

David Sharp, Paris: A Brief Autobiography

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I was born in Kendal, a picturesque market town in the English Lake District, three years after the end of World War II.

My father was a Westmorland farmer who had spent part of the war and the immediate post-war period with British forces in North Africa and Italy.

He had met my mother, the daughter of a middle-class Manchester family who had trained as a chiropodist, when she moved to Kendal to replace a male colleague who had gone off to fight in World War II. My father was later called up himself and saw service in North Africa and Italy. My parents were married in 1947, not long after his return.

My sister and I were to grow up in the lovely setting of the southern Lake District, close to the wild shores of Morecambe Bay, where I conceived a passion for boats and sailing that was partly inspired by the books of Arthur Ransome.

I also very early on became aware that I wanted to write, even though I was to spend the next fifty years and more postponing the fulfilment of that desire.

When I was born my father, having himself renounced ambitions for advancement that had germinated at the war's end, was working as a farm labourer. In 1952, however, my parents bought a house and some land in the village of Milnthorpe, going on to create a market-garden. Our mother was to supplement the earnings from that enterprise with photography, both portraits and local press pictures, and, later, by returning part-time to chiropody.

The dominant event of my childhood was my father's death from cancer, when I had just turned thirteen. My mother had adopted naturopathy and vegetarianism, and influenced by her strong distrust of conventional medicine my father spent almost his entire illness, with its train of dramatic emergencies, at home.

My two final years of secondary education were spent at Ackworth Friends' School in Yorkshire, to which my mother sent me to break me out of the depression that followed my father's death. The effort was partially successful. I learned to appreciate Quakerism — the religion adopted by both my parents.

Photo: the author sailing on Morecambe Bay, in the early 1960s



I also overruled my original desire to write, an activity which for complicated reasons I was unable to see as in any way connected with the real world, by opting to specialize in science, and notably mathematics.

1960s: "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out"

In 1966 I went to Sussex University, which was then a trendy new faculty, although for me its most desirable quality was its location, just about as far as I could get away from my region of origin without actually leaving the country!

Two years later the horrors of the Vietnam War, plus May 1968 in France, turned my world-view upside down. Soon, having eschewed capitalism, imperialism and also science, I was missing my lectures to take part in protest marches, read Marx and Marcuse and become increasingly absorbed in the hippie movement.

Having decided to "Turn On, Tune In and Drop Out", and viewing so-called primitive societies as in some way a model to be followed, I asked to switch from mathematics to social anthropology, which I was allowed to do at the price of an extra year's study.

I graduated from Sussex in 1970 with a mediocre degree; in my confused state it did not actually occur to me until afterwards that there would be no more grant money, and that I was therefore going to need to find some way of earning a living.

After an aimless and financially draining summer of wandering around Morocco, I went home to mum and spent an invigorating winter earning my first real money by driving a van to deliver wines and spirits throughout the Lake District. During lunch breaks seated on mountainside vantage points, I read Romantic and Beat poetry.

I followed this up in the spring of 1971 with two weeks in a Tibetan monastery in southern Scotland, before returning, still without a clear aim, to Brighton.

Moving to France

Meeting a young French woman who was spending her study year abroad in that town allowed me to discover Paris. I jumped at the opportunity to get away from England by moving there, which I did permanently in 1972, not long before my home country finally became a member of the European Community.

I spent over a decade teaching English, mostly in Parisian universities, and also doing increasing amounts of translation work. At various times I thought of returning to Britain, but there was always either a personal relationship or a job, or both, that kept me in France.

Encouraged by a French academic friend, I finally regretted having missed my way at university in England, and decided to return to studies. I enrolled at the "Paris I" law and economics faculty, and was able to get a master's degree in economics while continuing part-time work.

Partly as a result of my new studies — more reading of Marx, as well as of Ricardo and Keynes — my occasional flashes of literary production became increasingly

eclipsed by political activism. I spent around four years campaigning hard for the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland and being a fellow-traveller of the Ligue Communiste, a branch of the French Trotskyist movement.

I do not to this day regret either of those activities, of which the high point was a terrifying day of detention by the British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary during Queen Elizabeth's silver jubilee visit to Belfast in the summer of 1977.

Back in Paris, bashing out copies of "Irlande Libre", a paper I had helped launch with the aid of an IBM golfball typewriter and lots of glue, was a formative experience of both writing and editing. And the publication in Le Monde, on August 12th 1979, of an opinion piece I had painstakingly written in French to mark the tenth anniversary of the sending of British troops to Belfast gave me the satisfaction of seeing my prose made available to thousands of readers.

For several years, however, most of my journalism was unpaid, or low-paid, activism. I wrote in French for the Ligue Communiste newspaper "Rouge" — then still a daily — and also occasionally for the pro-Socialist daily Le Matin de Paris. I also penned intermittent reports from Paris in English for "Time Out", a long-since defunct British lefty mag called "Seven Days", and an early city newspaper called "The Paris Metro". The arrival of children in the 1980s took me out of circulation politically, and also concentrated my mind on earning decent money rather than just scraping by and contributing most of my meager income to activism.

Journalism and Agence France-Presse

Journalism seemed like a reasonable substitute for real writing — perhaps a step on the way to it, I thought — and I slowly graduated by working for several French business newsletters, and then for "Jeune Afrique", a weekly news magazine about Africa.

In the very week that I became a father I also started work at the English Service of Agence France-Presse (AFP) in Paris, where I was to stay for almost 30 years until my retirement, in December 2012. Apart from a five-month stint at the agency's London bureau in late 1989 I worked at the Paris headquarters, occupying a variety of posts including graphics editor, webmaster and documentalist.

In late 1994, I became swept up in the excitement of the internet, and decided that it was one wave I didn't want to miss. My company, which like many others was initially sceptical about the new phenomenon, appointed me to look into it, and for two years I published a stream of internal notes on journalism and the 'net.

On the strength of that experience, having learned about both web publishing and scripting — a simplified form of computer programming — I worked as AFP's de facto webmaster from 1995 to 2000.

As such I had the privilege of designing some quite exciting architectures, until I realized that I was pouring too much creativity into something that was essentially

destined to be ephemeral, and that was also becoming seen as too important to be left in the hands of a relatively junior person such as myself.

In 2000 my request to return to my original AFP assignment, as a sub-editor on the English service, was granted. Because of my deep doubts about the role played by the media in our society, I preferred to play a back-room role rather than going out into the field to report. From late 2005 until my retirement I was employed in the text documentation service, preparing chronologies, background pieces and obituaries.

In 1998, my mother died unexpectedly, and fortunately painlessly, in England. That decided me to take my children on a trip to Australia, from where a long-lost branch of my father's family had recently got in touch with me.

My mother had died without ever having managed to achieve her long-stated ambition of writing — something for which she had real talent — and her death boosted my determination to try and avoid a similar frustration.

Trade-unionism and websites

Nevertheless, in around 2002 I decided I didn't want to retire without having made a decent attempt to do real trade-union work, something I believe in strongly. I agreed to be an elected staff delegate for the French national journalists' union (SNJ), following that up with two years on the company works committee.

Having had experience with Internet work, I built a web site for the union branch, and went on to restructure the national union's site.

From November 2008 to the spring of 2012 I built and ran "SOS-AFP", an online petition site which I designed for the AFP unions, to try and prevent the government from privatising the company. This was successful, although subsequent French governments have continued to throw their weight around concerning AFP. The site, with information in both French and English, is still online

In April 2009 I was elected to the AFP Works Committee, this time for the CGT journalists' union.

Also in 2009 I was granted French citizenship, and thus started voting in national elections for the first time in my life.

In September of the same year I decided to join the SUD-AFP trade union, set up by work colleagues who had become exasperated by the devious policies of the main French labour groupings. "SUD" stands for "solidaires, unitaires et démocratiques", and so far it has amply lived up to its declared principles of solidarity, unity and democracy.

I was proud to be elected again to the Works Committee, in September 2011, this time for SUD-AFP.

Trade-union work has been a source of great satisfaction, and also taught me a great deal. Since retiring, however, I have cut down on the union work and am devoting myself mostly to research and writing, centred on the media and advertising.

Politics, in both France and the "Old Country"

Politics is of course a constant concern. In recent years I have marched in Paris not only to try and save our pensions but also to support Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his movement against the upstart Emmanuel Macron. After being brought to power on the back of a massive media campaign, the latter is now busily dismantling most of our labour rights.

In 2016 my home country also started to come alive politically, with the EU referendum and the rise of Jeremy Corbyn. To my great surprise I found myself joining the Labour Party, to support Corbyn.

If I had been able to take part in the referendum, I would have been part of the 52% who voted in favour of Brexit.

I have also returned with pleasure to the Quakerism of my early years, despite my basically non-religious philosophy.

Outside the world of work I lead a quiet life, spending as much time as possible reading, enjoying music and other arts, and walking both in city parks and the countryside, where my favourite pastime is observing birds, flowers and trees.

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