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Life before Somerville

Abstract

Life before Somerville: certainly there must have been such a thing, though it seems a foreign country. My background is perhaps 'unconventional', although at the stage where my trajectory towards Somerville began to sediment, oddly representative of the time. I was born in 1974 in Dublin, a second child with a brother 4 years senior. There was a younger brother to come, 8 years later. My parents met at Oxford. My father was working for a BPhil in International Law at Pembroke and my mother was doing English at Somerville: there is rather a long line of Somervillians in my pedigree. My father decided to enter the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, becoming a diplomat. So they travelled.

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Life before Somerville

ANDREW WHELAN came up to read PPE at Somerville in 1998. In 2007 he took a PhD in Sociology at Trinity College Dublin. He is now a lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Media & Communication at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

He is a fourth generation Somervillian. His great-grandmother, Mabel Burdess (Kingsland) came up to Somerville in 1908 to read Lit Hum, his grandmother, June Tillett (Burdess) in 1939 to read Music, his aunt Clare Bonney (Penelope Tillett) in 1964 and his mother Elizabeth Whelan (Tillett) in 1966, both to read English, but his life before Somerville was not what you might expect.

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I was born in 1974 in Dublin, a second child with a brother 4 years senior. There was a younger brother to come, 8 years later.

My parents met at Oxford. My father was working for a BPhil in International Law at Pembroke and my mother was doing English at Somerville: there is rather a long line of Somervillians in my pedigree. My father decided to enter the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, becoming a diplomat. So they travelled.

My older brother remembers Paris when I was a mewling babe, but I do not. I can remember the Taj Mahal, when I was very young, and collecting caterpillars and spent shell casings in Beirut (1978). We had one from a mortar: we used it as an umbrella stand. A gigantic (to me) cockroach crawling most distressingly up my leg in the dark somewhere (probably also Beirut). Sand piling up against the wheels of Mercedes (probably Jeddah), the sun so hot that car door handles were too hot to touch. A ‘Six Millions Dollar Man’ (sic) T-shirt, a ‘reproduction’, of which I was inordinately fond. We were in Kashmir at a time when the Led Zeppelin song of the same name was still in currency. All this before I was seven. Getting spectacular sunburn. On returning ‘home’ to Ireland, I am reported to have said: ‘Why is the sand green in this country?’

My mother once told me that everything went great until I was about 9, and it was all downhill from there. At 15 I left my father’s diplomatic residence on 68th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenue in New York City, preferring to hang out on the Lower East Side. I’d hated and feared school, and developed an impressive and consistent record for truancy. I once got expelled for it, which I thought something of an accomplishment (being disinvited altogether from a party one never showed the slightest inclination to attend).

In 1989, there was a tent city in Tompkins Square Park, and a number of the derelict tenements around it had been converted into squats, many of them lovingly cared for by their occupants. There were activists, punks, large numbers of people who had simply been downsized, deinstitutionalized casualties of care in the community, and people with serious drug and alcohol problems. The neighbourhood was being gentrified, and the word ‘yuppie’ loomed large.

On more than one occasion, navy blue NYPD riot vehicles resembling tanks and armoured personnel carriers flattened the temporary shelters of the homeless people in the park. There were photographs in the Village Voice of the people who lived in the subway tunnels. Ed Koch, Ronald Reagan, voodoo economics. Homeless people marched to the chant: ‘No housing, no peace’. Trash would be set on fire in the middle of the street. I hung around with another boy my age calling himself Casper, who had hitchhiked from Dayton, Ohio. We debated issues, for instance: is it ethically acceptable for vegetarians to wear leather?

There were a lot of young people sleeping in the park or in squats. In winter you would see lines of bodies on the grill vents in the sidewalk, where periodically a rush of hot air would get pushed up out of the subway. Eventually I was caught, and told I could return to Ireland in the nice way, or in the way which involves handcuffs and not being allowed back in. I had, as you might imagine, caused my parents some concern.

At 17, I spent some time with my grandmother, another Somervillian, who did her utmost to support me when I was being so ‘difficult’, and, at 93, is still living in central Oxford. Soon I was officially moved out and living in the ‘other’ Oxford – the one with Cowley and Barton and Blackbird Leys in it, where ‘hotting’ displays were invented. I was in sheltered accommodation for young people, aged 18-24. The young people who stayed there got a place because they had referrals of some kind: they were homeless,



Andrew Whelan (1998, PPE)

or had come out of care, or were at risk in their families, or were on probation, or had mental health or drug issues. Everyone picked up everyone else's talents, be they in the fields of mental health or unorthodox consumption practices.

A 17 year old boy who was asked to leave that hostel died shortly thereafter under the skate ramp on Cowley Road. There was an attempted suicide who was permanently brain damaged. We went to visit her in the Nuffield, but she wasn't there anymore. She couldn't have been over 21. There was intravenous drug use, and there were HIV diagnoses later down the line in consequence. People coming down from crack cocaine would pull knives on you in the corridor. There was broken glass everywhere.

Fortunately for us, rave was happening, and with it came some interesting opportunities for political mobilisation. The practice was, of the fortnightly weekend, to get a lift somehow to Luton. There would be hundreds of cars, vans, and converted buses and

other vehicles parked up, waiting for word as to where the party was. The Exodus Collective would have scouts going through the industrial estates all week scoping unoccupied warehouses. The convoy would end up on one of these estates, and then a bunch of decommissioned east European jeeps and lorries would roll in: the sound system. These vehicles were military green; Exodus would paint red stars on the front of the vehicles. They would tear out a bollard to get close to one of the warehouses, and open up the corrugated shutters like a tin of sardines. They would take under an hour to set up the wall of speakers, and then they would begin letting people in, charging a pound at the door. The dance would go on until noon the following day. The crowds that attended these events were generally fairly disenfranchised, but also extremely diverse.

This was when Michael Howard's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) was coming into Law. Groups of people listening to 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats' were rendered criminal. That phrase is actually in the legislation.

There were huge protests in London in consequence. 'New Age travellers', squatters, and ravers were the targets of this legislation – people who are 'matter out of place'. We were squatting off the Cowley Road, and when the squat was summarily shut, a group of people went to St. Aldate's police station to inquire after those who had been arrested. We were sprayed with fire extinguishers inside the station, and then chased up the street with dogs and batons; it seemed rather heavy-handed at the time, but perhaps this is normal. Another group got arrested, charged with affray (using or threatening unlawful violence 'such as would cause a person of reasonable firmness present at the scene to fear for his personal safety'), and later on spent a week in Crown Court, looking at time. Apparently it cost the state three quarters of a million pounds, a waste of money? We were all acquitted. Trying to run away when people in uniforms with dogs are beating you with sticks may still be legal in the UK, our jury seemed to think it was. I gather however that it's hard to run when you've been kettled.

I was the only one of the accused invited to testify, a dubious honour, but in retrospect I must have been considered presentable. Early in the proceedings someone had the idea of asking George Monbiot if he might like to say something supportive somewhere on the issues around the case, the Act, and the right to assembly, but he declined. I recall my indomitable barrister (Legal Aid) saying she remembered being chased by mounted

police across Hyde Park in her youth. She had been chanting ‘Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh’. I also vividly remember the efforts of the Socialist Workers Party. In one squat which had been running just fine, they came in one day and said there would be a meeting, and minutes would be taken. There would be a chair, a secretary, and a treasurer. The ravers and crusties were mystified, some people walked out in disgust. What a blessing that I did not know then what I know now about the terrors of neoliberalized academic administration.

As time progressed things began to get tricky. People were taking more and more drugs, of more consuming varieties. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do and not much to look forward to. Eventually, there was even Tony Blair. The nooks and crannies of the periphery seemed to be getting harder to live in. Some of the people I knew were literally disassembling. Eventually I decided it was time to get somewhere else. Unlike many of the people around me, I had a head start in formulating an escape plan: a thorough grounding in the right sort of cultural capital. I had read voraciously, and of course I had been supported and encouraged in that. Wherever we were growing up, the house was always stuffed full of books. Some kinds of drop-outs can bounce back in.

I began attending a ‘Return to Learn’ course at Ruskin College on Walton Street: anyone could walk in off the street to this course, and this still amazes me, that Ruskin offered that and that money would be put towards that. Help and encouragement from my family went a long way too. I was encouraged at Ruskin to continue and eventually got the sort of piece of paper from there which might count for something in an application to university. I also got a reference from my Ruskin tutor, who did research in the sociology of popular music, an area I remain very interested in. I don’t know what she put in it, but she had great faith in my capacity to go on.

I was invited to an interview at Somerville, one of the most interesting and nerve-racking conversations of my life. Nobody who interviewed me knew that my family had, one might say, previous form with the College.

Now I live in Wollongong, a de-industrialized city south of Sydney. I lecture in the Sociology program in the School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication. My first year PPE tutorials were an hour’s duration with four students in attendance. Here we spend an hour a week with about 25 first-years, a high proportion of whom are ‘first-in-family’ (to attend university, that is). Wollongong was devastated by redundancies in the

local steelworks in a number of rounds affecting three generations. It is a working-class Australian city, but the university is now the largest employer, followed closely by the hospital. I have the good fortune of investigating with students how all of this came to pass and what we might make of it.

I teach social theory, microsociology, and sociology of youth culture. I do this because I think it might be a useful thing to do, and because it is fun, but I do it also because I want to be like the people who taught me and put faith in me in Oxford; I wanted to be like them pretty much as soon as I met them.

ANDREW WHELAN