

THE DAYS OF YORE

“Late Developer”

From **The Days of Yore Website**
Administered by **Astri von Ahlander**

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*In 1972, Scammell founded *Index on Censorship*, for which he served as editor until 1981. He received his B.A. from Nottingham University and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, where he now teaches nonfiction writing.*

What did you want to be when you grew up?

A soccer player.

Why?

I grew up in working class England, and sport seemed the obvious route to fame and riches. My father was a good amateur soccer player and we kids spent all of our waking hours playing soccer, listening to soccer on the radio, and occasionally getting taken to a professional game on a Saturday. But in high school I realized I was one of the smallest people on the pitch, so that faded.

Once the soccer dream faded, where did you set your sights?

I really had no idea. I got to a good high school through pure chance – one of only two from our village in my year – and found myself in a place where they studied Latin, French, German, math, history, geography – a full range of academic subjects – and it turned out I was good at nearly all of them.

But I paid a price. My school was an hour away, students who went there were considered to be “stuck up snobs” by the boys in the village. I was cut off from my friends and no longer understood by even my father, a plumber, or my mother, a former chambermaid – though they were very proud of me. I guess it was the start of what would now be called alienation.

What did you do after you graduated high school?

The only thing I had to cling to was something my English teacher said to me in exasperation one day. “Scammell you’re too facile with your words. Have you ever thought of trying journalism?” I hadn’t the slightest idea what I would do after leaving school at the age of 16 – which was the norm in those days – so, I thought, why not? I sent out about forty letters to every single newspaper within a radius of sixty miles whose names I found in a press directory and got one offer back: to work as a copy boy, that is, messenger boy, at a daily paper in nearby Southampton. But I was warned I wouldn’t be allowed to write a word for the newspaper, and so it turned out, with the exception of about six brief items in a gossip column.

How long did you do that job?

Two years. Luckily I was befriended by the paper’s theatre critic, who asked me to babysit for his children and invited me to stay over at his apartment because I lived too far away to get home. I had the run of his bookshelves and it was like Aladdin’s cave to me. For my birthday he gave me *Candide* by Voltaire. He introduced me to the writers known as the “Angry Young Men” – Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, Philip Larkin, and so on. He also lent me books by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Forster, Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, and took me to the theater, so that was the beginning of my real education, I would say.

Did all this reading make you think that perhaps you wanted to write books as well?

I began to think about it, but at the age of eighteen I was drafted into the army, which I considered a disaster at the time, since for most people it was a complete waste of two years, a dead end.

But your two years in the army weren’t at all wasted, I gather.

No, quite the opposite. It was another astonishingly lucky break. I was crazy about motorcycles at the time, and I found out that if you wanted to ride a bike in the army you had to join the Intelligence Corps – don’t ask. It all had to do with something called Field Security. At various interviews I was asked if I would be prepared to learn Russian. No way, I said, the first couple of times, but the third time I said I would if that was the only way to get into the Intelligence Corps.

So you could ride a motorcycle!

Yes! And believe it or not, I was transferred to the Intelligence Corps and I was put on the Field Security Course with a vision of ending up on a motorcycle. But one day a notice went up on the announcements board: “The following people are being transferred to the Joint Services School for Linguists”- a military school for studying Russian – and my name was on it. I complained to the Adjutant, but the army doesn’t listen to stuff like that. So, I was sent to study Russian.

And that changed everything?

Yes. After a few months of intensive preparation we were sent to study at Cambridge University for one out of our two years of service, though we lived separately from the regular students and had classes all day long. But in approximately a year and a half we went from knowing not a word of Russian to being completely fluent, and I went from being a hick to semi-educated.

I was surrounded by high flyers. One fellow on my course was teaching himself Sanskrit on the side, another was reading Proust in French. I later found out that writers like Alan Bennett, Michael Frayn, and D.S. Thomas had taken these courses too. Everyone seemed headed to Oxford or Cambridge or London universities. I didn’t have the qualifications to go myself, so I studied on my own and ended up at Nottingham University.

Being fluent in Russian is one thing. But when did Russian literature enter the picture?

Well, that was the amazing thing about the army course—Frayn and Thomas have written a bit about it themselves, and a whole book on it also came out recently. We read Pushkin and Lermontov, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Chekhov. We got to publish our own newspaper and put on plays in Russia. I mean, poetry in the army, it was crazy!

I imagine that probably doesn’t happen in the American army...

I suspect not. It was a very British and very eccentric project, and for me it became another step in my real education. In fact, I can say I owe almost everything to the army. I got a first class degree (the equivalent of summa cum laude) in Russian. I wrote for and then edited the student newspaper, winning a national prize along the way, and that’s when I truly began to think about being at least a journalist, if not a real writer.

What did you do when you graduated from the University of Nottingham?

Well, innocent fool that I was, I had no job to go to, no idea what to do, no one, really, to advise me – unless I wanted to line up for interviews for jobs in business and industry. Luckily, one of my professors mentioned the possibility of a job to teach English in the former Yugoslavia – in Slovenia in the far north of the country. I jumped at it, having studied Serbo-Croatian as a minor at Nottingham, only to learn that the Slovenians spoke their own language – Slovene, which was even more difficult than the already difficult Serbo-Croatian.

Slovenia, like the rest of Yugoslavia, was governed by a stiflingly orthodox, communist dictatorship. I was shadowed almost everywhere I went, and virtually no one would speak to me outside the classroom, because they were afraid, so it was a miserable time in my life.

I had applied for a Fulbright to come to the USA, for the banal reason that I had met and fallen in love with a young American grad student at Nottingham. You see how well directed this career was? How totally clear I was on where I was going? [laughs] I didn't get the Fulbright the first year, but I did get it the second year and I came to Columbia, to graduate school, to study – what else? – Russian literature.

And what about the writing, were you making progress?

I had begun writing in university, for the school literary journal as well as the newspaper, and I really wanted to write novels. My two idols were D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce...two very easy people to emulate [laughs]. I filled many long hours in Slovenia trying to write a novel, a sort of Joycean pastiche set in Ljubljana, where I was living, but it was a mess.

I now think I don't have enough imagination to write novels, but at the time I was just baffled, so, I did what one does in such a situation, I moved sideways. One day in the Russian department office at Columbia I overheard two professors discussing a book by an author named Konstantin Fedin, an early Soviet Modernist writer from the nineteen twenties. It was Fedin's first book, *Cities and Years*, whose first part was very experimental, and I had loved it when I studied it in university. I had translated a part of it for fun – translating was a sort of hobby of mine – so when I heard one of the professors say he had recommended the book for publication, I jumped in and said, "Have they got a translator?" Long story short, he gave me the editor's name and address. I sent him a sample, and at the end of my first year at Columbia, I got a contract to translate it, with what seemed like a handsome advance to a graduate student.

I went off to California— where else? — in search of the Beatniks, but they were mostly gone by 1960, when I arrived there, though minor members of the group occasionally turned up at Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore to give a reading. I rented a room in Sausalito, one of their former hangouts, just outside San Francisco, and translated most of the novel over the summer vacation. That became my first publication.

Wow! What next?

Well, in the meantime I had had another unbelievable piece of luck. Back in New York I had rented a room with a Russian émigré lady, Miss Anna Feigin, on West 104th Street, just off Broadway. She was very nice, but kept to herself, and I also kept to myself. I still knew very few people in New York. The relationship with my girlfriend hadn't worked out and she had moved to Washington, so I was pretty lonely, and I made up for it by working like hell.

One day in the spring of 1960 Miss Feigin asked if I could have tea with her the following Saturday afternoon. So on Saturday I turned up for tea, and when I entered the room, a tall, balding, middle-aged gentleman stood up to greet me, along with his beautiful, elegant wife and an even taller younger man who was obviously his son. “I’d like you to meet Mr. Vladimir Nabokov, Mrs. Vera Nabokov, and their son Dmitri,” said my landlady. So we all sat politely having tea and chatting amiably in a mixture of Russian and English. They asked me about my interest in translation and I told them about *Cities and Years*— which didn’t seem to impress Nabokov at all — and that seemed to be that. Nabokov was on his way to Utah to go butterfly hunting and then to Hollywood to write the screenplay for *Lolita*.

A couple of weeks later I had gotten a letter from Vera in Utah, saying, “My husband was very interested to know that you translate, would you send him a sample?” I sent him a Chekov story I had translated. Vera then asked me to translate three pages from Nabokov’s Russian novel, *The Gift*, and the next thing I knew, I got a letter from California saying, “My husband was very impressed with your translation, would you care to translate his novel?”

For some reason I wasn’t excited. I hadn’t been a big fan of *Lolita* — which I had read on the thirty-six-hour train ride from London to Ljubljana — and by now I sort of expected it. But I said yes, of course, and after working on the Fedin all summer, bought my first car and drove down to Los Angeles to meet with Nabokov and sign a contract.

Tell me about translating Nabokov.

I spent the following summer (and most of the fall) translating four out of the five chapters of the **The Gift** (chapter one had been translated by Dmitri), and found them both easy and difficult. They were easy in one way because Nabokov’s syntax was very western, heavily influenced by the French and English he had learned as a child. On the other hand his vocabulary was fiendishly erudite and difficult. He had started out as a poet and it told in his language, which was highly allusive and often symbolic.

But I must have done all right, because I was then asked to do another novel, *The Defense*. So without in the least intending it, I was launched as a translator, if not as a novelist, and not long after that I translated *Crime and Punishment*, by Dostoevsky, and *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, by Tolstoy.

No small fish to fry! As a translator, I often get frustrated when people ask me, “If the writer speaks English, why doesn’t he just translate the book himself?” I try to explain that being able to speak a language is very different from being able to write in that language. But, in the case of Nabokov, he wrote in English as well as Russian. Why didn’t he translate the books himself?

I asked him the same question. He said that before the colossal success of *Lolita* he had been unable to interest American publishers in his earlier Russian novels, but now that

Lolita was a bestseller, they were clamoring for them. And I think it was Vera who told me in one of her letters that he wanted to save his time to write more books in English. That is why he wanted someone else to translate them. But of course he then went over the translations very carefully and sometimes rewrote whole passages. So he got a rare opportunity to correct and improve his younger self.

What was the living like when you were a graduate student in New York?

I mainly lived off things I bought at the deli, I expect. My big luxury was a half-roasted chicken— that would keep me going for about four days. The fellowship I had in those days was 2,700 dollars for a year. Out of that I rented my room, fed myself, and went as often as I could to the theater and jazz clubs. Translation was my lifesaver. It paid for me to go to California, to buy a used car, to go back to Europe the following summer, and so on.

What is the relationship between your translation work and your own writing— does one feed the other?

Well, it was supposed to do that, but in some ways it didn't help. Great writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nabokov, are too good, the climb to their level is too steep, so that trying to emulate them – and failing – had a negative effect on me. What I tell young writers now is, don't read exclusively the classics or other great writers, or rather, read them to know what they're doing, what the best standards are, but also read lesser ones, because I found it very discouraging to fall so short of where I wished to be.

I'd never heard of MFA programs, and I don't think many existed at that time, but I would have loved to have someone sit down with me and tell me what I was doing right and wrong. I really floundered, I didn't know what I was doing.

But you were doing things.

I was still trying to write novels and short stories – very bad ones.

Did you have a sense by then that “writer” is what you wanted to be?

Yes.

Did you have a sense of what that would mean?

[laughs] No! Not really.

After New York you moved back to England.

Yes, I moved back to England with a young German woman I'd married and a baby daughter, but with no job or prospects, except a contract for another translation. I took another sidestep by starting to write reviews for journals and newspapers and I made

money off that too, but I didn't realize what a dangerous business reviewing can be. It's easy and quick to do, puts your name up in lights, and brings in a little publicity and money, but looking back you realize you've been frittering your time away. There are all these wonderful books, real books, that you've been enjoying and writing about, and all you have to show for it are a string of ephemeral and instantly forgettable reviews.

What other work did you do besides reviewing?

I caved and got a regular job working for the BBC Overseas Services in London. I was a language supervisor, which meant I supervised the translations of the news and the current events into Russian, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, and Czech. I knew two of the languages well and the other three hardly at all — but that is how the BBC worked in those days and in fact it wasn't long before they abolished our positions and merged us with the regular broadcast services. I was assigned to the Bulgarian service and hated it.

But while at the BBC I started working with Soviet dissident writers. I was asked to translate the memoir of a writer named Anatoly Marchenko, who had been in the post-Stalin, post-Khrushchev labor camps and had horrendous stories to tell that the West barely knew about. The Soviet dissident movement was just getting off the ground and young writers had started by circulating their censored works in samizdat and after a while sending them abroad. So I left the BBC and started writing about these things for British newspapers and continuing to review and translate, but that money petered out too.

When I look back I wonder how we survived. We soon had two children, then three, then four (my friends joked that that's what happens to people who work at home). So, I was pretty desperate. But then I saw an advertisement for a new organization that was going to be set up which was in answer to an appeal from two Soviet dissidents, Pavel Litvinov and Larissa Bogoraz, asking Western intellectuals to set up some sort of organization to support the dissidents in the Soviet Union, but not only in the Soviet Union. It had to concern itself with political prisoners and repressed intellectuals in South America, parts of Europe, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, and in South Africa, China, and various other parts of the world.

That is where *Index on Censorship* comes from?

Yes. I got the job, with no mandate other than to start something. Our intellectual backers included big names, such as Stravinsky, Henry Moore, Stephen Spender, and so on, but there was very little money. I founded the literary-political magazine, *Index on Censorship* in 1972, first as a quarterly and eventually as a bi-monthly. And we had great success. I had good connections by now with Russian dissidents, Polish dissidents, Czech dissidents, and so on.

After a few years, we ended up distributing the *Chronicle of Current Events*, which was the best-known Russian dissident publication, as well as underground Czech and Polish journals. Through the BBC I also had good contacts and very easy ways of finding out

what was going on in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil after the military takeovers there. We had articles on Iran under the Shah, on Greece, Turkey, and so on, and we published lots of poems and prose from works that were censored in their home countries, but we never made any money, of course.

It was great fun, intellectually stimulating and morally rewarding, and what the experience taught me was that my interests lay not in literature alone, but at the confluence of literature and politics, a circumstance that drew me powerfully to the work of the dissident Russian novelist, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Spotting this interest, an editor with one of the publishers I had translated for asked me, “Why don’t you write a biography of Solzhenitsyn?”

Had you thought of writing biography before?

As I told you, I seem to back into everything I do. If ever I write a memoir, it’s going to be called “Late Developer” (which is what they called people like me at that high school I mentioned earlier.) It had never occurred to me before, but I thought, why not? I spent about four months trying to write the book, but very little was known about Solzhenitsyn’s life back then because he was in hiding. I think I wrote forty thousand words, and then I came back and said, “I can’t do it.” I am a very thorough person, and I felt I couldn’t pass this off as a biography.

But I didn’t forget it either. The scandal around Solzhenitsyn escalated sharply after the discovery of his secret manuscript of *The Gulag Archipelago* and his decision to publish it in the West. Out of the blue, his attorney in Switzerland contacted me and asked me to oversee the translation of volume one of *Gulag* into English.

Oversee the Solzhenitsyn translation, not do it?

No, it had already been completed by a former AP correspondent in Moscow, Thomas Whitney. But his Russian wasn’t all that great, nor was his style in English. I was horrified and marked it up all over the place, but the editor at Harper and Row said, “We can’t do this, it’s going to take too long.” So we had tremendous fights. I edited the whole damn thing, but it went out with about a quarter of my corrections, and that is how it appeared in English. It was terrible, but nobody seemed to notice.

But that wasn’t the last of Solzhenitsyn for you.

I returned to Europe and to *Index*, and shortly after that Solzhenitsyn was expelled. He moved to Zurich in Switzerland and rented an apartment there. I sent him a confidential publisher’s report I had written about a memoir by his first wife that had been doctored by the KGB. It was a longish analysis of what had been added and what taken away from a samizdat text I had seen, and he wrote back asking me to come and see him.

And you’re thinking, “I have forty thousands words of a biography that I want to write on you!”

That's right! I went to Zurich and told him about the *Gulag Archipelago* translation. I also said, "I would like to write your biography, will you cooperate?" He said, "I won't cooperate, but I won't stand in your way." A number of his relatives and friends had moved to this country [USA] and England, and in effect what it meant was that I could go and talk to them and he wouldn't order them not to speak with me. But he didn't have the time to cooperate. So I signed a contract with a publisher right away.

The Solzhenitsyn biography was your first big book project?

Yes. Biography actually turned out to be the perfect form for me. One way in which reviewing had been useful was that I was used to incorporating political and historical material as background, so that part presented few problems, while the "life" part brought up all those previous ambitions I'd had to write novels. I was sure I would have to employ novelistic devices to bring the book alive, so I resolved to collect as much material as I could and then dramatize it.

While collecting the material I followed my instincts, which led me to the British Museum Library and a captured German military map of the Caucasus in southern Russia, where I knew Solzhenitsyn had been born. There I found an exact location for the farm of Solzhenitsyn's grandfather in the North Caucasus, so I took some tracing paper (there were no photocopiers in those days) and sent Solzhenitsyn a copy. He was now living in Vermont and he now said I could visit him and he would answer questions. His wife later told me that when he got my letter and the map, he'd said, "What do you think Natalia? This young man is serious. We should help him."

Great! So you went to talk with Solzhenitsyn?

I met him in Vermont and every afternoon at about four-thirty, after his writing day was over, I would interview him over a couple of beers at a rustic picnic table outside his cabin. Each interview lasted about an hour, an hour and a half, and I was incredibly impressed by him. He had such charisma, such an air of concentrated attention. The way he looked into your eyes and the rapidity and clarity with which he talked were quite mesmerizing. I was totally bowled over, fascinated by him. It was all tape-recorded. I still have those recordings.

When you write a biography, you really have to live with your subject for a long period of time. Did you live differently with Solzhenitsyn and Koestler?

Yes, very much so. You see, to me Solzhenitsyn was a hero. I deeply admired him, I loved what he'd done, I loved his books and his writing. I totally identified with his struggle and the dissident struggle against the Soviet dictatorship. So, I very much enjoyed studying and re-living his life.

I should say, however, that this love and admiration don't extend to either the views or the books of his last period, after he moved to the West, or even after he returned to

Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. Not long after I interviewed him, for example, he gave his Harvard speech about the decadence of America, and I thought it was a disaster. I had briefly seen his life in Vermont. Apart from watching the TV news at night – mainly the British BBC – he didn't read American newspapers or journals, nor did he simply go into town once in a while to talk to the locals, and that was the beginning of a certain disillusionment with him – but not with his earlier life.

By the time I came to write a lot of that biography, I'd gotten a certain distance from him. I was sure that the charismatic and convincing Solzhenitsyn I'd met was genuine, but I realized it was only part of the story.

By the way, he later denounced me in one of his own memoirs. I feel sort of proud of that, it meant I hadn't stacked the cards too much and had preserved a modicum of balance.

How was “living” with Koestler— a very different type?

I was asked to do the Koestler biography by Koestler's literary executor after I had done the Solzhenitsyn one. I had advanced further on the path of becoming a quasi-novelist at that point, so for me he became above all a character in a book, a very complex character that I had to get right. The irony is that although I personally met and observed Solzhenitsyn, I hardly knew his private character at all, whereas although I never knew Koestler (though I had once met him very briefly at the end of his life), I had complete access to his papers and to dozens of people who had known him intimately.

Koestler was a man of contradictions, whose virtues and faults were writ large, and my obsession in that book was to get all his complexities down in such a way that they made sense, were believable, and as close to the truth as I could get, without distorting either the positive or the negative sides of his character.

To return to your life path, at this point were you supporting yourself completely on writing?

No, not ever. I finished the Solzhenitsyn book back in America with grants from Columbia University and the Ford Foundation, and a part time job working for George Soros on an exchange program with Eastern Europe. After it I signed a contract for a book on the emigration of dissident writers, artists, dancers and musicians to the West, but the advance was miserable and I was soon broke again.

Fortunately I was offered a temporary job teaching Russian Literature at Cornell which then turned into a permanent position, and that financed the first half of my work on Koestler. By now, with Solzhenitsyn under my belt, I felt like a different writer. I was more experienced, more sophisticated, but also more demanding of myself, which ended with family jokes about how long it was taking to write, which to my horror ended up at not far short of twenty years.

Why did the Koestler biography take so long to write?

Well, there are two reasons. The first is simply circumstantial. I was working all that time as a full time professor. True, I had sabbaticals and shorter leaves from time to time, but the majority of the work was done during the summer and winter vacations, and only to a very small extent during term time.

But I admit there's a personal dimension to this as well. I am very anal when it comes to research and facts. I mean, I accumulated a mountain of material about Koestler, far more than I shall ever use. The book you see now is only the tip of the iceberg, and even then the version I published is only 2/3 of what I wrote.

I was also able to give freer range to my imagination, because nearly all the principals were dead, while the living witnesses who told me their stories also felt free to spill all the beans. So I was able to be more expansive and felt I was at last living out Virginia Woolf's dictum, "A biographer is the novelist on oath."

When did you come to teach at Columbia?

I came in 1994 to work as a half-time professor of nonfiction writing and translation. The search committee asked me why I wanted to give up tenure, give up a full professorship [at Cornell], and accept a lower salary. I said, "The answer is in two words: New York." I love New York, I have always loved New York, and so I moved back and spent the next ten years finishing the Koestler book.

I can say, by the way, that I was definitely influenced in my writing by my experience in the writing program in the Columbia School of the Arts. In teaching, you learn almost as much as your students. I had never before had to formulate and articulate what writing was all about, had never had to analyze the rules of nonfiction so minutely. I also learned *from* my students. Every year I've been here, there have been students I admire, students to whom I don't mind saying, "You write better than I do." And I've also learned from the ones who are less successful, whose mistakes I can see better for having sometimes made them myself.

If you could formulate advice to fledgling writers out there, what would you say?

The obvious thing is to stay true to your vision of what it is you want to do. However bumbling and easily distracted I was, I never forgot that my ultimate goal was to write, and I really did keep writing all the time in one form or another. I think it's what sorts out the wheat from the chaff, that sort of persistence and obsession.

But as I've said, I was extremely lucky along the way, and I pose the question: what would have happened if those chance events had not happened when they did and the way they did? But then I remind myself that, as with that first translation, luck only took hold because the ground had been prepared. And Nabokov only asked me to work with him because I'd translated a whole novel – and a difficult one – already. And I was first

asked to write a biography of Solzhenitsyn because I'd written widely about the dissidents already. So I guess there's a mixture of luck and preparation.

I guess there's also one other thing aspiring writers should take to heart, and that is that most of us don't make a living from our trade, so you have to be very hard-working to achieve anything at all – and crazy, but that's a different story.

Interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander