
Opening Extract from...

The Plot

The Biography of an English Acre

Written by Madeleine Bunting

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THE PLOT

A Biography of an English Acre

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GRANTA

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Map 3 on page 108, War: Reproduced by permission
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Map 4 on page 172: A detail of the map of
The County of York Survey'd in MDCCXVII, VIII, IX and
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except p. 32, Bunting family gathering, private collection,
p. 78, Buff ermine moth by kind permission of Marion Frith
and p. 128, My father, private collection.

Attempts were made to trace the original
of Thirkleby Hall's shooting book on p. 160, but failed.
The publishers will be happy to insert an appropriate
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Prologue

'Wisdom sits in places' –
a saying of the Western Apache

In London I own a small piece of land. It was laid out as a rectangle of garden by Edwardian property developers, building for the expanding numbers of white-collar workers in a city at the heart of a rapidly globalizing world. For a few years, along with my four brothers and sisters, I co-owned another plot of land, inherited from my father, on a grassy hillside overlooking the Vale of York on the edge of the North York moors.

The soil of the city is rich with its history; the broken pieces of china calling to mind hundreds of years of soups, stews, bread and ale consumed by the generations of human beings who have lived on this piece of land. Many of those pieces are broken into such small fragments that they offer only the most indistinct of references to the centuries from which they came. I dig and weed the soil as earlier generations of women and men have done on what were once the farms of a village called Hackney. The larger fragments are instantly recognizable: the blue Willow china hints at the Hackney of the first half of the twentieth century, a place of migration, economic depression and war. This Hackney soil reminds me of the transience of the

populations that move in and – usually as quickly as possible – out again. I, like those of many other communities – Huguenot, Jewish – am passing through.

That is not something I can say for the Plot in Yorkshire and the Chapel my father, a sculptor, built there. This acre of land is so full of intense memory that it will never let me pass through. Each time I visit, it snags the heart so violently that I'm left disorientated by the force of emotion. It's a landscape peopled with images so clear and voices so loud that it shakes my sense of reality. On one occasion, walking with my own children down the track leading to the Plot, the thought that my earlier selves were about to emerge – from around the corner, from the forest on one side, jumping out of the bracken in a game of hide-and-seek – was overpowering. With some kind of inner eye (an eye that doesn't measure material reality) I saw my ten-year-old self coming down to meet me on the track which leads to the Chapel. She was complaining that she was bored – yet another visit to this plot of land her parents owned. She was restless for all the freedoms children don't have to shape their own lives, so she dragged her feet and curled her lip resentfully. Yet I know now that the sights, sounds and smells of that walk were permeating her mind and shaping her soul in ways that would last a lifetime.

This land has always been a place full of dread and fear for me. It was a central piece of the mythology that sustained my family, and it came to represent everything that failed. As a child, this plot and everything my father built on it intimidated me; as an adult, it would oppress me with the weight of disillusionment. For several decades now, it has haunted me as a monument to failed dreams.

Jean-Paul Sartre once said that we belong to wherever we have managed to carve our initials and return to watch those

initials age. Sartre's claim holds true for my father, only he did more than just carve initials, he built a chapel on this acre of North Yorkshire, and tended it his entire life. When we called him as adults, he would start his news with 'I've been up to the Chapel to cut the grass.' Ill-health crept up on him, undiagnosed and untreated, and he fretted about how to ensure that the Chapel survived him. He made appeals to various institutions but found no interest. Defeated, he didn't mention the Chapel in his will. As he lay dying, he kept repeating that he had left 'everything in a mess' – he couldn't even bring himself to clarify what he meant by 'everything'.

What I haven't been able to answer since I left the family home in a tiny village, Oswaldkirk, five miles from the Plot, is why for so many years I felt I lived in exile. For several decades, the few visits back, however painful, always felt like a homecoming. It's why I have delighted in places I found all over the world, from Peru to India, that reminded me, in however small, even absurd, a measure, of where I grew up, and in particular of the Chapel and its acre. I began to notice that wherever I went I was looking for memories of the North Yorkshire moors. It's why the sound of a glider – the noise of the engine cutting, the soft swish of the metal craft high in the sky – has always stopped me short in my tracks: it is the sound of the Plot, since the gliders from the club a mile away often flew overhead. I am instantly transported, with the swiftness that only a memory of sound or smell can achieve, back to the hot sunny afternoons spent at the Chapel as a child.

Isabel Allende writes of how she always yearns to return home and the minute she arrives, is desperate to leave. A similar ambivalence overwhelmed me in the middle of an interview researching this book, and it filled me with an absurd hilarity. It was as much as I could do to stop myself collapsing

in giggles. The interview was with a National Farmers' Union official and he was explaining – with the condescension he regarded as appropriate for me, a woman and a Londoner – why shooting was so pleasurable on the hillside of the Plot: 'The steepness of the hillside means that the birds come straight up out of the trees, like a bat out of hell,' he commented. That had been me: a bat out of hell. At sixteen, I had fled North Yorkshire for Brighton, as different and as far away as I could get without leaving England. I travelled to Asia, Africa and Latin America, I lived in the States and I ended up in London, in neighbourhoods such as Brixton and then Hackney, that reminded me of places I had travelled to. I put North Yorkshire firmly behind me, with its entrenched snobberies of 'incomer', class and gender: I was out of there and on to other things. It was six years before I returned, and when I came back the visits were brief, and followed the same pattern: a thrill of anticipation at the signs for the M1 and 'The North', which reached a surge at Watford. Then the arrival: the mud-encrusted, narrow roads, the gaunt hedgerow trees and the deep sense of desolation. Even now I do not like visiting the Plot alone, but take my boisterous, irreverent children or cheerful, thoughtful friends. Each time I left North Yorkshire, there was a tearing sense of loss, and always a promise to myself that one day I would repair that loss, resolve the ambivalence – find either a way to say goodbye for good or a way to come and go with a lighter heart.

On one occasion, heading north to research this book, my eye fell on a news story about an unresolved murder; a torso of an African boy had been found in the Thames and, after several years of forensic research, they had been able to track down the region of Africa from which he had come. They had analysed the build-up of minerals in his bones, accumulated in

minuscule quantities from the water he drank and the food he ate. It was powerful material evidence of how we are, literally, made by place. This sense of place is not just a product of imagination and memory, it is also physical; the elements of the land, its rocks, earth and water, are measured in our bones. It's hard, perhaps even impossible, to abandon our own geography of memory.

I began to wonder if this acre of land, so full of ghosts, could help me piece together a new way of understanding my father and the family's history. Perhaps, like the red thread Ariadne span for Theseus to guide him through the Minotaur's labyrinth, I could follow the stories of this Plot – both the ones my father told and new ones I could discover for myself – and find a better account of my father, a difficult, complex man, and the place. If wisdom 'sits in places', as the Native American Apache say, what wisdom did this place have to offer? At certain points in our lives, some questions become insistent. They are not new questions, only the most important. You first learn them as a child: who are your parents? Where is your home? Where do you belong? Perhaps the Plot could provide some answers, and help me understand how a place can shape a life. As a journalist, I write about the fraught politicization of these questions, but there are identities of place that are much more particular and emotional – and universal: they are a crucial part of how we understand ourselves. Even in highly mobile, urban societies, when the relationship with place has often been stripped down to bare function – one lives near work, or where the schools are good, or the property is a good investment – there are plots of land we dream of and use as a repository of meaning and wisdom, and a place where we find company.

The personal investigation is what has brought me back to this particular acre, but it needs to sit within a bigger story of how others have also used this bit of land and the relationships across time that I have with them. I need an understanding of the teeming histories under my feet on the Plot. Because in England we are always walking over stories, over a soil rich with the blood, toil, tears and sweat of generations, beside walls in which each stone has been cut and put in place, and each hedgerow planted and pruned by calloused hands.

Dad loved to tell his guests the stories of the Plot, the ones he found and the ones he brought with him; I eavesdropped on the tales of the battles, the travellers, the faith and the heroes. Now it is my turn to dig out what I remember from my father, find out new stories and see if I can piece together the plot. I'll use a right to roam across many types of knowledge, and at times I'll need to lean on other people's plots to help explain my own. Can I discover the Plot for myself, and in doing so find the difficult man who was my father, and finally lay all the ghosts to rest? And if I can, then perhaps so can you, on your plot.


BERGEN
OSLO
STAVENGER
NORWAY
THE NORTH SEA
ABERDEEN
SCOTLAND
EDINBURGH
DENMARK
SCOTCH CORNER
NORTH YORK MOORS
YORK
HULL
ENGLAND
WALES
BREMEN
GERMANY
AMSTERDAM
LONDON
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
FRANCE
MAP 1
NORTHERN EUROPE
MB

1

The middle of nowhere

There are over 32.7 million acres in England and this is the story of just one of those acres. So the first task is to take you there, to help you distinguish it from the many other millions of acres and their stories that are crowded into England, this small fragment of an island washed by the cold waters of the North Sea and the Atlantic. On the OL 26 Ordnance Survey map, the escarpment of the Hambleton Hills marking the western edge of the North York moors is accentuated by great curves and blocks of pale green to denote the woodland that cloaks the steep hillsides. At its south-west corner a promontory juts out over the surrounding wooded ravines before turning east. The higher land is scored by valleys, and it is just above one of these, where two tracks meet, where woodland and pasture abut, that there's a name, Scotch Corner, and a small black cross to mark the chapel my father built.

Or you could find a Google map of Oldstead, North Yorkshire, and, guided by the Hambleton Hills' rich curves of dark woodland on this wondrously forever-sunny day captured by satellite from space, allow the eye to follow the dark tree-lined track from Oldstead village up to a large bright triangle

of pasture on the hill above. A few clicks on the cursor and, closer in, you can pick out the blurred outline of roofs tucked into the shadows of the surrounding trees. This is the Chapel, its pantiles pale pink against the surrounding trees, just visible from space.

Both these ways of finding the Plot still bear the characteristics of their origins as military technologies, the one to defend Britain from a French revolutionary army in 1791, the other a weapon of the Cold War. They will enable you to move across the land, to position yourself amongst millions of acres, and to find any one specific acre, however nondescript or obscure. They offer possibilities of speed and surveillance. They are about mobility and location, with an efficiency and accuracy that is very useful. They will get you to the Plot, but they offer only knowledge – of which our age has no shortage – not the understanding we need.

They will tell you nothing about how a place feels under your feet, how it smells or how the wind runs through your hair. Everything is flattened into two dimensions so that aerial dominance cannot reveal the shape of the land, how it curves, conceals and reveals, and how that reverberates in the muscles of your calves, the ache of your back and shoulders. They cannot convey how to live on this land, the nature of the soil and water and how to husband both to produce food, nor what to gather or hunt. They will offer no explanation for the scattering of farms and villages, the line of the roads or the shape of the fields, whose boundaries are the crackle glaze of the walkers' map. They can record features that people used to give meaning to this land – the burial mounds, the earthworks, the churches – but they can never explain those meanings. They describe only some of what's there, but give no explanation as to why.

These kinds of mapping say nothing of the people living

here, their relationships to places and other people, yet these are the kinds of knowledge some other cultures privilege in how they orientate themselves in a landscape. Some use memory maps dense with the narrative meaning that sustains human life. The Koyukon of north-west Alaska use stories to describe their landscape; 'narration as navigation', as Robert Macfarlane puts it, so that the land is 'filled with networks of paths, names and associations. People know every feature of the landscape in minute detail. The lakes, river bends, hills and creeks are named and imbued with personal and cultural meaning'. Narrative can be anchored to place, and a conversation can be a sequence of place names which serve to tell stories, provide moral guidance and encapsulate a rich repository of meanings. Eavesdrop on a family and such dialogues weave in and out of the conversation; any group of intimates with shared memories uses place to reference them. These are the maps needed to find the Plot.

An evening train from Newcastle to London is hurtling through the gloaming of a chilly April. Inside the casing of metal spinning along well-oiled rails there is the fug of many bodies, tea going cold in cardboard cups, biscuit crumbs. Beyond the glare of strip lighting is another world of dark outlines, which loom up, swallow us and then shrink as the train speeds past empty fields and the occasional lit window of a lonely farmhouse. Twenty minutes after we pull out of Darlington, the skyline to the east rises steeply to a plateau. For the next fifteen minutes, this great bulk of land heaped up on the horizon keeps pace with the train, a relatively even contour spooling as we speed south, brooding down on the lowland between us. I have had time to remember, time to scan the familiar outline, time to look out for the small, perfect

reminder to take with me back to London: a glimpse of lumpy horse, more grey than white, cut into the escarpment. Kilburn's White Horse. A sip of tea and it has shot past, engulfed in the thickening dark. But the brief moment of recognition has taken me straight to the damp darkness as it gathers on the Plot, less than a mile from the White Horse; here, there's the occasional shrill shriek of a roosting pheasant, the plaintive cry of a lost lamb from across the fields and the wind stirring the trees. The Plot lies on this edge of the mass of rock that forms the North York moors, folded into the undulations once licked by glaciers.

I sit in the train hurtling south, but my imagination takes a walk up the track to the Plot. I know the track so well and have walked it in the dark before, so even in this fast-thickening dusk we wouldn't need a torch. We leave the cottages of the small village of Oldstead with their windows of cosy light, and head straight up into the forested hills, into the dark of the steep track. Trees overhang the path here and press tight in around you; later in the summer, the nettles spilling over the verge will sting the trailing hand. The only guide is my memory and the small patches of dark grey light overhead between the outstretched branches. Darkness produces its own palette of blacks and greys and the eyes strain to pick them out. They matter in night walking. Every sense is alert to catch the clues that orientate us: a breeze on the cheek, a shift in the degrees of darkness. Initially, the ground underfoot is even and the steep track draws you through a tunnel of greenery, bushes thick on both sides. Then the darkness thins and one senses the small fields opening out on both sides; there's a fresh whisper of wind coming down over the neighbouring valleys. Sound opens up the space above as the hoots of owls reverberate over the woods; at night they can reclaim

this land as their domain without fear of human disturbance. Up here there are no roads, only a handful of remote, outlying farms. About halfway up it lightens, and on both sides of the track there is a break in the hedge. One can hear livestock stirring in the field, grazing, shitting and even, on occasion, a horse in night-time canter, its hooves thudding. Here the dim outlines of a magnificent ash tree are clearly discernible, its handsome grey trunk within arm's reach right by the track. Beyond, one can see the outline of a distant hill, while below, the small back-road from Kilburn to Oldstead is periodically illuminated by the brief flare of headlights from a passing car. A handsome oak memorial bench has recently been erected here. Intriguingly, a neighbouring farmer and his wife told me that the horses they train are always agitated at this point on the track; over the years they've noticed how their horses start, and need to be calmed. Across in the field is a magnificent smoothly grassed hillock, ten feet high by fifteen feet; the Oldstead farmer and local historian Fred Banks told me it was an old lime-kiln, built up here to take advantage of the plentiful supplies of both limestone and timber. The carts would have had to reckon with the steep track down, laden with their precious load of lime with which to fertilize the fields.

But we press on – it's not the time to be pausing on the bench to admire the view. Now the track is rough, and there is one large worn boulder which can make even the most careful night-walker stumble. Staggering over the bumpy last section, which deters all motorists, one finally emerges at a wooden gate and the even turf of the Plot. The track continues, but here there is a dry stone wall and a low wooden fence. We have arrived in the middle of nowhere, and the dark heightens that sense of human emptiness. We are now surrounded by

thousands, perhaps millions, of trees and their inhabitants: the crackle of twigs, the creaking of branches, the disembodied cries of unidentifiable animals. The sense of the busy, hidden lives of myriad creatures crowds around us.

Night brings a particular intensity to the Plot; the stories of this land press in on your imagination. And nothing is so compelling, so instantly familiar as the combination of smells that the night breathes: the invigorating freshness of pine trees, rotting bracken, sweet turf. The night is a time when in this crowded nation you can still find a measure of solitude. This was the plot my father first stumbled across as a sixteen-year-old boy on a school ramble. It was the remoteness that seduced him into returning, thirteen years later, to buy a fifty-year lease on the ruined farmhouse he had found there. Now, it is only in these dark moments of evening or night that one can recapture that sense of isolation which once defined this acre and thousands of its neighbours.

For many centuries there were a modest farmhouse and alehouse on the Plot at Scotch Corner. They were abandoned sometime in the early twentieth century when the Bulmers, the last owners, moved down into Oldstead. In the 1871 census, Richard Bulmer is listed as the head of the household at Scotch Corner; by 1881 Elisabeth Bulmer had taken his place, and by the next census in 1891 it was Henry Bulmer, presumably her son, who was the head of the household. They were described as farmers – not smallholders – so there would have been a number of sheep pasturing on the moors nearby, perhaps cows and pigs and certainly chickens. There would have been room for a vegetable garden, but probably no arable up here in the hills where the growing season was shortened by frosts and the steep hills made ploughing impracticable. The Bulmers appeared to have made some money on the side by

brewing ale. Elisabeth is regarded locally as the last inhabitant of Scotch Corner. She left when already advanced in years to run the Black Swan public house in Oldstead. 'Alehouse' was perhaps too grand a term for what was probably the meagre business of brewing in an outhouse. Serving beer to passers-by – shepherds, the occasional farmer – in the kitchen would have been a useful sideline for a farmer's wife. This was the last vestige of Scotch Corner's centuries as a small inn on the Drovers' Road from Scotland. But brewing beer requires a good supply of water, and Scotch Corner perched up on the hillside had never had that to offer its inhabitants. In neighbouring Cockerdale, springs dot the narrow valley and feed into a buoyant stream, but Scotch Corner's inhabitants had to scramble down the hill and across a strip of land to the stream that rises in its neighbouring valley, Hell Hole. The local tradition is that the old Mrs Bulmer was gathering water by yoke and pail from the stream on a daily basis well into old age. After she left, the house and farm buildings fell into ruins, choked with briars until half a century later, a London schoolboy arrived with a head already full of dreams.

If you chance on the Plot, the low one-storeyed building by the gate offers little interest. Metal shutters cover the windows. Pantiled, with rough stone walls, the back end of this building runs into a hillside covered with gorse and bracken. In front of it, the stone flags are now badly cracked, the paving uneven. We called this the Hut. Beyond is a grassy area surrounded by a low stone wall, thick with brilliant green moss. Twenty feet from the first building stands the Chapel. Built of the same materials of stone and pantiles, it is twice the height, an imposing block facing away from the gate, out into a line of cherry trees planted just beyond the boundary wall.

Wander across the grass and look at the Chapel and you realize that this is no ordinary farm building. The façade is almost forty feet in height, and there are two elaborately carved wooden doors. Above the lintel is a semicircular sculpture, a relief in apricot sandstone of Noah receiving the dove's sprig of olive. Noah's face is turned up, and his muscular arms reach out to greet this symbol of peace; his swirl of outstretched limbs and shoulders echoes the curves of his halo and the bird's wing. Noah may still look worried but it is a joyous image as the bird seems to offer the sprig directly to his mouth to taste. A couple of feet above Noah, in a rectangular niche, stands another stone sculpture about four feet high of a Madonna and Child. She is the pale grey of York stone, the same colour as the walls, and she's a hefty woman. Her son is a chubby, rounded football of a baby, all cheek and clenched fist. At either corner of the façade are buttresses ten foot high which jut out a foot or two. Once, they served as plinths for two herald angels, whose banners unfurled around their bodies.

Walk closer to the façade and the elaborate carvings of the doors can be seen through the clumsy wrought-iron security gate. A fluid patterning based on Celtic knotwork incorporates scenes from the Bible, such as Eve's creation from a rib of Adam, the temptation in the Garden of Eden and the Crucifixion. Carved into the bottom are the initials JB and the dates 1957–87. It was my father's tribute to the thirty years since he had first built the Chapel. Below the doors, on the threshold of the Chapel, lies his gravestone, inscribed with

JOHN JOSEPH BUNTING † SCULPTOR AND
ARTIST OF RYEDALE † BUILT THIS CHAPEL
1957 † DIED 19 NOVEMBER 2002 AGED 75

If you walk around the Chapel to the west side, you can see three small windows high up in the wall. Here there is also a stone bench built into the hillside, with a stone wall against which to lean. This was where my father liked to sit, and where family photos were taken. Now it's a dank, dark corner, facing into thick forest. High overhead, on the gable end of the roof, is a small metal cross.

The passer-by is bemused: who could possibly have lavished such care and attention on this remote structure? My father never put any signs up to indicate the nature of the place. In the early days he made a small, hand-painted wooden board – WAR MEMORIAL CHAPEL PLEASE RESPECT THE PREMISES – added his telephone number and propped it up *inside* the Hut. The intruder would only find this plea after they had broken in. The reticence was at odds with my father's interest in publicity; the Chapel was frequently featured in local newspapers and magazines and Dad kept every yellowed clipping. But for those adventurous enough to seek the place out, he was offering no more information. Those who stumbled unexpectedly across the place were puzzled. I used to bump into walkers who were delighted to find someone who could explain what the place was all about. More recently, my brother has put up a board which gives a brief account of the Chapel's history.

I haven't been in the Chapel or the Hut for years. So it is a child's memories that take me inside when I visit now. It was always very cold, the marrow-chilling cold of stone that never feels sunlight. In the Chapel, eyes had to adjust to the gloom because the only light came from the three small stained-glass windows high up on the west wall and from the open doors. My father, a devout Catholic, used to invite a priest to come and say Mass on Boxing Day or Easter Monday; I remember getting bored and being embarrassed by the family's tentative

singing. The priest faced the altar and was often barely audible as he murmured prayers. I used to stare at the sculptures around me, and try to keep my bottom from going numb on the stone-flagged floor. I formed a very clear set of likes and dislikes about the sculptures my father had carved for his Chapel. There were two large crucifixes hanging on the walls; the one above the altar was a pale oak young man with his eyes ready to pop out of their sockets. He looked as if he was on a diving board and was going to jump on me. The eastern wall was dominated by a life-size Christ which my father had carved on a fellowship to Spain as a sculpture student. His head was framed in thick black hair and his painted face looked anguished; the richly varnished wood gleamed and the blood trickled down the torso and spilled over from the nails driven into the feet. This was the romantic, wronged Christ of my imagination.

Both these Christs were gloomily intimidating, so I averted my eyes, keeping them lowered on two dark-grey slate reliefs which stood on either side of the altar. Jesus revealing his glowing Sacred Heart was on one side, and the Virgin Mary on the other; the pleats of their clothing and features of their faces were outlined in gilt paint. I flinched from the exposed heart, a Catholic mystical image which suggested too much blood, but loved the way Mary's sash curved as it tumbled down her skirt.

Along the wall there was often a large wooden sculpture or two. As the family grew in size, there was no room for my father's life-size figures in our small cottage, so they were moved into the Chapel, where they towered over us children. One piece, six feet high, was called 'An Ape in Anger' and depicted a naked muscular man, his face, distorted with rage, turned upwards and his fists clenched. It gave me nightmares.

The only colour apart from the pale greys and creamy coffee of the Yorkshire stones came when a beam of late sunlight might occasionally fall through the stained-glass windows my father had made, and splashed rich reds and blues across the rough, unplastered walls and the stone floor, altar and benches. On the walls there were tablet inscriptions, dedications to men who had died in the Second World War whom I heard my father talking about with his friends. But he never explained to me why these people were important, and since they were men and they were dead, I had no reason to be interested.

What did pique my curiosity, however, was the effigy carved in York stone that lay, life-size, dominating the floor of the Chapel. His head lay at the altar, almost under the priest's robes, while the soles of his boots greeted one on arrival at the door. He was dressed in full battle fatigues and a paratrooper's helmet; his baggy trousers were tucked into his commando boots, and his thick-set arms lay across his body as if he were holding himself. At his neck was a checked kerchief, and around his waist ran a belt, its loops and pockets all detailed in stone. He lay, spread out across the floor on his rectangular plinth, leaving little space for the rest of us. For services there were two short benches for the adults, and children sat cross-legged on the floor beside this effigy. After Mass, when the Chapel was empty, I could come back and rub my finger around the treads on the soles of his boots, poke it into the indentations of his neckscarf and collar. I did not think he looked friendly – his jaw was set with the head turned to one side on his stone bier – but the ordinary intimate detail of this dead man's uniform made him vivid. There always seemed the possibility that he could come alive, break from his stone, stand up to shake out the creases in his trousers and join us for lunch. I thought he would be a rather awkward guest, a little shy.