gift with which a child can be endowed, self-confidence. Diffident though he was, he loved me from babyhood, perhaps because I resembled his own mother who had died prematurely when he was only twenty-two. He and I conspired together. I climbed his bookshelves, right up to the ceiling, clinging grubbily to the dusty ledges. He never tried to stop me, and both of us knew he wouldn't tell my mother, who would immediately anticipate cracked skulls and broken arms. That I was a girl was irrelevant to his ambitions for me. I could be anything I wanted to be. His feminism was not an intellectual construct. Quite simply, he saw no reason to think that women were lesser beings than men. Until I was sixteen or so, it never

occurred to me that this was a rare attitude for a man born in the nineteenth century to take.

Intelligent, ambitious and shy, my father so closely resembled the film actor Leslie Howard, renowned for the role of Ashley in the film *Gone with the Wind*, that people stopped him in the street to ask for his autograph. He longed to be a politician, a career he was in no way cut out for. He disdained the career that the circumstance of having to make a living thrust upon him – for his father, an Anglican priest, was painfully poor – that of university lecturer. All his life long, he wanted to be what he wasn't. At Oxford University he had established something of a record, winning the Chancellor's English Essay Prize, the Gladstone and the Matthew Arnold Memorial Prizes, all in the space of two years. He was later awarded a Ph.D. for his thesis on Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, at a time when doctorates in philosophy were extremely rare. But he had no great respect for his own considerable academic achievements. He slipped into sycophancy when encountering notable public figures. When I was old enough to notice, I wept inwardly for him, but could never persuade him to see these men for what many of them were – pompous, pushy or self-obsessed.

My father had adored his mother, Edith Kate, who married when she was only twenty-two a considerably older man, George Catlin, who was an ordained minister in the Church of England. Before long, she rebelled against the constraints of being a vicar's wife. She was widely read, and her commonplace book reveals the intensity of her commitment to educate herself. The carefully copied quotations range from George Meredith to William Wilberforce, and are decorated with pen-and-ink drawings of local churches and villages. She came to resent the exclusion of women from civic life. She supported the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, organisations that campaigned for women to have a vote, though they eschewed violent methods towards that end.

This brought her into conflict with many members of the Church her husband served. Parish councillors and patrons of Anglican livings were disinclined to appoint curates with radical wives. The marriage became strained, and Edith Catlin left her husband and son in 1915 to work in a charity settlement in the East End of London. Her son, who had won an Exhibition to New College, Oxford, was broken-hearted. Two years later, she died of uraemia after a failed operation. His understanding of the cause that had driven her shaped the rest of his life. It was a significant reason for his attraction to my mother.

My mother, Vera Brittain, was a conscientious but rather remote parent. She was small, dark-haired, intense, serious and single-minded. My brother and I were brought up to respect her work; she was the family's main breadwinner. She was also intensely ambitious. She once wrote of the unhappy years she spent at Oxford immediately after the First World War, 'Only Ambition held me to life.' As a child, I realised that her deepest commitment was to writing, then to my brother and only after them, to me. I don't recall resenting this at all, but it taught me to be independent. My mother was not widely liked. Her candour, which she did little to modify, left behind a trail of offended acquaintances, often fellow authors. At least two of her friendships with well-known contemporaries, the writers Phyllis Bentley and Storm Jameson, broke up eventually on the rocks of my mother's criticisms and convictions.

My mother's memories of the First World War were never far away, and were haunted by the men she had lost, men she was determined to make immortal by her writing. By my teens, I had a rounded image of Roland Leighton, the fiancé killed in France just before Christmas 1915, and of Edward, the sensitive, music-loving brother who survived until June 1918 when he was killed in the final Austrian offensive against Italy. Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, the two other dear friends of Edward, who died in 1917, were less clearly defined in my mind. But I had a

feeling that both had been in love with Vera too, probably the only young woman they had come to know well with whom they could share the horrors of the war. My mother kept their letters, books and poems, charting the change from the romantic heroism of the early months, best captured in Rupert Brooke's poetry, to the disillusion and despair of the trenches, and the legacy of devastated towns and villages.

Soon after he volunteered for military service, my mother sent her fiancé Roland a copy of Rupert Brooke's war sonnets, *1914*. At Christmas 1917, from Étaples in northern France, she sent her brother Edward, inscribed to 'my bien-aimé', Gilbert Frankau's *City of Fear*, a brutal description of the murdered town of Ypres. Edward sent her, a few days later, Robert Nichols's poems, *Ardours and Endurances*. Under the inscription, she later wrote the date of Edward's death in Italy, 15 June 1918, and Nichols's words 'I, too, take leave of all I ever had.'

The legacy of the war cast a permanent shadow over her life which nothing could quite dispel. Four years of war had accentuated her natural trait of anxiety. As I wrote in a 1978 preface to her famous autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, 'it was hard for her to laugh unconstrainedly; at the back of her mind, the row upon row of wooden crosses were planted too deeply'. But she did allow herself some moments of frivolity. She loved clothes, and used to take me with her while she tried on the elegant polka-dotted silk dresses and emphatic hats of the 1930s. A new hat or pair of gloves could lift her spirits for days. It was a pleasure I did not share. After the first ten minutes of each encounter with a supercilious sales lady, I began to think about ponies and tricycles, and to resent the waste of my time. These early experiences immunised me against both shopping and fashion. For years I bought the first thing I saw that looked even vaguely as if it might suit me, though often it didn't.

Our disciplined, hard-working and peripatetic household was completed by Amy Francis, who was recruited at the age of

eighteen to help look after the children, and became, as cook and housekeeper, central to the enterprise.

One floor of our house was the domain of my mother's beloved friend Auntie Winifred. Winifred Holtby, who had met my mother in the autumn of 1919 when both were students at Somerville College, Oxford, was, like her, a writer. The two young women had shared flats, first in Doughty Street, Bloomsbury, and then in Maida Vale, after leaving university, and together tried to break into the world of journalism and writing books. Both were regarded as progressive writers, addressing topics like feminism and equal rights not much discussed in conventional society. They were also both passionate protagonists of the League of Nations, forerunner to today's United Nations, and lectured for the League of Nations Union up and down the country.

After my mother married in 1925, she and my father shared their home with Winifred. That seemed to some of their friends and acquaintances an odd arrangement. But my father held a professorship at Cornell University in New York State and was away a lot of the time. He recognised that my mother needed the loyal friendship and support Winifred unstintingly gave her. With eyes the colour of cornflowers and hair the pale gold of the summer wheat in her native Yorkshire wolds, Winifred couldn't easily be overlooked. Indeed she might have been a descendant of the Vikings who had ravaged and occupied so much of the east coast of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire centuries before. Tall – nearly six feet – and slim, she was incandescent with the radiance of her short and concentrated life. For she died, aged thirty-seven, when I was only five.

The fashions of the 1930s added drama to Winifred's striking appearance. She often wore a dark cloak, black or purple, with a wide-brimmed felt hat. Her favourite dress was a slim black shift decorated with sequins, which caught and reflected light in all the colours of the spectrum. It seemed to sum up her being, one that elicited radiance in others. 'My existence,' she once wrote, 'seems

to me like a clear stream which has simply reflected other people's stories and problems.'* Those lives came from a wide spectrum of Yorkshire society. Brought up in the village of Rudston in the East Riding, Winifred as a little girl had accompanied her father David to agricultural events and around his farm. Her mother Alice, the first woman to become an alderman in Yorkshire, took her to meet her constituents, many of them struggling with the agricultural depression of the turn of the twentieth century. Their experiences became the material for Winifred's most ambitious book, *South Riding*, in which she explored the story of local government in her imaginary part of the county. For Winifred, local government, far from being lacklustre, involved itself in the deepest hopes and fears of its community.

Winifred was by nature a mediator, a peacemaker who tried to reconcile the powerful people who jostled for her affection: her mother Alderman Mrs Holtby; Lady Rhondda, proprietor and editor of the feminist journal *Time and Tide*; my mother and many more. Like many a peacemaker, she sometimes evoked contempt and cruelty in others. Virginia Woolf, aloof and disdainful of other women writers, dismissed her as 'poor, gaping Winifred', a savage allusion to her wide, toothy smile.

Lady Rhondda, daughter of the Welsh industrialist and politician David Thomas, later Lord Rhondda, was a friend of Winifred and an occasional visitor to our house. She used to travel with a carefully packed suitcase of medicines. I may have sensed that my mother disliked her, for I certainly did. She was fussy, domineering and unbending. She was also single-minded in her devotion to the women's cause, but I came to appreciate her contribution to that cause only much later in my life, when I got to know something about the work of the equal-rights organisation the Six Point Group, founded in 1918.

* Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby*, Virago, 1999.

For my brother and me, Winifred was the source of unending pleasure: stories, games, wild fantasies, exotic visitors and carved wooden crocodiles from South Africa, the country she had come to love after her visit there in 1926. Sometimes she looked after us in my parents' absence abroad. Our favourite game was 'elephants'. We would pile cushions high up on Winifred's back, and issue orders from our rickety howdah as she crawled carefully across the floor. Ordinary things became extraordinary, and occasionally frightening. When, in an absent-minded moment, she gave me undiluted antiseptic to gargle away a sore throat, I thought I had swallowed fire.

John and I loved Auntie Winifred. We were also aware how much her friendship meant to our mother. For Winifred was life-affirming, one of those blessed people who find the world a constant source of delight, excitement and laughter. She radiated gaiety. That gaiety helped to dispel the sadness that permeated my mother's life after her losses in the First World War.

Some critics and commentators, both at the time and since, have suggested that the relationship between Vera and Winifred must have been a lesbian one. The fact that Winifred continued to live in our household after my mother's marriage to George Catlin confirmed them in that belief. My mother deeply resented this. She felt that it was inspired by a subtle anti-feminism to the effect that women could never be real friends unless there was a sexual motivation, while the friendships of men had been celebrated in literature from classical times. Her book *Testament of Friendship* (1940), which told the story of her relationship with Winifred, was in part motivated by her determination to refute that assumption. But as a famous woman author holding progressive opinions about the position women should occupy, and one whose writing was readily accessible to a wide range of readers, my mother became an icon to feminists and in particular to lesbian feminists. She herself was instinctively heterosexual. She had inherited a Victorian legacy of prejudice but had largely overcome

it through her own friendships with lesbian women. When I was fifteen, she explained to me that some men and women were homosexual. She sometimes asked me to accompany her when she met lesbian women who were besotted with her, to indicate her own commitment to a conventional marriage and family.

A generation later, my friend Val Mitchison, daughter of the Scottish writer and broadcaster Naomi Mitchison, and I were summoned to meet the President of the Junior Common Room at Somerville, and asked not to make public show of what was assumed to be a lesbian relationship. I was shocked because I knew it was not. Val, with her usual robustness, insisted on walking around Somerville's gardens hand in hand with me for the next few days, just to show the authorities they could go to hell. It took another generation before the myth that women who were heterosexual could not have close female friendships was dispelled.

While Auntie Winifred was a source of delight to John and me, our blood relatives were less appealing. We had no uncles or aunts, since my father was an only child and my mother had lost her brother in the First World War, but both maternal grandparents came from large families. My maternal grandmother, Edith Brittain, was the daughter of an impoverished organist and music teacher, Inglis Bervon, and was one of four sisters. Two of them married, the two others remained single. The eldest, Florence Bervon, a tall woman with piercing brown eyes, made herself into a headmistress despite having no teaching qualifications. She, together with her friend Louise Heath-Jones, shared the headship of St Monica's at Kingswood in Surrey, the private girls' school my mother attended. The third sister, Aunt Lillie, was cheerful and rather fussy. She married a thin, elegant businessman called Arthur Bentley-Carr, and they had one son, Robin, who later became a wartime squadron-leader in RAF Bomber Command. The youngest sister, Aunt Belle, was also the jolliest – funny and

candid. After working as a governess, the respectable profession for unqualified young middle-class women, she had bought a tea-shop in Deal that she called 'The Golden Hinde'. John and I used to stay with her, riding ponies over the South Downs, spending long afternoons on the shingle beach, and retiring to a beach hut for tea whenever it got too rainy or too cold.

My grandmother Edith had married into a much better-off family than her own, and was conscious of the status this conferred upon her. I remember her as being very proper, punctual and tidy, and well dressed in a rather elaborate way. I was transfixed by the fox furs she wore, with the fox perpetually eating its own feet where the fastenings were. She was a good cook and a careful housekeeper, keeping a close eye on the Welsh maids who lived in the Brittain grandparents' extensive Kensington flat.

My grandfather, Thomas Arthur Brittain, had been overtaken by melancholia following Edward's loss in battle and his own early retirement. He had nothing to do, beyond getting dressed, about which he was fastidious, going to Harrods and reading the newspapers. He lived a life of comfort and emptiness, occasionally lightened by visits from my mother, who was punctilious about visiting, and on Sundays by us two grandchildren. Sunday tea was an important occasion, for which we were dressed in party clothes. It did not disappoint us, for there was always an array of rock cakes and Victoria sandwiches made by my grandmother, biscuits and cherry sponge.

The Brittains, my grandfather's family, were a quarrelsome lot. There were eleven children, of whom my grandfather was the eldest, and they rarely met except at weddings and funerals. By the time John and I were born, most of them were lost to us. There were rumours of one who had gone to the Klondike to hunt for gold. Just one, the youngest, Aunt Muriel, remained closely in touch. She had 'married well', to use the phrase much in fashion at the time, a young man called Henry Leigh Groves, the only son of a successful Manchester businessman, William Grimble

Groves, who had made his money from a thriving brewery. In 1897 he had bought an impressive Victorian mansion, Holehird, in the Patterdale valley in the Lake District, designed by the renowned architect J. S. Crowther and commanding a panoramic view of Lake Windermere and the Langdale fells beyond.

Henry Leigh Groves trained as a water engineer and worked on the construction of reservoirs, but his real dedication was to public service. 'Service,' he once wrote sententiously, 'is the rent we pay for our room on earth.' Elected to the Westmorland County Council as representative for Bowness, he remained on it for forty-seven years and was its chairman from 1925 to 1927. He meant exactly what he said, and the rent he paid for his room on earth was indeed munificent. Becoming High Sheriff in 1938, he celebrated his office by donating the bed of Lake Windermere, 3642 acres in all, to the Westmorland County Council. The gift enabled the local authority to control development and commercial exploitation of the lake. He and Muriel also devoted themselves to creating a work of art out of the already extensive gardens he had inherited. There were large heated greenhouses in which a remarkable range of orchids flourished. Great-aunt Muriel used to enjoy taking guests between the rows of flesh-eating orchids, their exotic flowers moving to follow the warm scent of living beings.

Aunt Muriel was not particularly keen on her Brittain relatives, but fortunately for me, my mother was among the exceptions. Muriel liked my mother, who had been a bridesmaid at her wedding to Leigh in 1906. Muriel and Leigh never had any children, but they were generous hosts to John and me, encouraging us to row on the pond and scramble up the surrounding fells. I came to love the Lake District, and after the war quite often went to visit.

Aunt Muriel was an unpredictable lady, much given to practical jokes. I was disconcerted by her habit of wearing felt hats in bed, and by her occasionally putting wet sponges on the tops of

doors, which would fall on unsuspecting maids carrying trays. My strangest moment was when, as a teenager, I met an unknown woman guest waiting outside the bathroom carrying a towel. Aunt Muriel denied her existence. Later that morning, as we waited outside the mansion for Uncle Leigh in his elegant 1920s Lancia to drive us to church, I saw the same person coming around the edge of the long façade of Holehird. Again, Aunt Muriel claimed she was unable to see anybody. To this day, I do not know whether I was seeing a ghost, or the real presence of my great-aunt's niece, a lady called Philippa Hole, an aspiring poet, who suffered from delusions and lived in a mental hospital. Her main delusion was that she was the wife of T. S. Eliot.

John intermittently dreamed of inheriting the house, but true to his lifelong commitment to Westmorland, Uncle Leigh gave Holehird and 550 acres of adjoining land to the County Council in 1945. Years later, the mansion was rented for a nominal amount to the Cheshire Homes, and for thirty years housed patients with incurable illnesses. The marvellous gardens were handed over to the Cumbrian Horticultural Society, and are still a joy to see.

In the years shortly before the Second World War, my mother enjoyed a period of fame as a best-selling writer. Her most renowned book, *Testament of Youth*, an autobiography of her wartime experience as a nurse and her personal agony in losing all the young men she most loved, had attracted enthusiastic reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. After it was published in 1933, she was invited to undertake prestigious lecture tours in North America, the apotheosis of a best-selling author.

We children once or twice travelled down with her to Southampton on the boat train, set apart from all the other trains at Waterloo by the romance and mystery of its destination. Uniformed porters manhandled huge belted trunks and handsome leather suitcases pasted with coloured stickers announcing their

owners' previous voyages, to Paris, Delhi or Cape Town. Inside the carriages, each polished table boasted its complement of shaded orange lamps. Southampton docks were dominated by the haughty liners of the Atlantic, their row upon row of white cabins crowned by three or four red and black funnels towering above the piers. My mother's stateroom would be filled with flowers and yellow telegrams, heralds of the adventures to come. We children had only a notional idea of North America, a vast, vigorous continent on the other side of a huge blue ocean which commanded a large slice of the toy globe in our nursery.

My father adored meeting the great, and the great poseurs, of the political world, and could rarely distinguish between them. He was the instigator of the cocktail parties that brought all kinds of visitors to our house, though my mother's fame was the reason they came. Some of their guests were fashionable authors of the time. The guest my brother and I liked best was the actress Sybil Thorndike, a woman whose radiant and generous presence warmed all those she met. She was rare in acknowledging and liking children – most of my parents' guests loftily ignored our presence. Dressed in our nightclothes, we used to watch the arrivals through the banisters. Most thrilling of all to us were the Africans, for we had never before met anyone with a black skin. Among them was Clements Kadalie, the founder in 1919 of one of the first African trades unions, the Industrial and Commercial Union. He had met Auntie Winifred on the visit she had made to South Africa in 1926.

Persuaded that trades union organisation was the first vital step to the liberation of the African majority, Winifred raised the money to send out to South Africa an experienced union organiser, William Ballinger. He and his wife Margaret threw themselves into the cause of the Africans. Margaret became, in 1937, one of the three representatives of Africans in the House of Assembly, following the removal of all African voters from the electoral roll the year before. Sixteen years after entering the Assembly,

Margaret Ballinger became the first leader of the Liberal Party of South Africa. Seven years later, in 1960, she retired from Parliament when the Nationalist government of Hendrik Verwoerd abolished even this indirect form of representation of the African majority. To the Nationalist government, Africans were a different species, for whom democracy was inappropriate.

Just as Winifred had become committed to righting the injustices suffered by the African majority in South Africa, so my father had thrown himself into the cause of the independence of India. He had become an enthusiastic supporter of the Free India Movement, and Vice-Chairman of the Council for Indian Independence. One day in January 1936, a slim young visitor with dark rings under haunted brown eyes came to tea to meet fellow socialists in Britain. Jawaharlal Nehru had just got out of prison. His sister, Lakshmi Pandit, herself an activist in the struggle for Indian independence, a commanding and handsome woman who combined grace with intellect, became my parents' lifelong friend. Among the other visitors to my parents' house was H. G. Wells, with his high, squeaky voice; another, the renowned young author Rebecca West, intense, dark and powerful. According to my mother, who told me long afterwards, she overheard Wells declare to West, as she passed by offering drinks, 'I could take you between the tram lines!'

After the last guest had gone and the hum of conversation had ceased, my brother and I would slip into the drawing-room to finish off the dregs in the bottoms of the glasses, returning to bed in a warm and muzzy haze.

Despite the visitors and the occasional parties, ours was a highly disciplined household. My mother was a methodical, tidy person, characteristics that had served her well as a VAD nurse during the war. Her manuscripts were always well organised, her correspondence carefully filed. My father and I were both untidy. He had piles of newspapers, articles and books in his study, waiting to be read; I had toys and clothes scattered about the nursery.

Determinedly professional, my mother was at work in her study by 10 a.m., after reading the newspapers and the morning's letters, sorting out the shopping lists and paying the bills. At least an hour every day was devoted to replying to letters, often by hand, which the Royal Mail delivered that afternoon or at latest the following morning. Her correspondence was enormous, amounting to hundreds of letters and cards every month. Everyone who wrote to her was answered with the same conscientious and personal concern. She built up an extensive network of people from all over the world who felt, through letters, that she was a close friend. Her study was a sacred place, of blotters and pens in black-and-gold stands, of carefully ranged notepaper and envelopes, and of manuscripts composed in her neat, rounded script. Every member of the household well understood that only death, war or a serious accident would justify interrupting her there. It was many weary stairs away from ground level, where milkmen clinked the bottles in their horse-drawn floats, and pedlars bellowed their wares.

My brother and I had our own territory, a brightly painted yellow nursery on the third floor with wooden bars over the windows to stop us falling out. When we were very young, the room was shared with various nannies in starched white aprons, stern figures who were not to be disobeyed. Once left on our own to play, we spent long happy hours with our lead soldiers and farm animals, each piece carefully made and painted. Our soldiers were rarely engaged in battle. My brother liked to line them up on a linoleum parade ground, while I held elections and organised them into voting for the king, who wore a gold-and-white uniform and a cocked hat and was invariably elected. On occasion, when we were out of sorts with one another, one of us would bombard the other's soldiers with small pellets from tiny cannons, but we preferred setting up a cavalry charge. The hurtling horses of the Light Brigade flung themselves ceaselessly at the merciless guns of the Russians on our nursery floor.