

A.J.P. TAYLOR
RADICAL
HISTORIAN
OF EUROPE
CHRIS WRIGLEY

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alan Taylor has been the subject of two good biographies, written by Adam Sisman and Kathleen Burk. Perhaps, in the centenary year of his birth, there is room for a third.

Initially I had intended writing about his historical and current affairs work but I found it unwise not to relate his early publications to his unusual home background and his evolving political views. I was urged to write a biography, and this is the result. I felt I had certain advantages in so doing, not least in having spoken with many who played parts in his earlier life and are now long dead. I had gathered much information for the biographical introduction to my bibliography of his writings, published in 1980, and also for a 'Memoir' published after his death in *The Proceedings of the British Academy* (1992). Although much younger, I had got to know Alan Taylor reasonably well during his later years. I first met him in 1968. Later, in the mid- to late 1970s, he and his first wife, Margaret, spoke to me several times about his various publications and aspects of his life when I was preparing the bibliography. They were very happy for me, indeed even encouraged me, to take notes of what they said. In turn, some of the factual details I found for that book (such as the venues of CND lectures) were helpful for his autobiography. Subsequently, I saw much of him and his third wife, Dr Éva Haraszti-Taylor.

In writing this biography I have been helped by many people, most of whom are recorded in the references at the end. I have long known Professor Kathy Burk. She recently reminded me that I had given her my large A.J.P. Taylor bibliography (1980) as a wedding present! I came to know Adam Sisman when he prepared his biography and I am grateful to him for his kind and generous help. Professor Robert Cole, the author of a study of Taylor's writings, generously shared his correspondence with Alan Taylor with Éva Taylor and me. I am very grateful to Giles and Sebastian Taylor for letting me interview them. I am also very grateful for much valuable information and advice from Professor Douglas Farnie, whose knowledge of Manchester, Manchester business history and Manchester University is encyclopaedic. I am also grateful to Professor Brian Harrison for permitting me to use his interview with Alan Taylor. I have also benefited from many conversations over thirty years with Della Hilton.

I am also grateful for the assistance of Jacqueline Kavanagh and her colleagues at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, as well as to the BBC for granting me permission to quote substantial amounts of its copyright material. I am also grateful to the archivists at Bristol University Library, The John Rylands Library, Manchester, The Hallward Library, Nottingham, The Modern Records Centre, Warwick University, The Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, The Working Class Movement Library, Salford, The House of Lords Record Office and The National Archives, Kew.

Above all, I have been helped and encouraged by Éva Haraszti-Taylor. Sadly, she died on 29 October 2005. Fortunately, she read the whole book some six months earlier and I was pleased that she greatly liked it (though feeling I was sometimes too critical of her second husband). She was an able scholar and a major contributor to Anglo-Hungarian cultural relations. I miss her.

In preparing the book I am heavily in the debt of Su Spencer, who has typed it and revised it with the patience of a saint. My wife, Professor Margaret Walsh, has also shown immense patience while it has been researched and written. I am also grateful for the encouragement and patience of Dr Lester Crook and Elizabeth Friend-Smith of I.B. Tauris, and to Robert Hastings of Dexter Haven Associates for getting the book into final shape.

INTRODUCTION

During his lifetime Alan John Percivale Taylor (1906–90) was a controversial yet much-admired historian. He succeeded in being respected by much of the academic history profession as well as appealing to a wide readership beyond the bounds of higher education. A decade and a half after his death much of his work remains in print, mostly in paperback and available in small town bookshops as well as large city stores across the country. This book provides a biographical study of his career as a historian and radical intellectual.¹

Over the years Alan Taylor developed his own distinctive style. This included much use of paradox as well as epigrams and wit. His own life was also full of paradoxes and contrasts. He began as something of a gentleman scholar but became almost obsessively anxious to be recognised as a professional scholar. He saw himself as the no-nonsense northern nonconformist yet in Oxford he soon cast off his northern accent and, appointed to an academic post in the prestigious history department at Manchester University, he was very quick to try, with eventual success, to return to Oxford. He saw himself as the sturdy outsider fighting the Establishment, yet he thrived within Magdalen College and was something of a stickler concerning observation of its traditions. He stood as a ‘man of the people’, a modern ‘Trouble Maker’ (to use the title of his 1956 Ford Lectures), yet he was a friend of Lord Beaverbrook and, following the lead of his friend Lord Berners, he even dined with ‘Tom’ Mosley. However, when all is said, he belonged to the radical side of British public life.

Indeed, Taylor’s life and career are a part of the mainstream British Left culture of the mid-1930s to late 1950s. This was a British democratic socialism which readjusted from the post-First World War pacifism and dewey-eyed optimism concerning Bolshevik Russia prevalent in 1917–20 and after. It was anti-fascist, anti-appeasement and critically supportive of Labour in office (in coalition and then on its own) in 1940–51. It was in favour of ‘the Great Alliance’, with Soviet Russia, prone to ‘Englishness’ (as exemplified by George Orwell) and supportive of Labour’s nationalisation and welfare state programmes. Alan Taylor was a major contributor to the *New Statesman* during much of its most influential period.

Taylor became a national radio and television performer immediately after the Second World War. Indeed, he was one of Britain’s first ‘TV

personalities'. This came about from his willingness, even eagerness, to participate in current affairs programmes. He was a vigorous member of panels discussing politics and international issues. By his later years, he was sufficiently a 'personality' to be on discussing almost any aspect of life. For instance, on 14 May 1983 he was on 'The Late Clive James' show on Channel 4 with the writers John Mortimer and Edna O'Brien, discussing 'childhood'. A month later, on 27 June, he appeared with Barbara Castle on 'Private Lives' on BBC2, in which Maria Aitken interviewed them about their private lives. He cultivated his role as a television personality with his own distinctive style, encompassing his bow tie to his persona of prickly dissenter.

While a person of the Left, he was also very much an English partisan. This was especially so concerning Germany and, to a lesser degree, the United States. He travelled fairly swiftly from a teenage espousal of Marxist views to his own often idiosyncratic mix of political dissent. Kenneth O. Morgan has observed that Taylor was 'a little-England socialist of a kind who defied all orthodox categories'. In his day, he was one of Britain's best-known intellectuals, even coming first in a *Times* informal poll to ascertain the most influential British intellectual since the Second World War.²

However, though he made a name for himself as a prominent intellectual of the Left, Alan Taylor believed deeply in the historian's task being to seek for the truth about the past and to present that truth clearly, even if the findings were inconvenient to his or her own political views. He also believed in the central importance of history to the humanities as a subject which enhanced both individuals' and national understanding. From early on in his career he aspired to write history which would be read by a large section of the public. In this he sought to emulate the success of great figures of the past, such as Edward Gibbon and Thomas Babington Macaulay, as well as of the generation before his, such as George Macaulay Trevelyan. His output of historical writing was immense. His career brings to mind the artist Matisse's aphorism: 'Without hard work, talent is not enough.'

Well before his death he was undoubtedly one of the best-known historians of his time. Professor D.C. Watt, for example, observed in 1977, in a special A.J.P. Taylor issue of an American academic journal, that Taylor's television lectures had made him 'the sole British historian whose name is a household word'.³ This continued to be the case, both before and since his death, even to an amusing extent. A cursory look at references to his name on CD-ROMs of the *Independent* newspaper of the early 1990s produced a sports page with a footballer being referred to as the A.J.P. Taylor of the pitch, apparently denoting a virtuoso performer. Another instance of the widespread recognition of his name was a spoof on the almost obligatory use of favourable A.J.P. Taylor quotations by

publishers on book covers: Paula Yates' book *Sex With Paula Yates* (London, Sphere, 1987) having on its back cover 'A definitive work – A.J.P. Taylor'. More seriously, quotations from his writings have launched a thousand articles or reviews in the British quality press. He also became the historian of first resort for the cultured who wished to be informed quickly about historical events. He was also drawn on by major writers. For instance, those enjoying Tom Stoppard's superb play *Travesties* (1975) who know Taylor's *The First World War* (1963) have heard one speech on the events at Sarajevo in June 1914 which summarises Taylor's opening page. He was also sufficient of an immediately recognisable public figure for his face to be one of those of several celebrities who appeared on advertisements in the London underground and elsewhere which made a financial appeal to support research to seek a cure for Parkinson's disease.

He had a strong 'middle Britain' constituency of support. His books, his television appearances and his public lectures appealed to many of the comfortably off professional classes, especially graduates and especially those retired. These were the people who were the backbone of local history, local archaeology and local drama societies as well as of voluntary bodies such as the National Trust. Part of this support was that British middle-class radicalism that expressed itself through the Fabian Society, Christian Socialism and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), but more of it was Conservative in politics. For such Conservatives Alan Taylor, though often a fiery radical in politics, was acceptable in much the same way as J.B. Priestley was. Both men were a part of a much-admired pantheon of 'characters' who presented their subjects with panache as well as insight; a group which included John Betjeman on places, Alec Clifton-Taylor and Sir Nicholas Pevsner on buildings, Arthur Negus on antiques, Kenneth (Lord) Clark on art, Sir Mortimer Wheeler on archaeology, Jacob Bronowski on science and Malcolm Muggeridge on Muggeridge and much else.

His style has had an impact on historians and journalists alike. In particular, as Professor Avner Offer has observed, Alan Taylor has had a huge effect on the style of many British and some American historians. The short, sharp sentence, the love of paradox and epigrams and other features of his style had become common among these historians, a contrast to the style of continental European historians. Taylor was also sufficiently a familiar public figure for his style to attract comment in the British press. For instance, a columnist in the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* in 1970 commented,

He is the most irritating of British historians. Just when he has made some apparently outrageous remark he provides an authoritative footnote in support of his contention.

But it's his style that worries me most – for...when I've been reading him I find that unconsciously I ape him. I find that I begin to write like this. In very short sentences. I make assertions which I do not qualify. I leave out words such as 'perhaps' or 'probably' or 'maybe'. I set myself up as the great know-all of the Press...

I regard him as a dangerous influence, especially for someone as susceptible as myself. He must not be allowed to infiltrate his method into the column. He must be resolutely resisted. I will not read him again for at least a week.⁴

He was a very English writer. His roots were very much in Lancashire. His feelings of 'Northernness' and 'Englishness' stemmed in large part from his pride in his family's involvement in the great Lancashire cotton trade and its associations with radicalism in politics from the time of his grandfather J.T. Taylor onwards. This 'Northernness' was painfully thrown into relief with the industrial calamities of Lancashire and elsewhere from 1921 onwards.⁵ His roots are important in understanding the man.

- 1 -

ROOTS

Alan Taylor stemmed from a wealthy, intellectual, nonconformist background. The wealth had been accumulated in the cotton trade. This was the archetypal background for English individualistic radicalism, associated with Richard Cobden and John Bright in the days of the Anti-Corn Law League (1839–46) and after, and with many of the victors of the Liberal Party’s January 1906 general election landslide victory. This background explains much about Taylor’s views, both when moulded by his home and later in life when he had become an irreverent and opinionated maverick, yet still essentially of the Left.

Alan John Percivale Taylor was born on 25 March 1906 at 29 Barrett Road and grew up at 18 Crosby Road, Birkdale, then in Lancashire. This was not long after the Liberal Party’s triumph. Seventy-five years later, with some glee, he recalled that his mother had gone daily to the *Southport Guardian* offices to see the Liberal victories being displayed on a screen: ‘It is true that she was heavily gone with child and had to go in a bath-chair; but I can say that I witnessed the greatest Liberal triumph of all time – if from a privileged position!’ More seriously, as he added then of the Liberal victory, ‘I was brought up on it as a story.’¹

Alan Taylor’s family background is interesting, being of typical Lancashire entrepreneurial stock yet with marked radical political views in generations. Even more interesting are the nuances he saw, or imagined, between his northern middle-class relatives. His father, Percy Lees Taylor (1874–1940), was a second-generation cotton merchant in the firm James Taylor and Sons, founded in 1870. James Taylor (1848–1933) had become rich quickly in the boom of the early 1870s. His capital had probably come in part from the Quaker family of his wife, Amelia Lees, and perhaps in lesser part from his own efforts in dealing in cotton waste and running a soap warehouse. He had successfully developed his business of selling

cotton piece goods, primarily to India, in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, when such trade was growing rapidly. To favourable trading opportunities he added hard work, tough bargaining and avoiding speculation in cotton futures. As he was not tied to a manufacturing base, a feature of his business was that he moved his offices and his warehouses frequently in pursuit of lower rents, so cutting overall costs. Percy, his eldest son, joined his father in his Manchester office in Bull's Head Chambers in 1890, becoming senior partner in effect from 1898, when James retired. Under his leadership the business diversified, acquiring a spinning mill at Blackburn and one at Preston. In 1914 the business's offices were at Calcutta House, 50 Princess Street, Manchester, with much of the firm's cotton piece trade being with India, Burma and China. According to Alan, Percy Taylor earned £5000 or more each year from when he was in his early twenties.² This was a very large income then and among his relatives he was deemed to be 'a very rich man'.³

Percy Taylor enjoyed reading and was interested in politics. He had stayed at Preston Grammar School until the then late age of sixteen and thereafter had continued to read English literature and history for pleasure. His misfortune was very poor hearing. He was a short man, a little on the plump side. He was good-natured and generally very well liked. He and his wife lived in Southport. On his return journey from six months in India, after his marriage in 1900, he contracted typhoid fever. He regularly suffered from bronchitis and, not long before his son Alan was born, one of his lungs was damaged by tuberculosis. Southport was famous as a health resort, with claims to being especially beneficial for those with bronchitis.

While Alan Taylor's grandfather was a stern Victorian paterfamilias, domineering over his wife and children, his father was a gentle person, notably – even excessively – considerate to his wife and very fond of children. Taylor later observed of his father that he 'adored kids more than anyone I've ever known'.⁴ Unlike his father and son, Percy was generous with money. Alan Taylor was to fear that he was being too like his father when his first wife continued to subsidise Dylan Thomas regardless of his protests and he became excessively anxious about money as he became older in inflationary times, careful to avoid Percy's free-spending ways.

Alan Taylor's mother was Constance Sumner Thompson (1878–1946). She was the third daughter in a Methodist family linked to warehousing on one side and the corn trade on the other. Her father, William Henry Thompson (c.1830–1904), who was born out of wedlock to a woman with the surname Martin, ran a wholesale grocery business in Preston. No one of Alan Taylor's generation knew why he was given the surname Thompson. After a first wife died in childbirth, William Henry Thompson married Martha Thompson, and they had seven children: Florence (1876–1939),

Sally (c.1877–c.1892), Constance (1878–1946), who married Percy Taylor, Kate (1880–1906), who married Gustav Juhlin, John (1883–1939), who married Sarah Fraser, William Henry, ‘Harry’ (1886–1947), who married Joan Beauchamp, and Madge (1887–1965), who married William Sinclair. William Henry Thompson was a ‘pro-Boer’ during the Boer War; so both of Alan Taylor’s grandfathers had radical political views.

Connie’s mother, Martha, was the daughter of John Thompson, who as a boy had walked with his mother from Brampton, Cumberland, to Preston. He had been a handloom weaver and then an owner of several handlooms, selling out as handloom weaving collapsed in the face of steam-powered factory production. He became a miller, making much money from grain. He married a Sumner from Blackburn and they had



Three generations of Taylors: Alan Taylor with his father and grandmother.

three boys (John, William and Joseph) and two girls (Martha and Matilda, 'Taidy'). He established his family as among the wealthiest in Preston. When he died his widow, according to Alan Taylor, was the only one in their area, Ashton on Ribble, 'who kept her own carriage...in which she drove out every afternoon'. John Thompson was also radical, at least when young. He voted for Henry ('Orator') Hunt in Preston in the 1830 general election, receiving afterwards a commemorative medal. In turn his eldest son, John, was also radical, working as a journalist on the *Preston Herald*, in which he denounced the Anti-Corn Law League. The other sons, William and Joseph, were very successful solicitors. William Thompson was an alderman and in the early 1860s a leading figure of Preston's guild. According to Alan Taylor he was responsible for clearing many medieval buildings and also for creating between 1861 and 1867 Avenham Park, where formerly there had been mostly market gardens.⁵

Martha was the toughest of the Thompsons. Her three brothers ruined their health by excessive drinking, John apparently dying young in the Preston workhouse hospital. Martha and her children were vehemently anti-alcohol and had in them a stern streak of Puritanism. One niece recalled of Harry Thompson and another of his nieces, 'Puritanical in the extreme Thompson way, he once washed the make-up off Joy's face. She was eighteen at the time.' Alan Taylor recalled Martha as 'a hard woman...a terrible woman'. She was the only person who struck fear into Harry.⁶

Alan Taylor was always very sensitive to the nuances of class, especially among the middle class. For instance, he made a distinction between his public school (Bootham) and Michael Foot's (Leighton Park), arguing that Foot's was more upper crust and his own barely counted as such; even though both were Quaker. In the case of his grandparents he felt there was a social divide between the blunt, no-nonsense, Lancashire-accented Taylors and the Thompsons, who were closer to the landed interest and who spoke 'best English'.

He elaborated the social differences between the Taylors and the Thompsons when he reminisced about family history to his Thompson relatives in late 1973. This was in spite of both families living very close to each other in the late nineteenth century: the Thompsons living at Beech Grove, the Taylors in the next parallel road, Victoria Parade (with Percy and Connie Taylor returning close to these streets after the First World War). Martha Thompson's second and third brothers, Joseph and William, were both successful solicitors. According to Alan Taylor,

There were two societies in Preston. One was the wealthy society but vulgar, of the mill owners and cotton men, who were rich but, like my

grandfather Taylor...spoke broad Lancashire. James Taylor spoke real thick Lancashire. It wasn't just an accent. But the Thompsons – I can remember from my grandmother – they spoke beautiful English...

And to be a solicitor in Preston was to put you up in the society of the earls of Derby and people like that. If you go back to the eighteenth century you'll find that the two Members [of Parliament for Preston], one was always a Stanley, the Derby family, and the other was nearly always a Fazackerley, who were hereditary solicitors...

[The Fazackerleys] handled all those north Lancashire, Roman Catholic landowners of the eighteenth century...They were...the Derby's solicitors, they handled people like the Welds and the Blundells who owned all the land of North Lancashire.

...There were these two separate societies and the Thompsons, because of the two uncles, belonged to this different society.⁷

One of Alan Taylor's nieces was less convinced of this Taylor–Thompson contrast, at least in accents, observing in 1985: 'My memory of aunts and uncles was of a fairly strong Lancashire accent.'⁸

This is suggestive of Alan Taylor's self-image, at least part of the time, as a no-nonsense, bluff Lancashire man, a chip off the block of his grandfather, 'JT'. In his memoirs he depicts JT as a male chauvinist and a successful entrepreneur who, unlike Alan's father Percy, took care of the pence as well as the pounds. Alan Taylor's JT became, at least in his grandson's depictions, an heroic radical figure of the Richard Cobden and John Bright kind. Cobden and Bright had argued the Corn Laws out of existence, in Taylor's much-favoured simplification of the history of the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Alan Taylor could similarly engage in politics in such a way; not in grass-roots slog and anonymity. Perhaps his adoption of an identity through his initials – AJP – echoed his grandfather as JT, as well as then being an academic norm.

His near hero-worship of his Taylor grandfather appears to be a balance to his downgrading of his mother. This was due partly to the lesser financial prowess of his Thompson grandparents and partly to what he felt to be a harsher side of some of the Thompsons. While his Thompson grandfather was alive, he and Martha lived in grand style. After his death in 1904 Martha lived with her eldest daughter, Florence, in Blackton Road, Preston, and money was very tight. They were helped financially at one point by a legacy from Martha's brother Joe, who like her other brothers died early due to alcoholism. Percy Taylor funded Martha and he also paid for Harry's articles. He probably paid for the wedding of Madge, the youngest daughter (and sister of Connie). When Martha died in 1921 Percy provided a generous lump sum for Florence, part of which was used

to buy a bungalow, which she named 'Brampton', and Florence's brother Harry provided her with a small annuity. She lived frugally until she died in 1939. Alan Taylor was not at ease with his father's generosity. As late as 1973 he was wanting to know how much money Florence had left. 'But there must have been some capital...somewhere [remaining of that] my father gave her,' he was insisting in 1973, with the implication that it should have returned to him, not been left to his Thompson cousins.⁹

In his autobiography Alan Taylor divided the children of his grandparents, William Henry and Martha Thompson, between those who took after William Henry, who were 'soft and kind', and those who took after Martha, who were 'sharp-tongued and arrogant'. He had no hesitation in placing his mother in the second category. Whereas he deemed Florence 'the sweetest of the lot' he observed of his mother that she 'was hard and intellectually sharp, which made her aggressive'.¹⁰ Connie Thompson stayed at school until seventeen and was pushed into elementary school teaching. She taught for only eighteen months. Given her well-remembered dislike of children, marriage provided a welcome escape from this work. Alan Taylor recalled, 'My mother often told me she married without love and only to get away from her elementary school.'¹¹ This was not something many would choose to tell, let alone reiterate, to their only child. It may have been the cause of Alan Taylor's occasional breathtaking frankness on personal matters, which could be notably insensitive to others' feelings.¹²

For some of their time in Southport, Connie had her youngest sister living with them – one aspect of his youth Alan Taylor omitted from his autobiography. Madge Thompson was a very lively, bright young woman. However, Alan Taylor later recalled, 'When Madge was quite a girl she had an affair with a married man...and when I was a tiny boy she was dumped on us for about two years.' Although recognising she was 'very sharp', he observed in 1973, 'All the Thompsons were tiresome with the exception of Florence and John, but Madge was the only one who was really a bitch.' Madge left to train as a nurse, later marrying a house surgeon at Lancaster hospital. The marriage took place from Percy and Connie Taylor's home in Preston.¹³

Connie Taylor was a powerful influence on her son, though, like several others, one that was understated in his autobiography. Eunice Holliday, née Blackwell, in old age recalled of Mrs Taylor, 'She was tall, quite arrogant, very smart – she had very good taste in clothes...Rather a masculine type. Very outspoken. Women used to kiss a lot in those days. Mrs Taylor always put her hand up. She didn't want to be kissed. She was strong-minded. But she liked straightforward, honest type of people.'¹⁴

Yet, although Connie Taylor was often reticent in showing her feelings, she clearly cared greatly for Alan. Her first child, Miriam, born in November

1902, died of tubercular meningitis after fifteen months. When Alan was sickly she sought the help of her friend Mrs Mary Ann ('Polly' or 'Mab') Blackwell, who was a firm believer in homeopathic medicine, as had been her mother and grandmother. She was deemed to have ensured the survival of her own daughter, Eunice, and several other delicate children by arranging for them to be treated by a Dr Wheeler. After the frail young Alan received homeopathic treatment Connie and the Blackwells came to believe that this had saved Alan's life, or at least enabled him to live the life of a normal child. Connie Taylor, who was an excellent needlewoman, spent many months preparing a huge tablecloth for afternoon tea, with a five to six foot centre of linen and great borders on which she crocheted butterflies. When this magnificent work was finished she presented it to Mrs Blackwell, saying: 'Every butterfly is a thank-you.' She gave Eunice beautiful editions of books such as *The Wind in the Willows*, also, Eunice felt, as a thank-you to her mother. In 1913 she was to know the heartbreak of the birth of a stillborn child. It is very difficult to see her as the hard-hearted mother of Taylor's autobiography, at least not in his early years.

Alan Taylor appears to have eagerly sought more outward signs of motherly love and, later, her intellectual approbation. While his mother had other interests – she was an excellent golfer and a skilful needlewoman, and enjoyed playing bridge – she was (as Eunice Holliday recalled) 'very politically minded and strong in her views'. Given her apparent distaste for young children and her love of political argument, Alan soon learnt that the way to gain his mother's attention and interest was through intellectual precocity. In his autobiography Taylor perceptively commented, 'Books for me were real life,' though adding less accurately, 'people were an interruption and hardly even that'.¹⁵ He probably did read at an early age, but in some of his claims of being a child prodigy he was assuming an early heroic character, inviting comparisons with John Stuart Mill, William Morris and others.

His early years were spent in a comfortable and secure, somewhat closed world and he was very much a spoilt child. His father, dressed in a blue serge suit and a bowler hat, smoking a Havana cigar, went every day to Manchester by train to work at the family firm's main offices in Calcutta House near the city centre.¹⁶ His mother ran the home. She also played much golf, winning numerous trophies, including at county championships. Golf offered exercise, a break from the domestic scene and, in Edwardian England, participation in a very popular and socially respectable game among the middle class.¹⁷ She had the benefit of Southport, one of the better of the many courses recently established by the coast. Beyond these patterns of life, the Taylors lived in a small community of similar interests, based primarily around the Southport Congregational Chapel and to a lesser extent the local Liberal Party.

The Southport Congregational Chapel provided a focus for much of the Taylors' social life. They were loyal to it, though the Taylor family background included Quaker and Baptist allegiances and on the Thompson side there had been strict Methodism. Congregationalism was more flexible in doctrine and often had a Liberal or radical edge. In the case of Southport, two of its leading figures were Joshua and Mary Anne Blackwell. Like Percy Taylor, Joshua Blackwell had been a Manchester businessman, selling food on the Manchester Exchange, but had retired and was superintendent and secretary of the Sunday school. He was a very strong Labour Party supporter. Percy Taylor supported the Sunday school work financially, including giving generously to the fund for the annual Christmas 'poor children's treat' (for those from the nearby very poor area within Southport), but not actively. He and his wife were friends of the Blackwells and participated in political discussions held at the Blackwells' house. Sometimes there were visiting national political figures, including quite probably George Lansbury.¹⁸

At this time the Taylors were still Liberals, ones who identified with the radical David Lloyd George. They supported the local Liberals by holding garden parties at their home. Connie, who was active in the local Liberal women's organisation, was not the more radical on votes for women. Alan Taylor later recalled, 'My mother, I think, felt embarrassed that she was not a suffragette, and her embarrassment took the form of being very hostile to the suffragettes, whereas my father, who was always tolerant, thought that if women wanted to be suffragettes they were entitled to be.'¹⁹

For Percy Taylor, Joshua Blackwell provided congenial male company and his daughters offered substitutes for the deceased Miriam. Alan Taylor recalled that his father often told him that he never ceased grieving for Miriam.²⁰ The Blackwells had three daughters – Elizabeth, Lillias and, several years younger, Eunice. Percy Taylor got on especially well with Lil, who was a shy, very considerate girl. She realised how miserable it was for him to have such impaired hearing and took pains to speak carefully to him. Percy and Connie Taylor also took an interest in Eunice, later in the early 1920s buying her and her husband, Clifford Holliday, a wedding present of silver and Percy taking her to her wedding in the Southport Congregational Chapel.

Though six years older than Alan, Eunice often provided rare young company for him. On some Saturdays Percy Taylor took Alan and Eunice into Southport. The two children always wanted to go to Southport's 1465-yard-long pier, the second longest in Britain. Occasionally they went to the fairground. Never, so Eunice Holliday told me, did they go to the shops or for morning or afternoon tea. For both children the big attraction was the diver, Bert Powsey (known as 'Professor Powsey'). Alan Taylor later recollected,

His most sensational dive, which I witnessed, was the dive when he tied both his hands to his sides, tied his legs together, then plunged in and emerged safe and sound with all his ropes loosened. The climax at the end of the whole show, as I remember, was the bicycle dive, an expedition which he conducted down a steep board into the sea with the bicycle alight and blazing around him.²¹

Similarly, Eunice provided company for Alan when Percy Taylor and Joshua Blackwell went after chapel on a Sunday to the sand-dunes the other side of the railway line from the Taylors' house on Crosby Road (where they lived from 1908 until 1913). There they all walked or played on the dunes, or sometimes paddled in the sea. As his autobiography and Eunice's later recollections make clear, he played in the sand like any other little boy. Indeed, Mrs Eunice Holliday, some seventy years later, was amused when she recalled the males playing cowboys and Indians. 'It struck me as very funny because they went to church and they sang about peace and not fighting: and yet Alan was on this side of the hill, and father was on the other side, and they were hiding behind little hills, saying, "Bang, bang, bang!"'

The Blackwells' house in Stanley Avenue was less than ten minutes' walk away from the Taylors', and was next door but one to the small private junior school to which Alan went. This was owned and run by two sisters, Annie and Kitty Filmer. After school Alan Taylor often went to the Blackwells, where he was given a boiled egg for his tea. At the Blackwells he was very inquisitive, looking into boxes and drawers. He found the bar of chocolate that Eunice's father used to leave her each day and was allowed to have half the chocolate, no doubt as part of the process of building him up from being a delicate child. Eunice later recollected, 'He would have eaten all my chocolate if mother had let him.' He also loved to read or have read to him Beatrix Potter's books. Eunice recalled, 'I had got the books. Father used to read to us. Father sat on his chair, I sat on one side and Alan sat on the other.' In 1983 Alan Taylor informed her in a letter that he had walked down Stanley Avenue when making a 1980 television series on four Lancashire coastal towns and had found 'the school of the Misses Filmer ... now dilapidated. I remember the boiled egg your mother gave me so often after school and the joy I got from reading your set of Beatrix Potter.'²²

When the Taylors went to the Blackwells' house for political discussions Eunice kept Alan quiet by playing a board and dice game, 'Prince's Quest'. She later recalled, 'I soon discovered that Alan had to win, otherwise there was trouble ... So I arranged for him to win and he was happy. But oh I was so bored with the game. Also my dog had to be shut in the kitchen [as] Alan was afraid of (or didn't like) dogs.'²³

He also used to talk with Mrs Blackwell. According to Eunice her mother was very good with children. 'Mother talked to him as an adult, she always did with children. She did not talk down to him.' On one occasion when he was six he got into a long argument with her as to which language Jesus spoke, with him arguing for one answer and she another.²⁴

The significance of the Blackwells – and of Eunice in particular – was that the young Taylor had very few contacts, let alone friends, other than the occasional visits of relatives, including cousins of roughly his age, and his partners in some dancing lessons in Birkdale Town Hall. Later, he even commented, 'I used to walk to school in the gutter so as not to have to mix with the other children on the pavement.'²⁵ This is easy to believe. His studied aloofness at the Filmers' junior school cannot have endeared him to his fellow students. He sat separately, as he could already read, and read on his own while the other children were taught. Having neither brothers and sisters nor close friends who would ensure he did not become too used to having his own way, he became very wilful. Eunice Holliday recalled that though he was 'not a very pugilistic little boy...he would be angry...he got very cross with people'. When he asked one of his classmates home to tea the boy knocked over some of his toy soldiers and he gave him a bloody nose – thus seeing him off for good.²⁶ He was also a very observant boy, taking in what he saw and keeping much of his knowledge to himself. Later he commented of his powerful recollections of his early years, 'being an only child and detached...you see things more and you watch with more amusement'.²⁷ He was very much a solitary and self-contained child.

When the Taylors went on holiday, they took their small, near-closed social world with them. They went to the Lake District in 1909 and 1913, the Isle of Man in 1910 and 1912 and Rhos in north Wales in 1911. On each occasion Percy Taylor paid for several relations to accompany them, as well as Alan's nurse. In 1912 Percy took Alan's two grandmothers, Amelia Taylor and Martha Thompson, two of his brothers and Connie's brother, Harry Thompson. In 1913 Joshua, Polly and Eunice Blackwell went as well. Then, for a fortnight, the Taylor party took over much of a hotel at Borrowdale, at the top of Derwentwater, and all but young Alan and his nurse enjoyed long walks.

The other notable feature of his childhood was that he was a spoilt child. 'He was spoilt in all ways,' recalled Eunice Holliday, 'except that certain people would keep him in order,' one being her father. Given the early death of his sister Miriam and Alan's delicate health, it is not surprising that he was a much-looked-after little boy. Indeed, as Eunice Holliday later commented, he was 'more than looked after...they adored him'. With a few exceptions, including his mother, he usually got what he wanted from people. In terms of possessions he was given large numbers

of toy soldiers, many visitors bringing him a box of them. These he laid out in part of the house's large attic area, and spent long hours on his own playing with them.

His father doted on him. Percy Taylor's poor hearing kept him from substantial participation in the political debates at the Blackwells' house. However, he could enjoy children's company, especially that of his son. Alan clearly loved and admired his father, though he came to deprecate his generosity with money and his sensitive relationships with women. On these matters he admired more the financially very prudent and patriarchal ways of his grandfather James Taylor, even if he himself did not fully match his patriarchal ways in practice. Eunice Holliday recalled of the father and



The only child.

young son, 'They were so happy together.' As Alan grew older he identified with many of his father's views. When reviewing *Father Figures*, the autobiography of Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman* (1931–60), he quoted with approval Martin's words about his father: 'His causes became my causes, his revolt mine.' Alan Taylor then declared, 'I had much the same relationship with my father and I have derived nothing but strength from his example. Father–son hostility is a great waste of time... it prevents a dissenter from getting on with the real job which is to kick against the world.'²⁸

He was also spoilt by Annie Clark, who was first employed as a general maid and then as his nurse. She was initially in her twenties, from Newcastle upon Tyne and remembered as being careful, responsible and a very nice person. She met well young Alan's requirements from women: 'With Nanna there was no doubt that I was the dominant male. She adored me, hugged me, gave me whatever I wanted.'²⁹ As well as Annie Clark, the Taylors had a second resident maid, a daily charwoman (whose tasks included washing the family's clothes), for some time a young woman, who took Alan for walks and occasionally bathed him, and a gardener.

He did not get his way, at least not as much as he wished, with his mother. In his autobiography, *A Personal History* (1983), she comes close to being the villain of the piece. The criticisms included:

She was the disciplinarian in the household as her own mother had been before her. She was the one who made me sit on my pot or eat up food I did not like, particularly rice pudding... Once, when my mother threatened to spank me, he [his father] stood between her and said, 'If you lay a hand on that child I'll never speak to you again.'³⁰

Yet, as has already been remarked, there is much to suggest that he was unfair towards her. It is highly likely that she was both a loving mother and a person who found it hard to express her emotions. Given the concern over Alan's delicate health, the insistence on eating his rice pudding seems sensible enough, and his habit of behaving sufficiently badly at the dinner table to be sent to finish his meal in the kitchen, with Annie Clark, who spoilt him, may well have merited some form of retribution. Eunice Holliday recalled Connie Taylor as 'a nice person' but 'not an affectionate person, a cold person', unlike her husband, who was 'very affectionate'. Yet, as well as being extremely anxious over her son's health, she may well have felt marginalised by her husband and son.

Alan Taylor, into old age, felt cheated that his mother had not shown him more affection. Shortly, before his seventy-ninth birthday he expressed this vigorously to Éva, his third wife. She summed up his views in her diary: 'His mother was always interested in something else. Alan was

always used as a means to an end.’³¹ In this he may have had later developments in mind, such as her travels abroad with Henry Sara. But, if this view were applied to this early period of his life, then there would be an element of the pot calling the kettle black. He and his father appear often to have paid little heed to her interests. His mother liked to go frequently for morning coffee in Thom’s Japanese Tea Rooms in Southport, just with Alan on some weekdays. On Saturdays, when Percy was available, he and Alan instead ‘escaped’ to Pleasureland or the pier. She enjoyed golf, but, after playing it with her some Saturdays, Percy made it clear that he preferred the attractions of Pleasureland and the pier. His father, apparently, also used his deafness to avoid doing other things which his wife proposed and he did not like.³² Connie Taylor came from a family which greatly valued culture. Percy Taylor quite probably read more widely than his wife, but he could not enjoy music.³³ Connie Taylor coped silently on the whole with her lot, though Eunice Holliday once overheard her confide in Eunice’s mother: ‘It is very difficult whispering sweet nothings in the ear of a deaf person.’

Connie Taylor clearly had a distressing experience of childbearing in these years. She was 24 when Miriam was born in 1902, 27 when Alan was born in 1906 and about 34 when she gave birth to a stillborn child in 1913. These experiences were emotionally shattering and after each childbirth the Taylors moved house, at first within Birkdale and then, in 1913, away from the area. In his autobiography Alan Taylor did not reflect on his mother’s misfortunes. He commented, ‘I was pulled up by the roots without warning,’ but added, ‘I cannot say that I had much in the way of roots to be pulled up by.’³⁴

- 2 -

GROWING

The strongest influences on the youthful Alan Taylor were his home life, with its radical intellectual conversations, Bootham School and his omnivorous reading. His parents' wealth enabled him to become familiar with much of continental Europe before he was 21. By that age he was still closely tied, emotionally and intellectually, to his parents and their views. At school and then at Oxford University he displayed precocious abilities.

He first went abroad for the winter of 1913–14. He and his mother spent several months at Alassio on the Italian Riviera and then Lugano, over the Swiss border. In 1921 he returned to Switzerland with his parents. In 1924 he went with his mother and Henry Sara to Berlin and other parts of Germany, followed by Paris. In the summer of 1925 the three went to Soviet Russia, returning via Riga and Berlin. In addition he went on school trips to Normandy. Hence journeys to continental Europe, often lengthy ones, became for him a norm, just as it was customary for the family to migrate to Borrowdale, Buttermere or Hawkshead in the Lake District or elsewhere for part of the summer. In later life he in turn came to expect to spend part of the summer with his first family on the Isle of Wight. This was a comfortable, gentlemanly style of life, more common in the Edwardian and inter-war years than after 1945. His early stays abroad may well have influenced him choosing later to study on the continent of Europe, and, once in Vienna, eventually adopting a topic involving northern Italy.

After a brief stay with his maternal grandmother in Lytham on his return from Italy in 1914, Alan Taylor lived in Buxton. His family rented a large house, 10 Manchester Road, close to the Crescent and the Pump Room. In his autobiography he commented that it was 'not as big as the house in Birkdale',¹ but it was a large house by most people's standards. He lived happily at home at first, playing with other children, cycling up and

down the surrounding hills and enjoying outings in his paternal grandfather's car. He attended day schools: first a private preparatory school run by a Buxton woman and her Swiss husband, Monsieur and Madame de la Motte, and second, from early 1916, Buxton College. After a period of ordinary, rumbustious schoolboy life there, his mother removed him to a public school sooner than planned, perhaps because she feared he was becoming coarse.² At any rate, that was one explanation he offered in his autobiography. His alternative explanation is more convincing: that when his mother became vehemently opposed to military conscription and she learnt that he and other younger boys had been shown 'the trenches where the older boys trained in the OTC' she removed him 'immediately from the shadow of the OTC'.³ He would have soon gone to Rugby but, as that school expected its pupils to join the Officer Training Corps, she withdrew his name and instead reserved a place for him at the Quaker Bootham School in York for when he reached its minimum age of 13. In the interim he was sent to another public school, The Downs at Malvern, owned and run by Herbert William Jones, a Quaker.

The First World War had a very major impact on the political views of Connie and Percy Taylor, and so on their son. Percy Taylor was quickly disillusioned with the war, apparently from reading Bernard Shaw's *Commonsense about the War*, which was published on 14 November 1914 as a 32-page supplement to the *New Statesman*. Shaw disliked Herbert Henry Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister, and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, whom he deemed to be 'a Junker from his topmost hair to the tips of his toes...[with] a personal taste for mendacity'. In his booklet he argued that Grey's justification for the war, a 75-year-old treaty, was feeble. He urged people to demand that the belligerent governments openly state their war aims and that a just and democratic peace be made to avoid a future European war. He supported the British war effort as a struggle for survival with Germany but warned, 'Nations are like bees: they cannot kill except at the cost of their own lives.' Shaw's arguments disconcerted Percy Taylor, who commented to his wife, 'Asquith and Grey are honourable men. I don't believe they would have lied to us.'⁴

Shaw's arguments also appeared to have had an impact later on Alan Taylor, who discussed Shaw's pamphlet in his *The Trouble Makers* (1957), observing: 'Shaw enjoyed pricking moral pretensions; he also enjoyed teasing his fellow Dissenters.' Shaw's formulations seem also to have influenced his thinking and style. For instance, Shaw's assertion: 'Democracy without equality is a delusion more dangerous than frank oligarchy and autocracy. And with Democracy there is no hope of peace.' This seems to presage such epigrams of Alan Taylor as: 'Without democracy socialism would be worth nothing, but democracy is worth a great deal even when it is not

socialist.⁵ More generally, Shaw was one of the authors whom Taylor would admit had influenced him. Thus, in a letter to the historian Robert Cole, he wrote, 'You won't find a single book that influenced me except Shaw, in style, and perhaps Cobbett. Once upon a time Samuel Butler influenced me until I discovered how silly he was.'⁶

Shaw's arguments in the autumn of 1914 'for open democratic diplomacy, for full civil rights and a fair livelihood for the soldier and his dependants' were still in support of Britain fighting the war. He hoped that, 'Properly handled, this war can be led to a victory, not only for the Allies over Germany, but for democracy over its worst enemies both at home and abroad.'⁷

However, with the introduction of conscription in two stages in January and May 1916, Connie Taylor became vigorously anti-war and in favour of those who opposed continuing it. In this she was influenced by her much-loved brother, William Henry (Harry) Thompson, being a conscientious objector. Margaret Cole, one of Harry Thompson's circle of socialist friends, wrote of him that he 'was a tall handsome athletic fellow, excelling in all games'. She added, 'He was one of the few men I have known who managed to devote his life to "causes" without ever losing either his sense of humour or his power of enjoying himself.'⁸ Funded by Percy Taylor, Harry had trained as a solicitor in an old Preston firm, probably Fazackerleys, where life was still sufficiently leisurely for him to play billiards many afternoons. After qualifying on 1 April 1908, he joined a firm of solicitors in Longton, Staffordshire. He gained his introduction to trade union work through John Ward, secretary of the Navvies' Union and Liberal MP for Stoke-on-Trent. The grounds of Harry's objection to being conscripted was, according to his nephew, 'a belief in individual liberty'. Another opponent of the war in his age group, Molly Hamilton (a Labour MP, 1929–31), later wrote that 'resistance, primarily emotional, to the glorification of war was the main-spring of resistance to the majority view'. Connie Taylor shared such sentiments, as well as Molly Hamilton's other observation,

That war means the massive, selective slaughter, the killing, maiming, blinding, shell-shocking of men was a fact no one could refuse to see... Against this stark background, the elevated chatter of publicists and parsons went on; against this, the glitter of the 'home front'; against this, the well-nigh universal pretence that those who had to endure things we could not even bear to think about were helped by our behaving as though those things did not exist.

In Connie Taylor's case she walked out of the Buxton Methodist chapel, never to return, when the minister referred to conscientious objectors as shirkers.⁹

When conscription had been introduced Harry Thompson had turned to Connie for support. Years later Alan Taylor could recall his uncle coming over from Longton 'on a two-stroke [motorbike] to see my mother in 1916 and I heard this one phrase, "I'm not going"'. Once called up, he refused military service or alternative service. As an 'absolutist' he was treated badly. He was among those sent to Wakefield Prison for the 'Wakefield experiment' of offering absolutists better conditions in return for less intransigent attitudes to co-operation. Harry Thompson was one of an advisory committee, chaired by Walter Ayles and including Henry Sara, which organised the absolutists in Wakefield gaol and rejected the Home Office's proposals for them. He was released from prison in April 1919.¹⁰ For the rest of the war and 1919 Connie devoted herself to her brother and to the cause of the conscientious objectors. Harry spent lengthy terms in gaol, and his sister took great pains to support him in any way she could. In the summer of 1919 the Taylors gave holidays at their rented holiday house in Hawkshead to a stream of conscientious objectors newly released from prison and selected by Harry Thompson. One of these men became Connie Taylor's frequent companion for the rest of her life: Henry Sara.

Sara was a tall, good-looking man who devoted his life to being a political propagandist. He did various work after leaving school, including being a brewery engineer. He read Robert Blatchford's socialist newspaper *The Clarion*. In 1908 he took up revolutionary syndicalism, becoming a member of the Industrial League, which in 1911 became the British section of the Chicago Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). From late 1913 he assisted Guy Aldred with his hybrid revolutionary Marxian anarchist propaganda, notably with his paper *The Herald of Revolt* (published between December 1910 and May 1914) and its successor, *Spur*, with its sub-heading *Because The Workers Need A Spur* (published between June 1914 and April 1921). Sara became an anti-war hero through his campaigning against the war in north London and throughout the country in 1914 and 1915 and his subsequent suffering as a conscientious objector. He was arrested as early as 28 September 1914 for an anti-war speech in London. After the introduction of conscription for single men in January 1916 Sara returned his call-up papers, declaring that he conscientiously objected to the war on socialist grounds. He was arrested in London on 3 April 1916 and, although he suffered from defective eyesight (a wall eye), he was passed as medically fit for the army. He was beaten and humiliated at the Harrow Road Barracks of the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion London Regiment before being sent to Hurdcott Camp. He was then sentenced to 112 days' imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs. From there he went on to Parkhurst Prison, Isle of Wight. He was returned to the regiment, beaten, sentenced to further imprisonment and returned to Parkhurst. After his case was

aired in the House of Commons, later in 1916, he was taken before the Central Tribunal, which accepted he was a conscientious objector. However, as he was an absolutist, refusing alternative work, further courts martial resulted in a two-year prison sentence in Exeter and then Wakefield, where he was offered, but resisted, the temptation of comfortable quarters under the 'Wakefield experiment' of September 1918. After another court martial, in October 1918, he went on hunger strike, and was released (subject to recall) under the 'Cat and Mouse' legislation originally intended for suffragettes, in February 1919.

After his release from prison Sara resumed working with Guy Aldred, promoting the Communist League and its journal *The Communist* by making lengthy propaganda tours round the country. Aldred's communism was anti-parliamentary and he was very critical of Lenin's policies for Britain. His group remained separate from those who formed the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in January 1921.¹¹ Henry Sara broke with Aldred, first supporting Sylvia Pankhurst and her Workers' Socialist Federation. After she had left the Communist Party he joined it, in 1922, having been to the Soviet Union in 1921. Reg Groves later gave this portrait of Sara in the 1920s:

Henry, tall, strong of build, with eloquent, resonant voice, and a commanding platform manner, incisive, informed in debate and discussion, brought much to us [discontented CPGB members] in the way of knowledge of Marxism, socialist theory and labour history... A popular outdoor orator in Finsbury Park and elsewhere before, during and after the war, and a skilful lecturer at socialist and secularist halls all over the country, he had hesitated to join the Communist Party at the time of its foundation, knowing as he did most of its leading personalities from pre-war days. But a visit to Russia...decided him, though the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising caused him some uneasiness...¹²

Sara also did a lot of work for the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC, formed in 1921), under the aegis of Len Williams, who was an organiser of the NCLC (and later general secretary of the Labour Party). Alan Taylor later wrote of the NCLC:

This involved adult evening courses of a more or less Marxist character or, in more grandiloquent terms, 'education as a partisan effort to improve the position of Labour in the present, and to assist in the abolition of wage-slavery'. The Marxism taught by the Labour Colleges was entirely pre-Bolshevik.¹³

The Taylors would have known from the *Manchester Guardian* of Sara's ill-treatment in 1916. His case was taken up by MPs Joseph King (Liberal)

and Philip Snowden (Independent Labour Party – ILP) and by Dr John Clifford, the eminent nonconformist leader. For Connie, Sara became a second heroic figure, along with her brother; a contrast to her kindly, worthy but not romantic (in any sense) husband. Alan Taylor liked Sara and was much influenced by him, especially when he was in his teens. Quite possibly he was the strongest intellectual influence on him until Lewis Namier.

Nonetheless, Taylor also appears to have seen Harry Thompson and Henry Sara as competitors for his mother's attention and esteem. Faced with the heroic pair of conscientious objectors, he made much of the unpleasant features of The Downs. He hated the 'rigidity and rules' and felt persecuted because 'we were timed over everything', from the moment they got up in the morning. His uncle kindly humoured him, observing: 'Prison was nothing like as bad as that. You have had a tougher war than I did.' In his autobiography Alan Taylor wrote of his time at The Downs, 'I originally called this chapter Shades of the Prison House. But there were no Shades about The Downs School. It was the Prison House itself, at any rate for me.' This was another instance of his bidding up his experiences to a literary level, in this case drawing from William Wordsworth's 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality'. After such huffing and puffing, he admitted, 'I suppose life at the Downs was not as unrelievedly grim as it seems in retrospect.'¹⁴

However, for the young Taylor his time at The Downs must have come as a shock: not to be the centre of attention from all but his mother, to lose all the comforts he had taken for granted, to have little or no privacy and to have to make beds, clean shoes and carry out other such tasks for himself. In short, it was what he needed. Not surprisingly, his parents ignored his pleas to be removed.

He enjoyed Bootham School more, at least after his first year. He still had to make his bed, clean his shoes and take cold baths. But he was getting older and he developed interests which he enjoyed all his life. He became fascinated by church architecture, examining and recording details with the enthusiasm that many of his age group had for train-spotting. Over many years he filled 'seven large volumes of archaeological diaries containing detailed observations' on the churches he visited; these he destroyed before the mid-1960s.¹⁵ His fascination was fostered by a retired teacher, Neave Brayshaw, nicknamed 'Puddles', who encouraged his young charges to form their own judgements without guidebooks. Perhaps this approach was later reflected in Taylor's diplomatic history, where he displayed a mastery of the printed documents combined with a strong disposition to accept few views on their subject second-hand. It was also characteristic of the young Taylor that his favourite hobby should have

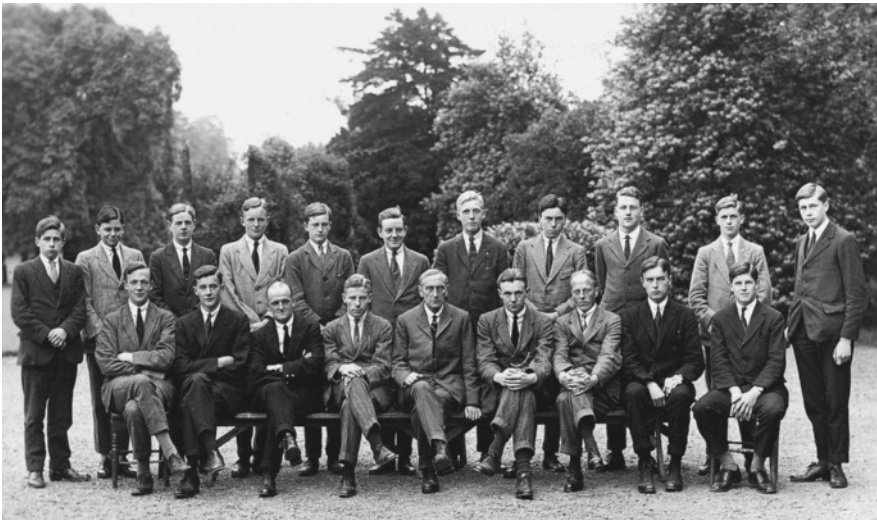
been both intellectual and suitable for one who had a few friends but was nevertheless something of a loner.

Many years later, in 1983, Alan Taylor contributed a piece to Bootham's booklet *150 Years of Natural History*, in which he paid tribute to Brayshaw, observing that he 'gave us a feel for medieval architecture and then left us to carry on for ourselves'. He then commented,

I compiled diary after diary devoted to village churches. Soon I was ambitious enough to include pages of mouldings and in time I could turn out ground plans with the styles duly hatched or painted. When I ran out of local churches I moved on to the Minster which absorbed my attention for the best part of a year. Best of all were the neighbouring Cistercian abbeys, my ground plans of which nearly got me an appointment as an Inspector of Ancient Monuments some years after I left school.

He added, 'Hardly a day passes when I do not bless the name of Bootham Natural History Society and above all Puddles.'¹⁶ His considerable knowledge of Gothic architecture proved decisive in him securing a scholarship to Oriol College, Oxford.

In many ways his public school years, at The Downs and Bootham, display him adopting the traditional survival strategies of the schoolboy immersed in hostile, alien surroundings away from the cocoon of a well-to-do home. In fiction, such as Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) and Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co* (1899), and in autobiography, there are such recurring themes as the central figure engaging in periods



At Bootham (at centre of back row).

of rebelliousness to secure peer group approval, systems of cribbing to assist weaker boys avoid their masters' retribution, patterns of loyalty of almost a tribal kind to houses and even dormitories, and either enthusiasm for, or avoidance of, sport.

The precociously clever but physically small and slight Alan Taylor could sparkle and attract the limelight as a rebel. At the start of 1923 he was just under five feet five inches tall and weighed nine stone (153 pounds). Moreover, being agin and being able to argue with vigour came naturally to him given his home experiences. At The Downs, according to his autobiography, he was elected to the school's Cabinet and for a while ran it to subvert the masters' powers of punishment. At Bootham, he fitted in better; perhaps The Downs School had been a preparatory experience for Bootham. Here, he just scoffed at and queried some of the Quaker assumptions and as a reeve bent the position's powers to grant himself leave from playing football, instead spending the time exploring York.¹⁷ It is striking that both at The Downs and Bootham he rose to positions of authority with his peers, and at Bootham he seems to have been a poacher turned gamekeeper. He later observed, 'I, having been a rebel, was a stern disciplinarian when I became a reeve.'¹⁸ This has echoes of his later role of rebel, when he was one but from within Oxbridge, and within his college a stickler for upholding its traditions.

He also won some peer group approval through the long-hallowed public schoolboy practice of cribbing. Winston Churchill in *My Early Life* (1930) recounted how at Harrow he wrote English essays for a friend in return for Latin translations. Taylor, in his autobiography, recalled that he 'learnt how to exploit my cleverness, doing the prep of the bigger boys and winning protection in return'.¹⁹

At Bootham he exhibited leadership among his fellows in the loyalties accruing to houses and even dormitories. He clearly revelled in such competitiveness within the enclosed public school society. He was in Penn House, bedroom 24, in the period before 'bedrooms were based on age groups which changed yearly...so the allegiance to a bedroom throughout one's school life was no longer of any significance'.²⁰ Indeed, he was 'head of the bedroom' in his last year at Bootham, 1923–24. In 1921 he initiated 'No. 24 Chronicle', a miscellaneous series of jottings, including 'in-jokes' concerning the six to ten members of the dormitory. He was teased over his small size. For instance, one entry included, 'It is rumoured that Tailor's [sic] nurse has been on the way but is coming per return post. The baby of many initials being highly excited told an excellent story about the wilds of Africa.' The chronicle also recounted raids on other dormitories, including one which noted that 'the opposing forces under A.J.P.T. had been put to flight, retreating into their mountain stronghold'.²¹

Though much involved in dormitory boisterousness, Alan Taylor was very much the antithesis of a sporting hero. While at The Downs his doctor, fearing that one of his lungs was near to collapse, recommended that he should spend his time in the open air. In his autobiography Taylor described this as ‘a stroke of luck’ and indicated it was better still when the doctor gave him a certificate of exemption from playing football. At Bootham, he had to play this team game again – in his eyes ‘an agony made worse by the fact that all except the two top elevens had to bicycle over a mile to the playing field’. That is, until he became a reeve and gave himself a dispensation from compulsory football. Cricket was voluntary, so he played tennis instead.²² Hence his routes to prominence and respect among his fellow pupils had to be intellectual, not sporting.

Part of his intellectual distinctiveness stemmed from his very unorthodox radical home background. There can have been very, very few public schoolboys at that time who came from a wealthy home in which the Bolsheviks were revered and where political opinions were divided between the Left of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Communist Party of Great Britain. The October Revolution in Russia moved his parents from dissatisfaction with the Liberals and support for conscientious objectors to socialism. Alan Taylor wrote in his autobiography, ‘While others talked, Lenin had acted: he had ended the war.’²³ Thereafter, when he went home he found plenty of ILP pamphlets to read. With the arrival of Henry Sara into the family circle, from 1919, he gained a Marxist mentor who guided his socialist reading.

The young Taylor wore advanced political opinions like a badge on his clothes. He made no secret of the unorthodox views which were rampant at his home. One of his few female acquaintances of this period recalled seeing Connie Taylor in the following words: ‘this famous mother, whom I had heard of because we had heard of her...as a communist...which was something rather exciting to be.’ She added that his red mother ‘was part of the general impression of advanced views and sophistication generally that Alan gave’.²⁴ It is notable that the ‘Chronicle of Bedroom 24’, Penn House, Bootham, early on became the ‘Soviet Chronicles’, beginning:

On Friday the Soviet G [government] was established in No. 24, its object being to establish liberty and independence [sic] for shirkers. The other members, who live across the ocean, opposed its opinions and declared war. Hearing of this, Krupp’s Arsenal was erected to protect the new PM and his colleagues.

He presented orthodox Marxist views in an attention-seeking but prize-winning school essay, ‘Communism’. In this he sternly observed, ‘The Communist incentive is not an emotional one – they leave it to social

reformers to go into hysterics over slum conditions.’ In the course of a heavy-handed explanation of the materialist conception of history he wrote of the diffusion of

...different forms of dominant class ideology through the schools – how many of my hearers have heard of the Materialist Conception of History before – the churches – Blessed are the meek – the universities and, above all, the Press, while the subjection of the proletariat is secured by the legal and military systems, centralised under the state.

He also emphasised, ‘Regarding the instruments of bourgeois “democracy” as merely the organs of class domination, the proletariat must therefore build its own institutions moulded to suit its own needs, in order to supplant the plutocratic state.’²⁵

He also presented himself as a stern, unbending orthodox Marxist in a letter he wrote to the *Communist*, 3 June 1922, a newspaper which appealed to middle-class intellectuals and which sold around 8000 copies. The 16-year-old Alan Taylor remonstrated with Raymond Postgate, then aged 25, over an essay on ‘Literature and Communism’ in the *Communist*, 27 May 1922, condemning Postgate for being a bourgeois and failing to understand the ‘Materialist Conception of History’. In writing from Bootham the young Taylor apparently saw no irony in observing, ‘I have always been afraid that bourgeois culture was too deeply ingrained ever to be eradicated or even completely nullified by doses, however, continuous, of *Plebs* and the *Communist*.’

It is difficult not to suspect that Henry Sara encouraged or put him up to writing the letter. Postgate, who had been a conscientious objector, was a founder member of the CPGB, was on the executive committee of the Plebs League and had been editor of the *Communist* from June 1921 until about 20 May 1922, when he resigned from the editorship and, within two years, from the CPGB, disgusted by communist political tactics of orchestrating opposition to those with whom they disagreed. The biographer of Rajani Palme Dutt, the CPGB’s orthodox theoretician, who scrapped the *Communist* in February 1923, observed of the departure of Postgate and others: ‘Those who could not accept the demands of ideological purity and party discipline were forced to leave the organisation.’²⁶ Presumably, the CPGB hardliners enjoyed a schoolboy from Bootham ‘getting the line right’ in a letter against the recently departed editor. Postgate himself in his reply observed, ‘The logical corollary is that I should be expelled from the party.’

In terms of a biography of Alan Taylor the most interesting aspect of this letter and his ‘Communism’ essay is that it displays his concern to impress his mother and Henry Sara. His attitude towards his mother was

very ambivalent, combining love and hate, marked by repeated attempts to win her love by intellectual brilliance. He later wrote to the historian Robert Cole, 'I inherited my cleverness from my mother and disliked her all the same. She was totally self-centred, a sort of aspiring Madame Bovary as so many women are. She treated my father badly, and maybe I have revenged him by taking it out on the women in my life.'²⁷

While appearing the Marxist tyro, Taylor also supported his father in his ILP activities. Percy and Connie Taylor moved in early 1919 to 17 Rose Terrace, Ashton-on-Ribble, Preston, very close to where they had been children. James and Amelia Taylor had lived at 25 Victoria Parade since the late 1880s, while William and Martha Thompson had lived at 27 Beech Grove.²⁸ Number 17 Rose Terrace, an attractive, substantial detached house (now a nursing home), was to be Alan Taylor's home throughout his years at Bootham and Oxford, and, indeed, until 1931. His parents moved later in the 1930s to 8 Mulgrave Avenue, Ashton-on-Ribble, a little more select and close by Ashton Park. Percy Taylor became a stalwart of the Preston branch of the ILP, a predominantly working-class body. He became a member of the gas workers' branch of the General and Municipal Workers' Union, thereby being eligible to be a delegate to the Preston Trades and Labour Council, of which he was a member for the rest of his life. Alan Taylor joined the ILP in 1921, when he was fifteen. In his autobiography he recalled that he had gone each Sunday evening with his parents to the ILP meetings, just as he had earlier gone to chapel with his mother: 'I even addressed a meeting, I cannot remember on what – probably an attack on parliamentary democracy, a theme I then mistakenly favoured.'²⁹

17 Rose
Terrace,
Preston, as it
is now (with
blue plaque
to the right
of the door).



Thus there was little difference initially between the arguments he could put within a left-wing ILP branch and his intellectual support for the CPGB.

His parents' involvement in politics led to various national politicians of the Left staying at their house. These included such leading Labour figures as Arthur Henderson and George Lansbury, and also Harry Pollitt of the CPGB. Alan Taylor later commented that while a schoolboy he had heard Henderson speak in Preston, probably at a meeting chaired by his father. He recalled him as being 'a good speaker – very effectively making his points'. He added that, while he was something of the stolid trade unionist, 'that he had been a Methodist preacher came through very clearly'. As for Lansbury, like his father he had great admiration for him, observing: 'He was a very good speaker, putting a lot of heart into what he said... he had a lot of understanding of people. He was also a man with a good sense of humour. As a speaker he was good at lifting his audience.'³⁰ He also liked Pollitt, not least because he was willing to play solo whist.³¹ Perhaps being accustomed at an early age to talk with the Left's leading lights encouraged him later to expect to lead from the top in CND, a celebrity variant on *noblesse oblige*.

His parents were going their own ways in their lives as well as in their socialist politics. Percy Taylor sold his share of the family business in early 1920, at the peak of the post-war boom. After an unsuccessful attempt to develop a wholesale confectionery business, he devoted himself to local Labour politics and lived on his dwindling capital. He diligently attended the Sunday morning meetings of the Preston Trades Council from about 1921. He was elected on to the Board of Guardians (who ran the workhouse). He stood unsuccessfully as the Labour candidate for Preston Council for St John's ward in 1925, losing with 1587 votes to the successful Independent, who polled 1641 votes. He also lost in by-elections in Ashton and St Peter's wards. In October 1926 he lost again, this time in Fishwick ward, polling 1158 votes to the successful Conservative candidate's 1312 votes. The Conservative leader, in congratulating the successful candidate, said he would have disliked her seat being contested less 'had Comrade Taylor been a pukka [sic] working man. He added, 'I have no use for these rich intellectual doctrinaires who are sheltering under the Labour flag.' Percy Taylor won a by-election for Park ward, which followed an aldermanic elevation, on 24 November 1926 by 2371 to 1961 votes, and was the first Labour candidate to win that ward. He held it in the 1928 municipal elections by 2140 votes to the Conservative candidate's 2047 votes. He lost the seat in 1931, but returned to Preston Council in 1932 for Fishwick ward, winning by 1627 votes to the Conservative's 1472. He held the seat comfortably in 1935 and 1938, remaining a councillor until his death. The town council was his 'consuming interest'.³²

Connie Taylor was also involved in politics, supporting Henry Sara in his communist propaganda. Taylor recalled,

My mother, I think, still hankered to play a great revolutionary role. She made large financial contributions to the Communist Party, as the records of Special Branch probably show. But it was not her own money. It was relayed to her from a Soviet bank in London and she passed it on to the Communist Party, thus, it was hoped, concealing the source...

However, she did finance Sara for a very long time. Also, in 1924, the year that members of the Communist Party were banned by the Labour Party from standing as Labour candidates, she stood for Preston Council and lost as a Labour candidate for the St John's Ward (and was succeeded as candidate in 1925 by her husband).

However, her 'consuming interest' was the Labour colleges movement. Sara worked for the NCLC until 1948, and in the 1920s and 1930s he stayed with the Taylors for months each year while lecturing in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Connie Taylor was secretary of the Preston Labour College. Percy gave lectures on the cotton industry and wrote suitably hardline Marxist analyses of the industry's problems for *Plebs*.³³ Sometimes the teenage Alan Taylor went with his father or Sara, often operating the slide projector for illustrated talks. These experiences gave him the taste for such meetings, hence probably his enjoyment later in speaking to Historical Association meetings. In the 1920s Connie Taylor was also often away from home, sometimes for several weeks, travelling with Sara or one of her old school friends.

Percy Taylor also had his friend Doris Sharples, nicknamed 'Little Dolly'. She was a younger sister of Sydney Sharples, one of the local ILP members. Their father, a hairdresser, died of pneumonia in 1917, leaving a widow, four boys and seven girls. Sydney brought two of his sisters, Doris and her younger sister Hilda, to the ILP children's Christmas party in December 1919, at which Percy Taylor was dressed up as Father Christmas. Doris later recalled,

My younger sister Hilda had been very ill and Mr Taylor suggested he took her to stay with him and his wife for a week or two until she got stronger.

They lived in a big detached house in Ashton... They kept two maids who lived in, so Hilda was well looked after... Hilda stayed with them for about six weeks and certainly looked a lot better physically for her attention.

Doris Sharples had been born on 6 November 1909, so was a few years younger than Miriam would have been. For Percy Taylor she and Hilda

were substitutes. She recollected, 'He did with my sister and I [sic] all the things he should have done with his own children. He never stopped talking about little Miriam.' He took them for car rides in the countryside, bringing along 'one of his maids to accompany us'. He took them to Stratford-upon-Avon, where they saw a play, went on the river and visited Anne Hathaway's cottage. When Connie Taylor was abroad, Doris remembered,

Pa Taylor used to invite my sister and I [sic] to stay at their house for a few weeks during our school summer holidays. He still kept two maids in the house to look after us, and once or twice Alice, the cook, would come with us if we were travelling a long way and had to stay the night in a small hotel.

Percy Taylor also paid for the two girls' education at Moor Park High School for Girls, Preston, enabling them to stay until 14 (two years beyond the minimum age).³⁴

For Percy Taylor, the two girls made up not only for the dead daughter but also for the much-loved son away at boarding school. Over the years, 'Little Dolly' (she never grew taller than four feet eleven inches) became his favourite of the sisters. Alan Taylor liked her. He also helped his father conceal from his mother how often they met. Doris later commented of Percy Taylor, 'He was the nicest person I had ever met. I was young and impressionable then. I had lost my own father when I was seven. Percy had lost his own little girl when she was eighteen months old... So he was to me the father I had lost, and I was to him the daughter that he had lost.' She also delivered the judgement: 'He was worth two of Alan. He was a very good man.' In contrast, she observed of Connie Taylor, 'She was something of a dragon. She had been a teacher – but got married to get out of teaching. I should imagine she was an awful teacher as she did not like children.'³⁵ When Doris married Arthur Nicholson at Preston Registry Office in 1932, it was Percy Taylor who gave her away.³⁶

As well as enjoying the company of Doris Sharples, Percy continued to enjoy treating other children, notably his nephews and nieces. They later remembered him as their favourite uncle – 'a delightful person', 'a nice bloke'. He had a strong sense of fun, so much so that they warmly recalled that 'he wasn't like a grown-up at all'. On one occasion he had everybody in laughter when he rolled the housemaid up in a carpet. He also took his nephews and nieces on outings. Two were taken to the Isle of Man, where they went to Douglas. There they went round and round the harbour on open trams, enjoying 'a marvellous packed lunch of cold lamb chops', and even more throwing the bones on the promenade. When their mother was told of her brother-in-law's day out, she laughed, observing

'just like Percy'.³⁷ By all accounts he appears to have been the archetypal kind uncle.

Alan Taylor made friends at school and university, but made few at home. Having no surviving sisters, his contact with girls was infrequent. At Buxton, when he was nine or ten, he had been friendly with Eileen Mills, the daughter of the landlord of the George Hotel, and he also saw his cousins, Margery and Nancy Taylor. When he was a teenager he seems to have adopted a 'laddish' attitude at Bootham, at Oxford University and in Vienna. This is epitomised by his comment on entering York one afternoon: 'Our belief that the girls at the cocoa works supplemented their wages by immoral means was, I fear, unfounded.'³⁸ The corollary to this kind of immature macho posturing was an awkwardness with girls of his age.

In York the boys from Bootham met the girls from the Quaker girls' school, The Mount, on Sunday mornings at the Friends' Meeting and on a few special occasions. It is possible that, in his mind, the young Taylor made a brief acquaintanceship with Kathleen Constable into more of a friendship than she felt it to be.³⁹ However, it is also possible that in later life she downplayed her pleasure in his friendship. He first met her when they were the lead speakers in a joint debate between Bootham and The Mount on the motion 'That the progress of civilisation has not tended to increase the happiness of mankind', held in The Mount in March 1923. He must have been much impressed by her. Later that year, in December, he went to The Mount, when both schools put on open exhibitions of schoolwork, to hear Kathleen Constable give a short talk on Shakespeare's theatre, and sat listening attentively during it. He also sought her out at the Rowntree family's leaving party for pupils of both schools, held in their cocoa works. According to Kathleen Tillotson, this 'was regarded as something of an ordeal as we were supposed to mix up and we weren't used to mixing up'. She recalled she intended sitting just with her brother, but a shy Alan Taylor joined them, 'so there we were, three of us, sitting rather self-consciously and Alan doing almost all the talking'.⁴⁰

Notably shy and awkward with girls of his age, he did develop stronger friendships with a few boys of his age group. In his autobiography he wrote of one, George Clazy, 'Suddenly I fell in love with him. George was very highminded, next door to a prig, and our relations were entirely innocent. His attraction for me was as much intellectual as physical. When I first took up with him he was staggeringly beautiful.'⁴¹ This seems to be the not unusual puppy love of single-sex schools. Writing of the economic historian Eileen Power, Maxine Berg has observed of 'the passionate schoolgirl-like friendships of a single-sex college' that these 'could accommodate and transcend their relationships with the opposite sex and their marriages'.⁴² Alan Taylor had brief crushes of this kind at

school but, while having a few effusive male friendships which lasted long, his norm was undoubtedly heterosexual relationships. Where men were especially important in his later life they tended to be more father figures: Lewis Namier, A.P. Wadsworth and Beaverbrook.

George Clazy remained Taylor's best friend until well into his Oxford undergraduate days. His early departure from Bootham turned him into a pen pal and a friend to meet up with in vacations. Together they went on walking holidays in Scotland and the Lake District, including during the summers of 1925 and 1926. The two also holidayed in Germany and Austria in the summer of 1928, a year after Taylor had graduated. However, the friendship ended tragically, with a lovelorn Clazy committing suicide over an attractive young woman in mid-1929.⁴³ But by then Taylor was not emotionally involved, and apparently was not greatly upset by the news of his death.

Another particular friend at Bootham, albeit briefly, was Roger Moore. When George Clazy was not available to join Alan, his mother and Sara on a six-week holiday in Germany and France in summer 1924 he invited Moore, with whom he often discussed books and current affairs. In his autobiography, Taylor commented, 'He was a sweet character but he did not fit in. He was shocked by the incessant political arguments and Marxist talk.'⁴⁴ Kathleen Tillotson, who had known Moore longer than Taylor had, having known him at home as well as when he was at Bootham, was surprised at the time that they became friends: 'I wouldn't have thought of him as having very much in common with Alan... I think his particular interest was in mathematics... and he was a quieter type.' By chance, she was also surprised to come across them with Connie Taylor and Henry Sara on the boat back from the Continent in the late summer of 1924. It is notable that Alan Taylor's interest in her remained very high. She later recalled that, after the passengers had transferred from the boat, 'Alan came down the train looking for me, and sat down and talked to me on the journey and talked about what he had seen and had been doing.'⁴⁵

By the later years of his time at Bootham Taylor had made his name in the school. Dennis Constable, two years his junior, later judged him to have been 'quite impressively clever'. His sister, Kathleen, had been immediately impressed by his performance when she debated against him, later recalling that, while she had prepared her speech rather like an essay and half read it, 'his idea was much better, much more lively', using notes and contesting points she had made. That he was the Bootham choice to be its main speaker was indicative of how highly regarded his intellectual and debating skills were, while the other Bootham speaker was a member of the Rowntree family, Geoffrey (who seconded Kathleen Constable). In 1991 she gave the verdict that she 'did then realise that here was somebody very

clever, even then one could recognise it; [but] it is difficult to know how much one reads back'.⁴⁶

For one who prided himself on being a rebel, Alan Taylor clearly participated and competed. He had a substantial list of achievements in the Bootham school magazine on his leaving. As well as his exhibition at Oriel, it recorded:

He was on the Committee of the Natural History Club (1920–24), of which he was Secretary, and also the Committees of The Senior Essay and Debating Societies. He was a distinguished archaeologist, for he won the Old Scholars' Exhibition for Archaeology, and was placed several times in the Inter-Schools Diary competition, winning the first prize once. He was also the winner of the B.B. Letall Essay Prize (1921); and was a reeve during his last year.⁴⁷

He was sufficiently clever to win a scholarship to Oxford, but not the one he first went for. He was intensely competitive and tried to win a scholarship to Balliol. This he did not get. In his autobiography he explains his failure in terms of a radical riposte to what should be done to Oxford under a communist society, and to preference being given to a poorer student who would have been unable to study at Oxford without a scholarship. There seem to me to be two persuasive interpretations of his account other than just to register distaste at the 'blow it up after I have gone down' anecdote.⁴⁸ The first is to recognise it as a literary reply to the specific point put to him (what should be done with Oxford in a communist society?). It was an echo of the Eton headmaster's comment, when Henry Salt resigned as a master from the school in order to devote himself to humanitarian causes: 'Socialism! Then blow us up! There's nothing left for it but that.'⁴⁹ The second is to observe that a feature of his autobiography and other recollections is that he seems to have been unable to admit to having simply failed; there is usually a striking anecdote of a righteous and radical stand made to suggest that it was his radical views which cost him dearly. Probably these anecdotes were embellished after the event; but, possibly, in some cases, they were true accounts of his actions, but these were a defensive mechanism of one who was insecure and wanted an alibi for a failure. Whatever the case, this suggests that he felt greatly the need to achieve to impress his mother.

However, there is no reason to doubt that his success in winning a scholarship to Oriel College was due to his deep knowledge of Gothic architecture. But it was also buttressed by his broad knowledge stemming from very extensive reading.

While his family and Bootham were very big influences on the young Taylor, the third undoubtedly was his love of books. He was the archetypal young bookworm. He wrote in his autobiography of his early teens, 'Life

did not exist for me except at second hand – no experiences, no one to talk to. I had day dreams of becoming a revolutionary leader, curiously enough always dressed in Cromwellian armour.⁵⁰ Writing to Éva Haraszti in 1972 of his efforts to write about his youth in his autobiography he commented, ‘When I try to remember it, I can only remember the books I read, beginning with *Pilgrim’s Progress*.’⁵¹

He read from an early age. He greatly enjoyed such children’s classics as the books by Beatrix Potter, especially *The Tailor of Gloucester* (1902), Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), as well as the adventure stories of G.A. Henty, with *A Roving Commission* (1899) as his favourite. Later, he read all the Harrison Ainsworth historical novels, including *The Tower Of London* (1840), that were in Buxton public library. In contributing in 1974 to a *Times Literary Supplement* feature on the children’s books ‘that made the deepest impression ... in childhood’ he wrote of *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678): ‘I had it read to me before I could read. When I could, I read it again and again. I skipped the conversations. One of the greatest books in the world and the most subversive.’⁵² In early October 1979, when staying with Roy Avery (a former pupil) and his wife, Taylor surprised them, when the conversation got on to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, by quoting a sizeable section of it from memory.⁵³ From this and other nonconformist classics he acquired a habit of mind which on occasion came near to personifying people in Bunyanesque ways. This was notably so with the titles of book reviews or essays, such as ‘Mr High Mind’s Party’ or ‘Recalling Mr Fearful – for Truth’. He may well have been encouraged in this by Malcolm Muggeridge dubbing Ramsay MacDonald ‘Mr High Mind’ in his *The Thirties* (1940), a book which much influenced him.

He was also greatly influenced by Samuel Johnson and, especially, by James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791), which he described as ‘my favourite book’.⁵⁴ He liked to quote Macaulay: ‘Homer is not more decidedly the first of heroic poets, Shakespeare is not more decidedly the first of dramatists, Demosthenes is not more decidedly the first of orators, than Boswell is the first of biographers. He has no second.’ The sharp-tongued epigrammatic style of Johnson was a forerunner of Taylor’s comments, in sentiment as well as style:

Though we cannot out-vote them, we will out-argue them.
 Every man has a right to utter what he thinks is truth; and every other
 man has a right to knock him down for it.
 Martyrdom is the test.
 That fellow seems to possess but one idea, and that is a wrong one.

All are not Taylor but Dr Johnson (at least as recorded by Boswell); but all could be in Taylor’s writing.⁵⁵ He also drew examples from Johnson, as he

did from Bunyan. For instance, he joined Johnson in enjoying the chapter of Horrebow, *The Natural History of Iceland*, 'Concerning snakes': 'There are no snakes to be met throughout the whole island'. He applied the anecdote to a review of books searching for the roots of European unity.⁵⁶

Alan Taylor drew more from Johnson than style and examples. He tried to emulate him, to be a quick-witted and a great arguer. Boswell wrote, 'Johnson could not brook appearing to be worsted in argument, even when he had taken the wrong side, to shew the force and dexterity of his talents.' Taylor had a similar passion for winning an argument and for 'hitting hard', as he exhibited memorably on television current affairs discussion programmes in the 1950s. He also adopted Johnson's irascible persona from at least his late fifties, dealing tersely with anyone whose views or questions annoyed him. He also was Johnsonian in his pig-headed use of the terms 'Scotch' and 'Scotchmen', much annoying many people in the mid-1960s.⁵⁷

Alan Taylor knew his Boswell and quite a lot more about Dr Johnson. He knew how vivid the distinctions between Whigs and Tories were to Johnson and had reservations about Lewis Namier's rewriting of 1760s British party politics. He may well have warmed towards Johnson's almost postmodern reflections on history, made in the presence of Edward Gibbon: 'We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy, of history, is conjecture.'⁵⁸

When elderly, Taylor was asked by Michael Parkinson, on his BBC television 'chat show' 'Parkinson', whether he thought historians were born or made. In replying he said that he had been 'obsessed with history as a small boy'. He had enjoyed his father telling him stories. He had asked his father: 'What happened next?' and had been doing this ever since.⁵⁹ He was especially encouraged in his history reading at Bootham by Leslie Gilbert, a Manchester University graduate, who arrived as history master in 1920. Frank Thistlethwaite, who was also taught by Gilbert, later recalled him as 'a man with a first-class mind' who 'had a big impact on his best pupils, especially in encouraging them to write well. He stood for "no sloppy paragraphs".'⁶⁰ Gilbert, a devout Quaker (and keen cricketer), according to Alan Taylor wished 'to save my soul from Marxism'.⁶¹ In the short run he failed in this, but he spurred him on to read the multiple volumes of the classic historians and also the then current textbooks.

While the young Taylor read a very impressive quantity of great literature, he did read major works of history at Bootham and at Oxford. Indeed, he had read a substantial number of classic historical works even before arriving at Oxford.⁶² He built on this foundation while there.