The conventional wisdom among Ghanaians is that 1957 was the most exciting year in the lives of those who were lucky enough to have seen it. I agree with that, but if pressed, I would say that personally, I would vote for 1956 as the year to end all years. For that was the year that gave us the day on which our imaginations actually burst open and climbed into the clouds above. How?

First, the setting. The world price for cocoa (Ghana’s main export crop, grown in the forest areas like my town, Asiakwa) had been relatively good since about 1949, and the Gold Coast was experiencing a minor economic boom. In 1949, for instance, the father of a friend of mine, Kwame ‘Toh (short for Ettoh), a cocoa farmer, had been able to buy a brand new one-and-a-half ton Bedford truck. This was such a rare happening that even today – after over 50 years, I still remember the registration number of the truck: AR 3460.

Before that, only one man, Mr Baah, had ever owned a vehicle in our town, a small Vauxhall 14 (AH 9981). Mr Baah was unapproachable and I had to admire his car from afar. One of his sons, Kwadwo Tawiah, also known as Oware, was a distant cousin and he never stopped boasting about the car and making us all very jealous. He never got us inside it – not even once. Kwame ‘Toh was completely different. He was friendly and gentle, and he welcomed his young friends, me among them, who had become extremely excited over his father’s purchase. Although the truck had an official driver, Ansah Kofi, another very nice chap, it was Kwame ‘Toh who controlled it most of the time.

Under the pretext of going to “wash” it before it started operations for the day, Kwame would gather us in it and take us for a ride, as far as Sagyimase (three miles away on the road to Kyebi) before we came back to a stream near Asiakwa to do the actual washing of the truck.

We loved these early morning rides, for Kwame ‘Toh was a fun-loving guy and he entertained us by driving “in pieces” (he did this by pressing on the accelerator pedal, releasing his foot from it, and doing the same thing again, in short, rhythmic bursts that made the truck speed up and slow down, in...
Better still, he allowed those of us, like me, who were his real mates, to take a hand at driving the truck. First, he would let me steer the vehicle while he controlled the pedals. The sensation of me driving a one-and-a-half ton truck over our unpaved roads, at the age of 12, will never leave me.

I think it’s the sheer enjoyment of those moments that made me grow up to become a petrol-head: over the years, I have loved sports cars to a degree that amazes some of the more “intellectual” people among my friends. They tease me because I cannot be pried away from the TV set whenever there is a Grand Prix motor race going on, and have attended three Grand Prix races in person. (Sports cars I have owned include Renault Floride, Sunbeam Alpine, BMW 2000CS, BMW Alpina, B3 3.0 and BMW Alpina B10 V8).

The first time Kwame ‘Toh allowed me to take full control of the pedals, my 12-year-old legs were so weak that I couldn’t fully depress the clutch before changing gears. He taught me to take hold of the base of the steering wheel with both hands, whilst pressing the clutch down, as that would give my legs more strength! So, whenever I changed gears, the vehicle veered slightly off the road and he had to grab it to correct the steering. I learnt very quickly to change gears without taking my hands off the steering wheel, and I am sure that the quick reflexes I developed whilst deploying all my faculties at that very early age behind the wheel, have served me in very good stead over the years.

Once, a girlfriend I wanted to impress made my day when she remarked, after watching my driving manoeuvres: “Ei, you drive like Stirling Moss!” (Moss was one of the biggest names in world and British motor racing in the 1950s and early 60s).

I owe all that to Kwame ‘Toh. Indeed, when I became proficient in driving, Kwame ‘Toh became very proud of me and allowed me to drive the truck into the town, despite the risk he took of annoying his father if we were caught. But his father – who, by the way, was also called Duodu, like me – never upbraided him, as far as I know.

Having caught the driving bug in AR 3460, I was on the lookout for other vehicles to drive throughout the 1950s. There were a lot of cars to be had, because many Ghanaians were prosperous in those days, what with so much economic activity going on all over the place, mainly as a result of the way the Cocoa Rehabilitation (CR) department of the Gold Coast government was paying farmers compensation for cutting out their cocoa trees that had been affected by the swollen shoot disease.

Even some farmers whose farms didn’t suffer from swollen shoot bribed officials to certify falsely that the farms had been affected, so that they could get huge lump sums from the CR department.

“Whereas the UGCC said it wanted ‘self-government’ in the shortest possible time”, Nkrumah’s slogan was ‘self-government now!’! This translated into three letters ‘SGN!’ which became very popular.”
But whilst the economy appeared to be “booming”, politically, the country was seething to boiling point beneath us. Ghana’s founding leader, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, had returned to the Gold Coast from London, in December 1947, to become the general secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) – the political movement that had been founded in the 1940s to wrest power from the British.

He had found the UGCC leadership that had invited him too “conservative” for his liking. So he ditched them in 1949 to form his own, more radical Convention People’s Party (CPP).

Whereas the UGCC said it wanted “self-government in the shortest possible time”, Nkrumah’s slogan was “self-government now!”. This translated into three letters “SGN!” which became very popular, especially with the youth of the country, who were good at organising things politically.

In a general election held in February 1951, the CPP trounced the UGCC, winning 35 of the 38 seats contested by popular vote, not by electoral college. Dr Nkrumah was asked to form a government under the title, “Leader of Government Business”. This government had a cabinet with a majority of Ghanaians, though certain key posts, including finance and foreign relations, were held by British officials. And the British governor exercised special powers that could override cabinet decisions.

The cocoa farmers, who had, in earlier years, used violence to prevent their cocoa trees from being “cut out” to combat the swollen shoot disease, expected the government, led by Nkrumah, to bring a cure to the disease other than the “cutting-out” favoured by the British colonial authorities. But Nkrumah had no such cure. However, he conciliated them somewhat by introducing a system of compensation which gave farmers money when their diseased cocoa trees were cut out.

However, the cocoa farmers had another complaint – they expected Nkrumah to pay them the full world price for cocoa, instead of giving them only a part and continuing the practice whereby the government creamed off about a third to half of the world price and gave it to a Cocoa Marketing Board (CMB) which was supposed to invest the money and use the proceeds from it to support the cocoa price whenever the world price fell low.

The farmers divined in no time that the CMB had become the milch-cow from which the government was sucking funds for projects in the non-cocoa producing areas, as well as other “frivolous expenditures”.

Suddenly, the Gold Coast, which had been governed as one country from the beginning of the 20th century, began to hear the word “federation”. The cocoa-growing areas of Asante and Akyem Abuakwa, in particular, became the hotbed of an anti-CPP organisation called the National Liberation Movement (NLM) and in alliance with the Northern People’s Party (NPP) based in Northern Ghana, demanded that the Gold Coast be turned into a federation before it was granted independence.

The agitation for federation turned violent. In Asante, at least 15 people on either side were killed. Many people on both sides of the political divide had to leave their villages and towns when they discovered that they were no longer safe there. At Tafio, a town near Asiakwa, my hometown, a man was stabbed to death. This was the first time I had ever heard of anyone in our area dying as a result of political activity.

In fact, two more general elections had to be held, amidst great excitement – in 1954 and 1956 – before the British announced they would leave. In both, Nkrumah and his CPP triumphed and trounced the NLM. But the NLM wouldn’t give up, and it looked for a time as if the British would use the division in the country as an excuse to postpone independence indefinitely.

My own life had undergone a transformation. After leaving Kyebi Government School in 1953, I became a pupil teacher at Asiakwa Presbyterian Junior School. I was paid £7 a week, but so cheap was life in those days that I could afford to dress like a dandy.

There was a type of shirt I used to buy that was sold exclusively by the Union Trading Company (UTC) called “Doctor”. It was white with an ever so blue tinge, and a “stiff neck”. I used to spend hours on it getting the “stiff neck” starched and ironed.
back to its original shape. It was to no avail, but even the unsatisfactory result gave me a shirt that everyone could admire. Apparently, a beautiful young lady who lived near our school, Awurua Akua, fell for me as a result, and she would come and poke her head through a window, when I passed, and chat me up. She arranged with one of my female pupils to go and collect delicacies like nkhage cake (cakes made out of groundnuts) for me, during the “recreation” breaks, and at night, she would climb into my room through a window (so that my folks would not notice her presence).

We had a very steamy affair — my very first — and I regretted it terribly when she suddenly left town with her folks. I never saw her again till a decade or so later, when she suddenly left town with her folks. I never saw her again till a decade or so later, when she

The sixth subject I chose was Twi, for which I relied entirely on my own knowledge. I didn’t even know what the syllabus was, but merely perused past questions to try and work out what I was required to know!

Learning all these subjects in my spare time was tough: they were not what I would have chosen if there had been any alternative for me. But if one wanted a GCE — the be-all and end-all of social advancement in a British territory — then one had to go by the curriculum set by that remote institution deciding our fates from far away — the University of London.

Far removed as British educational institutions were from our daily lives, they couldn’t care less about what African students really wanted to learn about, though they took our hefty examination fees quite gladly. I mean, I had to study the Medieval History of England (1066 to 1485) when I knew nothing about the history of Africa!

My history lessons were authored at the Rapid Results College in Wimbledon, London SW19 — not exactly where one would expect knowledge of Asante’s resistance to British rule, or apartheid in South Africa, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and other subjects in which we were interested because we read about them in the newspapers. For a “private student”, like me, who had no secondary school with specialised teachers to take him through the syllabus, the easiest thing to do was to choose subjects in which study material was easily obtainable. Even in geography, there was not much about Africa.

English Language or English Literature were, of course, avowedly foreign: I had never heard of Joseph Conrad before I began to study his works in depth; and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, written in 1797 and which I was obliged to master, made as much sense to me as the jumbled psychotic dreams from which the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was alleged to suffer.

Well, in what was no doubt a foolhardy manner, I boldly registered for the GCE exam for June 1956, after only 15 months of private study. This was youthful madness — even pupils in secondary schools who had regular teachers took the equivalent examination after five years of study, and me, a private student, was attempting it in 15 months!

I went to Accra to do the examination in June 1956, and then went to Asiakwa to await the results. It was whilst I was listlessly living from day to day, anxious to the point of sickness to find out how I had done in the exam, that I came across New Nation, a Christian magazine. An article by Peter Barker (now a Presbyterian priest practising his profession in London; he writes and speaks Twi as perfectly as you would expect of a native-born Twi-speaker), caught my eye, and I wrote personally to him, asking whether they would be interested if I wrote for the paper.

I had been emboldened to think of taking up writing because I was both an avid reader, and listener to the radio. I never missed a fiction programme on what was then the Gold Coast Broadcasting Service (“Station Z.O.Y”). It was on a programme called The Singing Net that I made my debut as a fiction writer: I wrote a short story called Tough Guy In Town which was later published in Voice of Ghana (Ministry of Information, Accra) and New World Writing. It was broadcast on The Singing Net.

So, I burst on to the writing scene just as Ghana was about to become independent. The good prospects that the advent of independence suddenly opened up for us inspired many other Ghanaians to carve out career paths for themselves in a manner similar to mine. We were ambitious and on the way! Let 1957 come! So far as many of us were concerned, it couldn’t come fast enough.

And sure enough, our hopes were not disappointed. With independence and ‘Africanisation’ of the public services, many of us were able to obtain jobs which were formerly held by Europeans, and we could either serve our country well, or ruin it. For me, those were magical years — 1957: reporter of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation; 1958: sub-editor; 1960: news editor; 1961: editor of Drum magazine. No wonder Ghanaians of a certain age-group love the country to bits and have risked life and liberty to serve it, and will continue to do so.