Edited by Andrew Forge

The Townsend Journals

An artist’s record of his times I 928-— 5 I

Tate Gallery 1976

William Townsend 1909-1973

William Townsend died suddenly in Canada in the summer of 1973.
Besides a considerable body of painting, he left behind him a vast quantity
of twiting, most ofwhich had never been seen by anyone but himself.

An entry in one of his journals from the early ﬁfties records how, while
helping his parents move house, he had discovered boxes and boxes of old
papers and notebooks from his childhood. Even he is astonished at their
quantity and variety: illustrated descriptions of parish churches, notes on
the geology of East Kent, notes on place names, on comparative philology,
on Russian Grammar, on bird songs, painting—by—painting reviews of the
Royal Academy Summer Show. ‘What a diligent boy I was 5’ he cxclairns.
This diligent and omnivorous interest persisted remarkably, for the journal
in which the discovery is recorded was part of a daily record that he‘kept
with few interruptions from his school days until the end of his life. One
can only wonder at the selﬁdiscipline and the inner pressure which took
him to his desk night after night, whatever the exertions of the day, Whether
in the studio, or teaching or in a full social life. Some years ago he had
realised that this journal was beginning to assume an historic character. He
deposited the existing volumes in the Library of University College, London
with instructions that it was not to be made generally available until twenty
years after his death. At the same time he asked the present writer to be
responsible for a first reading and to make recommendations to Charlotte
Townsend, his daughter and heir, about publication from it. This was
made possible by a generous grant from the Leverhulrne Foundation.

In total the journal runs to nearly ﬁfty volumes of manuscript, mostly in
hard—covered notebooks of 8 X 5 in. There must be well over two-and-a-
half million words. The earliest entries tend to be a combination of boyish
accounts of school life and achievement with highly detailed descriptions of
things seen. His two passions are nature and architecture and in these he is
evidently much encouraged by his father Lewis Townsend, a dentist and a
man of letters ﬂldﬂqllé, a poet and the author of a successful biography of
Oliver Wendell Holmes. In much of the early writing one has the sense ofa
task undertaken to gratify certain stringent parental demands.

Father and eldest son, with or without the rest of the family, were
inveterate walkers, birdwatchers, antiquarians, botanists, tireless at the
highest reaches of sight-seeing. There were long weekend walks through
the countryside. of East Kent in which not a nest goes unidentiﬁed nor a
cottage undated. There were also meticulously planned holidays in Nor~

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mandy, Wales, Ireland, Brighton, Bath: during which, it seems, every
quarter of an hour is accounted for. The first ‘volumes are almost entirely
given to descriptions of places seen. The discipline of this kind of writing
must have helped to shape his formidable visual memory. It is as though he
can play the day over to himself like a film. The painter’s immediacy of
apprehension combines with the antiquarianis sense of a layered past. And
at his best his descriptive writing is distinguished not only in its clarity and
intelligence but by a certain dry vividness from which marvellous images
suddenly flash out, as when he recalls his first impression of Milan Cathe—
dral as ‘a hillside of dead pines’, or tells himself that provincial England is
‘like a sleepy pear’.

He went to the Slade in the autumn of 1926, his time there coinciding
with the last years of Professor Tonks’ regime. It was here that he made the
essential friendships of his life; with Claude Rogers, William Coldstream,
Geoffrey Tibble, Edgar Hubert, Elinor Bellingharn~Srnith, Anthony
Devas, Rodrigo Moynihan, Gabriel Lopez and many others. Two experi~
enees occur during this time which were to have a lasting effect on him.
One was nearly nine months of travel abroad, first in Egypt where he was
the guest of a fellow Slade student called Yousef, and almost immediately
afterwards in France, Italy and Tunisia in the company of a retired naval
commander who was an amateur painter. His record of these travels stands
as a whole and there seemed to be no point in breaking into it in making the
present selection. The second crucial experience was the death by suicide
of one of his closest friends, the Colombian Gabriel Lopez. Townsend pro~
foundly admired his painting and his poetry, diametrically different from
his own. He had been with him a great deal during the last months of his

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Group at the Slade, Summer 1929. Left
to right: Dev-as, Clough, Kitchener,
Boxall, Shephard, Lopez, —, Scroggie, —,
Hunt, Townsend, -

Fancy dress dance at the Yorkshire Grey
February I932. Back row: Nancy Sharp:
William Coldstream, Rodrigo Moyniham
far right; Claude Rogers. From: left
side; Edgar Hubert, George Charlton,
Caitlin Macnamara, right side; Vivien
John, Geoffrey Tibble

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life and his death affected him deeply. The diaries come to an abrupt stop
a few days after Lopez’s death. When they start again two years later, we
ﬁnd him back in Canterbury, helping his father keep the accounts for his
practice.

Through literary friends of his father’s, particularly Eleanor Farjeon,
Townsend had built up several connections with publishers and he had
begun to ﬁnd work illustrating books and designing jackets. He had hoped

left
William Townsend, ‘Canterbury’
1945\*?

right
William Townsend, ‘Hop Alleys’
195 x—2. Tate Gal'1er\_\'

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to be able to survive on this in London but it was never a regular living.
His life in Canterbury has the qualities of an exile, broken only by oc~
casional visits to London to chase publishers, see exhibitions and keep up
with his friends. These are melancholy years. He sees himself being slowly
brought down by provincial life, losing contact with the people that mean
most to him, unable to free himself from the demands of his father, on
whom he is, in any case, dependent. He develops a passion for the ballet,
blowing his savings and paying a balIetomane’s court to Danilova and
Toumanova in their prime. And as the decade advances, he becomes in-
creasingly drawn into left wing politics, the local Labour Party, the League
of Nations Union, the W.E.A., Arms For Spain. Both the Abyssinian
conﬂict and the Spanish Civil War are recorded almost daily, as are the
Munich Crisis and the events leading to September 1939. He watches his
friends somewhat at a distance, recording with intense feeling each visit and
each nuance of aesthetic and political opinion. He is a witness from the
wings of their first successes: Devas’ rise as a fashionable portrait painter,
the short—lived and daring experiments in informal abstraction of Tibble
and Moynihan, the founding of the Euston Road School by Rogers and
Coldstream and their swift recldme along with Pasmore and Graham Bell in

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William Townsend, ‘Hedley Mountain’
1963 Hazel Strouzs

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the years immediately before the war.

He joins the army in 1941 and is demobilised ﬁve years later, having
become a staff captain with the Army School of Education. This period is
not recorded in the journals. When he picks up civilian life and returns to
writing, he is married, Charlotte is born and he is a teacher at (Zamberwell
School of Art, where William Johnstone was reassembling the people who
had been connected with the Euston Road School before the war. From
this point on his life is centred on art schools, at Camberwell and then at
the Slade where he goes with Coldstream in the autumn of 1949. From
1951 onwards he makes regular visits to Canada where he also teaches.

Read as a whole the journals yield an extraordinary picture of a life in
both its private and its public dimensions. It is not possible yet to do com-
plete justice to this picture in publication, for to do this would mean to
observe a balance between the inner and the outer chronicle. Scores of
people are mentioned in these pages and although I do not think that he
would have minded the publication of his professional acidities, I know
that he would not have wanted conﬁdences abused nor feelings needlessly
hurt. So any selection now can only give a partial impression of the scope
of the journals and of their ﬁnal importance - that importance stemming, as
I have suggested, from their inclusiveness. The document as a whole is
many things: a profoundly honest confession; an acute and sophisticated
account of a professional career, with all the gossip and inside talk that
implies; it is a succession of passionately detailed and feeling accounts of
places and above all buildings seen; it is the critique of an intelligent and

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humane man upon his times. In selecting these extracts, which amount to
the merest tip of an iceberg, I have concentrated on three periods which
seem to me to be of the greatest historical interest: his student years, the
late thirties and the first year of the war, and the years 1946 to 195:. I have
not included anything after these for a variety of reasons. Later entries tend
increasingly to be about day—to—day matters at the Slade —— conversations
with students, college politics, the somewhat repetitive appointments of
academic life. All this is fascinating to anyone involved in this world but of
limited general interest. These are also the years of his Canadian visits.

He was first invited there to teach at the summer session of the Banﬁ"
School of Fine Art. It was the first time that he had crossed the Atlantic
and all his skills an observer are brought out to the full. He is learning a
new landscape with its own fauna and flora, all of which have to be worked
up and recorded. He is learning a new culture, new kinds of cities, new
styles of reference. And of course, he is meeting scores of new people and
looking at a lot of unfamiliar art. As visit follows visit he begins to under-
stand Canadian life in greater depth and ﬁnally even to become a part of it.
All his life he had been fascinated by the special problems posed by the
relationship of English art to the Continent. Now in Canada he was to en-
counter similar problems in new terms. He became something of a spokes-
man for Canadian art and culture and as the journals go on from the first
visit to the end, a remarkably rounded ‘picture emerges of a crucial period.
But the effect stands as a whole. There seemed to be no point in extracting
sections whose real interest lies in their contribution to an organic account,
separate to a large extent, from his preoccupations at home.

Finally, during the last few years there is a change in the nature of the
entries themselves. The style becomes more elliptical, less reflective, and
private and public matters are more sharply intercut. When the time is
right for more inclusive publication, such changes of style will fall meaning-
fully into place. I cannot see that they would here.

One strand which is never dropped in the entire text is his commentary
upon his own painting. Whatever else he was involved in, however rnulti—
furious his interests, the central concern was always his studio. And. yet,
like so many artists in this country, there is something tentative in his
relationship to it. Perhaps in the end, too much time was spent thinking
about it at a distance from a productive nziliezz, his time broken by insecurity,
war, too much reaching, his hold on it xveakened by lack of recognition. He
had committed himself early to a quiet position. Any form of extremism
was foreign to his judicious observer’s temperament, and he was not an
innovator. However, the best of his painting reflects those qualities of
balance, sensitivity, and acute economical observation which were essential
to him, and in some of the Kentish hop garden series and the cityscapes
of Edmonton, these qualities are refined to a pitch which approaches
perfection.

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me that Roland is the only one of us who has joined up —— anti aircraft.
Camouﬂage he says is hopeless. He himself is ﬁnding it very difiicult
to do nothing and impossible to paint . . .

Then I rang up Stephen Bone. He conﬁrmed my general idea of the
chances of artists at the moment. He also is in the know about the M. of
Information and gave me the address; but that scheme is still only in
embryo.

9 September 1939 Most of the morning went in tracking down the Ministry of Information;
from one government building I was sent to another, no one was sure where
it was, or even knew sometimes that there was such a Ministry. However I
did ﬁnd it, after calling at the Home Office and learning that its location
had changed overnight. It is now at the Senate House of the University,
but they were no longer giving out posts, nor even considering appli-
cations. . .

Down to Canterbury in the afternoon. The train crowded, and the plat-
forms at Tonbridge and other stations packed with hop—picl<ers starting the
season. Two young soldiers opposite me; they were perfectly happy but
had no idea of what was happening to them; for the last few days they had
been moved about from place to place doing nothing, new on their way to
Shorncliife to guard the hospital; possibly going to Egypt. There was a
pleasant friendly feeling among the people in the compartment; we chatted
away without any violence of feeling or opinion. Concern for the Poles and
H0p\_pickerS on their way to Kent’ hope that something will be done quickly to relieve the pressure on them is
Radio Times Hulmn Picture Lz'bmr\_r the general sentiment at the moment. People are troubled or bewildered by

the slow start on the Western Front . . . even here papers that had no sym-
pathy for Madrid’s defenders are recalling the glorious memory of that
city and splashing its slogan ‘they shall not pass’. The slogans of the Spanish
war are no doubt appropriate enough in Poland but it is curious to ﬁnd
them now so approved by the enemies of the Republic, just as it is curious
to think of Ward Price leading the Daily Mail against German fascism
when a few days ago his books were boosted by the B.U.F. in their book-
shops, and the Mail and Express had no use for a peace front against
aggression.

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11 September 1939 A telegram from Anthony asking me to meet him for lunch. Up to town by

the morning train which was very crowded —- the service is very reduced
from to-day and the trains stop all over the place and are slower so I did
not reach London until after twelve. Walked round Bedford St. and that
quarter to see what publishers looked like staying in town and which had
shut up. Most of them still there so far, but Gollancz closed down except
for enquiries; the communist bookshop next door, displaying the Daily

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William Townsend, A. R. 1-‘. drawings

of Canterbury Cathedral

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Worker in separate sheets, and various photographs and pronouncements,
was the only window lively enough to attract a group of people. Verve and
the lovely reproductions in Zwemn1er’s windows still spread out for us
behind the gummed lattice. . .still plenty of people to hang round the second-
hand shelves in Charing X road, and books ought to sell better than ever
with no competition or distractions. Nothing else worth while is open in
London — no theatres, cinemas, exhibitions, galleries, museums, no child-
ren and no friends left.

Met Anthony in Charlotte St, and went with him to Bertorelli’s.
Nicolette of course was there. Igor and his sister and two other girls and
Leigh Ashton who is high up in the Ministry of Information and from
whom Anthony was hoping much. But his hopes were drowned in a
moment, for he told us there are hundreds of applicants at the Ministry; all
are being turned away and that the personnel sufﬁcient for present needs
was carefully picked months ago. Leigh Ashton said he was certain the war
was coming three months ago, never had any doubt afterwards, he is con-
vinced that the ratiﬁcation of the Russo-German pact — not the signing —
precipitated the war, but I was astonished to hear him say that he thought
Russia would come in against us in the end, against Poland at least, and
take part of the Polish territory. I don’t know where any evidence exists for
such an expectation . . . But how pleasant it was to be there at lunch with
old friends and others, people I liked and women charming to look at, talk-
ing calmly. One of the most depressing things to me is the de—centralisa-
tion from London, which will no longer be the place where it was always
easy to meet many friends and pick up one’s interests and news. New
scattered all over England and without the means of travelling easily from
one to the other — with no art centre anywhere. Now co—operation is so
badly needed to help anything of the arts to survive; in peace time such
dc-centralisation would be very welcome.

Anthony and Nicolette are very shattered; still suffering from the first
horror and hating the world they live in; and people too, particularly those
who have been stimulated by the excitement to feel alive almost for the
first time.

Anthony is going to register as a C.O. when called up if he is not able to
get into a job before then. We both agreed in any case that it was a mistake
to think of tying ourselves up in the army before we had to. At the moment
all schemes for artists are only sketched out and there seems no place for us
in the war system but I don’t think this will last for ever. I think we should
wait and really try to ﬁt in instead of allowing the diﬂiculties to pull us
down and force us where we might not be doing the best job even from the
military point of view . . .

I came. home by the 5.15 train — there are only two evening trains to
Canterbury now; from to-day half the service, and late journeys will be in
the dark with only the most miserable mockery of a light from the ceiling of

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12 September 1939

Canterbury Cathedral

Dean of Canterbury, photograph by
Fisk-Moore Studios

26 October 1939

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each compartment. No children who survive this war should ever be afraid
of the dark again; but that is poor compensation for no bright streets and
toy shops, circuses or ﬁreworks or trains blazing by.

The cathedral nave is full of earth, lorries are rumbling in and shooting
cartloads down on the ﬂoor and now there is a wilderness four or ﬁve feet
deep between the pillars from the west door to the choir steps. Services are
going to be held in the crypt which is also to serve as an air—raid shelter and
the earth is destined to form a blanket in the choir above the crypt vaults.
Down below the crypt is being strengthened with props and beams like a
mine and between the columns there there are set in position huge earth
ﬁlled crates forming it into separate compartments darkly and solidly
closed in. Back to the catacombs. The old glass has gone and the windows
are boarded up, the Black Prince is hidden behind a barricade of sandbags;
workmen are everywhere ﬁlling bags and carrying them, hammering beams
and shifting earth. I heard a good many critics of the Dean for this prepara-
tion; from the old verger who thought it was witness to a lack of faith in
God who could protect his own house if though he thoroughly approved the
removal of the glass, which had happened also in the last war when popular
old Dean Wace had ordered it), to the ladies of Canterbury shrieking ‘why
on earth don’t they get rid of the Dean’, glad of another opportunity of
attacking him. I think he is quite right to do all he can to protect people,
once he has decided and others have agreed that the crypt shall be an
official shelter; and then God may protect his house of course, but the
house belongs too to those without faith as well as those with faith; to those
who remember Rheims and the German air force in the Spanish war which
did not trouble to spare cathedrals if they were in the way.

Met John Austen at Beaz1ey’s. He is quite knocked off his feet, ready he
says to sign a separate peace on any terms at any moment. Beazley is braver
and I strongly supported the idea of holding a mixed exhibition in his
gallery as soon as possible as a gesture of belief in the things we have always
held to be important and which are certainly a part of what we are meaning
to ﬁght for, and so should go on as long as possible. Not much point in
growing as spiritually dark as a fascist country in order to defeat one.

Started making some drawings of the goings—on in the Cathedral. It is
going to be a long time before any of us get jobs where we shall be paid to
do what we want to do and could do well.

. . . At ﬁve I was in Piccadilly, and from there I walked to Mecklenburgh
Square. It is the changes to notice, not the sights anyone would come to
London to see, which are the interest to-day ; the prostitutes in the turnings
of!" Bond St. standing at the corners so much earlier, the usual pairs, now in

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arrived at the house and who drove off the colonel and his men with in-
dignity. However in the meantime the L.D.V. had rummaged through the
house, had come across the transcription of Goya etchings with anti-fascist
and Spanish slogans on them which Rodrigdghad done for the Spanish war
campaigns and made off with them, and they are now being summoned to
apologize and return the pictures. If they will not do this Elinor says they
may sue them for housebreaking and stealing pictures! Elinor says she has
black looks from the villagers, baulked of their prey, which will not be
lightened by the knowledge that the proposed victim has been entrusted by

the air ministry with a conﬁdential commission. ‘K /;.Z,\_.0,//,7 AA ,1 \_ ,5 ,—;—;¢ 7“

21 September 1940 A raid warning was given just as we left Tunbridge Wells, and we had
reached Ashford before the all-clear. In the car we could hear nothing of
the planes, not see them but we could calculate very well their course from
the direction of the upturned faces of the little groups of men and women
standing in the village streets, by the roadside, or in knots about cottage
gates. It was odd driving through this countryside which I know so well
and having the impression that it had suddenly become more thickly
peopled. I have never seen so many folk about on these roads, nobody can
have taken shelter 3 but all had stepped outside to watch the planes. Mothers
were holding up their babies even at the garden fences to point out the
planes in the sky; we seemed to be the only ones indifferent to what was
above. Goudhurst Street was a wonderful sight. The hill was crowded with
folk, clusters of hop-pickers and groups of soldiers, and on the terrace out-
side the pub at the top the benches were black with rows of drinkers, and
the pub at the bottom seemed even fuller, the drinkers jammed in the
doorway and overﬂowing into the paved triangle in front of the house. It
was a perfect Rowlandson village for the day: more packed with ﬂirting
girls and topers than you could imagine anywhere but in his drawings: and
for a mile of two beyond the village in both directions girls, in twos and
threes, dressed in their smartest, were making their way in.

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II October 1940 Father had promised to come home this afternoon for me to begin a portrait
and I had just ﬁnished stretching the canvas and was at lunch when he
suddenly appeared to tell us that there had been a bomb in Bur-gate St. half
an hour before. He had been attending a patient and all his windows had
blown in; the patient was still waiting there and he rushed across the road
to catch the next bus to Canterbury. There was something very touching
in the thought of this conscientiousness and energy kept up after a bad
shock; I thought so as I watched him — a frail little man — running across
the road to the bus. I said to Mother as we sat down again, ‘It is hard luck
to be worried all the time, with half his practice gone, and then to be nearly

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Bombed Canterbury, photograph by
Fz's}c—Maare Studios

Uden, ‘Canterbury High Street the
morning after the Blitz’

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bombed out twice in a few weeks’ and she burst into tears; and I found it
diflicult not to do so myself in the curious emotion and relief of survival.
One feels saved oneself as well as the possible victim. I went into Canter-
bury. There was a rope across the street and beyond it a crowd of men in
tin helmets busy over a pile of wreckage in the roadway, grey dusty beams
and rubble; on one side, the side of father’s surgery a huge gap where
Williams the furriers proud new shop had stood and Carver and Stani-
forths’ bookshop; both now heaps of spiky rubbish with men clambering
over, prising up shards and timber, tossing them into the street with a clatter
and a puff of plaster dust. Beyond the scarred side wall of Stephensons, the
tailors, and the stripped front and the jagged hole of the shop below; this
side the gap a torn upper floor hanging into the street and a comb of rafters
from the roof cocked above it, in that pile disappeared the bookshop which
I never failed to visit when I was in the town, where I was the first cus-
tomer, where I had bought my books and browsed over many unread,
where only yesterday I went in to mention Edmond’s poems, to get
‘Horizon’; and in that pile Miss Carver had been killed, Miss Staniforth
gravely injured, and there was not even a book to be seen. The furrier and
his customers were dead too; a woman who had been stepping from her car
on the opposite side of the street was killed too; old Mr Dukes the watch-
maker dragged covered with rubbish but only bruised from the ruin of his
shop; all people our familiars for years, their business our daily interest and
this group of buildings our centre in Canterbury. On the other side of the
road was the tea shop where we lunched and took our friends to coffee, the
Beaz1ey’s Gallery where I held my water colour shows, where three of my
drawings for Jane were this day in the window; the second—hand book
shop; the pub at the corner of the lane where Beazley slipped in for his
drirﬂ<s, and I sometimes too with Tim Jordan —- all now with the fronts
blown in and knocked awry, with scars and cuts all over and clumps of tiles
jolted loose on the roofs. I was allowed past the rope when I had told my
name and business; all Father’s windows had been blown in, the glass had
scattered everywhere about the rooms, on floors and furniture, followed by
dust and plaster chips, so that it looked like a house left by its owners and
abandoned for ten years to wind and weather. Father was restless and could
think of nothing to do, so I started on to clearing up, sweeping first every-
thing on to the ﬂoor, shaking the glass off the carpets and taking them out
to the garden at the back to be swept, collecting the loose panes that might
still fall from the windows; then men appeared to nail muslin and boards
across the windows, we had a cup of tea sent in and looked a little more
calmly about. Father had to go to see an old patient, and as we walked up
to the garage to get into a taxi I saw Mr Beazley, of the gallery, across the
road, being helped along by a young man. His clothes were indescribably
creased and covered with white dust and pieces of wood and plaster, his
face was ﬂaccid, pale, like suet, and his eyes looked tiny, so pitifully weak

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Bombed Canterbury, photograph by
Fisk-Moore Studios

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and watery. He used to be the very type of prosperous looking, stout,
conﬁdent and comfortable bourgeois, pleased with his appearance, the
world and his place in it. He had just been to take Miss Carver’s body to the
mortuary. ‘I wish it had been me. I wish it had been me’, he said in a
strange, whimpering little voice as though it was all he had left in the
world, a hopeless wish, and he was noticing nothing else. Then he shufiied
on, leaning on his companion’s arm. Miss C. had been his secretary in Paris,
his companion for thirty years; once his mistress I always supposed.

It was a wonderful night; the moon almost full again, quite clear and
still ; the siren came clearly to us from Canterbury. After supper Father and
I walked a little way up Bridge Hill as we usually do 3 and suddenly heard
two clattering reports of bombs between us and Canterbury. Father started
to run home and I with him, a thing neither of would have done yesterday -
not for so distant a report, hard though it came through the stillness of the
night. . .

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