

*My favorite professor at university had been William McNeill: a kind, yet worldly-wise man, with a speciality in the sort of world history that's always fascinated me. He led me through a lengthy, personal reading course I greatly enjoyed.*

*After that I'd long wanted to do work worthy of him, but only with the first draft of my  $E=mc^2$  manuscript did I finally feel I was ready. I sent it him, explaining how much his words had meant to me all these years.*

*He replied saying how much he liked the book, offering a nice blurb, then added that as a retired teacher it meant a great deal to him that his influence had lived on with a student in this way. But he did have one little question: who WAS I? He had no memory, whatsoever, of our time together. Would I mind filling him in on what I'd been up to in these years?*

*I loved that, and the following two letters were the result. The first is an overview, but a bit mannered; in the second I circle back with more honesty.*

Dear William McNeill,

What kind, pleasing comments about the  $E=mc^2$  ms! I was actually a math major at Chicago and the topic of our reading course is pretty vague to me too. But I do remember how welcoming you were to this novice in the history department.

As with many math majors, I'd always been attracted to grand, over-arching theories, but - perhaps from growing up in the city of Chicago - I'd also picked up enough feeling for human quirks to have some doubts about how accurate most of the ones I heard at the University might actually be. What I preferred about your approach was how solidly grounded it was; how fair it seemed to the way people and nations might really act.

The social studies lecturing at Oxford came about pretty indirectly. I had a minor flair for math, but only liked the field - I didn't love it. History I did love, but I remember - I think for one of your other courses - being staggered at the compression necessary for good results: document after document to be investigated and considered, all to produce one paragraph.

There was also something more. I'd grown up in Chicago, and gone to college in Chicago: it felt like time to explore. Yet another comment I picked up on was your describing the way you'd enjoyed or at least learned from living in Britain immediately after the war: how much there was to gain from working and living in a foreign country, as opposed to just being a student.

I think I asked you 'what' it was one learned, and you answered that this wasn't easy to say in words. (Having not yet had kids, your comments about the intimacy of giving orange juice rations to your children also slipped past me.) To someone who liked the great clarity of math that was an intriguing lure.

That wasn't the only factor, but I left Chicago for London, ostensibly to study at the LSE. Once there, though, it was clear that more studying was not what this young man then wanted. I ended up in Paris over a Christmas vacation, pretty much by chance (a new friend was hitching, and it seemed unkind to let her hitch all the way on her own). Then in Paris I experienced the fundamental experience of all good Midwesterners in that city: I ran out of money. Not speaking any French I looked around for an English-language organization; knocked on the door of the Herald Tribune newspaper, whose copyboy was leaving that day – and realized that a rare opportunity had opened up.

There was a draw to working at a great international newspaper I found immensely attractive.

Once, bored at university, I had picked up a collection of essays from a foreign correspondent who on his return to the U.S. had travelled around the country meeting people and writing up his experiences. From even earlier, as a child, I remember reading an Arthur C. Clarke short story about a journalist having a worldwide audience as he describes, from a high-orbiting satellite, dawn passing over the planet Earth below him, while the sun rose on the first day of the then-distant year 2000. That seemed exactly what I'd be proud to do.

No one in my family had been involved in writing, and I think I had been 50 percent of the (two) students who had failed the basic writing exam in my final year at the University of Chicago. That actually turned out to be useful, for it meant I was happy to start learning, with no preconceptions, from a few kind staff members who worked at the Trib. After a year or two I was reporting from most parts of Western Europe, along with venturing to the wrong side of the Berlin Wall and other adventures. Although journalistic writing is limited, it was a great experience for someone aged 21.

At that point yet another (!) throw-away comment of yours was floating around in my head. It was the point you mentioned pretty often in the lectures that few individuals fundamentally change their attitudes after age 25. (And if I confused this memory and you actually said the opposite, then wouldn't it be like a Maupassant story to find I'd acted on the misunderstanding? In this case though it would be a Maupassant story with a happy ending.) Also, I wasn't a natural journalist. I left the paper, freelanced a little, and then – again fulfilling all stereotypes of good Midwesterners – moved to a little village in the South of France.

Here the dictum of getting to know another culture from the inside really came into its own. London of the mid 1970s had felt like a strange, black and white parallel universe to America. Paris had been more exuberant, and I'd enjoyed experiencing its life, down to reading a sequence of newspapers each week as I commuted to work on the Métro, starting with the Communist paper Humanité on Mondays, and ending with Figaro or Aurore on Friday. But a little village in the foothills of the Alps was even better.

What came out of that time (in the early '80s) was my second book, 'The Secret House', which luckily enough turned into a great best-seller, in the US and elsewhere. This meant I had cash to do nothing for a number of years...but who at that age wants to do nothing? I'd enjoyed the book – a popular science account of what happens to an ordinary family, in an ordinary day – but now I was at a bit of a loss. The university world seemed too closed, and too far away (because I'd crossed that age 25 watershed?), but I continued to feel this urge for more intellectual connection.

Bodanises are nothing if not cautious, and as a first intellectual effort I wrote a little essay book. I didn't trust myself to have ideas that could command the sweep of an entire book. But essays of between 2,000 and 10,000 words? The ones that worked should be manageable, and if any didn't work, well, the reader could pass them over.

I was also living half of each year in London by then, and had in the back of my mind the experience of, I think, the vice-president (war minister?) of the American Confederacy, who'd hastily relocated in England after 1865, and leapfrogged his way into English society, or at least into the legal system, by writing a very good book.

To some extent that worked for me. Much of the essay book is embarrassing to see today – there's a great deal of posturing, and working on very incomplete research – but a few parts of it did work. (The book itself is long out of print, mercifully, but one of its essays, on 'Socialism and Bacteria', ended up much anthologized, perhaps most conveniently in a collection that John Carey edited; in the UK it was called the Faber Book of Science; I don't know who produced it in the US.) Most importantly, I realized that if I was going to do any serious work, I'd need to step back, and engage in more thorough background reading, not just of particular topics, but to develop my conceptual tools as well.

England being the densely woven society that it is, an editor at Macmillan knew a Fellow at St. Antony's, the postgraduate college at Oxford specializing in international relations. Following the great principle that you can get almost anything you want if you're not greedy, I went for an affiliation that came with zero pay at first, and so was easy for them to offer. That eventually turned into a paid position, and in about 1991 began teaching a course within the history faculty at the university that I called 'An Intellectual Tool-Kit: Selected Topics in Social Inquiry'. Some of it was the old University of Chicago surveys; some of it though took a different tack, X-raying in a fresh way the history and inner nature of a range of conceptual tools. The first year I gave it just at St. Antony's, but a number of postgraduates from throughout the university felt it filled in gaps from their undergraduate days (you know how patchy the UK system is). The following year I began giving it in the grand Examination Schools building, under the auspices of the history faculty, for the university as a whole.

Oxford can be a pretty stuffy place, but an advantage is that it doesn't look over its shoulder at anyone else. I had no official background in the social sciences, and certainly had no graduate degrees. Warwick or Sandhurst or probably even Chicago wouldn't have been happy with that, but at Oxford nobody cared. If anything they were proud of it. I really liked that.

The first years of the course were pleasing. The administrators were happy to leave me in peace, and the assumed 'air' at the university encouraged me to look into the foundations of one conceptual and analytic system after another. I'd give lectures on mathematical economics with professors of economics taking notes; lectures on Durkheim with Theodore Zeldin scribbling away. (And in the several week segment on the great historians it was my pleasure to bring your work in along the way.)

Soon the Intellectual Tool-Kit became the only required course for all Ph.D. students in the social studies faculty. This led to a nice twist when at one point I thought: hmm, maybe +I+ could register for a doctorate. But I was told Oh God no, that was terrible: students might be allowed to assist in courses, but they absolutely couldn't design and be the main teachers in courses. This meant that if I took the Tool-Kit course I'd have to stop offering it. But since it was mandatory, how could postgraduate students remain in attendance without it? They'd have to leave, and without their tuition fees - esp from the foreign students - Oxford couldn't keep going; certainly not in the front rank as it presently was. And without Oxford could Britain still be Britain? I exaggerate, but only slightly: the department head was adamant that I do nothing to threaten the system my courses were part of.

In time though the lectures stopped being so fresh. There was a great deal more for me to learn about intellectual tools of course, but I felt it was time to start using some of the Tool-Kit ideas; putting them into practice. (I'd prepared lengthy summaries of most of the lectures to hand out, but I didn't want to publish those: it would be a good text, but in most places a derivative one.) And, as had been the case with journalism, I also discovered I wasn't a natural academic.

It's not especially complimentary to say, but I think I was too selfish. I loved teaching fresh material, but I didn't enjoy teaching required courses. Similarly I loved the idea of exploring as far as I could in fresh ideas, but the standard form of journal articles locked within a given conceptual approach was not for me. Although a few Oxford academics then were exceptional writers - Michael Howard; John Carey - there was little concern among most for how their ideas could be more widely received, or that there could be significance in shaping one's work for intrinsic readability. Even many of the historians - usually the last hold-outs in writing for the informed public - were, at Oxford, often caught up in internal British polemics.

In a few previous years I'd supported myself by writing sequels to the popular 'Secret House' book, but I thought what made more sense now was to support myself by engaging in work that directly connected with the real world, away from the more theoretical texts I'd in these years spent so long reading and analyzing. I

began doing some business consulting, and especially got involved in the interesting field of imagining histories for strategists in various firms or industries, looking back from some point in the future.

When this was conceived as coming from a vantage point 50 years ahead it was pretty much guesswork, but when it was from only five or ten years ahead then it really was an interesting exercise. I learned the technique with a long stint at Shell scenarios, then did this for energy firms, NGO's, software groups, automotive firms and the like.

This too was good, yet after a while I again felt something was lacking. It was as if before going to Oxford I'd built a nice camera – the ability to write – but had nothing much to photograph. At Oxford I'd learned a great deal about what others had focused on, but I wasn't taking any original photographs myself. Only with the business work did I now feel I was getting ready to grasp real content; real aspirations and trends in the world outside. When I read the minutes of the Washington D. C. committee in 1945 that was considering whether and how to bomb Japan, for example, I felt: I recognize many of the personality types; from the many high-level meetings I've now been in. I know the stunts they're trying to pull.

Sometimes I'm astonished that for a fairly bright person, who's been busy for years, it's taken me well into my 40s to be able to have some notion of how to mix style with meaningful content. At least history, interpreted widely, seems a good field for those who through ambition or – as in my case – through being stodgily late developers, wish to have a long creative future ahead. I feel I finally am posturing much less, and really aiming directly on sharing truths.

For what happens in my own work next, a lot I suspect depends on how the  $E=mc^2$  book does. If the book does sell, and I can take a few years off from the business work, there are a number of ideas I feel ready to start on. Some are direct spin-offs from  $E=mc^2$ , as with a full book on the heavy water episode in Norway during World War II, or a biography of Emilie du Châtelet.

A more abrupt shift would be 'The 10 Commandments', i.e. the one other equation-like brief item which everyone knows of. But beyond the title it's still quite vague; I don't know whether it would be historical, or set in the present-day. This might be something to spend a summer mulling over.

One of the things that helped considerably with the  $E=mc^2$  book is that I signed the contract right after having committed myself to a year on a separate, business contract, in the energy and finance world. Yet instead of the delay being frustrating, it meant that for long months I was able to have the idea in the back of my mind while engaged with energy work; doing unorganized background reading; rolling various plans and phrasings around without any pressure of imminent writing. That time to build up perspective was invaluable.

As I suspect you know, these are just some of the pleasures in the quiet pause before a book comes out. One can think of all sorts of projects then, yet still be spared, by the allowable rest everyone around encourages, from having to go ahead and do any of them. Ah bliss.

All best,

*McNeill wrote back without too much of a delay; I thought of nice replies, didn't do much about it, then finally in the autumn got my act together to write.*

Dear Bill,

Let me first of all apologize for the great delay in replying. This summer I took my first extended vacation in several years, and your package must have arrived just a week or so after I left. It then waited patiently all the months till my return last week.

I liked your letter and the article (very much); I'll comment on the letter now so that I can at least get some response off today.

It's touching to exchange thoughts after this interval of time, and it's curious how differently a career appears from the inside vs. from the outside. I never thought of myself as restless, or energetic, but rather as profoundly lazy; always avoiding having to make a real career choice; just sliding into one thing after another.

Thus I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to be in grad school at the LSE, and that's why I hitched to Paris. Then, at the Trib in Paris - a job which arose quite by chance, because I didn't speak any French when I arrived, and they needed a menial person to make coffee etc the exact day I came by - it seemed 'logical' to stay a while. And then, given that I was there, it seemed natural to try to work up to being a writer, for that had many more perks than there were being a copy-boy.

Hmm, maybe it wasn't quite so chancy. For why out of the various possible English-language jobs in Paris did I gravitate towards one at the Trib, rather than at, say, a bank? There was the attraction of sharing knowledge as I noted before, but also, a few months after I started working there, I received a letter from a retired uncle of mine who'd been close to my father, recounting their days in the slums of Winnipeg in the 1910s. My uncle wrote that he too had once been a copyboy (I'd had no idea of this), on one of the Winnipeg papers, and that he'd dreamed of being a columnist or even a foreign correspondent, but that his lack of education and the need to help support his parents meant that he never got the chance.

Although I hadn't known those details, I probably had been mulling for years over the way that my father and uncle (they were in business together) had never been able to fulfil any deeper interests they may have had. There were a few books on

mathematics around the house – not university level, but still serious high school texts – and I remember finding my father's neatly penciled calculations and proofs in the margins. He'd do that for fun after a long day working. But of course with the need to raise a large family, plus a lack of enough formal education himself, it never went further than that.

I remember thinking, when I got the letter from my uncle, how unfair it was that I was being treated well at the Paris Trib, simply because I'd had the luck to acquire a University of Chicago education, while so many of my relatives – and also many friends from my ordinary high school in Chicago – who were just as bright or indeed often brighter couldn't make knowing comments about world literature, or throw in terms from political science, and so they couldn't pass through the informal initiation rituals needed for entry into top newspapers or other organizations of that sort.

What I felt wasn't quite a resentment on behalf of my family – all had ended up doing well – but rather a sadness that whatever further dreams they may have held had little chance of being fulfilled. That gave me an intense sense of obligation to progress: to work hard enough to swirl through the system and rise to a level at the paper which would fulfil what my uncle and others might have wished.

Looking back from decades later, that's so clearly a young man's motivation. But it was powerful none the less. I also realize that things were even more nuanced than that. For I had no desire to advance at any cost, and rather felt it a matter of great pride to preserve my sense of what was right while at the Trib. The only time that slipped – and if I do write the book on 'Good Guys Finish First'/'Good Guys Finish Last' this will feature in the introduction – was when a friend who had a job one level above mine, Hal, got a chance to try out for a post as senior copy-editor, which was several levels even higher.

If he got promoted and I took over his job it would have been a giant improvement for me. I was locked in the telex room, with the job of tearing pieces of paper off a dozen or so clanking telex machines, and racing with them to the news room for sorting. It was loud, exhausting, and utterly repetitious. Even the telex room itself was dispiriting: just one small window, high up; with frayed linoleum floors, and a constant smell of burnt wiring from the shaking machines.

Hal's job, by contrast, had been to sit out in the main news room and sort those sheets into categories – making a rough estimate of what would be the main stories in the next day's paper – and then to keep those categories neatly updated through the day, so that the news editor could make a quick, informed decision about which story would actually be used, from the welter of AP/Reuters/NYTimes and other sources rushing in. Since he didn't have to stay in the telex room, Hal also had plenty of chances to talk with the senior editors.

While Hal had his try-out as a senior copy-editor, I took over his job sorting the telex sheets into categories. It was, indeed, a different world. I was in public, and when I spread out the telexed wire stories I was doing so right at the big oak table where the news editor and other senior individuals sat. I could chat with the editors, and be seen by the other staff. It was the break I'd dreamt of. I stayed later and later at the paper that week; I read the French newspapers and wire services as thoroughly as I could in the mornings before work began, so I would be even more up on what would be demanded on the news desk. But then, after one week Hal came back: he'd not been granted a job as copy-editor.

By all rights I should have gone back to the relatively hidden telex room. But – and oh the embarrassment to admit ethical weaknesses, even years later – I half-pretended I wasn't aware that had been our implicit deal. Instead, it ended up that Hal and I now shared the two old jobs. For me it was a great promotion, since half the time I was out in the newsroom. For Hal it was a great demotion, since half the time he was all the way back to being in the clanking telex room.

I rationalized it on the ground that Hal would have other chances, while for me that was the one-off opportunity to rise up. (His family was well off, and he had numerous other connections in Paris.) But even so – and even though Hal accepted it; his heart already leaving the Trib – I knew that I'd undercut him and also let myself down: that this was not the way I wanted to get ahead.

After that, I tried to make a point in my remaining time at the Herald Trib to advance simply by producing stand-out work. It was a lot easier ethically. Also, I thought that even if it didn't get me to better positions at the Trib, it would mean that I was learning technical skills which would be helpful elsewhere. (While if I'd simply advanced through manipulation, that would be based on nothing; simply the arbitrary configuration of personalities at one particular newspaper.)

It was a nice challenge, and there I think the old training in mathematics came in handy in my writing. It wasn't so much in being able to write about technical subjects, but rather in having some experience in seeing overall shapes and patterns. (Elementary math is lots of numbers, but on a higher level math is more like architecture – think of being caught inside Handel's Messiah, and being able to 'see' the abstract sound-scape being created.) I loved getting a handle on the shape of an argument or explanation.

At the same time, I also tried to use what once would have been taught as standard rhetoric in my writing: imagining what the reader or listener might be expecting, yet having that in mind a half-step *before* the listener actually was clear about it. I think John Updike called it the ability to 'lean forward': this awareness for the writer of what your readers will be expecting next .

When I actually did leave the Trib – it seemed after a lifetime, but in fact had been just about 18 months – I still didn't have any clear career vision in mind. Leaving had



simply been forced: the depth possible in mainstream journalism articles was to limited. A sort of wry humor was permitted; so too was a mild amount of analytic probing. But anything that could let writing or analysis reach the truth - anything touching the demons or drastic hopes of real life - was off limits.

That related to something more. I'd been attracted to math as a youngster not just because it allowed me to see interesting shapes. It also was something that was permanent; true. I loved the fact that ' $2+2=4$ ' had held when Babylon was first being built, and that it had also been true when the Earth was young; it will be true - guaranteed - billions of years in the future; long after our solar system is gone. For a youngster who had lost his father when 10 years old, that hope of touching permanence was a very strong motivation. I hunted for it wherever I could. Journalism was not going to be the place to experience or reveal it.

It wasn't immediately clear - this is still in the period when I was leaving the Trib, so my very early 20s - what would be the better choice. I got into books, again out of what seemed a logically forced solution. I was supporting myself as a free-lance journalist right after leaving the Trib, and this was fun, but tiring. It was hard to earn enough to buy big chunks of free time, and there was no possibility of a magic escape. But if I took the energy that went into 40 separate articles of 1,000 words and instead put it into writing 40,000 words of continuous text, then half a book would be done - and who knew what a book might earn or lead to?

This is what turned out well. My first book - an excruciatingly imitative account of basic human biology - only gave me about a year or two of income, but by the end I had a hint of how to write better. That motivated me to try another book, only this time starting from that end point: trying to be honest in tone all the way through. That's what became 'The Secret House': a book that once the tone was cracked, was a pure joy to write. I felt I had found something true: that I was simply describing a whole arrangement or insight that had opened itself up. (The gimmick in that book was to describe an ordinary family or couple as if we were looking up at giant Gullivers. The tone was crucial. Instead of a cold reductionism, as with someone like Richard Dawkins, I aimed to present the unexpected scientific details with the kindness of IB Singer's Gimpel the Fool.)

Thus the way that so much had felt forced, or constrained in my career. I'd often experienced a problem in terms of not being able to delve deeply into trying to see a truth, and then out of all the possible solutions, there was usually one that involved the course of least resistance: where I could solve my problem by simply reverting to something more and more true to myself.

Most of all, this underlying 'true' thing was the opening of a door that let me describe events or experiences as they really were. At university that had been mathematics, and history; in Paris it had been the grown-up political world which was revealed - opened up - through the opportunities at the Trib. And then next, when the writing on that early 'Secret House' book had been flying, I'd felt that I was

looking down on a craggy 3-dimensional surface, and I was simply describing what it was I saw – like flying over a rugged landscape in a helicopter. It was very beautiful, and very satisfying, because I felt that what I was seeing was not arbitrary, but true.

I think the underlying drive was similar when I made the move after that, from popular books to Oxford. I was keen to go deeper in analyzing history and societies, and a position at a renowned university seemed ideal, especially if I could rig it to have no administrative responsibilities. (It's true that as noted such a position also had no pay, at least at the start, but that was just one of the necessary tradeoffs: I'd earn money part-time some other way until matters improved, as indeed after a year or two they did.)

There was a nice twist from from my miscellaneous reading that helped to get the Tool-Kit course accepted. For the key meeting, trying to convince the Oxford authorities to go ahead, I remembered that when the American army officer Charlie Beckwith had been trying to get his idea of a new style special forces unit to be accepted - what would become known as Delta Force - he'd had little success with Pentagon authorities at first. They felt it as an insult: what was wrong with their own offerings? Similarly when I proposed a new course at Oxford.

The way Beckwith succeeded was to shift course. Instead of criticizing anything the Pentagon already had on offer, he said 'Ah, there's a gap in the US's military offerings'. This was something the Pentagon could accept without losing face, for who doesn't want to fill in a gap? That's what worked for me too in getting the Tool-Kit accepted. I explained to the powers that be that Oxford was incredible, magnificent: that I would be a worthless worm to ever suggest anything in its offerings was inadequate. However. There was a gap in the training new grad students were given. Aside from the university's offering of some basic work in statistics, it was pretty much assumed they would stay in their silos. But wouldn't economics students gain from understanding a bit about sociology, or linguists from understanding behavioral economics or anthropology? [[\*\*here's a later [video](#) talking about that.]]

I remember your once mentioning the way when reading exam papers you would get fresh ideas from seeing how students had misinterpreted what you'd meant. I was lucky enough to experience that at Oxford, too, especially in the first years of the 'Intellectual Tool-Kit' course. But here too, after a while I felt I'd gained about as much as I was going to get from the students. Producing lectures on entirely fresh topics helped a little, but not enough.

What was happening was that the amount of work I did for the new lectures was enough to get me interested in exploring those fields in more depth, but the students' comments – however suggestive; however bright they were – only emphasized what depths there remained to explore.

If I had been able to mix the teaching with regular sabbaticals it might have been okay, e.g. a year or two teaching, then a year or two off. But Oxford wasn't really open for that, and since I had little children by then I couldn't divide my own day further to allow it. To do deeper work – again, to try to see a simple beauty; simple truth – I had to leave the university, whence the return to full-time writing or other work i.e. my consulting.

It was different this time though, for one thing that had leapt out from the teaching was the importance of being forced to deal with new ideas and experiences. I'd always been struck at the way writers of academics easily became too isolated; creating a wall of knowledge that impressed less educated people around them, but which often was out of date, or merely self-serving. A forced contact with reality means that can't happen.

It's much like the way – as mentioned in the previous letter – you'd described the forced contact with post-war British society for you and your family. It meant that you had no choice but to be aware of that different world, with its different attitudes. The odds and ends of business work I do – the General Motors global scenarios are now finished, and next year there'll be some work helping chart out Shell's next round of global scenarios – provide some of that function. It means I'm forced to take cognizance of these very different views of the world.

It also means I don't have to write books simply to keep the bank manager happy, but rather can produce books from the heart. What happened here reminds me of those old Reader's Digest stories where someone decides to do the decent thing, foregoing all hopes of reward, and yet by chance they get rewarded anyway.  $E=mc^2$  was written because I was fascinated by the image of a gush of historical events swooping into Bern and 1905 and Einstein; I was equally fascinated by the way that what Einstein created in time led to young resistance volunteers scrambling up snowy cliffs at night, under German guns; the way his vision could also be a template for us to view the burning of giant stars with greater insight than ever before. (There was also the technical challenge of trying to tell human stories in a moving yet honest way.) All that was my motivation – and in great contrast with the various sequels to the Secret House, money had nothing to do with it. Yet  $E=mc^2$  has now been sold to two dozen countries, and might – how will I ever be able to make fun of the Reader's Digest again? – be more lucrative than the books that I'd intended to be lucrative.

As to your kind thoughts on particular books, the 'analytical' part of me is strongly tempted by 'Good Guys Finish First – and Last'. There were hints of sharp analysis in the ' $E=mc^2$ ' book, but not a great deal. 'Good Guys' would be a chance to go deeper. I especially like your suggestion about evaluating entire societies through this lens, and a structure for the book is coming into focus.

The more poetic or literary side of me is now indeed tempted to home in on the 'Francois and Emilie' idea. It was a great pleasure trying to shape some of the

chapters in 'E=mc<sup>2</sup>' into miniature 'art' works, and I have a hunch that unless I get stale on my 18th century lovers (which has happened to other topics before), 'Francois and Emilie' would be a chance to take that further. The big question will be whether I shape it as i) opening a door to the past (then taking the readers through it, and keeping them there), or whether instead ii) I lift away the barrier between us and the past, and show how much of today's world and issues were being prefigured or set up then. Probably there'll be some sort of mix.

As to which of these two books comes first, that might be arbitrary, depending on what publishers say. Or maybe I'll just start on one, and if it peters out at some point, I can circle around or start on the other, with the hope that the time off will make the first one come back. We'll see.

About the Santa Fe Institute [where McNeill had been invited to lecture; it used advanced math and biology ostensibly to understand human organizations] I agree with you entirely. I certainly understand why you were tempted at first – all the points about getting fresh inputs, and considering new approaches apply. No one wants to be considered a fuddy-duddy; closed off to new ideas. But the key weakness is exactly what you identified: physics and chemistry and other such fields have many regularities, but people are different from that. Although there can be a number of deep patterns or recurrent motifs in human behavior, there's no exactitude about how those will apply, and which ones will be relevant. Remember Max Weber's critique of the sociobiology of his time? Yes yes, he said, it's true that humans do have some curious overlaps with the behavior of dogs or bees, but it's the points where we differ that make all the difference. Similarly, we know that JFK viewed the Cuban Missile Crisis through the lens of 1914, where it was wise to step back, but he just as easily could have viewed it through the lens of 1939, where it was crucial to stand firm. At the level of the Santa Fe institute's work, either course of action would have been plausible, and indeed might even seem predictable. But in fact only one of those possibilities occurred.

There's something else about the Santa Fe Institute. Again I think I mentioned in the earlier letter the way that math majors were often attracted to overarching theories of history: they loved Marx, non-ironic reading of Plato's Republic, etc. This is a strong bias for many physical scientists, not least because they see it come true year after year in their work. It's natural accordingly that they'll be disposed to believe they can find such guaranteed patterns in the human world; it's natural they'd feel that Jared Diamond or economic modelers or others are uncovering something 'true'; that there are deep, 100% explanatory regularities have been found.

It's not an impossible bias to break, for physical scientists also understand the notion of a palette of possibilities, from which appropriate tools or insights are chosen as needed. This of course is what your work and those of others can supply. In an essay I put together back in the '80s I wrote how many people love the idea that there's an all-pervasive causal scaffolding behind the surface world we live in, and that some special individuals –mystics, etc – can see that scaffolding of great certainty. When

we see a commando strike force, or a hyper-confident economic modeler, or a totally self-assured calm mystic, we feel that we're seeing the outer manifestation of this deeper world: we get a pleasure, often, from imagining how easy life must be for these individuals, who have escaped from the agony of free-will, and know, at every moment, exactly how they must act. (That was one of the essays that gave me the idea for a Parallel Worlds book; it might end up as part of the 'Good Guys' idea now.) This isn't to downgrade actual soldiers, or skilled economists: just the fantasy that others hold about them.

The danger in corresponding with writers is that they never know when to stop! I will take the need to pick up my children from their school as a reason for today's letter to cease. They are 7 and 4, which are wonderful ages: a joy and trust towards the outside world on their part; a pleasure quite impossible to put in words at sharing that from mine. In the evenings we hold hands and whisper our thoughts about the day: talking about this, and that, and whatever we want. Apples or other nutritious substances have been known to be consumed at the same time; stories are usually supplied at the end. When they get to share this with their own children one day, they'll understand what fulfilment is.

Anyway, as mentioned above, I should have a quiet space this weekend, so can get off a comment on your paper before a further week has passed.

Best,

*It was a pleasure writing those letters, and we continued our correspondence for many years. With the stout good health of the farm boy he'd once been, back in 1920s Canada, McNeill lived nearly to his centenary, passing away in 2016. It's also sweet - or disheartening? - when rereading this to see how persistent I've been about projects. The du Châtelet book I only got around to about 5 years after that letter, while the one about good guys waited until finally transmuting into The Art of Fairness, released at the end of 2020.*

*The letters with McNeill also became more honest as time went on. In those first two, although I didn't exactly lie, I'd spun matters to give the impression that steps had always run smoothly. Reality, of course, was more complex.*

*For example, I'd casually mentioned running out of cash in Paris and stumbling on the job at the Trib. That happened, but until the moment when I did get the Trib job I didn't know it was going to happen: instead, I thought I might have to turn back to studies at the LSE (which I wasn't then interested in), or return all the way to Chicago, which despite being a city I loved would have been a great disappointment at that stage.*

*In the second letter I also casually mentioned that I wrote the Secret House 'once the tone was cracked'. Passive constructions like that hide a lot. The weeks on end when I was trying to find that tone were exceptionally unpleasant: one of the very worst feelings I've had in my life. It was like being about to break up with someone, knowing the time you're going to have to share talking about will be Awful.*

*There was something good, and something bad, that came from that difficult interval. The good was that the intensity was a sign of my pushing into fresh territory: right at the limit of what I could do. The momentum from my thinking so hard carried me forward into a tone, a humor, for the Secret House that was wonderful. Without the intensity of the push, I'd never have found that.*

*The negative was that I couldn't bear to again face such unpleasant sensations as those weeks or months trying to break through. That's why I wrote ever easier sequels: the Secret Garden (part-time when I was at Oxford); the Secret Family (in London; the introduction ends with my eldest when he was about four, wobbling in to where I was typing, carrying a cup of coffee for me, and proudly saying 'Be imaginative Daddy' as he delivered it before trundling out.) They weren't terrible, and got excellent advances, enough to keep a family happily going, but I wrote them without ever having to concentrate hard. Yet existing where you're only semi-connected to your work is a waste. Time is finite, and although writing the first draft of each of those sequels was quick, once editing and design and publicity etc came in it still meant a year or more taken away from anything that could have been more satisfying.*

*There was another story behind E=mc<sup>2</sup> that I slighted to McNeill; an embarrassing one about self-thwarting. A few years before I'd had the idea for it - when still writing one of the Secret sequels, and doing bits of consulting (pretty straightforward stuff with one of the large management consultancies; less interesting than the Shell scenarios later) - I remember sitting up in bed at night, reading a series of dialogues by the late 17th century French astronomer Fontenelle. It was beautiful, poetic: he was describing walking on an open meadow at night with a bright 20-something aristocratic woman: telling her about the stars; answering her questions about whether there might be life there, and what we could ever know about it. I wanted to write something as vivid as that.*

*Around the same time I was also reading a biography of the great astrophysicist and Nobel Laureate Chandrasekhar, whom I'd briefly met at Chicago: a seemingly forbidding, austere man. But in the biography - which included, I think, a long raw transcript of an interview with him - he came alive. I saw how a mix of racism and insecurity had made him so reserved; I got hints of what he dreamed, and what he desired. That sort of insight is also what I wanted to write about - and that too I felt impossibly far away from beginning.*

*Only after several years, and a bout of fresh business work to clear the air, did I manage to make a fresh start. I had been able to stifle my dissatisfaction, for in my daily life I really was loving time with the kids. But finally I drew the simple conclusion. I'd felt bad not writing like Fontenelle, or as deeply as the biography of Chandra. So why didn't I give myself permission to do that? All I'd ever had to do was simply go ahead! Nor was there any reason I needed to find that impossible. Children sleep - especially if tired out by racing games in nearby parks - and I've always liked working at night. Limited time also has the advantage that you can't dawdle when the moment comes to get started.*

*Thus the first two letters to McNeill: true in their own way, but incomplete. It's easy to tell the story of your life in a way where everything inevitably leads forward. If you've been even a little bit successful that won't be too hard, for everything that happened does indeed form a causal chain leading to where you are now. But those stories are misleading, just as the way the passenger interface in commercial jets - of gentle accelerations; of warmed, gently moving air in the cabin - is also misleading, giving little indication of the freezing high velocity blasts just outside the window.*

*My notes about [writing one chapter](#), in one book, get a little closer into what's really going on under the surface.*