

The Annals of Bertha

(First draft?)

I was born on the 26th March 1915 at 9.15 in the morning, at home at Castlehill, Lenzie, the second surviving child of John and Bertha McOuat. I had had brothers, I think two, who had died in infancy, and of whom I learned only vaguely. So as far as I was concerned, I was the middle of three—Jean, six years older and John known as Jack, who was eight years younger. Perhaps I early learned what it was to be a loner something which was to stand me in good stead in later life.

But let's go back to the beginning. I remember seeing a photograph of me in my high pram with my mother elegantly dressed, leaning over me a very dark haired babe who was passed over by a not too gracious friend, as having a head like a sweep's brush!

Opposite where I was born stood 'the Ferns' where grandfather and grandmother Johnston lived and after the death on active service in the first world war of her husband, Roderick Reid McQueen, Edith, my aunt made her home until the death of the grandparents when the Ferns was sold. Here the other members of the Johnston family, Meg with her husband Kenneth Duncan M.R.C.V.S. Edin., Bob married to Julie Ross, Billy married to Cissy McKenzie, Chic married to Ellie Crosthwaite (marriage dissolved) would foregather with their children, Kenneth Mackenzie (Kenzie) Meg's son, Julie, Sheila and Robert Cumine ('Bun') who died of peritonitis when only four years old, the children of Robert and Julie. Now that's put the family in the picture.

My early memories are of a pleasant childhood spent at first during the years of the first world war—did I remember an early armistice day when I stood with my mother at the door listening to the hooters sounding. I like to think so. A little later I certainly remember seeing the R34, the ill-fated airship flying serenely over the moss which adjoined our house. That same moss was our playground—a peaty boggy field where cattle grazed. We had so much fun there as a rule, but one day, when I was too young to stray on my own, I made off when the burn was in spate. I seem to remember a bottom spanking for that misdemeanour! On another occasion I was shut in the boxroom—a punishment for what crime I can't recollect. On the window sill were built up to dry out, blocks of washing soap, which had been cut from a large block. The idea came to me, 'I'll get my own back'—so I threw them each one through the open window into the garden below. Did I really do that, spiteful little monster that I was? I don't remember the outcome. Perhaps it's just as well but one thing is certain and that is that I at about four years old was sent to Sunday school with big sister Jean. This was held in the church hall of Lenzie

Parish Church, later called Lenzie Old Parish Church after the union in 1929, with the Lenzie United Free Church, and the leader or the superintendant as he was called was my uncle John Douglas, the lawyer husband of my father's sister, Maggie, a goodly man but hardly an inspiration to a restless four year old who was wearing new lace trimmed knickers which she wanted to show to all. He said 'I think you should bring her back when she is a little older, Jean' so there I was expelled just when my parents had hoped to effect a transformation in the naughty one. But one thing Uncle John Douglas did was to introduce to me, albeit rather early, the beautiful poem 'The Hound of Heaven' by Francis Thompson, as well as little floral text cards. It's strange how that at such a young age, I grasped something that was to mean so much to me in later life, long before I could even begin to understand the message. Is it too fanciful for me to think that here were the seeds of my religious faith, sown early and ever growing? But we must accept the cruel event—expelled I was!

Very soon a revolutionary method of teaching young people was introduced in L.O.P.—a primary Sunday School with a leader, a pianist and about six teen age teachers of which I was one. (So you see the light wasn't quite extinguished.) Little tables for expression work were set in a fan shape in front of the leader's desk, and on those we had sand trays and modeling clays on which we went to work. Sad to say my uncle was not impressed by such frivolity, deeming this new system a passing fancy. But pass it didn't and on its foundation was built a sound teaching system where little four year olds had a chance to learn of a faith which could be theirs in later life.

Before we leave Uncle John Douglas I remember his wife, my aunt Maggie McOuat an elder sister of my father John, her sister Jeannie who married George McNeal and who had a son Freddie whom I hardly knew. They lived for a time at Kirn on Clydeside in a charming house, Dalinmore. We visited there as a family and my strongest memory was of a plant in the conservatory which when we clapped our hands, shut up its leaves only to relax them again when all was quiet. Needless to say it was named the 'shut up plant'. A drink of warm milk from the cow didn't have the same appeal! Later when George and Jeannie died and only my cousin Freddie was left, the house was sold and became a rest home for the elderly. What source supplied George McNeal (I think he was spelt with an 'e') with the wherewithal allowing him to live in such comfort, I shall never know and for that matter where did the finances originate from allowing the other McOuats Mary, the maiden aunt, Alec also unmarried, Willie who married Connie Johnston (not of my mother's family) Matthew who married Ellie Murdoch and who lived in Liverpool until his death. I knew my grandmother Jean but the grandfather Alex ? had died before I was born. Every Sunday afternoon, we as a family were expected to visit

the old lady (she seemed old to me but in fact she may have been only in her sixties), and I remember her sitting in the drawing room of Birdston Villa, Lenzie, twiddling her thumbs surrounded as she was by Victorian furniture a piano and a harmonium. Who ever played those I can't think. On our departure for home on a cold frosty evening as we passed by the grandfather clock and the owls in glass case . . . inherited . . . I was given a 'boiling' as such hard sweeties were called 'to keep out the cold'. When she died when I wouldn't have reached my tenth birthday, I remember well my father telling my sister Jean and me of her death in our bedroom at Castlehill—so quietly and reverently he spoke. Now I realise that from four male McOuats there has gone on only my brother Jack and his son Gary, to carry on the name—so unlike the Bremners who bristle with male heirs—does this signify anything? Before I leave the McOuats at Birdston, a thought has dawned on me. When Mary died, Alec was left to be chief cook and bottle washer tending his mother, who could probably have done more than twiddle her thumbs, in a very much too large home—so different is the lot of present day aging parents! Is it any wonder that he later broke loose to sleep rough and so sadly to finish his days in what was known as a 'model lodging house'. What would the psychiatrists have to say in this case?

Now to my school days which owing to a very debilitating attack of scarlet fever, started later than was the norm . . . spent long weeks at Innellan . . . At age six, I was enrolled at Miss Dow's school in the south side of Lenzie, which was in Lanarkshire as opposed to Dunbartonshire in which county I was born. This necessitated a walk of a little less than a mile, so I was entrusted to the care of my grandfather Johnston, who, rigged out in tile hat, and a carnation in his button hole, set off for his jewellery business in Glasgow. He would see me over the railway bridge, leaving me to make the last part of the journey on my own. I shall always remember his hands, stained and grubby from the garden which he loved but redeemed to splendour by a larger than usual solitaire diamond ring! At Miss Dow's I learned gentility if nothing else. She tried in vain to cure my left handedness by asking me to do all my writing with my right hand, but by the time I came to the last line, I was allowed to lapse—not such a good idea, methinks. I still write with the left but in many other ways am ambidextrous. I wonder who first set the standard and made the ruling that the right was the right way and is left handedness inherited? In my near family there have been at least four 'corrie fisters'. During my recovery—Innellan . . .

So on to my 'big' school which was to the primary department of Lenzie Academy—just down Hawthorn Avenue from my home—no need for an escort now. I enjoyed my time there not showing any great prowess, indeed I think my reports could have been inscribed with the 'could do

better' tag. I entered into sport and gym—but never *could* climb ropes and when it came to running I was almost a non-starter. In the hockey eleven I was either in goal or at centre half where I accompanied the team to our conquests against neighbouring teams. I can't remember now how often we won or lost but one thing is for certain which is that I early took on the team spirit which is with me to this day. . . . Hockey ball on eye. Miss Bisset playing for Scotland . . . School finished at four when I would make my way to Gran Johnston's kitchen with its enormous Smith Wellstood range in its black leaded splendour and shining steel there to rock myself gently in the dear company of Lizzie in whom I could confide—she never seemed to tire of my confidences. Throughout my senior school days I had special friends—Esther Gillies (I wonder where she is now) and Nancy Weir who later was my bridesmaid. She and I used to play two piano duets in a music studio in Glasgow, but that was later when we were both married and expecting sons. She, dear Nancy fell ill with M.S. and died in the early seventies.