

## Early Years

It was a cold, raw, still January day outside Eton College. The clatter of hooves could be heard from a distance as a plush carriage drawn by four bay horses approached the entrance to the impressive buildings. With a loud ‘Whoa!’ the driver pulled on the reins. With much snorting and stamping, the steaming horses came to a stop. A carriage door swung open. Out jumped an agile seven-year-old boy. He gazed at the red-brown and honey-coloured stone, the high castellated<sup>1</sup> tops to the walls and the spire-topped towers. What is this place going to be like? he thought to himself. A shiver may not have been totally due to the penetrating damp.

‘Come on, Charles. Look smart or your masters will get a bad impression of you.’

‘Yes, Father.’

They proceeded to the entrance followed by a servant lugging a compact, but heavy, leather trunk with C. Simeon stencilled on the side. Charles’s father pulled his heavy blue woollen coat around him. The

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1. Like a castle.

wide heavy sleeves ornamented with silver buttons and the cream silk breeches showed his status as a man of property and influence.

A tall man with a sharp nose, dressed in black except for a grey waistcoat, hastened out. 'Ah, Richard Simeon, Esquire, I believe. We were expecting you. You are very welcome. I am Mr John Foster, Headmaster of Eton College. Did you have a good journey?'

'Tolerable. The carriage is well sprung.'

'And what is your name, boy?'

Charles looked up into the piecing blue eyes. 'Charles Simeon, sir.'

'I trust you will work hard and be a credit to Eton College and your family. Come this way. I will introduce Charles to his house master and you and I, Mr Simeon, shall partake of some tea – quite the fashion nowadays, I believe.'

The little group of three proceeded off into the interior of the building, Charles two or three steps behind the adults, gazing around him.

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Charles Simeon was the fourth and youngest son of successful businessman and landowner Richard Simeon. He was born in Reading, approximately forty miles west of London, on 24th September, 1759. Though baptised as was expected in those days, he was not brought up in a home where religion was important or strictly observed, despite both parents having ancestors who held important positions in the

Church of England. Sadly, his mother died when he was a young child and he scarcely had any recollection of her. Although he had a privileged and well-to-do background, life at Eton would not be a bed of roses.

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Charles sat on the hard wooden bench conscious of the stares of boys curious about the newcomer or just waiting to pounce on some weakness, ready to attach to him a cutting nickname.

‘What’s for supper?’ he asked the boy next to him.

‘Just the usual mutton scraps left over from dinner,’ answered the boy without glancing at him.

‘That doesn’t seem very appealing.’

‘It’s what we get every day. Mashed potato and mutton at two o’clock with the scraps at six.’

‘What if you don’t like mutton?’

‘Then you go hungry.’

‘When is breakfast?’

‘Ten o’clock. You get milk and a buttered roll. Same at ten at night.’

‘No breakfast till ten o’clock! I’ll be famished by then!’

‘You’ll get used to it.’

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The boy’s prophecy proved correct. Charles endured not only the unvaried diet (Eton College had land which supported a large flock of sheep) but also the unimaginative teaching, drudgery and harsh discipline.

Latin and, to a much lesser extent, Greek were the subjects taught. Learning by heart was the teaching method. Pupils were also introduced to the wisdom and mythologies<sup>2</sup> of the Roman and Greek past, which may have been more interesting for them. They slept in a long dormitory, a room containing fifty beds. Each junior pupil was assigned to a senior boy who was entitled to ask him to do humdrum tasks such as cleaning shoes or making beds. This drudgery was called 'fagging'. Failure to do these tasks properly could result in painful discipline. The masters, too, frequently beat boys for a range of offences. One thing which Eton College emphasised was fitness and various rough team games were part of school life.

Charles developed over the years in Eton into an athletic youth.

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'Hi there, fellows. That was a jolly good game of cricket. Beats translating the Aeneid<sup>3</sup>.'

'Yes. This college needs livening up. Show one of your party tricks, Charles.'

'I'd love to. Say, Josiah, you arrange the chairs.'

Josiah knew what was expected of him. He arranged six chairs in a row. 'Rather you than me,' he said. 'I'd break my neck.'

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2. Stories of gods and heroes which are usually far-fetched.

3. The Aeneid is a Latin Epic poem written by Virgil between 29 and 19 B.C.

Charles took a deep breath, sprang forward and with one bound cleared the six chairs.

There were shouts of, 'Bravo, Charles!' and much clapping from the half dozen classmates.

'What about the candle trick?' asked Trevor.

'See if you can get a candle, then.'

While Trevor sauntered off to find a candle, Charles took off his shoes and silk stockings. He had started to dress in a vain, show-off manner. (Men in those times, especially the well-off, might dress in splendidly embroidered silk waistcoats, wear shirts with frilly cuffs and sport cut-away coats with craftsmen-designed silver buttons.)

Trevor entered slowly with the lit candle in a sconce<sup>4</sup> so that the flame would not flicker and go out.

'Okay, Trevor, put it on the floor.'

When Trevor put the sconce on the floor, without hesitation, Charles snuffed out the candle with his toes, again to clapping and cheers.

Never the most handsome of boys, his ability in horse-riding and games and his party tricks made him well-accepted at Eton, despite being mocked for his flashy dress sense.

So what about the Christian faith, because Eton was originally closely linked to the parish church? Was Charles a follower of Jesus at this time? Prayers were said three times a day in Latin and chapel services were held, but all was routine and lifeless. The only

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4. A candlestick holder with a handle.

spark of religious interest shown by Charles was when there was a national fast day during the American War of Independence. He took that seriously and only ate one hard-boiled egg all day. However, his fellow Etonians thought this was more in tune with his show-off character than genuine religious conviction – and they were proved correct as this religious turn was very temporary. Sometimes he did show flashes of conscience and kept a money box for the poor. But that was just a sop to his conscience, not love learnt from the heart of God.