RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

You Cannot Live As I Have Lived and Not End Up Like This

Terence Blacker

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Praise for *You Cannot Live As I Have Lived and Not End Up Like This*:

‘[A] superb and sensational rummage inside the head of a man who was “full of strangeness and wonderful gamey variety”’
Daily Express

‘Once in a blue moon comes a biography that has the texture of life-as-it-is-lived, the usual province of fiction … With stealth and sympathy, the biographer has followed his subject’s footsteps into all sorts of strange by-ways, most of them frightening or humiliating or forlorn’ Craig Brown,
Daily Telegraph

‘A splendidly entertaining romp through a life misled’
New Statesman

‘Sympathetic and extremely enjoyable’
Daily Telegraph

Terrific … I can’t imagine reading a more interesting biography of a crack addict. That sounds cheap; I don’t suppose I’ll read a more interesting biography for a while’
Evening Standard

‘Excellent’
Literary Review

You cannot live As I Have Lived and Not End Up Like This

The thoroughly disgraceful life & times of Willie Donaldson

by Terence Blacker

EBURY PRESS

To Angela

‘I don’t see how you can conceive happiness without love. Friends, money, a good job are nothing, absolutely nothing.’[1]
1955

‘Emma Jane seems determined to turn my brothel into a home. This must be resisted.’[2]
1975

‘She’s driving me mad. She’s vain, deceitful, spoilt, manipulative, feckless, unfaithful, unreliable. She isn’t even on the telephone. She’s the ideal woman.’[3]
1995

‘The wicked acts are no more the whole truth than the virtuous ones.’[4]
2000

1
A life of sorts

FOR THE TWENTY-FIVE years that I had known him, Willie Donaldson had screened his calls. He was someone who liked to be in control, who dreaded the surprise telephone call, the unscheduled encounter on the street. There were people to avoid: enemies, creditors, over-loyal acquaintances from the past, friends who might call him at the wrong moment to chat, to fix up a lunch or – a particular dread – to invite him for a weekend in the country. From the mid-1980s, there had been a crack habit to maintain and, with it, a series of doomed, obsessive liaisons, bringing him into close contact, professional and personal, with dealers, ex-cons, users and tarts.

These were the people from whom he really wanted to hear. Very occasionally, one would ring Willie and, rather than having to hang around in the waiting-room of his answering machine until he picked up or didn't, one was straight through. On those occasions, he didn't sound himself. Normally a great telephone conversationalist, he would be hurried. His voice, usually rather welcoming, sounded disappointed. There was someone coming over, he would say breathlessly. Could we talk in the morning?

A couple of years before he died, Willie had thrown away his writer's notebooks and various items from the past, but he kept the tapes from his answering machine. One night, shortly after I had decided to write this book, I listened to them. It was a more upsetting experience than I had

anticipated. Letters, notes, diaries have an inbuilt formality to them but the tapes of incoming calls, sometimes full conversations, have an unrehearsed intimacy. The voices of Willie's life crowded in, one after another: brisk PAs from TV production companies, crack partners, friends from the past, professional visitors from escort agencies, flirty Sloane Rangers, dealers, the odd publisher, his part-time agent, a gravel-voiced hood calling himself Pizza-Face Scarlatti, who might equally have been Peter Cook playing one of his regular jokes or a real gangster – the voices were from all ages, all classes. They were cheerful, amorous, exasperated, concerned, hysterical ('*It's lies – all lies!*' one woman screamed) and, sometimes, downright scary.

For each of these people, a different Willie Donaldson existed. For some he was William, others Willie, a few Button. The occasional call from officialdom (no pick-ups there) addressed him by his first name, Charles.

An old-fashioned machine, the answerphone had a loud tone before each message and on one or two of the cassettes the distant, ghostly echo of previous conversations could be heard in the background. The precariousness and oddity of my friend's life was there and with it, the impossibility of doing justice to its full strangeness and wonderful gamey variety.

Of course, someone had been here before and he, too, had struggled with the problem. In his memoirs *From Winchester to This*, Willie wrote: 'In real life a person is an unknowable jumble of contradictory qualities. Brave and cowardly. Cruel and kind. Treacherous and loyal. Feckless and prudent. In fiction, this would be confusing … This is a mistake writers of biography make. They try to shape a life, to give it a fictional coherence. They should just tip the whole mess on to the page and say: "Here is a life of sorts. Make of it what you will".'

Willie worked over his life in his writings. While most of the facts he recorded were approximately true, they were,

above all, a writer's material. He edited, distorted, added and deleted. He told his own version of the truth. Corruption, morality and the madness of fame were his great themes, and he was determined that his readers would understand that, when it came to bad behaviour, he wrote with hard-earned personal authority. 'I've done some terrible things,' he would say to friends, and we knew that it was true. The complex erotic fantasy life he lived out was real enough, and so was the narcotic fuel which propelled it, but there were other things that he was less open about – debts, dodgy dealings, rumours of blackmail. To a journalist who asked about his life around the time of his third and final bankruptcy in 1994, he simply said: 'I've been a complete cunt.'

Had he? It seemed odd that a man whose comic prose had such wild energy, whose autobiographical writings were so unsparingly clear-eyed, could have lived a life of such irredeemable self-indulgence. His words, after all, had given such pleasure, and had been important in their way. *The Henry Root Letters* were not just astonishingly funny. They heralded the dawning of a new age. Just as Peter Cook's impression of Harold Macmillan in *Beyond The Fringe* is now seen as the moment when Britain learnt to laugh at politicians, so Henry Root's vision of contemporary Britain, where senior policemen, minor TV stars, Mrs Thatcher and Esther Rantzen all essentially belonged to the same world, one dominated by publicists, image, soundbites, was the first indication that the age of celebrity was upon us.

Willie had an extraordinary sensitivity to social trends: fifteen or so years after Root, he created another comic monster in his character Liz Reed, whose TV production company Heartfelt Productions was a leading player in the increasingly competitive compassion market. A few years later, it would be no particular surprise to see some of Liz's

wilder projects – *Disabled Gladiators*, perhaps, or *Who Put Heroin in My Kiddies' Sweets?* – reported in the TV listings.

But for all the mad verve of Willie's overtly funny books, it was when he was writing about himself (past and present, lovers, friends and enemies, his various acts of financial, sexual and narcotic misbehaviour, matters of conscience and guilt) that he was at his best and most interesting as a writer. Few, if any, of the flashier writers about sexual obsession or drug dependence have, for all their overwrought prose, caught them with the chilling force of Willie's lacerating autobiographical novel *Is This Allowed?* Many boastfully modest memoirs have been written about the Sixties, but Willie's account in *From Winchester to This* of how the past bears on the present – and the other way round – is more surprising and moving than almost all of them.

Willie Donaldson was a comic moralist. He was generous to friends, younger writers and strangers who wrote to him. He was wonderful company. There was a natural, if unconventional, kindness to him. Yet, distorting the past and the present for the sake of a joke, he chose to portray himself as a reckless decadent, a corrupter of innocence, a moral bankrupt, a chancer, a squanderer of money, privilege and luck. That is the version of Willie that has lived on.

'There's a rather odd rumour going about that Willie Donaldson has been found dead.'

I was at my desk at home in Norfolk when the call from Jamie Fergusson, obituary editor of the *Independent*, reached me.

Jamie had been contacted by someone on the *Guardian*. A junior reporter on the paper had been the source, via her father who knew a caretaker in Fulham.

I rang around. None of our mutual friends knew anything. Eventually I called Cherry Donaldson who,

although she and Willie had separated in 1987, was still officially the tenant of his flat and knew the practical, usually shambolic details of his life. She too had heard nothing.

I rang the local police station, where the duty officer suggested I called the coroner's office. It was closed. I tried the police again. The duty officer, a woman with the bored, whiny voice of someone announcing trains on a very hot day, was disapproving of my persistence. She suggested that I rang the coroner's office during working hours.

'But, you see, none of his friends know about this,' I said, trying to be reasonable.

'I'm sure that the coroner will be able to help you in the morning, sir.'

'I'd prefer not to wait until the morning.'

'At the end of the day, this is just a rumour, sir. What we're talking here is rumour control.'

'There's his wife,' I said, trying another tack. 'She's very upset.'

'Wife, sir? Wouldn't she know already?'

'They didn't live together.'

The woman police officer considered the full oddness of what I was telling her.

'You don't think that ringing up his wife was a little bit insensitive, sir?'

I hung up. Willie could have turned this into a wonderful story, self-important and thick members of the constabulary being something of a speciality of his.

Cherry spoke to the police. They rang her back to confirm that a seventy-year-old man had been found dead at the address she had given. It was true. Willie was dead.

The estate of Charles William Donaldson was not left in good order. Two days after his death, Cherry and Charlie Donaldson, his forty-five-year-old son from his first

marriage, entered the flat where almost thirty years previously they had all lived.

The place was in a grim and squalid state. A film of fat, the residue of thousands of fry-ups, covered the kitchen. In Willie's sitting-room and in the 'literary room' where he worked, credit card statements, unanswered letters from friends and magazine photographs of his last great love Rachel Garley were pushed into folders containing the various drafts of the work that had preoccupied him while he was with Rachel, *Canetti et Moi* (by Rachel Garley). His computer was logged on to a lesbian porn site.

In the last few years of his life, Willie had discovered the joy of credit cards and, by the time of his death, had run up debts of more than £18,000. Other small or significant acts of ducking and diving involving tax and VAT pushed his potential, posthumous indebtedness towards £25,000.

Cherry Donaldson, his heir from a will drawn up in 1987, consulted a lawyer who advised her to distance herself from the dangerous shambles of his estate by renouncing probate.

A side effect of this decision is that he has no literary executor to supervise his published work: a publisher wishing to reissue *The Henry Root Letters* or a producer interested in filming *Is This Allowed?* has, at the moment of writing, no one to talk to.

Willie's estate, which currently consists of debts, is in legal limbo.

On the obituary pages, Willie was given a fitting send-off. The *Daily Telegraph* is said to have a house rule that only heads of state and popes are given a full page but Willie broke the rules in death as in life; its very funny obituary was headlined 'WILLIAM DONALDSON, Wykehamist pimp, crack fiend and adulterer who created Henry Root and *Beyond The Fringe*'. In the *Guardian*, Christopher Hawtree wrote that 'Donaldson lived by[1] the seat of his pants –

which were often cast aside, for his abundant good humour, the ultimate aphrodisiac, brought him more than a dalliance with the actor Sarah Miles and the singer Carly Simon.'

In *The Times*, he was 'a womanising satirist[2] and novelist who squandered several fortunes on wild living' while, in the *Independent*, Willie's friend and former co-writer Simon Carr provided a more nuanced and personal account. 'In the absence[3] of a reliable biography we can only piece together the life of William Donaldson,' Simon wrote. 'His gifts for fiction, his personal fortifications and his theatrical ambitions both in and out of the theatre obscure much of the autobiographical data.'

This sense that Willie had somehow given us all the slip, providing a false alternative narrative of his life, would not go away. I re-read *From Winchester to This* and, strangely, the book that had disappointed me when I had read it on its publication in 1998 – its clever-dick evasions seemed calculated to irritate any reader who just wanted to be told the story – now struck me as an astonishing and moving piece of work. But, behind the brilliant wit, deft writing, the expressions of shame and regret, there was, I was beginning to think, a subtle process of deception, perhaps self-deception, going on. Willie had presented his life as one of tragi-comic decline: huge wealth leading to humiliating poverty, love to perversion, champagne on a Sunningdale lawn to a crack den in Ladbroke Grove, friendship to betrayal. His writing, as he described it, was an irresponsible skitter across the surface of contemporary life, involving jokes and facetiousness and wasting the time of serious people.

It was this version which was faithfully reproduced in the obituaries, and it was wrong. Here was a man whose untrustworthiness in all things had become legendary, and yet he had been trusted to tell the essential truth about himself.

I wanted to find out what happened to Willie Donaldson: a man who had known, worked with, employed, and gone to bed with some of the most remarkable people of his generation but who would only present his memories of them through a fairground mirror of jokes; who appeared to have a reckless confidence yet was riddled with self-loathing; who confessed all and revealed nothing; who was so extraordinarily funny and yet so sad.

The English upper middle-class has over the past century thrown up its share of characters – insiders who choose to live on the outside, charming shysters who move from one dodgy enterprise to the next, squanderers of money and love, footlers and fools who have eventually paid the price for a life of self-indulgence. Willie was all of those things, according to his version and that of his enemies, but the caricatures were not enough in his case. I began to wonder whether this apparent decline, this loss year by year of cash, reputation and a slim chance of happiness, was not something else – a sort of perverse triumph, a liberation from the past and its expectations.

There was something else. When anyone dies, unless he is very old, those that loved them are likely to be left with a sense of unfinished business – conversations, disagreements and plans are left uncompleted. With Willie, this sense was particularly acute for it was his habit to compartmentalise his life. There are areas and incidents to which he would refer only glancingly, or disguise in the form of a joke, or simply dismiss.

Listening half-guiltily to those tapes, I realised that for me there would be more to writing his biography than merely trying to put together the details of an extraordinary story of triumph and decline that he never quite managed to tell himself.

We are brought up to believe in a certain model of friendship: solid, reliable, the gift of someone who will stand by you and offer support and sympathy through the

bad times as well as the good. In my experience, Willie Donaldson was none of those things. He actually prided himself on his lack of moral fibre. Trying to explain this to me once, he told me that, if I were in hospital, dying, and called him to my bedside for a final farewell, and then moments later he had received another call from a service flat where Francesca Annis (a fantasy figure at the time) told him she was waiting for him, he would have no choice. It had to be Francesca.

His was never exactly a shoulder to cry on. I turned to him at the end of my marriage and we had an awkward and pointless conversation. It was as if I were asking advice about a crisis in some distant land whose language and customs he had never learnt.

Friendship is slipperier than one might think. Even if I were not writing about him, there would be no day on which thoughts of Willie would not have drifted into my mind. Over a year after his death, I miss our conversations on the telephone, our lunches. His perspective on the world – a trashy story in the tabloids, a bit of politics, some writerly humiliation that one of us had suffered, scandalous gossip of friends in trouble or misbehaving – was always interesting, unusual and funny. The opinions that most of us hold tend to bear the faint fingerprints of others: a column read, an interview watched. His were always predictably unpredictable and entirely his own.

Willie was a good, sharp reader; it was his hard-earned approval that many of us wanted above all when we wrote. He was generous in his opinions, curious. Unlike most writers when they are on the ropes (and somehow, even when he was in the bestseller lists or waltzing around Europe with a TV crew, he conveyed the impression that a knockout punch was never far away), he admired openly and without jealousy the work of younger, hotter, better-paid rivals. ‘Breathtaking,’ he would say about something he had read. ‘I don’t know why we all don’t just give up.’

Now I knew there was more than just a question of discovering what happened to him in his life. I wanted to track down my friend.

Few people get a good send-off at a crematorium. The process is too grimly industrial, with funeral parties stacked up like aeroplanes over Heathrow, to allow the individuality and uniqueness of a life to come through. The groups of murmuring, dark-suited mourners, waiting their turn with their hearse, their coffin, their loved one, their memories and sadness, look remarkably similar. At the final fire, one life is pretty much like another.

There is usually an odd sense of awkwardness on these occasions and Willie's funeral, a private event at Mortlake crematorium in south-west London, was odder than most. The compartments were represented – family, a couple of wives, a Page Three girl, school friends, some TV types, a few writers – but few knew anybody outside their own little group. The small chapel was not full.

Willie's sister Jane had arranged the service, opting sensibly for the safe C-of-E form although Willie was a resolute nonbeliever. But then, as the vicar, a Cambridge contemporary, reminded us, which of us *really* know what the other believes? I was pretty sure most of those present had a good idea of what Willie believed and said so in a brief address, at the end of which I read a passage about Willie's Winchester days from *Is This Allowed?* There was more laughter in the crematorium than is entirely seemly at a funeral.

As, at the end of the service, the coffin trundled off towards the flames, Charlie Donaldson, in the front row, asked his stepmother Cherry Donaldson if the body would be burnt now. She said it probably would be.

'That's a bit heavy,' Charlie murmured. 'I think I would have preferred a burial.'

'Bit late for that now,' said Cherry.

And as the coffin of Willie Donaldson disappeared, a bark of laughter, in a voice that was uncannily like his, echoed through the crematorium.

Charles.

2
Family Fantasy

'I'M IN A mood[1] at the moment to blame my parents for almost everything,' Willie wrote in 1990, as he began to work on his memoirs. 'The moderate hash I've made of things is undoubtedly their fault.'

Haunted increasingly by memories of his childhood – the memoirs were originally to be entitled *From Sunningdale to This* – Willie would conjure up in his later writing a picture of dysfunctional privilege, complete with a distant and disappointed father and a mother who, to quote the confident words of one of Willie's obituarists, was 'snobbish and bullying'. Those who knew Willie as an adult confirmed this version. 'His problems began with his mother,' one person told me; 'he could never forgive himself for despising his father', said another. Something, I assumed, must have gone very wrong, back there in Sunningdale.

The Donaldsons were certainly rich. When Charles William Donaldson entered the world, on January 4, 1935, he was born into a solid shipping dynasty that had borne the family name since being established by William and John Donaldson in 1854. Based in Glasgow, the Donaldson Line owned a fleet of nineteen passenger and cargo ships under the control of various interlinked companies, headed by Willie's father Charles Glen, his uncle Fred and cousin Norman.

The chairman of the company, Willie's grandfather Charles (the family believed in simplicity when it came to

christening their children) lived in squirearchal grandeur at Airthrey Castle, near Perth. An uncle owned the winner of the One Thousand Guineas and the Oaks. Another raced several yachts, one of which represented its country in the British-American Cup. His uncle Fred (scandalously, Willie kept this to himself) was joint master of the Lanarkshire Hunt. ‘All the Donaldsons were keen on sport and the country life,’ reads the official company history *The Donaldson Line: A Century of Shipping*.

In 1927, Charles Glen Donaldson had married Elizabeth Stockley, a girl who, although she also came from a smart, mercantile background, quickly decided that she had no intention of leading the life expected of her, passing chilly weekends on large estates in Scotland while the men were out shooting birds. In 1932, the Donaldsons went south to live in Sunningdale and, apart from a spell at the Admiralty during the war, Mr Donaldson would spend the rest of his working life at the firm’s London offices.

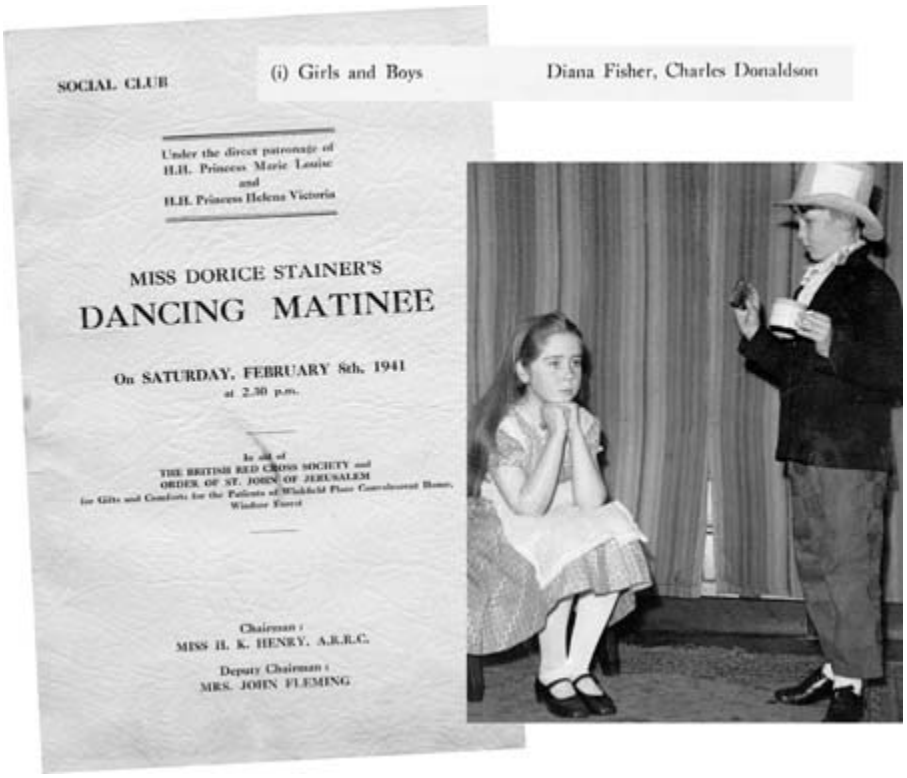
It was this great dislocation, and the difficulties it caused Mr Donaldson, which would form the basis of Willie’s case against his mother but, as it turns out, there is another, more reliable testament to those early years of his childhood.

‘It occurs to me that it may be interesting for you in the years to come, to have a diary of the war, or rather, a diary of what *you* were doing in the war,’ Elizabeth, better known as Betty, Donaldson wrote in a leather-bound notebook in January 1940. ‘I wish I had one of the last war, although there are a lot of things I was too young to bother about that I should like to know, and you two may feel the same.’

So begins an unusual and sometimes moving account of the war years, as seen from a large house beside the golf course at Sunningdale, and recorded in two notebooks, the first of which is addressed to Willies’s older sister, Eleanor Jane, and the second to Charles, as Willie was then known. Betty had the clever idea of addressing the diary to the

children who were also largely its subject, making it a sort of extended letter to their future selves. The pages are dominated by news of the war, mostly disastrous in the first book, which was dedicated to Eleanor Jane, interspersed with cuttings and photographs from the newspapers, bracingly patriotic poems by AP Herbert, published transcripts of speeches by Chamberlain and Churchill, and the odd account of society weddings.

Betty Donaldson (holding the flowers), officiates at the launching of the Donaldson Line's HMS *Corinaldo II* in 1949. Mr Donaldson is at the back of the group, eighth from the right.



Girls and Boys, 1941.

But because family life went on, there are also family photographs, the programme for Miss Dorice Stainer's Dancing Matinee, Eleanor Jane's first letter home, a school report for Charles.

Betty Donaldson was a good, clear writer and her account conveys the fear and the defiance of 1939 to 1941 and the growing sense of hope as the war progressed. Perhaps because she really did sense that the life they had taken for granted could come to an end at any moment, and that what she was writing might one day be a reminder of a lost civilisation, she is more candid about her feelings than perhaps one might expect from a woman of that generation and that class.

Here is Betty Donaldson on the week when war broke out.

That was a dreadful week, Darlings. A week of the most heavenly weather you can imagine, and you were enjoying yourselves so much that the contrast of what was hanging over us seemed so much worse. I said very little to you about the war because last September Charles cried, when he had seen the guns in London, and said, 'I don't want to be killed,' so I was afraid of frightening him. However we were boarding up our skylights by this time and fitting dark blinds. On August 31 we heard on the wireless instructions for the evacuation of children from London and the industrial towns. The war had suddenly come much closer. On September 1, Germany marched into Poland and Warsaw had already been bombed. Well of course after that I wasn't frightened of being at war any longer, I was afraid of *not* going to war quick enough to help Poland after all our promises. How often since then have we listened to the wireless with anxious hearts, but nothing *yet* has been quite so dreadful to me as that Sunday morning, at eleven o'clock, when I sent you out to play in the garden away from the sound of the great announcement and sat alone to hear the decision that was to change all our lives. Out of the silence came Neville Chamberlain's voice – terribly sad, but so resolute and so clear. Here is his speech…

A few hours later, German torpedoes claimed their first victims of the war, sinking a passenger liner called the *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. It belonged to the Donaldson Line.

I was awoken at four am by a wretched reporter ringing to up so speak to Daddy.

It was an awful shock, coming so quickly, and it seemed, in the night, as if the Germans must be

> sinking all our ships at once, but really it was just chance that the very first one was Daddy's. As Mrs King, at the electrical shop said to me, 'it brought the war home to Sunningdale'.

In those early months, the war certainly seemed close to home. On May 24, Betty Donaldson reported that the Germans had reached Boulogne and that 'everyone predicts an early invasion'. Under pressure from friends and even from her husband to take the children away to Scotland, she wrote, 'I have a feeling that as you are English children and should not leave England in her blackest hour, so you are Sunningdale children and have no right to your home if we leave it now'.

They stayed, braving bombing raids, during one of which the neighbouring house was destroyed, and at least one false alarm.

> About eleven-thirty Mrs Cooke woke me up to tell me that Cooper had arrived to 'guard the house', as the church bells were ringing. All ringing of church bells has been stopped except to warn the people of the landing of German troops by parachute or otherwise. So you can imagine my feelings – 'they've come at last, well here we are' sort of feeling. Cooper had a gun but no ammunition, but insisted on staying outside and assuring us that no German would get into the house while he was there and I could sleep in peace. Needless to say, I didn't sleep a wink all night.

In spite of these frights and alarms, life in the Donaldson household seems to have retained an odd normality. Mr Donaldson was away much of the time at the Admiralty. Charles attended the same school as Eleanor Jane until, in September 1940, he moved to a school in Virginia Water after something of a false start.

> Unfortunately you didn’t like school at all, Charlie Bill, and after two days refused to go again. As Eleanor Jane was going to Guildford to have her tonsils out on September 20, and as the weather was too lovely for a little boy of four to be indoors anyway, you weren’t made to go.

Meanwhile, there were birthday parties, sports clubs and rehearsals at Dorice Stainer’s dancing classes at the village hall on Saturday mornings (‘Charles has developed a talent for ballroom dancing’). The picture that emerges of Mrs Donaldson’s growing son is one of confidence, bordering on heartiness. At his nursery school, he was moved up a class, having become too big and boisterous for the other children. His mother marvelled at the way that he, the youngest boy at dancing classes, would ask the older girls to dance. He was quick on the uptake and not above showing off – ‘Is there *anything* you don’t know, Charles?’ his sister would ask. Like any proud mother, Betty Donaldson noted down her son’s every quip and *bon mot*, including this exchange with his maternal grandfather, when Charles was six.

With Eleanor Jane, in fancy dress.

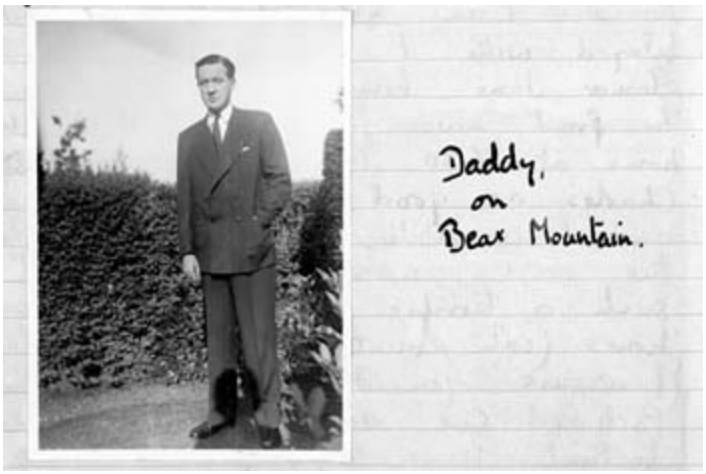
> Sept. 11 We spent the day today at Guildford, where Charles found his grandfather picking off dead flowers. ‘It is all I am any good at,’ said Fah, ‘You know it is easier to destroy than to build up – that is, Charles, it is easier to do away with flowers than to make them, like everything else.’ Charles, who always likes to have the last word, as you know, answered slowly, ‘Yes, except with knots – then it is easier to do than to undo them.’ Am I extremely foolish or was that rather a clever thought for a child of six, on the spur of the moment?

In 1942, Mr Donaldson donned naval uniform for the first time (something he had hitherto resisted) and was part of a delegation from the Admiralty to America, his departure provoking an anguished entry in his wife’s war diary (‘Oh

my darlings if you don’t see him again you will have had the best father any children ever had’). The children were upset, too, although Charles’s anxiety was alleviated by a promise that he would be paid sixpence for every week his father was away. Thirteen weeks and six shillings and sixpence later, the family was reunited.

Mr Donaldson may have been rather an aloof figure but, by the standards of the day, he was closely involved in the lives of his children, attending birthday parties, going on trips to the seaside and putting up with clever-dick remarks from his son over the breakfast table. However, almost all photographs of him then and later exude uneasiness and melancholy. Posing on the mound in the garden from where he would like to look at the golf course – his nickname at the time was ‘Pooh Bear’ so the hillock became ‘Bear Mountain’ – he looks more Eeyore than Pooh.

The truth is that Charles Glen Donaldson was an unhappy man. His problem was not, as his son would claim half a century later, that he had a snobbish bully of a wife and longed to be away from the Home Counties and back among his own folks in Scotland. He had been born into a family business for which he was temperamentally unsuited. He was a shy man, who liked playing dance tunes on the family piano and singing along to them. Betty Donaldson would say occasionally that he really should have played in a dance band. Chronically indecisive and lacking in the most basic leadership skills, he must have found the business of managing a successful shipping line, with his hunting, yachting, castle-owning family, something of a nightmare. ‘It was a problem he inherited, this awful shipping line,’ Willie’s sister Jane says today.



Mr Donaldson at home.

Under these circumstances, the escape to Sunningdale organised by Betty Donaldson represented perhaps not a surrender to social pressure but its very opposite, an act of rebellion. A rift developed between Betty and the Donaldsons in Scotland, who never quite forgave her for taking away Charles Glen to Sunningdale, but her motives were probably not selfish or snobbish, but an attempt to save her husband from the crushing burden of family expectation.

If she failed, it was because, characteristically, Mr Donaldson tried to please both sides, staying in Scotland during the week and his family over weekends and during holidays. He drank, even early in the marriage and, although he was clearly adored by Betty and the children, he became a rather withdrawn figure at home. Julian Mitchell, Willie's best friend in his late teens, remembers that the Donaldson house had 'a palatial downstairs loo where Mr Donaldson had a cubicle for his exclusive use, as he was supposed to have picked up some lethally infectious bug in the east'.

Later, Willie would recall the occasion when his father once took him to Broadstairs to look at boats, telling him that he had always longed to sail but was unable to afford it. It was a lesson in the absurdity of financial caution,