

A Review of 'A Distant Prospect', by Lord Berners

This book is a sequel to his previous autobiography, 'First Childhood', and is similarly set out in short chapters. It takes the reader from the time Gerald (Lord Berners) left Elmley, his Preparatory School, through to his time at Eton. It is the late 1890's and he is at the beginning of his teenage years (a phrase not yet invented).

Arriving at Eton (in Windsor) and saying goodbye to his mother, he reflects on the time she left him at Elmley when *'I had felt like a fledgling abandoned by the mother bird. Now I was eager to return and confront the new life that was before me.'* And so a somewhat more self-assured Gerald starts the next chapter of his life.

Like his first book his memories are recalled through the people who were then important in his life. Gerald's house Matron, (Dame, Hag or Mrs. Elton) encouraged boys who had artistic tendencies to go and chat with her in her sitting room. It was she who allowed him to have access to the Dining Room piano. This not only helped him socially but also enabled his development in music, Wagner in particular. We meet Marston: *'so intelligent, so witty, so erudite (and) mature'* and Deniston: *'he was certainly remarkably good looking'* and particular about his dress. As in previous friendships, they each in turn delight and disappoint.

There are details of the timetable at Eton and some of the rules, rigidly imposed, plus the *'illogical Eton terminology'* where 'absence' meant roll-call. This information I found very helpful as it enabled me to put him into a defined context and environment.

Gerald's time at Eton had mixed blessings; success at learning seemed to be hampered because of *'the effect Eton had on my capacity for work'*. In his view *'more importance had come to be attached to organised games than to scholarship'*. After success in passing the Entrance Examination for Eton he remarked that *'this was my swan-song as far as examinations were concerned'*. Socially, however, there is more reward as he realised that *'I was at least intelligent and amusing enough to hold my own among people who are not entirely obsessed by sport and athletics.'*

Adolescence is a time of sexual awakening and Gerald was no exception. His Housemaster suggests he does not *'make undesirable friendships'*. During the time when he is giving piano concerts to Upper members (older boys) and enjoying greater intimacy with them there are *'cynical grins and mysterious hints'*. Curiosity leads him to meet 'Windsor tarts' – for talking to only. Convalescing after a bout of rheumatic fever, there is possible material for scandal too. We also gain some insight into how Gerald saw himself socially, as part of 'country life', and how he and his parents related to each other.

I feel this is a 'meatier' book – perhaps necessarily so – witnessing Gerald as he matures. The sense of humour though is still very evident. As he leaves Eton, what is the Distant Prospect?

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This book is in print and is also available at the Library.