William Golding

The Man Who Wrote Lord of the Flies

John Carey

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Extract

WILLIAM GOLDING

The Man Who Wrote *Lord of the Flies*

A LIFE

JOHN CAREY

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Contents

A Note on Sources

The story this book tells has not been told before. William Golding was a shy, private man, scornful of publicity, and of those who sought it, and strongly averse to the idea of a biography being written in his lifetime. None was, and the sources on which this first biography draws have remained largely unread and untouched since his death.

The Golding archive, which is still in the keeping of his family, and has not previously been made accessible to anyone outside it, is remarkably – and sometimes bewilderingly – rich. It far exceeds in bulk all his published works, and it comprises unpublished novels, both complete and fragmentary, early drafts of published novels, numerous projects and plans, two autobiographical works, one of them concentrating on his relationships with women, and a 5,000-page journal which he kept every day for twenty-two years.

Besides being an intimate account of his private life, and a treasure-house of memories of his childhood and youth, the journal is a behind-the-scenes revelation of the writer's craft, reporting each day on the progress of whatever novel he is at work on, tracing its origins, trying out alternative plot-lines, and criticizing, often violently, what he has written so far. Further, he began the journal as a dream diary, and though his waking life gradually came to dominate, he continued to record dreams almost to the end, together with his interpretations and identification of the incidents they recalled. As an author's systematic exploration of his unconscious and examination of his conscious life, Golding's journal is, I think, unique.

My other main source is the correspondence between Golding and his editor at Faber and Faber, Charles Monteith. It was Monteith who rescued Golding from obscurity. When they first met, Golding was a provincial schoolmaster, forty-two years old, who had written several

novels, and sent them to every publisher he could think of, without success. The most recent of the rejects had come into Monteith's hands, and he worked with Golding to make it publishable, though no one else, either at Faber and Faber or elsewhere, thought that it was. It became a modern classic, *Lord of the Flies*, which has sold, to date, twenty million copies in the UK alone, and has been translated into over thirty languages.

Monteith remained Golding's editor, friend, consultant and champion for forty years. Together they developed a spectacularly successful working relationship, the record of which is preserved in hundreds of letters in the Faber and Faber archive. These have remained uninspected until now, and they provide an account of Golding's development as a writer, his plans, ambitions and fears, his thoughts about his written and unwritten books, his struggles with indecision and despair, and his anxieties as a husband and father and how they affected his work.

A minor problem in quoting from Golding's manuscripts is his spelling, which was sometimes erratic. It might seem better to correct it, or to draw attention to misspellings so that they are not taken for misprints. However, he anticipated both these alternatives with disfavour. 'It's a moody-making thought', he remarked in his journal on 1 March 1982, 'that some bugger will either silently (unobtrusively) correct my spelling, or even worse, interrupt the text with brackets and sic in italics. But my bad grammar and bad spelling was me.' Out of respect for his disquiet I have left any misspellings uncorrected and unsignalled.

I

Beginning

His earliest memory was of a colour, 'red mostly, but everywhere, and a sense of wind blowing, buffeting, and there was much light'. Together with this was an awareness, an 'unadulterated sense of self', which 'saw as you might with the lens of your eyes removed'. Whether this was actually a memory of his own birth, he is not sure. If so, it was remarkably trouble-free compared to his mother's experience of the same event. As soon as she had given birth to William Gerald Golding on 19 September 1911 she said to his father, 'That'll be all.'

In his next memory he is eighteen months old, maybe less. He is in a cot with a railing round. It has been pulled next to his parents' brass-framed double bed because he is sick with some childish ailment, and feels a little feverish. It is evening. Thick curtains hang over the window, attached by large rings to a bamboo pole. A gas jet on the wall gives a dim light. He is alone in the room. Suddenly something appears above the right-hand end of the curtain pole. It is like a small cockerel, and its colour is an indistinct and indescribable white. It struts along the pole, its head moving backwards and forwards. It knows he is in the cot, and it radiates 'utter friendliness' towards him. He feels happy and unafraid. Just near the mid-point of the pole it vanishes and the friendliness goes with it.

He hopes for it to return, but it does not. When his parents come to bed he tries to tell them about it, using the few words he knows. 'Thing', he says, or rather 'Fing', and 'Come back?' His father laughs, and assures him kindly that the thing won't come back, he's been dreaming. But he knows it was not a dream. Seeing it was not like dreaming, nor like waking. Its friendliness was 'like a whole atmosphere of natural love'. It seemed to come from 'the centre of all rightness'.

Struggling to tell his parents about it brings him for the first time up against 'the brute impossibility of communicating'. When he grew up he came to wonder quite what he had seen: 'Was it an exercise of clairvoyance before growing up into a rationalist world stifled it?' But he remembered it as one of the most powerful experiences of his life, a glimpse of 'the spiritual, the miraculous' that he hoarded in his memory as a refuge from 'the bloody cold daylight I've spent my life in, except when drunk'.

His first certainly dateable memory was his second birthday. He had been given a pair of white kid boots, and felt proud as he looked down and saw them projecting beyond the lace of his pinafore. The pride seems odd to him in retrospect, because it sorts ill with his lifelong antipathy to being tidy or smart or even clean. As an adult, he reflects, he washes or bathes only when the dirt starts to make him feel uncomfortable. But at two he was still, he thinks, 'half male and half female', so he took pride in adornment. He remembers, at about the same time, being pushed down the pavement at Marlborough, where they lived, by his nursemaid Lily. He is in a pushchair, not a pram, and dressed in a white silk frock. He is happy and excited because Lily has given him one of her hair-grips, a ring of tortoiseshell with a simple brass-wire clip across it, to pin back his shoulder-length blond curls. It makes him feel 'one of the right sort of people', that is, females. He thinks of girls as superior, beautiful beings, and understands their delight in being smooth, round, decorative and pretty. The hair-grip goes some way towards satisfying his deep desire to be one of them.

The little boy who saw the white cockerel, and the little boy wearing Lily's hair-grip, both remained part of William Golding. The spiritual and the miraculous, and their collision with science and rationality, were at the centre of his creative life. That was the white cockerel's legacy. The hair-grip boy came to see that what is admired as manliness is often synonymous with destruction and stupidity, and he developed a sympathy with men whose sexual natures took them across conventional gender boundaries.

2

Grandparents

His mother's family, the Curnoes, were Cornish, and lived in Newquay. His mother Mildred claimed that her aquiline nose derived from Phoenician voyagers, who, centuries before, had made the hazardous journey to Cornwall in search of tin. Perhaps the Curnoe menfolk got their taste for travel from the Phoenicians too. Golding's grandfather Thomas Curnoe and his two sons Tom and William, his mother's brothers, spent much of their lives abroad. Grandfather Curnoe went off to seek his fortune in the Californian gold rush and later took his skills as a mining engineer to Australia and South Africa. His copy of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* was passed down in the family, with his American address on the title page, 'Bodie, Mono County, Cal.'. Today Bodie is a tourist attraction, one of the best-preserved ghost-towns in the Wild West. But back in the 1880s it was booming. One outraged preacher described it as 'a sea of sin, lashed by the tempest of lust and passion'. In Golding's imagination, some of its wildness seems to have rubbed off onto his grandfather. On his Australian trip in 1974 he visited the deserted mining complex of Old Ballarat, another site of his grandfather's labours, and found himself wondering if the old man had left unknown Curnoe progeny there and in America. He inherited a naval cutlass from his mother's side of the family, with channels for the blood to run down, and perhaps this added to his boyhood impression of old Curnoe's wildness.

He thought of his grandfather as an adventurer who missed his chance. At the start of the nineteenth century Newquay had been almost non-existent, just a handful of fishing boats drawn up on the sand, and a house for the lookout. Then came the industrial revolution and the demand for coal. A harbour was built and a rail tunnel

bored through the cliff to transport coal for the donkey engines. Grandfather Curnoe reckoned that this was the Newquay of the future, and invested the profit from his various gold-rushes in the mines, where it sank without trace. 'It came in minin, and 'tis goin' in minin,' he observed correctly. What Newquay actually became from the 1890s on was a tourist resort, and if only he had stayed at home and built a hotel he could, Golding estimated, have made a fortune.

It was said that Grandfather Curnoe worked abroad so much because he and his wife would have murdered each other if he had not. She was Mary Elizabeth (née Husband) and they had married in 1869. While he was off in the gold-fields she was reduced to taking in lodgers in her house in Newquay. Golding never saw his grandfather, and thinks he may eventually have just 'vanished', finding poverty-stricken Cornwall, a bitter wife and four children too much to bear. (In fact he died in Newquay in July 1904, seven years before Golding's birth.) Of his grandmother, on the other hand, he had clear memories. She was 'fierce, mean and dangerous', taller than his mother, and always clad in black from head to foot. Her face was brown, like a peasant's. Though his mother called her 'Ma', there seemed nothing maternal about her to little Golding. He remembers a terrible occasion when they were staying at his grandmother's, and his mother gave him a bath in the big bathroom. It was tremendous fun. She would soap his bottom and sit him at the top of the bath's sloping end. Then he would slide down and hit the warm water with a mighty splash. Suddenly their joy was cut through 'as with a sword'. A black creature flung open the bathroom door and stood there 'uttering bloody knives'. There was a 'whirling fury' and a slammed door, and his mother was left in tears gathering up the fragments of a broken mirror.

On a later visit – it was his third birthday – he saw, just once, his great-grandmother, a tiny creature 'in a black bombazine and lace cap and cape', slumped in a kitchen chair. He tried to speak to her, but could not make her understand. Instead she sang, over and over again, a single phrase: 'Down to the river in the time of the day'. She had been born, he records, before 1830, 'while the air was still echoing from

the Battle of Waterloo'. (This was almost true: she was Mary Anne Husband (née Teague), born in 1824, and she died on 7 October 1914, a month after her great-grandson saw her).

He came to suspect that the menfolk of the Curnoe family had been addicted to drink, as well as to adventure. There was a strange, perhaps partly imagined, episode when he was playing with his brother Jose in the Curnoe house at Newquay, and came (he says) upon a room piled high with crates of empty whisky bottles and full soda siphons, which the two boys sprayed at each other. The womenfolk, including his mother, had, he thought, made their lives into a respectable fortress that 'drink and the devil' could not touch. Looking at photographs of three generations of Curnoe women he saw the same intransigence in each – hair tugged back and faces grimly set, daring the lens 'to pry below the protected surface'.

His paternal grandparents feature much less prominently in Golding's reminiscences than the Curnoes. Grandfather Jo Golding was a Bristol bootmaker, who 'cobbled all his life', his grandson recalled, but 'hadn't a penny' to bless himself with. As a boy Golding liked him, but he came to be a little ashamed of this side of the family, and condemned himself as a 'pure and perfect snob' for being ashamed. Jo's father Abraham had been a bootmaker too. Jo married Polly (or, more formally, Mary Anne Brain), described on their wedding certificate as a 'tailoress', on 3 March 1876, the very day Jo became twenty-one. Polly was twenty. They set up house in Kingswood, Bristol, and Alec, Golding's father, was born nine months later on 14 December 1876. He was the eldest of their three sons. The other two were named, imaginatively, George Walter Raleigh and Frederick Joseph Othello. Jo died in 1936, but Polly lived on until after the Second World War. There is a Golding family photograph of her with son, grandson, and great-grandchildren, taken in the summer of 1945. Alec remembered his parents as kindly and gentle. Golding's cousin Eileen described Jo as placid and approachable, while Polly inspired her sons to better things. But Abraham, Alec's grandfather, had been, Eileen thought, both religious and a drunkard, given to violently bullying his wife and children, and she believed that Alec's teetotalism and religious scepticism might both be traceable to this experience, whether at first or second hand.

Watching the TV comedy programme *Till Death Us Do Part* in the 1970s, in which Warren Mitchell played the raucously prejudiced, working-class Alf Garnett, reminded Golding of his 'proletarian' connections. He remembered the backstreets of Kingswood as being 'faintly sordid', and smelling of dirt and urine.

3
Parents

Alec, Golding's father, influenced him more strongly than any other human being, and fortunately we know a good deal about him because his journal, which he kept regularly from 1899 to 1905, and then more infrequently until 1918, survives. It covers 398 pages of a handsome Log Book, bound in black boards with maroon morocco spine and corners, and a hinged flap with a metal lock that clamps the back cover to the front. Alec says he always kept it locked. It portrays a lonely, embittered, alienated young intellectual who passes through suicidal depression until he finds, in love and marriage, something like happiness. It is also revealing about conditions in the new 'Board schools' set up under the Education Acts of the 1870s.

The preface to the journal, dated 27 December 1898, outlines Alec's previous life and current opinions. He went to Kingswood Wesleyan School at five and did well, eventually becoming a pupil teacher, a decision he has never ceased to regret, 'for if I hate anything in this world it is teaching youngsters – on such an insignificant salary too'. In 1895, when he was eighteen, he got his first job, at Crew's Hole School, then moved to Avon Vale School, and passed his London matriculation, first class, in January 1898. At the time of starting the journal he was at the New Higher Grade School, Fairfield Road, on £85 a year.

Under the heading 'My Ideas on Certain Important Questions' he lists his beliefs. He holds to 'the vortex theory of atoms', and believes that the Supreme Power is energy, as in gravitation and magnetism. Though he attends the local Moravian Church (a Protestant denomination dating back to Jan Hus and his followers in fifteenth-century Bohemia), he believes that Jesus Christ was simply a perfect man, and dismisses much of what the Gospels record as untrue, because they

make Jesus say 'ridiculous things', such as 'He that believeth not shall be damned'. Darwin's theory of evolution is, in his view 'one of the most sublime conceptions of the human mind', and puts its formulator 'far and away above any scientist the world has yet known'. Acquaintances call him 'Atheist, Sceptic, Fool and Lunatic' because of these beliefs.

He considers modern society 'a perfect fraud' and hates class distinction. Social rank, and ownership of property, should, he holds, be based on a person's morality and intelligence, not birth. He believes in the equality of men and women, though he does not like 'cigarette-smoking, cudgel-swinging, manly-mouthed, public-speaking, bloomer-wearing' modern women. He shuns his female colleagues because of their 'frivolity' and they look on him as a 'freak'. Most of his pastimes are solitary (though he is keen on cricket for a while), and they all take second place to cramming for the exams that will lead eventually to an external London degree. He is bookish. Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Kingsley's *Alton Locke* and *Yeast* are among his favourites, and he admires Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan*, though when he reads her *Mighty Atom*, and finds that she believes an atom to be a 'curly, twisty thing', visible under a microscope, his admiration wanes. He starts writing 'a purely imaginative yarn' himself, but seems not to have persisted, and on another occasion he composes some verses, though he is disinclined to be 'added to the list of jingling, long-haired, dreaming rhymesters'. His Latin is advanced enough for him to struggle through some of Horace's *Odes* (his copy of *Odes* Book IV, edited by T. E. Page, 1898, and inscribed 'Alec A. Golding 4.9.99' is still among the books in his son's library), but he finds it 'deuced hard work'. He plays the violin and buys a second-hand harp; he paints in watercolour and oils, and he is an enthusiastic photographer. On the scientific side, he has a microscope, sends off to a firm in Birmingham for specimen slides, and keeps an aquarium. Cycling is a pleasure, but as his colleagues consider him 'miserable, ascetic and eccentric' he generally rides alone. For the same reason finding a companion to accompany him on his summer holiday is difficult. However, he has a week in Cornwall in August 1899 and is enraptured by the landscape and the sea.

He is extremely fastidious, and any hint of sexual immorality offends him. Kingswood is 'a little hell'. Its staple industry, the boot

trade, has attracted 'scum' from Northampton, Leicester and Leeds. Vile language is heard on every street, even from children. Couples engage in 'obscene jests', and worse. There are many brothels – one at least in Soundwell Road where he lives. A lifelong teetotaller, he watches disdainfully, from his study window, the 'raucous and immoral' crowd that spills out from the pub opposite at closing time. Cornwall is little better. He is disgusted to see trippers copulating on the beach and in the fields. One girl, he reports, commits a 'bestial outrage on common decency' by perching ingeniously on a railing, and holding up an umbrella to keep the rain off, while her young man engages with her from behind.

Understandably, given this sensibility, he finds the rough Board-school children he teaches hard to deal with, especially as the normal class size is seventy or above. In November 1899 the chairman of the School Management Committee calls him in and tells him he is a 'failure', and a hopeless disciplinarian. In his 'mental agony' he contemplates suicide, and fears he may go mad. On his doctor's advice he takes two months off; he also applies for various alternative teaching posts, but is at a disadvantage since he has not attended either university or a teachers' training college. Things look up briefly when he gets a job at a school in Falmouth, but after one term he is displaced by a college-trained teacher. Back home he takes a post at Crew's Hole School, where he first taught. He never liked it, and now it is worse than before. The children are 'awful to cope with', and an 'undisciplined rabble' throw stones at him in the street, shouting 'Bloody old Golding'. The headmaster advises him to resign, and he feels he 'could cry with misery and hopelessness'.

His salvation came in November 1900 when he applied successfully for a teaching post in Newquay and took lodgings with a Mrs Curnoe. The Cornish scenery delighted him afresh, and he was soon reproducing it in watercolours and photographs. He found his landlady's daughter Mildred a 'sensible' young person, 'without conceit or aggressive forwardness', and when he played the violin of an evening she accompanied him on the piano. All the same, he felt awkward in her company, and wished she were a 'fellow' not a girl. At school, things do not go well at first. He is, once again, stoned and hooted at by

the boys, and is puzzled by his unpopularity. His Darwinism tells against him, because he identifies himself, in his failure, as one of the unfit. Out on a walk he finds a baby rabbit which seems unable to move. He strokes it and puts it in a sunny spot, but next day finds it dead, and feels kinship with it because, like him, it is has failed in the universal fight for survival – 'poor little beggar'.

Despite this melancholy reflection, something has clearly changed for the better. Back home in Bristol for the Easter holiday in 1901 he goes to see D'Oyly Carte's productions of *The Mikado, The Gondoliers, Iolanthe* and *Patience*, and has 'never laughed so heartily'. He also enjoys Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* – a 'healthy' contrast, he opines, to 'horrible' *Jane Eyre*, which is a 'forerunner of the sex novel abomination'. He and Miss Curnoe now go on walks together. He finds her 'intelligent company', unlike so many of her sex, and they discuss 'geology, tidal action, wave motion, plant life, animal life'. As the weeks pass, their conversations become less academic, and he no longer wishes she were a fellow. But he feels it would be dishonourable to propose marriage since he does not earn enough to keep her. Besides, she might turn him down. She keeps saying she wishes she could marry someone with money. This drives him frantic, as it was perhaps intended to, and he is soon so in love he cannot concentrate on anything else.

At last, in January 1903, she consents to marry him and he puts a ring – rubies and brilliants – on her finger. The struggle now is to find a job that pays more than Newquay. He takes a post in London at Addison Garden School, Shepherd's Bush, but hates it, and it pays only £95 a year. Mildred sends him advertisements and he applies, unsuccessfully, for a dozen jobs in the course of three months. She seems 'upset and irritable' all summer, but then rather shocks him by kissing him as his train leaves at the end of the holidays. It is a momentary aberration. Usually 'Dear M is against any "public" kissing'. In September 1904 he gets a job at a school in Swindon at £100 a year, but 'Dearest Mildred' is showing signs of impatience. She takes it into her head that she will be a 'pianiste' in a touring company, or, alternatively a 'useful help' with a family in Willesden. The 'diabolical' dangers attendant on either course horrify Alec, and he is taken aback when

Mildred tells him that she would prefer to get a 'situation' rather than marry, because she would be independent, whereas marriage is nothing but 'service without independence'.

However, their bumpy engagement survived. In September 1905 he took a post in Wiltshire, at Marlborough Grammar School, teaching Physics, Chemistry, Drawing and Botany for £125 a year, and on 3 January 1906 he and Mildred were married in Truro cathedral. He was thirty, she thirty-six. They rented a house at 8 Alexandra Terrace, Marlborough, and furnished it for £59 from Wolfe and Hollander, paying £3 a month on the instalment plan. They only just made ends meet, and though Mildred proved a 'splendid manager' they were down to their last pennies by the time his January pay cheque arrived. In July the school governors, perhaps hearing that Mildred was pregnant, granted him a rise of £5 a year, but he refused it, considering it 'beggarly' compared with the work he had done. They spent the summer in Newquay with Mildred's family, and she stayed there when he returned to school. On 7 October a telegram told him that Mildred had been safely delivered of a boy at 11 p.m. the previous night. They called him Joseph Thomas Curnoe Golding, but in the family he was always Jose (with a short 'o' to rhyme with 'dose') or José (his father and brother always used this form in their writing; it is not clear why).

Marriage and fatherhood transformed Alec, giving him new confidence. Nothing seems to be left of the young man who said he hated teaching youngsters. He is replaced by an inspiring schoolmaster who, everyone agreed, had an effortless rapport with children. It must have helped that Marlborough Grammar School was very small. The original Elizabethan grammar school had closed down in 1899 and its ancient buildings were demolished. The new school opened on 6 October 1905, so Alec was one of the first staff members. It was co-educational and had, at first just eighty pupils. Schools he had taught in previously, and hated, had that many in a single class. He stayed at Marlborough for the rest of his working life, and generations of pupils testified to his exceptional gifts. He was loved as well as admired. According to one ex-pupil he looked like a Cornish pixie – short, slight, with a round cherubic face, a gleaming bald pate ringed with white hair, and a snub nose with gold-rimmed spectacles perched

on it. The school had no money to spare for scientific equipment, so he made it himself. To illustrate the generation of electricity he converted a treadle sewing machine into a dynamo, with a giant horseshoe magnet and a pair of hand-wound coils the size of jam jars. When vigorously pedalled the whole apparatus shuddered and its flash-lamp bulb flickered triumphantly. He also constructed a water turbine using seventy or eighty teaspoons fixed by their handles in a wooden axle. Jets of water were played on the spoons and the turbine revolved at high speed, drenching the operator. His greatest feat was building a wireless set out of scrap materials such as kitchen paper, cigarette-packet foil, and bits of brass sheet. Since the school could not afford science textbooks, he wrote and printed those himself too. Copies of each page were made on a jelly hectograph – an early duplicator consisting of a gelatine pad to which texts or diagrams were transferred using aniline dyes. Then Alec would sew the pages into Manila covers. His political views also proved enlightening to his pupils. 'It was', one of them recalled, 'through reading his copies of the *Labour Monthly* and through talking to him that I made my first acquaintance with Socialism – no easy thing in the East Wilts of the early twenties.'

His atheism seems to have caused him some inner turmoil. At least one pupil suspected that he suffered 'agonizing conflicts between reason and emotion'. On two occasions when he had to deputize for the headmaster at morning assembly, he collapsed and had to be helped from the hall. He managed to get through the opening hymn, but broke down completely when it came to the prayers and the scriptural reading. Atheism did not, however, inhibit his fondness for biblical quotations, which he used in almost any situation. 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard' was a favourite for reprimanding inattention in class.

He took his external London degree in 1910, in Botany, Zoology and Animal Physiology, and *An Introduction to General Geography* by Alec A. Golding BSc was published by Cambridge University Press in 1915. It is an extraordinary volume, covering in 222 pages the place of the earth in the solar system, the causes of day and night, seasons and climates, the distribution of plants and animals, oceanography, geology, minerals, population density, races, religions and governments. He also kept up his painting – a large oil and several watercolours, one

of them of Trevemper Mill near Newquay, are still in the family's possession. But in career terms he was utterly unambitious, and quite content to remain as deputy head. As a socialist he had little time for the pomp and circumstance of authority, and on school prize days he pointedly declined to assemble with local dignitaries and the school governors on the platform. His only concession to the grandeur of the occasion was to take a bottle of Indian ink and carefully paint out the chemical stains and bleach marks on his academic gown. In conservative Wiltshire his socialism, atheism and pacifism would probably have debarred advancement in his profession, even if he had wanted it.

Music was always important to him. He played the viola, cello, piano and flute, as well as the violin. To illustrate the vibration of columns of air to his science class he would cut a dozen lengths of bamboo, and turn them into flutes by boring finger-holes and stopping the ends with corks. Then he would distribute them to the class, and teach them to play simple tunes. A highlight of the school year were the pre-Christmas parties at which sandwiches, jellies, cakes and powdered lemonade were consumed, and valetas, military two-steps, and occasional waltzes and polkas danced, with Alec accompanying on piano or violin.

These fond memories show how he seemed to his devoted pupils. No comparable account of his wife Mildred survives, but in the mid-1960s Golding wrote an analysis of her character which includes things he had been told about her early life. She was, he says, a 'leggy, gaunt, intelligent girl, high spirited and witty', who shunned the rowdy Curnoe menfolk and longed for respectability. Like her husband, she was a lifelong teetotaller. A secret that came to light only after her death was that she was born in a pub. When Alec arrived on the scene, he fell in love, 'and so, perhaps, did she'. She was very aware of being six years older, which made the marriage 'a bit ridiculous' by the standards of the time. However, marriage was an escape route from home, so she accepted him, but with, Golding believes, 'a sense of shame'. The earliest photograph he has of her shows her in a white dress of about 1895, with fringes and bobbles. She holds her head a little defiantly, smiling up to the left with a look of humorous self-awareness, as if to say 'What nonsense it all is!' The line of curls carefully arranged along

her high forehead only serves to accentuate that, whatever else, she is not 'softly feminine'.

She shared her husband's advanced views. Golding's essay 'The Ladder and the Tree' recounts that they would stand together 'proudly and indignantly' on the steps of Marlborough town hall, 'under the suffragette banner', heedless of the occasional overripe tomato lobbed in their direction. Family tradition has it that Mildred was, strictly, a suffragist not a suffragette, in that she campaigned for the woman's vote but opposed violent means. Like Alec she was a socialist and an agnostic, or perhaps atheist. Towards the end of her life she is reported as saying wistfully, 'I'd really like to believe in Christianity – it must be nice.' Like Alec, too, she was a musician. She played the viola, 'with concentrated detestation of that fiddling instrument', but loved the piano, and would sit erect as she played, 'dancing almost', and swaying her head in time with the music. They had musical evenings when neighbouring families would come and bring their instruments, and little Golding, in bed upstairs, would hear music, talk and laughter floating up, and the sound of the maid's feet (they kept a maid as well as a cook-housekeeper) hurrying along the hall with coffee. Masters and mistresses from school, and sometimes pupils, came to tea.

But his parents gradually withdrew from social life. He suspects it had something to do with Alec's not becoming a headmaster. His mother sensed that her husband was 'defeated', and felt ashamed. She still retained her lively interest in people, but it was carried on surreptitiously. He remembers her peeping at passers-by from behind curtains. All the same, they did not withdraw completely. They were mainstays of the orchestra at the Marlborough Operatic Society's annual productions, 'playing busily in front of the stage' while the local talent performed *The Dutch Girl* or *Merrie England.*