

## Stupid things I've done

The terrible wild-fires in Australia earlier in the year reminded me of the most stupid thing I have ever done. When Anna and I were staying in Newtonmore in the summer of 1969 we went for a walk on the hills, and I had a great wish to have a campfire. I don't know why I wanted this, but it had taken hold of my imagination. Fires in the open air had been a pleasure in childhood, both with the family and with Michael, but they were a childish thing that I had put away very soon. The wish to renew the childish pleasure was perhaps a reaction to the self-imposed austerity of my adolescence. On those childhood occasions my role had been always subsidiary, with parents, elder sisters or Michael playing the responsible part, which may have left me hankering after taking the lead. Apart from this the whole thing was quite pointless; we may have had some bit of food to cook, but there was no necessity for it. The idea was simply something that had caught my fancy and I was determined to carry it through. I don't think Anna was particularly keen, but she went along with it. There were birch trees, brushwood, bracken and grass all around. It had not been a particularly dry summer so things were not 'tinder-dry', but it was a very hot day and I am sure that a fire, if it got hold, would have spread. I don't remember whether there was much wind - not enough to prevent our swimming comfortably in the burn. We were conscious of the possibility of danger, but it didn't make us desist, although we took some care to find a 'safe' place. I think we first lit a fire on a flat rock on a hillside, but quickly extinguished it, and went on to look for somewhere safer. In the end we chose a little stoney island in the burn, where we kept our fire burning for perhaps an hour. Far from re-assuring me, these precautions only make me shudder the more, because they show how clearly I recognised the potential for disaster. I'm not sure when exactly I came to realise how stupid we had been, but for many years now the memory has brought me out in a sweat of remorse. It's not just a matter of what might have happened - what frightens me more is that I persisted, under the spell of an idea, in a course of action which I knew to be reckless.

Another stupid thing from about the same period happened when we were walking along South Street one summer evening. I think Richard Killough was with us, so perhaps it was 1970, when he came over with Ruthie. As we passed Rodgers' meal-shop we stopped to look in the window and saw a couple of mice making free with the grains and beans laid out on display. At the time we were probably not acquainted with *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, so we did not think then, as we have in retrospect, of Hunca Munca and Tom Thumb. For some reason I felt it incumbent on us to tell someone, and so I went to a phone box, found the Cupar number of the Rodger family, and rang them up. I'm not sure why I did this. It was partly a feeling that it would be irresponsible to allow this outrage to continue unchecked. There was a good deal of self-importance in this misplaced sense of public duty. I think I was mainly moved by the humour of the situation. I saw that the joke had gone bad when we realised a few weeks later that the manager of the shop had lost his job, presumably as a result of my humorous action. Making that phone call is what I always think of when I hear the phrase 'seemed a good idea at the time', the epitaph of so many stupid actions.

It's not an accident that the two stupidest things I can remember doing belong to that period of my life. I was certainly a very foolish young man. When I wrote the fortieth anniversary memoir of events surrounding our wedding in 1967 I realised

just how foolish we must appear in the eyes of our children, but of course it is all very well for them to look superior from the vantage point of their thirty or more years. We were only in our early twenties when we committed the acts of folly which, against the odds, have turned out so surprisingly well. People in their early twenties are foolish. I was only saved from doing more foolish things by the fact that I did very little at all. But I did talk, and I did say an awful lot of stupid things. I would get carried away by my train of thought, or by sarcasm or humour or self-aggrandizement to say things I didn't mean or things I hadn't thought out. I would cause offence and hurt people's feelings, and I would make myself look foolish. Again and again I would return from a social outing with a burden of remorse on my mind for something I had said, too ashamed to admit it even to Anna.

I should not give the impression that folly ceased when I was no longer young. All my life I have found it difficult to keep a curb on my tongue. Sometimes it is a matter of being carried away and saying things that seem a good idea at the time, but which turn out to be unsuitable for the occasion or to be hurtful in some unintended way. But there are also occasions when I'm aware of the disaster ahead. As on the hillside at Newtonmore I can see the impending folly, but am driven on all the same. I see in advance that I am about to tell a joke or a story, and that I had much better not, and yet I go on and tell it. Stories are indeed treacherous in this way, a siren temptation that is hard to guard against. One might think that if no-one in the present company has heard the story one is safe enough telling it, but a story that has been told more than once or twice becomes stale, even to those who have not heard it before. It has become, and cannot disguise the fact, a performance. By repeating a well-worn anecdote we cease to be ourselves as we are now and slip back to that earlier self that we were when we first heard about or experienced the event, throwing off the things we have learnt and the understanding we have gained in the intervening years. Tony Wills always warned against telling stories – he didn't say why, but it must have been due to his horror of inauthenticity – but he was not above falling into the trap himself. Personally I love hearing and telling stories, and conversation would be dull without them. It isn't easy to know when is the right time and when the wrong time for a particular story. But there have been many times when I knew full well that a particular story was past its best and that I should suppress it, and yet I went ahead and told it. It has all the stupidity of a received idea, even if it is one's own personal received idea.

It would not be so bad if my stupidity had been confined to saying stupid things. Unfortunately this is not so. When it comes to business affairs I have a string of follies to my name. Probably buying the house at Lundin Links was the worst. The way I used to tell it was that the estate agent in Leven told me that I would get on with Mr Hainey, the seller of the house, because he was 'a bearded gentleman, like yourself', and that I trusted Peter Hainey on the basis of this recommendation. Perhaps there was something in this – at least it conveys my simple-minded acceptance of everything that Hainey and the estate agent told me about the house. We came to think of Hainey as a rogue, because the house proved a disappointment, but I think if we are honest we have to say that most of the deception was perpetrated by us on ourselves. I was always willing to take things at face value, but on this case it was worse than that, since the defects of the house and its situation were obvious enough, there was no need to dig beneath the surface, and yet we somehow refused to see them.

My folly with respect to houses swung into action again when we moved to Newcastle. Glen Rodger, who sold us the house in Rothbury Terrace, was not a bearded gentleman, but I still contrived to like him and persuade myself that he was on my side. Since we were moving at the expense of the Civil Service I had the option of having a proper survey of the house – not just a valuation but a full structural and electrical survey. Had I taken advantage of this they would undoubtedly have discovered the leaking roof and the unsafe wiring. I still don't know how Mr Rodger convinced me to forego this option. He may have frightened me into thinking that I would miss the chance of the house, but his main argument was that of the confidence man in Herman Melville's novel – trust me, don't give in to the temptation to mistrust. I could see that he was a troubled man with an unhappy wife, and I was unwilling to let them down either by backing out of the deal or by driving down the price. He may have allowed me to see his private woes in order to play upon my sympathy, but I don't think he did. Mrs Rodger said something to me that frightened me; I don't remember what it was but it left me with the feeling that if I didn't give them the price they needed something horrible would happen. I don't recall when it was that we learned that she was an alcoholic. The details of the affair might be vague in my mind now, but clearly things weighed with me which I should not have permitted to interfere with a business transaction.

The world of work offered many new avenues for stupid actions. Most people who work with computers will have stories of how they accidentally deleted essential files, as I did on the old VAX system when working late at night. I suppose my stupidest computing mistake was when I switched the voltage setting in the belief that I was opening up the network port. But most of my work follies were due to speaking without thinking, expressing opinions either in the wrong company or without the necessary knowledge. Usually there were no consequences – the remarks, like my less stupid remarks, sank into the sand. On the only occasion when I removed the bridle from my tongue when I was working at Leven I caught a lashing rebuke from a colleague. I think this was undeserved, as I'm pretty sure she misheard me, but it taught me to be more wary. Just occasionally I found myself saddled with an annoying commitment as a result of speaking unwisely. During my time in IT Services I was always being told not to say Yes so readily when people asked me to do things for them. My weakness in this regard was partly just weak will, an inability to stand up to the selfishness of many academics, but there was also a perverse desire to pile up work on my shoulders – partly vanity, partly self-disgust, partly good-nature. I obtained an insight into this perversity once I had retired. In moments of depression, when I am disgusted with myself and angry with those around me, I thrash around to find some act of benevolence which will soften my sense of guilt and demonstrate to me that I am not really at enmity with the world. Working sixty or seventy hours a week was an easy option.

Both my business ineptitude and my imprudent ways at work seem to me to show an inability to separate the private from the public. My personal feelings and psychological tics intrude too readily on activities which should be conducted more objectively. I'm sure the same applies to everyone, more or less, but observation leads me to think that many people separate their public and private worlds more effectively and so act more rationally. It's the Wemmick thing, Walworth sentiments and office sentiments. The same failure of objectivity interferes with my aesthetic judgements, and has incapacitated me for teaching. On the few occasions when I have been a teacher I have found it impossible to tell people they are wrong, because I can always see or imagine that from some point of view they are right. This applied

all the time when I was trying to teach philosophy, but I found the same tendency at work when I was doing IT training. There are more ways than one to kill a cat, I remember saying to people, quite often causing offence by the callousness of the phrase. When I forced myself to show people the 'right way' to do something I always felt uneasy.

It may be that all this psychologising is no more than an attempt to render interesting what is in reality a banal case of a lazy mind that refuses to focus on the matter in hand. Perhaps I should simply admit to being wrong and try to learn better for the future, rather than trying to demonstrate that there is something in my nature that makes me bound to fail. It's true that I never received the training as a teacher which would have taught me how to award marks and tell students when they are wrong. And a good book on how to buy a house might have prepared me to deal less foolishly with Hainey and Rodger. An inability to focus has always been my main intellectual failing. At school this led to failure to learn by rote, and also to a tendency to careless mistakes. I still recall the pain and ignominy when, in a test of long-division, I got two sums wrong out of three. At later stages, such as in my various pieces of research, it has left me unable to organize facts effectively and force arguments to a conclusion. It might be laziness, or a kind of arrogance, but whatever it is I have always felt it as a weakness. It's too late now, but I wonder whether there is a kind of discipline that I might have learned in my youth which would have brought things into focus. Probably there is. I suppose it was what poor old Ackrill in Oxford was trying to impose upon me, but I ducked out. I'll have to write a whole chapter about my experience of learning.

If work has given me many opportunities for stupidity, interviews for work gave even more, and so prevented me from getting jobs where I might have fared even worse. I used to enjoy making stories out of my interviewing disasters. I would have really liked the job at the Open University, and I could see that some members of the committee wanted me to succeed. I could see who was against me, but I had no idea what to say to persuade him. Bernard told me that he couldn't understand my incompetence in this regard. When he went for an interview he would prepare by working out what the interviewers wanted to hear and would go along knowing exactly what part he had to play. Other people have told me how in interviews they have always worked out which member of the panel is the one they have to convince, and have concentrated their fire there. I was never able to do either of these things. I was always passive, answering questions as they came, never, like Bernard, taking control of the situation myself. The only interviews in which I was ever successful were those in the civil service which I was bound to pass by virtue of my educational qualifications, and the interview at St Andrews. I believe I was the only candidate for the St Andrews job, but I was also lucky. Everyone told me that I was very foolish to put in the application letter, under the heading of outside interests and positions held, that I was a member of CND and had been a branch secretary in the Labour Party. By chance, of course, the decision was to be made by Bruce Mitchell, who also was a member of CND and the Labour Party. So in this case, foolishness paid off.

Still, I may be taking this all too seriously. There have been, of course, many occasions when stupidity has been merely farcical. I suspect the children would cite the incident of the cake as a good example. It was while we were in Newcastle. One weekend we were planning an expedition by train with the three children and one of Jessy's friends. When we reached the station I found that I had forgotten the family

rail-card. We could not afford to take the trip without the card, so I went back to the house to fetch it, while Anna stayed behind at the station with the children. I had the easier task. When I got home I found that we had also forgotten to bring the cake for the picnic. Back at the station I was congratulated on the speed of my journey and on retrieving the cake, but then it turned out that I had still failed to bring the rail-card. We gave up the train-ride and went somewhere by bus instead. The difference between this lapse and some of the other things I've been thinking about is that it was merely a lapse. It may have been a sign that I was pre-occupied with other things, perhaps under stress at work, but I don't see in it any of the sinister implications that I have been discussing. It was just carelessness, like getting sums wrong. It was neither a deliberate act nor a deliberate refusal to focus. I feel as though it was something that happened to me, rather than something I did, and I guess that is why remembering it does not cause me the same discomfort as some of the other memories.

I am always very conscious of the possibility of carelessness and sometimes take bizarre precautions to guard against it. In my computing work I will check and double-check things so repeatedly that I talk myself into greater confusion and introduce more sources of error. And yet I know that if I leave one thing unchecked it will turn out to be the one thing that is wrong. In my writing I know that the unverified quotation or reference will turn out to be wrong. The causes of such lapses are first of all my bad memory, and secondly the fatal capacity for misunderstanding.

Stupidity is not a thing of the past. I still say stupid things which seem a good idea at the time. I still watch myself walking into obvious traps. But on the whole it happens less frequently now than it used to – at least if we exclude driving. My driving blunders are mainly due to the inability or refusal to focus the mind effectively, at roundabouts for example, or when overtaking. I suspect there are also some perceptual problems at work, but they in turn may be due to a fundamental laziness and a failure to submit to training.

But if I am less downright stupid than I was in the past, the basic psychological fault that was present on the Newtonmore hillside is still as strong as ever – the power of a compelling idea to determine my actions in defiance of reason. Sometimes it's a matter of inhibition, as when I find that I cannot think of anything to say to someone I meet in the street or at a gathering because my mind is set on a course and I cannot deviate enough to find a single topic of possible conversation. At other times it is a positive force which draws me along fixed lines in a direction I know is wrong. Sexual desire, a determination to strike a pose, the force of habit, laziness or the lure of easy applause or approval can all still make me defy reason. Having gained experience in the everyday patterns of life, I find it simpler than in the past to avoid the most obvious extremes of folly, but this state of mind is still properly called stupidity – it is a sort of stupor, a lack of responsiveness and a denial of imagination.