

Language learning and me

It started even before I was born. My grandfather, you see, did not speak English as a first language. I knew his initials to stand for Patrick John. But most knew him as Jock. The generic Scotsman. Catholic, born in Glasgae, raised partly in Castle Bay, Barra and South Uist. He ran away to sea just after the First World War and spent his working life as a stoker below decks. Nan spoke Northeastern. Methodist. Book. Cook. Geordie. Mum spoke the urban English of Southsea, Portsmouth. Dad was East Belfast Presbyterian Northern Irish and full of old seafarer's words that would follow me later through a naval boarding school. Four accents in one room near Fratton Park. Me they baptised with one name in St Andrew's, Eastney Barracks, Church of England.

My parents took me to Singapore when I was five and in my mind the colours are still the brightest. And the sounds are in my ears – the Mandarin of our Chinese neighbours, who would hand sugar cane to me and my brother over the fence. The percussive beat of Tamil, spoken in the streets when fierce demons and voracious gods were paraded. The native Malay in the shaded Kampong not half a mile from our family bungalow, where we were guided by the amah who cleaned and did housework for my mother, by then pregnant with our younger brother.

And back to England in 1967 and the rich warm Devonian vowels and rolled consonantal Rs. I was part of the first generation of primary French. We went to Normandy, to Bayeux and Arromanches, gathering a sense of shared history. This was 1972. Then away again to Malta with my parents to the complex semitic tones of a dusty Catholic refuge in a blue Mediterranean. In secondary school, all boys, most with a home in Portsmouth or Plymouth, as befitted our maritime heritage, I added German, not my first, but my longest love – the language that took me to Dortmund, Westphalia and the magical enchanted Weser Bergland. In German I did not need to be the working class boy my vowels and idiom would always make me in English. I could be an intellectual, a *philosophe*, a *Philosoph*, a teenager.

So I came to the polyglot life of the language teacher, language preacher. In Zurich/ Zurigo I heard the grating Italian of elderly Swiss Germans determined to communicate with young visitors from the south, the struggles of Francophone Helvetians in Germanic and the archaic survival of Romansh. I heard forms of German so distant from the High Language norm that they seemed like auerochs wandering among a herd of Friesians. Or Frisians.

I learned that I was no longer able to survive in a single rarified speech code. I would always need to hear other voices around me.

On the streets of North Manchester I caught snatches of the miraculous – the Yiddish of the Orthodox on their way to the baker's shop. Occasionally, in the early 1990s I would hear a little Polish or Ukrainian – long before the migration of Eastern Europeans to England to seek their fortunes a decade later.

I taught the German I loved and I returned to the Gaelic. And back where I began, I realised my grandfather's name was my own. Jock for John. John for Ian.