

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Tuesday Essay

## My best Christmas

Edward Rutherfurd is famous for his sweeping historical novels. Maybe it goes back to when he was a boy, it was Christmas, and all he wanted was toy soldiers...

Edward Rutherfurd

Published on Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2009 11:25AM EST Last updated on Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2009 11:51AM EST

---

Christmases were wonderful when I was a child. Presents were few, but that made them all the more exciting. They weren't always new, either. Once, after I'd seen one of the big old gauge 0 electric trains in a movie and said how I'd like one, my parents, after discovering that these weren't being made any more, tracked down a second-hand set which I found to my delight under the Christmas tree that year. Where the little 00 gauge trains made a discreet buzz, my train clattered and rattled 'round the room, emitting electric flashes and a distinct smell of ozone. I loved it.

When I was seven, I was given a model boat. This was new. It was a launch made of tin, with a clockwork engine that you wound up. It plowed slowly but inexorably through the water with a range of about a hundred yards. It also had a rudder so that you could send it out in a huge circle. I belonged to a cheerful gang of little boys, and we used to go to the local pond where the other children liked to sail their nice little model sailboats. Taking careful aim, we'd send out the tin monster, which, like a roman galley with a battering ram, would bump, mash and sometimes even sink any of the delicate craft that it encountered. We'd spend a happy time, until some outraged parent with a weeping child made us go away. My friends were always wanting to borrow that boat.

At the age of 12 we had to take a big exam. One of my friends was told that, if he passed, he would get a 10-speed bike. When I suggested this to my father, he looked at me calmly and announced: "Well I'll give you a thick ear if you don't pass." Not that my father, who was the kindest of men, ever actually laid a finger on me. But his saying that was very wise, for it gave me far more confidence about the exam than if he'd tried to bribe me with a present. I did pass, and that Christmas I got a bike with three speeds. It was a wonderful metallic blue, and it was called a "Manhattan."

" Like many men, my father fancied himself as a carpenter "

Life was safer in those days. I could disappear for an afternoon on my bike and no one would worry. There were some very long hills in our area, and with just three speeds there were often times when it was a real challenge not to get off and walk. I can't think of any better training for the rigours of becoming a historical novelist.

But without doubt, the best Christmas present I ever had was when I was eight.

I had always liked playing with toy soldiers. But that summer we had gone to see our French cousins in Paris, and my mother had taken me to the military museum at Les Invalides, where there was an exhibition of model soldiers that encompassed what seemed to be Napoleon's entire Grande Armée. She'd patiently waited while I spent over an hour looking at them, transfixed; so, as Christmas approached, there wasn't any doubt about what I wanted.

But I wasn't sure I was going to get any. My mother told me she thought I already had enough soldiers. As for my

father, he had other things on his mind. For that was the year he decided to remake the kitchen.

I should explain that, like many men, my father fancied himself as a carpenter. He had some fine old planes and other implements, but though he showed me how to use these in the proper manner, his skills were really very limited. His best friend was a wonderful craftsman. He would make toys for children and beautifully turned bowls for his friends. But my father's efforts were sporadic at best and confined to things like shelves or the odd cabinet. On these occasions, no one was allowed to enter his workshop. He said that he did not want to be disturbed, but I suspect that it was so that we shouldn't see what a hash he was making of it.

One thing he never lacked was raw material. He was always hoarding wood. Any block of timber, any plank, or even bit of driftwood was seized and carried in triumph to the shed beside the garage that he called his workshop, where there was wood piled to the rafters. If you ever questioned the need, he'd point to some dusty board and demand: "Have you any idea what it would cost to buy that?"

From that October onwards, my father was always in his workshop. All the kitchen cabinets were to be replaced, he told us, and neither I nor my mother were allowed to set foot in his sanctum. One day towards the end of November I smelled paint coming from the workshop and asked him if he was nearly finished. But he shook his head sadly and said he wouldn't be done until some time in the spring.

As for the subject of Christmas presents, my mother told me that he was so taken up with his kitchen cabinets that he'd left the whole business of presents in her hands. So I reckoned I wasn't going to see any more toy soldiers that year.

When Christmas day arrived however, to my delight, there was a huge box of model soldiers under the Christmas tree. Then my mother told me I should go out with my father to the garage. I noticed that the car was standing outside. He led me in.

And there on the garage floor was a model fort. It was about five feet square, made of four big boards that interlocked to make the walls, all with battlements and crenellations. In one wall there was a drawbridge that you could lower and raise with a string. And there was also a big, square, free-standing tower that you could place where you liked, and which had its own entrance and defences. The whole thing was painted silver. It might not have won any prizes for carpentry, but it had used up a useful quantity of my father's stock of wood, you could get inside it to play, it was virtually indestructible, and it was, to me, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.

And my father had made it for me with his own hands. The story about the kitchen cabinets had only been to put me off the scent – to my mother's great relief, no doubt.

Since then, I have had wonderful Christmases with my own children, but for my own childhood, that Christmas was the best.

*Edward Rutherfurd is the author of Sarum, London and other historical novels.*

