Bill & Shirley

a memoir

Keith Ovenden

For Alastair Bisley & Lydia Wevers
In friendship

The first word

I doubt if anything is really irrelevant. Everything that happens is intrinsically like the man it happens to.

Maurice Spandrell in Aldous Huxley's
Point Counter Point

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Preface

This is a memoir of my parents-in-law, Bill Sutch and Shirley Smith.

I met my wife, Helen, their only child, when we were both graduate students at Oxford in 1967, and we were married in the Wellington registry office, suitably located in Anvil House, in late October 1971. There is no point in pretending that, as far as family relations were concerned, it didn't start badly. Shirley was deeply opposed to the marriage, and did everything she could to prevent it. Prohibition being impossible — Helen was nearly 26 years old — and persuasion ineffective, she implied some sort of rejection, thus launching a period of coarse adjustment to which we felt obliged to conform.

Despite the unprepossessing start, this is not a confessional text, but it is worth mentioning that I found all of this hard to understand. My credentials as suitor and husband didn't strike either Helen or me as all that bad. The support we received from Bill and Shirley's friends, as well as our own, suggested that they shared our point of view. But of course, as both Helen and I eventually came to see, as in all such matters of the heart and psyche, the situation — its

effects and its consequences — were not really about us. They were about them.

Circumstances really do alter cases, and they do so under time's piercing arrow. I knew Bill only for the last four years of his life, but they were years of high incident and drama, both public and private, and ones in which his general orientation to the world suffered a savage reversal. In the spring of 1974, at the age of 67, he was charged with an offence under the Official Secrets Act which, were he to be found guilty, would surely condemn him to prison for the rest of his life. The case dominated the ever-excitable press, which was hardly surprising given the circumstances of his arrest, when he was apparently set to meet a Russian Embassy official on a city street on a dark night in heavy rain. Spielberg could hardly have set it up better. Speculation both before and after the trial, along with deeply hostile commentary from some quarters, threatened to destroy a reputation that had been built over a lifetime of prominence in and devotion to his home country.

By the time of his death in September 1975 he was a man badly in need of sympathetic loyalty. Nor did his life, as is generally the case with public figures trapped in controversies outside their control, cease after his death. Because Helen and I have had his presence in our own lives ever since, this memoir embraces elements that may look rather too much like biography: the subject is there, but he is long since dead. It is not my purpose, as others have felt so free to do, to root among his remains.

So I must say straight away that this makes no pretence of being a biography. It is, rather, an account of my own evolving understanding of the man, an understanding grounded not only in my direct experience of him in those last few years of his life, but also in the contents of his

bookshelves, the items and objects in which he delighted, the memories of him that people occasionally confided to me, and the apparently endless streams of public and private commentary about him. Though frequently active in journalism and broadcasting in the 1970s, and again in the second half of the 1980s, I never contributed to any of the public commentary about Bill, but I have made it my business over the years to take the pulse of public response to his name and reputation.

What I have gained from this is reflected in what I have written. You surely do not have to reflect for long either on the course of Bill's treatment in the media, or on the enterprise of memoir writing, to see that it could hardly have been otherwise. I make no claims to biographical thoroughness. I have not read his voluminous papers, which are in the Alexander Turnbull Library. I have not read the many letters that he wrote either to his daughter or to his wife. I have not conducted interviews, systematic or otherwise, with the hundreds of people who knew him. This is a memoir, a special class of remembrance.

The position with Shirley is rather different. I knew her from a first meeting in 1970, when she visited Oxford, until her death at the end of 2007; rather longer even than she had known her husband, whom she had probably first met in 1941. Throughout those years our relationship evolved through more phases than the moon, driven first from hostility into familial intimacy by our children, her grandchildren, and then cemented into mutual respect through the life that Helen and I lived together, the books that I wrote (and she read), her gradually changing view of the world and eventually by her deep regret for much that she found troubling in her past. 'If only, if only . . .' she would say. Her final years were spoiled by slowly encroaching

indications of dementia, then wrecked by a disabling stroke, but before this first stroke and its successors, she committed some aspects of this regret to paper in a series of autobiographical sketches about her childhood, her life at Oxford in the 1930s, her marriage to Bill, her struggles in the law. In a sense she wrote them for Helen and me, and she certainly wanted me to read them, but though I have relied on them a little here, I do not quote from them. Many of the sketches were written when she stayed with us in Poland one summer at the very end of the last century, under very special circumstances. We had become friends long since, but it was an unusual sort of friendship. I have painted it in colours that I hope capture its unique qualities.

The one confession I do make is that these memoirs have been committed to paper towards the end of my own life simply because I feel the need to clear my mind about them. Both Bill and Shirley were extraordinary people whom it was a privilege to have known. That our earliest encounters caused me great pain is of small importance compared with the great profit that I derived from their encouragement and friendship. I had learned much earlier in my life that it is neither necessary nor desirable to be liked by everyone. Something that, quite possibly, Bill never learned. The virtue of patience, however, is that it can bring other and far greater rewards than the satisfaction it is so often said to provide in itself.

Some balance has to be sought in any memoir: a balance between the self and its private preoccupations at the time of writing, and the self in the world at some other, earlier times; between home and society as they were then as opposed to now; between intimates, acquaintances and strangers in an ever-shifting world of memory and deeds; between factual

and reputational information about others that we have now as well as then. It can be a difficult experience to confront one's own past errors and ignorance, but the recompense of understanding far outweighs the costs, and may lead to real if limited enlightenment. It is in response to these reflections that I have appended to this memoir a short resumé of my views on biography, which I believe also attach to memoirs.

Helen has read this work with her customary dispassionate and loving attention. I would not have sought publication without her agreement, but the fact of its appearance in print does not signify her endorsement of either my memory or my interpretation. This is my memoir, not hers.

Keith Ovenden
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The Lion & the Weasel

A memoir of Bill Sutch

I

There were always going to be difficulties, though I was at first surprised by their number. Loyalty to his wife Shirley, who was deeply opposed to our marriage, meant, inevitably, that Bill sided with her, and felt unable to express what I came to detect as his anxiety about her inability to accept our relationship for what it was. It was immediately obvious that he was deeply attached to his daughter, and the danger of losing her over this controversy of the heart was clearly more real for him than it apparently was for Shirley. He gave us, as a wedding present, a set of Danish cutlery, though he addressed the gift only to Helen and satisfied his evident need — evident to me, at any rate — to apologise for the whole unnecessary imbroglio with the hesitant words, 'That will be all right, won't it?', as though the acceptability of our marriage imagined through a lifetime of eating together might find symbolic expression in his gift.

Then there was the matter of my profession, only then recently labelled, following American practice, political science. At Keele, my undergraduate university, where the subject had been presided over by Professor Sammy Finer, the subject was called political institutions. At Oxford, where

I had recently completed a doctorate, it was political studies. At Essex University, where I then taught, I was a lecturer in the Department of Government. I didn't muchlike the term political science myself, and had had some entertaining if fruitless conversations on the topic during my year as a master's student at the University of Michigan. It was in vain, however, that I pointed out to Bill (as I was encouraged to call him from the start) that the word science simply meant knowledge, and that we should leave it at that. For him, political science was anathema, qualifying those it identified as second-class intellectual citizens.[1]

This view seemed to extend to political philosophy on which, from time to time, I occasionally attempted discussion, or at least conversation. It seemed to be of no interest to him: a view that was later confirmed by the contents of his bookshelves when, after his death, they became more readily available to us.

Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Marx and Laski all belonged to Shirley, and dated from her years studying Literae Humaniores and philosophy (also called, with some slight derision, Mods and Greats) at St Hugh's College, Oxford. I never got the least hint that Bill had ever read any works by these thinkers. He was uninterested. I came to the conclusion that it was practicalities which mattered, and that in these he had a tendency to autodidacticism. His background knowledge was confined largely to New Zealand and came not from the big ideas of philosophers, but from textbooks and manuals which, almost without exception, were empirical: C. A. Cotton's *Geomorphology of New Zealand*, Henry Suter's *Manual of the New Zealand Mollusca*, K. A. Wodzicki's *Introduced Mammals of New Zealand*, Ferdinand von Hochstetter's *Geology of New Zealand*

(1864) in Charles Fleming's 1959 translation, and almost everything on plants and shrubs and trees.

When it came to knowledge, New Zealand was his obsession. And if he needed guidance he went to the top. For instance, we found a letter of early January 1945 from A. J. Healy, a botanist in the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, in response to an enquiry from Bill, setting out the literature on New Zealand plants. Thomas Cheeseman, R. M. Laing and E. W. Blackwell, W. Martin on plants, H. B. Dobbie on New Zealand ferns, everything by Leonard Cockayne — Healy recommended them all. Bill clearly took the advice, because they turned up on his shelves. Healy's letter he dropped into a copy of the 1927 edition of Cockayne's *New Zealand Plants and Their Story* which Shirley, then aged 13, had received as a botany prize at Queen Margaret College in 1929. Family cross-fertilisation, the school prize endorsed by a DSIR specialist as a reliable source.

The evident fascination with the detailed character of his own country of which these volumes speak (I know of no other household with a copy of Thomas Broun's 1880 edition of *Manual of the New Zealand Coleoptera*), coupled with his immense retentive memory, could make Bill an indifferent companion. Helen has deep scar memories of summer holidays when she was six, seven and eight, of long hours on dusty roads under a hot sun while her father pronounced monologues on the geology, flora, distinctive bird life and history of each area through which Shirley drove them in their little old car. As children do, she blanked it all out. He was a born teacher, but she was the wrong age.

Helen told me how very different the situation was when, still a young girl, she went to the summertime Student Congresses at Curious Cove in the Marlborough Sounds and, later, the Workers' Educational Association

Summer Schools at New Plymouth, where Bill was invited to give talks and lectures. There would be more than 150 people present, many in family groups, gathered for a camp-style holiday in which informal lectures and discussion groups about topics of current interest took place alongside home-made evening entertainments, charades, dances and community singing. These very happy occasions (I have seen the photographs) were a completely different environment for learning about New Zealand and the world. There Bill was a different sort of teacher.

Similarly with budding adolescent and young adult intellectuals. It sometimes seems as if a whole generation of male students and youthful public servants have recalled to me, over the years, their pleasure at being invited to labour on the site of the Ernst Plischke-designed house that Bill and Shirley were building on the hillside above Todman Street in the Wellington suburb of Brooklyn in the 1950s.[2] Hugh Price, later a distinguished publisher, remembered unloading and hauling gravel; Rod Alley, later a university lecturer, wielded a pick and shovel; Fergus McLean, later a New Zealand trade commissioner, along with other young recruits from the Department of Industries and Commerce, helped to mix concrete and haul building materials; while Shirley grubbed gorse and laid on the lunchtime sandwiches.

Some probably found the tasks a burdensome intrusion on their weekends, but all those I have spoken to have grateful memories of working beside this knowledgeable, greatly experienced man who was eager to impart what he had learned, and knew how to nurture and sustain their interest. Just as John Ruskin, in nineteenth-century Oxford, took his students roadbuilding with picks and shovels, so Bill secured a place of enduring affection among these young people as their contribution was rewarded with

conversation, instruction and advice.

What I lost sight of when first I heard these tales was the reverse: the effect of these young people on Bill. I think now that he found in them exactly the kind of endorsement and recognition of his own value to the world that he very much needed. Their approval eased, without ever completely eradicating, his anxiety, uncertainty, hesitancy and deep insecurity. For some reason I didn't fit into their mould. I had had significant teachers of my own and did not need another, so that I failed to play back to him, through my grateful attention, his vital place in the world. And besides, my presence in his life really had little to do with him. I was there because of Helen, which must somehow have relegated him to a position of secondary importance — not something he was particularly used to. I was inattentive to the kinds of telling detail that would have led to greater understanding and toleration on my part.

There are always, in people's lives, apparently little things that may speak volumes about them if we can only notice and focus on them. I write later in this book about Shirley's pinks — small carnations that she nurtured. With Bill I later saw that I should have focused on his Buddhas. He collected perhaps as many as 20 small statues of the Buddha, generally in the lotus position and made for the most part of stone or inexpensive metals. Museum shop copies, they represent different strands of Buddhism: Indian, Sri Lankan, Cambodian and Chinese, and different eras. None is particularly valuable in itself. Why did he collect them? Bill had no Buddhist beliefs or tendencies himself. He was one of the least contemplative people I have ever known. His interest in the great anthropologist Franz Boas's theories of 'primitivism' in art may have stimulated an interest in keeping one or two examples of Buddhist veneration, but

A small bronze Buddha, 21.5 x 15 cm. Bill collected such things, but no one, least of all Shirley, seemed to know why.

not 20 of them. Was he trying to tell us something? I have no answer, but surely they are suggestive.

It was perhaps my misfortune to have encountered Bill too late in his day, for when I began to acquire some intimate knowledge of him, from the spring of 1971 to the winter of 1972 when I held a post-doctoral fellowship at Victoria University of Wellington, I was expected to spend many hours in his company. They were never happy. The ritual was dinner on a Sunday evening at Helen's parents' home, the spiritual breaking of bread at the altar of family. Present, too, would be Bill's sister — also called Shirley — who lived almost next door. She was a professional psychologist who had recently taken early retirement from the psychology service for schools. In the family she was commonly referred to as 'sister Shirley'.

Given Shirley and Bill's antagonism to our marriage, and the wound this had inflicted on Helen in discovering that her mother's love was not unconditional, it is hard even now for friends to understand why we saw this ritual endorsement of family as a necessary obligation. Surely we might have said, well, in the circumstances, perhaps we should stay away, or at least go less frequently. It is a testimony to the strength of Helen's personality, her determination not to let her parents drive her from the family, that we never adopted this option.

The circumstances, already unpropitious enough, were laced with an air of tension so intense that it hung heavy over the table like a Brent Wong geometric sky object, oppressive, angular, a form of mesmeric menace. The situation was not helped by Shirley's resistance to having outsiders, or even family, in her kitchen, so that any normal participation in the general minutiae of the dinner was denied me. No table