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The Blackburn rover

by Nicholas Wapshott, Sunday Times, London

William Woodruff's tale of boyhood in a bleak mill town was a No 1 best-seller. Now he's repeated the magic with a sequel. Our correspondent follows the trail from Nab End

William Woodruff stands in his book-lined study, looking out through a floor-to-ceiling window into a garden dense with exotic trees. Brilliantly caparisoned birds flicker between the branches. Squirrels are frequent visitors; so, occasionally, is the odd racoon. "I like to have a racoon around," he says. "They're reassuring."

Here, on a blazing day in Florida, his voice is startling in its incongruity. Flat, deadpan, traces of East Lancashire, with its distinctive rolling Rs and flat vowels.

It is a reminder of how great a distance this remarkable man has come since his youth. He is 86 now, sharp featured, a little arthritic, a respected academic who has taught on American campuses for decades. He is also fast becoming a national treasure. For Woodruff, an economic historian and expert on subjects as obscure as the world rubber trade, is one of the last survivors of an age which has almost vanished from memory. And his recollections of poverty and hardship in Blackburn during the early years of the Depression have made him a publishing phenomenon.

The first volume of his autobiography, *The Road to Nab End*, was in the best-seller lists for much of last year and has just returned to the top ten. Its sequel, *Beyond Nab End*, published last month, is already the top-selling paperback across the country.

Critics have been unanimous in praise. *The Independent* called *The Road to Nab End* a masterpiece. Alan Bullock, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, said Woodruff was a born writer. *The Spectator* suggested that even Ibsen would have envied his extraordinary eye for the telling detail.

I am here to talk to him about a life that led not only to (and from) Nab End, but to the filth and squalor of the East End, to a scholarship at Oxford — where he was a confidante of a generation of young idealists who would go on to build a new Britain after the war — to a meeting with the Labour leader George Lansbury, to Harvard and Princeton, and finally to fame as No 1 best-selling author.

He stands upright and alert at about 5ft 6in (1.68m), his white hair trimmed to the scalp. He has bright eyes revealing acute intelligence. He reminds me of the actor Lionel Jeffries, with a prominent nose famously broken when, as he tells in the first *Nab End* book, he was pushed headfirst from a bridge by other boys.

The Northern lad is still in evidence in the accent and, oddly, he often speaks in the third person. "He writes in the pool," he says of himself. "He writes in the hot-pot (he means, presumably, the bath), he writes in the fields." His German wife Helga, 19 years his junior, he refers to as "Mother".

“I met Mother in Melbourne when I was a widower,” he says.

“We married a week later. I was 42 and she was so much younger. I had to act fast. Didn’t we, Mother? Marry in a week?” “No,” says Helga, beaming. “It was less than a week.”

Up before dawn, Woodruff works out on an exercise bike before devouring porridge, hard-boiled eggs, tea, toast and fruit juice and vitamins. Then he has a 40-minute nap before taking up his pen — he writes in ballpoint on a yellow-lined pad.

“The rest of the day I scribble,” he says. “I am really selfish; I will not be disturbed. Whether you paid me or not, I would do it. Sometimes I’m here until two in the morning.”

His large wooden desk is crammed with reminders of a life’s journey; a photograph of the Bodleian, a picture of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, where he was taken up by Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atom bomb, a photograph of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, which conjures up a scalding memory of poverty. “That’s how I saw my mother when she told me ‘Everything is gone’.” There is, too, a Buddha, a reminder of his first wife, who died of cancer.

Most telling of all, a weaver’s shuttle, like the one which flew from a loom and struck his grandfather dead. It is a link to Blackburn and a reminder of the harsh life in a cotton town when the mills were dying.

His father’s misery at being unemployed, and the devastation it brought, led the young William to try to make sense of his times. In 1933 he decided to try his luck in London and three years later, with the help of a London County Council scholarship, went up to Oxford. During the Second World War he fought in North Africa and other areas of the Mediterranean theatre, returning to academic life after the war. All these experiences formed the foundation of a series of books which came to light only years afterwards.

“I wrote *Billy Boy* (as he calls *The Road to Nab End*) for a small audience, *Vessel of Sadness* (his memoir of the Anzio landings) for a small audience. They took upon them a life of their own. What’s the reason? I have no idea. It isn’t good literature.”

The first autobiographical volume evokes crowded poverty in a terraced slum in Blackburn’s Griffin Street.

“It is pure Gracie Fields,” he says. “You know — ‘It’s so bad, love, there’s nothing you can do but laugh at it’. The bottom of the heap bred resilience and fortitude.”

The second book, *Beyond Nab End*, feeds an apparently insatiable public appetite for Woodruff’s life story. “They ran out of books before the publishing date,” he says. “There has been a reprinting each week in the first month.”

At its heart is the transformation of a boy into an idealistic undergraduate. Woodruff had little formal education and the effort required to pass the Oxford entrance exams — five subjects, including Latin and French, mastered from scratch in 12 months — showed extraordinary determination.

“To get through you needed excellent health, enormous vitality and a photographic memory, which thankfully I have,” he says. At Oxford he joined men

such as George Woodcock, who became the head of the TUC, and Harold Wilson, the future Prime Minister.

He will for ever be grateful for the chance given to him. "The British gave me the best education I could have had in the world and it didn't cost me a dime."

The university's emphasis on thought, rather than rote learning, came as a revelation. He was told to come to tutorials armed with opinions. "Can you imagine what a shock it was? In my family we weren't paid to think."

At Oxford he was a pacifist. But in September 1939 he joined up without hesitation. "You have to choose when to fight in your own defence. There are things you have to stick up for. That's what changed me from a pacifist.

"For a Brit then, there was no choice. I knew Hitler was a maniac. The man was hammering on the door. I felt I had to try to defend the country. When I was training in Clacton in 1939 I knew very well that had the Germans arrived I would have died. We only had broomsticks to fight with and one of the arrows of their invasion plan went right through where I was standing."

Woodruff rose to become a major, then acting colonel, but his northern plain speaking held back what might have been a brilliant military career. "Had I not crossed swords with some particularly idiotic generals, I would have gone to the top, no doubt about it. I was meant to speak when I was spoken to, but, being a Woodruff and a Lancastrian, I could not keep quiet."

After the war, he turned down a Labour seat in favour of academia. "Of course, what I should have been was a Labour minister in a Labour government. It was a shoo-in for me. With my qualifications and my beliefs, it would have been easy and all sorts of people urged me to go straight into Parliament, but I turned it down.

"I let a lot of people down. The Jesuit priest (who had supported him in the early days and encouraged him to try for Oxford), all those who backed me. I was meant to represent working people and there were great hopes for me in Parliament. Woodcock went to the top; Woodruff didn't."

A reluctance to enter politics did not, however, mean a lack of ambition. Woodruff was lured to Harvard by the promise of a teaching post. He found life there a wonderful contrast to the privations of postwar Britain. "I wrote back from Harvard, 'It is Christmas every day here'. Everything was gift-wrapped. The thing that struck me was the abundance, the waste of food. They would ask if you wanted another cup of coffee but didn't demand another dime. It was the richest country in the world."

Even in America, though, his Lancastrian cussedness marked him out. "I didn't think there was the same individuality as there was among the people I left behind. Americans had little time for whistleblowers and difficult people. There were no Difficult Harrys. And I was a very Difficult Harry."

After the success of *Nab End*, Woodruff returned briefly as a famous man to Blackburn, the town he had left as an unknown. There, he went to see the house where he had been brought up.

"The biggest sin on my part was not taking a picture of 76 Griffin Street, because it is all gone since my visit," he says. "I had a feeling of shame when I saw the house. It was such an awful area. It had such a dirty door and there were

four-letter words scrawled on it. I looked, but I couldn't take a picture. I didn't want to maintain a link with that."

Blackburn, however, has taken Woodruff to its heart. "They have a guided tour of Nab End now," he says. And he takes mischievous delight in the fact that "The Brass" — Blackburn's most distinguished citizens — turned out for him.

Now his socialism has dimmed. "You discover that it doesn't work. What came up about Russia was so damning. We once thought the Russians had five meals a day and played tennis all the time, mostly in the nude. Who wouldn't want that? Even class doesn't worry me now. All I want is responsible government. Anything that brings humankind together, I'm for; anything that puts them apart, I'm against."

America has been good to him. He is the patriarch of an extended family of seven children and six grandchildren. He taught until he was 80 and has concentrated since on writing.

"The gift has come down from above, but I have really worked at it," he says. "Thank goodness I have had the scribbling or I would have burst with all those stories trying to get out."

Straight to the top: the story of a bestseller

THE extraordinary story of the discovery of William Woodruff the best-selling author could itself form the plot-line of a work of fiction.

The Road To Nab End first came out under the imprint of a small publisher. Then Richard Beswick (of Little Brown) came across a review of this evocation of childhood by an obscure academic and was immediately interested.

Woodruff's ability to summon the minutiae of Northern family life across more than three-quarters of a century had him entranced — as it has thousands of book buyers.

"Once I had read it I knew it could reach out to a wider audience," Beswick says. "It's a wonderful story — warm, nostalgic but without sentimentality. It is a photographic record of many of the the major events of the past century and also of a vanished age. It introduces younger readers to a world that has gone — and Woodruff is a guide to that distant time. I have to admit I was surprised by the runaway success."

Woodruff — who describes himself as a compulsive writer — was already part way through *Beyond Nab End* when the first book of memoirs went on sale.

Beswick knew that he had hit gold. "Richard wrote to me asking 'Have you got any more in the bottom drawer?' Woodruff recalls. "I wrote back, 'Yes, another five'."

Woodruff's lost treasures, it transpired, include his account of the Anzio landings, *Letters to My Grandson* and *Paradise Galore*, "a Gulliver's Travels-type allegory" involving a pig, a camel and a mouse.

"I think his next book for us will be a novel," Beswick says.

I knew I must either speak up, or be lost*

THE first tutor I visited was A. B. Rodger, dean and tutor in history at Balliol College. I was wearing a tie. As I crossed the quad, bells tolled. I

wondered what was in store for me. In answer to my knocking, I received a bellowing response to enter. I stepped into a large, book-lined study. The ivy-framed windows looked out on to a quadrangle swarming with students. Lamps burned overhead and on the tables. A heavy-bodied, middle-aged man of medium height stood with his back to the fire. He was wearing a tweed jacket, grey flannel trousers and a plaid shirt. His flushed face and large, bald head, which was cocked quizzically to one side, gave the appearance of a bulldog about to bite. At one end of the mantelpiece was a wedding picture of the man I faced. "Yes," he said fiercely, squinting at me over his half-moon spectacles.

"I'm Woodruff."

"Ah, yes, Woodruff," he answered sceptically. "So you want to do some work, do you?" He ignored my outstretched hand.

"Yes," I said cautiously. I had made up my mind that the bulldog was not going to bite. As bidden, I sat down on the edge of a chair.

"Done any history at an upper level?" he asked, shaking the loose change in his trouser pocket.

"No, sir."

"None?"

"No."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Blackburn, Lancashire."

"When did you leave school?"

"At thirteen."

"Thirteen," he repeated, staring at me in a bemused way, while whistling under his breath.

"What do you hope to do in life?"

"To be a Labour politician."

He rattled his coins some more.

"Tell you what," he said, his eyes challenging mine, "why don't we break the ice with a paper on the Enclosure Movement of the 18th century ... you know ... when a lot of people were chased off the land ... Material and moral loss of the poor, etc. You might not think so, Woodruff, but it has a lot to do with what has been happening in Russia lately."

Although I knew a little about the collectivisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union, I hadn't the slightest idea what the English Enclosure Movement was. "Yes," I agreed, my voice breaking.

"Well, that's settled," he said, striding about the room, shuffling papers as he went.

I sensed he expected me to leave. I didn't dare. I either spoke up now or I was lost. "Where might I find the details?" I ventured.

"Details, details?" he started, as if it were improper of me to ask. "Well, you might look at Slater and Beresford, and Fisher and Johnson for a start," he said grudgingly. "If you look at them, you'd better look at Hammonds, and Cole, and Fay, and Prothero."

I scribbled names down in my notebook as fast as I could.

He seemed puzzled and a little put out when I asked him for the authors' initials and the titles of the books. I didn't dare ask him which parts of the books I should read.

By now I wasn't even talking right. How on earth was I going to find eight books, read them, and produce an essay in a week's time? "Will it be necessary to read all eight volumes?"

"Gracious me no, Woodruff," he boomed. "You'd be mad to. You don't read books, you gut them; it's the gist you're after. If you feel that an author has nothing important to say, drop him. You'll get the nub of things pretty quickly, you'll see. Anyway, you won't find half the books I've given you. There are other students preparing essays, you know." Smiling, he waited.

My face must have registered consternation.

"Even looking for a book you can't find will teach you something, Woodruff." He whistled under his breath again, shuffled his papers, and indicated that I should go.

I stayed. I had to — I was desperate. "How long do you expect the essay to be?" "Well, Woodruff, that depends on you, doesn't it? Some do it in ten pages, others with nothing to say, dawdle it out to twenty. The standard rule is to start at the beginning and to go on to the end. You're a sensible fellow, Woodruff, I'm sure you'll know when you've reached the end."

While I gathered my papers to go, he gave me some advice on lectures. "You might try Rowse ... everybody does. Good on Tudors. I'd look in on Clark too, while you're at it. Sound on the 17th and 18th centuries is Clark. What you are after is the gist, remember."

I really was not listening. I was wondering why he was recommending Rowse and the Tudors when the Tudors preceded the dates of my examinations. I thought he must have made a mistake and I said so.

"Ah," he answered, smile on lips. There was a pause while he whistled some more. "Woodruff, you have not come to Oxford to pass examinations, you have come to learn. The whole purpose of Oxford is learning."

I stared at him, bewildered. How on earth was I supposed to recognise the "gist" he talked about. To ask him, I realised, would be a reckless thing to do. Mumbling my thanks, I made for the door. As I stumbled out into the quad, I wondered how I was doing to cope. I made my way past the porter's lodge into the street, jumped on my bike and rushed off in search of the recommended volumes, to gut the "gist" of them.

Was it Harold's heart?

FOLLOWING my visit to New Inn Hall Street I ran into Harold Wilson on the steps of University College.

"I've just volunteered," I said. "What are you going to do?" His reply startled me. "I've been called to higher things."

I suppose I jumped to conclusions, but his eyes were upraised, he did have a hand on his heart, and his face expressed pain.

"I didn't know you had trouble with your heart, Harold."

"Nothing wrong with my heart, Woody, I've decided to join Bill Beveridge." (Sir William Beveridge was head of University College.)

“Doing what?”

“Studying the five giant evils: war, sickness, ignorance, hunger, and unemployment.”

I was perplexed; perhaps he was pulling my leg. I thought of Harold during the war. He had joined the economic section of the War Cabinet. In 1945 he became a member of Attlee’s Government and later Prime Minister.

*Extracts from *Beyond Nab End*