London Landscape – Autobiography

An account of my life

John Horder

This is the first instalment of the autobiography of John Horder. He intended it to be read solely by family and friends. However the *London Journal of Primary Care* subsequently persuaded him to let us serialise it for a wider readership. Those of you who are registered with the journal will be informed when new chapters are posted on the website. The autobiography as a whole is an important piece of history. It is remarkable for its humanity, perception and humility – much like the man himself.

John is a founding father of modern general practice. He was doing his medical finals when the NHS was founded in 1948 and has been an active advocate of whole person, family and community-oriented general practice ever since. He became active in the College of General Practitioners shortly after its formation in 1952 and before it gained its Royal Charter in 1967. He was one of the two founders of the Leeuwenhorst European Study Group that defined the job description of a general practitioner in 1974. He was President of the RCGP between 1979 and 1982. He assisted the setting up of general practice educational bodies in several Western European countries, especially Yugoslavia and Portugal. He has been a tireless supporter of interdisciplinary learning and founded the Centre for the Advancement of Inter-professional Education (CAIPE) in 1987. He lives in Primrose Hill with his wife Elizabeth June, who was also his partner in general practice.

Abridged by Maria Guihen (Ealing PCT)

Introduction

I want to write about my own life because it has given me such varied experience and opportunities in parallel to each other. Medicine, music, painting and writing still fill my days now that I am 80 and each has introduced me to a different world of people and ideas. Medicine alone has involved practicing, teaching, researching and organising.

It is the contrasts between these different experiences which are easiest to see. What unites them most obviously is myself, but there is something about my background which makes me look for qualities which they might all have in common and for some unifying purpose which they might all serve and share. This is the challenge symbolised by my grandfather, Garrett Horder, whom I never knew, but continue to imagine.

Garrett died soon after I was born. My image of him has formed from two sources, the first being his children, especially his daughter Constance, who was a frequent presence in the first half of my life.

The second is a strange Victorian desk from the study which he was still using after his retirement from his ministry at Ealing Green Congregational church and before his death at the age of 81. The study was dark and full of books about religion and poetry. On

these two subjects Garrett himself had written at least a dozen books. In 1898 he published the first edition of *Worship Song*, a hymnbook which went through many editions, finally falling out of use by 1950. But his name still appears in texts about hymnology, and several hymns and hymn – tunes which he originally introduced still feature in better known collections. Even now, although I have copies of all Garrett's writings, I have scarcely read any of them. By reading some of them now, I hope to see how far my imagination of himself and his ideas resembles the only remaining evidence.

All through my life I have imagined God in the likeness of this grandfather whom I never saw. That image always precedes, if only for a moment, any later thoughts about whether God could conceivably have a human form or whether the ideas about the universe, the world and human life which I carried out of my childhood could stand up to the test of evidence or make coherent sense.

So the grandfather of my imagination forms not only the starting point of this autobiography, but also its challenge. God was at the centre of his life, as a Person, a unifying principle to which everything else related,

and as a focus towards which all effort should be directed. It was this unifying foundation which I learned of through his children and through the church which they and I attended after his death.

Part One: Childhood in Ealing

Ealing Green, with home and church, was the centre of my world. When my family moved to this London suburb just before the end of the nineteenth century, it was at the very edge of London. There were still country walks until the time of the First World War. Suburban building now spreads at least ten miles further west and north.

'Greenacre'

Our home, 'Greenacre', was a wonderful house, with a very long garden behind it and Ealing Green in front. I lived there from the age of four, and in my memory it still remains clear in all its details.

Immediately in front of Greenacre, across a small road, was a line of big chestnut trees. They became oppressive in summer because they overshadowed the house and hid the morning sun. They also hid the church on the other side of the main road along which the number 65 bus ran (and still runs today).

The church opposite, where my grandfather had been the Minister before my birth, was central in our family life. We went, of course, to the service every Sunday morning, sitting in the family pew. When I was 10, I was allowed to sit with the organist, Douglas, an enthusiast and an excellent musician. But, alas, he was developing multiple sclerosis, becoming unable later to use his legs. (There were whispered rumours about his alcoholic father and how the sins of fathers were visited on their children). He made an important contribution to my lifelong love of the organ and I am still grateful to him.

The 'Greenacre' family

My father

He was a very kind and good man, who was always smoking a pipe (I disliked the smell and it put me off smoking for life). He made a success of his life, despite twice suffering bankruptcies. As a quantity surveyor he gained such important contracts as the rebuilding of the Bank of England.

One of the most positive memories I have of him was a walk we went on together. It was then that I was alone with him and he really talked with me; I felt that I was being taken into his confidence. This happened seldom. Perhaps there were too many females between

him and me, and the age gap between us of 42 years was too great. I wonder too, with hindsight, how much the depressive tendency which he inherited from his father (and was referred to as 'the liver') played a part in making him anxious and preoccupied, even though no major episodes occurred before the last three years of his life. The standards which he set were very high, especially about truthfulness, trustworthiness, duty and work. I'm grateful for that influence. However, in giving too little time to me, he set a pattern by which I later gave too little time to my own children. This I greatly regret.

My mother

Soon after my birth, my Mother had to go away because she was said to be ill with 'neuritis'. I have often wondered whether this diagnosis represented a post-partum depressive state. Such states at the time were either not recognised or were concealed under some respectable label. I have a belief that her illness and my change to bottle-feeding may have been partly responsible for a psychological problem in relation to my mother which was with me as early as I can remember and has remained with me through most of my life. There was some evidence for this belief in the Jungian analysis which I undertook with Gerhard Adler when I was a student and rather more, later, during discussions with Dr Willi Hoffer, a Freudian analyst.

I do not remember my mother as a feminine figure or as one who enjoyed physical contact. She seldom missed a chance to comment adversely on any woman who flaunted her sexuality through her appearance. This was the most obvious way in which the whole area of sexuality was suppressed in the family as something improper. One effect of this on me was that I reached the age of 18 with remarkable misconceptions about childbirth and with an insuperable sense of shame in the face of inevitable physical urges.

Nellie

Nellie, my mother's younger sister, was invited to join our household when their mother – my grandmother – died. Nellie 'spoiled' me. She was always kind and loving and always took second place. In her self-effacement and devotion to the rest of the family, she was saintly. She was my second mother and I weep when I think of her.

The three Horder aunts

'The aunts' invariably came to tea on Mondays, after organising 'mother's meeting' at the church.

May was the eldest – quiet, self-effacing and disciplined. She had had a long and distinguished career at St Bartholomew's hospital as a nursing sister in charge of a ward and she had won the Royal Red Cross decoration during the First World War. Her fiancé had been killed in the Boer war. By my time she had

retired and seemed a rather sad, mysterious person whose real life had passed already.

Constance, a vivacious talker, was bursting with ideas about the people she knew, about gardening and, above all, about religion. She seemed to be carrying on the mission which my grandfather had pursued so strongly as a Minister in a nonconformist Christian church. Later in her life, I had personal experience of a streak of cruelty in her. She was, in my opinion, not infrequently cruel to Winifred (the third Horder aunt, by marriage), her only companion for many years after May's death. I shall not forget Winifred's relief when she was given the chance to escape to a nursing home. By that time Constance was showing signs of her final mental illness. I have always felt that I disappointed her by not following in my grandfather's footsteps.

Uncle Leslie

Leslie, whom I never knew, was the much loved and respected second son of Garrett and Annie. He was an exceptionally gentle character, in contrast to his older brother, Percy. His early death was attributed to overwork as a senior official in the Bank of England during the war, but this seems unlikely to be the only explanation. There is a Memorial plaque to him in the cloister of the church of St Bartholomew the Great in the City of London.

On my mother's side one brother, Cuthbert, and one sister, Lotte, remained in Ealing, together with children and grandchildren.

One more relative

One more distant cousin was important and cannot be left out. Thomas, later Lord Horder, became a medical student at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, where he started on a brilliant career, remaining associated with the same hospital for the rest of his life as a consultant physician. He became famous when he was called in to see King Edward VII and reached the right diagnosis, because he noticed something about the medicines on the bedside shelf which the King's regular and much more senior physicians had missed. He was one of the first doctors to carry equipment for taking blood samples during consultations in the home. He gained an outstanding reputation as a diagnostician and prognosticator. The time came when it was said that no one of importance could be allowed to die without seeing him first.

Thomas Horder died in 1955. In his last years he expressed strong reservations about the National Health Service, believing that it would be at the mercy of politicians whose interests would be at best irrelevant and at worst destructive to it. The Fellowship for Freedom in Medicine, which he created, flourished for a few years, but did not long survive his death and the popularity of the new service. His forecast about the effect of politicians on the health service, which

had at first seemed unjustifiable, is now proving increasingly correct. He was particularly concerned that the NHS might harm relationships between patients and doctors.

A summary of the Horders and Plaistowes

There were considerable contrasts between the Plaistowes (my mother's side) and the Horders (my father's side). It is easier to describe shared characteristics in the Plaistowes. Prosperity from successful commerce is the first to come to mind. Add to this conventionality, comfort, self-satisfaction and optimism.

The Horders were less of a pattern. They were idealists, each in their own way, and ambitious ones, but not for money. In their different professions they were notably successful. Religion was truly important for all of them, while the Plaistowes seemed more concerned with appearances, conventions and habits in church attendance.

A tendency to depressive illness was in both families, but more severely in the Horders. I have shared this tendency. Is it genetic? Or does it relate to the aspirations and pressures which flow from puritanical beliefs? More likely that both influences work together.

Music

Music came early into my life because of my mother, a licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music. As a violinist she reached a high enough standard to play as a soloist in concertos at Ealing town hall.

I was started on the piano at the age of six. My teacher, Richard Latham, was important to me and important in his profession. When he began to teach me, he was in his first post as organist in a church at Ealing Common. It was there that he gave me my first organ lesson. Richard later became a Professor at the Royal College of Music and organist at a fashionable church in Knightsbridge. He had been the first person to inspire me.

There were frequent musical occasions at Greenacre. When I was sufficiently competent to accompany my mother, I did not enjoy it. Perhaps this was partly because I usually had to read my part for the first time, without prior practice. Ever since then lack of sufficient preparation, together with a requirement that playing should be in the evening when I was usually tired, has nearly ruined my enjoyment of chamber music.

East and West

The difference between East and West has been important to me throughout my life and it remains so. It symbolises two contrasting clusters of feelings and thoughts. This seemed to start at Greenacre.

The back attic faced west. The window faced towards the sun as it went down behind the screen of trees which separated our garden from Walpole Park (where

once or twice a year a fair was held— with merry-go-rounds which emitted a menacing, disturbing sort of music – a travesty of the sound which belongs to church organs, which have meant so much to me).

The front attic faced east towards the sun, as it rose behind another screen of trees just across the street. This was my own special room, where I could hide and have my private thoughts, some of which were deeply shameful and could not possibly have been told to anyone. Here I could dress up in various ways without being seen, something of which my mother disapproved – or so I thought.

The rising sun meant the future, hope, ideas, excitement, growth and freedom. The setting sun meant decline, sadness, death (perhaps even cruelty and terror, associated with its blood red colour and the sound of steam merry-go-round organs in the park).

Reflections of my childhood in Ealing

Written after an interval of 70 years, this account of childhood has been a mixture of facts and feelings. The facts are those important enough to me to have been remembered, but memory can be unreliable. What I

feel about my parents has been influenced by being myself a parent, by having children who are parents and by witnessing the problems of other parents who were friends or patients and, not least, by the psychological theories that I have encountered.

In so far as I have been critical, have I been unfair? After all, parenting has innumerable aspects and many of them are difficult. Between my parents and me there was a gap of, not one, but two generations; and this was in a century when the pace and range of changes in beliefs and behaviour were already increasing as they had never done before.

My childhood, surrounded entirely by loving adults, mostly feminine, may have been unusual, but it was not unhappy.

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