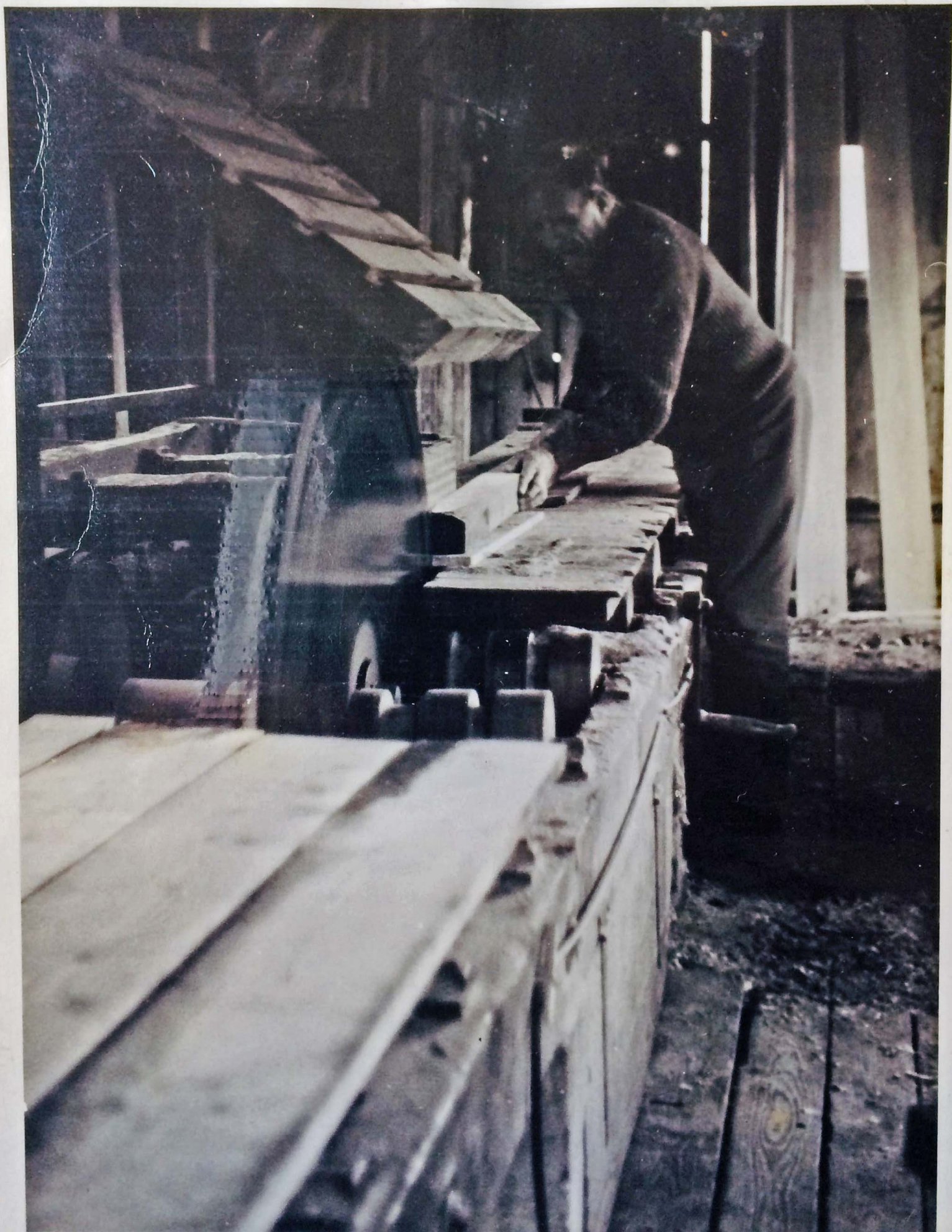






A.L. The resonant song of the high speed saw and the gorgeous resony smell of the new cut wood, will be among the last memories of my life, just as they are among the first. So it's like a return to the days before I ever went to school to be here at Eshiels. It's just outside the town of Peebles and it looks down on the river Tweed and it's a sawmill. But the sawmiller, George Robertson didn't start out in life to work with wood and I don't think, George, that you started life here at Eshiels, did you?

G.Y. No, I was born outside Haddington.(Amisfield) My father was a gamekeeper there and I was just too young to know what was going on. However, after about three or four years, he shifted to a place called Haile's Castle, that's on Whittingham Estate, about four miles further down the water and it was a great ruined old castle and we were just looking onto that. Most of my boyhood days when I went to the school, until I was about ten or eleven years old, was spent round about there. We went to the fishing a lot. We had always been fishers and spent a lot of time about the castle of course, because it was ruined and there were lots of dungeons and holes from the waterside, chimneys we used to climb up until we couldn't get up any further and we didn't know where the chimneys went. We found out later on, when the Office of Works took it over, that in the bottom of some of the dungeons, there were entries through the solid rock, into yet another dungeon, where they must have lowered the prisoners down with a rope, and there was no light, nothing. It must have been a terrible experience.

A.L. Did this sort of stimulate your imagination, being around this place.

G.R. I always had plenty imagination, I think. My brother was just about a year and a half older than me and we were all great readers and well, we read all about the likes of Traprain Law, at the back.

A.L. Yes, where the great horde of silver was found.

G.R. Yes, that was inside my father's domain as it were. As a matter of fact we did a lot more about the Law than we were supposed to, because it's very steep on the south side and a lot of Jackdaws nested there, and in the nesting season we were continually hunting jackdaws eggs. We were strictly warned about approaching the steepest bit, but we conveniently forgot the warnings when we needed to.

We went to the school at East Linton.

A.L. What kind of school was it in those days?

G.Y. I think it had six or seven teachers and the headmaster was an awfy man who had every boy in that school terrified from him.

A.L. You said you went to the fishing. What kind of fish was it you were after?

G.Y. There it was just trout. We used to go holidays to a place called Linn Plumm (3 mls s.e. of Haddington) where we had cousins, and we would saunter out there and sometimes a long road, for we were only boys of ten, eleven or twelve years old.

And there was Newlands burn, Snowden burn, Fastnet and the head waters of the Whitadder and we used to fish there all day and it was a long road home again.

A.L. This was the kind of life that John Buchan used to write about.

G.R. Yes, John Buchan. Now what was one of his books -- John Burnet of Barns, but the other one was a poaching book.

A.L. Oh I remember that one, John McNab.

G.R. John McNab, where he set himself out to beat the local gamekeepers, and one thing and another like that.

A.L. Did your father have much trouble with poachers, as a gamekeeper?

G.R. Well, he had a section of water of the Tyne to watch and quite a lot of colliers in that countryside, came and fished the Tyne and it wasn't strictly legal and us boys often had to go away up and look the water, to see if there were any poachers and bring home word. I remember once going up there and there were half a dozen miners preparing to fish and they asked me where I was going. I said I was just going up to tell my father if there was any poachers --- so one of them gave me a sixpence, I remember and said 'go home and tell your father there were no poachers', which I duly did and that was that.

A.L. Did you ever in later life, get to the stage of trying a wee bit poaching yourself?

G.R. Oh yes, we poached an awful lot. That was later on in Peeblesshire here, in fact I've killed an awful lot of fish and maybe should be ashamed to say how many I've killed. I've killed them as big as thirty six pound but it was always our ambition to catch a forty pounder, but there's not so many forty pounders and of course this was all illegal.

A.L. This was in the River Tweed?

G.R. Yes, in the River Tweed. We didn't go away with a cleek and a stick legally.

A.L. How did you set out on a poaching expedition?

G.R. We mostly went out just at the grey darkening and the salmon were on the 'reds', on the streams. It's a queer thing with fish, sometimes maybe in fresh running water, they can be very wild, other times they're so quiet you can get near to them, but oh well, we got a bit hunt now and again and we used to say that's our shot by. By the law of averages we should get by for a wee while.

A.L. Now how did you go for these fish? Did you have lights?

G.R. A light, yes. When they come onto the streams, all the way from here to Berwick-on-Tweed you'll come to streams where the water falls from one pool to another. It may be slow or it may be fast, it may be a hundred yards long or two hundred yards long, but that stream between the two pools is where the fish come to lie, come up out of the pools and all the way to Berwick-on-Tweed you'll get this same pattern. Starting up here, the Red Yett, or Red Gate in Scots and then the next one was the Maggie, the next one was the Castle Haugh Cheek, the next one was Cardrona Ford and the next one was the Rummier and the next one was Robbies Putts, just like that, all the way.

A.L. Marvellous names.

G.R. Another was Jaw Stanes, marvellous names right enough but we started generally on the Red Yett and it depended on how many we got, how far we went and very often we didn't need to go by the Red Yett. The thing to do was to go in to the bottom of the stream and gradually work your way inwards, in to the deep water and you're always coming in to the back of the fish--- and the fish if you disturbed them, they would work their way gently upwards and you would just naturally work your way up behind them, till you get within striking distance. Sometimes you didn't get within striking distance if they were a bit wild but that was the general idea.

A.L. And you just had a gaff and a cleek?

G.R. A gaff, yes that was all we had.

A.L. When you left school what did you take up then?

G.R. I left school at twelve years of age, to herd. My father was herding at the time and there were two reasons why I left school. There was plenty work at home, cutting peats, working at the hay, looking the hill when the herd was away at the clippings and things like that. The other reason was we were outside the three mile limit and we couldn't be forced to go, but that didn't play a very big part.

A.L. You mean, in those days, if you lived more than three miles from school, you couldn't be made to go?

G.R. Personally, as far as I recall, I was Jack-easy. I wasn't like a lot of kids who wanted to get away from school but I was quite happy to get away and work at the hay and the peats and look the hill. At looking the hill, a boy is as good as a man you know.

A.L. Now what does looking the hill actually mean?

G.R. Well in the mornings sheep have this strange custom, I don't know how they acquired it. They go up at night to the hill tops and you go along and sort them out and get them up and any casualties that are left, you see to them, see them right. But the sheep naturally gravitate upwards and when they're away up, they're generally all right, unless you've got to watch that one doesn't go away up and leave a lamb, maybe not fed. You've got to see these lambs right. If it's a cold morning, you've got to see them as we say 'sookit', because if you left that lamb not 'sookit', you'd to go out to the tops and see it as well. And another thing, you'd to be out pretty early, at daylight in summer time, because the crows were very bad on coupit sheep.

A.L. Yes, they can blind them.

G.R. They can blind them. We had quite a few with one out, but the odd one, the sheep manages to guard the one eye by turning it's head over, but in some cases it can't and we've had them with two out, and well, the sheep's taken into a park somewhere, a field and it generally does away all right.

A.L. Oh a blind sheep can still feed away?

G.R. Yes.

A.L. But it wouldn't be fit to go out on the hill?

G.R. No, generally they're put into a park and work away, just the same as a blind body does an awful lot of things. It's astonishing.

A.L. And even as a twelve year old, you learned how to cope with this sort of thing?

G.R. Oh yes, a herd's laddie at twelve years old is about as good as a man. He can set on a lamb, you know when a ewe has a dead lamb. He can skin the lamb, take a twin off another one, drape the skin over the twin of course, stick it in there and it saves a man's labour you see.

A.L. The mother of the dead lamb then accepts this new lamb as her own?

G.R. Sure and some easier than others. There are places where the ewes are so kindly, that on the hill, if you had a twin lamb handy, you could skin a lamb and put it on and she would take it there. Those black-faced sheep are just like human beings. There's some are the devil's own self to get them to take a lamb and some of them wouldn't take a lamb at all -- but very few. Most of them will take a lamb, properly applied.

A.L. You've got to delude them by giving them the smell of their own?

G.R. Yes, that's right. They're queer beasts.

A.L. So that was in 1917, by which time the war was well on?

G.R. Yes, 1917.

A.L. Was your father away to the war?

G.R. My father was in the Middle East. I was under age, but what they call an A4 boy.

A.L. What was an A4 boy?

G.R. Under age but fit.

A.L. Oh and were you keen to go to the army?

G.R. Oh keen, daft keen, stupid keen. I went to Hawick, supposed to be the hiring day but I slipped up to the recruiting office and the man welcomed me with open arms, of course.

MAN. Your age?

G.R. I was sixteen past but I said eighteen and ten months. It looked a better age to give.

MAN. Oh it's a pity you weren't another couple of months older, then you wouldn't need your parents permission, but we'll leave that just now, I expect that'll be all right.

G.R. I said to myself that it would be all right. Anyway, he asked what I did and when I said hill herd, he said that's finished it. He asked who I herded to. Well it was a well known farmer, a big farmer and a very well known name in the Borders just now.

MAN. That's as much as my job's worth, to take you away from there. You go home and get your parents permission and get your boss's permission and go down to Duns and tell the Recruiting Officer there that I sent you and it'll be all right.

G.R. Well, I knew well enough I wouldn't get my parents permission, and as far as the farmer, I never even mentioned it. By this time my brother had skipped it and he was under age. So he said he'd let my brother go, but if I tried it, he'd soon bring me back. So that put paid to that, so I took the first opportunity at the term, of leaving. I took the first opportunity of going away to the army after that.

A.L. What age were you when you were in the army then?

G.R. I was eighteen and I was eighteen when we went overseas. We were in Ireland for a while and came over to Aldershot and spent some hectic days about Aldershot and then we went to Newcastle on Tyne and from there we sailed to Archangel. Murmansk was the port we were supposed to be going to, but when we got to Murmansk most of us never got off the boat. They just put off two or three men.

A.L. This was after the Russian Revolution had taken place?

G.R. Yes.

A.L. It was also after the Armistice?

G.R. No. It was before the Armistice. The first revolution took place in Russia in the beginning of 1917, when Kerensky took power, then Lenin came in October and he took over. There was an awful lot of racketeering went on in that business, amongst all the great powers and we were being sent to Archangel to guard that railway, in case, if the Germans followed on and maybe took possession of Murmansk, which would serve them as an ice-free port. For all it's hundreds of miles north of Archangel and Archangel is icebound, Murmansk is ice-free. Now, the Bolsheviks were in Archangel till the day before we arrived, I think sometime in June and they took up river. The Dvina river is a very big river, anything from a mile to two miles wide, in places.

A.L. And how did you eventually get captured?

G.R. Well, some bright spark had the idea we would retake this village and I was one of the boys who went up the night before to see if the trenches were occupied --- and the trenches were occupied. We arrived there at daylight, in the morning and it was just a massacre.

A.L. Once you were captured, you eventually fetched up in Moscow?

G.R. Yes.

A.L. And what had you to do there?

G.R. We worked at various things. That was in the winter time we arrived there.

A.L. You weren't put in prison?

G.R. I was in one of the biggest prisons I've ever been in, and I've not been in many but they were all in Russia. In Vologda, on the way to Moscow, we were put in a prison there and put in a cell and it was about thirty degrees below zero and in a cell with no glass in the windows. You couldn't keep yourself warm, even running up and down and the only food we got in that place, a pail of sort of slush called soup, was put on the table every day at twelve o'clock, and you reached over your neighbour's shoulder with a spoon, and tried to get a mouthful. Sometimes it was knocked out your hand, sometimes you were lucky but there was nothing more till the next day. Well luckily the Chief of General Staff arrived in there and kicked up murder about British prisoners being confined among criminals, who were actually criminals from the Red Army, and he got us shifted out of there into better quarters, much better but there was no food.

A.L. And then when you were in Moscow, were you released from

prison?

G.R. Yes, we were on parole. I have a passport there on my desk, saying that the bearer, George Robertson, has the right to be inside Moscow anytime, provided he's back in the barracks by eight o'clock. We worked all over the place. We found jobs for ourselves and I worked in a factory a while and we shovelled snow. I worked in the Foreign Office quite a while.

A.L. Oh, who did you meet there?

G.R. Litvinov, we often saw him there.

A.L. He was the Foreign Minister?

G.R. He was the Foreign Minister. Then there was Chicherin. Litvinov and Chicherin were the two men that we had most to do with. Chicherin now, I think he was Home Secretary at that time.

A.L. And what were they like to meet?

G.R. Chicherin was a gentle old man, a gentle fine old man. He was a millionaire and went over to the Bolsheviks. And I saw Lenin in the Red Square but never got near enough to speak to him. For fifty years I've thought I never saw Trotsky, but I've a book there with a picture of May Day 1919, in Moscow, in the Red Square and there were Lenin and Trotsky, walking across to the stand, where they addressed the populace. And I was a wee figure in the back.

A.L. Really, you were there at that time?

G.R. Yes.

A.L. Did you learn Russian at all?

G.R. A little, but to tell the truth, I've been back again twice and I've forgotten a gey lot. It seems quite familiar sounding but I'm gey helpless at it now.

A.L. When you were there what were living conditions like?

G.R. Unbelievable, but you must remember this was in the midst of a Civil War. People were dying in millions actually, of hunger and typhus and that's no exaggeration. The dead carts went round every day and collected the dead from the hospitals and the houses. I had a very unpleasant job to do myself. The British Consul asked for two or three men to go and get the body of a British businessman who had died in hospital. So I went along with another chap who had volunteered and we were directed to a place down some stairs to a sort of cellar, and the bodies should have been on shelves but they were just heaved off in heaps and luckily I had seen this man before, when he was alive. He had a wee short pointed beard and I just noticed his head sticking out of a heap and we managed to get him dragged out and taken back on a sleigh and buried. And when I got back, I didn't smoke at the time, but I got some Russian 'mahorka', rough peasant tobacco and I smoked and smoked to try and get the taste of that place out of my mouth.

A.L. When you were in Moscow, you didn't get on too well in the food line, did you?

G.R. Oh it was utter starvation. We never got a bite before twelve o'clock in the day and then it was just a bowl of soup, a wee bit of black bread and on special days we would get some bird seed porridge, made with millet, but this was a great

treat and sunflower oil on the top of it, what the Russians called maslo or butter. It just made our day. We used to think if we had that and nothing else, we would live like princes.

A.L. Now when you came back home here from Russia, did people understand what you'd been through?

G.R. Not at all. There was a decent old woman who said in a kindly way 'Hello laddie. You've surely been a long time getting home'. I didn't want to talk about it so I just said I'd been abroad. 'By gosh' she said 'You don't know how lucky you are. In this country it was just terrible for a while. You could hardly get a bit sugar to put in your tea'.

A.L. What was it like to meet your family again?

G.R. Ah well, my father was away in a place in Berwickshire at a lambing and he was driving some sheep across a field, away from me and he just noticed, without turning and I walked right up and said hello and he turned round, shook hands and walked away again. So I delicately left the subject alone, until things were better adjusted.

A.L. That's a real Scottish unemotional way of hiding emotions.

G.R. Yes, but I can recall his very attitude.

A.L. What kind of man was he?

G.R. Now that's difficult. He left the school at twelve years old too, at Fountainhall in Gala Water, and he's told me the schoolteacher was very keen for him to stay on but his folk were just herds, they had nothing. When my father first came to Peeblesshire he had thirty pounds a year and over in Yarrow there was plenty with twenty eight pounds. He was exceptionally well read, even to the point of quoting a fair lot of Latin, and that was practically unknown amongst working folk. I mean even yet, I move among folk, that to read a book, a decent book, is practically unknown to them and the television has made them even worse.

A.L. In your own life, what has become your favourite reading?

G.R. There are three authors which have given me a tremendous lot of pleasure and you'll maybe laugh but Wodehouse is one, W.W. Jacobs and I may say Three Men in a Boat. I carry it yet, Three Men in a Boat, in my car and if I have to wait for anyone, I can just lift it and open it. But Wodehouse, for all they're a bit silly, there's some great phrases and it's grand literature.

A.L. And when you've tried to sum up all your experiences, that you've had, here and overseas -----?

G.R. What gives me most pleasure?

A.L. Yes.

G.R. Without reading, I think life wouldn't be worth living and the car. What worries me just now is that there's going to be a shortage of petrol, but what worries me more, is the fact that they're talking about the over seventies, I'm seventy four, having to take a driving test. And as sure as anything, next year I'll have had a license for over fifty years, as sure as anything I wouldn't pass a driving test. I get more

pleasure out of the car and books and I know no more about a car, when I open the bonnet, I don't know what's under it after fifty years.

Mr G. Y. Robertson

—an appreciation

THE recent death of George Robertson removed a colourful and outspoken figure from a wide circle of friends in the South of Scotland. He was particularly well known in the farming community, which he served as a timber merchant for 40 years. Although he retired nominally 12 years ago, he continued to work daily at his sawmill in Eshiels, near Peebles, and attended Lanark Market every week until the time of his death.

George Robertson was born into a herding family in East Lothian in 1899. He left school at the age of 12 and worked as a shepherd on a number of farms in the Border country until he enlisted in the Royal Scots during the First World War.

He took part in the campaign in North Russia and had misfortune to be taken as a prisoner of war in 1918. He was not released until 1920 and spent the better part of these two years in Moscow. Since the chance of escape from Russia was highly remote, he and the other prisoners were given a considerable amount of freedom within Moscow, and he thus had an opportunity to observe at first-hand the social and political changes which followed the Russian Revolution.

In later years he twice visited Russia, and while he expressed admiration for some of the objectives of its leaders, he was critical of their excesses and heavy-handed approach. He retained a keen interest in the Soviet Union throughout his life and, with an astonishing memory for

detail, could recall events of 50 years ago as if they had happened only a few days before.

This trait brought him to the attention of the B.B.C. and he gave several radio talks in which he reminisced about post-revolutionary Russia. He was also interviewed for television.

After his return to Scotland in 1920, he worked for some years as a shepherd before joining the Forestry Commission at Glentress, near Peebles. He left the Commission to establish his own business in the 1930's and for the next 40 years he supplied farmers with stobs, troughs and gates.

George Robertson took a lively interest in politics throughout his life. He enjoyed nothing more than a discussion of the merits of the various political philosophies of the different parties. While his listeners sometimes disagreed with his views, they invariably left him on the friendliest of terms.

He had a large library of books, mostly on a political theme, to which he constantly referred. He enjoyed poetry and was apt to quote Burns and Tennyson at appropriate moments. For light entertainment he read avidly the novels of P. G. Wodehouse.

In the course of his 78 years, George Robertson showed numerous kindnesses to friends and strangers alike. He was a generous and hospitable man at all times, and was always lively and stimulating in conversation. Those who knew him—and they were many—mourn the loss of a good friend.

G. T.

Obituary

Mr GEORGE ROBERTSON

George Robertson, Eshiels, Peebles, who died suddenly at Lanark Market last week was well known in timber and farming circles in the Borders.

During World War I he served with the 2nd 10th Battalion of the Royal Scots and took part in the campaign in North Russia. In the course of a raid 400 miles south of Archangel he had the misfortune to be taken prisoner, and after a long and arduous journey was imprisoned in Moscow.

At this time he and a number of other Royal Scots played football with a ball made up of rags and old papers. This was a new game for the Russians and eventually a local football league was formed, composed of prisoners and their gaurds. During this time the prisoners were visited by Lenin.

It was many months after the end of the war that the prisoners were repatriated and brought home to this country.

Mr Robertson was a faithful attender of the annual reunions of the 2nd 10th Royal Scots, the former West Lothian Battalion.