

Chapter 2

Boyhood in France (1950–1953)



Dad had accepted a job in Paris to work for British Railways in France. It sounds so much better in French: *Les chemins de fer britanniques en France*. In 1950 we moved to a small village called Saint-Leu-la-Forêt, which at that time was set amidst the vast Forest of Montmorency, where the French monarchs used to hunt until July 14, 1789 when the French Revolution and the Fall of the Bastille prison put a stop to all that. I was entranced by the enormous quantities of autumnal leaves to be fashioned into castles and redoubts. I was less entranced when it dawned on me that I was actually expected to learn French. For a while I resisted, and remained at the bottom of my class while my brothers both did well. Mum and dad were both fine linguists, having studied Modern Languages (French and German) at university (both Cardiff and Oxford, in dad's case). They also had a good grasp of Latin and



Fig. 2.1 La-Celle-St-Cloud, France, ca. 1951. I am wearing the grey smock worn by all French primary school boys at that time and have the regulation *cheveux-en-brosse* haircut

Italian, and dad had taught himself Ancient Greek as a boy at Cardiff High School when banished by one of his teachers from history lessons: ‘Williams, out!’

Fortunately for me, we moved from Saint-Leu-la-Forêt, where the teacher and I shared a mutual antipathy, to the hamlet of La Châtaigneraie adjoining the small town of Vaucresson near the village of La-Celle-St-Cloud. Dad used to cycle each day to and from the station at Vaucresson and then by train to and from Paris, while we three boys went to the primary school at La-Celle-St-Cloud (Fig. 2.1), where I finally decided to master French and discovered the joys of wide reading in several languages. There was a prison at the end of our street and there were occasional escapes. One day the front gate bell rang while we were at school and dad at work. A very polite escaped prisoner said to my mother: ‘Madame, I am taking the small change you left out for the milkman. I felt I should let you know.’ Mum thanked him for his thoughtfulness. A little later mum gave some gardening work to an itinerant unemployed man (there was much poverty in post-war France) and he dug up some German helmets from our back garden. The word spread that we were not British after all and that *les Boches* (the Germans) were back. Because mum spoke French with a Welsh and not an English accent, it took some time for these rumours to be allayed. We boys were oblivious to all these undercurrents until mum told us about them much later.

That our appreciation of landscape closely reflects our childhood experiences was brought home to me during a chance visit (during a geology conference in 2008) to the travelling display of the French Impressionists, then on view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, where I was entranced by Alfred Sisley’s *Path through the woods, La-Celle-St-Cloud*. I knew that path, knew it well, for it was uncannily like the one that my brothers and I had followed daily on our long walk to primary school in La-Celle-St-Cloud village some seventy years later. We used to call it ‘the school in the woods’ and it was here that my superb teacher, Jacques Degorce, drummed into me the names of all the main rivers and the elevations of the highest mountains of France. Oddly enough, and despite this capes and bays approach to geography, he kindled in me a love of landscape that has

persisted ever since. Perhaps this was also due to the exploits of the intrepid French mountain climbers Maurice Herzog, Lionel Terray and Gaston Rébuffat on Annapurna at that time. Who knows? The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) has expressed what I am fumbling to convey so much better: ‘The route we pursue through time is strewn with all we have begun to be and all we might become’.

Thanks to the work ethic and knowledge instilled in me by Jacques Degorce, I won a scholarship to the Lycée Hoche in Versailles. Here I soon realised that the boys who did not work vanished at the end of each term, so there was a powerful incentive to knuckle down and work. The standards were very high and the teachers first rate. One exercise I was set at age eleven was to go to the Louvre in Paris, visit the Egyptian Antiquities rooms in that great museum, and write a ten page illustrated essay summarising what I had seen. Perhaps it was that experience that sparked an early desire to visit Egypt one day and see the temples and frescoes for myself.

While in France we enjoyed the ridiculously long French school holidays. We were expected to work and complete our ‘cahiers de vacance’ (holiday notebooks), but still had plenty of time for mischief. Our parents were keen travellers and both loved the sea so we took our summer holidays in Spain at Castelldefels and Tossa del Mar on the Costa Brava, at La Napoule near Saint-Raphaël on the Côte d’Azur, and at Quiberon in Brittany. It was in Spain that I learned an important lesson. One day my parents befriended a German couple who were soaking up the sun on the beach near the hotel where we were all staying. Herr Henzehler had been a fighter pilot during the war. I could not understand why my parents were so obviously enjoying the company of “the enemy”. Only a few years earlier he and my father had been fighting on opposite sides. Was the war really over that long ago? It was a salutary experience for one small boy.

Another lesson I was to learn a few years later. All the European history I was taught in France was a catalogue of a thousand years of glorious French victories and ignominious English defeats, with the battle of Fontenay taking pride of place in this eulogy to the French fighting spirit. Waterloo was simply not mentioned, nor was Trafalgar. Several years later, after we had moved to Sheffield in South Yorkshire at the end of 1953, I had to re-learn all my European history. Now it was a thousand years of French defeats and English victories. And so, by the age of thirteen, I had acquired an enduring scepticism for anyone (or any institution) claiming a monopoly of truth. This unwillingness to accept authority unquestioningly has stayed with me to this day, and has more than once landed me in hot water!

Nile Waters, Saharan Sands

Adventures of a Geomorphologist at Large

Williams, M.

2016, XIX, 210 p. 141 illus., 32 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-25443-2