



R. ERIC SMYTHIES

AROUND  
THE WORLD  
IN  
EIGHTY YEARS



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# *Introduction*

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IF THIS RECORD SEEMS TO RESEMBLE THAT OF A ROLLING stone I think it is the result of circumstances over which I had little control, and my first choice (so far as I had any choice) would have been for a more settled life with a better chance to gather moss. My early life was "unsettled" owing to the long state of political and economic chaos in Argentina where my parents (who were both English) had their home on an Estancia that was called "La Independencia," which did not save it from being engulfed in the general ruin of the 1890's, with a revolution in 1890 and another in 1893.

I just had time to grow up in England and be educated and trained as a mechanical engineer, emigrate to Canada and start in what could have been a promising business of my own, which I left to serve in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in the First World War. Picking up the threads again after being demobilized in 1919, I had the experience of feeling really prosperous for a time in the Big Boom of the 1920's, followed by the corresponding devastation of the Big Bust of the Great Depression in the 1930's, which was no more than over when the Hitler War was upon us and my uniform exhumed from mothballs before Canada had officially declared war on the Nazis. I had long planned to retire from high-pressure business at about 60 if possible, and I was 58 in 1946.

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There seemed little point in returning to business life for two years or so, and it seemed a better idea to my wife and I to set out in search of a retirement Utopia in a nice, warm, sunny climate, with reasonable cost of living, good medical and library facilities and an agreement with Canada about non-duplication of income taxes. This may seem a very simple specification but it proved surprisingly hard to find a place to fit it, and after living in Barbados, Mexico and Hawaii and exploring many Caribbean Islands, Florida and California, we finally returned to Victoria as being the best compromise we knew for ourselves, all things considered. Since our return in 1961 we have visited the Fiji Islands and, in 1967, South Africa where we have a number of relatives we had never met before. We both have relatives in Australia and hope to visit them soon unless immobilized by the increasing decrepitude of old age; it looks like a close race against time.

R. E. S.

## AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY YEARS



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NINETEENTH century Great Britain had surplus people and surplus capital to invest in other countries, and there was a popular belief in the wisdom of what was known as geographical distribution of investments to avoid the error of having "too many eggs in one basket."

Some of the baskets in foreign countries proved to be very unreliable, as for instance some Latin American republics that were notably lacking in anything resembling political or economic stability.

My father went to Argentina in 1866 when he was 17, with the approval and financial backing of his father who was a clergyman and rector of a fair-sized country parish in Leicestershire. A young fellow of 17 might not be well informed about international politics or economics but his father might be.

I have no memory of ever seeing either of them so had no opportunity to ask them if they had weighed the wisdom of investing or settling in a country with such a lurid past.

Three centuries of ruthless oppression and exploitation as a colony of Spain was followed by fifty years or so of sanguinary civil strife between the Provinces with interludes of combined efforts to exterminate the native Indians, or at least drive them so far south into Patagonia that they would cease to be a

menace for a generation. It is now another century since my father went there and Argentina has still not achieved stability.

A considerable number of British people made the same mistake at about the same time and most of them suffered the same fate as my father, who worked hard for 25 years or so developing his Estancia in the province of Santa Fé, only to be rather completely ruined in the long period of chaos with a revolution in 1890 and another in 1893.

My two oldest brothers, George and Bertie, had returned from school in England in time to be called up for military service in the upheaval of 1893. Being born in the country made them liable for this despite having legal status as British subjects.

I suppose that father might have been able to salvage something from the wreck of his property in time, but he died in 1896 at the age of 47 after a short illness. George and Bertie survived their military experience and shifted for themselves as best they could in Argentina, while my mother was left in England with her six younger children and very little money.

Fortunately we were well supplied with aunts and uncles, some of whom rallied round to help us, with a few comments on the fallacy of thinking that orphaned nephews and nieces might be cheaper by the half-dozen.

Custom decreed that we should all go to boarding schools of the kind the British call Public because they are private. The only member of the family I saw much of was my brother Dudley, about 18 months older than myself, though we went to different schools when he was 11 and I was 9½, after which we met only in the holidays.

When he was 16 he went to sea as a cadet in a sailing ship making voyages to Australia and back to England, which took about 11 months, so we met hardly at all. We were never all together under one roof as a family unit and in due course became scattered about the world, as did so many British families in the heyday of the Empire.

My brother Wilfred was also a sailor but died at the age of 22 of black water fever off the west coast of Africa, then known very aptly as the White Man's Grave. Soon afterward Bertie died in Argentina from the bite of a poisonous reptile when he was far from medical help. At least that was the report that reached us in England for what it was worth, observing that sudden death in various forms was always likely to be just round the corner in that distressful country, and the reported cause might not be the real one.

My oldest brother George remained in Argentina till he was 37 in the year 1911, when he decided to move to Kenya for a change. At the same time I decided to emigrate to Canada, when I was 22.

My mother had the experience of being reduced to penury and bereaved of husband and two older sons within a short space of time, but she was not the type to wilt under such "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." My oldest sister went to India and the other two to South Africa. They all married at about 21 or so and I am well supplied with great-nephews and great-nieces, scattered about in England, South Africa, Australia and Canada, with several of them married now.

At the tender age of 9½ I went to a boarding prep school of 200 boys in a town about 30 miles from London. As in other schools of the type and times, the general atmosphere was somewhat austere to put it mildly, and might be described as being composed of about equal parts of monastery and barrack, but I do not think it did me any real harm.

Academically I was behind my age group as my education up to that time had been extremely sketchy, a result of having no settled home. Needless to say I found my first two years or so fairly tough going in the classrooms. Otherwise it was not so bad as I had certainly not been spoilt or pampered, and did not suffer from homesickness so much as some of my classmates.

After 12 months in the prep school we were transferred to the senior school of 600 boys in the heart of the City of London, where it had been since it was founded in 1553, on a site of 5½ acres and in buildings that had once been part of the Grey Friars Monastery.

The atmosphere of the Senior School was even more austere if possible and was accentuated by the cold and gloomy cloisters, with stone plaques on the walls inscribed with grim trivia such as, "Here lies a benefactor, let no-one move his bones," so that one could not help feeling anything remotely resembling joy would be frowned on as unrefined.

One should not criticize one's Alma Mater and I can honestly say I have always been grateful that I had the type of education, character training and discipline for which the public schools of England are noted. In view of the disaster by which my family was overtaken in Argentina I was doubly fortunate.

I was still there when the school took a great leap forward to modernization in 1902. The site of 5½ acres in the heart of London was sold to the post office and a fine, new school built on an estate of 1,200 acres in the beautiful Sussex Weald country some 40 miles away. We even had such startling innovations as electric light and central heat though the latter especially caused some head-shaking among the more conservative and we were solemnly warned of the danger of sitting on the radiators, which were, however, seldom warm enough to present the slightest danger, though vastly better than no heat at all in the average English winter.

More important than such concessions to comfortable living was the complete reorganization of the faculty which needed modernizing even more than the buildings. Many of the older members of the teaching staff were pensioned off and replaced with younger men, including a new headmaster with new ideas about education and how such a school should be run outside the classrooms.

I was about 13½ at the time and thought the changes added up to a vast improvement. I suppose I have always and instinctively been in favour of progress and opposed to keeping up old customs for sentimental reasons, long after they have ceased to have any point.

While the school was still in London I had applied for transfer from the classical to the modern side. This was on my own initiative as I had no-one to advise me in such matters and there was no career master, though the head of the modern side did function quietly and unofficially in that capacity.

Each year a dozen or so of the most brilliant scholars on the classical side competed for scholarships to Oxford or Cambridge, usually with success. The proportion of students from such schools going on to university was much smaller than it is now, and was in practice limited to those who planned a career in teaching, the church or the diplomatic service and so on.

The teaching of science was in a very early stage and those planning to qualify as engineers, architects or accountants usually served for three or four years as articulated pupils with established firms, a form of training that was both thorough and practical, and cost as much in time and money as a university course.

My school had a long-standing connection with the City of London, and a boy on leaving with a good reputation could usually find a start in life as a junior in such organizations as the Bank of England, Lloyd's, the Stock Exchange, or one of the well-known merchant houses of the City.

In the course of history some alumni had become aldermen or even Lord Mayor of London, both positions of some distinction and associated with the prior attainment of substantial wealth.

This type of career did not appeal to me, however, as I have always rather disliked the idea of living or working in a large city, and had decided at an early age that I should probably

emigrate. The fact that I had no close home ties in England was a factor in this decision.

In the many years I have spent in Canada I have often found myself involved in discussions with parents, about the relative merits of boarding schools for boys and girls, as compared with keeping them at home and sending them to the non-private day schools, usually called public schools in Canada and the United States.

I have always been a staunch advocate of the advantages of letting children be educated and trained by people who are professionals at the job, rather than by their own parents the great majority of whom are rank amateurs (and too often bungling amateurs) who botch the job.

Far too many fond mothers seem to be horrified at the mere mention of the word discipline, which is connected in their minds with something harsh and punitive, instead of connoting good training and orderly conduct, in which so many Canadian and American children are notably lacking.

From observation I am convinced that children going to a day-school are far too likely to derive their notions of behaviour outside the classrooms, from the friends and classmates whose parents have the lowest standards in such matters. And if their own parents try to exact a higher standard the youngsters call them tyrants, and often regard as permissible any means they can think of to do what they want, rather than what their parents wish them to do.

Any well run boarding school relieves the parents of much of the less pleasant part of the job of training children in the way they should go, both in the classrooms and in extracurricular activities. It is customary for senior students who have shown capacity for leadership to have responsibility for much of the every day routine, such as keeping order in the living quarters and so on. It is up to the faculty to select the seniors for this chore wisely and back them up if necessary, in keeping the general tone of the school at a high level.

Many youngsters respond more readily to group pressure of their contemporaries than to guidance by parents or teachers, and it is most important for such pressure to be in the right direction.

In non-private day-schools it happens too often that a class or a whole school may be under the baleful influence of a clique with subversive ideas, bent on undermining the efforts of teachers to keep up a good standard of scholarship and behaviour, and very little can be done to improve matters. If this occurs in a private school and the malefactors are intransigent, their parents can be quietly asked to remove them.

Reference to my school days would be incomplete without mention of the cadet corps or O.T.C. as it came to be known, which was organized soon after the school moved to the country. Many well informed people in Britain and France were convinced that Germany planned war as soon as the time seemed opportune. The handwriting on the wall of international politics was too plain to be misunderstood.

I am not a war-like type but it seemed a patriotic duty to be trained and prepared, so I was one of the first to join the corps. We were already well versed in barrack-square drill which was part of our regular routine, but I enjoyed the miniature rifle range where my performance was much better than on the cricket field, for which I had neither liking nor aptitude. Some of the foremost military critics forecast the outbreak of war for 1910, then only six years ahead of us. In the event they were only four years out in their reckoning, not a serious margin of error as these things go.

After I left school I served for four years in a unit of the territorial army, the 1st Hampshire Royal Garrison Artillery. We trained in the coast defence batteries in the Isle of Wight, which were equipped with naval guns of all sizes up to 12" calibre. When war actually came I served in the navy but that is another chapter.

As the time for me to leave school approached some of my

relatives arranged that I should enter the service of one of the large railways in India that were built by British capital and engineers. The idea was acceptable to me but there proved to be a serious obstacle.

It seemed that before going to India it was desirable that I should have some experience in railway administration in England, and the English railways did not take kindly to the notion of training someone like myself, only to see me go off to India just as I became useful to them. This was understandable but it would have saved their time and trouble and me from a humiliating experience, if they had said so frankly instead of pretending to fall in with the idea and then setting an academic booby-trap into which I fell with a sickening thud.

I was directed to present myself at the London headquarters of a certain line, to sit for an examination the syllabus of which should have been straightforward enough for anyone fresh from seven years at a good school. The syllabus did not mention, however, that the exam could not possibly be passed by anyone who was not fluent in the Welsh language, which would I believe rule out the great majority of the Welsh people nowadays.

The line in question ran to Wales and the final part of the exam consisted of writing down from dictation, the names of a number of the stations in that country. The most notorious of these had 58 letters, *Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllantysiliogogoch*, but I could not pronounce it to save my life. I do not know if the examiner gave me this one but he might as well have talked Chinese or Zulu so far as I was concerned.

Perhaps this unpleasant experience was a blessing in disguise because it resulted in someone asking me what I really wanted to do, to which I replied that I would like to be a mechanical engineer, though without any serious expectation that it would be feasible for me. However, the kindly old great-aunt who

had been a sort of fairy godmother to me, undertook to make it financially feasible, for which I have been eternally grateful to her memory.

It was arranged that I should become an indentured apprentice in a shipbuilding and marine engineering plant in Southampton. In return for a premium of £150 sterling I had the privilege of working in the different departments of the engineering side of the plant, for a period of four years, the last 12 months of which would be spent in the drafting office. Pay was merely pocket-money of a few shillings a week.

For the first three years it meant putting in a 54-hour week, starting at 6 a.m. daily for six days per week, with Saturday afternoons off unless required to work overtime, which happened sometimes. In order to take full advantage of the training it was necessary to attend evening classes on three or four evenings a week from October to May inclusive, and to study textbooks in what spare time one had. The schedule did not leave much time or energy for fun and games, but I had little money for such frivolous diversions and my work provided plenty of physical exercise.

I was surprised by the relatively small number of apprentices who did seem to take their training seriously, both in the plant I was in and other plants in the vicinity. There was too much absenteeism and attendance at the evening classes in the local technical institute was much lower than it should have been.

From observation I concluded that many of them had no special wish to be engineers and were there mainly because their parents did not know what else to do with them. Some had definite leanings that were out of line with their parents' ideas. I remember one large young fellow who was very fond of horses and whose most cherished possession was a revolver of heavy calibre, that he was obviously itching to use. His one idea was to go to the wild west where men could be men, and he may have done this unless the war caught up with him



first. It was a waste of everyone's time and his parents' money to try to make a would-be cowboy into an engineer.

Lack of keenness in my fellow apprentices was a help to me as there was little competition for some of the things I wanted to do, such as going out on the trials of ships we built or repaired. This often meant overtime work and uncertainty about the time of return, which could interfere with any arrangements they had planned for fun in the evening.

Experience gained on trial ~~ships~~<sup>trips</sup> was invaluable to me when I went to sea later on, to round out my training and see something of the world while deciding to which country to emigrate.

Some of my relatives poured cold water on the idea of sea-going, for various reasons, one being the risk of falling victim to the temptations that beset seafaring men in sinful foreign ports, another was the hazard of being unable to settle down ashore again, which I fully intended to do after I had gained the experience I needed. I had a strong hankering for a settled life in a home of my own such as I had never experienced.

My naval uncle was very scathing about my going to sea in the engineroom. He exclaimed, "Engineers! we called 'em Ashcats when I was in the service!" He was good to me and I have pleasant memories of him but he belonged to the time when engineers in the navy were not commissioned officers, and senior officers of the executive branch strongly disliked having a lot of dirty, oily, smelly ironmongery below decks, and the ugly funnels above, nestling among their nice, white sails and belching black smoke over everything; to say nothing of seeing ships, sails and men covered with coal dust every time the bunkers must be filled.

Later on when I told this same uncle that I planned to emigrate to Canada, he tried to dissuade me on the ground that (he said) Canada was an agricultural country, where an engineer would find small demand for his services.

It was true that many Britons of the well educated class thought it was the natural function of the "Colonies" such as

Canada and Australia to supply the Mother Country with raw materials for industry and cheap food for factory workers, taking in exchange the products of the factories.

The education of such folk was largely classical and did not include the subject of economies. They were naturally disposed to regard details of money and trade as rather beneath their dignity, and some hardly distinguished between capital and income in their personal financial affairs.

So they did not readily grasp the fact that if the people of the "Colonies" meekly accepted their ideas on the subject, they would soon find themselves either bankrupt or with a standard of living much lower than that of the industrialized Mother Country.

If Canada exported iron ore worth about \$15 for instance, and bought it back in the form of a motor car for something like \$1,500 or \$2,000, it would be a poor transaction for Canada. This is a very rough illustration but the basic principle is there.

At the time Canada was best known to most Britons as an exporter of wheat and it was not generally realized that there was extensive development of mining, lumbering, fishing, general manufacturing and the use of vast potential resources of hydro-electric power.

In due course I was very glad I had not let myself be dissuaded from going to Canada by this mistaken advice. I suppose most young people have the experience of being offered advice by older folk, which is naturally well meant. The problem is to sift the good grain of first-hand knowledge or experience from the chaff of misinformation or mistaken notions gleaned from heaven knows where. It is a mistake to resent advice or to let a shut mind reject it automatically.

Young men of my generation in England were hampered in choice of a career by the operation of the social caste system, that left-over relic of feudalism. Priority went to commissioned rank in the army or navy, for which the pay was so small that

it was generally considered impracticable without private means to support the social status involved, and in the piping times of peace there were not enough commissions to go round in any case.

Some of my relatives felt I was letting the family down in choosing to be an engineer, but there was no prospect of my being a "gentleman" of private means, and I did not notice anyone shedding tears over my decision to emigrate.

I thought it curious that many of the wage-earners with whom I associated in the shipbuilding plant had the idea that a "gentleman" did not have to work for his living, and this despite being strongly socialistic in politics. They were prone to repeat the popular clichés of the doctrinaire socialists such as, "from each according to his ability and to each according to his need," without having any real grasp of the full implications of such idealistic nonsense. I came to the conclusion that the tenets of socialism were far more widely held among the mass of the voters, than was realized by the traditionally conservative class.

At the same time I felt that the ideas of the socialists about economics were just as far from reality as the ideas of those to whom they were politically opposed, if in a different way. My views have not been shaken by the course of events in the past half-century or the present economic troubles of Britain.

The final year of my apprenticeship was spent in the drawing office which was a "white-collar" job, starting at 9 o'clock instead of 6 a.m., thus allowing more time for study and the opportunity to put into practice the theory, design and mathematics I had learned in evening classes at the technical institute.

With the approach of my 21st birthday and the end of apprenticeship it was necessary to think about getting a job in the engineroom at sea, the next step in my career. Owing to the depressed state of the British Merchant Marine such jobs were hard to find. Many men with excellent qualifications as Captains or Chief Engineers were unemployed or glad to

take anything they could get at small pay, as better than nothing.

I was offered a job by one of the large passenger lines but it did not fit my plans as it would have meant several years at sea before I could sit for the exam for a 2nd Engineer's Certificate. The firm offered to keep me on as a junior in the drawing office at 28/- a week, equal to \$7 United States then, and on which I could live without luxuries to which I was not accustomed in any case.

So I did this for several months until one day a telegram arrived from a firm of consulting engineers in Glasgow, asking me if I could join a ship in the Roath Basin, Cardiff, the next day, to which I sent off a prompt acceptance with thanks.

Then I had to scurry round winding up affairs and packing a bag in order to take the train the next morning, knowing that it might be three years or more before I should return. Tramp ships could be away from Britain for any length of time up to three years before a member of the crew could claim to be paid off or repatriated at the owner's expense. That was a risk I had to run but in the event I was lucky.

I had no idea what the ship would be like or where she might be going or even what my pay would be, but those details were unimportant in relation to the business of getting on with my career. It seemed like setting out to keep a blind date with fate but in those days when a job was offered, it was wise to take it and not boggle over details.

I thought I had a fairly good idea what my duties would be and the kind of life I should lead as the "dogbody" of the engineroom staff, doing the hottest, dirtiest and meanest jobs the 2nd and 3rd engineers were glad to be able to pass on to me, in the way of the sea. It was the customary experience of a young engineer on his first voyage, going down to the sea in the hot, oily, smelly bowels of a tramp steamer.

In due course I found that the mental picture I had formed of the experience awaiting me, was very close to the reality.