Who Was Cousin Alice?
Also by John Matthias

Poetry
Bucyrus (1970)
Turns (1975)
Crossing (1979)
Bathory & Lermontov (1980)
Northern Summer (1984)
A Gathering of Ways (1991)
Swimming at Midnight (1995)
Beltane at Aphelion (1995)
Working Progress, Working Title (2002)
Swell & Variations on the Song of Songs (2003)
Kedging (2007)
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(with Göran Printz-Påhlson)
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(With Lars-Håkan Svensson)

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23 Modern British Poets (1971)
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Kedging in ‘Kedging in Time’

After the first version of the poem now called ‘Kedging in Time’ was published in *Chicago Review* using only its first line as a title—‘Thirty-Nine Among the Sands, His Steps’—I was asked by the editors of that journal to give an account of its occasion and composition. Although it was impossible to pass up such an offer, I was aware that there are always dangers that come with any experiment in self-reading.¹ One doesn’t want inadvertently to shut down any passages—a resonant word in the watery context of this poem—while opening up a lock here and there by way of some auto- and bibliographical heaving and hoing at cranks, gates, gears, and other kinds of machinery. Most of the ships in this tale are too heavy to portage; and a clogged sluice may now and then require a better trained nautical sleuth than the maker of the poem and author of these notes. Still, the essay was generally enjoyed and a number of readers suggested that I reprint it in the book, *Kedging* (Salt Publishing, 2007) where it can in fact be found in a slightly different form.

To begin with, the title of the piece changed after its appearance in *Chicago Review*. The first line is now just a first line, though still splicing the titles of two popular fictions of the early Twentieth Century, Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). The title is now as given above, while the version in the book, re-formatted to encourage a slow reading, follows the title with a modified quote from the OED and a dedication:

[Kedge, v. intr. A. To warp a ship, or move it from one position to another by winding in a hawser attached to a small anchor dropped at some distance; also trans. To warp. B. Of a ship: To move by means of kedging.] Poets, too, may cast an anchor well before them, pulling forward when attached to something solid, only then to cast their anchor once again.

For some families involved:

Drury-Lowe, Adams, Bonham-Carter, Hilton-Young, Young

And for friends
The addition of a dedication serves, I hope, to suggest at once that the poem is not entirely impersonal in the mix of literary and historical materials encountered by the reader following the first fourteen lines. In fact, by the end of the piece, it should become clear that an elegy for Pamela Adams, along with her forbears and some in her extended family, has emerged out of the various dissolves, re-windings and general historical parataxis of the text. Although fictional characters, historical figures, and family members keep an extended and perhaps an initially perplexing company in the piece, Pamela is at the center and draws the others together as daughter and wife of sailors, reader of Childers, Buchan, Anthony Hope and Rider Haggard, writer of memoirs, step-mother, mother, mother-in-law, cousin and friend of those many members of “families involved.” Although it’s going to sound like name-dropping, a bit of family history may help to open up the poem.²

At some point in the fall of 1966 I found myself at a party in London talking to the most beautiful woman in England. Reader, I married her. But not for a year or so. I was inconveniently married to someone else at the moment and, of course, I had to meet Ms. Diana Adams’ family. That very night I made a start at what was a very long process. At the end of the party Ms. Adams suggested dropping back to “my sister’s place,” what I assumed would be a student flat. Her sister’s name, “Liz Young,” sounded reassuring enough, but my London roommate (my American wife was at Stanford), drove the four of us—the fourth was a friend who had met Liz’s husband, Wayland, at I.U. in Bloomington, and that sounded downright Hoosier—straight up Bayswater Rd. to a private house amid hotels and high rises more or less across from the Round Pond in Hyde Park. I still thought the “student flat” might be at the back or maybe in the attic, but became a little alarmed when I saw a blue plaque near the door saying that James Barrie had written Peter Pan inside. Liz and Wayland lived, along with their five children, in the whole house, not just in part of it. After I got to know Wayland I sometimes thought he, with all his polymath’s enthusiasms, might be Peter Pan.

It was quite late and all children save the eldest—that was Easter, eighteen—were in bed. After a while Wayland, and a little later Liz, came down from wherever they had been upstairs. The backdrop to
a sherry and a couple of hours conversation was a large library, art on the walls by some artists I recognized—Duncan Grant in his Matisse phase, for example—and both a piano and harpsichord. As Wayland talked a little shop, it turned out that he was a member of the Wilson government and had another name—Lord Kennet. (His paper trail is hard to follow as he’s published books under the names Wayland Hilton-Young, Wayland Young, and Wayland Kennet. The changes of name suggest an intellectual restlessness that has been part of his character.) Liz, as it turned out, was Diana’s half sister, daughter not of Pamela, but of Bryan Adams’ first wife, Audrey, who had drowned in a swimming accident. Liz was a poet, a published authority on arms control, and co-author, with Wayland, of books ranging in subject from old London churches to Northern Lazio in Italy. On the literary side of things, they were friends of people like Wole Soyinka and William Golding; on the political side, they entertained ministers, ambassadors, and a range of high-flying academics including a man I met later that year called Henry Kissinger. Liz and Wayland were about forty. Diana was twenty-one. I was twenty-four and felt like an American pilgrim out of Henry James.

Diana had been living at Liz and Wayland’s house while attending Russian classes at what was then called Holborn College. And she had lived there before, when she was doing A-levels at Queens. It must have been a heady environment for a teenage girl. Her own home was in the tiny village of Hacheston, in Suffolk, where her father had retired after serving in two World Wars. He was over eighty. Pamela was twenty years younger. They had met at the League of Nations before the Second War. Captain Adams had been pleased when his first daughter married the son of an old shipmate, Edward Hilton Young. They had served together on Vindictive, about which Hilton Young wrote in his book By Land and Sea. (It is my main source for the attack at Zeebrugge.) The Captain had been pleased enough with Wayland’s early books, but didn’t like his famous contribution to the zeitgeist of the Sixties, Eros Denied. “All about sex,” he sniffed when I mentioned it some years later. (It was research at the Kinsey Institute that had led Wayland briefly to Bloomington.)

Though Edward Hilton Young had proposed to Virginia Woolf in a punt on the Cam, he eventually married the widow of Captain

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Kedging in ‘Kedging in Time’
John Matthias

Scott of the Antarctic. So Lady Scott was Wayland’s mother. She was a sculptor and a friend of T.E. Lawrence, who sat to her for a bust. I eventually imagined both a polar waste and a desert at opposite ends of the house: one the province of Scott, the other of Lawrence. Wayland would sometimes dress up in Lawrence’s Arab robes (somehow in his possession) and dash about the house with his dagger. His daughter, Louisa, writes her grandmother’s life in *A Great Task of Happiness*. Another daughter, Emily, is a sculptor, like Lady Scott—and perhaps the finest living stone carver in the tradition of Gaudier-Brzeska, Eric Gill, and Mestrovic.³

The Scott, Young and Adams families are all from Naval backgrounds. Louisa writes in her biography that the Youngs “came from a line of runaway cabin boys and pirates which developed into Admirals.” I have in my library the midshipman’s log book composed by Sidney Drury-Lowe, Pamela Adams’ father, from the time he was thirteen. No runaway or pirate, he came from a branch of the family which one associates with the poetry of John Donne. He, too, “developed into” an Admiral. Bryan Adams, born in Australia, also went to sea at an early age. Along with Hilton Young, he served under Sir Roger Keyes at certain points in the First World War. Thoby Young, Diana’s ten-year-old nephew when I met him, eventually married Roger Keyes’ granddaughter.

“And Pamela was nine.” The passage that introduces Pamela to the poem finds her “near Rosyth in the little coastal / village, Aberdour.” Here she waits for her father’s occasional visits, reading Hope, Buchan and Childers, playing games, looking out to sea where the naval war is in progress. Part II of the poem concludes looking forward to her 94th year and her memories of the Kiel Regatta, the war-time patrols of destroyers and dreadnoughts, and eventually the surrender and scuttling of the German fleet. At the end of her life, she thought she was the last to have seen *Der Tag*, The Surrender. Her father had seen to it that she and a few other children of officers were taken out in a launch as the German ships steamed past. She tells the story in one of her unpublished memoirs, *The Iron Pier*, which is a source for this part of the poem. Out at sea her future husband was also aboard his ship. She wouldn’t marry him for twenty years, but there he was. Like Pamela herself, and like her father, he had a copy of Childers’ *Riddle of*
Churchill had sent copies to all ships at sea after Childers’ participation in The Cuxhaven Raid in December 1914—a raid that depended on the observations of shores, islands, canals, sandbanks, tides and military strategies of a fictional character living in a novel.

“On Vindictive . . . nothing flying in the sky except the gulls.” At the end of Part III, the poem returns to Pamela by way of Bryan Adams’ and Hilton Young’s participation in the attack on the guns at Zeebrugge. The strategic importance of the raid would take too long to explain here, but it’s worth saying that it was a nearly suicidal assignment for those, led by Captain Adams, who dashed from their ship in a land attack against the lighthouse on the mole. (Maps of the coastline from Dunkirk north to Borkum and Cuxhaven can be found in Robert Massie’s history, *Castles of Steel.* Adams survived intact while Hilton Young, still on *Vindictive,* lost an arm to enemy fire. The narrative passage describing the attack merges in the text with Pamela’s half-dreaming memories on the early morning of Remembrance Day, 1966. This was my first visit to Hacheston, and there I am, “the young American / walking with the family to the little Norman church.”

By the time I wrote this passage, Pamela was dead. Or, perhaps, I was writing it as she died. It is rather uncanny. Diana had flown to England in February of 2005 and had been there for a month or so, nursing her mother. The poem turned biographical and elegiac during that period. The remembered events included the Remembrance Day celebration, a first meeting between “the young American” and Pamela and Bryan Adams, pleasure sailing on the Alde, a dinner, and some awkward literary conversation in which the American tries to talk about Virginia Woolf—he was reading *Jacob’s Room* coming up on the train—when the Captain said (the poem only has him “looking rather bored”): “Perhaps we’ve had enough of her,” maybe referring to his future son-in-law’s blather, or maybe to his own memories of his shipmate’s infatuation with VirginiaWoolf herself. The bookshelves there in Hacheston held some serious literature—complete sets of Hardy, Austen, Scott—but it’s the talismanic Kipling, Buchan, and Hope toward whose books, unfortunately, the American has his back. As for Childers, he finally read *The Riddle of the Sands* when it was urged on him by, of all people, Geoffrey Hill.

The poem ends—aside from the echoing questions meant for “Mr.
Memory”—where it began, with sailing on the Alde. I had placed “Wayland, Nigel, and Ian” in the yacht at the Kiel Regatta—an actual yachtsman, a Bonham-Carter cousin, and my newborn grandson—while, of course, the little sailing boat in the Suffolk river contains the Captain, his wife, his daughter, and the troublesome American. Diana “sailed the Alde” quite early in life and her head was full of sometimes frightening fantasies—“children’s strategies on tidal rivers / where the toy wooden soldiers rose / in marshmist reeds and tipped their Bismarck helmets / to the girls, Achtung!” The rest of the opening passage, however, introduces an altogether different strand of the poem: “Cousin Erskine had preceded / by some leagues And even Uncle Win. Sons of Lord Anchises, Prophesying war, sang of arms and men who had come back again

\[ By \text{whom the bundled fasces were restored} \ldots \]

Biographically speaking, there is no Uncle Win or Cousin Erskine in the Adams, Young, or Drury-Lowe clans. The references are to Childers and Churchill, who “had preceded” the principal family members of the poem into historical waters—and in the wake of Aeneas and Lucius Junius Brutus. Early on, Childers—an enthusiastic combatant in the Boer War—was as bullish an Imperialist as Churchill himself, and the “bundled fasces” resonate equally of Imperial Britain, Augustan Rome, Bismarck’s Germany, and the Italy of Mussolini.

To compound the fiction braided at the outset around biography, Childers, as far as I know, never sailed from the Alde in Suffolk on any of his pre-World War I explorations of the Frisian islands, the coasts of Holland and Germany, and the Baltic that provided material for *The Riddle of the Sands* and, eventually, his official paper for the Admiralty, *The Seizure of Borkum and Juist*. He sailed out the mouth of the Thames. However, his journey on *Vixen*, and the journey of his characters Davies and Carruthers on *Dulcibella*, enter the poem at once as fiction and fact. Sailing *Vixen*, Childers carried with him and read Book Six of *The Aeneid* and Anthony Hope’s *Rupert of Hentzau*, sequel to *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Pamela would also be reading Hope—as would Churchill.

The mapping of Davies and Carruthers, their discovery of German military secrets, and the epilogue by “the editor” dealing with the
deciphered memorandum Carruthers pulls from a stove at Norderney, became a matter of great interest at the War Office after *The Riddle of the Sands* was published in 1903. Fictional characters began at that point their instruction of statesmen, Admirals, and Generals who continued listening up to and beyond the Cuxhaven Raid of December 1914. From the first page of the poem, fictional characters move in the same world as men and women like Bryan and Pamela Adams, Hilton Young, Sidney Drury-Lowe, John Buchan, Kaiser Wilhelm, Tsar Nicholas and Childers himself.

The next several pages of text, following the introduction of motifs in the initial fifteen lines, braid together Childers’ articulated fear that Germany could easily launch an invasion of Britain from the Frisian islands with Churchill’s reading of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and his composition of *Savrola*, the Ruritanian romance he wrote in 1897 and published first in *MacMillan’s Magazine* and then, in 1900, as a novel with Hodder and Stoughton’s “Sevenpenny Library.” Unlike *The Riddle of the Sands*, *Savrola* would be of no importance at all if it weren’t by Churchill. Written in the wake of *Zenda*’s extreme popularity, and between Malakand and the River War when its author was twenty-four, *Savrola* is dedicated to “The Officers of the IVth (Queen’s Own) Hussars in whose company the author served for four happy years.” In the poem, the adventures of the republican Savrola as he battles in fictional “Laurania” with dictator Morala on the right and radical Kreutz on the left, merge with an account of the actual attack at Kilid Bahr in the Bosphorus.4 While Laurania’s fleet is recalled from Port Said to quell Savrola’s rebellion—*Fortune, Petrarch* and *Sonato* exchanging fire with shore batteries as they attempt to gain access to Laurania’s major harbor—*Agamemnon, Inflexible* and *Irresistible* encountered in fact a similar situation steaming up the strait to the Hellespont in the Dardanelles campaign that sent the novelist who had become First Lord of the Admiralty plummeting into temporary obscurity. Edmund Wilson said that in some ways Churchill’s career gave him the impression of a person living perpetually in a boy’s adventure story; the same might be said of Childers. In the case of both, their fictions prefigure events in the First War and after. And Churchill knew his Childers well. Carruthers’ fear of a German attack from the Frisians became Childers’ memorandum recommending a British attack from
Borkum and Juist, supported by the Russians in the Baltic. Churchill chose the Dardanelles and disaster. Who knows what might have happened at Borkum and Juist?

As Morala and Churchill “dream of power” and Churchill pauses in his 1897 composition, the poem’s clock is re-set for 1915 and Gallipoli. If only the fictional Carruthers saw the dangers of a German invasion of the eastern coast of Britain from the Frisians (British barges now diverted from the Baltic to the Dardanelles), it was Richard Hannay, John Buchan’s hero in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), *Greenmantle* (1916), and two subsequent novels, who knows that Kaiser Wilhelm “gave it out he was a secret / Muslim and proclaimed a Jihad in Islamic lands / against the Brits.” From this point to the end of Part I, Buchan and his fictions become a new strand in the braiding, anticipating a transition from the British failure against the Turks and Germans at Gallipoli to the success of Brits and Russians—aided by T.E. Lawrence, who may be the model for Sandy Arbuthnot in *Greenmantle*—at Erzerum. As he wrote his novels, Buchan, who worked (sometimes with Lawrence) in intelligence and decoding, also wrote the ongoing chronicle (verging on propaganda) that became *The Nelson History of the War*. The strange story about the Kaiser’s feigned conversion to Islam is evidently true, as it is told in the history as well as the fiction.

The poem continues with the first references to Childers’ adventure running guns to Ireland on the *Asgard*—guns which, though intended for the Dublin Volunteers, were eventually taken by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and used in the Easter Rebellion. While Childers was at sea, Austria sent its ultimatum to Serbia. The war began, and Childers returned to England to fly as navigator in a Short 136 from which he pointed out details from the maps made in his head sailing *Vixen* back in 1897. Because of that, “1903’s fiction [does indeed, drawing on *Vixen’s* log] prefigure 1915’s fact.” Childers spent the rest of his life trying to reconcile his commitment to the cause of Ireland with his loyalty to the Empire. In the end, of course, that couldn’t be done.5

How do these and other texts function in the poem? As secure holds for the kedge-anchor of my reefed verbal craft. When I first read *The Riddle of the Sands*, I had to look up “kedge” and “kedging” in the OED. In seconds I had on my screen just the kind of list I like—*kechel, Kechua, keckle, kecksy, keddah, kedje, kedge-anchor, kedger, kedging,*
kedjeway—and immediately wrote a short poem bouncing phrases off these K’s. (“K,K,K, Katie” sang the Tommies and the sailors shipped to foreign ports.) The phrases include some that find their way into the present, longer poem when its poetics, as it were, is made plain:

... what’s the future of the future tense?
What’s propitious in the past? Passing through the present
Kedging’s all you’re good for
With a foot of water under you, the tide gone out, the fog so thick
You can’t see lights at Norderney but enter history in spite
Of that by sounding in its shallows with an oar.

In the end, I thought an epigraph could make this even plainer.

The “young American” of Part III bores the Captain by going on at dinner about Virginia Woolf. I’ve mentioned that he was “in fact” reading Jacob’s Room. (By 1922, when Woolf’s novel was published in the same year as The Waste Land, modernism had begun making fiction like Buchan’s look even more unsophisticated and jingoistic than it is.) In Jacob’s Room, Jacob and his friend Timothy Durrant sail from Falmouth to St. Ives Bay before the war, following the same route around Land’s End that Childers took in Asgard in July 1914. Asgard, indeed, sailed with its load of guns right through massive exercises of the British fleet which occurred at the same time, George V observing from a dreadnought. Jacob, like the characters in Greenmantle, travels eventually to Turkey before he is ground up in the gears of war and becomes a casualty in a world that came into being, while, as Woolf has it, “A voice kept remarking that Prime Ministers and Viceroyes spoke in the Reichstag; entered Lahore; said that the Emperor traveled; in Milan they rioted; said there were rumours in Vienna; said that the Ambassador at Constantinople had audience with the Sultan; the fleet was at Gibraltar.”

The fleet would be at Scapa Flow. The conclusion of Part II quotes a passage from Childers’ Vixen log and finds Wilhelm sailing in the Baltic just before the outbreak of war. He had always envied the Royal Navy and participated enthusiastically with those other heirs of Queen Victoria, cousins Nicholas II and George V, in the parties and regattas held at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. Admiral Jellicoe brought
150 British ships down into the North Sea to support the Cuxhaven Raid. Zeppelins and submarines ventured out, but not the great ships of Wilhelm’s *Hochseeflotte*, which were hiding in the estuaries and rivers known so well to Childers. The raid achieved little and, subsequent to that, the Germans would not be drawn. There would be no early Trafalgar. There would be no Trafalgar at all, even at Jutland.

I need only identify two or three more texts—though one is a film—into which the kedge-anchor digs in order to haul this contraption forward (winds and retreating tide also sometimes pushing it back). The film is Alfred Hitchcock’s version of Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. While Part II of the poem begins with a quote from Childers’ paper on Borkum and Juist and an evocation of the response in East Anglian coastal towns to seeing aircraft and ships of war, a central figure called “Mr. Memory” is soon introduced. There is no such character in Buchan’s novel. He is added by Hitchcock to the 1935 film along with a love-interest for Hannay. (The latter’s name is Pamela, but because of the more important Pamela in the poem, references to this character use the name of the actress who played her, Madeleine Carroll.) While ships in the North Sea, Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan in Room 40 (working on codes, like his hero), and the secret agents of Black Stone all try either to establish or penetrate an “atmosphere,” the aim of Buchan’s villains to acquire intelligence about the disposition of the British fleet becomes—once “Buchan’s Hannay” morphs into “Hannay’s Buchan” in the film—a search for secret plans to build a silent aircraft engine. Mr. Memory, whose music hall act involves his ability to recall an infinite number of unrelated facts when questioned by members of the audience, substitutes for Hannay’s code-breaking in the novel. At the end of the film, Mr. Memory begins to reveal the secret formulas in a Palladium performance and is immediately shot. Hannay has shouted out, “What are the 39 Steps?” Mr. Memory, evidently programmed in some way to carry all the information in his head and deliver it to the villains, says “The 39 Steps is an organization of spies collecting information on behalf . . .” Which is as far as he gets. But the 39 Steps in the novel is a set of stairs down to the sea where full tide occurs at 10:17. At that time, Hannay finds the villains at Trafalgar Lodge—with its 39 steps—where, in the poem as well as the novel, he accosts them. He has decoded his information and followed his clues
to this place and time, which is not performance time at the Palladium. “The day [when] the book which [Hannay] inhabits enters time”—publication day in 1915—happens to be a day when the evacuation was under way at Gallipoli. Mr. Memory is not asked in the poem about that, or indeed about what he happens to be doing in a poem in the first place. But he becomes the most important single figure other than Pamela. The questions that are put to him derive either directly from Hitchcock or from kedging activities already introduced. By the end of the poem he has run out of answers and, like Erskine Childers, has been shot.

Which does not mean that the reader will be unable to answer questions for him. Did Erskine Childers eat Carruthers’ heart? Yes. Who returned to Ireland in a German submarine when / Asgard’s captain still served Empire and Ascendancy in Short 136 / In skies above the Heligoland Bight? That was Roger Casement. Who was hanged and who was shot / and why? Childers was shot, Roger Casement was hanged. For carrying an illegal weapon. For treason against the crown. Did Churchill cheer and did Cuchulain weep? Yes. Who steps thirty-nine among the sands or riddles there / who also may have sailed the Alde? Erskine Childers, Edward Hilton-Young, Bryan Adams, Diana Adams, a visiting American who’d just read Jacob’s Room, and Pamela both old and young.

On 29 July the fleet leaves
Portland in the dark to pass the straits of Dover, eighteen miles
Of warships steaming toward the foggy empty waters
In the north . . .
and Pamela was nine.

We have now again reached the family memoir section of the poem, the long run of lines about Pamela and her father ending with their playing the parts of characters from The Prisoner of Zenda. Mr. Memory falters while Mrs. Adams, 94, remembers; the child Pamela reads her romance to the exhausted Captain Drury-Lowe.

She lived near Rosyth in the little coastal village, Aberdour. Her father was a captain & she sometimes saw his ship out on patrol. She wished she were a boy and could go to sea herself and didn’t like it when
her mother & the other naval wives would say

_But you can marry a sailor!_ Precocious reader, she’d go down
to the rocks emerging at low tide with Buchan or Childers,
Rider Haggard or Hope. She’d be the hero on the run,
she’d be the spy, she’d be the swashbuckling master
of a masked identity. Then she’d make a large uncovered stone
her ship, fire a broadside at the Germans who were hunting
through the fogs to find her father and, although
she didn’t know it, her future husband too. Her own child
would also be a captain’s daughter and the strategist of
tidal rivers to the south where toy wooden soldiers rose in marasmist
reeds and tipped their Bismarck helmets to the girls, _Achtung! Achtung!_
herself father joked, running towards her laughing down
the iron pier where landing craft left officers and men
who now and then were granted leave. He’d walk with her along
the narrow path between the bay and village, rightful
king of Ruritania, prisoner freed from Zenda and engaged
to Princess Flavia; and she’d be Rudolph Rassendyll
dueling for his borrowed crown & honor with Black Michael’s
black usurping henchmen on the castle bridge.
Then her father’s utter great fatigue would overwhelm him
and he’d lie down in the sun,
shade his aching eyes with his daughter’s open book . . .
If you asked Mr. Memory about these two, he’d be
confused. Father, daughter? Captain, mate?
Two red-headed Rudolphs? Richard Hannay and his scout Pienaar
cloaked entirely in an atmosphere & sharing stories with
the very man who stalked them? Mr. Memory at the Palladium
might falter, but not Mrs. Adams, 94, perhaps the last alive to have
seen the things she’s seen, telling ancients at the ancient public school
converted to a home: _And I was Pamela, a child, and yet I
saw it all. Every ship on the horizon steaming in formation
while the two of us would sing dispatch or distich there
beneath the sign of all these sails: darting in and out & crossing tacks
at fifteen knots, the yachtsmen heading for the Kiel Regatta,
Wayland, Nigel, Ian: Monarch firing from the
forward turret out of fog by whom the bundled fasces or
the kingdom come._ She kissed her father’s eyes
And read him stories from her book.
At the beginning of section III, “Cousin Nicky”—Tsar Nicholas II—also reads to comfort the frightened and exhausted. Amazingly, he actually read Buchan’s *Greenmantle* to his imprisoned family before their execution, finding information in it Buchan got about the strategies leading to the Russian cavalry attack at Erzerum from some visiting Russian journalists, including Vladimir Nabokov’s father, whom he had shown around Scapa Flow in February 1916. Buchan wrote to his mother in October 1917: “I saw a letter from the Grand Duchess Olga saying that she and her sisters and Papa had been greatly cheered and comforted in their exile by *Greenmantle*. It is an odd fate for me to cheer the prison of the Tsar.” The narrative of *Greenmantle* is twined around Pamela’s story and that of Buchan’s work on codes in Room 40, details of which fascinating operations derive from a masterful source, David Hahn’s remarkable *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing*, which I’ve used off and on ever since I wrote *Pages* in 1995. Surprisingly, Buchan gave the characteristic stare of Admiral Hall, head of decrypting in Room 40 and known as “Blinker” because of a twitch that accompanied the stare, to one of the villains in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. For the rest, the poem kedges on by way of its fictions and facts—many of the latter opened up by another masterpiece, Robert K. Massie’s *Castles of Steel*—toward Zeebrugge and *Vindictive*—and Hilton Young’s account of Bryan Adams’ landing party. When this attack occurred, Pamela was still in Aberdour, still only nine, though she would marry Bryan Adams in the end. On Remembrance Day 1966, she must have been younger than I am now. Strange to think I’m sixty four. I wonder what she made of me. I’m sure Captain Adams knew I’d come to take his daughter away. What a loss, for me, that I was really still too young to speak to him sympathetically about his participation in two World Wars and a long life at sea. He could have told me, a sedentary grad student, much that I had to learn from books for thirty years. He was by then quite deaf. Almost the first thing he said to me was that he wished the Brits were fighting with us there in Vietnam. For a 1960s peace activist, such as I then was, that made things quite awkward. At lunch that day in 1966 there was a British Foreign Service type whose father had been a Commander and who had an upper lip so stiff that you could pluck it. “I do like Richard Palmer,” said the Captain as
my rival left the table under which Diana had been kicking me. Soon enough I did in fact take the Captain’s daughter away to America and, shortly after that, he died. Pamela lived on for years, and for years we spent our summers at her house there in Suffolk. My favorite response to this poem came from one of its first readers: “I like Pamela,” he said. He is not alone. She had a kind of goodness that everyone who met her felt; a Christian would say she was touched by Grace, but that would have embarrassed her terribly. Her house was a kind of Howards End, and she was a kind of Mrs. Wilcox. Any lonely waif might be invited there, and many were. She outlived everyone in her generation; she even outlives Mr. Memory in the poem.

Liz and Wayland are now in their eighties and I’ve literally lost count of the numbers of grandchildren and great-grandchildren there are. Their magical house on Bayswater Rd., Peter Pan at the door and Lady Scott’s studio at the back, still holds its magnificent past, though one wonders when the future will arrive with a wrecking ball and hotel. In the sixties, an Indian journalist called Abu Abraham lived in the studio. He once told me about his elementary education in New Delhi and a British history teacher who lectured them on what he claimed was the most powerful influence in the modern world since the 18th century. It was something that Abu wasn’t quite able to get, and he wrote down “British Seepa” in his notes. British sea power.

Because of certain medical problems and an accompanying claustrophobia, I never go to England any more. For many years I was adopted by a family and conscripted (willingly enough) by a history not my own. I owe them a lot. I owe them at the very least a poem.