

The Ralph Story

My Search for The Lady of Shalott

Martyn Bradley

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The Lady of Shalott, 1888. John William Waterhouse. Tate. Photo: Tate.

*For my daughter, Abi, without whose encouragement the quest
would never have been completed.*

This story is not an autobiography. There is not much to be found here that does not relate directly to the central quest. Whilst I have included some social history and endeavoured to highlight some of the relevant attitudes and laws which have changed over time, there is very little to do with either my working life or my music, both of which have occupied many, many hours but have had little influence on the years of searching.

All related within the story is true as far as I can remember. The birth story as it was originally told to me by my mum in 1962 is 'word for word'.

Any errors are purely down to a lapse of memory over the intervening years. I have changed some names to protect the identities of individuals who may still be with us.

Chapter 1

The gold watch

I think I should begin my story as Martyn Bradley at twelve years old, for that is when the bombshell dropped.

I enjoyed the things you would expect any twelve-year-old boy in England in the early 1960s to enjoy. Eagle and Lion comics dropped through the letterbox every week. I collected postage stamps. I played the side-drum in the Boys' Brigade band, and most of all I enjoyed playing outside with my large group of local friends.

Sidcup in Kent in those days retained a small-town feel and housed reminders that the war was not long over. The first money I ever 'earned' was in helping to demolish a nearby air-raid shelter in the crescent just off the main road. I must have been nine or ten and all the gang were involved. Although I remember it as great fun, it was probably extremely dangerous!

My immediate family was not large – Mum and Dad, and me. I had three cousins whom I liked but who lived way up north and for most of the time didn't exist in my world. On the rare occasions they visited, we had big family gatherings at grandparents' houses where we children had to be on our best behaviour – or else!

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At that age I wasn't much interested in my aunts and uncles and there seemed to be a lot of them. Dad's father had married one of four sisters who all lived around the Sidcup area, which is why my parents had settled there after I came along. Life was great and I was an extremely happy child. I had passed the 11+ exam and went to a very good school.

One of the most important things for me at that time, and something that has remained of equal importance throughout my life, was a sense of belonging. I was never happier than when I was part of a group, and joined just about every available club: sports teams, Sunday School, the Boys' Brigade, the Saturday morning pictures (ABC Minors) crowd. I worked hard, played hard, and enjoyed a wonderful childhood.

It was when I was twelve I first encountered the word 'adopted'. In September 1961, I was a new boy at Cray Valley Technical School. In our year was a boy, Colin, whose parents had been killed in a road accident when he was younger. We became good friends. He lived with his grandparents, and he often talked about how strict they were, not letting him take part in things the rest of us took for granted. The incident I remember best was the school production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*. We first and second years all went along to the auditions, got parts and were thrilled that we were to be part of a prestigious event in the school calendar. Colin had to withdraw from the production after the first rehearsal because it meant he got home late from school and this had upset some routine his grandparents lived to. I remember him being so angry and saying his real parents would have enjoyed his being in the production, but of course his grandparents 'had only adopted him'. I realised his grandparents were now bringing him up but it was as if 'adopted' meant something rather nasty, especially in a twelve-year-old's mind.

The bombshell dropped a little later that same year. The

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extended family had gathered to celebrate Christmas and the birthday of my father's grandfather. A very rich, strict and supposedly religious man, he gave all his great-grandchildren an inscribed gold watch for Christmas. All except me.

The reason given to my parents was that I was 'adopted'. I vaguely remember the rows this caused. In fact, my parents never spoke to him again. From then on, there was always an atmosphere when we were with any of his daughters, who we referred to as my great aunts, and the bad feeling must have had an effect on me in that I remember those times so well even now.

Mum and Dad were very involved in the Baptist church. Mum sang in the choir and had run the Girl Guides until a few years previous, and Dad was the Sunday School superintendent so they weren't exactly the sort of people to bear grudges for little or no reason. It must have been a really bad time for them and I didn't understand the 'adopted' thing that had caused so much ill-feeling and resentment. OK, I hadn't got my watch, but there was obviously some matter of fairness or principle at work somewhere.

I can't remember exactly how long after this event it was that I asked what 'adopted' really meant – perhaps just a week or so – but I can vividly remember finding out!

It was Mum who told me. I probably asked her rather than Dad because she always seemed to explain things so clearly. We were very close and discussed most things quite openly and in some depth. At that time world affairs such as Yuri Gagarin's flight into space and the increasing tension in Cuba were the sort of things that got us going, but until that day I had never once mentioned gold watches or adoption. She must have had a lot of confidence in my ability to deal with the story as she certainly didn't hold back on the details. I can remember waiting with some trepidation in the lounge while she went upstairs to fetch some papers she thought I should see.

She first explained what adoption meant – that I was someone

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else's child but that I was now part of the Bradley family and they were bringing me up. I was legally their child although Mum hadn't actually given birth to me. I then heard a story that I was to hear many times over the years. It all rang true and it never changed.

I wasn't Martyn Bradley at all: I was born Ralph Allan Wellington on October 8th 1949 at The Haven, a Home for unmarried mothers and babies run by the Baptist Missionary Society in Yateley, just outside of London and near Aldershot. My real mother was Dorothy Ruth Wellington. The Home had told my parents that she was the 16-year-old daughter of a missionary family in Leopoldville, capital of the Belgian Congo in Africa. Trouble had erupted in that country and Dorothy Ruth had been one of the victims of an unprecedented attack on a white mission station. Being young and evidently very pretty, she had formed a prime target. My father could have been any one of a number of individuals. There had also been some deaths but it was not known whether any of the Wellington family were victims. Dorothy Ruth had been shipped back from Africa to England on her own with arrangements made for her to give birth at The Haven in order to avoid further scandal to the family and the Missionary Society, and for her own safety.

Mum knew all the details, as told her by The Haven: Dorothy had come by ship into Southampton and had been taken to The Haven by another missionary, a friend of the Wellingtons, who was home on furlough. We had provided accommodation at home for missionaries on furlough and so I knew this meant they were back in England having a rest from their overseas work. Mum fetched the original adoption information which showed my real mother's name and The Haven's record of my birth and development during my first weeks of life, so I knew it was all true. Mum explained that she couldn't have any children of her own. She had conceived some years earlier but had miscarried

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very late in the pregnancy. Complications had left adoption as the only option for having and raising a child. They loved me as if I were their own, and Mum hoped above all else that, having been told the incredible truth, it would not change the love I had for her and Dad.

I reassured her that of course it didn't change a thing. But I cried. I cried a lot, in fact – not for myself or for Mum or our family in Sidcup, but for Dorothy Ruth. What had she endured so far from England and how on earth did she manage to cope with all that happened to her following such an outrage? Mum loved the Pre-Raphaelites and we had a large print of *The Lady of Shalott* by John William Waterhouse on the wall in the lounge – the beautiful young maiden sailing away in the boat not knowing what lies before her.



***'The Lady of Shalott', 1888. John William Waterhouse. Tate.
Photo: Tate.***

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Following my ‘finding out’, it always represented Dorothy Ruth, my mother, escaping over the water to an unknown life, frightened and alone. I still get quite emotional when I see that painting. Of course, it now crops up absolutely everywhere!

I had so many questions to ask Mum that day. I wanted to know all about The Haven, I wanted to know why I had been chosen for the Bradley family instead of all the other babies at the home, but the first question – and by far the most important to me – was ‘What was my real mother like?’ Mum could not answer. She was, I remember, very emotional at this point and explained that it was a strict policy of The Haven, and indeed all homes from which babies were adopted in those days, that birth mothers and adoptive parents were not allowed any interaction and therefore did not meet. All the information Mum had shared had been obtained from The Haven itself, and apart from the two pieces of paper which listed my birth date, my real mother’s name, my weights on various days and the date of my legal adoption, there was nothing else. Thank goodness Mum had the mind to keep those sheets of paper safe. She gave them to me on that day, and they became the most valuable of my possessions.

I think Mum had known the day would come when she would have to go through this and, now it was over, she seemed to radiate a new level of happiness. I remember being left in the front room on my own for some time after I heard this amazing story, reflecting on its content. It was a tearful time.

So then, finally, I knew why I hadn’t got my watch! It was to do with real family relations, fathers and sons and the sharing of a common blood, things I was not part of in the mind of my great-grandfather. I did not belong.

I wiped away the tears, looked at the Lady of Shalott and vowed to myself that I would find my real mother.

However long it took.

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THE BAPTIST UNION OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND (BAPTIST WOMEN'S LEAGUE)

GENERAL SECRETARY:
THE REV. M. E. AUBREY, C.H., M.A.

ORGANISING & DEPUTATION SECRETARY
MISS E. L. CHAPPLE

THE HAVEN

(HOME FOR MOTHERS AND BABIES)

TEL. YATELEY 3107

VIGO LANE,
YATELEY,
NR. CAMBERLEY

MATRON:
MISS A. K. FINNEY,
S.R.N., S.C.M., M.T.D., D.N. (LOND.)

R A L P H.

Date of Birth 8.10.1949. Birth Weight. 8 lb. 7½ ozs.
At 25.11.49. 10 lbs. 10 ozs.

Feeds: 5 level measures Half-Cream "Cow & Gate"
5½ ozs. or 11 Tablespoons. hot boiled water.
(Four-hourly, the last feed 9.30 p.m.)

Orange Juice - ½ Teaspoon to 1 oz. water.
(Given by spoon from small cup.....4.45 p.m.)

Cod Liver Oil - ¼ Teaspoonful by spoon before 10 a.m.
and 6 p.m. feeds.

Baby has been successfully vaccinated and circumcised. Sits on
chamber after every feed. Will soon require Full-Cream Cow & Gate.

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A.C.A. 4.—Adoption Order in respect of an infant.
(Rule 10 of the Adoption of Children (County Court) Rules, 1949.)

In the

BROMLEY

County Court.

No. F 245

IN THE MATTER OF THE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN ACTS, 1926 TO 1949,

AND

IN THE MATTER OF (1) RALPH ALLAN WELLINGTON AN INFANT.

(1) Enter name(s) and surname as shown in the heading of Form A.C.A. 1.

Application having been made by GERALD LESLIE RICHARD BRADLEY

by occupation RAILWAY CLERK resident

at 19 NORTHCOOTE ROAD, SIDCUP, KENT. and

domiciled in England/Wales [and DOROTHY MARY BRADLEY his wife]

(hereinafter called the applicant/applicants) for an order under the Adoption of Children Acts, 1926

to 1949, authorising him/her/them to adopt RALPH ALLAN WELLINGTON, an

infant, the child/adopted child of DOROTHY RUTH WELLINGTON /

_____ and _____ ;

And the said RALPH ALLAN WELLINGTON (hereinafter called the infant)

being of the MALE sex, and never having been married ;

And the applicant/one of the applicants

having attained the age of twenty-five years and being at least twenty-one years older than the infant or

having attained the age of twenty-one years and being a relative of the infant within the meaning of the said Acts or

being the mother/father of the infant ;

(2) Delete where there is no change of name.

[And the names by which the infant is to be known being MARTYN RICHARD BRADLEY] (*)

(3) Delete this entry—

(a) If the infant is not identical with a person whose birth is registered in the Registers of Births in England, Wales or Scotland, or in a Register of Births abroad kept by the Registrar General;

(b) If the infant has previously been adopted. Where the infant is identical with a person whose birth is registered in any such register other than the Registers of Births in England or Wales, modify the entry accordingly.

[And it having been proved to the satisfaction of the judge that the infant is identical with

RALPH ALAN, to whom the entry numbered 393

and made on the 19th October 1949, in the Register

of Births for the registration district of ALDRERSHOT

and sub-district of HATLEY WINNERS in the county of

SOUTHAMPTON relates] (*) ;

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(4) Delete "probable", unless the precise date of the infant's birth is proved.

And the [probable] (4) date of the birth of the infant appearing to be the 8th October 1949.

[And the infant having been previously the subject of an adoption order dated the

(5) Delete except where the infant has previously been adopted.

_____ 19____, of which particulars are entered in the Adopted Children Register] (5);

And all the consents required by the said Acts being obtained or dispensed with;

It is ordered that the applicant/applicants be authorised to adopt the infant;

[And the following payment or reward is sanctioned:

_____]

[And as regards costs it is ordered that:

_____]

And it is directed that the Registrar General shall make in the Adopted Children Register an entry recording the adoption in accordance with the particulars set out in the Schedule to this order.

[And it is further directed that the Registrar General shall cause the said entry in the Register of Births to be marked with the word "adopted"] (6).

[And it is further directed that the Registrar General shall cause the previous entry in the Adopted Children Register relating to the infant to be marked with the word "re-adopted"] (6).

Dated the 18th day of April 1950.

T. M. FRITCHARD
Registrar.
T. M. Fritchard

(6) Where a probable date of birth is specified in the body of the order, enter that date without qualification. If the infant is one of twins, include, if possible, the hour as well as the date of birth.
(7) Where there is a change, enter only the names by which the infant is to be known.

HOURS OF ATTENDANCE at the Court Office from 10 a.m. till 3.30 p.m., except on _____ when the Office will be open from _____ till _____

SCHEDULE TO FORM No. 4

| Date (6) and country of birth of child | Name and surname of child (7) | Sex of child | Name and surname, address and occupation of adopter or adopters | Date of adoption order and description of court by which made |
|--|---|--------------|--|---|
| 8th Oct. 1949 England | MARTYN Richard Bradley | male | GERALD LESLIE RICHARD BRADLEY 19 NORTHCOOTE ROAD, SIDCUP, KENT RAILWAY CLERK AND DOROTHY MARY BRADLEY HOUSEWIFE | 18th April, 1950 BROOLEY COUNTY COURT. |

This is an extract from *The Ralph Story: My Search for The Lady of Shalott* by Martyn Bradley. Continue the journey by purchasing in ebook or print on Amazon at [mybook.to/TheRalphStory](https://www.amazon.com/mybook.to/TheRalphStory) or order in a favourite bookshop.

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