

BOOK REVIEW

Piece of another period: four sons and a Cambridge childhood

by Richard, Stephen, Robert and John Boyd

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When I was invited by *Nature* to suggest a suitable book for 'holiday reading' I immediately plumped for Gwen Raverat's '*Period Piece*', the delightful account by Charles Darwin's granddaughter of growing up in late nineteenth century Cambridge surrounded by relatives and friends including the Huxley, Keynes, Wedgwood and Hill families.

In a book that explicitly genuflects to that earlier volume, the four sons (born 1935-45) of Dixon Boyd, the Cambridge Professor of Anatomy and Fellow of Clare College, and Amélie Boyd (née Loewenthal), tell their own Cambridge childhood stories. Compiled principally from letters between their parents from their time as young medical students in Belfast in the late 1920s until Dixon's death in 1968; family correspondence to and from sons away at school or university; and the later memories of their four sons, the tone is superficially domestic. However, this is a household in academic Cambridge and apparently mundane routines resonate with University, principally medical, personalities, news, views, gossip and (a little) historical perspective.

Nobel Prize winners, and Fellows of the Royal Society occupied what the Boyds refer to as the first rank of medico-scientific Cambridge, to which they explicitly acknowledge their father did not belong despite distinguished work especially on placental anatomy. Nevertheless these memoirs are full of the Great and Good - at least 17 Nobel Laureates are mentioned, and I gave up counting the FRs. Several of these were firm family friends, others, neighbours and colleagues. Hence the slight shock of realising that the 1951 detailed handwritten correspondence with the owner of a property they intend to rent, discussing the arrangements for gardeners, boilers, bathrooms, and coal deliveries was actually with Professor Edgar Adrian, winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1932. The professional roles of family friends sometimes led to confusion, especially for Robert and Richard who followed their parents into medical careers and discovered that old friends were eminent practitioners usually addressed as 'Sir'.

General social history permeates the letters, including the tribulations of young love in the 1930s and the subterfuge necessary to spend a night together, and the shock felt by three of the adult sons as they learn of a pre-marriage abortion. Percolating through the narrative are issues of class, religion and money; a casual racism that the four brothers view retrospectively with surprise and distaste; and what would nowadays be called gender issues. Amélie, a prize-winning student, resigned herself to being a 'Cambridge wife', managing the household and hosting social occasions ('E.M Forster here to dine...Kingsley Amis for lunch yesterday'), whilst relegated professionally to infant welfare clinics and school medicals.

This is a personal, albeit multi-voiced, memoir, not a history. There are no footnotes, no undue explanatory interventions and no complete index, although an extremely useful catalogue of personal names and brief biographical resumes is included. It is charming and quirky, rich in detail and reassuringly free of retrospective analysis.

Tilli Tansey
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