

Autobiography chapter: Fortune

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∇ **The lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground.**

℞ **Yea, I have a goodly heritage.**

As an undergraduate at Magdalen I frequently attended the 8 am service called “Dean’s Prayers” in the College Chapel on weekday mornings. I was at that time about the only undergraduate to do so, the only people attending being usually the Dean of Divinity (Adam Fox) and an aged don called Benecke. It was quite a short order of service including a number of versicles and responses taken from the psalms but not part of the ordinary prayer book services. I was particularly struck and impressed by the one above – initially because of the humorous possibility of confusion with gambling on a fairground, but also because I felt it was very appropriate to my personal situation. It still seems, nearly 50 years later, to be the appropriate heading under which to reflect on the course of my life which has in so many ways fallen in a “fair ground” as a result of the goodly heritage that I have enjoyed. Indeed so many of the vital determining points in my life seem to have been of such a remarkably chancy nature that the idea of “the lot falling” is extraordinarily appropriate. What follows is inevitably influenced strongly by selective memories but gives some indication of how I feel about a variety of features in my life.

The first goodly heritage was of course my family. Though I now disagree with many of my parents’ attitudes and methods of bringing up children, they possessed three vital things: a warm loving atmosphere, an upbringing into a Christian faith (which they had), and an encouragement of higher education (which they had not) and a willingness to finance it (out of meagre resources). Added to this was the advantage of having an elder brother who had pioneered the way. Because of his pioneering I had a much easier growing up because they abandoned the worst parts of their ideas that they found didn’t work with him. Also, whereas the idea of his going to Oxford came as something of a shock to them, when my time came it was almost a foregone conclusion. Also of course I learnt a lot of things directly from Ken and from his experience.

There was a series of apparently unrelated accidents of timing that proved crucial in my life. The first was when I went in May 1931 for the entrance exam at Stockport Grammar School. Being just 9½ I was put in the group sitting for entrance to Junior A,

but then I was fished out of this before the exam got started by Mr Smith (Ken's maths master) and put in those sitting for entrance to 1A. This was probably connected with the school's knowledge of Ken. Had it not happened my whole career would have been delayed by a year which would have been disastrous, because it would have meant that our move to Derby would have been during my School Cert year instead of after. This in turn (even if it had not damaged my results) would have meant that I would have had to sit for my university scholarship in December 1940 when Derby School had had a term's turmoil of partial evacuation¹ owing to the war. Thus there would have been two unforeseeable sources of jeopardy to my academic success that I in fact avoided, quite apart from the fact that postponement of these stages would have totally changed all other aspects of my life.

Then again, I would never have applied to Magdalen had I not known Ken's school-friend Hal who did chemistry there and showed us round in 1933.

Some people might think that it was a disadvantage to have one's university career coincide with the war, but in fact there were so many compensations that one can reasonably make out a case that it was an advantage! As I have pointed out elsewhere, I certainly had nicer college rooms than I would have done otherwise. University life was much more civilised than before or after the war because of the smaller number of undergraduates and (relative to before the war) the more equal sex ratio. It seems to me to have been a golden age between the rigid rules of an earlier period when the sexes were almost totally segregated and the anarchy of the permissive society that was to follow. Even the war itself conferred benefits like being able to stay up free in the vacations sometimes to "fire-watch" – i.e. to watch for incendiary bombs if there was an air raid.

The next "good out of evil" development arose from being "disappointed in love". To cheer me up a friend went with me to the cinema to see "The Great Dictator", and the appropriate number of days after that cinema visit I went down with scarlet fever – obviously caught at the cinema. I was then carted off to the isolation hospital and totally isolated because for about a week nobody knew where I was. The College suppressed the information to avoid panic, so my friends simply found I had disappeared, and the College accidentally gave my parents the address of the wrong hospital so I did not get their letters. So to meet Dorothy there after four days of such isolation was both an immediate boon and a determining factor for good in the whole of my life.

The next "good out of evil" event was finals in 1942. I was bitterly disappointed when I was told that I was pretty certain to get a 2nd, with little chance of a 1st and little fear of a 3rd. (In chemistry one was only told this tentatively after finals, the class being finally awarded after the fourth year research project.) My ambition up to then had been to

¹This might well have happened in any case. I had no assurance of success when I sat for my schol in December 1938. It had taken Ken two years to get one, and when I departed for Oxford to sit for it my headmaster said "now you mustn't expect to get one at the first attempt – you are very young!"

stay on to do a DPhil and then go on to an academic career, but in wartime only people with firsts could stay on for DPhil. But again this was a blessing in disguise both in the short term and the long term: in the short term because staying on for DPhil would have undoubtedly have postponed our marriage for two or three years, and I don't know how I could have survived psychologically without Dorothy's support for that time; and in the long term because I now believe that following an academic career from scratch is a very narrow life, and my life had been much fuller and broadened by spending half of it in industry.

The next remarkable piece of "fair ground" was getting a job at Ferodo in 1943, when I really got in on the ground floor of the beginnings of a real research department – what had gone on previously had just been technical development. Considering that I was a fresh graduate aged 21½ I was given quite amazing freedom to plan my own research. Also out of the disappointing absence for the first 18 months of the X-ray equipment I had expected, I was led to a great broadening of my experience and interests. Again in 1949 it was a terrible shock when Mr Hancock, the research manager with whom I had much closer affinities than I had with my immediate boss Dr Parker, was dismissed. But out of this came an expansion of my field to cover resin development that again broadened my interests and experience into production and relationships with people in the factory, and a new boss Mr Whitehouse with whom I was very much on the same wavelength.

Two of the freedoms that I enjoyed at Ferodo were the freedom to publish and the freedom to attend scientific meetings. These led to my being so well-known to the people on the committee of the X-ray Analysis Group of the Institute of Physics that they proposed me for elections to the committee although I was not a member of the Institute! The Institute promptly made me an AInstP to cover their embarrassment and I was elected to the committee in 1950, and elected secretary for three years from 1952. This doubtless reduced my scientific output a bit (it took up about a day a week of Ferodo's time) but it really launched me into the crystallographic community. At the same time my research freedom enabled me to get my PhD in 1956 and FInstP immediately after. The whole period 1943-60 was a golden age of opportunity for young scientists: the facilities were fairly primitive by later standards, but they were constantly expanding, not contracting as in the 70s and 80s.

In the mean time it was pure chance that the first new houses in the area (pretty rosy ones!) were put up by a speculative builder in New Mills in 1947, and so we went to live there. It was not a place that we would have chosen on aesthetic grounds, but it was the only place in the area where we could have had the spiritual experience into which we were led by Fr Weatherhead who became vicar there in 1948.

The financial situation at Ferodo began to deteriorate in the early 60s and the two senior research managers saw the writing on the wall and left in 1963. I was appointed to take charge of all physics and testing on the basis of my early experience in the 40s in

this field (when I was short of X-rays) and so separated from my real love of chemical structure. By 1964 I had decided that I hated this situation and must leave. The timing was perfect because it coincided with the major expansion of the universities and was *the* ideal time to be looking for an academic job. If my situation at Ferodo had remained tolerable for a few years longer I would not have contemplated moving at that time, and would have missed the chance. I would then have been caught up in the decline of the company's fortunes through the 1970s.

A further set of "good out of evil" situations also shaped my academic career. In 1962 Jack Zussman had moved from Manchester to be reader in mineralogy at Oxford, which rather cut short an enjoyable early collaboration (and I felt a pang of jealousy that he should go to Oxford of all places). But it was he in 1964 who was able to tell me of the vacancy in geochemistry at Oxford, and to encourage me to apply – without such encouragement I would not have thought it was near enough to my field. Then six months after my arrival in Oxford Prof Wager died, and when Prof Vincent was appointed I was fearful that he would not regard me as a proper geochemist. However, not only did I get on with him far better than I ever would have done with Wager, but his move to Oxford led to Jack Zussman's move back to Manchester as professor. This again dismayed me when Jack first told me, because I regarded him as my main ally and supporter in the Department, but both he and David Vincent persuaded me to apply for the resulting vacancy in the readership. I was initially far from sure that I wanted it, but in the event it was a job that suited me far better than the lectureship in geochemistry (quite apart from the enhanced status and salary!)

Finally there were the circumstances surrounding my retirement. I had long intended to retire earlier than the prescribed 67+, though wondered how the finances would stand it, as I have of course rather few "service years" in the university and had not been able to transfer any pension rights from Turner and Newall. It was therefore providential that my wish to retire coincided so well with the need of the universities to promote early retirement. Notice of the scheme reached me in spring 1982, when I was planning to retire in September 1984, but as it was only available until September 1983 I had to bring retirement a year earlier than intended. This was a great blessing in that we had two years of retirement before Dorothy was ill, instead of one, and also a reasonable pension as a result of being given several years free notional service and also because of the calculation of pension being based on the best year's salary in the last thirteen (in real terms) reached back to a point before salaries started to lag behind inflation in the early seventies.