

Setting the Scene

Nineteen-thirty-five, held within its grasp, two important events... my birthday and The Silver Jubilee. The former, I am happily celebrating, the King's unfortunately, lasted only a year... It was also the year Stanley Baldwin elected Prime Minister... when massive unemployment the main social malaise... a fear I felt acutely, all my working life...

Perhaps my brother was named Stanley after Baldwin, or my middle name, given - after Arthur Balfour. How many of us know why we are so named...? However, my surname Kearey, I do know - comes from the anglicized Gaelic-Irish name O'Ciardha - a clan name, originating from central south-west Ireland. My maternal side, linked to the land, hails from Chard in Somerset.

The Jarrow march celebrated the first year of my birth. Later that year, anti-fascist activists persuaded Mosley to call-off his march... both these events took place the year King George V died. Two years later, Neville Chamberlain was elected to take control of that same party. The war years - of the Coalition party, headed by Winston Churchill, covered the first ten years of my life... The government of Clement Attlee and the Labour Party - his Second Ministry, coincided with the Korean War, the Berlin blockade and formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]. These, saw to the completion of my 'First Fifteen' years.

During this period, home meant North Harrow. A time, when the knife grinder and onion seller cycled round the roads... the milk was collected in churns, to be delivered by horse and cart, by the pint and quart... the coal by the coalman wearing his sacking hood and apron... and the bread - by van. Gypsies sold pegs and posies of heather at the door - leaving special chalk marks on the pavement. The Rag-a-bone man sang, and the scrap man called..., 'any-old-iron'. Biscuits and sugar sold loose... salt and soap by the block and flour and split peas by the bag... all obtained at Lipton's or the Home & Colonial. The butcher sold you fat - to melt down for lard, and 'skewered' meat... pinned tag, declared part and price. Greengrocers sold seasonal home-grown vegetables whilst the beetroot boiled in a bucket. Large blocks of chocolate and toffee, broken with a small brass hammer, sold in Woolworths, whose goods were displayed on open counters. Few aeroplanes seen or heard... no cars, ran down our road... not everyone had a telephone... there were no televisions, central heating systems, super-markets or electric toasters... Holes were dug in the road by workers using a sledgehammer first to break-up the concrete - taking it in turns to hammer an enormous chisel, held in long-handed grips... concrete mixed in the road by hand and plasterers stirred their daub adding horsehair. Builders used methods devised in the twenties.

The family diets consisted mainly of bread and jam, roast beef... hot, with roast potatoes and cabbage, cold-slice or minced with mashed potatoes... beef, perhaps stewed with dumplings... sausages, and very occasionally - fish on Fridays. Puddings, of rice or stewed fruit - perhaps in a pie... but always served with thin custard... Tea - the common drink... Long-grain rice, pasta, pizza, burgers, brown bread, packets of sauce mix and ground coffee - never! Chicken a rarity - a special treat for Christmas.

School life was coming to an end... my aunt, alerted by an overheard conversation - whilst serving at table, heard about the difficulty experienced 'finding an applicant to be an apprentice' - in an artists department. She spoke to her employer, the owner of the printing factory, about my interest in drawing... He invited me to attend an interview... On that momentous day: my hair slicked back by copious applications of water, my shoes, brilliantly polished by much hard work - shone like mirrors. The razor sharp creases, put into my trousers the night before - ironed, whilst listening to Tommy Handley. In my pocket was the six and sixpence - my earnings from my paper round... remained, unspent...

My father had generously paid for a weekly train ticket - an action meant to demonstrate to me the confidence he had in my ability to hold down my first job. He was very much of 'the old school'. Whilst I was looking forward to a bohemian life-style, he, understanding the ways of the world, looked towards *my* dedication and perseverance... to '*set me up*', for a lifetime of work!

Ever since leaving home, my thoughts consumed by doubt and fear. Every part of me charged with foreboding. My walk, dodging in and out of the streams of workers down Station Road, Neasden, took me away from the railway station... past the bombed out sidings and goods-yard that stretched as far as

Wembley. The soot blackened factory walls - hiding behind spearheaded railings... the endless rows of terraced Victorian villas - bravely advanced upon the pavement; their geranium filled window boxes trying to lend colourful distraction from the all too obvious bomb damage. A poster-hung hoarding exclaimed, by stark design, the virtues of Persil's whitening power and Tetley's superior leaf - promoted by a colourful plantation scene, which gave colour and softened the aspect... I reached the factory gate... Peering out from behind the grill of a small enquiry hatch a portly gatekeeper acknowledged my knock. He was attired in a brown, patched, warehouse coat, gripping a rolled-up cigarette between a few stained teeth, croaked a gruff, 'What-ja-want?' My fear returned; I thrust out my letter - Mr Oppenheimer's elaborate hand graced the paper... I made my first utterance since leaving home, 'Here sir!' The door opened... I reluctantly squeezed in. My working life began...