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First Woman

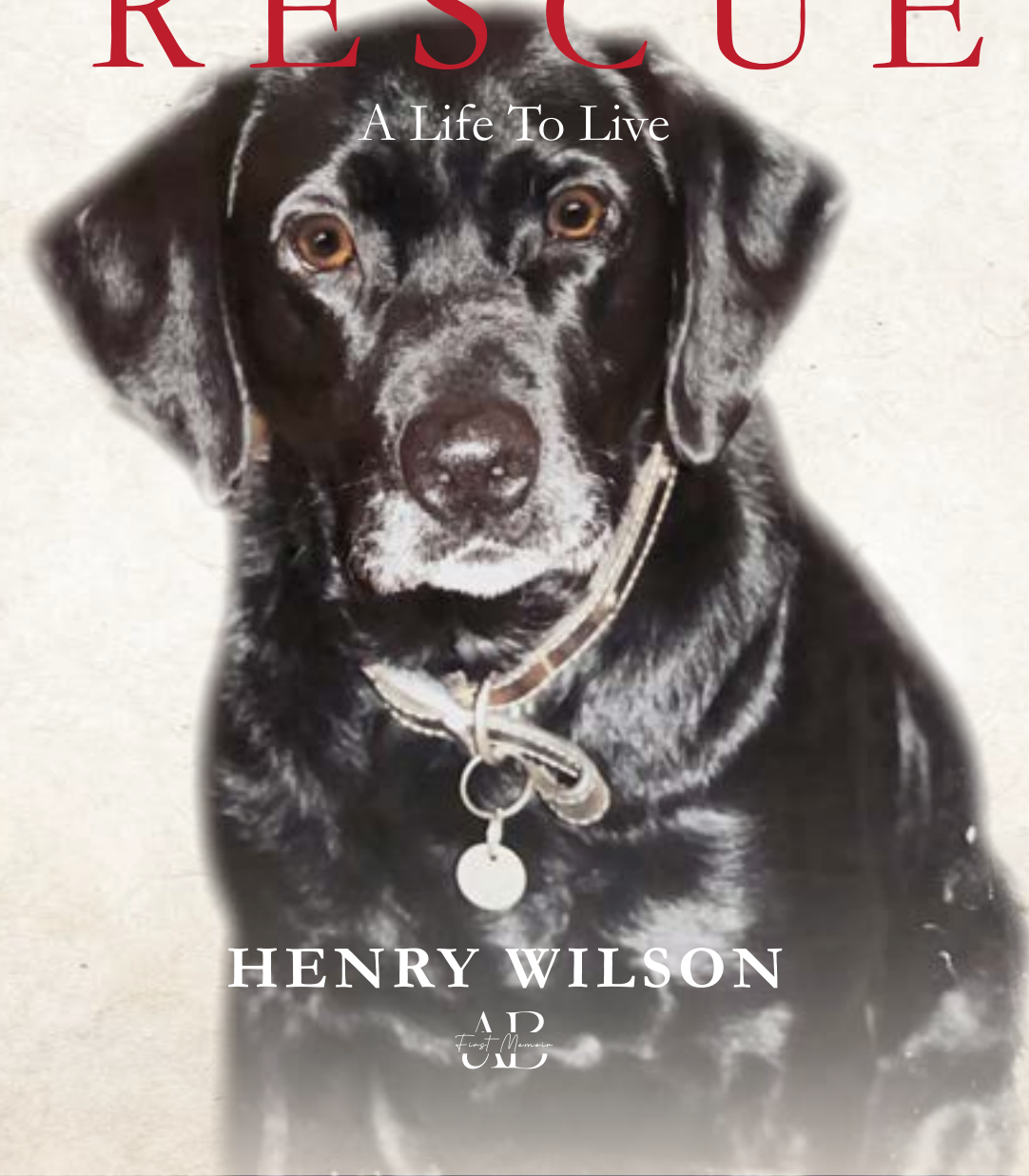
HENRY WILSON

TOBY TO THE RESCUE
A Life To Live

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A Life To Live



HENRY WILSON

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Born in 1939 in the village of Fatfield, near Washington, Harry's life, by all accounts, started as normal in pre-war Britain. While WW2 brought havoc in the world, Harry's life changed forever when he lost his mum Gladys at the age of four. Harry grew up in a loving and caring family raised by his father, Albert and his stepmother Mary. Albert was a schoolteacher, and Mary worked as a nurse at the local pit near Washington.

Harry's glowing and long-lasting career at Shell UK offered him great professional and personal satisfaction. It has been a rewarding journey which offered him a platform for professional development across multiple projects. Although Harry had trained as a researcher and academic in electro-chemistry, his job took him in many different directions and places worldwide. He oversaw a ground-breaking liquid petroleum gas (LPG) project in Japan, and he undertook tough negotiations with some of the biggest automotive giants in Europe. Harry's proudest achievement is establishing the North West Occupational Health Centre. The strange turns of life allowed him to circle back to his original passion and interest – medicine and health, something he was discouraged from pursuing at a young age.

Another tragedy hit Harry hard when his first wife, Janet, died of cancer, leading to an inevitable grieving period and loneliness. Toby, the black Labrador, came to the rescue and adopted Harry. Both moved to England's newest Book Town, Sedbergh in Cumbria, where Harry opened a flourishing railway-themed bookshop. With a renewed sense of purpose in life, he married Eileen in 2010. Both live a peaceful life in the village of Bowsden, near Berwick Upon Tweed, with their two Dalmatians, Leo and Freya.

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A Life To Live

HENRY (HARRY) WILSON



FirstMemoir

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*For cousin David, who has always been
more like a brother to me*

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Chapter One

A Pre-War Baby

Everyone is keen to see some sort of record of their passage through life. I think I have had an interesting life. Lately, my children have started to take an interest in it, which I find very rewarding. Richard, my older boy, asked me recently if I knew much about my maternal grandmother, a topic that I have some knowledge of. I knew she was Irish and she came from a family of Scots lawyers who had lived in Ireland for some time. Her name was Murdoch, but it's just the very fact that Richard asked about it that I thought was great.

Thinking about early childhood and my earliest memories does pose a challenge as I find it difficult to separate what I think I remember from what I have been told or seen in photographs. My father, Albert, was a keen photographer and took many photographs of me as a child. He was a motorbike enthusiast and had a great interest in cinema. He made a few films, and there's one that I particularly enjoyed watching called *3000 Miles through Europe*. It's a story of a trip he made by motorbike during the school holidays from Hull and driving through Germany, Switzerland, and reaching Venice, and then back through France. There is a

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good shot in that film of France in the 1920s, not long after the First World War. You can see clearly an early tank on its side in a ditch.

Thinking back and trying to trace my earliest memories, there is a picture that comes to mind, a photograph of me as a toddler, possibly two years old or around that age, in a white balaclava, pushing a little pram in our front garden. I've also got a memory of my father with his little Austin 7. There's a photograph of me sitting with Dad in the front seat, banging the horn.

I spent my childhood and early days of adult life in the village of Fatfield near Washington. Back in the day, it used to be a mining village and it had a working colliery, which closed in 1965. It was an exciting living situation as both of my grandparents lived in the village. Our house was in the middle. We had a line of elm trees opposite us that were planted several years before the Second World War. A single oak was planted as a memorial for the people who died in a local colliery accident. My paternal grandparents, Henry (also known as Grandpa Wilson) and his wife Margaret, lived almost at the top of the village. I remember my grandfather saying to me that these trees will prevent anyone from building opposite our house. My maternal grandparents, George and Anna Whittle, lived on the other side of the village but still relatively close, two or three hundred yards away.

Grandpa Wilson was born in 1876 and worked as an apprentice in a shipyard in Sunderland. He is an enigma to me because even though he started as an apprentice, by 1910 he had a row of houses and had built himself a rather nice villa, which would have cost quite a lot of money. As a younger

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boy, I didn't have the chance to ask my grandfather about all of this, but what remains a mystery to me is how he had gone from being an apprentice in a shipyard with very little money to achieving quite a success with building works. One theory is that he must have had a patron; somebody had seen him and his potential and backed him.

He also had a workshop, and from what I know, he was quite a charitable person. I knew some of it, but at his funeral in 1957 I was approached by someone who told me what a good guy my grandfather was. He then asked me if I knew what he did during and after the Spanish flu pandemic after the First World War. I knew very little and was told by this person that my grandfather gave coffins to people who couldn't afford to buy them so that they could bury their families. I immediately thought, "what a good guy!"

Dad had one sister, Eileen Barbara Temperley. I liked her very much and she was someone from whom I learned much as a young boy. Auntie Eileen taught me a lot. I was born on her twenty-first birthday (13 March 1939), so she never forgave me for that! She wanted to be a stage actress and did some acting when she moved to Hull. Her husband, my uncle, was transferred to Hull after the war, and consequently my aunt moved there together with my cousin David. Because of her acting background, one of the things she taught me was to be able to project my voice and speak to a script. I didn't have a nickname at school, but Auntie Eileen used to call me "K-Hen" because King Henry was always known as K-Hen in Shakespeare. I really missed not being able to see them. I found their transfer to Hull difficult, and it was a big change because I used to see and hang

out with David regularly. The new situation meant that I was only able to see him once every six months, which was far from ideal. On the other side of the road in Fatfield and on my mum's side, I had a big family – there were five of them!

A Tragedy That Shaped My Childhood

At an early age, I experienced a big tragedy which probably had quite an impact on me growing up. I lost my mum, Gladys, when I was only four. This was in the midst of the Second World War. She died of meningitis. It was really an unfortunate turn of events as it was the result of a complication from surgery she had earlier. As far as I recall, she went into the Sunderland Royal Infirmary hospital for some routine ear surgery. She always had bother with her ears and had a mastoid problem. I imagine it was a bacterial infection that caused the complications, which I believe was something that could have been easily treated with antibiotics, but there weren't any because of the War. So, she died.

Mum was one of five children, and she was the second oldest. Similarly to Dad, she had been a schoolteacher in the local school in Washington. She had taught art subjects which included painting, needlework, and sewing. Back then, times were different, and she had to stop doing what she loved because a female had to give up teaching if she wanted to get married. It wasn't allowed for a teacher to be employed as a married woman. Unbelievable really.

Life after her death wasn't easy for Dad either. After my mum's death, we lived briefly with my father's parents

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at Grandpa Wilson's house, which was at the top of the street. There was this moment that I can recall when Dad had a row with my grandparents over what, from today's perspective, looks like a trivial matter – someone had been eating our golden syrup. Maybe there was more to the story, but I couldn't really tell. I know that Dad walked out, and we went down the bank to our house. I remember it being dark and cold, and we had to sort out the heating quickly. I had with me a small wooden wheelbarrow which Grandpa Wilson had made for me. I also had my teddy bear and my favourite book as a kid – *Tiger Tim's Annual*. I can still remember its red cover. It was about the adventures of Tiger Tim and his friends – the Bruin Boys and the Brownie Boys. It had beautiful, colourful illustrations and great humour. I kept the teddy bear until I had scarlet fever. The hospital deemed it necessary to incinerate it, as it was a source of infection.

We had a series of housekeepers after Mum passed away. Some lasted longer than others! Looking back, I can still picture the game I played with Ms Wright in the kitchen. I have fond memories of her. She was a friend of my grandfather. We played "bombers". I was the pilot of this aeroplane made of kitchen chairs and she was the bomb aimer, and I told her to drop the bombs and we dropped the cricket bat on the floor and bang-bang-bang! The second housekeeper was the one that my father had been referred to by someone. Her name was Hannah Hall, an American lady who lived with us. She had her own room upstairs. I think she was a schoolteacher. She lasted a month and left by mutual agreement. In those days, food was rationed, and

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she could not make the rations last. We were pretty lucky because Grandpa Wilson had a farm up in Weardale, so we had bacon. Farmers actually did quite well in those days. We also had food parcels sent over from India by Uncle George, my mother's brother, which included things like a big tin of Indian butter and sugar in a big cardboard box. Uncle George was posted to India as he worked for the Civil Service. As a family, we were very proud of him, and happy to hear that he married one of the three sisters who were society beauties in Delhi. Her name was Barbara, sister of Merle Oberon, the actress.

I remember one time while Hannah was still with us, I got really upset with her. Dad came back from work that afternoon, and he was going to go to the library to return a book because it was either overdue or it was going to be overdue soon. Before leaving, Dad said, "if I don't get it back tonight, I'll get shot." Of course, I took this literally, and when Hannah came to put me to bed, my father had still not returned. I told her that I was not going to bed until Dad returned, fearing that the authorities might have shot him because of the book. She replied that she wasn't sure when he would return and that it could be anytime. It's not the nicest of things to go to bed with the thoughts of your father getting killed, and I don't think that Hannah understood the whole irrational fear in me then. Psychologically, it probably made a lot of sense that I was stressed considering my mum's recent passing away.

Hannah kept in touch, and after the War, she went back to America. It is funny how I can still recall her parcels as well. She used to send me a package with big American

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comics and bubblegum probably every couple of months. I was really excited because it was great for school swaps.

The next housekeeper was also very nice. Her name was Jean and she was born in the Shetland Islands. She stayed with us for some time. Jean was the sister of Mary and Ann. Mary was later to become my stepmother.

During the days when it was just Dad and me, I found a unique sense of delight in his culinary adventures, especially when it came to frying potatoes. He did very tasty potato fritters, a thinly sliced potato in batter which he deep fried. We didn't have it very often, but it was something I used to look forward to when we did.

Mary's Arrival In Our Lives

Soon my father married Mary, who worked as a nurse. In the beginning, I didn't really like her. She was pretty bothersome because she tried to tell me to do things which were perfectly acceptable practice, but I just didn't want to be told what to do by her. I resented her also because my dad was obviously keen on her and I now had to share him. They eventually got married. Dad kept the peace. He didn't want Mary to be upset by me, and it was quite difficult.

I was very close to my dad. One of the things I really enjoyed doing with him as a child was going to the meetings of the various clubs that he was in. I would hold adult conversations – aged four and five. It was great fun for me, although I am not sure how the recipients of the conversation would have felt. Unfortunately, this stopped

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with Mary's arrival in the household. It was a complete step change – something I was not happy with at first.

Eventually, and not so long after, my relationship with Mary warmed up, and I accepted her in my life. I remember meeting her family members too. One of the downsides of all this was that the new family arrangement had upset my family on my mother's side. My maternal grandmother Anna was not at all happy with these developments. Grandma Buggins, as we used to call her, disapproved of Dad remarrying. She didn't take it out on me. I used to get Christmas gifts and birthday cards from her, but Dad didn't. We even stopped seeing each other because, by then, they had moved. The first time I saw all the cousins was at Grandma Buggins' funeral in the 1950s.

Even though I felt sad about not being allowed to attend Dad's meetings anymore, I was quite happy to do boy things and play with some of the other boys in the village. I have a vivid memory of one of the games we played. There was a sandy bank near us where we used to bore holes, put explosives in, and set them off. It would then bring down some of the sand. We got the explosives from fireworks, removed the gunpowder from them, put them into a new packet, folded it up, put in a fuse and set it off. I had great fun while doing it!

Caught Between Two Worlds

I spent most of my time in Washington because my dad was a schoolteacher there. Because of those arrangements, most of my friends were from Washington rather than

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Fatfield. Most of the friends from Fatfield were through the church we attended. I would normally see those friends during school holidays, half-term or Christmas. I look back on that time and realise that having a foot in two camps was a bit awkward. I couldn't build a full relationship with Fatfield or a full relationship with Washington.

My favourite subject at school was history. I can't think of a subject that I didn't like. I was a very lucky student because I had a photographic memory meaning that learning came easily. I sailed through school and through exams. The downside was that I didn't understand what I was doing most of the time. Back then, we weren't taught to think but to reproduce facts and knowledge. I would have been a very different person had I been encouraged to think critically instead of memorising things.

Even though my dad was a teacher at my school, I can't say this went particularly well for me. He picked on me during the one year I was his student. I don't think it was a conscious decision, but he wanted to make sure – and show the rest of the class – that there wasn't any favouritism. I still remember the day I and some other students got caned by him for something we shouldn't have been doing. What annoyed me was that I wasn't actually doing it but we all had to take the blame. Mary put it in an interesting way afterwards by saying, "If you don't play with the crows, you won't be shot," which was a good way to say, "watch the company you keep."

When I was younger, I recall wanting to become a doctor. Even though I never became one, I was lucky enough that my life took me as close to it as possible. I am not

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sure how I became interested in the medical profession. I think Auntie Ann played a role. She was also a nurse and encouraged me down that path and told me stories of her nursing experience, including when she assisted in an operation performed on a kitchen table on her own mother to remove a cancerous breast. Still, I recall that I'd been actively discouraged from following that particular career path by my stepmother, Mary. She always used to say that I was never going to be a doctor because I had the wrong temperament and that I would be worried too much about my patients. Mary was a nurse herself and knew quite a few doctors and nurses. I think I would have been a good doctor if I had pursued that path. On the other hand, Dad never commented on that particular career direction for me. I never heard him say anything really, although I think he probably wanted me to become an engineer of some sort, which is what he wanted for himself.

The only issue I can think of that might have caused some problems for me becoming a doctor was my colour-blindness. I have been red and green colour-blind from birth. It comes from my mum's side of the family. Uncle George and Uncle Jack were both colour-blind. Not long after the War, there was this moment when we were getting our house painted. Apparently, the painter was painting the garage door red, and I was watching him do this and told him something about the paint being the same colour as the grass. And, of course, he went off and fetched Dad. I was then given a whole series of coloured wool to sort out, which was as good a test as any. I wasn't particularly bothered by being colour-blind. I just put up with it, really.

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I encountered some problems when I had to choose my indicators carefully in chemistry. Some I could see, and some I couldn't.

It is funny to think that these early childhood years and the experiences associated with them had quite significant effects on shaping the person I am today. Being able to remember vividly the story about Hannah Hall and my fears over Dad being shot over a book return attest to this. Even at the age of 84, I can still recall that moment vividly, which happened nearly 80 years ago. I distinctly remember feeling extremely anxious that night. If I were to think of one word that could capture my childhood experiences it would be "resilience" because I had to cope with losing my mum when I was four but also losing David and Auntie Eileen, who moved down to Hull. I enjoyed having them around. Though I didn't appreciate it initially, I also learned a lot from Mary.

