

Uncle Wullie

I grew up in a ship-building town, in the days when Britain still built ships. Nowadays, the former ship-yard owners have taken up gentlemen farming, and the descendants of their welders and riveters and caulkers now work in the local telephone call centres. My father and his brothers all had some connection with the sea. Some were sea-going engineers; some worked in the shipyards; and one actually ran a shipyard far, far away. I had an uncle, Wullie by name, whose Clydeside accent was so impenetrable that I swear that the television character, Rab C. Nesbit, must have been based on him, but Wullie was a chief naval architect, no less, at one of the local shipyards. (For no obvious reason, I was reminded strongly of Wullie when my daughter gave me as a birthday present a Haw Jummy tam-o-shanter with attached ginger wig, which I have promised to wear when I go to the next World Cup in Japan/South Korea).

My paternal grandfather had been carried away in the influenza epidemic after the First World War, but my paternal grandmother was still living on to a frail old age. In those days, the Scots, like the Japanese, had a reverence for the old, and, each Sunday afternoon, all of her sons – apart from the one running the shipyard at the other end of the world – would gather at my grandmother's house, where they drank tea and ate scones, and allow their children to be grilled on their doings. How many runs did you score? What was your score in the maths exam? How many catches did you take? Did you go to church this morning? Are you courting yet?

Wullie, who acted as chief inquisitor, was a man who believed that the inheritors of his blood-line should do practical things, like sailing upon or designing or building bulk-carriers. I had a cousin, May, a pleasant girl, bright enough to be researching for a PhD at Glasgow University. May's research was into muscle reactions, and part of this research involved some truly disgusting experiment, like removing the brains of cats and measuring how long it took for their limbs to stop twitching, (or maybe it was measuring their squeals after their tendons had been cut, or..or..something truly revolting). There had always been some speculation within the family about where May obtained her specimens.

Every Sunday afternoon, Wullie would turn on May, and ask, "How mony cats hiv yi kilt this week?" May would blush, and reply that regrettable sacrifices had to be made for the sake of scientific progress. Wullie's questioning of me was not so threatening. At that time, I was apprenticed to a chartered accountant. (Not articled, which is a wimpish Norman word, but

apprenticed, which is an earthy Pictish word). Although chartered accountants did not sail ships, Wullie had a certain respect for them, probably because they would have worked out the financial numbers for the ships that he had designed. (Wullie himself would only be interested in things like deadweight and propeller torque and crane capacity). The questions that he asked me were not too blush-making, fairly mild questions along the lines of "Hiv yi added mony guid buiks this week?"

I survived the questioning, which got more penetrating as the years went by, leading to such questions as "How mony figures hiv yi ticked since I last seen yi?" and "Hiv yi found mony guid frauds this week?". May, however, came near to a nervous breakdown, feeling that she would either have to stop killing cats or pretend that her studies prevented her attending the family gathering.

She chose to continue killing her cats. Wullie died before, long afterwards, I moved to treasury. His death was timely, for I fear that he would never have approved of dealing in leveraged-indexed-floating-dual-currency-structured-notes as a way of life. Dealing in these would to him be much worse than killing Glasgow cats.

But, you protest, you cannot be sure that Wullie would have disapproved of treasury, which, after all, is not a million miles from chartered accountancy. In turn, I can assure you that Wullie believed only in tangible things, which his ships carried. Steel or coal would be acceptable as cargoes, oil would be marginal, but he would have resigned rather than design a tanker for something so intangible as liquefied gas. Exchanging dollars for sterling might have been acceptable, if I had carried them in a big sack to the bank. Making the transaction over the phone ran against the family tradi-

tion. Covering exposures, hedging, doing interest rate swaps....all sounded jobs for wee lasses.

Did Wullie succeed in driving us into proper jobs? Alas, no. Not a single one of my generation became involved with the sea. Lots of doctors and one member of the Scottish Parliament. My brother, to be fair, worked in Wullie's shipyard for a spell, and on his first day followed the tradition of being sent by his foreman to queue at the counter of the Paint Stores for a two-gallon tin of tartan paint (Mind ye get gloss, son, nane o that emulsion, now), but he soon tired of all the Uncle Wullie-style behaviour, and now works for a NASA sub-contractor.

Things get worse with the next generation. A PR person, a software consultant, a performance artist in Seattle. Poor Wullie must be turning in his grave. ■

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