# Blackwood's

*Magazine*

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WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS LTD

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# *Q.E.D.*

J. E. MORPURGO

Donald went up to Oxford in the autumn of 1935 with an open scholarship in mathematics. To us, his contemporaries, there was nothing sensational in this; almost all that we knew about him throughout his school-days was that he was bound to end up with a scholarship. For the rest he moved among us unremarked and unremarkable, second fiddle in the orchestra, a good chess-player, speaking seldom and then always in a hesitant whisper.

His First was as inevitable as his scholarship and so too was his research fellowship at Yale. Then came the war. He could have stayed in America or, if the authorities had been less prodigal with talent, a place could have been found for him in one of those eccentric back-room organisations where wranglers and classics dons broke enemy codes. Instead he enlisted in an infantry regiment and when I met him again on a troopship bound for India he had achieved the extravagant rank of lance-corporal.

After that meeting it was six years before I heard of Donald again. I doubt if he thought of me as an old friend; indeed I doubt that he had any old friends. But perhaps because at that time I was much in the public eye, more so than any of our schoolfellows, I was easy to find. He needed to talk to someone, and so he wrote inviting me to lunch. I had little inclination to accept but no reason for refusing, and thus it was that I heard the whole story in a dingy Soho restaurant and from his own lips in a unique burst of continuous and articulate confidence.

Donald's fighting-war lasted for precisely twenty-four hours. Then, just one insignificant unit in the sour statistics of Singapore, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese and shipped off to work on the Burma-Siam railroad.

Strong men were shattered by that experience and Donald, slightly built, even frail, was anything but strong. At school he had been afflicted with a nervous twitch and a tendency to stammer if he was addressed by anyone senior to himself. Yet on the railroad he survived, enduring deprivation and the barbarities of his captors in a manner that was almost complacent.

Neither the Japanese guards nor his fellow-prisoners could ever discover the source of his strength. He suffered from the broiling sun no less than did his companions; even more than most he was unfitted for continuous physical drudgery, and

he shrank from the brutalities to which all were subjected. But all the time on the blackboard of his mind he worked at mathematical problems, closing out pain, humiliation and tragedy.

Early in 1944, at a time when most of the survivors in the camp could scarcely summon the energy to eat the miserable rations which would keep them from their graves, Donald began to put on weight, and —this would have been even more surprising to those of us who had known him at school than his resilience—he grew convivial, a focus of strength for his dispirited companions. Throughout the last year of captivity he was ebullient, resourceful, confident, and, for the first and only time in his life, indisputably a leader.

Release came at last, and no sooner was Donald back in England than he was on the train to Oxford and knocking on the door of A. B. Wynyard, Regius Professor of Mathematics.

Wynyard was a great mathematician; almost alone he had sustained the reputation of the Oxford school at a time when Cambridge was plush with world-famous mathematicians. He was an austere man who had never succumbed to the sybaritism that was customary among his academic colleagues and who was not given to demonstrating friendship even for his brighter pupils. He greeted Donald as warmly as he knew how and offered what he thought was appropriate by way of hospitality: a cup of tea. But Donald could not wait. As Wynyard stood there, teapot in one hand and cooling kettle in the other, he paraded his calculations, line by line, equation by equation, just as he had done out there on the railroad, just as he did for me, despite my total incapacity to comprehend, a few months later in Soho. And for Wynyard, who did understand, Donald at last came to reconstructing that glorious moment in January 1944 when he realised that his thought-processes had arrived at a triumphant and, to a scholar, an earth-shaking conclusion—when he knew that he had produced and proved beyond dispute a theory unknown to all his mathematician predecessors.

Wynyard put down the teapot and the kettle. He moved across the room and, with a gesture that came awkwardly from a man unaccustomed to showing affection, put an arm round Donald's shoulders and led him to the only armchair. Still without saying a word, he shuffled through a cupboard and came out with a bottle of whisky and a glass. He filled the glass as if he were pouring beer, handed it to Donald, then drew up a kitchen chair and, almost knee to knee, sat facing his one-time student.

"Drink up, Donald." (He had

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*J. E. Morpurgo has written over twenty books, including the Penguin* History of the United States, Barnes Wallis *and* Treason at West Point. *This is his second contribution to* Blackwood's *(see the April 1977 issue).*

Christian name.) "Drink up. It's superb, this theory of yours, magnificent, beautiful. But . . .", and now it was Wynyard who was stumbling over his words, "but . . . I have it here somewhere . . . in 1942 or perhaps in 1943 it was . . . Professor Svenson . . . you know, Albert Svenson at Uppsala . . . Svenson who published that same theory . . . in my opinion more than a theory, it's incontrovertible . . . and put it out in an American journal. Now which journal was it? I know I have it here somewhere."

* * * *

Donald was never elected to the Royal Society. In that he has confounded the predictions that were made about him when he was seventeen. But, after all, he did waste much of his twenties building a railway in Siam, and it is said that if mathematicians are not in the Royal before they are thirty, they never will be. I see him almost every time I go to the States. Not that we have much to say to each other, but then we never did converse a great deal. Even so, now that Wynyard is dead, I come closer to being a friend than any other person he knows. He lives comfortably enough in a small apartment close to the exclusive New England college where he teaches. A bachelor who has no expensive tastes except collecting recordings of classical music can do very well on an American professorial salary, and Donald has the handsome supplement of royalties from his text-book, which is used in the freshman mathematics course in almost every college and university in the United States. But sometimes, as I sit with him listening to Sibelius or Grieg, I think that I see something behind his eyes. Though I cannot read or comprehend it, I know that he is chalking hieroglyphics on the blackboard of his mind, and I cannot be certain if it is sweat or tears that blind him to that wondrous realisation of Q.E.D.