Young Sam Butler and the origins of modern running:
His Athletic and Illicit Exploits as a Fox and a Hound

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Please join me in a wet field. I'm afraid there's no buried treasure. It's just a humble, low-lying basin of unkempt grass and spiky marsh-reeds, with one arthritic tree.

It took a round-the-world flight, a day's drive, and three days of persistent map-work and tough running to find this field. What I really wanted to locate was the ditch – straight & shallow, it crosses the middle of the field. It's eroded and overgrown with weeds, discernible only as a line of darker green and lingering puddles.

Sorry, it's not the most glamorous tourist destination. Yet here lie the origins of organized running in the modern world.

Here, too, lie clues to radically revisionist biography of the writer Samuel Butler.

Butler wrote famously about his unhappy formative years, including his undistinguished school career, in the novel *The Way of All Flesh*. He told the same story in a short autobiographical memoir, and in the version he gave later in life to his friend and first biographer, Henry Festing Jones. Every other biographer – and there have been more than a dozen – has followed that account. His sufferings as a child, and the repression in the teenager of all the best and most creative in his character, have become iconic of the Victorian era. For Butler's own biography, for his formation as a writer, his Bildungsroman narrative, they have been accepted as accurate and adequate.

The soggy field shows they are neither. In that wet ditch I found things about Butler that he chose not to reveal.

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There hasn't been a TV version of The Way of All Flesh, so Butler now isn't such a big name as he was a hundred years ago.

His great mock-utopia *Erewhon* ("No-where" backwards, more or less, alluding to Thomas More's U-topia), and his wickedly irreverent *Notebooks,* and his autobiographical novel made him a cult figure for the early 20th century. He was a favourite of Bernard Shaw, E.M. Forster, the Bloomsbury Group, James Joyce, Robert Graves, and others. They liked his demolition of the Victorian orthodoxies of church and family, his strong, lucid prose, and his subversive, surprising wit.

His time will come again – and the St John's Butler Project has made a major contribution with its

events over the last two years. He'll come again as a satiric novelist, as a prophet of modern global communications, as a chronicler of emigration settlement, and as the man who warned us against becoming enslaved to technology. His time has already come as a translator of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, although I think nobody but me has noticed how his prose translations, ignored when they were published in the 1890s and invisible ever since, have been pirated by several popular classics series (Barnes & Noble, for example) and mass-market paperbacks. The book of the sexy TV mini-series of the *Odyssey*, with supermodel Vanessa Williams as Calypso on the cover, is Butler's translation. He would be amused.

Butler was a versatile writer, and radical thinker, who wrote with a pungently personal voice and accessible classless language that was ahead of its time. One collection that I contributed to calls him "Victorian against the grain" and that's part of the truth.

It's a younger Butler I'm discussing today – and how my wet field contributed to the making of a substantial writer.

He began writing during five years in New Zealand's South Island, and that's where I became interested in him, as I too had moved there. His first publication was in fact a narrative of his journey to New Zealand and first experiences as a settler there, published in the St John's College magazine, *The Eagle.*

Reading *The Way of All Flesh* for the Novel course I was teaching at University of Canterbury, I noticed a paragraph where the hero, Ernest, then a schoolboy, runs several miles to present a parting gift to a housemaid who has been dismissed by his stern father. The narrator says that at school Ernest joined in an "amusement" called "the hounds," so "a run of six or seven miles across country was no more than he was used to." There isn't much running in *Middlemarch*, *The Ambassadors*, or the other novels I was teaching that year, so I stored the little episode away. (Later it became one of the seeds of my book *Running in Literature.*)

Butler based Ernest's school, which he calls "Roughborough," on Shrewsbury. Butler was there from 1848 to 1854, and always claimed to have been unhappy and unsuccessful. On a visit to England I decided to go there, mainly for Butler, but also because I was curious about "the Hounds," more formally "The Royal Shrewsbury School Hunt." West's history of the school temptingly referred to the "Hound Books," in which the club's activities were recorded.

The invention of cross-country running as an organized modern sport has always been attributed to Rugby School, mainly because of the paper-chase "Hare and Hounds" run in Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). That chapter inspired the first adult running club, Thames Hare and Hounds, founded at Roehampton in 1868. Their founder, Walter Rye, paid tribute to Rugby School as the cradle of the sport in his seminal essay, "Paper-Chasing and Cross-Country Running" for the Badminton Library in 1887.

That's not quite the whole story.

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At Shrewsbury, as well as looking at some youthful watercolours by Butler, I asked the

Librarian, at that time a courteous classicist, to find the “Hound Books” for me.

They were treasure trove. Crackly old exercise books, such as you'd find in any dusty attic, their pages are hand-written in scratchy black ink. The writing changes year by year, with each new schoolboy secretary of the club. The oldest is dated 1831, and a letter indicates the sport was established considerably earlier, with a “Huntsman” or club captain. To be conservative, the date for the beginning of the sport at Shrewsbury is no later than October 1820.

Very briefly, some context:

A game called “Hunt the Fox” or “Hunt the Hare” had been played in English schools at least since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Both names are given in Strutt's *Sports & Pastimes of the People of England.* Shakespeare may have played it at Stratford Grammar School, as when Hamlet is eluding the Elsinore security guards, he calls out, “Hide, fox, and all after.”

Probably a form of hide-and-seek, the game became more mobile and more organised in some schools a little after 1800. At Shrewsbury they called it “the Hunt” or “the Hounds.” It was a way for the young gents to practise their future adult pastime of hunting.

At first it was organised by halls or houses. The precursor of the main series of Hound Books, the one that dates from 1831, is called “The Journal of the Hunts of Mr Iliffe's Fox-Hounds.” It details the autumn season activities and courses of a club of 37 members. A reminiscence of the period from 1834 to 1839 focuses on the rivalries between the House clubs with names like Iliffe's, Gee's, Jollyboys and Butler's Hounds – Butler in that case being Dr Samuel Butler, the Headmaster, our Sam's grandfather.

A footnote. Dr Butler, Head from 1798-1836, has always been seen as exclusively academic, and all the credit for developing games has gone to Arnold of Rugby. Pierre de Coubertin, for example, praised Arnold as a major inspiration of his vision of a revived Olympic Games. But cricket, and a form of football were established at Shrewsbury under Butler; he also permitted or encouraged “Butler's Hounds.” The Journal of the Hunt records that the run of October 18, 1831, “met at the Reverend Archdeacon Butler's farm.” So Dr Butler was at least supportive of outdoor sport, and may have had an initiatory role.

Perhaps he simply saw the advantages in terms of health, as the school was still on its old town site, with ancient cramped accommodation and serious hygiene problems – infested with noisy rats, according to a schoolboy letter of Samuel Butler's.

By 1839, the contentious House clubs or hunts had merged into a single club, “the Royal Shrewsbury School Hunt.” The first of the surviving school Hound Books covers October 1842, but refers to “the last three seasons,” suggesting a date of 1839 for the merger into the School club.

Literary research is not always this much fun. The Hound Book reports of the runs are detailed, spirited, and sometimes very funny.

This is how the first entry begins. (This is the earliest known document of the sport of cross-country.)

Journal of the Hunts

Saturday Oct. 16th 1831

"Met at Mr Tuck's Park Inn, Drayton Road; after drawing a cover near the Severn, a fox was found in the Gorse which, breaking cover in gallant style, crossed the Canal, and thence bearing towards Sundorne, was headed and turned toward Battlesfield, went round the church, crossed the country towards the Chester Road, Driver taking the lead until we came to Sundorne Wood, where, on account of the thickness of the cover, he was lost for some time and the lead taken by Trojan until we came to the Fox Hotel Atherton kept by Mr Brown, where the gentlemen refreshed themselves with a hearty glass of ale."

A bonus of this research was confirming that at these very beginnings of organized running, there is already evidence of the three great motivating passions of all true cross-country runners – running, beer, and trespassing.

Like most runners, the Hounds were independent, maverick, even rebellious, and enjoyed a vigorous social life. They liked to "refresh themselves" during runs. They paused to "imbibe punch at the farm of N. Lloyd Esq.," they "washed the hounds mouths out with some beer" (the hounds were the younger boys) and they "regaled our pack with punch &c." During the run called "The Long," they drank beer and sherry at the inn at Atcham. On special occasions they took full meals ("were regaled with a substantial repast"), often at "Mother Wade's."

And then they ran on. After refreshing themselves with ale that day in 1831, they sighted the fox again, and "After running him a mile in full cry he was at length killed by Lawless...The hunt lasted for an hour & twenty minutes without a check. The run was decidedly about 10 miles. Brush got by the whip Bill Hebson."

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The runs took place twice a week from September to the Christmas holidays, usually Saturdays and Tuesdays. They varied between four and ten miles, though "the Long" could be 14 miles. Often they crossed difficult country. "Fencing" (vaulting fences or gates) is much admired. In a Shropshire autumn, the country was often wet and heavy. October 25th, 1851 is typical:

"The run was very heavy, owing to the wetness of the long grass and turnips."

Hazards are recorded with relish, like a "snarling dog" encountered on September 25th, 1852:

"which however we sent back to his owner with more than he bargained for...and followed the scent at a merry pace towards Berwick Brook, enountering on the way one or two very stiff fences."

Two runners called "foxes" (at Rugby and elsewhere they were "hares") ran ahead laying a "scent" of shredded paper, which they carried in "scent bags." . After "law", an interval of about five to ten minutes, the "pack" was "coupled up" and "threw off" after the scent. From time to time an "all-up" was called, to regroup the stragglers. The runners were divided into "Gentlemen of the runs" or

“gentlemen subscribers,” the older boys, and “Hounds,” the juniors. The hounds all ran under hound-like names, like Challenger, Trojan, Traveller, Driver, or Merlin. The club captain was the “Huntsman,” who carried a horn, assisted by two “Whippers-in,” or “Whips,” carrying whips, who disciplined the pack of hounds There were “checks” (a lost trail, or a false trail), a “view halloa” when the foxes were sighted, and then the “run in,” with the fastest getting the honor of “the kill.” At that point the collaborative hunting exercise turned into a competitive race. There was a rule that “No gentleman may 'ride over hounds' to win, or make the kill. But it was obviously genuinely competitive, as most of the reports include a result, for instance “Palmer 1st, Challenger 2nd, Wildfire 3rd,” for October 25th, 1851.

After “the run-in,” and “the kill,” someone was awarded “the brush.” I prefer not to know what that meant.

Some of this is still part of modern running.

Cross-country was originally called “paper-chasing,” and many courses followed trails of paper, until well into the 20th century. Hash House Harriers preserve the old game, these days following a scent of flour. Groups of runners are still called a “pack” (like the original pack of hounds), the ones in front are “leaders,” those who get dropped are “back of the pack” or “stragglers,” and all cross-country runners are “harriers,” which means “hare-hunters.” The cross-over is clear in the names of the earliest running clubs, names like Thames Hare & Hounds, Cheshire Tally-ho!, Blackheath Harriers, and Essex Beagles.

One term that has shifted semantically in our era is the “run-in.” For them, it was the final mile or so when the foxes were sighted and the run became a race. For us, you can have a run-in with your neighbours, originally derived perhaps from the pack of hounds scrapping over the fox. The Shrewsbury spring cross-country race, the “Steeplechase,” also survives, in the sanitised and over-regulated version in modern track athletics and the Olympic Games. Originally of course it was a horseback race across country from village church to village church, steeple to steeple. The first two runs of Thames Hare and Hounds were called Steeplechases.

I mentioned trespassing as well as beer. They did a lot of it. Relations with local farmers, and often with the school authorities, were less than harmonious. At some farms they were served refreshments, but at others the Hound Books record “altercations,” “threats,” and “burning execrations.” They bore no grudges. After one “infuriated” old man threatened “a summunds” against them, “Saying good for the old fellow we struck into the lane.”

I got engrossed in the Hound Books. In imagination I ran with those long-dead schoolboys, sharing their enjoyment of hard running over varied country. I also realized that I held in my hands absolutely authentic documentation of the very early history of modern sport, my sport in particular. In these stained and yellow pages, some describing runs that took place before the reign of Queen Victoria, lie the origins of the English National, the World Cross-Country Championships, and all the international off-road sports we call cross-country, trail running, mountain running, mud running, park runs, or harriers; the very first seeds you could say of the London and New York Marathons, and the huge social phenomenon that is modern running.

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So I wanted to join them.

Each week their hunts used to go in an agreed direction, more or less following a known course, although the foxes who laid the scent had to provide variety and challenge. Over the years these runs acquired names. I did my best that week to run The Bog, The Drayton, The Tucks and The Long (all fourteen miles of it). Often I was turned back by urban sprawl, screaming highways, and ever-burgeoning Sainsburys, but I managed to trace some routes and located landmarks familiar from the Hound Books - the mighty Severn River and little grass-clogged Berwick Brook, Coton Hill and Sundorne Farm (still there in the 1990s, squeezed next to a giant retail park), Battlefield (where King Henry IV retained his title in 1403) and the tiny communities of Hencott and Atcham.

In a car you would call this country rolling, but for a runner it is hard hilly going. I scratched my shins on stubble and plodded across what the Hound Books often call "heavy ploughed land." I ran across folds and gulleys, even the natural bowls where cold water lurked. I could not, in my mid-fifties, match the boy runners' eagerness for "good leaps" and "stiff fences." I wriggled inelegantly through the thick thorn hedges that they crossed by a technique known as "belly-hedging." Nor could I "run in" on the narrow lanes as freely as they did, being pressed against the hedgerow every few seconds by the whang of some frenzied car.

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So where does Samuel Butler fit into this precursive history of running?

For my literary Butler research, the official reason for visiting Shrewsbury, I didn't honestly expect to find much that was new. Butler's biographers, as I said, have never tried to add to his own full narrative, accepting that he was, as the novel tells us, "listless and unhappy," "no greater lover of his school work than of the games."

But the Hounds and my runs in their footsteps showed a different schoolboy Butler. One day I followed the Hounds to Hencott Pool, where they made their "kill" on November 3, 1851; and where a year later (September 25, 1852) they met the "check" of the "snarling dog" which we have already sent off with more than he bargained for.

I draw my examples from that era because that was when Sam Butler was one of the runners. In his first two years he was a "hound," and as he became senior he graduated to "gentleman." Then, I found, he became a frequent choice as "fox." That was a surprise. Being fox is a role that requires initiative, resourcefulness, and excellent local knowledge, as well as running ability. The other boys, or the Huntsman and Whips, would choose foxes who they could trust to be both reliable and inventive, leading them over a challenging and innovative route while keeping to the main outline of the week's course, and one that would provide a good clear "run-in" at the end. The secretary is critical, for instance, of the foxes (not Butler) who one day led a run that didn't have enough "leaps." Being fox was a skilled pioneering job.

A young Sam who was that competent and that trusted is not the listless, unpopular nerdy teenager of his own versions – "a young muff, a mollycoddle," he calls himself in the novel, "a mere bag of

bones with...no strength or stamina whatever." The later passage about running after Ellen sits rather inconsistently with that. The facts are that as a regular choice as fox, he had to design the course, lay false trails, and stay ahead of the eager pack until they'd had a good run, all the time carrying the heavy scent bag and dropping the paper.

Then I found an episode that even more vividly reveals this new Butler, the inventive fox, the lively leader. The Hound Book entry for November 3, 1852, a month before Butler's 17th birthday, says that he was one of the two foxes for a run that followed days of heavy rain. Reaching a field on the way to Hencott that was covered by a sheet of shallow water, the foxes mischievously laid the paper trail so that it seemed to go directly across the low-lying field, towards the hill on the other side. In fact, in the middle of the field, concealed beneath the apparently shallow flood, lay what the Hound Book calls "a treacherous drain," a ditch about three or four feet deep. It was invisible beneath the sheet of water covering the whole field. Seeing the paper "scent" go on up the hillside opposite, and perhaps taunted by a glimpse of the foxes themselves, the runners splashed through the innocently shallow water, until they reached the unseen deeper ditch. Where they all fell in.

The Hound Book reports, "both hounds and gentlemen, some head first, some tail were one after the other seen to disappear in the water; this however only cooled our legs without cooling our ardour, and we went along at a brisk pace up the fields towards Hencott."

It's a moment that reveals a competent, humorous, and self-confident Butler, accepted as one of the peer-group, roguishly inventive. That's a Butler who could go on to write Erewhon, and become an intrepid explorer in some of the world's most treacherous mountains. The listless and neurotically bookish young Butler of his own creation is hard to reconcile with those things.

Finding that field and its treacherous ditch became the last objective of my scholarly literary research.

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It took another visit, two or three years later. I went back to Hencott where the pack ran "at a brisk pace" after Butler gave them the ducking, and searched for hours through faceless 1950s housing developments to find the route they had taken into the open country. No trace. Most likely it was all buried under the suburbs and supermarkets.

And after all, I was only looking for a field. It hardly mattered. On my last morning, when I needed to drive south ready for my flight to New Zealand next day, I made one last attempt, looking once more for a footpath I'd found marked on an old map.

After more "checks," (as the Hounds would have said) I found a promising narrow lane between Coton Hill and the railway. That line, I'd established, was built later than 1852, so the barrier it presented to me would not have existed when Butler ran. I jogged up the lane hopefully, but it led only to an opulent white house. The scent had died.

Walking disconsolately back to the car, I suddenly saw a tiny foot-track I'd missed on the way up, twisting steeply down through long grass. It was almost overgrown. Pushing through weeds and

undergrowth, I scrambled quite a way down. And there, at the bottom of the hill, I found it. Here was a low-lying field between two hills, clumped with marsh-grass, with the remnant of a dark green ditch running straight across it. Soggy now in September, it would be flooded after the November rains.

Real biographers would sneer at all the trouble I'd taken to find an obscure and boggy bit of England. But I felt as if I had made contact. I even took some incompetent photos.

On that last picture, that's the hill towards Hencott, and I like to think Sam Butler and his fellow fox lay there out of sight, mischievously watching all the runners stumble and splash into the flooded ditch. I jogged a short way in their footsteps up the hill, a small tribute to this tiny dot in the history of running and the true life of the young Samuel Butler.

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But that's not the end of our run today.

There was one more source of undiscovered treasure – treasure for the history of running and the life of Samuel Butler. A popular teacher, who taught maths at the school from 1840 to 1855, Mr A.T. Paget, used to provide some home hospitality for senior boys, tea and crumpets and conversation, and he shared a lot of their school interests. He kept a Scrapbook of trivia and memorabilia of school life. It survives in the library. Glued on some pages are race-cards for what look like horse-race meets, the Annual Steeplechase and the Second Spring Meeting. They are lists of owners, horses and jockeys, a single list for the Steeplechase, several for different events in the Second Spring Meeting. The entries are listed with owner first, then a contraction for the horse, then the name, and in italics the rider.

So, “Mr Pott's bk h [black horse] Family Herald - *Butler*”
or “Mr Butler's b c [brown colt?] Marionette - *George*”
or on another occasion, “Mr Clarke's bk h Vesuvius - *Butler*”

In fact, these are the runners, in the annual cross-country championship, the Steeplechase, and the the annual track and field athletics meeting. The supposed jockey is the runner, given a horselike name, and entered by an owner who is usually a senior boy or staff member, and who paid some kind of small entry fee. On that last one, when Butler ran as Vesuvius, there's a note that says, “For Horses of all ages. The Winner to pay towards expenses. The Second Horse to save his stake. Three times round and the distance.”

Very briefly, the first reference to the Shrewsbury Steeplechase, the cross-country championship, is in 1834. After a gap, there are continuous records, in Paget's Notebook and elsewhere, from 1845 on. That makes it the earliest known organized cross-country race, unless you count the fell runs at Highand Games. Certainly it's the earliest still existing. It's true that the running footmen of the 17th and 18th centuries raced on Newmarket or Epsom downs, as well as Hyde Park and London's roads, but those were still match races over a set distance, more like our road races in concept, not true cross-country with rough ground, plough, fences and streams.

Rugby's “The Crick,” generally cited as the earliest cross-country race, dates from 1838, four years later than Shrewsbury's first recorded “Steeplechase.” By later in the century, most public schools held steeplechases or cross-country championships. Lord Alfred Douglas wrote a fine essay called “Winning the Steeplechase at Winchester,” in which the first sentence is “The happiest day of my life was the day I won the school steeplechase.” (That was in 1887.) Douglas also revealed that when a bout of flu prevented him from defending his title in his final year, “I do not think I ever suffered more in my mind than I did then” - an extraordinary statement from a man who was so reviled for his involvement with Oscar Wilde. Thackeray in *The Virginians* refers to prizes at “hare and hounds” at Harrow. But so far as I have established, Shrewsbury's was the earliest; or the earliest for which documentation survives.

The Second Spring Meeting, these days School Sports, is also, I believe, the oldest still-existing annual athletics meeting. Modelled on horse racing, with Stewards and Clerks of the Course, it included (taking the 1854 programme) The Derby Stakes (about one mile), The Hurdle Race, the Trial Stakes (for horses under 5ft 4in), and the Two-Year-Old Stakes (for juniors). There were also “throwing the cricket ball,” “high leap,” “distance leap,” “sack race,” and “match,” which seems to have been a two-man head-to-head sprint. So it was a pretty full track and field meeting, derived from two of the three source rivers of modern athletics - rural sports and horse-racing. The third source, ancient Greek games, would be added a little later in the century, completing the strange mélange of our modern sport.

So in cross-country, Shrewsbury probably pre-dated Rugby and had the first documented true race; and in athletics, it certainly predated Exeter College, Oxford (usually cited as the earliest) in founding a meeting that still exists.

In Paget's Notebook I also found what is, I believe, the earliest illustration of the competitive sport of cross-country running. The artist – unmistakeably from other sketches in Paget's Notebook - was Samuel Butler.

One more source of information was concealed in the race-cards. In the autumn fox and hounds season, the canine names allocated to the younger boys, “Trojan,” “Driver,” and so on, were passed on from generation to generation. But the horses' names for the Steeplechase and Second Spring Meeting were concocted specially for each occasion. And these were teenage boys with a classical and literary education. After a while it dawned on me that the horse names might be significant. Then I realized they were often satirical. There was “Adonis”, “The Wild 'Un,” “Plate-licker,” “Oliver Twist,” “Bon Mot,” “All Ale,” “Toothpick,” and “Everlasting Pea,” spelt Pea but probably a disturber of the night-time peace in the dormitory; and “Bog-trotter.” Butler's burly pugnacious brother Tom on one occasion was named “Dominie Samson.”

Some of the names made me suspect that teenage humour and teenage testosterone were about as active in the early years of Queen Victoria as at any other date. Boys were given the names “Heart-breaker,” “Miss Prettyman,” “The Perfumer,” “Smut Fancier,” “Frog's Spawn,” “The Beaver Hunter,” and there were two adjacent runners given the names “Romeo” and “Juliet.”

So what did his peers call Samuel Butler? Suddenly we have access to a set of absolutely authentic personal judgments – close-up and unfiltered.

“Mr Warren's bk h Conservatory – Butler” seems innocent enough.

“Vesuvius”? Well, put it together with “Everlasting Chimney” for another race and it suggests Butler already had his lifelong smoking habit that may have contributed to his death at 66 from probably lung cancer. Or perhaps he was given to eruptions of bad temper.

Other names he was given are more surprising, and revealing. The writer who drew much of his satiric energy from denigrating and rejecting his family was at age 15 given the name “Family Herald.” Even more revealingly, in another race he ran as “Tails of my Grandfather.” It seems the teenage Sam was given to boasting or at least talking about his distinguished grandfather Dr Samuel Butler, maybe even his father, who had also been a distinguished Shrewsbury scholar. For the great deconstructer of Victorian patriarchy, for the writer who scathingly denigrated his parents and sisters and made fictional capital from rejecting them, for the mocking artist of “Family Prayers,” for the emotionally scarred son who described his father as his greatest lifelong enemy, that's unexpected, to put it mildly. “Family Herald” is in total conflict with his own version of his youthful character and the way he branded himself as a writer.

On other occasions he was given names that are even less flattering - “Penny Trumpet,” and “Backbiter.” Both are psychologically credible if you look at the whole of Butler's career and work. There is a streak in his writing of a kind of repressed boastfulness, a penny trumpet quality in his self-promotion in the fields of evolution, and Homeric and Shakespearean scholarship. And there's certainly a streak of resentment, an element of paranoia. Backbiter? He spent a lot of energy later in life backbiting Charles Darwin. Debate for Butler too readily turns to spite. It's not a totally defining characteristic, but it's part of the whole of an honest appraisal of him, and it's worth knowing how early it was recognised by his school friends.

The entry forms for schoolboy running events are an unusual source for literary biography, but absolutely authentic. Suddenly we can see how the young Butler was seen at the time by his peers, with absolutely no intervention by any biographer or by the subject himself. These are also judgments that have the truthfulness of being written in an almost secret code, an insider language for the initiated. If the school authorities saw the joke, they didn't intervene. In the 1880s, when the horse names had become more obviously uncomplimentary and ribald, the practice was discontinued.

But St John's, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and Rebecca won't be pleased if I leave Samuel Butler as a chain-smoking, boastful backbiter, distinguished only for leading his friends into deep water.

So now, for my conclusion – belatedly but with demonic thunder - enter the villain of my story.

A personal confession. You need to know that when I started as an 11-plus scholarship boy at a London public school, I was suddenly plunged into algebra, French and Latin, with classmates who had been doing them for two years and a French and Latin master who was much too dottily brainy to conceive how ignorant and lost I was. I fell victim to severe child abuse, inflicted by a book called *Kennedy's Latin Primer*. It had a dull green cover, and it tormented and humiliated me by listing all the different forms taken by the Latin word for table, and whole pages of forms for the

verb to love. Terms like dative, pluperfect, and subjunctive were unrelieved cruelty. *Kennedy's Latin Primer* was my equivalent of Dickens's blacking factory, or Butler getting thrashed at age 3 for not being able to pronounce his c's. It scarred me for life.

This early trauma rose into my consciousness again when I discovered that the Shrewsbury Headmaster in Butler's day was the eminent classicist, Dr Benjamin Kennedy, head from 1836 to 1867. A fussy despot, Kennedy didn't share his predecessor Dr Butler's appreciation of the value of sports. It's ironic that the new boys' run is now named after him, the "Benjy." He detested the Hounds. Receiving complaints about their trespassing, Kennedy tried to make restrictive rules about where the boys were allowed to run. The Hound Book merely comments "as stolen fruit is always the sweetest, we determined to...revive the good old custom of running out of bounds." In defiance of the new restrictions, they vaulted hedges, enraged an irascible miller, faced off with farmers, chased off their dogs, visited Mother Wade's for illicit beer, and ran often wide-eyed down the secluded road which the school's official history calls "Lovers Lane," but the Hound Book more forthrightly calls "Fornicators Lane."

Kennedy tried making them wear mortar-boards as they ran. He locked their dormitories to catch them coming in. He once stood out in the cold to take the names of those breaking bounds. They whooped by in triumphant defiance on the other side of the hedge. His most lethal strike was when, as they reported, "Ben nabbed the scent bag." The scent bag was their icon. Its theft had to be avenged. With an eloquent gesture of reprisal, they ripped up copies of the Latin textbook the Headmaster had recently published - *Kennedy's Latin Primer* - and dropped the shredded pages as paper trail around the muddy Shropshire countryside. "Frantic but fruitless" was how they described his efforts to control them.

Now you know why I have taken the Shrewsbury Hounds to my heart, They ripped up *Kennedy's Latin Primer*. They used it as paper trail. They dropped it in wet grass and across fields of sodden plough. A dark psychic cloud was lifted when I read those entries in the Hound Book.

Right in the middle of this warfare against the Satanic foe – my Satanic foe, anyway - at a time when the Hounds' membership was high and rebelliousness rampant, and the enemy at his most draconian, was the lad who later belittled himself as "a young muff, a mollycoddle," "listless and unhappy," totally cowed, according to the novel, by the Headmaster Dr Skinner. At the height of the conflict, his final year, 1854, Sam Butler was elected Huntsman. He was chosen by the members of a vigorous and fearlessly maverick organisation as their leader in difficult times.

Sadly, we don't have an ensuing narrative, because Butler in fact missed most of the autumn term, not because of illness as the Hound Book says, but because by a last-minute decision he went with his family on an extended tour of Italy. He returned in time to fulfil his duties as Huntsman in "fixing the ground" and being in effect race director for the "Steeplechase" in March, and then meeting manager for the "Second Spring Meeting" in May. He didn't run in the Steeplechase, he wrote to his mother, because he was "not at all in condition." For the athletics, his duties as Huntsman stopped him running. "The stewards are not expected to run as they have the pacing of the ground and the height of the hurdles," he wrote to his sister.

So Butler ended as race director of an early version of the world's first modern cross-country race,

and as meeting manager of the earliest still-existing athletics meeting. He also, as we have seen, drew the earliest pictorial image of cross-country racing. His running and the documents in which it can be traced reveal him as a strong runner, lively, inventive, mischievous, respected by his peers, while they also mocked his smoking and his boasting.

Why did he suppress all this? Why did he propagate a version of his schooldays that omits so much memorable activity, personal success, and peer esteem? Why does he refer to the Hounds, even in the passage in *The Way of All Flesh* where Ernest runs after Ellen, merely as "an amusement?" Clearly it was more important to him than that.

To put it as simply as I can, he needed Ernest in the novel to succeed despite his family and his repressive education, just as Butler believed he had to shake off his own origins (or evolve from them) to succeed. His own symbolic day was when he sailed for New Zealand. *The Way of All Flesh* does not send Ernest to New Zealand, but the scene where Ernest rejects his parents as he is released from prison is carefully dated September 30th, 1859 – the date Butler sailed from England. It's typical of this evasive ironist that the key event of his life is so precisely acknowledged in a book that doesn't mention it.

He needed to present himself as having evolved into a strong independent organism by conscious personal effort, overcoming repression and enmity, proving his own (in the Darwinian sense) fitness, succeeding intellectually, as a heavyweight thinker on religion and evolution, and as a self-confident urbane man of letters, not as one who benefitted from distinguished antecedents or achieved success as a runner or a sheepfarmer. It wouldn't have suited his fictional purpose or his autobiographic re-imaging of himself to admit that he had been a feisty and foxy teenager.

The invented self-narrative is also consistent with the temperamental ironic elusiveness that made him, during his time in New Zealand, publish anonymously a scathing review of his own first book, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement.* The listless unpopular wimp is ironic camouflage, like the naïvely Christian and imperialist narrator of "Erewhon." My running Butler, Butler the hound, Butler the fox, Butler the Huntsman, is the one could go on to be a winning cox with the Lady Margaret Boat Club, discover what is now the Whitcombe Pass in fearful alpine terrain at over 4000ft/1300m, make money as an energetic and settler sheep farmer, spend long holidays covering prodigious distances in mountainous country in Switzerland, northern Italy and Sicily, walk hundreds of miles in the countryside around London on his twice-weekly excursions, write a book that stands with *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* as one of the great triumvirate of iconoclastic ironic imagined-world fictions, and become one of the most innovative authors and most energetic minds of his time.

And the key to all this was a soggy ditch, and an illicit and shameful hidden life as a runner.

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