

## CHILDREN OF EMPIRE: A TRILOGY

## VOLUME I: AS I RECALL

BY HUGH HALDANE THOMSON AND HIS FAMILY - WITH PICTURES

### PROLOGUE

*I am faced with boxes of jumbled photographs representing the criss-crossing lives of the Thomson and Partridge tribes over three generations and two plan-chest drawers with a set of typed manuscripts by my father, Hugh Haldane Thomson, written in the last two decades of his life when he decided during a plane trip he would try to 'pin down the past'. The decision he came to was jotted down in a handwritten note to himself mid-flight between Gatwick and Malta in the Summer of 1990. This is it:*

This is how it all began.....in the air. At night. Which is of little importance when you are flying. In flight you are the prisoner of encapsulated time and place; sharing the company of enchained souls, belted in, tightly ranged in serried ranks of long backed seats; contained and trapped in a constricted lozenge which is temporarily peopled by strangers variously distracted from reality by trivial current events. Charm, backed by the relentless hum of engine power prepares you for conjectured disaster. She invites your interest, discreetly, with pop-down oxygen masks, inflatable lifebelts and emergency exits. So it's dark outside.....Or if it is daylight? What difference does it make.... one does not really believe that.....that.... Probably not, since the whole gruesome concept is infinitely subconscious. With any luck, soothed by food and drink, one will survive once more, cossetted by rigorously attendant hostesses proffering alcohol and of course salted peanuts... the latter inaccessibly imprisoned in tricky little packets of minute proportions. Mind you, the impending meal smells appetising and may well prove so to be. Bearing in mind that it is a paid up component of the ticket one will undoubtedly consume it in toto, defiant, if nothing else.....be it all at 2.30 a.m. in the middle of the night. There will be no fuss. No well worn thoughts of discredited diets or no longer sacred rules concerning eating proper meals at recognised intervals and never snacks between.

The new preoccupation of the moment is the management of scarce space. Juggling with diverse containers, plastic wrappings, elusive lightweight cutlery, perilous tumblers and tipping mini bottles of wine, while all the while, before your very eyes pass similar supplies for window seated fellow passengers - you are merely finding out that your selected aisle seat option also has its drawbacks. All the same, time passes pleasantly enough with the pangs of hunger well satisfied and the inner self soothed by a modest head of alcoholic steam. In the end it becomes a matter of stacking the unconsumed remnants and the plastic trash that went with them. In the midst of returning order a frustrated neighbour dives apologetically for some trivial missing item. Consequent expansive gestures designed to squirm aside thus impinge upon aisle space and are rewarded with a sharp unforgiving prod from a passing trolley loaded high with discarded trays. Mine will soon be swept away - but not before the agonising inside neighbour, pleading passing rights, seeks to make his frantic way towards the nearest toilet where, happily, he may be fortunate enough to readjust the indelicate balances of nature to acceptable levels. At least he can rest assured that he will not fall over in the process. This should prove well-nigh impossible..... provided only that he can shut the door behind him.

Peace at last. The lights are dimmed. All passengers have been duly processed into a state of somnolent satisfaction. In this silent chamber surrounded by the constant, heavy all-pervasive hum of droning engine power I am personally isolated by one solitary private eye of light, poised almost overhead and peering down inquisitively from above. Alongside, on my chair arm is lodged a designated switch with which to turn off its beaming eye - at my personal whim. It lights the table folded down before me. Here is the opportunity. Seize it. You have the paper and the pen. Start writing. Make notes at least. Such opportunities have existed so many times before; opportunities to pin down the past; opportunities avidly considered, short term, but not quite taken, save fitfully and entirely without true purpose. It is now high time to start the record, to try at least to write down if not to fully understand the whys and wherefores of a lifetime; to look across the years from a distant standpoint; observed distantly through the mists of intervening events, part forgotten memories of places and of peoples; of incidents both significant and trivial; at highlights and at lowlights; at other lives and sometime deaths. Put the past on record and see what you will find. Go back to where it all began - to a small town on the Ross-shire coast, called Tain. Start the journey.....now!

*In Chapter 1 that journey begins with reminiscences from some months after his birth on 30 May 1919. His father had married on his return to normal life from the Middle East following the cessation of his World War I duties. Haldane's childhood ends symbolically at the age of 9 with the death of his beloved dog, Duthac, the same age as he was. As he himself wrote about the loss of his only constant and uncritical companion of those years, in hindsight this event taught him how 'the end of one phase of life serves first and foremost as a marker for the next one that follows'. Gradually I will relay in subsequent chapters all Dad's text, uninterfered with other than dealing with obvious spelling mistakes or untidy formatting.*

*One thing he did not do was to coordinate to his story the huge stock of family photos accumulated over the decades (the latest only inherited by me, his daughter, on his death in 2008) from which I have picked the highlights - turning this gradually into an illustrated family history. The faded photos of his childhood can now be enhanced on the computer to look better than the originals, though there still remains a host of unknown Edwardian faces looking out at me - the dramatis personae of his childhood - whose identity, given few of them are labelled, I have tried to deduce from his text - not always successfully. As I work through his story new incidents appeared to relate to pictures I had already looked at, but now seemed to fit. In some cases I covered several chapters before coming across new photographs which fitted in earlier, and have had to retrace my steps and insert them if I thought they added to the text. Although I enhanced dark and light in such photos overall, I have deliberately left any blemishes there sometimes are, as they add to the sense of time past. As so often with families, a new photograph album is started after a key event, such as marriage, birth of a child or move to a new place. There is an album for Haldane's life up to age three (only much later did he change over to his other name, Hugh), starting with a frontispiece of his mother and father each at their desk in the manse in Tain (see Chapter 2). This was for him a particularly precious album peculiar to his sole story before others came along - much as, years later, my album with photos of the very first years of life in Africa are precious to me, hugged to me as my sole story before others came along. Haldane's album helped to anchor some people and places, but there was no picture in it of the Tain*

manse itself - their first house. In some cases I discovered further information that, so as not to interfere with his original text, I felt needed at least a contributory endnote - take, for instance, the significance of the name of his beloved dog.

What results is not encyclopaedic in its factual coverage - more a cubist collage made up of small, separate facets which, as *pars pro toto* are surprisingly sufficient to build up enough of an overall picture to make an engaging narrative - this fits Haldane's idea of describing the diamond of truth by looking at its various facets (his opening quotation to Chapter 1). From these, in my frame text in italics I have concentrated on certain threads and questions that seem, fatefully, to have run through the saga of the entire Thomson family, including that of Haldane's own children (myself and my brother). These give a dramatic turn to the many factual descriptions of changing surroundings and events that Haldane was so good at, while his self-questionings as he grew up and launched into life in the world would be recognized by any family in their own particular combinations. In the end my frame text has inevitably turned out to be biased by my own reflections, as my own life appeared to repeat my father's on so many fronts. My approach legitimately concurs that of a hero of mine, the art critic and poet, Charles Baudelaire, who famously declaimed that art criticism is superior when 'partial, passionate and political'<sup>1</sup>, rather than attempting total detachment. For those wishing to simply read my father's account untouched by my interventions, all they need do is read his faithfully reproduced chapters in normal text, avoiding my frame text in italics and Endnotes inserted as further commentary at the end of each chapter, from the point of view of someone living a century later.

It soon became apparent how during my own life key aspects of my father's life were completely unknown to me - as unknown as my life was to him, in fact. In the same way his own life was in the end as much a blank sheet to his own father as his father's was to him - apart from the publicly known highlights - so I have felt it necessary to allocate a separate interlude chapter to his parents, to try to get to the bottom of certain unanswerable questions. Such it is in families, that only much later when we get a perspective on things do we wish we had asked about them more and reached out to understand. As children we thought we were the centre of their universe - when in fact we were but one of the many balls they were struggling to keep in the air whilst dealing with other massive twists and turns of life and self-development. All the same, although my father mentioned certain incidents of his childhood which became part of Thomson family lore, while alive he kept his store of photographs to himself, even though I had from early on made attempts to know more about our family history. I would build up the photo albums I still have with photographs from my mother's side of the family (the Partridges) which happened to include pictures that impinged on Thomson lives - but Dad once accused me of being ruthless in my raids on the archive: there was evidently a reason for holding back on sharing his own collection of photos and going through them with me explaining who was who, and this was to do with protecting memories of his life with his mother who died so young. Thus although his own writing often richly amplifies the pictures I was only to see in 2008, there are many gaps in the captions where I cannot with certainty identify who the relatives and friends in them are.

I thus began the long process of sorting these images - very much stamps of the technology of their time in their smallness or sepia fadedness - and inserting them at points where they seemed to match his story.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Salon of 1846*

*Rather like that haunting Stephen Poliakoff drama, **Shooting the Past**, which reconstructs lives from old photographs in a threatened picture library, even though I knew some mainline facts about his childhood I could not at first identify the figures from this period before I had come onto the scene unless someone had written names on the back. In many cases I have had to insert rather vague overall captions until surviving family members in Scotland may eventually be able to provide more accurate detail in an updated version.*

*As the chapters move on, certain parallels present themselves between the generations - history repeating itself over and over again - I have punctuated Haldane's subdivisions with a small ouroboros symbol as a spacer: the version I chose has within it the well-known Greek phrase carved over the entrance doorway into the Temple of Delphi: **KNOW THYSELF**. Strangely, when a few decades ago I had my own coat of arms drawn up for the name 'Thomson', featuring the lion of Scotland and Virgo blackbirds, the herald provided this very phrase as its motto, this time in Latin, **NOSCE TEIPSUM**. It perfectly fits both Haldane and my endless search to make sense of who we were/are, and why I decided I should work at fulfilling my father's wish to let his autobiography reach the light of day. We all to a greater or lesser extent 'construct' and 'reinvent' ourselves in the light of internal debates, and certainly this family biography seeded by Hugh Haldane Thomson is evidence of how far we all gave ourselves up to intense self-scrutiny against a far-flung background of world events and upheavals. Its appeal, I believe, is that readers will identify their own inner situations from this individual story.*

*As his life proceeds, straight away in Chapter 1 a different matter presented itself to me as editor at a very early stage. Even during his childhood years my mother's life (she was born three years later) started, at first spasmodically, to interweave with his - since, as he mentions - both their families encountered each other on a summer holiday at Nigg in Scotland when they were young children. Fate indeed laid down its marker early - and then waited another fifteen years before fully playing its hand. At that first encounter in 1923 both were children living in the aftermath of the First World War, both with parents damaged in different ways from its experience, surviving to tell their tales. The question was, what do we know of my mother's point of view, given all we have are her own family photos as signposts mapping out her side of the story? The irony is that Mary was a better writer than all of us, revealed in the highly articulate letters she wrote throughout her life to many different people - but we were never able to draw her into writing her autobiography, probably because its central tragedy was too painful to relive or talk about. Although the silent queen of our tale, I ensure in later chapters that she interweaves with Haldane's story as the ever-present, silent witness, and at certain points I try to put words to her probable thoughts on the basis of past conversations with her, but I can presume no further. In my brother's case we agreed between us very early on that he would simply write his own story as a separate work and not try to weave it in to this oeuvre. Hence in the frame text to Dad's Trilogy he features in my own recollections of him as his sister.*

*Then apart from feeling duty-bound to try and interject some facets of my mother's side of the story from the very beginning (if only sketchily), in order to provide essential background to Dad's Trilogy overall there were three piles I needed to sink into the River of Time. The first - within the territory of Haldane's childhood, given he was an immediate post-WWI baby - was to look (in Chapter 2) at features of his mother and father's lives during and after the Great War that so deeply affected his own psychological development*

- long before his own WWII adventures recounted in Chapters 4,5 and 6 immediately following school and university (Chapter 3). Questions of the Thomson lineage and any connections with other famous 'Thomsons' - from architects to physicists to newspapers owners - are sketched in, taking into consideration that in Scotland 'Thomson' is a surname as common as 'Smith'. Haldane's own War years are recounted by him in fuller detail (in relation to time covered) than any of his other life experiences, being vivid memories at the heart of which, did his family but understand, further seismic shocks to his psyche occurred whose extent none of us was to fully realize until decades later, though impacting on our family all our lives in terms of a long-standing, creeping metal/mental fatigue, especially on my mother.

Given the Edinburgh circles he lived in, and childhood conversations with friends of his father, it was fairly obvious to Haldane after WWII that he should seek a career in Africa (the descriptions of being a white man in Africa by a friend of his father given in Chapter 1 were seeds already planted in his mind as early as the age of two or three). What appears to be the inevitability of this option cannot be fully understood without the second pile I stop to drive into the river of Time (Chapter 7), a much deeper one concerning the many early Scots explorers of Africa (including Joseph Thomson) and the missionary work there that followed in its slipstream. So many of the key individuals involved, including David Livingstone, had lived in or near Edinburgh, the city where my father spent his senior school days and University life, leaving behind a living oral transmission generations later within the clerical circles his father, the Rev. G T Thomson, moved in.

Near the end of World War II Haldane married my mother, Mary - so just like him, I was a post-WWII baby, born nine months later almost to the day in September 1945. My life with my young parents in Africa from 1946 began the long years of the next phase of my father's life there - set off in a prelude which in hindsight one can only describe as comparable to living in the Garden of Eden - and described by Haldane in Chapter 8. At this point my frame text starts to interject my own memories before and after everything changed with the virus that felled my mother - when we were, as it were, expelled from the Earthly Paradise.

DAD'S AGE (Mum's Age 3 years less)	YEAR	DAD'S STORY	LYNDA'S STORY	LYNDA'S AGE (Martin's Age 5 years less)	MARTIN'S STORY	MUM'S STORY	YEAR
	1910	CHAPTER 1 CHILDHOOD					
1	1920	CHAPTER 3 SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY	CHAPTER 2 Flashback: WWI: the Grandfathers and Grandmothers and their influence on Haldane and Mary. Other notable Thomsons.				1925
10	1930						1935
	1940	CHAPTERS 4,5 & 6 WWII					
						Married Dec. 1944	1940
	1945	CHAPTER 7 Victorian adventurers in Africa	Born 1945				1945
	1949	CHAPTER 8 to Africa	Earliest years in Africa		Born 1950		1950

For Volume I of Haldane's Trilogy entitled by him 'AS I RECALL', the above writing plan summarises its chapters - chronologically spanning half a century (1900-50) and ending at this natural caesura.