



Tony Besse is not everyone's man. The explanation lies in his background. He came into inherited wealth and inherited duties and assumed along with them an inherited right to the top table. He is impatient. *'Andre (his brother) and Tony have one characteristic in common – rapid and impulsive outbursts of anger'*, Hilda wrote to Kurt Hahn on 15th November 1951. And he has a disdain for authority and for constraints on his freedom of action.

His access, first through his parents and then on his own account, to the founding figures of the Atlantic College – Hahn, Darvall, Hoare, Schuster – was succeeded by his leading role in the setting up of two further Colleges. For him, intermediaries are either subordinates or obstacles. But Shell's documented judgment on his father rings true for Tony too: *'Besse's motives must always be assumed to be noble, whatever the actual sins of commission may be ... if he feels he is with friends he will give of his utmost.'*

The Middle East has left its mark on him. He feels the injustices of the Arab-Israeli confrontation daily and personally. Among his closest friends are Crown Prince Hassan and his wife Princess Sarvarth, she a former IB Council colleague and founder and patron of the outstanding IB school in Amman.

Life in the region was a constant struggle for survival, always against the background of lawlessness. But he also remembers that Letters of Credit, or IOU's, were widely used in lieu of banks, which meant that everything was dependent on personal trust. *'Shiploads were disposed of in this way'*, and he could not recall a single instance of default. His most important contribution to this practice of personal trust has been his decision, after he had rescued his firm's Provident Fund from the Yemeni confiscation and transferred it to London, to honour all the distributions to members. This was considered miraculous, and he received tributes for years afterwards. *'Not even BP (British Petroleum) did this.'*

And it explains his stubborn determination to ensure that Yemeni students enter our United World Colleges, the scholarships offered by College Heads but the selection carried out by him each year on personal visits, the incidental costs such as travel and insurance very often carried by him too. His motto for this commitment could serve as a motto for all our efforts to identify and sponsor students from the world's poorest and most conflict-ridden areas: *'From nowhere to somewhere.'*

Tony's daughter Joy, an Atlantic College graduate, describes her father as the Don Quixote of Arabia. Like his great Italian friend Bartolomeo Migone, he has never failed to tilt hard against the windmills. His unusual personal engagement gives for me meaning to the phrase *'If education is understanding the rules, experience is understanding the exceptions.'*

Tony has lived his life against the grain. He has talked movingly of an acute sense of inadequacy and failure in the Middle East – *'We did not return to Aden or to Yemen ... Yemen, the environment, my own temperament ... I was not made for a primitive and lawless society'* but *'by then UWC had caught up with me: Mecklenburgh Square, Blackburn, Gourlay, the IB, George Schuster, the Mountbatten years, the setting up of the International Board, the establishment of new colleges under the Mountbatten impulse and thrust. I was no longer idle. I was busy. I was happy.'* We should also recognise that our Arab world advocates and interpreters have been few. Tony has held this fort often alone. Its importance is now becoming clearer by the day.

In 1968 Tony sent the Schusters a magnum of champagne for their Diamond Wedding. In 1970 George Schuster wrote him a letter. *'We had often looked at this splendid bottle without, hitherto, finding a worthy occasion for drinking it ... I have just come back from two days at St. Donat's ... on Saturday evening, at the closing ceremony, we had a large dinner party ... the duty to make a closing speech on this occasion fell to me ... I decided to take the line that, after we had been spending two days reviewing the present state and achievements at St. Donat's and in discussing the aims and tasks for future international development, I would like to ask them to look back over the past ... I said that there was one man, a Frenchman, M. Anton Besse, who made that beginning possible ... I said that I wanted them to drink your health and to send you a special message of appreciation and gratitude...'*

It has all been our gain.

Continuing Besse Generosity

The Besse reputation and Besse wealth have generated many pressures on Tony's life. He has enjoyed the benefits – the sailing and the yachts, the sub-aqua diving, the skiing, the beautiful homes, art works and comfortable hotels - but he has never done anything other than try to share these things with as many friends as possible. *'Beiti Beita: My House is Your House.'* His mother left her entire estate to St. Antony's, Oxford; hence the Lady Besse building. Tony was the executor of her will and contrasted ruefully the dons' anxiety to 'encash' the will with the university's long hesitations when his father first proposed his initial donation. He takes his wheelchair-bound sister, for 40 years a recluse in Monte Carlo, there as often as she feels up to it. She too has made major donations.

His father made gifts of Ethiopian art to the British Museum, where they are exhibited over his name. When Tony and Christiane were leaving Aden, they were asked to purchase a large collection of Arab artefacts that had been assembled over many years by a rather remarkable, formally uneducated Indian. They refused them but successfully launched the idea of a Department of Antiquities, whose prospects were also much improved when Tony persuaded the British to insist on export licences for national treasures in order to prevent indiscriminate and large scale selling to foreign buyers.

Some of his quietest charitable work, which he mentions only with shy embarrassment, has been done on behalf of sick people. He discovered that he had a bookkeeper in Ethiopia suffering from glandular fever that had become cancerous. He sent him to England to combine medical treatment with a course in accounting. Thus qualified, this man soon became the chief accountant of the new national bank. He repaid his debts. The bank created unending trouble for the Besse Company. His accountant remained his faithful warning friend, telephoning him one day to tell him it was time for him to leave. *'When?' 'Soon.'* The government humiliated him, refusing him an exit visa three times when he was already at the airport. He left Aden for the last time on 10th June 1969, the French consul carrying his bag to provide a touch of diplomatic protection and immunity.

He found another invalid after insisting on entering a local home, discovering a young girl, hidden by her parents, crawling on all-fours because polio had robbed her of the ability to walk upright. One leg was a matchstick. He brought her to Paris, where the surgeons insisted on immediate operations to rebuild the missing limb before calcification set in. Tony paid for 18 years of operations and treatment. She has spent half her life in bed. The psychological problems have been daunting. She was two and a half when Tony discovered her. She is now 37 and *'hops around like a gazelle'*. Her brother had colon cancer. The father paid the immediate costs but Tony has covered *'everything else'*. Medical treatment of this range and ambition runs, Tony says, counter to all local superstition, especially among women and mothers.

Reflections

Looking back, Tony describes his life as an inverted pyramid.

Nothing in his story made family life easy. Family life would not have been possible without Christiane. Her loyalty to Tony bears admirable comparison with the loyalty of Hilda to Anton. Starting on married life with 14 servants, a house the envy of the country and beyond, a role as hostess especially in both Aden and Beirut that rivalled that of old Anton Besse in Aden, she never complained when the screw turned. When Tony found himself in jail in Yemen because a Yemeni, having bought shares, thought he now owned the company and had Tony imprisoned, she brought him his coffee every morning. Now, generally agreed to be the finest literary translator in France from English into French – James Baldwin, William Boyd, William Shawcross and Amitav Ghosh have been or are among her authors and close personal friends - she has her own publishing company in Paris, the Editions Philippe Rey.



and explained that the Italian mint owned a large supply of silver that had been purchased cheaply long ago, that the College could purchase it at a rock-bottom price and, with the minting of a new commemorative coin, stood to make a large contribution to the College's finances. The outcome was a silver coin that won prizes for its design, outsold almost all other commemorative coins in the history of the Italian mint, and raised more than 820,000 Euros for the College's budget. Indeed, *'siamo in Italia!'*

Bosnia and Herzegovina

When Tony learned that a former student of the Adriatic College who had specialized in Balkan languages and affairs, Pilvi Torsti, and I were travelling to Bosnia in January 2001, he simply said that he was coming along too. He had not been there before! This was the beginning of a six-year struggle to set up the movement's first college in a post-conflict country. Pilvi and I found we could always count on two things: his absolute refusal to lose heart, and his unfailing generosity in covering all those minor expenses, usually hospitality for those whose good will and help were important, that individually amount to little but collectively represent a major sum. We could not have done it without him. And then came the day when Pilvi had to decide whether, with her husband and then one child, she could move from Finland to Sarajevo to set up an office and to see the plans through to actual implementation. She wisely and firmly refused to do so unless she could be guaranteed a minimum budget to carry out the essential preparatory programmes in the City of Mostar. It was Tony who came forward with legally binding underwriting. *'Pilvi can make plans in the secure knowledge that she will not be running aground. I do not feel particularly happy or comfortable taking on this commitment but I am prepared to do it, against the odds, for the sake of not turning back. I believe in the project and it is not in my temperament to give up or give in.'* Again, a College (his third) could not have started without him.

Other Experiences

Tony was invited on to the International Baccalaureate Council of Foundation by its Founder President, John Goormaghtigh. He completed his IB tenure as Vice-President. Once again it is the friendships he remembers most warmly: John Goormaghtigh of course, Alec Peterson, Jacqueline Roubinet of the Ecole Bilingue in Paris, Piet Gathier from Holland, Monique Seefried, Greg Crafter, George Walker, Robert Blackburn. As always, he covered all his own expenses. Little known is the fact that, at a moment of special financial insecurity, he also covered anonymously a major part of the salary of the IB Deputy Director General, Robert Blackburn.

There were mixed memories and mixed feelings too. The money-raising recital he arranged for the UWC, given by his friend Kiri te Kanawa in Monte Carlo, with Sir John Pritchard conducting, attended by some 1000 guests including the Monaco royalty and the UWC President the Prince of Wales, was an immense organizational task. It raised ten scholarships but achieved, in his eyes, little echo and little support in UWC circles.

France too has been a disappointment. His home country was first invited to join the UWC in 1962 when the philosopher Raymond Aron, a friend of Lawrence Darvall, attempted unsuccessfully after meeting Desmond Hoare to interest the Ministry of Education. Repeated efforts have been made to set French involvement on a more secure and ambitious path. No one was more enthusiastic than Mountbatten, who even pressed for a French college in Fontainebleau. Tony has never been an advocate for a French college, but the constantly renewed efforts of the French National Committee have reminded him of his father's disheartening experience: *'France has all the institutions it needs'*.

successfully supplanted for this flight. Those who knew his ability to lose almost every object that was entrusted to him were not surprised to learn that he lost the scarf too, the pilot Douglas Hamilton having dived twice in efforts to recover it in mid-air.

Tony Besse and the United World Colleges

The Besse family had now launched two major enterprises that were finding their feet: St. Antony's College in Oxford, and Atlantic College. The reputation that Atlantic College rapidly established under Desmond Hoare's leadership would have thrilled the father, who had once written that *'The development and strengthening of character can only be achieved by methods applied in certain schools – by tests of physical endurance (sea, mountains), by increasing responsibility – by intellectual tasks that the pupil must prepare as if he were attending a conference, and in the course of these tasks the teacher will pose even paradoxical questions to judge the level of interest and the knowledge acquired in order to confirm in the pupil his mastery of the subject and to give him full confidence in it.'* [●]

But Tony took a back seat in Atlantic College affairs, more than fully occupied in extracting himself and his business from the turmoil of the Middle East, until Mountbatten came along and insisted on his personal involvement. Under Mountbatten's International Presidency Tony took on the first Chairmanship of the International Board. It was a somewhat thankless task. The early colleges to join Atlantic College, now The United World College of the Atlantic, were set up by strong-minded and strong-willed individuals who had little time for centralized financial accountability and a common scholarship fund. Colleges and National Committees responded to Mountbatten's relentless energy and inspirational leadership (they had little choice); but submission to administrative control was another matter.

Tony's renown in UWC affairs does not however rest alone on his donation of St. Donat's Castle, decisive, courageous and farsighted as that was; and he happily remembers those experiences that have given him life-long satisfaction. They have been his travels with Mountbatten, his decisive achievements as a co-founder of the United World College of the Adriatic, his similar role in setting up the College in Bosnia and Herzegovina, his membership of the Council of Foundation of the International Baccalaureate in a critical phase of its development, and his single-handed achievement (and again generosity) in ensuring that Yemen also began to send students to the United World Colleges.

The UWC of the Adriatic

The story of Tony Besse's patient determination to bring the Adriatic College project, initially launched by Mountbatten and Gianfranco Facco Bonetti, to fruition is reflected in the chapter on Corrado Belci. What survives in his own memories is the straightforward enjoyment of working with warm-hearted Mediterranean colleagues whose response to every new problem requiring yet another Italian miracle for its solution was *'siamo in Italia'*. [●] His friendship with Gianfranco, with Bartolomeo Migone, with Gaspare Pacia the lawyer, his deep respect for the wisdom, integrity and utter dependability of the Region's President Avvocato Comelli and his governmental colleagues, was mirrored in their confidence that he was "their man", that he would bring the United World Colleges, despite all the scepticism and anxiety, to the table. He was moved by their trust in him and responded accordingly. In the endless negotiations over the purchase of a major property in the centre of the village of Duino, the Hotel Ples (finally achieved years later) with a resistant lady owner in Ljubljana, he was told on the eve of yet another mission into Slovenia by Comelli that *'my car will be waiting for you at the hotel tomorrow morning at 08.00, and whatever agreement you reach with the lady, we in the Region will back you.'*

Nor can he forget the arrival at a meeting of the Italian National Committee of Andreatta, the Italian Minister of Finance, who on being told that they needed money, replied dryly *'then let us make some'*;

[●] *'Le développement et l'affermissement du caractère ne peuvent être obtenus que par les méthodes appliquées dans certaines écoles – par des épreuves d'endurance physique (mer, montagne), par une responsabilité grandissante – par des travaux intellectuels que l'élève devra préparer comme un conférencier et du cours de cette épreuve, un professeur poserait des questions même paradoxales pour juger de l'intérêt pris, des connaissances acquises afin de confirmer l'étudiant dans la certitude qu'il est de même de posséder un sujet, et de lui donner confiance en lui.'*

[●] *'We are in Italy'*



Tony Besse and Kurt Hahn

From his father's death onwards Tony had maintained an intermittent and respectful correspondence with Kurt Hahn and made the occasional visit to Gordonstoun. Already in 1952 he had assured Hahn that he should not hesitate *"to appeal to me if ever there is a scheme of yours for which you would like to have a special sum of money."* He was rapidly persuaded during an evening walk on the Gordonstoun estate that, as Tony later expressed it, it was *'my privilege to endow the school with a proper lookout tower for the Coastguard Unit. The stroll up the hill marked a turning point in my life.'* But by the autumn of that same year Hahn was no longer Headmaster of Gordonstoun and was struggling to regain his health. Within a few months he was however to enter on arguably the most fruitful period of his life. His schemes became abundant in both number and scope. His foremost ambition from 1955 onwards was the Atlantic College.

Tony was now intensely preoccupied by his business and family affairs, and there can be no doubt that the critical personality in these years was Hilda Besse. Her loyalties to her husband, the man and the ideas, were now transferred to Kurt Hahn. She was distressed beyond expression by what she regarded as his shabby treatment by the Gordonstoun Governing Body over his departure. Her letters give passionate expression to her feelings. Her inner turmoil was made the more acute by the divisions that had opened up within her own family, and by her longing that Tony should succeed in following in his father's daunting footsteps. How disinterested was Kurt Hahn's skilfully attentive support in these years? He must have found welcome encouragement in her unquestioning confidence in his life's mission, and his immediately warm responses to her requests for counsel in her family affairs were a natural response to such openly expressed admiration. Cynicism in such matters can always creep in by the back door but if, as noted above, Hahn was a skilful angler of men, his fish was in this as in so many other instances a very willing victim, as is clear from Tony's letter of 21st June 1959 to Eric Warburg:

'I made the acquaintance of Atlantic Colleges nearly three years ago when I had the privilege of accompanying Kurt Hahn on his German tour of Outward Bound Schools ... our recent fumbblings within the Atlantic Alliance have been lamentable indeed ... against this fragmented tableau, common and purposeful action in the field of European education assumes greater urgency and, like you, I feel strongly that at least a 'pilot' college should be endowed with the peculiar vigour of Kurt Hahn's faith and sincerity .. For the purpose of wider prospection ... you may fairly assume that, at worst, response from this quarter will not be disappointing.'

It was entirely sensible and in line with common donor practice that Tony Besse should eventually have offered one half of the St. Donat's purchase price on condition that British sources confirmed their commitment by finding the other half: hence the tense meeting in Kurt Hahn's habitual London den, Brown's Hotel in Dover Street, in October 1960, just 72 hours before the option to purchase expired. It was also entirely in line with the lead-up to the fateful meeting that a part of the Besse donation had been promised by his mother. The fact that, in the end, the entire donation came from him has ensured him his pre-eminent place in the UWC story. In excitement and drama it had been a saga worthy of the Castle's previous owner, William Randolph Hearst. The purchase completed, Tony Besse flew in a small private plane from London to Cardiff with Kurt Hahn sitting alongside the pilot and has never forgotten how Kurt, in his fanatical pursuit of fresh air, pulled open the window as they were taxiing for take-off (and how the pilot quietly lent across and closed it again as they left the runway). When I heard this story, I was reminded of the occasion in 1947 when Hahn had insisted on joining Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton, a crucial ally of his in the very early days of Outward Bound, in his open Tiger Moth for a flight from Aberdeen to Kinloss. Hahn borrowed a scarf from another lady guest whom he had

sailing, went on to own jointly some fine yachts, until the day when Shawcross entrusted Tony Besse through power of attorney with the administration of all his estate for the ten years preceding and two years after his death, a formidable task in difficult domestic circumstances that, so Tony felt in retrospect, seemed to absorb almost half of this time and energies.

Other Active Interests

In the unforeseeable way in which contacts are made during wartime, Tony Besse came across Jacques Cousteau. This was when Cousteau was cutting up the inner tubes of motor tyres to make underwater masks. Cousteau, thanks to the influence of his first wife, had been able to persuade the French company Air Liquide and one of their engineers, Gagnan, to develop a self-regulating valve that controlled the pressure of compressed air inhaled by divers irrespective of depth. This was the birth of sub-aqua. The dangers of this new activity were made all too clear when four divers, all known to Tony, died exploring a complex cave system in the Rhone part of France; their air had been poisoned with the exhaust fumes of the local garage compressor normally used for motor tyres. Tony himself got into difficulties when diving with Cousteau. He had no depth gauge, and when the classical depth dizziness began to overcome him, he discovered from Cousteau's gauge that they were at 72 meters. By this time he had too little air for the essential decompression stops and found himself with immediate shoulder pains placed in a decompression chamber. But diving with Cousteau at the Farsan Islands off the coast of Saudi Arabia among the "unbelievable" marine life including friendly sharks that behaved like inquisitive, companionable dogs, and dozens of later diving excursions off the Turkish coast, searching for Greek and Roman treasures before this was prohibited, made this one of the passions of his life.

Tony once spent two months on Cousteau's boat *La Calypso*, which he had helped to finance, and had memorable experiences with Louis Malle, the noted film maker and director of Cousteau's *The Silent World*. Voyages of underwater exploration took them to the Farsan Islands, the Seychelles and the Amirantes. One especially lively memory concerns their joint visit to the Sultan of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Shakhbout; the annual income of Abu Dhabi at the time was the equivalent of £7,500. Later, in 1954, the *La Calypso's* bow bubble, created to enable underwater filming, collapsed and required major reconstruction. This was done at Tony's expense in the Besse shipyard in Aden. Following this repair, *La Calypso* became the first vessel to engage in offshore survey work off the coast of Abu Dhabi. A large bell was lowered to the sea floor; shots were fired down; and measurements of the vibration readings as well as core samples were sent to laboratories in Texas for detailed analysis. This truly pioneering work was done on behalf of the energy firms BP and Totale and the engineering company Schlumberger.

Tony needed and regularly indulged his taste and gifts for physical pursuits, the element of danger adding to their attractions. Sailing, windsurfing at which he was an expert, sub-aqua diving to extreme depths, skiing, riding powerful motor cycles between Lyons and Paris against the stop watch: life always required some drama.

One cannot be surprised that Kurt Hahn's philosophy found as ready an echo with the son as it had done with father and mother.



Memories of the Middle East – Some Happier

The legendary Maria Theresa Thaler had been the currency in Ethiopia from roughly 1730 onwards. At one stage in the reign of Haile Selassie, the emperor decided that large quantities must be taken out of the country. Tony Besse and his company were given the task.

The true Maria Theresa Thalers were 97% pure silver. It was the habit during the rainy season to bury them in kerosene tins. Now they were packed in small cases that could be passed through the manholes into the interior of the Besse trucks. The first convoy from Addis Ababa to the port of Assam, with a military escort, carried 250 tons. In Assam an illiterate Amharic Customs official rejected the documentation he could not read and wanted all coins counted one by one. Tony flew down to Assam, insisted then on an immediate meeting with the Emperor, had the documentation transformed into an order, and all was well. Successive convoys, each of ten vehicles and ten trailers, had no further difficulties.

And there were the Arab dhows.

Tony's father had been quick to exploit their qualities. Tony followed up.

These craft, sailing under the Besse flag, were remarkable for the personalities of their captains. These men were independent merchants. They provided the food and wages for their crews. They took on additional cargo if space allowed, on commission. Successful trading depended on bagged shipments that could easily be offloaded in primitive harbours and carried to their destinations in small consignments by camels or on smaller boats. Thus the quality of the bags was all-important. But the regularity of the local winds, which blow for five months steadily in one direction, then five months in the other, discouraged any more sophisticated development of these craft. Engines were not successful because their construction could not resist the vibrations.

The company made regular use of one remarkable marine architect. He was illiterate and thus used neither pencil nor paper. He simply asked which ports would be entered for loading and off-loading, how many crew would be carried, what the cargoes would consist of, and the dhow would emerge weeks later from his yard. Tony Besse was to commission an illustrated publication on Arab dhows and to lecture to the Society for Arabian Studies of Exeter University on these craft that are now almost entirely lost to history. ■

That Tony Besse was a major figure in the region, both as his father's son and in his own right, was clear to all visitors, and the contacts he made in this way often ripened into long-term friendships. One of these was with the last British High Commissioner, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan. In the closing tense months of British rule, wives were repatriated on account of the dangers, and Sir Humphrey became a frequent house guest. Tony recalls the dignified British withdrawal, the deliberate ceremony of the final day, the eloquent lowering of the flag, but also the complete abandonment of all the British houses that lay open to intruders the following morning. Tony himself went to rescue the visitors' book from the official residence which had been forgotten in the rush of events. The Besses and the Trevelyans remained close friends for many years.

Another prominent guest was Sir Hartley Shawcross, who had come to the world's attention as the very young British Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials. He had first come out to Aden to represent the interests of the Anglo-Iranian oil company, a subsidiary of Shell, after an Italian vessel, curiously named the *Mary Rose*, had been taken into custody by the Royal Navy after having allegedly broken the embargo placed on non-British ships in the area shortly after Mossadeq had nationalised all oil companies operating in Iran. On his second visit, and already alerted by experience to the indifferent quality of the Shell guest accommodation, Shawcross stayed with the Besses and subsequently invited them to stay with him at his East Sussex home in Friston. They discovered common interests, above all

■ MARES, the Marine Ethnography of the Arabian and Persian Gulf and the Red Sea project was launched at the University of Exeter in the UK in 2008

consulted him in strict confidence over borrowing facilities for the repayment of a crippling debt to the Soviet Union. It transpired that the corrupt President was planning to pledge state assets to cover the proposed loan from the World Bank without World Bank authority, a procedure severely prohibited under Bank rules. Tony Besse was able to intervene privately behind the scenes and to save both the country and the Bank misappropriated funds to the tune of some US \$486 million.

Memories of the Middle East – Some Sobering

Fortunately hardened by his experiences with the French resistance, Tony was to see at first hand the rough side of life and the regional brutalities: *'the Middle Ages in the 20th Century - faithful friendship was jostled by the blackest treachery, and the crude facts of a semi-barbaric life were encountered at every turn.'* Public hangings on the site of the crime were commonplace. He recalls a bitter commercial dispute with Phillips who had started selling radio sets behind his back despite a clear contractual agreement to use the Besse agency. The visiting Dutch manager was so shaken by the hanging bodies lining his route in to the office from the airport that he acquiesced meekly and left as quickly as he could. Tony was compelled to witness one wretch being beheaded. He remembers the uprising in July 1967 in Aden against the lingering British rule. Ten British soldiers were burned alive in their armoured car. The following morning "Mad Mitch" Mitchell, the Commanding Officer, marched his tough Glaswegian men in ceremonial formation, he and the bagpipes in the lead, into the revolutionary Crater area of Aden and cleansed it of all rebels.

There were more personal episodes too.

Inadequate facilities in the port of Hodeidah were leading to delays of up to six months. Queue jumping and corruption were making trading impossible, and cargoes were being diverted to Djibouti. Tony was well aware that a nearby second harbour, Salif, despite a narrow and shallow entrance, had a quay that his waiting ship could use because, as it normally carried cattle and had large doors on the sides, it could off-load lying alongside without cranes or other equipment. He boarded the ship himself and the off-loading was completed in half a day, the engines holding the ship against the quay. News arrived that the government objected because no authorisation had been given. When he reached the bottom of the gangway Tony was informed that the local Governor required a case of whisky. This was quickly drawn from the ship's stores, but as he reached the bottom of the gangway for the second time he was arrested by two colonels and driven off to Hodeidah where he was told he must spend the night in prison. He retained enough authority to decline this unwelcome hospitality and withdrew to a nearby hotel. The following morning the Prime Minister ordered his release – the previous evening the country's President had without consultation made a major speech welcoming the opening of a second national harbour. Within two days the local Governor had been dismissed, within seven the manager of the main harbour.

But he did not always escape prison and saw them on at least two occasions from the inside. On one he recognized a fellow-prisoner as having been until the previous day the governor of the National Bank, imprisoned on suspicion of having arranged credit facilities for a major debtor. On another, he found himself alongside a sailor whose wrists were bleeding badly from severely tightened ratchet handcuffs for which the warders had lost the key. Taking the revolver off the nearest warder, and recalling lessons learned from the wartime French underground, he shot the handcuffs off and became the hero of the prison. Local justice was pretty merciless. Historical Ethiopian tradition dictated that the punishment for two men in dispute was to handcuff them together and imprison them until they had sorted out their differences.



Yemen and Ethiopia in the 1950's and 1960's

Yemen had been known to the Romans as *Arabia Felix*, and Aden had been a British Crown Colony since 1838, but the interior remained mercilessly if picturesquely primitive. It is reported in a recent book [●] that, when the British Consul in the country's second city Taiz wanted to go for a walk, he had first to secure the local Iman's permission which could take up to two weeks to arrive; that he then walked with an open umbrella to ensure that he was treated with respect; and that the local people would spontaneously roll up the trousers of visiting white men to find out if they were white all over.

At no time did Tony have more money, power, assets of every kind, prestige and responsibility than when he took over his father's businesses. The Besse family enjoyed a privileged position. But from 1950 onwards he was struggling to keep the firm alive. The arrival in the Middle East of the Soviet and Chinese communist missions radically influenced political developments and made life increasingly difficult. The Besse family eventually left Aden in June 1969 and the Besse companies were nationalized in November, 'nationalization' a euphemism for confiscation, for they lost all company assets and personal belongings – the house and its contents, pictures, papers, the children's toys, everything. And after the British authorities abandoned Yemen in November 1967, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was to become the source and supporter of insurgency in other parts of the region.

The Yemeni experience was mirrored in his other major trading country, Ethiopia. Again he started from a strong position that reflected his father's relationship with the Emperor, Haile Selassie. For when the Emperor returned in 1941 from war-time exile, he had no money and sent his son-in-law to seek help from Besse senior. Anton Besse knew how to play his cards. After enquiring delicately what the Emperor needed, he replied: *'I do not think that will be enough. I will give you double, but please do not come back for more.'* The Emperor never forgot this gesture, and the Besse companies under his reign were never refused anything.

Tony remembers the Emperor with respect: few roads, famine, people dying of hunger, but all areas had churches and mosques side by side and there was no discrimination. A small man, dressed in a tweed jacket and grey slacks, the Emperor met his visitors in a small side room, more a private saloon, spoke halting French but always wished to lead the conversation, concluding interviews courteously but firmly after 45 minutes.

Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974, his kingdom succeeded by the one-party communist state, the People's Republic of Ethiopia. There followed in the 1980's the notorious famines that affected in total some 8 million and left at least 1 million dead.

From Lebanon, Tony attempted for ten years to control his increasingly fragmented, heavily threatened business interests. It was an intensely unhappy time. Having opened an office in Beirut and taken a suite in the St. George's Hotel, uprooted and, he says, idle, he and his wife Christiane travelled in Syria and Turkey whilst he made spasmodic attempts to revive his business in Aden. The only possibility for travel there was the unreliable fortnightly flight from Damascus in an old Russian aeroplane, for which he spent many days and nights waiting in sleazy Damascus hotels. Why, he asks himself still today, this continuing obsession with Yemen, rather than contemplating a move to one of the Gulf States? Loyalty to his former staff? The home of the "House of Besse"? The birthplace of their children? A betrayed sense of belonging? Pride?

Much later, over 24 years later, during which he heard nothing from Aden about compensation for the nationalized assets, the reunification of northern with southern Yemen took place after the Soviet withdrawal under Gorbachev. Tony went to the Prime Minister whom he liked and trusted. The Prime Minister compelled the southerners to meet him and eventually to agree compensation for the confiscated business assets amounting to some 5% of their original value. Subsequently the Prime Minister

[●] The War that Never Was
by Duff Hart-David, Century 2011

But Tony's efforts to make his way in Aden in the family business were unhappy and unsuccessful, marked by many a dispute with his father and with colleagues more senior, more experienced and above all older than him. After his war-time experiences, he had no taste for life on an office high chair. He was bored and discontented. There was, people said, much of the old man in Tony. There came the day when, in violent argument, he threw in his hand, marched out of the offices, packed a bag, and went immediately to the harbour to see whether any company ships were on the point of departure. 'Yes,' said the captain, 'for New York.' 'Will there be any stops?' 'I don't know. I haven't had my full instructions yet. What can I do for you?' 'Give me a cabin.'

Self-Banishment and Return

In New York Tony earned his living as a taxi driver without a licence, parked cars on a series of small parking lots, earning more from tips than wages (this must have led to his dramatically generous tipping of all porters and waiters in later life), and secured two six-month visas before being told by a charmed lady official that, if he wanted a third one, he should go 'up-state' and pretend that he was asking for his first.

When her husband fell ill, Hilda wrote to Tony, asking him urgently to return. Tony was as proud as his father. His father must make the request. Anton wrote. '*No one has ever laid down conditions on me – but please come back.*' This was the moment when Tony abandoned his plans for US citizenship and, confident that he was the one son who could accept the responsibilities, remained close to his father after the latter's stroke and, with his mother's full support, assumed the leadership on his father's death.

Tony Besse thus found himself at the age of twenty-four, without either university or any other form of training, in charge of the Besse empire or, as Tony preferred to describe it, a '*vast series of private shops*'. The immensity of the task was completely unclear to him at the outset. But he recalls with strong feeling and a retrospective sense of pride that all his father's children from both marriages signed a document on the morning after the funeral that divided the inheritance equally between them all, with separate provision for Hilda for the rest of her life. It was his task now to turn the series of private shops into properly constituted companies with statutes, auditors and shareholders, a formidable challenge given the informal, personal nature of his father's management style and the vast distances of the remote and primitive parts of the Besse enterprise. It was not until 19th June 1966, 15 years after his father's death, that *The Sunday Telegraph* could report that Tony had retained control of all operations in Aden together with the shareholdings of one of his sisters, whilst his other brothers and sisters had taken over all the interests in Ethiopia and Somaliland, the value of the divided assets totalling well over £10 million. Tony described his own share as the locomotive and one third of the coaches, but the tumultuous political events in the region now left little long-term scope for survival and prosperity.

Without experience or qualifications, Tony had only his father's example to follow. Be a hard taskmaster but fair to all. Most important: treat locals and expatriates equally. He picked up an oral knowledge of Arabic without much difficulty – bi-lingual in English and French, he has an ear for languages and acquired them with no formal training. It cannot however be surprising that efforts to track his business fortunes end in colourful accounts of individual episodes. Given the then unexplored state of the Middle East and its subsequent rapid enrichment through oil, one cannot help wondering what his tough and experienced father, Shell's major representative and partner in the region, might have made of the opportunities.



Tony's Youth

In 1940, when it suddenly became clear that France would be occupied by the Germans, Anton Besse, who was in France recovering from back injuries caused by a flying accident, sent a telegram to Aden stating that all the assets of the firm were to be placed at the disposal of the British Government 'as long as Britain remained at war'. In February 1941 he and Hilda, determined to escape the Vichy regime, left France for Spain with an exit visa secured for them by an American couple who were anxious to purchase their property. They found their way back to Aden by May 1941 via the United States and India. But the children were left behind in the French home, Le Paradou.

This decision would have been impossible without that uniquely British contribution to international child welfare, the nanny. Tony later made the distinction between his biological and his 'real' mother, Miss Ogilvie (she was later to care for the two children of his sister Joy who died painfully in childbirth in 1952). The consequence was that Tony entered adolescence under German occupation and without parental control.

As an independent, physically active and adventurous youngster he was soon running errands for the French resistance, assuming the right not to attend school regularly. One day he stood up in the assembly and shouted at the Headmaster, a Vichy supporter, and was expelled. He became specialized in stealing from the Germans – guns, grenades and binoculars. His home was visited by German officers, accompanied by a Frenchman. His sister sat on one of the pistols he had stolen and left lying around. A German dirk was hanging on the wall. The Frenchman told him to remove it. It transpired later that this Frenchman was a double agent. Tony remembers cold nights awaiting drops of supplies. It was always 'dicey'. No fires; the planes came in low and released the packages without parachutes that had to be collected rapidly before the Germans arrived, alerted by the noise. Eventually Tony and a friend from school who had insisted on accompanying him were picked up by a German patrol and handed over to the Italians who were administering the port of Toulon and the surrounding area. He was confronted by a distinguished and elegant officer who had been in Somalia and knew of his father. 'You have your life in front of you. Run!' He ran. He moved to Bordeaux, where they engaged in difficult cooperation with Spanish communists who were specialists in resistance activities from their Civil War: 'One man above you, two below'. It is difficult to get Tony to talk about these events. The loss of life of several young friends weighs heavily on him today.

Essentially, it was all 'fun', the outcome of youthful boredom, no parents to say no, the combination of delinquency and courage that, to take another example, was also typical of the Polish resistance. The thing was to be 'débrouillard'. After the war he was awarded a resistance medal but decided not to attend the ceremony.

Thus Anton and Hilda Besse found a hardened and independent son at war's end. For Tony, his parents 'had not mattered very much'. His mother was 'distant' and always chose her husband over her children. Later, he was remorseful over this judgment, and recognized in her 'a very courageous woman'.

Just as important, his parents now found themselves back in France without connections or friends, but it was a France on her knees, divided, settling scores (Tony remembers women 'collaboratrices', thought to have been involved with the retreating German officers, being thrown over the bridges in Bordeaux, then shot as their bodies bobbed up and down in the water). They observed Tony working the black market, selling silk stockings, putting the money straight into his back pocket as if it were the most natural thing. Tony took them on their first return visit to Paris, finding accommodation for them in the only hotel in the city that had heating, and arranging meetings with Ministers – it was his Resistance connections that made all this possible. His parents, shocked and unsettled, could not wait to move Tony to the more familiar, more trustworthy atmosphere of Aden.

At the safe distance of many years later, Hahn was to refer to this irreverently as *'his greatest fundraising mistake'*, but he did not put a foot wrong at the time. The body was flown from the nearby RAF and Fleet Air Arm station Lossiemouth via London to the south of France, seen off in formal style by an RAF Guard of Honour, all stage-managed by Hahn. Hahn delivered a memorable address in the school's Michael Kirk. Sixty years later, Tony Besse the son continued to recall his and his mother's gratitude for Hahn's devoted attention to their needs and the dignity with which he surrounded this leave-taking. It is all too easy to be cynical of the sincerity of human relations between donors and recipients in the world of fundraising, but Hilda Besse's letter to Kurt Hahn is surely unambiguous: *'From Anton's desk, in the room he loves, I write you these lines, my dear and noble friend, to try and tell you once again what you have meant to me during those eight days at Gordonstoun. To have reached you ... to have had that last talk with you before life was extinguished, almost as suddenly as a flame in the wind ... those days will cast their light and blessing far, far beyond the power of our eyes to see ... You and Gordonstoun have kindled a spark in our beloved son, Tony, which will become the fire we all need to cleanse and purify the dross within us ...'*¹

There were important practical consequences.

The family resolved that the five-year financial commitment to Gordonstoun, rendered doubtful by Anton's death, would be fully respected, even to the extent of being freed of any possible death duty implications.

Through his first wife, Anton Besse had discovered the motto *Plus est en vous* of the van Gruuthuuse family which remains engraved to this day on the fine renaissance palace, the Grathaus, in Bruges, and adopted it as his own. Hahn now wrote, seeking Hilda's permission to adopt it for Gordonstoun. *'I only dare ask because it is no accident that he and I when we first met felt so strongly moved, as if we had been brothers-in-arms for years unknown to each other.'* Pindar's *'Grow into what you are'*, much used by the founders of the German Country Boarding Schools (*Landerziehungsheime*) even before Salem was opened, was thus given more explicit expression.

Hilda Besse became a member of the Gordonstoun Governing Body.

Tony Besse met Kurt Hahn.

The Besse Inheritance

The surviving personal correspondence illustrates the degree to which Kurt Hahn now became an intimate family counsellor, for Anton Besse, as happens so often with men of action, had died intestate, and there was no clear provision for the succession in the leadership of A. Besse and Co (Aden) Ltd. It was not a simple matter, and we find Hahn holding Hilda's hand: *'Never doubt how much they all need you, even though at times they transfer what was once their rebellion against the paternal authority into a resistance against guidance by their mother. These are passing moods. Victorian patience will carry the day.'*

Would his children be lone wolves like their father, or would they just be sheep? In retrospect there seems to have been little doubt that it was Tony, of the five children, who would take over, but little in the Besse family history was uneventful.

¹ Only a few months later Kurt Hahn's admirable, long-serving secretary Miss Wicken announced her plan that *'Hahn should marry Madame Besse, thus solving all Gordonstoun's financial difficulties in one deft stroke. The lady is willing; Hahn is the only stumbling block.'*



KURT

Vice-Chancellor's loyal support Oxford, already dimly conscious of its failure, will give St. Antony's a fair chance ... I have hopes that before long we shall be able to say: "La révolution est en marche."

And then he was given his opening by a letter from Hilda Besse in which *'I shall try to express the feelings of happiness and gratitude which our meeting with you engendered. We came away from you with a glow in our hearts which I feel nothing can ever extinguish'*; followed a few days later by *'I regard the short visit to you as the most luminous experience of my life'*.

But Chris Arnold Forster, who was handling some of Besse's financial investments in Britain, had difficulty in pinning him down. Yes, it was his firm intention to see that the school should not be hampered by lack of money, but for the moment he could not contemplate anything approaching the Oxford grant. Long letters exchanged between Arnold Forster and Hahn brought no concrete conclusions, although they included some thoughts from Hahn about withdrawal from Gordonstoun (and 'Greater Gordonstoun'), leaving Gordonstoun to become *'an enlightened Public School with a bit of seamanship thrown in'*.

As so often, it is difficult to know whether this was sincere sentiment or another tactical ploy, but Hahn went back on the offensive a month later, urging on Arnold Forster the impact that would be made on American sponsors by a school *'in Britain, saved by a Frenchman and presided over by a German. What an impressive guarantee of our worthiness to serve Europe!'* Arnold Forster had to reply that his two most recent letters from Besse were *'rather disturbing and very confusing ... he is fairly sick in body and mind'*.

All was to be well, albeit not as 'well' as both had hoped, but the saviour now became Hilda Besse, who entered independently into correspondence with Chris Arnold Forster, explaining to him in detail how her husband's innate wish to give had literally bolted in the past year or so. The Oxford donation had become known; he had been besieged by supplicants; he had allowed himself to be taken out of his depth and wanted to feel his feet on the solid sea-bottom again. Nonetheless, in a letter in which he told Arnold Forster that he wanted to make it unnecessary to continue a correspondence *'which must, I am sure, be distasteful to you'*, Besse confirmed the provision of £13,000 a year for five years. The school was able to breathe more easily. Hahn felt like a man *'who has been released from prison and had forgotten what it was like to be free'*.

By January 1950 full cordiality between Besse and Hahn had been restored. Hahn, *'my dear friend'*, visited the Besse home in the south of France in April. Letters of reciprocal admiration flowed between them. *'Since meeting you (Besse to Hahn), I have drawn further inspiration from your personality, and the impulse to stretch out my hand to you, to share, if only in a minute degree, the great work you have devoted your life to, became irresistible'*; Hahn to Besse: *'In coming to Le Paradou (the Besse home) I was doing what I longed to do ever since I heard Chris Arnold Forster speak of your home – his face alive with blissful memories. But my special reason was to render account to the man who has given new strength to my purpose in life...'* In seeking to draw Besse closer into the actual management of Gordonstoun affairs, he reported on the new financial discipline reigning there, for *'if you had not translated your belief into action, we would not have survived 1950 ...'* A new Executive Committee and a Controller had been appointed to supervise the budgetary affairs in replacement of a Bursar who, a meticulous accountant, *'only reported on economic happenings which he should have shaped'*.

In June 1951 the Besses responded to repeated entreaties from Hahn to visit the school again. Anton Besse had not been well. He and his wife travelled to Scotland almost immediately after he had received an Honorary Degree from Oxford University on June 12th. Hahn of course wanted to show him everything and set an exhausting pace. Besse felt unwell and was taken to the school sanatorium, where he died on the following day.

But what one would not give for sight of the letter from Kurt Hahn after this visit, understandably absent from the files, which Arnold Forster answered in the following words! *'Your "very personal" letter amused me vastly. I do not think that anything could so vividly recall my own days at Le Paradou as your description of the Sultan dominating his harem. It is, of course, quite true that for many years past he has assumed the right to command everybody and be commanded by none. There have been moments when I thought that his gallant lady would rebel and box his ears, but she has great patience and very deep affection for him. Chris.'*

The Vice-Chancellor Stallybrass had understood Besse and secured his confidence but died after a fall from a London-Oxford train in October 1948. The Oxford working committee was strengthened by the addition of J. C. Masterman, the Provost of Worcester College, by curious coincidence another of those British students who had been interned in Ruhleben in 1914 and befriended by Hahn.^[o]

The University had realised that looking a gift horse in the mouth for too long was a hazardous enterprise. The Council was convened in the Long Vacation of 1948, and the offer was officially accepted by the whole university in Congregation on 15th September, noting the following: *'Our benefactor (who was insisting once again on anonymity) wishes men of all nationalities, and in particular of his own France, to have the benefit of such an education. For he believes that the future prospects for Europe and the world depend upon international understanding and upon international rather than national action. He has provided, therefore, that admission to the College shall be subject to no test of a religious, political or racial character.'*

Thus was born St. Antony's College, Oxford, but it had been a close-run thing. For in October 1947 Besse was writing to Masterman: *'our mutual friend Arnold Forster has sent me your memo ... whereas I was prepared to put my heart and soul into its realisation, I have only one desire today, and that is to forget all about it. The very large sum of money I donated seems to have been rendered useless.'*

And now Gordonstoun

It was just a few days before the formal meeting of the Oxford University Congregation that Gordonstoun received the telegram quoted at the outset. Hahn, despite being an Oxford man, was not to repeat Oxford's mistakes – indeed, he went almost to the other extreme. But it was now Hilda Besse who became the key personality.

Many years earlier, in 1908, Anton Besse had met and married Marguerite Godefroid, a member of a wealthy and aristocratic Belgian family, their anything but leisurely honeymoon taking them to Antwerp, London, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich, Vienna, Trieste, Venice, Milan, Lyons, Paris, Havre and Brussels. She both invested her money in the firm and supervised the books. It must have been a good partnership, at least business-wise, for turnover increased by 750% in the first year and by 2500% by the outbreak of the First World War. But divorce followed, and in 1922 Anton married a rather remarkable Scots lady, Hilda Crowther, initially his secretary, to whom he is said to have dictated letters almost non-stop during the honeymoon, with whom however he had five children, Ariane, Joy, Peter, Tony and Monna.

In June 1949 Besse and his wife visited Gordonstoun. Arnold Forster wrote to Hahn a few days later: *'the visit (has been) a complete success ... you completely won his heart ... he wants to spend a lot more time with you ... he told me last night that his visit would prove "very fruitful" for Gordonstoun.'* And then the dilemma that faces all fundraisers: *'I could of course press him for an immediate donation ... if on the other hand we make no such SOS. signal now, our chances of getting a real foundation on a very much bigger scale would in my view be greatly enhanced ... but it is no use playing a waiting game if the ship is going to sink in the meanwhile...'*

Kurt Hahn's younger brother Rudo was the enthusiastic hunter and fisherman in the family, but Kurt was no mean angler either. He knew exactly how to play a big fish. ^[p] *'My faith in our mission'*; he wrote immediately to Besse, *'is strong but vulnerable. It is ever in need of confirmation from independent sources. What you have done in your life, what you have thought and dreamt, could not be realised by me from hearsay only or from the written word; it needed a meeting.'* And a few days later, allowing himself to comment on the difficulties that Besse was still facing over the status of his college in Oxford: *'Oxford always had the saving grace of inconsistency ... I believe that with the*

[o] He was later a member of the Atlantic College Governing Council but resigned as a matter of principle when girls were admitted in 1967.

[p] "How is your French fishery expedition progressing? Is the fish on the hook or still nibbling strongly?" Eric Warburg to Kurt Hahn on 13th October 1949



Around this time he set out his ideas on education. He had always impressed friends and visitors with his knowledge of literature and love of poetry and the range of his musical interests, and he was especially proud of all this in the light of his lack of education after the age of 18. Looking at extracts from an essay of his on education, one readily comprehends the immediate rapport that was to arise between him and Kurt Hahn:

'Yet instead of the Divine, as interpreted by the teachings of traditional and progressive morality, and the Human, as represented by Science, merging and flowing together in one great stream, these two currents have, up to the present, pursued two different courses. Perhaps this is the cause of the ever-hardening division between Education and Instruction, since the latter tends to consider only facts, unrelated to morality ... the great savants are not unaware of the force of sentiment; they know that nothing great or strong can be created without it ... given teachers who are also converts, and lecturers chosen from the élite of all countries, men known for their international breadth of outlook ... the development and strengthening of character can proceed hand in hand with the acquisition of knowledge, by special methods which would include tests of physical endurance and a sense of responsibility ..'

Initiative and independence of judgment and of action were the qualities he was after. In 1947 he went to the Ministry of Education in Paris to offer funding for a French college that would promote these qualities. What rapidly became christened Le College des Rebelles found no friends. It was to be another fifty years before Ferdinand Mayor, the Director General of UNESCO, was to declare that 'the history of our time compels us to affirm that rebellion is one of the basic aspects of being human ... Non-violent rebellion, creative disobedience, or the insubordination of those who refuse the unacceptable is the best way to ensure that humankind successfully makes the transition from the logic of force, which still prevails today, to the logic of reason ... this idea of peaceful and creative rebellion is essential in order to open us the paths to the future ...'. But France had no need of new institutions! And no private institution could issue diplomas that would enjoy official recognition.

Besse turned to Britain. He had admired the British colonial administration and the British wartime achievements, but now (as he was to write later),

'for all too long it has seemed to me that the order of the day in England has been 'Conformity', the training for which begins at school ... where British youth is concerned the craze for conformity to a pattern and the failure to exhort boys to set themselves and strive towards a higher ideal, both individually and collectively, has resulted in a standard of mediocrity which is painful to behold in a country I have always loved and admired ... the present levelling down of humanity and the widely adopted principle of Safety First represent the very antithesis of my ideal ...'

His purple views were, it must be said, based substantially on his failure to recruit British young men of the calibre to serve him on his terms in the Middle East.

In short, he turned to Oxford. He wanted more Frenchmen to study there. He offered to set up a college for the purpose. Anyone who knows Oxford knows that things there take time. He was in a hurry. Here was Oxford behaving just like those short-sighted Shell executives. His offer was £1.5 million. What was this problem about obtaining a charter? To bring matters forward, he offered £250,000 to be shared between the eight poorest colleges on condition that they favoured applicants of French nationality, and the offer was accepted. Besse was then angered by the university's assumption that he was adding these £250,000 to his original gift rather than redeploying some of it for more rapid results.

■ Ferdinand Mayor: Paris July 1998 – *Education at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*

One unsuccessful venture was Arabian Airways. In the 1930's steamships capable of carrying passengers were rare. The alternative, dhows, were unreliable, uncomfortable and slow. The British RAF had simple airstrips across South West Arabia, but charts, ground maintenance, fuel supplies and navigational aids were primitive if available at all. Besse calculated that the creation of a mail service in cooperation with Imperial Airways in Khartoum would generate a useful profit. He jumped too soon. The necessary authorisations were not forthcoming, and he sold up in 1939 at a loss. Precisely ten years later he turned down the invitation to become Chairman of Aden Airways, a highly profitable subsidiary of BOAC. But this was one venture among scores. He had been toughened early on by setbacks. In 1921 he had arrived in London to find that a senior business colleague, himself now penniless, had run up debts for the company amounting to £550,000. Besse was effectively bankrupt. He was utterly frank with the Scottish manager in London of the National Bank of India, the one bank operating in Aden: *'I will pay back everything, but I shall need your help'*. He then, people said, *'pledged his trousers to the bank'*. At the half-way stage of repayment, the manager called in all his senior staff and told them that Besse must be given all the help he asked for, now and in the future. Anton Besse was influenced for life by this expression of trust.

He had also encountered problems of a more political nature. As the Abyssinian conflict came closer in the mid-1930's, he was carrying through a rapid expansion of all his activities in the country, provoking an order from Mussolini himself forbidding him from trading there. Then he was accused of smuggling, gun-running and trading in drugs, all of which he vigorously contested in a letter to the French newspaper, *Le Journal*, which had published these accusations. More significantly, in the early months of 1935 he had noticed in the trade returns provided by his agent in Asmara a sharp increase in oil fuel supplies ordered from Shell, especially aviation fuel. Knowing that Mussolini had to rely on Shell supplies until able to organise transportation from Italian ports, he suspected military developments in the area. He at once sought an interview with the Emperor, Haile Selassie, who understood the implications immediately but placed his trust in the League of Nations. Besse's efforts to get him to make a direct approach to London were entirely unsuccessful. Shortly after, when the Italians started using mustard gas against the local people, he cut off their fuel supplies completely. He was placed on the Fascist black list. Later, travelling from Beirut to Paris, his plane was held back by headwinds and forced to land for refuelling in Brindisi. The Italians learned that he was on board, took him off the plane and imprisoned him. Pressure from Paris and London secured his release only after some forty-eight hours.

Writing her memoirs some twenty years after the Second World War, Freya Stark, who during the war had returned to Aden – *'set in remoteness, independent of time'* – remembered *'Hilda Besse and Anton sparkling with gaiety and malice ... he enjoyed his enemies with unfailing gusto ... he was distressed at this time (1941) because he could not help making money during the war; it piled up "malgré moi"'*.

Illness, Education and St. Antony's College, Oxford

In 1948 Anton Besse suffered a stroke. Other thoughts entered his mind. The business had become *'gigantic'*. *'Where is the man who can take over my burden?'* He had already opened and financed an apprentice training school in Aden; also a dispensary which within its first twelve months treated almost 2000 minor surgical and another 2000 medical cases. He had invested in education for women and in the University of Addis Ababa. There are, it seems, no records that confirm the number and extent of his donations. He had once told Freya Stark that her charity was like the Morse code: *'only dots and dashes'*. His was consistently anonymous and consistently undocumented. But now he had bigger ideas.



KURT

04

Africa, Europe ... his agents are everywhere ... he is a real Epicurean in the good sense of the word; and has made himself here a world of his own – not belonging even to the British club, but knowing everyone worth knowing, and having immense power all over the country ... a wonderful person who lets life play upon him as if he were an instrument responsive to all its variations ... he has made several fortunes and does not care for money a bit... he sits at his desk across the room and settles huge enterprises in a quiet way – where his ships are to go, whether or not to buy up all the incense of his coast, to send tar and petrol to Abyssinia. The office ... an arcaded room with lots of compartments with desks, each with some huge business of its own, a Parsi, an Arab, French, German, Englishman, Russian, running them ... it is fascinating to see so huge and varied an affair and one brain the centre of it all ...' [●]

In truth, he was not modest. What was his aim in life? To organise all the Red Sea, Arabia, Abyssinia, the Sudan, the Somali lands, British and German East Africa; acquire ships to bring out to these countries all that the local population could need; convey back to Europe and America all that these countries could produce; and establish agencies in London, Paris, Marseilles, Barcelona, New York and Hamburg for this purpose.

In 1914, presenting himself for military duties, he was asked: 'What are you in civilian life?' 'A millionaire.'

In 1923 he took on the business of Royal Shell. At the time Shell business amounted to 700 tons annually, or some 180,000 gallons. Despite debts, he quickly built three ships and was soon able to report that he had secured 72% of the entire Red Sea trade in oil. In 1936 he installed the first diesel engines in Arab dhows, building up a fleet of 14 craft that could operate in all weathers and seasons – these craft were to carry mutton safely from Berbera to Aden and to supply the fuel for all the British RAF stations on the south side of the Arabian Peninsula. He operated four other trading vessels, some thirty lighters and five tugs, and built a floating dock for their maintenance. He introduced air-conditioning to Aden, electricity, modern plumbing with the first piped water, refrigerators and deep freezers, washing machines, and the first steel fishing vessel. His agencies included Austin, Lancia, Renault, Jaguar, Holden & Dodge cars, for all of which he also provided the necessary servicing facilities. Besse & Co. were agents for the Liverpool & London & Globe Insurance Company Ltd and the Prudential Assurance Company Ltd. and for air and sea travel bookings. His associate company, *The Halal Shipping Company Ltd.*, represented many shipping lines. Shortly after the Second World War he established a fleet of 104 large Italian Lancia lorries, both tanker and goods vehicles, for moving products between Assab, Dessie and Addis Ababa. So rough were the roads that each round journey consumed one set of tyres. It was he who then pioneered the system, now common-place, of raising one pair of tyres when loads were lighter. And he devised cleaning procedures that enabled him to load his tanker lorries with coffee on their return journeys.

But by far his most important if always difficult trading relationship was with the Royal Shell oil company. In 1947 Besse bought two abandoned Italian oil tanks at Assab, then embarked on the building of a jetty made out of a floating dock of oil drums. Shell were reluctant to expose their tankers to so primitive an enterprise. Besse's written response was characteristic. 'I invariably see (a scheme) from the point of view of its potentialities when fully developed. I am so conscious of all the advantages of Assab that if you do not agree I will myself buy a tanker to keep the port supplied.' Six months later: '... we are in a position to supply entirely the eastern and northern parts of Ethiopia. Pumps have been erected at all the vital points, and our organization there is growing at such a pace that before the end of the year, when Assab is in working order and able to receive tankers carrying white oil, I hope to be able to turn to you and say: Gentlemen, Ethiopia is yours.'

[●] The eventual range of his business is well illustrated by his letter heading in the 1950's: A. Besse and Co. (Aden) Ltd. Agents for Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. Ltd., Associated British Oil Engines (Export) Ltd., Austin Motor Export Corporation Ltd., Bayer Products Ltd., Candles (Overseas) Ltd. Carrier Corporation, Chloride Batteries Ltd., Chrysler Corporation, CIBA Laboratories Ltd., Citrus Board (South Africa), J. V. Drake and Co., Ercole Marelli and Co., Export Bottlers Ltd., Francolor, Franke and Heidecke, Gilbey's Ltd., Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Export Co., Heineken's Bierbrouwerij Maatschappij N. V., Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd., International Marine Radio Co. Ltd., International Paints Ltd., Kodak Ltd., Nash Kelvinator Corporation, National Carbon (Eastern) Ltd., N. V. Philips, H. A. Riedl Ltd., The Shell Co. Ltd., Societe Anonyme L'air Liquide, Sunbeam Cycles Ltd., Tissot & Fils S. A. (Swiss Watches), Underwood Corporation, Willys Overland Export Corporation

The Arnold Forsters' son Mark was one of the eight small boys who were enrolled in Hahn's first school in Scotland, Rothiemurchus, opened only weeks after his flight to Britain in July 1933 and the precursor to Gordonstoun which was launched in September of the following year.

The *Macenas*, the *Deus ex Machina* behind the telegram, embodied all the romance, mystery and optimism implied by this dramatic message, although the road was to be longer and more uphill than Chris Arnold Forster foresaw. It was his neighbour in the south of France, Anton Besse of Aden, the father of our own Antonin (Tony) Besse, the donor of St. Donat's Castle and estate.

Anton Besse of Aden

Anton Besse was born in 1877, lost his father at the age of seven, experienced vividly the sufferings of his mother as she tried to keep up middle class appearances with no money, failed his baccalaureate, joined the army at 18 to become, so he later claimed, France's youngest corporal, and responded in 1899, at 22, to an advertisement from a French firm established in Aden and in Hodeidah, a port in Yemen. It is claimed – the Besse mythology began early and has rarely faltered – that, asked to state his qualifications, he replied: *"I have none; I know nothing"*, and was engaged immediately. The conditions of employment were tough: duration of the contract three years, remuneration 150 Frs. (£6) a month, after three years a holiday of four to six months; *'whether or not the employee is entitled to remuneration while on leave to be decided later'*; *'misbehaviour, disobedience or inefficiency on the employee's part automatically cancels the contract and the employee must leave Aden by the next boat at his own expense'*. But by 1900 he was writing that he was getting up at half-past four and working right through until six in the evening: *'One must always be taking the initiative, no time to stop and think, one must work as it were by instinct ... big deals and little deals are settled by one word... the whole time one has to take one's courage in one's hands and always, always press forward ...'*

Before long, and despite a clause in his contract that forbade him from setting up his own business in the Aden area for five years after leaving the firm, he had started up on his own.

Two accomplished writers have left us portraits of him.

Evelyn Waugh invested him with a degree of immortality in his novel *Scoop* in the character Le Blanc (◻), but his diary (6th December 1930) gives us a more direct impression of the man's energy and way of life, for Waugh partly alarming, partly delectable, above all memorable:

'... after lunch we went for what Mr. B. called a little walk in the hills ... luckily I had rubber-soled shoes, otherwise climb absolutely impossible ... Besse gave a little skip and swarmed straight up a perpendicular cliff. Later loose stones ... "it is better to press with the feet than pull with the hands!" ... we were bare to waist and very much scratched and bruised ... crossed crater, climbed another cliff, walked along edge, and then came down over red-hot rocks ... then long walk on loose cinders to sea, where servants were awaiting us with towels and tea ... bathed in a warm, shark-infested sea ... drove back at great speed ... Besse had change of clothes ... came in full of having fallen in love with a Papist lady doctor ... dined Besse and his mistress and clerks ... excellent dinner and wine ... bed early, slept well ...'

Freya Stark gives us the more intimate, romantic picture, for she saw him with a woman's eye, and he was a woman's man:

'M. Besse ... is more than charming: he is a Merchant, in the style of the Arabian Nights or the Renaissance: all day long telegrams come to him from India, America, China, Yemen,

◻ Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* is treasured for its satirical, hugely entertaining debunking of journalism. The background, as he himself readily acknowledged in his *Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936), was infinitely more sinister: *'Fascist empire came first to Ethiopia, following the Italian invasion late in 1935. The fighting itself was conducted with unprecedented brutality by the Italians, who were desperate for a quick victory: gas and chemical warfare, as well as saturation bombing, killed enormous numbers, as did the detention and concentration camps that the Italians brought with them from the pacification campaigns of a few years earlier against the nomadic Senussi. Around 3000 Italians died compared with tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. Neither later nor at the time did this kind of bloodshed occasion much criticism; inside Italy, victory marked the high point of Mussolini's reign, a 'golden age' of fascist Empire.'*

'The peace that followed was equally enlightening. Following an assassination attempt on Viceroy Graziani, notorious for his brutality, Fascist squads went on the rampage in Addis Ababa, killing over a thousand people in cold blood. Others were executed in mass reprisals, including several hundred monks. All this offered a foretaste of what Europe – and Italy – would experience a few years later at the hands of the Germans. Meanwhile, Ciano addressed the General Assembly of the League of Nations, and referred to the "sacred mission of civilisation" which Italy was heeding, declaring that his country would "consider it an honour to inform the League of the progress achieved in its work of civilising Ethiopia".' Mark Mazower *Dark Continent* Penguin Edition pp. 72-73.



Tony Besse

Beiti Beitak [*My House is Your House*]

As visitors make their way through St. Donat's Castle, they come across a plaque with this inscription.

TO COMMEMORATE THE GENEROUS GIFT OF

ST. DONAT'S CASTLE

BY

M. ANTONIN BESSE

FOR

THE UNITED WORLD COLLEGE OF THE ATLANTIC

OPENED IN SEPTEMBER 1962

Had Tony Besse not made his donation in October 1960, the castle would have passed into other, commercial hands. No one can say whether the Atlantic College project would have survived this setback, or the United World Colleges have come into being.

This is a story that should be carried in the hearts of every member of the United World Colleges.

It is also the story of a family.

On 3rd September 1948, when Kurt Hahn was struggling to re-establish his Gordonstoun School in its original Scottish home after wartime exile in Wales, and the financial situation was desperate, he received the following mutilated but unmistakeably urgent telegram from a long-standing friend and member of his school council:

Discussing future development with one who ... education on vast scale and who might completely solve Gordonstoun future financial problems would therefore urge dispatch of as complete a documentation as possible regardless expense must reach me by September 10 acknowledge Kurt Hahn or representative Gordonstoun ... please send airmail Gordonstoun literature and all Hahn lectures or pamphlets bearing upon underlying aims of Gordonstoun and Salem special reference to international aspects stop acknowledge receipt telegraphically and state Hahns movements next three weeks Chris Arnold Forster.

The Arnold Forsters had been friends and admirers of Kurt Hahn since the 1920's. Chris had been a prominent member of the Union for Democratic Control, a body that in England had worked for a negotiated settlement of the First World War. Mrs Ka Arnold Forster had taught at Salem. It was she who, sitting at lunch in the Hotel Continental in Geneva in 1933 during Hahn's brief imprisonment by the Nazis, saw the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald at a neighbouring table with his private secretary Neville Butler. A note quickly passed to Neville Butler led to Ramsay Macdonald's letter to the German National Socialist Government seeking the release of Kurt Hahn, then in so-called "protective custody" - he had been arrested in the early hours of 11th March. By the time the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baron von Neurath, answered the letter, Hahn had been released but forbidden all further contact with Salem and expelled from Baden.

Neville Butler had himself been freed from German custody in the camp of Ruhleben, outside Berlin, in 1915, where as an undergraduate he had been studying in Germany and caught by the outbreak of war. He went on to spend several weeks in the Hahn household in Berlin. How strange to envisage an Englishman being allowed to live with a German family in wartime, subject to only minor restrictions! It was all thanks to Hahn's powers of persuasion - he had visited the camp to enquire after Oxbridge graduates in internment there. We must be very thankful, for Neville Butler later provided us with one of the few intimate and truly evocative insights into Hahn's early family life - and at an especially fascinating time.