



## Hal's Reading Diary - July 2004

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

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**Roger Mills** on Hal's latest craze.

Hal is now three and five months and wants soldiers to feature in his stories. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.<!-- break-->

This Easter Bank Holiday we had a family outing to Battle Abbey and the site of the Battle of Hastings which lies below what is left of the Abbey buildings. Being three and a quarter, the historical aspects of the place didn't detain Hal, and vague hopes I had had of walking round the battlefield were quickly abandoned in favour of hide and seek among the buttresses and cellars of the surviving parts of the Abbey complex. At the end of our visit though we came across a couple of 'soldiers', one dressed as a Norman in a chain mail vest and carrying an impressive sword, the other a Saxon in a linen tunic and armed with a bow and arrows and a fighting axe.

Hal was fascinated by these two, and soldiers, which had been only a budding interest up till that point, now became a full blown obsession. A few days later we were at a car boot sale and he spotted a Dorling Kindersley book about Ancient Civilizations which happened to have a picture of Roman soldiers on the front. Hal demanded that we buy it and when we got home went carefully through the book looking for images of soldiers and spending a long time poring over the ones he found. When we make up stories for him nowadays he almost always wants them to feature soldiers as well as his own heroics.

In this obsession with soldiers, of course, Hal is just being like vast numbers of boys his age and I can remember being exactly like that myself. But watching this phenomenon come alive in my son got me wondering just what is going on here. Why is it that so many small boys are so fascinated by soldiers?

One possibility would be that the soldier fascination is down to some kind of conditioning. We haven't been nudging Hal in a military direction it is true, but maybe he is picking it up from his friends at nursery. But I rather doubt this. There aren't guns and swords to play with at nursery ? there would be accidents and complaints if there were. And Hal's main playmates outside of nursery, the children in our lane, are all girls and not at all bellicose in their games as far as I can see. Even if Hal was getting his initial exposure to things military from his friends, it still begs the question as to what got them interested. The archetypal toy for a small boy seems to have always been a soldier, at least certainly in western culture this seems to be so.

So what is going on? Why is being a soldier such fun? One possibility comes from Freud's theory of human instincts. Freud suggested that everyone has an innate destructive drive ? what he termed 'thanatos' or the death instinct. This part of Freud's thinking has proved highly contentious with later analysts, and many reject the idea outright. But it is certainly the case that many many people who have the experience of an in-depth analysis discover angry and aggressive parts of themselves that they had only the vaguest notion of before they started their therapeutic journey. Depressives often find that getting in touch with their angry aggressive side is a fundamental step in the direction of feeling more substantial and getting over their condition.

The aggression that patients describe however is rarely of an unprovoked kind. Their anger is almost invariably a response to having been on the end of psychologically wounding experiences of one kind or another. So is there an innate instinct of aggression? Perhaps it is possible to get closer to the state of things by looking at someone like Hal. He gets as much pleasure from knocking down a castle he has made out of toy bricks as he does from constructing it. He delights in waving his sword around. But as far as I can see, even allowing for gross parental bias, his 'destructive' instinct does not extend to wanting to hurt and cause pain and suffering to people.

Perhaps the safest hypothesis is to think of an innate, quasi-destructive instinct, which is primarily tied up with the superabundant physical energy which so many boys seem to have. This instinct is a sort of demolition delight, a delight which has everything to do with smashing things and not much to do with smashing people. My guess is that the soldier obsession kicks in because it is such a good vehicle for this kind of feeling. Indeed in a way it is an extension of the love of cars and trains which I suggested in an earlier diary is so compelling because it works as a projection of a boy's sense of his own physicality. Trains and cars have faded from Hal's interests now. But I can see an awful lot of visits to castles on the horizon.

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