

Introduction.

Robert Kemp was a playwright who spoke and often wrote in the Scots tongue. His plays reflect his ease in the language and a deep knowledge of Scotland's literature and history. Many of the characters and stories are drawn from Scotland's past and its rich folklore. He wrote upwards of 120 plays, for radio and theatre, in English and Scots, but is remembered chiefly for his adaptation of Sir David Lyndsay's the Three Estates for the Edinburgh Festival in 1948, and for two Moliere adaptations into Scots, Let Wives Tak Tent, and the Laird O Grippy.

One of his own plays, "The Asset", was criticised by the Church of Scotland, which led to Robert leaving the Church for a year. Another play, a Trump for Jericho, dramatises the row which split the Kirk after the Disruption of 1844. There were many other history plays: about Robert Burns "The Other Dear Charmer", Robert the Bruce "The King of Scots", "Rob Roy Macgregor", Queen Margaret - "The Saxon Saint", "Master John Knox".

Robert's plays are still occasionally performed by amateur dramatic societies looking for Scots texts. His text of the Three Estates, which skillfully united excerpts from the original with his own lines, was revived several times and was performed in Poland in the 1980s.

Robert also wrote nine novels, of which "the Malacca Cane" and "Gretna Green" were the most successful. A fluent speaker of French and German, Robert was also a journalist, who worked for the BBC in the Second World War.

Writing about Robert in “Scotland’s books; A History of Scottish Literature”, Robert Crawford wrote: “In a period when little Scottish literature or history was part of the school curriculum and when Scots or Gaelic was still frowned on in many classrooms, imaginative writing played its traditional, substantial part in keeping national narratives familiar.”

Robert’s son, Arnold, who was himself a newspaper editor, wrote: “ I do not think it is simply filial piety which persuades me that his work is neglected and misunderstood. For about 15 years after the war his work in the theatre achieved a consistent popular success in Scotland and he left behind a body of writing and comment about the Scottish condition which was passionate and sometimes agonised.”

Robert’s playscripts, his letters and diaries are held in the Robert Kemp archive in the National Library of Scotland. The programmes and posters and other theatrical memorabilia of the post- Second World War period are in the Scottish Theatre Archive at Glasgow University.

This memoir quotes extensively from Robert’s writings and from Arnold’s journalism and an unpublished travelogue and memoir; “The Sentimental Tourist”.

Chapter One: An Orkney Childhood.

Robert Kemp was born in Orkney in 1908, where his father Arnold Low Kemp, a minister of the Church of Scotland had been posted to the island of Hoy two years earlier. What follows is an account of Robert's childhood by his son, Arnold.

The manse at Longhope was in the Georgian style and left Robert with an almost passionate admiration for Georgian architecture. It influenced his decision after the Second World War to settle in a house in Georgian style on the edge of the New Town of Edinburgh. His study there, I recollect, was the cosiest room in the house. He seemed to have no objection to company while he worked at the typewriter, and so the family would congregate before the fire, to read or do the crossword. His father's study in the manse was also especially snug, the most interesting and important room in the house and, I suspect, a refuge from the physical chores of life going on around him. As a boy Arnold Low had worn a caliper on his leg. He had had the good sense to marry an exceptionally gifted and energetic woman. Robina Simpson, who had been a school

headmistress in Banchory. The rooms, when my father revisited the manse in 1967, just before his death, inevitably seemed smaller:

“I have a vivid memory of standing forlornly by my mother’s bed when she and my father were ill with ptomaine poisoning through having eaten a badly dressed crab. I must have been very young at the time, for the level of the bed was also that of my chin ... I tend to shy off dressed crab to this day.’

Most of Robert’s memories of Orkney were idyllic. Much of the happiness of his infancy derived from friendship with a crippled cobbler called David Heddle who live not far away. This man, Robert wrote, had a truly marvellous understanding of children and interest in them. In the season 1955-56 a play called *Our Maggy* was performed by the Edinburgh Gateway Company, of which my father was a founder and chairman from 1953 to 1960. The author’s name was given as D. H. Heddle, a pseudonym used by Robert. His reason for doing so was probably because he had two more serious plays under his own name in the repertory of that season. *Conspirators* and *A Nest of Singing Birds* (originally called *The Scientific Singers*). But it was also a tribute to a man of whom he spoke to the end of his life with affection.

Other recollections were of finding a beautiful golden plover dead on the path outside his bedroom window. It had dashed itself to death against the panes on a stormy night. The island was not only without trees but without cars also; but he did see an early seaplane swoop down on the waters of the bay, its splashing floats reminding him of the way swans and ducks extend their webbed feet in the same operation.

Shopping sometimes acquired the sheen of romance. When a schooner known

as the floating shop sailed into the bay, his father and he would row out to make some purchases, more for the fun of it than from necessity. One morning my father went to school and emerged into the playground to find that the Grand Fleet had arrived in Scapa Flow. His surprise at its sudden appearance formed a favourite anecdote later in his life. He wrote:

“We had crossed the moor in the morning in a light mist. When we got out for playtime at eleven, there was the fleet – the battleships in the flow and the auxiliaries in our bay of Longhope – as if they had materialised by magic ... We children all went careering down to the shore and stood there shouting and waving our arms, no doubt as queer and gibbering a horde of savages as any that greeted the vessels of Captain Cook amid the Pacific Isles.”

This must have taken place in July 1914. On the last day of that month the Grand Fleet was at its battle stations, the battleships at Scapa Flow and Cromarty, the battle cruisers at Rosyth. In the dramatic arrival of the fleet Robert saw, in recollection, the sudden manifestation of the industrial world in a community largely innocent of it. He saw that his boyhood had been spent in an utterly different world, a world closer to the ballads and the old folk-songs, indeed still part of it, still without a bridgehead to the new world of mechanical invention, mass media, and easy transport. He recalled:

“That night when the British Grand Fleet arrived there was some fog and the sirens of the escort destroyers were heard whooping in the Pentland Firth. One old lady exclaimed: ‘Mercy me, what unwardly beast is that?’... She still belonged to the old world where terror presented itself in the shape of a medieval monster. You must not think of those isles folk as unintelligent. Their intelligence was undoubtedly a great deal higher than you might expect to find in some urban districts today.

My first school was on this island and my impression is that the pupils were clever though intensely shy. It is perhaps difficult for those of you who have lived always in towns to understand the reserve of those who have grown up in solitude for some of the children who came to school from lonely crofts, even to answer the

teacher's simplest question required an intense inward struggle.... They were children, too, for whom folk tales – tales perhaps about trolls or fairies – were still real.”

At 11 p.m. on August 4 the Admiralty flashed the signal to all HM ships and naval establishments: ‘Commence hostilities against Germany’. Arnold Low Kemp was chaplain to the Royal Navy at Scapa Flow from 1911 to 1915; he offered the naval officers the hospitality of the manse. Because of the presence of the Grand Fleet, the population of Orkney was increased by 100,000 between 1914 and 1919, a number four times that of the resident population.

On another occasion Robert nearly drowned when going in a party to visit a battleship; a sudden storm caught them and threatened to dash them against the side of the vessel. One of the party, an agile young Orcadian, saved the day by shinning up a rope onto the battleship and then towing them round to the lee side.

In 1916 Lord Kitchener set off from Scapa Flow aboard HMS Hampshire. It struck a mine and he went down with it, making no attempt to escape; he had been warned of a watery death by a fortune-teller. By then the Kemps had left Orkney and gone to Millbrex in Buchan. They missed too the scuttling of the German Fleet by its crews at the end of the First World War.

Scapa Flow's old naval importance has given it a new tourist attraction. Divers come to explore the wrecks which form a unique underwater record of one of the great periods of British and German maritime history. Three battleships and four cruisers remain on the seabed.

When Robert revisited Orkney in 1967, the BBC was filming an ascent by

mountaineers of the Old Man of Hoy. At the time the rural economy was in decline and incomers and weekenders had yet to make their arrival in any significant numbers. He found at Rackwick about 20 or 30 crofts still standing but he believed all the residents had left except one or two, although some were used on summer weekends by people from Stromness. An old man scurried by. He had refused to leave despite efforts to persuade him to do so.

Robert retained a love of the Orkney landscape with its shifting light and colour. He wrote of his feelings on hearing a BBC commentator describe Longhope, the centre of his world for seven years, as 'outlandish'.

"Last year I met some of my school fellows of these days again. They had become grizzled seamen and seasonal farmers in the interval ... I also met a very remarkable former naval man who began life in the East End of London, spent 40 years in warships, and now lives here. As we walked one day he suddenly remarked, 'If I were to leave this place I would die'. So, as you rush off to catch a bus or take part in a traffic jam in the name of civilisation and metropolitanism, don't waste all your sympathy on the Orcadians, but keep some for yourselves."

Chapter Two: Between the Wars

Arnold Low Kemp's next posting was to Aberdeenshire, to the village of Birse, where Robert, his younger sister Robin and brother Arnold, grew up. Robert attended the local primary school and then Robert Gordon's High School in Aberdeen, where he stayed with an aunt during the week, and later he went to Aberdeen University, where he studied French and German and won a gold medal.

At the age of 16, Robert went to Yorkshire to stay with his aunt Norah Kemp. An early woman medical graduate of Glasgow University, Norah graduated in medicine from Queen Margaret College in 1897, two years after the first women doctors qualified there and about 20 years after women first won the right to practise. In 1898 she was appointed the first female assistant medical officer – and indeed the first female doctor to serve in any asylum throughout Yorkshire – at The Retreat, the famous Quaker institution for the mentally disturbed. At the time, Norah was living in a large house in The Mount. His stay made a profound impression on Robert, who wrote:

The nearest I approached to foreign travel was a visit to York. At that time I had indeed paid brief visits to the great metropolitan centres, Edinburgh and Glasgow. I suppose I must have been an osprey more at home in northern latitudes. [My aunt] invited me to stay with her for a few weeks one summer. She was in general practice

and lived in a gracious house in a street which, like many others, has been ruined by thunderous heavy traffic on the main road to Leeds... It may be easily imagined what an effect this vast and beautiful cathedral had on an impressionable boy. I was spellbound by the narrow old cobbled streets across which the half-timbered houses leaned to kiss one another.

His aunt had interesting friends. Some had literary interests, some were Quakers.

He continued:

This holiday was a sort of landmark in my life. It took me away from the narrow routine of 'swotting' for the next exam; it showed me a great deal of visible, standing beauty such as I had never imagined could exist; and it enabled me to look at my own country with new eyes on my return.

Of course, I was a bit of a solitary and a natural flaneur. I never grew weary wandering about ... I was taken to hear the sung Communion service in the Minster. This was my first experience of English church music, and when I saw the organist was Edward Bairstow, musicians will understand what a revelation it was ...

There was also a very good repertory theatre in York, to which my aunt took me for every production. I don't think I should have enjoyed it so much if I had been in a school party ... I should not have had that taste of Quaker evenings, with coffee and biscuits and intellectual conversation.

Arnold wrote:

Robert's ambition of writing for the theatre was undoubtedly reinforced by this visit. One of his comedies, *Henrietta MD*, was to deal with women's struggles to be admitted to medical education. It was set in Edinburgh and based on the story of Sophia Jex-Blake, who was a medical student at Edinburgh from 1869 to 1872 but was with the other women refused permission to graduate. She founded the London School of Medicine for Women in 1874 and gained the legal right to practise in Britain in 1877. She worked as a doctor in Edinburgh until 1899. To her Norah owed the possibility of her own career.

Norah lived expansively but must have been of an optimistic and improvident disposition for she died impoverished. Robert had to pay for the funeral. But he remembered her with lively affection. 'It is a strange and touching fact that when she lay dying she was unable to recall what had happened five minutes before, but spoke at length of a performance of *The School for Scandal* which we saw on that, by then, remote visit'.

In 1918, when the First World War ended, Robert was ten. When World War Two broke out he was 31. Looking back in later life he described this period as ending in “ a grinding funereal fugue in a minor key.

“I can remember the ringing of the bell of the little church (in Aberdeenshire in 1918) for victory! What a hollow victory that turned out to be. We know now that it's impossible to come well out of a war and one must fix one's eyes firmly upon the spectre of defeat and remind oneself that it is actually far worse to lose a war than to win it. If you doubt me on that, I think any German would confirm it. And I don't mean that in a sarcastic way.

My last year at school and my university days fell in the twenties, therefore I am bound to regard myself as made by the twenties. Of course, the twenties are regarded as the period of the Bright Young people, of drink and drugs, of promiscuity in love, of Noel Coward's views of the present and Lytton Strachey's views of the past. It was the first age of jazz in this country, of popular motorcars, of the gramophone and broadcasting.

In Aberdeen where I was then, we were no doubt protected from the more extreme forms of the mood of the day. Yet I can remember so many things that were typical of that period – the shell-shocked wreck of a master whose life we made a long misery. There was a very tough bad boy in our class, I remember – in some moods a little charmer, but towards all masters an implacable foe. This unfortunate master could

not wield the tawse to any great effect, but one day he determined to make an example of the little ruffian. Whenever this master began to tawse, the entire class would count aloud. I remember as if it were yesterday we had reached thirty seven. The boy was not in the least humbled. After the thirty-seventh stroke he addressed the master quite respectfully, saying "Please sir, when's the night shift coming on?"

It is funny, I think – if you can forget about the master. It was the first and only time I had ever seen a man foam at the mouth and afterwards, terrified by what we had done, we met and decided that we would change our behaviour.

The enormous slaughter of the war did undoubtedly cause both hysteria and cynicism. It also led to such a pointed questioning of all the gods of our father that the said deities have never really recovered, which in some cases, though not all, was probably a good thing.

Oddly enough the men who made the revolution in politics, Bernard Shaw, Wells, the Webbs were not of the generation who died in the war. They were much older men. They now stepped into the gap, and the theories they preached found wider and wider acceptance. I think that in so far as I was a typical creature of the twenties, I was typical in my general distrust, even in my cynicism which has since protected me from the glib appeal of more than one political doctrine. I was so distrustful that I even distrusted scepticism.

There was what is sometimes called a breakdown of discipline and morality. This was inevitable, once one had discarded the standards which had before so rigidly obtained. Now that the men had lost confidence, the women seized their great chance.

It is true that women had, since the end of the previous century been able to enter such professions as medicine. My own aunt was one of the early women medical graduates of the University of Glasgow. But it took the first war thoroughly to demolish the defences of male privilege. That was when our present ideas about professional women really took root, of men and women working on an equal footing, of women combining, or trying to combine marriage with a career, and of a woman's right to do so if she chose.

While the twenties Charlestoned and black-bottomed and Noel Coward sang "Dance Little Lady," an American in London, T.S.Eliot was setting down the moral climate of defeat. "The Waste Land" he called it. ..it is difficult and depressing. And almost before even the intellectuals could take in what the Waste Land was about, the twenties had officially ended.

I had just gone to work, in England. With my wage of five pounds a week I thought myself a man of great substance. When I travelled for my newspaper, I had a first class ticket. I could charge for taxis without question and had a generous overnight allowance.

I can remember the slump beginning. It showed first in a sudden and alarming falling off of advertisements in the paper. From feeling secure we were all wondering how long the paper could afford to keep us on. The frightful unemployment of the thirties began. I remember visiting the Rhonnda to write about unemployment, and Jarrow, where Palmer's shipyard closed down and threw the entire population out of work. It was true that the twenties had shown the great example of labour troubles in the

general strike, in 1926 - a desperate show by organized labour to secure, by unconstitutional means, a dominating position, but the thirties saw something more remarkable and very sad, the patience and despair of the working classes in the face of idleness and want.

My recollection of the twenties is of on the whole a gay and merry epoch, with lots of fun and games and adventures that did no one much harm. The thirties were a nightmare. I expect that was why many people were genuinely relieved when the second war broke out. The thirties resembled a grinding funereal fugue, in a minor key."

Chapter Three: Meta

While at Aberdeen University, he became engaged to Meta. They married in 1935, when Robert was working for the Manchester Guardian.

Born in 1905, Meta was the youngest of 14 children of a fishing family in Rosehearty. All of the surviving children (one died at sea) attended Aberdeen University - the eldest paying for the next in line and so on down to Meta.

After her marriage Meta continued to work as an English teacher and her stable income helped to sustain the household, particularly after 1947 when Robert gave up his job and became a full-time writer.

Arnold wrote:

Rosehearty was built on herring and was a thriving centre for fishing and boatbuilding. Much of the life ebbed from it long ago, to Fraserburgh three miles along the coast where my mother went to school at the academy, and beyond; indeed the rise of Fraserburgh began before the end of the nineteenth century. The herring trade there peaked in 1913 and the decline of the villages continued in the depressed decades after the war. The village fishermen had used small boats but now the trade was dominated by larger boats using ports with railheads. The aftermath of war and political upheaval had closed the main markets in Germany and Russia.

Life in Rosehearty, where Meta grew up in some poverty, the youngest of 14, had its darker side. The community was self-contained and shut-faced. Her father, John Strachan, came from Inverallochy, the son of a fisherman, and, although it was only a few miles from Rosehearty, was always regarded as an outsider, a fact of which my mother would speak with resentment to the end of her days. He was a cooper to trade, a mason, a Unitarian, and an accomplished flautist, but had to supplement his income by going to the fishing. When he returned, my mother recalled, there would be a pile of sovereigns on the sideboard.

The locals had a grim and even cruel humour. My mother would tell us a story about a chest of drawers which had 'gone down the wrong side of the family'. The undeserving recipient of this legacy had a baby but it died in infancy. 'Ah weel', said one of the dispossessed. 'She'll have a lang drawer tae bury it in'. Another story concerned a man at the point of death. The woman sitting with him had to go out on an errand. 'If ye feel yersel slipping away', she instructed, 'juist lean ower and blaw oot the candle'.

Most villagers were called Downie, Duthie, or Ritchie (my grandmother's maiden name), and inevitably there was in-breeding. Various deformities and genetic weaknesses were present in the population (although Rosehearty also produced gifted sons and daughters who went on to find distinction elsewhere). As a rather timid young girl my mother would make a detour on the way to school to avoid the sinister and menacing figure of what we would now recognise as a child with severe disabilities.

T-names, or nicknames, were given to identify the many people likely to share the same name. As new generations appeared, such names became ever more elaborate though brevity was not unknown: Meta lost a brother at sea; he was Jim One (a younger brother was Jim Two). The oldest boy was Ritchie. He and others in turn helped younger ones through university. Bob became headmaster of the primary school at Avoch in the Black Isle, where my mother recalled some of the happiest times of her young life while on holiday. Ritchie eventually emigrated to Winnipeg. My grandmother, Margaret, took my mother with her to try it for a while, probably after the

death of her husband in 1914 of stomach cancer at the age of 54, but could not settle. One night soon after their arrival there was a violent electrical storm which terrified her and she never recovered her nerve. (She was, it would seem, a timorous woman. John Strachan went to Glasgow, presumably in the hope of finding work, and they were married in 1882. One day at a street market my grandmother saw a pickpocket plying his trade. She was frightened by the thought of having to vie evidence and they went north again more or less at once). My mother attended business school in Winnipeg but soon she and her mother returned to Scotland; Meta went to Aberdeen University, where she met my father, and then completed her training as a teacher.

We have a glimpse of her, shortly before she married my father, who had by that time joined the *Manchester Guardian*, in a memoir written by my Uncle Arnold, my father's young brother. Meta invited him to join her nephew Bill on holiday at her mother's house in Mid Street in the summer of 1932 when he was about 14 years old. The boys ate mackerel so fresh that it might have leapt out of the sea into the pan; they had never tasted fish like it. One night the boys were taken out by one of Meta's uncles in his drift-netter. They sailed from Fraserburgh and their trip was particularly memorable because a large whale surfaced beside the boat. The skipper seemed vexed and Addie thought he was anxious in case it harmed his nets. The whale blew a couple of times before disappearing. When the nets were let out and the engines switched off, the boat rolled in the swell. The boys were sick. They curled up in bunks: nephew Bill disgraced himself by vomiting all over the boots of one of the fishermen. But in the morning the nets were pulled in, the fish salted and stored, and the engines restarted. Their sea-sickness over, the boys ate herring, split and grilled, with bread and jam, all washed down by strong tea, and were met by Meta on the shore.

Meta would entertain us with tales of Rosehearty's eccentric ways, recounted with liberal quotations in the Scots speech of her youth, often incomprehensible to her own children growing up in an age of ever more powerful standardising forces. It was a centre of secession and freemasonry, and she was raised in the United Free Church

(which eventually was reunited with the Church of Scotland in 1929, with a few dissidents persisting). It also did not celebrate Christmas but had extensive festivities at New Year. The Mason's Walk on New Year's Day was a famous event. Until recently Christmas was regarded as the English and Irish festival and New Year the Scots. Over the years the English Christmas, Christian but always with its pagan undertones, has merged with Scotland's Auld Yuill, more frankly irreligious with its echoes of pre-Christian ceremonial. Commercial gods are mostly worshipped now in both countries. There was among stricter Presbyterians a doctrinal objection to the idolatrous symbolism of the Christmas feast but there was also considerable confusion about the calendar. Until it was reformed in 1752, Christmas in Scotland had officially fallen on January 5. It was then switched to December 25. (Christ's actual date of birth remains unknown even to modern scholarship).

In the fishing villages the old Druidic fire festivals refused to die. On Auld Yuill, the name they gave to Hogmanay, the clavier, a lighted torch, was carried round the fishing boats to bring them luck in the coming season. This old custom had continued despite frequent denunciations by kirk sessions from the Reformation on. In Rosehearty they hung up their stockings not on Christmas Eve but on Auld Yuill, and the celebrations ran on until about January 11.

Old photographs of Rosehearty's folk belie the rather dark image it has in my mind: they look cheerful and their camaraderie is evident. Edwin Muir wrote of the 'communal joy', lost now to modern society, of hay-making or when blankets, in their annual washing on the forms, were tramped by women's feet in tubs. The magic of those times is captured in *To See Ourselves*, old photographs of rural Scotland collected by Dorothy I. Kidd. Nor were the old folks as stern as their hard religion implied, although they were suspicious of anything 'arty-farty'. Robert, remembering their kindness and their mirth, wrote:

It was one of the paradoxes about the 'old folks' that their behaviour was a good deal gentler than one would guess by merely reading of their stern professions. Their toughness grew from never being very far from want.

Once, when we were teenagers, my parents took us back to Rosehearty. It was claustrophobic; we had a sense of being watched from behind twitching curtains and we were glad to go home. Meta was deflated and disappointed.

Robert respected the godliness of the fisher folk. He told the story of a north-east fisherman who was asked to read the lesson at a funeral in Great Yarmouth: he gave the passage by heart, without glancing at the Bible. Fishermen were also fatalistic, and did not learn to swim, for swimming might prolong their agony if they fell overboard. They knew their boots would quickly drag them down. Shortly after his marriage Robert contributed to the *Manchester Guardian* an account of a wedding in a fishing village in the north-east. It gives a picture of the life which my mother was leaving behind, and which was already dying:

In the vanished age the wife might wear black velvet with bugles; today, most likely, she would choose white satin. In any case her marriage would have many odd appearances to the southern eye. The bride, long betrothed, waits to hear what has been her sweetheart's fortune at the fishing. One day the boats return from the 'Highlands' or from East Anglia. Bad luck may ruin every hope, and there is nothing to do but wait again, but perhaps the fisherman returns with the money sticking out of his pockets. On the first possible Sunday the couple are 'cried' from the pulpit, and then without delay are wed. The story goes that in one town after a good fishing the list of banns was so long that it took the minister half an hour, and that at one point a man rose up to say, 'Please sir, ye're marrying me to the wrong woman'.

The wedding will be none of your quiet affairs. A hall, standing in the middle of the grey village, which seems gay at the return of its sailors, will be hired and three hundred guests invited. Sometimes the malicious call this a 'beggars' wedding' because of the number of presents that are bound to fall into the lap of the bride and bridegroom. Oddly enough – though not so odd if one considers the economics of the matter – the groom, 'flush' of cash after the prosperous season, pays for the entertainment and for his bride's gown. He also gives his mother a silk dress for the occasion. On the other hand, the bride's parents give her a 'providing' of blankets and of linen that will last her all her days. After the ceremony the huge company sits down to a 'knife and fork' tea, the relatives of both parties being grouped at the high table around the tiered and terraced bride's-cake. In the lull, while tea is being cleared away, the bride slips home to lay aside her veil and then returns to the dance, where she distributes her favours equally among all the young men of her acquaintance.

That is a brief gaiety, though it is a mistake to suppose that a hard life implies unhappiness. After marriage the bearing of children and the life of toil soon rob

a young woman of her bloom. She has to adapt herself to the round of net-mending, knitting, or 'wyving' as she would call it, washing, and cooking. It is not long before her man is away with his drifter again. Henceforth the weather and the boats are uppermost in her mind, and as a protection from anxiety she develops the brand of fatalism expressed in the saying of one woman I knew, 'if he has mair days, he'll come through'. No doubt the fisher wife sleeps little in a gale, but she has another narcotic beside her fatalism. It is the day-long labour at the repair of nets. The fisherman will have piled all his torn nets into the work shed or outhouse, and there his wife will sit threading the meshes with her flying white bone needle. Her fingers are stained with creosote oil which is used to preserve the thread. The house, too, reeks of it. It is a quick and clever worker who can mend one net a day.

The women sit at the net mending from early morning till the light fades at night. If they are in company they beguile the time by singing, the telling of stories, and the raking up of old gossip. Another occupation is the knitting of the 'ganzies' or heavy sea jerseys which the fishermen wear. In the long winter evenings they sit and 'wyve' by the light of the oil lamp; in the summer they may be seen walking out of an evening along the rocks. The ends of the big steel needles are stuck in a sheath round the waists, and even as the women walk the needles are flying.

And there are the vast bakings of 'boat's breid', the oatcakes with which the fishermen provision their boats, or the boilings of jam, for the day is past when it was thought that herring and tattie and oatmeal were sufficient fare for the fishing.

When the fleet is at some distant fishing ground the life of the wife is one of privation – she does not bother much about her food if there is no man to appreciate it. At the same time she is saving for the joyous day when her man comes home. Then the table will be groaning under its weight of food at every meal, and she will no doubt be told how lucky she is to be at home all the time where plenty reigns!

Chapter Four: A Writing Life

Robert began his writing career at the Manchester Guardian in 1929, He married Meta, during his eight year stint at the Guardian and they spent the early years of their married life in Lancashire. Among their friends were the historian AJP Taylor and his wife Margaret Adams who were living in the Peak District and the couples went on picnics together where the bohemian Taylors and their friends would strip off and skinny dip – much to the embarrassment of shy Meta. Arnold wrote:

Taylor, in his Personal History 1983, mentions his friendship with my parents, who often came to stay at weekends, but seems to have been unaware of any unease.

He recalls that after a long search he found a pool in the Dane Valley where he could dive and swim. “We spent many summer days there, sunbathing and swimming naked.

The newspaper was a second university for Robert, where he found himself drawn towards the theatre, writing more and more criticism. He met several people who influenced and inspired him in those years – one was the German expressionist dramatist Ernst Toller, whom he sat with during the rehearsals of his play “Draw the Fires” performed in Manchester in 1935. Toller, a German Jew who had been traumatised by the first world war, hanged himself in 1939 in New

York after his family had been rounded up and sent to concentration camps.

Chapter Three: War

In 1937, one of Robert's first radio plays, "The Country Mouse Goes to Town," was successfully broadcast, beginning his career as a dramatist. It is light comedy – but the tension of the pre-war atmosphere is discernible.

In it, Robert satirises Hitler:

"Fade up a voice making an emotional speech in German

"Buchan Mouse: My but that lad's in a rage about something"

"Kelvinside Mouse: Oh that's Herr Mouser. He does it every night.

"Buchan Mouse: But what does he gang on about?"

"Kelvinside Mouse: He thinks that whenever anything goes wrong with the grey mice, it's the fault of the white mice and if a white mouse marries a grey one it's race pollution...now he's demanding a fair share of the world's cheese.

"Broadcaster: Here is the news bulletin – in the House of Mouse, I beg your pardon, in the Hice of Mice. I'm sorry, I'll begin that sentence again. In the House of Mice this evening the Prime Mouse made his eagerly awaited statement on the cheese situation. The Government, he said, was constantly thinking of cheese and viewed the turn which

events had taken with the gravest concern. Nevertheless they did not feel warranted in taking the initiative at this stage. They would continue to act in concert with France and all that he could say was that he hoped in the near future to take the House into his confidence.

“About the same time Herr Mouser, addressing an audience of forty thousand grey whiskers at Nuremberg reiterated his demand for more cheese. Britain, he said, had Cheshire, Cheddar, Wensleydale, Stilton, Lancashire and above all Leigh Toasters, while France retained with a grasp of iron Camembert, Port Salut, Brie, Pont L’Eveque and Roquefort. Such a balance of cheese could only constitute a menace to the peace of mousedom.”

Robert was recruited around this time to the BBC in London by an innovative features director Laurence Gilliam. In an address at Gilliam’s funeral in 1964 Robert said:

“I remember one day, walking with Laurence by the side of Broadcasting House and hearing, from an open window of the room where it was being recorded, the voice of Hitler rising to a maniac’s shriek at the last Nuremberg rally before he marched. The thought of the ordeal to come made us both sick at heart.

“The hour approaching was to be Laurence’s finest as it was of many others in their different spheres. He led a massive attack, which I refuse to call by the dubious name of propaganda, because it in fact asserted those truths about the Nazis to which

so many had tried to blind themselves, and which subsequent history has established beyond all question.”

For his first factual programme, broadcast in 1938, Robert later recalled that he: “had the honour of being attacked by Goebbels in his paper Der Angriff”.

“An influential committee of English Jews had bought out two shiploads of children, some of them very gifted. They arrived at Harwich in the snow. They were accommodated in the flimsy chalets of a holiday camp. I did a very simple programme about them.”

The children, he later wrote, had been “torn from their families, sometimes in humiliating circumstances, their parents having been prevented from going onto the platforms to see them off.”

In a talk given many years after the war, he revealed he had been privy to a rift between the people who welcomed them in Britain.

“I arrived in the camp one morning to find a section of the receiving committee in a state of extreme annoyance, even anger. They were what I would term the liberal section, the section who perhaps had drifted away from their religion, even if they clung to their sense of race and were Zionists. I asked what was the matter. One lady said to me: ‘Can you believe it? These poor children arrive here, newly separated from their families, all in a neurotic state, and what do you think, two of our rabbis talked to them

last night. When they were finished the children were hysterical and we couldn't get them to go to sleep. Really these rabbis should never have been allowed within a mile of the camp.'

I found out that these two rabbis had come and insisted upon addressing the children, assembled in the dining hall. They had urged the children never to forget the moment of flight, humiliation and exile. Never to forget the persecution of their race which they were now suffering and which their parents would suffer in worse form. They tied the whole history of the Jewish people, from its bondage to the progroms of mediaeval Europe to the occasion. They brought to mind persecutions in every age and country and strove to stamp their plight for ever on the minds of the children, who were in tears and worse by the end of it, sick for their parents and filled with terror. Is it any wonder that the helpers should have been angry, yet who will maintain that the rabbis were utterly without a case, even if they chose a method that was like searing the children with a red hot iron.

The children had been reduced to hysteria. And yet I could see what the rabbis meant.

He continued:

This was typical of the atmosphere of the thirties. The Spanish civil war was another voice in that fugue. Britain was atrophied for various reasons, not least because it didn't care for Franco, nor was it enamoured with the protagonists on the other side. We were unwilling to interfere in the affairs of others, just as we were unwilling to take

our courage in both hands and stop Mussolini in Abyssinia. The slaughter of the first war was still a potent force. The voters who supported Neville Chamberlain were those who remembered the nightmare of 1914-18. They hid their heads in the sands of peace at any price and whatever the cost to others. They lacked the courage to see that the conflict could not longer be avoided.

But if the slump ended the twenties, the declaration of war put paid to the thirties in an even grimmer manner. And the miracle of it is that the moaners of the thirties were exactly the same people who became the heroes of the war. Sometimes it is tempting to think as if one set went underground for a spell and another emerged. But of course they were the same people, finding new impulses and new courage.”

Arnold later wrote: “Robert Kemp took no part in the Services. When called up he was found to have tuberculosis and it was feared he would not live; his mother nursed him back to health in the clean air of Birse on eggs and cream, a rich diet in times of privation but not one of which modern medicine would approve.”

Robert was dispatched to Paris in the “phoney war” the period before the battle of France in May 1940. Below are some extracts from his diary from this time.

14 April 1940: I reached the Gare du Nord at 9.40 last night. The Frenchman opposite where I sat from Calais was convinced of the resolute spirit of France and Great Britain.

Paris is not very bleak. There is street lighting but of course no illuminated signs

allowed. The lights of motors are not nearly so subdued as in London. I was told by the barman in the hotel that at the moment of the 'alerte' all the lights were switched off! Must verify this.

The French are very calm and brave about this war. Really very, very admirable seeing they catch it without much warning and have been catching it for a long time, since 1870.

...Went to see 'Cyrano' but had a terrible seat and could not see. I could not make out much despite knowing the play pretty well. Really how can the theatre compete with the cinema when the cheaper places are so bad.

Dinner at Quasimodo's – the joy of Quasimodo's was to see the maitre d'hotel playing with fire – in preparing the Crepe Suzette. He tossed the burning spirit around like a conjurer.

Some streets have blue lights, others shaded white ones. The great white bulbs of the lamps that light the Champs Elysee like pearls in peacetime are blacked out for half or three quarters on top but something of the peace time effect remains, - the long running perspective of lamps.

The moon was shining over the Seine and the Dame was outlined against the sky. Paris by moonlight – it is almost worth keeping the blackout for that.

April 15. Today I changed £5 and got 860 F. M. Lion said 'France will be saved again by her wine' referring to all the cellars.

April 18. Evacuation is by family which in effect means that the wife and children are evacuated and then voluntarily. If, as in England, they had evacuated children alone, there would have been revolution!

Paris is looking just heaven tonight. The sun setting below the Arc de Triomphe. Green light and shady clouds. Trees all fresh and young in the Champs-Elysee. A moon overhead although it was still light.

Always many women in cafes writing letters – no doubt to their mobilised husbands etc.

Naturally there are lots of soldiers on leave etc and it is wonderful to see the girls sparkle in this company. The idea is to send them away happy and I am sure they do. So of course would British women but I doubt if many could do it in such a sparkling way.

During the phoney war, Robert was also sent to Holland – where he heard from a Dutch radio journalist about a “courtesy visit” from an engineer of the Reichs Rundfunk Gesellschaft, the German broadcasting organisation but the engineer “had very soon forgotten his courtesy and spoken as if he planned to take the transmitter over the next day” - which he did some months later.

For the most part for Robert and Meta the war years were: “miserable days of bombs and reverses, when one year seemed to drag into another without summer or winter and life held small delight for anyone. Of course there was much of interest –

meeting with Poles, Free French, London firemen in the blitz.”

Robert and Meta lost all their possessions when the store where they were keeping them was blown up and were left only with the clothes they stood up in and the contents of a couple of suitcases. Robert recalled with chagrin moaning about this at length to a colleague at work before learning that she had just lost her sister, with whom she lived, in a bombing raid.

“Some people are of natural indomitable courage and must always seem very wonderful to those of us who are not numbered among the heroes. On one occasion in the midst of quite a bad raid, I saw a London bus driver taking his huge red monster through the deserted streets, maintaining the service on his route as if nothing were amiss.”

On another occasion having lunch with a distinguished Scotsman who had been twice decorated in the first war – probably Lord Reith – Robert felt constrained to follow his example of staying at a table by the window and carrying on talking while other diners took cover as bombs fell around them.

“Finally I was summoned to take a hand in the launching of War Report which began on D Day. We were all prepared for that mighty campaign and yet all was in doubt till the last moment. We knew that it would mean last minute work of the most hectic kind, but would the correspondents who had set off with the great armada get

back their stuff in time. That they did is now a matter of history.

The most wonderful thing of all was I think the arrival of two records from a correspondent, Guy Byam, later killed, who had been dropped by parachute, carrying recording gear. How those records got to London I doubt if anyone ever knew. But they suddenly appeared in the arms of a messenger and were duly broadcast.

One of my greatest pleasures was to hear the voice of my old friend Robert Dunnett, a son of the manse, coming in on a transmitter set up in Normandy after the American landings. I used to feel a sort of reflected glory in the unvarying high quality of his messages.”

Arnold and his older brother David spent a good part of the war at Birse, sometimes with their parents, sometimes left in the care of their grandparents.

The minister Arnold Low Kemp, who walked with a limp as a result of childhood rickets, was viewed by his family as a contemplator rather than a doer, a man whose gentle dreaminess prompted his energetic capable wife Robina Simpson to warn Robert, never to leave his work unfinished. “This was the result of seeing certain efforts of my father with good beginnings but never carried through to the end”.

Robina was a vigorous, energetic woman in these years. She was a ‘dab hand’ at embroidery, and some of her work is in the possession of the National Museum of Scotland. She played the piano and organ, raised her family, entertained, regularly visited parishioners with food and advice, wrote several unpublished works of romantic fiction and, through the war years and beyond she fed her household with the aid of a

large walled kitchen garden, often sending her small grandsons out to fill a pail of tatties for tea. In the Scottish tradition, she kept her own name and in the later years of her widowhood in Edinburgh, she sometimes went out to Sunday lunch with her son Robert's family. Robert kept some of the menus from these occasions, signed by those present and she always wrote, with a firm hand: *'Robina J Simpson'*.

Arnold wrote: "I have a particularly vivid recollection of Granny throwing the meal on to the ground for the hens she kept in the yard at the back of the manse and then with a swift twist of her powerful wrists breaking the neck of one for the pot as it happily fed. The fowl suffered no foreknowledge of its fate. Later I watched her clean and pluck it at the kitchen table, she breathed noisily through her nose as she did so.

In the garden of Birse we grandchildren found much happiness. At the front of the manse was a lawn on which we picnicked and beyond was what had been grass tennis courts by then overgrown. To a child the manse, with its long corridors, seemed huge. In the kitchen Grandpa played patience – a variety called Demon 13 – or showed us how to turn old paper into hats, boats or puzzles as Granny prepared the supper. We would wake in the morning to the sound of wind in the pines and the croon of wood pigeons. We would pile into the Baby Austin and drive to Aboyne for the shopping. Naturally Granny was the driver while Grandpa offered advice, philosophy and anecdote."

Though out of the way in the deepest countryside, the war touched the family at

the manse at Birse in a personal way. Robert's younger brother known to Arnold as Uncle Addie, studied tropical agriculture at Aberdeen University and emigrated to Malaya in 1937, joined the Malay States Volunteer Force. He was in Kuala Lumpur when it fell to the Japanese. He managed to escape, but was missing for several months in 1942, passing at one point in a small boat yards from Japanese troops who took him and his companion for Malay fishermen and waved. Eventually he reappeared, wounded, in Colombo.

In his sermons at Birse, Arnold Low, sometimes touched on the subject of the missing, telling of an elderly lady who said she hoped her missing son had "made his peace with Jesus."

The presbyterian minster of the last century has often been caricatured but a few of Arnold Low's sermons which survive in the National Library of Scotland reveal a kindly man attempting to give comfort to his parishioners in troubled times.

On April 15 1934, he condemned the treatment of Jews in Germany from the pulpit, asking people to take an interest in matters that may have seemed far away: "There are people who cannot see beyond themselves, or their kin, or their own country... we share in the amazement at so-called Chrstian Germany 's treatment of Jews."

Just days before Germany invaded Poland, on August 20 1939, he gave a

sermon on the text:

“My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise.” Psalm Lv11, 7.

“The fifty seventh Psalm is ascribed to David when in flight before the persecution of Saul the King. He and his followers were in the region of Engedi familiar to him from his youth and they found shelter in one of the many caves over against where Saul and his army were...

There is the tension of the times, in the insane and bitter hostility of Saul, the King against his fellow countrymen, represented in David and his followers. There is the cave in which the latter found shelter representing their awareness of the peril in which they lived...

There is undoubted tension over, more or less, the whole inhabited world. We are getting used to the phrase we come upon in the public press, the war of nerves. ...

As things are we know not from week to week to what peril from the sudden ravage of war we would stand exposed. We rearm, we dig shelters, we are provided with masks and disks for the purposes of identification are to be issued to us. Every possible provision is made for the evacuation of women and children from the great centres of population in the event of hostilities. Our cave of Engedi is a vast one and manned against the pitiless eventualities which may befall...”

Two Sundays later, just two days after the invasion of Poland and on the actual day

that Britain declared war on Germany, which was a Sunday, the pews must have been full of anxious faces. Fears of aerial bombardment of the cities meant a mass evacuation of mothers and children into the countryside would have been underway (Ewen Cameron). *ref Impaled upon a Thistle, Scotland since 1880*

The text was “I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.”

Ezekiel X1, **September 3 1939.**

“It is a far cry from the Townhead or Bridgeton or Denniston of Glasgow to Deeside; from the surroundings of the children there to their surroundings here; from associations which as yet are unknown, untied and unfamiliar. It is without doubt a great wrench and trial, that to be condoned and justified requires great justification. And surely there is justification enough in the escape from the modern terrors of war in the shape of ruthless attack of the enemy from the air. At any rate we have, not merely in scripture, but in the reality of our own time an example of the scattering in the divine guidance that is over us and of the comfort of the unforsaking presence of God. ..

Mungo Park was brought up in Selkirk but it wasn't until he was on the banks of the Niger alone and sick that a flower, a wild flower, growing quietly at his elbowside spoke to him of God's providence and God's care, and he took heart of grace again.

We may think that it is hard on women and children to be taken from their homes and drafted miles and miles away among strangers and to what must appear to some, a

strange faraway land. But to discover kindness and shelter and understanding and sympathy there is to awaken to revealings which speak surely of the divine providence and presence...We cannot see the stars until the night comes on...I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.”

1940 started with the tense wait of the phoney war. There was sporadic fighting at sea and in the air. The first Luftwaffe raid on the UK was on Rosyth in Fife and at Scapa Flow in Orkney, where Arnold Low had previously been a minister.

In Birse, on March 28, 1940, Arnold Low preached on:

“Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” 11 Timothy 11 3.

“Over and above the clash of arms in France and Norway; in the sea and on it and in the air fierce and terrible as these are, there is the clash over the standards of life between which there is an impassable gulf just as of old, and there can be no possible compromise....Are we to be led by the ears under the cloak of aggression by all the nonsense that has been spoken about the Nordic race and its purity and about Thor and the heaven of his Valhalla or are we to stand by at all costs the faith of our fathers?”

June 10 1940, the day that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigned to be replaced by Churchill, and as the deportation of Jews was happening across Europe he gave a

sermon on “In the Mount of the Lord it shall be Seen”, Genesis, xx11 14.:

“Take for instance, the holy people. I suppose there have been no people on earth so beset with criticism, searching and bitter criticism, as the Jews. The accusations, the insults that are meted out to them in many lands are almost past comprehension; they are regarded as the off-scouring of the earth by people who are not in the same street with them so to speak. There are good, bad and indifferent among all kinds of people. When we think of the people of God as reflected in the Bible we recall how the faith had failed the world had not been for them; we think of them as the channel through which the knowledge of the living God has come to man; of their heroic witness to it even amidst Titanic nations whose might often overwhelmed them; of their bearing the torch in exile....Do not let any red herring of Jew belittling be drawn across our path to make us forget the undeniable greatness of their witness of old to the power of God and to the love of God.... Let there be no mistake about the holiness of the holy people; it is forever an indisputable fact. It is written all over their ancient story. In the high places of their extraordinary witness it is written, in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.

France fell on May 22, 1940. On **Sunday, May 23, 1940**, a few short weeks after Dunkirk, the pews would have been full of worried faces, many with family in the military. Arnold Low may have brought a glimmer of light to the anxious eyes of his parishioners when he opened his sermon on “And I will give thee the treasures of

darkness” from Isaiah thus:

“I met a lady the other day and conversation as so many conversations in these days turned on the war. I was struck with a remark she made in the most casual way. She said, it must be hard for ministers at this time to find words of help and encouragement for their congregations. We were feeling the pressure of the enemy, his increasing advance; we were retreating; we were rescuing vast forces from the entanglement of an impossible position; and all that following upon the collapse of Holland and Belgium and Norway gave the outlook very ugly appearance. It was hard for ministers, she thought, to speak a word in season...it struck me as an odd thought...”

He continued more gravely:

“We live in times of great gravity for the country, for the empire and for the world. In common phrase things look black. We have withdrawn our forces from Europe, save those brave warriors, our fighting air forces, who continue to render much effective service over the lands of the enemy. We are passing through most serious times; there are demands made upon the whole civil population of the country to receive the lessons of these times calmly as possible and take what measure they can to improve them...”

The treasures of darkness are in the words of the prophet the gift of God; it is the teaching of St Paul that it is God who calls us to will and do that which is good and in the warfare of the faith there is no discharge. Except you take up your cross, said our

Lord, and follow me ye cannot be my disciple. The jewel of the crown is the cross, the glory of the light of life is the treasure of the darkness. There can be no turning back. There can be no accommodation with the wild doctrines that set Thor and Woden above Jesus; the doctrines of brute force above those of the spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind that is in Christ....

In the faith once delivered to the saints in the days of trial, the dark days of trial are disclosing themselves as rich in the treasure which speaks hope and liberty and lasting peace in the time to come.”

Chapter Four: Parental Influence

Arnold Low lived only a short time after the end of World War Two. He retired from his parish in 1948 and moved to Edinburgh but died a year later, in 1949 aged 80.

Robina lived on in an apartment in Edinburgh and in her last years, as her health failed, she moved in with her son and his family. This was not always an easy situation, as the household was a busy one and both adults worked full time, although they did have a housekeeper, Helen Stewart.

Robert drew on his memories of the manse and his parents in his work.

Robert wrote: “When I was a boy the ministers were expected to be not only solid preachers and good pastors but accomplished public entertainers. The result was that many ministers developed the art of telling a story and holding an audience which would have licked some of the artists at a Royal Command Variety Performance. They could draw roars of laughter from an audience which had nothing to put them in a risible mood beyond a cup of tea and a bag of buns”

He also recalled some of the favourite anecdotes of the manse: “I remember the advice of the old beadle to the nervous candidate about to leave the vestry to preach to a strange congregation. “that’s a’richt sir,” he observed. “Just ca’ awa and dinnae care a docken for ony o’ them.

And when I go to the theatre to observe the public response to some artistic venture particularly dear to my heart, I am afraid I often recall the remark of, perhaps it was the same beadle, who being asked what sort of attendance there was going to be at the evening service, looked through the window for a minute or two and then reported, "There's twa-three auld wifies just pourin in."

At the greater distance of a generation, Arnold recalled: "Grandpa let the glebe and when he was required by his wife to work in the large walled kitchen garden and could think of no spiritual or pastoral duty that must claim his attention instead, he would amuse himself with a bonfire. Once he contrived a fire which consumed the blackberry bushes, thus avoiding the tiresome task of picking the fruit."

My grandmother's industrious horticulture and my grandfather's pleasure in bonfires passed to my father. From her he acquired conscientious habits and from him a certain dreaminess. Every spring as he surveyed the long and narrow garden of his house in Edinburgh my father would long for a bigger plot and he wrote:

'The smell of smoke, whether it is of my own creating or sniffed as I pass from one of the city gardens where the piles of leaves are burning, always fills me with a deep sense of contentment...no doubt I shall be told it derives from some childhood memory, buried deep under subsequent layers, of happiness in the vast old garden in which my parents strove.' "

Arnold also recalled: “the care with which Grandpa would extinguish the picnic fire: forest fires were (and are) a hazard of the Deeside summer. He would repeatedly pour water from the kettle onto the embers until no spark was left. It was a task that was as soothing as is bonfire.

I remember the beadle ringing the bell with a chain attached to his foot and summoning the congregation to the simple little church. I can recall my grandfather’s teaching but not the content of his sermons beyond the fact that they were faithful expositions of the text which had been read as the lessons.

He had a stock of anecdotes which he repeated as if they were hallowed ritual. When chicken was on the table he would invariably say “this bird has not lived in vain”, a family incantation which I honour to this day.

Grandpa was not at all a stern moralist of the old Presbyterian variety, but he was prepared to insist on the peace and sanctity of the Sabbath if his grandchildren were making too much noise.

Both my grandparents lie in the graveyard at Birse. My father (Robert Kemp) wrote this recollection of my grandmother’s funeral in 1963 when her ashes were buried next to those of grandpa:

“There was a peace and a sense of identity in that quiet country churchyard.

When I followed them to their last resting place the mild sunshine of early spring touched the surrounding hills and the larks were pouring out their anthem high above us in a pale blue sky. It was as if great nature was smiling on them for the last time.’

Arnold thought he saw his grandparents represented in one of Robert's plays, 'A Nest of Singers'.

"The play is full of personal themes. It is a rejection of the grim Calvinism of the extreme reformed position. In Professor Meldrum and his wife there are echoes of my father's parents, of his mother's struggles to improve the music in the kirks where they laboured and of his father's aspirational dreaming and homely humour. He puts into the professor's mouth my grandfather's old mantra 'This bird did not live in vain'

It seems inconceivable that the question of church music could have caused riots in the streets, yet the play is based on an incident recorded in the annals of Aberdeen. In its light-hearted way, it deals with the enduring mystery at the heart of the Scottish experience, the Reformation and the passions it aroused, the distortions which grew from it like ugly weeds. In the play he honours his parents' life long assertions that music and laughter are not incompatible with the worship of God."

Edinburgh Festival

He was encouraged to do this by his involvement in the birth of the Edinburgh International Festival.

Robert's son David Kemp wrote: "Dad was a big influence on these early Festivals. The 1947 programme book has a biography and photo of him, And he contributes an article on Scottish dramatists to the 1948 book. I do remember going to the first production of the Thrie Estaitis (Robert Kemp's adaptation of the original text) in 1947, and I remember Tyrone Guthrie and Tanya Moiseiwitch, the famous designer, stayed at our home in Warriston Crescent during rehearsals. She had my bedroom (we were on holiday in Glen Clova).

And of course there's a lot about Louis Jouvet and L'Ecole des Femmes (which Robert Kemp adapted into Scots the next year as Let Wives tak Tent) in the 1947 book. Dad discovered the Assembly Hall as a theatre venue and he was the force behind early Festival productions like The Gentle Shepherd and The Highland Fair. Hail Caledonia! was another of his Festival productions."

One of the last things Robert wrote before his death in 1967 aged 59 was an article celebrating the 21st anniversary of the Edinburgh Festival for the Scottish Field.

Robert Kemp on the 21st Edinburgh Festival.

Those who did not live through the Second World War can appreciate something of its military history through reading books or seeing films and television programmes. They may even gain some impression of the lives of civilians. But the books and films may make it seem that battle was one continuous excitement, some of which spilled over to those on the home front' as it used to be called. For the vast majority of people, it was a dull, anxious time, during which even the prospect of an ultimate Allied victory often seemed very slender. Living was by ration book and coupon, the black-out made one glad to reach home and stay there. Many cities were regularly bombed and night after night had to be spent in shelters of varying degrees of discomfort. As a period it, it deserved the adjective 'soul-destroying'.

Then, when the last cheers of the victory celebrations died away, the whole world seemed exhausted. Much of Europe was in ruins. Take France, Germany and Italy out of the world of international music and how much is left? If war stimulated men of action, it left most of humanity in the condition of a patient who has all but succumbed after a long illness. The doctors know it will take a long time to set him on his feet again, and they know too, that they cannot succeed unless the patient is capable of an effort on his own behalf.

I like to think of the Edinburgh Festival as part of the effort which mankind made to throw off the inertia that followed upon the war. There were those who remembered the glories of the opera house, the concert hall and the theatre from the thirties and were determined to restore them – not in the struggling way in which the arts had preserved their continuity for five years, but sumptuously, with an expenditure of money

which would have been unthinkable when guns not butter, much less Mozart, were the priority.

The Edinburgh festival was not an Edinburgh or even a Scottish idea. So far as I can gather it originated in a suggestion by Audrey Mildmay, the singer, whose husband Mr John Christie founded the Glyndebourne Opera.

The first need was for a beautiful city in which the Festival could be held, and Edinburgh was a natural first choice. The Lord Provost was in those days a much beloved Writer to the Signet, Sir John Falconer. I am told that he at first rejected the idea of establishing the Festival but later changed his mind. Certainly, he became its most devout advocate and this quiet man of culture seemed to be the right man to lead such a venture.

Looking back, I doubt if anyone realised what was happening. There must have been scepticism in many quarters, if there was also unlimited enthusiasm amongst those who were fired with the idea of renewing the youth of the arts and adding to Edinburgh's fame by making it a centre where the greatest performers of the world could assemble. Let us remember that for these virtuosi the war had been a dreadful time. Many of them were Jewish and had been compelled to leave their homes.

For me, the chief delight of the first Festival in 1947, was to see and hear again two men who had been among my idols before war brought down its curtain. These were Schnabel, the great interpreter of Beethoven, and the French actor Louis Jouvet. Schnabel I had first heard playing at a concert when I was still at school and later on, when a young reporter, I had enjoyed an hour of his company, for the great musician evidently did not think it a waste of his time to talk to me for an hour at his hotel after a

concert. I had seen Jouvet playing in Paris and also on the screen. I had also the privilege of meeting him before the war, when a friend in the French theatre took me round to his dressing room at the Athenee, that vast dressing room with one wall covered by a picture of Moliere's company, in which he died just after leaving the stage, just as Moliere himself did.

I mention these two, because this illustrates what was very much on everyone's mind at the time of the first Festival – the idea of taking up the threads again, of restoring the broken continuity and the international friendship of art. Jouvet brought two of his great successes to the Lyceum, Giraudoux's "Ondine" which I had already seen in Paris, and Moliere's L'Ecole des Femmes. This second had such a stimulating effect on me that I immediately set about translating it into Scots. My version 'Let Wives Take Tent' was performed at the Gateway early in the following year. It was the first thing of mine in which Duncan Macrae appeared, so it was altogether an important experience for me.

When attending the first Festival I did not dream that I should be employed in the second and in several subsequent ones. James Bridie, who was a member of the Festival Committee, had determined that there should be a Scottish contribution to the second Festival and had sent to Tyrone Guthrie some old Scottish plays, among them Sir David Lyndsay's 'Ane Pleasant Satire of the Thrie Estaitis' It fell to me to adapt this remarkable work for the stage.

But which stage? The work demanded an open stage. I can well remember the day spent with Guthrie, Bridie and William Grahame of the Festival Society, inspecting

every available hall. Late in the day, I thought “Why not the Assembly Hall?” As soon as he saw it, Guthrie knew it was the place. It gave him the first major opportunity to put into practice ideas of stagecraft which had had immense effect.

To everyone engaged in the venture it seems a huge adventure although up to the opening night the rest of the world seemed indifferent. It was the first time the “Scottish Theatre” had ever worked as a single body and the experience gave a sense of identity which those who took part have never lost.

I must apologise for having shot off at this personal tangent, yet how is one to recall past Festivals and their atmosphere except in this personal way? They are made up of personal experience whether one is engaged as an artist or wrote or is a member of the audience. One remembers certain occasions, certain works, certain artists – and that is the Edinburgh Festival. Over the years, it has become a regular meeting place of talent, sometimes of genius and to go through the yearly brochures, singling out a name here and a name there, would be an arduous process, for surely the majority of great artists and companies have visited Edinburgh during the annual three weeks.

An important, and totally unforeseen development was the growth of “the Fringe “ – those companies which came to Edinburgh at their own risk and set up shop in all sorts of little halls too small for the uses of the official Festival. I am not sure that they have always received cordial approval, for a good deal of money is spent on sponsoring the event and there are a lot of impudent youngsters competing for the money. Yet all things considered, “the Fringe” has brought experiment, liveliness and adventure into what could easily become a stodgy mixture. If a great deal of its charm is simply that it

gives young people a chance to show what they can do, it has on several occasions uncovered work of real merit.

It so happens that I write these words on the very day when when fighting has broken out between Israel and the Arab nations,. It is impossible for me to tell whether the war will be confined and stopped by the intervention of the United Nations or whether the worst will happen. I find myself thinking, "Here I am writing of the 21st Edinburgh Festival as if I were sure that it would occur". Suddenly everything seems again on the point of being thrown into the melting pot. And it is a melting point in which the temperatures will be higher than anything thought of heretofore.

Suddenly it is brought home to me that the Edinburgh Festival is the creation of peace and the symbol of it. Even a severe threat of war could bring about its cancellation. Nothing is certain in this vale of tears and I suppose that there are times when a huge international occasion, backed by public money and depending for its success on free intercourse between nations, is very vulnerable.

I ask myself "Have we been grateful enough for the Edinburgh Festival?" At first, I think, we undoubtedly were. We had crossed one desert and our throats were parched. But as the years passed, people seemed to be more critical. There was more ginning of one kind or another. Something of the simple gaiety and enthusiasm wore off. Foolish and meaningless stunts seems to be stealing attention from performances sometimes so close to the ideal that there was little to say about them.

Twice before in my life I have seen Europe go dark and watched the doves of peace having their necks wrung. I must still have faith that mankind has not gone

entirely mad and that somehow a general war will be averted. If that is so, we shall have our 21st Festival. The old city will be floodlit, in her streets strange tongues will be heard. Great artists will weave their spells, and we shall gladly submit to their enchantment. We will be able to share again, in some of the most glorious creations of the human spirit.

That is what the Festival really brings to us. It may not be a great creative occasion, in the sense that new works naturally spring to life at a Festival. The object is primarily to secure the most heady performances of acknowledged masterpieces, which may be likened to fountains at which mankind is never weary of drinking.

Here are Arnold's recollections of being in the background as Robert and his friends took control of a disused cinema at the top of Leith Walk which became the Gateway Theatre, and later the company under actor director Tom Fleming mutated into the Lyceum.

Duncan Macrae was released by the Citizens to take the lead in *Let Wives Take Tent* at the Gateway in 1947. This wonderful actor personified and perhaps inspired the theories my father was building about a Scottish theatre. His flowing movements, his sudden shifts from melancholy to low cunning, the ragged glamour of his costume, the fantastical atmosphere he so quickly created, the richly relished language – all these qualities tallied exactly with the theoretical specification. I have never seen the like of

Macrae on stage: he was a genius.

.The theatre was full, and this exciting experience convinced Dad and his friends that though the Gateway was off the beaten track something could be achieved there.

The revival of the Three Estates sprang from the association of James Bridie and Tyrone Guthrie.

Bridie (O.H. Mavor) had been active in the Scottish National Players - founded after the First World War in emulation of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. They did not have the resolution - or perhaps the resources - to turn professional but in 1943 Bridie founded the Glasgow Citizens'. Here a gifted company, including Duncan Macrae and Stanley Baxter, were now carrying forward on a professional basis the work done before the war.

At the old Vic Guthrie had started to undermine the vapid orthodoxy of polished drawing-room naturalism which then dominated the London stage.

Guthrie also directed Bridie plays whose success in London was closely associated with the brilliant actor Alastair Sim.

My father had gone to Glasgow to meet Bridie. They went for a drink to a club and Bridie walked with him to Queen Street station, where he was catching the train back to Edinburgh. Just at the moment of parting Bridie asked him if he knew The Three Estates, adding: "I should look at it again, Robert, if I were you."

The work was known to my father, as to other lovers of Scottish literature, though its existence seemed to be a closely guarded secret at a time when Scottish universities

paid scant attention to Scottish history and culture. Dad could see that certain sections of it were powerfully dramatic. It predated Elizabethan comedy by more than 20 years and was still rooted in the morality play. It also contained savage satire. Eloquent and forceful speech was put into the mouth of the common man and its existence suggested that in the sixteenth century there must have been a body of Scottish actors, and this is borne out in various entries in documents of the time.

Sir David wrote with an informed knowledge of contemporary European thought. It is another curiosity that this single dramatic masterpiece in the Scottish canon should, through its powerful assault on ecclesiastical corruption, have helped to bring on the Reformation, the eventual result of which was that the theatre in Scotland entered a prolonged period of darkness.

What Dad did not then know was that Bridie had been pressing the claims of a Scottish play upon the festival programme committee, and had sent three plays to Guthrie, who was to produce.

Apart from *The Three Estates*, the plays were Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* and Douglas, John Home's pretentious and empty play which had wrung the ludicrous comment from an over-enthusiastic speaker when it was first performed in Edinburgh in 1756 of 'Where's your Wullie Shakespeare noo?'

My father had only heard of Tyrone Guthrie, in a delightful but very vague way, from his friends of the Scottish National Players. Their stories generally began by describing some crisis at rehearsal and ended with "Then Tony said- " and gales of

laughter. All meetings with Guthrie tended to have the memorable quality of first meetings, and so Dad could not swear that the hour he spent with him and Bridie at the Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh was the first occasions on which he shook his hand and observed his curious and fascinating mind:

'His qualities are so diverse and wayward that they defy a quick summing up. His gentleness with the sensitive is matched only by devastation of the bumptious. Alongside most extraordinary imagination and stagecraft of pure genius, he will place (deliberately I suspect) pieces of school-boyish fun which arouse the purist to fury but which have often a strange force in heightening the beauty of a scene. His conviction that every dramatic masterpiece lives in a different way for succeeding ages is the moral justification for his sometimes startling re-interpretations. He uses paradoxes a good deal. Villains become trebly sinister by being played as nice fellows and the symbolic figure of Truth or Chastity suddenly appears as a maiden aunt or a Sunday school teacher.

On one of my early meetings, I discovered his fondness for the Scottish tea-room with its passing show of the kind which he so brilliantly caught in one of his radio plays. I also discovered the powerful force of his energy. We met in Glasgow and attended a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* together,. Next morning we caught the nine o'clock train together and talked till six o'clock that evening. I can remember after he left the house suddenly feeling as tired as if I

had spent a day walking over the hills, and falling fast asleep. It was on this day, I think, that he made the first, rough sketch of the Assembly hall stage.'

Guthrie's brilliant use of this venue, where the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland is held each year, was to have a profound impact on theatre. It was chosen only after a long but convivial search during which, one may safely infer, drink was taken.

In the adaptation of the text, which ran for 13 hours when first performed at Linlithgow Palace (later burned down by Cromwell) in 1540, my father strove to remain faithful to the original and ensure that his interpolations, where they were inevitable, could not be detected. He had a kind of reward when a very scholarly lady in a letter to the Scotsman quoted three of the lines he had written under the impression they were Lindsay's.

From the first rehearsal Guthrie 'transformed this hazardous undertaking into a joyous adventure in which we all lived with a new zest'. Even when the prophets of doom intoned and advance bookings were nil they 'never wilted'. As rehearsals advanced Guthrie would bring out some wonderful conceptions, like the entrance of Divine Correction:

'I had always felt that this entry must defeat him. To achieve its greatest force, it had to have surprise, of the kind which I could imagine easily enough on a proscenium stage, but not on an open stage. But what did he do? There entered

a mighty procession of men at arms carrying banners. Concealed among them was Divine Correction. They formed a circle and dipped their banners. Still in the centre, at the tips of their grounded poles, stood the eternal figure and (again the paradox) not apparelled in golden armour with angel's wings but grey, unarmed, austere. I still look back upon it as one of the most majestic moments the stage has offered.'

The play was a sensation. The London critics were dazzled by the colour and energy of the spectacle, its rich language, its broad comedy, the force of the satire, the stunning moment when the clergy remove their dark robes to reveal their scarlet undergarments. Guthrie had restored the apron stage to the theatre. The actors processed or bounded in along the aisles, and this brought cast and audience into an intimacy of a kind long lost in conventional theatre with its lighted tableau.

The experience of *The Three Estates* demonstrated another truth about theatre which, my father believed, was not always grasped by intellectual commentators – that it was not simply text-driven, though textual richness was indispensable, but was organic, arising from the inter-action of all the elements in it – writers, actors, directors, musicians, ballet-masters and so on.

For Scots, no less than critics, the play was also a revelation. Scots is daunting on the page, even to Scots – a factor which had contributed to Walter Scott's loss of popularity in his own country. My father said:

All reading taught in the schools is in English. When we read we do not spell out every word. We recognise them by their shape, length and appearance. It is only a new or strange word that pulls us up and even then it will not hold us up for long if it follows the English usage in spelling.

But when we come to read Scots the aspect of the words is strange, even when they are words with which we are perfectly familiar and may even use ourselves. So instead of skating lightly across the page on a smooth film of familiar shapes, we are constantly striking those snags in the ice. They represent absolutely no real difficulty but the modern reader is the laziest of mortals and doesn't like to have the even tenor of his ways disturbed. Therefore, there is, even in Scotland, a deep prejudice against reading Scots.

To their great delight, the Scottish audience found that it could easily understand the language of the play and glory in it. It is not every day that you find your own little country has been harbouring a masterpiece.

When that amazing opening night took place, I was nine. I have a clear but incomplete memory of it. Just before the lights dimmed, I looked round and caught a glimpse of my father at the back. His face had lost its mask of relaxed good humour and I realised suddenly how enormously nervous he must be. Duncan Macrae, too, I remember, in his comic glory, costumed like a gorgeous bird. But that may be from later years, for the play was revived in following years and intermittently ever since.

For my father the Three Estates was what the physicists would call a point of singularity, a point at which forces come together and then spread out afterwards, as when a rock is thrown into a pool. He found himself with a higher profile; in the Hollywood jargon of our own day, he was 'hot', a condition that comes to most artists maybe only once in their lives. It is a moment that has to be grasped before times change and memory fades. In 1948 my father left the BBC to pursue his own career full-time as a writer. In a small country where a professional writer could only aspire to relatively meagre rewards, it was a brave step, infused by a patriotic determination to put his own people on the stage, to let them speak there on their own terms and in their own words.

His standing and connections at the BBC gave him the assurance of continuing work in radio for his underpinning income, and this was to continue into the age of television. Later my mother returned to teaching and without her contribution the household economy would at various points have foundered.

Stimulated and energised by his encounter with Guthrie and convinced now that his theories were sound, he entered the most fruitful period of his life.

By now he had formed a firm friendship with the actress Lennox Milne and Tom Fleming. One day George Candlish (the Church of Scotland minister who was in charge of the building) asked them to establish a professional company to give regular seasons. Dad said yes at once – and was 'immediately terrified'. He had no experience of administration. From friends and acquaintances they realised £1,000; the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council made a matching grant. The Edinburgh Gateway

Company was born.

In its 12 seasons between 1953 and 1965 the Gateway performed a rich variety of material. Repertory has its limitations. Shakespeare is best done by English actors, O'Casey and Synge by Irish and productions elsewhere must always have the quality if a shadow or pale copy. Yet I look back on these years, when I was a frequent attender of first nights, with great gratitude, for I had a theatrical education of some width. I have always particularly enjoyed theatre in Dublin which has retained much of the warmth that I remember from the Gateway days.

The early years of the Gateway were a period of considerable fecundity for my father. In the first ten years he wrote a string of plays for the company. Ten original plays, comedies and historical dramas mostly written during this period, were performed, and three adaptations or translations.

Then the pace began to drop and the ice of an artistic winter began to form over him. When the theatre was municipalised in 1966, and Tom Fleming became the first director of the Lyceum Company, Dad found himself increasingly out of sympathy with theatrical trends, and he fell out with his old friend. Fleming's agenda was highly intellectual and admired by many critics; but in my father's phrase, it emptied the pews. Thereafter the forces of centralisation against which my father had long fought, gathered power. A new regime at the Citizens' specifically rejected its own tradition. Reactions of this kind are inevitable and desirable if any art is to progress, but that is a view easier to embrace from a position of detachment.

Dad continued to find ample employment in television and radio but the times

had become less propitious for him. He wrote five novels: *The Malacca Cane*, a comedy set in Edinburgh, is the best – most of the others are reworking of his plays. He supplemented his income also with journalism in the *Glasgow Herald*. Much of polite Edinburgh treated him with indifference. He began to suffer intermittently from depression. He found critics uncomprehending and patronising. Worse, he became aware of their provincialism and deference to London judgements. If there was anything worse than Anglophobia, he wrote, it was Anglophilia of this provincial kind where nothing was accepted in Scotland unless it had the imprimatur of a London critic. He became saddened that he was remembered as the adapter of Lindsay; for subsequent festivals he had adapted Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* and Joseph Mitchell's *Highland Fair*. Now he said: 'I have finished with adaptations,.' His own plays have considerable merit, particularly the comedies of his best years, like *The Penny Wedding*, *The Scientific Singers*, *Henrietta MD*, and *The Other Dear Charmer*. I am partisan of course and must leave the judgement to time

The people in his plays are drawn from life...but they are not kitchen comedies; they deal with the great Scottish themes but with a light touch. His greatest gift to the theatre, apart from his sense of comedy and character and his understanding of Scottish theatre, was his easy use of Scots.

This is not the ersatz Scots of the Scots renaissance, whose contortions are sometimes grotesque and risible, but is the spoken Scots of the people among whom he grew up and lived, and whom he loved. The only other contemporary artist, I think, who used Scots with anything like this ease and authority was the poet Robert Garioch.

And my father helped the Church of Scotland make some redemption for the puritanical persecution of theatre which has disfigured our religious history. He was particularly offended when Ayr Presbytery denounced, without having seen it, a one-act play, *The Asset*, when it was screened on television in 1956. In protest, he left the church, returning a year later and it may have been in some spirit of compensation that the church commissioned him to write a play for the quatercentenary of the reformation, *Master John Knox*. The scenes of social realism to which Ayr Presbytery objected would be regarded as merely routine by modern television dramatists; they were acting in the tradition so memorably lampooned by Burns in *Holy Wullie's Prayer*.

Above all, as he recognised in a sad speech given towards the end of his life, the forces of centralisation were destroying the Scots which he sought to dignify, the grammatically correct Scots of the old middle classes and the country places. In the mega-world London and New York would dominate. In fact, Los Angeles is king. The process of the dilution and degeneration began as soon as Jamie the Saxt packed his bags and left for London. What had been the language of a court fragmented into dialects, and there is no standard Scots, no settled orthography. The process was made inexorable by the adoption of the Bible in English. The reduction of Edinburgh to provincial status obliged its establishment to ape English customs, speech and manners, a theme of Robert McLellan's play *The Flouers o Edinburgh*. The new mass media added American English as a powerful and increasingly pervasive normative model. I sometimes hear English critics, from a cultural standpoint not dissimilar to that of my father, lamenting the inroads of American usage into their own language. But

language races on unheeding and leaves us all behind. Old words come back in new clothes; we are all learning to lurk and surf on the internet.

Many years after his father's death, in 2000, Arnold contributed an essay about him to the Scottish Review. Below is an extract.

The Bourgeois Bohemian, from the Scottish Review's special edition 'Fathers of the Nation'.

Many years ago Sir Alec Guinness appeared in the West End production of John

Mortimer's play *A Journey Round My Father*. As I recall, the father was a blind barrister and his son's portrait was ambiguous and impressionistic. Indeed the message was that the father, like all fathers, would inevitably remain mysterious to his son. And although my father, Robert Kemp, was as kind, gentle and loving a parent as anyone could wish, allowing his study to become the family den even as he worked away at his plays, his novels, his radio and television scripts and his journalism, I became aware that beyond the attentive domestic figure there was another, subtly different personality that moved about in public, had friends who were talented and raffish, engaged in the politics of the theatre though rarely in the politics of parties and parliaments, loved his Saturday lunchtimes and occasional evenings at the Scottish Arts Club, of which he served a term as president, and relished his hour in the Northern Bar on Saturday nights with the Pink News and a small gathering of friends

I suspected, too, that in his youth there had been riotous patches. Indeed, my mother once disclosed that he and a friend had been thrown out of a music hall in Manchester. Later I sometimes came upon his spoor, at the Cafe Royal or the Abbotsford, where those who had known him in the old days spoke of his conviviality. There were occasions, of course, when we glimpsed it at home, when he had visitors, and certainly our household was rarely too far away from laughter. But I suppose he felt he had to set us all an example of restraint, and like all parents, perhaps, kept part of himself hidden.

He tried to inculcate the conventional values of honesty, integrity, sobriety, restraint, good manners and respect for others. Much of this was carried on, in

collaboration with my mother, at our table. But there was talk, too, especially as we grew older, about ideas, history and cultures. And it was through his often complex attitudes that he most truly moulded me. He was the son of the manse and entertained a most lively dislike of science which, I suspect, came down from the days of the old Darwinian controversies. He wanted us to excel in the arts and humanities, though I fear we often disappointed him. He tried to communicate his own love of Scottish traditions, and would offer us a pound if we learned by heart The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens or Tam O'Shanter. If the school report spoke ill of our attainments in Latin, French or English, his brows would beetle in disapproval. But once I failed a science O-level spectacularly, walking out before the end and scoring three per cent. He was delighted, and congratulated me as if on a notable achievement.

His plays are peopled by the characters who came to the manse which, as he later observed, stood as a panoramic social observation point with an eye on both the gentry and the common folk.

My father died in 1967 at the age of 59, carried away by a stroke which, I suspect, was brought on by medical treatment he was receiving at the time for an ulcer. Scarcely a day goes past when I do not think of him. It is a sad truth that you remember your parents in their declining years more vividly than in their prime. Towards the end of his life he suffered sometimes from melancholy which, in a man of such wit and merriment, was sad to see. But, with only a little effort, I look beyond, to the sunlit days of our childhood beside the Water of Leith, to his love, his companionship, his cultivated intelligence and his lack of conceit or self-satisfaction. It

is one of the delights of advancing years sometimes to see in my grandchildren, in a look or a laugh or a mannerism, sudden glimpses of both my father and my mother.

I suppose I have inherited some of his attitudes – his francophilia and his belief, sometimes strained in the face of mindless crime or executive greed, in the possibility of social harmony. When I became an editor, of the Glasgow Herald between 1981 and 1994, his influence was the most pervasive of all, perhaps because it operated unceasingly and often at a subconscious level. I had learned my trade from three fine masters – Alastair Dunnett, Alastair Hetherington and Eric Mackay – but any editor will tell you there is no single right way of doing the job. Everyone must find an approach and a method. I think I was more than usually sympathetic to contributors and freelances. If so, this was because I had seen how my father, down the years, had suffered at the hands of the mediocre and the arrogant. As a freelance, he usually had to grin and bear it, although sometimes he didn't.

But, most of all, I think, he influenced my own rejection of Thatcherism. Its emphasis on the marketplace would have offended his concepts of social harmony and he would, I fancy, have detested its hectoring tone, just as my mother did. His premature death still fills me with a sense of injustice and every year by which my own lifespan exceeds his seems an ill-deserved bonus. Above all, like many Scots, I sense in myself that everlasting struggle between the bourgeois and the bohemian. In his case the bourgeois won but the bohemian was always there too, never crudely dressed but wrapped in wit and irony.

Chapter : Family Life

The Kemp family which eventually numbered six, Robert, Meta and their three sons of whom Arnold was the middle one, between David and Robbie, and their daughter Christina, lived in Warriston Crescent in Edinburgh's New Town.

Later Arnold wrote about one of his earliest memories there - the removal of the Georgian railings which adorned many streets in the New Town - taken by the Ministry of Works for salvage to raise money for guns.

“No city escaped the Ministry requisition; one of my earliest childhood memories is of contractors coming, presumably in 1943, to remove the central iron balustrade from the step of our Georgian terrace house in Edinburgh. Indeed, apart from the occasional air-raid alert when we all went down to cower in the basement by the dim light of a candle, the requisition of our railings is my most vivid memory of the war.”

These railings were not replaced for years, and in his 50s, Robert Kemp the playwright appeared in the Evening News when he drove his Model T Ford into a

basement on a dark night, suffering a head injury.

Arnold recalled the quiet Sundays of his youth:

Both my parents were religious but not officiously so. Before we went to St Stephen's Church for morning service, we devoured the Sunday Post. Oor Wullie, and the companion strip The Broons, were an essential antidote to the Scottish Sunday as I remember it in the years after the war, when the Church was still a power in the land.

To this day I will hear no ill spoken of the Sunday Post, because it brought sunlight into our presbyterian gloom. We fell upon it greedily when it came, and divided it up. Oor Wullie and The Broons was first choice, followed by the football reports and the Jack Harkness page.

Then we turned to the vividly written football reports. 'Mackintosh provided a capital assortment on the wings', said one typical line, a pun on a then popular make of chocolates. (Early in his career Willie Hunter, the brilliant Herald columnist, wrote freelance football reports for the Sunday Post. Before moving to his Herald job, he sent in a spirit of satire a valedictory match report which contained every football cliché he could think of. That evening the sports editor wired him with the offer of a staff job).

Elsewhere in the paper the 'doc' gave sound if obvious advice to

hypochondriacs, and Francis Gay, a fictitious minister, spread a rosy glow from his imaginary manse. The famous centrespread dispensed urban myth masquerading as reportage. The paper's later decline accelerated when it switched to real news but I have always felt grateful for the relief it brought into the long Sundays of my youth.

Endell Laird, who spent his early years on the paper before going on to edit the Daily Record and Sunday Mail, said he thought its secret was that it beguiled people who lived in an often harsh industrial and economic culture with a benign and kindly vision of their world.

The antics of extreme presbyterians in the Western Isles have coloured the reputation of all. In fact the services in the church were not grim affairs. The worst you could say about them was that they had passages of tedium that sent you into a trance where the mind wandered far. But the choir sang anthems, the ministers read the refreshingly secular intimations about marriages and bazaars, and at Christmas brought in professional musicians to sing and play Handel's Messiah. The sermons were a bit of a trial, but the traditional pandrop made them pass pleasantly. In the Sunday school we met the rumbustious children of Stockbridge.

And then there was Sunday lunch. My mother would have put the roast in the oven before we went to church and its delicious smells assailed us the moment we came through the door. There was an agonising wait until the vegetables were done, and then we fell upon it. There were, of course, a series of culinary stratagems to make the joint 'do another day'. First there was broth, and after the bread and gravy. I smack my chops at the memory. Plain white slice bread is reviled by faddists today and

I suppose it doesn't have much to recommend it – except as a sponge for gravy. I have retained a taste for it, and it is regarded by my nearest and dearest as a Kemp oddity. Then there was the washing up, in which we were all supposed to help. My mother, noting my skill at evading it, began calling it the 'Arnold's Sunday skive'. Drink was rarely on the table and then only when there were visitors. Sherry might be produced before Christmas lunch or on some other special day.

David Kemp recalled

"The house was full of books, and both our parents spoke the unaffected Scots of their north-east childhoods. We grew up at ease with the old Scots tongue and its literature. We never warmed to the modern demotic."

We spent our childhood plowtering in this muddy stream, guddling unsuccessfully for trout, a prey to the local leeches. The gardens of the crescent ran down to the river and were separated from it by a wall."

A favourtie family story:

'A likeable and artistic English family, who lived a few doors along the street, acquired a duck to keep in the garden. They thought it would prosper more if it could have access to the river, and decided to make an opening for it in the wall, in the way that a hatch might be let into the door for the nocturnal passage of cats. A few of the local urchins, myself among them, were asked to help and a merry little party we were. Armed with

primitive tools, like old bits of railing and iron bars, we spent a most agreeable summer's evening knocking a hole in the wall. Some weeks later, we went on holiday to the depths of Angus. Newspapers then did not penetrate to the head of Glen Clova until the day after publication, and the first we knew that anything was amiss was a telegram from my grandmother saying cheerfully: 'Don't worry, firemen pumping water out of house.' The summer rains had produced an enormous spate. The swollen water of Leith had poured through the duck's hole; its force had knocked down the dividing wall, wrecking the garden of Sir Andrew Murray, the lord provost, which he had primped in preparation for the first Edinburgh Festival. My father's reflections were rueful, since my mother and he had, shortly before our holiday, been at the dinner party where the duck had been on the menu, but they were tempered by schadenfreude over the damage to Sir Andrew's garden - comeuppance for a show-off

In his study, Robert was churning out novels, plays and other paid work. He wrote nine novels, the most successful of which were Gretna Green and The Malacca Cane. He wrote dozens of plays for radio and theatre. He is best remembered for his adaption of the Three Estates. His most successful play was "The Other Dear Charmer" about Robert Burns' relationship with Nancie Maclehose.

To supplement his income, he wrote the text for a series of coffee table books called "Colourful Scotland" and had a weekly column in the Scotsman. In order to have something to write about for the Notebook he would take

excursions.

“My father, who loved the scent of maritime commerce because of his Orcadian boyhood, would walk to Leith to find out what the sea and its trade had brought to this shore. He wandered among the ships and, when I went with him, would point out the street names of the old burgh, taking relish in their exotic resonance – Madeira Place, Salamander Street, When, as a playwright, novelist, broadcaster, and journalist, he ran out of inspiration, or found the solitary life in front of the typewriter too much to take, he would go aboard one of the merchant ships that plied between Leith and Antwerp and had cabins for a few passengers. There he found stimulation in this very different world, listening to the conversation of the officers and crew and watching them at work, and once ashore making a trip to Ghent.

Here is one of Robert’s “Notebook” columns about a favourite trip to the Forth Bridge.

Robert Kemp on the Forth Bridge August 19 1961.

What do you do with your friends on the long summer evenings? I am thinking of those who descend upon one from Thurso or Truro, at this holiday season. Sometimes the descent is without warning; sometimes they announce themselves five minute in advance, from a call box.

As we drink our coffee, panic seizes me. Already we seem to have covered the past, the present, and the future pretty fully, and two hours are looming ahead. Can my conversation last out?

This is the point at which I suggest, and if the suggestion is ignored, gently insist,

that we should all drive to South Queensferry to inspect progress on the new Forth Bridge.

These lofty towers, now united by the vast droop of the cables, no doubt make a fine spectacle. At first I did delude myself that our guests might care to see them. But as visit after visit is notched up it becomes plain, even to me, that the true object of the expeditions is to give me a chance to expatiate upon that dear old friend, the original railway bridge, above which the upstart towers have had the impudence to soar.

My earliest memory of the old bridge goes back to the 1880s, I received it not through my own eyes but through those of my father. As a child he was taken from Glasgow on holiday to Aberdour, and so his earliest recollection was of men working on the bridge at night, by the light of naphtha flares. Think of the magnificent scene of Victorian illumination that conjures up – into what wild streamers the winds of the estuary must have blown them.

Your true Forth Bridge addict always begins with the Tay Bridge Disaster (the night of which his grannie so well remembered.) This provides a cue for a note on the faulty rivets cast at Wormit and the unhappy end of the designer Sir Thomas Bouch.

Why should the Tay Bridge lead to the Forth? Those who are not Bridge-minded forget if they ever knew, that Bouch was commissioned to build over Forth as well. He designed a suspension bridge and work had begun. One brick pier of his remains to this day on Inchgarvaey, under the northern cantilever of the central tower (to observe which sixpenceworth of ferry essential).

The blowing down of the Tay Bridge led to a vote of no confidence in Bouch's

design, and work was stopped. Thus was the way made for Sir John Fowler and Sir Benjamin Baker.

South Queensferry is the perfect vantage point for lecturing one's friends (or indeed one's enemies) on the "Holbein straddle" According to my legend, Fowler was attending an exhibition in the company of Nasmyth inventor of the steam hammer, when the news reached them from Dundee. They were standing in front of Holbein's portrait of King Henry VIII, and Nasmyth said the Tay Bridge would still be standing if it had been given the same stance as the King's, with feet planted wide apart. Fowler took the tip - but you ought to hear me explain it at South Queensferry.

A man who knew a man who had in his youth been assistant to Baker told me that one reason for the splendid workmanship in the bridge was that the chief inspected every rivet with his own eagle eye. At night, after a good dinner and with a bottle of claret under his waistcoat, he would don those old-fashioned dancing pumps with bows and walk to the end of the narrowest girder, scrutinising as he went. Result – general consternation and every boat ordered to circle underneath so that the great man could be fished out of the water. But he never made a false step.

Of the achievements of Sir William Arrol, the actual builder, I know only that they rested entirely upon that respectable Scottish dish, singed sheep's heid. When he was a blacksmith in Glasgow, people brought their sheep's heids to be singed at his smithy, and the pennies thus earned paid for his evening classes.

But the time I have worked through this body of hearsay and have added the length of the bridge in yards, I discern a strained look upon the faces of my visitors. And

this is the moment to ram home the advantage.

Having reminded them that the whole contraption could never have been built if Bessemer and Siemens had not invented their cheap process for the manufacture of steel, I pass easily to an account of my famous walk across the bridge. Don't they wish they also could have felt, with the sensitive sole of the foot, even through one's shoe, the minute gap that widens every time a train weighs down the span between the cantilevers? Do they understand the basic principle of the cantilever? I illustrate that by means of my walking stick.

Which leads me to the extraordinary number of coins strewn on the permanent way, and even balanced precariously on girders, where the superstitious have thrown them from passing trains, intending to hit the water. This I maintain, with some show of authority, to be merely the ancient pagan custom of propitiating the river-god, in modern guise.

And now it is time to return home. My guests suddenly become afraid of being locked out of their hotel, and cannot be persuaded to stay, even for a cup of tea. The Forth bridge has its uses and they are not confined to transporting persons and freight from the Lothians to Fife.

But in contrast to the light tone of much of his writing, in the background life was often difficult. There were money worries - Robert was a successful freelance writer but the family's expenses were considerable. His intermittent diaries and the meticulous household account books he kept over these years survive too in

the National Library of Scotland.

He noted in his account books, the precise destination of virtually every penny he earned; from the purchase of a newspaper to the £5 he gave his elderly mother when she went on a trip to London. The diaries record an intense work rate, with plays and novels flowing from his pen, their progress as they are sent around to agents, sometimes returned, sometimes accepted, and his constant worry over payments and the strain of meeting the bills of a large family. Here is a flavour.

1939 Feb 27: Register Arnold

1939 Tuesday March 7; Register Arnold 1/- (fine)

1944 Meta, of Arnold; wild horses wouldn't drag Arnold on a walk this afternoon. Robbie (then aged about 3): wild horses wouldn't come on a walk.

1944 The time has come when I need to work all the time if I am to get all my plays down – and must try not to work at anything else.

Dec 52. On Sunday Meta and I broadcast a radio talk?(probably for The Guid Scots Tongue) She did well and the excitement made her look so pretty – quite as she looked when we went out to dances more than 20 years ago.

1953. Thurs Jan 1

These holidays have been the pleasantest I can remember. The children are older and do not require so much care. I cannot recall any Christmas within my lifetime when I was so little tired. It has made an enormous difference to Meta, whom I remember on one occasion never getting to bed on Christmas night at all.

From a professional point of view it ended on a depressing note...

What a joy the children have been to us. They have made the holiday a delight. David goes to a dancing class and I think Arnold regrets that he elected not to go. Tonight we had an impromptu party and all were dancing.

Nov 25 1953: This is a black period from the point of view of payments

Dec 8: I felt a lifting of the load today because I have paid the boys' fees. I have never been so late as this before. Of course the car, the painting of the hall, the holiday will set me back during the summer. I am resolved never again to tax my financial reserves as I have just done. To pay my debts, among which I reckon my overdraft, and be free is my modest ambition. Yet it is tempting. The house needs a new stove to save Meta work, we need to repair the painting and buy a new carpet, the workshop needs to be made into a room for Arnold. Perhaps the work will come in. Thank goodness it has been milder. To work in cold weather is beyond me.

1958. Sat Feb 8: A year full of snow

Thursday March 6: a black day.

Friday March 19: a fruitless day of doodling

Fri March 21: Last night of Gateway season- I am not well.

Tues May 6: The cherry tree is in flower in front of my window.

1959 Thursday July 16: Arnold began work on the Scotsman.

August 18: Sent off "Ane Historie of the Reformation". If this is the last I hear of this unfortunate work I shall be thankful.

September 30: The Thrie Estaitis has come and gone for the last time under Guthrie. In some ways I shall not be sorry. It has been a ball and chain around my professional reputation. K has had the sack at last. This is a great relief for one and all. We have been carrying him for a year or two at least.

...I am struggling with The Girl who loved Eggheads and bitterly regretting I asked to have it commissioned.

Dec 1: Arnold on holiday – it is splendid to see how he has tackled his work and seems so happy in it.

Gateway still in doldrums. We have an overdraft of £6000 and £780 from current account - this is all that lies between us and destruction.

1960. May 30. Heard from Derek Glynne (his agent) that there is no joy for "My Good Brown" in New York.

Oct 29: R threatens to close the Gateway giving the loss on Knox as a reason. At Knox

at night.

Dec 31. The last day of a very mixed and uphill year for me. Shopped in the morning. Prepared for Arnold's party. My resolution for the New Year is to work harder and more methodically. I have too many idle moments.

1966 April 8: Went to Iona. Rotten weather. Atmosphere somehow poisonous. Engine failure. Why do we carry on going to the Highlands?

Sept 21 Robbie (his youngest son) and Hazel were married today - a very lovely moving service on a wonderfully benign sunny autumn day. Meta's mauve outfit, the occasion of so many worries, was the success of the day and she looked marvellous. Once again as we listened to the service, I realised what a dear and loving wife she has been and what a support and comfort she has been to me. It seems scarcely possible but we must now be drawing somewhere towards the end and I intend that she will be happy until death do us part. I can hardly believe that we will ever be parted.

1967 Feb 12: I loathe television but must keep it up for the money. What am I doing with my life? Nothing.

August 17: reached home after a very pleasant, idle and relaxing ten days in Oban

September 6: Well if it weren't for Meta I think I should be starving this month.

November 7: Had a warning of heart trouble. Chalmers gave me a cardiogram and it seems I do have some slight defect.

November 8: Finished 'Ben Line'

Robert Kemp died soon after making this entry, aged 59.