

'First Childhood', by Lord Berners

This is Lord Berners' first autobiographical book, written in 1941, and takes the reader from his early childhood memories up to his first four terms at Elmley. There are 25 short chapters, each concentrating on particular persons, places or events.

Born in 1883, Lord Berners' first memory is at his grandparents' house, Arley, where he is aware of a screen of brightly coloured pictures cut-out and pasted. Arley House continued to be very important to him and in the Epilogue Lord Berners reflects that the 'change at Arley cast a benumbing spell upon the closing years of my childhood'.

As an only child, it could often be a solitary life. Sometimes companions would be grown-ups, such as Mrs. Matchett, the Housekeeper at Arley, whom he fondly referred to as a 'Fairy Godmother'. Children and adults from the neighbourhood were invited to the house as friends for Lord Berners. Sometimes this arrangement worked well, but at other times it proved unsatisfactory; there is a wonderful story about Nesta and the Stokes boys in a haystack. Two elderly ladies, widely travelled, and with whom Lord Berners spent many happy hours, sparked a love of travel which remained with him.

His mother was particularly influential; she was 'one of the most natural people I've ever known' and 'we were very happy in one another's company'. His father he describes as a 'curious, moody, rather brilliant creature' who showed a lack of interest in Lord Berners and was seldom around.

At aged 7, the local Curate was brought in to teach the young boy, followed by a governess from Geneva, Mademoiselle Bock. Lord Berners' sense of mischief is at play in the subsequent exit of this young lady. From Chapter 12 onwards the book is largely about his time at the preparatory school, Elmley, which sometimes is frightening for vulnerable young boys. It is Lord Berners' first time away from home and the emotions are sometimes raw. He recalls there were 'two large flies in the ointment of my school life': the Headmaster, and his growing awareness that he is 'not good at games'. There is a delightful interlude about one of the summer holidays.

Some of the character of Lord Berners is evident in this book: his need to make friends, his imagination and creativity, his sense of inferiority (seen through a lack of 'physical strength and superiority in games' and 'manliness'), and his (often-hindered) solace in the Arts and in music particularly. But throughout this time his sense of humour and mischief, understandably dimmed at times, is never lost.

The vocabulary used does reflect his classical learning, but nevertheless it is an easy-going style. I often found myself chuckling, not only by the events themselves, but also by the way it is written. This is a fascinating book as an introduction to Lord Berners.

Janet Deane,

U3A Faringdon Appreciation of Berners (FAB) Group

(This book is currently in print and is also available at Faringdon Library.)