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True Blue: The Oxford Boat Race Mutiny

Daniel Topolski with Patrick Robinson

About the Book

Strikingly reminiscent of *Chariots of Fire*, this book tells the story of the sporting event which shook both Oxford University and its Boat Club to the very foundations during the harsh winter of 1986/7.

A group of American students arrives at Oxford, hoping to put some steel into a Boat Race crew still reeling from their recent humiliating defeat at the hands of Cambridge. But disagreements over training methods soon bring to a head a bitter clash between the elected President of the Dark Blues and a fiery-tempered rower from California. Much more than the race is at stake in this clash between the amateur sporting tradition of the Boat Race and New World big-star sportsmanship. In the resulting battle, which made headline news worldwide, the rebels, having failed to remove the Boat Club President, pull out six weeks before the race. Will Oxford Coach Topolski, against all odds, mould an inexperienced and demoralised reserve crew of no-hopers into a winning team?

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Daniel Topolski with Patrick Robinson

TRUE BLUE

The Oxford Boat Race Mutiny

In memory of ‘Jumbo’, the truest Blue of all

PHOTOGRAPHIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOREWORD
THE BOAT RACE

With the possible exception of an Olympic marathon, or a World Boxing Championship, the race between the Dark and Light Blues represents the most brutal, harsh and uncompromising struggle in all of sport. They call it simply the Boat Race, and the oarsmen of England's two great universities have rowed the Race on the London Tideway almost every year since 1836. In general the only acceptable excuse ever advanced for a postponement has been a world war. It has remained essentially unchanged since it was first rowed on the River Thames in 1829, just fourteen years after the Battle of Waterloo, in the reign of King George IV.

The Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister when the oarsmen of Oxford University first raced the oarsmen of Cambridge University. This was an England devoid of compassion; an England in which eight-year-old children worked in factories, in which a poor man could still be hanged for stealing a sheep; an England which still condoned the slave trade. Much was expected of England's sportsmen and standards were pretty brutal. The Heavyweight Boxing Champion James (Deaf) Burke, around this time fought ninety-nine rounds at St Albans, in a bareknuckle bout which lasted well over three hours and caused the death of his opponent Simon Byrne.

In character the Boat Race has never changed. It remains today the same murderous test which had the

riverside crowds up and roaring in their thousands back in the 1830s – among them the Heavyweight Champion himself, the son of a Thames waterman. Now 150 million people around the world watch the race on television every year.

It is a four-and-a-quarter mile marathon – three times longer than a regular modern Olympic summer course. The route is invariably windswept and cold, the waters rough and dangerous, with a fast tide bearing the oarsmen often into ‘sinking water’. A far cry from the six-lane still-water courses of the international regatta circuit. It is rowed at the back end of winter on the surging spring tide in late March on a Saturday, on the wide urban River Thames between Putney and Mortlake, the stretch to the west of the city, which divides the counties of Surrey and Middlesex.

It is one of the world’s great endurance tests, and it takes its participants to the brink of total collapse and sometimes beyond. Old oarsmen once believed it could knock five years off a man’s life just to have taken part. It demands courage, strength, skill, superb fitness and dedication. A fit athletic oarsman with two or three years of solid training experience behind him requires a further intensive seven months of hard preparation, all through the worst weeks of the English winter. Ambulances are waiting at the finish.

The race demands a near fanatical willpower and contempt for the opposition. But perhaps above all it demands team spirit and a selflessness that recognizes no barrier. The Boat Race is a pure throwback to the old bareknuckle days of sport.

It represents the ultimate challenge to the hard, quiet gladiators of world rowing, one of the few Olympic events in which there is still no possibility of any monetary reward whatsoever. Those who seek the grim, private glory of participation in the Boat Race have been called The Last

Amateurs. They are men whose pride it is to absorb the self-imposed punishment of the race. They are men who may sometimes dread the forthcoming battle because of the anticipated pain. But they are also men who need the chance to prove themselves in a competition which few can tolerate.

The race attracts American oarsmen too, who regard acceptance to study a course at the University of Oxford as a great honour, offering too the chance to take that privileged step to row in the Dark Blue boat against the Light Blues of Cambridge. For it is a step which will set them apart for the rest of their lives.

Some of these American students make the pilgrimage to Oxford with quite illustrious collegiate and international careers behind them – names going back thirty years, like Rubin, Spencer, Howell, Fink, Trippe, Bockstoce, Sawyier, Shealy, Brown and Reininger. They all came, and they all pulled a Dark Blue oar from Putney to Mortlake. Most of them brought their own brand of humour and honour; their cheerful brashness comfortably absorbed by the Oxford coaches, who were happy to introduce an invigorating culture shock to their British squads in return for the strength and guts of the confident big Americans.

Such Americans do not give up. They do not collapse. And they never shirk the ultimate sacrifice the Race demands. In fact Americans have a very good record of success in the Boat Race, and many English oarsmen who have competed with them look back fondly on their days at Oxford and treasure the strong transatlantic friendships they made for the rest of their lives.

In 1986 Oxford suffered their first defeat in eleven years. The ten Dark Blue victories in a row between 1976 and 1985 had been an all-time record and came after sixty desolate years in which Oxford had won but twelve times.

It was Daniel Topolski, a former Boat Race winner, who had suddenly and dramatically changed the world for

Oxford.

During his historic reign, the Dark Blues broke the Boat Race course record three times and smashed every other record along the way. They boated the heaviest crew ever, the biggest man ever, the first woman (cox) ever and the most successful oarsman ever (Boris Rankov with his famous six victories). And they provided oarsmen and coaches for British and overseas Olympic and world championship teams winning gold, silver and bronze medals. The 1981 Oxford crew beat the British National Eight at Henley to win the prized Grand Challenge Cup.

Heroism and brilliance walked hand-in-hand during these most glorious years. The conflicts with the Light Blues were brutal, none more awesome than the six-foot victory in 1980 – Oxford battling to hold their lead with their bow man a barely conscious passenger for the final mile.

But the defeat of 1986 was devastating. The crew would not remain as others have, close-knit and forever friends. For Oxford's apparent invincibility was at an end and excuses and scapegoats were needed to ease the pain. Oxford's Boat Race men were to pay a heavy price for that one defeat after so many years of triumph. Now a new, insidious mood replaced the traditional brotherhood.

In the bleak winter of 1986–87, in the aftermath of the defeat, a group of international-class Americans came to Oxford and made it clear that they did not particularly like what they saw. They considered the harshness of the winter training schedule unnecessary. They considered the Oxford chief coach Daniel Topolski to be a demonic martinet of the river, with too much influence and outdated techniques. And they considered the holder of the ancient office of President of the Oxford University Boat Club, the quiet Scotsman, Donald Macdonald, to be below standard as an oarsman and essentially a man to be pushed aside.

They were supremely confident of themselves, of their talent and their value to Oxford. But their actions that winter were unprecedented. The 850-year-old seat of English learning was split asunder by a political battle that raged across the international air waves and through the media, as the suave and accomplished raiding party from the U.S.A. fought for control of the University Boat Club.

At the centre of it all stood the unsuspecting figures of coach Topolski and the Oxford President Macdonald. At first unprepared, they found themselves ensnared in a web of deceit, threat and counterthreat which seemed certain to obliterate the entire constitution of the Boat Club.

But as the conflict grew harder, the unassuming Macdonald grew tougher, and with scores of newspaper, television and radio personnel laying siege to Oriel Square, he began a momentous and sometimes heroic fightback.

At one stage he stood virtually alone, the only rock between total anarchy and years of tradition. He was assailed from every corner, and for a while he remained the sole guardian of the sacred trust among oarsmen which had held the Boat Club together for one-and-a-half centuries. But it was a trust that while strong and resolute in history and theory, was totally vulnerable in the face of what has become, in modern sport, something akin to warfare.

The battle made headlines both on the sports pages and front pages of England's national newspapers for weeks on end. Each night the story made the news all over the world. It made the front page of the *New York Times*. Macdonald himself was once phoned by an old friend in Tokyo to tell him he was headlines on the six o'clock evening news in Japan.

The Times ran the story one day over five columns on its front page under the headline 'Oxford Threaten To Use Reserves – As Crew Mutiny'. The *Daily Mail* devoted its entire news feature page to the uproar with a line over the

top which read ‘Behind The Gentlemanly Façade Of A British Legend’ – and then in the biggest type used on that page: ‘Mutiny Of The Oxford Yanks’.

The Oxford Mutiny, as it came to be known, caused rifts among friends that will never be healed. Senior figures at the university were appalled at the seditiousness of the battle, the intrigue, the dogged entrenchment of the principal parties, for months afterwards the university reverberated from the strife.

My own part was strictly that of an onlooker. But the Boat Race has always had a kind of mystical attraction for me, since long ago in the early Sixties when I covered the event for the *Daily Express*. It was a part of my career which was distinguished by my total lack of grasp of the finer points of the sport. I also, on one near-legendary occasion, thundered through the columns of ‘The World’s Greatest Newspaper’ that Oxford ‘were so bad they may as well not turn up for the race.’ The five-length victory of the Dark Blues that year reduced me to a figure of fun which lives to this day in some unforgiving rowing circles.

Nonetheless I managed to retain a few staunch friendships from those days, but only among those oarsmen who have been blessed with a sense of humour. I still receive wildly amusing letters from time to time from Oxford’s American strokeman who blew my 1963 forecast out of the water. His crew mate Miles Morland, the 1965 President, was a regular dinner companion during the many years we both lived in New York.

Another old friendship that still survives is with a young Isis oarsman of 1966, who swears to God he once told me that Oxford were rowing with special oars with holes in the blades to cut down water resistance. And that I printed it! I simply could not have believed him … but on a slow news day ….

The name of that jester was Daniel Topolski. He went on to row twice in the Boat Race for Oxford, winning once, and

became a writer and travel photo-journalist, a world champion oarsman and Olympic coach. He also became the most successful Oxford coach of all time. Which was something of a surprise to me, for Daniel had never seemed the sort of man destined to become a crew-cutted drill sergeant of the river. Daniel, with his fashionably long hair, his charm, his *bon viveur* life-style and beautiful girlfriends, his penchant for rough travelling in far-flung exotic places, always struck me as being more at home in expensive King's Road restaurants than a gymnasium. But I was wrong. He is forty-three-years-old now and still looks more at home in a Chelsea restaurant; but his legend will live in the Oxford University Boathouse forever.

I left journalism and formed my own publishing company in the United States. I also wrote books about my first love – racehorses – and then, in 1985, co-authored a book called *Born to Win*, the autobiography of the great Australian helmsman John Bertrand, skipper of *Australia II* which won the America's Cup.

In the four years following the triumph of *Australia II* I was asked to write several biographies by various publishers and literary agents, but none of them had the personal sense of heroism that unfailingly catches my attention. Nothing was so moving that it would inspire me to devote months and months to the writing of another book. Until that is I began to follow the saga of the Oxford Mutiny. Months later, I was talking to Daniel Topolski about an entirely different subject when I just happened to remark: 'I suppose by now you've nearly finished a book about the Mutiny.'

'Well no, I've thought about it,' he said, 'but my heart isn't really in it and I haven't honestly pushed that much. The whole thing was so bruising I still haven't properly got over it. Even now I wake up in a cold sweat about it.'

'That bad?'

'Bad beyond your wildest dreams,' he said.

We talked about it for a while and I could see the scars went very deep.

‘How does Macdonald feel now?’ I asked. ‘Just as badly, I think.’ said the coach. ‘I don’t think any of us will ever really get over it.’

It took me six weeks to persuade him that the full story should be told, that we could write it together. With Donald Macdonald, he gathered together the mountain of documentation that tabled the events of 1986–87 at the university. I was astonished by the unfolding story as I pored over the cuttings, letters, and the minutes of Boat Club meetings. It was like gazing at the innermost workings of a monastery, attending confidential discussions to which no outsider had ever been admitted before.

At one point, as the crisis was reaching its peak, the President had called Dan to tell him that he was close to breaking point. Topolski told him: ‘If you quit, I’ll go too and they can have it. But if you stay and fight them, I’ll fight the bastards with you.’

Those were the words that saved the traditions of the OUBC. They were the words of Dan Topolski, the only man who could ever tell this true, and most devastating sports story of our times.

Patrick Robinson.

CHAPTER ONE

A FANATIC IN THE ATTIC

He made up for his initial lack of skill and finesse by fanatical commitment and a fiendish aggression. The prostrate figure of Donald Macdonald, half-dead with the fury of his effort in a race, caused one coach to warn: 'I do not especially want a death on my hands.'

HE HAD BEEN waiting for five days now. Once again Mr Macdonald stood alone outside number 37 Albert Road, shivering in the bleak north-east wind which swept up the River Tees. For an insurance inspector, with a pregnant wife and sixteen-month-old baby, he was showing scant regard for the strict rules of punctuality which govern the daily workings of the dour and fastidious business of underwriting policies, as his watch ticked resolutely on beyond the hour of nine a.m.

Again he scanned the deserted street, felt the chill of the wind through his heavy tan Burberry, and paced along the front of his large, terraced Victorian house. He was a big man of enormous strength, a lean 6ft 2ins, with big hands and a shock of dark curly hair. He had a gentle studious face with deep brown eyes which he now cast heavenwards to the December skies in a gesture of exasperation and despair.

He walked a few more yards to his car. 'Perhaps they don't even bother to contact you at all if they don't think

you are good enough,' he thought. 'Perhaps at twenty-seven I'm just too old. Damn. I probably never stood a chance anyway. I was only testing myself. So why has it suddenly become my whole life?'

He started the car and drove slowly forward, just as the first waves of sleet began to sweep across the windscreen. Suddenly, he sensed a movement in the doorway of number 29. A grey-uniformed figure was hurrying to the next house. Mr Macdonald wound down the window, and called out, 'Morning. Anything for number 37?'

The postman fumbled in his bag and pulled out a big bulky buff envelope. 'Just this, sir,' he said in a broad North Yorkshire brogue, and hurried away into the now-driving gale. The insurance man clutched the package, stared at the return address in the top left-hand corner. Here was his destiny, and he placed it meticulously on the passenger seat. Then he drove on to the offices of the General Accident Insurance Company at Bishopton in Stockton-on-Tees. It was a drive he would never forget. Sometimes he would look at the road, sometimes he would gaze at the package, which mockingly guarded its fateful secret. Years later he would recall ruefully, 'It was a drive to work of the most exquisite torture.'

He pushed his normal Tuesday morning workload to the back of his mind. The package on the front seat now assumed fantastical proportions – a possible state pardon to a man on death row. There was no life beyond the package. He drove through those drab, hopeless provincial streets of north-east England as if the elixir of life lay just a few inches from his left hand. He parked the car carefully, forcing himself to stay calm, and fought to control his own dread of failure should there be rejection beyond the seal. Thank God he had told no one, except Ruth, not even his father, not even his brother. And now, he told himself, I'm going to open the package, right here in the General Accident car park.

He stared at the return address, Mansfield College, University of Oxford, and he ripped open the envelope. Inside were all of the essays he had written, and written, and written, often through the night, pages and pages, months of work, extolling the virtues of T.S. Eliot, examining the tragedies of Shakespeare, of Hamlet, the lonely Prince of Denmark, of the grotesquely-betrayed King Lear; and perhaps the most demanding of all, the soul-searching studies of the strengths of man in extreme danger and isolation, so beautifully penned by the Polish author Joseph Conrad.

'They've sent the whole lot back,' he whispered in near silent anguish. 'Everything I wrote.' And the dull sense of foreboding descended like a cloak upon him. 'I know one thing,' he muttered, 'I shall find it hard to admit to anyone what I tried to do. Where's the letter? Surely they must have written to me. But perhaps they don't bother if you're so bad. They just return your papers.' And then he found it, typed upon stiff ivory-coloured stationery, from the head of the department of English literature, Mansfield College.

'You will already have heard,' it began erroneously, 'the good news that the college is offering you a place to read English from next October.…' A vision of bountiful libraries, of academic pastures, of discussion and study. It all cascaded through his brain. 'A place to read English.…'

Even as he read the words which would change his life, he imagined a far-distant river and the mighty whack of eight oars slicing into the water, the rush of the bubbling slipstream beneath the speeding shell. He tensed to the burst of ferocious energy surging through his arms and chest – and in his mind he clutched once more the great wooden handle in his hands, and the cries of the coxswain rang through his brain: '*In-three! In-two! In-one! Go!!*'

And now at last, he thought, those blades are coloured Dark Blue, Oxford Blue, the colour of learning, the colour of

culture. The colour of the Titans of the River, 'Dan Topolski's fabled Oxford University Boat-Race crew'.

All alone in the General Accident car park, Macdonald half-expected to feel the pain, the dreadful pain of killer racing that he had once known, and to which he had been addicted.

He dumped the entire contents of the package on the floor of the car, and, still with imperious disregard for the traditions of punctuality in the insurance business, he hurtled out of the car park, heading back home to number 37 Albert Road, Eaglescliffe, to share his triumph. By now it was after nine-thirty, and as he drove out through the sullen Victorian streets in this town of the once-burgeoning industrial north-east, he knew he would miss the place. The people were so warm and friendly – for despite their reputation for pragmatism, they were instantly hospitable and full of charm and northern frankness.

Gazing down the river towards Middlesbrough, he could see only the great iron skeletons of disused cranes still aiming skywards from the old derelict shipyards which once spelled such hope and profit, and now signified only decay and the far-lost prosperity of another age. The grime of the place, showing gloomily between the facile concrete and glass attempts of the 1960s to brighten up the old town was always a source of mild sadness to him. But not on this day. Instead he envisioned once more a bright but fading picture of a great colonial house in a sunlit garden, tumbling with the glorious red, yellow, and orange flowers of the canna plant.

Singapore, in the final days of the Empire, the late 1950s and early 60s, the island city of his birthplace and childhood, the paradise of his earliest memories. What a home it had been, one of the loveliest homes in a land of grand homes – wide cool verandahs, spectacular tropical fruits, tennis courts, Chinese servants, and enormous windows with carved shutters for the cooling breezes.

Standing solitary on an imposing ridge it had been the last line of defence against the Japanese. The Madras sappers and miners had managed to hold out for a week before the surrender. After Field Marshall Slim's men drove the Japanese out, it became the home of the manager of the New Zealand Insurance Company – the biggest overseas insurance operation of its type in South-East Asia – the lord of which was his own father, Captain Ian Macdonald, late of the Rajputana Rifles, 2nd Indian Airborne Division. A Henley finalist, man of steel.

Captain Macdonald and his beautiful wife, Mary, were among the last of the colonial empire, living to the full that hard-working but rewarding life.

Everyone called his father Tuan Bezar (the equivalent of Hong Kong's Taipan) – and he could remember the loud threats of 'Will tell Tuan for sure!' as he raced with his first cousin Gordon for the cover of the lacy fronds of the casuarina grove, shouting with laughter. It was carefree laughter which he had not known since. At the time it never occurred to the oldest son of Captain Macdonald that any other form of life existed.

Leaving Singapore in 1964 at the age of eight had been a truly traumatic experience for him and he still remembered weeping tears of desolation as he said goodbye to Gordon and his Chinese friends and flew to England on an old Comet Four, never to return.

It was the kind of upheaval that had been commonplace in his family for more than a hundred years. The Macdonalds were Scottish through and through, tracing their ancestry back directly to the survivors of the massacre at Glencoe. By the middle of the nineteenth century, while maintaining strong roots in Edinburgh and in Stirling, they were mostly to be found adventuring in the Far East, making and sometimes losing fortunes in spices and textiles, tea and property.

Donald's maternal Scottish grandfather had traded in Java and his Australian-born mother had lived there. There were also countless cousins and other relatives running vast sheep stations in New South Wales. In Sydney they still talk of the incorruptible Rhodes Scholar and Queen's Counsel, the Honourable Sir Vernon Treatt, Donald's great-uncle, Leader of the Opposition in the NSW State Government and later appointed Chief Commissioner of Sydney to reorganize the city's chaotic civil service. The Macdonalds were then and still are a tough, resolute and resourceful clan, with friends all over the world – particularly in the east.

'Homecoming' for Donald was a severe shock. His father now worked in the City of London – and the eight-year-old former 'playboy' of the tropics found himself in a world which bore no relation to anything he had known before. The sight of people wearing overcoats and caps amazed him. The cold took his breath away.

Like many a well-born colonial Scotsman before him, young Donald was enrolled in a stern boarding school back in the old country. In his case it was Morrison's Academy, which was established in 1860 in the small granite country town of Crieff in Perthshire, the very gateway to the Highlands. There he learned to cope with the cold, to run in the foothills, to play Rugby football on bleak wet winter days, and to find independence from the family and the servants he had always known.

He emerged from the academy ten years later, at ease with the local farmers and Scottish businessmen and with the world. He had too a finely developed love of poetry and literature which would stay with him for the rest of his life. He was a popular fellow, mainly due to his polite, unassuming and trusting manner, and his keen, droll wit.

Donald was, above all, a Scotsman, born of the blood, with a predeliction for wearing the elegant tartan kilt of the Macdonalds, and for playing the bagpipes, that most

mournful of instruments which seems to sound a cry from the very heart of that grim and ancient land. Following the Macdonald's strong tradition of business and enterprise, their eldest son joined Lloyd's of London, headquarters of the world's insurance markets.

Now, as he crossed the River Tees on his way home, his thoughts were still far from the rusting cranes on either bank. Further down the banks were more rural, more like a river should be, with the stream running quite quickly towards the centre. 'That's the place to be,' he muttered, 'just slightly left, cut the next bend tighter, and then hit the stream again. Probably worth about one-and-a-half-boat lengths.' His mind wandered back four years to the time of his last serious race. Here, three miles from Eaglescliffe, on this morning of dreams, he was back in 1978, in the London Rowing Club Eight, pulling the number six oar with a fierce devotion, fighting for victory on the London Tideway at Putney.

If he thought hard enough, he could remember the first day as a twenty-year-old that he ever reported to the club, at the suggestion of his father, and the cheerful welcome he instantly received from the men who rowed there. He had never been in a racing shell in his life, but they adopted him as a friend and a potential crewmate without hesitation. If they needed any convincing his demonstration of strength on the ergometer rowing machine was decisive, and within forty-eight hours he was actually in a boat, with a chance to row in a competitive Eight.

The first five seconds of his first-ever trial were sufficient. He was captivated, a total prisoner of the river and of the cameraderie of the oarsmen, from that moment on. The thrill of a fast boat cutting through the water was like an aphrodisiac. Only stronger. No thrill, no sensation had ever affected him as the vicious sweet opium of crew racing. It affected his every waking hour. He fought for a place in the boat, he trained to become super-fit, he ran

circuits, pumped iron. And all day, every day, the thought of the boat was with him.

Within weeks he had progressed from a rough, raw number 2 man in the bow of the boat, into a rough but less raw number 6 man in the engine room. He made up for his initial lack of skill and finesse by a fanatical commitment, and a fiendish aggression which even surprised himself. He pulled so hard he found himself on the verge of total collapse at the end of every outing.

Within a few months he had actually moved into the London Rowing Club; he rented a room in the attic above the bar. He lived for the water, rowed in the mornings before work, rowed in the evenings after work. After a few weeks he arranged for his younger brother Hugh to join him as a resident at the club. By now they were both in the insurance business and they went to work in the City each morning on Hugh's motor bike. And while Hugh would never become quite the fanatic that Donald now was, he was still very keen and rowed with his brother whenever he could.

By 1978 they were the mainstays of the crew – Donald pulling away with a deranged dedication as the London Eight stormed from victory to victory in regattas up and down the river. He was allowed to train with the National Lightweight Squad which was based at the club, and he drove his body harder and harder in an attempt to stay up with the best in England. One coach, alarmed at the fury with which Donald attacked the circuit training, called him over and sternly warned him that he, as coach, did not especially want a death on his hands.

The prostrate figure of Donald Macdonald, half-dead with effort after a race, was a regular sight in the dressing room of LRC. There was something of the noble savage about Captain Macdonald's son, and he sought victory in these early days of his love affair with the sport with a

near-lunatic hatred of defeat, despite his initial lack of finesse.

I was a member of that National Lightweight crew and I remember Donald. He was always eager to learn, and at times quizzed us remorselessly for advice. During one summer, late in the season after the world championships, we combined with Donald and some of his crewmates to race a series of regattas in the West Country. We won everywhere we went But soon afterwards, Donald disappeared from the London rowing scene and I was quite surprised to learn he had gone to live in Scotland.

There had been one race on the Thames in 1978 in which Donald and Hugh rowed together in a pair. So confident were they of victory they invited their parents to watch the race. On the day, they won every one of the heats easily – but in the final, disaster struck. A passing ferry almost swamped them, when they were in a clear lead, and, not being great watermen, they filled up with half-a-ton of ballast and were beaten by the narrowest of margins.

The usual family commiserations were in full swing when Donald went berserk. He ranted and raved, shouted and trembled, waved his arms, swore and blasphemed. He was white with anger. ‘I think I used language on that day that my mother had never heard before,’ he recalls. ‘I was like a madman. But it was just the defeat. I could not take it.’

Involvement in the sport at this high-class club level heightened his interest in the annual Oxford–Cambridge battle on the Thames which started right in front of his bedroom window at the rowing club. On the big day of the year on the Tideway, the silent thoughtful figure of Donald Macdonald could be seen staring from the attic across the water to the start, the same thought churning over and over in his mind … ‘Could I do that? Could I, one day, row for Oxford University?’

And yet, in a sense, life ultimately overtook him. He met Ruth on the steps of London Rowing Club. They married in 1979, and after a honeymoon in an idyllic cottage, owned by his parents in Stirling, they elected to bow out of the London rat-race, and to move north of the border to live in the land of his forefathers. Donald secured a job with General Accident in the town of Stirling, and Ruth accepted a demanding post as Training Officer for the Regional Health Board in the same place. Within three years a progressively ambitious Donald seized a promotion in Stockton, and they moved again.

And now, here he was in Stockton-on-Tees – another provincial man in a provincial job, struggling on the lower rungs of a modest corporate ladder. At the age of twenty-seven, like so many others, he now felt the stirring of unfulfilled hopes, of dreams that had slipped away. There must, he thought, be thousands of young men about to enter their thirties who felt much the same. But how many of them dared still to cherish his powerful ambitions in the field of literature and in becoming a top-class oarsman? These were the ambitions of school-leavers, youths of eighteen. How could he have kept them so private for all of those years? And how could they have burned so strongly in his subconscious, and for so long?

In addition he also sought the security of a British home, from which his wife and children would never be uprooted – the old solid yearnings of the children of the Empire in which vast distances and massive family upheavals were, for two centuries, regarded as irrelevant among the hardy breed of people who held it all together. For as long as he could remember he had sought to provide that sense of permanence that he had missed since the departure from Singapore twenty years before.

It was Stockton that had first inspired him to break out of the mundane career that stretched before him. From the moment when he had first parked the little company car in

the little car park and walked with a thousand other office workers into his place of employment up on the second floor, he had thought: ‘My God, I am really one of them now. Everything I have always dreaded, trapped in a job which leaves me entirely unfulfilled. I have brought my family to this point and here I may stay if I am not very, very careful. Could I ever have a mansion in Singapore, with vast lawns? And where is the river that once made me feel so alive, and gave me such hope?

‘They are all slipping away. And I must not let them escape. Because I can still make it. Ruth has challenged me to try, and since she does not care about the financial hardship, I *will* do it.’

For several months Donald fought for a place as an undergraduate. All day long he worked at the General Accident Insurance Company, all afternoon he worked for his insurance examinations, the ones which would take him another small step up the ladder should he fail in his ultimate quest for higher learning and athletic glory at Oxford.

At night he worked on the writings of Eliot, Shakespeare and Conrad. He sought the advice of his friend, the local parish vicar Zolile M’Bali, who was born in the South African township of Soweto and who had fought a far tougher battle for a decent chance than the one Donald now faced. The Rev. M’Bali and his wife were both Oxford graduates and Mrs M’Bali agreed to coach him in the subtleties of passing the Oxford entrance exams. In addition he needed to pass a French examination and he enlisted the help of another local lady, Mrs Janet Atkinson, who had read Modern Languages at Oxford, to guide him through this critical section of the Oxford entry.

He never stopped working. Not for one day, from the moment he decided to try in January of 1982 until the moment he walked out of the examination room at the local school nine months later. He had in truth carried a work-

load which would have daunted a less determined man, sometimes he would stumble up to bed at two and three a.m. Once he never made it and Ruth found him paralyzed with exhaustion, slumped over his desk at six in the morning. Occasionally he thought he could not take it any more, and that he must give himself another year. But he had no time. Even if he made Oxford, even if he made the Oxford rowing crew, he would already be the oldest man ever to row in the Boat Race. He could not wait. He had to pass that exam so he just went on working with a desperation which Ruth had not seen in him before.

At last he had his result, and there were a million things for him to do. The house to be sold, his resignation to send to the GA, bank managers to meet, loans to be arranged, a new house to be bought in Oxford.

They were on their way again – to Oxford this time where Donald expected, surely with good reason, to find a hard-working but gentle peace. Leaving Stockton would not be the same emotional wrench as leaving Singapore had been. But Stockton would hold many memories, mostly of people, many of whom would remain lifelong friends; after all both of the Macdonald children, Ian and Alexandra, were born there.

He stopped the car outside the house and stepped out onto the same icy Albert Road which had, just one hour before, seemed like the Valley of Death. Now it was bathed in the warm glow of victory – and Donald shot through the front door of number 37, yelling like a banshee, and scattering his precious essays behind him.

He grabbed Ruth and danced a neat little Scottish reel around the kitchen, knocked over two chairs, sent a frying pan flying, and scattered a box of corn-flakes all over the floor. But no one was ‘telling Tuan’ this time. There was only Ruth to share his joy, and she flung her arms around him and told him that in her view this was the major opportunity of his life, and that minor details like being

broke should not stand in the way of his Oxford degree in English literature.

Together they read the letter from John Creaser, head of English literature at Mansfield College. Its contents were a source of great pride – Donald had done so well in the literary critique section, in which he was required to examine a poem called ‘Fencing the Uplands’ by Charles Tomlinson, that Professor Creaser was moved to write: ‘This was one of the two outstanding essays we read on that poem … exceptionally acute and accurate in its detailed analysis.’

The excitement was overwhelming but then Donald looked aghast at his watch. What could he possibly be doing at home at this hour of the morning? He charged back out through the front door and drove all the way back to Stockton, his little Ford moving like a Ferrari. He hit his desk running shortly after 11 a.m. One way or another, the rules of punctuality in the world of Scottish insurance were more or less in smithereens for him at this stage. But for financial reasons he would have to keep his job until the very last minute before he left for Oxford.

The New Year of 1984 seemed to arrive quickly, and before it was more than a few days old Donald steeled himself for a phone call he felt he must now make. The recipient was often on the phone and the line was constantly busy. But finally, he got through and I picked it up with my usual curt: ‘Hello’.

‘Er, I wonder if I might speak to Mr Topolski?’

‘This is Daniel speaking.’

‘Oh, er, Daniel. I was hoping you might remember me. Donald Macdonald. No 6 London Rowing Club 1978.’

The conversation that followed was terse and to the point. He wanted to know whether he could do any work before coming up to Oxford so he would be better prepared and I told him the amount of weight training and circuit

training he would be required to undertake if he was to have any chance at all of making the Blue Boat.

Donald gulped and I remember him muttering something about being able to manage around twenty squat-jumps at this stage of fitness (this by the way would probably cause an unfit person to collapse).

'Fine,' I replied. 'Work that up to around eighty.'

'I'm sorry, Dan, I didn't quite get that. How many did you say?'

''Bout eighty.'

'*Eighty*,' he yelled. 'I thought you said eighteen. Jesus Christ!'

Anyway North Yorkshire's King of the Overkill went to work. He underwent a regime of training at a local gymnasium which would have put a marine commando in a rest home. Inside two weeks he had stretched and pulled just about every muscle in his back, and the more it hurt the harder he trained. Finally the pain levelled him and it took a specialist to put him right. Ruth was still massaging that back when he arrived at college eight months later. They sold the Ford and the house in Stockton, and bought a much smaller semi-detached in the more expensive vicinity of Oxford. There was £5,000 worth of change on which he proposed to support his family for four years as a supplement to his government grants.

The move south was chaotic. Donald, Ruth and the babies drove down the motorway in a battered old Beetle, and the furniture from the big Stockton house instantly filled every square inch of space in their new residence in Lime Road, Botley. It also filled the cellar, the attic, the front garden and half of the back garden. Friends and relatives rallied, and drove to Botley to remove some of the pieces. Then, leaving the Beetle behind, Donald set off on the train, alone, back to Stockton where he would stay with friends and continue to work and draw his salary for another six weeks. Every weekend he made the 360-mile