

Evil's Good: Book of Boasts and Other Investments

by Simon Cawkwell

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Sample Chapter: A BEAR'S BACKGROUND

"Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

- The Book of Matthew, chapter 6 verse 9 (also, plausibly, Robert Maxwell)

My parents arrived at Oxford from New Zealand in latish 1946. My father came on a Rhodes scholarship and having picked up a respectable degree walked a hundred yards from Christ Church to become a don at University College in 1950. He is still there but is now an emeritus fellow. I think he gets dining rights but has nothing to do with the administration of the place. Nothing whatsoever about his conduct in or attitude towards life has anything to do with gambling. He is about as financially risk averse as it is possible to be. I do not know why. His aversion may be genetically derived or it may come from a childhood in the thirties where he saw at first hand the consequences of a deep and sustained depression. My mother has virtually nothing to do with money and, save in the practical sense of recognising it as a means of exchange for life's necessities, has absolutely no interest in the subject whatsoever. I have never once heard her raise it as a topic of conversation and, although she has not said so, I think she thinks the subject pretty boring and a mark of inferiority on the part of the speaker if raised.

My father's second name is Law. This is rumoured to be because he, and thus I, are descended from John Law, the Scottish financier who set up the Mississippi scheme and was generally in charge of financial scams in France in 1720 (he might have operated the South Sea Bubble here at the same time but for being wanted on murder charges). So there's a hint as to my interest in financial markets. That said, there is absolutely no evidence that John Law has anything to with my family whatsoever. Anyone got a pocket DNA kit to take to John Law's grave in Venice? Cash paid.

I was born in 1946 and brought up in north Oxford in what I now recognise were virtually idyllic conditions — only, needless to add, I did not even begin to realise it at the time. The place was stuffed with kind enthusiastic intelligent and honourable people. My contemporaries had parents who had been through the war. They did not complain and they put their backs into getting things done. So, although there was not a lot of cash around, all was always provided for in the most stimulating and equitable environment any child could conceivably wish to be born into.

Aside from a rather handsome married vicar who publicly canoodled with a woman who was not his wife, I never heard of any hint of marital infidelity in my childhood Oxford. Divorce was regarded as socially inferior.

The Dragon School, on the banks of Oxford's river Cherwell, was heaven for young boys and, as far as I am aware, so remains. Although I am the son of a don and was therefore expected to shine in the academic department, I did nothing of the sort. Only occasionally could I be bothered to put in any sort of effort. So I was eclipsed by the swots. And, given that one or two of the swots were clever fellows into the bargain, the eclipsing was pretty thorough and, worse, persistent. I do not know what would have happened had I gone to a school where my contemporaries would have been less able. But I suspect the result would have been much the same.

The only activity in which I excelled was target shooting and I was told by the shooting master that I was the best he had ever trained. I think it may have been because I was quite tall for my age and, having a good eye, obtained the same picture round after round and squeezed gently through. It led to consistently high scores. The shooting master gave me a letter of introduction or something like that for me to hand on to the captain of shooting at Rugby, my next school. On arrival and quite understandably I took along my letter of introduction and, on being tested alongside members of the Rugby shooting eight, trounced or equalled the lot and I asked when I would be admitted to the eight. I did not know that thirteen year old boys are not supposed to talk like this.

As it happens I never made the eight since I developed a flinch when using .303 rifles as the kick forced the thumb of my left hand smartly into my cheek — I am a left-hander. I assure you that if you do this for long you will develop a bruised area and you will flinch each time you pull the trigger. This is not good for scores. I presume that the butt of my rifle was just too short for some reason. By the age of fifteen I had lost all interest in shooting — and this despite having terrorised every bird in north Oxford over the previous five years.

I went to Rugby because my father had been capped in the sport of the same name for Scotland. He argued that I would be sufficiently tough for the game — my brother went to Shrewsbury since he was and is less physically robust than I and thus more suited to soccer. But I am basically effete or, if not that, indolent and I have never played rugby since I left school. I may have watched twenty games — almost all on television and as a result of a bet. So much for my father's hopes by way of sporting prowess.

The summer game was of course cricket. My father played for a variety of teams. There were the Barnacles, the Academics, the Cryptics and others who were rather posher. I heard names such as I Zingari and had various ties pointed out to me. Goodness me, that world has changed. Nobody under fifty today wears a club or school tie. Yet, when I started in the City, Friday was always a club tie day, particularly school and regimental ties. I cannot say that this change matters. It is just a fact.

My family's aged Vauxhall Wyvern would trundle to village cricket grounds all over Oxfordshire and neighbouring counties. I can't readily remember the names of the villages now. But, to my mind, the best ground was that of Cookham Dean. It was so small that sixes were easily scored. Those matches were followed by invitations to the nearby house of a wine wholesaler based on Paddington Green. My father then used to buy wine for University College and I well remember the merchant's elegant labels on the occasional half bottles that were given to my father as samples by which to encourage trade. Curiously, given that I must drink more wine per annum than anybody else in London and, for all I know, the universe, I did not take to wine until I was approaching sixteen years. That said, I

have been making up for those lost years ever since. The drawback has been that, since I am what is referred to in the animal husbandry business as a good converter, I turn those excess calories into fat.

When I was eleven I broke bones in both feet during the Easter holidays. Thus the following summer term's cricket was a complete write off and I never really regained a personal playing interest and hardly ever watched a match of any sort. But I attended a number of matches at Lord's when I lived in St. John's Wood in the early nineties and a few years ago took a bit of a swing at betting on them. The result has been that I now think test match cricket is extraordinarily interesting. What seems such a slow game in fact fluctuates enormously — sometimes in the space of a few balls. And, whilst I will never understand what those crafty bowlers are preparing, I enjoy having it explained to me after they have done it. (Some people do not enjoy cricket. And the most prominent opponent of the game of whom I am aware was the late Lady Menzies, whose husband, Sir Robert, was Prime Minister of Australia. She observed that she had been to a cricket ground and had visited it twenty years later only to find that the same two batsmen were still at the crease.)

To start with, and for a fortnight a year during the summer holiday, my family rented a cottage by the sea, typically in Cornwall or Wales. This entailed Walls plain vanilla ice cream, rock pools and sand between one's toes along with brief dips into cold seas — global warming had yet to arrive. For myself, I can't get enough global warming.

However, and later on as I entered my teens, my family went to the Lake District and a house set above Lake Buttermere. These holidays involved walking up hills and back down again. I never enjoyed this since, although I appreciated the view from the top, I did not think it especially interesting to walk up hills — it seemed as pointless an activity as that undertaken half the time by the Grand Old Duke of York's ten thousand men.

That said, I went on long walks around Lake Buttermere and its environs and have never lost an interest in watching water and fishing. Those days out must have entailed covering comfortably upwards of fifteen miles at a time. Thus I always thought marches of (say) three miles when I was in the corps at Rugby entirely pathetic attainments. I suppose that Rugby's point was that a high proportion of my then contemporaries came from the soft South East where not a lot of walking was done at all.



Regrettably, I have not continued with fishing. My addiction to gambling and the market rather pathetically does not let me lift my eyes from the screen. Save for lunch, I suppose. That said, I have taken fishing quite seriously: for instance in 1969, my wife and I left Lusaka at 5.00 a.m. one day and arrived perhaps two hours later under the shadow of the Kariba dam. This mighty enterprise chewed fishes through its turbines with the result that all variety of predators waited below to take the ready-chopped harvest. One of those waiting proved to be a tiger fish, which may have weighed about ten pounds. It elected to pursue

my spinner. It fought ferociously and had fearsome teeth. I think I chucked it back — I could see no future in cooking it.

But it was a hot day and, since I had seen a Rhodesian bush ranger type swimming around with a spear gun and wearing, as it happens, a black Stetson (I can't think why he had it on for swimming — however, it certainly looked glamorous), I took a swim myself in the calm waters at the side of the great swirling Zambezi. I may have been in the water for half an hour. It was not until I returned to Lusaka that it was pointed out to me that it was up these quiet side waters that crocodile who might be intent on a spot of fishing themselves might be found. Looking back, I cannot imagine why the risk of proving to be a crocodile's lunch did not occur to me at the time — it might have been my protected upbringing. Nor was that all. For I could have contracted bilharzia, an appalling disease which is prevalent in all African water and is a massive curse throughout the continent. You can get rid of it by spending a few weeks in London's Hospital for Tropical Diseases. But the vast majority of Africans cannot get there and, in any event, I am told that every day in that institution you get brown soup, which puts one off hospitalisation for life. Further, I doubt if the Burgundy is up to much either.

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