

**Stephen MacKeith, born 1906, growing up in Southampton,
one of ten children**

(His brother Donald Kenneth died 5 years before Stephen was born)

'A long time ago at number 66 Howard Road in Southampton there lived a family called the MacKeiths, and along the road at number 46 there lived a family called the Haslers ...'

.....Pause. Bated breath as the six listening children wait to see which story will be told this time. Will it be the one about Monica being tipped into the pond on Southampton Common? Or 'Lean Out!' the one about Stephen riding on his brother Malcolm's motor bike all the way to Oxford? Or about the boy with a cleft palate leaning over the side of the boat on the way to the Isle of Wight saying 'Sharks? Sharks?' Or the Laughing Shoes on the Isle of Wight? Or Stephen's comment to the mother of a school friend, 'Are you by any chance related to the vulture or scavenger bird?' Or Stephen's humiliation as John Bull There will be others I have forgotten. Ask my siblings.

These stories had a ritualistic quality and they were deeply moralistic. He had a strong sense of fun and a not very 'politically correct' approach in telling them which in no way lessened their moral impact. He had a sense of self depreciation and not taking himself too seriously, a useful lesson in life.

These stories gave me a sense of him and his siblings being children – once. This is not an easy concept for children faced with grown-ups – how were these grown-ups ever CHILDREN?! Well, stories about them as children helped us to think of them as

having been young once. Maybe it helped us to imagine we might grow into adults.

These stories were so much part of my childhood that I assumed all children had such stories. My request for my Bartrum Cousins to confirm the details of one story were met with a blank look. 'What stories Lucy?' Imagine! They hadn't heard any of them!

But we were lucky. Here are my remembered versions some of the stories:

Lean Out!

Stephen rode with his older brother Malcolm on a motor bike all the way to Oxford where Malcolm was studying medicine. (I remember it being as a pillion passenger, a brother is sure it was in a side car). Malcolm was born in 1895 and was thus eleven years older than Stephen, so I imagine Stephen made that journey in his teens. What a journey to make with his big brother! Basically Stephen told the story of this helmetless ride and what happened at bends in the road. Stephen was a keen motorist as an adult and while I don't remember the detail, I suspect he would have told us the roads they travelled along, where they changed from one road to another, the places they passed. Most importantly, the tension would build up as they approached a corner, us children would get ready to join in the refrain, and as the duo got to the corner, we would all join in Malcolm's instructions to his passenger and shout in unison 'Lean Out!' It was an exciting journey.

Where are the Sharks?

Stephen told stories about two boys at his school who had speech defects. One had a cleft palate and one had another condition

creating a speech defect. We were struck dumb as he imitated their speech. We were fascinated. And there was a terrible tale of when one of these boys was teased and eventually lost the roof plate for his cleft palate over the side of a boat on a day trip to the Isle of Wight.

Lots of boys kept telling this one boy that there were sharks in the sea and had him running from one side of the boat to the other looking for the sharks. As he went from one side to the other he looked over the side crying 'Where are the sharks? Where are the sharks?' When his plate finally fell out of his mouth into the sea, Stephen imitated his voice in an even more exaggerated way. (This is difficult to convey in a written version of the story) 'Ere ar a arks? Ere ar a arks?' We didn't feel very comfortable laughing at this story. It wasn't a very comfortable story. I don't think it was meant to be.

Laughing Shoes

Family holidays were spent locally on the Isle of Wight. The MacKeith family was a large family and whilst father Alexander earned a good living as a doctor, clothes were handed down and money reserved for important matters like education.

Stephen talked about how they had good holidays, they were fun. One time he was chasing after siblings on a run, hampered by worn out shoes whose stitching was broken at the front, perhaps his toes were pushing beyond the front of the shoes. As he passed a local child, they were hysterical with laughter, pointing at Stephen's feet and saying, 'Look! Look! Your shoes are laughing! Your shoes are laughing!' I remember Stephen conveyed a feeling of humiliation at having only old worn out shoes to wear but he also managed to demonstrate that there

wasn't anything actually shameful about having second hand clothes, there was no need to feel bad about it. He would build up the tension as we waited for the punch line and have us all in hysterics about 'laughing shoes' by the end of the story.

Are you related to the Vulture or Scavenger Bird?

Stephen knew that there were families who had much more money than his because he knew them. He also knew that a family with many children had to share more than a family with only a few or even only one child.

He had a good friend from school from such a family. Eventually he was invited to his friend's house for tea. (I wish I could remember the name, I'm sure he told us) So he went to the house. They played. And then it was time for tea.

In the MacKeith household you had to eat plenty of bread and butter before you could have anything like a cake – and I suspect that they weren't very rich sugary cakes either. You were also expected to finish everything on your plate. Good Scottish Puritan values useful with a large family.

In this house there were only cakes! Even more shocking, Stephen's school friend didn't even finish the cakes he had chosen, his mother finished them. As Stephen explained to us children when telling this story, he had recently been learning about vultures and their place in the world of Nature – so interesting to understand how the world worked. So after some time observing, he politely said to his friend's mother, 'Are you by any chance related to the vulture or scavenger bird?'

He explained that he was never invited back to that house again.

And so we learnt about values of not wasting things and how you sometimes need to not say the first thing that comes into your mind, even if it is an interesting and accurate observation. Good lessons in life.

Stephen as John Bull

Stephen as John Bull has the addition of a photo to help us understand the story though he used to tell us the story without the picture.

Born in 1906, Stephen was a child of WWI. He was eight when war broke out, twelve when it ended. His brother Malcolm went to the front as a young medic and never really recovered from the experience. His father was doctor to the local Territorial Army. Impressionable years.

He used to tell us how he had the great honour of being selected to play John Bull, to epitomise the pride of the nation, for a show for the soldiers who returned from the front. He was proudly kitted out in a smart outfit – see the photo, I suspect he may have described each item of his outfit in great detail when telling us the story without the photo to show us. How proud he was!

It was a great disappointment to discover that he was not going to have a real bull dog for the procession but the photo shows us that he remained proud of his role. I don't think studio portraits were often taken of the MacKeith children so the photo alone acknowledges an important occasion.

The moment arrived – the returned soldiers were sat on either side of the aisle for the procession to come up the middle, many

of them wounded, limbs missing, some in wheel chairs. Stephen was ready to play his proud part.

And so he began his walk up the aisle but as he progressed a silence fell .. and then the irrepressible laughter from the audience ... why? Stephen would describe to us how the toy dog did not contribute to the solemnity of the occasion because it had landed on its back and so he was dragging it along on its back, legs in air, instead of being boldly the right way up!

Stephen described his deep humiliation at what was happening, how his pride in playing this part disintegrated and he no longer felt proud, just embarrassed. I can't remember if he talked about how the soldiers may have felt having been at the front and seen the realities of war rather than the glorified version those at home heard, being at some distance from the real action. Or did he add those layers later? Did I add them myself as an adult in later years?

It was an example of Stephen telling a story against himself, conveying deep feelings about important matters even if it was clothed in an entertaining form, causing our eyes to open in wide disbelief and lack of understanding of adult matters even as we felt that there were important matters imbedded in the story. I have wondered how key this story was to his later adoption of a career in psychiatry which led him to work with soldiers in WWII which started only twenty-one years later.

(I'm afraid I can't remember the details of Monica being tipped into the pond on Southampton Common. Or perhaps it was another younger twin, Ronald or Kaye, and Monica was sent home to get help from adults as one of the older children in charge of an outing without adults to the Common?

There's was a story about the visiting French boy but I can't remember that either.

I have been unable to trace the details of MacGranny's story of the *Rats and the Peas* ...)

He told us stories and he also sang us songs, many of them WWI songs such as *Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag* and *Tipperary*. I can still hear his voice in my head when I sing *The Raging Seas Did Roar*, a satisfyingly repetitive song to sing with children, and the marching song *I had a good home which I left, left, left*. Incidentally, these songs are also great to teach non-English speakers our difficult language!

Looking back I realise that my father was so committed to his work and his role as breadwinner for a large family that, like many fathers, he was with his wife and family less than we might have all wanted. Perhaps this added extra poignancy to what he gave us – stories and songs – when he was with us. The scarce time he gave us gave it extra value. The stories were told at memorable times like between our different bedrooms, at home and on holiday, Dad perching on a chair on the landing, speaking in a quiet tone. As an adult I realise his purpose may have been to lull us to sleep rather than to hear the story to the end! The songs were sung in the car, often keeping tired, wriggling children content enough to complete the journey quietly.

In the 1980s and 90s Stephen used to visit me in Devon where I lived, and he spent a lot of time looking into his mother's family history. His mother (Alice Gadd) had come from Exeter and she left the county of Devon to go and live with her Scottish husband (Alexander MacKeith) in Southampton. In my turn, I have

enjoyed visiting a particular friend in Southampton and thinking about Stephen's stories of his childhood there.

I have often found myself thinking of these stories throughout my life. Something will trigger the memory of one of them. We don't always understand things when they are happening, do we? It wasn't until I became a grandparent that I got an understanding of what it might have been like for my parents with their grandchildren. It wasn't until my brother Jim died that I even thought about what it must have been like for my father when three of his siblings died in 1977 when he was in his early seventies.

I am grateful to Stephen for the raw material of these stories and songs from his childhood. They have provided an introduction to a kind of speculation about family and history.

Lucy MacKeith November 2019.