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Some Sort of Genius

Paul O'Keeffe

About the Author

Paul O’Keeffe is a freelance lecturer and writer based in Liverpool. He gained his Ph.D. with a scholarly edition of Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr* and is currently writing a biography of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

SOME SORT OF GENIUS

A Life of Wyndham Lewis

Paul O’Keeffe

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ONE

F⁴ 1008

The typography of this page, along with every other external surface of the world, impresses itself upon the brain through a threefold relay of neurones: rods and cones, ganglion cells and optic nerve fibres.

Light, projecting images of objects in the temporal or outer fields of vision, strikes the retinal surfaces closest to the nose. Fibres conduct these images along the right and left optic nerves, into the cranial cavity and through the dura mater, until they cross at the optic chiasma. Fibres from the left nasal retina then pass along the right optic tract, those from the right passing along the left, to the primary visual centres at the base of the brain, and from there to the occipital lobes at the rear. Images of objects positioned between the temporal, in what are known as the nasal, fields are registered by the outer retinae and communicated more directly: bypassing the junction at the centre of the optic chiasma, fibres from the right eye run along the right optic nerve and tract, those from the left eye along the left optic nerve and tract. The central field, represented by the macular region at the centre of the retina, splits down the middle in each eye, half belonging to the temporal and half to the nasal field. The bundle of fibres from the macular region of each retina run along the optic nerves to the optic chiasma. There the bundles divide. Half the fibres from each eye pass along the right tract, half along the left.

Extensive damage to one of the optic nerves will destroy the sight in the eye to which it belongs. Similar damage to one of the optic tracts will cause a loss of the nasal field in one eye and of the temporal field in the other. Damage to the optic chiasma will eliminate the temporal vision of both eyes.

Below the chiasma, embedded in bone, lies the pituitary gland. About a centimetre across, it occupies a small depression in the base of the skull, protected by bony ridges front and back. The appearance of this depression suggests its name: the sella turcica or Turkish saddle. In its healthy state the pituitary gland is not connected with the mechanism of sight.

The Pathology Museum on the ground floor and mezzanine of Westminster Medical School in Horseferry Road was dismantled in 1986, when government rationalisation of the Health Service merged it with Charing Cross Hospital.[*1] As they awaited transfer to other premises, the cluttered ranks of old, disease-tattered human organs formed grotesque collages in corridors, offices and storerooms. Amongst this grisly, formalin-preserved lumber, the dexter half of a man's brain lay sealed in its perspex container, the label barely legible: F^{A} 1008. It was occasionally retrieved from the chaotic limbo of exhibits for the edification of medical students learning about cerebral tumours.

The longitudinal cross-section of F^{A} 1008 shows a pituitary gland swollen to a solid ovoid mass, six centimetres in height and four centimetres from front to back and from side to side; it is the size of a moderately developed hen's egg. The bottom of this morbid excrescence was some two centimetres lower than the original site of the gland, because, in its inexorable growth, it had burst apart the ridges of the sella turcica and forced the bone itself downwards. Its bulbous upper extremity, meanwhile, pushed on into the floor of the midbrain, compressing the

third ventricle and flattening the optic chiasma to the thinness of paper. The tumour was pink in section and stippled with blood vessels. Because of its age and slow growth, parts of the outer surface had calcified like eggshell.

Sight began to fail in 1937 as the tumescent gland encroached on the chiasma causing a gradual loss of vision, starting with the temporal field, in the left eye. By 1946 the temporal field of the right eye had also become affected as the tumour expanded further to atrophy the optic fibres at this sensory junction box. By 1950, vision in the left eye had been practically obliterated and only a small window in the lower central field stayed open. The pupil was almost fixed in direct light. With the destruction of the chiasma nearly complete, only the central field of the right eye remained and even this limited vista had the grainy texture of a mist, creeping across the mouth of a tunnel, as the right optic tract was also invaded. The blue-grey mist was not of uniform density and a movement of the head could bring small details into focus: a friend's waistcoat, a nose, a bald scalp. But such splinters of perception gradually dulled as the thickening mist became less and less distinguishable from the outer darkness. However, darkness never entirely overwhelmed the narrow island of sight and in this sensory twilight visitors could still be discerned as shadows and a sunlit window as a blurred rectangular patch of slightly lighter grey.

Blindness, although the most devastating, was not the only effect of the tumour. The pituitary gland controls the hormonal balance of the body. An adult male victim of pituitary disorder might suffer in one of two ways: overactivity or hyperpituitarism produces 'Acromegaly': an ape-like coarsening of the features, abundance of hair and enlargement of bones in hands and feet; underactivity or hypopituitarism, 'Feminism': poor beard, thinning or absence of pubic, armpit and chest hair, smooth skin and loss of sexual function. The man whose last organic remnant

is preserved as F[A] 1008 was afflicted by the latter condition. Four years before he died a female acquaintance noted his ‘queer white skin, unlined face and hands . . . Like an old frog.’

The tumour blinded and emasculated, but did not kill him. Autopsy revealed an enlarged heart, while microscopic examination of a section of kidney showed grossly distended arteries. Hypertension, or chronic high blood-pressure, had caused renal failure and the level of urea in the blood accordingly rose to ten times the norm. The result was uraemic coma. Bronchopneumonia finally engorged the lungs with pus. Doctors call this ‘the old man’s friend’.

Death in the subdistrict of Westminster South was registered on the eighth of March 1957 by the deceased’s widow: died seventh of March, Westminster Hospital, Percy Wyndham Lewis, Male, 72 years, of Studio A, 29 Notting Hill Gate, Kensington, Artist and Author.

TWO

Tracks

The deceased was not 72. He was 74.

Over half a century earlier, in February 1900, the estranged wife of Charles Edward Lewis made a solemn declaration at the Mansion House in the City of London, in accordance with the Statutory Declarations Act. Her only son had been born on the 18th day of November 1882, at Amherst, Nova Scotia, in the Dominion of Canada. The declaration was being made, she claimed, because there had been no Registry of Births in Amherst at that time and, as a result, the boy did not have a birth certificate. In his 18th year, the last of the 19th century, and for the price of a shilling stamp, it was belatedly certified by Anne Stuart Lewis and the Lord Mayor of London that Percy Wyndham Lewis had been born.

With no other documentation to back his mother's statement, an individual's birthdate becomes a matter of hearsay. For a man who was to spend the major part of his life creating an aura of mystery and drama around his vigorously self-promoted personality, the lack of a birth certificate would be a symbolic but potent advantage. It would afford him the opportunity, denied to those who had embarked upon more conventionally documented lives, of retrospective choice in the time, place and circumstances of his birth. It would shroud the fantastic event in mystery. Evasion would become a lifelong habit: evasion of creditors, of infatuated women, of importunate offspring.

The lack of a birth certificate meant that he could invent himself.

In 1949 he would give future biographers an account of the nativity, understated but nonetheless marked out for portentous embroidery. ‘It was on the North American continent,’ he claimed, ‘and the cradle was a ship moored to the side of a wharf.’

An earlier account was more definitive as to the natal vessel. But it was discrepant as to date and place, from his mother’s testimony, by three years and 150 miles:

> November 18, 1885, on . . . yacht of American registry (Portland, Maine), belonging to the Portland Yacht Club off Campobello, Nova Scotia, Canada.

This much is true: Wyndham Lewis’s father owned a 28-ton sloop, *Wanda*, of Canadian registry (St John, New Brunswick). Campobello is an island just west of the Maine border and part of the province of New Brunswick. It lies at the mouth of an immense inlet 170 miles long and 50 miles wide. Noted for strong currents and the highest tides in the world, the difference between high and low water in its upper reaches is as great as 50 feet.

It may have been that the child was told a swashbuckling version of his birth at the yarn-spinning father’s knee. It may have been that the two facts, the father’s ownership of a boat and the son’s birth in Nova Scotia, became conflated into a single colourful family legend. Either way the story, unquestioned, became chronicled: that Wyndham Lewis was born on a yacht in the Bay of Fundy.

Leaving aside the improbability of a man embarking upon a boating trip with a nine-months-pregnant wife, in winter and in such potentially perilous waters, one constituent of the myth is exploded by Lloyd’s of London, whose yacht register lists the *Wanda* as having been built by J. T. Logan

at Rothesay, New Brunswick, in 1883, the year after Charles Lewis's son first saw the light of day.

It would have been satisfying to discover that truly inclement weather, a storm or hurricane perhaps, prevailed in the Bay of Fundy on 18 November 1882. Satisfying, not in order to add drama and excitement to the otherwise uneventful early pages of a biography, but in the interests merely of mundane truth: to preclude decisively the shipboard birth that Lewis later claimed for himself. Unfortunately no such tempestuous conditions were forecast for the Maritime Provinces the day before in Saint John's *Daily Sun*: 'moderate to fresh northwest to north winds; fair weather; stationary or slightly lower temperature.' Between the 17th and the 20th the temperature continued to fall, rivers iced over and a storm appeared to threaten.

But no storm came and no conclusive proof can be found that Lewis was not born on a yacht, apart from the fact that the only such vessel his father was ever documented as owning was built a year too late to serve as 'cradle' to his son.

However, there was something extraordinary about the weather that weekend, something far more awe-inspiring than storm or hurricane. Had family legend passed on to Lewis the actual atmospheric conditions prevailing across the Maritime Provinces and the western United States on the 17th and 18th, and indeed the 19th and 20th of November 1882, he would have had no need to enlist an as yet unbuilt sloop to add the lustre of distinction to his nativity.

Telegraph operators at the Western Union Building in Saint John reported crimson sparks showering from their apparatus whenever it was touched, and at one point the entire signal board of the central telephone office 'was ablaze with electric fire'. It was referred to as an 'electric

storm’, but the *Daily Evening News* of 18 November clarified the term:

> It is scarcely proper to call the electric disturbance a storm. The air simply becomes heavily charged with electricity, which takes to the wires, and creates on them wavy currents, which generally antagonize the current of the battery operating the wire, making a general confusion, and the transmission of messages difficult, and at times . . . almost or quite impossible.

An experiment was made with the quadruplex wire running from Bangor, Maine, to North Sydney, Cape Breton Island. Each end of the wire was earthed and, without the aid of generator or battery, conversation was carried on and messages transmitted across the seven hundred miles between the two points. It was hailed as ‘one of the most remarkable feats accomplished in telegraphy’.

As if this were not enough excitement to commemorate the birth of a child to Charles and Anne Lewis, the electrical disturbance also gave rise to the most spectacular phenomenon of the northern skies: the Aurora Borealis. From Halifax, Nova Scotia, to as far west as Chicago the reports came in: ‘fully two thirds of the sky is ablaze tonight with auroral light of many colours.’

*

At the opposite end of Fundy to the island of Campobello, just inland of a stretch of water called the Cumberland Basin, lies the town of Amherst. There, according to his mother’s sworn statement, and in all probability on dry land, Percy Wyndham Lewis was born. It was to be home for the first six months of the child’s life.

Amherst, in Cumberland County, Nova Scotia, was an expanding town drawing revenue from the lumber business

and from the fertile farmland of the Tantramar Marshes that surrounded it. The 1881 census numbered the population at 1,800. A year later, when Oscar Wilde arrived by train from Saint John on the last leg of his epic North American tour, it had almost doubled. Nevertheless, Wilde had been amazed at the smallness of the population when a correspondent for the *Morning Herald* interviewed ‘beauty’s latest evangel’ in his room at Lamy’s Hotel. ‘Do you tell me that it has only three thousand inhabitants? Why, I never spoke in a town so small as that’, he told the reporter. ‘I consider it a beautiful little place.’ And the population were amazed at ‘wild Oscar’, as they called him, dressed in knee breeches and black silk hose, addressing them on the Decorative Arts in the Amherst Academy of Music, six weeks before Wyndham Lewis was born.

*

Seven years before, Charles Lewis had taken 16-year-old Anne Prickett from her mother’s boarding house in Upper Norwood, South London. They were married on 23 February 1876, at St Stephen’s Church, Camberwell. He was 33, a mutton-chop-sideburned Civil War veteran, with an army career behind him distinguished by gallantry and considerable recklessness. He possessed a highly treasured document, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, which granted him the nominal rank of Captain by Brevet, in recognition of his ‘gallant and meritorious services during the war’.

According to War Department records he had entered the Military Academy of West Point as cadet on 1 July 1861, tendered his resignation three and a half months later on account of weak eyesight, and a year later enlisted in the 130th New York Volunteer Infantry in August 1862. This regiment became the 19th New York Cavalry and was subsequently known as the 1st New York Dragoons. Charles

was made Sergeant three days after enlisting, then in October he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

At Manassas Junction, on 17 October 1863, he led 15 men to capture an unoccupied enemy earthwork and, having taken it, proceeded, against orders, to attack another. While galloping towards this second, unauthorised, objective he was shot through the left groin. The exit wound had not healed by the following January and it was not until April that he was pronounced fit enough for active duty. Then, only a month later, on 7 May, in an action at Todd's Tavern, two days into the gruelling Battle of Wilderness, he was taken prisoner. The next six months were spent in a variety of Confederate prisons. He was confined at Libby Prison in Virginia, Macon in Georgia, at Roper Hospital in Charleston, South Carolina, and finally at a poorly guarded camp at Columbia. From here, on 4 November, he escaped with two other Union officers. It took them a month to walk the two hundred miles through Confederate territory from Columbia to their own lines at Knoxville, Tennessee. Some time during the four-month period of convalescence from this ordeal, Charles was evidently able to demonstrate that his virile processes were unaffected by the earlier wound to the groin. It was a demonstration, however, necessitating treatment for primary syphilis in April 1865.

He had by this time been promoted to 1st Lieutenant and was a hero in his home town, where he wrote a first account of his daring exploits for the local paper, the *Nunda News*. 'ESCAPE FROM REBEL PRISON' was subtitled: 'A long and Perilous journey through the Mountains, Narrow Escape, Interesting Incidents'. It told of being chased by Rebel guards and bloodhounds, the privations of cold and hunger, and crossing the Great Smoky Mountains in thick snow and constantly under threat from attacks by marauding bands of hostile Indians known to be prowling the area.

Married, Charles worked for his brother William's firm in Montreal: W. F. Lewis & Company, wine merchants.[*1] As the

wife of a travelling liquor salesman, Anne was to become used to temporary accommodation and long periods left alone while Charles plied his wares across western Canada.

*

> Most miserable day feeling not well at all. Hear of diphtheria in the hotel.

The first brief entry in Anne Lewis's 1883 diary records a bleak New Year's Monday at Lamy's Hotel, Amherst, where Oscar Wilde had been interviewed, reclining on a black bearskin rug and sipping tea, only three months before.

Anne's fears for the health of her month-old baby were understandable. Five years earlier, in a Quebec hotel, she had borne a child that breathed for an hour and died. She had just turned 18 and apart from Mrs Geddes, the midwife, she was alone. The news was cabled to her husband in Montreal. Perhaps because of the disparity in age between Charles and his 'darling little wife' his reaction seemed strangely detached: a father consoling his daughter over the loss of a cherished puppy:

> I sympathise deeply with you about the little one as I know you had set considerable store by it and even I had got to liking the idea of your having the little companion of your own.

Delayed by business, he had promised to get up to see her inside a week.

She had received letters from her mother in August and September 1877, anticipating: 'longing to see your baby how proud we shall be'; urging caution in gynaecological matters: 'ask the nurse, with my love, to take care how she binds you up of all things'; fussing:

> I hope you will like what I have sent you . . . everything the baby will need for the next two months, at any rate. I will then all being well get the short clothes ready. Mrs Bray sent in a very pretty satin hood, but as you will see I could not get it in, it will do when you come home.

And she had the letter in October consoling her, telling her there was another little angel in heaven waiting for them:

> it is hard to say Oh Father not my will but thine be done, but we know not what is good for us; but the disappointment is none the less, and I am truly grieved, that it did not please our Heavenly Father to spare your baby.

She had sent her daughter the box of baby clothes from England in early September, tempting mortality. They had arrived in time for the child's birth and death. 'You must put the little things safely away', she told Anne, 'don't look at them dear.'

In Lamy's Hotel, five years on, memories of that first fruitless labour must have made her small son's grip on life seem frighteningly tenuous, especially with suspicion of diphtheria in the hotel. The choking scourge of infants thrived in the colder months of the year. It started with a redness and soreness of the throat. This inflammation generated a tough livid membrane, sometimes spreading over the whole inner surface of the larynx and trachea. The accumulation and folding of the membrane could eventually close off the respiratory tract, causing death by asphyxiation. It would be seven years before an antitoxin was developed to cure the disease and another 23 years before there was a hope of preventing it by immunisation.

Rumour of the disease that New Year's Day prompted hasty packing and a move to healthier accommodation, 'much warmer and more comfortable', four days later.

Today an establishment called the Elm Tree Tavern stands on the corner of Victoria Street and Station Road, the railway line running alongside. From the sidewalk nothing can be seen through the smoked glass of the windows and crush-barred double doors, but to the left of the bar at the far end of the long single-storey building, a black and white photograph hangs on the garishly papered wall between two flashing fruit machines. Blurred by the non-reflective glass, the photograph shows the Terrace Hotel that once occupied this site.

It was to the Terrace Hotel that Charles Lewis and his wife moved with their six-week-old son, fleeing the diphtheria scare at Lamy's. For the next five months, Anne would grow accustomed to the blasts of steam whistles as the clanging locomotives crossed Victoria Street within 50 feet of her and her baby, east to Halifax or west to Saint John, New Brunswick.

During those five months, according to her diary, Anne saw little of her husband. She recorded Charles's departure for Montreal on 6 January and his unexpected return on 11 February, his departure for St John and Eastport, his return ten days later. He was then away for the latter half of March, the whole of April and most of May. Occasionally he sent her a cheque for $50, enabling her to pay for their board, the washing, milk, and for a series of nursemaids: Miss O'Neill, Mary Niles, Annie and Clara Emree.

The baby was christened, Percy Wyndham, on 26 January, in an Anglican ceremony conducted at Christ Church, Amherst, by the Reverend George Townshend. Anne's schedule of his comings and goings suggests that Charles was not present. The child's forenames, however, were probably his father's choice and they may have commemorated an exotic hero from his military career.

Sir Percy Wyndham was an English soldier of fortune.[*2] He had served in the French Navy, British artillery, Austrian cavalry and, during the Risorgimento, under General

Garibaldi at the battles of Palermo and Capua. In the latter theatre of war he reached the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and was knighted in the field by King Victor Emmanuel. In 1861 he came to America and joined the Union Army as Colonel of the First New Jersey Cavalry, a rank he held until the end of 1863. He cut a dashing figure with moustaches a foot wide.

Military records show the paths of Sir Percy Wyndham and the 21-year-old 2nd Lieutenant Lewis coinciding from 13 September to 17 October 1883, when the 19th New York and the 1st New Jersey Cavalry were in action together. The coincidence ceased, at least as far as the 2nd Lieutenant was concerned, the day a Confederate rifle bullet passed through his groin.

If Percy Wyndham Lewis ever knew the reason for the particular conjunction of his forenames he never recorded the fact. Had he known of the dashing namesake he might have been less adamant in suppressing ‘Percy’ in adult life. It would come to be regarded as a personal affront to call him anything but ‘Wyndham Lewis’, ‘Lewis’ or, in the case of certain favoured intimates, ‘Wyndham’.

*

Although she had numerous acquaintances in Amherst the winter of 1883 seems, for the most part, to have been a tedious time for Anne. Unchronicled blank days in the little diary were interspersed with health anxieties: ‘saw the Doctor about Baby as was very uneasy’; with mundane post-natal procedures: ‘had my breast strapped’; with foul weather and abortive engagements: ‘very stormy day. Was to have dined at the Douglas’s’. A full day was defined in terms of social contacts. One Thursday was particularly busy: ‘out to dinner at Mrs Douglas’s, called on Mrs Main, Mrs Dickey, Miss Townshend, Mrs Townshend, Mrs Boggs.’ There was an invitation to the Masonic Ball on the first

Saturday in February. It was a big affair and on Friday the Terrace Hotel was full. But she made no mention of having attended. There would have been constraints upon an unaccompanied married woman.

April was a particularly lonely and trying month. In the first week the baby was sufficiently ill, or she sufficiently nervous, to necessitate a Sunday visit to the doctor. The undisclosed sickness had abated by Wednesday but at the weekend she was exhausted. ‘Have felt vexed and worried all the week . . . feeling quite miserable – very unwell in the evening’. Towards the end of the month her diary entries were a monotonous litany of isolation: Wednesday, ‘quite alone’; Thursday, ‘alone’; Tuesday, ‘had no one with me’; Wednesday, ‘quite alone’; Sunday, ‘at home all day. Nothing new.’

Then, when Charles returned from Montreal on 25 May, they started packing. A week later, Friday 1 June, they went to Moncton. ‘Left Amherst’, she wrote, ‘and so glad to go.’

On 7 June they moved on from Moncton to the seaside town of Shediac, 14 miles away, on the Cumberland Strait between New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, where Anne was to stay for the next three months. The place was noted for its oysters, fine sandy beaches and the warmest sea bathing north of the US Carolinas. Although Charles spent just as much time away from her as before, it was summer and the weather pleasant. She was able to take the baby’s occasional sickness in her stride, although getting advice from a Dr Harrison just in case. When her friend Mrs Ryan came over from Moncton they had a drive out to Hopewell Cape, no doubt to see what the Baedeker described as ‘remarkable rocks of red sandstone, sculpted into fantastic shapes by the powerful tides’. The baby’s first tooth appeared above the gum and nine days later the second, and Anne duly recorded both events. In July she was able to go bathing and, one Friday evening, danced and had ‘quite a pleasant time’. August passed with less to report

and in early September she received a telegram from Charles in Montreal ‘advising remove to Jacquet River’. She packed and, three days later, boarded the train at Moncton, with ‘Percy good as possible during the journey’, arriving in Jacquet River at eight in the evening.

The reason for the move to this angling resort in the far north of New Brunswick is not known and, although Anne pronounced herself ‘quite well pleased with the surroundings’, they were there for less than a month. The interlude was notable for three momentous diary entries. The 17th of September was Anne’s 24th birthday, an occasion that brought Charles from Montreal to stay with her for a week. The following day Percy was ten months old and, a week later, his eighth tooth appeared.

On 2 October they left Jacquet River, arriving in Montreal on the 3rd, and five words in Anne’s diary recorded an end to hotel living:

> Took possession of our house.

Provisions bought and carefully noted in the first week marked a significant stake in domestic stability for the family:

> 7lbs of white sugar
> 7lbs of brown sugar
> 7lbs of soda
> 7lbs of soap
> a pound and a half of coffee
> 2lbs of butter
> 2lbs of rice
> 21bs of bacon
> 3 dozen eggs
> oatmeal
> 2 finnan haddies
> 2 pots of preserves

a peck and a half of potatoes
one peck of apples.

A servant, Mary O’Neill, was hired for $11 a month

Anne’s Post Office passbook, renewed in January of the following year, gave the address as number 14, Fort Street. In the southern part of the city, rue du Fort, as it is now, runs between Dorchester West and Sherbrooke West, the latter said to have been the handsomest residential street in Montreal. It was close to the village of Lachine, the yachting resort, and Charles and his wife drove there with his brother William and sister-in-law Maggie on their first Sunday in the city.

A familiar pattern re-established itself as Charles left for the Eastern Townships on 9 October and was gone a week. He was back for two days and then away again. Anne stayed behind, making careful note of her activities: taking the baby out, tending to him when he was sick from eating too much, engaging a plumber to fit pipes to something downstairs, visiting Maggie, shopping.

The baby’s first birthday, 18 November, was the last significant date in Anne’s 1883 diary. Thereafter, no trace exists of the family’s movements in the city of Montreal and province of Quebec.

By the time they left, Percy was in his fifth year.

*

Anne’s third Post Office Pass Book, issued September 1887, was sent to her on Campobello Island, New Brunswick, and a Liverpool and London Globe Insurance policy in the name of Charles Edward Lewis suggested he owned or rented property in Welshpool, the largest hamlet on this ten-mile-long resort for summer visitors. They wintered at Saint John, New Brunswick.

By the spring of 1888, the family had moved across the Canadian border, to Portland, Maine. Here Charles became the proud owner of the 48-foot sloop, *Wanda*.

Family tradition had it that they lived near to a reservation of Micmac Indians, and Lewis recalled: ‘my mother painting pictures of the farmhouse where we lived, my father writing books inside it’.

> My infant mind was filled with the hubbub of battles. A part of the garden was converted into the field of the ‘Wilderness’ . . . I could not help imbibing from my very American father . . . a lot about the Civil War.

While not always reliable, his memory, as to both age and place, seemed, in this case, consistent: ‘at 6 years old I frisked and frolicked with other little American boys on the New English coast.’ Older children of a neighbouring family, ‘the Collis boys’, taught young Percy his first swear words, much to his mother’s horror, and once he was butted by a goat he had approached thinking it a sheep.

They cannot have spent as long as a year in Portland. ‘At around the age of six’, Lewis declared, again with some accuracy, ‘I arrived in England, a small American.’ This was towards the end of 1888.

George Howard Lewis, President of Bell, Lewis & Yates Coal Mining Company of Buffalo, NY, and a man of considerable wealth, agreed to provide his younger brother with a six-monthly stipend of $500. The first payment was sent on 7 January 1889 together with a letter wishing his brother’s income were ‘a little larger’ and hoping it would increase in time. When George died in October 1897, Charles had received a total of $9,000.

*

For the next three years, Charles, his wife and child left little trace. For a time they lived together in Eastbourne, and later on the Isle of Wight. Then husband and wife separated. Anne took her son to live with his maternal grandmother in Norwood, while Charles remained in Ryde.

Mrs Prickett's boarding house, 'Ravenstone' in Farquhar Road, was a large establishment employing a live-in domestic staff of 11 and able to cater for around 20 paying guests. The 68-year-old widow's sister-in-law, Frances Prickett, also lived with her, together with an elderly retainer, Mrs Tompkins.

Percy played in the rolling grassy parkland surrounding the Crystal Palace under his mother's careful supervision, exchanging this, at intervals, for the heartier holiday pastimes of sea and shoreline with his father.

THREE

‘Am greatly disappointed in the boy and have unpleasant misgivings regarding his future’

‘So it is’ said I.

‘All hands shorten sail’ shouted Mortar.

There was a great hubub [*sic*] in which I had a good share.

‘Now boys lower the dinghy and Charlie do you think you could get in and steer, and have Brown, Donagan and Hayward in with you to row’ said Mortar.

‘Obey orders, sir’ said I.

The real force of the storm had abated, and [in] thick mist [only a] gusty wind made the sloop go. Now getting into the dinghy and rowing or sailing about was a very simple thing. We rowed away from the sloop into the darkness, and soon saw something black looming ahead.

So began ‘Good Times’, Percy Wyndham Lewis’s earliest surviving literary composition. Pencilled across 30 pages of lined paper in a tiny green and black covered exercise book, it was illustrated with childish drawings of figures in profile: schoolcapped boys carrying muskets, hatchets and cutlasses confront feathered savages armed with shields, spiked clubs and spears. Creatures of the son’s imagination, they were doubtless born out of the father’s stories of his

epic redskin-threatened journey from Confederate prison to Union lines of 1864. The setting was a tropical island, familiar to readers of Defoe or Stevenson, although Campobello and the Isle of Wight would have figured in the child's mind as well. And the action began aboard a sloop, the only type of vessel heard of at his father's knee. Significantly, the young author of 'Good Times' divided his father's two forenames between his narrator, 'Charlie', and the castaway explorer who organises the boys' resistance against the cannibals: 'Sir Edward More'.

*

In 1892 Charles was renting a place called Laurel Cottage at 7 West Street, in Ryde. Here he kept 'a stack of dogs', and elsewhere in the neighbourhood a shadowy female companion with whom he later confessed to have 'lived as man and wife' since the previous year. Anne may have been aware of this but still entertained hopes that some time her husband 'would be willing to bury any old differences' and that they 'might have started afresh'. He held out no such hope and, for the time being, seemed content for their marriage to hang in limbo awaiting some event to trigger its collapse.

Meanwhile, he suspected 'the old people', his mother-in-law, Frances Prickett and Mrs Tompkins, were turning his son against him. This at least was his explanation for the boy's behaviour in April 1892, when the ten-year-old came to Laurel Cottage for a holiday.

'He sneers at me', Charles complained, 'and abuses Polly.' Whether the object of the child's abuse on this occasion was his father's mistress or one of his dogs is not clear, but Percy was evidently enjoying himself. He pulled down half the branches of a laurel tree in the garden and Charles feared his landlord would come down on him for the damage. On another day the boy disappeared until 8 o'clock

in the evening. Eventually his father had had enough and wrote to Anne demanding she take him back to Norwood where, he was inclined to think, the child was apt to behave himself better.

Nevertheless, before the boy's pattern of mischief established itself, Charles had been well pleased with him. 'He looks first-rate', Anne was told, 'brown as a berry.' And one Tuesday, father and son stood companionably on the beach at Ryde, watching the big guns firing from the naval base at Portsmouth on the other side of the Solent. This spectacle provided the boy with a climax to his first attempt at literary narrative:

> a thunderous roar, and a great shot come crashing through the building, and swept the natives away with it. Then roar after roar and shot after shot came crashing over the Island . . . We went on the beach and saw a cloud of smoke on the sea and the British ensign. We cheered, and we cheered and cheered.

But the 'good times' were all too fleeting that spring holiday and, leaving the mutilated laurel behind him, Percy was returned to his mother with an ominous judgement on his head:

> Am greatly disappointed with the boy and have unpleasant misgivings regarding his future.

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Charles gave up Laurel Cottage with the idea of moving to the East Sussex coast. However, finding everything too expensive, in December 1892 he rented another property in Ryde. Number 5, Partlands Avenue, known as Winchester Villa, was 'very comfortable and a great improvement on Laurel Cottage'. He was 'about out of funds' and asked Anne