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Different Drummer

The Life of Kenneth MacMillan

Written by Jann Parry

Published by Faber and Faber

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Different Drummer
The Life of Kenneth MacMillan

JANN PARRY



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Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
29 October 1992	I
1 The Making of a Dancer 1929–1952	5
2 The Making of a Choreographer 1952–1966	115
3 Berlin: Divided City, Divided Self 1966–1970	307
4 Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet 1970–1977	373
5 New Departures 1978–1992	477
Aftermath	701
Epilogue	703
Chronology of MacMillan's Choreography	708
Selected Recordings	721
Sources	
<i>Note on Main Critics</i>	727
<i>Note on Periodicals and Specialist Dance Publications</i>	728
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	728
<i>Reviews and Press Coverage of Works by MacMillan</i>	733
<i>Personal Contact: Interviews and Correspondence</i>	739
Index	741

29 October 1992

Sirens screeched in Covent Garden, the streets and alleyways around the Royal Opera House resounding with their wails until the former market area seemed to be howling. Ambulances had rushed to respond to the Opera House's emergency call, while the first-night audience cocooned inside the old theatre remained unaware of the turmoil behind the scenes. A body had been found backstage, slumped in an unlit corridor. The off-duty member of the stage crew who found the unconscious man assumed he was a tramp who had somehow wandered in from the street and collapsed in the maze of artists' dressing-rooms. She informed the stage-door staff; overhearing her report, Anthony Dowell, the Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet, realised at once who it must be. Company staff had been searching with increasing concern for the choreographer of the three-act work that was nearing its conclusion on stage. He was inexplicably absent and the dancers were becoming aware, as they glanced into the wings, that something was terribly wrong. They could see ashen faces, running figures, frantic consultations. Meanwhile the audience was engrossed in the unfolding drama of *Mayerling*, Kenneth MacMillan's tragic ballet, remounted with a new star in the lead.

MacMillan had arrived at the theatre early in the evening of 29 October 1992, accompanied by his wife, Deborah. He wanted to reassure the dancers that he was confident they would justify his faith in them. In fact, he was tense and nervous himself, as always before a production of one of his ballets. *Mayerling* is a demanding work, requiring the dancer in the role of Crown Prince Rudolf of Austro-Hungary to remain on stage almost throughout the three acts. The former Bolshoi principal, Irek Mukhamedov, was taking the role for the first time; the Royal Ballet's young Italian ballerina, Viviana Durante, was making her debut as Rudolf's mistress, Mary Vetsera.

As MacMillan and Deborah took their usual house seats in the Grand Tier, the theatre's General Director, Jeremy Isaacs, leaned across the aisle and whispered, 'Good luck.' The curtain rose on the

funeral with which the ballet begins and ends. Black-clad mourners shelter from the rain under glistening umbrellas as a coffin is lowered through a trapdoor at the rear of the stage. Only when the scene is reprised at the conclusion of the ballet does the audience appreciate that the burial is that of Mary Vetsera, killed by Rudolf in a suicide pact.

Overcome with anxiety during the first act, MacMillan left his seat, telling his wife he was suffering from a panic attack. He had been prone to such attacks for most of his life. He had learned to recognise the symptoms – breathlessness, palpitations, cold sweats – and to some extent, how to deal with them. He also knew that he had a damaged heart after a serious heart attack four years previously. But on this occasion, he ascribed his distress to nerves about the first-night performance of *Mayerling*, revived after a gap of six years.

Deborah tried to calm him down and offered to fetch him a cup of tea. They went together through the pass door leading from the front of house to the backstage area and the staff canteen. She brought him the tea while he sat on the stairs leading to the canteen, talking to staff and dancers passing by during the interval. When the warning bell rang for the start of the second act, he told Deborah to go back and watch the performance on his behalf, while he rested in the green room.

During the next interval, Deborah searched for her husband to let him know that all was going extremely well on stage. He was not in the green room and had not been seen in the canteen. She asked Anthony Dowell to have MacMillan urgently paged over the backstage Tannoy. Dowell joined in the search, while Deborah alerted other members of staff.

Desperately worried, she went back into the auditorium for the last act, standing behind the row of staff seats. Suddenly, St John Ambulance first-aiders, always present during performances, ran past her. She knew her worst fears had been realised. As the audience remained absorbed in the onstage drama, Dowell led her to the opera dressing-room corridor, where MacMillan was lying. His body was cold, the look on his face one of surprise. He had probably been dead for about an hour.

While Deborah cradled her husband's body in her arms in the dressing-room corridor, Jeremy Isaacs was fetched from his seat.

The ballet was coming to an end and decisions needed to be taken. The dancers would have to be told as they came offstage, with Mukhamedov and Durante among the last to know. The cast could hardly be expected to take their bows smiling as if nothing had happened. Isaacs was convinced that the audience should be made aware that a great choreographer's life and an era of the Royal Ballet's history had ended while they were watching a magnificent performance. He would break the news of MacMillan's death on stage soon after the curtain came down – even though no doctor had yet officially declared MacMillan dead.

At the conclusion of *Mayerling*, Rudolf takes Mary behind a screen and shoots her before turning his gun on himself. He crashes to the ground, bringing down the screen that has hidden Mary's body, lying on a bed. Her clandestine funeral is a sombre coda to this devastating scene of self-destruction.

In the audience we were still struggling to regain our composure as the heavy, red Opera House curtains reopened and Mukhamedov stood alone on stage to receive our applause. After such a shattering finale, applause is normally a cathartic release for spectators and performers alike. Mukhamedov looked stricken, his face and body drained. The sound of clapping swelled to let him know that he had conquered a challenging ballet, but he seemed unable to acknowledge the applause. The curtains closed to let the entire cast assemble for their communal bows – the usual convention.

By now, most of the company knew what had happened. The stage manager, Keith Gray, had broken the news to Mukhamedov shortly before he took the first curtain call on his own. He had had to face the audience deep in shock. Gray, as agreed with Isaacs, waited until the rest of the cast had swept forward and back in their initial curtain call before giving Isaacs the signal to go on stage and make the announcement to the audience. Isaacs stepped in front of the dancers and held up his hand for silence. The applause ceased as he said, 'It is with deep sadness, and in shock, that I have to tell you that the great master whose work we have seen performed here tonight, Kenneth MacMillan, has, during the performance, suffered a heart attack and died.' A woman's voice wailed in disbelief. Isaacs continued, 'I ask you to rise and bow your heads, and to leave the theatre in silence.'

The horseshoe-shaped auditorium was charged with emotion that had no outlet. Reactions to Isaacs's brief speech reverberated

around the packed house of over two thousand people, arranged in tiers up to the domed ceiling. Apart from some strangled sobs, the unnatural hush in the theatre was broken only by shuffling feet as the audience filed out of the dimmed theatre – an eerie echo of the funeral scene we had just witnessed in the ballet. The curtains had closed on the cast, by now holding each other in distress. There was nowhere more fitting for them to grieve: they were part of the drama of MacMillan's death.

For a man of the theatre, it was an impressive way to go. Nobody present will ever forget the impact of learning of the choreographer's death – although each person remembers the details of the experience slightly differently. For those close to MacMillan, however, it was a private tragedy transformed into a public spectacle. For Deborah MacMillan, Isaacs had made an over-hasty decision to declare her husband dead before a crowd of strangers, who were to know of his death even before their teenage daughter, Charlotte. Deborah rushed home to tell her. Charlotte had to be told before the news broke on the radio. Deborah would otherwise have wished to remain with her husband's body, which she had to leave in the theatre.

MacMillan, a reclusive man who let his ballets speak for him, had sought privacy in his last moments, dreading the indignity of collapsing in public. Deborah believed that the announcement of his death should have waited until the following day, after which obituaries would appear. Friends, admirers, ballet-lovers and the rest of the world would have time to absorb the news of his death, and further tribute could be paid at his memorial service. This took place four months later in Westminster Abbey, where the achievements of national figures, from political leaders to great artists, are ceremonially honoured. Yet perhaps for Kenneth, the working-class boy whose fierce ambition had been to perform on the Covent Garden stage, and then to direct the famous ballet company based there, the Royal Opera House was indeed the right place to bow out.

I

The Making of a Dancer

1929-1952

I

To his public, Kenneth MacMillan was an enigmatic figure. His ballets would lay emotions bare, challenging and provoking audiences, but the man who created them remained a mystery. He would grant interviews when required to do so, but there were few profiles or long articles about him in the press. He'd agree to be recorded, occasionally, for radio or television – but he gave little away. He wasn't disobliging, just laconic. He would not, or could not, explain his ballets or reveal the sources of his inspiration. He was cagey about his early experiences, often misleading interviewers if he did talk about his youth.

For many years, he hid his face behind dark glasses and a moustache. The dancers with whom he worked were often unable to see his eyes during rehearsals. When he appeared on stage (without the glasses) to take a bow after the premiere of one of his ballets, he looked like an animal caught in the headlights. Although he sometimes wore a suit, or very occasionally a dinner-jacket for first-night curtain calls, he frequently appeared in ill-fitting trousers whose crotch hung down to his knees. It was hard to imagine he had once been an elegant classical dancer.

When he first came to attention as a talented choreographer in the 1950s, he was a tall, languid young man with a mop of dark hair and an ever-present cigarette. By the time of his international success with *Romeo and Juliet*, his first three-act ballet in 1965, his hair had gone prematurely grey. Shortly afterwards he left the Royal Ballet for three years to become Artistic Director of the (then) West Berlin Deutsche Oper Ballet company. Reports filtered out that he was having a hard time with the German opera-house system, in which ballet traditionally occupied second place. On his return to take over the directorship of the Royal Ballet in 1970, he was a changed man. His health was poor: he had collapsed in Germany as a result of stress and alcoholism, and although he appeared to have recovered fully from a stroke, he was psychologically fragile.

He kept his difficulties private, acquiring a reputation for remaining obdurately silent at Royal Ballet press conferences and at Board

and committee meetings. Only his closest friends, and the woman who was to become his wife, knew the extent of the anxieties he suffered. The first Director of the Royal Ballet to have come from within its ranks, he was beset by managerial problems from the start. He had inherited a company riven with resentment at his appointment and at the changes inflicted on the way it was run. The nature of the Royal Opera House as an institution, and its relationship with its funding body, the Arts Council, had altered radically by the 1970s. Expectations of what ballet should be were also shifting, as Opera House audiences grew more conservative and contemporary dance broke new ground.

MacMillan came in for savage criticism, both as Director of the nation's leading classical ballet company and for his own creations. Reviewers in Britain and in America, when the Royal Ballet went on tour there, split into two camps, defenders and deplorers. Their reactions affected box-office takings and influenced management attitudes towards him, making him feel beleaguered, even paranoid. Yet he continued to choreograph extraordinary ballets, a number of which have won acceptance as modern masterpieces.

After he resigned as Artistic Director of the company in 1977, his work became darker, even more controversial. He pushed the boundaries of ballet further than anyone had dared, courting hostility from critics and audiences alike. He remained elusive, spending part of his time in the United States with American Ballet Theatre, as artistic associate and choreographer. Although he valued his four-year experience with ABT (while retaining his links with the Royal Ballet), he was scarcely known to the American public as a personality. The opposite of a self-promoter, reluctant to make use of the media, he was also ill-suited to socialising at fund-raising galas on tour across the States.

When he re-emerged on the London ballet scene at the end of the 1980s to create a long-awaited three-act ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, few people outside the Royal Ballet knew how ill he had been after a serious heart attack. He had to pace himself carefully to complete the choreography, which starred an unknown youngster, Darcey Bussell, who was to become one of Britain's favourite ballerinas.

The *Pagodas* premiere coincided with his sixtieth birthday. Assumptions that he had mellowed were soon confounded by what

turned out to be his last work, *The Judas Tree*. Brutal and uncompromising, it contained themes that had preoccupied him throughout his creative life: sexual provocation, betrayal, collusion in wrong-doing, crippling guilt and a longing for redemption. *The Judas Tree* initially confounded its audiences. MacMillan was more of a puzzle than ever, shielding himself in obligatory publicity photographs behind the huge upturned collar of a black overcoat.

After his death, obituaries and eulogies described his career but not the man himself. He had kept his secrets, confiding only in his wife and the psychiatrists and psychotherapists he consulted over the years. He let his ballets speak for him, preferring not to discuss them with his dancers or his closest friends, let alone with journalists. He dreaded and disliked writing, although towards the end of his life he started to draft an account of his early memories. He gave up, dissatisfied by his attempts to express himself in words. (His draft memoir informs the first part of this biography.)

Stories recounted by friends and former dancers who remember him as gregarious and funny as a young man are hard to reconcile with the reclusive figure seen at the theatre or heard on the radio, talking in a melancholy drawl. People who had known him during the lowest time of his life in Germany painted conflicting pictures of him, ranging from a fiercely creative artist to a lonely man sunk in abject misery.

Acquaintances who had lost touch with him over the years were surprised to learn that he had married, had had a daughter, and had been honoured with a knighthood.

His family knew a different side to him from the one he presented in public. Even they, however, found out more about him from his ballets than from his conversations at home. The diaries he kept during his last years are tantalisingly unrevealing about his inner life; they are aide-memoires, briefly noting events and his terse opinions about his own work and that of others. Researching his biography has required detective work in assembling the missing-pieces jigsaw of his boyhood and early career as a dancer. Once he started choreographing in his twenties, the ballets reveal how closely he identified with his central character – the damaged innocent, the vulnerable young person whose trust is betrayed. This person is marked from the start as a misfit, someone who longs to be like the others but who is destined to remain an outsider, ultimately alone.

In many of his ballets, the key figure is the heroine, traumatised by events over which she has no control; in his later works, however, the already damaged central character, often male, is culpable, bringing about his (or her) own destruction.

MacMillan created over seventy works in a variety of genres, and he was never consciously autobiographical. His overt source of inspiration might come from films or books; above all, it sprang from the music he chose and from the bodies and personalities of the dancers who interested him. What came out in the rehearsal studio often surprised him: he preferred not to analyse what he had done, even while acknowledging that his subconscious had been at work. Then, once his ballets entered the repertoire of a company, they took on a trajectory of their own as performers' interpretations of roles changed, though the choreography remained the same. The dramatic power of the roles – for women, Juliet, Manon, Mary Vetsera, the Chosen Maiden in his *Rite of Spring*; for men, Romeo, Des Grieux, Lescaut, Crown Prince Rudolf, the Foreman in *The Judas Tree* – continues to attract dancers from many different countries. Internationally famous guest artists have taken them on, while the MacMillan repertoire has been an important reason for dancers choosing to join the Royal Ballet.

The ballets have been performed widely since MacMillan's death in 1992, as companies have clamoured to stage them. Meanwhile, the man who created them has remained more elusive than ever. This biography sets out to examine his background and the origins of the themes that recur so obsessively in his work. It is an account of how the neuroses that tormented him fuelled his career as a creator. He was never to have an easy life: he achieved his ambition to be an artistic director at considerable cost to himself, and although he eventually found happiness as a husband and father, he always felt himself an outsider, marching to a different drum from his fellows.

The source of his sense of dislocation, of never belonging, lies in his childhood. Yet his handwritten memoir does not give the picture of a troubled boyhood: his deepest feelings remained buried. Although his perception of himself was of a lonely child, his school-mates and early friends report that he was not an outcast, isolated in the playground or picked on by bullies. Indeed, he seems to have been a confident, outgoing youngster until his mother's death when he was twelve set him apart. Then, like the fictional Billy Elliot, a

motherless miner's son, he found his own means of expression through dance, defying his working-class background to do so.

According to his draft memoir, and the recollections of his surviving relatives, he had been a much loved child, an afterthought when his mother was forty, following three surviving siblings. He was born on 11 December 1929, as the worldwide economic depression followed the Wall Street crash. 'I must have been an expensive baby to have been delivered in a nursing home,' he speculated. The earlier MacMillan children (one of whom died in infancy) had been born at home: Kenneth saw the light of day in the Davar Maternity Clinic in Dunfermline, the ancient royal capital of Scotland, birth-place of the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie and of Moira Shearer, the ballerina and film star.

The MacMillan family had established itself in Fife, across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh. Kenneth's father, William, was one of six children born to David MacMillan, bricklayer and stonemason, and Jane McNeil. She had been a weaver in a damask linen factory at the time of their marriage in Dunfermline in 1892, when she was nineteen. They were recorded on their marriage certificate as living next door to each other in Golfdrum Street, an old part of the town, in north-west Dunfermline. David MacMillan's father, a tinsmith, was evidently illiterate, for he had signed David's birth certificate with an 'X'. Jane's father, Matthew McNeil, Kenneth's great-grandfather, is variously described on marriage and death certificates as a coal miner, a labourer and 'a hawker of earthenware' – a pedlar of jugs and pots, sold door to door.

David and Jane would appear to have been the first in their families to have done quite well for themselves, to judge from photographs of them, soberly dressed and surrounded by their large family. By the time that Kenneth was old enough to remember his paternal grandmother, she was a formidable Scottish matriarch in her sixties. David had earned enough as a builder to provide for all six children, although the youngest, Jean, William's baby sister, remembered that they celebrated birthdays with simply a dumpling for the birthday child: with luck, if she had been a good girl, there was a threepenny bit inside.

William had left home to earn his living as a coal miner shortly before the First World War broke out in 1914. He enlisted in the army, aged twenty-four, in May 1915, serving as a gunner with the

Highland Fifth Royal Garrison Artillery. A photograph of him in uniform, taken at the Dunfermline studio of D. Cummings Simpson, intrigued Kenneth, possibly because the resemblance between father and son was so marked. He wrote in his memoir:

Gunner MacMillan W stares stubbornly at Mr Simpson (or was it an assistant?). Behind him is a would-be elegant rococo screen edged with sham pre-Raphaelite stained glass. Father's feet firmly planted on a grubby tufted carpet show off his polished boots and puttees, but his fierce grip on the back of the chair beside him betrays his unease in this boudoir composition. A badly placed aspidistra and some cut flowers complete this ill-conceived picture. My father was not good humoured enough to find it funny.

In fact, the formally posed photograph was typical of those taken of soldiers at the time, many of them later serving as mementoes of men killed in action.

William MacMillan's Highland regiment was posted to East Anglia on its way to the battlefields of France. The soldiers, as part of their training, were required to guard the waterworks that served the coastal resort of Great Yarmouth. There William met and courted Edith Shreeve. Her family lived in a tied cottage belonging to the Ormesby Waterworks, the private company that managed the reservoir, built in 1855 to provide fresh water for Yarmouth. Her father, George William Shreeve, was employed as an engine minder, operating the water pumps – a step up from his previous job as an agricultural labourer. Her mother, Mary Anne (née Sales), was a local girl, born and married in the same rural parish as her husband: Rollesby, West Flegg, a short distance along the coast from Great Yarmouth.

Edith May Shreeve was the youngest of three children, with a ten-year gap between her and the eldest, Louise. Edith was 'in service', working as a kitchen maid in the nearby town of Sheringham, when she fell for her Scottish soldier. She was already twenty-eight when she married William MacMillan on 2 December 1916, though she took a year off her age on the wedding certificate. He was three years younger than she was and about to leave for France, with a strong likelihood of being killed. Edith was very probably pregnant by the time of her wedding, for her first child, Jean, was born just seven months later, on 3 July 1917. Family legend had it that the bungled delivery was in the cottage at Ormesby, and in using

forceps, the local doctor had ripped off the baby's ear and punctured her eardrum. The ear was stitched back on, leaving a scar and permanent damage to Jean's hearing. Although her hearing had seemed passable as a youngster, she had to rely increasingly on guesswork and lip-reading as it deteriorated. She was completely deaf by the time she reached her twenties, and her voice became flat and gruff once she could no longer hear herself speak.

William, who had been mustard-gassed during the Battle of the Somme, was officially demobilised from the army in January 1919, two months after Armistice Day. He had been unfit for action since suffering the German gas attack, an experience that left him mentally and physically scarred. His lungs were permanently damaged and the skin on his face and neck, burnt by the mustard gas, would break out into sores. He had been sent back from the front to hospital in Scotland. Once discharged, he refused further medical treatment and would not apply for a disability pension. He wanted nothing more to do with the army and never spoke to his family about his wartime experiences. Later in life, he even discouraged his youngest son from joining the Scouts: 'the uniform' was the only reason he gave Kenneth.

Disillusioned by post-war conditions, William often talked of taking his family to the Soviet Union. He listened to broadcasts from Russia (in English) on the radio and believed that Soviet socialism had abolished poverty and unemployment. He was not, however, a member of the Communist Party and made no moves to emigrate to the USSR. Years later, his eldest son, George, would repeat the claim that 'someone in authority' had visited the family house to deliver a warning against listening to communist propaganda. William brought up both his sons to mistrust the 'authorities' who tried to exercise control over their lives.

Damaged though he was, William managed to find a job as a labourer at a gasworks near Dunfermline. He had sent for his wife and young daughter to join him in Scotland, where they lived with his parents before moving into a stone-clad terrace house in the village of Crossford, a mile and a half from Dunfermline. The house, on Main Street, was near the post office and the Pitfirane Arms Hotel. The next MacMillan children would be born there. Betty arrived in 1920; then came the first son, David, who died at six months in 1923. After the birth of another son, George (named

after Edith's elder brother), two years later, there was a five-year gap before Kenneth, the last and dearest to his mother's heart. According to his Scottish aunt Jean, Kenneth was always called 'my pet' by Edith. 'She wouldn't let the wind blow on him,' said Jean, disapprovingly. 'Whatever he wanted, she gave in to him.'

Edith MacMillan, transplanted from her East Anglian setting, found her husband's Scots family daunting – especially her redoubtable mother-in-law. Kenneth recalled as a small boy tiptoeing quietly around his grandmother's house with his mother, both of them overawed by the way that Jane MacMillan doled out linen from a large wooden box like some Eastern empress. 'Presumably dispensing such largesse helped her manipulate her large family. She was a great fat lady who dominated her small husband and many children, including my father, who was always subdued in her presence.'

Soon after Kenneth was born, his father lost his job at the gas-works. A workmate had been injured in an industrial accident. William MacMillan testified at the compensation hearing that the accident had been caused by the gas company's negligence. The injured worker won his compensation; William was sacked.

In the Depression years of the 1930s this could have been a calamity. Resourceful, William turned to poultry farming, selling eggs and dressed chickens in Dunfermline market. He had kept hens in the garden at the back of the house to feed his family and supplement his earnings; now he leased extra land for two thousand free-range birds, rearing them from chicks in incubators. His eldest son George remembered the family sitting up late on Friday nights, plucking the feathers from forty to fifty chickens into tin baths, arms covered with Vaseline to prevent fleas running up them. Kenneth was too young to help with the plucking but remembered the pleasure of collecting eggs from under the warm breasts of the hens, and marvelled at his gentle mother's ability, 'without turning a hair', to wring the necks of chickens due to go to market.

On Saturday mornings, the family transported their produce by car, a bull-nose Morris Oxford, to Dunfermline, a grey-granite city dominated by its cathedral, built in the ruins of an eleventh-century Benedictine Abbey. The kings of Scotland are buried there, including Robert the Bruce. The Scotsman credited as the creator of modern Freemasonry, William Schaw (1550–1602), has a monument in the Abbey. Membership of a Freemasons' lodge is usually confidential,

but William MacMillan left his membership card among his papers after his death. It is dated 1920, the year he returned to Dunfermline after the First World War.

While William and his older children sold eggs and chickens in Dunfermline marketplace, Edith would go to variety-show matinees, taking Kenneth with her, as soon as he was old enough to keep still. He usually sat on her lap, unwilling to lose physical contact with her until he had to. Dunfermline's main music-hall on Reform Street, grandly named the Opera House, held Highland-dancing classes on Saturday mornings, before the variety show. (The building was to be dismantled in the 1980s and reassembled in Sarasota, Florida, as part of the Asolo Centre for the Performing Arts.) Kenneth joined in the classes from the age of four. 'That was where it all started,' reckoned his brother George. 'Kenneth was always interested in dressing up and dancing, so Mother let him pursue it as he grew up.'

Scottish children routinely learn their country's dances from an early age. Such youthful training helped develop the co-ordination and elegantly arched feet that Kenneth was to display as a ballet dancer. He retained few memories, however, of his early dance classes or indeed of his first five years in Scotland. His visual flash-backs were disconcertingly bleak. Instead of the golden days of a happy childhood, he recalled an umbrella blowing inside out as he and his sisters struggled against the wind, crossing a hump-backed bridge. 'Like dreams, unimportant details persist and try to take on a significance, but only the quality of the bleached northern light remains to disturb me.' Another memory of bad weather was even more disturbing: 'Once when a great storm cracked over our village, Mother was so terrified that she hid with me in a cupboard under the stairs. Her fear of storms has stayed with me since.' It was an experience that later merged with wartime terrors, when he and his mother cowered together in fear of falling bombs, listening for explosions as the Luftwaffe attacked Britain.

He clearly recollected his first shock at being parted from his mother when he went to infant school in Dunfermline. He had enjoyed the bus ride with her and had no idea that he was going to be left behind in the classroom until he saw her leaving through a glass door. He was outraged when the teacher 'hauled me to the front of the class and called me a cry-baby'. He refused to attend

school unless his mother accompanied him. She gave in, indulging her youngest child and washing her hands of George, a blond, head-strong boy who played truant from school, risking the strap from his father. George was frequently beaten by William, who never laid a hand on Kenneth, protected as he was by his mother. Kenneth later confided to a friend that his mother had breast-fed him until he was four. He told a psychotherapist that he and his mother were 'far too close': the therapist, Marianne Jacoby, concluded that he had never been weaned psychologically.

Kenneth was five when he left Scotland for East Anglia in 1935, realising when he was somewhat older that the family had done a 'moonlight flit', leaving unpaid bills behind. He, George and their mother went south by overnight train; William and the two teenaged girls travelled in the family car, their sole remaining possession apart from their clothes. Kenneth was told never to mention the circumstances in which the MacMillans had arrived in Great Yarmouth – the first of many secrets that were to haunt his youth.

He came to believe that his father had gone shamefully bankrupt, unable to keep up the lease on the failing chicken farm. George, however, in recounting the family's history, attributed the move from Scotland to their father's stubborn pride. When the limited lease on the farmland expired, William had been outbid for its renewal. He was offered the loan of some land elsewhere by a friend, possibly a fellow Freemason, but 'said he'd have no more of it and sold up, basically for pennies'. The family had been told by Edith's elder sister Louise that plenty of jobs were available in Yarmouth. William opted to take his chances down south – an unwise decision, as it turned out, for the economic Depression of the 1930s affected every part of Britain.

Great Yarmouth, then as now, was a popular seaside resort, with numerous piers straddling its pebble beaches. Once an important fishing port, especially for herring, and a naval base, it had become increasingly reliant on visitors in search of inexpensive family holidays. Hotels, boarding houses and hostels crowded along the sea front in the 1930s. They still do, although almost all have been redeveloped; mobile-home parks now cater for those who are on tighter budgets.

Before the extensive damage inflicted by World War II bombing, the town retained much of the street layout of its medieval past.

Yarmouth (the 'Great' incorporates once neighbouring villages) was originally a settlement on a sandbank at the mouth of the Yare estuary. As the town grew and prospered in the twelfth century, its expansion was restricted by the narrow space between the sea and the rivers Yare and Bure. A fortified wall, completed by the end of the fourteenth century, prevented it extending further for centuries to come. The cramped town Charles Dickens described in *David Copperfield* had scarcely changed in structure by the time the MacMillans moved there. The three main streets, running parallel to the coast and river, were still connected by narrow, cobbled alleys known as 'rows': the narrowest, 'Kittywitches', was only thirty inches wide. The upper floors of the houses in this area overhung the passageways; the inhabitants could reach out of their bedroom windows and touch each other's walls (or so Kenneth remembered).

The higgledy-piggledy Old Town, with its cobbled market at the centre, was where the MacMillans would end up living. The rows, whose housing was considered substandard and overdue for redevelopment in the 1930s, were largely destroyed by wartime bombing. The few buildings that remained were subsequently demolished, so that no complete row remains today. Yarmouth's historic past, including the streets and dwellings Dickens described so vividly, is no longer visible.

When the MacMillan family arrived in 1935, they stayed first with Louise, 'Aunt Louie', Tiptod, in her small house at Runham Vauxhall, near Great Yarmouth railway station, while William looked for work. He was reduced to taking whatever short-term jobs he could, as a labourer or a cook in hotels. The battered car from Scotland was soon sold, for just £5. The impoverished family of six outstayed its initial welcome with the Tiptods, 'straining sisterly affection to breaking point', Kenneth was told. They moved into two-room lodgings near by: the boys shared one bed, their sisters another in the same room. Their parents slept in the remaining room. Their landlady refused to acknowledge that the beds were infested with bugs: 'The old lady squirmed uncomfortably when Mother drew back the sheets and squeezed a bedbug between her thumbs. It occurred to me that it might have been my blood that made dark spots on the linen.'

They moved again, to the low-rent area near the market square where Kenneth was to stay with his family for the rest of his

childhood. The terrace in which the MacMillans lived was made up of former fishermen's smoke-houses, in which kippers had been strung up to cure under the roof. Even in their own two-up, two-down rented house, there was little privacy. Aged six or so, Kenneth walked in on his parents making love: 'I wandered into their bedroom smoking a make-believe sugar cigarette, hoping to shock them. At first they did not hear me and I watched fascinated, knowing and not knowing what they were doing. They hardly paused in their love-making and told me to leave the room.'

Whether or not young Kenneth was psychologically disturbed by seeing his parents in the act of sex, he recorded the event in his memoir decades later with affection, pleased that his parents were still physically attracted to each other in spite of their straitened circumstances. He continued to share a bedroom with his brother George. The five-year age gap between the two boys meant they had little in common, especially since they went to different schools. Kenneth was sent first to Northgate Infants, then to Northgate Junior, while George went to Yarmouth's Hospital School, originally established in the seventeenth century to educate poor children from the town's workhouse. It retained a reputation as a 'rough' school, whose pupils would end their education at the age of fourteen.

The brothers squabbled in their shared room. One night, during a pillow fight, Kenneth was knocked off the bed and broke his collar-bone. His father had to carry him two miles to the nearest hospital. George was in trouble yet again. He was supposed to be old enough to know better, while Kenneth, his mother's pet, was the innocent victim.

He might also have been subjected to his brother's sexual experimentation. Although there is no mention of such taboo intimacy in Kenneth's draft memoir about his childhood, he told his wife that George had involved him in activities about which he felt ashamed and resentful. Such memories, recounted later in life, are impossible to verify. However, as Kenneth grew older, his animosity towards George became pronounced – unusually so, even for brothers who were very different in character and interests. The curdled sibling relationships in his ballet *My Brother, My Sisters* might owe something to Kenneth's uneasy feelings about his own brother, whatever did or did not take place between them as they grew up.

While they were still youngsters, the two boys were prepared to collaborate in earning whatever money they could on Saturday mornings. Their uncle had made them a handcart out of fruit boxes and perambulator wheels, which they used to ferry holiday-makers' luggage from the station to the hotels and boarding houses, waiting expectantly for a tip. A useful source of small change was the Garibaldi Hotel, a large multi-storey hostel (now a single-storey disco club), where working men from the East End of London were housed for their summer holidays. The men, a boisterous bunch, used to take part in the town's street carnival, jiggling collecting boxes for local charities. They were happy to lean out of their upstairs windows and throw coins to street-urchin Kenneth, who improvised a tap dance on one of the wide downstairs windowsills, while George whistled a tune and collected the pennies.

As a child, Kenneth had no inhibitions about performing in public. He had enjoyed his Scottish-dancing lessons in Dunfermline, and he soon discovered end-of-the-pier talent competitions in Yarmouth. Lots of children performed in them, as much for entertainment as in the hope of winning not very valuable prizes. Kenneth had learned to tap dance by joining up with two girls of about his age, Joan Tooley and Daphne Morley, who lived at the bottom of his street and who went to Saturday-morning dance classes at the Little Theatre. Joan Tooley believes that Kenneth's mother paid for his weekly tap classes, which cost one shilling – 'quite a lot in those days, but somehow our mums managed it'. Joan liked Kenneth's mother: 'She was always kind to us children. She was plump, with grey hair. His father was dark and a bit fierce, with a Scottish accent. We were frightened of him. I think he had a touch of Scottish temper. Once something upset him and he got hold of me and tore my dress.'

William MacMillan might not have approved of his younger son's activities, but he let Edith indulge him. She was proud of his dancing ability, especially when he started to come home with prizes. The Little Theatre classes were run by Miss Jean Boulton, a 'no-nonsense' teacher whose pupils regularly took part in competitions on Britannia Pier. She taught ballet as well as tap, so Kenneth must have been aware of ballet from quite early on. Unable to afford a costume for the talent competitions, he exploited his waiflike appearance by wearing short trousers with braces over his

thin, shirtless shoulders. 'I must have got this idea from some film,' he said. 'Obviously, I was hoping for the sympathy of the audience.' Small and skinny, he won the end-of-the-pier competitions so regularly that 'Uncle' Neville Bishop, who organised them, bribed him not to compete. By then, Kenneth had accumulated enough prizes in the form of ashtrays and fish knives to keep the family over-stocked with fancy items.

The MacMillans lived in genteel poverty while William struggled to find and keep a job. In the summer-holiday season he worked as a cook in seaside hotels, as did Edith once Kenneth was old enough to look after himself. In winter, jobs were hard to come by. William, angry and despairing at his loss of dignity as the unemployed head of the family, turned to alcohol for comfort. 'I sensed that my mother colluded with him and turned a blind eye when he kept back his drinking money from his infrequent wage packets.' The two girls, Jean and Betty, contributed to the house-keeping when they found work as shop assistants or hotel maids; they probably helped pay for Kenneth's tap classes.

His clothes were bought on credit, under an arrangement known as 'buying on the club'. As he recorded in his memoir:

'Wear now and pay later' read the sign in the shop where my new Sunday suit was chosen. I accidentally ruined this new suit on its first outing when I fell into a ditch, catching minnows on my long walk home from Sunday School.

The suit had still to be paid for, to his mother's distress.

Mother shopped for food around the corner at the Co-op. The cashier sat in a glass booth high above the counters, receiving the shoppers' money from an overhead tramway system and despatching the change and receipt back along the same route. 'Can I pay you later?' I heard my mother shout at the cage. The cashier looked around anxiously and then nodded her agreement. The other shoppers stared at us. Mother had shamelessly asked for credit and was given it. I did not know what anguish it caused her, but I squirmed in disbelief, wrapped in my infantile snobbery.

He wondered whether the cashier had been one of Edith's clients at her fortune-telling sessions.

My mother was often asked to tea because she said she could foretell the future by reading the tea leaves. Mysterious and convincing, she spoke like an actress savouring the subtlety of her performance. 'I come from gypsy

THE MAKING OF A DANCER 1929-1952

blood,' she told her listeners conspiratorially. I nearly fell off her lap in surprise. She never could substantiate this claim but the idea appealed to me. Her need to be admired by an audience surprised me but I was aware how much she enjoyed it. I realise now that it was from these moments that my love of theatre began.

He was already entranced by the cinema. As a small boy, he was a regular at the Saturday-morning children's shows at the Plaza cinema in the marketplace, featuring cowboy serials and 'Flash Gordon'. 'I would sit with one leg tucked under me – a surprisingly comfortable position – endeavouring to make out what the actors were saying through the cacophony of noise the forty or more excited children were making during the hour-long show.' As he grew older, he and his brother would go to the double feature in the evening, watching Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney films, Hollywood romances and musicals: young Kenneth was a keen fan of Fred Astaire's elegant tap dancing. The boys' Saturday-night treat was tripe and chips, soaked in vinegar and wrapped in newspaper packets, from one of the stalls opposite the cinema. 'In winter, when the greenish-yellow glow of the lamps in the marketplace tried to penetrate the coastal fogs and mists, it was cosy and inviting in the cinema.' It was his place of safety and escape; films would continue to feed his imagination as he grew up, becoming a prime source of his inspiration as a creator of ballets. When he was a child, there were no books at home. Films were his window into a world outside Great Yarmouth.