Peter Cook

A Biography

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Extract

Introduction

Peter wanted to call his autobiography *3-D Lobster*. The cover design was to feature himself, attired in cloth cap and mac, in bed with Jayne Mansfield and brandishing a huge embossed lobster. Inevitably, he never got round to writing it. He had other titles – *Retired and Emotional*, *Who Are These People?*, *Can I Go Now?* and *I've Forgotten* among them – but *3-D Lobster* was the best, speaking as it did of one of his comic enthusiasms, rather than of weariness or resignation.

I first encountered Peter Cook in 1982, when I was working as a trainee on the BBC's *Children in Need* programme. A few years before, some halfwit at the corporation had authorised the destruction of all the *Not Only . . . But Also* programmes kept on videotape, on the grounds that the tapes themselves represented a reusable resource. Unlike the myriad local news reports from Halifax and Weston-super-Mare, catalogued and stored with the religious fervour that only the great God of News can inspire in the imagination-free TV executive, these marvellous comedy programmes were regarded as trivial by definition, mere ephemera to be discarded without compunction. Besides, union agreements forbade the repeat of programmes more than two years old, so as far as the Corporation was concerned the material was all but useless. Mrs Thatcher, at that time, was no more than a gleam in the Conservative Party's eye.

Peter had pleaded with the BBC, offering to replace each tape with a brand new one, and to pay for the future storage costs of the condemned programmes. Impossible, replied the apparatchiks: generous though his offer was, the system was simply not flexible enough to accommodate it. Failing that, he argued, could he not at least retain a cassette copy

of each show, so that the programmes would not be lost to posterity? Out of the question, came the reply. The material was BBC copyright. It could not possibly be allowed off the premises, and that went for the limited amount of filmed material that survived as well. Peter's pleas were in vain, and the tapes were wiped. One shudders to think what was recorded over them.

Not Only ... But Also had been my favourite TV programme as a child. As part of my *Children in Need* duties, I volunteered for the task of choosing ten 'Classic Comedy Clips', mainly so that I could gain access to the film library, surreptitiously record the surviving material on to VHS and restore it to its authors. It was nerve-janglingly exciting to dust off the bulky 35 mm film cans, prise them open and thread their contents on to the antiquated viewing machine: in some cases, I was the first person to see these programmes for seventeen years. I even managed to damage one film, which snapped in two (it still bears a clumsy repair) when I laced it up wrongly. I didn't dare call expert help, as I didn't really have a convincing explanation for what I was up to. Eventually, the deed was done and two copies were dispatched to *Private Eye*, one for Peter and one for Dudley Moore. Of course, I kept a copy for myself. Dudley, I discovered during the research for this book, never got his cassette. Relations between Peter and Dudley were not at their best in 1982.

I was lucky enough to work with Peter many times in subsequent years, on the Radio 4 *News Quiz*, on *Have I Got News For You* and *The Bore of the Year Awards* for BBC Television. He even suggested, jokingly, that I should write his biography. He knew, by then, that *3-D Lobster* would never see the light of day. I last saw him in the summer of 1994, when we and a few others sat round watching the World Cup Final on television. I thought by then that I had got to know him a little. I now realise that I barely knew him at all.

CHAPTER 1

Raised by Goats

Early Life, 1937–51

There are those who say – and Peter Cook himself was among them – that most of his humour was autobiographical. Others – and Peter Cook himself was among them – contend that this simply isn't the case. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in the middle. Peter's humour was indeed littered with incidents from his own life, but he tended to parody his background, or veer off surreally at a tangent from it, rather than straightforwardly disguise it with a veneer of jokes. Too much significance should not therefore be read into what can nevertheless be an absorbing game, that of tracing back threads of reality through his labyrinthine mental processes. 'Raised by goats . . . nanny-goats . . . raised by nannies. Bingo! I only just got that one the other day,' says Peter's sister Sarah.

Peter Edward Cook was indeed raised by nannies, or by a combination of nannies and grannies at any rate; not as traumatic a father substitute as Sir Arthur Streeb-Greebling's flock of goats, but a father substitute for all that. For successive generations the Cook family put service to the Empire above mere family considerations, representing their monarch dutifully in a variety of distant locations, while the sons they produced were sent home to boarding schools to begin the process anew. Theirs was a line of gentle, witty, dutiful and impeccably-mannered men, with melancholy souls that undoubtedly owed much to their lonely, separated childhoods.

Peter's grandfather, Edward Cook, was Traffic Manager for the Federated Malay States Railway in Kuala Lumpur. It was there, one evening in May, 1914, that he went out into the garden and blew his brains out with a revolver, in a fit of depression brought on by nervousness at a forthcoming

promotion to acting General Manager. Tributes in the *Malay Mail* spoke of an immensely popular character, able, energetic, kindly and thoughtful, but whose cheerful and amusing exterior skilfully concealed an easily depressed temperament. It is a description that will be familiar to anyone who knew the young Peter Cook. Like Peter, his grandfather had been known as 'Cookie' to his friends, one of whom wrote: 'His last words were "Don't think unkindly of me, I must have rest." God send you have found it, Cookie'.[1]

His widow Minnie kept the suicide a secret throughout her life; indeed it was not until Peter traced his family history through *Debrett's* that the details came to light. He found it a disturbing revelation, as much for the discovery of his grandmother's lifelong burden as for the unfortunate facts themselves. Often, his own father Alec had sat there examining Edward Cook's photograph for the hundredth time and wishing aloud that he had known him. Alec had been eight at the time and several thousand miles away, enduring the rigours of life at the Imperial Service College, Windsor.

The school was a direct descendant of the United Services College, which had spawned Rudyard Kipling and formed the basis for his brutal 'Stalky & Co.' stories. It was an institution so cold in winter that boys would sneak off to the boiler room and hang like bats from the hot water pipes. Eventually Alec Cook triumphed through the mud and ice, made a place in the First XI, became Captain of School and won a scholarship to Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1924. Money was tight: he and his best friend Bob Church were so poor that they shared the same pair of white gloves, one each in the top pocket, for functions. But the fatherless boy showed ability and determination, and in 1928 won a place as a Cadet in the Colonial Office. He was posted to the Calabar Province of Nigeria, and set sail from Liverpool at once.

The life of an Assistant District Officer, which Alec became when he had completed his training, was a solitary one. It involved acting as a kind of touring King Solomon, with a detachment of native police in tow, arbitrating on everything from land disputes to problems of male impotence. Contact with other Englishmen, which occurred just once a month, ought to have been an occasion for wild celebration, but being Englishmen a quiet pipe and a scratchy gramophone record were generally the order of the day. 'My father used to receive news by boat, six months after it was published,' Peter recalled. 'He'd open *The Times* and say, "Good God, Worcester are 78 for 6."

'He did something extraordinary actually. He was very young, had no knowledge of any of the three main languages spoken, yet was suddenly

in charge of a hundred square miles of territory. This was his life – at least as I understood it from reading his diaries. He travelled around from village to village with trunks, and was entirely reliant on a local interpreter, and the trick of it was to hope you'd chosen an honest interpreter because otherwise it was all nonsense. They were tremendously alarming circumstances to live in – to have to reach moral or judicial decisions over a society about which, at least when you arrived, you knew absolutely nothing.'[2]

Perhaps surprisingly, it was a system that worked. The unscrupulous early colonial adventurers had been replaced, by the 1930s, with a cadre of earnest, dedicated, honest young men. According to Peter's youngest sister Elizabeth, 'My father was a product of the age. It would never have occurred to him not to give his life to the Empire in a philanthropic way. But at the same time he was a witty man, and there'd be a quiet little smile about it all, without questioning the overall principle of the thing.' A dry, slightly subversive humour lay behind Alec Cook's scrupulously polite exterior, a characteristic that was to be magnified several times over in his son.

By 1936 Alec had grown into an attractive and charming man, tall and slim, gangly but graceful, with prematurely grey hair and the Cook family's prominent asymmetrical ears. A smoker, he was much given to worrying over problems, and had a taste for P. G. Wodehouse and Stravinsky. Colonial officers were given four months' leave after every eighteen months of continuous duty, so every couple of years he would sail home. On one such break, while staying with Bob Church's family in Eastbourne, he met, fell in love with and utterly charmed Margaret Mayo, the daughter of a local solicitor.

Charles Mayo, her father, cut something of a dash in South Coast society, roaring up at court cases by motorbike, a pipe jutting between his clenched teeth. Something of a ladies' man, he had been rusticated from St John's College, Oxford for antics that he would never divulge. He had served unscathed and with distinction in the Great War as an officer with the Royal Sussex Regiment, and had actually contributed a humorous article or two to *Punch* magazine from the trenches. After the war he represented Sussex at rugby, hockey and badminton, before settling down to provincial respectability as President of the Eastbourne West Country Association, Chairman of the Willingdon Golf Club and a freemason so loyal that his family were forced to eat meat from the worst butcher in town. He practised as a solicitor in a firm he helped found, called Mayo and Perkins ('I want you to lay down your life, Perkins. We need a futile gesture at this stage. It will raise the whole tone of the war' – one of the more memorable passages from *Beyond the Fringe*).

Charles Mayo loved humorous writing of all sorts, and his study was lined with leather-bound copies of *Punch*. His daughters Joan and Margaret (Madge for short) grew up into tremendous gigglers, both of them notably pretty and rather popular with the chaps down at the tennis club. Margaret was academically brilliant – she had cut quite a swathe through St Winifred's School for Girls – and it was a source of eternal regret to her that at the time, her family had not yet amassed enough money to send her to university. For the rest of her life she was assiduously self-taught, immersing herself in everything from the violin to the works of Edward Gibbon. She had left England, instead of pursuing further education, and had become governess to a wealthy Jewish family in Prague. When events in Europe began to deteriorate, she returned home, to divide her time between the trim lawns of the Golf Club and bravely squeamish volunteer work as a Red Cross nurse at the Sailors' and Soldiers' Home in Upperton Road.

Alec Cook's clever mind and exotic lifestyle appealed to Margaret's intellectually frustrated side. They suited each other well. They were both warm, kind, conservative, respectable people with a shared sense of humour. Their differences – she was deeply religious, he less so, she was rather untidy, he precise and meticulous – were of a sort that they would successfully work to overcome. They married on 20 June 1936 at St Mary's, Eastbourne, in a flurry of feather boas and big hats. Colonel and Mrs Church contributed a set of trays, Captain and Mrs Carpendale gave a flower vase, Colonel and Mrs Garwood donated a mirror, while Sir Alexander and Lady Maguire chipped in with some dessert knives and forks. The contribution of Perkins, who also attended, was not recorded. Margaret and Alec bundled the whole lot up into their luggage, and set sail for Nigeria on 1 July.

Margaret was not to spend long in the Nigerian bush. Within a few months of her arrival she fell pregnant, and returned at once to England. It was deemed officially that West Africa was no place to bring up a European child, and so began a long and complicated pattern of separations that were to bedevil Cook family life for the next twenty years. While Alec sadly presided over his miniature kingdom alone, Margaret made the journey not to Eastbourne, where her friends were, but to a new life in Torquay. Her parents had separated while she was in Africa, and by an amazing coincidence her mother's family home in Devon, long since sold, had recently come back on the market. Caroline Mayo had snapped it up using money from an inheritance, and set about sprucing it into a suitable home for her daughter and her imminent grandson.

'Bythorn', standing in Bronshill Road, Torquay, was a large, boxy,

substantial and slightly gloomy house, too big to be ordinary, too hemmed-in to be grand, at the end of a dark, mysterious driveway. There were mullioned windows, a verandah, a monkey-puzzle tree in the garden: altogether, a place with recesses and hidden depths for an infant to explore, but a slightly intimidating house perhaps, not the kind you could imagine ringing with the sound of childish laughter. Its new occupant, Peter Edward Cook, was actually born at St Chad's nursing home, on 17 November 1937. He was a striking baby, possessed of memorable, startling, dark eyes, that gazed out and transfixed you from under beautiful thick lashes which would one day send his sisters into agonies of jealousy. Peter had inherited a perfect combination of his father's elegant bone structure and his mother's soft, feminine face, tempered slightly by Alec's somewhat inelegant 1930s ears.

Madge wrote to her husband, who had been promoted to District Officer in her absence: 'Darling, once more I salute you as DO. Even more however I salute you as the father of the most beautiful baby that ever happened. I have entered the ranks of doting mothers, and really speaking without fear or favour, he is rather a nice one. I do so wish you were here to see him. He was an enormous creature – 8¾ lbs, so gave me some unpleasant moments, but one soon forgets all the horrors. He has quantities of mouse coloured hair, lovely deep blue eyes set quite far apart, quite long eyelashes, and the beginnings of eyebrows which he lifts rather cynically at the world. He is long in the body and has lovely dimples on his knees. Aphra said he had a very brainy forehead . . . Take great care of yourself darling and come back soon, love from Margaret. P. S. I cried when I read your letter that came with the flowers, but they were tears of happiness such as you read about in books. Thank you again so much, sweetheart.' With her letter, Madge dispatched a selection of rich Christmas puddings to keep Alec fortified on hot, lonely nights in the bush. Madge's mum wrote to him as well, congratulating him on his beautiful son and sending him a useful selection of Christmas puddings.

Alec was due home on leave in February 1938. Early in January, Margaret wrote to keep him informed of their son's precocious developments. 'Darling, I can think of very little else except your arrival. A refrain jigs in my head to the tune of 'The Campbells are coming' – 'Alec is coming, hurray, hurray.' Our son is still practically perfect. His only fault is that he makes a most fearful din between his 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. feed. He appears to have lungs of brass. I let Nannie go out on Sunday night and he really excelled himself. I was very relieved to see her back again. He grows more and more intelligent. I hope he isn't too forward because he really is rather remarkably so. He now goes out for a walk in his pram

every afternoon. Nannie thought the wind rather cold so we dressed him up in a blue bonnet with bows under the chin. He looked very comical and was simply furious!'

At the age of three months, Peter was finally introduced to Alec, who recorded the event in Margaret's baby book: 'First viewed by father. Showed slight apprehension, but soon became gracious and accepted strange phenomenon. Some resemblance to said father now noticeable in shape of head and ears.' Alec's leave was an idyllic four months, but as it drew to a close Margaret had to face the moment she had been secretly dreading since her pregnancy had first been diagnosed. It was time for her, as the dutiful wife of a District Officer, to accompany her husband back to Nigeria to resume his duties, and to leave her baby behind in England. Before the summer had even started, they were gone.

Truth be told, Margaret detested Nigeria, not that Nigeria ever had a chance – for it was Nigeria and the Colonial Service that were responsible for this most agonising of partings. Peter's sister Elizabeth Cook remembers that her mother 'really hated the place – the fact that it separated her from Peter and later on from Sarah was really heartbreaking for her.' There is no doubt that her utter devotion to her son was fortified and intensified by the distance involved, and that despite the baffling and dislocated nature of Peter's early childhood, he returned her affection with fierce intensity as he grew up. She later confessed to her son the lifelong feelings of guilt she had endured as a result of leaving him behind.

Granny Mayo, a quiet, gentle, frail, elegant and occasionally anxious woman with rheumatism, lavished maternal dedication on baby Peter in her daughter's stead, but not having any acquaintances with similar-sized offspring in the area, she found the business of importing friends for him to play with elaborate and difficult. Peter's first birthday party was almost entirely attended by adults: Granny Mayo wrote to Margaret in Nigeria to tell her that Aunt Joan had given him a tambourine and a toy truck, Dorothy and her husband had provided a teddy bear, Mrs Reade had donated some handkerchiefs and Miss Perrett had chipped in with a doll. 'I asked Miss Perrett to bring Mrs Denham's boy but they were engaged,' she offered. A distant relative eventually managed to rustle up a little girl called Mary, and the two children sat there surrounded by a ring of grown-ups. The upside of this lifestyle was a pleasing degree of precocity. 'The baby has gone', wrote Granny Cook to her daughter-in-law. 'In his place an alert, interested small boy. So like his father at this age.' Then, remembering her own separations from the young Alec, she added wistfully, 'The years roll back as I look at his dear little face, and I am a mother again, with a small son to whom I was the world.'

Alec and Margaret's next home leave came round in the summer of 1939. It took Peter a week to accept his mother, a lot longer before he would go near his father. Alec was a keen cine enthusiast, and exorcised the frustrated artist within himself by making his son the star of a series of elegant little films. He would cut dramatically from the ironwork of Peter's stout Victorian pram to the enormous treetrunk legs of the nanny coming down the gloomy stairs. A finger moved the hands of the clock while the levels fell in Peter's milk bottles. The child's tiny hands strayed ineptly across the keys of a Bechstein grand piano.

Viewed sixty years later, the small boy toddling through the grainy celluloid is instantly recognisable: the familiar sweep of floppy hair across the forehead, the elegant features beginning to emerge from the podgy face. He is prodigiously well-wrapped, in one shot trussed and buttoned up in a woollen coat of the Hardy Amies variety favoured by the Queen, elsewhere in a little double-breasted jacket, jodhpurs and a pixie hat, like a Teutonic garden gnome. In fact Peter spends much of the film tottering after the gardener, a tall rigid figure dressed gravely in cloth cap, waistcoat and ankle-length black apron, a spade ever-present by his side. Peter apes his movements using a miniature trowel.

The gardener was Peter's principal friend, not least because of all the other interesting friends that were literally turned up by his work – worms, snails, beetles, ants, newts, lizards and the like. Peter was utterly fascinated by creepy-crawlies of every description. Most fascinating of all were bees, although this was something of a love-hate relationship. He knew that these were little creatures to be feared – 'does not like bees' recorded his father in the baby book – but at the same time their little stripy bodies mesmerised him. As time went on the tiny living creatures of the garden came to supplant the teddy bears and toy trucks and handkerchiefs he had been given to play with.

Alec and Margaret's return to Nigeria was overshadowed by the prospect of war, and the knowledge that even the limited access to their son they had so far enjoyed was about to be curtailed. When hostilities broke out, Alec was ordered to arrest any Germans he found in the neighbourhood. Margaret was appointed as a cypher clerk in a government office in Lagos, on ten shillings a month: the contract pointed out sternly that 'Your appointment does not render you eligible for leave.' Peter would not see his mother for several years.

Once the front railings of 'Bythorn' had been taken away to be melted down and made into Spitfires, the war in Torquay was largely uneventful. Only two bombs fell in the area. One would have killed a child, had its mother not had the foresight to borrow Peter's old pram – the pram met

its end, but its St Pancras-strength ironwork protected its occupant. The other, a doodlebug, landed on a house down the road and blew the householder, a Mrs Jean Gatty, unharmed into the middle of the street, together with the bath she was in at the time. The incident turned up, somewhat adulterated, in a later *Not Only . . . But Also* sketch, when Sir Arthur Streeve-Greevling (as he was then) was asked how he met his wife:

> I found her during the war. She blew into the sitting room with a bit of shrapnel and became embedded in the sofa. One thing led to her mother, and we were married within the hour.

For the young Peter, however, the war's most dramatic incident came when he went to sleep with a jar of tadpoles by his bedside, upset it by accident during the night, and woke the next morning to find ten dead ones lying like dried currants on his pillow.

As it turned out, Alec managed one solo trip back to England early on in the war, and took his son for a fortnight's farm holiday at Chagford, where he noticed that Peter had become 'very observant, and fond of making running commentaries when out for a walk'. Alec and Margaret were also jointly allowed a brief trip home in 1943. But for the most part, entertainment was in the hands of Aunt Joan, when she wasn't driving ambulances, her husband Roy, who taught Peter to ride a bike, and Granny Mayo. She tried taking him to a panto, without much success – 'I had to be bound and gagged – it was almost as bad as English folk-dancing, and that was the worst'[3] said Peter many years later. The housekeeper, Mrs Brimacombe, fared better with a trip to Plainmoor to see Torquay United play in 1944. 'I became a complete fanatic,' remembered Peter. 'I used to queue up an hour-and-a-half beforehand to get in the front row by the halfway line. By the time the players came out, I had to rush off to the gents, so I always came back to find I'd lost my place.'[4]

Most of the real entertaining, however, was done by Peter himself. Like her daughter, Granny Mayo was a great giggler, and her grandson realised very early on that he possessed the capacity to make her laugh. This cheered them both up immensely in the absence of his mother and father, and he found it easy to keep her entertained with a string of silly voices and jokes. When Granny Cook came to tea, for instance, he would balance an ink bottle on top of the door, which the grown-ups had to affect not to notice, to keep the possibility of a spillage alive. He was an avid reader, and loved A. A. Milne, *Alice in Wonderland* (chunks of which later turned up wholesale in *Not Only . . . But Also*) and *Babar the Elephant*. His

Babar book, which he was given in 1941, featured a vivid and memorable passage in which Babar falls asleep on a long, dark evening and has a nightmare. 'Tap! Tap! Tap!' goes a hideous old woman at the window, who is surrounded by a crowd of ugly creatures – another passage that found its way into a familiar Pete and Dud sketch.

At the tail end of 1944 Peter was joined by his mother at last. She had become pregnant with her second child, Sarah, who was born in January 1945, and had 'hastened home through U-boat infested seas to prevent her child being an African' (this at least was how Peter recounted the story, while transferring it to himself, in the promotional material for *Beyond the Fringe*). It was now Alec's turn to suffer the misery of separation, and the joys of having to entertain himself. He made a short film – a dramatisation of the song *Frankie and Johnnie* – and also set about writing a book, which was never finished or published, about the District Officer's lot.

'A European can feel pretty lonely in Nigeria', he wrote, 'lonely for his own civilisation, for art, music and the theatre, for gaiety and good talk, for the sight of a beautiful woman conscious of the perfection of her gown, for femininity, mildness and the gentle way of life. For weeks on end the D.O. may not see another European, unless he is fortunate enough to be accompanied by his wife. [This is] the main drawback of life in Nigeria, the tragic division of a wife's time, the portioning of her life between her husband and her children. I do not underestimate the climate and the bugs that breed in it, but the average bout of malaria is no worse than a bad cold or a slight touch of 'flu in England. It is the mind and not the body that is most severely tried [here].'

By this time Alec Cook was in sole charge of a thousand square miles of territory containing almost half a million members of the Ibo tribe, and was about to be promoted further, to Assistant Secretary. One of his principal tasks was to help set up the Native Authority, a forerunner of the Independent post-colonial government. He and his colleagues were in effect being asked to prepare the Colonial Service for dissolution, and to sign the death warrant for their own species. It was not a task that disturbed him unduly – he believed that the British legacy would be a sound one. The democratic councils and law courts going up across the country 'would symbolise a declaration of relentless warfare against fear and darkness, against trickery and juju and the evil and revolting practices connected therewith.' Nigeria, he pointed out, was administered 'not by Huns but by Britons'.

He remained apprehensive, however, that independence would almost

certainly arrive prematurely, before a sufficient level of moral integrity had ingrained itself in Nigerian society. He wrote of his fellow District Officers that 'honesty comes naturally to them, they have imbibed it with their mothers' milk . . . to such men the graft and corruption indigenous to West Africa causes great mental distress.' He would, nonetheless, when the time came, don for the last time 'his white uniform with the tight collar, gird his ceremonial sword about him, pull on his black shiny boots with the assistance of the domestic staff, and gingerly descend the iron steps to deliver a suitable address on the privileges and duties of being British.' The hint of amused irony behind the genuine conviction that he was doing something worthwhile is unmistakable.

At the end of the war, Alec Cook returned to England, to be reintroduced to his son for the first time in Peter's living memory. Peter recalled the moment: 'I suppose I first realised who my father was when I was seven, when he came back with some very black bananas from Nigeria. And I thanked him for those. But I didn't quite know who he was and I was told he was my father. So we shook hands and agreed on it. He was a total stranger to me.'[5] Throughout the remainder of their lives Peter utterly adored his parents, and they too ached with affection for their son; but the physical distance between them was matched by a slight distance in emotional understanding, a gap that was bridged by great love but not always by true intimacy. 'I never really knew my father,'[6] Peter admitted, in a sad echo of his father's own complaint.

The reunion between Peter and his parents was to be short-lived. Alec was posted suddenly to Gibraltar, to take up the job of Financial Secretary to the Colony. Margaret went with him, and because the Mediterranean was considered officially suitable for young children, so did baby Sarah. Peter was to be left behind again, but this time he was also to be separated from Granny Mayo, and Aunt Joan and Uncle Roy. With only a few terms' sporadic education at a Torquay day school under his belt, it was time for Peter to go to a proper boarding school. St Bede's was chosen, an Eastbourne prep school in the process of returning home from its wartime exile in Exmoor, that would be close to Grandfather Mayo should any emergency arise. When it was time to say goodbye, Peter sobbed uncontrollably on the platform.

St Bede's School is a cluster of rambling, spacious, mock half-timbered buildings purpose-built in 1895, which stands on a breezy headland near the white cliffs at Beachy Head. Today it is a bustling, friendly and sumptuously well-equipped school for some four hundred boys and girls, most of them from Eastbourne itself. In 1945 it was a freezing, regimented institution, all

parquet flooring and rough carbolic soap, where ninety boys were carefully watched for dangerous signs of self-expression. As a small, lonely, asthmatic child, Peter was easy prey for bullies, and suffered badly at the hands of an unpleasant older boy called Ramsbotham. He learned quickly that the techniques used to keep Granny Mayo entertained could be profitably employed to prevent Ramsbotham hitting him. Using a combination of 'wit and sarcasm', as he described it, he was able to deflect his tormentor's attentions on to others.

His teachers would have preferred to see Peter stand up and fight rather than joke his way out of a corner – his first school report dismissed him as 'cynical' – but the authorities were soon won over by his academic brilliance. His brave enthusiasm on the football field, where he graced the inside left position with one or two tricks learned from Torquay United's Don Mills, also stood him in good stead. In time he gained a decent measure of popularity and a reputation as the school wit. On one occasion the annual nativity play ground to a halt, when the next boy due on stage was found collapsed helpless with laughter in the wings after Peter had whispered something in his ear.

Despite having arrived at a modus vivendi, Peter was desperately unhappy at St Bede's, not that he would ever have admitted as much to his parents. Having his appendix removed in 1948 didn't help matters. According to his sister Sarah, 'Peter had the toughest deal as far as being left behind was concerned. When I was sent away to school later, I whinged like anything about it all, I hated it. But Peter never moaned – I never once heard him complain. It's taken me a long time to realise how difficult it was for my parents too – as a child you only see it from a child's point of view. Nobody was being cruel intentionally: that was just the way things were.' His mother wrote to him once a week – Margaret wrote to each of her children once a week for as long as she lived – but it was no substitute for her actual presence. Peter confided the truth of his childhood loneliness only to his wives, in later years. As long as his parents lived, he would breezily tell any inquisitive journalist that as a boy he had 'really loved visiting all those different places.'[7] In fact, he lived for the school holidays in Gibraltar entirely because it meant seeing his family again.

As Sarah grew up, she became Peter's constant holiday companion, on a series of expeditions to investigate Gibraltar's creepy-crawlies. They caught little fish at Rosea Bay using home-made rods and bait, and fed them to the cat. They rescued terrapins from a dried-up river bed in Spain, and made a pond for them among the figs and geraniums of their rambling garden. Peter installed a fearsome-looking pet praying mantis in

a shoe box, which terrified the life out of his sister. Anything that crept, or crawled, or buzzed, Peter would try and keep it in a cardboard box. In May 1947 he was apprehended by Spanish customs, trying to smuggle a tortoise across the border in a teapot.

It was the custom for Bob Church to send Alec an annual subscription to the *Reader's Digest* as a present, and Peter was absolutely fascinated to read an article therein about killer bees. This became something of an obsession, and he would lead Sarah on hunts lasting many hours for an elusive flower named the 'Bee Orchid'. In return, Peter would patiently sit through endless dolly's tea parties and beach picnics organised by his little sister. 'Despite the age gap, I never felt bossed, teased, patronised or merely tolerated by him – not then, not ever,' says Sarah. Peter was undoubtedly content. Compared to life at St Bede's, Gibraltar was an absolute idyll. On one occasion Errol Flynn's yacht dropped anchor in the bay, and Peter swam out with his autograph book clamped between his teeth. Flynn's wife went down below, and returned with the scrawled inscription 'Hiya Pete'. 'He had signed. I swam away happily. There has never been a thrill quite like that since.'[8]

At last, Peter got the chance to befriend his father. They played golf and tennis, and went fishing together. On occasion the family would even have a little flutter on the races. In 1951, Alec Cook dreamed that the Derby would be won by a horse called Nickel Penny. He then found out that there was a horse running at 40–1 called Nickel Coin, so – ever cautious – he only placed a small bet on it. A friend of his placed a much larger bet, and won a fortune when it scraped home in first place. Alec also introduced the concept of a national lottery to Gibraltar, and placed his family on strict orders not to purchase a ticket. He was terrified that his wife might actually win something in his own draw. Margaret nicknamed her husband 'the sea green incorruptible' because of his constant scrupulous integrity. This clear moral sense, with its absolute respect for the truth, was passed down to his son wholesale, along with Alec's melancholy core and his sharp sense of humour.

Humour was enjoyed in the Cook household very much on a shared basis. The whole family loved to play around with words, and Peter's predilection for taking a subject and running with it very much came from his father. Favourite family jokes were usually based on word play, often spoonerisms, such as the school report accusing a pupil of tasting the whole worm. Humorous books were an important influence: Wodehouse, Beachcomber, *1066 and All That*, and the savagely accurate Geoffrey Willans–Ronald Searle creation, Nigel Molesworth. Most popular of all were the delightfully bleak *Ruthless Rhymes* and *More Ruthless Rhymes* by

Harry Grahame, illustrated by Ridgewell, short verses redolent of Edward Lear's more macabre moments. Peter's favourite, of course, was the one entitled 'Prebendary Gorm':

> When Mrs Gorm (Aunt Heloise)
> Was stung to death by savage bees,
> Her husband (Prebendary Gorm)
> Put on his veil, and took the swarm
> He's publishing a book, next May,
> On 'How to make Bee Keeping Pay'.

This was accompanied by an illustration of Mrs Gorm, her entire head hidden beneath a cloud of furious killer bees, a few of whom are stinging the dog for good measure, while her husband stands behind her grinning heartily in bee-proof gear. Some of the *Ruthless Rhymes* were quite advanced:

> Weep not for little Leonie
> Abducted by a French Marquis,
> Though loss of honour was a wrench
> Just think how it's improved her French.

Generally speaking, though, the family's humour was dry, witty and very English, and always stopped short of being crude. When Peter drew a picture in Sarah's autograph book of their little sister Elizabeth (who was born in 1952) sitting on her potty, Sarah rubbed it out with much embarrassment before anyone could see it. Few of the family's comic favourites were brash or American or both, although Peter personally enjoyed the Goons, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, the Marx Brothers and Abbott and Costello, whom his parents didn't much care for. An exception to this was Frank Crumit, whose comic songs *Abdul Abulbul Amir*, *The Gay Caballero* and *The Song of the Prune* were frequently played. Alec's expansive collection of 78rpm records also took in Stanley Holloway, whose lugubrious monologues usually concerned plain-speaking little Lancastrians failing to bat their eyelids in the presence of kings, lions and other impressive authority figures. Looking back on his career in the mid-1980s, Peter admitted that 'Only in my forties have I realised that a lot of my sense of humour comes from my parents – that's quite humbling, in a way.'[9]

The atmosphere in the Cook household was correspondingly polite and relaxed. Alec and Margaret were gentle and loving parents. They had no

need for any formal imposition of discipline: the perfect manners they had instilled in their children kept order for them. 'There were certain things I knew not to do with them present'[10] was how Peter later summed up their disciplinary policy. A key part of the Cook family's code of manners was the stress put on not being boring – never outstaying one's welcome, for instance – while being prepared to suffer it from others. This had a profound effect on Peter, who was careful never to bore anyone throughout his life, and yet whose ability to converse politely when cornered by pub bores was justly famous. The importance of not burdening others with one's own trivial problems was perhaps best expressed by the family nanny, who was trapped with Sarah on a blazing passenger vessel – happily both later escaped unhurt – and yet managed to get a cable off to Margaret Cook. It read: 'SHIP ON FIRE. DO NOT WORRY.' Peter, of course, was beset with problems in his later life, but would never have dreamed of disturbing his family with them.

All of which is not to say that the family stood on ceremony. After all, Alec Cook, a man sufficiently important to have his signature printed on Gibraltar's pound notes, happily skipped down the street to school holding his daughter's hand every morning. When a ship carrying ammunition exploded in the harbour, he told Sarah that everyone at the Secretariat had hidden under the table playing bears. The Cooks' was a happy house, full of laughter and music – Margaret played violin in the Gibraltar Symphony Orchestra – often with a party in full swing. But always there was the underlying sadness, on both sides, of Peter's returns to school. Peter's career plan remained largely unspoken but generally understood: that he would follow his father and his father before him into overseas service on behalf of his country. To achieve that end, sacrifices needed to be made. Peter's smile would evaporate and turn to tears at the airport. Eleanor Hudson, an old school friend of Margaret's, would meet Peter on his arrival in Britain and arrange his transfer to school: she remembers him as a quiet, solemn charge, contemplative of his fate.

Peter had in fact triumphed at St Bede's, as far as the authorities there were concerned. His final term's report, in the summer of 1951, concluded that 'Originality of thought and a command of words give him a maturity of style beyond his years. In speech or essay he is never dull and his work should always be interesting.' His Headmaster added: 'A very excellent term. I think he should have a very promising future at Radley.' For Radley, one of England's great public schools, was where Peter was bound, an even larger and more intimidating institution, promising greater challenges to be faced and bigger bullies to be faced down.

Sir Arthur Streeb-Greebling, in interview many years later, defended

his decision to bring up his own son Roger in the traditional English manner:

> 'We had him educated privately.'
> 'But not by governesses.'
> 'No, by goats. Not by governesses, goats.'
> 'Despite your own childhood experiences with goats.'
> 'Well it was either that, or King's School Canterbury. And I'm not entirely heartless you know.'[11]