

Catholic childhood

Chapter 2: Stonyhurst

In September 1955 I joined the school train from Euston in London to Whalley in Lancashire, destination Stonyhurst College, the historic boys' boarding school founded in 1593 at St Omer, now in northern France, by the Jesuits, Catholic schools having been outlawed by Queen Elizabeth I's Protestant regime. The Jesuits no longer run it. Indeed you don't apparently have to be a Catholic to go there. Nor do you have to board or even be a boy. Stonyhurst is a co-educational school now (so presumably the pupils have stopped singing *The Stonyhurst Chorus* which goes "While boyhood doth to manhood grow/Be aye the same we used to know"). The school is professionally marketed – and far more expensive than it used to be, even allowing for inflation: from the publicity shots the facilities are improved beyond recognition and apparently there are hardly any Jesuits left on the staff.

Since I'd won an entrance scholarship I was placed in Lower Grammar "S", one of three streamed classes for 13-year-olds. Ours was the smallest: there were just 12 of us in a year of 50-60 boys. We were in no doubt about what was expected of scholars over the course of our Stonyhurst career: in with a scholarship, out with another one at Oxford or Cambridge. To this end we took five GCE O levels at the age of 15 after two years rather than the standard three: English language, French, maths, Latin and Greek (though I was spared Greek, having somehow avoided it at Ladycross, and learnt some geography instead). A levels followed two years later; then at 17 we had an extra year to study and compete for a university entrance scholarship. At the very least it was taken for granted that we would have a good chance of getting a place at one of the Oxbridge colleges – assuming that we behaved ourselves, worked hard and did as we were told.

But here's a funny thing. Until the age of about 14 I wasn't dreaming of a future in academe: I actually planned to be a soldier. I'd read Winston Churchill on his early life and saw myself following in his footsteps to Sandhurst, the military college for would-be officers, rather than university. In fact, looking back, a post-school course involving more practical work and physical activity would probably have suited me much better than conventional study for an academic degree. There was a problem, though, with soldiering: it involved trying to kill people.

And the question of killing people was already a worry. One of the first English essays I can remember writing at Stonyhurst was called "The election address of an independent candidate". Pages of platitudes attempting to justify the policies of the Conservative party ended with two big disagreements. Having been to France I objected to the British licensing laws which in those days banned pubs from serving beer in the afternoon – surely the best time of day to drink it, particularly in summer – and I objected to the death penalty for murder which, as I saw it, repeated the crime.

At first sight Stonyhurst seemed to be a very military school. Massive lifesize (or bigger) portraits of the seven old boys who had been awarded the Victoria Cross dominated the refectory (dining-room)* – though only later did I find out where Stonyhurst really stands in the hierarchy of VC-holders. Eton is said to be in first place with 37, more than five times the Stonyhurst score and as many as the next two public schools, Harrow (20) and Haileybury (17), put together; then come

Wellington (15), Cheltenham (14), Marlborough (13), Edinburgh (nine) and Clifton (eight); level with Stonyhurst on seven are Dulwich, Rugby and Westminster. Wikipedia, the source of these details, advises caution here for all sorts of reasons; one I found out for myself was that it's possible for a VC holder to be claimed by two schools because he actually went to two schools. Lieutenant Maurice Dease, the first VC of the first world war, spent several years at Stonyhurst before moving on to the army department of Wimbledon College, also a traditionally Jesuit institution. Not surprisingly he is claimed by both.

*The refectory also included a table where Oliver Cromwell is said to have slept in full armour on the eve of the battle of Preston in 1648.

Another one of the Stonyhurst seven was Aidan Liddell of the Royal Flying Corps. He appeared in a historic group photograph, published in July 1908 in the school magazine, along with the Irishman Joseph Plunkett. Some years later Liddell died of his wounds in France and was awarded the VC for bravery whereas Plunkett was executed by the British in Dublin for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising. This is a reminder that Stonyhurst alumni have taken part in all sorts of militant activities, on various sides, over the years from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to the contested British occupation of Ireland including Derry's Bloody Sunday in 1972. And one or two of them are highly likely to have taken a pot shot at somebody they went to school with.

In his memoir *Jesuit Child* (Michael Joseph, 1971) Macdonald Hastings (journalist father of journalist Max*) writes of a Stonyhurst contemporary, the IRA man Peter O'Flaherty: "He was my bosom pal at the age when boys first make close friends. He ultimately became a Southern Irish rebel, second-in-command of the IRA. He posted his name with others on the door of Southwark Cathedral in 1939 at a time when the IRA were laying bombs in suitcases about London."

*ex-editor of the London *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Telegraph*

Or a metaphorical pot shot, you might say. The right-wing journalist and popular historian Paul Johnson* was a Stonyhurst contemporary of Bruce Kent*, who was once a monsignor (a kind of super priest in the Catholic Church) and later became the top man in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The curiosity is that in their younger days Johnson was the radical who wrote passionately for, and edited, the left-wing *New Statesman* while Kent was the conservative clergyman who once described his irritation at CND demonstrators** getting in the way of the weddings he celebrated on Saturdays. Later in life Johnson and Kent swapped sides. Kent became an intrepid peace campaigner who impressed his opponents as well as his supporters while Johnson wrote Mrs Thatcher's speeches and was decorated by President George Bush. Perhaps this tendency to be militant rather than moderate, to insist on taking things to their logical conclusion, whatever it costs, is what a Stonyhurst schooling particularly seems to encourage.

*Johnson died in January 2023; Kent in June 2022.

**According to his obit in the *Daily Telegraph* he thought they were "absolute loonies".

Certainly in the 1950s this was a very military school. Membership of the army cadet force, the CCF, was compulsory from the day you arrived until the day you left, although I imagine it was formally described as "voluntary" (weird isn't it: "all our boys volunteer"). This meant playing soldiers for one and a half afternoons every week. And for three of your five years at school there was a week's

compulsory camp during the summer holidays. The CCF seemed to be everywhere: it organised the boys' Christmas concert and attached itself to various religious ceremonies. For example, we stayed at school for Holy Week and Easter unless they were very late in the year, and on the Sunday we went to mass in battledress so we could form up outside the church afterwards for an Easter parade.

On the feast of Corpus Christi in high summer the CCF provided a guard of honour for the procession of the blessed sacrament (consecrated wafer) from the church to an outside altar for the service of benediction. According to legend, once when a boy dropped his rifle in church the regimental sergeant major, who was evidently not a Catholic, shouted "Don't make a balls of it in front of your god". RSM Slack's normal, natural mode was the high-volume parade-ground bark and I don't think I ever saw him smile. I can hear him now screaming in broad Lancashire "Put Cadet --- on report, laffing on parade".

I was put on a charge just once – in bizarre circumstances. At summer CCF camp somewhere on Salisbury Plain I collapsed with a mild attack of dysentery and as a precaution was immediately sent to hospital. After 24 hours' observation I was pronounced fit to leave by the hospital doctor and invited to phone home – which I did, asking my mother to come and collect me. Six weeks later, back at school for the autumn term, I found myself on a charge for "leaving camp without permission". I suppose I was lucky it wasn't "desertion" or "mutiny" (I knew better than to point out in reply that I had, in fact, left camp with the CCF's permission and then the hospital with theirs).

Drill was the most boring bit of the CCF; exercises could be fun. Sometimes we got to use our 1914-18 rifles to fire blanks in the direction of another platoon from a safe distance. Indeed safety was paramount. When loading, unloading or reloading our rifles we were told to "keep your weapon pointed towards the ground rather than up in the air". One boy in my platoon misapplied the instruction by resting his loaded rifle on his foot and then accidentally touching the trigger so discharging a blank round. The blast penetrated his boot and gave him a flesh wound, thus getting him off CCF for weeks.

For me, the worst thing about the CCF was the uniform. Blacking your boots and polishing the brass bits of your webbing belt was nuisance enough but wearing battledress, made of rough serge, was itchy torture, above all if you had sensitive skin, as redheads like me tend to have. I started off suffering in silence. Then after a few weeks it occurred to me that I could wear my pyjamas underneath the battledress. It was a bit hot in the summer, admittedly, but not too hot: Lancashire in those days didn't seem to suffer much from global warming.

One problem remained: the coarse fabric of the standard-issue khaki shirt which, even if you wore a pyjama jacket underneath, chafed at the neck. What to do? Salvation came from an ad in my mother's newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*. "Ex-officers' khaki shirts for sale, stylish, comfortable..." I read, and immediately sent off my postal order for 19/6 (just less than £1). Only once did an officious boy NCO spot the difference between my officer's shirt and the standard-issue ones and order me to change shirts in future. I ignored him, crossed my fingers and continued to get away with it.

I was already ambivalent about the army in the autumn of 1956 when in a matter of weeks the whole political world was turned upside down by the double crisis of Suez and Hungary. I remember sharing in the excitement when "our troops" went in to try to recapture and secure the Suez Canal –

but the exhilaration didn't last. For one thing we eventually learnt that an ex-Stonyhurst boy was a casualty of the operation. This was Second-Lieutenant Anthony Moorhouse, who was doing his national service in the West Yorkshire regiment. His younger brother Peter was a pupil at Stonyhurst at the time, a senior cadet.

Anthony was captured by "terrorists" aka "resistance fighters" who planned to exchange him for Egyptian prisoners taken by the British. The kidnapers took him to a safe house where he was trussed, gagged and hidden under the floor. Four days later they came back to the safe house to find him dead. "There was a curfew and constant patrols," one of them said to the *Guardian* 50 years later, explaining why it took them so long.

Meanwhile the Hungarian rebels against their Communist regime were being brutally crushed by the Russian army. In our junior debating society the extraordinary, preposterous motion "This house deplors the failure of the western powers to declare war on Soviet Russia" was defeated by a mere two votes. The Jesuit priest who supervised the debate later commented in the school magazine: "A generous and quixotic leap to the side of the hard-pressed Hungarians might have paid off." Oh yes...and started the third world war?

These were crazy times. For many of my generation – and certainly for me – politics proper began in the autumn of 1956. How could you continue to support either the Russians in Hungary or the British who, we learnt, had colluded with Israel as well as France in attacking Egypt?* For once the Americans seemed to be the comparatively good guys because they insisted that the British and their allies should withdraw from Suez after their invasion. Both the Communist party worldwide and the Conservative party in Britain lost a lot of support in 1956 – and some of us on the threshold of politics really woke up.

*Paul Johnson, still in radical mode, wrote the first, and definitive, account of the collusion, *The Suez War*, MacGibbon & Kee, 1957

I had a relative called Bill Hyett (he was married to a cousin of my mother's) who was a staunch Liberal and had once been the Liberal party candidate for East Grinstead. When I went to see him after the Suez debacle he recalled the animated discussions he'd had over the years with my Conservative father. Now Bill compared Suez to the Ulster Unionist/Tory revolt against the threat of Irish Home Rule in 1913 when the "law and order" party showed itself as anything but. "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right" was their slogan. Bill was of course delighted that I was moving towards Liberalism.

But Stonyhurst certainly wasn't. Most people there – Jesuit staff and boys – were conventional, Conservative "patriots" who took world events in their stride without worrying too much about the ethics of what Britain was doing. One of my contemporaries, William Cash, known then as "Willy", who reinvented himself at Oxford as "Bill" and nowadays appears in public as "Sir Bill Cash MP", went on to become even more right-wing, obsessive and long-winded over Europe and Brexit than he was at school. Another contemporary was William "Stiffy" James, son and half-brother of Tory MPs (RA Butler was his godfather). Two exceptions to the right-wing mood were Anand Chitnis, a boy in my year whose elder brother Pratap, also a product of Stonyhurst, was a big shot in the Liberal party, and Peter Levi SJ, a scholastic, that is, a Jesuit in training so not yet a priest.

Peter, a classical scholar and poet who afterwards became Oxford professor of poetry (and later left the Jesuits and married Deirdre Craven, the widow of Cyril Connolly), was a tall, lanky figure with a stride to match and a high-pitched squeaky voice. In fact his voice was perfect for imitations of the Queen, who in those days had a particularly formal and strangulated delivery. “My husband and I...” was an unmistakable introductory phrase of hers, often mocked by the irreverent.

So when Peter, speaking in a school debate, suddenly used that phrase in a very recognisable voice there was instant reaction: sniggering, giggles, laughter... except from Edward Loden*, a senior and very keen boy soldier in the cadet force. Tight-lipped, white-faced (or was it in fact red?) with fury, he stormed out of the room and went to complain at this disgraceful example of *lèse-majesté*...not to a senior Jesuit but to a senior soldier, the CCF’s commanding officer, Colonel Louis Robertson.

*I’m afraid that Loden crops up later in this book (in Chapter 11) as an officer in the Parachute Regiment whose men committed the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972.

I don’t think there were any serious consequences but this was a striking reminder of where power and influence seemed to lie at Stonyhurst in the 1950s. It’s not entirely facetious to draw a parallel between the college at that time and Franco’s Spain. In both there was a fraternal relationship between the church and the military. In Spain the church, part of the coalition that had brought Franco to power, continued to validate the Francoist regime while at Stonyhurst the Jesuits conspicuously encouraged, and depended on, the cadet force and its military discipline.

Long after I left school I discovered an actual connection between Stonyhurst and Franco’s forces in the Spanish Civil War. If you read on, you’ll see why this wasn’t included in the school’s history curriculum – it wasn’t something for the Jesuits to boast about. The historian Richard Baxell, in his account of the British volunteers who came to Spain to fight for the Republic,* describes what happened to some International Brigaders who were captured: “The prisoners were taken individually to be interrogated by Don Pablo Merry del Val, the son of the former Spanish ambassador in London, who was a lawyer and a senior official in the Nationalist Ministry of Press and Propaganda. Del Val spoke impeccable English in an upper-class accent, having been educated at Stonyhurst, the same Jesuit-run English public school as a number of Rebel officers, including the head of the Nationalist press office, Luis Bolin.” The British prisoners were threatened with summary execution by their guards and had to watch their Spanish fellow-captives taken away to be shot.

**Unlikely Warriors*, Aurum Press, 2012

Bolin, born in 1894 to a Spanish father and an English mother, was a particularly nasty customer. He’d been one of the organisers of the secret flight in July 1936 that brought Franco from semi-exile in the Canaries to Morocco from where he launched the uprising that started the civil war. Bolin then flew to Rome where he negotiated an arms deal with Mussolini’s government. After the German aerial bombing of Guernica he orchestrated the propaganda campaign that claimed that the town had actually been destroyed by “Red saboteurs”.

But of the various Spanish old boys whose names crop up in accounts of the civil war, Gonzalo de Aguilera Munro, an aristocrat who followed his father to Stonyhurst as a pupil (1897-1904), was surely the nastiest piece of work. According to his own account, when the war started he lined up the labourers on his estate and shot six of them *pour encourager les autres*. At the end of his life,

obviously demented, he shot and killed his own two sons and he died in a mental hospital. During the war he was a press officer – he said things to journalists like: “It’s our programme, you understand, to exterminate a third of the male population of Spain. That will clean up the country and rid us of the proletariat.”

There were also British Stonyhurst old boys who prominently supported Franco – as did most upper-class, intellectual and literary Catholics. Bernard Wall, founder and editor of the pro-Franco quarterly *Colosseum*, devoted the October 1938 issue to the complete text of Primo de Rivera’s exposition of fascist doctrine. He even had good things to say about Hitler: racism, he argued, “gives the people unity and hope”. Tom Burns, the publisher (and later, diplomat and spy), went beyond verbal support in 1938 when he drove an ambulance, donated by English Catholics, to Burgos where the Nationalists had their headquarters.*

**Papa Spy* by Jimmy Burns, Walker & Co, New York, 2009. The book describes his father’s work as British press attaché in the Madrid embassy during the second world war. It involved covert propaganda and espionage.

By contrast another Stonyhurst old boy, Major Frank Foley, was responsible for saving thousands of Jews from the Nazis in the 1930s. At the British embassy in Berlin, as passport control officer, he arranged exit documents for would-be refugees in defiance of British government policy.**

** *Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews* by Michael Smith, Biteback 2016.

A key aspect of the Stonyhurst CCF was to encourage careers in the armed services for old boys. But in the late 1950s the policy didn’t seem to be working. In May 1959 a Catholic military chaplain wrote to the *Stonyhurst Magazine* to complain about the lack of old boys choosing the army as a career: “Not since 1956 has a Stonyhurst officer cadet passed out of Sandhurst. The last to enter from Stonyhurst was in 1954.” When Peter Levi wrote in reply, saying this wasn’t in fact a disaster, his letter was not published. A year or two later, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford and Peter was at Heythrop, a Jesuit college in Oxfordshire, I wrote inviting him to join an anti-nuclear Committee of 100 demonstration. He wrote back regretfully saying no: “As things are, there would be all hell let loose, & I don’t want to be thrown out of the Jesuits at this point for the sake of a single political demonstration.”

In the 1950s Britain’s foreign policy was dominated by brutal colonial repression in places like Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus. In Kenya at Hola camp 11 Mau Mau detainees were clubbed to death; in Cyprus there were frequent reports of brutality and torture, although at the time they were officially denied. France was fighting the Algerian war in a similar way: an early copy of the left-wing weekly *L’Express* would arrive uncensored in the school library to be followed by the officially doctored version – it was a simple matter to compare the two, looking for the blank columns in the second copy to show where reports of torture or other atrocities by the army or police had been cut by the French authorities.

Hanging and the campaign to abolish it continued to be a big issue in Britain until the mid-1960s but an even bigger one increasingly was the H-bomb. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was founded in early 1958 and the first Aldermaston march took place that Easter. Just as in the Suez crisis, where there didn’t seem to be any case at all in favour of the Israeli-British-French attack on

Egypt, I failed to see how Catholics could justify supporting the use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons. According to classic Catholic doctrine a “just war” must meet certain criteria – including the reasonable supposition that it wouldn’t do more harm than good. So how could the mass destruction of civilian targets qualify? How could there be a “just” nuclear war?

I can’t be sure in which order I read the two arguments that follow; they make a powerful pragmatic point – but what’s it worth in moral terms? A historian commenting on Oliver Cromwell’s massacres of civilians after the capture of Drogheda and Wexford during his Irish campaign in 1649 said they could certainly be considered “war crimes” but since they had the effect of terrifying the Catholic population, and therefore shortening the war, they could be justified – just as the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were “war crimes” but had a similar effect. They too terrified the Japanese enemy and so helped to bring the war to an end. Winston Churchill writing about the second world war appealed to the same argument but the other way round: Hiroshima and Nagasaki were terrible things to inflict on a civilian population but, if they persuaded the Japanese to stop fighting, they were justified just as Cromwell’s massacres had been.

Some Catholics in the 1950s did seem to see the issue of the H-bomb more clearly: the French bishops, for example, came out against it and in the Jesuit periodical *The Month* Archbishop Roberts SJ argued cogently and eloquently that the use of nuclear weapons couldn’t possibly be justified on moral grounds. But it has taken 60 years or so – and the passage of I don’t know how many popes – for the Vatican to take up a principled position on the issue. If the Catholic Church has been in decline in my lifetime this has to be one of the reasons – this and welcoming as a convert a war criminal like Tony Blair without any apparent “act of contrition” for his collaboration with the United States in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. And as for Boris Johnson, “the first Catholic prime minister”, you really couldn’t make it up. If lying is what politicians routinely do, at least conventional ones pretend that they don’t. Boris shows his contempt for the hoi polloi by changing his tune when it suits him and without apology. As his ex-editor Max Hastings once put it, “I would not take Boris’s word about whether it is Monday or Tuesday.”

In the spring of 1959, my last year at Stonyhurst, I went to see the headmaster, Father Boyle SJ, to ask permission to go on CND’s anti-nuclear Aldermaston march rather than stay at school for Holy Week and the Easter CCF parade. I quoted Archbishop Roberts though I made it clear that I had no intention of marching under a banner proclaiming “Stonyhurst says no to nuclear weapons” – this would have been obvious nonsense since most of the school would certainly have said yes to them. But Fr Boyle was adamant that I wouldn’t be allowed to march anyway in what was officially term time. Stonyhurst couldn’t possibly sanction such behaviour – what would our military old boys think?

I think that was the moment when I decided that I needed to leave school as soon as possible.

A year or so earlier, under the regime of Fr Boyle’s predecessor, Fr Vavasour, there’d been a truly shocking incident – though I only learnt the details of it years later. Four boys had gone out drinking in the neighbouring town of Preston on a school whole holiday. One of them, drunk, fell down the steps of a public toilet, broke his leg and was taken to hospital. The hospital, reasonably enough, phoned the college. The other three boys, instead of sensibly making their inconspicuous way back to Stonyhurst, went to the hospital to check on the patient’s condition – and walked into the arms of a couple of waiting Jesuits.

All four boys were instantly expelled, though the sentence was later technically commuted to “rustication” so that the miscreants would qualify for membership of the old boys’ association. For three of them, 18-year-olds who were leaving that year, this was hardly even a punishment – the holidays started early, that was all. But for the fourth boy, aged 17, who was planning to come back to school in the autumn, expulsion was very bad news. Finding somewhere else to take his A-levels was a problem for him and his parents.

I was told all this years later by his younger brother, then an eight-year-old pupil at Hodder, the Stonyhurst prep school, which was a few minutes’ walk away. Boys at the college with younger brothers at Hodder used to visit them on Sundays. So when his elder brother didn’t turn up one Sunday he was mystified: was his brother ill? There was no word of explanation from anyone in authority and he only found out that his brother had been expelled when their father wrote and told him several weeks later.

When the England rugby player Kyran Bracken and his elder brother John were at Stonyhurst in the 1980s, the penalty for drinking was suspension rather than expulsion. John was caught drinking and suspended. But because the Bracken parents were away, he couldn’t be sent home so he was transferred to the school infirmary to serve his 10-day sentence in solitary confinement, though he was allowed to go for a run from time to time. Kyran could take him academic work to do but not speak to him.*

**Behind the Scrum, Kyran Bracken, Orion 2004*

This cold inhuman treatment shows, I think, that there are even worse things in school life than corporal punishment. As a body the Stonyhurst Jesuits were certainly callous, unfeeling – and shouldn’t really have been in charge of a boys’ boarding school. But though they were repressive they were not particularly sadistic – for the time. Corporal punishment was routine in the 1950s in both private and state schools. At Stonyhurst, beatings on the hand were administered by the Jesuit-on-duty using a ferula (a length of whalebone wrapped in rubber). You queued up outside his office, then reported the number of strokes you’d been awarded by whoever it was you’d fallen foul of.

I was beaten only once at Stonyhurst as an individual (there were also one or two occasions where we were punished collectively). One summer’s day I decided to check the lunchtime cricket scoreboard on the radio before going outside to the playground as we were programmed to do. I was spotted on the way to the playroom where the radio was and sentenced to three strokes of the ferula. This was a highly educative experience and confirmed my growing understanding that authority usually got things wrong, that if you trusted the people above you, you risked doing yourself an injury. I wasn’t an anarchist yet but I was moving in that direction.

And the Jesuits, known for their highly sophisticated and intense supervision, were on my case. Here’s a specimen comment in an end-of-term report from my playroom master* when I was 14: “He seems to have become somewhat bumptious – excessively self-confident & independent.” And a year later (from the same Jesuit): “He seems a very conceited boy in great need of some basic humility.” From a different Jesuit another year later: “There is a grave danger of his becoming an eccentric and leading others the same way.” And the headmaster chipped in with “he may be wasting time in talk and ‘discussion’, not spending sufficient time on the solid work that is necessary if the discussion is to be of value”.

*A playroom master is the equivalent of a house master in a conventional English public school: the traditional Jesuit method is to group pupils laterally in playrooms according to age rather than vertically in houses made up of all age-groups. One intended effect of this is to reduce the opportunities for boys of different ages to mix and form close friendships – including sexual ones. At Stonyhurst, although younger, prettier boys were known as “tarts” and were chatted up by older boys, I think that was as far as it went at that time (the late 1950s). However, there were various scandals later on, some apparently involving people I was at school with who progressed into teaching whether in or out of the Jesuit order.

Stonyhurst certainly provided many opportunities for “talk and discussion”: besides the Catholic Evidence Guild (see below), there were debating societies for junior and senior boys and as you went up the school you could join specialist discussion groups, which often included the teachers, in subjects like history, science, literature. In the literary one my paper on the novels of Graham Greene was preceded by one from Anthony Levi SJ (a scholastic like his brother Peter) on comedy in literature and followed by Peter himself on the poet WB Yeats. The literary highpoint of the year was a visit by two of his contemporaries, Julian Mitchell and Dom Moraes, who read a selection of modern poetry including their own work.

Once we had a visit from the journalist Christopher Hollis who had previously taught at Stonyhurst and later sent his sons* there. As we gathered in the school library I wondered if Hollis’s talk would essentially be a repetition of his latest piece in the *Spectator*, a copy of which lay behind him on the table. It was, and I learnt the valuable lesson that all freelance journalists need to learn: good stories can profitably be told (and sold) more than once. By now I was thinking about journalism as a career. I’d had two brief spells of work experience which both led in the same direction. The first was a week on the *Sevenoaks News*, a small independent weekly, where the editor gave me simple assignments and corrected my death reports: when I wrote “so-and-so died” he would change it to “passed away” or for variation “passed over”. I also wrote a feature on Esperanto, the constructed international language, based on interviewing a local linguist.

*One of them, my contemporary Nigel Hollis, went into publishing and died aged 45.

The second spell of work experience was even briefer. I spent a monotonous, mindless day in a workshop shaping lengths of aluminium tubing on a lathe. The pay was one shilling and sixpence an hour – the price of a pint of beer. It was a day well spent because not to be repeated. At the end of it I collected my 12 shillings and said politely that I wouldn’t be back. Schoolwork leading to Oxford and the possibility of journalism suddenly seemed very attractive by comparison.

At school there were play-reading groups (I read the part of Jimmy Porter in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*) and plays produced on stage, sometimes with boy producers. Subversive-sounding literature (*Howl* by Allen Ginsburg) circulated and I went regularly with Reynold Clark, the head of English, to Preston public library to choose books for the senior library, including ones by Gide, Camus and Sartre which were on the Index of books that Catholics were theoretically forbidden to read*. But we were effectively exempt from this ban because our role was to prepare ourselves to engage in public debate with Protestants and atheists at university and beyond. So we needed to know our enemy and their thoughts and arguments.

*Graham Greene's novels were not on the Index – but nor were they available in the main Stonyhurst library which was open to 12-year-olds. When Greene visited the college the Jesuit showing him round felt he had to apologise for this. Ever the diplomat, Greene apparently replied that he quite understood and agreed that moral complexity, as in *The Heart of the Matter*, wasn't suitable fare for juniors.

Then of course there was a boys' literary magazine; ours was called the *Eagle* (I think it was first published well before the boys' comic of that name which was launched in 1950). Among the pieces I wrote – various short stories, a polemical attack on boxing (after I'd given it up, of course), a gossip column – there was one that caused a minor theological/political crisis. It was a vigorous defence of the proposal to replace Latin by English in the celebration of the mass. In the end my article was printed with a disclaimer, dictated by Stonyhurst's leading Jesuit theologian, including a highly guarded sentence that I certainly would not have written: "The text of the latest Papal pronouncement does not, I understand, encourage one to believe that any *major* change is likely." A few years later, of course, the "major change" took place as the Catholic church dragged itself into the 20th century and replaced Latin by the vernacular.

Religion was *the* dominant feature of school life. In fact it's difficult to imagine a more intensely Catholic school than Stonyhurst was in the 1950s. Winter and summer, every day started with an electric wake-up bell at 6.55am followed by mass in the boys' chapel at 7.25am. On Sunday there was a second, sung mass in the parish church which was in the college grounds and a benediction service in the evening. Every day there was grace before meals, of course, and finally "night prayers", after which there was compulsory silence until breakfast next day. Here's a sample of the kind of thing that sent us to bed:

"Death is often nearer than you imagine; and many who have promised themselves a long life have suddenly been cut off in their sins. Are you so ready that, if death should come tonight, you would not be surprised? Do not live in a state in which you dare not die."

Or how about this, possibly even more chilling?

"You can only die once and if you die ill the loss is irreparable. If anyone from hell could return to life, how would he prepare himself for death? Let the misery of others be an instruction to you."

These examples were published in *The Manual of Prayers for Youth* (1935 edition); they are not included in today's *Stonyhurst Prayer Book* which is an altogether gentler affair.

The chapel was sometimes used in times of crisis by the headmaster, a Jesuit whose formal title was Rector, for what in a conventional school would be special assemblies. Fr Vavasour's were legendary. One I remember featured what he called "saving" your "brother" who was caught up in some "immoral" activity by reporting him. But to be fair to my fellow-pupils I don't think they ever did collaborate with the authorities in this way.

At the beginning of the school year we spent several days in retreat. Ordinary social activities were out, talking above all – though at table "please pass the salt" was just about OK. As well as devotional books in the library there was a supply of religious pamphlets published by the English Catholic Truth Society and its sterner Irish equivalent. One of the Irish ones warned against what Catholics call "the dangerous occasions of sin" – in this case ballroom dancing. It's only fair to add

that in my last term the Jesuits invited the Harrogate convent girls to a dance at Stonyhurst, though their supervision made sinning difficult. That was the occasion after which I tried to write a gossip column – hard work in the circumstances...and ultimately unrewarded. Research* has revealed that the piece wasn't in the end published.

*thanks, Peter F

As well as compulsory religious activities, such as the Easter church parade and the Corpus Christi procession, there were all sorts of voluntary ones. In May devout and diligent boys wrote verses in praise of the Virgin Mary in French, Greek or Latin to be displayed outside the chapel, English not being considered suitable for this high-status task. Then for planned prayer, discussion and good works you could join the Sodality of the Assumption of Our Lady, which organised various spiritual activities and insisted on a quarter of an hour's private meditation every day. Or there was the Guild of St Peter whose members prayed together and marched to the church before mass on the feast of saints Peter and Paul.

For the opportunity to defend the faith in public you could join the Catholic Evidence Guild. After studying a topic like confession or papal infallibility you stood on a soapbox in the playground and practised your speech on anyone who was prepared to listen. Then you took your test. This meant standing at the teacher's desk in a classroom to deliver a 10-15 minute speech to three Jesuits sitting at the back and answering their questions. If you passed, you were licensed for that topic at traditional speakers' venues like Hyde Park and Tower Hill in London and the Pier Head in Liverpool or local ones in Preston and Blackburn.

My favourite topic was "The Problem of Evil". I was already highly sceptical about the so-called proofs for the existence of God – they made sense if you believed in God but weren't very convincing if you didn't – so I was delighted to find something I could defend with complete conviction. Essentially, disposing of "the problem of evil" was providing an answer to those people who said: "An omnipotent God can't possibly allow pain or sin or disability and be called merciful." To which the simple answer was: "Oh yes, he can precisely because he's all-powerful – in other words he can define what is merciful and what isn't." This kind of reasoning is sometimes dismissed as "jesuitical" but it made, and makes, sense to me.

The most pervasive religious observance at Stonyhurst was that every piece of schoolwork you did was prefaced by the dedication AMDG (ad majorem dei gloriam – to the greater glory of God). It wasn't, strictly speaking, compulsory but everybody did it. And the boys who wanted to go the extra mile added at the end of their work LDS or even LDS ET BVM (laus deo semper – praise always be to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary).

The one thing the Jesuits couldn't change was the weather which at Stonyhurst has always been cold, dismal and damp. Indeed if you've ever wondered why Lancashire was one of the few places in England where Catholicism was still widely practised in the 18th century – where Catholic landowners often managed to survive, for the most part keeping their lands as well as their faith – the weather must have had something to do with it. Today Lancashire holds two of England's all-time rainfall records: highest in five minutes – 32mm (at Preston not far from Stonyhurst in 1893) and highest in 90 minutes – 117mm (at Dunsop Valley, even nearer, in 1967).

The weather (and therefore the mud and soggy of the sports pitches) surely explains why Stonyhurst has usually been better at rugby than cricket. There were two internationals in my year, Barry O'Driscoll, first of a famous Irish rugby family, and Nick Drake-Lee, who played in the front row for England while still at university. I particularly remember the summer of 1958 when we had to play cricket on wet, soggy, pitches for the entire term except for a single weekend. Winter was a depressing time and seemed to go on much longer than it did in the south-east of England. Most years I seemed to spend a week in the infirmary with flu, bronchitis or whatever. In fact I was permanently cold in winter and took to wearing three pullovers under my tweed jacket. Curiously, authoritarian and prescriptive as it was, Stonyhurst in the 1950s didn't have a strict school uniform policy in the normal sense. We wore tweed jackets and grey flannels in the week and dark suits on Sundays.

The weather and the college building – at one time, apparently, the biggest in England under a single roof – made a strong impression on Stonyhurst's most famous old boy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*. When Sherlock Holmes leaves 221B Baker Street he often seems to encounter fog and in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, set on Dartmoor, the hall with its twin towers is recognisably Stonyhurst. So of course is the damp, foggy weather. But the landscape around Stonyhurst could be inspirational, as the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Hobbit romances of JRR Tolkien certainly show. And nowadays visitors flock to the surrounding countryside as well as the school.

*There is (or certainly was in the 1950s) a Conan Doyle anecdote: his place in church was directly below the pulpit where the regular preacher had the unfortunate habit of spraying his spittle when waxing rhetorical. So CD decided one Sunday to bring in an umbrella which he put up when the preacher started. History doesn't record what happened next but presumably he was beaten, as he was according to his own account, *Memories and Adventures: An Autobiography*, regularly and often.

But what of the teaching? I was taught by some outstanding people, both Jesuits and laymen: Reynold Clark and Peter Hardwick (English); Fr Rea and Fr Holt (history); Fr Hennessy and Mr Dow (French). The prefect of studies (academic headmaster) was Fr Freddie Turner, a classics specialist who once told me off for including on a notice I put up what he called "a split infinitive" – which I found out later was what classicists really wanted to be a mistake in English but actually wasn't. Still, he was a distinguished scholar and fully deserved the half-page obituary he got in the *Guardian* from one of his star pupils, Mark Thompson, once boss of the BBC.

I can't remember a single case of what you might call "bad teaching" that we in the scholarship stream had to put up with. The nearest thing would be when Captain Lawrence, a military man who was the adjutant in the cadet force, was drafted in as our English teacher (I think it was to replace Peter Hardwick who was ill) in our O-level year. In his second week he announced that since *some* of us displayed weaknesses in the construction of our English essays, we would *all* have to make a formal plan and write it out in our exercise books before we wrote the actual essay.

I saw this as a technical challenge, as I observed to anyone who would listen. What you do is leave a few lines blank, write the essay as usual, then work out the "plan" from the essay; that way, you've hardly had to do much extra work and you've made sure that the plan and the finished essay match perfectly.

I've always enjoyed showing off, particularly in English. I'd inherited from my father a copy of the classic usage guide by HW Fowler called *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* which includes the following advice on the spelling of program(me): "...-am was the regular spelling until the 19th c...& is preferable, as conforming to the usual English representation of Greek *gramma* in *anagram*, *cryptogram*, *diagram*, *telegram* &." So in this case the Americans have always been right as opposed to the snobbish English Victorians who insisted on copying the French spelling *programme*.

Having read Fowler, I couldn't wait to include the word in an essay. As I expected it came back from Mr Hardwick with "program" marked wrong so I pointed out to him that the mighty Fowler agreed with me. When he'd checked the reference Mr Hardwick graciously accepted that I was right but we then agreed that it was probably a good idea to keep to the conventional English spelling, particularly in public exams.

For O level maths we scholars had an eccentric master who certainly couldn't have coped with the boys of our age in the other classes. We gave him an easy ride because he was a brilliant teacher as well as friendly and consistently good-humoured. His name was Percy ("Fishy") Haddock and as he explained to every new class at the beginning of the year, he wasn't really a maths master at all; in fact his proper job was teaching A-level chemistry; but he'd been dragooned into O-level maths teaching years before and because he was successful he was stuck with it. He was certainly good at explaining theorems to bright boys but a bit otherworldly and more than a bit deaf.

Here follows one of those classic school anecdotes. It was a warm, sluggish summer afternoon and we were struggling to concentrate and stay awake. Fishy was at the blackboard buried in a quadratic equation. Suddenly a boy on my right picked up his *Hillard & Botting* (a textbook familiar to Latin scholars of the time) and hurled it at my head. I ducked and the book smashed into the window.

Even Fishy heard the crash and besides the window was now badly cracked. He left the blackboard and went over to the window. "What's happened? I wonder what's caused this?" he muttered, talking speculatively to himself. Then, after a pause, "Could it have been a bird perhaps, flying at the window from outside?" "Yes, sir, it was a bird, sir; we saw it, sir" we shouted – and that, fortunately, was that.

But we did pass O-level maths, some of us with very high marks, and the scientists among us teamed up with Fishy again in the chemistry lab. Not me, however: of the three A-level subject streams available (classics, science and modern subjects) I took the third, modern subjects, which consisted of history, English literature and French literature. And after A level I specialised in history aiming at an entrance scholarship at one of the Oxford colleges. As I've already said, by now I was determined to leave Stonyhurst as soon as possible. And the simplest way of doing that was to be awarded a university scholarship. So in the autumn term I applied myself and, as it turned out, I got lucky at the first attempt.