

Goodbye, Calcutta

In Conrad's story "Youth", Marlow, the narrator, drank and said, "Wasn't that the best time when we were young at sea?" His listeners nodded, the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, all of whom had begun life in the merchant service.

Joseph Conrad was himself one of the countless number to be found in almost every walk of life whose early working years were spent at sea. Tommy Steele, entertainer; John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister and entertainer; John Masefield, Poet Laureate; Sir Frederick Bowhill, Air Chief Marshal and Extra Master; Sir Bushby Hewson, Extra Master and Admiralty Judge; Dennis Wheatley, prolific writer of thrillers; Sir Robin Gillet, Lord Mayor of London and Master Mariner. Those are but a few.

Amongst others is the lad who on October 10, 1876, his sixteenth birthday, joined the full-rigged vessel *Blair Athole* at Cardiff. He was accompanied by his father who agreed with the *Blair Athole's* Master that his son should join as an apprentice. The boy however flatly refused to sign indentures on the grounds that he did not wish to be tied for a period of time. His father did not particularly want him at home any longer and, after some angry words, it was agreed he would sign on as a member of the crew, namely as ship's boy, the lowest possible rank.

The captain of the *Blair Athole* was a tough Scot from Stirling, Alexander Taylor. The officers were British but the crew included Germans, Swedes, Portuguese, a Frenchman, an Italian, an Austrian and a Brazilian. There were also two apprentices. The bosun was a bully, disliked by the other crew members. The ship's boy's pay was to be ten shillings a month.



The iron built ship of 1,777 gross tons took more than seven weeks to reach the coast of Brazil, with salt pork and biscuits the staple diet for the crew, but the biscuits were infested with weevils and the crew decided to send a representative to the master to complain. Perhaps because of his obviously superior education, (he had attended University College School in London,) they chose the ship's boy. Surprisingly, Captain Taylor listened to him and agreed that in future the biscuits should be baked. This meant that they could be broken with a belying pin and the weevils much more easily removed before the biscuits were eaten.

When the ship reached Rio harbour the boy decided to desert and made his way beyond the city limits, hoping to hide until the *Blair Athole* had sailed. After a day or two with no food and no money he became faint with hunger, but was picked up by a stout negress who took him to her shack and built up his strength by feeding him on bananas. The lady however made it clear that she expected some return for her generosity. Many years later his son said "his

generously proportioned protectress began to make advances to him as unmistakable as they were unalluring" When the lady's attention was otherwise engaged, he escaped and made his way back to the docks.

He thought of joining another ship bound for a British port and so took a bed in a seamen's lodging house, but was apprehended by the local authorities and, as a punishment for deserting, was set to shovelling coal from the dockside into ships' bunkers, the only white man in the gang. After a months hard labour he was ignominiously returned on board the *Blair Athole*.

The ship sailed on 12 January 1877, across the South Atlantic and round the Cape to India, where the coast of Bengal was sighted fourteen weeks later. For the boy the voyage was not uneventful. After putting up with every humiliation and much bullying from the bosun, matters came to a head one tropical night when, in front of the whole crew, the boy knocked-out the bosun. This made him something of a hero with the crew.

The *Blair Athole* anchored off the mouth of the Hooghly River, where the pilot came on board wearing a uniform with brass buttons and wearing white gloves. The boy was ordered into the pilot boat and told to carry the pilot's bag on board. He considered this to be the proudest day of his life.

After an enjoyable month in Calcutta the pilot came on board again to guide the ship down the river and the boy watched and wondered whether he could ever one day be as grand as that Hooghly pilot. Many years later he recalled the day he left Calcutta: "I have often wished that I could have seen ahead. I have often dreamed of that time when I stood at the capstan head and helped to heave my small weight at the capstan bar with the rest of the company on the forecastle, to get our ship into a proper position to be towed by the tug to take us down the Hooghly until we could sail. I remember, as we were drawn from the quay by hauling at the capstan, we sang as we paced the forecastle: "Hooray, my boys, we're homeward bound!" and "Goodbye, Calcutta". I, in my dream said, "Goodbye Calcutta, I shall return, but not on the forecastle head".

The *Blair Athole* docked in London just short of a year of when she first set sail. The boy jumped onto the quayside, leaving his gear behind. He had been properly discharged this time with the sum of £3-11-0, the balance of wages due to him as ship's boy. He never regretted his sailing experience. It left him with an abiding love of the sea, which was to persist for the rest of his life.

It could not have been within the wildest dreams of the barefooted ship's boy that the next occasion he would sail the Hooghly would be forty-four years later and in a much grander uniform than the Hooghly pilot – that of His Imperial Britannic Majesty's Viceroy of India, to the accompaniment of a salute of thirty-one guns.

Since the time of the transfer of the Capital from Calcutta to Delhi ten years previously, the Viceroy had been accustomed to spend the month of December in the old capital of British India, and on one visit the ship's boy, now Viceroy, accepted an

invitation from the Chairman of the Calcutta Port Authority, to take a day off from his public engagements and go for a cruise on the river Hooghly in the Port Commissioners sloop *Pansy*.

It was a small party, the only other guests being half a dozen of the leading business men of Calcutta. The Viceroy was in an expansive mood and at the breakfast table he went back forty-four years to his first visit to Calcutta and his experiences as a ship's boy on the *Blair Athole*.

A sequel to his reminiscences was later described by Sir Clement Hindley, the Viceroy's host for the day:

"We got into wireless touch with *HMS Southampton*, the flagship of the East Indies Squadron, then proceeding up river on an official visit to Calcutta. The presence of the Viceroy on board was communicated to *HMS Southampton*, and we were able to arrange to pass her in a long open stretch of the river, which formed an admirable setting for the dramatic scene which then took place.

As *HMS Southampton* came round this wide curve of swiftly flowing water in brilliant sunshine, she fired a salute of 31 guns, and the whole ship's company were paraded on deck, while the Viceroy of India stood alone on the upper deck of the *Pansy* to acknowledge the salute, his own flag flying from *Pansy's* main mast. When the two ships passed we heard the National anthem played by the band, the Marines drawn up on deck presented arms, and the white ensign at the stern dipped.

Not one of those present aboard the *Pansy* can ever forget the impression made by the solitary figure of the Viceroy standing bare-headed in the sunlight to acknowledge these royal honours, remembering as we did the simple words in which he had just been telling us of his humble visit and the incident of the pilot, which had taken place almost at the same spot so many years before. There can be very few Viceroys who have received a Royal Salute from one of Her Majesty's ships afloat, and certainly no other Viceroy in such circumstances."

The Viceroy was not often given to outbursts of emotion. But on this occasion he was seen to brush away some tears, which had come into his eyes.

The ship's boy was Rufus Isaacs: barrister, Queens Counsel, Bencher of the Middle Temple, Member of Parliament, Solicitor General, Attorney General, Lord Chief Justice of England, High Commissioner and Special Ambassador to the USA, Viceroy and Governor General of India, Secretary of State for Foreign affairs, Captain of Deal Castle and Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. The first Jew to be successively Attorney General, Lord Chief Justice, Ambassador, Viceroy and Foreign Secretary in Britain, and the first commoner to rise to the rank of Marquess since the Duke of Wellington, as the 1st Marquess of Reading.

Trials in which he figured either as Counsel or Judge are those of Whitaker Wright, who committed suicide in the Law Courts after the verdict; the poisoner Seddon; and the Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement, whom Reading sentenced to death for high treason.

Reading's apparent success story did not mean that his life was always plain sailing, however. Before going to the bar Rufus Isaacs joined a firm on the Stock Exchange run by his brother in law as a clerk, with a view to becoming a fully fledged member of the Stock Exchange. In this respect he was unsuccessful and was in fact "hammered" as a defaulter with debts amounting to the large sum of £8000, yet when he died aged 74 he had long since paid all his creditors in full and left over £250,000.



Rufus Isaacs, Viceroy of India

Some years later, in 1912, Isaacs became involved in what became known as the Marconi Scandal. Godfrey Isaacs, Managing Director of the Marconi Company in Britain, negotiated a contract with Herbert Samuel, the Post Master General, to erect a series of wireless stations round the Empire. The following month shares in the American Marconi Company were secretly bought by three Liberal Ministers, Lloyd George, Alexander Murray, the Master of Elibank and Chief Whip, and Rufus Isaacs (the brother of Godfrey), who was the Attorney General. Soon rumours were heard about insider trading and corruption over the Government contract, with exaggerated charges fuelled in some cases by anti-Semitism. In the House of Commons debate Isaacs was somewhat disingenuous in denying that he owned shares in "that Company" (the British one) thereby giving the impression that he owned no Marconi shares at all. A Liberal Select Committee exonerated the Ministers but amongst members of the public who felt the affair "stank" was Rudyard Kipling who, on hearing in 1913 that Isaacs would become Lord Chief Justice, was inspired to write his poem "Gehazi". The idea of Isaacs as Gehazi came from the Old Testament. Elisha, a "Man of God", from Kings ch.2.v 25, cures Naaman of leprosy but refuse to accept the patient's proffered payment; Gehazi, Elisha's servant, then runs after Naaman, pretending his master has changed his mind so that he can embezzle the money himself, but Elisha, on realising what Gehazi has done, punishes his servant by transferring Naaman's leprosy to him and his seed forever.

The poem was not published until 1919, but the verses "circulated". Isaacs, who became Lord Reading in 1914, did not sue for libel, although the poem was potentially libellous.

Perhaps, while mixing with the great and good, holding high offices of state and coping with the vicissitudes of fortune, Rufus Isaacs, one time ship's boy, was heartened and sustained by the knowledge that if all else failed there remained still the possibility of a Mate's job on the coast.

Hamish Roberts

Kipling's "Gehazi", and a very interesting paper on it by Julian Moore, can be found at

www.kipling.org.uk/rg_gehazi_moore.htm