

Chapter 1

Monkton Combe and Childhood

The village of Monkton Combe is situated on the south-facing slope of a tree-lined hill, overlooking the picturesque valley of Limpley Stoke, three miles from the city of Bath, Somerset. In medieval times the monks of Bath Abbey farmed this ‘cume’ (or ‘hollow’), hence its name. The village is an isolated hamlet, approached by narrow winding lanes, and consists mostly of a curving main street with simple cottages and houses focusing on Midford Brook along the bottom of the valley. In 1868 a remarkable vicar of Monkton Combe, the Reverend Francis Pocock, who had rebuilt the church and designed a new vicarage, founded a school to uphold the evangelical traditions of the Anglican Church. Monkton Combe was to become a leading influence among a small group of independent schools dedicated to foster this ideal, both within the educational sphere and in public life. By 1922 it was firmly established and it was where the 15-year-old Ray Hutchinson was beginning to record his thoughts, impressions and hopes in his schoolboy diary.

The choice of school was no accident, for his parents were evangelical to an almost fanatical degree. His father, Harry, had married Catherine Painter in 1901. She died thirteen months later, after giving birth to a son, Sheldon. Three years later Harry married Lucy Mabel Coryton, from a mixed Cornish and strongly Irish background. In 1907 she gave birth to a son, naming him Raymond Coryton. Mabel was convinced of the truth of the evangelical Christian tradition, the literal infallibility of the Bible (in the Authorised Version) and the possible imminence of ‘the second coming’ of Christ. To be ready for this she

wore fresh underwear to bed every night in case the Almighty made a return in the small hours. She feared Roman Catholicism and would cross the road if she saw a nun approaching. Her personal copy of the Bible is annotated on nearly every page. She finds evidence that all non-Christian faiths are undermined by scriptural evidence. In particular she dismisses Darwinism on the interpretation of the genealogy of Jesus as laid down in the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which records a direct descent from Adam: 'Thus destroying Darwinism. No Evolution.' Similar evidence is found to dismiss Christian Science and any other non-evangelical Protestant denomination. These convictions were also evident on Harry's side of the family. His father, Henry, held meetings in his home with a prominent evangelical preacher, Josiah Spiers, who was dedicated to spreading the gospel among young people. In 1867 fifteen children attended a gathering in Henry's home in Islington, which became the cradle from which was formed the Children's Special Service Mission (later The Scripture Union) which held Christian services for young people on the beaches of Britain in the summer months. After severe personal financial business difficulties, Henry became the first secretary of the CSSM. This was the somewhat stringent religious atmosphere dominating the Hutchinsons' house in Finchley, London, which was to be Ray's home until he left Oxford.

It was a happy and close-knit family and Ray's early letters from school were affectionately addressed to 'Dear Pater' and 'Dear Mumzie' and in his diary he wrote that "'Mother'" I think should *always* be spelt with a capital'. As an adult he declared that he had been 'spoilt' as a child. He also remembered with pleasure being read, in the nursery, the works of Amy Le Feuvre – his first experience of literary enjoyment. But his reaction to the evangelicalism of his childhood upbringing was to have a profound and often conflicting impact on his later imaginative world.

His first educational steps took him to Hendon Preparatory School. Here signs of his talent and enthusiasm for reading and writing were quickly apparent. His termly reports consistently listed 'excellent' in the English column and he left with a scholarship to Tenterden Preparatory School in Hendon. The major event of his Tenterden days was his entry for an essay prize on 'War Models', an exhibition (mostly of tanks) displayed in London to raise money for disabled soldiers. The competition was open to all boys up to 18 years old. Harry and Mabel were the proud parents in the audience when Lady Haig, wife

of the prominent First War general, handed the winning prize of two guineas to the 10-year-old Ray, commenting that his essay 'showed more originality and imagination than the efforts of the older boys'. Three years later Ray was wearing the uniform of a new boy at Monkton Combe.

He was always known as Ray to his family and friends, though some close friends also knew him as 'Hutch'. Except for his first novel he published as R.C. Hutchinson, but he was often referred to simply as R.C.H.

He was a good-looking teenager but there were some health worries as he was found to have a weak heart which threatened to curtail his sporting activities. His major athletic interest was rowing and Monkton Combe was strong on the river (it has produced an impressive list of Olympic medallists). He also played rugby to a competent level and enjoyed tennis. He was subject to constant medical examinations but managed to be given a clean bill of health for sport throughout his school career. He enjoyed the physical challenges of both rowing and rugby (he writes quite poetically of the sound of the oars driving through the water in a rowing race) but was scornful of 'people taking games in earnest' and of the ethos of 'muscular Christianity' which flourished as part of the idealism of religious education in Victorian England and extended into the 1920s. In later years he suggested his dislike of school rugby, but it seems it was more his description of the 'incessant' amount of rugby, its compulsory requirement and the assumption that it instilled moral virtue which irritated him, rather than the game itself.

Few statements could be more self-perceptive than the opening sentence of his schoolboy diary, (which he referred to as his 'red book'), declaring that he had 'decided to write a diary of thought, since my life consists, I think, more in thought than in deed'. Hutchinson's later years were not going to be full of incident – his personal life was to be, for the most part, one of happiness and married contentment; his war experience one of administrative skill and influence rather than physical challenge or suffering. Mostly from the privacy of his study his world view would be a predominately private one, a vivid and imaginative landscape which few of his contemporary writers would rival. By the age of 16 he was writing his internal autobiography. Future years would see this vision subtly and widely extended, but all the essential ingredients were already being recorded in his own hand in 1923. The diary opens with all the theatricality one would expect

from a lively 16 year old. The title page includes the warning: ‘In the case of the owner’s death to be DESTROYED IMMEDIATELY’, and adds the note: ‘This diary contains matter of the UTMOST PRIVACY. It is therefore requested that no one but the owner read or glance through its pages.’

By far the most common subject for discussion in its pages is religion, and there are at least 70 entries covering his concerns, some of them at considerable length. Doubtless many adolescents are exercised by religious dilemmas and are confused as they move from one idea to another, but in Ray’s case he seems to be writing a daily record of his theological journey and shows surprising maturity in the expression of this process. He confronts the problems of predestination, the possible ‘state’ of heaven, the problems of pain and suffering, temptation, the resurrection, providence, confession, celibacy, the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the nature of divine inspiration in terms of biblical authorship. But his main preoccupation is how evangelicalism impinges on his home and school life and he frequently repeats his conviction that it strangles ‘joy’. He shared this view with the figure who was his ‘confessor’ and his closest ally – his step-brother Sheldon: ‘he is more than a friend, and more than a brother; to me he is everything’. Sheldon was some four years Ray’s senior, an Old Monktonian who left for Cambridge just as Ray was starting his diary and who corresponded with Ray on a regular basis. Sheldon became an Anglo-Catholic priest, remembered as a larger-than-life character, a jovial and charitable parish clergyman (who would rather liked to have become a bishop). Ray could express himself freely and openly to him:

I begin to feel more and more that Sheldon is everything to me. He has such a wonderful, perpetual sense of humour, coupled with such deep sympathy over everything; he is so broad-minded, he has both Faith and Humility – things I know only by name ... Sheldon’s religion is a far, far finer thing than mine; he has joy, joy, joy brimming over... Talking of sympathy, I wish Christian people would learn it. Love is the whole thing in this bloody world; the Bible say so and it’s right ... Love is the creative force in this world, but it is *more*, it is everything – *GOD* is love ... sympathy is really nothing but love, and love is everything.

He concludes one paragraph with the rather brutal observation: 'Monkton is just the same. There is no love in its religion.'

If he objected to what he saw as the lack of 'love' and 'joy' in the religious diet he was being offered, he was also suspicious of what he saw as false enthusiasm in its forms of worship. He attended (against his will) meetings arranged by the Crusaders – a youth group formed to encourage teenage boys (especially from public schools) towards the evangelical position. Ray records:

This afternoon I was at the Crusaders as usual. How I hate it nowadays. This idea of 'religion served up in a palatable form' bores me to tears. The Crusader 'services' are so blatant and noisy. Boys are supposed to be fond of that sort of thing; perhaps some are; but I really believe that a quiet devotional service would appeal just as much to most of them. (That is what Sheldon says, and I agree with him). The choruses are horribly unpoetical and unmusical. The 'straight-forward' talks are stereotyped and lifeless. It is what people call the 'bright meeting'.

Such irritation is often balanced by a whimsical comic touch (and a mixture of humour and seriousness was to be a hallmark of his later narrative style):

Really our Church-Worship is an extraordinary thing. I find it difficult to imagine the Almighty sitting up in Heaven with a smile on his face, listening to a lot of weary schoolboys moaning out the 'Venite' to the wheezy strains of the dissonant harmonium. This is what is known as 'praise'.

Having such convictions, and linked with the influence of Sheldon, it was not surprising that he was drawn in some respects to the High Church tradition but didn't want to distress his parents. They would doubtless have been somewhat alarmed if they had read his entry: 'the Eucharist without the idea of transubstantiation is, in my opinion, void. Why should we be afraid of that glorious mystery?'

But more important to Ray was his belief that evangelical enthusiasm was not giving his father 'joy' but making him unhappy. He was very conscious of Harry's difficult life: becoming a young widower,

confronted with financial burdens, sacrificing much to see Ray through Monkton:

Gad! What a life he has had ... Rotten home – parents stiff as starch and damnably evangelical. Love apparently of a formalised and conventional type. Marriage for one year, then, a son – and no wife. Then a second marriage; cussedness of first wife's relatives; no wonder his religion is of a joyless stereotyped evangelical sort of thing. Poor Father ... I owe everything to the pater... I realise what a wonderful man he is ... I *must* give him some happiness. I must make love an *active* thing. I *must* not let my love grow cold. I must *conquer* him with love.

He continues: 'I think one day, if ever I am so energetic, I shall write a novel on the parent problem. How love remains, but opinions are yet so widely different. It is a problem.' He defines the 'problem' further:

parents are the most priceless people going. With them it is all love, love, love; showers of it – but *no* knowledge. And they study me ... they tell me what 'stages' I am getting to ... it is rather topping to watch them studying: they know so little, and think they know so much.

Was the memory of his father's 'problems' part of the imaginative seed which inspired Ray's novel *Image of My Father*, written some 40 years later?

A comparable pattern can be seen in the relationship with his mother. There was no lack of affection, but an immense sense of frustration stemming from her religious enthusiasm: 'A most awful letter from home yesterday. Nothing but Bible truths etc., *I am* so tired of it.' He records reading the writings of Augusta Cook, a popular evangelical author of the time and a favourite of his Mother's. Presumably Mabel had been reading such volumes as *Light from the Book of Daniel on Past, Present and Future* and *The Divine Calendar: Vol.One: The Seven Seals. Vol.Two: The Seven Trumpets*. Ray was dismissive of Cook's writings:

Really such fanaticism is something amazing. As works of humour, hers are the acme of perfection, but as anything

else, as religion, oh! Roman Anti-Christ, British-Israel, all the trimmings! The whole thing reeks of *blind* lunacy. Facts and figures twisted about and mixed up with odd texts from the Bible.

But he was very sympathetic to his mother's loyal support of his father and her constant efforts to be a good stepmother to Sheldon. Was the memory of his mother not part of the imaginative seed which inspired Ray's novel *The Stepmother*, written some 30 years later?

But there were other things to occupy a teenager's thoughts. For one thing he was strongly attracted to his younger step-cousin Esmé, who was a regular visitor to the Hutchinson home.

Topping kid; gad she will be a topping girl in a few years time; just at present I can do anything I like – kiss her when I want to – but in 1930? I wonder ... There is no getting away from the fact, I am absolutely in love with Esmé. But love at my age never comes to anything.

He was also fascinated by the theatre and cinema: 'everyone should go *sometimes* to *good* films ... the cinema is the thing of the day. It is everyone's *duty* to go to it.' He airs a rather prim view that the cinema can have the effect of showing the dire results of immoral behaviour, but this is countered by a more humane confession: 'Sin is very, *very* attractive!' There were other attractions to be gained from theatre visits apart from dramatic pleasure:

the worst of it is I always fall in love with the actresses on the spot. This afternoon there was a delightful little dancer there ... I simply loved her at once. Incidentally she hardly wore anything. Yes, I am afraid I get a good deal of enjoyment from those dancing girls.

In an interesting footnote to an entry on the cinema he adds: 'I wonder if I could write scenarios?'

He also mentions his pleasure in smoking and the freedom of doing so at home, with easier evasions than the restrictions of school rules: 'Well, less than three weeks more, and I shall be having my first fag after eleven weeks. Oh my God, is there anything to be compared with the joy of that first fag?' As an adult he was rarely to be seen