



Corpid 1947



# Dominic Bruce, the “Medium-Sized Man” of Colditz Castle, RAF Officer and College Principal

## Brendan Bruce

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Brendan Bruce, CCO of Low Associates Brussels, formerly Director of Communications to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, writes about his father Dominic Bruce, whose extraordinary life was commemorated on 7 June 2024 at a ceremony attended by the President to unveil a Blue Plaque outside the house where he lived in Newcastle.

Have a look at this photo. It is of a fresh-faced group of College rowers. Over to the left is the cox, standing slightly apart. Somehow solitary, even as part of the group.

He is easy to spot, being ten years older, with a face formed by war, and months of near starvation. He has been shot at from point blank range. Baled out of a burning aeroplane. Arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo. Shoved up against a wall in front of a firing squad. Court-martialled. Sentenced to long terms in solitary confinement (where he spent his time reciting poetry to the guards). He has flown at five hundred feet over Unter Den Linden in Berlin sitting in a Wellington's bomb bay. He has tried to steal an aeroplane from a Luftwaffe aerodrome. He has travelled through Germany posing as a Belgian Gastarbeiter (with false papers in the name of Joe Soap). He has walked out of the main gate of the maximum-security Spangenberg Castle smoking a cigar. He has escaped from Colditz Castle in a tea chest. He has been poked by bayonets hiding in a haystack in a U-Boat pen in Danzig. He is someone more used to prison life than College life.

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He has seen more violence, tragedy and death in one day than the others will see in a lifetime. It's cold, and his hands are stuffed into his RAF officer's greatcoat, from which the badges of rank have been carefully removed. They are boys, posing as men. He is balding, married, with three children and another on the way.

He stares at the camera with a slight Mona Lisa smile, but he sends us no message from history. He is universally called the "Medium-Sized Man". But his real name is Dominic Bruce. And he was my father.

His journey towards Corpus Christi was radically different from that of those well-fed, self-confident public schoolboys in their expensive clothes.

It started in a village on the banks of the Tyne. His father was a coal miner, and he was educated at the local primary school. He lost two brothers, one to the Church at the age of twelve, the other to disease at the age of three. He never experienced poverty, as his father was part of that aristocracy of labour, the Durham Miners, and they were always in demand. But he witnessed it daily. He often told the story of how he came to understand the true nature of Christianity. One day, a boy came to school on a bitterly cold winter's day without a shirt. The headmaster took his own shirt off and gave it to the boy. Yeshua bar Yussuf would have applauded.

He was a bright pupil, earning a place at a well-known grammar school in Newcastle. Small and slight, he had to create survival strategies in an environment where disputes were traditionally resolved by fists. So, he used to pay for bodyguards out of his pocket money, an early example of two of his major talents, an ingenious solution to a seemingly intractable problems (he has been rightly described as "the most ingenious escaper of the Second World War") and an astonishing ability to persuade others to follow his vision. He was a natural leader, but this constantly clashed with his desire to confront all forms of authority. "Always remember," he would say to me, wagging his finger, "you were born to give orders, not to follow them."

This impulse to oppose (and his hair-trigger temper) both got him into trouble and got him out of it. He was once arrested by military police in Piccadilly. Drunkenness. AWOL. Resisting arrest, etc. etc. Taken back to his squadron under guard, his newly appointed Commanding Officer refused to charge him when he saw the bright candy-coloured stripe of the extremely scarce Air Force Medal on his breast. You don't charge heroes. He was, is and now always will be the only man in history to have been awarded the Military Cross and the Air Force Medal. And yet he was bookish, a good writer and an entertaining public speaker with a lightning quick wit and a seductive charm.

He had qualified for a place at Durham University before the War, but of course back then you had to be very wealthy, or very lucky, to take it up. To be a coal miner's son at a university in the Thirties was to put you into the company of unicorns. The War changed everything.

In 1945 he turned down a parliamentary seat in a safe Labour constituency (which would have led him directly to the Wilson Cabinet of 1964), because he had one burning ambition. He was going to go to Oxford and do the thing he liked doing best, arguing with historians about history. For a man who had exceptionally few personal heroes (Chaim Weitzman, King George VI, "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted" Wellington and his mother, the soi-disant "Angel of Hebburn") he added Max Beloff, whom he was still quoting at me fifty years later. One his many quirks was that he would never eat with his children, save for Sunday lunch. And that wasn't a meal, it was an undergraduate tutorial. My elder brothers (Durham and Sandhurst) were already adults when I started debating over the roast joint and Yorkshire puddings. No holds barred, all you had to be was fast, furious and very well read. When I went to Warwick, my first year was spent gawping at people in astonishment who said to me that they were struggling with the reading list, all of which I had read by the age of fourteen. So, Corpus entered my life without my even being aware of it. That and the fact that from infancy, if you wanted to rebel against the ruling junta in our rambling old Georgian house by the Thames (and I most certainly did), all you had to do was wait for the annual Boat Race and then root for Cambridge at the top of your voice, a hell-bent heresy equivalent to claiming that the Archbishop of Canterbury was in the apostolic succession.

He was distinctly displeased when he found out I had no intention of applying to Corpus to read History, after (to my stupefaction) I found out that you had to study Anglo-Saxon in your first year.

En revanche, he would have been surprised and pleased that, given my deep-seated anti-Oxford prejudice, I deposited my diaries in the Bodleian. My loyalty to him (and his loyalty to Corpus) finally trumped my loyalty to The Iron Lady (and my well-founded fear of that swinging handbag).

Missing out on a place at Durham (a bitter experience he shared with my mother whose promised Durham scholarship went to the niece of the local mayor, something that turned her into a lifelong Tory) formed the inspiration for his life's work: to provide opportunities for children of modest means to exploit their talents. He spent his post-Corpus career working on the concept of further education and technical skills training, culminating with his appointment as the Founding Principal of Kingston College of Further Education in Surrey. This was a plum job and the competition for it was intense. The shortlist contained two other candidates for the interviewing panel to consider.

He only had a degree from Corpus, and a Military Cross. The others were a brigadier and a Royal Navy captain. But he had a secret weapon, the sheer rapier-like speed of that irresistible wit. As he entered, the chairman of the panel was still reading his CV. Looking up at him in astonishment he said in some surprise, "It says here that you have nine children. Are they all yours?" (thinking perhaps that some were stepchildren). "So my wife assures me," came the roguish reply.

His real legacy is not all the medals, or these extraordinary stories that seem to have come straight from a John Buchan novel, but those tens of thousands of children who became valued adults because they were given the opportunity he was refused. He believed that the purpose of life is to leave this world in a better place than you found it. And by that criterion, he succeeded. Respect is earned, and he undoubtedly earned it. He certainly had mine. I hope he knew that. There were five institutions that moulded the Medium-Sized Man and made him what he became: the Roman Catholic Church (of all his many honours he was most proud of the fact that he was a Papal Knight); the National Union of Miners; Oflag IV-C (aka Colditz Castle); the Royal Air Force; and Corpus Christi College, Oxford (there was an ancient, foxed print of the Pelican Sundial hanging on a wall outside my childhood bedroom). He was very proud of all of them. Corpus should be very proud of him.

*Harriet Patrick, Assistant Archivist, writes:*

We have very little in the College Archive pertaining directly to Dominic Bruce during his time at Corpus. But, thanks to the White Books (lists of College members, printed annually), we know where he lived as an undergraduate. As a mature student he lived out of College: during his first year he resided on Manor Road, Headington; for his second and third years he lived at 45 Marston Street.

Dominic Bruce was a member of the College Boat Club: photographs in the Archive tell us that he was cox for the 1947 and 1948 crews. *The Pelican Record* suggests that this was something of a thankless task, and was not steeped in success. The December 1946 issue explains:

We have suffered this term from a quantitative lack of oarsmen, from an insufficiency of coaches to improve them, and from a want of enthusiasm amongst the more experienced oars, born of the worship of the goddess Competition. It is all too commonly held that because Torpids and Eights are held respectively in the Hilary and Trinity terms, rowing in the Michaelmas term does not matter. This tendency to regard the Boat Club as a college prestige-making machine is regrettable. Three of this term's new oarsmen have not rowed before. Daily tubbing has been their lot, and the task of maintaining interest at this most thankless stage. A new and competent cox [unnamed here, but assuredly Dominic Bruce] has been a valuable acquisition.<sup>1</sup>



Things improved for the crew in Hilary 1947:

This term's Torpid crew was competent rather than powerful. It achieved a bump on Exeter on the third night, rather by persistence than élan, and so hauled itself out of the unenviable position of sandwich boat. That it failed to catch Worcester and rowed over the last three nights was probably in part due to standing-by for three days until the river should free itself of ice. The achievement was not unnoticed in Another Place and from our namesake in the Fens came congratulations by telegram. Numbers are up, and if during the Trinity Term all who can will row we may achieve that almost forgotten wonder, a second boat in Eights. [Crew listed, including Cox: D. Bruce.]<sup>2</sup>

Corpus's disastrous performance during the 1948 Summer Eights was despaired upon, and the editors of *The Pelican Record* lamented junior members' unwillingness to join the crew, or indeed to help in any way:

The 1st VIII this year was keen, excellently coached, hard-working and well trained. Yet it went down every night. How shall we account for Corpus' humiliating glissando of 11 places in two years? It is not just that we have an acute shortage of men who did well in school rowing, for this is a regular feature of this College, and has never before prevented us from holding an honoured place on the river. It lies rather in the fact that exactly nine men were available to choose the VIII from, and of these only two weighed more than 11 stone. Since the numbers of the College now stand higher than ever before, the obvious conclusion must be drawn. Judging from conversation, indeed, the Man-in-the-JCR does mind Corpus' defeat, but apparently not enough to do anything about it – not even, as was pointed out by more than one visitor, to run up the tow-path with the crew. We can only hope that the next generation of undergraduates will express their disapproval of our position on the river in more realistic terms than the present, though even this can hardly be expected if the current apathy continues among the more senior members of the JCR.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Pelican Record*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, December 1946.

<sup>2</sup> *The Pelican Record*, Vol. XXVII, No. 5, March 1947.

<sup>3</sup> *The Pelican Record*, Vol. XXVIII No. 3, June 1948