

CHAPTER 1

First Memories



A first memory: a beach, a father, a boat, a costume, and laughter.
The father was a mechanical fitter and a shop steward from Stepney.
The picture was taken in 1928 when the girl, now 90, was three.

My teddy was called Jimmy Jewel, and one day I looked out of the bedroom window and saw my mother putting him through the mangle and he came out flat.

This book is built on reminiscences of events that took place many decades earlier in people's lives, in their first twenty-one years of life. Memory is a tricky thing, and much research has gone into analysing our first recollections, yet there is little certainty about when memories can be said to begin. The current view seems to be that, while they can be laid down from very early on, even shortly before birth, we go through a period of 'childhood amnesia' between the ages of, say, three and seven, when many of our first memories seem to be obliterated. A recent study looked at what children remembered at age three, then tested them again at age seven. Very little had stayed lodged in their brains, but more remained from girls than boys, which led to speculation that it was because girls were more likely to think and talk about themselves than boys. It may also depend on how much reminiscence went on in the family. 'Do you remember when...?' questions addressed to a child itself, rather than bouncing around at a gathering above the heads of the children, seem more likely to have kept early events alive. In a similar way, photographs can act to reinforce a memory.

I asked people about their first memories. Most could recall vividly just one or two events that must have occurred not long before they first went to school, which was usually at age five. A minority clearly remember from a younger age still, as the first examples will show. However, we can't always be sure whether this was a genuine memory retained for over 70 years, or a recollection of something we've been told, or a 'false' memory. In considering this, a London psychologist, one who early in his career examined the behaviour of boys as they grew, expressed his distrust of even his own memory:

The moment one begins to investigate the truth of the simplest facts which one has accepted as true about one's own life, it is as though one has stepped off a firm narrow path into a bog or quicksand. Every step one takes one sinks more deeply into the bog of uncertainty. False memories irritate me profoundly. One is being lifted on my father's shoulders on the roof of Croydon Airport hotel to see Neville Chamberlain and hear him say: 'I have in my hand a piece of paper that means peace in our time'. Unhappily, he never said that, and at 200 yards away we couldn't have heard him anyway.

Moreover Chamberlain didn't land at Croydon, but at Heston. He perhaps combined a memory of watching from his father's shoulders as a plane landed, with the recurring film footage of Chamberlain waving that notorious piece of paper as he spoke.

That caveat made, what do our subjects list as their earliest memories? Here's a selection that must be from very early on:

I remember having my nappy changed, and those old boat-shaped feeding bottles.

My very earliest memory is sitting on my mother's lap while she talked to a friend. I could not speak yet. As she spoke she put a warm hand on to my cold foot. There was a clock under a bell jar in the room. It did not have a pendulum, just some silver balls that went round one way and then the other and I used to watch it for hours,