

Testament of a youth survived

Childhood for Lorraine Cavanagh was privileged, wealthy — and traumatic. She tells **Sarah Meyrick** why she has written of it

THE Revd Dr Lorraine Cavanagh's upbringing was so extraordinary that, if it formed the plot of a novel, it would seem far-fetched.

She was born in Belgravia, in 1946, to an American mother and a French father. Her mother, Poleen, a beautiful woman from an old New England family, was the daughter of Caresse Crosby, who, with her second husband, Harry Crosby, ran the Black Sun Press, which published some of the earliest works by D. H. Lawrence and Scott Fitzgerald, among others. (The character of the Great Gatsby was said to have been modelled on Crosby.)

Dr Cavanagh's father was a French count, old aristocracy. The couple had met before the war, but were divorced by the time their daughter was two. Other marriages and other relationships followed ("an endless stream of semi-permanent men" attached to her mother); and the child Lorraine was regarded as a "nuisance", largely neglected by her absent parents, and sent away to boarding school ("a hard-edged place").

She was also sexually abused by one of her many stepfathers ("Uncle William"), and also by her own father. The latter had a penchant for young women, and frequently made remarks such as, "Well, of course, if you weren't my daughter, you'd be my mistress."

This is the barest sketch of an eye-watering tale; the full story is told in her new book, *Re-Building the Ruined Places: A journey out of childhood trauma*.

Today, she is in her seventies, a happily married mother and grandmother. She is an Anglican priest, a theologian, and an author. How does she look back on her childhood now?

"I was really extremely fortunate," she says, surprisingly. "I had three to five years, up until my [half-] sister was born, of a loving family environment in France. I'm not saying that it was perfect, but I took away from it the basic building blocks for whatever happened afterwards not to have done permanent damage. I was absolutely adored by my aunt and my cousins. I had an idyllic, very protected life in Paris."

One of her most painful early memories was being dragged away from that Paris home by her mother. She didn't know it at the time, but she was the victim of a savage tug-of-war between her parents. "I can remember just absolutely being devastated and screaming my head off in the taxi, and my cousin also weeping," she says.

"From then on, I lived with that sense of dislocation, and having been torn away. I experienced that again, much later, when I was sent off to see a couple who were friends of my mother's. And they happened to be psychiatrists. They sat me down, and said, 'Listen, you're not the problem. It's your parents,' which was the thing I absolutely needed to hear."

"And then, of course, my parents cottoned on to this, and decided I was being brainwashed, because they never wanted the truth out. They didn't want to face it themselves. They were in complete denial, not only about what was happening to me, but also their own lives."

As she says, "families like ours didn't see shrinks," something that inflicted terrible damage on her half-brother Philippe (her father's son from an earlier marriage). "My poor brother had obviously suffered from some probably fairly ordinary normal, teenage de-



pression," she says. "And it was decided that he was mad, and schizophrenic. And then he was bundled off and given electric-shock treatment. Of course, that totally fried his brain. And my father just saw it all as weakness."

SURPRISINGLY, perhaps, given his resistance to anything associated with the interior life, her father insisted on her being brought up as a Roman Catholic — "not because he particularly cared about being Catholic, but because that was what was expected by the family", she says, adding "Thank goodness."

"Anything that was to do with feelings, was a no-go area for him. As I grew older, I realised he was a person, like my stepfather, who carried around an immense amount of anger, which he could barely suppress."

He was also drunk much of the time. "He was a serious alcoholic. My mother was an alcoholic, too. And we know what that does, that throws people's personalities completely out of kilter. My mother had a narcissistic personality disorder. I don't know so much about my father, whether you'd call it that, but certainly what mattered in the general frame of things was him first. Basically, everything needed to fit in with the way he saw things."

As a parent, he was "supremely lazy", she says. "You know, stay out of my way, stay out

of my hair, get on the pill, get a job, don't come bothering me."

It wasn't just emotional neglect. For all her grand origins, after school Dr Cavanagh lived in Paris in acute poverty. "I literally had no money," she says. She used to live for Sunday lunch with her father, when she would at least have one proper meal. She was trained for nothing, although she wanted to act.

"I did get one job in a gallery. I think I got sacked. But the thing is, I so deeply lacked any kind of confidence or sense of reality," she says. "I was terrified that I'd fail. I mean, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you live with a sense of failure."

Her destiny was to marry someone with money, and preferably a title "which would do everyone credit". She recalls, when she was at boarding school, her mother sending her a newspaper cutting showing a member of the Greek royal family getting married, with a note that said: "This could have been you." She says: "I was only 13. And I just thought, 'Well, I've failed before I've even started.'"

A GREAT deal of water has flowed under the bridge since then. Dr Cavanagh found her way "out of the rabbit hole" of her childhood, something that she attributes largely to a loving relationship with her second husband, Sean. They have been together 49 years. She learned to be a completely different sort of mother to her own daughters. "I was determined that they should have what I never had, which was unconditional love, and also encouragement," she says.

She also found a home in the Anglican Church. Encouraged in her vocation by her then Bishop, Rowan Williams, she went to Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, in her forties, to study theology, gained a Ph.D., and was ordained in 2001. Her ministry has included university chaplaincy at Cambridge

and at Cardiff. Today, she takes occasional services in the Church in Wales.

She has written other books on theological subjects, but this is the first time she has told her personal story. So why now?

"The book had been waiting to be written for a long time," she says. "It's not particularly anything I'd planned. But I do notice that the subject of trauma and abuse is a big subject now. The other reasons are that very little, as far as I know, has been written about the kind of things I'm writing about going on in privileged and wealthy families."

"But the other reason for writing this book was for my generation. You lived in a culture of stiff upper lip, and don't talk. And if you were to say anything, it would be such a betrayal . . . so you learnt to live telling yourself that it wasn't really happening, that it was OK."

The climate is very different now. "I've got sufficient distance on it now, and sufficient objectivity, and hopefully a little bit more spiritual understanding of it, to be able to write about it fairly objectively, I hope."

Where, if anywhere, does forgiveness fit in? "We shouldn't automatically assume that because an abuse survivor is a Christian, they must therefore forgive," she says. "The abuse survivor lives with the abuse; it's not an event that happens and then goes away, even if you'd like to think it will at the time. . ."

"Forgiveness, if and when it happens, happens entirely through grace, and it's largely God's business. But what the survivor can be helped to do, very gently over time, with the help of good friends, good therapists, good priests, is to learn to understand a little bit about the context of their abusers, and how those people came to be, or do what they do."

She herself has tried to understand her parents — the book is threaded through with compassion — although it wasn't always easy. "My grandmother [her mother's mother] was one of the great illuminati of Paris in the 1920s, and certainly didn't have any time for children. And Harry Crosby, her then husband, really didn't have time for children, although he did try and seduce my mother. So, for my mother, it was all about payback. 'I didn't have [maternal love]; so you're not having it.'"

Her father asked for her forgiveness at the end of his life, but her mother — who remained a deeply destructive presence in her daughter's life until her death five or six years ago — never did.

Trauma, Dr Cavanagh writes in the introduction to the book, "has become fertile ground, like compost". She hopes that understanding will grow as a result.

She has developed a new course, *Ministering Through Trauma and Abuse*, which she offers online. It is intended to help students to examine how they can use their own stories of how they became the people they are, to help others.

"We are not a clean slate. We minister from our wounds," she says. "I think we need to own the lives we've lived, and own the truth about them, which is the things that we've got wrong and that we regret, and all of that, but also all the other stuff that complicates things, and that we don't find it easy to live with."

Those engaged in ministry need "to be human beings", and to remember that they are called to engage with other human beings. "We don't literally say, 'I understand because this happened to me.' But we've digested our stuff, and come to a deep understanding, come to a place with God where we can say 'I know that my Redeemer lives,' because we know that that is understood in God, and matters to God, and therefore must be used."

Re-Building the Ruined Places: A journey out of childhood trauma by Lorraine Cavanagh is published by Arno Books at £14.99 (Church Times Bookshop £13.49); 978-1-73915-670-1. The online course is available at lorrainecavanagh.net.

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