

Michaelmas daisies

The michaelmas daisies are almost over for another year. Anna and I disagree about them. I like them very much, while she barely tolerates them. They have established themselves in most of the flower-beds and they grow out of the walls and the cracks between paving-stones. So I suppose they are a weed. This year some of the flowers have struck me as being larger than usual, and the colour has been stronger. There is sometimes a dowdy look to the purple, but this year it has seemed somehow glossier. Perhaps there were so many of them in the garden that each day there was one specimen that has just reached its peak of condition; perhaps these peaks coincided with some particularly vibrant sunshine. Now they are wind-blown and beaten down by rain. Soon it will be time to pull them up for another year.

Micahelmas daisies remind me of childhood, of Shooters Hill Road and Blackheath Congregational Church. There were always lots of them cheering up the garden when there was not much else to lend colour to the scene. They came up unbidden at the end of summer, as the bluebells came up at the start. Returning year by year they were at once unexpected and familiar. I liked them because the name was intriguing, with its unexplained connection with my friend Michael, and because I was aware that they were regarded with ambivalence as both flowers and weeds. They grew on abandoned plots, bomb-sites and in the untended gardens of houses with big dogs.

We used them to decorate our harvest festival baskets for church. There was a harvest festival each year at around Michaelmas. We would put some token offerings into a basket and march up to the front of the church for the minister to take them off us and place them on a table. I don't know how many of these ceremonies I took part in, perhaps fewer than half a dozen, starting at the age of six, or perhaps four or five, although I don't recall going to church from Guibal Road (where we lived until I was five years old). I don't remember how old I was when I stopped attending these ceremonies and all of them have coalesced in my memory. Before we had the car we must have carried our baskets on the 89 bus, but I don't remember ever doing this – perhaps I found it so embarrassing that I wanted to forget it.

The baskets were made of wafer-thin strips of wood, with a metal handle. The approved way of carrying the basket up the aisle was not to use the handle but to hold it up in both hands. We would remove the handle – or those who were more imaginative than me would incorporate it in their decoration. Baskets came in different sizes, and you got them from the greengrocers with soft fruit. They were quite plentiful, but there would always be a last-minute panic over finding them. The main problem was what to put into the basket. Because we didn't grow many vegetables of our own it meant buying some extra. I suppose Mummy must have done this for us. It bothered me slightly. We were told about giving thanks for the annual harvest, about harvest-home feasts. I had seen the wheat being gathered in on farms, and felt that my basket of potatoes and carrots from the green-grocer was not quite the real thing. I couldn't see what the harvest had to do with them or with me. No doubt Mr and Mrs Wigley did their best to explain it, but none of their words have stuck. Mrs Wigley in particular was conscious that many of the church and biblical traditions needed to be translated for the benefit of an urban congregation – I can remember that such was the shape and general drift of many of the things she told us, but the particular points she was making are lost. It is hard to believe that

someone who always seemed so old and grey and dry was in her own eyes, and probably in actual fact, modern and progressive in her beliefs. The issue of what to include in the offerings must have exercised the adults as much as it did me, and I think I can remember a change of policy, a point at which it became admissible to include tinned food.

However much Mrs Wigley might assure us that our urban offerings were as acceptable to God as those of the traditional harvest festival, we seem to have felt that something from the country would help. One year Tiggy brought some wheat seeds home from holiday and planted them in her garden, and tended them so well that she had a little row of wheat, some of which she put in her basket. Another year Mummy decided that the table where the baskets were placed should be decorated with a sheaf of corn, so while we were out for a drive in the car she stole one from a farmer's field. I remember the theft, but I can't picture the trophy on the table in church. I expect we took a few stalks from the bundle for our own baskets before the rest of the sheaf was put on display. Finding something of our own to give must have been less of a problem when we lived in Guibal Road, with its many fruit trees, and soft-fruit beds left over from when Grandpa tended the garden. If there was some home-made jam in the larder we would include a jar, which seemed to make more sense.

I never really grasped the practical point of the harvest festival. Where did the food end up? Presumably it went to children's homes or old people's homes. We may have been told, or else I worked it out for myself. I think I can remember wondering whether the random collection of fresh and tinned fruit and vegetables would be particularly useful in an institution such as I imagined these homes to be. I must have had a vague conception of how stuff would be procured in bulk for catering on a large scale. All in all, the harvest festival seemed a pretty empty ritual. It was one of the things which I felt instinctively to be phoney, before I knew the word. It is not one of the things the memory of which is warm and alive; it provides no pathways back into the mind of childhood. Except for one thing. I remember that I enjoyed decorating the basket with michaelmas daisies. It may be that 'decorating' meant little more than putting a few sprays in the basket. Decoration was regarded as important in all the Sunday School work. I suspect Mrs Wigley was a follower of Ruskin. I remember holding tenaciously to the michaelmas daisies one year when someone suggested using some other flower, or perhaps coloured paper. Neither the practical nor the spiritual meaning of the event touched me, but I think of the church and Mrs Wigley, and of Michael and me with our tins of beans whenever I see the michaelmas daisies appearing at the end of summer.