

PURSUIT

The Memoirs of

JOHN CALDER



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Follow a shadow, it still flies you.
Seem to fly it, it will pursue.

Ben Jonson

Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells.
Shakespeare

Faint, yet pursuing...

Judges 8:4

...aspires

Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue
Vain war with heaven...

Milton

Dedication

This autobiography is dedicated to three people described in it, three people who in different ways I know I have let down and to whom I feel a deep guilt that no apology can mitigate. They are first of all my great-uncle Jim (Sir James Calder), who did so much for me and was so generous, both to my father and myself. I lost what he left me, but I remain grateful. Secondly I still feel responsible for the unhappy death of Lisel Field, which I could have prevented. Thirdly I apologize to Reginald Attewell, whose loyalty and long service deserved better recognition than was possible at a time when I was myself in deep trouble.

Preface

My pursuits have always varied here and there:
to do well, and please and show success at times.
At others: what to do and to go where
impulse and need demanded. Now what primes
these memories of the many lives I've led
is to record what happened, who was what,
put right the lies that other books have fed
the reading public, and above all to not
add to those lies. My motivation's been
to add a little to the world, to stop the rot,
the greed and corruption that makes Man mean,
where good is bad and all ideals insane
to those who cannot think ahead and choose
destruction's path. I see ahead much pain:
both good and bad have everything to lose.
But to the end for a better world I'll sue.
The chances are not good, but there's no choice;
once young, now old, I only can pursue
what I believe in with my weakening voice.

Pursuit

Chapter 1

BEGINNINGS

I inherited genes that, once in my body, rebelled against those of my forebears and somehow became twisted out of all recognition of their sources. Both sides of my family, going two generations back, contained patriarchs and staunch conservatives, unthinking in their political views (which were those that stood to their greatest advantage) and in their religious ones (which consisted of a Roman Catholicism of total orthodoxy). My two grandfathers were members of an establishment that they wanted to penetrate ever deeper; both had absolute faith in the power of money and property and believed in a God who was a patriarch, like them, and who would reward them in the next world as well or better than in this. They were not unkind to those who served them, provided of course that they knew their place and were properly respectful of their betters. From an early age my instincts were very different, but this did not become obvious until my maturity, to which they undoubtedly gave another, less flattering, name.

My great-grandfather, James Calder, came from Buchan in the North East of Scotland, a member of a crofting family, of which I have never had the time to find out more. As a young man he had moved to Alloa in central Scotland, married a Mackenzie, the daughter of a local brewer. The name, Mackenzie, which is also my middle name, always had a mystical quality in family conversation, a name to be proud of. In due course he took over the brewery and changed its name to Calder's. He also acquired about twenty-thousand acres of land covering the two sides and the middle of the Ochil Hills between Perth and Kinross, bridging a wild and beautiful area of Perthshire and Kinross-shire, to which I constantly return in my dreams. He built, or more likely extended, a large house near Forgandenny called Ardargie, which had formal gardens as well as a home farm and a large walled vegetable garden. It included a stretch of river, a tributary of the May, which boasted a waterfall and a bridge called the Hummel Bummel, so rickety that one crossed it at one's peril. To prove my hardiness as a child I often bathed in the icy pool below the waterfall. In addition, Ardargie had many farms, and a large grouse moor over the higher ground and mountains, from the top of which one could see the Pentlands, south of Edinburgh, and far into the Highlands to the north. It also had a splendid view of Loch Leven with its castle on an island, where Mary

Queen of Scots had spent miserable years in captivity. Behind the loch rise the majestic Lomond Hills, a notable landmark to the east. Westward the mountains stretched beyond the northern reaches of Stirling, and were known as the Highland Line.

James Calder's son, my grandfather, was John Joseph Calder. In each generation down to my own there have been at least two Calder boys, the first named after his grandfather and the second after his father. My father was therefore James, being the eldest, and his younger brother was John, although called Ian, its Gaelic form, and the reverse applied to myself and my younger brother. J.J., as he was often called, was a patriarch like his father, and he produced two sons and six daughters, which strangely enough constituted exactly the same make-up as the family on my mother's side, except that in the latter's case the two boys died as teenagers, while the six girls survived.

John Joseph inherited his father's house Ardargie and the northern part of the estate, while his younger brother James took the southern part and a second house, Ledlanet, which had been converted into a shooting lodge and extended by his father. Ledlanet will play a large part in this narrative. It was a pleasant stone-built house in the Scottish baronial style, with the usual public rooms, three of them, aside from the dining room and a small outer and large inner hall, and with nine bedrooms and three servants' rooms behind a green baize door. It contrasted in every way with Ardargie, which was a large rambling house, set low down between the higher ground north and south, near a river and overlooking a small trout loch. The Ledlanet Loch was much larger, but a good ten-minute walk away. Ledlanet was set high on a hill with a splendid view from the first floor over the Kinross valley and Loch Leven. Tall trees blocked the view on the ground floor. The best farmland was my grandfather's, the best grouse moor and wild mountain scenery my great-uncle's. The two brothers divided the family business interests between them: my grandfather took over the Alloa brewery, his younger brother a whisky distillery at Stronachie that happened to be on his own land and beside the winding road leading through the hills. In addition, he took up a timber business, mainly dealing in home-grown softwoods and hardwood. This latter had grown of necessity because there was much forest on the Calder estates, not just in the Scottish central belt, but further up north, where more land had been bought in Ross-shire. It was my great-uncle who developed the timber business into an international concern, importing from Canada, the Baltic states and Russia, and eventually buying up timber yards at many British ports. He became Timber Controller in both the First and Second World Wars and received as recompense a knighthood in 1921, further to an earlier CBE. He allowed his distillery to be merged into the Distillers

Company, the creation of Harry Ross, a magnate who persuaded many Scottish distilling families to pool their interests into a giant corporation powerful enough to establish Scotch whisky as an international drink.

Sir James became Chairman of the management committee of Distillers Company, at the time his most important business interest, and between the wars travelled for the purpose of whisky promotion. The far-Eastern travels were commemorated in Chinese and Japanese artefacts that adorned Ledlanet. Among the many photographs later discovered in the house were those of Joseph Kennedy, a business associate, and his sons, including John Kennedy, later to become US President. The whole Kennedy family were frequent visitors. Joe Kennedy was American Ambassador to Britain in the Thirties, and his boys learnt to shoot grouse on the moors at Ledlanet. The connection of course was whisky, which Joe Kennedy imported into the U.S. during Prohibition.

My other grandfather was Canadian, a self-made man called Marcellin Wilson. Although he was a French Canadian, the Wilson name came from an ancestor, a soldier in Wellington's Peninsular army who, when wounded, had been left behind in Portugal and eventually emigrated from there to Canada. My grandfather grew up on Île Bézard on the St Lawrence river near Montreal. He was a farm boy, who by dint of will power acquired land and made successful speculations out of which he was able to found a bank, the Banque Canadienne Nationale. As a small boy I would be given \$20 notes with his portrait on them. Foolishly I never kept one. He became a successful Canadian industrialist with a finger in many pies and undoubtedly made a fortune out of prohibition in the United States during its thirteen years' duration, from 1920 to 1933. He was heavily involved in Canadian distilling and also imported whisky and gin from Scotland. It was this connection that brought my parents together in the Twenties. My grandfather was also a politician who became a senator and treasurer of the Liberal Party, which in those days was the ruling party of Canada. He was a close associate of Mackenzie King, Canadian prime minister for virtually the entire period from 1921 to 1948.

A little should be said of my two grandmothers. The Scottish one was really English, born in Liverpool and from a Lancashire merchant family called Broadbent. Strict and stern, it was often said of her that she would have preferred to have been a nun. As a boy I spent many holidays, especially the long summer ones, at Ardargie, and although I was naturally quiet and obedient, a bookworm in fact, I was always aware of her disapproval of something. I realize now that my mother and her very different background were held against me. Consequently, I always went in trepidation of her. My grandfather had a library of leather-bound nineteenth-century classics, and I read my way through much of it. Occasionally she would retrieve a

book from me, dismissing it as unsuitable, and return it to the shelf, where I could always easily find it again once alone.

The other grandmother was a housewife from an old French-Canadian family, the Geffrions, who had certainly brought a dowry with her. She overprotected her grandchildren when they came into her orbit as she had overprotected her children. Occasionally, when I was a child, living with my mother in Montreal, in a house just a few doors away, she would see me passing and a message would be sent out to the effect that I was not wearing a hat or overshoes (in winter) or suitable clothing. In her house my hands were constantly inspected, which inevitably led to a trip to the bathroom to wash them, followed by a painful trimming of fingernails. I doubt very much if she ever had a non-domestic thought; her phobias were dirt and untidiness. At the end of her life she went into a coma for several years and was artificially fed, only occasionally emerging to murmur the name of one of her daughters.

My father was a victim of his own early celebrity. Brought up at Ardargie, he went to a Catholic public school¹ at Fort Augustus near Inverness, where he was educated by Benedictine monks. I never heard him comment much on it and I have no idea whether he was happy there. In those days it was not an issue: children did what their parents intended for them, especially if they came from a class which was aware of its superior position and was upwardly mobile. He joined the army in 1914, and was, so I was brought up to believe, under age when he did so. As his birth certificate tells me that he was born in 1895, I do not see how this is possible, sixteen being the military age then. He started in the Scottish Horse as a Second Lieutenant. I was told that he was a captain at sixteen, but this too does not accord with the dates. However, his military career was much honoured in the family: he was promoted to captain, mentioned in despatches and awarded the Military Cross. He went through the trenches, was badly gassed, took Hill 60, which was his major moment of glory, and ended up in the Lovat Scouts and as an observer on a reconnaissance plane. My reference books tell me that Hill 60, a military observation point in Belgium, was taken on 17th April 1915 by two regiments, one of them Scottish, but lost again in May. Family pride, and no doubt commercial considerations, led to my grandfather acquiring “the Hill” after the war and building a hostelry there. My father related this to me with disgust when I was about seven.

After the war my father showed little inclination to go to university – New College, Oxford, had at one point been on the cards – nor did he want to work for his tyrannical father in the brewery, although I believe he did

1 Public school in the British sense (i.e. privileged private education in a strictly disciplined environment).

so for a short time. He eventually started a pig farm, but that enterprise ended in disaster: his entire stock was wiped out by swine fever before any of the piglets were old enough to go to market. There may have been other unsuccessful business ventures. No one ever went to the trouble to tell me about my father's early days, and those who could have are all now gone. He had a romance with an Irish girl, which somehow did not please his family, presumably because she was not of their class, and they disentangled him from that love affair. He then went to Canada with introductions from his uncle to his whisky contacts in Montreal. One of these was to Senator Marcellin Wilson, and that is how he met my mother, the youngest of the six Wilson girls. Her eldest sister, Juliette, was already married to another Scot, Colonel Rupert Dawson, son of the whisky distiller Peter Dawson, whose estate was not far from the Calders', at Braco in Perthshire. But I do not believe there was any direct contact there before my father went to Canada.

My mother was the youngest of the family. She had once been taken to a day school at a Montreal Convent and cried until brought home, and in the end was educated privately – and poorly – in her parents' house. She later learnt English, but she must have had some lessons as a child. The Canadian-French spoken in the family must have been supplemented by Parisian French, as her father was a cosmopolitan by nature who often visited France, and whose philanthropic pursuits included setting up a residence for Canadian students in Paris in the Cité Universitaire district. He would have insisted that the family could speak proper French as well as the local patois. He was to become a Commandeur of the Légion d'Honneur as a result of his philanthropy in France.

My mother's character was a strange one, and I shall return to it later. The spoilt baby of the family, a *nouvelle riche* and indulgent one, whose cultural aspirations tended to be showy and superficial, she was accustomed all her life to having anything she wanted, rather like Galsworthy's Fleur Forsyth. Her elder sisters all married, three of them to Canadians of similar backgrounds, one to Rupert Dawson and one, the fourth, to an Englishman, Henry Winkworth. My father, who was a good-looking man with his military bearing, fashionable moustache and good manners, having no doubt a little French from wartime service in France, must have appealed to her strongly.

They were married in Montreal, and my Scottish grandparents went over for the wedding. My grandmother told me many years later of her memories of that day, especially of their disgust at the "waste" at the wedding lunch. This was large and long, with many courses, each accompanied by a different wine. Most of the guests drank a little from each glass and left it when the next arrived, so that at the end of the feast the table was

covered with half-full wine glasses. The sumptuousness of my Canadian grandfather's ostentatious hospitality was very upsetting to the frugal sensibilities of his Scottish guests.

At some time in the Twenties my father went with his new wife to start a business at Hudson's Bay, The Calder Trading Company, which apparently did quite well, the only really successful business venture of his entire life. I doubt if my mother ever spent much time there, but in any case she could not stand the climate of a lonely and bleak outpost of northern Canada, and she made him sell it. She had earlier visited Ardargie with my father, her only visit to Scotland until the Second World War broke out, and she hated every minute of it. The discomforts of a Scottish country house without central heating, the indifference of its inhabitants to the temperature and the climate, and the iron discipline and simple food, did not appeal to her. Worse was my grandmother's disdain of a little colonial girl who could not speak English properly and expected to be pampered and the centre of attention all the time. From then on it was either London, where she felt at home among the flappers, or frequent visits by steamer, first-class, to Canada, always accompanied by a lady's maid and a large number of wardrobe trunks. Her father had made arrangements for her to have a considerable income and a house in Montreal only a few doors away from his own.

I was born in that city on 25th January 1927. My mother had preferred to return to the bosom of her family, and especially her mother and Canadian doctors, to have me. The same happened with the birth of her two other children, my sister Betty (Elizabeth Thérèse) three and a half years later, and my brother James Wilson, five years after me. We were all born in Montreal and in the care of a Dr Goldbloom, a paediatrician at the hospital on the mountain that overlooks the city. I was born at home in a house on Pine Avenue just under the heavily forested Mount Royal itself. It must have been some time after that that my Wilson grandfather, who had a palatial house with a large garden on Ontario Avenue (now called the Rue du Musée) bought my mother's house, referred to above, as a gift, which was only a few doors higher up the hill than his own, and planted directly opposite the house of one of his elder daughters. I was to spend much time there as I grew up, and later during the war. I still remember the address: 3525 Ontario Avenue. Today it is the Polish Embassy.

My birthday is also Robert Burns's birthday, and this was greeted as a happy omen in Scotland. Robert Burns, the national poet, has his birthday celebrated, usually in a highly ritualized manner, on or around that day, not just in Scotland, but among the Scottish diaspora all over the world. I later discovered that it was also the birthday of W. Somerset Maugham, whose

novels I was so much to admire when a teenager, and of Virginia Woolf, who became a favourite author in adulthood. My Scottish grandfather, delighted to know that his family name and bloodstock would continue, immediately made arrangements to entail his house and estate on me after his death, and he put my name down for Britain's best-known public school for Catholics, Ampleforth in Yorkshire, which is run by Benedictine monks, as was my father's school at Fort Augustus. Such is the pressure to enter Britain's top schools, it is customary to put boys' names down at birth for the year at which they are expected to start. In my case it was at age eight at Gilling Castle, the preparatory school for Ampleforth.

There is little I remember about those first eight years. I was often in Scotland, at least once a year in Montreal, and spent some summers at American and Canadian resorts (I remember Spring Lake in New Jersey and the New Brunswick coast), and on at least two occasions I stayed at Palm Beach in Florida, where my Canadian grandfather wintered, always dapper in white trousers, lightweight dark jacket, white shoes, panama hat and cane. On one occasion when my father was at Palm Beach, he took me to a film with Gary Cooper about the Bengal Lancers. I didn't get to see the end, because he made a great fuss to the manager about a scene where a British soldier picks up and swivels a Bren gun against his attackers, claiming this was physically not possible. We were ejected into the street. There is an earlier picture of me in a sailor suit, aged about four, and another, probably at six, posing with my younger siblings. For some reason I remember my fifth birthday, when I was taken for an afternoon walk on the mountain above Ontario Avenue, reached in those days by a long stretch of steep steps, which turned the street into a cul-de-sac. It was a very cold winter day, and I remember returning in the dark to a birthday cake. I do not remember anybody being present other than the governess in charge of me, or it might have been a domestic; there were at least four in the house. My younger brother was less than a month old that day.

My father, who at that point was an ex-soldier with no fixed employment, would spend time in his clubs, the Caledonian in London or the United Services in Montreal, undoubtedly drinking too much while swapping reminiscences of the war with other ex-soldiers. He finally took a large house called Skendelby Hall in Lincolnshire, a country mansion with a large park in front of it, through which the local Fox Hunt frequently rode, and with both decorative and vegetable gardens. It was fairly isolated, with Spilsby, a small village, a mile or two away, and I spent some time there both before and after going to boarding school. My father now had a job of sorts, working at a timber yard at Boston on the Wash, part of Calders Ltd, which belonged to his uncle, Sir James. This was a drive of at least an hour. Who kept up the Montreal house and Skendelby Hall,

paid for the travel, the cost of London hotels and skiing holidays in the Tyrol and other expensive pursuits, like Italian holidays? Almost entirely my mother. In fact, I should remove the “almost”. She had a large income from her father and she spent all of it. As a Canadian now resident outside of Canada, she paid very little tax and often none.

Until I went to boarding school I was almost always on my own, but this did not disturb me much, because a Belgian governess, Miss Verhaegen (I think her first name was Sylvia, but I always called her Miss Verhaegen or Mademoiselle), taught me to read early on, so that at five I could read almost anything and use a dictionary. In Montreal I occasionally saw cousins, but they were usually much older. I went to a day school called Selwyn House in Montreal for a term or two, but all I can remember is the way to get there and nothing else. There was a gardener’s son of my own age called Reggie Davey at Skendelby with whom I played games, but I recall little, and mostly remember just walking around the park on my own, sometimes having my sister follow me around the garden, and reading. I also played chess with my father, but he became very angry the first time I won, at ten years old, and much less warm and friendly thereafter, while nicer to my sister, whose company he evidently preferred. She adored him for the rest of his life, and his portrait has become her favourite icon.

The biggest problem was to get enough to read. My father read a few authors, mostly Scottish ones like Ian Hay, in vogue at the time, and books about the Great War, the most important event of his life. Skendelby had no library, unlike Ardargie, and the village shop had only a few paperbacks of adolescent fiction, the Bulldog Drummond stories being the most popular. There was the *Boy’s Own Paper* and similar publications, and I devoured them, but too quickly. On visits to London I would get the historical novels of G.A. Henty and must have read nearly all of them, patriotic histories about the British Empire, written as adventure books for the most part. There were also many novels about boarding schools, such as *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and the series of schoolboy adventures in pulp format that featured Wharton of the Remove (if I have the name right) and a fat boy, Billy Bunter, always the butt. I discovered P.G. Wodehouse and went on reading him through my teens. And there were *Swallows and Amazons* and the *Hornblower* novels. But I read quickly and often reread, because there was never enough, and at Skendelby very little else to do. If a public library existed anywhere within miles, I was unaware of it, and my mother would never have heard of such an institution. Also, in those days, the class I belonged to never liked touching anything that had been through other hands. A library book would have been considered unclean.

In Britain I rarely saw my mother. She was in London, no doubt frequenting *thés dansants* and nightclubs. I doubt if she ever went to theatres

– certainly not to concerts, although later she affected to like music. My father took me to one or two variety shows, and a great-aunt, Tina, my grandfather's elder sister, who was also an aunt through marriage of Cecil Beaton the photographer, would take me to pantomimes at Christmas. I remember *Babes in the Wood* and *Aladdin*. She also took me around London on the top deck of the bus; my mother had never taken a bus in her life! And she took me to Woolworth's, where I was allowed to spend sixpence. Sixpence could buy quite a lot in those days: in the toy department most things were a penny or less. For twopence I was able to buy a toy sword and for another twopence a scabbard and belt to go with it.

I am not sure when Miss Verhaegen stopped tutoring me. There was a man who came to Skendelby to give me lessons, probably in arithmetic, but I have no exact recollection of him. At Ardargie I had learnt to shoot, and been sent out with the gamekeeper, armed with a four-ten single-barrelled shotgun, to kill rabbits. I did not like to see them die, much less wounded and running about squealing, but I was told to do it and did. I also learnt to fish for trout in the small loch at Ardargie. I was out with my four-ten gun for a few days at Skendelby with the gardener, who was also the keeper (there was not much game to keep), but there was no compulsion as at Ardargie, where every moment of my day was planned out by my grandfather, so I shot there rarely. I was also given a dog at Skendelby – a black Labrador puppy called Jeff, of which I instantly became fond – but as it was kept in the kennels, and almost immediately afterwards I was sent to boarding school, I saw little of the dog and I have no idea of what happened to it after we moved out in 1939.

At Skendelby Hall there was a permanent staff of a butler, a French chef called Figue, a governess for my sister and younger brother (the latter being kept in isolation so that I hardly ever saw him), other kitchen staff and probably two housemaids. My mother had her lady's maid, who travelled to London with her. She was in any case very rarely in the country, being unaccustomed to and bored of it. Meal times were variable. I usually ate on my own, sometimes had tea with my father on weekends, but there were no family meals that I remember at Skendelby Hall. My younger sister and brother were fed separately and at different times. Ardargie was different. There I ate at least breakfast, lunch and tea with my grandparents, Gaffer and Gran, perhaps at times dinner too. I was expected to speak when spoken to and to absorb the stream of anecdotes and commonplace wisdom and instruction issuing from my grandfather. My father's shortcomings (as a bad businessman and an undisciplined son) were often compared to his more promising younger brother, Ian, who died of leukaemia at about the time I went to school. I do not remember him at all and only have a

vague recollection of his photo. I occasionally met some of my cousins who lived locally in the Tay valley and around Perthshire, in particular Bunty Manners, a girl of roughly my own age. The Calders were doubly related to the Manners. Maisie, my eldest aunt, had married a Colonel Manners, while my great-uncle, Sir James, was married to another, Mildred Manners, who died just before the war of diabetes. The latter was the only member of the family who had liked music and could play the piano; she was a friend of Dame Clara Butt, the well-known Lieder and concert singer. Music among the Calders was something you heard in church on Sundays. My grandfather and his brother each said that the other could not tell the difference between *God Save the King* and *Rule Britannia*. Various aunts occasionally turned up at Ardgargie, often with their own children, and were civil to me, sometimes taking me out to tea. My father did not get on with his own father and stayed away, although he sometimes went to his uncle at Ledlanet to shoot grouse.

On my Canadian visits I met my cousins and their families on their side of the water, but was never particularly intimate with any of them, as there was usually too big an age difference, two to ten years older or more. They were all French-speaking, but they would speak English to me, although I had some French: I had been brought up on the English side of the great Montreal divide, which was not unlike the sectarianism of Protestant and Catholic Ireland. My Canadian grandfather was important enough to be above all that, but the Catholic French-Canadians were nearly always treated as inferior citizens by the English (largely Scottish) minority, overwhelmingly Protestant, who lived in the more affluent districts and usually spoke no French. The Ostiguys, Brodeurs and Raymonds all lived near the Wilson patriarchy in large houses which had been bought for them by Senator Wilson. Three of the daughters had married British husbands, all Catholics; the English one, Henry Winkworth, lived in London. Of the six daughters, five had families, varying from one to seven children. This was to become a bone of some contention when it was realized that the will and estate of my Canadian grandfather was partially divided by family and partly by individual grandchild, the mother in each case having the income for life, with the capital to be divided among the grandchildren when the mothers died. There were nineteen grandchildren after eliminating those who died before adulthood, and coming from a family of three I was placed to receive the average, a third of a sixth one way and a nineteenth the other.

The things that were to play a large part in my adult life – literature, music, the theatre and intellectual interests in general – were sadly missing in my home life as a child. My biggest problem was getting books, especially challenging ones. I had a mind that welcomed challenge, or I would not have persevered with the Smolletts, Thackerays, Macaulays and even

heavier, mainly Scottish, writers in the Ardargie library as I did. Music consisted, other than hymns and whatever I heard on the odd visit to the music hall or panto, of my father's collection of Harry Lauder records, but that was only after 1940 and in Canada. As for theatre, that started in boarding school with Latin and Greek plays in the classroom.

The sequence of events during and after the first eight years of my life is unclear, a jumble of unconnected memories. My world changed when, frightened and trying not to show it, I took a taxi with my mother from York to Gilling Castle to start school.