WILLIAM BOYD

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THE NEW CONFESSIONS

William Boyd was born in Accra, Ghana, and educated at the universities of Nice, Glasgow, and Oxford. His first novel, *A Good Man in Africa*, won the Somerset Maugham Award; his second, *An Ice-Cream War*, was winner of the 1982 John Llewelyn Rhys Prize and short-listed for the 1982 Booker Prize. He is also the author of a third novel, *Stars and Bars*, and *On the Yankee Station*, a collection of short stories. He lives in London.

FOR SUSAN

THE NEW CONFESSIONS

WILLIAM BOYD

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Monsieur Rousseau embraced me. He kissed me several times, and held me in his arms with elegant cordiality. Oh, I shall never forget that I have been thus. ROUSSEAU: "Goodbye, you are a fine fellow." BOSWELL: "You have shown me great goodness. But I deserved it." ROUSSEAU: "Yes, you are malicious, but 'tis a pleasant malice, a malice I don't dislike. Write and tell me how you are." BOSWELL: "And you will write to me?" . . . ROUSSEAU: "Yes." BOSWELL: "Goodbye. If you are still living in seven years I shall return to Switzerland from Scotland to see you." ROUSSEAU: "Do so. We shall be old acquaintances." BOSWELL: "One word more. Can I feel sure that I am held to you by a thread, even if of the finest? By a hair?" (*Seizing a hair of my head.*) ROUSSEAU: "Yes. Remember always that there are points at which our souls are bound." BOSWELL: "It is enough. I, with my melancholy, I, who often look upon myself as a despicable being, a good for nothing creature who should make his exit from life—I shall be upheld for ever by the thought that I am bound to Rousseau. Goodbye. Bravo! I shall *live* to the end of my days." ROUSSEAU: "That is undoubtedly a thing one must do. Goodbye."

—*The Private Papers of James Boswell*

1 BEGINNINGS

My first act on entering this world was to kill my mother. I was heaved—a healthy eight pounds—lacquered and ruddy from her womb one cold March day in Edinburgh, 1899. I like to think that for a few hours she knew she had another son but I have no evidence for the fact. The date of my birth was the date of her death, and thus began all my misfortunes. My father? My father was lecturing to his anatomy students at the University. Word of my mother's confinement was sent to him at once but the messenger—a dim porter called McPhail—could not gain admittance to the lecture theater. My father's habit was to lock the doors from the inside and refuse to be interrupted. I believe that day he even had a cadaver on a marble slab before his lectern. The messenger, McPhail, having tried the door, peered through the portholed glass, saw the corpse and queasily decided to wait until the lecture was over. My father later emerged to learn the good and bad news. By the time he arrived at the infirmary, I was alive and his wife was dead.

How did he feel? I can almost see his bloodless bony face, the thick tufts of unshaved bristle on his cheekbones, as he looms over the cot. No emotion would be registered there—neither joy nor desperation.

There might be a thin reek of camphor and formaldehyde overlaying the smell of tobacco that normally clung to his clothes (he was a sixty-a-day man). And his hands, firm on the cot frame, would be perfumed too, with carbolic, and the nails would be edged white with residues of the talcum powder that preserved the rubber of his dun, transparent operating gloves.

My father was normally a clean man, almost obsessively so, and I could never understand why he did not take the end of a match or the point of a penknife to his cuticles and scrape away the small talcum beach deposited there. It was one of two personal features that I found continually aggravating. The other was his refusal to shave those bristles from his cheeks. Twin dense sickles of beard grew there, beneath his eyes. It is an affectation I have observed frequently among Englishmen, particularly in army officers, yet I would say that my father was a man almost bereft of affectations—so why did he persist with such an obtrusive one? As I grew older it sometimes drove me almost insane with irritation.

On those rare occasions when I came across my father asleep, I would stand and gaze at his waxy features—at once smooth (because of the paleness of his skin) and crude (because of the sharp angularities of his facial bones)—and be genuinely tempted to attempt a clandestine razoring. I might at least remove or so seriously damage one tuft that he would be obliged to shave off the other. Of course, I never dared, and the cheek fuzz remained.

Why do I go on about it so? you might ask, with perfect reasonableness. . . . Let me put it this way. When you live with someone, when you see his face every day, and you do not love him, the banal traffic of social intercourse is only tolerable when there is nothing on that face or about that person that attracts your eye. It could be a scar, a squint, a tic, a mole—whatever—the gaze is irresistibly drawn there. You know how sometimes in the cinema a hair or a piece of fluff will get trapped in the projector's lens and flicker and twitch maddeningly at the edge of the frame until freed? When that happens, have you ever been able to pay full attention to what is on the screen? Never. An irritating blemish on the face of a constant companion has the same effect: a large portion of your mind is always claimed by it. So it was with me and my father. He was usually irked by me, and I was needled by him.

Ergo, I did not love my father. . . . I do not know. Perhaps I did, in my own way. Certainly, it was a complicated enough relationship to do

duty as Love's understudy. I know he never loved *me*, but that, as far as I am concerned, is of little importance. He did not love me because, quite simply, I was a constant reminder of his loss. As I grew older the correlation paradoxically reasserted itself. One of the last times I saw him—he an octogenarian, I in my forties—I caught his image reflected in the slightly ajar door of a glass and mahogany cabinet (I had turned my head to call for tea). There was a detectable flare to his nostrils, a quiet disgusted shake of his head. And I remember being particularly pleasant to him that afternoon, in spite of his appalling testiness. But at that stage of my life nothing—not even he—could disturb my own misanthropic calm. His last words to me that day were "Why don't you get your bloody hair cut?" Hair. Very apt. Full circle. I almost told him I would if he would shave off his sodding cheek-bristles, said I would have seen a hell of a lot more of him in the last thirty-odd years if he had, but I kept my peace. I can see his pale-blue eyes, hard and clear, sandwiched between their hoary brows, upper and lower, and still hear his strong, metallic, precise Scottish accent (I had lost mine by then, another source of scorn). "Yes, Dad," I said, "right you are." Forty-seven years of age and still trying to please the old bastard. God help me.

Anyway, I digress. Let me tell you something about this enterprise upon which we have both—you and I—embarked. Here is the story of a life. My life. One man's life in the twentieth century. This is what I have done and this is what has been done to me. If on occasion I have used some innocent embellishment, it has been only to fill the odd defect of memory. Sometimes I may have taken for a fact what was no more than a probability, but—and this is crucial—I have never put down as true what I knew to be false. I present myself as I was—vile and contemptible when I behaved in that fashion; and kind, generous and selfless when I was so. I have always looked closely at those around me and have not spared myself that same scrutiny. I am not a cynic; I am not prejudiced. I am simply a realist. I do not judge. I note. So, here I am. You may groan at my unbelievable blunders, berate me for my numberless imbecilities and blush to the whites of your eyes at my confessions, but—but—can you, I wonder, can you really put your hand on your heart and say, "I am better than he"?

My name is John James Todd. My father was Innes McNeil Todd, senior consultant surgeon at the Royal Infirmary and professor of

clinical anatomy at the University. When I was born he was thirty-seven years old, astonishingly young for a man in his eminent position, a rapid promotion brought on by his eagerness for experiment and innovation. He was a "modern" in the world of medicine, striving earnestly to free it from the tenacious hold of its medieval past (still alarmingly prevalent in the late nineteenth century). He sensed a lightening in the east and he wanted to be there to welcome the new dawn. He would try anything to advance its progress, such was his zeal, and some of his efforts paid off.

My darling mother was Emmeline Dale, the daughter of Sir Hector Dale, of Drumlarish, Ayrshire, a laird of vast acreage, little means and less intellect. My parents married in 1891. My mother was the fifth child of Sir Hector (his wife, her mother, died when she was five). She had four older brothers and a younger sister, Faye, who lived in England. My mother was by all accounts much in love with my father. They met when he came to cauterize an inflamed goiter on Sir Hector's throat. In those days Sir Hector possessed an Edinburgh town house, in the New Town, Ann Street (which was shortly sold, alas), where the Dale family spent the worst winter months, returning to the big house at Drumlarish in the spring. Innes Todd married Emmeline Dale in St. Mungo's parish church in Barnton, then a village outside Edinburgh, whence the Todds originally hailed. Sir Hector conferred on his daughter a modest dowry and the young couple moved into the enormous apartment my father had taken—for reasons best known to himself—in the unfashionable High Street where, again by all accounts, they lived in blameless happiness—until I arrived.

In 1892, some sixteen months after the marriage, my mother gave birth to her first child, a boy, my brother. Prior to his conception my mother had miscarried when five months pregnant. (A girl, I later learned. Ah, my lost sister, what a difference you would have made!) The new child was thus doubly anticipated and the anxiety attending his birth also multiplied. Not uncalled for, as it turned out. My brother's proved to be a difficult, painful parturition and, although he was robust and healthy enough, my mother required several months' convalescence. He was called Thompson Hector Dale Todd. Curiously, he was Sir Hector's first grandchild (his four sons were all bachelors and deficient in all manner of areas) and this fact, and the suppliant nomenclature, earned my brother a lucky financial settlement from his grandfather's dwindling estate (I was some years too late).

T.H.D. Todd, my brother. Thompson Todd. I believe some of his

friends actually call him Tommy, but, even since earliest childhood, I swear, I have been unable to call him anything else but Thompson. Names are important to me, almost talismanic. As a Christian name Thompson seemed (and seems—he still flourishes, the miserable bastard) absolutely perfect for him. The stolidity, the solidity, the thick consonants, the—from my point of view—utter impossibility of imbuing it with any tones of affection.

Go to Edinburgh. Stand on the esplanade of the tremendous castle, the gatehouse at your back. You are looking down the Royal Mile, the ancient High Street of the city, the spine of the Old Town. Ignore, if you can, today's scrubbed stone and loving restoration, the bright tat and crass bustle. When I was born the Old Town was in a state of severe decay, the buildings black and scrofulous, dark already but darkened further by the smoke and cinders of a million chimney pots and the belching soot from the railway station in the valley below. The street itself was erratically cobbled; some of the stones were two hundred years old, round and worn like pebbles on a beach. In other places they had crumbled or subsided and the holes in the pavement were filled with sand and dirt. Here and there were pale-gray new cobbles of Aberdeen granite. On either side stood dark misshapen terraces of shops and houses.

Turn now and look north towards the Firth of Forth. All of Edinburgh's dignity and decorum has moved across the steep valley of Waverley Gardens to the neat elegant grid of the New Town. Its sunny leafy squares, its classical assurance, its perfect Georgian symmetry, stood in potent contrast to the narrowing foul descent from the castle on its crag to the palace of Holyrood and its modest park.

Now leave the castle's esplanade and walk down the High Street towards St. Giles's Cathedral. Stay on the left-hand side. Through the Lawnmarket and on. As you go, you pass low doorways, squat dark tunnels that lead down to chill terraced canyons. Let four or five of these doorways go by and you will come to an entranceway named Kelpie's Wynd. Enter. Those of you taller than five feet eight inches will have to duck your heads. Pass through the tunnel and you emerge in Kelpie's Court. Look up. The tall, stepped gables crowd in above, revealing a hedged, mean patch of sky. Only in midsummer are the old heavy flags of the courtyard warmed by the sun. This is where the Todd family lived. Second door on the left. Number 3.

These are curious buildings on each side of the Royal Mile. Imagine

the street as being set on top of a vast sloping ridge. On the south side the buildings clutter and tumble haphazardly to the Grassmarket and Victoria Street below. But on the other side, the north, there is an abrupt steep descent to the railway lines at the bottom of the valley. On the north side of the High Street a house with four stories at the front can have, because of the angle of the slope, nine or ten at the back. From Princes Street, across the valley gardens, these vast strict blocks face you like masonry cliffs seamed with narrow chasms. In those days they seemed prodigious edifices, embryonic skyscrapers, still growing.

Some of these old buildings contained up to twenty apartments, some small, some grand. Ours was one of the latter; I think at one stage, two had been knocked into one. There was a large drawing room, a library, a dining room, six bedrooms and a bathroom. A large kitchen with a pantry, a scullery and a sleeping closet constituted the servants' quarters. There had been buildings on this site since the fifteenth century. From time to time they had fallen or burned down and new dwellings had been constructed on the ruins. The architecture on the High Street had the character of an antiquated stone shantytown. Houses had grown piecemeal, by accretion and alteration. Windows were all sizes—actually a pleasing diversity—and installing water closets and modern plumbing required real ingenuity.

The oldest part of the building was invariably the stairs and stairwell. Stone and spiral, they survived the periodic destructions. The steps were smooth, concaved by the stigmata of a million boots. The doors off were small—easier to defend, I suppose; or built for smaller, earlier Scotsmen. The well was always dark. A faint light drained down from a high window at the roof. Here and there a gas mantle hissed. There was a musty vegetable dampness about these stairways—like an old gloomy cellar: earthy, mossy, feculent.

Our apartment was on the first floor. Through the tiny doorway was a hall with wooden boards, empty save for a fireplace with a coal fire always burning there winter and summer, as if to shield our home from the stairs' chill grip. To the right a door led to the kitchen; to the left, the living rooms. It was as if one moved not only from one climate to another but also to another era. From a world of stone and steel (the pocked handrail) to wood, paneling, paper, rugs and pictures. The drawing room had a fine molded ceiling, the library an Oriental silk carpet. The corridors were paneled in fumed oak, the bedrooms lined with hand-blocked printed papers. This was a legacy of my mother's last, fatal confinement. After her death, the character of the apart-