Chapter 1

THE BEGINNING

The first thing I remember is looking up at an operating room light.

I was a little boy. I had contracted tuberculosis from the milk of an infected cow. Fortunately, it was in the neck glands only, and the surgeon in the local town elected to simply aspirate the abscess. He did this I don't know how many times, but it eventually healed. There was no anesthetic, and I don't remember anyone holding me down, although maybe they did. I remember the nurses laughing because I would wriggle my feet while not moving anything else. My father would buy me a bottle of American cream soda pop after the procedure. I never saw that drink in America, but it was hugely popular in Scotland.

I grew up in a mining village in the center of Scotland called Slamannan. There must have been miners who came back from North America because there were tiny groups of houses a few miles from the village named after the places from the Gold Rush era, such as a collection of three houses called Dawson City and another group called California. Why anyone would come back to that godforsaken place in the Scottish moors, I never understood, even as a child.

It was called a mining village because that was all there was. There was one small brick manufacturing works, mining, and military. The surrounding farms were pretty much subsistence. The land was poor, boggy, and filled with steep little hills. These were so steep that it was unsafe to use tractors to plow as they would roll over. Most farmers had

plough horse. I remember these as being a gigantic breed called Clydesdales. Sitting on the back of one of these horses was like sitting with your legs open on a kitchen table.

The men who went off to join the military were treated with respect. This, after all, had been a common occupation in Scotland for centuries. The tales of the Scottish mercenaries were frequently told to children, like the story of Sandy Leckie. Oliver Cromwell had been having some trouble in Scotland, so he simply hired Sandy Leckie, who was Scottish, but was one of Frederick the Great's generals. Sandy came over from Germany, reorganized the English army, whipped the Scots, and went back to Germany.

As you can see, we had somewhat mixed loyalties in the village. Our one true hero was Sandy Binnie. In the First World War, Sandy was in the trenches. A British soldier was wounded and caught on the barbed wire in the middle of no-man's-land. He was screaming and crying all night, and of course, no one could get to him. Sandy listened to him for a long time and could not stand it any longer. He crawled out of his trench and across the mud to rescue the man. He had just cut the man off the wire and put him on his back to carry him back to his trench when the Germans put up a star shell.

As Sandy would say, there he was standing in the middle of no-man's-land with a man on his back, and it was bright as day. The machine guns opened up. They had tracer rounds in them, so Sandy could watch the streams of bullets converging on him, and there was nothing he could do. Just before the stream of bullets reached him, a German officer jumped up on the parapet of his trench, waved his arms, and shouted *nien*. The machine guns stopped, and Sandy carried the man back to his own trench under the light of the star shell. He got the Military Medal for that feat of valor.

One of the great stories I remember was written by Neil Munro. A group of Scottish mercenaries were sitting around talking. One of them, John Splendid, was speaking, "Heart of a rose, *Gra mo chroi*, bird song at the lip, star eye, and wisdom, yet woman to the core. I wish I were as young as I then was, but *Ochanee*, what would avail my teens if the one woman that ever understood me were but dust in Golgo. She died a stainless maid in Golgo, in Silesia. Hoots, toots, here I am on an old man's story. In times of leisure, I cheat myself into the notion that once I loved a foreign lass who died a stainless maid."

It must have been sixty years or more since I first read that, and it is as moving to me today as it was then.

The mines around the village were awful, a vision of hell. The coal seams were narrow, so the men worked in a squatting position with a pick and shovel. Many were below the water table, so the men might have their backside in water as they squatted. It was a true Orwellian nightmare. Sometimes they would break through a wall, and the water would come in and drown them like rats in a trap.

The squatting and torquing position meant that they would frequently tear the medial meniscus in their knee. This was so common among miners in Scotland that my old professor, Ian Smillie, became world-famous for developing knives to remove a torn meniscus. I used these knives in my first year of residency in the seventies. If a meniscus is removed, it is like removing the oiling pad from a bearing. Twenty or thirty years later, the bearing wears out, and the patient needs a knee replacement; only there were no knee replacements in those days. As everyone smoked and all the miners had black lung, I doubt many lived to the age when they would have needed it in any case.

I still remember working on one medical ward in Scotland. The consultant said that he probably could not teach us medical students much other than to know when to let someone go. I have the feeling, which may not be correct, that if a patient was older than sixty-five, they were told to go away and sit in the corner and stop bothering people. I vividly remember my first case in Canada. It was an old lady who had broken her hip. The senior resident operated on her. She died the next day as about 20 percent did then. The family asked me what had happened. I explained to them that she was ninety-five and she died. I mean, that happens to ninety-five-year-olds. The family was extremely upset.

"She came in here a fit, healthy ninety-five-year-old, and now she's dead."

I did not understand what the fuss was about, and it took my chief some time to settle down the family. It certainly was a different way of looking at the world.

The boys I went to primary school with went down the mines at sixteen. At eighteen, they were married, and at twenty, they had children. These were men. I look around today, and I don't know what to say about the thirty-year-olds living in their mother's basement. My father had been a miner. The pit boss told him he was too intelligent to do that

and encouraged him to sit an examination. From the pit face, he got a scholarship to Glasgow University and became a Presbyterian minister. Having been a miner and seen the appalling circumstances they lived in, he was a lifelong socialist.

I remember when strip mining came in. They would simply tear the top of a mountain and strip out the coal. The proto-environmentalists of that day objected bitterly to the mess, but my father looked on with satisfaction. He said that he was pleased that men would never again have to go under the ground like moles.

Every summer, I remember the terror of polio. It is hard to convey to anyone nowadays the awful sense of doom that every summer would bring. One boy in my class, who must have been age six, got polio and was left with a paralyzed leg and a double-sided iron brace for the rest of his life. My parents would not let my brothers and me near the village children the whole summer. The world let out an incredible sigh of relief when the Salk injectable polio immunization first came out, followed shortly by the Sabin oral. And now I hear of people not immunizing their children because of some junk science, which were lies to begin with and had long since been disproved and withdrawn. Oh well, sic transit gloria mundi.