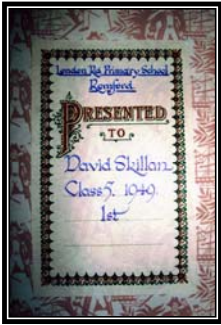


MY EARLIEST MEMORIES

An EXCERPT from DAVID'S DIARY

by David Skillan



I was sorting through some of my books the other day—I have a small library of about 500 hardcovers, my one and only extravagance, mostly purchased on sale—when I came across an old copy of *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. It was one of my favourites when I was a boy, along with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*, and Jonathon Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Pasted inside the cover of *Treasure Island* is a label headed “London Road Primary School, Romford,” and underneath, in beautiful handwritten script, “Presented to David Skillan, Class 5, 1949. 1st.” It was an award for reading. I was ten years old and overjoyed to be top of the class in a subject I loved.

I was born three months before the outbreak of World War II, with a midwife in attendance, in the family home at 11 Marina Gardens, on the outskirts of Romford, Essex. Our bungalow was surrounded by fields of potatoes and cabbages. Romford was a well-known English market town, famous for its Saturday market, brewery, and greyhound dog-racing stadium. It’s now part of Greater London.

Dog-eared black-and-white photos (such as the one below, with my sister Janice) tell me I was a handsome baby—chubby, blond, and blue-eyed. As I grew older, I became thin and wiry and a bit of a ragamuffin, a shy and sensitive but curious eager beaver and sometimes cheeky lad with an unruly mop of curly hair that I got from my dad and later did my best to plaster down.

My earliest recollections—I would have been a toddler of about 18 months—are of doodlebugs (German bombs that made weird noises when falling) whistling down on us, and my mother Olive tucking me under one arm and grabbing my sister’s hand as she raced down the garden path, threw us into the bomb shelter (which the British government had built in most backyards in the south of England), jumped in beside us, and helped us on with our gas masks. I can also faintly recall being in London en route to visit relatives when the air-raid sirens wailed. We descended with throngs of people into the nearest Underground (Tube) station for refuge until the all-clear sounded. Many lay on blankets on the station platform. All great fun to a youngster who had no idea of the gravity of the situation.

Like most men, my dad Arthur was away serving in the armed forces, so for a long time, like many of her generation, my mother had to be both mother and father to us. Easier said than done when a mischievous scamp like me was involved!

Though my family was far from well off, like many British kids, I had a happy, carefree childhood. When I was about three, though the London blitz was over, the bombing continued in southern England, so, like many families living close to London, we were evacuated to Yorkshire. This ruggedly beautiful part of northern England—well known through the writings of the Brontë sisters and James Herriot—was filled with quaint villages, desolate moors, and rolling hills and dales. We lived in what seemed to my young, impressionable eyes to be a very large, grand dwelling named Leat House. It was owned by a titled family who had divided it into several small flats and made it available as part of the



war effort. Surrounded by wheat, barley, and potato fields, with acres of manicured lawns and wooded grounds, it was the perfect playground for an adventurous boy with an inquisitive mind.

As a youngster I was always restless—what today would be called hyperactive. I could never sit still. A bit of a daredevil, I often took chances, risking life and limb by climbing trees and jumping into fast-flowing streams before I could swim. It was a wonder, said everyone who knew me, that I never broke my neck! I loved the wide, open spaces of the great outdoors and everything related to the natural world, taking every opportunity to investigate hedgerows and woods, which especially in springtime and early summer were alive with bluebells, daffodils, forget-me-nots, rabbits, hedgehogs, pheasants, ravens, finches, robins, and birdsong. After school and on weekends I explored the countryside, looking for bugs, newts, lizards, and tadpoles, which, to my mother's horror, I triumphantly took home in glass jars. I'll never forget the melodious call of the cuckoo echoing across the English countryside.

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A keen movie buff from a very young age, I sang in the school choir. When I was seven or eight I was chosen for one of the leads in a school play that included singing “Christopher Robin,” but the night before the big day I was overcome with shyness (some would call it nerves or stage fright) and had to back out. Luckily, another boy took my place, which was a relief, for I hated the idea of letting anyone down. I would have died of shame.

After a Cub Scout I became a Sea Cadet for a while, but soon became bored because we spent most of our time learning how to tie knots and never went near water. Ironically, I was to learn to love sailing in my teenage years while living in Germany, but was always violently seasick when I went to sea in freighters and ocean liners as a young adult.

Even as a youngster I was very observant. My mother would often say I “didn't miss much”—something that would stand me in good stead throughout my life. Blessed with a fertile imagination (which sometimes got the better of me), I discovered early that I loved to write—and, to my surprise, was fairly good at it. This attribute was to come in handy in the years ahead, when my work required a lot of writing. I've always made copious notes about almost everything, and have written piles of letters to friends and family. It just goes to show how an early childhood interest can profoundly affect one's entire life. →



I was born in this bungalow in Romford, Essex.



My first school, London Road Primary.