

# George and his Influence on Outdoor Adventure

By Roger Orgill MBE

The year was 1948 and I was a fourteen year old returning for the Christmas holiday from boarding school in Ireland. During the previous term my mother, Gwen, had made a monumental decision and taken up a residential post as Domestic Bursar at the newly opened Adult Education College which occupied a large part of a great mansion at Attingham Hall, as it was then known, a National Trust property at Atcham near Shrewsbury. Since my mother's post was residential my sister Judith and I both found ourselves that Christmas in a new 'home situation', one vastly different from our earlier situation on the edge of the Pennines in Lancashire.

In due course I was formally introduced to the Warden of the College, the 42 year old Mr George Trevelyan, known to the staff simply by his initials 'GLT'. The meeting in his splendid study was warm and welcoming but somewhat overwhelming. He was such an imposing figure, I was an awkward self-conscious fourteen year old and though I did not realise it at the time, it must have been something akin to the Gordonstoun master-pupil situation. Although I sensed that in the absence of my father at sea in the navy, I might develop a relationship with this GLT, I could not have foreseen the profound influence he was to have on my life over the next 47 years.

Being adventurous by nature and already obsessed by outdoor exploration, Attingham and its vast and somewhat overgrown estate, complete with its own river Tern and nearby river Severn, was a paradise and presented unlimited scope for further exploration and adventures. George quickly recognised my interest in the outdoors and encouraged all my ventures, which included canoe building and restoration of a dinghy in which I taught myself to sail. Aware of my enthusiasm and interest in a range of activities, George allowed me to learn through first-hand experience. He would never intervene, but simply provided words of advice, telling me, for example, that my woodworking might improve if more time was given to preparing and sharpening tools; and when he found me labouring away with a blunt plane, he pointed out that "woodwork is a craft, and it must therefore be a pleasure, not a chore".

Holidays at Attingham were looked forward to with great anticipation and were a wonderful mixture of new experiences. As for all the staff there was ample opportunity to take part in the open College courses or to join student group excursions into the surrounding area. For example, we went to Ironbridge Gorge where one of the College's residential tutors, Michael Rix, was uncovering the historical significance of the area and what he chose to call 'Industrial Archaeology'. I remember accompanying the other tutor, Donald Moore, to one

of the earliest International Musical Eistedfodau at Llangollen. Music was a major feature in the College programme and there were opportunities to squeeze into the back of the great lecture room for concerts and recitals or during Easter or Summer Music Schools, and to slip quietly in to marvel at the late night quartet playing in various rooms throughout the house.

All meals were communal affairs shared with students, staff and visitors alike. I well remember finding a spare breakfast-time seat next to someone who I later discovered was Yehudi Menuhin. Occasionally, George would produce flagons of cider for evening meals, adding that as there was no licence he could make no charge, but, any 'contributions' found in the bowls conveniently placed on tables would be welcome, but of course a totally unconnected gesture. Another vivid memory of meal times is of a Twelfth Night celebration and George leading a candle lit procession from the kitchen to the college dining room along the stone flagged corridor, carrying on high great platters of food to the accompaniment of the Boar's Head carol.



*Photo: Gwen, Domestic Bursar at Attingham Hall, Roger Orgill's mother*

The routine and rhythms of the college and wholly new lifestyle I thoroughly enjoyed. Not so my sister who missed the privacy of a normal home, particularly as mother was totally absorbed with her duties, frequently taking on additional secretarial work and general administration when necessary. [It should be remembered that food rationing was still in force, an additional challenge to any residential venture at that time].

Richard St Barbe-Baker On reflection, the combination of George's influence and the huge variety and richness of the College programmes proved to be an enormously formative and developmental experience. I was, for example, as a youth, able to sit in on lectures by leading authorities such as Lady Eve Balfour speaking about organic agriculture or Richard St Barbe-Baker on the importance of forestry for soil and water conservation, subjects which George sought to explore ahead of most institutions of the time. It was on one such course that an official from the Ministry of Food, standing in George's study and drinking his best sherry, said to the assembled group in a loud and pompous way: "Trevelyan, I tell you now there is no future in organics". Also in the room at the time was Sam Mayall, a local organic farmer, already successfully marketing his own brand of stoneground wholemeal flour nationwide.

Attingham had been requisitioned by the Army during the war and, within the constraints of the limited budget, there was a constant effort to improve the quality of the student accommodation. I frequently helped painting walls and, together with George on one occasion late at night, we were both balancing on a hand rail to reach the opposite wall over a stair well. This necessitated stretching out and painting round one's hand which had only the wall to rest on. Suddenly, George let out a yell and, having painted round his hand, drew back and said, "Hooray, I now know why human hand prints feature in prehistoric animal cave paintings". We then experimented leaving impressions of mutilated prints on the wall as in some of the original paintings.



Horizons were expanded as George introduced me to climbing and caving, the 'Great Sports' as he called them, and I was invited at an early age to the Trevelyan Whitsun Lake District manhunt established by the family in the previous century. I found it was not only required that one chased over the ten square miles of the Borrowdale fells all day, but one had to contribute fully to the evening entertainment of songs and ballads. Seatoller House at Seathwaite was the historical base for the manhunt. Returning there after an exhausting day was a delight. 'Hot baths, lashings of tea and rum, butter and bread!

Experiences were progressive, and books from George on climbing, caving, arctic exploration and the new activity of sub aqua, which I also took up later in North Wales, were regular Christmas, Easter and birthday presents. They fired my enthusiasm and encouraged further endeavours. On walks George often spoke of Rudolf Steiner's beliefs and of what Goethe had to say on certain subjects, always careful to add that "You don't have to accept this, but simply try it as an idea" - advice which contributed greatly to my learning and experience and preparation for a future as yet unclear. Whilst there were frequent visitors from a nearby Steiner community and whilst George was deeply into Anthroposophy, he never at any time thrust his views or beliefs on me, but rather suggested that the holistic nature of Steiner's principles provided a framework for understanding some of the mysteries of life. Little did I realise that later in my life, whilst doing an external masters course in Outdoor Education, I would be strongly advocating the 'Waldorf approach' as an outstanding example of 'child-centred' education, a form of education totally unbeknown to the Education Department of Bangor

University at that time, or later still, becoming chairman of the Trustees of Hereford Waldorf School.

There were also memorable nights when we would climb to the top of the house and lie flat on the roof over Attingham's great portico identifying stars, planets and constellations whilst speculating on the nature of the universe. Also working late into the night with George laying out a complete astronomical map of the northern hemisphere on the domed ceiling at the base of the Rotunda, a space which was to become immensely significant to later events at the College when the Zodiac of mosaics encircled the walls.



I spent most of my years of compulsory national service at the Catterick Camp with the Royal Armoured Corps in the Yorkshire Dales. I became involved in 'adventure training' activities with new recruits, then a relatively new development, which included pot-holing, climbing and overnight exercises across the surrounding moors. Leave breaks allowed a return to beloved Attingham where George continued to take an active interest in my development and together we explored local rocks, climbing and abseiling in the old sandstone quarries in the area. At this time George also led a caving expedition to South Wales where, with the South Wales Caving Club, we had the great privilege of exploring part of the newly discovered Ogof Ffynnon Ddu, which later turned out to be one of the most extensive caving systems in Britain.

It was now 1953; Everest had just been climbed and, through Jack Hollins, a mutual friend, George learned that Col John Hunt, the expedition leader, had recently returned to his home in Llanfair Waterdine on the south Shropshire border. George quickly arranged that Col Hunt should visit Attingham and give an informal talk. Being on leave at the time he also suggested that I should accompany Jack to collect him by car. The return journey to Attingham was spent trying to convince Col Hunt that this was not a lecture to the public but to a group in residence at the College, the Everest team having firmly agreed that no such public lecture be given until all team members had a full collection of slides. As colour slides were used to illustrate the talk, this must have been the very first account of the famous expedition. George marked the occasion by presenting me with his climbing boots. Within two years, the now Sir John Hunt had left the Army and had been appointed as first Director of the new Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. He also took on the chairmanship of the newly

opening Snowdonia National Recreation Centre at Capel Curig, where, having achieved premature release from National Service, I had become the youngest in the team of the four founding members of staff.

George had served as referee for my application for the new 'assistant instructor' post and had additionally requested that Mr H Justin-Evans, Deputy Secretary of the Central Council for Physical Recreation responsible for the new Centre, should call on him. Justin, who became a great friend, later told me that George had in fact interviewed him to see if the post was suitable and would fully occupy me. Shortly before I took up my appointment, George included me as a contributor to a weekend adventure course thereby linking an Attingham programme with the new venture in Snowdonia.



*Photo: The Hunt Lecture*

George had a link with the field of outdoor adventure for young people long before I knew him. Jim Hogan (who was later to become president of the National Association for Outdoor Education), as a young schoolmaster during the Second World War, was invited by Kurt Hahn, the famous educationalist, to become the warden of a sailing school at Aberdovey, with the task of interpreting Hahn's ideas. He was to be assisted by the secondment of two Gordonstoun masters, one of whom was George. This venture was the birth of the new worldwide Outward Bound movement.

George was a frequent visitor to Plas y Brenin as the new Snowdonia Centre was called. His wife Helen and daughter Catriona also came to inspect as did Michael Dower, George's nephew, in the early days of his work with the Civic Trust, Michael's brother Robin, currently Master of the Trevelyan Whitsun Manhunt. George's brother Geoffrey and his young son also visited and we climbed together. George was very familiar with Snowdonia and routes he had climbed in his Cambridge days were frequently repeated. On such occasions, not only was I treated to graphic accounts of the past with distinguished climbers of the day, in particular Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and tales of the legendary Cambridge Easter climbing parties at Pen-y-Pass, but I was also learning something of the great tradition and ethos of mountaineering. George's energy and enthusiasm for climbing were boundless and whilst never at any time complaining of actually being tired, he would frequently take 'cat naps' in the heather between routes. On occasions George would visit and accompany me when taking students on the hill. This would add considerably to the richness of the day as he would recount

past exploits, quote from his immense poetry repertoire or lead chases down the hillside, out-running everyone.

What George and the courses at Attingham gave me I was able to translate into my work at the new centre. Snowdonia was historically a climbing and mountaineering area. I was able to add to our programme canoe-building, canoeing, exploring the marine environment of the Menai Straits and Anglesey coast and country dancing. All that I had learned about communal living and sharing with students and visitors was a considerable advantage in the life of the new centre. We developed a national reputation within five years of opening, and international recognition thereafter.

A feature of courses in the early years at Plas y Brenin was the morning pre-breakfast gathering on the terrace overlooking the twin lakes of Mymbyr and up to the Snowdon Horseshoe. This was a voluntary event for students when staff took it in turn to lead a ten minute period of quiet contemplation and quotations from the best of mountaineering and exploration literature, something akin to the Sunday morning Attingham service. On some occasions this also took place on mountain camps at the start of the day.



*Photo: Sir George with Roger Orgill at a happy chance meeting in a pub near Attingham in 1993*

Overnight expeditions spent in the mountains with tents and sleeping bags were wonderful and natural opportunities to facilitate discussions and occasionally explore philosophical and esoteric topics with student groups. The atmospheric nature of a high camp in a mountain cwm at sunset can be very moving particularly for those experiencing it for the first time. The onset of evening and a quiet meal was in contrast to the earlier physical activity of the day, and contributed greatly as background to the relaxed and contemplative mood of the evening. Sometimes lying on sleeping bags to explore the night sky, the darkness would provide a level of security and anonymity for conversation to range over the mysteries of the universe, our relationship with the planet, the existence of God or some form of superior intelligence at work in the cosmos. Students would later quietly admit to never having been able to broach such subjects before, and the exchange having contributed greatly to their enjoyment of a week's experience. George had been the principal formative influence in my life that had enabled me to help young people to widen their horizons.

By the 1960s my mother had left Attingham and died, and I was therefore seeing less of George. There was however one memorable visit to the centre by George when, following a heavy snowfall, we were dropped off by car close to Bethesda and, using skins on our skis climbed up on to the start of the Glyders and skied, not without difficulty, the whole way back to Capel Curig, a distance of some twelve miles of undulating mountain ridge.

This was a period of environmental awakening, the questioning of values and lifestyle, and of searching for alternative ways of living. At Plas y Brenin there was lively exchange, as those leading the training in outdoor adventure had much in common, including a strong belief in spiritual values which might be explored through outdoor experiences. At the appropriate time, and to give confidence to tutors and course directors, I sought to involve George, who agreed to address an invited gathering at Bangor university, where a mountaineer friend of mine, Sir Charles Evans, had become principal. (He was instrumental in establishing an unrivalled postgraduate Outdoor Education programme for trainee teachers at the university.)

At this time a great many young people were coming to Wales seeking alternative lifestyles, small plots of land and affordable housing. I became involved with friends in establishing something of a Wales network. The community at Findhorn in the North of Scotland was contributing by arranging events and so on. Eventually a suitable property for a centre for this network was found, the address being 1 Trevelyan Terrace! 'Greenhouse', as it came to be known, accommodated a number of ventures and quickly became a focal point for meetings and meditation.

With the help of Findhorn, Jeremy Light, a tutor at the Centre for Alternative Technology, and David Redpath, a weaver and owner of Wallace Woollen Mill in Pembrokeshire, regular workshops were arranged and an annual One Earth national gathering held alternatively in North, mid and South Wales. George was a keynote speaker at most of these events, giving rousing presentations and encouragement to the largely youthful participants. Speaking to an audience at CAT late one afternoon George held them spellbound. We were outdoors sitting in a horseshoe on straw bales. George had his back to the setting sun and there was great anticipation as it was going to be a matter of timing, the audience being aware that the sun would clearly disappear behind the skyline mountain ridge, and it was closing fast. Without turning round George sensed this and finished just as it vanished. The applause was tremendous, and as we walked away arm in arm I congratulated him on the presentation and timing. His reply was "Yes, I felt it was a bit of a corker". On other occasions we would arrange for George to visit the various groups on their home patch which included those living in tepees in mid Wales where, surprisingly, the local farming community was very protective towards them and wary of visitors, as we found in trying to locate them. We were decidedly suspect and were frequently asked if we were from 'the council'.

Out of the blue one day George rang to say that a television producer was interested in doing a piece on New Age developments in Wales. After a

preliminary visit and introduction to Greenhouse friends, arrangements went ahead. Such was the extent of material and interest of the production staff and camera crew alike that instead of the one programme intended, a series of six resulted accompanied with an illustrated book which featured a piece on George and his contribution in Wales.

George asked me to help him with the planning and running of a course on the adventure theme which he included in the Attingham programme in 1965. We attracted Chris Bonnington and Don Whillans, both highly distinguished mountaineers, Sam Hugill, 'the last great shanty singer' on the staff of the Aberdovey Outward Bound Sea School, and the author Hammond Innes.

And in 1971 I was invited to take part in the event which celebrated the conclusion of George's 23 successful years as warden of the college at Attingham. My role was to take a hot air balloon in which Matthew, his son-in-law, flew up and away toward Wenlock Edge, symbolically representing George flying away from Attingham. Next morning, in a tethered flight, George, who was by then crippled with arthritis, viewed Attingham from the air. In spite of the pain the landing must have caused, he was not prepared to miss the opportunity.

In recent years I have become closely connected with the Brahma Kumaris movement, which also has contributed greatly through partnership working in young people's development and outdoor learning. George and I were at the Mind, Body and Spirit Festival at Olympia, where he was as usual a keynote speaker in 1978, when I made my first connection with the organisation. We met and made a close link with Sister Jayanti. Brahma Kumaaris had just established a small base in north London. In later years, Sister Jayanti and Dadi Janki, one of the great spiritual leaders of our time, both told me of George's assistance and kindness toward them in their early days in London.



In September 1994, some 23 years after George had retired from the college at Attingham, I was in Shropshire, having been speaking at the annual conference of the physical education branch of the Prison Service. On leaving, I called in at the Mytton and Mermaid Hotel at the gates of Attingham and found, to my astonishment, George and some friends about to have lunch! George immediately leapt to the conclusion that this had been 'planned', as he was the guest of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club, which was celebrating its 50th



anniversary with a formal visit to Attingham. George was there in his capacity of President and to speak at the end of the tour. As George had no wish to have a formal tour by the National Trust, together with the curator we put George in a wheelchair and with great excitement and anticipation whisked him round to explore all his special places. George tired and over tea fell fast asleep. Together with Geseke Clark, who was accompanying George, and Clive Tate, the Field Club's Chairman, we were somewhat apprehensive that George would awake, leap to his feet and launch into a new age theme. We were relieved and impressed when he did speak, as usual without notes and gave the most fitting address imaginable. This was, I believe, George's final visit to Attingham, though we were not to know it at the time, and just somehow, I had been prompted to share the occasion.

Early in 1996 I received a telephone call to say that George was fast approaching the end of his earthly life. It so happened that Ruth Nesfield-Cookson and I visited him at the same time, and were able to share time with him only five days before he embarked on what he had often called 'the great adventure'. The Memorial events at St James', Piccadilly, and Hawkwood College in Gloucestershire, were great gatherings of those who had loved and been inspired by George. The St James' service was conducted by the Rev Donald Reeves who, as part of the service, blessed two small yew trees, conveniently provided by David Lorimer. One was to be planted at the Findhorn Foundation, the other down the Mile Walk at Attingham. The planting at Attingham duly took place on the banks of the river Tern, looking across the deer park, in the presence of a group of family and friends and some of George's ex-colleagues. A short address was given by the Rev Gordon Barker. The event and location of the tree are on record with the National Trust at Attingham Park.

A photograph of George hangs on my bedroom wall and I continue to sense his guiding hand and spirit in my work, which I would most certainly not have achieved without his influence, his encouragement, his vast enthusiasm and much support nearly half a century. Yes, I loved him dearly, there was a father-son relationship. which he confirmed in a moving Christmas letter in 1991.

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