

THEODORE DEODATUS NATHANIEL BESTERMAN



A personal memoir of his step-grandfather by
Tristram Besterman
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Frontispiece: portrait of Theodore Besterman made at Studio Harcourt, Paris, in the late 1940s. It is inscribed by Theodore to his wife, Evelyn, my paternal grandmother. Studio Harcourt was formed in 1934 and is renowned for its black and white portraits of celebrities and the élite of Paris society. Still active today, Studio Harcourt boasts an inimitable style that is “Le mariage entre mystère et légende”.

Preamble

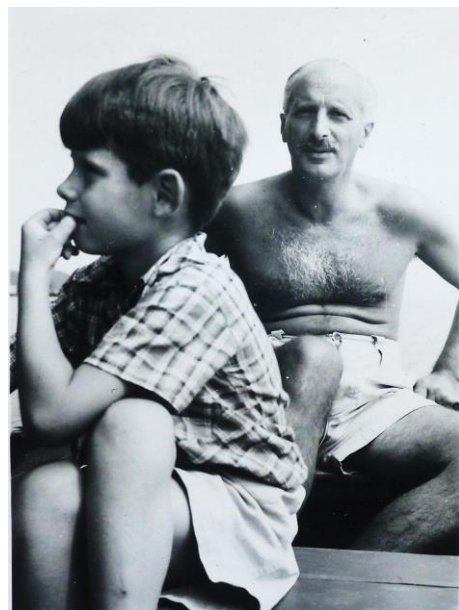
In assembling these recollections, I have responded to an invitation by Professor Nicholas Cronk, Director of The Voltaire Foundation at the University of Oxford, who suggested that my personal memories would complement the excellent account of Theodore Besterman's life and achievements by Giles Barber¹, written in 2010 for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

I have drawn on a number of sources: my own memories of the man who was the nearest thing to a paternal grandfather in my life; a few handwritten notes, photographs and letters passed down to me; stories about him that were passed on orally by my father, Edwin Besterman (these have the ring of truth about them, albeit inevitably embellished with repeated telling by an accomplished raconteur); and last, my father's succinct, type-written memoir on his family.

I have structured this account in four parts. *Family background* is self-explanatory. *Earlier fragments* covers the period before my birth and *Later fragments* the period after. In the final section, *Reflections*, I ponder the complexities and contradictions that characterise Theodore's distinctive *persona*.

My encounters with Theodore were intermittent throughout my childhood and into young adulthood – I was 27 when Theodore died in 1976. Whilst he was a rather remote and intimidating figure in my life, the times that I did spend with him made a deep and lasting impression. I still feel his influence, much of it beneficial.

Right: Theodore and the author aged about five in a boat on Lake Geneva, Coppet, in 1955.



¹ http://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/www_vf/about_us/documents/Bbiog4Vfwebsitev3.pdf

Family background

Sometime after Theodore's birth in Łódź, Poland in 1904, his parents, Benjamin Besterman and Gołda Augusta Krengiel emigrated to England with their little boy. The indirect lineage that connects me to Theodore requires explanation. Twenty years after Theodore's birth in Eastern Europe, the scene shifts to the east coast of the United States, where my father, Edwin Kahn (junior), was born on 4 May 1924. He was only six months old when his biological father, Edwin Kahn (senior), died from *encephalitis lethargica* contracted at the end of an epidemic that broke out in the USA in 1919.

His young widow, my grandmother Evelyn, was a tall New Yorker of striking appearance, and when a decent period of time had elapsed after Edwin senior's death, a succession of young men paid court. She was a sophisticated, vivacious, educated and intelligent woman of means, though the Depression had substantially reduced her personal fortune. On board ship bound for Brazil with my father, aged about ten, she met a fellow passenger, Theodore Besterman, who was travelling for the Society for Psychical Research to investigate mediums in the USA and South America. A combination of good looks, wit and charm (devastating when he chose to exercise it) made him very attractive to women. Several years Evelyn's junior, he and she hit it off and contrived to be on the same ship for the return journey.

When Theodore and Evelyn married in 1936, it was second time around for both of them. My father was young enough for it to be expedient for him to assume the same surname as his re-married mother, so his patronymic was formally changed from Kahn to Besterman, the name that has now passed down through our branch of the family.

Theodore was quite open about his ambivalence to family life. He was wary of anything that might unduly distract him from his work, so contact with family was conducted to fit in with his rigorously disciplined work schedule. He told my father that a man must choose either to have a successful career or to raise a family, and not to delude himself that he could do both. To someone as driven as Theodore must have been to

complete the monumental literary projects that he set himself – from the *World Bibliography of Bibliographies* to the Voltaire correspondence, to name but two - the possibility of a family life must have seemed not just an unnecessary diversion but a real threat.

Theodore died of cancer in 1976, without issue despite three marriages and numerous female conquests (for which some time must have been spared).

Earlier fragments

The story goes that as a consequence of both his parents working, young Theodore was left to his own devices during the day, with an apple in his pocket to sustain him. They may have lived close to Bloomsbury, because he found his way to The British Museum and thence to the Reading Room, where he proceeded to educate himself. Such parental insouciance about his education and welfare is difficult to reconcile with the kind of parental adoration that would bestow upon an only child the names ‘god-given’ in Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

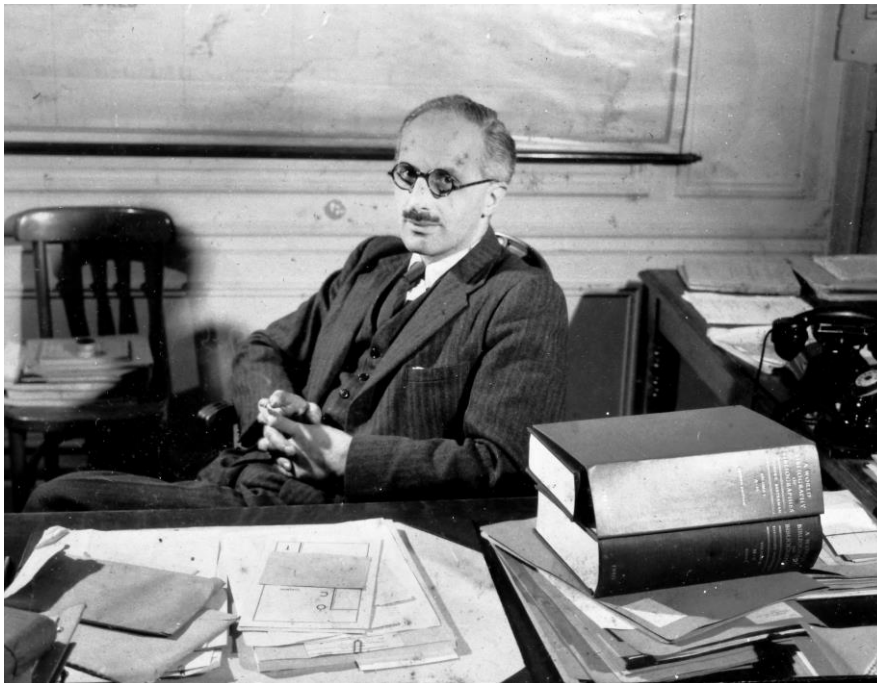
Following their marriage in 1936, Theodore and Evelyn set up home together in Hampstead, in Guyon House, a handsome eighteenth century terraced house on Heath Street. Soon after, he established the Guyon House Press at 100 Bunhill Row, London, naming it after his new home. He later claimed that it was the only press “in the country in which the entire work was done under one roof: the editing, the setting, the printing, and the binding².”



² Besterman, T. 1974. *Fifty Years a Bookman*. Reprint of The Arundell Esdaile Lecture 1973 to The English Association and Library Association, London p. 11.

In Hampstead, they employed a butler, who, on discovering that his employer had set up a press, handed in his notice. When asked why, he explained that he was a ‘gentleman’s gentleman’; a printer, he considered, was not a fitting occupation for a gentleman. The subsequent exchange is unrecorded but happily resulted in the notice being withdrawn.

As a maker, I can identify with the Theodore who immersed himself in the detailed craftsmanship of *making* a book. Specifying the paper, the binding, the typeface and inks: he supervised every particular. The books printed in 1938/9 at the Guyon House and the Golden Cockerel Presses convey a sense of delight in skilled craftsmanship and design and are a joy to hold. The important materiality of the book is tangible. *Magna Carta and other charters of English liberties*, published by the Guyon House Press in 1938, as Giles Barber reports, was made in a limited edition of 256 using “Tyrian red, blue and black titling, head and tail pieces by Berthold Wolpe, (one) of the great designers of the period”.



Theodore about 1938, in a panelled room, probably at Guyon House, Hampstead.

He is holding a cigarette; on the desk are volumes from the second edition of *The World Bibliography of Bibliographies*.

The Pilgrim Fathers, printed at the Golden Cockerel Press, credits Geoffrey Wales for his fine wood engravings with the same typographic weight as Theodore Besterman, as editor³. Opposite the title page, the names of the men who undertook the printing are recorded (Christopher Sandford and

³ See end-piece.

Owen Rutter), as is the typeface (Polyphilus), the paper (Arnold's mould-made) and the date it was completed (30th day of March, 1939). There is something defiantly unquenchable about such civilised creativity being celebrated in one corner of Europe as in another books were being burned by the Nazis. The press proved – at least temporarily – less mighty than the sword as it, too, was consumed by the flames of the London *blitz* in 1940.

Evelyn supported Theodore for much of this time, which is when he began work on *The World Bibliography of Bibliographies*. As if he were not sufficiently occupied with his bibliographic work and running a small publishing enterprise, in 1938 Theodore was selected as the Labour candidate in the constituency of Warwick and Leamington in the run-up to the general election scheduled to take place by 1940. This was a parliamentary seat that Anthony Eden, the Tory incumbent, had held with a comfortable majority for many years. If Theodore was seriously considering a political career at this stage, two things scuppered it. First was the outbreak of war, which postponed the general election. Second was Theodore's inability to suffer fools gladly, coupled with his capacity for biting irony. During the course of an interview with the local press, the reporter noticed the Irish Setter in the Labour candidate's home. Asked what he fed it on, Theodore replied, "Caviar and foie gras, of course." The ensuing headline was as damaging as it was inevitable: "Labour candidate feeds pet on luxury food".

The on-line archive for the *Leamington Spa Courier* reports several more interventions from Theodore as prospective Labour candidate until 1942, including a handsome tribute to his political adversary. The Edens and Bestermans became close friends and Theodore publicly praised Eden for his pre-war anti-appeasement stance.

Theodore and Evelyn with their Irish Setter probably in the garden of Guyon House, about 1937.



It seems entirely possible that Theodore lost his appetite for politics when he discovered how the irrational theatricality of party politics ran counter to the common good and trampled the common ground he found across the political divide – caviar or no. Theodore remained trenchantly left wing and, with his taste for the finer things in life, would now be dubbed a champagne socialist.

Early discharge from the Royal Artillery on medical grounds was followed by Theodore's service as an air raid warden, joining Evelyn in Civil Defence in north London.

Evelyn became friends with another warden, Edith Heald, who lived in nearby Cannon Place. Through their friendship, Audrey Heald, an ambulance driver and third daughter of Edith and Dr C.B. Heald, met Edwin; they were married in 1944. After the war they had two sons, Harvey and me.



From left to right: Theodore, Evelyn and my father, Edwin. This may have been taken around 1942, when Edwin went up to Cambridge to read medicine. During the vacation he, too, worked for Civil Defence.

An acute post-war shortage of housing drove up property prices, particularly in blitzed London. When they sold Guyon House in the late 1940s, Theodore and Evelyn asked the same price that they had paid in 1936, because they could not countenance profiteering from the war. (The house was bought by a rather less scrupulous though distinguished physician from St Mary's Hospital, who promptly sold it on for a vast profit. During the 1960s Guyon House was the home of the actor, Peter O'Toole).

The sale of Guyon House was prompted by Theodore's move to Paris to join Julian Huxley, the first Director General at UNESCO. Theodore was appointed Head of the Department of Exchange of Information. In the French capital, the Bestermans lived in a lovely flat close to the newly

established UNESCO headquarters at 19 Avenue Kléber, in sight of the Arc de Triomphe. In post-war Paris, they flourished and made many lasting friends in the circle of artists, writers, scientists and diplomats to which Theodore's work at UNESCO gave him access. Evelyn was in her element, and became involved in refugee relief and the English Speaking Union.

In a world shattered by war and trying to get to grips with its causes, the UNESCO project was controversial from the start. In his published account⁴, Theodore explains and defends the fledgling organisation – it had come under fire from many quarters, including luminaries such as T.S. Eliot. Against this backdrop of negativity, Theodore looked forward to a time when the organisation would become “a positive philosophical source of energy... if UNESCO is not to relapse into a diffused benevolence. At that moment scientific humanism may come into its own.”⁵



A reception for UNESCO delegates at Chateau de Coppet in the early 1950s. Theodore can be glimpsed, facing camera, in front of the left doorway.

⁴ Besterman, T. 1951. *UNESCO: Peace in the Minds of Men*. Methuen, London.

⁵ *ibid.* p.109.

The choice of words reflects both Theodore's own and Huxley's deeply held convictions. Their work at UNESCO was a courageous attempt to put Enlightenment values into the service of mankind. These supplied the philosophical underpinning for a vision of the world safeguarded from oppression through universal education, tolerance and freedom of expression. From today's perspective, never have such ideas seemed more important, albeit that they are once again and most infamously, under sustained and ferocious assault.

Later fragments

As I write this, I have on my desk a copy of *Tristram Shandy*⁶. It is inscribed in fountain pen, "Tristram – to start his library, with all love from Popsie⁷", dated 4.2.50 – a few months after my birth.

At the end of Huxley's term of office at UNESCO, the Bestermans returned to London, where they lived in a flat in Bentinck Street behind the Wigmore Hall. Theodore became increasingly immersed in the writings of Voltaire and studies of the French Enlightenment. In 1952 they moved to Geneva, where Theodore was appointed founding Director of the Institut et Musée Voltaire at Les Délices, Voltaire's former town house, owned by Geneva City Council. It was an arrangement from which both sides should have benefited – Theodore brought both his extensive library with its collection of manuscripts and his intellectual energy, whilst the city fathers provided the building and a salary.

The elision of the persons of twentieth century Theodore Besterman and eighteenth century Voltaire – at least in Theodore's mind - reached a kind of apotheosis in this period. This is where I, as a small boy, have my earliest memory of meeting both men. My mother, brother and I had taken a BEA night flight from Heathrow to Geneva, and a sleepy five-year-old Tristram was bundled out of the taxi at Les Délices and told to go

⁶ Sterne, L. 1759-1767 (originally in nine volumes). *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman, and a Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. Reprinted Hutchinson & Co, London 1906.

⁷ When Theodore married my grandmother, reluctant to address his stepfather as daddy or Theodore, my father called him Popsie and his mother, for the sake of parity, Mopsie. This must have been with their blessing, for those are the names by which our family knew and addressed them, and by which they signed letters to my brother and me.

inside the house and wait there. I negotiated the spooky shadows to climb the steps and passed through a vast doorway into the dimly lit entrance hall, where I encountered an apparition. There, sitting at his desk, quill pen in hand was a man, half-turned away and only faintly discernible in the gloom. Was this my grandfather and if so, why was he sitting motionless and dressed in quaint, old-fashioned clothes? I didn't wait to find out, turned and fled. The real Theodore had by this time appeared outside, and amused by my incoherent terror, explained that this was a model made in wax of the original owner of the house, a man called Voltaire. Out of the minds of babes, indeed: the figures of Voltaire and Theodore long remained interchangeable in my young imagination.



Evelyn at the entrance to Les Délices, early 1950s.

Les Délices was a staging post for a holiday that Theodore and Evelyn provided for the family at the Chateau de Coppet on Lake Geneva, which they must have rented for a month or so in August. The Chateau no doubt held happy memories from their UNESCO days. I remember two summers spent there, an idyllic time for us boys, let loose in the grounds, with fishing and swimming off the short wooden jetty. Theodore swam

regularly and was no mean oarsman. On one occasion we narrowly avoided disaster when a storm blew up unexpectedly and threatened to capsize our small boat with the family in it, as we returned from an excursion across the lake. As he had with my father, Theodore taught me chess and somehow contrived to let me win!



In a rowing boat moored to the jetty at Chateau de Coppet, about 1954. My elder brother, Harvey in the bows; Evelyn amidships; then me and Theodore in in the stern.

My memory of both Evelyn and Theodore in this period was one of relaxed elegance and poise, in surroundings that seemed to my eyes entirely opulent. For me, coming from the smog-filled, drab, bomb-damaged London of the 1950s, where eating out meant Lyons Corner House, they seemed to me to be as exotic and alluring as birds of paradise at the zoo. Always clinging to Theodore was the scent of panatelas, which he loved to smoke and went on smoking through all the time that I knew him.



Theodore was a dapper man, a few inches shorter than Evelyn. When reading, he would don a pair of very heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, over which he could raise an eyebrow in quizzical disbelief. The neatly trimmed moustache was equally mobile when the upper lip was prompted to curl in disdain. Done as a party trick for the amusement of children was one thing – only later would I understand these as weapons deployed to devastate a disagreeable interlocutor.

Theodore outside the entrance to Les Délices, early 1950s.

Another foible was an inability to roll an English ‘r’ at the front of the tongue. To get around this small impediment, he pronounced his ‘r’s the French way, which to my ears only added to the sense of the exotic.

When Theodore and Evelyn came to England during the 1950s, they would visit us and sometimes treat us to an outing.

An elephant ride at Whipsnade about 1958. Theodore seated between my brother Harvey (hand raised) and my best chum Christopher. Theodore may be pointing at me, waiting my turn.



During our last stay at Coppet, I made a large number of small animals out of Plasticine. Like most children, I loved making things and happily occupied myself by the hour modelling an extensive menagerie. Theodore was genuinely interested in my output and convinced himself that I was a sculptor in the making. I have four black and white postcards of Les Délices, commissioned by Evelyn, on the back of which she writes to my mother in about 1954, “I hope that Tristram has settled down in the Lycée” (in South Kensington)... “it is exciting about his modelling and I hope it really develops.” For years afterwards Theodore would ask if I was pursuing what he had evidently convinced himself was my true *métier*. Hardly an Epstein in the making, I fear that I was in this, as in much else, a disappointment to him.



One of four postcards of les Délices, commissioned by Evelyn in the 1950s to raise funds for the Institut et Musée Voltaire.

Those same postcards, used as four sheets of notepaper, carry a cryptic message about a brewing storm at Les Délices. Evelyn writes vividly, “Just a moment before the storm... Our latest tragedy – water in the cellar under the library where books are stored! City can’t or won’t fix it which means moving publications stock where?... I

am planning carbon copy reports of the weekend if still living by Monday... The gardeners are madly neating up (*sic*) planters, etc. – all that should be routine. They expected a laurel wreath from me but instead got a poison ivy one as I said ‘I hope it’ll be kept that way always’. The ‘floral’ decorations in the Institut have come straight from a sordid funeral (parlour?): undusted palms and ferns. It’s really an outrage. I hope the crush will be so great no-one will notice. Excuse this horrid note – which I hope you can read. I just wanted a tiny chat with you to help me through the day.”

Theodore’s tenure at Les Délices was destined to end in tears, with the tragicomic inevitability of grand opera. Theodore had no truck with petty-fogging Swiss officialdom and they would no doubt have found M. le Directeur no less difficult to deal with. The atmosphere became increasingly poisonous as acrimonious accusation and counter accusation flew between the Geneva authorities and Theodore. At issue was the removal and sale of items from the collection at Les Délices, with ownership hotly disputed by both sides. There was a costly court case, which Theodore lost. To the end, Theodore bristled with indignation about the whole sorry affair, which he consistently attributed to the underhand means by which the Geneva authorities wanted to be shot of him.

A published letter from Theodore⁸ mounts a scathing attack on a Mr Wilson, who had assumed that an output such as Theodore’s could only have been achieved with state subsidy and a small army of workers. Far from it, Theodore boasts, “Pray forgive me for mentioning that my edition of Voltaire’s correspondence was a fairly substantial undertaking – 20,000 letters, hundreds of appendixes, tens of thousands of notes, 107 volumes. Yet it was planned and carried out single-handed, with one secretary and for part of the time, one assistant.” That was true. He also denies any reliance on “help or subsidy of any kind from any French organism”. This was a reference to the production of the Voltaire correspondence whilst Theodore was at Les Délices, an enterprise which was substantially underwritten by the Swiss authorities, a fact that is conveniently omitted.

⁸ The New York Review of Books Volume 11, Number 11. 19 December, 1968.

This glossing is neatly elided with his declaration that “A new edition is now in the press... again undertaken without subsidy of any kind.”

And it wasn't only his official appointment that ended in tears. Both Theodore and Evelyn were fluent in French and German, but as her cards to my mother show, Evelyn found life in Geneva uncongenial after London and Paris. She disliked the small-minded provincialism and snobbery that characterised Geneva society and found the continual quarrels with the city council wearisome. Her relationship with Theodore had been patched up after numerous affairs but was clearly under strain. When a new love interest developed inside Les Délices, where Marie Louise van Muyden was working, Evelyn decided to call it a day and moved back to London, where she occupied a small but well-appointed flat in Portland Place until her death from cancer in 1965.

Evelyn and Theodore divorced. Theodore must have found himself suddenly in quite straitened circumstances, with the loss of both a salaried job and a grace-and-favour roof over his head, and with no further recourse to Evelyn's financial support. He was, however, a resourceful man who was capable of directing a formidable intelligence towards any new challenge. Voltaire, he knew, had supported himself through both publishing and shrewd investment. If Voltaire could do it, so could he. Theodore applied his mind to the stock market. He set himself the target of making his first million in two years. That he succeeded in the 1960s was no mean feat. He went on to amass a private fortune of sufficient size to support his work as an independent man of letters, as a collector and to support a lifestyle that allowed him to acquire and enjoy the best of everything. From a spacious flat in Pall Mall to a large country residence near Banbury, he was able to afford to live sumptuously. He kept a superb cellar and amassed a substantial collection of art.

I visited Theodore at his spacious flat in Pall Mall soon after he bought it, in about 1964. It was being adapted and fitted out to accommodate his library and study at the time. No expense was spared as he supervised a small army of workmen. He singled out, from the many tradesmen traipsing through his flat, carpenters as ‘particularly good sorts’. He gave

me lunch at his club, the Reform, whose founding political agenda would have appealed to him. It was conveniently just around the corner from his flat, and the cuisine reminded me of my boarding school. Later that year, he invited me to his flat-warming party, where I mingled with the throng. This must have been as I was embarking on O-Levels. Theodore introduced me to a friendly, elderly man, who asked me what I wanted to be. "A biologist", I replied. "Why?", came the inevitable rejoinder. Now I began to flounder, improvising *'Just William'* style, managing a rather lame, "well, because I'm interested in animals, I s'pose" (I had devoured all Gerald Durrell's books as a boy, so was something of an expert on the subject.) He smiled benignly and made some encouraging remark before wandering off. Theodore came over. "Well how did you get on? That was Julian Huxley."

I was by this time quite wary of Theodore, having been scarred a few times by a rap over the knuckles occasioned by some minor slip of the tongue or an indefensible gap in my knowledge. Looking back, my defensiveness says as much about me as it might about him. On one occasion, in his hearing, I used the expression, 'touch wood'. "Don't be revolting," came the stern rebuke. Only later did I understand the offence that superstition would give to an Enlightenment scholar for whom the virtue of tolerance did not extend to embracing the ignorance of youth.

Because Theodore's own childhood had been so unusual and he had an intellect so refined and developed through self-education, I think a normal boy's mental capacity and pursuits were incomprehensible to him.

He didn't have it all his own way. A year before his death, I took my fiancée, Perry, to meet him at his last home, Thorpe Mandeville manor house. Theodore was very hospitable and in expansive mood. He greeted us wearing a dark maroon, quilted, silk smoking jacket. Looking out of the windows of his huge study onto the lawn that curved down to the valley below, he spotted a bird a few yards away. "What an extraordinary bird," he exclaimed and enquired if I knew what it might be. It was a starling. What a relief to realise that he didn't know everything and that I even knew something he didn't! At the time anyone who lived in London was familiar with the vast, wheeling murmurations of starling that came to

roost on the buildings in and around Trafalgar Square as dusk darkened the capital. Nonetheless, a close encounter with one was a rarity.

Theodore's study at Thorpe Mandeville was appointed to fulfil its function as Voltaire studies mission control. It occupied one of the largest rooms on the ground floor of the manor house, with a vast desk at its centre. I remember this had a curved outline. Behind his revolving chair was a low book-case, perhaps twenty foot long, built in a crescent shape, whose arc centred on his chair. It was beautifully designed to place within easy reach all the volumes to which he needed ready access.

The only shadow that day was cast by the chilly relationship between Theodore and Marie Louise.

To his great credit, after his divorce from Evelyn, Theodore continued to keep in touch with us and maintained an interest in my brother and me. He attended a concert at my school, when I performed a 'cello concerto with the school orchestra – even if his sole observation afterwards was that I was rather too quiet. He invited my brother and me to stay with him and Marie Louise in a vast French chateau one summer. As boys will, we were happy to entertain ourselves in the grounds, catching lizards and making dens. Marie Louise was a kindly woman, if also somewhat ill at ease with children. I remember comparatively little contact with Theodore, who may have continued to work while there on vacation.

That is not to say that Theodore was unable to relax and enjoy quite normal forms of escapism. He loved movies, particularly westerns.

He also loved animals and was quite soppy with them. As well as the Irish Setter he had in the 1930s, he introduced Evelyn to Siamese cats; she doted on a particularly neurotic pair in her London flat until the end. Theodore went on to keep a Pyrenean Mountain Dog during his marriage to Marie Louise. I remember it fondly, because it was big, soft and cuddly, and was called Jean-Jacques. Theodore enjoyed the in-joke of having an animal named after Rousseau that he could call to order. Theodore addressed all animals as 'pussy cat' – regardless of its species.

Theodore was genuinely interested in art and enjoyed the company of artists. Jacob Epstein was a friend – the story goes that he oversaw the delivery of a consignment of sculptures to New York, for which he received a bronze bust in lieu of payment. During Theodore's time at UNESCO, Edmond Xavier (known as Peter) Kapp became a friend – he made a pen-and-ink portrait of Julian Huxley in 1947. Theodore had a sketch by Peter Kapp of a figure curled up asleep on a London Underground platform, taking shelter during the blitz. It is reminiscent of the series by Henry Moore.

Theodore was the intimate, for a time, of Mary Kessel, a war artist who arrived some weeks after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where her small drawings seem curiously detached from the horrors she was spared by the time of her arrival. She had had a close relationship with Kenneth, later Lord, Clark, who chaired the War Artists Advisory Committee between 1939 to 1945.

From the early 1960s, Theodore decided to collect art seriously. He sought advice from an authoritative insider, who understood the trade. At the time, British watercolours were out of favour, so Theodore began to buy judiciously, against little competition. Apart from pursuing a policy of acquisition that prefigured Warren Buffett in the world of investment, Theodore had, I believe, a good eye. In June 1969, an exhibition was mounted at the Leger Galleries in London, entitled *English Watercolours and Drawings from the Collection of Theodore Besterman*. The catalogue provides evidence of a collection that spanned 250 years of English watercolourists. It includes, *inter alia*, works by Bratby, Constable, Peter de Wint, Flaxman, Rowlandson, Gillray, Hepworth, Kneller, Lear, Lowry, Millais, Palmer, Reynolds, Rosetti, Sandby, Sickert, Sutherland, Tissot, Turner and Zoffany. And a couple of Mary Kessells. Instead of cashing in his investment, when interest in watercolours returned, he first offered his collection to the nation. Characteristically, he made conditions, which were non-negotiable. He was prepared to allow his collection to be displayed in its entirety either in a dedicated extension at the Dulwich Picture Gallery or in refurbished rooms in Somerset House. The latter option was prescient in terms of today's use of the building but neither

alternative was acceptable to the Government. Piqued by his treatment by an ungrateful nation, he consigned the whole collection for sale through Sotheby's auction rooms. The sale, I was told, lasted two days.

Reflections

When I was reading for a degree in natural sciences at Cambridge in the late 1960s, I received repeated invitations to tea from a Mr Leigh, Fellow of Trinity College, which happened also to be my college. This was Ralph Alexander Leigh, an eminent modern languages scholar and specialist in Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was curious to meet the grandson of his colleague, Theodore. As a science student and having experienced Theodore's intolerance of my boundless ignorance, I hardly relished the prospect of a cosy chat about the Enlightenment in Leigh's rooms in Great Court. So I always found an excuse politely to decline his invitation. I had my come-uppance a few years later, when I received my MA and found myself sitting next to Leigh at high table – a position he had deliberately contrived. His first words to me were a reproach, "why did you never accept my invitation to tea when you were *in statu pupillari*?" With nowhere left to hide I decided on an honest reply. "I was unsure what we would talk about, since my knowledge of Theodore is largely personal." He regarded me with disappointment as he observed, "I am entirely uninterested in your grandfather, as a *person*." QED, thought I. Luckily for both of us, we found more congenial conversation elsewhere at the table.

A trivial anecdote that probably reflects poorly on me – I should have made more of an effort towards not only Leigh but also Theodore. That is the wisdom of hindsight afforded to a man now in his sixties.

Nonetheless, it raises that hoary old question of whether we gain a better appreciation of an eminent individual's work when we understand the person better. That issue is thrown into high relief by knowledge of Theodore's own intentions.

When I visited him at Thorpe Mandeville in the mid-seventies, I asked Theodore, as he had dedicated much of his life to Voltaire, who was going to write the definitive life of Theodore Besterman and his correspondence? He replied firmly that he had made sure that no-one would ever

be able to do that. That was the end of the subject: it was not up for discussion.

This raises at least two questions. The wider one: why the urge to cover his traces? And the moral one: what right do I – or does anyone else, for that matter – have to go against his wishes?

In answer to the second question, I offer the following justification. My career has been in museums and in that profession, context is indispensable to understanding narrative significance. By any measure, Theodore was an extraordinary man, who has left a body of work behind him that is of a scale that can be truly described as monumental. All the factors that created the man capable of such prodigious industry seem to me to be important. To base our appraisal of Theodore exclusively on his published output and his own account of his life is to reduce him to two dimensions, one of which is decidedly rickety. I submit that he's more interesting and certainly worth more than that.

In that justification, the second question is inextricably connected with the first. For Theodore's life was such a tangle of contradictions that he must have been, at some level, a deeply conflicted man. On the one hand, there is the scholar who reflected in his work the Enlightenment values of the rational, the factual and the verifiable. On the other, there is the contrived, and entirely unreliable narrative of his own life that was, to misquote George du Maurier's curate, true in parts. Once one fictitious detail is uncovered, the whole edifice begins to totter: nothing can be taken at face value.

For it is in these contradictions that I find Theodore so fascinating. His work from psychical research to Voltaire was in pursuit of truth, yet he falsified his own biography. He cared deeply about social inequality yet lived a life of great privilege. He kept the family at a distance but became plaintive if he felt they were ignoring him. And he pursued the life of an independent scholar whilst wanting the recognition that only academic institutions could bestow. Most of all, he was the loner who wanted to be accepted by the establishment.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that the key to understanding these contradictions probably lies in Theodore's Jewish origins in Poland. Theodore always maintained that he was born in Bradford to émigré Polish parents. The nationality of the parents is true but his birth nationality is a fiction: that he was born in Łódź came to light decades after his death, when a search of the register of births in Bradford drew a blank and his birth certificate was soon found in Łódź. He anglicised his mother's maiden name from Krengiel to Cringle for his entry in *Who's Who*. Anti-Semitism was certainly rife in Poland – and is a nascent canker in many European countries today. As Brecht reminds us, even if Hitler is dead, “the bitch that bore him is in heat again”⁹. Precisely what caused Benjamin Besterman, the diamond merchant, to lead his family out of Poland we can never know. Had he not done so, the twentieth century study of Voltaire would have taken a very different course. In the New Montefiore Cemetery, New York, there are two memorials to residents of Łódź who were killed in the Holocaust. On the south face of one are inscribed the names of eight people called Besterman¹⁰.

Having emigrated, it seems entirely probable that his parents inculcated in Theodore the importance of adopting and perfecting his own cultural camouflage, to blend with the background – and to cover his tracks. Like so many of the Jewish diaspora in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was the pervasive insecurity of the ‘other’, aspiring to be accepted by a society that may shun the incomer and be lethally intolerant of difference. In the process of constructing the *persona* of an English gentleman, Theodore became something of an aficionado of cricket – not bad for a man who, apart from playing tennis socially, had, I believe, no real interest in sport of any kind.

The narrative of the self-taught scholar did not fit well with the establishment man. Giles Barber, in his biography on Theodore, makes the point with exquisite understatement, “He sometimes later let it be thought that he was at Magdalene College, Oxford, a view for which no evidence can be found.”

⁹ The closing lines of the political satire, *The Resistible Rise of Umberto Ui*, by Bertolt Brecht. Written in 1941, the play was first produced in 1958.

¹⁰ <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/hm-lodz-nm-1.htm>

The purchase of the manor house in rolling English countryside was the perfect set for the final act of the narrative drama, scripted by Theodore. There he put the finishing touches to a deal that would deliver the recognition that he craved: he bequeathed his entire estate to the University of Oxford. Whether wittingly or no, these arrangements ensured controversy *post mortem*. In his zeal to secure his scholarly legacy, he rather short-changed Marie Louise, who found herself out of pocket after his death. The University of Oxford offered to settle out of court but Marie Louise resolved to seek legal redress. In 1981, nearly five years after Theodore died, the High Court ruled in her favour, the sum awarded being sufficient to keep Marie Louise in the “style of life” to which she had become accustomed¹¹. It is understood that this was a ruling that set an important legal precedent.

I have a small collection of books written or edited by Theodore, to which I have added over the years (his library went to the Taylorian at Oxford, where I drew their attention, a few years ago, to the lack of any visible tribute to the man whose books filled one room). They are representative of a tiny fraction of Theodore’s output and range from psychical research, library studies and bibliography to Voltaire, the Enlightenment and some of the limited editions that he personally sponsored. These include a small number of the compilations of fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century art books that he published in the series, *The Printed Sources of Western Art*. This was his “best loved collection of books”¹².

Setting out to ‘know’ a man who intended to be unknowable has, inevitably, been a challenge. In writing about my elusive subject, I have reassessed my own relationship with Theodore. I emerge from the process with undiminished respect for the self-propelled scholar and bookman, greater empathy for a difficult and complicated man and a wistful sense of the conversations I wish I could have with him now.

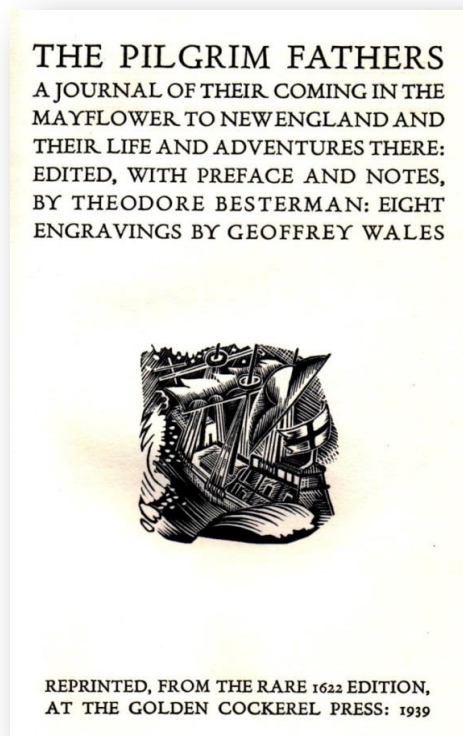
His legacy to scholarship and to the world of books is immeasurable. Theodore endowed the Besterman Medal, awarded annually ‘for outstanding bibliography or guide to literature’ at the Library Association

¹¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, Saturday August 1 1981, p.3.

¹² Besterman, T. 1974. *Op. cit.* p.7.

(now CILIP). In October 1992, when the award was made, I was invited by the Association to address the ceremony on Theodore. In addition to his published work, he made sure, through his endowment of the Voltaire Foundation at Oxford, that the vastly ambitious *Complete Works of Voltaire*, that he began, would be completed after his death as well as studies of the Enlightenment more generally. Under the sure-handed direction of Nicholas Cronk and his board, the Foundation has amply fulfilled Theodore's ambitions, as this great project nears completion.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to end by quoting Professor Cronk, who observes that the cultural construction of 'Voltaire', "that process of mythification and image-making, began with Voltaire himself and was actively encouraged by him, making it even harder for us to have a clear sense of the real writer, let alone the 'real' man".¹³ Therein may lie a further clue to the wilfully chimeric Theodore Besterman. If this memoir has done something to bring into sharper focus 'Besterman l'homme', then it may have served a useful purpose without, I hope, trivialising the revered memory of 'Besterman littérateur'.



¹³ Cronk, N. 2005. Inventing Voltaire. In Mallinson, J. (ed.) *The Eighteenth century now: boundaries and perspectives*. SVEC 2005:10, p.23. Voltaire Foundation, Oxford.