

# Catholic childhood

## Chapter 1: Ladycross

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I was born in March 1942 in a Catholic nursing home in Sevenoaks, a Kent market and commuter town which, like the others, has never been what you'd call a hotbed of revolution, though "Royal" Tunbridge Wells a few miles away has form. The first English anarchist paper, *The Anarchist*, was founded in 1885 by a man from Tunbridge Wells called Henry Seymour, who was also local secretary of the National Secular Society\*, and in the 1960s the town certainly had an anarchist group because I was the invited speaker at one of their meetings.

\**The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists*, John Quail, Paladin, 1978

My mother was a devout and active member of the local branch of the Church of Rome, particularly its choir and the Catholic Women's League, which did good works, while my father energetically supported the Church of England. A lifelong Conservative, he was chairman of the local association in Clapham and then of the one in Sevenoaks. Once in the 1930s he was almost an MP. The man who narrowly beat him for the Sevenoaks nomination was Sir Charles Ponsonby Bart (Eton, the Guards etc) who was the choice of the landed gentry and the upper class in general while my father stood for the town, business and the city of London, where he worked in insurance as an actuary, having left school at the age of 14. The most prominent local Tory was of course Sir Winston Churchill, who lived at Chartwell near Westerham, a few miles from Sevenoaks, when he wasn't occupying Number 10.

I made my first public appearance aged four at the Conservative summer fête in the grounds of Knole, the Sevenoaks stately home; its owner, Lord Sackville, was the local party president. My father must have bought an awful lot of tickets for the raffle because the winning one had my name on it. The prize was a gigantic stuffed rabbit – far too big to be a cuddly toy – and I had some difficulty collecting it and carrying it back to my parents. I remember being a bit miffed that the sunshade the rabbit was holding in the display turned out not to be included in the prize.

My parents disagreed fundamentally about religion but it was the difference between their ages that really stood out. When I was born my father was already a grand old man of 70 whereas my mother was a sprightly 30-year-old. As I started to grow up my father's health gradually went downhill and he died when I was six. That was in November 1948. My mother lived on for almost 70 years, until March 2018, when she died aged 105. I should also mention that my sister Monica was born in June 1945 so there were two of us to look after.

The shock and pain of my father's death caused my mother to have a nervous breakdown, so she found dealing with a boisterous six-year-old impossible. After Christmas I was sent to a kind of hostel-cum-boarding school in Bexhill, Sussex, which seemed to specialise in children whose parents had been posted abroad by the military or the diplomatic service. It wasn't a particularly happy time for me but I don't remember being overwhelmed by grief. I suppose I just got on with things. What helped was that I wasn't surrounded by people competing to express their sympathy. And in the late 1940s you didn't have to explain to everybody how you came to be fatherless since plenty of other

children no longer had fathers – a simple matter of war damage. So I didn't have the difficulty of having to admit that my father had been too old to be conscripted to fight in the first world war, never mind the second. By contrast, my mother for the rest of her long life remained embarrassed by the fact that she'd married a much older man. I think that first separation between my mother and me had a long-term consequence: we were never particularly close during my childhood or in later life.

In the late 1940s we were all, adults and children, men and women, soldiers and civilians, to some extent "war damaged". This was the official, and estate agents', term for things that were bombed or blasted and might remain unrepaired for years afterwards in those parts of Britain, like Kent, that had suffered during the battle of Britain and subsequent air raids, attacks by flying bombs etc. One of my childhood escapades was organising an obstacle-course race for the six-year-olds of the neighbourhood through our war-damaged greenhouses. My right hand still bears a faint scar from a jagged piece of glass that dropped into it after the optically challenged and careless clown standing above me had put his head into one of the few panes that remained unbroken.

An earlier exploit of mine was dropping an onion down the well at a farm where we were staying in Cornwall to avoid the bombs that Kent had to put up with. There was no bottled mineral water in those days so I suppose we all had to drink a lot of cow's milk afterwards.\* Then there was my assault on one of our beehives using a bucket of water (the bees certainly got their own back) and my teasing of the cockerel who proceeded to chase me down the garden. As you see, I was an early convert to the theory, fashionable in the 1960s, of "learning by doing rather than thinking" or as it used to be called, trial and error. There was a lot of error, from which I suppose I learnt, eventually.

\*Since writing this I've found a reference to the incident in the baby book my mother kept until I went to prep school: "He is up to his tricks again. He threw an onion in the well and we had to pay a man £1 to extricate it."

I don't remember much about my stay in Bexhill – except spending my seventh birthday in bed with mumps. But I do remember a boy called Stanley who made a strong impression. He was always in trouble, most of it self-generated. Inevitably he became the butt so that when anything went wrong and a grown-up asked "What's happened? Who did this?" poor Stanley was automatically blamed. But it was a useful negative lesson to learn: in difficult circumstances don't show off; keep your head down; stay out of trouble.

After Bexhill I spent the summer term as a boarder in a proper prep school, Catholic of course, called Whispers, which was near Wadhurst, also in Sussex. There I remember learning to box and play cricket and in the wolf cubs how to tie a reef knot – not much else, though my schooling continued, obviously. That had started in September 1945 when I was three and a half at Granville school in Sevenoaks, founded by a remarkable woman called Miss Ena Makin and still going strong, catering to the commuter classes. It had opened just a few months before on 8 May 1945 – VE day – with a school crest of V for victory superimposed on a dove of peace, or the other way round.

Miss Makin's sidekick, Miss Westwater, was my first teacher, one of three – all women – from whom I learnt my letters as a small boy. The second was Mrs Rathbone at St Thomas's in Sevenoaks, another new, but this time Catholic, school which now occupied the premises of the nursing home where I'd been born. I spent the school year 1949-50 there as a day boy. And the third was Miss

Harnett at Ladycross, Seaford, Sussex, the Catholic boarding school where I went to begin my conventional (for boys whose parents could afford it) passage through childhood and adolescence: five years at prep school, then another five at “public school”, which is what independent fee-paying schools were traditionally called. Miss Harnett would have been a star in any schooling system: she was Irish and eloquent, kind and inspiring. In her English classes I didn’t feel I was working: even spelling and grammar were fun.

My mother by the way was in no doubt about my need for boarding school. Here’s her very last entry in my baby book, dated September 1950: “Wynford is now 8 ½ and is about to go to his prep school as a boarder. It will do him a world of good. He is v noisy & disobedient at home & needs discipline...”

But why particularly Ladycross? After her death a letter found in my mother’s papers was evidently a reply to her request for advice on which Catholic boarding schools I should be sent to. Written in 1949 by a man called Randon Gilman whose son was a monk and priest at Ampleforth, the Benedictine abbey and school in Yorkshire\*, it says of Ladycross: “Excellent reputation....I think it is the best-known Catholic prep school.” He goes on to recommend as a follow-up either Stonyhurst or Downside, which in terms of prestige he says are “about equal”; then he adds that Ampleforth “has taken 1<sup>st</sup> place *amongst Catholics*, as it is now the largest of all the Catholic boys’ schools – altho’ not YET quite so well-known as the others to Protestants”.

\* The son, Father Aidan Gilman, died there in 2018 aged 91.

Over the years various schools have been called “the Catholic Eton” including Downside, Stonyhurst and The Oratory while Beaumont, a Jesuit school and near neighbour of Eton in the Thames valley, but now defunct, once seemed to have a stronger claim than the others. According to the Jesuit poet (and Stonyhurst schoolmaster) Peter Levi, Beaumont’s first challenge to Eton for a game of cricket “had been met with the response ‘Harrow we know, Winchester we have heard of but what is Beaumont?’ to which the reply had been ‘Beaumont is what Eton was, the school for Catholic gentlemen.’”\* Note the “the”: *the* school for Catholic gentlemen. But there can be little doubt that increasingly after 1949 the “Catholic Eton”, if there was one, was assumed by many people to be Ampleforth. There’s even a book about it including that phrase in the subtitle\*\*. And a private tutorial company seemed to confirm that status by placing Ampleforth first among Catholic schools in a survey of the top independents according to the number of their entries in *Who’s Who*\*\*\*. Today, though, there’s more than a doubt about Ampleforth which has been accused of extensive sexual abuse and at one point banned from taking on new pupils.

\* *Beaumont 1861-1961*, André Deutsch, 1961

\*\* *Ampleforth College: The Emergence of Ampleforth College as “the Catholic Eton”*, Peter Galliver, Gracewing Publishing, 2019

\*\*\* *Does Alma Still Matter?*, Keystone Tutors, 18 November 2020

In any case there’s now a simpler and more logical answer to the question. Surely the “Catholic Eton” can only be Eton itself, as it was in the first place. Founded in 1440 by the devout Catholic King Henry VI, Eton has had a Catholic chaplain since 1985 and is said, by the St Nicholas Society, to have over 250 Catholic pupils. In 2021 its most prominent alumnus, Boris Johnson, who had abandoned

Catholicism as an Eton schoolboy, apparently returned to the faith in a spectacular reverse ferret so he could marry a Catholic. Although he'd previously been married and divorced more than once as a mere Anglican, those marriages apparently didn't count because, once baptised by the Catholic church, you're theirs for life, unable to escape. A "lapsed Catholic", in the eyes of the church, is still a Catholic with all that entails.

Which brings me neatly to "privilege", one of the two classic objections to private, paid-for education; the other, which applies particularly to boarding schools, is the question of "abuse", sexual and sadistic, as documented in Alex Renton's excellent blend of memoir and reportage, *Stiff Upper Lip\**. So let me say, simply, that yes, I was greatly privileged to be schooled at Ladycross and Stonyhurst, but no, I was never "abused", unless you count as abuse the corporal punishment that was routine at boys' and many girls' schools, state and private, day and boarding, in the 1950s, as it was in many of the children's own homes – and in the state institutions euphemistically called "children's homes". At neither of my schools was there much bullying and I was certainly never bullied (I was big for my age and I boxed in and out of the ring); as far as sex is concerned there were some mildly erotic encounters between boys at Ladycross but none that I knew of at Stonyhurst; at neither school, as far as I knew, was there anything untoward between boys and masters (or mistresses, a recent development, undreamt of in the 1950s, at least by me).

\*Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017

One incident, though, is worth recording: a clever boy called Clay who was evidently highly strung once erupted hysterically during supervised evening prep. Mr Holmes, the master in charge, simply lifted him up and deposited him out of the open classroom window onto the ground (we were on the ground floor, obviously). The defenestration of Clay became one of those stories we told and retold (Clay survived the encounter and left with a scholarship to Downside).

Seaford in the 1950s seemed to be a magnet for prep schools. I can't say how many there were, though one was our nextdoor neighbour: Tyttenhanger's playing fields were divided from ours by a hedge. Another school, Chesterton, was opposite – just across the Eastbourne Road. In practical terms this meant that inter-school sports matches were pretty routine affairs: for football and rugby we often walked to the other school, wearing our sports kit; at half-time there was a slice of orange each; then we walked back to school. At least for cricket matches there was some kind of tea between innings – if only a sugary synthetic-tasting powdered lemon drink and a bun or a couple of biscuits.

But think how energy-efficient and kind to the planet this was. Instead of what happens now when the affluent parents of today's private day-school children charge round in people carriers on Saturday mornings or after school from one child's judo to another's football and a third's ballet, we just walked. And the unwoke facts have to be faced: we were naturally leaner and fitter then – school food wasn't that bad, and except for the mumps and measles epidemics which punctuated the school year, we didn't need much medical intervention (beyond compulsory doses to avert constipation). Most important and healthiest of all, our consumption of sweets was strictly controlled. Government-imposed rationing was in force when I started at Ladycross in 1950 and after it was abolished, the authorities merely changed our weekly sweet ration from "six ounces" to what you could get for one and sixpence. So of course we gained nothing. "Chiz, chiz", as Nigel Molesworth of that 1950s classic *Down with Skool* would certainly have put it.

Since we weren't allowed cash at school, sweets were currency. One year in March I decided to make a book for the Grand National. I worked out cautious odds on the fancied horses so I wouldn't take a beating, realising that the novelty of the whole thing would encourage schoolboy punters. Part of the fun was calculating how many sweets were equivalent to a Mars or Crunchy bar. When race day came it turned out I was safe so I did the whole thing all over again in June for the Derby. Even the odd master came up with a toffee or two for a bet. I think afterwards I was quietly told not to make a habit of it but looking back, it's a wonder that I was allowed to do it at all. Did somebody in the staffroom say "Why not? It's practical maths." I should point out that in the 1950s measuring the playground by walking round it hadn't been invented; those were the days of endless arithmetical calculations called "problems" such as "If it takes two men four hours to cut a cricket field using two mowers how long will it take three men using one?"

But there was some severity and some arbitrary behaviour by authority. I said "Shit!" once – I thought under my breath but obviously within the hearing of the master in charge. He gave me a disapproving lecture and, just when I thought that was the end of it, he said: "I'm sending you to the headmaster with this note." Lecture two followed and so did the next referral: "This is serious: I'm sending you to the school chaplain." And after that it was back to the original master who couldn't resist a final admonishment. It was bewildering: four tellings-off for one four-letter word.

Also weird was the occasion when, for some reason, I somehow contrived to miss boxing. I honestly can't remember why this happened – probably I just forgot. Ridiculously I was beaten for "disobeying school rules" which meant three strikes on the hand with the ferula, a 12-inch leather-covered strap. But – I need to say this – however offensive the punishment sounds now, we didn't feel brutalised or terrorised. Afterwards we stoically refused to blub and we put our hands into hot water to mitigate the pain – in fact I don't remember anybody crying – and we did not live in fear. This may be difficult to understand now when, quite rightly, beating naughty boys is no longer the done thing. But then it was universal so we accepted it.

Of course we were nervous at first: as eight-year-old new boys we didn't know what was going to happen to us in this strange new environment. My first memory at Ladycross is of bonding with another new boy, who was close to me on the alphabetical list because of his surname, Hamilton (his father was the publisher Hamish Hamilton). AAHH revealed that his trio of Christian names, Alistair, *Ansulda*, Hamish, included one he was very worried about – the second obviously. Having an unusual name made you vulnerable to teasing, like any other deviation from the norm. I was similarly worried about "Wynford" and started telling people I was to be called "John", chronologically my first name after all.

But I can't say it was difficult to avoid your Christian names being widely known since at school we were always called by our surnames. For brothers, this meant not being Rodney or Charles but Smith ma (short for major, the elder) or Smith mi (minor). This Latinate labelling system could easily accommodate a third and a fourth brother – in which case the sequence went "maximus, major, minor, minimus" – which was handy because one particularly fecund French family, the de Montalemberts, kept sending their sons to Ladycross.

In fact we had quite a few French boys – Seaford was/is near the Channel ferry port of Newhaven, just as Stonyhurst in Lancashire was handy for boys travelling from Ireland via Liverpool – and there were other exotics like Vittorio Manunta, the Italian child film star of *Never Take No for An Answer*,

Prince Amedeo, the Italian Duke of Aosta (1943-2021), who used to come for just the summer term, and Nicolas Gereda de Borbon, who was said to have a Vatican title as well as his Spanish one. Among the predominantly middle-class intake there was a sprinkling of English aristos and one or two MPs' sons – but the boy whose father we most admired was Michael Reid, the son of the second world war hero and prisoner escaper Major Pat Reid, himself an old Ladycross boy and author of *The Colditz Story*, published in 1952, the year that Michael joined the school.

Most of the teachers were competent and kind but there were one or two characters who came straight out of Evelyn Waugh. “Major” Mallet, who had a military moustache and was timetabled to teach my class both English and history for a while, delivered sonorous lectures which he obviously got out of a book because of the way he pronounced the words he used. “Case, see-mile and meet-aphor,” he once intoned. He was an early convert to the trendy doctrine that history should be recent and “relevant” – so the 1940 Dunkirk fiasco occupied weeks of dictated narrative with the major implying that he'd been a participant in the events being described. However, he didn't stay long at Ladycross and after he left it was rumoured that he'd spent the war in the Home Guard on the Norfolk coast.

In my last year I had personal tuition from an old Ladycross boy called Patrick Early who was marking time between Downside and Cambridge. He later (rather unfairly) described the school as “an awful, unheated place with bald playing fields and terrible food, set on the cliffs above Seaford”\*. We met for tutorials in the school library; he complimented and corrected my essays, chatted amicably and taught me poker. Later he worked for the British Council, wrote poetry and translated the Spanish Republican poet Antonio Machado.

\*quoted in the *Times* obituary of another ex-Ladycross boy, Mark Sykes

In my time at Ladycross (1950-5) there was something of a regime change. The owner and headmaster, Tony (ex-Downside) Roper, retired and sold the school to Michael (ex-Stonyhurst) Feeny, and there were various reforms, gradually introduced. Cold showers first thing in the morning was one Feeny innovation. Another was academic streaming. In the old Roper days you were placed according to age, then moved up a class if you were obviously ready for the next one. After my first week at Ladycross I was moved up and confronted by a fierce schoolmaster called Mr Pontet (who was inclined to twist and pull your short hairs from behind) with “mensa, mensa, mensam...” – my first Latin lesson – and so it went on until I reached the top form, where for a year I had to compete for prizes with boys a year older than me. But Feeny was a moderniser, set on dividing boys from the beginning into sheep and goats: two academic streams – there weren't enough boys for three.

In terms of how we practised the Catholic religion, there was little noticeable difference between Roper's Ladycross and Feeny's. There was chapel, a chaplain, weekly Sunday mass, a boys' choir, grace before meals and an annual “retreat”, which consisted of listening to homilies, prayer, meditation and uplifting reading.

Once the priest giving the retreat, who was German, tried to explain the complicated Catholic doctrine of “giving scandal”, which is defined as an attitude or behaviour which leads another to do evil. The basis of the doctrine is a letter by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians referring to eating meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols: although it wasn't in itself wrong for a Christian to

eat the meat – since a pagan sacrifice could not “change” anything – by eating it they could “give scandal”, so cause offence, to those ignorant of the correct theological position.

Critically this means that you can give scandal by performing an act which is not in itself immoral but can be misinterpreted. The priest illustrated the point by saying that in Germany he could go to a café and drink a glass of beer without anybody objecting – but in England doing so could “give scandal” because many Protestants saw drinking alcohol, particularly by the clergy, as sinful.

I remember thinking then that this wasn't a very good argument: surely Catholics should do what they thought was right irrespective of other people's views. Indeed the scandal (in the ordinary English sense) of sex crimes committed by Catholic clergy being covered up by the church is surely made worse by this conscious policy of avoiding “giving scandal”. In the end your reputation and public image will be a worse disaster when the cover-ups are discovered, as has been demonstrated time and again in recent years. The sex crime followed by the cover-up seems to implicate the institution in the first offence as well as the second.

Under Feeny, in my time at least, Ladycross remained a relatively warm and friendly place whereas the Stonyhurst I went on to was something of an extended ordeal. I don't know how many times I reflected on my good luck in *not* having been sent to a Jesuit prep school. Maybe if I had, I would still be “one of theirs” and another example of the popular saying attributed to the Jesuits, “Give me a child of seven and he's mine for life”.

By the way, there is no evidence that the Jesuit founding fathers such as Ignatius Loyala ever said this or anything like it. Still less would he or they have used the words “Give me a child UNTIL he is seven...” This is the silliest cliché applied to the intensely intellectual Jesuits since they've never been known for specialising in crèches, playgroups or nurseries. Schools and universities are their thing.

# Catholic childhood

## Chapter 2: Stonyhurst

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In September 1955 I joined the school train from Euston in London to Whalley in Lancashire, destination Stonyhurst College, the historic boys' boarding school founded in 1593 at St Omer, now in northern France, by the Jesuits, Catholic schools having been outlawed by Queen Elizabeth I's Protestant regime. The Jesuits no longer run it. Indeed you don't apparently have to be a Catholic to go there. Nor do you have to board or even be a boy. Stonyhurst is a co-educational school now (so presumably the pupils have stopped singing *The Stonyhurst Chorus* which goes "While boyhood doth to manhood grow/Be aye the same we used to know"). The school is professionally marketed – and far more expensive than it used to be, even allowing for inflation: from the publicity shots the facilities are improved beyond recognition and apparently there are hardly any Jesuits left on the staff.

Since I'd won an entrance scholarship I was placed in Lower Grammar "S", one of three streamed classes for 13-year-olds. Ours was the smallest: there were just 12 of us in a year of 50-60 boys. We were in no doubt about what was expected of scholars over the course of our Stonyhurst career: in with a scholarship, out with another one at Oxford or Cambridge. To this end we took five GCE O levels at the age of 15 after two years rather than the standard three: English language, French, maths, Latin and Greek (though I was spared Greek, having somehow avoided it at Ladycross, and learnt some geography instead). A levels followed two years later; then at 17 we had an extra year to study and compete for a university entrance scholarship. At the very least it was taken for granted that we would have a good chance of getting a place at one of the Oxbridge colleges – assuming that we behaved ourselves, worked hard and did as we were told.

But here's a funny thing. Until the age of about 14 I wasn't dreaming of a future in academe: I actually planned to be a soldier. I'd read Winston Churchill on his early life and saw myself following in his footsteps to Sandhurst, the military college for would-be officers, rather than university. In fact, looking back, a post-school course involving more practical work and physical activity would probably have suited me much better than conventional study for an academic degree. There was a problem, though, with soldiering: it involved trying to kill people.

And the question of killing people was already a worry. One of the first English essays I can remember writing at Stonyhurst was called "The election address of an independent candidate". Pages of platitudes attempting to justify the policies of the Conservative party ended with two big disagreements. Having been to France I objected to the British licensing laws which in those days banned pubs from serving beer in the afternoon – surely the best time of day to drink it, particularly in summer – and I objected to the death penalty for murder which, as I saw it, repeated the crime.

At first sight Stonyhurst seemed to be a very military school. Massive lifesize (or bigger) portraits of the seven old boys who had been awarded the Victoria Cross dominated the refectory (dining-room)\* – though only later did I find out where Stonyhurst really stands in the hierarchy of VC-holders. Eton is said to be in first place with 37, more than five times the Stonyhurst score and as many as the next two public schools, Harrow (20) and Haileybury (17), put together; then come



Wellington (15), Cheltenham (14), Marlborough (13), Edinburgh (nine) and Clifton (eight); level with Stonyhurst on seven are Dulwich, Rugby and Westminster. Wikipedia, the source of these details, advises caution here for all sorts of reasons; one I found out for myself was that it's possible for a VC holder to be claimed by two schools because he actually went to two schools. Lieutenant Maurice Dease, the first VC of the first world war, spent several years at Stonyhurst before moving on to the army department of Wimbledon College, also a traditionally Jesuit institution. Not surprisingly he is claimed by both.

\*The refectory also included a table where Oliver Cromwell is said to have slept in full armour on the eve of the battle of Preston in 1648.

Another one of the Stonyhurst seven was Aidan Liddell of the Royal Flying Corps. He appeared in a historic group photograph, published in July 1908 in the school magazine, along with the Irishman Joseph Plunkett. Some years later Liddell died of his wounds in France and was awarded the VC for bravery whereas Plunkett was executed by the British in Dublin for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising. This is a reminder that Stonyhurst alumni have taken part in all sorts of militant activities, on various sides, over the years from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to the contested British occupation of Ireland including Derry's Bloody Sunday in 1972. And one or two of them are highly likely to have taken a pot shot at somebody they went to school with.

In his memoir *Jesuit Child* (Michael Joseph, 1971) Macdonald Hastings (journalist father of journalist Max\*) writes of a Stonyhurst contemporary, the IRA man Peter O'Flaherty: "He was my bosom pal at the age when boys first make close friends. He ultimately became a Southern Irish rebel, second-in-command of the IRA. He posted his name with others on the door of Southwark Cathedral in 1939 at a time when the IRA were laying bombs in suitcases about London."

\*ex-editor of the London *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Telegraph*

Or a metaphorical pot shot, you might say. The right-wing journalist and popular historian Paul Johnson\* was a Stonyhurst contemporary of Bruce Kent\*, who was once a monsignor (a kind of super priest in the Catholic Church) and later became the top man in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The curiosity is that in their younger days Johnson was the radical who wrote passionately for, and edited, the left-wing *New Statesman* while Kent was the conservative clergyman who once described his irritation at CND demonstrators\*\* getting in the way of the weddings he celebrated on Saturdays. Later in life Johnson and Kent swapped sides. Kent became an intrepid peace campaigner who impressed his opponents as well as his supporters while Johnson wrote Mrs Thatcher's speeches and was decorated by President George Bush. Perhaps this tendency to be militant rather than moderate, to insist on taking things to their logical conclusion, whatever it costs, is what a Stonyhurst schooling particularly seems to encourage.

\*Johnson died in January 2023; Kent in June 2022.

\*\*According to his obit in the *Daily Telegraph* he thought they were "absolute loonies".

Certainly in the 1950s this was a very military school. Membership of the army cadet force, the CCF, was compulsory from the day you arrived until the day you left, although I imagine it was formally described as "voluntary" (weird isn't it: "all our boys volunteer"). This meant playing soldiers for one and a half afternoons every week. And for three of your five years at school there was a week's

compulsory camp during the summer holidays. The CCF seemed to be everywhere: it organised the boys' Christmas concert and attached itself to various religious ceremonies. For example, we stayed at school for Holy Week and Easter unless they were very late in the year, and on the Sunday we went to mass in battledress so we could form up outside the church afterwards for an Easter parade.

On the feast of Corpus Christi in high summer the CCF provided a guard of honour for the procession of the blessed sacrament (consecrated wafer) from the church to an outside altar for the service of benediction. According to legend, once when a boy dropped his rifle in church the regimental sergeant major, who was evidently not a Catholic, shouted "Don't make a balls of it in front of your god". RSM Slack's normal, natural mode was the high-volume parade-ground bark and I don't think I ever saw him smile. I can hear him now screaming in broad Lancashire "Put Cadet --- on report, laffing on parade".

I was put on a charge just once – in bizarre circumstances. At summer CCF camp somewhere on Salisbury Plain I collapsed with a mild attack of dysentery and as a precaution was immediately sent to hospital. After 24 hours' observation I was pronounced fit to leave by the hospital doctor and invited to phone home – which I did, asking my mother to come and collect me. Six weeks later, back at school for the autumn term, I found myself on a charge for "leaving camp without permission". I suppose I was lucky it wasn't "desertion" or "mutiny" (I knew better than to point out in reply that I had, in fact, left camp with the CCF's permission and then the hospital with theirs).

Drill was the most boring bit of the CCF; exercises could be fun. Sometimes we got to use our 1914-18 rifles to fire blanks in the direction of another platoon from a safe distance. Indeed safety was paramount. When loading, unloading or reloading our rifles we were told to "keep your weapon pointed towards the ground rather than up in the air". One boy in my platoon misapplied the instruction by resting his loaded rifle on his foot and then accidentally touching the trigger so discharging a blank round. The blast penetrated his boot and gave him a flesh wound, thus getting him off CCF for weeks.

For me, the worst thing about the CCF was the uniform. Blacking your boots and polishing the brass bits of your webbing belt was nuisance enough but wearing battledress, made of rough serge, was itchy torture, above all if you had sensitive skin, as redheads like me tend to have. I started off suffering in silence. Then after a few weeks it occurred to me that I could wear my pyjamas underneath the battledress. It was a bit hot in the summer, admittedly, but not too hot: Lancashire in those days didn't seem to suffer much from global warming.

One problem remained: the coarse fabric of the standard-issue khaki shirt which, even if you wore a pyjama jacket underneath, chafed at the neck. What to do? Salvation came from an ad in my mother's newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*. "Ex-officers' khaki shirts for sale, stylish, comfortable..." I read, and immediately sent off my postal order for 19/6 (just less than £1). Only once did an officious boy NCO spot the difference between my officer's shirt and the standard-issue ones and order me to change shirts in future. I ignored him, crossed my fingers and continued to get away with it.

I was already ambivalent about the army in the autumn of 1956 when in a matter of weeks the whole political world was turned upside down by the double crisis of Suez and Hungary. I remember sharing in the excitement when "our troops" went in to try to recapture and secure the Suez Canal –

but the exhilaration didn't last. For one thing we eventually learnt that an ex-Stonyhurst boy was a casualty of the operation. This was Second-Lieutenant Anthony Moorhouse, who was doing his national service in the West Yorkshire regiment. His younger brother Peter was a pupil at Stonyhurst at the time, a senior cadet.

Anthony was captured by "terrorists" aka "resistance fighters" who planned to exchange him for Egyptian prisoners taken by the British. The kidnapers took him to a safe house where he was trussed, gagged and hidden under the floor. Four days later they came back to the safe house to find him dead. "There was a curfew and constant patrols," one of them said to the *Guardian* 50 years later, explaining why it took them so long.

Meanwhile the Hungarian rebels against their Communist regime were being brutally crushed by the Russian army. In our junior debating society the extraordinary, preposterous motion "This house deplors the failure of the western powers to declare war on Soviet Russia" was defeated by a mere two votes. The Jesuit priest who supervised the debate later commented in the school magazine: "A generous and quixotic leap to the side of the hard-pressed Hungarians might have paid off." Oh yes...and started the third world war?

These were crazy times. For many of my generation – and certainly for me – politics proper began in the autumn of 1956. How could you continue to support either the Russians in Hungary or the British who, we learnt, had colluded with Israel as well as France in attacking Egypt?\* For once the Americans seemed to be the comparatively good guys because they insisted that the British and their allies should withdraw from Suez after their invasion. Both the Communist party worldwide and the Conservative party in Britain lost a lot of support in 1956 – and some of us on the threshold of politics really woke up.

\*Paul Johnson, still in radical mode, wrote the first, and definitive, account of the collusion, *The Suez War*, MacGibbon & Kee, 1957

I had a relative called Bill Hyett (he was married to a cousin of my mother's) who was a staunch Liberal and had once been the Liberal party candidate for East Grinstead. When I went to see him after the Suez debacle he recalled the animated discussions he'd had over the years with my Conservative father. Now Bill compared Suez to the Ulster Unionist/Tory revolt against the threat of Irish Home Rule in 1913 when the "law and order" party showed itself as anything but. "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right" was their slogan. Bill was of course delighted that I was moving towards Liberalism.

But Stonyhurst certainly wasn't. Most people there – Jesuit staff and boys – were conventional, Conservative "patriots" who took world events in their stride without worrying too much about the ethics of what Britain was doing. One of my contemporaries, William Cash, known then as "Willy", who reinvented himself at Oxford as "Bill" and nowadays appears in public as "Sir Bill Cash MP", went on to become even more right-wing, obsessive and long-winded over Europe and Brexit than he was at school. Another contemporary was William "Stiffy" James, son and half-brother of Tory MPs (RA Butler was his godfather). Two exceptions to the right-wing mood were Anand Chitnis, a boy in my year whose elder brother Pratap, also a product of Stonyhurst, was a big shot in the Liberal party, and Peter Levi SJ, a scholastic, that is, a Jesuit in training so not yet a priest.

Peter, a classical scholar and poet who afterwards became Oxford professor of poetry (and later left the Jesuits and married Deirdre Craven, the widow of Cyril Connolly), was a tall, lanky figure with a stride to match and a high-pitched squeaky voice. In fact his voice was perfect for imitations of the Queen, who in those days had a particularly formal and strangulated delivery. “My husband and I...” was an unmistakable introductory phrase of hers, often mocked by the irreverent.

So when Peter, speaking in a school debate, suddenly used that phrase in a very recognisable voice there was instant reaction: sniggering, giggles, laughter... except from Edward Loden\*, a senior and very keen boy soldier in the cadet force. Tight-lipped, white-faced (or was it in fact red?) with fury, he stormed out of the room and went to complain at this disgraceful example of *lèse-majesté*...not to a senior Jesuit but to a senior soldier, the CCF's commanding officer, Colonel Louis Robertson.

\*I'm afraid that Loden crops up later in this book (in Chapter 11) as an officer in the Parachute Regiment whose men committed the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972.

I don't think there were any serious consequences but this was a striking reminder of where power and influence seemed to lie at Stonyhurst in the 1950s. It's not entirely facetious to draw a parallel between the college at that time and Franco's Spain. In both there was a fraternal relationship between the church and the military. In Spain the church, part of the coalition that had brought Franco to power, continued to validate the Francoist regime while at Stonyhurst the Jesuits conspicuously encouraged, and depended on, the cadet force and its military discipline.

Long after I left school I discovered an actual connection between Stonyhurst and Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War. If you read on, you'll see why this wasn't included in the school's history curriculum – it wasn't something for the Jesuits to boast about. The historian Richard Baxell, in his account of the British volunteers who came to Spain to fight for the Republic,\* describes what happened to some International Brigaders who were captured: “The prisoners were taken individually to be interrogated by Don Pablo Merry del Val, the son of the former Spanish ambassador in London, who was a lawyer and a senior official in the Nationalist Ministry of Press and Propaganda. Del Val spoke impeccable English in an upper-class accent, having been educated at Stonyhurst, the same Jesuit-run English public school as a number of Rebel officers, including the head of the Nationalist press office, Luis Bolin.” The British prisoners were threatened with summary execution by their guards and had to watch their Spanish fellow-captives taken away to be shot.

\**Unlikely Warriors*, Aurum Press, 2012

Bolin, born in 1894 to a Spanish father and an English mother, was a particularly nasty customer. He'd been one of the organisers of the secret flight in July 1936 that brought Franco from semi-exile in the Canaries to Morocco from where he launched the uprising that started the civil war. Bolin then flew to Rome where he negotiated an arms deal with Mussolini's government. After the German aerial bombing of Guernica he orchestrated the propaganda campaign that claimed that the town had actually been destroyed by “Red saboteurs”.

But of the various Spanish old boys whose names crop up in accounts of the civil war, Gonzalo de Aguilera Munro, an aristocrat who followed his father to Stonyhurst as a pupil (1897-1904), was surely the nastiest piece of work. According to his own account, when the war started he lined up the labourers on his estate and shot six of them *pour encourager les autres*. At the end of his life,

obviously demented, he shot and killed his own two sons and he died in a mental hospital. During the war he was a press officer – he said things to journalists like: “It’s our programme, you understand, to exterminate a third of the male population of Spain. That will clean up the country and rid us of the proletariat.”

There were also British Stonyhurst old boys who prominently supported Franco – as did most upper-class, intellectual and literary Catholics. Bernard Wall, founder and editor of the pro-Franco quarterly *Colosseum*, devoted the October 1938 issue to the complete text of Primo de Rivera’s exposition of fascist doctrine. He even had good things to say about Hitler: racism, he argued, “gives the people unity and hope”. Tom Burns, the publisher (and later, diplomat and spy), went beyond verbal support in 1938 when he drove an ambulance, donated by English Catholics, to Burgos where the Nationalists had their headquarters.\*

\**Papa Spy* by Jimmy Burns, Walker & Co, New York, 2009. The book describes his father’s work as British press attaché in the Madrid embassy during the second world war. It involved covert propaganda and espionage.

By contrast another Stonyhurst old boy, Major Frank Foley, was responsible for saving thousands of Jews from the Nazis in the 1930s. At the British embassy in Berlin, as passport control officer, he arranged exit documents for would-be refugees in defiance of British government policy.\*\*

\*\* *Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews* by Michael Smith, Biteback 2016.

A key aspect of the Stonyhurst CCF was to encourage careers in the armed services for old boys. But in the late 1950s the policy didn’t seem to be working. In May 1959 a Catholic military chaplain wrote to the *Stonyhurst Magazine* to complain about the lack of old boys choosing the army as a career: “Not since 1956 has a Stonyhurst officer cadet passed out of Sandhurst. The last to enter from Stonyhurst was in 1954.” When Peter Levi wrote in reply, saying this wasn’t in fact a disaster, his letter was not published. A year or two later, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford and Peter was at Heythrop, a Jesuit college in Oxfordshire, I wrote inviting him to join an anti-nuclear Committee of 100 demonstration. He wrote back regretfully saying no: “As things are, there would be all hell let loose, & I don’t want to be thrown out of the Jesuits at this point for the sake of a single political demonstration.”

In the 1950s Britain’s foreign policy was dominated by brutal colonial repression in places like Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus. In Kenya at Hola camp 11 Mau Mau detainees were clubbed to death; in Cyprus there were frequent reports of brutality and torture, although at the time they were officially denied. France was fighting the Algerian war in a similar way: an early copy of the left-wing weekly *L’Express* would arrive uncensored in the school library to be followed by the officially doctored version – it was a simple matter to compare the two, looking for the blank columns in the second copy to show where reports of torture or other atrocities by the army or police had been cut by the French authorities.

Hanging and the campaign to abolish it continued to be a big issue in Britain until the mid-1960s but an even bigger one increasingly was the H-bomb. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was founded in early 1958 and the first Aldermaston march took place that Easter. Just as in the Suez crisis, where there didn’t seem to be any case at all in favour of the Israeli-British-French attack on

Egypt, I failed to see how Catholics could justify supporting the use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons. According to classic Catholic doctrine a “just war” must meet certain criteria – including the reasonable supposition that it wouldn’t do more harm than good. So how could the mass destruction of civilian targets qualify? How could there be a “just” nuclear war?

I can’t be sure in which order I read the two arguments that follow; they make a powerful pragmatic point – but what’s it worth in moral terms? A historian commenting on Oliver Cromwell’s massacres of civilians after the capture of Drogheda and Wexford during his Irish campaign in 1649 said they could certainly be considered “war crimes” but since they had the effect of terrifying the Catholic population, and therefore shortening the war, they could be justified – just as the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were “war crimes” but had a similar effect. They too terrified the Japanese enemy and so helped to bring the war to an end. Winston Churchill writing about the second world war appealed to the same argument but the other way round: Hiroshima and Nagasaki were terrible things to inflict on a civilian population but, if they persuaded the Japanese to stop fighting, they were justified just as Cromwell’s massacres had been.

Some Catholics in the 1950s did seem to see the issue of the H-bomb more clearly: the French bishops, for example, came out against it and in the Jesuit periodical *The Month* Archbishop Roberts SJ argued cogently and eloquently that the use of nuclear weapons couldn’t possibly be justified on moral grounds. But it has taken 60 years or so – and the passage of I don’t know how many popes – for the Vatican to take up a principled position on the issue. If the Catholic Church has been in decline in my lifetime this has to be one of the reasons – this and welcoming as a convert a war criminal like Tony Blair without any apparent “act of contrition” for his collaboration with the United States in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. And as for Boris Johnson, “the first Catholic prime minister”, you really couldn’t make it up. If lying is what politicians routinely do, at least conventional ones pretend that they don’t. Boris shows his contempt for the hoi polloi by changing his tune when it suits him and without apology. As his ex-editor Max Hastings once put it, “I would not take Boris’s word about whether it is Monday or Tuesday.”

In the spring of 1959, my last year at Stonyhurst, I went to see the headmaster, Father Boyle SJ, to ask permission to go on CND’s anti-nuclear Aldermaston march rather than stay at school for Holy Week and the Easter CCF parade. I quoted Archbishop Roberts though I made it clear that I had no intention of marching under a banner proclaiming “Stonyhurst says no to nuclear weapons” – this would have been obvious nonsense since most of the school would certainly have said yes to them. But Fr Boyle was adamant that I wouldn’t be allowed to march anyway in what was officially term time. Stonyhurst couldn’t possibly sanction such behaviour – what would our military old boys think?

I think that was the moment when I decided that I needed to leave school as soon as possible.

A year or so earlier, under the regime of Fr Boyle’s predecessor, Fr Vavasour, there’d been a truly shocking incident – though I only learnt the details of it years later. Four boys had gone out drinking in the neighbouring town of Preston on a school whole holiday. One of them, drunk, fell down the steps of a public toilet, broke his leg and was taken to hospital. The hospital, reasonably enough, phoned the college. The other three boys, instead of sensibly making their inconspicuous way back to Stonyhurst, went to the hospital to check on the patient’s condition – and walked into the arms of a couple of waiting Jesuits.

All four boys were instantly expelled, though the sentence was later technically commuted to “rustication” so that the miscreants would qualify for membership of the old boys’ association. For three of them, 18-year-olds who were leaving that year, this was hardly even a punishment – the holidays started early, that was all. But for the fourth boy, aged 17, who was planning to come back to school in the autumn, expulsion was very bad news. Finding somewhere else to take his A-levels was a problem for him and his parents.

I was told all this years later by his younger brother, then an eight-year-old pupil at Hodder, the Stonyhurst prep school, which was a few minutes’ walk away. Boys at the college with younger brothers at Hodder used to visit them on Sundays. So when his elder brother didn’t turn up one Sunday he was mystified: was his brother ill? There was no word of explanation from anyone in authority and he only found out that his brother had been expelled when their father wrote and told him several weeks later.

When the England rugby player Kyran Bracken and his elder brother John were at Stonyhurst in the 1980s, the penalty for drinking was suspension rather than expulsion. John was caught drinking and suspended. But because the Bracken parents were away, he couldn’t be sent home so he was transferred to the school infirmary to serve his 10-day sentence in solitary confinement, though he was allowed to go for a run from time to time. Kyran could take him academic work to do but not speak to him.\*

*\*Behind the Scrum, Kyran Bracken, Orion 2004*

This cold inhuman treatment shows, I think, that there are even worse things in school life than corporal punishment. As a body the Stonyhurst Jesuits were certainly callous, unfeeling – and shouldn’t really have been in charge of a boys’ boarding school. But though they were repressive they were not particularly sadistic – for the time. Corporal punishment was routine in the 1950s in both private and state schools. At Stonyhurst, beatings on the hand were administered by the Jesuit-on-duty using a ferula (a length of whalebone wrapped in rubber). You queued up outside his office, then reported the number of strokes you’d been awarded by whoever it was you’d fallen foul of.

I was beaten only once at Stonyhurst as an individual (there were also one or two occasions where we were punished collectively). One summer’s day I decided to check the lunchtime cricket scoreboard on the radio before going outside to the playground as we were programmed to do. I was spotted on the way to the playroom where the radio was and sentenced to three strokes of the ferula. This was a highly educative experience and confirmed my growing understanding that authority usually got things wrong, that if you trusted the people above you, you risked doing yourself an injury. I wasn’t an anarchist yet but I was moving in that direction.

And the Jesuits, known for their highly sophisticated and intense supervision, were on my case. Here’s a specimen comment in an end-of-term report from my playroom master\* when I was 14: “He seems to have become somewhat bumptious – excessively self-confident & independent.” And a year later (from the same Jesuit): “He seems a very conceited boy in great need of some basic humility.” From a different Jesuit another year later: “There is a grave danger of his becoming an eccentric and leading others the same way.” And the headmaster chipped in with “he may be wasting time in talk and ‘discussion’, not spending sufficient time on the solid work that is necessary if the discussion is to be of value”.

\*A playroom master is the equivalent of a house master in a conventional English public school: the traditional Jesuit method is to group pupils laterally in playrooms according to age rather than vertically in houses made up of all age-groups. One intended effect of this is to reduce the opportunities for boys of different ages to mix and form close friendships – including sexual ones. At Stonyhurst, although younger, prettier boys were known as “tarts” and were chatted up by older boys, I think that was as far as it went at that time (the late 1950s). However, there were various scandals later on, some apparently involving people I was at school with who progressed into teaching whether in or out of the Jesuit order.

Stonyhurst certainly provided many opportunities for “talk and discussion”: besides the Catholic Evidence Guild (see below), there were debating societies for junior and senior boys and as you went up the school you could join specialist discussion groups, which often included the teachers, in subjects like history, science, literature. In the literary one my paper on the novels of Graham Greene was preceded by one from Anthony Levi SJ (a scholastic like his brother Peter) on comedy in literature and followed by Peter himself on the poet WB Yeats. The literary highpoint of the year was a visit by two of his contemporaries, Julian Mitchell and Dom Moraes, who read a selection of modern poetry including their own work.

Once we had a visit from the journalist Christopher Hollis who had previously taught at Stonyhurst and later sent his sons\* there. As we gathered in the school library I wondered if Hollis’s talk would essentially be a repetition of his latest piece in the *Spectator*, a copy of which lay behind him on the table. It was, and I learnt the valuable lesson that all freelance journalists need to learn: good stories can profitably be told (and sold) more than once. By now I was thinking about journalism as a career. I’d had two brief spells of work experience which both led in the same direction. The first was a week on the *Sevenoaks News*, a small independent weekly, where the editor gave me simple assignments and corrected my death reports: when I wrote “so-and-so died” he would change it to “passed away” or for variation “passed over”. I also wrote a feature on Esperanto, the constructed international language, based on interviewing a local linguist.

\*One of them, my contemporary Nigel Hollis, went into publishing and died aged 45.

The second spell of work experience was even briefer. I spent a monotonous, mindless day in a workshop shaping lengths of aluminium tubing on a lathe. The pay was one shilling and sixpence an hour – the price of a pint of beer. It was a day well spent because not to be repeated. At the end of it I collected my 12 shillings and said politely that I wouldn’t be back. Schoolwork leading to Oxford and the possibility of journalism suddenly seemed very attractive by comparison.

At school there were play-reading groups (I read the part of Jimmy Porter in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*) and plays produced on stage, sometimes with boy producers. Subversive-sounding literature (*Howl* by Allen Ginsburg) circulated and I went regularly with Reynold Clark, the head of English, to Preston public library to choose books for the senior library, including ones by Gide, Camus and Sartre which were on the Index of books that Catholics were theoretically forbidden to read\*. But we were effectively exempt from this ban because our role was to prepare ourselves to engage in public debate with Protestants and atheists at university and beyond. So we needed to know our enemy and their thoughts and arguments.



\*Graham Greene's novels were not on the Index – but nor were they available in the main Stonyhurst library which was open to 12-year-olds. When Greene visited the college the Jesuit showing him round felt he had to apologise for this. Ever the diplomat, Greene apparently replied that he quite understood and agreed that moral complexity, as in *The Heart of the Matter*, wasn't suitable fare for juniors.

Then of course there was a boys' literary magazine; ours was called the *Eagle* (I think it was first published well before the boys' comic of that name which was launched in 1950). Among the pieces I wrote – various short stories, a polemical attack on boxing (after I'd given it up, of course), a gossip column – there was one that caused a minor theological/political crisis. It was a vigorous defence of the proposal to replace Latin by English in the celebration of the mass. In the end my article was printed with a disclaimer, dictated by Stonyhurst's leading Jesuit theologian, including a highly guarded sentence that I certainly would not have written: "The text of the latest Papal pronouncement does not, I understand, encourage one to believe that any *major* change is likely." A few years later, of course, the "major change" took place as the Catholic church dragged itself into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and replaced Latin by the vernacular.

Religion was *the* dominant feature of school life. In fact it's difficult to imagine a more intensely Catholic school than Stonyhurst was in the 1950s. Winter and summer, every day started with an electric wake-up bell at 6.55am followed by mass in the boys' chapel at 7.25am. On Sunday there was a second, sung mass in the parish church which was in the college grounds and a benediction service in the evening. Every day there was grace before meals, of course, and finally "night prayers", after which there was compulsory silence until breakfast next day. Here's a sample of the kind of thing that sent us to bed:

"Death is often nearer than you imagine; and many who have promised themselves a long life have suddenly been cut off in their sins. Are you so ready that, if death should come tonight, you would not be surprised? Do not live in a state in which you dare not die."

Or how about this, possibly even more chilling?

"You can only die once and if you die ill the loss is irreparable. If anyone from hell could return to life, how would he prepare himself for death? Let the misery of others be an instruction to you."

These examples were published in *The Manual of Prayers for Youth* (1935 edition); they are not included in today's *Stonyhurst Prayer Book* which is an altogether gentler affair.

The chapel was sometimes used in times of crisis by the headmaster, a Jesuit whose formal title was Rector, for what in a conventional school would be special assemblies. Fr Vavasour's were legendary. One I remember featured what he called "saving" your "brother" who was caught up in some "immoral" activity by reporting him. But to be fair to my fellow-pupils I don't think they ever did collaborate with the authorities in this way.

At the beginning of the school year we spent several days in retreat. Ordinary social activities were out, talking above all – though at table "please pass the salt" was just about OK. As well as devotional books in the library there was a supply of religious pamphlets published by the English Catholic Truth Society and its sterner Irish equivalent. One of the Irish ones warned against what Catholics call "the dangerous occasions of sin" – in this case ballroom dancing. It's only fair to add

that in my last term the Jesuits invited the Harrogate convent girls to a dance at Stonyhurst, though their supervision made sinning difficult. That was the occasion after which I tried to write a gossip column – hard work in the circumstances...and ultimately unrewarded. Research\* has revealed that the piece wasn't in the end published.

\*thanks, Peter F

As well as compulsory religious activities, such as the Easter church parade and the Corpus Christi procession, there were all sorts of voluntary ones. In May devout and diligent boys wrote verses in praise of the Virgin Mary in French, Greek or Latin to be displayed outside the chapel, English not being considered suitable for this high-status task. Then for planned prayer, discussion and good works you could join the Sodality of the Assumption of Our Lady, which organised various spiritual activities and insisted on a quarter of an hour's private meditation every day. Or there was the Guild of St Peter whose members prayed together and marched to the church before mass on the feast of saints Peter and Paul.

For the opportunity to defend the faith in public you could join the Catholic Evidence Guild. After studying a topic like confession or papal infallibility you stood on a soapbox in the playground and practised your speech on anyone who was prepared to listen. Then you took your test. This meant standing at the teacher's desk in a classroom to deliver a 10-15 minute speech to three Jesuits sitting at the back and answering their questions. If you passed, you were licensed for that topic at traditional speakers' venues like Hyde Park and Tower Hill in London and the Pier Head in Liverpool or local ones in Preston and Blackburn.

My favourite topic was "The Problem of Evil". I was already highly sceptical about the so-called proofs for the existence of God – they made sense if you believed in God but weren't very convincing if you didn't – so I was delighted to find something I could defend with complete conviction. Essentially, disposing of "the problem of evil" was providing an answer to those people who said: "An omnipotent God can't possibly allow pain or sin or disability and be called merciful." To which the simple answer was: "Oh yes, he can precisely because he's all-powerful – in other words he can define what is merciful and what isn't." This kind of reasoning is sometimes dismissed as "jesuitical" but it made, and makes, sense to me.

The most pervasive religious observance at Stonyhurst was that every piece of schoolwork you did was prefaced by the dedication AMDG (ad majorem dei gloriam – to the greater glory of God). It wasn't, strictly speaking, compulsory but everybody did it. And the boys who wanted to go the extra mile added at the end of their work LDS or even LDS ET BVM (laus deo semper – praise always be to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary).

The one thing the Jesuits couldn't change was the weather which at Stonyhurst has always been cold, dismal and damp. Indeed if you've ever wondered why Lancashire was one of the few places in England where Catholicism was still widely practised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – where Catholic landowners often managed to survive, for the most part keeping their lands as well as their faith – the weather must have had something to do with it. Today Lancashire holds two of England's all-time rainfall records: highest in five minutes – 32mm (at Preston not far from Stonyhurst in 1893) and highest in 90 minutes – 117mm (at Dunsop Valley, even nearer, in 1967).

The weather (and therefore the mud and soggy of the sports pitches) surely explains why Stonyhurst has usually been better at rugby than cricket. There were two internationals in my year, Barry O'Driscoll, first of a famous Irish rugby family, and Nick Drake-Lee, who played in the front row for England while still at university. I particularly remember the summer of 1958 when we had to play cricket on wet, soggy, pitches for the entire term except for a single weekend. Winter was a depressing time and seemed to go on much longer than it did in the south-east of England. Most years I seemed to spend a week in the infirmary with flu, bronchitis or whatever. In fact I was permanently cold in winter and took to wearing three pullovers under my tweed jacket. Curiously, authoritarian and prescriptive as it was, Stonyhurst in the 1950s didn't have a strict school uniform policy in the normal sense. We wore tweed jackets and grey flannels in the week and dark suits on Sundays.

The weather and the college building – at one time, apparently, the biggest in England under a single roof – made a strong impression on Stonyhurst's most famous old boy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle\*. When Sherlock Holmes leaves 221B Baker Street he often seems to encounter fog and in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, set on Dartmoor, the hall with its twin towers is recognisably Stonyhurst. So of course is the damp, foggy weather. But the landscape around Stonyhurst could be inspirational, as the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Hobbit romances of JRR Tolkien certainly show. And nowadays visitors flock to the surrounding countryside as well as the school.

\*There is (or certainly was in the 1950s) a Conan Doyle anecdote: his place in church was directly below the pulpit where the regular preacher had the unfortunate habit of spraying his spittle when waxing rhetorical. So CD decided one Sunday to bring in an umbrella which he put up when the preacher started. History doesn't record what happened next but presumably he was beaten, as he was according to his own account, *Memories and Adventures: An Autobiography*, regularly and often.

But what of the teaching? I was taught by some outstanding people, both Jesuits and laymen: Reynold Clark and Peter Hardwick (English); Fr Rea and Fr Holt (history); Fr Hennessy and Mr Dow (French). The prefect of studies (academic headmaster) was Fr Freddie Turner, a classics specialist who once told me off for including on a notice I put up what he called "a split infinitive" – which I found out later was what classicists really wanted to be a mistake in English but actually wasn't. Still, he was a distinguished scholar and fully deserved the half-page obituary he got in the *Guardian* from one of his star pupils, Mark Thompson, once boss of the BBC.

I can't remember a single case of what you might call "bad teaching" that we in the scholarship stream had to put up with. The nearest thing would be when Captain Lawrence, a military man who was the adjutant in the cadet force, was drafted in as our English teacher (I think it was to replace Peter Hardwick who was ill) in our O-level year. In his second week he announced that since *some* of us displayed weaknesses in the construction of our English essays, we would *all* have to make a formal plan and write it out in our exercise books before we wrote the actual essay.

I saw this as a technical challenge, as I observed to anyone who would listen. What you do is leave a few lines blank, write the essay as usual, then work out the "plan" from the essay; that way, you've hardly had to do much extra work and you've made sure that the plan and the finished essay match perfectly.

I've always enjoyed showing off, particularly in English. I'd inherited from my father a copy of the classic usage guide by HW Fowler called *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* which includes the following advice on the spelling of program(me): "...-am was the regular spelling until the 19<sup>th</sup> c...& is preferable, as conforming to the usual English representation of Greek *gramma* in *anagram*, *cryptogram*, *diagram*, *telegram* &." So in this case the Americans have always been right as opposed to the snobbish English Victorians who insisted on copying the French spelling *programme*.

Having read Fowler, I couldn't wait to include the word in an essay. As I expected it came back from Mr Hardwick with "program" marked wrong so I pointed out to him that the mighty Fowler agreed with me. When he'd checked the reference Mr Hardwick graciously accepted that I was right but we then agreed that it was probably a good idea to keep to the conventional English spelling, particularly in public exams.

For O level maths we scholars had an eccentric master who certainly couldn't have coped with the boys of our age in the other classes. We gave him an easy ride because he was a brilliant teacher as well as friendly and consistently good-humoured. His name was Percy ("Fishy") Haddock and as he explained to every new class at the beginning of the year, he wasn't really a maths master at all; in fact his proper job was teaching A-level chemistry; but he'd been dragooned into O-level maths teaching years before and because he was successful he was stuck with it. He was certainly good at explaining theorems to bright boys but a bit otherworldly and more than a bit deaf.

Here follows one of those classic school anecdotes. It was a warm, sluggish summer afternoon and we were struggling to concentrate and stay awake. Fishy was at the blackboard buried in a quadratic equation. Suddenly a boy on my right picked up his *Hillard & Botting* (a textbook familiar to Latin scholars of the time) and hurled it at my head. I ducked and the book smashed into the window.

Even Fishy heard the crash and besides the window was now badly cracked. He left the blackboard and went over to the window. "What's happened? I wonder what's caused this?" he muttered, talking speculatively to himself. Then, after a pause, "Could it have been a bird perhaps, flying at the window from outside?" "Yes, sir, it was a bird, sir; we saw it, sir" we shouted – and that, fortunately, was that.

But we did pass O-level maths, some of us with very high marks, and the scientists among us teamed up with Fishy again in the chemistry lab. Not me, however: of the three A-level subject streams available (classics, science and modern subjects) I took the third, modern subjects, which consisted of history, English literature and French literature. And after A level I specialised in history aiming at an entrance scholarship at one of the Oxford colleges. As I've already said, by now I was determined to leave Stonyhurst as soon as possible. And the simplest way of doing that was to be awarded a university scholarship. So in the autumn term I applied myself and, as it turned out, I got lucky at the first attempt.

# Anarchist youth

## Chapter 3: Christ Church

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We sit and wait in silence; then in comes a man wearing an academic gown. He too is silent as he distributes our question papers. He pauses to say: "It is not the custom at the House to invigilate on these occasions. We leave it to" – he looks up and selects, apparently at random, two portraits on the walls above – "John Locke and George Canning to be your invigilators..." and walks out.

We are – about 20 of us – in the Great Hall at Christ Church, Oxford, now familiar to the world through the medium of Harry Potter films, competing for an entrance scholarship in history; the year is 1959; and the speaker is (probably, I can't be sure now) the history don Charles Stuart. As I glance round at my dark-suited rivals, most of whom look as though they come from schools like Eton, Harrow and Ampleforth (at least two of them, it turns out, certainly do because, like me, they win scholarships), everybody starts writing, and so do I – in silence obviously.

I wish I could remember what the questions were and what I wrote in the history papers and the general one on politics and current affairs. But I do remember the rather intimidating interview that followed, which was conducted by about half a dozen dons including Charles Stuart. Among other things I was asked if I had anything to add to my answer on the consequences of the Great Reform Act of 1832. I had to say no, I'm afraid not – and thought afterwards "that didn't go too well".

But why was I applying to Christ Church in the first place? It has always been the grandest and most conservative of the Oxford colleges, containing as it does, instead of a mere chapel, the city's Anglican cathedral – hence its insider's name "the House" (of Christ, in Latin *Aedes Christi*) – and traditionally known for producing Protestant parsons and prime ministers\*, almost always Tory ones; even the celebrated Liberal PM William Gladstone started out as a Tory.

\*Eton continues to produce prime ministers but the last Houseman was Lord Home, who gave up his title, reverted to Sir Alec Douglas-Home and was defeated by Harold Wilson in 1964. One of my contemporaries, Jonathan Aitken (Eton & Ch Ch), having dated Mrs Thatcher's daughter Carol but failed to become prime minister, eventually settled for a dog collar.

The answer is very simple: the men's colleges, in those sexually segregated days, divided themselves into three groups for their entrance scholarship exams; in the academic year 1959-60 the Christ Church group came first in December; the Balliol and New College groups later on. So if I wanted to have a go early and aim high, the House was the obvious target. As one of the Stonyhurst Jesuits who'd been an undergraduate there pointed out to me, a big college like Christ Church was probably more tolerant of deviance and dissent than the smaller ones; and because of the numbers you were more likely to find like-minded friends there, which I certainly did.

I have never regretted choosing to apply to Christ Church, though one or two of their more traditional dons may have regretted the fact that I was accepted. Apparently I was once proposed for membership of the Pythic or "P" club, a secretive intellectual dining club for junior and senior members of Christ Church, and blackballed by every single don (this according to an ex-junior member).

When the letter came offering me a scholarship, it came via Stonyhurst with Jesuit congratulations: it was a moment to savour. The Christmas holidays were never more enjoyable because there was no school I had to go back to. But now that I was permitted by the family to leave Stonyhurst, what next? There were several options. My uncle Tony, who was based in Switzerland, suggested that I get some work experience at the travel firm that employed him as a courier, accompanying people on rail and channel-ferry journeys from London, then on coach tours of the country. But I chose Paris – a course in French language and a taste of French life.

Looking back, one of the strange things about Stonyhurst – and, I imagine, plenty of other similar institutions – in the 1950s was that our post-O-level schooling was so narrowly academic as opposed to relevant, vocational or practical. We couldn't study French *language* at A level – it had to be French literature to go with English literature and history. So however familiar we became with the tragedies of Racine and the fables of La Fontaine, most of us remained pretty monosyllabic when it came to French conversation.

My much older half-sister Audrey, who had read French literature at Oxford in the 1920s, acted as my mentor and guardian. I moved to her house in Sussex for the equivalent of the Easter term, reading history classics like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Macaulay's *History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, dipping into her eclectic fiction library which ranged from Marcel Proust, in French of course, via Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* to blood-and-thunder merchant Dornford Yates; then she organised my summer term at the Institut Britannique in Paris.

Paris was fun (see Chapter 6) and I did improve my French. On the way I lost my Catholic faith, though not my virginity, and I moved further to the left, from Liberal to left-wing Labour, influenced by the mounting pro-CND campaign leading up to Labour's Scarborough conference in October 1960 which voted to ban the bomb.

I arrived at Christ Church in the same month with longish red hair, the beginnings of a ginger beard and a tremendous appetite for university life, particularly the debating, scribbling and protesting part of it. I did go to some lectures, particularly in the first few weeks. The historian AJP Taylor, for example, started his at the demanding hour of nine in the morning. And I was there in the first week to hear one of Britain's original telly dons, bright and bow-tied, announce to a packed lecture room: "You may wonder why I start my lectures at nine o'clock; let me tell you if it was any later you wouldn't be able to get in." I rose to the challenge and came back a week later but that was as much as I could manage.

I found the atmosphere intoxicating and, as usual, was inclined to show off. "I came to Oxford to make history not to read it" was one of the oh-so-clever remarks I made – I can't remember where, probably in the union bar. But it came back to haunt me, as it was quoted by all and sundry.

Over the next three years I didn't achieve very much in the academic arena. Through indolence and over-confidence I failed my prelims (first-year exams) in history twice, and so after two terms I was rusticated, that is, sent away from the university city of Oxford to the countryside (Notting Hill in London, actually). Then when I finally passed prelims I changed from history to psychology and philosophy (PPP), a brand-new hybrid course bridging the science-arts divide, based in what is now the Oxford Experimental Psychology Department.

My experience of the tutors in the two subjects was mixed. For example, I enjoyed sessions with the bluff, cheerful Michael Argyle who tutored me for social psychology; I didn't get on at all with the don I was assigned to for moral and political philosophy. Jim Griffin, a bright youngish American about to publish a book on Wittgenstein, announced at my first tutorial: "We're going to do moral philosophy this term; you can get political philosophy up on your own." I proceeded to do just that without bothering Jim G any further.

A highlight of the time was a polemical lecture by the (then) Marxist analytic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre entitled "Politics in Eysenck and Freud". Which reminds me: in those less-enlightened times Freud's name was still being bandied about whenever the word psychology cropped up. So if somebody asked "Do you come across Freud on your course?" you could answer: "Not much in psychology since his theories aren't really 'science' – they're inherently untestable – but they're sometimes mentioned in philosophy of mind." The psychology we did was not speculation but science; the method was of testing theory by experiment. One advantage therefore was that we gained an understanding, enhanced by studying the philosophy of knowledge, of how scientists in general go about their work.

The shocking truth is that it was – and is – perfectly possible to progress through Britain's most elite educational pathways, leading to a bachelor's degree at, say, Oxford or Cambridge, having dropped some or all of the following...the science subjects, history, languages, maths... immediately after O level/GCSE and also having never done any philosophy at all. This is because of reliance on the English A-level system which consists of a small number of stand-alone subjects and therefore necessitates premature specialisation. At school we were always told that the top universities favoured this approach because it meant that undergraduates started their courses at a higher level than would otherwise be possible. But surely something like the International Baccalaureate would be a better preparation for a first degree than A levels.

I ended up with a fourth-class honours degree, an embarrassment that I share with all sorts of well-known people such as the novelist Joyce Cary, the art critic John Ruskin, the Russian rugby legend Prince Obolensky, the philologist Henry Sweet, the QC and Lord Chancellor Gerald Gardiner, the maverick Liberal peer Tim Beaumont and the rower/coach Daniel Topolski\* whose fourth in geography in 1967 is said to have been the last one Oxford ever awarded. Did I suffer in any practical way for my fourth in later life? Not really since I wasn't destined for a conventional academic career. At interviews for jobs in journalism and publishing you might in those days be asked "Do you have a degree?" (or, even more likely, "You do have a degree, don't you?") but nothing more pressing than that.

\*Not to mention the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Tory prime minister Robert Cecil (later Lord Salisbury); the cricketer (and all-round sportsman) CB Fry; the Rev Colin Semper, head of BBC religious broadcasting; Oxford's first black African student, Christian Cole from Sierra Leone, grandson of a slave; and Colin Cowdrey, another legendary cricketer. In all, the most distinguished company I have ever kept.

Fourths are long gone and so are entrance scholarships, compulsory Latin O levels as a qualification for admission – and single-sex colleges. This has to be the biggest change of all. Oxford in 1960 was male-dominated by a factor of almost six to one because there were so many colleges for men,

including one or two big ones like Christ Church and Balliol, and so few for women. The obvious solution, which took place over time, was for all the colleges to accept both men and women.

Also in 1960 we were witnessing the end of national service with its distorting effect on university entrance: throughout the 1950s most young men spent two years in the armed forces so male university students usually started their courses at 20 rather than 18. As a result Oxford in 1960 still included some third-year undergraduates who were born in 1937, for example the future journalists Paul Foot and Richard Ingrams. From a positive point of view we 18-year-olds had the advantage of mixing with people who'd seen a bit of life – and sometimes, particularly because of national service, death. A curious consequence was that brothers, born several years apart, might rub shoulders at Oxford: for example, Richard Ingrams, one of the founders of *Private Eye*, and his youngest brother Leonard, the financier and opera impresario, born in 1941. Leonard, a brilliant contemporary of mine at Stonyhurst, died of a heart attack in 2005.

In class terms about half of Oxford's undergraduate students were from fee-paying schools and half from state (mostly grammar) schools, though Christ Church stood out as posher than most of the other colleges with more aristocrats, more Etonians and more offspring/descendants of Tory politicians (eg Winston Churchill the younger, grandson of the great man) than anywhere else. I think our public school proportion was as high as 70 per cent.

I once wrote a piece in *Isis* arguing that, however uncomfortable some people from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds and state schools might feel in the alien environment of dining in hall, "scouts" (personal domestic servants), dons' sherry parties and the rest, the mere fact that they were undergraduates at Oxford meant that they were now prospective members of Britain's elite with their futures assured, assuming they exerted themselves. I got some stick over this particularly from two chippy ex-grammar school northerners – angry young men, you might say – but they both went on to become highly successful journalists, thus proving my point. Edward Pearce (1939-2018) was a *Daily Telegraph* leader writer, biographer and choleric controversialist (who notoriously came unstuck when he attacked Liverpool football supporters after the Hillsborough disaster), and John Heilpern (1942-2021) was a celebrated theatre reviewer for the *Observer* and the biographer of John Osborne.

When a student representative council (SRC) was set up in Oxford the junior common room (JCR) of every college had to decide whether or not to affiliate. At Christ Church this was not really an issue: there was apathy rather than controversy. But in our JCR the proposition was formally opposed by Christopher Lennox-Boyd and John Walker-Smith, two old Etonians whose fathers were both members of Harold Macmillan's Conservative government. Their opposition wasn't intended to be taken seriously, of course: it was what an anthropologist or sociologist might call an assertion of tribal identity in a rapidly changing world. The motion to affiliate to the SRC in one of Oxford's biggest colleges was passed by just 13 of our votes to their two – which illustrates the apathy.

I was once in a spontaneous gathering of Housemen (somewhere between 15 and 20 of us, I didn't count) which had no particular point – it was just people talking, chatting, gossiping – and afterwards one of them said to me: "Do you realise you and I were the only people in that room who *didn't* go to Eton?"



I should also mention the pubs and the parties or I might be accused of a whitewash. There was a lot of serious drinking by male undergraduates, not just the posh boys, whereas it's worth emphasising that in those pre-feminist, unwoke days almost all the women, if they drank alcohol at all, drank "moderately". In Oxford at that time you hardly ever saw a woman student who was actually drunk.

And drinking was so easy and accessible, assuming you could afford it, which because of universal grants (for those who weren't rich), most people could. There was a college bar; there was the Oxford Union bar; there were numerous local pubs; and of course there were parties – sherry parties given by dons, cocktail parties given by affluent undergraduates, bottle parties organised collectively by the rest of us. One Sunday I was invited to a midday drinks party by Charles Fletcher, the half-brother of Susannah York, actress and film star (and much more than that: she was a supporter of Mordechai Vanunu, the dissident who revealed Israel's nuclear weapons programme, and once she boldly dedicated a performance in Israel to him). After half a dozen whisky cocktails on an empty stomach, I woke up at about five o'clock in the afternoon, feeling distinctly unwell, and suddenly remembered that I'd asked half of Charles's guests including Susannah to more drinks at six o'clock. I don't think I was able to drink much that evening and I didn't drink whisky again for at least three months.

My left-wing Liberal friend John Davies was an entertainer, a legendary drinker and the source of innumerable stories. Once, invited for drinks by an opponent before a union debate, he took full advantage and drank the best part of a bottle of whisky. So when he got up to speak he could no longer articulate clearly: Saudi Arabia became "Shaudy Rabya" – and bang went any ideas John might have had about a political or administrative career in the Middle East.

John's host on this occasion was the colourful, notorious (though later reformed) Jonathan Aitken, great-nephew of Lord Beaverbrook, old Etonian and after Oxford a journalist, a Tory politician and proven public liar, a prison inmate and prison reformer, an Anglican clergyman and prison chaplain; also the elder brother of Maria Aitken, the actress and theatre director. Once, encouraged by Maria, Jonathan invited me to rural Suffolk for the weekend; we went for an early evening walk, carrying between us a single firearm. As a guest I had the use of it when a solitary hare appeared: bang, bang – the hare went to the kitchen to be hung and the anecdote back to Oxford to appear in *Cherwell*.

John and I were once invited to speak at a local village debating society on some cultural topic or other after we'd been fed and watered. As the taxi brought us closer to the venue I asked him what he was going to say. "I'll think of something," he said. And he did. His speech began: "To begin at the beginning: it is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent..." It was the first five minutes of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* recited verbatim (as far as I could tell). He sat down to delighted applause. So he got up again and provided another two and a half minutes as an encore.

John had a phenomenal memory and when sober, a remarkable fluency off the cuff. Bob Chesshyre, later an *Observer* journalist, shared rooms and tutorials with him and remembered: "He could come into a tutorial with a few notes and construct his essay on the spot, pretending to read it out from a blank sheet of paper. The only problem came when the tutor asked him to go back and reread a point he'd made."

I missed John's most spectacular exploit since I had been rusticated at the time. Bob tells the tale of The Man Who Nearly Burnt Down the College: "I'd been out for the evening and came back to find our rooms on fire with thick, black smoke pouring out and no way of getting in. I rushed to the porter's lodge and after a sceptical look he came out and saw the smoke so gave the alarm. John meanwhile had woken up and managed to struggle out and down to the bathrooms (in the basement), where he passed out again.

"That caused real panic when the fire brigade arrived to put the fire out: no John – where was he? But he was found eventually and taken to hospital where he stayed for several days. So when the college authorities started their investigation I was summoned by the junior censor, responsible for discipline, and invited to explain what had happened.

"Well,' I said, 'John was of course a highly studious person who often worked late into the night and it's true he was a smoker. I had left him buried in *Beowulf*. He must have nodded off while studying – with cigarette in hand.'

"The don reached down beside his desk and came up with an empty whisky bottle. 'D'you think this could have had anything to do with it?' he said. I said nothing. 'I think for insurance purposes I prefer your story,' he said" – and that was that.

John was a fluent speaker and enjoyed debating. As Oxford Union officers\*, he and I both qualified to stand for the presidency and we spoke on the same side in favour of the motion "That law and justice are incompatible". We were defeated by Jeffrey Jowell (later Sir Jeffrey, a barrister and academic) both in the vote after the debate and in the presidential election that followed – I think John got more votes than I did but Jeffrey was the clear winner.

\*I was elected secretary in my second year and enjoyed taking the piss out of people with long names and titles when I slowly and deliberately read out the minutes of the previous week's debate. For example, for one kilted youngest son of a duke (who became a Tory politician), I intoned: "Lord...James...Alexander...Douglas...Hamilton...Balliol...also spoke."

I wasn't expecting to win but to me that wasn't the main point: this was an opportunity to challenge some fundamental assumptions. I attacked the social contract theory of government – the claim that in a democracy people have voluntarily agreed to surrender some of their natural rights in exchange for protection by the state – by saying that this was a myth to justify state power. Unlike the members of a sports club who really have consented to follow the rules of a particular game, so *have* to accept them, citizens have not *in fact* agreed to surrender their rights. Therefore we are not *in all circumstances* bound by the law: we are logically and morally entitled to break it if there is a good reason to do so. This argument is freely available to the environmental warrior supporters of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil as it was an important one to us in the anti-nuclear Committee of 100.

In the debate I failed to convince the majority of the house but that was hardly surprising. At least I got a fair hearing. And at one point I managed to attract – for just about the only time in my debating life – an ovation. I was interrupted by the secretary (and later president) Garth Pratt who said, to a smattering of polite applause: "How is it, if the speaker claims not to accept the rules and procedures of democracy, that he's standing for election as union president?" To which I replied:

“I’m afraid the honourable secretary is another person who has failed to understand the difference between politics and games.”

On a previous occasion I was defeated for the presidency by Michael Beloff (a leading barrister specialising in sport and for 10 years the president of Trinity College)\*. A third candidate then was David Prior-Palmer, who later became an abrasive and highly unpopular “group chief executive” of the *Financial Times* after joining the paper as a trainee in 1964, trendily ditching the “Prior” part of his surname. At one point David was a neighbour of mine in Clapham where he lived in a very grand house, the sale of which, when he moved to Dulwich, was said to have produced the funds that paid the private school fees of his three children.

\*The motion was that “the Government should give people what they need rather than what they want”, which I opposed, arguing that it shouldn’t be up to governments to decide anyway.

I can’t claim to have been a brilliant debater: I was always more interested in the issues being discussed than the techniques that speakers used, the rhetorical flourishes, if you like. Above all I wasn’t keen on the *ad hominem*, the kind of argument, if you can call it that, starting “so-and-so is an upper-class parasite/ignorant yob/male chauvinist pig so you can’t take what they say seriously”.

Nowadays, intimidated as so many people are by identity politics and online abuse, it can be difficult to find an actual argument buried in what they say. Then it was instructive to hear politicians with a reputation for eloquence and wit in the House of Commons turn out to be rather slow on their feet and pedestrian when they spoke in the Oxford Union or at meetings of the political clubs. The Tory classicist Enoch Powell (his notorious “rivers of blood” speech was years in the future) was once embarrassed by an interrupter with the erudite Latin quip *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (“after this, therefore because of this”, so signalling a non-sequitur in Powell’s argument). Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader who later tried to have Norman Scott killed (in the event only Scott’s dog died), though sharply suited and quick-witted\*, came over as theatrical and a bit pompous. Max Beloff, a right-wing academic and the father of Michael, made a faux pas in a debate when he came up with the coinage *Aldermasturbation*. He was, reasonably enough, hissed for this breach of good manners – and not just by CND supporters. Later I learned from Michael’s autobiography\*\* that Max in his Oxford youth had been one of the tellers for the 1933 motion refusing to fight for king and country. Michael, an urbane and articulate liberal when I knew him, was never as radical in youth as his father – or, in later life, as reactionary.

\*he once referred to me as “the Hon Member from Oberammergau”, a quote I never lived down.

\*\**MJBQC: A Life Within and Without the Law*, Bloomsbury, 2022

The best speaker I heard at Oxford was Brian Walden, an ex-president of the union who went on to be a Labour MP and an incisive TV interviewer. He managed to make his speech impediment – an inability to pronounce the letter “R” – a mannerism that forced you to listen to him more attentively. And he was merciless in ridiculing his opponents. Once I can remember squirming as he targeted the peace movement and its various “unilateralist” elements, challenging the audience to disagree with his claims that we contradicted one another. Of course we did: the Communists (whose party line was to oppose the British and American bombs but not the Russian one) opposed the left-wing Labourites (who insisted that we should all vote Labour to get the bomb banned but couldn’t make

up their minds whether that meant we should withdraw from Nato) and they in turn opposed the Trotskyists and anarchists (who were against all bombs and military alliances and in favour of direct action), and the pacifists who were opposed to all use of force.

Of the nine undergraduates elected president of the union in my three years (1960-3) all except one went on to work in journalism or the law; one of the journalists, Phillip Whitehead, was also a Labour MP. The exception was Girish Karnad (1938-2019), an Indian Rhodes scholar who became an actor and playwright. In chronological order they were: Robert Rowland (TV), Phillip Whitehead (TV), Paul Foot (print), Howard Preece (print), Hugh Stephenson (print), John McDonnell (bar), Michael Beloff (bar), Girish Karnad, Jeffrey Jowell (bar). I don't think any of them ever aspired to become prime minister, never mind "world king": you could say that, unlike Boris, they grew up.

Early in my second year the secretary of the Christ Church debating club, the Cardinal Society, asked me to propose: "That this house would rather run with the hare than hunt with the hounds." Opposing the motion would be Jonathan Aitken and Sir George Young, another Old Etonian, a baronet after the death of his father, later leader of the House of Commons, now in the House of Lords\*. My seconder was Nicholas Bennett, who'd been at Westminster, which had particularly strong links with Christ Church.

\*As Lord Young of Cookham. Poor George: once described in the *Guardian* as "courteous, wry, insightful and very much on the left of his party", he's notorious for the following remark made in a radio interview: "The homeless? Aren't they the people you step over when you come out of the opera?" He was, clearly, intending to ridicule the rich rather than slight the homeless – but that is not how the quote has been understood by most people ever since.

We lost the vote at the end, which was hardly surprising, but Nich (a spelling he perversely preferred to the conventional Nick) turned out to be an original, something of a radical, already practically an anarchist. He'd written most of a book which became *Zigzag to Timbuktu*, describing a haphazard hitch-hiking journey round West Africa, and was working on the final chapter, commenting on the damage done to Africa by Western colonialism. His rooms in college and later his flat in Park End Street near Oxford railway station became a centre for the libertarian and bohemian fringe. Visitors included the guru of non-violent civil disobedience, Gene Sharp, and the American-Liverpudlian Thom Keyes, pot head, gambler, self-styled early friend of the Beatles and author of the pop novel *All Night Stand*.

Nich introduced me to his parents, Margot and Richard Bennett, who'd both been in Spain on the Republican side during the 1936-9 civil war, Margot as an unqualified but dedicated nurse, recruited mainly for her potential as a propagandist, and Richard as a journalist.\* Their Hampstead house attracted various musicians, writers and poker players, people like George jazz-singer Melly, Al the poet Alvarez, and Leon *Minder* Griffiths. Margot herself had published some crime fiction as well as journalism but now concentrated on writing scripts for television. Richard, who'd previously edited *Lilliput* magazine, was on the *Sunday Telegraph*, launched in February 1961; he provided Nich with a nice little earner.

\*A footnote in *The Spanish Civil War* by Hugh Thomas, referring to the May Days of 1937 when the Communists fought the anarchists in Barcelona, reads: "Richard Bennett (with Barcelona Radio)

described to me how...his door...was opened by two men carrying bombs who bluntly asked him: 'Whose side are you on?' 'Yours,' he wisely replied."

Fleet Street as always was keen on stories with an Oxford angle and the conventional conduit for them was the office of *Cherwell*, the university's weekly tabloid. No national paper's newsdesk could afford to ignore a call that started "*Cherwell* editor here. An undergraduate has been sent down for sex/drugs/blasphemy..." But far better than these random calls was a secret arrangement by father-and-son for exclusive access. Thus for a time the *Telegraphs*, *Sunday* and *Daily*, were the best informed Fleet Street papers of all.

On one occasion a piece sourced by Nicholas and written by Richard on Oxford's cannabis smokers was illustrated by Nich's pic of a group of us puffing a rolled cigarette that looked like a joint, passing it solemnly between us as was *de rigueur* in those days. In spite of the standard black wedges across our eyes I was recognisable and I was duly summoned by the Christ Church don in charge of discipline. "Were you actually smoking cannabis?" I was asked. "Certainly not," I replied. Fortunately I wasn't asked who'd taken the pic and I don't think Nicholas was ever suspected of originating this or any other story.

There were probably a couple of hundred student cannabis smokers in Oxford then, most of them Saturday night casuals rather than regular potheads. They/we were the bohemians – jazz (as well as rock 'n' roll) fans, poets, CND supporters. I was never more than a casual, partly since a joint was usually crumbled cannabis resin mixed with blond tobacco which I found nauseating (I preferred the black tobacco in Gauloises but couldn't really be bothered to roll my own joints). Later in Africa I enjoyed smoking leaf cannabis ready-rolled into joints which you could buy in the markets of Kampala and Mombasa for the same price as a packet of fags. But I was never really tempted by the glamour of "drugs". I remember during one vacation in Chelsea meeting an American action painter who was a heroin user: the needle marks on the underside of his left forearm were a distinct turn-off. And later, after Oxford, the bohemian poet Heathcote Williams once gave me a vivid description of an LSD trip – which sounded pretty scary and saved me the trouble of experimenting for myself.

One light-hearted *Telegraph* piece about St Clare's Hall, described as "a fringe institution" for girls supplying "female companionship for undergraduates", led to a libel action\*. The formidable principal of St Clare's, Anne Dreydel, was an enthusiast for litigation: my own first feature article for *Cherwell*, on students' initial impressions of Oxford, quoted a fairly harmless criticism of the teaching by a St Clare's student; she wasn't named but the detail in her quote identified her; she was summoned by Miss Dreydel, interrogated and then given an ultimatum: deny the quote or be sent down – so of course she had to deny/disown it, and of course *Cherwell* had to apologise. And I learnt my first lesson about the law of libel: truth may theoretically be a defence but in reality not everybody can afford to tell it.

\*The text of the offending article by Richard Bennett began: "When I was up at Cambridge, I remember there being a melancholy shortage of eligible girls. However, my man in Oxford reports that things are changing and that fringe institutions for girls are booming. More girls are coming to Oxford, and some are paying more to do less than they have ever done before."

"St Clare's Hall leads the field in both distinction and numbers. On the front of its prospectus is a picture of Magdalen College. Social possibilities are presented to the new St Clare's student soon

after she comes up, at the celebrated 'Meat Market'. Guests from a list of eligible undergraduates drawn up by St Clare's are invited to a cocktail party to look over the new intake.

"'You are just the sort of man we want our girls to meet. Please move round and make friends' is the greeting from the organisers on arrival. And on departure: 'What? You haven't found anyone to take out to dinner!'"

Heathcote Williams was another posh public school dissident who'd abandoned his rather ordinary and plebeian first name, John, somewhere between Eton and Christ Church. Heathcote, who went on to become a celebrated poet, actor, dramatist and activist, was already a dedicated bohemian working on his first book, *The Speakers*, about the Hyde Park orators. Though he was never active in student politics, he more than made up for it in later life (he's the subject of a planned biography by Andrew Lycett).

Christ Church was full of sons of the famous/notorious who often went on to achieve fame/notoriety in their own right. At least once on the BBC's *Question Time* Max (son of Oswald) Mosley appeared at the right hand of the chairman, David (son of Richard) Dimbleby; in their day as Housemen David presided over the JCR and edited *Isis* and Max was secretary of the union. I knew David slightly and Max quite well.

I met Max in my first term during a debate on the proposal to abolish capital punishment. In the Oxford Union, which is modelled on the House of Commons, you stand up if you want to challenge what somebody is saying and then wait to be noticed. If they're good on their feet, they can give way by sitting down to let you make your point; then they try to rubbish what you say. Interrupting somebody – or dealing with an interruption – is the most gladiatorial part of debating, which is why it always appealed to me.

Anyway, there I was, sitting in the front row, armed with all the arguments and statistics and eager to get into the action. So when a pro-hanging speaker said something particularly inaccurate or stupid I stood up. He went on speaking, refusing to give way, so I reluctantly sat down again. This happened several times. About the third or fourth time I noticed that laughter – well, tittering – started a second or two after I stood up. I turned round to see another tall, red-headed figure who'd also got to his feet a few places behind me. It was Max Mosley, playing jack-in-the-box or follow-my-leader – when I got up, he got up; when I sat down, he sat down.

Max introduced himself afterwards and said he was just having a laugh and he hoped I didn't mind. He was of course opposed to hanging (the debate ended in an overwhelming majority for abolition) and he certainly didn't consider himself particularly right-wing. Later I learnt that he did in fact support his father's politics, for some time at least. A few months after leaving Oxford, he was the election agent for the Union Movement candidate at a by-election and in the following year he was arrested after a punch-up involving his father and an angry mob. The by-election in Manchester Moss Side in November 1961 featured a racist leaflet which Max unconvincingly denied knowledge of when the *Daily Mail* produced it many years later; in the court case he was cleared of threatening behaviour on the grounds that he was protecting his father. But at Oxford emphasising his connection with his father wouldn't have helped him get elected to union office.

After Max was elected secretary of the union, Oswald Mosley came to Oxford several times. He spoke in union debates, where he was heard in relative silence rather than barracked, and once addressed the humanist group. On several occasions Max arranged for a group of politicians to meet his father who said he wanted to know what we thought. The group usually included Robert Skidelsky, a historian and economist who went on to write a sympathetic (and so much-criticised) biography of Mosley, published in 1975.

Bob was right-wing Labour at that time; when the SDP came along he defected to it and was nominated as one of their life peers; then he flirted with the Tories before becoming an independent. He later made sympathetic noises in the direction of Jeremy Corbyn, thus ending up a bit to the left of where he started. His website once reported: "My best friend there [at Oxford] was Max Mosley, and inevitably I met his father, Oswald Mosley, then in the twilight of a notorious career. He rolled his hypnotic eyes at me, and duly cast his spell."

My own memory of Oswald Mosley at one of these meetings is of somebody who was smooth, powerful and intimidating – snakelike and bearlike at the same time, if that's possible to imagine. The Union Movement policy he put forward was pro-united Europe and pro-apartheid. The history of Africa and the United States showed, he said, that the races were best kept apart; blacks and whites alike suffered from racial and cultural mixing. He emphasised that he didn't consider whites superior to blacks, just different – and both would benefit from separation.

Mosley had a pretty good idea of his audience and he had tremendous persuasive powers: he managed to make this obnoxious garbage sound almost convincing. But he also made one big mistake – or rather he had already made it in setting up the meeting. He'd brought with him an Italian fascist (a count, I seem to remember, though I didn't make a note of his name). As we started asking awkward questions, the mood changed. Suddenly in a mixture of broken English and gesticulating Italian the sidekick starting ranting about blacks, monkeys and trees.

Of course Mosley now tried to retrieve the situation: yes, some of their people did believe that black people were inferior to whites – but it wasn't necessary to believe it; he personally didn't believe it; there were even some black supporters of their policies. But the damage was done. By asking questions and listening to what was said – rather than shouting abuse – we'd got what we came for: an authentic glimpse of modern fascism. It certainly wasn't what Sir Oswald and Max had in mind when they invited us to the meeting.

Mosley père wasn't the only famous/notorious figure I met at Oxford. As well as my contemporaries (some of them the famous/notorious of the future) there were people like the heavyweight Labour politician Denis Healey and the maverick journalist (& MP) Tom Driberg, speakers I invited when I was chairman of the Labour club. Healey was frank – and by no means apologetic – about his undergraduate membership of the Communist party in the late 1930s. At the time the Labour party seemed to him feeble and inept, unsuited for the struggle against fascism. Then when I asked ex-Houseman Driberg whether at Christ Church in his day they'd returned junk mail to sender, signed Mickey Mouse, as we did, he claimed they'd gone much further. What they did apparently was to attach the blank returnable postage-free cards to heavy objects like bricks before posting them.

For the visit of the prime minister of the time, Harold Macmillan, I sat on the press bench in the union next to the TV-playwright-to-be Dennis Potter, an ex-Oxford student, who was reporting the

event for the *Daily Herald* – and at the same time heckling the speaker. He showed me the written text of Macmillan’s speech which he’d been given as a reporter. It meant that he could prepare and time his interruptions of the speech perfectly. Then when the Catholic student society invited my hero (when I was a Stonyhurst schoolboy), Archbishop Roberts SJ, who had argued that nuclear weapons were immoral, I was privileged to meet him at dinner beforehand. Looking back I see this chance to meet and talk to politicians, journalists and public figures as perhaps the greatest opportunity of being at Oxford.

David Crawford, the undergraduate student who organised the Archbishop Roberts visit, once asked me to write an account of how I’d lost my faith, as the Catholics say, for publication in the Oxford Catholic magazine *The Old Palace*. I wrote the piece but the university chaplain, Fr Michael Hollings, intervened and stopped it appearing.

In the same way some of my left-wing contemporaries weren’t keen on giving comfort to the enemy. The new left, which dominated the Labour club at the time, were adamant that “the mass media” were a big part of the problems created by capitalism: they oversimplified the issues and effectively supported the system. Ergo anyone who worked for them was letting the side down. When the Conservative club invited Richard Crossman to speak, their president invited me to sit next to him at dinner “to make intelligent left-wing conversation”. At the time Crossman wrote regularly for the *New Statesman* and also had a column in the *Daily Mirror*, so I asked him what the difference was between the two jobs. His reply wasn’t what the new left wanted to hear. “When I write for the *Statesman*, I say what’s in my head without really having to reflect,” he said, “but when I write my *Mirror* column I have to think much more carefully about getting my message across and whether it’s really what I think – or whether in fact it has any meaning at all.”

In those days the Christ Church posh boys were known as “bloodies”. They joined clubs like the Bullingdon, notorious for trashing restaurant dining-rooms, followed the Christ Church and New College beagles and supported the college boat club. By tradition success on the river was followed by a celebration dinner – and then mayhem.

There was one such dinner in my time. Curious to see what would happen afterwards I wandered along to Broad Walk next to the Christ Church meadow building, a traditional target. Stones were already whizzing through the air – but falling short or wide of the windows. Presumably they were being thrown by oarsmen rather than cricketers. Suddenly without really thinking I picked up a stone and threw it with (of course) a cricketer’s deadly accuracy; the window I aimed at shattered...and I decided that was enough of that. I went away, thoughtfully, embarrassed at what I had done.

The subsequent damage that night was substantial – enough for everybody in the college to be levied about £5 (£5 then – say, £100 now?) to pay for it. My left-wing friends complained that this was unfair on the non-participants, and obviously it was, but for once in my life I kept very quiet. I’d certainly had my £5 worth. I’d been reminded how easy it is to be caught up in crowd behaviour doing things you wouldn’t dream of doing if you were alone. What is true of aimless vandalism – whether by Christ Church bloodies or football hooligans – is equally true of political demonstrations. Being part of a group has a positive side in that you can gain confidence from those around you and so have the courage to act collectively. But the downside is the risk of being drawn into things like stone-throwing which you wouldn’t otherwise be capable of or even approve of.



# Anarchist youth

## Chapter 4: Committee of 100

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My stone-throwing incident had a long-term effect on the way I saw politics in general and demonstrations in particular. There were a lot of demos in those days. In my first term there was a huge CND march from the Brize Norton RAF base which, as it swept into the city of Oxford, was about 1,000 strong – say, one in eight of the university's undergraduates. There was an impressive Oxford contingent on the Aldermaston marches of 1961-3, including various people who would probably be embarrassed to be reminded that they were there. And then there was the Committee of 100 which had been launched in October 1960 with Bertrand Russell as its figurehead. After a big sitdown in Trafalgar Square in September 1961 it spawned regional committees including an Oxford one which I joined.

The secretary of the Oxford Committee was Will Warren, a Quaker veteran of the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC), which had pioneered militant anti-nuclear activity and organised the first Aldermaston march in 1958; Laurens Otter, then working at Oxfam, was another activist with a long list of battle honours. The members and supporters of the committee included trade unionist students from Ruskin College, as well as ordinary undergraduates. Although AJP Taylor was a leading light in CND, few Oxford dons supported the committee; Taylor certainly didn't. An exception was the philosopher Michael Hinton who once wrote me a friendly note after we were both arrested at a London demo and held overnight. After his death I found out from an obituary that he had met his wife, the novelist Jennifer Dawson, on the 1963 Aldermaston march.

Two phrases characterised the Committee of 100 – civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. The sitdown – in the road blocking access to a nuclear base or outside a symbolic building like the Ministry of Defence – illustrated the first; actually invading a nuclear base by climbing over the perimeter fence illustrated the second. In both cases the commitment to act non-violently – never physically resisting arrest, for example – was an essential part of the action. These ideas led me to anarchism, as I shall explain, but I adopted them in the first place because they seemed urgently necessary in the struggle against nuclear weapons.

To put this into perspective it's worth reciting a few of the facts of the time. In May 1960 an American spy plane was shot down deep into Russian territory and the Soviets stormed out of a summit meeting in Paris. In August 1961 the East German regime built the Berlin wall, essentially to stop their people deserting "socialism" for the capitalist west. In October 1962 the world came as close as it's ever been to nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. There was real panic in the air then: one of the best-known anti-nuclear activists, Pat Arrowsmith, ran away to Ireland with her companion, Wendy Butlin, while in the Oxford Union bar Roderick Floud, later a distinguished academic and university administrator, kept nervously looking at the clock during our game of bar billiards as the crucial deadline approached.

A limited test-ban treaty signed in August 1963 reduced tension and encouraged cock-eyed optimists to stop worrying. However, President Kennedy was assassinated later that year which increased tension again. A test screening of Stanley Kubrick's brilliant satire *Dr Strangelove or: How I*

*learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* had to be postponed because it had been scheduled for 22 November 1963, the day Kennedy was shot. More prosaically, Jonathan Aitken as Oxford Union treasurer in charge of entertainment, decided to mark the occasion by cancelling my debut as a stand-up comedian in a planned double act with Heathcote Williams. Heathcote went on to wow the world with his evocative poetry and various happenings while I was relieved to have been prevented from making a fool of myself.

I had arrived at Oxford in 1960 just after the Labour Party's historic decision to ban the bomb (reversed a year later after Hugh Gaitskell's campaign to "fight, fight and fight again" against it) and I immediately joined both the university Labour club and the party. I also joined the humanist group which had been founded two years earlier and became in my time probably the biggest and most influential of Oxford's political/religious/current affairs clubs, except for the Oxford Union itself. The site [ouhg.org.uk](http://ouhg.org.uk) gives access to an archive including a miscellany of ephemera and some fascinating detail, for example a reminder that the union passed the motion "This house does not believe in God" by 295 votes to 259 in the 1962 Trinity (summer) term.

The Oxford Labour club was divided between the pro-CND majority, most of whom supported the new left and its journal (still going strong), the *New Left Review*, and the Gaitskellite minority; in the two years 1960-2 the left's domination was never seriously challenged: if you were the approved left-wing candidate for a particular post, you were virtually certain to be elected. In my second year two of us were potential left-wing candidates for the post of Labour club chairman, in those unwoke days the term in use: Lydia Howard and me. Lydia, the daughter of the writer and broadcaster Marghanita Laski, was the girlfriend of "Ralph"\* Samuel – and boasted many more lefty brownie points than I did with my Catholic public-school and Conservative background – so there was no question of me going first: Lydia was duly elected in the spring and I followed in the summer, defeating the Gaitskellite Bob Skidelsky and also Connaire Kensit, who was a kind of maverick Maoist.

\*"Ralph" was what the socialist historian Raphael Samuel was then known as.

Lydia was only the third woman to chair the Oxford Labour club (the first was Betty Morrison in 1934; then came Shirley Williams in 1950) and around this time women were finally admitted to the Oxford Union – in two bites. What happened was this. The motion to admit women had already been passed several times in the debating chamber but on each occasion opponents had demanded a poll of life members to overturn the decision, enabling any geriatric don or other backwoodsman capable of forward movement to totter down to the union office to vote against reform.

In the autumn of 1961 two militant women undergraduates from St Anne's dressed up as men and managed to attend a union debate, watched by a third from the public gallery. The three were Rose Dugdale, an ex-debutante\* and heiress who became a socialist activist and IRA bomber, Jenny Grove and Sarah Cockburn (daughter of Jean "Sally Bowles" Ross and Claud Cockburn) who became a barrister and wrote crime fiction as Sarah Caudwell. The event was well organised and publicised but it didn't solve the problem.

\*one of the very last debs: presented at court in 1958 she had her dance in 1959 and went to Oxford that autumn. For upper-class young people the end of the "season" mirrored the end of national service: the world was changing.

According to the union's constitution, having recently lost a proposal to change the rules, we couldn't raise the matter again for a year. So early in 1962 somebody on the union standing committee – it might have been the president of the time, Hugh Stephenson, or possibly Harold Lind, an astute campaigner on the issue; it could even have been me – had the bright idea of proposing a different, more limited, reform: debating membership for women instead of full membership. I got the gig, explaining in my speech that of course we were in favour of full membership, which was finally passed a year later, but in this case much more than half a loaf was certainly better than none. The motion, opposed by Christ Church's own Christopher Lennox-Boyd (who else?), was passed by a huge majority\* – I don't think there was a poll, or if there was, it failed – and finally women could debate in the union on equal terms with men, whereas previously they could only speak as invited guests.

\*This is no exaggeration: the vote, as recorded by the press (including Dennis Potter, then a reporter on the *Daily Herald*), was 404 to 122.

The first woman undergraduate to speak in a debate as of right was Lydia Howard and a year later the first to speak as a full member was Karen McLeod, who had also been elected the first woman editor of *Isis*. She spoke in favour of a motion highly critical of the British press, citing the bad behaviour of four tabloid hacks who'd descended on Oxford in pursuit of an unmarried pregnant student – she'd written to *Isis* criticising marriage from the humanist point of view. Randolph Churchill (son of Sir Winston) also spoke for the motion; Donald Maclachlan, editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, and – guess who? – Jonathan Aitken spoke against; the motion was carried (158-132)\*.

\*see ouhg.org.uk

Although I'd been her strongest supporter for the editorship of *Isis* Karen and I used to argue a lot. I wanted to write a weekly column but Karen said no: she wasn't keen on letting me promote anarchist attitudes. We disagreed about various key points of left-wing doctrine, policy and iconography including Simone de Beauvoir. Here's Karen in a letter to me (dated Christmas Eve 1962): "I shall definitely have to run a campaign against *The Second Sex*. As every woman to whom I have spoken who has read it – from the respectable to the ultra non-respectable – has sadly remarked: 'Of course all the men one meets lap it up. They take it for gospel truth.'" Whereas she certainly didn't: for Karen, who was a Christian socialist, de Beauvoir was a brilliant bluestocking but lacked the experience, and the wisdom, of the child-bearing married woman that she herself was keen to become. People's attitudes were less predictable and less tribal in those days.

A woman student who did rate de Beauvoir highly was the feminist anthropologist-to-be Judith Okely (she also campaigned for the admission of women to the union). In her book on de Beauvoir\* she writes: "My article entitled *The Spectre of Feminism* was turned down by the male editor of *Isis* in 1962 as 'insufficiently anecdotal'." She adds self-critically: "It should really have been criticised for its clumsy paraphrasing of de Beauvoir." But having been rejected by *Isis*, the article was accepted by the new left magazine *Messenger* and finally published in April 1963 (see the last page of this chapter).

\**Simone de Beauvoir*, Virago, 1986

Sex at Oxford in the sense of the different opportunities for men and women was a key issue in the early 1960s. But so was actual sex and whether we were allowed to indulge in it. The various college authorities were unequivocally against it for unmarried undergraduates: if you were discovered *in flagrante* the sanction could be permanent exclusion. In a notorious case a woman undergraduate was sent down by her college (St Hilda's) while her boyfriend was rusticated for two weeks by his college (St Catherine's). There was a campaign\* against this appalling decision by St Hilda's although a Cambridge English don, David Holbrook – clearly a man with time on his hands – backed up the authorities in an *Isis* article saying that sex should be solely for reproduction, never for recreation.

\*A campaign – petitions and so on – but nothing more threatening to the authorities. In the early 1960s radical students organised protests including marches and sit-downs but only on external political issues like war and peace and colonialism. In the late 1960s control of students' lives and the content of their courses became a key issue: one of the grievances of the French revolting students in 1968 was the ban on males visiting female dormitories.

Some of the subsequent comments got the background to the story wrong. It wasn't true that all the men's colleges were more lenient than all the women's colleges, as is shown by another, less well-publicised case. In the spring of 1963 a Christ Church undergraduate, Jim Higgins, who was, incidentally (or perhaps not), secretary of both the college JCR and the anti-nuclear Oxford Committee of 100\*, was sent down after being found with a woman in his rooms at the wrong time of day. (Unlike the Christ Church posh boys, Jim, who'd come from grammar school, "didn't have the wit or the money to tip the scout who discovered them", according to one insider.)

\*Jim was replaced as Committee of 100 secretary by another Christ Church undergraduate, Charles Cameron.

And, on the other side of the coin, at Somerville women undergraduates who wanted to stay out late could apply for a key to enter college after hours rather than risk laddering their stockings or tearing their tights climbing in. Somerville always used to pride itself on being more emancipated than the other women's colleges. The tone was set by the distinguished scientist (and socialist) Janet Vaughan, college principal for over 20 years, who once, when I was in prison after a demonstration, sent me via one of her students an expression of her "great sympathy".

Of all the women's colleges St Hilda's was the one that most closely resembled a girls' boarding school. That was certainly the view of my half-sister Audrey who had been there in the 1920s after boarding at Malvern Girls' College\*. She told me that at St Hilda's in her day dangerous occasions of sin like going to the cinema with a male escort were strictly forbidden (the theatre, however, was allowed). As my contemporary Sheila Rowbotham put it in her memoir\*\*: "The first few days at St Hilda's felt like a tape rewinding. At Oxford the fifties had been preserved and in a women's college I was enclosed once again in an institution which returned me to the claustrophobia of Hunmanby\*\*\*." And even in the age of comparative enlightenment St Hilda's was the last of Oxford women's colleges to vote to abandon its single-sex status and admit male undergraduates.

\*founded in 1893, alma mater of romantic novelist Barbara Cartland and Caroline Lucas, the Green MP; now Malvern St James

\*\**Promise of a Dream*, Verso, 2001

\*\*\*Hunmanby Hall, 1928-91, a Methodist boarding school for girls

But how much sexual activity was there at Oxford in the early 1960s? The journalist Lynn Barber claimed in her memoir\* to have had the pleasure of 50 men in the space of two eight-week terms, whereas two of Oxford's best-known science graduates, Richard Dawkins and the even-more celebrated Stephen Hawking, both reported in their autobiographies\*\* that they managed to emerge after three undergraduate years quite unscathed, as virginal as on the day they matriculated.

\**An Education*, Lynn Barber, Penguin, 2009

\*\**My Brief History*, Stephen Hawking, Bantam, 2013; *An Appetite for Wonder*, Richard Dawkins, Bantam, 2013

Faced by this kind of discrepancy my own account is not intended to be a rebuttal of anything or in any way representative. The one general point I would make is that serious science students, who spent their working day in the labs actually working, obviously had less free time (for sport, drinking, debating, acting, poker, politics, recreational sex) than feckless arts students who might wander into a library from time to time and whose most pressing engagement was a weekly tutorial or two.

In the science subjects, attending lectures might be essential because the work being covered was as yet unpublished, whereas in the arts there was often the dismissive attitude that lectures were primarily intended for lazy students who couldn't be bothered to do the reading and in any case needed to be told what to think. Once, listening to a lecture by the philosopher (and Spurs fan) AJ Ayer, I suddenly became aware that the argument he was using came from one of his books – and not an obscure one: it was *Language, Truth and Logic* then in paperback.

Anyway, towards the end of my own still-virginal first term I was, to my great delight, seduced by a Somerville student. It happened like this. One morning my college pigeonhole (before email, letters from other students were delivered via the university's internal post along with all the other bumf like unsolicited sales letters trying to sell you insurance) revealed the following brief but clear note from A--: "You don't know me but I have seen you speaking in the union and would like to get to know you. Please come to tea this week on either Wednesday or Thursday."

An invitation difficult to refuse, you might say, and I certainly didn't refuse it. I turned up at Somerville on the Wednesday, found A--'s room and within an hour or so we were in her narrow single bed. She was in her third year, had spent most of the two previous ones in a relationship which had now ended, so she'd been looking around. Next day she came to my rooms in Christ Church for a successful return engagement but that turned out to be that. We parted amicably.

And then in the Christmas vacation I met Charlotte – Fawcett, that is. It's difficult to avoid identifying her for two reasons. First, as the late mother of Boris Johnson, she was a person of some political/historical interest. At the 2019 Tory Party conference he called her the "ace up his sleeve" on Brexit (she voted out apparently). And, second, because in a possibly unguarded moment\* she was once quoted by a journalist as saying: "I was engaged to somebody called Wynford Hicks who was extraordinarily beautiful to look at but actually quite boring." As anybody familiar with the internet knows, a quote like that has a timeless quality: it will never go away – and it hasn't. So I will answer it as best I can.

\*Interview by the *Gogglebox* star and *Spectator* columnist Mary Killen in *Tatler*, March 2015

For the record, Charlotte and I were never “engaged” – no promise, no ring, no announcement, no engagement party, certainly no proposed wedding date. “Engaged” is pure euphemism. The fact is that she and I spent more than a year together in what is nowadays called a “relationship” without the question of marriage coming up. Next, who would want to argue with “extraordinarily beautiful”? So I won’t.

But obviously I’m not happy with “actually quite boring”. It sounds like *Tatler* toff-speak to me, a drawling dialect that Charlotte didn’t use much when we were together but seems to have adopted afterwards, as she sought to reclaim her conventional top-drawer status. Unlike those who become radicalised at university Charlotte seemed to go the other way and became de-radicalised: what was previously challenging and exciting was now “boring”. Her teenage revolt was over.

We first met in the Café des Artistes in Redcliffe Gardens, a bohemian basement dive in Fulham, and soon found we had all sorts of superficial things in common. Charlotte’s younger brother Edmund was at Ampleforth, the Catholic public school where I might have gone if I hadn’t gone to Stonyhurst; Charlotte herself had been expelled from Mayfield, the convent where my younger sister Monica was at school (Charlotte’s elder sister Sarah was a nun there and we once made a pilgrimage to visit her). We were both 18, on the left and a bit on the wild side, both committed to the campaigns against nuclear weapons and apartheid in South Africa. Above all, we had both recently left the Catholic Church, or “lapsed”, in Catholic jargon.

Charlotte obviously returned to the faith at some point, which explains why she had her son Boris baptised as a Catholic with her best friend, (Lady) Rachel Billington, née Pakenham, as godmother. An early sign of Boris’s political ambition was his decision at Eton to abandon Rome and become an Anglican, before reverting to Catholicism when that became the better option; he was once described as having the relaxed attitude to religion of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Whig.

After failing to get on with the nuns at Mayfield, Charlotte was being tutored in London for entrance to Oxford where her father, the distinguished barrister Sir James Fawcett, was the bursar of All Souls College. But when she came to see me in Oxford during the Hilary (spring) term, independently of her parents, we had a problem: where was she going to stay? Certainly not in college with me – I wasn’t planning to get sent down. So I approached the only married student I knew then who was Max Mosley.

And that is how Charlotte came to be the house guest of Max and Jean Mosley at their Oxford flat. This episode is not mentioned in Max’s autobiography\* though, among other things, he does record that he was invited to join “the supposedly secret ‘P’ dining club” at Christ Church and that Paul Foot of all people was one of his regular supper guests for egg and chips.

\**Formula One and Beyond*, Max Mosley, Simon & Schuster 2015

At Easter 1961 Charlotte and I went on the Aldermaston march, CND’s annual pilgrimage from the Atomic Weapons Research Centre to Trafalgar Square in London. It was a fun time if a bit uncomfortable – we marchers had to sleep on hard wooden floors in school classrooms. But some of the slogans were imaginative: “Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Slough – THINK NOW!” in the town that John Betjeman had referenced so unfortunately in his 1937 environmental protest poem “Come, friendly

bombs...” ... “The bomb will put the dampers on the champers” as we proceeded through affluent Eaton Square on the edge of Chelsea. And later, when the radical wing of the movement was at odds with conservative CND chairman Canon Collins, “Ban the Bomb and fire the Canon”.

I wasn't particularly keen on the trad jazz bands and protest folk singers that provided the main soundtrack for CND marches. But some of the songs from the campaign against the Polaris nuclear submarine base in the Holy Loch near Glasgow hit the spot. My favourite was “We dinna want Polaris”, which included brilliant lines like “The mayor o’ the toon, he wants his hauf o’croon” and “It’s suicide tae hae them on the Clyde”. Later, when the Spies for Peace published their subversive material in time for the 1963 march, we sang: “I’ve got a secret, a nice official secret, and I’ve published it for all the world to see...”

That summer in London Charlotte was working as a volunteer for the Africa Bureau\*, selling tickets for a benefit concert which included the cast of *Beyond the Fringe*. At the gig we got to listen to Peter Cook’s marvellous Macmillan routine (from four-minute warnings of nuclear attack to a celebration of Roger Bannister’s four-minute mile). In August I joined the Fawcett family at their rented villa in Tuscany where Leonard Ingrams, the future banker and opera impresario, and his wife-to-be, Rosalind Moore, were fellow guests. The four of us spent a night sleeping out on the town walls of Lucca, smoking black tobacco to ward off the mosquitoes. Then Charlotte and I hitched back to England. This involved getting lifts in trucks and two-seater sports cars (no seatbelts in those days), rejecting offers of hotel rooms from sleazy would-be voyeurs and sleeping out on beaches such as the very stony one at Dieppe.

\*an anti-colonial think tank and part of the early anti-apartheid movement

And then came the Trafalgar Square sitdown of 17 September 1961. This was, without any doubt, the biggest challenge to the government launched by the anti-nuclear movement. What happened was that the Tory government reacted to the Committee of 100’s plan to sit down in Parliament Square by banning the – otherwise legal – rally in Trafalgar Square that was intended to precede it. Not only that: they jailed a third of the Committee of 100, including literary figures like Robert Bolt, Arnold Wesker and Christopher Logue, not to mention Bertrand and Lady Russell.

This was a massive PR blunder and ensured that Trafalgar Square on the day would be occupied by more people than the police could possibly contain or arrest; both the *Times* and *Peace News* put the number of demonstrators at 12,000. But the police did their best: they arrested a total of 1,314 people – by far the greatest number arrested on any one day in the history of protest in Britain\* – with more than 650 of us spending a night in the cells. Meanwhile at the parallel demo at the Holy Loch bad weather reduced the numbers though a further 289 people were arrested.

\*By comparison the demonstrations organised in London by the anti-climate change campaign Extinction Rebellion over 11 days from 15 April 2019 led to a total of 1,130 arrests while the ones that followed during October had reached 1,642 by the 16<sup>th</sup> of the month and were finally estimated at 1,850.

Charlotte and I both took part in the Trafalgar Square demo. I was arrested; she wasn't. It happened like this. From 5 o'clock in the afternoon to midnight there were skirmishes, by which I mean that demonstrators tried to evade the police so they could advance towards Parliament Square; they

were blocked; then many of them were arrested. This went on until midnight when most of the demonstrators who remained decided to call it a day. This left a hard core of activists – a few hundred of us, as I remember it. About 20 minutes after midnight the arrests began – some of them were on the robust side, and the violence continued afterwards in police stations.

My Oxford contemporary Adam Roberts (later Sir Adam and a professor of international relations) wrote a graphic account for the *New Statesman* about what happened to him during his arrest and afterwards, "The police at midnight", 22 September 1961. In the House of Lords Lord Kilbracken later summarised Adam's treatment as follows: "He was very seriously beaten up, kicked, and has a doctor's certificate which says that he was bleeding internally three days after the event."

I was quite roughly handled on my way to the police coach though, like most of us, I didn't need medical treatment. In fact the police behaviour was arbitrary and (nowadays you'd say) sexist. When I was arrested the policeman in charge said to Charlotte, blonde and beautiful and sitting down next to me, something like "Why don't you run along home?" And she did. Other women who weren't so lucky were dragged over the paving stones and thrown into fountains.

When the Oxford term started a week or so later Charlotte and I signed up for the newly established Oxford Committee of 100 and she joined me in the university humanist group – in fact she became a college rep at Lady Margaret Hall, for her first two terms\*. Fast forward now to the next big demo – or rather, series of demos at Ruislip and Wethersfield outside London and various other places including Brize Norton near Oxford scheduled for 9 December 1961, just as the university term was ending.

\*see the [ouhg.org.uk](http://ouhg.org.uk) website for humanist group membership cards

Charlotte and I were drifting apart and I think she was getting cold feet about the Committee of 100. She didn't turn up for the briefing before the demonstration and she wasn't there on the day. Then, afterwards, while I was in prison I gathered from a fellow inmate, the secretary, Will Warren, that she had resigned from the committee. Charlotte and I did have something of a reconciliation a few weeks later but that could only be temporary: we were obviously going in different directions.

The Brize Norton demo plan was to convene at a village green a few miles away, march to the base (legally), then sit down in the road to blockade it (illegally). Just before we moved off the senior police officer proposed a meeting with the marshals to discuss traffic arrangements. All was smooth and good-humoured until we noticed that, standing quite legally on the village green and causing no nuisance or obstruction to anyone, we had been surrounded by police officers.

"So do you intend to carry on with your plan to blockade the base?" asked the senior officer – and in answer we sat down on the grass and were carried away to police vehicles.\* Meanwhile the march moved off towards Brize Norton – including several marshals who had avoided the meeting with the police by staying in the pub. A few days later somebody wrote to the *Guardian* to say that the police behaviour that day reminded them of the Russians' tactics outside Budapest in 1956: invite the rebel leaders to a parley; then take them prisoner.

\* In his memoir, *The Accidental Making of an Anarchist*, 2016, available at [www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk](http://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk), Laurens Otter says that Will Warren had previously been assured by the police that "there would be no arrests" at this point. Looking back it seems likely that the local



police tactics changed in response to a diktat from the government to go for a pre-emptive strike to try to disrupt the Brize Norton demonstration. This certainly happened in London where six leading members of the Committee of 100 had been arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act on 8 December, the day before Ruislip and Wethersfield.

Since we had been stopped from actually committing an offence we could not be charged with anything – but never underestimate the ingenuity of a prosecution lawyer or the versatility of the English law: under the medieval Justices of the Peace Act (1361) we could be jailed for refusing to be “bound over to keep the peace”, that is, for refusing to agree to accept a heavier penalty if we subsequently committed an offence. The four of us who could spare the time declined to be bound over – and went to prison for the next 20 days.

We were sent to Oxford prison, which has since been transformed into a luxury hotel, the Malmaison. At the time it was far from luxurious but there is (or certainly was then) substance in Evelyn Waugh’s remark in the novel *Decline and Fall* that “anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison”. Porridge is an excellent example – that was what every public schoolboy and prison inmate (and Scotsman) used to have for breakfast in the 1950s and 60s. So no cause for complaint there obviously. Actually there’s even a positive point here: in prison in December 1961 I learnt to drink tea without sugar for the first time; this was because our miserly sugar ration couldn’t be stretched to cover both porridge and tea. Not being Scottish I couldn’t stomach unsweetened porridge whereas unsweetened tea, I found, was drinkable.

I probably put on a few pounds in prison: the meals were regular and substantial if not always appetising. But Laurens Otter noticeably lost weight because he fasted, protesting in Gandhian style, for the full 20 days. For 24 hours, though, we all fasted in protest at the execution of Robert McGladdery, the last man to be hanged in Northern Ireland.

Laurens and I used to meet in the exercise yard and just as in every traditional prison painting we trudged round in a circle; actually we went two by two, like children in a school crocodile or animals approaching Noah’s ark. But at least we were allowed to talk and I was treated to a running tutorial on radical politics in general and anarchism in particular. Laurens, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of groupuscule politics, turned the traditional arguments for and against anarchism on their head. Instead of asserting (after Rousseau) that fundamentally people were benign, well-intentioned, essentially good, so they had no need of the authoritarian state, Laurens, an Anglo-Catholic, argued, quoting the doctrine of the fall of man, that people were fundamentally flawed. Thus there was no coherent moral case for government because no man was good enough to be another man’s master: anarchism was the only logical solution. As an ex-Catholic I was impressed though not yet convinced by this argument. Over the next few months it stayed with me.

Inside, we ban-the-bombers were segregated from the other prisoners. But the occasional comments – from a con serving meals, say – were positive. Even more encouraging was the screw who came into the cell I shared with two others, expressed sympathy and told us his own story. He’d been a national serviceman in the RAF based in Cyprus at the time of Suez and had been a refusenik on principle.

In prison we wore our own clothes because we were “civil prisoners” – we hadn’t been convicted of anything – and we worked in a small group on one of the landings. We didn’t sew mailbags but we waxed the thread with which mailbags were sewn. This meant we could buy things like chocolate in the prison shop. Christmas day was memorable: we had roast pork followed by a kind of stodge pudding in a custardy sauce – but no booze alas – and we were treated to a carol concert put on by the Salvation Army.

We were allowed letters but not visits and we were issued with a green exercise book (*General Note Book* – “Name 6385 HICKS”) which I still have; it was censored and marked “OK for discharge”. Inside are the restrictions on its use including: “You must not write, draw or paint in it anything indecent or against the good order, security and discipline of the prison or wilfully disfigure or damage it or remove any pages, or make notes in shorthand or cipher.”

When we were released, we were treated to breakfast by the Quakers at their meeting house and interviewed by the *Oxford Mail*. I learnt that Will Warren, one of the two veterans from the Direct Action Committee, had just spent his third Christmas in four years in prison. The other one, Laurens Otter, was eating his first meal for 20 days.

In so many ways the brief experience of being in prison encouraged you think in an anti-authoritarian way. Increasingly, Committee of 100 activists were drawn to anarchism because it provided a theory that made sense of extra-parliamentary – that is to say direct – action. And as we encountered the various agencies of the state – police, courts, prison – and saw from experience how they worked, the anarchist critique became increasingly convincing.

For example, there was the case of Richard Wallace, a bearded carpenter and Committee of 100 activist who was an enthusiast for alternative lifestyles, a pioneer hippy if you like. He was arrested in February 1963 and fined for selling *Peace News* at Carfax in the middle of Oxford on Saturday morning. Technically he was guilty of “obstruction” because he hadn’t moved on – ie he hadn’t stopped selling papers – when asked to do so by a police officer. But Richard was no more causing an actual obstruction than the regular sellers of papers like the *Oxford Mail* and the *Evening Standard* who used the same site. It was pure political spite on the part of the police. And just like the government’s overreaction at Trafalgar Square in 1961, the police tactics here were plain stupid: I knew that this was a battle which for once we were certain to win.

The following Saturday four of us joined Richard at Carfax and one by one we were arrested for the same offence. By the time we appeared in court, the publicity was beginning to embarrass the Oxford establishment – but that didn’t stop the magistrates from fining us in spite of evidence (from Conservative club president Jonathan Aitken, among others) that nobody had actually been obstructed. Inevitably, a deal was then negotiated between the editor of *Peace News* and the police allowing the paper to be sold in public without interference.

Many years later I came across a piece by George Orwell\* protesting at an uncannily similar incident just after the second world war. Five people had been arrested for selling left-wing papers including *Peace News* and the anarchist paper *Freedom* outside Hyde Park; they were bound over (so effectively banned from street-selling papers) for six months or in one case fined and then jailed for a month for refusing to pay the fine. As Orwell observed, the enforcement of the law depends on

the discretion of the police and also on what public opinion is prepared to put up with; above all, by itself "The law is no protection."

\*Freedom of the Park, *Tribune*, 7 December 1945, accessible online

The case of Donald Room, Detective-Sergeant Challenor and a planted brick was rather more serious. During a series of demos against the state visit of King Paul and Queen Frederica of Greece in July 1963, Challenor arrested Room, an anarchist cartoonist, charged him with carrying an offensive weapon, then added a brick to the property taken from him in order to "prove" his guilt. When he was released from police custody Room had the presence of mind to send his jacket for analysis so he could show in court that he hadn't in fact been carrying the brick. Result: Room was acquitted and Challenor's destructive career as a bent copper was over.

Room's advantage in this case was that he was appearing before a "stipendiary" – that is professional – magistrate in London rather than the often petty, class-conscious and vindictive amateur magistrates outside London. That also applied to me in the one case when, charged with "insulting behaviour", I was found not guilty...

In court the police officer had a quick look at his notebook and said: "The defendant charged into the crowd using his banner pole as a battering ram. So I arrested him."

As the defendant I was delighted to hear this but showed no sign. Then when my turn came to cross-examine I said to the officer: "If, as you say, I was using the banner pole as a battering ram would you agree that the person holding the other pole would have been aware of what was happening?"

The officer paused as if considering this outlandish possibility for the first time. "No, not necessarily," he said. There were one or two suppressed titters from my Oxford student friends in the public gallery – and I was even more delighted.

"Thank you," said the magistrate to the officer. "You may step down." Without pausing he continued, now addressing the court: "There seem to be some elements of doubt in this case" – and then to me: "You are free to go."

So I rejoined my friends (including the person who'd been holding the other banner pole and had come to give evidence). We went to the pub to celebrate this rare event in prosecutions after demos, an acquittal.

I'd been charged with insulting behaviour under section five of the Public Order Act 1936 two weeks earlier on the last day of the 1963 Aldermaston march, which also featured the Spies for Peace revelations. Several thousands of us had broken away from the main march and spread out across Regent Street on the way to the rally in Hyde Park. We were defying the police who wanted us to march in a calm and orderly manner on one side of the road only. But there was no riot, no fighting and certainly no possibility of "charging into the crowd" since any bystanders were of course on the pavement not in the road. I was an obvious target for an officious police officer being over six feet tall with longish red hair and carrying one pole of a red-and-black banner which read "Oxford Anarchists".

The Spies for Peace story, which I refer to later in this book (see Chapter 11), was probably the highlight of the radical anti-nuclear campaign of the early 1960s. Other notable events for the Oxford committee were a march through the city centre at the key moment of the 1962 Cuba crisis and a “fast for world peace” outside an Oxford church over Christmas 1962; then we took part in two further attempts to immobilise/invoke nuclear bases, the first at Greenham Common in Berkshire, later the scene of the women’s peace camp, the second at Marham in Norfolk; and we supported the protest at Porton Down “Germ Warfare Centre” in June 1963. Nich Bennett and I also made a tape for a local pirate radio station which generated precisely one response, though that did include a pensioner’s postal order for £1.

The fast for peace was organised by Gene Sharp, the high priest and top theorist of non-violent action, then at St Catherine’s. There were half a dozen of us including Hugh Brody, the future anthropologist. Every morning for four days we assembled in front of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin; every evening we were driven to Gene’s flat to spend the night in sleeping bags. We drank water with lemon juice and ate nothing. I lost a stone over the four days but put it back on again in about two days afterwards – it was Christmas, after all. As Dorothy Parker once said of writing, I hated fasting but I enjoyed having done it.

At Greenham Common in June 1962 the plan was to blockade the base for 24 hours over a weekend. Adam Roberts, then working for *Peace News*, reported: “By Sunday morning 323 demonstrators had been arrested, but the sit-down carried on and the entrance to the base was blocked for at least 23 hours of the 24-hour demonstration.” For once I managed to avoid being arrested whereas two anarchist friends of mine, Diana Shelley and Charles Radcliffe, who were to spend several years together, first met in a police van at Greenham.

Diana was included in a study by oral historian Sam Carroll of the links between the Committee of 100 and the women of the Greenham Common peace camp many years later in the 1980s.\* Diana, then working for CND and a feminist herself, described the frustrations of dealing with these newcomers to direct action who didn’t seem interested in the radical past unless it could be called feminist: “One had to pretend that one had only just found out about nuclear weapons and peace issues and indeed quite possibly even feminism. I was basically saying ‘this thing that is happening now is part of a continuing tradition’ and what I encountered was a fixed gimlet stare and ‘I don’t want to know’.” But in spite of some sectarian conflict, the Greenham Common peace camp was an impressive affair; it lasted for 19 years from 1981 and included thousands of women.

*\*“I was arrested at Greenham in 1962”: Investigating the oral narratives of women in the Committee of 100, Sam Carroll, Oral History, spring 2004, volume 32, accessible online. The other five women interviewed were: Jay Ginn, Ruth Walter, Marion Prince, Jo Foster and Barbara Smoker.*

At Marham on 11 May 1963 we were more ambitious than we had been at Greenham: our objective was to invade the base and immobilise its nuclear bombers by sitting in front of them. For hours we stood around the perimeter fence, the athletes among us making sporadic attempts to penetrate it by climbing up the wire and jumping down on the other side; whenever this happened the RAF personnel lined up inside would throw the intruders back over the fence. After an afternoon of stalemate the word went round that we would pack up and go home at six o’clock but first there would be one final attempt to invade.

All went as expected until we realised that 12 of the invaders had not been thrown back this time but arrested. They were taken to a specially convened magistrates' court and the rest of us followed, gathering outside to find out what they'd been charged with. When the answer came, it was a bombshell – they'd been charged under section one of the Official Secrets Act, maximum sentence 14 years.

This was the section under which the Russian spy George Blake had been found guilty in May 1961 and sentenced to 42 years (three counts of 14 years). Even more to the point, after the Wethersfield demonstration in December 1961 six leading members of the Committee of 100 had been selectively prosecuted under the act and sentenced to 18 months.\* Then the committee had not reacted to this intimidation, for example by returning to Wethersfield. This time we had to react.

\*Two of the Wethersfield six, Michael Randle and Pat Pottle, met George Blake in prison and, shocked by the savagery of his sentence, later helped him escape and arranged safe houses for him in London. Then Randle drove him, hidden in a camper van, over the border to East Germany. Pottle and Randle were charged with helping Blake escape but acquitted by the jury in spite of a clear direction by the judge to convict.

The debate that followed the Marham charges was exceptional in the committee's history partly because it was dominated by the activists who had turned up and certainly not by the organisers. In fact Peter Cadogan\*, the local committee secretary, inexplicably argued that we shouldn't change our plans at all. He was ignored. It was clear that we had to respond – or abandon any pretence that we were committed to the principle of solidarity with those arrested. The majority supported the argument that we should return to Marham in a week's time having prepared ourselves for prison or whatever else might happen. But the minority (including me) insisted that those of us who could, should go back immediately. So we did, more than 50 of us. And the following Saturday several hundred others came back as promised.

\*Peter's reputation preceded him. He was one of a number of Trotskyists and ex-Trots lampooned in a song that in his case went: "Peter Cadogan he was there, talking to the *Mail*; if you don't tell the bourgeois press, the revolution'll fail." And it's true that Peter did like the sound of his own voice and the company of journalists. He had served in RAF air-sea rescue during the war, then joined the Communist party, from which he was suspended in 1956, the Labour party, which expelled him in 1959, and two Trotskyist groups, which also expelled him. He once claimed to be "England's most expelled socialist". Later, he was chairman of the South Place Ethical Society based at Conway Hall in Holborn, central London.

Returning to Marham that night, which by then it was, with the certainty of arrest and the virtual certainty of being charged under the Official Secrets Act felt, if sport's your thing, a bit like facing a demon fast bowler in failing light without a helmet. We scaled the perimeter fence and advanced in the gloom towards the planes. We were all arrested and charged, as we expected, under section one of the act and then, unless we accepted conditional bail, we were transferred to Norwich prison – or in the case of women to Holloway in London.

While I was inside I had various supportive letters including one from a young St Clare's student, Jo Firbank, one of five women arrested who initially refused bail. In spite of the weight of the charge against us her mood was buoyant: "The welfare committee have swamped Holloway with fruit,

chocolate and cigarettes – as only two of us smoke, I'm alright Jack...Apparently, I haven't been sent down from St Clare's and my principal (horror) is coming to see me tomorrow so I suppose I'd better stop writing and wash my hair, 'cos I've got to look respectable...My mother's in an awful state about this and keeps sending solicitors and people to see me..." The pressure told: Jo gave in and accepted bail.

I think there were nine days between our arrest and our appearance in court. I spent many hours writing an elaborate political/philosophical reply to the charge of acting in a way that was "prejudicial to the safety or interests of the state" with copious references to Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and South Africa. But it turned out that I was wasting my time. When we got to Downham Market magistrates' court we found that the charge under section one had been reduced to a much milder one under section three which didn't mention "the state"; we were all (including the original 12) fined £25 and that was that. Of course we never knew what would have happened to the 12 if we hadn't joined them. But at least, for once, we had responded successfully to intimidation by the state.

As I said earlier, the anarchist critique made increasing sense to Committee of 100 activists and an informal anarchist group had started meeting in Christ Church during the 1962 Michaelmas (autumn) term. Over the next few months I agreed with Nick Falk, editor of the Oxford new left's *Messenger* magazine, that I would write an introduction to anarchism. I wrote it and sent it in; it was typeset. Then came disaster; well, a snag. Partly because of defections to the anarchists and the various Trotskyist groups, particularly the International Socialists, the Oxford new left was running out of steam and the *Messenger* was no longer sustainable. It was about to disappear and with it my article.

So what I proposed to Nick was a joint issue between them and us with production costs shared. Our half was called *Anarchist Student*; as well as my piece it discussed anarchism and non-violence, and reported on the *Peace News* at Carfax saga; the *Messenger* half reviewed Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie* and included Judith Okely's "The Spectre of Feminism". So, completely by chance, the same publication included manifestos for both anarchism and feminism.

We managed to sell some copies of *Anarchist Student/Messenger* on the 1963 Aldermaston march though the Spies for Peace with their pamphlet *Danger! Official Secret* certainly stole our thunder. Nobody who was on that march will forget the point when a thousand or so of us turned left away from the main body to visit RSG Warren Row, advertised by the Spies as one of the underground shelters from which we would be ruled after a nuclear war. As with the Trafalgar Square sitdown of 17 September 1961 you felt part of what was going to be history (and hoped you would be around to help write it, or at least read it).

After Marham in May I managed, not through my own fault this time, one more interruption before I took my final exams in June 1963. I was a passenger in a car crash which led to a brief hospital visit. Four of us were on our way back from a party in the very early morning when the driver of our Mini-van, who'd spent much of the previous day at the wheel, dozed off and hit a wall at 50-60 mph. In the ambulance I remember saying to him as his face bled profusely: "You look like Henry Cooper", the British boxer who'd recently been badly cut by the mighty Muhammad Ali. Three of us had comparatively minor injuries while the driver's girlfriend, seat-belted in the front, had a broken leg – the Mini-van had hit the wall on her side.

In my case an x-ray revealed a cracked rib for which, I learnt, there was no treatment. But there certainly was pain: coughing was agony; sleep was difficult; physical exercise including sex virtually impossible. (So drive carefully, people, and try to stay awake.)

After my psychology practical and the written exams came a viva (voce), an oral exam for borderline candidates. I was pretty confident that my fourth was safe: I was being viva'd for a possible third. So I wasn't too disheartened when I failed to answer most of the questions. And I got my fourth.

# Anarchist youth

## Chapter 5: Notting Hill

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Although I now had my degree I wasn't ready to leave Oxford: I'd been there for only eight terms after all and there was unfinished business to take care of. In particular, the anarchist group was about to go public as a listed university club with a senior member, the historian James Joll, and a full programme of open meetings. So for the first term of the new academic year I found a cheap room in a bohemian rented house, 139 Woodstock Road, peopled by like-minded students including Rip Bulkeley, a genial, bearded left-wing person who at six and a half feet towered above everybody else, later a published poet and award-winning science writer\*.

\*Also the editor/publisher of *Wrong-righting Years, Memoirs of the Oxford 1960s Left*, Oxford, May 2017, available online, [rip@ripandjane.org](mailto:rip@ripandjane.org)

But first there was an active summer which started with the harassment\* – no other word for it – by constant picketing of Queen Frederica and King Paul of Greece during the several days of their state visit to London in July 1963. In this case our tactics were not to court arrest but to avoid it so we could pursue the royal couple for longer. When the anarchist cartoonist Donald Room was arrested (see Chapter 4) he was actually walking away from a police cordon, having failed to pass through it, though he was carrying a banner saying “Lambrakis RIP”. I was one of the last to be arrested: we were in the Mall marching from Trafalgar Square towards Buckingham Palace, surrounded by police.

\*This was a response to the murder of Grigoris Lambrakis, a left-wing MP and peace activist, by right-wing thugs – on the street and in plain view of numerous people – with evidence of complicity by the Greek government. See the film *Z*, 1969, made, mainly in French, by the Greek director-producer Costa-Gavras.

A matter of weeks later a convoy of camper vans organised by the Committee of 100 left Britain to cross western Europe from the Channel to the eastern Mediterranean with the stated intention of arriving in Athens for the Hiroshima Day commemoration on 6 August. I didn't join it. I knew there was no chance of the far-right government of Greece letting the convoy cross the frontier from Yugoslavia and I also didn't fancy being cooped up in an old Dormobile van for days subsisting on a diet of lentils, lettuce and brown rice washed down with herbal tea or, at best, home-brewed beer.\*

\*I was right about the convoy being prevented from reaching its destination – it was harassed and blocked by the Austrian and Yugoslav authorities even before it could reach the Greek frontier. But I was quite wrong about the restriction to “herbal tea or, at best, home-brewed beer”: in the event local sympathisers provided plenty of the real thing as the convoy proceeded via Belgium to Munich. See *Committee of 100: Athens Convoy in Solidarity* Volume 3, No 1.

But I certainly wanted to get to Athens in time for 6 August. So, naturally, I set off in good time and hitched. I didn't take the obvious direct route overland via Yugoslavia: it wouldn't have been clever to have been identified and stopped on the frontier by an alert Greek immigration official. Instead I went down the west side of Italy, then across from Naples to the port of Brindisi and on by ferry to Greece.



In Athens the Bertrand Russell Committee, organisers of the Hiroshima Day rally, were pleased to see me since by now the British peace convoy had been stopped on the Greek-Yugoslav frontier and turned back. They found me somewhere to stay and invited me to speak on 6 August (in English, of course: I didn't even have classical Greek, never mind the modern version). My host was a Communist ex-state schoolteacher, a casualty of the left's defeat in the Greek civil war of 1946-9: he was banned from public teaching posts and eked out a living giving private lessons. His way of feeding himself that summer was instructive. Every few days he stuffed various Mediterranean vegetables – peppers, aubergines, tomatoes – with rice and herbs and baked them in the oven. Supplemented by bread, that was his diet. In more affluent France, by contrast, stuffed tomatoes, featuring meat rather than rice, might be one course among several in a midday meal at a workers' restaurant.

The day after the Hiroshima Day rally one or two other English people and I met in a café and discussed how we might get to a second demonstration which we'd found out about. We had a street map of Athens and showed this to our taxi driver (we knew the demonstration area was likely to be cordoned off). He nodded and was about to drive away when the front passenger door opened and a plainclothes man got in and told the driver to go to the police station. Apart from some mild questioning nothing serious happened: we did have British passports after all. But it was a reminder of what living in a police state must be like.

And there was another reminder on my way out of Greece a day or so later. At the frontier with Yugoslavia I was stopped, questioned and then harangued by a senior uniformed Greek police officer who had excellent English but zero knowledge of British politics. "Bertrand Russell is a Communist," he ranted. "No, I'm afraid not," I replied. "You may disagree with him but you can't call him a Communist." There was no possible resolution of this conflict but when I saw a (perfectly respectable-looking) British car approach, I said to the driver: "Excuse me, can you possibly help? I'm having a disagreement with this gentleman. Is Bertrand Russell a Communist as far as you know?"

The unfortunate driver, looking puzzled, said something like "No, I don't think he is" – at which point the policeman, fuming and gesticulating, directed him to take his vehicle out of the main queue to be delayed and, presumably, interrogated for his pains. Feeling ever-so-slightly remorseful I walked on into Yugoslavia, relieved that my Greek visit was over.

My destination was near Beynac in the Dordogne, an international anarchist summer camp where I spent the next few weeks, as I did the following summer at another one near Alès in the Gard. The camps were organised by the Spanish anarchist movement in exile (their base was in Toulouse); they also attracted young French anarchists and a mixed collection from other countries.

There was a large communal tent for people who hadn't brought anything to sleep under but otherwise what was provided by the volunteers was what you'd expect in a fairly basic commercial campsite, things like cooking facilities, showers and latrines. There were some organised daytime activities – eg football with teams on national lines (Spain v France v Rest of the World) – but the main communal life was in the evening with lectures, debates and film shows (eg *Octobre à Paris*, on the massacre of Algerians by the Paris police in 1961, and *Fury over Spain*, newsreel footage of the first phase of the Spanish civil war/revolution with an anarchist commentary). Since the Spanish in the camp were all exiles – or the children of exiles – living in France, French was the language of discussion and I did some translating into English for the other foreigners.

There was the occasional cultural conflict. But the young French anarcho-nudists, when seeking the sun, kept well away from the sometimes strait-laced Spanish families who might have been disconcerted. That was tactful. The case of the “Ealing Anarchists” was something else. A middle-aged Spanish woman, utterly bewildered, asked me to explain the behaviour of two long-haired, bearded men who spent most of their time drinking in the sun then lying in the communal tent in a drunken stupor stinking of stale sweat, cheap red wine and urine. I confessed that I couldn’t.

I got a lift back from the camp with Jay Ginn and her partner, Roger Etherington. Then in Oxford I needed to find some means of support since I was no longer a state-subsidised student. I did various things – a bit of gardening here, a bit of house cleaning there – but my main source of income was *Private Eye*. To explain: the established distributors of newspapers and magazines, principally WH Smith, were not keen on handling *Private Eye*, which was scurrilous, irresponsible – and likely to involve them in costly libel actions. In the autumn of 1963, although the *Eye* was riding high on the back of its coverage of the Profumo scandal, Smiths still refused to distribute or sell it. Solution? Direct sales on the street, eg at Carfax in the middle of Oxford where we had recently won the right to sell *Peace News*. I sold the *Eye*, which paid the rent, and the anarchist/pacifist stuff as well. Fortunately the police left me alone.

John Profumo, the minister for war in Macmillan’s Tory cabinet, had resigned after the revelation of his affair with Christine Keeler. The osteopath Stephen Ward, who’d introduced them, was tried at the Old Bailey on a trumped-up charge of living off immoral earnings and killed himself before he could be “found guilty”. I reviewed the Denning report on the affair in *Isis* commenting that “Profumo was better employed sleeping with Christine Keeler than supervising the deployment of weapons of mass destruction” and making the fairly obvious point that Ward was hounded to his death. There was an astonishing reaction from the Cambridge literary don David Holbrook – yes, him again – who wrote a three-page diatribe full of psychoanalytic jargon attacking Ward for his “hate-filled” self-destructive tendencies, which apparently explained why “the judiciary, representing society, had to find him a criminal”. Fortunately, I had the last word, pointing out that even if Ward *wanted* to be hounded to death, he was still hounded.

In the now officially registered Oxford Anarchist Group, we had an impressive list of speakers that first term, starting with historian James Joll and including Colin Ward, the editor of *Anarchy*, non-violence guru Gene Sharp, novelist-journalist Colin MacInnes and broadcaster-journalist Ray Gosling. When the jazz singer George Melly came to talk about the Dada art movement I told him that he was expected afterwards at a second gig – the university jazz club – and walked him over to the venue. He ended the evening belting out his signature song, *Frankie and Johnny*, curled round the stand-up microphone.

Members of the group mentioned by the historian David Goodway in his survey of British libertarian thought\* also included Richard Mabey, the wildlife and botany man, and Carole Pateman, a political theorist. David himself has kept the faith and continues to publish material on aspects of anarchism.

\**Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*, Liverpool University Press, 2006

We changed the title of *Anarchist Student* to *Anarchist Youth* in the third issue noting that “not all our writers or readers are students”. Several themes dominated: the attempt to develop a positive anarchist theory of non-violent action; moves to federate the various British anarchist groups and

inevitably Spain where repression continued and assassinating Franco was still being seriously discussed – and sometimes attempted. The other editors over the five issues we published were Adrian Cunningham (a Cambridge student), Charles Radcliffe (later a Situationist), Mark Hendy (of the Syndicalist Workers' Federation) and Leo Valle (FIJL, Spanish anarchist youth). In an article entitled "Spain and the anarchist movement in Britain" I argued in favour of a non-violent approach and said that "so-called 'propaganda' bombs are bloody bad propaganda".

The SWF, although not numerous, was a lively organisation committed to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism which had inspired the Spanish anarchist movement. It was formed in 1950 after the break-up of the Anarchist Federation of Britain which split over various personal and political issues. Its dominant personality was Tom Brown, a Geordie veteran, who'd grown up on Tyneside, become an engineering shop steward and then a powerful propagandist for anarchism and syndicalism in print and on public platforms. Meetings were held in a King's Cross pub but the nerve centre of the SWF was a grotty building off the Harrow Road housing an ancient hand-fed printing press which (in its own good time) produced the monthly paper *Direct Action*. On my first visit there I met Ken Hawkes, a sports journalist who later became a TV producer, and I wrote the headline for the front-page lead: "AGAINST ALL BOMBS".

The article was about nuclear weapons but we were both aware that the sub-text of the headline was a comment on the disagreement between traditional anarchist bomb-throwers and the new wave of non-violent revolutionaries. The SWF accommodated members of both groups, though sometimes it wasn't clear which one somebody belonged to: unlike some other anarchists we tried to avoid internal conflict.

Another example of the eclectic nature of the SWF was the membership of Bill Egan, an Irishman who had joined the IRA as a teenager in the 1950s, had been interned in 1961, and had read his way into anarchism by the time he was released in 1962. He describes his influences as, first, Ken Hawkes and then people like Dwight Macdonald and Alex Comfort.\* Bill, who was then a merchant seaman, jumped ship in Athens in August 1963, not knowing that the Committee of 100 peace convoy was on its way there. He left behind him on board copies of *Direct Action*, including a piece by me on the July demonstrations in London. As an illegal immigrant and a member of a subversive organisation he was lucky to hitchhike successfully through Greece from Athens to Corfu without being challenged.

\*See *Understood Backwards* by Bill Egan, [wegan@pcug.org.au](mailto:wegan@pcug.org.au)

A curiosity that struck me at the time (or maybe it was to be expected) was that we anarchists included more than our fair share of media professionals. In the SWF besides Ken Hawkes and me, Mark Hendy worked in book publishing as a copy editor and so did Donovan Pedelty (later the author of *The Great Deception: How Parliamentary Democracy Duped the Workers*, Christie Books, 2013) while Bill Christopher was a print worker. Outside the SWF Philip Sansom was a magazine journalist, specialising in production; Nicolas Walter a writer, subeditor and editor; Albert Meltzer a newspaper copy taker. Stuart Christie, after his release from prison in Spain, was a writer, subeditor, editor and publisher. But an anarchist "team of all the talents" wasn't really an option since there were too many personality conflicts with Nicolas and Albert leading the way.

The SWF was part of an international anarcho-syndicalist body, the International Working Men's Association (IWMA)\*, formed in 1922; an international congress was held in Paris in December 1963. With Laurens Otter I hitched to Paris to represent the SWF at the congress and also spoke at a public meeting of anarchist militants dominated by Spanish veterans from 1936-9 and their children. It was the only the second time in my life as an anarchist that I had an audience of hundreds of people at a political meeting (the first was in Athens on Hiroshima Day). I said that in Britain the anarchist movement was flourishing and that it particularly owed its recent growth to the recruitment of Committee of 100 supporters committed to non-violent methods.

\*The IWMA later updated itself and became the International *Workers'* Association.

The reply to me came from Federica Montseny, who had been an anarchist minister – of health – in the 1936 popular front government in Madrid. She restated the traditional view held by anarchists that gains made in a revolution should be defended, if necessary by force of arms. What she didn't do, however, was argue in favour of assassinating Franco.

Back in London after Christmas I gravitated towards Notting Hill where the local anarchist group was the strongest and liveliest in London. It met at the flat of Brian and Margaret Hart and at various times various people, including Stuart Christie and me, stayed there. But I soon moved in to share with Mark Hendy who was looking for somebody to help with the rent. When I left to live with a girlfriend, Stuart replaced me.

My first paid employment was in a market research firm processing questionnaires. You needed to be careful but it was pretty boring. Then I got lucky. Geoffrey Cannon\*, who was working at *New Society*, had written an article which both praised Granada for the quality of its news and current affairs, citing its flagship programme *World in Action*, and had a go at TV criticism in the national press. Much of it was superficial and ignorant, he said; most of the critics didn't seem to know very much about television. One reason suggested for this was that journalists tended to become TV critics accidentally rather than by design, in some cases as a result of an actual accident. Sidney Bernstein, the boss of Granada, had been impressed by the piece and had commissioned Geoffrey to investigate the TV criticism angle further and write a book about it. He could provide publishers for the book, since Granada owned several, and pay researchers to investigate in detail. Two people were appointed and I was one.

\*Geoffrey was editor of *Radio Times* from 1969 to 1979 and later specialised in the politics of food, health and exercise; he is the author of various books including *Dieting makes you fat*, Virgin 2008 (revised edition).

It was a fairly loose set-up. Peter Hunt, whose ambition was to become a TV director/producer, and I were formally attached to the film-buying department in Granada's Golden Square offices. The man in charge was Leslie Halliwell, an amiable, solidly built fellow with a pronounced chin who, to anyone brought up on the *Eagle* comic, looked a lot like Harris Tweed, Extra-Special Agent; his sidekick at Granada was Philip Jenkinson, who eventually succeeded him. We had a weekly Soho lunch with Geoffrey who provided lists of people to be interviewed and lists of questions for them. The interviewees were mainly TV professionals and journalists, critics and their editors, but also relevant politicians and public pontificators, such as members of the Pilkington committee on the future of broadcasting.

Alas, Geoffrey's book never materialised but I found the interviewing work both fun and instructive. In a way I carried on with what I'd started at Oxford: meeting people in the media and political world and finding what and how they thought. There were some moments to treasure. Frank Allaun, a left-wing Labour MP with a reputation for fellow-travelling, insisted that my tape-recorder had to be switched off before he would admit that he read the Communist *Daily Worker* (we asked everybody which newspapers they read). Anthony Wedgwood Benn, then Labour spokesman on media, was still focussed on a conventional political career (he hadn't yet reinvented himself as Tony Lefty-Benn) and took it and himself very seriously. When I proposed an interview, he said he was of course extremely busy but he could perhaps spare me a few minutes in his Holland Park house at 9am while he was opening his post which was likely to be extensive. It was. Joyce Grenfell, actress, comedian, monologist, Pilkington committee member, answered all the questions then insisted on turning the tables and interviewing me about my anarchist attitudes and opinions. This exchange with me became the basis of one of her monologues – see *Joyce Grenfell* by Janie Hampton, John Murray, 2002.

To interview Sidney Bernstein and other Granada people Peter and I were flown up to Manchester in the company's six-seater executive Dove, the first time aged 22 I had ever been on an airplane. Bernstein himself was a forceful and chatty character and keen to clarify the company's image. "Last year," he said, "we took on six people at Granada. They all went to grammar school and they all went to Oxford." Alas, I concluded, no chance for me – one out of two isn't really good enough.

Of all the impressive people I met doing these interviews (as well as Bernstein and Sir John Pilkington himself, there were TV critics like Philip Purser and Peter Black) one stands out. John Freeman qualified for the survey on just about every count: professional broadcaster (famous for his *Face to Face* TV interviews with celebrities from Gilbert Harding to Adam Faith); politician, or rather ex-politician (he'd resigned from Attlee's government in 1951 with Aneurin Bevan and Harold Wilson over the imposition of prescription charges); now writer and editor (of the *New Statesman*). He replied to the set questions – anticipating the follow-ups – in clear coherent sentences without being prompted. On the tape I think I needed to speak just twice.

Then there was Dennis Potter who I met for the third time. As an Oxford graduate he'd previously come to report on university debates for the *Daily Herald*, soon to become the *IPC Sun*; now he was its TV critic. In one way Potter illustrated the accident thesis of how TV critics are made: he'd moved to television criticism from reporting when he was hit by an extreme form of psoriasis. But in another he undermined it: as it happened he was totally absorbed by television as a medium; he'd already written drama for it; and as he emphasised to me in the interview he considered it far more important than cinema or theatre precisely because it could deliver a mass working-class audience. It wasn't an accident that, leaving criticism behind, Potter became the outstanding TV playwright of his time. Perhaps it was messy cases like Potter's – was he a TV critic by accident or by design or both? – that undermined Geoffrey's thesis and caused the project to be abandoned.

Meanwhile the 1964 Easter CND march was a truncated affair lasting only one day. But it had its moment of drama when the radical section, led by the red-and-black flags of the anarchists, split off and turned into Monck Street, Westminster, where the Rotunda buildings were suspected of being the HQ of the London RSG (regional seat of government). In a narrow street we found ourselves blocked by row after row of police officers.

At the front the marchers stopped. There were conflicting calls to “Sit down” and “Move on”. The calls to sit down won. Then a debate took place with a megaphone being passed between the speakers: effectively, should we try to charge and push through the cordon or stay sitting down? Ron Bailey, who later became known as the leader of the squatters’ movement, and Del Foley, both members of the *Solidarity* group, argued for the charge; Peter Cadogan and I argued against. Inevitably we won the argument because the momentum of the marchers had been lost. We hadn’t gained very much admittedly but at least we had avoided a pointless punch-up. As we all walked away afterwards I spotted Chris Pallis, the leading light of *Solidarity*, who characteristically had taken no part in the debate since it was a public one: as a prominent medical professional, a neurologist, he preferred anonymity and published his political stuff under pseudonyms. Chris was wearing a long face – he clearly regretted what had happened and told me so. (A year later there was a second demonstration at the Rotundas, which was better attended and better known.)

The *Solidarity* group, which published a magazine with that title and numerous pamphlets, is best described as “libertarian Marxist”; its origins were in Trotskyism and it particularly appealed to those on the fringes of anarchism who felt they needed the intellectual security blanket of post-Marxist jargon (which they called theory). However, it was practical rather than theoretical in emphasis and its members made a very positive contribution to the radical politics of the time including the Committee of 100 and the Spies for Peace.

A fortnight after Easter I took part in a national anarchist conference hosted by the Bristol anarchists and attended by about 80 delegates from local groups. It re-established the Anarchist Federation of Britain as a loose association concentrating on pooling information and joint propaganda activities. I was elected to the six-person bureau as international secretary. Since an election was due later that year, an anti-parliamentary campaign was an obvious idea. We swapped slogans like “Vote for Guy Fawkes, the only honest man to enter Parliament” and “Why vote? It only encourages them”.

It was a busy time. I was approached by Stanley Hyland, a BBC2 producer planning a series of interviews with minority youth groups (others included Moral Rearmiers and Communists) called *Let Me Speak*. He’d read my introduction to anarchism, which had been reprinted in *Anarchy*, edited by Colin Ward, and invited me to find six more young anarchists to be interviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge in July 1964. We were paid £25 each with an extra £25 for me as the organiser of the panel.

I suppose I could have tried to exclude people I disagreed with but I didn’t and in any case my brief was to make the panel as representative as possible. So two of the six I recruited were Vincent Johnson from Liverpool (who you probably haven’t heard of) and Stuart Christie from Glasgow (who you probably have) – two traditional anarchists in the sense that they supported “propaganda of the deed”, that is trying to assassinate the enemy *pour encourager les autres*. And in the period from 1936, when the war in Spain started, until 1975, when he died from natural causes, General Franco was the anarchists’ number one enemy (nobody knows how many anti-Franco plots there were\* but they all failed, obviously). The four others, all Committee of 100 supporters, were Kate Saunders and Martin Small, both Oxford students, Adrian Cunningham, a Cambridge student, and Ian Vine, an engineering apprentice from Bristol. Martin, who wrote copiously for *Anarchy*, died a few years later from lung cancer after teaching history at a comprehensive school in Putney.

\* and not just anarchist ones: an abortive communist one featured the British double agent Kim Philby (see *A Spy Among Friends*, Ben Macintyre, Bloomsbury 2014).

I was well aware of Stuart's views – we were members of the same anarchist group, after all. But what he didn't tell me when *Let Me Speak* was being recorded was that he had already been recruited to put these views into practice. By the time the programme was shown in early September 1964 Stuart was in a Spanish prison having been arrested in Madrid carrying a rucksack packed with explosives. During the recording Muggerridge had asked him if he meant what he said: would he, for example, given the opportunity, try to assassinate Franco? And Stuart had of course answered yes. He'd then gone back to Notting Hill – Mark Hendy's flat – picked up his rucksack and set off for Paris, where he collected the explosives that were intended to do precisely this.

In his own account of these events\* Stuart admits to second thoughts: "Presented with the same question today, with a little more wisdom, I'm not sure that I would do the same thing. I didn't know exactly what I was signing up to. I thought I knew the risks I was running personally (although, as it turned out, I had underestimated the odds against me) but I must confess, I did not spend much time considering unforeseen consequences – the possibility of innocent victims or the unleashing of an even more horrific repression on the people of Spain." (pp122-3)

\**Granny Made Me an Anarchist*, Scribner, 2004. In spite of a few inaccuracies this is a good read – highly recommended. The book and three more detailed accounts on which it is based are now included in the Stuart Christie Memorial Archive, housed in the MayDay Rooms, Fleet Street, London. Stuart died from lung cancer in 2020.

When *Let Me Speak* was broadcast, Stuart's contribution was edited out because of his self-incriminating words. But simply by appearing in a British TV studio in July he had raised his own profile and made it much more likely that his activities would be monitored by Special Branch. And as he reports, information was routinely passed on by the British to their Spanish counterparts. "We have a lot of information on you from Scotland Yard's Special Branch as well as our own people in Britain and France," he was told after his arrest.

The monitoring could have started even earlier. Stuart describes an encounter with the branch's anarchist specialist, Detective-Sergeant Roy Cremer, at a London demonstration in June 1964 (so before the recording of *Let Me Speak*) – "the first time I had been arrested (for shouting abuse and not moving on when threatened by the police)". (p115) And long before that (p72) Stuart describes taking part in an attempt to pull Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell off the platform at the 1962 May Day demonstration in Queen's Park, Glasgow. Stuart was "unceremoniously ejected from the park" by the police and "an identifiable picture of me made the centre spread of the *Daily Record* the next day".

In fact, there was nowhere in Britain where an anarchist interested in the Spanish question would be more likely to become known to the Spanish authorities than Glasgow where "the anarchists organised regular demonstrations against the arrest and torture of Spanish labour militants in the office of the Spanish Vice-Consul, which more often than not ended with our occupying the building and handing over petitions". (pp106-7)

From Stuart's account there's no doubt that the assassination plot had been infiltrated since the American Express office near where he was arrested was full of plainclothes policemen waiting for him when he collected his mail. But then he was used as bait to keep the planned meet with his contact, presumably because they didn't know the person's identity. So I'm still not quite clear exactly who knew what and how they knew it.

I found out that Stuart had been arrested on my way back from the Alès anarchist summer camp (in Bayonne I'd bought the only available English newspaper, the *Daily Express*, mainly to check the cricket scores). So I hitched down to Madrid where he was being held, called in at the British embassy, was refused permission to see Stuart in the infamous Carabanchel prison, then made my way back to London. There I joined the defence committee for him and the Spanish anarchist arrested with him, Fernando Carballo Blanco. We organised pickets and marches, concentrating on the authoritarian nature of Spain's regime and the fact that Stuart and Carballo were being tried by a military court and faced the death penalty by garrotte. There were those, notably my friend John Rety, an editor of the anarchist paper *Freedom*, who for some reason started off naively insisting that Stuart couldn't possibly have done what he was accused of – but gradually even John got the obvious message.

Then came the trial, which lasted all of three hours, the guilty verdicts (hardly a surprise) and the sentences – 20 years in prison for Stuart, 30 years for Carballo. In the event Stuart served a week or two more than three years and was released in September 1967 in response to a general campaign for clemency and in particular a personal letter to Franco from his mother. His return to Britain was greeted by a media scrum at the airport with Stuart being rescued from the heavies of the *Scottish Daily Express* by an equally robust group of anarchists including John Rety, Albert Meltzer (an ex-boxer) and Mark Hendy (who was arrested for punching a reporter)\*. Next day Benedict Birnberg, the radical lawyer, who had handled Stuart's case from the beginning and had flown to Madrid to escort him home, asked me to negotiate the sale of his story. Stuart needed the money "to recover some of the legal expenses and the money Mum had sent to me in prison". (p256)

\*Mark adds: "I was released without charge after the man, from the *Daily Telegraph*, accepted that, contrary to what he'd been shouting at us, we weren't thugs there to capture Stuart's story for the *Express*. I apologised for the thump and he for the abuse."

Sitting in Ben's London Bridge office I spoke in person or by phone to various journalists. Stuart's preference (and mine) would have been for Paul Foot who was then freelancing for the *Sunday Times* as well as working for *Private Eye*; we both knew him and I was confident that he would write an accurate and sympathetic piece. But unfortunately the *Sunday Times* could not (or would not) compete with the tabloids when it came to buying stories: Paul's suggestion of "expenses" up to £125 fell well short. Of the papers that were interested, the *Scottish Daily Express* was definitely not what Stuart wanted – and their man only offered £300 anyway. So the deal went to the *People* for £600 (about what you'd pay then for a modest new car) for three articles on successive Sundays.

Part of the agreement was that the proofs of the articles would be checked to avoid naming somebody who might suffer as a result, eg by being identified as a "terrorist". But that was the only concession – what Stuart had signed up for was a version of events over which he had no control. As he put it: "Any resemblance between what I told Dennis [Cassidy] and what was published in the *People* was coincidental. I was portrayed as some kind of prison baron who led the life of a sybarite,



waited on hand and foot by flunkies..." (p258) On the first pre-publication Saturday night, since Stuart was still in the hands of the hacks, I went with Margaret Hart of the Notting Hill anarchists to the *People's* printers in Covent Garden to check the proofs – but all we could do was satisfy ourselves that nobody vulnerable to prosecution had been named.

There was a PS to the *People* story, not mentioned in Stuart's book. He later gave Paul Foot an account of how the material for the articles had been gathered which was published in *Private Eye*. As the editor Richard Ingrams later explained, the two reporters assigned to the story "accompanied Christie back to his home city of Glasgow. The three men spent the night on the town, ending up in a brothel where Christie had sex with a prostitute at the *People's* expense." When the *People* reporters sued for libel they had their alibi shot to pieces and their evidence described as "unsatisfactory" – though they were still awarded £500 damages each.\*

\*"One in the Eye", Richard Ingrams, *Guardian*, 1 October, 2005

Britain's general election came in October 1964, the month after Stuart's conviction. In North Kensington the Notting Hill anarchists took an energetic part in the anti-parliamentary campaign working jointly with the west London working group of the Committee of 100. The idea wasn't just to persuade people not to vote but to use the occasion to campaign for what we believed in. We published a "Why vote?" leaflet, which I wrote, ran public meetings in the Portobello Road market and – most fun of all – launched a night-time campaign to get the message across by putting our slogan "Why vote? It's a double X" on the walls of North Kensington. My partner in this particular crime was Jay Ginn\*, who drove the getaway vehicle, a small campervan. We used a wooden board with letters cut out of foam; then we lowered the board gently onto a flat open tin of white paint and applied the board to the wall. Voila! Truly the most sophisticated and literate graffiti in London.

\*Jay also appears in Chapters 4 & 9.

When the results came in, Harold Wilson's Labour party winning the election with a tiny national majority, we congratulated ourselves because turnout in North Kensington had gone down from 67.8% in 1959 to 61.32% in 1964; the Labour MP, George Rogers, kept his seat. However, if you look up the 1959 results, you'll see that there was an extra candidate then, Oswald Mosley, which must have affected the general turnout.

By this time I was a supply teacher in east London, though only briefly. Out of the blue I had a phone call from an Oxford friend who'd done some reporting shifts at the *Daily Mail*. "They're running a graduate training scheme in their Manchester office," he told me. "It's started but they're one short – why don't you apply?" I couldn't think of a reason not to so I did. I was interviewed by Derek Ingram, then deputy editor but soon to leave the *Mail* when he refused to implement the paper's new pro-white Rhodesia policy. Since Ingram was a liberal, I seemed on the surface to be the kind of recruit he was looking for; fortunately he didn't ask about the Committee of 100 and my convictions, in either sense of the word. And I did have a reasonable CV for an absolute beginner: some holiday work experience on my local weekly newspaper, the *Sevenoaks News*; interviewing practice, as described above; and lots of published pieces in student papers. So in a bewilderingly short time I found myself on a train to Manchester to become for nine months a trainee reporter.

What I didn't realise then was that my fellow trainees had all spent some time on local and regional papers where they'd learnt the basics of professional news reporting – and that at the *Mail* there wasn't going to be much of an organised training programme. Effectively “trainee reporter” meant somebody we can afford to pay less than a trained reporter (and naturally we hope they turn up trumps).

On the political front, although I went to some anarchist meetings in Manchester and London\*, I gradually stopped seeing myself as a militant – because clearly I wasn't one any longer. Decision day came a month or so after I started at the *Mail* when I got a call from reception saying there was a police officer downstairs who wanted to speak to me. He'd travelled up from the Harrow Road police station in London with a warrant for my arrest if I didn't pay the £25 fine I'd incurred for invading the Marham air base some 18 months before. I didn't hesitate. Fortunately I had my chequebook with me and I wrote out a cheque for £25 (exactly one week's wages). It was obvious that the PC was extremely relieved that he didn't have to escort me all the way back to west London – with or without handcuffs.

\*For example, in March 1965 I took part in the second annual conference of the Anarchist Federation of Britain, though I was no longer international secretary. It was held in the congenial surroundings of Ronnie Scott's jazz club in Soho.

By now (late autumn 1964) the Committee of 100's life, as a vibrant part of the anti-nuclear movement, was coming to an end, although activities in solidarity with the Greek peace movement continued. On 2 April 1967 50-60 demonstrators carried out “a non-violent invasion” of the Greek embassy in protest against weasel Wilson's immediate recognition of the far right government that followed the Colonels' coup d'état. But increasingly in the 1960s the Vietnam War replaced the bomb as the target of the entire British left from the Communists to the anarchists. As Grosvenor square replaced Trafalgar square the Committee of 100 wound itself up.

So far as I know there is no history of the Committee of 100 as a separate phenomenon, though it figures in various broader accounts, notably *Against the Bomb, The British Peace Movement 1958-1965*, Richard Taylor, Oxford: Clarendon, 1988, and it's an important element in various memoirs, the latest being Natasha Walter's *Before the Light Fades*, Virago, 2023. In a sense that's appropriate since the Committee didn't come out of nowhere and nor did it fizzle out without influence on what happened afterwards. As many people have pointed out, Committee activists went on to all sorts of radical campaigns from squatting to the underground press, not to mention the anti-war movement (Vietnam, Northern Ireland etc). And there is an unmistakable thread that connects the Committee with the Greenham Common peace camp and Extinction Rebellion. But here are a few points that occur to me.

1. The illegal September 1961 occupation of Trafalgar Square by 12,000 (or even 15,00 according to some accounts) demonstrators is seen as the Committee's highest point. But nobody knows how many people were only there because the demo had been banned. Certainly one Oxford student I knew told me at the time: “I'm only here because the government says I can't be.” And Natasha Walter quotes Diana Shelley as saying: “I went on it because it had been banned. It was a civil liberties issue for me.”
2. On the positive side Committee demos made civil disobedience accepted, even routine. But for most people this was a weekend activity: you could sit down in Whitehall on Saturday;

pay your fine and be back at work on Monday. The wild and hopeful rhetoric of “when arrested don’t cooperate: don’t give your name; fill the jails” was a hopeless failure from the beginning. After Brize Norton (1961), there were just five of us in Oxford prison: two veterans of the DAC (Will Warren and Laurens Otter) plus three students. And after Marham (1963) I was the sole Oxford student in prison on remand (a St Clare’s student who was sent to Holloway was pressurised into accepting bail).

3. The foot soldiers of the Committee (as opposed to mature/aging luminaries like Bertrand Russell, Herbert Read and Barbara Smoker) tended to be born in the early 1940s. Here’s an account by Nicolas Walter of the April 1961 sitdown: “By 3.45 about 2,500 people were defying the police order to disperse...Our average age can’t have been much over 20.” And it’s striking that, of the six women interviewed by Sam Carroll for her *Oral History* article, one was born in 1943, three in 1942 and one (Jay G) in 1939 (Barbara S is the outlier, born in 1923). In the Oxford Committee the point is even clearer and more emphatic: apart from DAC veterans like Will Warren and Laurens Otter we were all war babies born in 1939-45. As students, we were relatively free to act (only occasional ones had dependants) but that would only be true for three years or so. In my case going to prison as a student was possible; a prison sentence while working would have meant unemployment.
4. In political terms young people, and particularly students, can be volatile. There are copious examples from Oxford. Richard Kirkwood had recently discovered anarcho-syndicalism, joined the Committee of 100, became a Marxist & joined what became International Socialism. Gaby Charing was a founder member of the anarchist group but a year after leaving Oxford had become a gay activist instead. One Jewish member of the anarchist group went to Israel in the Long Vac & discovered the kibbutzim which became a replacement for him. Martin Small reversed my journey (from Catholicism to anarchism) & became a fervent Catholic. Inevitably, this volatility had an effect on the membership of something like the Committee of 100, which was always a loose and shifting set-up.
5. Whereas the original “official” ideology of the Committee was a blend of non-violence and non-hierarchical politics (gradually becoming less gentle and more anarchist), many of those who took part in the demonstrations did not share these views. Natasha W quotes Stuart Christie on the changes without noting that he had effectively swapped banning the British bomb for smuggling the parts for an anarchist one into Spain. I’m not even sure that the majority of students who supported the Oxford Committee were libertarians. Judy Green, for example, was a card-carrying CP member, as were various others, particularly at Ruskin. She wrote to me from Somerville when I was in Norwich prison after Marham: “Let me tell you that the party thinks you and Marham are super & has given lots of coverage.” And Richard K was not the only IS member to be a strong Committee activist.
6. Finally, external events inevitably had a big influence on the whole peace movement. The Cuba crisis of October 1962, which had activists like Pat Arrowsmith running for the hills, led to disillusionment, lassitude, a general feeling of hopelessness. And the limited test ban treaty of 1963 gave anybody who wanted out the perfect excuse to retire from anti-nuclear politics.

# “Roll Over, Beethoven”

## Chapter 6: Paris

For me Paris in April 1960 is where it all began, the “Sixties” I mean, although nobody then had any idea of what was going to happen in the decade to come. But historic, exotic Paris was certainly where you wanted to be that spring, not cold, spartan Stonyhurst or boring, genteel Sevenoaks or dull, dowdy London – several years away from starting to swing. The horse-chestnut trees flowered white and pink on the boulevards; and on the left bank, pavement cafés overflowed with long-haired girls dressed in black, scorning make-up except kohl eyeliner à la Juliette Greco, and bearded young men (beat poets? apprentice existentialist philosophers?) scribbled in *cahiers*, while the glamorous-looking African students (or were they visiting American jazz men or maybe GIs on furlough?) wore dark glasses even on cloudy days: cool dudes, spades in shades.

You certainly got the idea that bohemian left-bank Paris accepted black and brown people whereas the city as a whole certainly didn't. North Africans were a particular target. I remember a white girl, who said she was a Communist, talking about *sales arabes* – but then her father was a *flic* and there was a war on with a lot of brutality on both sides.

Brightly painted tarts walked up and down the rue St Denis and cute American girls in jeans and tee-shirts sold the *New York Herald Tribune*\* on the Champs Elysées trying to look like Jean Seberg in Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle*, which was the movie of the moment. There was jazz and cabaret singing in cellar clubs, much more of it than in London, and old American B-movies in poky cinemas where, way ahead of Britain, smoking was banned. Everywhere else (except in the Métro) the smell of Gauloises and Gitanes blended with freshly baked bread and espresso coffee, garlic, traffic fumes and more than a whiff of piss from the street pissoirs, which hadn't yet been removed in the name of hygiene, conformity and tourism.

\*It became the *International Herald Tribune* in 1967.

However, on both sides of the channel 1960 was not a vintage year for pop music. As Nik Cohn noted in his classic account of rock 'n' roll\*, the thrill had gone – “1960 was probably the worst year that pop had been through”. It was “the gap between two separate generations, the changeover”. But the film *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, shown in Paris as *Jazz à Newport*, included footage of the inimitable rock 'n' roller Chuck Berry as well as jazz greats like Thelonius Monk, Gerry Mulligan and

Louis Armstrong. And *Orpheu Negro* by Marcel Camus featured a haunting bossa nova soundtrack which was a compensation.

\**Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969

Johnny Hallyday released his first imitation-Elvis EP in 1960, featuring “J’suis mordu” (“I got stung”), but that was nothing more than a comical, almost parody, version – intended as *hommage* to Elvis if you like but nowhere near the real thing. French may be great for poetry, ballads, cabaret singing, even jazz, but the language of rock ‘n’ roll it ain’t. One of the great French eccentricities is the veneration of Johnny H, unto and even after death.

But for *branché* British and Americans, the Paris of those days was a magnet. As Irma Kurtz, later the London *Cosmopolitan* agony aunt, put it in a memoir\*, “I did not simply want to live in Paris when I started out from America, I wanted to be Parisian. In my mind to be Parisian meant coming as close as anyone could to perfection of intellect and art and experience and style and sex.”

\**Dear London*, Fourth Estate, 1997

Another temporary Parisian was Tara Browne, an astonishingly precocious 15-year-old Irish boy who was an heir to the Guinness fortune and an Eddie Cochran fan and died a few years later in a Chelsea car crash. He was immortalised soon after death by the Beatles in the song “I read the news today, oh boy”, and later by his biographer Paul Howard, who used the same line for the title of his book, and not least by the poet Hugo Williams\* who was part of his circle in Paris. I met Tara only once but his purple shirts, menthol cigarettes and total self-possession were unforgettable. Other posh young English names in Paris at that time besides Hugo himself included Clare Lane (daughter of Sir Allen of Penguin, which was about to publish the scandalous *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and sell millions of copies), who walked out with me once or twice, and pioneer hippy Sir Mark Palmer, who I learnt was a baronet when I sneaked a look at his passport. Most foreign students were enrolled on language courses, such as mine at the Institut Britannique and the one at the Alliance Française, but there were also finishing schools like Madame Anita’s for rich upwardly mobile English girls who were in Paris for poise and polish and were never allowed out without their white gloves.

\**A Day in the Life*, Lennon-McCartney, 1967; *I read the News Today, Oh Boy*, Paul Howard, Picador, 2016; “Tara Browne (1945-66)”, Hugo Williams, *London Review of Books*, 8 November 2018

The menace in the Paris air was something of an extra thrill. The Algerian war of independence was still very much on, though the FLN had declared a ceasefire in their guerrilla campaign against the French police and only the occasional bomb went off in a café. But there were police everywhere and soldiers guarded public buildings, demanding your *papiers* at gunpoint if you walked past. In the following year the FLN went back to bombing, killing 11 policemen and injuring 17 between August and October 1961. After the Paris chief of police, Maurice Papon, imposed a curfew on all French Algerians, a peaceful demonstration in defiance of it was met by brutal police repression that has been called a massacre. For several weeks afterwards unidentified bodies were discovered along the banks of the Seine. The French government admitted in 1998 that 40 people had been killed; other estimates have ranged up to 200. (Many years later it emerged that Papon had collaborated with the German occupation in the 1940s. As the civil servant in charge of policing in Bordeaux he had sent more than 1600 Jews to Drancy in Paris from where they were deported to the death camps. In 1998 he was found guilty of crimes against humanity.)

In February 1962 another peaceful but banned demonstration – this time by the Communist CGT union against the right-wing “Algérie Française” terrorists of the OAS – was driven back by the police towards the Charonne Métro station, which had been closed for the day. As the police charge continued there was no escape for the people at the back; nine of them were crushed to death. At their funeral the hundreds of thousands of mourners also remembered the earlier killings.

But in the spring of 1960 attention in Paris, as elsewhere, was focussed on the aftermath of another police atrocity – in South Africa. At the township of Sharpeville 69 people had been killed and at least 180 injured on 21 March when the police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against the notorious pass laws which regulated the movement of Africans in urban areas. A state of emergency was introduced on 30 March; the ANC and PAC organisations were declared illegal on 8 April; and 18,000 strikers were arrested and detained. There were worldwide demonstrations against this repression.

When I went along to join a protest outside the South African embassy on the Quai d’Orsay, I saw the demonstrators corralled by police on the other side of the road. So I crossed to the pavement next to the embassy and walked towards it. At once I was stopped by a plainclothes policeman. “Move away,” he said. I stood still. The policeman said: “In your country, when a policeman tells you to move, you move, n’est-ce pas?” And I said: “In my country the police don’t behave like this” – a naïve remark I later used to quote to myself, and anybody else who would listen, on Committee of 100 (and other) demos where the British police were being a bit over-robust.

For me and my lucky companions everyday life consisted of French language classes in the morning at the Institut Britannique (which was near the Sorbonne and loosely attached to it), followed by lunch in a cheap restaurant and afternoons whiled away sitting in cafés or wandering along the Seine or through the Luxembourg gardens. For reading, besides Camus and Sartre you had Simone de

Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan (of the four she was the easiest read, though Camus was the French writer I most admired). Fortunately, there wasn't any homework for the course, though there was an exam and a certificate at the end.

In the evening, another meal out, then the cinema or a jazz club or just hours in a café smoking Gauloises, talking, drinking the occasional drink rather than getting drunk English-style. There wasn't much public drunkenness on show in Paris, except by the *clochards*, homeless tramps who slept in the streets or under the bridges. But there was a big poster campaign in the Métro against excessive drinking: a pathetic-looking small boy was shown appealing to his father: "Papa, pense à moi! Ne bois pas!" And then the punchline: "Pas plus qu'un litre par jour." Not more than a litre of wine a day – rather more realistic than current "health guidelines", both French and British, and I've tried to follow this advice for the past 60-odd years. More or less.

If you wanted to extend the evening, you could go on to Les Halles, the fruit and vegetable market in the middle of Paris (now removed to the outskirts) where if you were still hungry or keen to do the right thing, as quoted in the guidebooks, you ordered *soupe à l'onion*. And on special occasions – somebody's birthday, say – it was a stiff walk uphill to Montmartre to see the dawn come up from the steps of the Sacré-Coeur, a huge white basilica with panoramic views over Paris.

How could 1960s students afford this hedonistic, apparently lavish, lifestyle, particularly eating out every day? Well, fortunately we weren't in England. Here from memory are a few basic facts. A (subsidised, obviously) student meal ticket cost, and changed hands for, one franc (there were 13 of those to the British pound); this bought three edible though not particularly gastronomic courses in a student restaurant; then at the Auberge (long gone) in the rue de l'École de Médecine there was a set meal for 1fr.80 which consisted of two frankfurter sausages with macaroni, two pieces of bread and a plain yogurt; at the nearby Acropole (then as now Greek-owned and still worth a visit) I once had a three-course à la carte meal for 3fr.60 (*filet de hareng, pommes de terre à l'huile; omelette nature; ananas au kirsch*). Then there were several self-service restaurants where meals including chicken, lobster (yes, lobster) and wine, were available at less than 10 francs.

But what impressed me most I think was the simple first course that often started a cheap restaurant meal. It might be *radis au beurre* or *oeuf dur mayonnaise* or *salade de tomates*. What was obvious was that people expected the radishes, eggs and tomatoes to actually taste of something; the dressing or garnish was an embellishment not a cover-up.

For me the only difficulty was that I'd been billeted on a family who lived north of Paris with a month's rent paid in advance. If I missed the last train to the suburbs from the Gare du Nord, there was no way back. Once, I stayed up in Paris for two successive nights, then took an early morning

train to where I was staying. I slept for 24 hours (with meal breaks) and left again for Paris after the next day's breakfast. My hosts, M and Mme Henri Fesquet (he was religious correspondent for *Le Monde*), were very understanding and didn't complain when I said I'd leave at the end of the month.

In those days Paris students often lived in hotels, paying not very much for the cheapest rooms, always at the top of the building and usually equipped with washbasin and bidet but no shower (use of the hotel bathroom was extra). The room I found cost 8 new francs (or 12 old shillings in British money – 60p now) a night. It was in the Hôtel des Nations in the Rue des Ecoles, a few minutes from the Sorbonne and the Institut Britannique.

The Institut gave me my first experience of coeducation since pre-prep school. I found it a great improvement on life in a single-sex boarding school – it was a relief to spend time with girls as equals and friends without the stress of having to pursue them and chat them up. I spent more time with Teresa, Gillian and Mary than anybody else except Ian, who hitched down to the south of France with me later that summer. The girls were always complaining they were harassed in the street in a way they weren't used to England, so they liked having able-bodied escorts.

A year later in England Teresa's parents gave a big weekend party to which we were all invited. It was eventful, to say the least, since first of all I fell over carrying a girl in a white dress into a field for a snog, catching my face on some barbed wire and so changing the colour of her dress from pure white to patches of pink (I still have the scar above my upper lip). Then next day another ex-Parisian, Jamie, driving his mother's Jaguar, took a left-hand bend a bit too quickly and turned the car over one and a quarter times. Fortunately, the roof didn't cave in and the four of us came out unhurt through the shattered windscreen.

Nowadays, when teenagers are said to hop into bed with each other as a way of saying hello (having swiped right – or is it left?), it's probably difficult to imagine that in 1960 you could easily be 18, English and still a virgin. In Paris I had several girlfriends and some quite passionate evenings in clubs and cafés or down by the river – but not what you'd call sex. One reason for the delay was that at the beginning of my stay in Paris I was still a keen and observant Catholic. I kept on going to mass on Sundays and to confession, and I kept on telling people I was a Catholic until suddenly I found I wasn't one any more. God had gone. But his absence took some getting used to.

When the summer came, there was only one place to go – as in American expat novels and *nouvelle vague* films: south from Paris on the Route Nationale 7 to the Mediterranean, to Marseille, Cannes, St Tropez, Nice – and only one way of getting there unless you owned a car or could easily afford the train fare. Hitch-hiking was the thing. Around this time Eric soon-to-be-an-Animal Burdon (as he recounts in his memoir\*) found out that his number one hero, Ray Charles, was due to play the



Antibes jazz festival in the south of France. From Newcastle Eric hitched down to Dover, then south from the Channel to the Mediterranean. But he arrived just too late to catch Ray's final performance, so he hitched back to Paris and finally caught up with him in a club. "I'll never forget the night I saw Ray Charles for the first time," he wrote. "The room went crazy...The whole room joined in the chant when Ray kicked into *What'd I Say*." Years later, when I had a feature to write on Ray Charles for *Radio Times*, I couldn't get to meet him but I managed to get a quote out of Eric (who was plugging his memoir at the time): "I heard him again two months ago," he said. "He was fantastic. I was as excited then as I was that first time."

*\*I used to be an Animal but I'm all right now, Faber & Faber, 1986.*

Hitching opened the door to anybody with imagination, wit, curiosity, who wanted to travel, whatever class they came from or aspired to join. If you were prepared to put up with some discomfort and accept the luck of the draw you could reasonably predict your arrival at the other end of France, Spain, Italy – even Greece – a few days later. It was democratic also: there was no firm convention about who paid for whom when you stopped for a meal or a drink. An affluent driver would automatically pay for the drinks; a truck driver might have his meal paid for.

The second world war had encouraged the development of hitching in Britain – in those days "we were all in it together" (except for the pacifists, the fascists and the spivs) and there wasn't much petrol. If you hitched wearing uniform so much the better for you. After the war came national service (uniform again) and after that, modest-looking tidy students with college scarves.

Of course some hitch-hikers got lifts more quickly than others. A girl by herself was unlikely to stay long at the roadside – but that was dangerous obviously, then as now. Two girls on the other hand made a good combination and they could always turn down a lift if it looked dodgy. And once on the ferry from Brindisi in Italy to Greece I met a threesome: three girls, including a stunning blonde, who had whizzed down the Italian peninsula together, taking lifts from single drivers – nobody else – confident they could handle anybody and anything.

But apart from single male hitchers the most common formula was a boy and a girl travelling together; this worked perfectly well – far better than two boys together. Even that could work up to a point on major routes as Ian and I found in early August 1960 when we set off from Paris one evening in search of Mediterranean sun. Alas, we got the time and the starting point wrong, had no lifts, walked all night and finally came upon a truck parked in a layby just as the world was starting to wake up.

The driver agreed to take us – and as things turned out I don't think he regretted it. When we stopped for breakfast in a *routiers* restaurant we had fried eggs and paid for his steak. But what came later was rather more important from his perspective. We had the perfect view, high up in the driver's cabin, when as we came down the hill into a village an elderly couple on a scooter suddenly appeared in the middle of the road from behind a parked car. Our driver swerved away violently, swinging the truck hard left – right across the road where it concertina'd another parked car. On the way he'd hit the scooter. It was a glancing blow – but both driver and passenger died instantly.

When the police arrived Ian and I were interviewed and were able to say clearly what had happened – that the truck driver was paying full attention, wasn't speeding and had done his best to avoid hitting the scooter. We walked on after that in sober mood obviously, found other lifts and in due course reached Marseille.

I spent the first day lying in the sun for about six hours and the next 24 lying in a cheap hotel room recovering from sunburn, sunstroke or whatever. Not something to repeat. We carried on along the coast, sleeping out just below the citadel in St Tropez, in deck chairs underneath the concert pavilion in Cannes (though the water sprinklers came on at about 5am which was a very rude awakening) and in the public park in Nice. And there we met serious trouble. By this time there were four of us and two, I think, had their wallets taken one night while they were asleep. Mine was at the bottom of my sleeping bag and, fortunately for me, it stayed there. We responded in two ways. First we sent telegrams to our parents asking for money and second we bought flick-knives – legal then in France though not in Britain. We never used them – fortunately we were never attacked again. But some of the romance of the Côte d'Azur had gone.

One or two food memories stand out, though. To us then *salade niçoise* – that feast of tinned tuna, anchovies, black olives, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes, green beans, with ideally not too much lettuce – was a discovery: it hadn't yet become a cliché of Mediterranean holidays and London bistro suppers. And I'd never eaten pizza before I went to Nice but in this ex-Italian city (French only since 1860) slices of *pizza niçoise* were on sale everywhere, in boulangeries, cafés and market stalls, as simple street food – just a layer of tomato purée on bread dough with black olives and anchovy fillets. That is still pizza as far as I'm concerned. Add a beer or a glass of rosé and you have the perfect snack – you can keep your mushrooms, chorizo and pineapple.

On the way back to Paris I had one lift that was memorable as a sign of changing times. It was with an English family from the east end of London in a Dormobile van which looked pretty full when they stopped – but the children in the back squeezed up to make room for me. They were on their way home after a week in a campsite on the Mediterranean and said they'd had a good time. But to save money, and because they were a bit suspicious about French food, they'd brought their own. Supplies were running low, they explained, so when we stopped for lunch it was tinned sardines on Jacob's cream crackers with cups of tea brewed on a camping gas stove.

Before the summer vacation of 1962 I'd been doubly lucky. First, the Oxford Union standing committee had been invited to nominate two students to join a Nato youth summer school on an island near Toulon in the south of France – and since we weren't explicitly told that they had to be Nato supporters it was agreed that I was eligible. Second, I'd met an enterprising girl called Fanny who was organising a summer villa booking for a dozen or so people on the Costa Brava in Spain. Fortunately the dates fitted.

There was no competition for places on the Nato jaunt so another committee member and I got to go. It was quite a balanced selection since my colleague David Lanch was moderate right-wing Labour and generally pro-Nato, whereas I obviously wasn't. Our train fares were paid-for and the money came upfront – no need to pretend you were going to buy a ticket or that you'd actually paid for one. So I hitched down to Le Lavandou on the Mediterranean coast for the ferry to Port-Cros. Port-Cros is one of a group of islands, the Iles d'Hyères, which include a much more famous neighbour, the Ile du Levant, where Europe's first village dedicated to nudism was founded by two doctors in 1931. Le Levant was just a kilometre away from Port-Cros and clearly visible from the beach.

The summer school sessions were morning and evening – and not too intense – with our afternoons free. It turned out that most of the participants were reasonably interested in politics but not particularly partisan. The other two Brits were even less Nato-orientated than David and me: their Cambridge tutor had been approached by somebody from Nato and had simply consulted and then recommended a couple of his students\*. There was a delightful American girl called Marcia who walked out with me and talked about her fiancé back home rather than her country's global strategy.

\*This informal method of recruitment is of course what gave the world the "Cambridge spies", notably Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross.

At cabaret time I managed to perform a topical song I'd written six months before while I was in Oxford prison – in the relaxed semi-holiday atmosphere it seemed to go down quite well:

*Sing a song of Nato*

*A pocket full of bombs*

*A thousand million people*

*A thousand million tombs.*

*And when the war is over  
And most of us are dead  
At least we'll know that we've escaped  
From all becoming red.*

*Salazar is counting  
The Africans he's killed  
In the name of freedom  
As his allies willed.*

*And now the hungry peoples  
Whose brothers we have slain  
At Suez, in Cyprus  
Will die in poisoned rain.*

*So sing for Yankee bases  
And German troops in Wales  
Fight for French Algeria  
And Oxford City jail.*

*Bring out your rockets  
Peace is a sin  
For we must blow the world to bits  
To save West Berlin.*

That was one highlight of the summer school, for me anyway. Another was an unofficial Oxbridge expedition to the Ile du Levant. It turned out that the Cambridge lads, while not being particularly

political, had one necessary accomplishment: they were oarsmen. So when we decided to visit the nudist island we surreptitiously started looking for unattended rowing boats. We managed to find one with oars but then discovered as we set off that it also had a leak. Still, that gave me something to do and as the other two rowed, I baled.

When we tied up at the jetty on Le Levant we noticed that in the port nobody was completely naked. Most people wore ordinary beach clothes whereas the keen nudists were wearing a *minimum*, a tiny triangle of fabric instead of shorts, with nothing above the waist. But on the beach everybody was naked and here it was certainly easier psychologically to take your clothes off than it was to leave them on. I managed to report this observation in my final exams in answer to a question on the psychology of clothes though it's hardly surprising or original. I can't say that the visit made me a fan of the nudist way of life – I suppose I've been conditioned to see it as exhibitionist – but I did enjoy swimming in warm water with no clothes on. That is a sensual pleasure without any doubt (just one reservation: keep a good lookout for jellyfish and spider crabs).

The physical location of the summer school was its greatest plus – the vegetation was/is superb – and in the following year, 1963, the island of Port-Cros became the centre of one of France's national parks, so off limits for summer schools. As far as I know the youth event was never repeated and in 1966 France under de Gaulle withdrew from full membership of Nato.

From Le Lavandou I hitched west along the French coast towards Perpignan then down to Barcelona, passing the turning to the Catalan village of San\* Feliu de Guizols on the way. I was early so I had a day or so to walk up and down Las Ramblas and round the port area. By this time I'd read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and I pictured the city as he described it – under working-class control with revolutionary songs and flags, particularly the red-and-black ones of the anarchists, and no tipping. Now in 1962 I was amazed at how cheap some of the restaurant meals were: these weren't tourist prices – but then in Barcelona in those days there didn't seem to be many tourists. Imagine that: in Barcelona, possibly the nearest thing now, in terms of the pestilence of tourism, to Venice. Once when I'd left the city centre and was wandering down a sidestreet a truck driver, seeing I was a foreigner, stopped and started talking to me in French.

\*The (Castilian) name of the town then; it's now in Catalan called "Sant Feliu".

That became a noticeable pattern: in Catalonia locals who'd been abroad or learnt French at school or spoke it anyway were delighted if you spoke French (English hadn't yet become the foreigners' lingua franca in Spain) because, being Catalans and opposed to the regime, they didn't want to speak Castilian Spanish, the language of Franco. Reasonably enough they didn't expect outsiders to speak Catalan and they wanted to communicate, so French was the answer. By contrast, on the

Atlantic side of Spain the Basques tended to be more reserved and enclosed, almost saying to foreigners: we've had to learn Spanish, which is difficult and annoying enough for us – don't expect us to speak English or French just to humour you.

After a few friendly exchanges the truck driver invited me to lunch at his family home with his wife and children. We didn't talk politics explicitly – in a police state as a rule you don't, to strangers anyway – but I learnt that he definitely preferred the freedom of French life to the harsh reality of Franco's Spain, which didn't suit anybody except for tourists and the rich. The most obvious and offensive feature of Spain at this time was the swaggering goons of the *Guardia Civil* – they were everywhere, always in twos with their guns and distinctive tricorne headgear.

In San Feliu our rented house was well-placed near the market and the beach and included a sunbathers' roof. But ice for the icebox had to be collected every day and in the kitchen there were just two not very powerful gas rings – no grill and no oven. This was for the 10 people the owners specified and of course we were never going to keep to that. Strays kept turning up and our numbers varied between 12 and 15 or so with the visitors in sleeping bags in the living room and on the sun roof.

From the beginning the casual set-up looked like a recipe for chaos and disappointment food-and-drink wise. So with Fanny's agreement I appointed myself catering manager, in charge of the shopping and cooking, taking 400 pesetas (about £2.50) from everybody every week. The other men washed up and helped in the kitchen; the women did the housework. And I practised running a household.

Coming from England to Francoist Spain the most remarkable thing was the low price of wine, spirits and tobacco. I went to one of the local bodegas (wine shops) and tasted the wines which were of two types: heavy dark reds with a touch of sweetness; thin light-coloured rosés that were far too sharp. The obvious solution was to mix them for a drinkable table wine, and after an exhausting tasting I managed to find a blend that I thought was the right formula. I paid the deposit on a huge cask and two of us lugged it back to the house.

The cheap fizz meanwhile was incredibly cheap: the price of a single bottle of sparkling wine worked out at half-a-crown in old money so you could get eight bottles for £1. The cheapest brandy, in an unlabelled litre bottle, was the equivalent of 4 shillings (so five bottles for £1) and a packet of the cheapest cigarettes 3 pesetas – less than sixpence. Even imported booze like Italian vermouth was cheaper than it was in Italy (I once complained that we, or rather the girls, were spending rather a lot on Coca-Cola – why didn't they drink Martini on the rocks instead?).

As well as the main attraction – the beach, obviously – there were outings. Once some of us went to a bullfight which was dramatic and exciting but not much fun for the horses in the early stages: they had to stand there being buffeted and gored by the bull while their riders tried to weaken him by piercing him with their lances. I was pleased I went but have never felt the urge to go again: football, rugby and cricket are gladiatorial enough, never mind boxing.

Once we went out to dinner in one of the hotels that regularly hoovered up all the lobsters the local fishermen caught, so you couldn't buy them in the market, and ordered paella royale, which included half a small lobster, a quarter of a chicken and all the shellfish you could think of. Being very greedy I was the only one of the four of us to finish (but then I'd deliberately eaten nothing at lunch). And several times we went out to clubs which the French tended to dominate with the martial art of line dancing, notably the Madison. To this day the Madison, like the clowning of the late Johnny Hallyday, retains its allure for the French. At *thés dansants* in the Dordogne the local wrinklies can still be seen forming up in line to take a pace forward and then swivel left before making a complete turnaround, rather as Brits of a certain age favour a kind of slow-motion jive to anything with a beat.

Elsewhere that summer (1962) the trendy dance on both sides of the Atlantic was the twist. As Chubby Checker who popularised it with *The Twist* and *Let's Twist Again* explained, it's "like putting out a cigarette with both feet and coming out of a shower and wiping your bottom with a towel to the beat". The standout singles were Sam Cooke's *Twistin' the Night Away* and *Twist and Shout* by the Isley Brothers; their sound has lasted better than the novelty dance itself: you don't see much twisting nowadays.

In the autumn of 1962 the Beatles released their first single, *Love Me Do*. At Christ Church Thom Keyes, who was from Liverpool and said he knew the boys, waved the record about, played it and then tried to persuade Mark Lennox-Boyd (the younger brother of Christopher) to book the Beatles for the following summer's Commemoration Ball; £40 was the sum Thom quoted. Alas Mark was not convinced and said no. The Christ Church committee ended up booking the Searchers (Liverpool's second or third group) and paying them £400. The Magdalen Commem Ball committee showed better judgment later in 1963 when they booked the Rolling Stones to appear in the summer of 1964 at a fee of £100; the Stones had to interrupt their American tour and fly back to do the gig – so not much of an earner for them but excellent PR.

As well as driving fast cars – a black Triumph TR4 was one of his – Thom was something of an impresario. He organised chemmy (baccarat chemin-de-fer) parties for the bloodies of Christ Church while the rest of us made do with poker, listening, night after night, to *Kind of Blue*, the Miles Davis LP that revolutionised jazz and still seems as exciting now as it did in 1959 when it was made. After all-night parties and poker sessions there'd be breakfast at George's café in the covered market.

The Beatles came to Oxford in February 1963 and played the Carfax Assembly Rooms (now the HSBC bank); tickets were six shillings and the place was packed, though more by local youth than university students. Dancing was crowded and difficult but some of us managed it. This date came five days after the recording session for the Beatles' first LP, *Please Please me*, which was released in the following month. A few weeks later the Searchers came to Oxford and played the town hall. By now I was beginning to wake up to what was happening: I interviewed the drummer and leader Chris Curtis for *Isis* and of course asked him: why Liverpool? Curtis explained that as an Atlantic seaport it had more exposure to American records, particularly rhythm 'n' blues, that's to say black pop music. The Liverpool scene had been bubbling in clubs like the Cavern since 1956 and was ready to explode.

But what nobody could satisfactorily explain was why British pop music was overwhelmed so suddenly and completely in 1963. The Beatles were followed by the rest of the Liverpool sound-makers (Gerry and the Pacemakers, the Searchers, Cilla Black...) and then by other British r 'n' b bands like the Stones, the Animals and the Kinks. In July the Beatles included Chuck Berry's 1956 hit "Roll Over, Beethoven...and tell Tchaikovsky the News" on their second LP, *With the Beatles*. This was the symbolic moment when British youth culture asserted its dominance over "high" culture – when "the Sixties" started to become what our parents, conservatives (with a small c) and the establishment in general were frightened of.

And the Americans who'd started it all came over and toured again. With the Stones on their first British tour in the autumn of 1963 were the Everly Brothers, Bo Diddley – and the flamboyant, outrageous Little Richard. I'd bought his LP, *Here's Little Richard*, when I was 15 and remained a fan up until his death in May 2020. Granada TV had the wit to record a special Little Richard concert in November which was shown in January 1964 – *It's Little Richard* with Sounds Incorporated and the Shirelles, available on Youtube and timeless.

Working for the *Daily Mail* in Manchester in 1964-5 I often got the pop gigs (this wasn't really a compliment – serious pop coverage was based in London), so on a Wednesday I might be sent down to the disused church now fitted out as a TV studio for *Top of the Pops* rehearsals in case something newsworthy happened or the newsdesk decided it wanted quotes from somebody. It hardly ever did. Fortunately the DJs didn't turn up until transmission day which was Thursday so I never had to be in the same room as the loathsome Jimmy Savile. People like the British bluesman Georgie Fame and the barefoot Sandie Shaw were more my cup of tea. I fancied Sandie and asked her out for a drink but she stood me up.

In April 1965 I managed to get hold of the *Mail's* single complimentary press ticket for Bob Dylan's packed concert in the Free Trade Hall where he sang solo and played acoustic guitar and harmonica. The audience, most of whom looked like sober students who'd come out for the evening in Manchester, where it nearly always rains, sensibly equipped with raincoats – serious young people certainly, not mods or rockers or Sixties trendies – offered polite applause after each intro, then



retreated into rapt and respectful silence. A uniformed attendant I spoke to afterwards was visibly impressed. "I've never heard an audience so quiet," he said, "not even for the Hallé." Indeed it was a bit like being in church, a quiet, rural English one with plainsong.

I was always ambivalent about Dylan. He wrote some good – intriguing, exciting – stuff but his voice had an awful nasal twang. As my friend Charlie Gillett noted,\* even in the early days Dylan sang in "a harsh, strident, tuneless voice, insisting that the words be listened to but rarely offering easy pleasure in the experience". As his career developed and he parted from his lover and soulmate Joan Baez, who really could sing, and abandoned radical politics, reverted to rock 'n' roll and found God, he became increasingly enigmatic – or difficult to like, you might say. But the one thing I always did admire about Dylan was his offhand, monosyllabic style at press conferences when reporters asked him their routine, idiotic and ignorant questions.

\**The Sound of the City*, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, New York, 1970

That night Dylan began as usual on his 1965 tour with "The Times They Are a-Changin'" and ended with "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue". But his reign as the world's favourite folk singer wasn't all over just then. The symbolic end for his hardcore British fans came just a year later in the same venue when his second set inspired the shout of "Judas" from one of the folkies in the audience because they didn't approve of the loud, amplified backing band he'd recently adopted.

Was this fair? You may not know, unless you're familiar with Dylan's early life, that before he discovered Woody Guthrie and became a folk singer he was a normal teenager and a rock 'n' roll fan. At high school he was in bands that performed covers of Little Richard and Elvis Presley and in 1959 his yearbook reported: "Robert Zimmerman to join 'Little Richard'." So it was never really fair to throw the insult "Judas" at him since you could say he was merely passing through the folk scene, en route from rock 'n' roll to – what to call it? – mature thinking-man's "rock".

The reverence for Dylan the folk hero survived his various musical, political and lifestyle phases until he was, to general bemusement, awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2016 – an event that some people, particularly those who'd read his mediocre memoir *Chronicles*, compared to the award of the Nobel peace prize to Henry Kissinger in 1973, which the satirical songsmith Tom Lehrer called the moment when "political satire became obsolete". The American novelist Philip Roth, passed over in Dylan's favour and invited to complain, merely said that next time the prize should obviously go to those other folkies Peter, Paul and Mary. Incidentally, James Brown was not the original "Mr Dynamite". That was Alfred Nobel who invented dynamite (among other explosives) but was keen to sanitise his image. He financed the prizes that bear his name after reading a premature obituary that called him the merchant of death.

One of the perks of being a reporter was that a press card issued by the National Union of Journalists gave access to the Manchester clubs. For example, when Dusty Springfield came to Mister Smith's, you wanted to be there and I was. Maybe Elton John was over the top when he called Dusty "the greatest white singer there has ever been" but she could certainly sing soul with the black American greats like Martha and the Vandellas, as she did once on *Ready, Steady, Go!*. And at Mister Smith's she delivered a spine-tingling performance.

I don't remember ever going to the Twisted Wheel nightclub, where Northern Soul was about to be born, but I was present when the Tamla-Motown tour came to town. One of the greatest-ever stage shows, the 1965 UK Tamla tour was planned to promote their record label in Britain but it turned out to be premature: most white kids, particularly in the provinces, didn't seem to be ready for black pop music delivered by black artists (as opposed to white cover versions). Headlined by the Supremes, the tour line-up included Martha and the Vandellas, (Little) Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Four Tops and British guests Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames. Beat that as a soul spectacular.

But the event in the Odeon cinema where they played was an embarrassment. My report in the *Mail* read: "Last night only 300 seats out of 2,700 were filled for the first house. The second house was better – but more than two thirds of the seats were empty." When I went backstage for a quote, Diana Ross was evidently upset. "It hurts me that people don't come. I cried today. I think the people who do come enjoy themselves. The others don't know what they're missing" – but there was little she or anybody could say or do about the fiasco, except bravely carry on to the next venue and hope for better luck.

The *Top of the Pops* weekly rehearsal used to appear in the *Mail* diary, a list of routine, predictable events, from the important to the trivial, that might make news so it was worth assigning a reporter to cover them. If they were based in Manchester so much the better since the reporter could be quickly withdrawn, if necessary, and reassigned to a more important story. But on a slow news day it made more sense for reporters to be out and about rather than sitting in the office reading the papers and working out their "exes" (expenses, considered by reporters the most important task of the week). Also, it was good PR for the paper if a reporter turned up to an unimportant event, even if there wasn't much chance of a story being published.

This work pattern was common to the popular papers but not to the heavies. The *Times* in those days didn't really exist north of Watford in terms of routine news gathering and the *Guardian*, even though it was a Manchester paper, lacked the resources of the *Mail*, so was forced to rely on a more skeletal diary: the local news stories they published tended to come from agencies and freelancers rather than staff reporters. Two things followed: if you met a *Guardian* reporter on a story you could

be pretty sure there'd be a piece in their paper next day; alternatively, you might spend hours checking an agency story only for the news editor to decide it didn't stand up – but there it was in the *Guardian* next day just as the agency had sent it in, give or take the odd misprint.

If you were assigned to cover a Manchester dog show or similar, you'd write a report knowing that by the time the last edition (the one for Manchester-and-district readers) was printed it would have been replaced by something more urgent/relevant/topical. So did anybody ever set eyes on one of these local Manchester stories? Yes, often – the *Mail's* Irish readers. That's because the paper's first edition, often a bit light on news, had to go to press at about nine o'clock in the evening to catch the delivery trucks and then the night ferries across the Irish Sea to Belfast and Dublin. Logically, therefore, it was the Irish edition that was most likely to include a Manchester dog show story.

Later, in academe, I used to wonder sometimes how my media studies lecturer colleagues would account for this kind of anomaly (assuming they'd read the different editions often and thoroughly enough to discover it): who was conspiring against whom here and why – and how exactly was it an example of class, race or gender oppression? Could it be cock-up rather than conspiracy, perhaps?

In the nine months I worked at the *Mail* I was sent out on a variety of stories including a by-election at Altrincham and Sale, won by the Conservative chancellor-to-be, Anthony Barber, the Manchester airport extension inquiry, a house fire in which three children died, the Waterloo hare-coursing Cup, extinct now because the sport has been illegal since 2005, Liverpool's preparations for the 1965 football cup final, which they won, and the Severn bursting its banks in the Shrewsbury area.

Covering that one was fun. The photographer and I went to Manchester airport and got into a three-seater plane which felt, as it bounced along the runway, a bit like a small sports car that happened to have wings and so could take off. When we got to the floods, the pilot made several dives down towards the water, turning away at the last second to give the photographer the best angle, as a bomber pilot would. Whereas, sitting on the other side of the plane, I saw nothing I could make sense of until I got back to the office and could study the pix to write the captions.

My fellow trainees at the *Mail* were all men – as were all the other journalists in the Manchester office and all those on the *Daily Sketch* who shared our huge open-plan office in Deansgate. Elsewhere you might meet the occasional woman reporter – the *Express* had one, I think, and so did the *Sun*. And a year or so later according to Carole Lee, who was the first female reporter in the *Mail's* Manchester newsroom, her immediate boss introduced the second one to her with the patronising words: "Here's a playmate for you."

This was the notorious Ken Donlan, the news editor, a *Mail* man for 25 years, who then briefly edited the *News of the World* and ended his career adjudicating disputes as the *Sun's* ombudsman. He was remembered by one *Mail* reporter as “a puce-faced, perpetually snarling parody of the stereotypical hard-bitten Hollywood city editor” and by another, after Donlan’s departure for the London office, as “a megalomaniac...who had ruled by fear.” But you had to laugh when the opportunity presented itself – if you dared, that is. The story goes that one day a reporter boldly said to him: “Good morning, Ken.” To which he replied: “If I want a weather forecast I will ring the Met Office.” Forced smiles all round.

The deputy news editor was Bill Dickson, who was as friendly as Donlan was obnoxious, and my graduate reporter colleagues included the amiable and able Brian MacArthur, who went on to launch the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and edit *Today*. He also presided over the “Hitler diaries that weren’t” scandal that embarrassed the *Sunday Times* and their authenticating expert, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, or Lord Dacre, as he became. Fr Rea SJ, one of my history masters at Stonyhurst, would have enjoyed the diaries affair; he’d always dismissed the brilliant Trevor-Roper, author of *The Last Days of Hitler*, as more of a journalist than a historian, but then Fr Rea was of the old school that thought the first world war was too recent to be history: it was really only “current affairs”.

There was a lot of drinking in those days, among *Mail* journalists as elsewhere. The reporter’s daily routine went like this: when you finished your shift you exited via the pub which conveniently was downstairs, part of the same Deansgate building. You bought a half-pint of bitter for any/all of the other reporters present. Then you were free to go. So if you were married or settled and happy with it, you could drink your half and say goodnight.

But for the rest of us the night was often far from over. The halves lined up in front of us on the bar. Reporters came and went. We drank the halves and reordered. If you thought you’d consumed too much liquid and couldn’t manage any more you changed to whisky – a small scotch, what the French call a “baby”. Then, when the pub closed (early in those days – 10h30?), you could move on to the press club, a dismal, dingy place which seemed to stay open as long as it needed to. On the way home you could pick up fish and chips (not so many hamburger joints in those days) before collapsing into bed.

On the more positive, healthy side, there was newspaper cricket with the other national titles. The matches were played mainly in the morning so we could go on to work the 3pm to 10pm shift. Ideally we hadn’t been out drinking the night before.

I can't say I particularly enjoyed being a reporter in Manchester though I certainly learnt something about news and how to write copy that people would actually read. But I learnt nothing about feature writing or interviewing or subediting or newspaper law (and certainly no shorthand or even proper typing) because, although we were called, and paid as, trainees, there wasn't any actual training. Later on after I left the *Mail* I learnt to write features, though more for magazines than newspapers, and sub copy, which I turned out to be quite good at. But I was never going to be a shit-hot tabloid reporter, certainly not a foot-in-the-door man, and after nine months the *Mail* let me go, saying they hoped I'd do better elsewhere; maybe I'd write books or something.

What they and I didn't know – had no way of knowing then – was that an idealised version of the *Mail* style based on economy, precision, clarity was something that would stay with me and influence the rest of my career. Later on, as a subeditor, working on periodicals as diverse as *Decanter*, *Woman*, *Police Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Radio Times* and various colour supplements, it was the *Mail* and certainly not broadsheets like the *Guardian* that I found useful as a stylistic model. And this applied even more strongly to my role in the training of journalists. At the time, though, the most positive thing about getting the sack was that I could return to London – which in 1965 was the place to be.

# “Roll Over, Beethoven”

## Chapter 7: swinging London

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Back in London in the summer of 1965 I stayed with friends in Battersea and went round to the local labour exchange to see what I could find. “Warehouseman/driver, £12 a week”, though less than half what I’d been getting at the *Mail*, sounded possible as a temporary job, and I started work at Mason & Richards, a confectionery and tobacco wholesalers in Battersea Park road. Alas, I was never asked to do any driving and I was a bit shocked to find that a fellow warehouseman, older than me and married with two children, was only getting £11.10s; he’d been hired some time before. There was no trade union. The one perk was that we could buy our cigarettes at wholesale prices.

Top-up jobs I did that year included market research interviewing and waiting in an Earls Court restaurant. The restaurant was called the Ouzel Galley after a mythical Irish trading ship and was owned by upper-crust people with estates in Scotland. They supplied the restaurant with venison which, roasted and served with redcurrant sauce, was our signature dish. “Would you recommend the venison?” I was often asked, and I always unhesitatingly said yes until the moment when, to my horror, I spotted that the mashed potato served with it came out of a packet. Still, nobody ever complained about the mash or the venison.

Sixties food in London could be a bit like that – mixed. Outside Soho, which had some excellent Italian restaurants serving the kind of food you’d get in Italy, there wasn’t much to tickle the taste-buds. One exception, Carrier’s in Camden Passage, Islington, was a showcase for the American gourmet and food writer Robert Carrier who reportedly sold 10 million copies of his first book, *Great Dishes of the World*. But as time passed and *nouvelle cuisine* became fashionable, foodies recoiled from the excesses of his culinary style which was not chips but cream with everything. Even his vegetables couldn’t escape a rich garnish.

Still if Paris was the place to be in 1960, London (restaurants apart) had clearly overtaken it five years later. Well before *Time* magazine’s “Swinging London” issue pronounced in 1966 that “as never before in modern times, London is switched on”, two other American journalists were enthusiastically on message. John Crosby told *Daily Telegraph* readers in April 1965 that London was “the most exciting city in the world”, while the editor of *Vogue*, Diana Vreeland, declared it “the most swinging city in the world at this moment”.

Just as the British pop/rock bands were beginning to command the international music scene, the world of fashion had acquired an English accent, as when David Bailey snapped Jean Shrimpton in a Mary Quant mini-dress, the cover pic for the first newspaper colour supplement\*. And the dominant spoken accent – not only in fashion and pop but in film and theatre – seemed to be less and less RP or comic-cockney à la Dick Van Dyke and more and more working-class authentic: Bermondsey (Michael Caine), Salford (Albert Finney) or scouse (Rita Tushingham).

\**Sunday Times*, 4 February 1962

London was the magnet – for the musicians and the fans. Led by the Beatles, who started their recording career in EMI’s Abbey Road studios in St John’s Wood in 1962, the bands (or groups as

they were known then) from northern cities like Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle came down to London to record – and stayed to party when they weren't touring. For fans from London and the Home Counties, who were now mostly sharp-suited Mods, the West End clubs were a regular weekend destination. Pop musicians and fans could get very close to one another in clubs like the Flamingo, the 100 Club and The Marquee – or in the *Ready, Steady, Go!* studio.

*RSG!*, which went out on Friday evenings from August 1963 to December 1966, was the coolest thing. Thought up by Rediffusion TV entertainment boss Elkan Allan, it recreated the style of a disco and deliberately put the dancing fans within touching distance of performers. The show was shot in a small studio in Kingsway, central London, where the cameras moved about constantly and often caught other cameras moving. The dancers, selected from local clubs for their style and precision, showed viewers the latest moves – and the latest Mod fashions.

Dusty Springfield introduced the first shows and then in 1964 came the Queen of the Mods, Cathy McGowan. She was a 19-year-old typist from Streatham who'd worked in the fashion department of *Woman's Own* magazine having answered the programme's ad for "a typical teenager". She talked south London plain not posh, stumbled over her words, often asked the stars silly questions – but she was one of our own and she dressed (and made herself up) on trend with great success. Fashion luminaries-to-be like Anna Wintour, a future *Vogue* editor, and the original super-model Twiggy were fans, as were we all (but she did say some naff things, like disrespecting the godfather of soul, James Brown\*). Meanwhile the BBC's rather staid answer to *RSG!* – *Top of the Pops* – which started recording in Manchester in 1964 inevitably moved down to London two years later. That was where it was happening, man.

\*"When he came here he was hailed as the great James Brown – and the show was awful." Quoted by Cliff White, *Let It Rock*, August 1975. Actually it wasn't awful, it was authentic JB: Cathy just didn't get it.

The key to *RSG!*'s success was identification with, and response to, the audience. For example, the programme's slogan "The weekend starts here" wasn't thought up in a marketing meeting but was said to have been adopted from a fan's comment. Apparently, after the pilot programme Keith Fordyce, the middle-aged, avuncular DJ who helped to launch *RSG!*, approached a group of Mods from out of town and said: "So, you chaps have come all the way from Sheffield on a Tuesday no less. I expect you'll be eager to get back to work, what with the weekend coming up and all." And one of them replied: "Are you kidding, mate? The weekend starts here."

If TV provided a showcase for the musicians, it was the new pirate radio stations that dominated the everyday life of pop music fans: they now had transistor radios so they could listen wherever they went. Radio Caroline started broadcasting all-day pop radio off the Essex coast in early 1964, followed by various others, notably Radio London. Backed by Texas money and run by an American advertising man, "Wonderful Radio London" had a particularly powerful transmitter and a polished, professional style; they claimed 10 million listeners by 1966 and unlike their rivals they made a profit.

But the British establishment, notably Aunty BBC, which had created the pirate opportunity in the first place by playing hardly any current pop music on radio, was not pleased by this threat to its monopoly so the Labour government made the whole thing illegal. They passed the Marine

Broadcasting Offences Act\* in August 1967 (which was supposed to be “the summer of love” when San Francisco replaced London as the world’s trendiest city). Then in September came the BBC’s launch of its own pop station, Radio One, which employed the ex- pirate DJs in an attempt to recreate their style, mood and atmosphere.

\*Anthony Wedgwood Benn, as he still was, had led the campaign against the pirates as Postmaster-General in charge of broadcasting; but he managed to avoid being identified as the villain who killed them off by changing jobs and becoming Minister of Technology before 1967.

My view of all this came via my glamorous actress girlfriend Hazel, who I’d met in Manchester and who, like me, was less than 100% obsessed by, and so dedicated to, building a career. After drama school Hazel had appeared in rep and one or two TV plays but she didn’t see acting as the only thing in life. She got an admin job in Radio London’s Mayfair offices and together we moved to a flat in Noel Road, Islington. We lived for the best part of a year at no 93 in a newly converted ground-floor flat a few doors away from the Island Queen, a traditional pub that was destined to be gentrified – as was the street and the whole area.

In 1965 Noel Road was one of those London streets in transition: a bus driver could live next door to an architect. I learnt this through doing interviews for a market research company who were insistent on finding interviewees with the right social profile. But one thing Hazel and I didn’t know was that the gay playwright Joe Orton and his companion Kenneth Halliwell were living at the other end of Noel Road (no 25) and had been for some time. A year after Hazel and I left Noel Road an angry, jealous Halliwell clubbed Orton to death in August 1967. So much for “the summer of love”.

A lot of the time Hazel and I listened loyally to Radio London but for an hour or so every evening there was only one option for really hip Londoners (and people like us who weren’t really as hip as all that but prided ourselves on our good taste). On the ultra-mainstream station Radio 390, which was otherwise devoted to “easy listening” and featured housewives’ choices like “Eve, the Woman’s Magazine of the Air”, a DJ called Mike Raven played the raucous black pop music otherwise known as r ‘n’ b. It was the real thing – rock, soul, blues and occasionally reggae.

As well as the curiously mainstream context of Radio 390 there was the paradox of the man himself: Raven, who introduced the records smoothly and knowledgeably in a posh but entirely natural-sounding accent, was born Austin Churton Fairman to affluent parents in 1924; after Aldenham public school, he went to, and ran away from, Magdalen College, Oxford, to join the Ballet Rambert; married a Republican refugee from the Spanish Civil War, made religious TV programmes, appeared in horror films...his exotic life-story goes on from there: he was a one-off.

Hazel had a friend called Tina who was desperate to meet Paul Jones, r ‘n’ b and blues singer, actor and later presenter of *The Blues Show* on Radio 2. “Ah,” I said, “I can help you there because I know Paul – or rather I used to know him when he was a student called Paul Pond.” He ran away from Jesus College, Oxford, to join Manfred Mann and sing songs like *5-4-3-2-1*, which for a time introduced *Ready, Steady, Go!* I managed to find out where the Manfreds were rehearsing or recording (I think it was at the 100 Club) and star-struck Tina got her result. Paul didn’t seem to be missing the English degree course he’d left behind: the adulation, and probably more, of his female fans saw to that.



Another friend of Hazel's was a male ex-drama student who was living with an older man, a BBC news reader and continuity announcer. They invited us to their Blackheath flat for dinner, cooked and served by Hazel's friend – it was my first social meeting with a gay couple. Gay sex between men was still illegal then; not until 1967 did the Sexual Offences Act decriminalise sex between men in England and Wales. Other overdue 1960s reforms were the legalisation of abortion, the relaxation of the divorce laws, the end of theatre censorship and the abolition of the death penalty. Readers may conclude that the "Swinging Sixties" started out as the dark ages. And even after 1967 gay young men under 21 and their partners were still liable to be persecuted and prosecuted.

If anything, the Blackheath gay couple seemed to have more sharply defined roles than Hazel and I had: we were for that time comparatively liberated. I did far more of the food shopping than she did for the simple reason that my working day as a schoolteacher ended much earlier than hers. I'd go round Chapel Market when I got back to Islington after work. It's true that Hazel was in charge of the all-important laundry and ironing – but we did share the cooking and cleaning.

Some of the stallholders in Chapel Market were distinctly unwoke. Once, keen to observe the anti-apartheid boycott of South African fruit, I checked the provenance of the oranges. "I don't buy South African," I explained earnestly. The reply was a shock – "Well, I quite understand, guv. You don't know who's handled them." Cowardice, I'm afraid, stopped me putting him right.

As Hazel went west to work in Mayfair I went the other way – to the east end of London as a supply teacher. For the 1965 autumn term I wore a tracksuit and worked in the PE department at Stepney Green boys' comprehensive school. Both the headmaster and the head of PE were impressive enthusiasts for the comprehensive revolution which was getting underway.

The PE man had a long-term plan to introduce rugby – for two reasons, both of which made sense. First, pragmatically, you could get 30 boys on the field at a time rather than 22 for football. Second, it was obvious to anyone who bothered to look that the trapping, heading and dribbling skills of football were beyond the reach of many boys as they grew into and past puberty; in spite of being fans of the professional game they were all too often "slow and clumsy" as players on the field (which is what the prep school master in charge of football had written about me as a 13-year-old left-back). Football played properly is for those who have what the TV pundits nowadays call "quality" – ie skill, talent, magic even, which most people do not have – whereas junior rugby gives boys (and nowadays girls as well) of all shapes and sizes much more of a chance to learn drills, combine as a team and enjoy the experience of an energetic physical contact sport.

But football dominated then and the Stepney Green boys, one age group at a time, were transported by coach out to the playing fields of Fairlop in Essex, a journey that took half an hour each way – so an hour's coach travel for, at the very most, two hours of activity. But there was some excellent – enthusiastic and expert – coaching for the boys. It was led by the West Ham player (and later manager) John Lyall who'd turned to coaching in his 20s having had to give up playing because of a knee injury.

I didn't make much of a contribution to the football, except to act as a minder on the coach journeys, but it was a different story with basketball. I'd played at school and I was sent on a weekend training course to brush up on rules, tactics and coaching tips so I could referee and

supervise properly. Whenever possible in PE lessons the boys played basketball and keen ones were allowed to use the gym for unsupervised practice during the lunch break.

All went well at Stepney Green until...on one otherwise ordinary day I walked in to end the practice session as usual since the gym had to be locked before afternoon classes. For no discernible reason one of the boys hurled the basketball he was holding so that it hit me on the arm and knocked the cigarette out of my hand (that's right: I was smoking in the gym, as you did virtually everywhere in those days). It was from close range and clearly deliberate. Without pausing to think I aimed a cuff in his direction – not a punch, you understand, but a cuff with the open hand. The boy dodged and then punched me full in the face with a straight left (fortunately not a very hard one and I did jerk my head back when I saw it coming). This time I did pause to think. "Right, we're going to the headmaster," I said and we went.

The head interviewed us separately (me first) and after describing what had happened I said at once that the cuff was a mistake, which I regretted. Nothing much happened to me, which was reasonable, I think. The boy was presumably punished in some way but I kept out of it. The lunchtime basketball sessions were cancelled, at least temporarily, and I was left wondering why the whole thing had happened: I can't remember having any previous trouble from the boy involved. It was a disillusioning experience.

As far as I knew there wasn't a single member of staff at Stepney Green who lived locally: the gentrification of the East End was years in the future. The teachers came from far and wide; Mr Naqvi, a Pakistani, commuted daily by tube from Harrow on the west side of London. He and I played poker for pennies in the lunch break with Mr Robertson, a Yorkshireman, and we met up once for a final game in the Christmas holidays.

After my autumn term was up I was sent to Glengall Grove, a mixed secondary modern on the Isle of Dogs, for the rest of the school year. This was an institution in decline, under sentence of death, waiting for the inevitable end, since comprehensivisation was the clear policy of both the local education authority\* and the Labour government. I was given the class of almost-15-year-old leavers to look after and timetabled to teach them maths and English. I did my best but the kids had their eyes on the future which, as far as they could see, didn't require any more arithmetic or English grammar; as for their present, that was pretty standard, consisting of normal things like pop music, fashion and football. The boys in particular had apprenticeships, or at least jobs, to look forward to and could not be persuaded to take an interest in school work. The girls, however, would at least bring me their handwritten application letters for clerical/admin/secretarial jobs– "Please, sir, is the punctuation all right, sir?"

\*the Inner London Education Authority which ran London schools from April 1965 until it was abolished in 1990.

And it was the girls – or rather half a dozen of them – who said yes to my proposal that we go and see *The Matchgirls*, a musical about the women workers' strike at the Bryant and May match factory in east London in 1888. As the drama unfolded and the evident wickedness of the rapacious owners and compliant foremen took centre stage, the girl sitting next to me couldn't contain herself. "Bleedin' cheek," she said. And she was right. I like to think that she went on to become a militant shop steward.

The kids openly expressed their football allegiances – both boys and girls brought their West Ham or Millwall scarves to school – but I don't remember any fuss about particular pop groups. Indeed it wasn't a Glengall Grove pupil but a teacher, Mrs Lopez, who was the school's most prominent pop fan. She would break into song in the staffroom, mainly her version of Ike and Tina Turner's *River Deep Mountain High*. In the Sixties pop music stopped being the preserve of teenagers; increasingly, grown-ups were fans too.

TV, radio and the discs you played on your own record-player were all very well but nothing could beat live music. In London we were spoilt: a British tour by American or local musicians usually took in at least one London venue. A few highlights: Millie "My Boy Lollipop" Jackson, the princess of reggae in the Goldhawk club, Shepherds Bush; the queen of soul, Aretha Franklin, triumphant at the Hammersmith Odeon; and the king, James Brown, in the Brixton Astoria and the Granada, East Ham...

The Brixton cinema was packed with people, almost all black, responding energetically to the music and it wasn't difficult to imagine yourself transported to the New York venue where Mr Brown had recorded his definitive album *Live at the Apollo* in October 1962, released in 1963 and sold all over black America. The concerts followed a consistent pattern: first his band would play without him, uptempo mainstream jazz mainly (these guys really were musicians); sometimes there'd be a guest singer; then after an interval Brown would take centre stage and hurl himself into his astonishing all-action singing-and-dancing act which earned him the title "the hardest-working man in show business". There was just no one like him for movement, except possibly Michael Jackson (who called Brown "my greatest inspiration"); certainly not Mick Jagger, who seemed by comparison effete, a bit of a lightweight.

The Brown voice was utterly distinctive: harsh, discordant, compelling; not smooth and syrupy-soulful in the style of Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye but insistent, strident, powerful. And for his bands Brown always hired the best and then made them play the way he wanted. Unlike some performers (notoriously the brilliant maverick Chuck Berry, who would play with almost anyone and seemed to care mostly about the money) Brown insisted on quality. Allegedly he would fine or, at worst, fire band members who played a bum note.

In September 1968 white American bands like The Doors and Jefferson Airplane came to town and played the Roundhouse, a converted engine shed and warehouse in Camden. It was loud. As one reviewer noted, Jefferson Airplane "lost some impact because the vocals were often inaudible against the strong backing". Quite: Gracie Slick's singing was very loud though a bit forced. But "Light My Fire" by The Doors was brilliant.

There were free festivals in London's Hyde Park from 1968. The best known was on 5 July 1969 (several weeks before the famous Woodstock festival in the United States) and featured the Rolling Stones. One of the reasons for it from the band's point of view was to introduce their new guitarist Mick Taylor who had replaced Brian Jones. Several complications here: Jones had been, effectively, the founder of the Stones; but his excessive drug use and increasingly erratic behaviour had led to the group firing him; two days before the Hyde Park concert he was found dead in his swimming pool, apparently from natural causes. In Hyde Park Jagger put on a white dress and read two stanzas of Shelley's poem *Adonais* about the death of his friend Keats – then hundreds of cabbage-white butterflies were released as a tribute to Jones. According to reports between 250,000 people and

500,000 were there – and I was certainly one of them so I can confirm several reports that the band weren't on particularly good form.

That wasn't the end of that day's entertainment, though. Lucky people who'd bought tickets (including me) just walked down the road to the Albert Hall where Chuck Berry, as usual backed by an ad hoc group of musicians, played his hits and did his signature duck walk across the stage. Dave Curtiss, one of Chuck's hastily assembled backing group, wrote later\*: "It was an amazing night; tore the place to bits we did." The Who were top of the bill, and the crowd were still chanting "Chuck Berry, Chuck Berry" 20 minutes into The Who's set. Pete Townshend had to say "Look, we love Chuck Berry too, but we're on now."

\*Quoted in *Purple Records 1971-1978*, Neil Priddey, Lulu Press, 2014

Chuck Berry's rocker fans threw coins as well as shouting and The Who tried to pacify them by playing the Eddie Cochran classic *Summertime Blues*. Eventually the rockers calmed down and the concert continued. Roger Daltrey said (much later\*): "You couldn't have thought of two more opposed groups. Chuck Berry's audience threw coins and we smashed our guitars." Curious quote this, considering that The Who's destructive antics seemed to follow directly on from the rockers' own.

\*[www.royalalberthall.com](http://www.royalalberthall.com)

The other dominant thing at this time was football. Somewhere in the 1960s football went from being merely England's number one sport to our most important cultural event, topic of conversation, source of political metaphor – and of course winning the 1966 World Cup helped. The prime minister, Harold Wilson, contributed to this process: he was a genuine football fan, reportedly to be found in the crowd when Huddersfield Town played at home, and he recognised a scoring opportunity when one presented itself. "Have you noticed how we only win the World Cup under a Labour government?" was one of his well-rehearsed quips after 1966. (And he's still, after all these years, correct, alas.)

But Wilson was too clever by half when he trendily decided that the Beatles should be awarded MBEs in 1965 for "services to industry". First, some existing MBE-holders immediately sent back their medals in protest at this "trivialisation"; second, just four years later John Lennon insisted on sending *his* back in protest at various things. His letter to the Queen cited Britain's involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war and support of the United States in Vietnam, both very good points; then he added something silly (which he later regretted) about a record of his and the pop charts.

I went to my first football match at Stamford Bridge on 20 February 1965 in the company of a Chelsea fan and saw the home side beat Tottenham Hotspur 1-0 in the fifth round of the FA Cup. But from early in the game I was lost to the Lilywhites. They had style and swagger on and off the pitch, and as the great Danny Blanchflower once put it: "The game is about glory."\* They had the most interesting famous fans – from the philosopher Freddie Ayer to the satirist Peter Cook by way of the actor Warren Mitchell (who played the monstrous bigot and West Ham fan Alf Garnett in *Till Death Us Do Part*). Above all, they now had the goal-scoring maestro Jimmy Greaves, who'd started his career at Chelsea, had been bought by AC Milan – and was then brought back to England in 1961 by the Spurs manager Bill Nicholson for £99,999.

\*Quoted out of context this sentence can easily be misunderstood. The full version is: “The great fallacy is that the game is first and last about winning. It is nothing of the kind. The game is about glory. It’s about doing things in style, with a flourish, about going out and beating the other lot, not waiting for them to die of boredom.” So it’s about style *and* winning, not style *instead of* winning. Over the years people, including some Spurs fans, have missed the point.

Greaves broke most of the available goal-scoring records for club and country including number of hat-tricks (15 for Spurs, six for England) but among the Spurs faithful one of his goals stands out as his greatest. I’m afraid you can’t see it on YouTube because there were no TV cameras at White Hart Lane on 5 October 1968 when Spurs played Leicester City in a First Division league game. But if you’re lucky you’re one of the 36,622 people (or your father or grandfather is – or possibly your mother or grandmother) who were there that afternoon and are still alive to tell the tale. A fan called Gary Wright, who like me was there, once wrote on a Spurs site\*:

“Pat Jennings [the Spurs goalkeeper] kicked the ball from his enormous hands to Jimmy standing on the halfway line in front of the Shelf stand. Instant control on his instep [NB: not his head] took him diagonally towards goal at the Paxton Road end. He beat the first man with his first control and accelerated past the second with a deft swivel and dip of his right shoulder. He straightened his run on goal and dragged the ball back and away from the third defender.

\*[www.allactionnoplots.com/2009/08/18](http://www.allactionnoplots.com/2009/08/18)

“The crowd were beginning to expect something special and an almost deathly silence came as they held their collective breath. By this stage Jimmy was facing the goal and he drew the next defender and put him on his backside as the next fall guy entered the frame. In a split second Jimmy slid the ball past him, and Peter Shilton [the Leicester City goalkeeper] made his move towards Jimmy’s feet. Too late – he casually slid the ball past the prone goalkeeper and it rolled into the net just inside the post.”

Spurs won the match 3-2 – and, as you might have guessed, Greaves scored the other two goals as well.

Strangely, Greaves doesn’t mention this particular goal in his autobiography\*, but he does describe two other, similar ones when the *Match of the Day* cameras were present: one of his two goals in a 4-0 home win over Blackpool in 1965 and again one of his two in a 4-0 home win over Newcastle United in 1966. I didn’t see either of them but the pattern was consistent: “I picked the ball up just inside the Newcastle half and simply started running. Tackles came in but somehow I managed to avoid them and skip past the Newcastle defenders to find myself in their penalty area with only their goalkeeper Gordon Marshall to beat...” And then, as from a matador, the *coup de grâce*: “As Marshall came out I simply upped a gear, swerved away to my right and passed the ball into the empty net.”

\**Greavsie, The Autobiography*, Time Warner Books, 2003

That was if you like the characteristic Greaves goal, nothing like the 30-yard thunderbolts of Bobby Charlton or the Portuguese centre forward Eusebio or Pele or Ronaldo or Shearer or Kane, but the deft feints and the neat execution, followed by the raised arm (just in case somebody in the stands hadn’t been paying attention).

Three years earlier a couple of matches between Spurs and Manchester United summed up Sixties football (and this time you certainly can see the highlights on YouTube). First at White Hart Lane on 16 October 1965 Spurs won 5-1. And two months later at Old Trafford United returned the compliment and also won 5-1. The players in those games included (for Spurs) Pat Jennings in goal, Cyril Knowles, Dave Mackay, Alan Mullery, Alan Gilzean and Jimmy Greaves\*; and (for United) Nobby Stiles, Paddy Crerand and – perhaps the most famous attacking trio in English football history – George Best, Denis Law and Bobby Charlton.

\*Greaves didn't play in the second match. He was suffering from hepatitis.

Two of the Spurs players were particularly celebrated. Alan Gilzean, who'd been bought from Dundee, was crowned king – weekly. “Gilzean (four times), born is the king of White Hart Lane” was the chant. His glancing headers (off a very bald head) were one of the key things Greaves fed off. Some people called them “the G-men”. Cyril Knowles, who was an attacking left-back, became a household name a bit later. In 1972 there was a TV ad for Wonderloaf, the sliced white substance, which included the phrase “Nice one, Cyril” for the baker allegedly responsible.

The slogan was irresistible: “Nice one, Cyril. Let's have another one” was the chant; it became a pop record – and in his career of 507 matches Knowles did score a few times (17).

When England won the World Cup 4-2 in July 1966 Greaves didn't play in the final – he'd lost his place (to the West Ham player Geoff Hurst) because of a leg injury inflicted by a France defender in a pool match and didn't get it back although he'd recovered. If substitutes had been allowed, as they were four years later in Mexico, Greaves would almost certainly have been used when the match went into extra time. Still, we won when it mattered for once, which was the main thing, even for Spurs supporters and Greaves fans.

The match, the result and Geoff Hurst's hat-trick, including the disputed third goal he scored in extra time, continue to be celebrated by those of us who were watching at the time\*. My favourite tribute came just three years after the match when the TV series *Till Death Us Do Part* turned up as a film. With three West Ham players in the England team (Bobby Moore and Martin Peters were the others) Alf Garnett is of course at Wembley for the final. As the Swiss referee goes to consult his Russian (actually Azerbaijani) linesman to check whether Hurst's shot has crossed the line, the irrepressible Alf speaks for England: “Remember Stalingrad!” he shouts. And the linesman of course comes up with the right answer.

\*The domestic TV audience for the final was the biggest in British TV history – well over 30 million – so if somebody old enough says they watched it they probably did. It was broadcast in black and white; colour TV (on BBC2 from 1967, BBC1 and ITV from 1969) came too late.

The downside of football was crowd trouble – or the threat of it. History records that Spurs fans were responsible for one appalling example in September 1969. After a 5-0 thrashing by Derby County at the Baseball Ground 500 hooligans on the train home smashed everything that was smashable and pulled the communication cord, stopping the train at Flitwick in Bedfordshire. When the driver refused to go on, the fans ran down the streets throwing stones, breaking windows, attacking cars...\*

\*described as “The Battle of Flitwick” in *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970-1974* by Dominic Sandbrook, Allen Lane, 2010

You would expect London derby matches to be particularly troublesome. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s I just don't remember any aggro happening around me. I went to a number of games in London, at White Hart Lane and the other big London grounds, sometimes with children – and always standing. For example, I have a clear and vivid memory of one Chelsea-Spurs match at Stamford Bridge on 14 November 1970. It was the biggest of games attracting more than 60,000 people including two small boys, my father-in-law, Richard Kisch, and me. It was memorable for all sorts of reasons, starting with the fact that it rained for about an hour before kick-off; we were standing as near to the front as we could get so the boys could see. It rained, as I remember, continuously throughout the 90 minutes which Chelsea dominated without managing to score. At that point Richard, who was inclined to impatience, said he'd had enough and fought his way out through the crowd. But he was still in the ground to hear the roar when Alan Mullery scored for Spurs in the 91<sup>st</sup> minute. He'd managed to leave, I think, by the time the second goal went in after 93 minutes, giving Spurs a 2-0 win. Not a proper fan, my father-in-law.\*

\* One of the boys I'd brought, though, supported Spurs from then on while his brother followed his father to Highbury, as it used to be, to support the Arsenal.

My point is: there was no crowd trouble that day. A second example – from the same season – makes the point even more emphatically. On Monday 3 May 1971 Arsenal were at White Hart Lane for the final league game of the season; sitting in second place they needed to win or draw 0-0 to be league champions ; then the following weekend (8 May) they were due to play Liverpool in the FA cup final. The league and FA cup double had been achieved precisely once in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – by Spurs in 1960-61. Now here were their historic rivals, Arsenal, on the brink of repeating the feat.

A small group of us left the *Radio Times* office in Marylebone High Street on a warm spring late afternoon and went to the ground by train arriving about an hour and a half before the 7.30pm kick-off. We managed to get in but thousands didn't. The numbers were, simply, immense. Officially, the attendance was 51,992 and a reasonable estimate of those left outside is a further 50,000, although the Arsenal website\* refers to “twice that number”.

\*[www.arsenal.com](http://www.arsenal.com)

In the stadium it was a tight match, not particularly lively or entertaining, with everything resting on the result. Ray Kennedy scored the only goal for Arsenal three minutes from the end. At the final whistle there was pandemonium. Apart from the noise thousands of Arsenal fans invaded the pitch and ran round celebrating their greatest-ever derby win. Later the Arsenal goalkeeper Bob Wilson, who'd made several good saves, called the first part of the double “the greatest moment of my career”. But there was no fighting, no resistance from the Spurs fans who just went home.

Commentators pointed out that both the football authorities and the police had seriously miscalculated. First, the match should have been all-ticket, which would have reduced the crowds. Second, the police should have been better prepared. But the striking thing, looking back, is that the whole thing passed off so peacefully. There were apparently some arrests but not the full-scale riot that might have happened.

For me, football remains *the* spectator sport. True, the offside law can be problematic but in general the surprise visitor from Mars wouldn't need a commentator to grasp what is going on. On the other hand I'm not sure it's the sport I wish I'd been super-good at: when I interviewed Martin Peters' wife Kathy, she told me that he used to come back from matches with legs so swollen from being kicked they "looked like elephantiasis".



# “Roll Over, Beethoven”

## Chapter 8: my “gap year”?

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Within a week of England winning the football world cup in July 1966 I was hitching from London down to Dover, next stop Calais, then eastern France, northern Italy, Yugoslavia (as it still was), Athens in Greece, then across the Mediterranean to Alexandria... My plan was to travel up the Nile to its main source in Lake Victoria. Then I'd see if I could find work for a while. Journalism was one idea, teaching probably a better one (I knew that Uganda's secondary schools depended on expats since Britain hadn't managed to educate and train enough locals before independence). After that, instead of continuing to follow the traditional “Cairo to the Cape” route, I could make for the east coast of Africa, cross the Indian ocean to Bombay (as it still was) and return to Europe overland.

So was it a “gap year”? In the end the whole trip lasted not much more than nine months (though I can claim a full year if you add the summer term I'd spent in Paris in 1960). The expression “gap year” didn't become trendy until the 1970s but the idea of a period of travel abroad with opportunities to interact with and learn from other cultures is pretty ancient. Think of the Grand Tour of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe undertaken by rich young gentlemen or the involuntary visits by conscripted national servicemen to Britain's turbulent, often revolting, colonies in the 1950s.

In Britain, Voluntary Service Overseas had been launched in 1958 just as national service in the armed forces was being phased out and there were various official ways that British teachers could be seconded to work abroad. But there was no question of my applying: to begin with I wasn't “a trained teacher” and I also didn't like the idea of committing myself to a two-year contract.

Before I left London I encountered what looked like a serious problem: of the two north African Muslim-dominated countries on the way up the Nile to Uganda, Egypt accepted tourists and would give you a transit visa but Sudan said no. The man at the embassy in London refused to issue a visa and said that travel over land from Egypt to Sudan wasn't possible – the new Aswan dam had flooded the area including the historic Sudanese city of Wadi Halfa; international tourists were not welcome and were not catered for, full stop: go to Sudan by air or not at all. What the travellers' grapevine said, though, was that in Cairo Sudanese visas *were* issued because local cross-border trade continued. Curiously, nobody in authority mentioned the war, perhaps because war had been endemic in Sudan since independence.

Sudan's first civil war (1955-72) was still going on in 1966; it was fought sporadically between the southern rebels, who were black Africans and mainly Christian or Animist (they believed that animals and plants had souls), and government forces; later the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 gave the south some self-rule. After a series of armed conflicts South Sudan finally became an independent state in 2011. However, civil wars have continued there, mainly caused by tribal rivalries.

Hitching to Athens was uneventful. One memorable thing was that every other driver who picked you up was delighted to be able to rattle off the names of the victorious England football team – “Bobby Charlton, Gordon Banks, Nobby Stiles...” Those were the days...with England seemingly preferred to Germany, west and east, by most Europeans (but it was the Sixties, after all, the decade

of the Beatles et al). A Swiss driver in northern Italy gave me the address of a hotel in Cairo which, he said, was just what I'd want: clean and cheap with good European food. But in Athens I slept in my sleeping-bag on the roof of a hotel – in those days the cheapest option – waiting for the boat to Alexandria.

After the sea crossing I didn't stay long in Alex: I was on the first available train to Cairo. Travelling in the cheapest class I had to stand all the way – for more than four hours – firmly wedged with no wriggling room. It was a bit like the Northern tube line in London on a Monday morning. I was sweltering in shorts but the other men – all the fourth-class passengers I could see were men – looked much cooler in long white cotton gowns. Rail travel was certainly cheap. I think it cost a total of £2 to go from Alex to Aswan in the south of Egypt. It would have been ridiculous to hitch with rail travel as cheap as it was.

Aswan in August was hot, the hottest place I'd ever been. Walking slowly out of the sun and into the shade didn't seem to make any difference to the temperature. But I found that being on the water and being moved even at slow speed through the sultry air seemed to help a bit: the next stage of the journey was by boat south across Lake Nasser to Wadi Halfa ("bloody halfway" in old soldier speak). This was a replacement Wadi Halfa – the original lies underneath the lake that was created by the building of the Aswan dam.

Next I had a long, hot, slow, dusty train ride across the Nubian desert to Khartoum where I stayed with expat friends for a few days. There was more train to come after that, from Khartoum south to Kosti, where the railway line ended and it was back to the river for an almost 1500km journey to Juba, Sudan's southern capital. This was supposed to take seven days and actually took 10 because the ancient paddle steamer made such slow progress through the vast papyrus swamp known as the Sudd, a barrier that had defeated the Romans and many later explorers.

My fellow travellers included various locals and their livestock – goats and chickens, mainly – some Sudanese soldiers and two other foreigners. There was also a cargo of onions piled up on deck. The soldiers provided a military escort against the possibility of a raid by southern guerrillas called the Anyanya – and we were closely guarded. We slept in a dormitory of tiered bunk beds which had a base of metal slats; in the next bunk to mine was a soldier who placed his rifle alongside himself so its muzzle was inches from my nose.

One of the foreigners was a Frenchman, like me in his early 20s, who was planning to continue south after Uganda, ultimate destination the Cape; the other was a young Kenyan Sikh, who'd spent time studying in London, and was on his way to his family home in Nairobi via Uganda. He confessed that he was dreading the reunion with his father. London had corrupted him in all sorts of ways that he'd be able to conceal but the overwhelming and inescapable fact was that he'd had his sacred Sikh hair cut short. The Frenchman and I continued his journey on the road to ruin by teaching him poker.

There were various stops – Malakal and Bor I remember – so that passengers and livestock could get on and off. But we didn't stop at Kodok, which is the modern name for Fashoda, the historic meeting-place in 1898 for two rival colonial expeditions, one British, the other French. There was a confrontation there but not a battle, which is why it's called the Fashoda "Incident". The French wisely gave way to superior British force and the Sudan was confirmed as subject to Anglo-Egyptian

rule. But French chauvinists nursed a grievance that lasted until the British navy sank their fleet at Oran in 1940 – giving them a much better excuse for hostility towards *la perfide albion*.

After Malakal, as we continued south towards the equator, the paddle steamer struggled increasingly against the vegetation; the heat became stronger and more humid; the insects noisier. The odd crocodile appeared out of the water seeming to rest on patches of vegetation to take the sun. On deck the day was dominated by flies; the night by mosquitoes. But in the foul-smelling and ill-lit showers and toilets the mosquitoes flew their missions day and night. So we were in and out of there as quickly as possible.

At first we ate some of our meals in the steamer's restaurant, which was open to all passengers including those with cheap tickets. They served an excellent three-course English breakfast as well as lunch and dinner: things like omelettes, kedgeree, fishcakes, freshly caught fried fish (well, they said it was freshly caught) and, most memorably, that distinctive British Empire product, Rose's lime marmalade. We also bought food from the various vendors where the steamer stopped. But as progress upriver slowed, supplies started to run out in the restaurant; even the locals seemed worried. So once we filched an onion from the huge pile on deck and added it to a tin of peas that the Frenchman said he was keeping for emergencies – the result was *petits pois à la française* which we heated on a borrowed charcoal stove.

The extreme humidity was having an effect – and I was still a cigarette-smoker – so by the time we finally got to Juba I was coughing, feeling unsteady and looking distinctly pale underneath my sun tan. The town was effectively under martial/police law and this certainly applied to foreigners, particularly ones who weren't proper paying tourists or business people. I immediately found myself confined to Juba hospital, examined by a local Arab doctor and declared to be suffering from bronchopneumonia and malaria.

Was I going to die? Was I going to have to stay in Juba for weeks? I'd missed the first plane south to Entebbe but I was allowed to take the second after only a few days in hospital. And when I arrived there the Ugandan-Asian doctor who examined me said I didn't in fact have either of the alleged illnesses, just a bit of a cough.

The cough cleared up and I proceeded to enjoy myself (and start smoking again). Because of its geography the Entebbe-Kampala region in the state of Buganda has a comfortable climate: consistent temperatures with very little seasonal variation; no extreme, humid heat because of its elevation (nearly 4,000 feet), and no cold because it's almost on the equator; a lot of rain in the rainy season – but 10 minutes after a heavy shower it was hard to find evidence of it on the earth, since the water had evaporated so quickly. All this made Buganda, the largest of Uganda's kingdoms, fertile, rich and traditionally dominant over its neighbours.

In the local markets there was always fruit – mango, paw-paw, pineapple, passionfruit, above all, different kinds of banana – and of course vegetables, which were harvested not once or twice but all the year round. It was said that when London-bound passenger flights were underbooked, things like artichokes and green peppers were added as freight for the Covent Garden wholesale market. There was also a plentiful supply of cannabis in leaf form, ready rolled into cigarettes and sold in recycled packets of Marlboro and Lucky Strike – 18 joints for about the same price as 20 virginia tobacco

cigarettes. So you could afford to smoke your own – no need for the elaborate spliff-sharing ritual of the hippy commune.

Lake Victoria looked very enticing but the first white person you met, and the second, said emphatically: “Do not, whatever you do, go swimming in the lake.” The problem was and is the risk of bilharzia or “snail fever”, a debilitating disease caused by a parasitic fluke released by freshwater snails. There were also said to be crocodiles. So I resisted the urge to swim.

But after the alcohol-free deserts of the Muslim north it was good to get a drink. There wasn't much that was both drinkable and affordable in the way of wine but there was plenty of lager-type beer, such as Nile Special, brewed at Jinja, and Tusker from Kenya, named after the rogue elephant that killed one of the brewery founders in 1922 when he was on safari. And there was *waragi*, a locally produced colourless spirit distilled from banana. Mixed with orange juice this gave you something like a screwdriver (if you were weaned on vodka) or plain old gin-and-orange if you weren't. *Waragi* certainly contributed to Kampala's lively nightlife where the clubs seemed to admit people without too much formality; the ethnic groups mixed freely; the girls were friendly; the party swung.

Well, up to a point: Uganda's national heartthrob at the time seemed to be the late white country singer Jim Reeves. I found this difficult to make sense of. Reeves had died in an airplane crash in 1964 but his canny widow continued to release his records. By a weird coincidence his only UK number one, *Distant Drums*, knocked the Beatles off the top of the British charts on 22 September 1966 just as I arrived in Uganda. Strange days.

From the way the expats behaved I also found it hard to believe that only a few months before, on 24 May 1966, the prime minister of Uganda, Milton Obote, had ordered his military commander, Idi Amin, to attack the royal compound in Mengo\*, shelling the palace. Mutesa II, who was the hereditary Kabaka (king) of Buganda and had been elected president of Uganda\*\*, managed to escape in the confusion and fled to London. But in and around the Battle of Mengo Hill there were said to have been hundreds of casualties. Now in September a few months later the expat community seemed curiously unaffected by the upheaval, almost as though they were living in a parallel universe. Sensible people avoided the Entebbe-Kampala road at night but otherwise expat life seemed to go on as relatively normal.

\*Mengo when I was there was spelt Mmengo but I have used the modern spelling.

\*\*Obote had suspended Mutesa as president, then replaced him, effectively assuming dictatorial powers. Obote's regime lasted for five years until the Commonwealth heads of government meeting of 1971 when Idi Amin deposed him in his absence and began his own dictatorship – a notorious and far more vicious reign of terror.

After a few weeks of rest and recuperation I started to ask around to see if any of the local secondary schools had a vacancy. I found one immediately – at the Mengo Senior School. It was the oldest school in Uganda and had been founded by the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society in 1895 as a free school for boys and girls. It was now boys-only and fee-paying, like all Ugandan schools. But why was there a vacancy at Mengo, the prestigious centre of the Baganda world? It was astonishing – or perhaps not: perhaps there was a vacancy because the school *was* in Mengo and other people didn't want to work there so soon after the battle.

The English headmaster, the Rev Brian Armitage, had arrived earlier in 1966 and was full of bright and progressive ideas. He'd decided to bring co-education back to the school in the following year but his plan to include current affairs in the curriculum was for now – and I fitted into it perfectly. The school already had reels of news film on world events delivered weekly with some accompanying written text, but this needed editing into a script and in some cases the addition of a bit of background so the boys could make better sense of it. Then, as the weekly film was projected, someone had to read out the script and deal with questions. This was a dream job, really, for an apprentice hack/teacher. And before I started I was sent on a short course in African history at Makerere college (now university).

My pupils were mostly local boys from Buganda but there were some Sudanese refugees, who were particularly tall and willowy-looking and coal-black as opposed to dark brown. What distinguished the boys as a group was their courtesy, their good humour and their positive attitude to being schooled. The idea of a “discipline problem”, your everyday experience as a London teacher, at Mengo seemed a long way away.

I filled in for some other lessons as well, history and English mainly, and was an extra man for sport. The first few minutes running around chasing a football at Mengo had me struggling to breathe – the problem was the altitude more than the heat. During my stay in Uganda I played my first game of squash (even more breathlessness) on what had been the Kabaka's squash court in Entebbe which was now open to people in government service and their friends. My sporting highlight, though, was a cricket match where I turned out for Makerere versus the Africa Cricket Club. I learnt that much of the cricket in Uganda was organised on ethnic/religious lines with teams of Indians, Muslims and Goans. When Amin expelled the Asians, he devastated Ugandan cricket as well as the economy.

I often had lunch with the boys – plain vegetarian food like beans, rice, millet, and *matoke*, the local banana staple – and once or twice I was invited to lunch with other teachers in their houses which were in the school grounds. As elsewhere in expat land the meal was cooked and brought to the table by African servants. I began to sense an awkwardness in my hosts: these were natural *Guardian* readers who now found themselves employing – exploiting? – domestic servants. But the servants came with the school house and would have been made homeless as well as jobless if my colleagues had decided they couldn't possibly put up with being waited on.

In my brief stay in Uganda I met Daniel Nelson who edited *The People*, a weekly published by the ruling Uganda People's Congress, from 1965 to 1969 and those responsible for producing the cultural/political magazine *Transition*. This had been launched in 1961 by Rajat Neogy, a Ugandan Asian born in Kampala the son of two teachers, and schooled there and in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies. *Transition* had attracted anyone who was anyone in African intellectual life across the whole continent – people like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ali Mazrui, who had just arrived at Makerere. Another contributor was Paul Theroux, the American travel writer and novelist, who had come to Kampala in 1965, having been chucked out of the Peace Corps\* for allegedly interfering in Malawi politics. He started at Makerere as a lecturer and was soon promoted to acting head of adult studies. He and Rajat were good friends and drinking buddies.

\*a US government agency of volunteers set up by President Kennedy in 1961, variously described as “missionaries of democracy” and “an outgrowth of the cold war”

Rajat could charm anybody even if you'd only just met him but Paul was a bit prickly. Although he was a dissident rather than a loyal American he seemed rather put out when I criticised the United States and insisted that it had replaced Britain as the predominant imperialist threat in many parts of Africa. Paul seemed to think that Britain was still the main problem.

A few months after I left Uganda Paul wrote two pieces in *Transition* that ruffled more than a few feathers. The first, "Tarzan is an Expatriate", pilloried the British in East Africa for being patronising neo-colonialists; the second, "Hating the Asians", asserted that "nearly everyone" – the British, the Africans, even some Asians – "hates the Asians". The orthodox view in newly independent Africa, Paul said, was that to hate the Asians was to show patriotism and, for the progressive non-African, to prove one's correct political credentials.

But the key question was: to what extent had the Asians in East Africa brought their unpopularity on themselves? In 2002, 30 years after Idi Amin expelled the Ugandan Asians, one of them, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who'd been embarrassed as a teenager by the anti-African racism shown by members of her own family, admitted in the *Independent*: "We Asians did not share our wealth and skills...and we did illegally send out money." And her killer punch: "Most Asians were deeply racist."\*

\*5/8/2002 [y.alibhai-brown@independent.co.uk](mailto:y.alibhai-brown@independent.co.uk)

She repeated the point more than 20 years later. On 24 November 2023 she told the *Times*: "Idi Amin was a brute but there was also a lot of racism among the country's Asians towards blacks."

Theroux's pro-Asian piece was much less coherent and measured than the Tarzan one which was a wholly justified onslaught on the British expats who were having their cake and eating it. Obote's regime was a repressive dictatorship from which the Africans – above all, the Baganda – were suffering while the expats lived a charmed life.

*Transition* was a rare thing in Africa – or anywhere – a genuine forum for discussion, and Rajat published loads of letters from affronted British expats in reply to the Tarzan piece. At the same time came the bombshell: like *Encounter*, the British literary and cultural magazine it resembled, *Transition* was revealed to have been secretly funded by the CIA via the conduit of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. I'm pretty sure that Rajat had no idea of the CIA connection; certainly he was emphatic on this point and the contents of *Transition* back him up.

A year or so later Rajat paid the price of editing a lively and controversial magazine under an authoritarian regime: he was arrested and jailed together with the contributor who'd offended the government. There was a pantomime element to all this: at first instead of Rajat the police arrested Daniel Nelson by mistake because someone in authority gave the order "Arrest the editor" – and Nelson was the one they were familiar with.

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For me, it was time to go. I was always more of a fly-by-night than a settler, and now I had a potential partner who fancied the trip to Mombasa, which for me was the way out of Africa, and she also had an open invite to a luxurious villa on the coast. So we set off by train on the Kampala-Mombasa railway, stopping for an hour or so at Nairobi. We travelled first-class in a two-person compartment, ate well in the restaurant and drank in the dramatic scenery, which included crossing the rift valley. It was the visual highlight of my nine-month circular journey.

As A wrote later: “The rift comes upon you suddenly – an enormous plaster model from a forgotten geography lesson. The plains have been torn apart by a huge subterranean force. Two thousand feet below the valley floor is at that height a scrub-covered plain studded with extinct volcanoes and umbrella-shaped trees.”

In Mombasa we lazed in the sun and the warm sea water, ate lobster and mango, dreamt of the future. Then A had to go back on the train to Kampala while I waited for the steamer to take me on across the Indian ocean to Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995). With a 10-day stay in front of me, I was forced back to economy class. I found a bed at the Asian-owned Happy Hotel, sharing a room with four other men, all Asians, and learnt at firsthand about the “Asian price”. I paid 7 shillings 50 a night while the others, I found out, paid just 5 shillings. For meals it was the same thing.

One of my fellow guests was a friendly gold smuggler from the Congo – perhaps it was the fact that, like me, he was a bit of an outsider that brought us together. We compared restaurant prices and his were always lower than mine. Later he took me to an Indian restaurant where I had been charged 4 shillings for a meal. While I waited outside he tried to persuade the proprietor to let me pay the Asian price which was 3 shillings. He was unsuccessful: the proprietor stuck to his rule: 4s for Africans and whites; 3s for Asians.

To make a pretty obvious point: for almost all Europeans (which is what white people, including Americans, were called in East Africa) this “Asian price” business was hardly a problem because they could afford to pay a bit more. But for the Africans it was a constant reminder that they didn’t really run, and so benefit from, the economy of their own country. Formal independence from Britain hadn’t led to equality: the Asians as a dominant economic elite were living on borrowed time.

Waiting for the ship, I spent the days exploring Mombasa in the heat, occasionally nipping into a bank or public building for a blast of air-conditioning. I found a bookshop which sold Frank Harris’s autobiography and Doris Lessing’s *Golden Notebook* which really impressed me. I started doing the daily crossword in the *Herald Tribune* and occasionally finished it. I won’t go on about the flies, the noise and the beggars. And it wasn’t overpoweringly hot all the time. I noted: “It is relatively cool in Mombasa between 5 and 7am...”

After 10 sweaty nights in the Happy Hotel dormitory the time came to exchange it for life on the ocean wave. But on board ship in deck class the sleeping arrangements were certainly worse. We were down in the hold with two-tiered bunks packed tightly together in a much bigger dormitory, men women and children all together. Once a child woke up and cried. The mother shouted and made more noise than the child. The child went on crying.

On the first day there was an announcement that deck-class passengers were not allowed to use first or second-class facilities. But this turned out to be only a formal ban, so we could in fact use the bathrooms and toilets and also the bar and lounge reserved for cabin-class passengers.

There were six non-Asian foreigners in deck class: two Aussies, two more Englishman, a 20-year-old Japanese\* student and me. I got on best with the Japanese boy, Toru, who’d set off from Tokyo a year before by air to Moscow, wearing a dark suit and carrying a designer suitcase; now he wore jeans and a British army combat jacket and carried a kitbag. He had only one shirt so I gave him one of mine. We carried on to Delhi together. One of the other Englishmen, Tony, was a north Londoner

who'd emigrated to South Africa, tried various jobs including working in the docks at Durban, and then hitched up to Kenya. He was on his way, he said, to Spain where he had vague hopes of a job for the summer.

\*How could a Japanese person possibly be treated as "non-Asian"? Very easily, just as in apartheid South Africa where the Japanese were given the formal status of "honorary white" for economic and political reasons.

The six of us were adopted by the chief steward who said he would arrange for us to have a fried egg at breakfast to supplement the ship's 100% vegetarian/vegan diet. That wasn't all: as the voyage continued the steward started buying me beers at the bar and paying for my entry to the bingo games that were our main public diversion. It was soon clear what I was expected to do in return. "I have a huge cardboard crate to take through the customs for the steward who supplies me with beer," I wrote in my notebook. It contained bottles of whisky, nylon shirts, tinned cheese...Other travellers took transistor radios through customs. None of us were stopped.

Smuggling (including drugs, of course) was one of the ways indigent Western travellers financed their travel in the third world. Another was to make use of the currency black market. In India, Egypt and Turkey the exchange rate for dollars and sterling on the street was 50% higher than it was in the bank. To try to stop people exploiting this, at international borders you often had to fill in a form declaring the foreign currencies you held – to be checked when you left the country.

But the most productive way to make money was to sell unsigned travellers' cheques on the black market, report a fictitious theft to the police and collect new travellers' cheques from the bank. Barry, assisted by Ken, another English boy, sold \$150 worth of travellers' cheques for \$70. Masahide, a 19-year-old Japanese boy who claimed to be cycling round the world, got \$140 for \$300 worth of travellers' cheques. Toru went with him to a Delhi police station to confirm his story of being robbed and was rewarded with \$30.

A slightly hazardous way of funding your travel, which I never dreamt of doing because I'd had jaundice years before, was to sell your blood. You could do this in various places – the top rate I heard quoted was in Kuwait, £10 a pint. Rail travel on the hippy trail was cheap – and even cheaper with a student card. Turkey gave students a 40% reduction on train tickets; Egypt, India and Pakistan gave 50%. In Istanbul main railway station six English boys, after clubbing together to buy a Turkish student card for a dollar, showed it in turn at the ticket window and so paid just over \$3 to cross Turkey by train.

Bombay was huge, bustling, lively – so many shops, people cars, noise... the most magnificent fruit and vegetable market I'd ever seen. Piles of fruit in geometric patterns, the pineapples delicately carved so the slices on sale have patterned edges. The smell of dung everywhere in the streets but no cows wandering; just one herd of cattle settled down for the night in the middle of the market area. On Grant Road, Kamathipura, the sex workers – five or six standing together – clutch at your sleeve as you pass, some very young, all with heavy make-up. Several dentists advertise false teeth in the window but otherwise look like any other shop. A bit bigger is a building labelled "Hospital: for skin, venereal and other diseases."



Most of the travelling hippies were male with the occasional couple but in Bombay I met Angela, a 19-year-old from somewhere in Surrey, who'd come to India 17 months before to fill the gap between school and university; now she was determined to stay rather than go back and study. She'd started off with just under £100, had £10 stolen and had £20 left, so she needed a job. So far she'd worked just the one day as a film extra in Bombay's bustling film industry. She was short and tubby with a big bosom, baggy trousers topped by an Indian-style tunic and still after 17 months naively open-mouthed about India: "It's so full of life," she enthused. "It's wonderful how alive some of these people are."

The train from Bombay to Delhi was fairly clean, certainly cleaner than an Egyptian train – but then the engine soot came in through the open window and lay in drifts. Snapshot of a Delhi street scene: "Cars, including pre-war Austins and Fords, buses, trucks, bicycles, scooters, motor bikes, orthodox taxis, bicycle rickshaws, two-seater scooter rickshaws, four-seater motorbike rickshaws, four-seater horse cabs, bullock carts, horse and carts, hand-carts, people streaming through the mass of vehicles dodging them – and of course the stately cow wandering unafraid."

A few years later, Paul Theroux recorded a similar experience in Calcutta: "Ponies harnessed to stagecoaches laboured over cobblestones; men pushed bicycles loaded with hay bales and firewood. I had never seen so many forms of transport: wagons, scooters, old cars, carts and sledges and odd, old-fashioned horse-drawn vehicles that might have been barouches."\*

\**The Great Railway Bazaar*, Hamish Hamilton, 1975

But Delhi had something else. As well as the noise, the dirt, the dung, the flies it had New Delhi, laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens, where the embassies are. There were: "Green parks, flowers, trees, big buildings in maroon and pale pink, clean roads." In Delhi itself the railway station restrooms (not an American euphemism for toilets: you actually rested there on daybeds) were free to travellers including those, like me and Toru, who were between train trips. He was about to leave for Agra and promised to come to London in a year's time (so far as I know he never made it). The station restaurant served things like scrambled eggs on toast with tea. I noted: "The tablecloth is white and clean; there are few flies; the smell of trains rather than drains... "

I'm waiting for a visa for Afghanistan. When it arrives it's back to the train: from Delhi into Pakistan via Lahore to Peshawar; then by bus into Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass and on to Kabul, Kandahar, Herat; and, still by bus, through Iran to the Turkish border, and back to the train for the last lap to Istanbul. For most of the journey there's a standard meal available at every stop: a spicy lamb/mutton rice dish – biryani if you like – with tea, usually black but sometimes with optional goat's milk. Then in the shop attached you can buy dessert: oranges and raisins. Since we're in Islamic territory there's no beer or wine, of course.

A highlight of the trip: climbing in a rickety old bus on the western edge of Pakistan up towards the Khyber Pass: brown barren terrain; occasional ruins of abandoned forts; plaques of the British regiments which had fought against the Pathan tribesmen who were never subdued – leaving the pass as the north-west frontier of the British Empire.

On the train in Turkey I met three American boys, students from Neuchâtel university in Switzerland. For their vacation they'd driven to Istanbul, parked their Volkswagen, and carried on east by train.

Now they were late for the new spring/summer term, keen to get back as soon as possible: yes, they'd be pleased to give me a lift to Switzerland if I did my share of the driving. So when they'd collected their car from the garage off we went – through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia (as it then was), northern Italy and up into Switzerland, without stopping for meals, just sandwich/petrol/toilet stops, rotating the driving among the four of us and completing the whole thing in not much more than 24 hours. In hitch-hiking terms it was the one-off unbeatable lift that would always win a race – even against single blonde girls: you just couldn't go any faster.

After that there was an anti-climactic journey back to Dover and London. I hitched of course but the fun, the tension, the excitement had gone: I thought I was going back to a humdrum, work-dominated existence. I had no idea that the final phase of "the Sixties" was about to burst into life.

# Work, play and politics

## Chapter 9: 1968 and all that

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I was back in London in time for the first all-London cup final in April 1967 when Spurs beat Chelsea 2-1 and for the hippy summer of love, to the smell of patchouli and the joyful, drugged-up sounds of the Mamas and the Papas' *San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)*, the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* LP and *All you need is love*, Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade of Pale*...though I remained an inveterate soul fan, a slave to Aretha, James Brown and now Otis Redding, who scored a cross-over hit at the Monterey festival in June 1967 – then died in a plane crash in December. There was also the Labour government's mean-minded and inept suppression of the pirate broadcasting ships and the launch in September of the anaemic BBC substitute, Radio One.

But by going on my mini world tour I'd missed a couple of key events in the alternative publishing world. *It\**, Britain's first underground paper, had been launched in October 1966 at the Roundhouse, a disused warehouse, with a paid-for party attended by the Italian screen goddess Monica Vitti, the Beatle Paul McCartney and the theatre director Peter Brook, while Richard Neville's *Oz* (the English version of an Australian original) came out much more quietly in January 1967.

*\*It/IT/International Times*: as you might expect, the exact name of the paper was never a fixed element, more a movable feast.

I started work in April 1967 at Cornmarket Press, the education and careers publishers founded by Clive Labovitch in partnership with the Tory politician Michael Heseltine\*. Cornmarket's core business was the careers directory series in which employers advertised for potential recruits who could pick up free copies of the books wherever they went for advice. The flagship title was the *Directory of Opportunities for Graduates*, which made serious money from companies offering openings in industry and the professions, followed by the *Directory of Opportunities for School Leavers*. The careers directories were backed up by *Which University?*, a reference book for would-be students, and there were also "real books" such as *The Age Between* by Derek Miller, a psychiatrist from the Tavistock Clinic pronouncing about teenagers, and *The New Polytechnics* by Eric Robinson, an academic who advocated and pioneered the expansion of polytechnics. A (to us now) sexist-sounding curiosity from the Cornmarket stable was *Late Start: Careers for Wives* by Clive's wife Penelope and Rosemary Simon. The book recognised and tried to respond to the fact that some women at least were waking up to new possibilities at work: the times, they were (up to a point) a-changing.

\*The business partners, who met at Oxford in the 1950s, had separated in 1965 with Heseltine adopting the name Haymarket Press for his own publishing business, which started with magazines like *Man About Town* (later *About Town*, later still *Town*) and *Management Today*.

My first direct boss was Rosemary's husband, Peter M Brown, who was in charge of the *Directory of Opportunities for Qualified and Experienced Men*, another (to us now) bizarre title reflecting the fact that professional careers in the 1960s were still very much male-dominated. I wrote blurbs for the advertising sales staff and researched ways of distributing the book, eg via professional institutes

and specialist colleges. Gradually, I found myself reading proofs for the other directories, being asked to write press releases, becoming a general editorial dogsbody.

But I must have been doing something right because without much warning I was promoted to editor – of the directories and the other books then being prepared for publication by Cornmarket (everything except *Which University?* which was edited by Audrey Segal). The person I replaced was an ex-Oxford Union president, Ian Lyon, who went off to edit the *Illustrated London News*. The existing directories weren't very demanding since they included little editorial content but I found editing the books a real learning experience. Both authors needed quite a lot of help with their sentences and even more with the structure of their paragraphs and chapters. Then suddenly I found myself in charge of yet another project – the *Directory of Further Education*. As usual, Cornmarket had maximised its advertising space-selling effort while not bothering too much about editorial content until enough space had been sold. Then when the decision to publish the book was taken, the necessary editorial had to be provided – somehow – and in a hurry, thus costing far more than if it had been systematically planned in the first place.

We needed a team of compilers. We had to obtain, and extract the course information from, the brochures of every further education college in the country, then organise the material according to subject headings. What we really needed of course was computerisation: what we had to depend on in 1968 was a card-index system and a platoon of willing workers to set it up and operate it. I recruited my sister Monica to supervise the compiling part of the operation; she stayed on at Cornmarket until the business collapsed in 1973.

Our source of literate but cheap labour in 1968 was a London agency run by a Mrs Bradford. She could supply an apparently unlimited number of unemployed arts graduates who were available to work for a flexible number of days for 50p an hour. They had to have basic literacy so they could distinguish between *astronomy* and *astrology*, *misanthropy* and *misogyny*, *paediatrician* and *paedophile*; they had to be reasonably careful, conscientious and systematic; they had to turn up roughly on time; but that was about all. The operation, which at its peak included more than a dozen people, needed an overflow office in a separate building. *DoFE 1968* was finally published in the autumn and inevitably made a loss: there was no 1969 edition.

There was only one book published by Cornmarket that I could take any commissioning credit for – *The Rise of Enoch Powell* by Paul Foot. What happened was this. After Powell's notorious "rivers of blood" speech on 20 April 1968 attacking immigration and the proposed race relations bill, liberal England was in uproar. The Tory leader, Edward Heath, sacked Powell from the shadow cabinet though the incident didn't seem to affect his popularity or that of the Tories.\* At Cornmarket we gathered for an emergency editorial meeting at which Clive Labovitch made a rare impassioned speech insisting that something must be done to destroy Powell's credibility. Names of possible journalistic assassins were bandied about.

\*Powell's adoption of an essentially racist attitude, supported by some right-wing Tories, has been cited as the crucial factor in the 1970 general election result; the political scientist R W Johnson said: "It became clear that Powell had won the election for the Tories..."

And then I spoke up: "In my opinion the right person for this is Paul Foot who has recently published *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, a highly competent demolition job. If you agree I will ask him." There

was no dissent. So, feeling very pleased with myself – and my new status as a temporary assistant commissioning editor – I phoned Paul and put the proposal to him. But to my great disappointment he said no. He said he'd already been approached by Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape with precisely this idea – and had turned it down on the grounds that he didn't think demolishing Powell was a political priority from a left-wing point of view.

I remonstrated; I argued; and Paul agreed to meet me to discuss the idea further. Perhaps he was influenced by the reports of Smithfield meat porters and London dockers marching in Powell's support. But when we met I successfully made the case that attacking Powell and destroying his credibility was highly important from a left-wing, as well as a liberal, point of view. He agreed to do the book.

Paul's typescript when he delivered it didn't need any intervention from me and I had nothing more to do with it. The book was published by Cornmarket in hardback, and also by Penguin in paperback, but there was a curious postscript. Clive Labovitch was so nervous about a possible hostile response from Powell that he took out expensive libel insurance, ensuring that the book couldn't make Cornmarket any money. As it turned out, this was a needless precaution. In the event Powell adopted a reasonable and constructive attitude to the book "offering all help with articles, speeches and information", as Paul acknowledged in the introduction.

Powell was a complex and crafty character, difficult to predict, as I found out years later when I phoned him for some quotes for a *Radio Times* feature about the *Any Questions?* radio programme. After some polite preliminaries I asked my first question. There was silence at the other end. Then Powell spoke: "Aren't you going to ask me anything else?" I twigged: he'd worked out that if he knew all the questions he was going to be asked before he said anything in reply, that would give him an advantage. It would be easier to control the interview and avoid uncomfortable follow-up questions.

In 1968 I had my own platform to sound off about Powell – and everything else. For once in my life I was writing a regular column, in the anarchist weekly paper *Freedom*. John Rety, one of the editors, had agreed to the idea in the autumn of 1967 and I kept at it for about 18 months including the whole of that memorable year of 1968 featuring the Prague spring, when the Czechs defied the Russians for several months (until August when the tanks rolled in); when there were student revolts in Britain and all over the world but particularly in Paris (where de Gaulle's government wobbled and the general lost his nerve and flew secretly to Germany for reassurance that the army would remain loyal); when there were riots and political assassinations in the United States, notably of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; when there were civil rights protests in the US and Northern Ireland. And when everywhere in the west there were anti-Vietnam demonstrations, eg at the Democrat Party convention in Chicago where "Mayor Daley's pigs" acquired their reputation with the aid of their nightsticks, and in London where Grosvenor Square became a surrogate battleground in March and October.

Echoes of these events continue to reverberate more than 50 years later. In April 1968 I wrote in *Freedom*: "The murder of Martin Luther King was shocking but not surprising. The riots which have followed it have been neither...In death King recaptured what he was losing to Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown: the allegiance of the urban Negro\*. But the allegiance was to the man as leader/hero not to his ideas. The blood of the martyr will be the seed not of King's church but of the

heresy of Black Power. There will be more riots. They will be in spite of the concessions that the white establishment will make – and partly because of them. As the machinery of government and the law is used to discourage racism instead of imposing it, the demands of Negroes will escalate...King's non-violence was made obsolete by its early success. As buses, lunch counters, elections were desegregated, Negroes, particularly in the northern states, began to believe that something could be done about the real issues – jobs, housing, poverty. But the walls of white power did not come tumbling down at a blast from King's trumpet."\*\*

\*\*"Negro" was the term then used by African Americans to describe themselves. The word figures strongly in King's "I have a dream" speech.

\*\**Fifth Column, Freedom*, April 1968

I followed most of these events from afar – via the mainstream media – but I was at the two London demos against the Vietnam War. After the first one, on 17 March 1968, I wrote: "It was a violent demonstration. Both police and protesters pushed, kicked, punched. The demonstrators threw sticks, stones, fireworks, lumps of earth, flour bombs, red paint. The mounted police charged the crowd and used their sticks."

One demonstrator, Jay Ginn, used her experience with horses to hold up the charge. She can be seen in a published photograph\* with long blond hair and white boots in front of a police horse holding on to its reins. Interviewed in 2023 and asked to justify her "bravery", she said: "No, it's not brave if you understand horses."

\**The 1960s Photographed by David Hurn*, London: Reel Art Press, 2015

Everyone who was anyone on the left of the time was in Grosvenor Square that day. The feminist activist and historian Sheila Rowbotham wrote: "I pushed, but not too hard, because the police were really beating isolated demonstrators behind the lines with their truncheons. Then the horses started going right through the crowd, driving people back and sideways and trampling them in the crush."\* Tariq Ali of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which organised the march, wrote that "The fighting continued for almost two hours" and concluded: "Many comrades were badly hurt and one pregnant woman had been beaten up severely."\*\*

\**Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties*, Sheila Rowbotham, Verso, 2001

\*\**Street Fighting Years*, Tariq Ali, Verso, 2005

Tariq also says in his memoir that the German student militants of the SDS were displeased by the general lack of militancy on 17 March. "They felt we should have prepared our supporters, providing them with helmets, and battled it out with staves," he wrote. But the late Jenny Diski can be more precise because she was with the SDS contingent on the day. As they formed up for the march to Grosvenor Square, they "wore crash helmets and had with them a thick wooden stave which they held at waist height across the eleven or so strong young men (and me) as they lined up...Every now and then at a barked signal the line suddenly broke into a real run, an organised trot, but still (apart from me) keeping in step. It was a small but quite alarming charge, an organised, running phalanx, which returned to a brisk march only at the next shout of our leader."\*

\**The Sixties*, Jenny Diski, Profile Books, 2009

Then at Grosvenor Square: “On a signal, they began a full charge, complete with an almighty bellowing. They held out the wooden stave in front of them, straight-armed, and it and I hit the fence...after two or three runs at it, during the last of which I, of course, fell over, the fence was flattened.”

Exciting stuff, fighting in the streets, though it had its limitations, as some of us argued at the time. “One of the objections to streetfighting – as Daniel Cohn-Bendit suggested at the LSE last week – is that if undertaken seriously against determined opposition it may not leave much time for the real work of social revolution...,” *Freedom* (22 June 1968). “Another objection...is that once you begin you have to continue – until the regime falls or you are crushed.”

And there’s something else. What you won’t find in any of these three books is an account of what was happening in Northern Ireland during 1968. And yet over the decades to come the conflict there was to have a bigger impact on British life and politics than events in Vietnam, Prague, Chicago or Paris. It was, for people with a historical bent, a second “Thirty Years War”\*. The event that led up to the “Troubles” was a march on 24 August 1968 from Coalisland to Dungannon organised by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. It was inspired by the American civil rights movement and adopted its tactics of non-violence and self-discipline. Blocked by the police at the entry to Dungannon, the demonstrators decided not to charge the cordon and sang *We Shall Overcome*.

\*Officially, the “Troubles” ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. But just as the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 failed to put an end to Catholic-Protestant conflict in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the GFA has not been a 100% success: sporadic violence has continued.

The next march was in Derry on 5 October. Once again there was an echo of the worldwide non-violent movement – a banner of the Committee of 100. As at Dungannon the issues were not complicated and could be summarised in the simple slogan “End discrimination against Catholics” – in the voting system for local councils, in housing, in jobs. But dominating everything was the sectarian Protestant police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which broke up the Derry demonstration by baton-charging the crowd, leaving many people injured including several MPs. It was in effect a declaration of war by the forces of “order” – and as everybody knows, 30 years of war followed, starting with two days of riots in the Catholic Bogside district of Derry.

One aspect of the problem in 1968 was that to many left-wing and liberal people safely ensconced on the British mainland, “civil rights” was something that reactionary white Americans needed to concede to black Americans – nothing to do with “us” over here. So Northern Ireland wasn’t really on their agenda. But over time the IRA’s bombs and examples of British repression, such as the introduction of internment in 1971 and the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972, changed all that.

The second of London’s anti-Vietnam War demonstrations was a curious affair in several ways. The lead-up to it featured lurid tabloid stories threatening a mega-riot, another “October Revolution organised by the Reds”, whereas the event itself was something of an anti-climax. On the day there were two separate demos. The official march, organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (who claimed it numbered 100,000), deliberately avoided Grosvenor Square and proceeded peacefully to Hyde Park. On the march there were slogans but the mood was subdued, awkward: the streets were

deserted except for police at strategic points like Downing Street; shop-fronts were boarded up; the atmosphere was eerie. A small breakaway section organised by the Maoists and supported by some anarchists targeted the American Embassy and there were scuffles in Grosvenor Square and a few injuries and arrests but nothing on the scale of the March demonstration.

A noticeable aspect of both these demos was the chanting. “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!” and “Victory to the NLF!” shouted the members of the various Marxist factions while the anarchists were silent for once. We were marching against the war – and obviously against the Americans who were fighting it with mass bombing and napalm. But we were not supporting their Communist opponents. Objectively, though, from the viewpoint of a disinterested observer there wasn’t much of a difference and, as so often, there were “violent” as well as “non-violent” anarchists on show.

Over the year of 1968 nothing else in the West came near the Paris revolt in terms of threatening the established order; a key point there was that the student uprising spread, geographically to the regions of France and in social and economic terms from the university to the factory. Student occupations of the university can be shrugged off: workers’ occupations of the factory are a serious threat to capitalist order. That is why de Gaulle’s government was rattled.

I wrote in *Freedom*: “The most significant element in the French rebellion was not the raising of the barricades but the occupation by students and workers of the universities and factories. As has been said so often, it is by taking control at work that the exploited classes have the capacity to achieve a revolution. The physical occupation of places of work demonstrates the power of the masses. How many policemen do you need to expel from their factories all the workers of France?”

But the reaction when it came was decisive. A pro-government demonstration in Paris was followed by a massive Gaullist victory in the June elections.

There is an epitaph. On 20 July 1968 I wrote in *Freedom*: “If you’ve never been to the international [anarchist] summer camp now would be a good time to go, particularly if you are a student. Since the camp is being organised in France it will probably attract a number of French students who have been involved in the Revolt...” But a week or two later, with my partner and her two young children, I turned up at the advertised campsite near Bayonne to find – just four families, each with a Spanish father and a French mother; not a single student. The anarchist wing of the May movement was broken.

To add to the mood of depression we had a wretched few days in the campsite where it seemed to rain all the time. By day the beach was hardly inviting; by night camping was increasingly miserable. Finally a powerful summer storm drowned our two pathetic little tents – without exaggeration it washed them several yards down the slope. In the middle of the night we were rescued and given shelter by the anarchist families who of course had proper professional tents with separate rooms.

Next morning there was only one thing for it. “You must go south to Spain,” they said. But I said: “We can’t – there’s an anarchist campaign for holidaymakers to boycott Francoist Spain.” And they said: “If anyone can give you permission, we can – and we do.” So we went across the border in search of the sun and sandy beaches...

In the autumn and winter of 1968 life carried on though not in a radical direction. Just as France had reacted to the May days of insurrection by re-electing de Gaulle’s government, electors in the



United States responded to the turmoil there by supporting Richard Nixon's law and order campaign and electing him president in November. Disorder was followed by reaction. Everywhere the prospects of major social change seemed dimmer than ever. But at least there had been some signs of radical life in 1968.

# Work, play and politics

## Chapter 10: Welcome aboard

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There was never a dull moment at Cornmarket. In the spring of 1969 I was summoned by Denis Curtis, the production director – the hub of the whole operation – and taken for a drink at his local, the swanky Westbury Hotel, a few doors down Conduit Street in Mayfair, where our offices were. I think we drank Montrachet, Denis's favourite tippie and one of the best white burgundies there is, but for once I was paying more attention to the message. "Would you like to edit *Welcome aboard*?" was the message. I didn't need much time to reflect.

*Welcome aboard* was an inflight magazine produced six times a year for the British Overseas Airways Corporation, then a separate outfit (it merged with British European Airways to make British Airways in 1974), by Clive Irving Limited, a contract publishing company linked to Cornmarket. Clive, a senior ex-*Sunday Times* journalist, was available for a chat if required but he was very much a hands-off boss for projects like *Welcome aboard*. BOAC was Britain's high-prestige intercontinental airline and the magazine reflected that. It came under the company's sales promotion manager whose assistant read every word and vetted every illustration.

There were three fixed points in every issue: first, a destination focus – Scotland, say, or East Africa or the Caribbean – so we needed a travel piece that promoted it. Then there was a short story for which we paid similar rates to those paid by the top American magazines. Graham Greene had been paid in air tickets worth £1,000 in old money for a short story; for everybody else the top rate was £500 (say £7,000 today). And the third fixed point was Denis Curtis's cookery column which meant that I had a curious – no, bizarre – working relationship with him: in real terms he was my immediate boss whereas I was the editor in charge of his copy. As far as editing consumer magazines went I was an absolute beginner. But I learnt.

I always listened to Denis who was an experienced magazine man but my main collaborator and source of ideas and expertise was the art editor, David Driver, who after *Welcome aboard* went on to become an outstanding designer of *Radio Times* and the *Times* (and also *Inside Story*). The key to David's success was that he was a journalist as much as he was a designer: he was as interested in what the story said as much as in what it looked like on the page. So he insisted on being involved from the beginning in everything we published.

BOAC imposed constraints of course. Our feature articles and short stories couldn't focus on air crashes or disasters in general and politics was an issue. That I could understand – it was the interpretation that was baffling. I couldn't see a problem with one science fiction story by Kingsley Amis until it was pointed out that it contained a passing reference to the state of Israel, which apparently might irritate/disconcert the Arab market. Amis declined to remove the reference so we had to look elsewhere for a replacement.

HE Bates had been far more amenable when some bits of his story *The Black Magnolia*\* about the attempted seduction of an oh-so-virtuous prig of a man by two voluptuous sirens were considered a touch too spicy by BOAC (even though this was the supposedly sexy Sixties). Here are some of the

cuts they insisted I had to negotiate with Bates via his agent (and unless I've misunderstood the law of copyright I am permitted to reproduce them here, having paid to publish the story in its original form, that's to say, uncut):

\*anthologised uncut in *The Wild Cherry Tree*, Michael Joseph, 1968, and Penguin, 1971

"...for fully another half-minute he sat silent, trying desperately to avoid the trap of eyes, breast, navel, painted toe nails and the provocative curve of her thighs.

"...she moved the upper part of her body forward, so that once again her fine expanded breasts seemed about to escape from their black triangular covering.

"Then to his ultimate horror she grasped one his hands and lifted it to the curve of her bosom."

But we *were* allowed to include the key moment when the attempted seduction of Hartley Spencer began: "... the sight of a naked body whose only covering consisted of three modest black triangles actually brought a flush to his cheeks and a sudden prickle of cold sweat to the nape of his neck". There was more trouble over the illustration to the story. The drawing we presented to BOAC was accurate, that is consistent with the text: the woman was depicted wearing her "three modest black triangles", aka a bikini. Alas, the picture was too much for BOAC: the drawing had to go back to the illustrator so that the space between the triangles could be filled in. The would-be seductress finally appeared in a conventional one-piece swimsuit – which of course now made the illustration modest but inaccurate.

We did get away with a striking and colourful cover for that issue of the magazine, which was photographed by Harri Peccinotti, art editor of *Nova* and known for his erotic *Pirelli* calendars. Our cover girl presented herself to readers as a deep-sea diver, tanned and glamorous in a yellow bikini, though she looked challenging rather than seductive and she had a knife fixed to her diving belt. The reference was to a celebrated Sixties image, the emergence from the ocean in the 1962 James Bond film *Dr No* of Ursula Andress, magnificent in a white bikini equipped with a large shell diver's knife (which in turn echoed Botticelli's *Venus*, except that his Venus is both knife-less and bikini-less).

Elsewhere in the issue (my first) we had the opposite problem – lack of spark or flair, in a word dullness. The destination report I inherited on East Africa and its game parks was informative but pedestrian: it needed spicing up, Denis said – and it was hard to disagree. So for the all-important first paragraph of the piece I went back in time and conjured up some explorers' names and evocative memories of books and films like *King Solomon's Mines* by Rider Haggard and Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*. Then I recycled this view of the Great Rift Valley: "The rift comes upon you suddenly – an enormous plaster model from a forgotten geography lesson..." But I left out any reference to Tarzan of the Apes because he featured elsewhere in the magazine – in a piece by Anthony Haden-Guest, which was an affectionate biog, giving us the chance to show a superb comic-strip page of the rampant apeman dispatching a lion.

For our Christmas issue we put Tommy Steele on the cover and I persuaded Irma Kurtz, queen of agony aunts, to celebrate pantomime, explaining to readers including her fellow-Americans why it has such a hold on the English imagination. In general we were mid-Atlantic but in one of our issues we went full-on stateside: "The ABC of the USA" was an excuse to wallow in Americana. We had a page of black-and-white and sepia pix of heavyweight boxers from John L Sullivan to Joe Frazier but

in dominant position – the greatest, then and always: Muhammad Ali in full colour. Another spread featured LP covers of 12 pop-singing stars of the Fifties and Sixties with the kings of rock ‘n’ roll and soul, Elvis Presley and James Brown, on facing pages. My favourite feature assignment, though, was to write the words for a double-page comic strip on the American Revolution and the Boston Tea Party called “John Adams in Birth of a Nation”. It appeared in glorious full colour courtesy of a legendary artist, Frank Bellamy, who’d worked on *Eagle* and drawn its lead feature, *Dan Dare*.

The writers we used on *Welcome aboard* worked mainly for the English glossies – *Queen*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Nova* – and the colour magazines published by newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer*. But when David Driver and I decided in our outdoor issue (Scotland was the featured destination) to celebrate the history of English sport, only one name cropped up – John Arlott’s. Like everyone who’d grown up listening to the BBC’s cricket coverage we were fans. When Arlott’s piece came in we illustrated it with a selection of historic pix including England’s victory in the 1966 football world cup final.

A year later, when the 1970 South African cricket tour of England was cancelled after Arlott had joined the boycott campaign, I interviewed him for *Radio Times*. I spent the day at the Edgbaston test match ground in Birmingham where he was covering the replacement international matches against a world XI and watched him work: 20 minutes in the hour on air for the six hours of play; then after just 20 further minutes he phoned over his match report to the copy-takers at the *Guardian*. Nowadays of course he’d have to type his own copy on a mini-computer keyboard.

I also got access to Arlott the legendary drinker: brandy and water was what kept him going throughout the day; then lunch for the two of us included half a bottle of white burgundy and a bottle of claret. But did he slur his words? No, never. Was the Hampshire burr a little slower after lunch? Possibly. But then his lucky radio listeners might have managed a glass or two with theirs and were hardly likely to notice.

The year I spent editing *Welcome aboard* was exactly what I needed to become a competent freelance magazine journalist on the basis of developing my writing and subbing skills. Because we published just six issues a year I was able to practise all the editorial tasks from thinking up and developing an idea to reading the proofs of the piece before it was published, by way of choosing and briefing a writer, checking what came in and tidying it up where necessary, not to mention discussing and agreeing the visual aspects of the feature with the art editor.

You needed both imagination and close reading ability. Once, in a retyped version of a murder mystery story by PD James, I spotted what looked like a big hole: something in the narrative was missing – or the whole thing didn’t add up. I phoned her agent and within 24 hours James herself came round to our offices with the missing paragraphs of the story. It had been retyped at the agency, without being properly checked, once too often.

Incidentally, every single one of the literary agents I dealt with in that year (1969-70) was a woman. The most memorable was Pat Kavanagh, of the AD Peters agency, who was married to the novelist Julian Barnes, though she once left him years later for a brief lesbian fling with another one of her clients, Jeanette Winterson. Ms Kavanagh – we were not on first-name terms – had a formidable, rather disconcerting manner: like an expert interviewer she was inclined to use extended silence to encourage you to say what you were thinking. I never bought a story or an article from her although

she once took me round to meet JB Priestley at his Albany flat; the elderly Priestley was affable enough but he didn't have anything for us.

By the way, on the issue of sexism, which was rampant elsewhere in 1960s media, I took over the editorship of *Welcome aboard* from Priscilla Chapman, the launch editor, and I was succeeded by Katherine Ivens. As far as I know their terms and conditions were comparable with mine; their budget was the same as mine; their policies in commissioning and paying journalists, both male and female, were the same as mine. I record this to make the point that in some magazines at least, as opposed to most of the others and virtually all newspapers and broadcast media, there didn't seem to be much of a sex/gender problem in 1969-70.

Once I wrote the main feature in the magazine myself. This was a report on the about-to-be-introduced Boeing 747, the jumbo jet that cheapened transatlantic travel and helped to inflict mass international tourism on the world, including some out-of-the-way places that hadn't seen it before. Now the 747's active life seems to be coming to an end but then it was a beautiful and impressive aircraft, inside and out, and I had an enjoyable week, flying via New York and Los Angeles to Boeing's Seattle factory to have a close look at it. As I wrote the piece puffing it, though, I was having more than doubts about the promotion of air travel. In fact I was beginning to think that only things like Australia's flying doctor and emergency aid after disasters justified the development and extensive use of the airplane. In the light of aerial bombing, atmospheric pollution and the spread of noxious viruses it was – is – difficult to see it more positively.

In any case I was never going to stay at *Welcome aboard* very long: I was becoming fascinated by the underground and alternative press, both the hippy, drugged-up version à la *International Times* and *Oz* and the more political left-wing papers like *Black Dwarf*. And I was confident I could now earn a living as a freelance journalist contributing to commercial magazines while working for the opposition.

My last assignment at *Welcome aboard* before handing over to my successor was to meet and commission the travel writer and historian James Morris (as he still was; he had sex reassignment surgery to become Jan Morris in 1972) to write a destination report on South Africa; he was working on the third book in his *Pax Britannica* series. We got on well enough but I was relieved to know that my name would not be on the issue of *Welcome aboard* promoting flights to apartheid South Africa.

However, I was disconcerted when Morris suddenly asked me over lunch if I knew who at the *Times Literary Supplement* might be responsible for adding the name of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin to a book review he'd written. Asking me was a long shot on his part but it certainly hit the target. I knew at once that he was talking about Nicolas Walter, veteran anarchist, one of the Spies for Peace and chief sub at the *TLS*, but I didn't let on. However, I wasn't surprised that when a history of the *TLS*\* came out in 2001, it included a paragraph spilling the beans on Morris, Nick and Kropotkin.

\**Critical Times*, Derwent May, HarperCollins

After *Welcome aboard* my first career move as a freelance was in the direction of *Radio Times*, the BBC magazine that had recently been facelifted by its new, cool editor, Geoffrey Cannon, and the art

editor David Driver, who introduced a distinctive italic masthead emphasising the *R* and the *T*. On the words side the magazine in the early 1970s certainly took itself seriously. As Geoffrey later put it in a letter to the *Guardian*, *RT* had “literary pretensions” and had adopted the slogan “writing of quality for a magazine of choice”. I wasn’t unhappy with that and I wrote features on various subjects, particularly sport, gradually moving over to features subbing which, as a day job, was easier to combine with work on alternative papers. The features editor was Peter Gillman, an old Oxford mate, while the chief sub, although I think he was styled “production editor”, was Brian Gearing, an able and amiable fellow who went on to edit the magazine when Geoffrey left in 1979.

A word here about Geoffrey who when appointed *RT* editor was already the *Guardian*’s dedicated “rock” critic. He always emphasised the trendy term “rock” in case anybody confused his subject matter either with “pop”, which was for the indiscriminating hoi polloi, or with old-style rock ‘n’ roll. Incidentally rock ‘n’ roll was not his strongest point and I’m sure he won’t mind my saying that, on one occasion, as his temporary tenant I felt obliged to remedy his lack of experience and knowledge of the real thing and pay my rent with a Little Richard LP.

On another occasion Geoffrey gave me a special assignment. To promote a BBC2 documentary on the upheaval in the United States over the Vietnam war he’d commissioned Andrew Kopkind, a radical left-wing American journalist, to explain and comment on the background; this included events like the notorious “massacre” of demonstrators at Kent State University in May 1970 when National Guardsmen opened fire on stone-throwing students, killing four and injuring nine. Whether he’d been told by Geoffrey to avoid direct criticism of the US government, police and university authorities – or had worked out a mild and muted policy for himself – the piece Kopkind sent in wasn’t really publishable. It was full of qualification, hesitation and circumlocution, with phrases like “on the one hand”, “it could be argued” and “some people would say”. Rewrite it, Geoffrey said to me, and I tried: that is, I took out the nonsensical contradictory padding and left... what Kopkind actually thought. Which, of course, was now perfectly publishable – though not in *Radio Times*.

Another assignment, this time planned, was subbing work on *Olympic Summer of Sport 1972*, a 96-page *Radio Times* special publication. It celebrated the BBC’s domination of TV sports coverage, featuring, besides the Munich Olympics, events like the Ashes test series, the Derby, Wimbledon, and the Open golf championship. The writers were the household names that delivered the coverage, people like Harry Carpenter, John Arlott and Julian Wilson. But one big name was missing, that of the man who, more than any other, stood for BBC’s sports coverage: David Coleman, the original inspiration for *Private Eye*’s piss-take on commentators’ cock-ups, “Colemanballs”, and also a celebrated *Spitting Image* character.

Coleman had something of a reputation. He was a star turn as a commentator but was said to have the shortest fuse in broadcasting. And as his ITV rival commentator Brian Moore once put it, “If he even said hello, it was more with a sneer than a smile.” So what follows is hardly surprising. Invited to write an article for *Olympic Summer of Sport* he said he wasn’t interested. Then, to make life easier for him, the athletics correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, Cliff Temple, ghosted the piece and it was sent to him for his approval. It came back from Coleman torn into four pieces and that was that: no Colemanballs after all.

The other notable aspect of *Olympic Summer of Sport* was that the decision of the BBC bosses to go ahead with the project was taken so late that a normal publishing schedule was impossible. The

result was that towards the end of the production process the art editor (David Driver) plus assistants and the subeditor (me) were sent down to the west country for a working week at Purnell's, the printers. We stayed in a Bath hotel and were chauffeured to and from the print works at Paulton. Sandwiches were provided at lunchtime though I insisted on a half-hour break in the pub.

My stint as a regular freelance for *Radio Times* lasted about three years. Then Nicolas Walter brought me into the subs' room of the *TLS* during the last months of Arthur Crook's editorship: since there was to be a new editor soon, full-time vacancies would have to remain unfilled while freelances did the work. My best-known colleague there was Martin Amis who rather pedantically objected to a paragraph break I'd introduced in a piece of his (purely to fill a line on a page proof). And once, minding the phone while Martin was on holiday, I picked up a call from someone at the Oxford Union who wanted him to debate with Mary Whitehouse on obscenity and censorship. "Well," I said, "I'm afraid Martin isn't here and I don't know where he is but I'll come and speak, if you like."

So I met the dragon Mary and John Mortimer who led for the opposition and thoroughly enjoyed the evening. Needless to say, Mary and censorship lost the debate.

After Arthur Crook's retirement I stayed on for a while under the new editor, John Gross, and was amused to see the effects of his radical innovation of introducing bylines for reviews. Suddenly, learned professors when checking their proofs insisted on reintroducing redundancies or pomposities that we'd cut or rewritten. Proud of seeing their names in print they no longer accepted that we at the *TLS* knew more than they did about clarity and writing style.

For the next few years I continued to work mainly as a freelance, writing features and subbing for various magazines. Besides *Radio Times* and the *TLS* I worked for *Woman* (where I spent some time on the staff and so was elected father of the NUJ chapel); the *Sunday Times* magazine for a month and the *Observer* magazine for several years; and *Decanter*, the wine magazine where, as well as writing and subbing, I acted as a consultant, helping the publisher hire a new editor. Among other things I started to collect house-style guides which laid down the law on arcane points of usage such as whether to spell "spoil" as "spoiled" and whether the word "none" can be followed by a plural verb or must remain singular. But what really interested me was the prospect of starting a radical magazine that would be a genuine alternative to the existing media.

# Work, play and politics

## Chapter 11: alternatives

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Between 1970, when I left *Welcome aboard*, and 1975, I was involved in four separate schemes to publish “alternative” magazines. The first, actually called *The Alternative*, was planned as a radical news and feature weekly in newspaper format – but all that survives is a printed dummy issue because we failed to raise the money to launch it. My main collaborators were David Driver who designed the magazine and Charlie Gillett, the DJ, rock writer, pioneer of “world music”, record producer and discoverer/patron of Ian Dury, Elvis Costello and Dire Straits, though I still think his most impressive achievement was the book that launched his career – *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*\*. Unlike so much of the tedious self-indulgent stuff published in newspapers, including the broadsheet press from about 1969, and specialist magazines, Charlie’s prose was clear, unpretentious and jargon-free. Just as I was a fan of the kind of music he preferred in the early days – rhythm ‘n’ blues – he was also a radical social critic who’d already written for both *New Society* and *Anarchy*. We shared an interest in sport bordering on obsession; Charlie was a club athlete and Sunday morning footballer. Also he and I lived round the corner from each other in Clapham so meetings were easy to arrange.

\*Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, New York, 1970

*The Alternative* dummy, which featured the Home Office’s persecution of black people and included a huge centre-page spread of Chuck Berry doing his celebrated duck walk, designed as a poster for your student bedsit wall, looked good but we failed to persuade enough people with money to invest in us. Two exceptions were the maverick Liberal peer Tim Beaumont and Pete Townshend of The Who; they both coughed up £100 (£1500 in today’s money). I got a friendly letter from John Arlott wishing me luck (but no cheque) and a less-than-friendly response from teetotal tea-drinker Tony Lefty-Benn who seized on a piece of unorthodox consumer advice (on where to buy cannabis) in the dummy issue and said sniffily: “I don’t think I could support that.” There were a few smaller sums from sympathetic journalists but we had to accept defeat: if there was going to be a successful “alternative” weekly it wasn’t going to be *The Alternative*.

At the time (1970-1) there were several other projects in the pipeline claiming to cover similar ground: Richard Neville, Andrew Fisher and Felix Dennis of *Oz* magazine, plus the trendy literary agent Ed Victor, were planning to launch a weekly paper called *Ink* (it will be “a muck-raking underground newspaper with big screaming headlines like the *Daily Mirror*” was their loud message to a conference of underground hacks); the Marxist left were developing something more serious, which was going to specialise in “radical photo-journalism” (it would appear as *Seven Days* for six months from October 1971\*); and Tony Elliott’s *Time Out* was already covering “alternative” as well as mainstream entertainment and events, though not yet weekly.

\*For a detailed account by Rosalind Delmar see [banmarchive.org.uk](http://banmarchive.org.uk).

When it was clear that *The Alternative* was never going to get off the ground Richard Neville said to Charlie and me: “Why not join *Ink*?” Wisely, Charlie declined the offer on the grounds that we didn’t



have enough in common with them. Unwisely, I accepted it and signed up for several months of chaos and confusion. I was asked to become section editor of the proposed *Inkweek* feature, a three-page entertainment-and-events guide in the middle of the planned paper – intended as competition for *Time Out*. I was given one editorial assistant and a budget of £10 a week. This meant I could contribute to the coffees, tube fares and cannabis joints of 10 people, enthusiasts for dance, film, rock, underground happenings or whatever, who would select and recommend what they thought were the outstanding events of the week in their specialty. There was a single column for each of them but no more.

*Ink's* marketing strategy, if you could call it that, was based on the idea that people who bought the paper for its alternative news and features would also be kept up to date with entertainment and events by *Inkweek*; they wouldn't have to buy *Time Out* as well unless they wanted comprehensive listings. This was reasonable enough. But what I couldn't do, obviously, with just three tabloid pages, was compete with *Time Out* in the sense of providing an equivalent editorial service (by February 1970 *Time Out* was already publishing 84 small-format pages of editorial/advertising rising to 100 in July, according to Nigel Fountain\*).

\**Underground: The London Alternative Press 1966-74*, Routledge, 1988

In his account of the *Ink* fiasco\*\* Richard Neville wrote: "We planned to capitalise on the success of Tony Elliott's *Time Out*, published once a fortnight, and plunder its thriving ad base." This is typical Richard – naive, glib and based on a series of false assumptions. As it turned out, *Time Out* went weekly just as *Ink* launched and from the beginning my *Inkweek* pages were never going to threaten their dominance of the alternative entertainment-listings market. And elsewhere in the magazine nobody seemed to know what they were doing, above all in the key area of layout and production. At one point as *Ink* neared publication day and disaster loomed – icebergs everywhere – I went to Richard and offered to transfer to a subbing and production role, letting someone else run *Inkweek*, but the only thing that happened was that a freelance copy editor from book publishing was recruited via Ed Victor to help tidy up the words. Sadly, like the rest of the *Ink* staff, Steve Cox had no experience of producing magazines on time to a professional standard.

\*\**Hippie Hippie Shake*, Bloomsbury, 1995

For most of us that kind of experience came later. In fact many of the *Ink* survivors went on to successful media careers – from the late Felix Dennis, magazine-publishing tycoon, poet (and self-confessed dissolute), to Marsha Rowe, co-founder of the feminist monthly *Spare Rib*, by way of Andrew Cockburn (US-based specialist in the politics of weaponry, author of various books, now Washington editor at *Harper's*), Anna Coote (feminist and specialist in social policy) and John Lloyd (contributing editor at the *Financial Times* after editing *Time Out* and the *New Statesman*). And we all learnt something at *Ink* – if only how not to do things.

If *The Alternative* added up to nothing more than a dummy issue, the much bigger problem with *Ink* was that there was no dummy and no coherent production plan either: everything was last-minute with people working through several nights to get the issue out – then waking up in a state of exhaustion to the living nightmare of having to start all over again. Two days before the deadline for the first issue the art director collapsed from the strain and was invalidated out. Then the shock-horror front-page lead story ("THE GREAT URANIUM ROBBERY") turned out to have been covered already

by the *Times* in a fairly minor way and ignored by the rest of the press, both overground and underground. In a bizarre twist Alex Mitchell, the ex-*Sunday Times* journalist responsible for writing the story, disappeared – only to re-emerge in the Clapham High Street offices of the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League as an acolyte of the sexist bully Gerry Healy.

In the various accounts of what happened at *Ink* there is one curious discrepancy. Alex\* describes himself as the editor of the paper (“They asked me to be its first editor and I accepted with unadulterated enthusiasm”) and Nigel Fountain uses the same term in his otherwise accurate and informative book on the London underground press. But I can’t remember having a single casual conversation – never mind a scheduled meeting – with Alex about his/our editorial policy in general or his attitude to what we were supposed to be trying to do with *Inkweek*. Certainly Richard Neville, who actually was the nearest thing to an editor of *Ink*, at least in the beginning, doesn’t call Alex the editor. He writes: “For news editor I had a brilliant idea. Who better than a crack investigator from the *Sunday Times*...?” And Marsha Rowe agrees that Alex was supposed to be “the news editor”: “Losing both the art editor and the news editor in the first week didn’t help.” But as far as I know Alex didn’t even do any news editing in his brief *Ink* career; at best, if you’d wanted to give him a formal title, you could have called him the temporary “chief reporter”: he did after all write one front-page story before he walked out.

\**Come the Revolution*, NewSouth, 2011

Underground journalism was supposed to be fun whereas working at *Ink* certainly wasn’t – and we knew we weren’t getting anywhere. But once I managed to strike a blow for the freedom fighters. The photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, best known as a radical chronicler of the Vietnam war, was in a protracted dispute with the right-wing *Telegraph* magazine: until it was resolved they wouldn’t release his entire file of photographs (of, I think, Ethiopia). How could we manage to extract them and get them back to Philip? With Sarah, my *Ink* assistant, I went by tube to a phone box at Waterloo Bridge near the Central Office of Information and I phoned the *Telegraph*. : “COI, here. I understand you have some pix of Ethiopia – could we possibly have a look?...OK, fine. I’ll send a girl over for them right away.” And that was that: Philip got his pictures back.

*Ink* never recovered from its disastrous start whereas *Time Out* went from strength to strength as the alternative weekly that people actually bought because they wanted the events info it provided. Gradually its news and feature coverage improved and it became less hippy and more radical; in the end it even lost its druggy anti-sport prejudice. I stayed with *Ink* for several months out of loyalty and laziness but I was already thinking about my next move: weekly publication was a pipedream – why not go for something less ambitious, a radical news magazine that didn’t need a lot of money to produce, didn’t depend on advertising and was on a small enough scale to be manageable without a large staff? The failure of *Ink* didn’t mean that there was no chance of a radical news magazine succeeding.

The result was *Inside Story*, which came out 13 times between March 1972 and December 1973. Once again it was designed by David Driver, who by day was beginning to make *Radio Times* the go-to place for photographers and illustrators who wanted their work to be intelligently and stylishly used. For *Inside Story*, which would be printed offset litho so we could paste what we wanted onto a layout sheet, we used a cheap manual typewriter for the body copy. And for the title David took the typed words – *inside story* – and had them blown up to the right size. The typist/typesetter was paid

and so was Peter Brookes\*\*, who supplied the brilliant cartoonish cover drawings. The material we published came from various sources – mainly dissident journalists but also activists – with the emphasis on telling people what was actually happening rather than telling them what we wanted them to think or do about it. Illustrations, usually unsigned, came from people in David's contacts book.

\*\*Peter went on to become the chief cartoonist on the *Times* where David was art director after leaving *Radio Times*.

At first the magazine was printed by a small commercial printer and distributed by Moore-Harness, who handled *Private Eye* and various soft-porn mags (ie, anything that WH Smith wouldn't take), but we never succeeded in selling enough copies either in newsagents or on subscription. After a year we moved to a cheaper printer and did the distribution ourselves; we ended up with a duplicated edition of 1,000 copies.

Inevitably the first issue of *Inside Story* was dominated by reaction to the media coverage of Northern Ireland. In August 1971 the Unionist government at Stormont had, with the agreement of Edward Heath's Westminster Tories, introduced internment without trial in a way that was both brutal and utterly inept. Only Catholics and Republican sympathisers were snatched and interned – and the majority of them were not in fact members of the IRA. In the protests and repression that followed, the death toll numbered 20 unarmed civilians (including 10 notoriously shot down by the paratroopers at Ballymurphy, a district of Belfast), two IRA men and two soldiers. Of the treatment suffered by selected internees under interrogation the only question was whether to call it "inhuman and degrading treatment" or bite the bullet and call it "torture". Internment was the IRA's number one recruiting sergeant and what made things worse was the fact that the mainstream British media, with hardly any exceptions, were conspicuously failing to report the repressive behaviour of the army and police.

Peter's cover drawing for the first issue of *Inside Story* showed reporters drinking at the bar of the Belfast Europa hotel where they could be easily reached by the army's PR department. "What do the papers say?" we asked. "What the army tells them" was the obvious answer and we proceeded to illustrate the point by describing the collusion that underlay so much of the coverage. We also quoted an anonymous piece in the *New Statesman* that identified a number of Ulster Unionists influential in the hierarchy of the BBC and ITV and added the name of John Cole, deputy editor of the *Guardian* and a staunch Unionist.

Not surprisingly there was opposition from some journalists to the management, distortion and suppression of news about Ireland. When *South of the Border*, a Granada TV film, was banned by the Independent Television Authority, the journalists who'd made it took the initiative and called a protest meeting at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on 22 November 1971. Two hundred people heard accounts of how the news was routinely distorted and suppressed inside newspapers, the BBC and the independent TV companies. A fiery resolution was passed – but then not very much happened.

I went to that meeting and I'd also joined the Anti-Internment League, helping to produce their newsletter as well as marching with them. Just after Christmas 1971 I went over to Belfast on the overnight ferry with a photographer accompanying a party of London-based pacifist leafleters whose

plan was to approach soldiers on the streets and in their barracks with an appeal “to end repression and bloodshed in Northern Ireland”. Two snaps of soldiers being leafleted\* would appear in the first issue of *Inside Story* and we all got home safely. In the light of what was about to happen, you could say we were lucky.

\*One of them featured the bearded Bill Hetherington, a veteran peace campaigner who died in November 2023 aged 89.

A few weeks later on 30 January 1972, while I was still researching the media coverage of Northern Ireland, came Derry’s Bloody Sunday massacre, an event that still reverberates with the news that one of the soldiers involved – after a delay of more than 50 years – is being prosecuted for murder\*. (The occasion was a banned anti-internment march organised by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in which more than 10,000 people took part. There were some teenage rioters throwing stones but most of the marchers were just angry and determined.) That it was murder is not now a matter of dispute: the Saville report of 2010 confirmed that none of the 13 civilians shot and killed (a 14<sup>th</sup> died later) had offered any threat to the soldiers – or anyone else – that might have justified their decision to open fire. True, the inquests returned open verdicts, at the time the only possible ones in Northern Ireland where cases had not gone through the criminal courts. But the coroner released a statement afterwards that left no doubt about his interpretation of the evidence: “...the army ran amok that day and shot without thinking what they were doing...it was sheer unadulterated murder...” (Major Hubert O’Neill, a retired British army officer and a Catholic, 21 August 1973)

\*The prosecution of “Soldier F” was confirmed on 14 December 2023. He had been charged in 2019 with two murders and five attempted murders though proceedings were stopped two years later.

A week after the shootings the Australian reporter Murray Sayle, working with another *Sunday Times* journalist on an investigative follow-up, “convincingly demonstrated that the soldiers had faced no fire from those they shot”\*. But his report added a conclusion that “the killings had been part of a predetermined plan” and the editor, Harold Evans, spiked the piece. “It was,” Lewis Chester writes, “the conclusion that caused the problem. Back in the London office it was felt that there was not enough evidence to back this contention.”

\**Making Waves: The Journalism of Murray Sayle*, Lewis Chester, 2016

But was the Bloody Sunday massacre in fact planned? It’s hard to imagine even the most hard-boiled, vicious and cynical British army officer scheming to gun down more than a dozen unarmed civilians in cold blood – and in full view of the media. So if there was a plan, it went badly wrong. But there are some clear pointers to there having been some planning for a confrontation. For example, Major-General Robert Ford, the army commander, who was quite well aware that the paras had already killed 10 unarmed people at Ballymurphy, Belfast, in the post-internment disturbances of August 1971, deliberately transferred them to Derry in an attempt to toughen up the army performance there. He also said in a memo dated 7 January 1972 that selected ringleaders of the rioters and hooligans in Derry should be “shot” (though he didn’t say killed).

On 19 May 2021 the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, “apologised” in the House of Commons for the Ballymurphy killings – 11 years after the “apology” of his predecessor, David Cameron, for

Bloody Sunday. There will never be a last word on these events but a few days later, on 28 May 2021, *Private Eye* quoted the judge's remarks after the collapse of a murder trial of two soldiers accused of shooting an unarmed IRA man in April 1972. "At that time, in fact until late 1973, an understanding was in place between the RUC and the army whereby the RUC did not arrest and question, or even take witness statements from, soldiers involved in shootings such as this one. This appalling practice was designed, at least in part, to protect soldiers from being prosecuted and in very large measure it succeeded." (Mr Justice O'Hara)

What I wrote about Bloody Sunday in *Inside Story* was based on what I was told at the time: "...for weeks before the shooting the army had planned to provoke a confrontation with the IRA. The plan was that rubber bullets would be fired at the crowd and that, when the IRA started shooting back, the paratroopers would be ready for a shoot-out with the gunmen. When the IRA did not react and open fire, the paras opened up anyway – and killed 13 unarmed men."

There certainly was an attempted cover-up of the murders, initially by the army and then by the establishment, notably the judiciary. The Widgery report (aka "the Widgery whitewash") by the Lord Chief Justice in April 1972 is an astonishing read in the light not only of the Saville report that followed it 38 years later but of contemporaneous accounts. "The question 'Who fired first?' is vital," said Widgery. "I am entirely satisfied that the first firing...was directed at the soldiers." You wouldn't have wanted to be a defendant in his courtroom.

The basis for the cover-up was the so-called "shot list" or "Loden list of engagements". It was apparently compiled in the first place by Major Ted Loden\*, who claimed to have interviewed the soldiers under his command immediately after the shootings (though, when questioned by Saville, the soldiers failed to confirm this); then, for no apparent reason, it was transcribed by another officer, Captain Mike Jackson (later the head of the army), before being typed. The list, used as the basis of claims sent round the world to British embassies in a crude attempt to sanitise the atrocity, is total fantasy in places. It cites as the paras' targets not the unarmed civilians who actually died that day but "nail bombers", "snipers" and "gunmen". And as the Derry-born campaigning journalist Eamonn McCann put it: "Some of the shots he describes would have had to go through brick walls to hit their targets. It's nonsense."\*\*

\*once a keen member of the Stonyhurst CCF and a contemporary of mine – see Chapter 2. Colonel (as he became) Loden, holder of the Military Cross, died a violent death, shot dead by armed robbers in Nairobi, Kenya, on 7 September 2013.

\*\*Eamonn McCann, interviewed in *Socialist Review*, July/August 2010

Yet Saville, while having to reject the nonsense, makes no criticism in his report of the officers responsible for it. Loden and Jackson emerge from the report whiter than white. The one discordant note in Saville's review of their actions is this: "It could be said that another officer in Major Loden's position might have appreciated that, in view of the amount of army gunfire, something seemed to be going seriously wrong." This is preposterous: there was an atrocity; the officers in command of the men who perpetrated it bear some responsibility for it; at the very least they were guilty of lying to cover up what happened.

But how come the ludicrous, impossible-to-believe “shot list” was accepted at the time by so many people? We have reached the crux of the matter. The Bloody Sunday atrocity is best explained in terms of its context: the army was used to getting away with murder, a facile phrase and a cliché but in this case the literal truth. And the British media were part of the explanation, as the following *Inside Story* article shows. Headlined “One man who finally quit” it was introduced as follows: “In the week after Bloody Sunday John O’Callaghan, who’d worked for the *Guardian* for 11 years, resigned. Here he explains why.” A couple of extracts follow.

“If a couple of British papers and a broadcasting channel had shared the *Sunday Times*’s occasional scepticism about the performance of the British army in Northern Ireland the slaughter in Derry on Bloody Sunday might have been averted. It is hardly possible to believe that, if those commanding the troops knew that a section of the press would be continuing a rigorous scrutiny of their behaviour, they would have felt able to embark on the adventure that led to the death of 13 people on the Bogside streets...”

O’Callaghan contrasted the *Guardian*’s coverage of Northern Ireland in the early 1970s with its refusal to accept the British government’s version of events in the 1916-21 Irish War of Independence...

“Instead of pioneering the truth-telling about the atrocities this time, the *Guardian* made excuses for internment.

“When it became clear that premeditated atrocities were part of the internment package, the *Guardian*’s comment on the Compton report was: ‘Vigorous and tough interrogation must go on. Discomfort of the kind revealed in this report leaving no physical damage cannot be weighed against the number of human lives which will be lost if the security forces do not get a continuing flow of information.’...”

“Apart from the sickening quality of the bully’s aside – ‘hit them where it won’t show for too long’ – the military must have felt that in the light of the *Guardian*’s previous tradition the open encouragement of vigorous and tough interrogation amounted to what one can only call a licence for mayhem.”

A PS: after John O’Callaghan’s death in 2007 his obituary in the *Guardian* failed to mention the reason for his resignation from the paper, though they did subsequently publish my letter pointing out what he’d written in *Inside Story*.

If internment was the IRA’s number one recruiting sergeant, number two was Bloody Sunday. It was seen by many Irish people as a declaration of war. And in February 2021 Roy Greenslade, ex-tabloid editor and journalism professor at City University (specialising in “ethics” – delicious irony that), revealed in the *British Journalism Review* that he too had started secretly supporting the IRA after Bloody Sunday. Who knows how many other people made that decision?

In the second *Inside Story* we highlighted the abortion issue and published three case histories of women refused the chance of having an abortion. The material had been collected by the Women’s Abortion and Contraception Campaign and was presented to the Lane Commission set up to examine the workings of the 1967 Abortion Act.

But here's a strange thing. A bit like the Committee of 100, the WACC tends to get left out of conventional accounts, perhaps because the activists of the time haven't recorded what they did – and the academics haven't caught up. See, for example, "Timeline of the Women's Liberation Movement" ([www.bl.uk/sisterhood/timeline](http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/timeline)) which records the founding conference at Oxford in 1970 with its four demands, ratified at Skegness in 1971, then jumps to the formation of the National Abortion Campaign in 1975 "to defend women's rights to make decisions about their own bodies".

But the original body formed to work for "free contraception and abortion on demand" was the Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign; for many activists at the time this issue was at least as vital as any other part of the women's movement. As Elizabeth Bird, a Bristol university lecturer, put it, the right to free legal abortion and contraception was "the most important issue" in terms of women's lives and control over them.

This quote comes from *Personal Histories of the Second Wave of Feminism*, 2003 ([www.feministarchivesouth.org.uk](http://www.feministarchivesouth.org.uk)), which is based on a series of interviews with "women involved in feminist action in Bristol in the 1970s and 1980s". Another quote from the document: "The Bristol group was affiliated to the national WACC, a precursor to the National Abortion Campaign (with an obvious difference of emphasis). Ellen [Malos] remembers the priority being women's right to control their own fertility and lives. The slogan of the time was 'Women must control their fate, not the church and not the state'."

Angela Rodaway, stressing that WACC was a "very important" predecessor of NAC, said: "Our first concern was contraception because we felt that if you couldn't regulate your own body then you couldn't regulate anything."

Jackie West's involvement with WACC was "more substantial and consistent than with any other group. WACC was underpinned by a deep commitment to pro-choice, the right to early safe abortion if chosen. The NAC politicised the issue more, and Jackie speculates [that] its roots were more influenced by the left/Trotsky politics, as opposed to WACC's woman-centred perspective." The national WACC, which was based in London, published the evidence they presented to the Lane Commission as a pamphlet, *Women & Abortion* (copies held by the Wellcome Collection, [info@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:info@wellcomecollection.org), and the London School of Economics library).

*Inside Story 2* also reported on the 1971 census fiasco, illustrating the story with an uncompleted form of unknown provenance, though I didn't have to look very hard to find it (the personal details were blacked out obviously). The headline was: "300,000 people in London alone didn't complete this form." And we included an autobiographical piece by Marsha Rowe on working at *Oz* and *Ink* explaining why she thought a feminist magazine like *Spare Rib*, which she was about to launch with Rosie Boycott, was necessary.

To the familiar tale of production problems at *Ink* and an impossible amount of overwork ("On the first issue I went two nights running without sleep and I don't think I had one day off and hardly a night until a month had passed") Marsha added a complaint that in its "hierarchical, arbitrary structure" *Ink* wasn't really an "alternative" to the mainstream media at all. She described the menial routine imposed on her of contacting local paper journalists for their news then "handing the stories over to someone else who would decide whether or not to print them. What's the point of

that?" The last straw was that a 17-year-old Irish typesetter was suddenly fired when she and Marsha were both away "because a change in the system had required it – the typesetting was to be farmed out".

Although *Spare Rib* when it was first published in June 1972 was organised on fairly conventional lines, it became a collective a year or so later, as Marsha emphasised in a letter to the *Guardian*\*. Having been voted in as editor at a staff meeting she decided after three issues "to form the magazine into a collective. I therefore resigned as editor and made the suggestion that we separate out the editorial responsibilities of the magazine. This was based on my own feminist ideals, which were, at the time, not held by many."

\*31 July 2007

The third *Inside Story* showed how using conventional news-gathering methods could work on alternative papers. "Make the calls," apprentice reporters are traditionally told: that is, check with local news sources regularly to see if they have a story. So among the contacts I kept up with was Tony Smythe, then the top man at the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty). Tony was an anarchist with an impressive CV including several months in jail for refusing compulsory military service in the 1950s and another month for refusing to be bound over with the Committee of 100 in August 1961. I explained to him what *Inside Story* was looking for. "I think I may have something for you," Tony said and went to a filing cabinet where he pulled out a series of photocopied sheets. Bylined "Peter Deeley" this was a piece on the police Special Branch written for the *Observer* – with Tony's help – but never published in the paper though it was syndicated for publication abroad. "It's two years old," Tony said, "so it'll need some updating."

I carefully avoided contacting Peter, whom I knew slightly, but managed to secure some snaps of suspected Special Branch men including Detective-Sergeant Roy Cremer, who specialised in monitoring the libertarian left. Peter Brookes had fun with the cover which featured a plainclothes man in heavy boots propositioning several hippy-looking men, also wearing heavy boots, who replied: "But we're already workin' for the Special Branch." After the updated article was published I got a letter from David Astor, the *Observer* editor, complaining that I'd breached his paper's copyright and asking me if I'd got the material on the Special Branch from Peter Deeley. I was delighted to reply that no, he hadn't been the source.

This was a bit of a coup but I suppose the feature I was most pleased about came in issue number eight March/April 1973: "The Spies for Peace Story", which was continued in issue number nine. It was written anonymously by one of the Spies, Nicolas Walter, who was listed in the magazine as the editor in charge of reviews – but as with most of the stories we published we didn't byline it.

"This Easter is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spies for Peace," we said. "Their achievement was to discover and publish documents describing the plans which had been made for ruling Britain in the event of nuclear war – and also the way these plans had been tested in two Nato exercises during 1962. The moral of the discovery was that the plans, which were undoubtedly known to the governments of foreign countries, were being kept secret from the people of this country – and that they would not work.



“The effect of the publication was to destroy the credibility not only of these particular secrets but of all official secrets – and of the ability of the authorities to keep them out of the hands of the people.

“The Spies for Peace were never caught: here for the first time is a full account of how they carried out their action and avoided detection.”

A more light-hearted defiance of the law was the anti-libel agreement. This was a commitment we thought up and proposed to alternative papers to republish any article by the others that led to the threat of a libel action, which we saw as an attempt to suppress free speech. We announced the agreement in *Inside Story* no 11 (September 1973), saying that two publications had already joined us and signed up: *Peace News*, the pacifist weekly, and the *Catonsville Roadrunner*, once described as “a revolutionary Christian magazine with a bit of anarchism thrown in”. We suggested the following standard letter to be sent to hostile solicitors:

“By threatening one of the publications listed below with a libel action, you have guaranteed that all of them will republish the passages you allege are libellous. We suggest that in future you advise your clients not to use the law to try to silence the press.”

In the following issue of *Inside Story* we were delighted to publish a letter from Peter Hain, the future Labour cabinet minister and later a peer of the realm – in those days a young Liberal activist and anti-apartheid campaigner. As the editor of *Liberator*, a radical Liberal magazine, he endorsed the campaign and enclosed “a signed agreement to join other publications in confronting libel charges”.

We came up against the libel laws particularly because we published first-person accounts of what happened in prisons and places like Broadmoor, officially described as “a high-security psychiatric hospital” and unofficially by inmates as “worse than a prison”. And we were always on the edge of what could be legally published. When we ran Stuart Christie’s account of police harassment between his release from a Spanish jail in September 1967 and his arrest in August 1971 for “conspiracy to cause explosions” (he was acquitted) we illustrated it with an illegally taken pic of him inside Brixton prison.

In *Inside Story 10*, which led on the 13-month occupation and work-in by the London print workers of Briant Colour, we also reported on the goings-on at *Time Out* which was increasingly successful in sales terms but riven by internal conflict. Tony Elliott, who had founded the magazine, was certainly “alternative” – he was very much at home in the underground arts and entertainment scene – but nobody could call him politically left-wing. Whereas many of those who joined *Time Out* certainly were. We wrote:

“As *Ink* collapsed, revived itself, then died – and *Seven Days* too came and went – *Time Out* found a new role employing some of the survivors of these disasters: Neil Lyndon had come from an earlier closure, *Idiot International*; John Lloyd came from *Ink* and Phil Kelly from *Seven Days*. Several of these new recruits accelerated an already clear tendency for some *Time Out* staff to become more aggressively left-wing, both editorially and as workers. In the summer of 1972 an NUJ chapel was formed: the writing was on the wall.”

At *Time Out* there was continuous conflict over who should edit the magazine – or whether there should be an editor at all – over wage rates and over editorial policy until in 1981 the radical section

of the staff split off to found an alternative, to be run on co-operative lines, called *City Limits*. That lasted an impressive 12 years.

Various people contributed to *Inside Story* – writers, artists, designers, typist-typesetters – but the person who was my constant collaborator, who came in very early and stayed until the end was Alan Balfour, the office and circulation manager. I think he was relieved when we reluctantly decided that we'd run out of – not ideas but steam, puff, whatever. After the 13<sup>th</sup> issue, published in December 1973, we called it a day and Alan was able to concentrate on his first love, the blues.

But then, not very long afterwards, several people approached me saying: what happened? Why stop? Why not start again? And (a glutton for punishment, me) I sighed and said: perhaps we need a different kind of paper and perhaps we would need to form a collective to share the work, the responsibility, the aggro. The result was *Wildcat*. I claim responsibility for the title: I had in mind posters and above all stickers that read “WILDCAT STRIKES!” in the traditional anarcho-syndicalist colours of black and red. That ambition was realised, I'm pleased to say, and the paper itself published a lot of stimulating and radical material. It was more of a campaigning, agitator's paper than *Inside Story* but readable, informative and above all not sectarian. The people that worked on it were either anarchists, who thought that radical journalism was more useful than crude propaganda, or left-wing scribblers who were, broadly speaking, libertarian.

A key person in the *Wildcat* package was the veteran anarchist Philip Sansom. He'd been one of the three editors of *War Commentary*, the wartime substitute for *Freedom*, who were jailed in 1945 for nine months for inciting members of the armed forces to “disaffection”: don't hand in your weapons; keep your powder dry ready for the social revolution, was the message. The first issue of *Wildcat* recalled – and celebrated – this challenge to the state. As well as a piece by Philip we reprinted an “Open Letter to British Soldiers”, first published in 1912 by *The Syndicalist*.

As a result our office at Housmans, the pacifist bookshop, was raided under the Incitement to Disaffection Act. When the police approached the *Wildcat* office the business manager of the premises, Harry Mister, told them I worked there. “He's a bit of a rascal, isn't he?” said one of them. To which Harry replied, as he told me later: “There's two sides to that: he might think you were a bit of a rascal breaking into his office.”

Philip was a charismatic figure: fluent as an outdoor orator at Speakers' Corner, highly competent in the editorial skills from scribbling to layout and something of a bon vivant – he could certainly cook, as he showed when he put on a dinner for the Spanish anarchist Miguel Garcia, after his release from prison in 1969. I supplied the wine.

Miguel Garcia (1908-1981) had fought in the Spanish Civil War and later in the anti-Franco resistance as an urban guerrilla. Captured in Barcelona in 1949 he served 20 years in prison where he met Stuart Christie. On his release Miguel came to London where he raised funds for Spanish prisoners, established an anarchist social club, the *Centro Iberico*, and continued to propagandise. According to Stuart, the audience at one of the meetings he addressed included members of what became “the Angry Brigade”. Miguel's memoir, *Franco's Prisoner*, was published by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1972.

One illustration of *Wildcat* editorial policy was a piece by my Oxford contemporary, the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham, about the life of Lilian Wolfe, an anarchist for whom the term

“veteran” is inadequate: she died aged 98 in 1975 having spent her life as a militant. In our introduction we said: “This article was originally written for the feminist press but was turned down by the two papers it was offered to.”

*Wildcat* didn't last long – 10 issues in all. Number eight, dated May 1975, gives a flavour of what we were about. The front page proclaims: “*WILDCAT* says NO! to the COMMON MARKET REFERENDUM” and below the headline there's a drawing of a wild disreputable-looking cat painting out both the EEC and the UK with a cross with the bubble “Organise to TAKE OVER!” The cat was the creation of the cartoonist Donald Room, who had joined us halfway through at Philip's suggestion, and later carried on with *Wildcat* anarchist comics for many years afterwards. So we did start *something* that lasted.

And once we were in a minor way the story. The *Wildcat* editorial office was on the first floor of Housmans at 5 Caledonian Road, King's Cross. We were at the front of the building, above the shop – overlooking a letterbox that had been there for decades, ever since the shop had been a post office. On 25 November 1974 I'd left the office early, posting a couple of letters while Eric R continued to lay out the forthcoming issue. Later that evening three IRA bombs went off in London injuring more than 20 people; one of them was in the letterbox outside our office. Our bomb did not draw blood but Eric had to go to hospital to be treated for shock and spent several days recovering.

I was quite restrained in my comments in the next issue of *Wildcat*, partly because I didn't think the Provisional IRA – the presumed perpetrators – would be listening. But I did ask this rhetorical question of the Trotskyist International Marxist Group, whose policy was to support the Provisionals: if a member of your organisation had died in the explosion would they have been murdered or “accidentally killed”?

Tact, cowardice – political correctness? – stopped me saying then to the IRA and their supporters something that will be obvious to the most naive person now: how come you chose a letterbox outside a *pacifist* bookshop? Was this a deliberate decision or the brain-fade of the bomber? Surely you weren't trying to punish, frighten – or eliminate – the radical pacifists who have broadly supported Irish independence and self-government and opposed the behaviour of the British army? Or did you just not bother to notice who might have been hit by your bomb?

But in the end, who cares about the niceties? Bombing people is brain-dead stupid, whoever does it, whoever it is done to.

Earlier that year (1974) Roy Greenslade (the secret IRA supporter after Bloody Sunday) and I had both been at the National Union of Journalists' annual delegate meeting in Wexford; my branch was London Freelance; his, Central London. As you might expect from the venue and the date, there was much drink taken, as the Irish say, and much animated discussion about the journalistic issues – on both sides of the border – of news management, censorship and so on. But the most pressing one was the Irish government's insistence that IRA voices – and those of their organised supporters – would not be broadcast, although their actions and statements could be reported. A similar ban on IRA speech was imposed by the British government in 1988.

To me as a journalist being a member of the NUJ was axiomatic. I couldn't understand why some of my fellow-anarchists who worked in journalism remained outside the union on the grounds that it

didn't follow classical anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist principles. In fact, compared to most other British unions, the NUJ was quite open and democratic.

I'd first joined in 1964, recruited as a temporary member when I was on the *Daily Mail* in Manchester, and I renewed my membership when I started working for Cornmarket Press in 1967. Then from 1970 I became quite active, joining a loose group of left-wing activists in the London Freelance Branch. We were never a majority of the branch and we never held the top three posts of chair, secretary and treasurer; at most we were six out of a branch committee of 15. But we were certainly influential enough to annoy a lot of important media people with big bylines\*, led by Bernard Levin, once described by the *Times*, the paper he wrote a column for, as "the most famous journalist of his day". Levin attacked us in print as a politically motivated Trotskyist clique and so did a right-wing NUJ activist called Tony Craig in the *Spectator* magazine. Their biggest complaint was that we exploited the alleged fact that attendance was small to commit the branch to left-wing policies that didn't represent members' views.

\*for example, Woodrow Wyatt, Marghanita Laski (no longer left-wing in middle age), John Grigg, Brian Inglis; also Levin's girlfriend at the time, Arianna Stassinopoulou, who went on to simplify her surname by marrying the American Republican politician Michael Huffington (they co-founded the Huffington Post); and the *Daily Telegraph* photographer John Warburton who lived and died an admirer of Oswald Mosley.

Unfortunately for them they'd relied on hearsay: they can't have actually attended the meetings they complained about. As branch vice-chairman (sic) in the relevant year (1975) I went back to the NUJ office and dug out the minutes book. And I was able to state, in a letter to the *Spectator* which they published, that attendance at the 11 LFB branch meetings held that year was between 42 and 85 (average 54.5). The notion that three men (all Trots) and an anarchist dog\* had dominated the branch until Bernard Levin and the *Spectator* gang came along and rescued it in 1976 was demonstrably false.

\*The best-known anarchist dog in London belonged to Arthur Moyse, the bus conductor, artist, writer and agitator.

But the fiction lingered on. Here, for example, is yet another version, this time by an ex-president of the NUJ no less. In July 2010 Francis Beckett wrote: "When Bernard Levin led a right-wing rebellion against the takeover of the NUJ's London Freelance Branch by the far left in 1976, the monthly branch meetings, which had always struggled to get a quorum, were suddenly crowded out with hundreds of people, whipped in by both sides."\*I don't think this is what you'd call eye-witness reporting.

\**What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?*, Biteback, 2010

For the record, as they say, I can identify one – and only one – member of a Trotskyist organisation among us: Geoffrey Sheridan (1944-2000) of the International Marxist Group who wrote for various publications including the *Guardian*. There was one emphatically self-labelling feminist: Angela Phillips, then a radical snapper, eg for *Spare Rib*, and later a distinguished professor of journalism. And of course I would have carried an anarchist card if such a thing existed. But the others, as I recall, were essentially NSRL – non-specific radical left – or if they had an affiliation they concealed

it. As a group we were as interested in the bread-and-butter questions of getting work and getting paid for it as in the resolutions on Ireland and women's rights that so annoyed the conservatives. For example, we introduced the idea of work-based freelance meetings to discuss individual publishers' rates and procedures, an initiative that – of course – we had to develop wherever we worked.

At the time most of my paid freelance work came from *Radio Times* so naturally it was their freelancers I invited to the meeting I organised in a pub near the office in Marylebone High Street. There was a pretty good turnout, maybe 12-15 people. They certainly found some things to complain about. But they spent most of the meeting having a good moan about the other national papers and magazines they worked for. And back in the *Radio Times* office my reputation as a troublemaker inevitably grew to the point where I got less and less work from them. Fortunately I had somewhere else to go. Just as I had invited Nick Walter to join me on *Inside Story* he recruited me to the subs' desk of the *TLS* (see Chapter 10).

# Education, education, education

## Chapter 12: the comprehensive revolution

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A year or so after *Wildcat* folded I decided that since our generation hadn't changed the world – and now looked highly unlikely to – I should try to do something else. So in 1977 I applied for a place on a one-year teacher training course at Garnett College in Roehampton, south-west London, which specialised in further education. I knew there were opportunities in FE colleges which ran courses in journalism and I liked the idea of teaching young people who had some idea about what they wanted to do in life, whereas I didn't much like what I'd found out at firsthand about British state schooling. There was too much of a contrast between schools in London and the ones in Kampala where the boys really wanted to learn – and were charming and polite as well. You could say that my experience at Mengo spoilt me for state secondary school teaching back home.

And another thing. Wearing my anarchist hat – it still fitted – I objected to compulsory state schooling just as most conventional orthodox left-wing people objected to voluntary paid-for schooling. My position by the way is that paying school fees for your children is no more morally reprehensible than paying a food or repair bill or rent for somewhere to live – in a society based on money everything, as they say, has its price. Indeed how can it be “immoral” to pay for schooling up to 18 but morally necessary to pay for it after 18, as self-labelling left-wing people supporting the British state now insist? By what right does the state compel parents to commit their children to its institutions to be brainwashed into the current orthodoxy whether it's anti-gay or pro-gay, anti-abortion or pro-abortion, anti or pro the death penalty, God in his many manifestations, transgenderism, wokeness, British values, flying the flag, above all “free speech”, whatever that may mean? And fining parents who take their children out of state school during termtime? How did that become normalised? Then there's the use of that bogus lying acronym ROSLA, the “raising of the school-leaving age”, which actually means ROCSA, the raising of the compulsory schooling age.

The Garnett course necessarily involved looking at post-11 education in general including secondary schooling. Some of the work in further education colleges was at secondary level – GCSEs, for example. And the rest of the FE work followed on from what was happening in the schools. In the next chapter I look at the question of English teaching but here the subject is secondary as well as further education, and inevitably you have to include a glance at primary education since that affected what happened later.

So what did I learn at Garnett? I was reminded that being lectured is a passive experience and I learnt from being lectured that lecturing is the rarest of all the teaching skills. I concluded that in routine teaching lectures, where they are considered necessary, should usually be as short as possible and that lecturers should, above all, keep their students awake; they should learn to be lively even if they're not natural performers. Unfortunately I don't remember being given any useful tips on lecturing at Garnett; my favourite bit of the whole course was being informed – in a lecture of course – that lecturing was by no means the best way of communicating important information. This was not learning positively by doing but learning negatively by being done to.

By contrast methods based on seminar/discussion/working groups of 12 or so with somebody introducing a topic having done some preparation were both stimulating and effective. This model transferred easily to practical, skills-based work on journalism techniques like interviewing, news and feature writing and subbing copy. On teaching practice, a key part of the course, I learnt a lot by watching journalism lecturers in my first week. The more confident ones involved me in the sessions immediately.

At the same time as I went to Garnett I was about to become a father so the question “What is to be done about children’s schooling?” was beginning to be personal and direct rather than a topic for speculation and debate. Until now all the decisions about my two step-daughters’ schooling had been taken by my wife, who was herself a primary teacher, with nil input from their father who lived abroad.

Amanda herself had had an unusual schooling history for a middle-class child (she and her family were certainly “middle-class”, although some of them perversely tried to deny it). Her left-wing journalist father had been a boarder at Tonbridge, the Kent public school; her mother, who’d been to grammar school and then spent some time in Paris learning French, was a nurse; but they were both bohemians and delighted in flouting convention. Moved about constantly as she was growing up, Amanda lived in various houses in Suffolk and Sussex, and on a sea-going yacht anchored off the south coast for two years, and went to more than a dozen different state primary schools. She failed the 11+ exam so was home-schooled for a year by her mother, whose lessons tended to be literary and imaginative rather than scientific and logical. Back in London, staying with relatives, she did her O levels at the West Kensington central school, then transferred to Holland Park comprehensive in 1958, the year it opened.

She went straight into the sixth form, where after two years she passed her A levels in English literature, economic history and geography, wrote an essay that won her an exchange scholarship to the USA for a year’s schooling, and gained a place at Sussex university to study American literature. She enjoyed being a pioneer at Holland Park where she was treated in the classroom as an equal with the boys; she captained the girls’ hockey team, was a prefect and at the same time wore her CND badge with pride – and with no comeback from the teachers most of whom were either lefties or at least liberals: in all, a pretty *comprehensive* success, you might say, for an 11+ failure: just what the new system was supposed to make possible.

The Holland Park sixth form then was based in historic Holland House where the common room overlooked a walled garden; the teachers wore academic gowns and took learning, as well as the passing of exams, seriously; small groups of six to eight for the A-level subjects replaced classes of 30 or more, common elsewhere in state education, above all in primary schools; teaching took place in wood-panelled rooms equipped with tables and chairs rather than in bleak classrooms with decrepit ink-stained desks; there was an excellent, well-stocked library...sounds idyllic, doesn’t it? More like a posh private school than a typical state secondary of the 1950s.

Not surprisingly, when the time came in the 1970s, Amanda thought that her daughters should be schooled in the state system, proceeding from a local primary – by now she was teaching in one – to a comprehensive. Pimlico when it opened in 1970 was new, inspiring and trend-setting just as Holland Park had been; it was co-educational, which was important, and socially diverse; the classes were modishly mixed-ability rather than streamed as in the olden days. As well as offering a wide

range of academic subjects Pimlico was strong on the art and music side (one of our girls had a strong visual sense; the other had started playing the harp at primary school). And it was housed in a brand-new purpose-built concrete structure designed by a distinguished and celebrated architect.

There is a positive family aspect to all this which is very much part of the story. While Pimlico was being built, the children's grandfather and I often passed it on our way to the Dolphin Square squash courts and we speculated about the possibility of them going to this exciting new school when they were old enough. The head teacher, Kathleen Mitchell, was the mother of a friend of ours who lived next-door-but-one to us in Clapham. Later, Amanda's cousin started her teaching career at Pimlico and another member of the extended family turned out to be the modern languages inspector responsible for the school. Ironically, all this privileged access was in some ways a disadvantage: when problems cropped up, Amanda was reluctant to make a fuss. As a teacher herself she didn't want to be seen as the dreaded "complaining parent", somebody who put her own children before the general interest. And naturally I took my cue from her.

But on one family social occasion I did ask the modern languages inspector what the school's policy on teaching French was supposed to be. The girls' grandmother had retired to France and we made regular family visits so they were used to the idea of saying *bonjour, monsieur* or *merci, madame* where appropriate. But Pimlico's French lessons didn't seem to go much beyond that: when would actual teaching of the language start? In reply the inspector accepted that what was happening was far from ideal: most of the children were both out of control and resistant to learning French and would therefore drop it as soon as they could; that would give the motivated ones the opportunity to learn the language properly. In the meantime there was nothing to be done. This was a private acknowledgement that the celebrated all-in approach – the basis of comprehensive schooling – wasn't actually working very well at Pimlico.

And as it turned out, there were plenty of problems at the school. The first and most obvious was the building itself: it was lauded in the educational and architectural press and won awards but it was seen by many of its users, both teaching staff and pupils, as essentially impractical. For example, here's a letter published in the *Architects' Journal* from one of the original 1970 pupils who went on to a career in engineering: "The layout of the building can be extremely difficult to understand, even after attending there for three years. When you can only access certain parts of the building from certain staircases, or have to go outside to get to some classrooms, one can only wonder at the reasoning of the architect behind the layout. It is only now, after spending the 26 years since I left in consulting, civil and structural engineering, that I fully appreciate some of the design flaws the building has."\*

\*Letter by Bob Lye, 14 September, 1999

Now here's a teacher's comment: "Those of us who taught there were not impressed by the awards won by the building. Its extensive windows resulted in very high summer temperatures. In the long hot summer of 1976 I was then the NUT rep and I had to press the health and safety executive to visit and try to persuade senior management to ameliorate the problem of temperatures of over 35 degrees."\*\* The writer adds that the building had another basic design fault – the central concourse: "At lesson change nearly 2,000 students converged on one concourse with predictable consequences on behaviour."



\*\*Letter by Ian Wilson to the *Guardian*, 17 January, 2019

This raises a key point, I think: the sheer size of the urban comprehensive was/is a huge disadvantage, daunting for both 11-year-old newbie pupils and inexperienced, nervous teachers. References to large numbers of uncontrollable students and frequent outbreaks of rowdy behaviour recur constantly in reports about urban comprehensives, including Pimlico in the 40 years of its existence (it closed in 2010). Pimlico was notorious for conflict between children from different social backgrounds as well as routine violence and vandalism: the middle-class children – a sizeable minority – were ridiculed as “melons” because some of them bought their lunch at a trendy local food shop that sold exotic fruit. Our daughters reported frequent verbal abuse, taunting and bullying, though mainly by other girls rather than boys. Homework was snatched and torn up or thrown down the toilet. Lessons were constantly disrupted, above all if the teacher was new, inexperienced or seen to be vulnerable. The favourite game with a new teacher was to see how many minutes it would take to make her – more often than not it was a “her” – burst into tears.

So far this is not exceptional in accounts of inner-city comprehensives during the 1970s but what follows certainly is. At the age of 14 our elder daughter was one of the witnesses to a fatal stabbing just outside the school. The boy responsible was an ex-pupil whose sister was in her class. Another pupil witness was Becky Gardiner who went on to work for the *Guardian* and wrote later about the killing and the trial that followed:

“After the stabbing, the boy with the knife had threatened the crowd: ‘Say anything and you’ll get the same.’ I believed him. I would have done anything to avoid giving evidence, but another boy made me stay...In the months I spent waiting for [the] trial to start I saw the killer’s sister every single day. How could I avoid her, she was in my year at school. We’d pass in the corridor. She’d look me in the eye. I’d look quickly to the floor. I was a grass. She was going to kill me...”\*

\**Guardian*, 7 February, 2002

If anything our daughter had it even worse than Becky since the killer’s sister was in her class and had always been one of the class bullies. Now after the killing the intimidation was worse: she was frightened to go back to school. Amanda went to see Kath Mitchell, the head, taking our daughter with her. When she said it was routine for some Pimlico boys to carry knives, Kath was quite put out: she didn’t seem aware of what was going on. (The boy was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison.)

To her credit our daughter decided to tough it out and stay at Pimlico, rather than transfer to another school, though several of her schoolmates (among them Ben Plowden, her ladyship’s grandson) left to go elsewhere. She passed her exams and went on to train as a nurse; then moved into midwifery and became a senior research fellow in Australia.

Indeed there are plenty of ex-Pimlico pupils who have succeeded, you might say – and some have written about their experiences. But the accounts aren’t exactly complimentary with violent behaviour and chaotic “mixed-ability” classes the main complaints. Zoe Brennan, who arrived at Pimlico in 1983, described\* “the pupils wrestling on the unpoliced concourse to the jubilant chorus of ‘Fight, fight, fight’, the regular setting fire to bins” and “mixed-ability classes in a permanent atmosphere of chaos”. For her the critical point came when she told the careers adviser she wanted

to be a journalist – “And I want to go to Oxford.” “Have you thought of a secretarial course?” was the reply. Then she was refused a reference for Oxford because “no one from here gets in there”. Zoe got the message and left Pimlico for sixth form college, Oxford and a successful career as a newspaper journalist.

\*“Why state schools should stream their pupils”, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 2016

Our daughter finished the course but some years down the line there was no chance that anyone else in the family would be made to follow in her footsteps. Fortunately we could afford to pay for my son to go to a fee-paying secondary school. This wasn’t an aberration on our part, more an example of a general response to a dire situation in our part of London – for people who could afford it.

For example, when I went to discuss my son’s secondary schooling with the woman who was acting head of his Clapham primary school, I explained our decision – and her words were unambiguous and emphatic. “I’m relieved to hear what you’ve said,” she told me. “There is no local state secondary school for boys that I could really recommend at the moment – one or two for girls perhaps but none for boys.” What advice she had for parents who couldn’t afford private education for their sons I can’t say.

Another example: one of my wife’s teacher colleagues at her Brixton primary school had reached with her husband the same view as we had: whereas teaching in the state sector was socially useful as well as challenging and interesting it didn’t compel you to inflict it on your children if it wasn’t good enough. Their son, like ours, would go to a fee-paying school. Again, like ours, he would have his private school fees partly paid from the money earned by a state school teacher.

And finally: on the day when I escorted my 11-year-old son to his fee-paying secondary school to start the first term I met two other *Guardian*-reading fathers who were doing precisely the same thing, the radical playwright Snoo Wilson and the designer of *Private Eye* magazine, Tony Rushton. With regret we agreed that this was not what was supposed to happen: the progressive Sixties hadn’t really delivered, had they?

But what was the rationale for the “comprehensive revolution” that was supposed to make such a difference to British schooling and society? I first heard this phrase in the autumn of 1960. The left-wing educationist Tyrell Burgess used it when he addressed the Oxford Labour club, arguing passionately and persuasively that the comprehensive school was much more than a socially just alternative to the existing “tripartite” secondary system introduced in 1944, consisting of grammar, technical and modern schools, with the academically oriented grammars remaining on top. The comprehensive school, Burgess said, was an educational-cum-social innovation that would set in motion a massive change in society. Having been schooled together in an egalitarian system, future generations would insist on equality at work and in life generally; they would break down the class barriers that deformed British society. In that sense the comprehensive was certainly seen as revolutionary by its most vocal advocates.

I don’t remember much dissent at that Labour club meeting. Whether we’d come to Oxford from public schools or grammar schools, boys’ schools or girls’ schools or the odd co-ed and/or early comprehensive, whether we were on the left or the right-wing of the Labour party, we all opposed

privilege and hierarchy in education and naturally supported the idea of comprehensives. And of course at the same time we were against the fee-paying “public schools” – particularly if we’d been to one. But I don’t think that most of us, unless we planned to become schoolteachers, gave much thought to the practicalities of the matter.

On the left of the Labour party, as opposed to the Fabians and Gaitskellites\* on the right, most of us hadn’t bothered to “read Crosland” – I certainly hadn’t. Anthony Crosland’s book *The Future of Socialism*, published in 1956, was the manifesto that was said to have changed British politics, inspiring several generations of right-wing Labour politicians; it was certainly a long-term influence on Tony Blair’s “New Labour” project. A 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition published in 2006 by Constable in association with the Fabian Society has a foreword by Gordon Brown stressing the continuing relevance of Crosland’s book to progressive politics including education. “Instead of, as we did in the past, investing only in some of the potential of some of our children, we must invest in all the potential of all children,” Brown wrote.

\*Members of the gradualist Fabian Society and supporters of Hugh Gaitskell, Labour party leader, 1955-63

And it was Crosland – well-known for that quote recorded by his wife Susan in her biography\*\*, “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland.” – who was the Labour minister responsible for implementing the policy of comprehensivisation in 1965.

\*\**Tony Crosland*, Susan Crosland, Jonathan Cape, 1982

So to understand and assess the original argument for comprehensives it’s not a bad idea to go back to Crosland’s celebrated book. In his chapter on education he reviews the existing state school system based on selection at 11 calling it “the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality”; the 1944 Education Act hadn’t achieved “equality of opportunity” for all sorts of reasons. Crosland also stresses the need to reduce class sizes, improve school buildings and raise the school-leaving age. And then he comes to the nub of the question: even when all these improvements have been made, he says, there will be no “equality of opportunity” while “we maintain a system of superior private schools, open to the wealthier classes, but out of reach of poorer children however talented and deserving”. So the first and most important reform must be to grasp the nettle of the “public schools”.

Later in the chapter he makes some specific policy proposals in a way that is measured and cautious. To be successful, comprehensives need various things like “a quite exceptional calibre of headmaster\*\*\*, of which the supply is severely limited; a high-quality staff for sixth-form teaching – again a factor in limited supply – and buildings of an adequate scale and scope”. If these conditions can’t be met “it would be quite wrong to close down grammar schools of acknowledged academic quality”.

\*\*\*an example of sexism common at the time, even among lefties and social reformers: it’s obvious that being able to include an able woman or two would ease the shortage of good “headmasters”.

Then Crosland puts an even stronger argument against the wanton destruction of grammar schools, one that may surprise those who recognise him only for the “destroy every fucking grammar school”

quote. He says that most education authorities don't favour mass comprehensivisation – “and no one proposes that the remainder should be coerced”. (Until he becomes the minister responsible for it Crosland is not keen on coercion.) But the next point really does deserve emphasis: “It would, moreover, be absurd from a socialist point of view to close down the grammar schools, while leaving the public schools still holding their present commanding position.”

Crosland has spotted something important here, something that, in office, he obviously forgot or ignored, something that less bright Labour politicians and their cheerleaders have consistently failed to see: closing down the grammar schools “would simply intensify the class cleavage by removing the middle tier which now spans the gulf between top and bottom”. Isn't this precisely what has happened in the past 50-odd years? And in office Labour went further than closing down state grammar schools wherever possible: they abolished the direct grant and voluntary-aided systems, forcing schools that had traditionally offered free places to bright working-class children to go comprehensive – or, for parents who could find the money, private.

An option, never seriously considered by Labour educationists and politicians, was to convert grammar schools to sixth-form colleges, restricting entry to pupils who had passed their GCE/GCSEs – something equivalent to the French lycée. The comprehensive would then have become an extension of primary school from 11 to 16, as so many in fact became. But this would have meant a massive increase in funding.

So what is to be done now about the “public schools”? In 1956 Crosland considered what options there were and said there were three, though the second turned out to be: do nothing but hope for the best, namely the withering away of the independent sector because of the excellence of the state sector – which hasn't worked out, clearly. The first option, abolition, Crosland rejected calmly but decisively, making several obvious points: the category “private schools” includes experimental schools\* – they are almost always private – and it would be silly as well as wrong to outlaw them since they are a valuable source of new ideas; then, as a matter of principle, “interference with private liberty would be intolerable” (except to the dyed-in-the-wool totalitarian this point is unanswerable); and finally the abolition of fee-paying schools would create a strong demand for private tutors and schools abroad, access to which would also have to be banned. Imagine officials at Dover, instead of just searching incoming vehicles for third world and east European immigrants, having to check outgoing vehicles in order to spot would-be expat school pupils, trying to distinguish them from their affluent peers who are merely going skiing or water-skiing in foreign parts.

\*Summerhill, founded by AS Neill in 1921, is a good example.

It's a pretty obvious point this. In fact I've often wondered if the people who say they want to “abolish the public schools” – that is, harass them, punish them and make them illegal – are aware that, from the reign of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no such thing as a legal Catholic school in England. Established once-Catholic schools like Winchester and Eton were compelled to conform to the new state religion, Anglicanism, and newly founded Catholic schools had to operate abroad, which inevitably made them more expensive and socially exclusive but didn't stop them functioning altogether. You could say therefore that “abolition” has already been tried over more than 200 years and has failed since a Catholic public school like Stonyhurst (founded at St Omer in northern France in 1593) survived its centuries of exile and continues to flourish.

And of course, if there were to be an end to charitable status for fee-paying schools, or punitive taxation\* or other state interference short of abolition, the private sector might be weakened, though it would certainly survive – but school fees would have to go up, and then increased fees would ensure that the sector would become even more exclusive than ever. Which takes us back to Crosland’s original argument: surely it isn’t desirable to “intensify the class cleavage”?

\*for example, the Labour party’s current policy of imposing VAT on private school fees

His third policy option was the integration of the fee-paying schools into the state system. He called this the “most sensible approach”, quoting the recommendation of the Fleming Committee in 1944 that independent schools should offer a quarter of their places to non fee-paying pupils; the proportion would gradually increase until these schools became “equally accessible to all pupils”. Crosland’s conclusion in the 1950s when he published his book was emphatic: “The next Labour government must simply choose between sending no state-aided pupils to the public schools at all, which would be a public confession that it had lost interest in socialism and equality, and sending a really large number. Clearly it must do the latter...”

As it turned out, Harold Wilson’s 1964 government didn’t do the latter (so according to the Crosland argument Labour stood accused of having “lost interest in socialism and equality”). But it was certainly set on reform, particularly in education where “progressive” ideas dominated. In 1964 the process of raising the school leaving age (ROSLA) from 15 to 16 was planned, though it didn’t actually happen until 1972. In 1965 Crosland, now education minister, issued the historic Circular 10/65 instructing local authorities to make plans for the introduction of comprehensive schools. Then in 1966 there was the three-week Dartmouth Seminar on the teaching of English when British and American specialists met and decided the subject should become “an instrument of personal growth”\*. And finally in 1967 the influential Plowden committee published its famous report, describing and endorsing child-centred primary education.

\*see Chapter 13

In fact Plowden made a number of other proposals, some of which were adopted over time and some of which were ignored. For example, the report said yes to nursery education from the age of three and to a restructuring of primary education with transfers at eight and 12, instead of 11; yes to a reduction in the size of primary school classes and to more male teachers; and an emphatic no to tests of intelligence and attainment, eg the 11+, and corporal punishment.

But the overwhelming effect of Plowden was to accelerate the move to “progressive”, child-centred education. Crucially, the abolition of the 11+ encouraged primary schools to continue to develop a more informal approach with an emphasis on individuality and learning by discovery. After all, if there was no longer powerful pressure from parents, teachers and school governors for the pupils to perform to a particular standard so they could pass the 11+ and so win selection to grammar school, primary schools could maintain a more relaxed and child-centred way of working. The report’s key slogan was “At the heart of the educational process lies the child.” And Plowden herself wrote, two years after the publication of her report: “The effect of the Report has been to accelerate the pace of change – to endorse the revolution in primary education which has been taking place since the war.”

In my opinion the three most useful Plowden proposals were to start schooling at the age of three; to restructure it with transfers to the next stage at eight and 12 (though I would have said 13) since 11 is far too young for the biggest change in a pupil's development; and – most important of all – to reduce the size of primary school classes by employing more teachers. This is the nettle that no government has since grasped. Again and again, this recommendation is made by experts, inspectors, committees, unions, individual teachers – and anybody who knows anything about schooling. Again and again, this recommendation is ignored, presumably because successive governments know only too well that the voting public will not pay the price that more egalitarian state education requires.

Class size is one of the key issues that influence parents to go private. Another is the general condition of most of the children in the neighbourhood: are they at five years old ready for school? What's their attitude to learning and being taught? Have they learnt to socialise, co-operate, work together?

Simply, you're better off as an individual pupil if the other children in your class have a positive mind-set and are ready for school. This sounds so obvious it hardly needs saying. In fact it's a point that does need emphasising as schooling has become less "the teacher instructs; the pupils listen and absorb" and more "the pupils ask questions and investigate to find things out for themselves"; less "the pupils take in information as individuals" and more "the pupils collaborate in group learning". The more that learning is active rather than passive the more it depends for success on the motivation of the learners and their attitude to each other. You don't need a degree in psychology to see the point.

When large classes have to be taught according to the ideology of "mixed-ability", teachers and pupils are truly up against it. But there's another thing. For some bizarre reason, which I have never understood, the state primary school seems committed to the practice of the same teacher teaching their class virtually everything on the syllabus for an entire year. So the teacher may need to prepare several different lesson plans, for different ability levels, in each of the subjects on the timetable. And the pupil has to put up with the same teacher all day long. If I may say this politely, some teachers must find aspects of the syllabus more challenging – I think that's the correct PC word – than others; and some pupils must find parts of the school day insupportably tedious.

I hold the old-fashioned view that teachers should know what they are talking about (and they shouldn't talk too much). In my experience it is the able and knowledgeable teacher who is more likely to have the confidence to say in response to a pupil's question: "I'll have to look that up – but why don't you look it up as well and we can compare notes?" The sharper you are as a student the easier it is to spot the teacher who's desperately trying to conceal the fact that they're really not sure how to answer a question because they lack the necessary background knowledge.

This knowledge thing is really the key: if "progressive education" means using new, different, up-to-date *methods* of teaching, concentrating on the basics at the beginning, introducing the nuances and subtleties as the children develop, who could oppose it? Not me, certainly: I'm all in favour of innovation, experiment, exciting ways of finding new solutions to old problems. And the lecture is certainly not the ideal way of teaching children. But unfortunately, all too often, "progressive education" has meant something contradictory to learning itself. It has been based on the absurd idea that acquiring knowledge doesn't matter, that what matters is process, method, skills

("transferable" skills of course) *instead of* knowledge. This is the theme of Daisy Christodoulou's excellent demolition job on the modern orthodoxy, *Seven Myths About Education*. \* Another iconoclast is Robert Peal, now acting head of the West London Free School, who records this ridiculous remark made by the deputy head at his first school: "History is a skills-based curriculum. You should really be able to teach it without knowing anything at all."\*\* In the United States ED Hirsch, who describes himself as a political liberal who was forced to become an educational conservative,\*\* stresses that it is children from disadvantaged homes that suffer most from abandoning the knowledge-based curriculum.

\*Routledge, 2014. The seven myths are: facts prevent understanding; teacher-led instruction is passive; the 21<sup>st</sup> century fundamentally changes everything; you can always just look it up; we should teach transferable skills; projects and activities are the best way to learn; teaching knowledge is indoctrination.

\*\**Progressively Worse: The burden of bad ideas in British schools*, Civitas, 2014

\*\*\* *The Making of Americans*, Yale University Press, 2010

Of course there's another big divide: where do you live? In the inner city or the outer suburbs? In the affluent parts of the south-east or the poverty-stricken parts of the north-east? A "good" postcode promises nice neighbours and calm, considerate, competent schooling for your children. There's not the same need to go private if you can afford to buy your way into the leafy suburbs or one of the commuter towns and villages where house prices start at half a million pounds. It adds insult to injury when such affluent people with "progressive" views whose children attend a good primary or comprehensive criticise parents who reluctantly go private because their local state school doesn't deliver.

There's a special *Guardian* reader's tone of disdain directed at these people who break the unwritten rules. Among them the worst offenders are said to be the left-wing politicians who send their children anywhere other than the local primary and comprehensive: ideology dictates that, instead, they should be made to suffer like other people's children. But isn't this the wrong way round: why should the *children* of a politician be discriminated against? Castigate the parent for their policies for other people's children but don't penalise the child unlucky enough to have a politician for a parent.

As a Londoner I was struck speechless once when a work colleague who lived somewhere in Hertfordshire let slip that his son at the local comprehensive was a member of the school golf team. A golf team at a comprehensive? But of course, why not? Why not golf, cricket, the classical languages, drama, music, art, debating and the rest at comprehensive schools? After all, the original argument used to promote the idea of them was "grammar schools for all", a slogan used by Harold Wilson campaigning in the 1964 election. And Crosland's famous Circular 10/65 promised to "preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for the children who now receive it and make it available for more children".

But nobody could argue that since 1965 the comprehensive schools as a whole have justified the faith in them that the educational revolutionaries had. Of course there have been successes but they have been offset by the failures. Are they fit for purpose? In fact the label "comprehensive" attached

to an individual school doesn't tell you very much. What is clear is that most parents in most areas of England and Wales send their children to the local comprehensive so you could say they accept the current system. However, nobody can say how many of those parents would go private if they could afford it.

Where once Britain had a succession of ex-grammar school prime ministers, starting with Harold Wilson in 1964, we now seem doomed to be ruled by people from fee-paying schools. Most people know that David Cameron and Boris Johnson went to Eton but, just as significantly, the current Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, is an old boy of Reigate Grammar School which went independent in 1976 while he was a pupil. And don't let's forget his most successful Labour predecessor, trendy Tony "I'm your mate" Blair, who went to Fettes in Scotland, which has been called the Eton of the north.

From the bench of judges to the England cricket team the powerful, influential and successful people in Britain today are disproportionately the products of independent schools. So abolish them, some say. But as Crosland the thinker (as opposed to Crosland the politician) pointed out, that's not the answer. The sensible answer surely is to improve state schooling.

The closure of schools caused by the Covid pandemic raised all sorts of questions: the need to maintain free school meals, for example; the non-availability in poor homes of personal computers; above all, the facts of life for families living in poverty – cramped, overcrowded, badly heated housing, lack of garden space, lack of spare cash for treats and emergencies, not to mention a higher death rate from the virus caused by greater personal contact at home as well as at work. Meanwhile there have been some absurdities, such as the decision by the Portuguese government to force private schools to close for a while since the state schools had to.

So you might say that the pandemic has removed the last thread of credibility from the specious argument that revolutionising the education system is a short cut to a more equal society. Instead, first establish your equal society; then, logically, you can hope for a more egalitarian approach to education.



# Education, education, education

## Chapter 13: the English question

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*No more Latin, no more French/No more sitting on a hard school bench*

If there's one slogan that's always quoted when anybody's trying to attack – or defend – the expansion of British higher education since the early 1960s it's "More means worse". Here, for example, is the Tory politician Lord David Willetts plugging his book in praise of universities\* in his (and my) Oxford college magazine: "Before the Robbins Report of 1963 about 5% of young people in England went to university – now we are close to 50%...Kingsley Amis, the original edusceptic, argued at the time that 'More means worse'." And here's my old friend and Oxford contemporary Professor Sir Roderick Floud attacking Amis directly in a lecture entitled "More Means Better: Fifty years of higher education": "British higher education, like much else, began to change in the 1960s. The report in 1963 of the Robbins Committee... produced the first six new – plateglass – universities. Meanwhile Anthony Crosland as secretary of state for education created the parallel polytechnic system. In response came the *cri de coeur* by the English novelist Kingsley Amis that 'more will mean worse'...expanding the number of students would reduce their quality...only very few – such as the tiny proportion of the population who then went to university, were clever enough to benefit from it."\*\*

\*A *University Education*, OUP, 2018, discussed in *Christ Church Matters 41*, Trinity Term 2018

\*\*19 June 2014 [www.gresham.ac.uk](http://www.gresham.ac.uk)

Well, at least Roderick gets the quotation right in his text whereas Willetts makes the common mistake of changing the tense in the quote so that a specific doleful prediction by Amis becomes a highly dubious – in fact nonsensical – general statement. But it looks as though neither of them has actually checked the source of the quote which is to be found in a long and rather rambling article by Amis in the July 1960 issue of *Encounter*\*\*\*. It was in fact published when Roderick was still at school and the Robbins Committee had yet to meet. So it could hardly be a reaction to Robbins – more a warning shot.

\*\*\*"Lone Voices: Views of the 'Fifties", Kingsley Amis, *Encounter*, July 1960

[www.unz.com/print/Encounter](http://www.unz.com/print/Encounter)

I must admit that I hadn't read the piece myself until recently but what stands out from it is that Amis, then a lecturer in English literature at Swansea university, is doing what the title suggests – looking back at the 1950s rather than forward to the 1960s. He takes pot-shots at various trends and trendsetters – "Hoggart-wash" is a palpable hit – but reserves his heavy artillery for advertising: "The majority of advertisers are as dishonest as they can get away with being." Advertising is also guilty of attracting "too many people of demonstrable literacy" whereas "where they are really needed is in teaching". That is the nub of his argument: not that his students are stupid but that they have been failed by the system; they have fallen into "the pit of ignorance and incapacity into which British education has sunk since the war". The result, he says, is that some of his students are barely

literate (he sarcastically cites “unsteadiness with hard words like *goes* and *its*”) and often ignorant of poetical terms like metre and canonical poets like Alexander Pope.

So if Swansea’s existing English literature students are ignorant and barely literate in Amis’s opinion, it’s not surprising that he warns against increasing their number. But – there are several buts. First, if we can imagine ourselves back in 1960, is the literacy problem unique to English literature students or do the university teachers of other subjects face it too? Do traditional Swansea university courses in maths, metallurgy and engineering falter because their students aren’t properly prepared for them? Do Eng lit undergraduates at, say, Birmingham and Liverpool struggle with their literacy and knowledge of poetic terminology in the same way as Swansea students are said to do?

And finally, wouldn’t Amis’s local problem be solved, or at least eased, by a remedial English course for Swansea literature students and any others that have been badly served by their schoolteachers? If this idea sounds a trifle far-fetched, please read on because that is what I ended up providing, essentially, for post-A level journalism students in the 1980s and 1990s.

As far as I know these questions were never asked because nobody bothered to engage with Amis’s argument. People merely reacted to its angry, melodramatic conclusion. Here is that conclusion, by the way, just as *Encounter* printed it: “I wish I could have a little tape-and-loudspeaker arrangement sewn into the binding of this magazine, to be triggered off by the light reflected from the reader’s eyes on to this part of the page, and set to bawl out at several bells: MORE *will mean* WORSE.”

Typographical variation used like this is the print equivalent of those abusive ALL IN CAPITALS scrawls once sent by post to newspaper offices or nowadays left on car windscreens to draw attention to the driver’s alleged adultery and/or poor parking – often in green ink and punctuated by multiple screamers (never less than three) like this: !!! Although Amis rejected the tabloid “Angry Young Man” label linking him with writers like John Osborne and Colin Wilson, he was clearly capable of more than mild irritation.

However, I’ve seen no evidence that in 1960 university teachers as a whole found their undergraduate students badly prepared. As far as Oxford and competence in English are concerned there are clear reasons for this: not only was an O-level pass in English language compulsory for Oxford entrance – so were passes in Latin and a modern language, usually French. And whereas English grammar lessons at school might be cursory or inept, an O-level student could hardly learn enough Latin and French grammar to pass in those subjects without acquiring a smattering of the English equivalent. So by passing those three key O levels, English, Latin and French, you gained – and so could demonstrate – a degree of competence in your own language.

For Catholic children, when I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s, there was also the catechism, which laid out the essentials of the church’s doctrine and incidentally helped to school us in English grammar. We started learning the catechism at the same time as we were learning to read and write, so it made a strong and lasting impression. “Who made you?” it began, and the answer, which we learnt to say out loud and then memorise, was “God made me” – not, you’ll notice, just the one word “God” but a full sentence. Alas, when I checked the current Catholic children’s catechism recently, I found that the full sentence had been replaced by the single word “God”. Whereas we learnt from the beginning that formal speech and writing required sentences: God expected to be spoken to properly, with due deference and respect for the conventions.

(Not so, of course, in the old Welsh school story where the teacher asks the class: “Who made the world, children?” and the answer is a thunderous chant of “Aneurin Bevan”. When the teacher asks again the class swot puts up a tentative hand: “Please, miss, was it God, miss?” As emphatically as before, the children shout out “Bloody Tory”.)

There was a downside, of course, to the old emphasis on Latin. It could result in a lifelong attachment to shibboleths like don’t end a sentence with a preposition or start one with a conjunction or “never split an infinitive”. To this day the prose of some of my contemporaries shows this particular scar. Here’s Sir Simon Jenkins, once editor of the *Times*, commenting in the *Guardian* on the prime minister’s policy on farming: “he faces the prospect of having de facto to nationalise an entire industry.” (2 March 2020)

As it stands, “having de facto to nationalise” is both clumsy and confusing: it’s a bit of a mouthful and it risks linking the Latin phrase “de facto” with “having” rather than with “nationalise”. Rewritten as “having to, effectively, nationalise” Simon’s sentence becomes clear and accessible to readers who didn’t attempt, never mind pass, O-level Latin but are used to reading idiomatic modern English.

The “split infinitive problem”, by the way, was solved long ago by academic linguists, notably the Danish scholar Otto Jespersen who redefined the infinitive as the simple verb form – “nationalise” without the preposition “to”. According to this elegant solution a “split infinitive” is simply not possible. To illustrate: *I made him do it* and *I wanted him to do it* both include the infinitive *do* but only the second includes the preposition *to*. So the *to* is an optional add-on, dictated by idiom not grammar; it can’t be an essential part of the infinitive. Newcomers to English may find this distinction difficult of course – which explains why they some of them will continue to say “I made him to do it” even after they’ve mastered more complicated constructions.

Long before Jespersen, Samuel Johnson said confidently of Milton that he “was too busy to much miss his wife”\*. Then George Bernard Shaw rebuked the *London Daily Chronicle* in 1892 for applying the false rule banning splitting, while Raymond Chandler became quite angry in 1947: “When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split.” In fact it’s easier to find really good writers who do sometimes “split” than ones who consciously decide not to.

\**Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, 1779-81*

Back in the 1950s English teachers spoke and wrote in the conventional version of English called “standard” as well as insisting that pupils speak and write it. You could get away with regional dialect in a short story, say, but not in an essay. There was school slang, of course, but that didn’t belong in written composition. In speech there were of course regional *accents* – used by pupils and teachers alike – but non-standard variants of grammar were ridiculed rather than respected. In the classroom you couldn’t say, still less write, “I could of danced all night” or “I don’t know nothing” without being seen as a figure of fun, a yokel, an ignoramus. Thus the consensus, conformity, convention encouraged “standard” English.

What is useful about Amis’s angry complaint is that it contradicts the conventional narrative that all was well with the teaching of English in state schools until the 1960s when the progressives came along and ruined it. However, on his main point Amis was wrong: there didn’t need to be any “more”

for things to get “worse” in many aspects of English; that was going to happen anyway in the 1960s as “progressive” child-centred doctrines increasingly dominated the classroom, Latin and French lost ground and English lessons in particular became more informal and less structured and coherent. But his outburst raises another question: was he right to say that British education *sank* to a “pit of ignorance and incapacity” *after* the end of the second world war? Or was what happened in the late 1940s and 1950s a continuation of what went before – more of the same?

There was one important end-of-war change of course: the 1944 Education Act as well as establishing the tripartite system of grammar, technical and modern schools (see Chapter 12) guaranteed free secondary education for all, thus widening access and increasing participation. So after 1945 “more” might well have led to “worse” in secondary education – for some people anyway – without a deliberate change of policy. In fact if expansion hadn’t led to some overall decline in quality, in the chaotic post-war conditions of the 1940s with ex-soldiers rapidly retrained as teachers, it would have been a miracle.

But, as far as the teaching of English is concerned, it’s clear that Amis was mistaken to imply that before 1945 all was well. According to two academic linguists in a learned article\* and accessible online, the decline goes back for decades. They write: “In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English grammar disappeared from the curriculum of most schools in England...the decline... in schools was linked to a similar gap in English universities, where there was virtually no serious research or teaching on English grammar.”

\**The English Patient: English Grammar and teaching in the twentieth century*, Richard Hudson and John Walmsley, *Journal of Linguistics*, Volume 41, No 3, November 2005

The argument they develop goes like this: in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “little serious work on grammar was being pursued in Britain, still less on the grammar of English. The work which was published was produced primarily by freelancers or practising teachers and was orientated to the needs of schools, journalists or civil servants.” They also quote a report published in 1921 which said that it was “impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no-one knows exactly what it is”.

“After the 1920s,” they say, “grammatical activity sank to an all-time low...pressure was also growing to place more weight on literature at the expense of grammar. From the teachers’ point of view, there was increasing uncertainty as to the purpose and use of grammar, and even as to its very nature... Under the pressure of English Literature there was felt to be no room for language study in an ‘English’ curriculum.” And by the 1960s a progressive/humanist movement took every opportunity to deploy all the arguments it could find against grammar: most children disliked it; children below the age of about 15 could not learn grammar, and even if they could it was no use to them.

A striking illustration of this attitude appeared at a celebrated Anglo-American seminar on English teaching held at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire in the summer of 1966, which attracted more than 50 specialists in the subject from Britain, the US and Canada. It emerged that there were some differences in existing practice between the two continents. According to one participant: “In many British schools the Americans found no written curriculum existed”; at best, what they found there was “a list of literary works to be read sometime during the year”. But there was consensus by the

end of the seminar over what was to be done in future: classroom English was to become, if it wasn't already, an instrument of personal growth rather than an arid exercise in accuracy and grammar, as another participant made explicit\*.

\*JN Hook, *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's first 67 Years*, 1979, and John Dixon, *Growth through English*, 1967, both published by the National Association for the Teaching of English

Hudson and Walmsley say that the decades from the 1930s to the 1970s "witnessed a growth of militant philistinism as a consequence of the essentially materialistic arguments put forward by the literature specialists – namely, that grammar could only be tolerated if it could empirically demonstrate that its teaching had a beneficial effect on pupils' language skills...

"Despite increased unease that standards of language were falling significantly and noticeably in the universities and that the educational system was failing the children in its care (Schools Council 1968: *passim*), representatives of the new 'humane' culture were happy to go on record as knowing nothing whatsoever about the grammar of their native language...In the 1960s there was no university tradition of research on English grammar, so *a fortiori* there was no tradition of linking this research to school teaching, nor was there any tradition in schools of linking teaching to university-level research.

"English teaching, both in primary schools and in secondary schools, was dominated by literature and the search for creativity in writing. Grammar was mere mechanics, which children could be taught as and when it was relevant, or which they could just be left to pick up for themselves... the demise of grammar was part of a larger package of educational changes which eventually turned out to be a dead end as it left a significant number of school leavers with hardly any reading and writing skills at all: in 1999 it was calculated that seven million UK adults were functionally illiterate."

Between 1968 and 1977 I gradually became aware of what was happening in English teaching in British state schools, particularly in London. My step-daughters were pupils at local primary schools, then at a comprehensive; my wife was, first, a student in a teacher training college, then a primary-school teacher. And what I learnt was deeply depressing: "creativity" – whatever that might mean: fairy stories? narrative flair? extra adverbs? – was the name of the game; accuracy and correctness were unimportant; structure, clarity and coherence were virtually ignored. Grammar and punctuation were reduced to a few infantile expressions and instructions: "a sentence must have a 'doing word'" (what we used to call a verb); "spoken words in a story need 'speech marks'" (a babyish oversimplification of inverted commas/quotation/quote marks); "when you pause for breath put a comma in" (ignore logic and hope for the best). As for spelling there didn't seem to be any plan at all: the dominant idea seemed to be that learning lists of words and having tests would put the children off so best not to insist; if all went well, they'd learn to spell in the end if they spent enough time reading books (tough if they didn't, of course).

Part of the primary school problem was the questionable literacy of some of the teachers. At our local Church of England primary, established 1648, in leafy, affluent Clapham the head teacher's circulars were a standing joke shared by parents on Saturday mornings during junior football on the common – you had to smile, though it was through clenched teeth.

At Garnett College of Education in the autumn of 1977 I found I was the only journalist on the one-year course for would-be FE teachers with professional experience so I was attached for practical work to the group specialising in English, although the college called it “Communications”, the term then in vogue. And that is how I came to be researching the different methods of teaching spelling in the college library one winter’s day. You’d think that would be a reasonable place to start – but it turned out to be a complete dead end. There was nothing – nothing at all – in the library on spelling although there were two shelves of books on various, often experimental, methods of teaching reading.

The most bizarre of these was the “initial teaching alphabet” (ITA), introduced in the early 1960s. As an early learner you were expected to absorb a 44-character alphabet in which each character corresponded to a single sound; then later, in a separate procedure, you had transfer this skill to normal reading of the conventional alphabet. After some years of experimental work on guinea pigs – mostly working-class children, of course – the scheme was abandoned, leaving its victims behind, some of them with a life sentence of illiteracy. To illustrate: once, missing the last train from Dover, I hitched a lift to south London with a cowman who was driving a stylish and comfortable car – a real gent who said he was happy to take me miles out of his way but he’d have to turn round and go back when my intended route left the main road: he just couldn’t read the signs that would show him the way home. When I asked why, he said: “I was supposed to learn to read by using the ITA method but I failed” – or it failed.

I did eventually manage to find a book on spelling: *Spelling: Caught or Taught?* by Margaret Peters (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). It illustrated the problem – a survey of primary school teachers showed “little evidence of actual instruction in spelling” whereas it was clear that for many children spelling is not simply “caught” by reading – and made various suggestions as to how to deal with it. One I found convincing was based on the psychological principle of association: from a word you can spell you progress to other similar ones you may have trouble with, as in learning by heart the sentence “The penguin spilt fruit juice down his suit and ruined it” where you’re already familiar with one or more “ui” words. But it was clear that 10 years after its publication the book’s message had not got through: spelling in most state schools was still not being systematically taught or practised.

In October 1976 the Labour prime minister James Callaghan had launched “the great debate” about public education with a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. He had referred to “complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job” and to “unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods”. Here, a year or so after his speech, was clear evidence that, in English at least, there was indeed a problem – and that, at Garnett at least, not much was being done to solve it.

The malaise seemed to be general and official. In our practical sessions at Garnett we were told that grammar, spelling and punctuation had a limited importance for both the traditional GCE qualification and the lower-level Certificate in Secondary Education\*, which had been introduced in 1965. As our group of aspirant English (sorry, “Communications”) teachers discovered more about the realities of the subject they were now expected to teach in colleges of further education, there was growing disillusionment at the task ahead of them. Whereas I was very relieved to find that the journalism tutors at the London College of Printing, where I did my teaching practice, thought that

grammar, spelling, punctuation and the rest were pretty important. After all, if you're editing somebody's copy, how exactly do you go about it if you can't punctuate? If you're writing for publication, some idea of grammar can't be bad. And, obviously, what's published needs to be spelt correctly – and in a consistent style in the case of variations (such as *spelt/spelled*).

\*The two qualifications were merged in 1988 into the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE).

After I joined the permanent staff of the LCP and started running journalism courses as well as teaching on them, I stopped worrying about the use of English as such and concentrated on journalistic technique. Several years passed. Then, almost simultaneously, two things happened: first, two editors who acted as our external examiners wrote a report saying that some LCP journalism students were still making elementary mistakes in English at the end of their course; and second, a magazine publishing company asked me to run a workshop covering aspects of English language for their graduate trainees. That's right: bright young graduates recruited for their writing skills, their ability to express themselves and communicate effectively, were hampered by the fact that they were still making basic errors in English – and obviously this wasn't good news for the titles they worked on. When challenged, they often responded by saying something like: "We were never taught that" – and you had to add (though not out loud): "And the university which managed to convert your A-levels into BA (increasingly first-class or 2:1) degrees obviously didn't bother too much either."

I once ran an intensive one-day writing and subbing workshop for the periodical publishers Morgan-Grampian at their offices in Woolwich which consisted of four participants, articulate graduates at the start of their careers. As they introduced themselves, I asked them to say what their formal level in English was. One of them had veered away from studying English after GCE; another had an A level in the subject; a third had a BA degree; and the fourth a higher degree. But was there any noticeable difference in their command of English in terms of usage, grammar etc? You'll have guessed the answer.

So "English for journalists" was born, as something adaptable to the needs of students, either pre-entry or already employed. It could be the first part of a course, an element in a full-time programme, or the basis of a one-day workshop. And it also became the title of a handbook\* for trainees, students and anybody interested in the subject, now in its fifth edition. But as the novelist and journalist Keith Waterhouse said when he reviewed the book in the *British Journalism Review*: "English for *journalists*? Aren't we supposed to *know* English?"

This remains the key question: not only potential journalists but everybody else is entitled to effective instruction and guided practice at school in the use of their own language. They shouldn't have to go to college for a remedial course.

\**English for Journalists*, Routledge, 1993...2023. A second book, *Writing for Journalists*, followed in 1999, and I contributed to several others in the Media Skills series. I also wrote a commentary on usage, *Quite Literally*, which came out in 2004.



A second theme of *The English Patient* is the development since the 1960s of linguistics and descriptive grammar as academic subjects. For the first time the universities started to provide a

theoretical basis for changes to the English curriculum. As successive official reports recommended that “English teaching should include explicit teaching about grammar”, the first national curriculum was introduced in 1988. The consequence is that there has been something of a revolution in the teaching and assessment of English in schools.

Not surprisingly there have been problems since “we in England are emerging from a period of grammar-free education”. Older teachers may have learnt some grammar but now need to cope with a new approach, while most young teachers “know very little grammar and are suspicious of explicit grammar teaching”. And then of course there are the parents who, unless they have been exposed to language and linguistics as an academic discipline, will now have difficulty helping with English homework.

During the Covid pandemic of 2020-22, many parents of English schoolchildren were on lockdown duty as emergency teaching assistants, some of them confronted for the first time with the new grammar jargon – expressions like modal verbs and relative pronoun cohesion. Eliane Glaser, a journalist and the mother of two primary-school children, reported\* that eight and nine-year-olds are now expected to know all about “noun phrases expanded by the addition of modifying adjectives, preposition phrases, fronted adverbials and determiners”. Of these the fronted adverbial has been a particular source of bafflement. According to the current national curriculum for Key Stage 2 children in year 4, aged 8-9: “Pupils should be taught to develop their understanding of the concepts set out in English Appendix 2 by...using fronted adverbials...[and]...indicate grammatical and other features by using commas after fronted adverbials.”

\**Prospect*, March 2021

So what’s it all about? First, what’s an adverbial and what’s the difference between it and an adverb? Bas Aarts, who is professor of English linguistics at University College London, has a blog called *Grammariansism* in which he comments on the issues raised by the national curriculum and answers queries, particularly from teachers. He writes: “...adverb is a *grammatical form* label (more specifically, a word class label), whereas Adverbial is a *grammatical function* label (and hence spelled with a capital letter on this blog).”

So an adverb can be an Adverbial and so can a variety of phrases and clauses that have a similar function. I follow the logic of adopting a particular word to show this function but unfortunately the word “adverbial” is also used in the terminology of traditional grammar as the adjective derived from the word “adverb”, for example in the expression “adverbial phrase”. Confusion between the two uses is inevitable.\* A further confusion is that some definitions of “phrase” seem to include “clauses” whereas in traditional grammar a clause has a verb and a phrase doesn’t.

\*See a lucid discussion of this and various other “fronting” issues by Brian Richards, professor of education at the Institute of Education in *Affronted Adverbials*, available at [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net).

Aarts continues: “What is a fronted Adverbial? This is simply an Adverbial that is placed at the start of a sentence, as in the following examples:

*Over the last few weeks*, the train company has apologised several times for the delays.

*Last month*, we went to the beach.



*Before the match finished*, the stadium emptied.

“(Something to be aware of: the national curriculum insists that children write a comma after a fronted Adverbial.)”

To be technical for a moment: classifying a word or group of words as an “Adverbial” is certainly an example of grammar whereas the decision about where it goes in a sentence is surely a matter of style rather than grammar. But what is the point of “fronting” anyway? Aarts explains: “The italicised phrases normally occur later in the sentence, so a question that arises here is this: ‘Why would we want to put Adverbials at the start of a sentence?’ The answer is that fronted Adverbials highlight the phrases that have been placed initially, and hence they can be a useful device for writers to draw their readers’ attention to this part of a sentence.”

So in rather clumsy and repetitious language we have the simple idea that what comes first in a sentence has more impact than it would later on. But is this always true? Aren’t some common initial words and phrases – last month, yesterday, on Sundays – the exact opposite of dramatic? Informative certainly but “perfunctory” would surely be a more accurate term. And can’t you also achieve impact in a sentence by a powerful ending? (Logically then, we would have to talk about “backed adverbials” as well as fronted ones – and “centred adverbials” too for the cases where they belong in mid-sentence.)

When a fairy story begins “Once upon a time” that expression is merely a sign that what follows is in fact a fairy story, just as years ago young listeners to the radio programme *Listen with Mother* settled down to the familiar words “Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin.”

And what about powerful endings to sentences? Here’s the children’s master story-teller Roald Dahl early in his book about a friendly giant, *The BFG*: “He was running so fast his black cloak was streaming out behind him *like the wings of a bird.*” And a line or two later: “A wide river appeared in his path. He crossed it *in one flying stride.*” No doubt about where the impact is in these examples. So should the 8-9 year olds be expected in an exercise to bring these phrases forward to “highlight” them, thus correcting Roald Dahl? I think not.

Now consider two questions you might put to a boy or girl: “What do you do on Saturdays?” and “When do you play football?” The formal answer to the first might be “On Saturdays I play football” and to the second “I play football on Saturdays”. Here the order of the words is determined not by a straining for effect but by deciding what the reader/listener wants/needs to know next. I think this logical principle is relevant both for those learning to write and for those writing (or rewriting) for publication. As the late great wordsmith Clive James said of his first editorial job on the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “Apart from the invaluable parsing lessons at school, these months doing rewrites were probably the best practical training I ever received...writing is essentially a matter of saying things in the right order.”\*

\**Unreliable Memoirs*, Jonathan Cape, 1980

In his blog Bas Aarts does add to his main point about impact, saying that fronted adverbials “also offer writers the opportunity to vary their sentence structures”, and he cautions against over use of them, specifying “box-ticking”. Alas, to judge from the various websites advising parents in these troubled times, it looks as though “box-ticking” is very much the name of the game.

Here are some examples of sentences including adverbials given by one prominent site\* for primary-school parents:

We met *by the train station*.

He stood and waited *under the clock*.

The rabbit hopped *as fast as it could*.

She danced *all night long*.

He ate his breakfast *before the sun came up*.

And the same sentences with the adverbials fronted:

*By the train station*, we met.

*Under the clock*, he stood and waited.

*As fast as it could*, the rabbit hopped.

*All night long*, she danced.

*Before the sun came up*, he ate his breakfast.

\* [www.theschoolrun.com](http://www.theschoolrun.com), owned and run by “mums working from home”, whose “resources are written by experienced primary school teachers”.

Apart from “box-ticking” what is the point of reversing the order of these sentences? As they stand they seem to make sense and sound natural. In fact, how can we decide whether it’s a good idea or not to reverse the order of them unless we have a context, above all unless we know what comes immediately before the quoted sentence? Several of the rewritten examples (*As fast as it could*, the rabbit hopped.) sound distinctly odd, though one of them (*By the train station*, we met.) echoes the title of a literary masterpiece: *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, Elizabeth Smart’s celebrated prose-poem novel. But in that example, you’ll notice, the adverbial introduces a dramatic statement, whereas the rewritten one above is the epitome of bathos. Indeed you could argue that it illustrates as well as anything could that it’s often a very bad idea to start a sentence with an adverbial.

If all this begins to sound like academic jargon leading to pointless exercises, there is another serious criticism to be made – that is, of the instruction to introduce commas after “fronting”. First, there is confusion about whether this is to be done in all cases or whether the pupil is expected to decide whether a comma is needed. The quote from the national curriculum seems to suggest that commas are obligatory – and Bas Aarts agrees. However, this is such a ludicrous idea that most people take refuge in some kind of contradictory-sounding compromise. Here’s what [www.theschoolrun.com](http://www.theschoolrun.com) says:

“A comma is normally used after an adverbial (but there are plenty of exceptions to this rule).”

But the real objection is that in English grammar, punctuation and style, as developed through the centuries, there is no such “rule”: it’s an artificial academic invention. In fact let’s go further: I don’t think I’d employ as an editor somebody who wanted to put a comma after “station” in the Smart title quoted above. We could digress for pages discussing the various ways in which commas should or shouldn’t be used, particularly after “adverbials”, but that would be pointless and silly. It’s enough to point out that in numerous straightforward examples accessible to children a comma is *not* in fact used after an adverbial. Thus the sharp, observant, literate child is liable to see the classroom exercise not merely as box-ticking but as nonsense.

Some children are brighter and more observant than adults give them credit for, as in the tale of the five-year-old pointing to an animal in the paddock and explaining to their younger sibling: “That’s a horse but bigs call it a gee-gee.”

Earlier I quoted the familiar phrase “Once upon a time”, an adverbial that routinely introduces fairy stories. It’s used in about a third of the examples included in *The Fairy Tale Treasury*\*. In not a single one is there a comma after the word *time*. OK, that’s only 50 years ago; perhaps there used to be a comma; perhaps once upon a time there was. Alas, no. A number of the stories in the *Treasury* were collected by Joseph Jacobs and originally published in 1890 as *English Folk Tales* – even back then in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no comma after *time*.

\* Hamish Hamilton, 1972

Also, did you spot all the fronted adverbials in the previous paragraph? A negative expression like *In not a single one* would never be followed by a comma (unless it was necessary to mark a parenthesis) but it does require inversion of subject and verb. Whereas sentence adverbs – *hopefully* used to show what the speaker/writer thinks (it won’t rain, *hopefully*), as opposed to the ordinary use of the adverb in the expression “to travel *hopefully*” (that is full of hope) – *do* need a comma to emphasise their function: to show that they are sentence adverbs. And so on: interesting stuff – but for 8-9 year-olds starting to write?

I don’t think it’s fair to blame teachers for the fronted adverbial muddle: they’re just trying to do what they’re told. It’s the policy-makers – the politicians, civil servants and senior academics – that have blundered into this in a well-intentioned but inept attempt to make English teaching more logical and coherent. It’s not the use of experts that’s to blame but the choice of those experts. Asking the academic linguists to reform the English curriculum unaided is like asking a bunch of physiotherapists or dieticians to take responsibility for the rescue of a failing football club, develop new and improved tactics and go on and win the league.

And, as numerous people have pointed out, learning English “grammar” has been confused with the naming of parts, completing sterile exercises and ticking boxes. We have lurched from trying to do without grammar teaching altogether to imposing a pointless and worse, inaccurate, version of it.

# A visit to Mallorca

I live in France now and have done since 1996 when I retired from teaching journalism at City University in London. From my small town on the western edge of the Dordogne it's a day's drive to Barcelona and the car ferry to Palma, Mallorca.

With my wife Amanda, I made this journey in March 2017 to see if we could find the place where her Communist journalist father, Richard Kisch (1912-1998), had been wounded in August 1936 fighting for the Spanish Republic against the Nationalists. When I knew him my father-in-law was a colourful, impatient character who was an unlikely Communist: he didn't do "theory"; he didn't easily follow "rules"; he was very inclined to make things up as he went along. Amanda sometimes said (when I showed signs of what she called controlling behaviour) that he should have been the anarchist and I should have been the Communist...but let that pass.

Richard and I got on well. We talked journalism and politics; we enjoyed meals, in restaurants and at home; we played squash and tennis together; and I introduced him to what might have been his heritage, had he been born in the East End of London rather than bourgeois Kensington: watching and supporting Tottenham Hotspur. He was adamant, though, that he was not "Jewish" – that was an accident of birth (followed by circumcision) that he refused to accept was going to blight his life: ex-Jewish he certainly was, just as I was an ex-Catholic, but that was the end of the matter. Having spent some time in Palestine as a young man, he certainly saw the modern state of Israel as an aggressive, imperialist force rather than as a haven.

One incident stands out. His younger brother, Edward Kisch, a successful accountant, was the extended-family entertainer – Guy Fawkes night, Christmas evening party, summer sports day – and once he summoned us to Brighton for a birthday/anniversary Sunday lunch at Wheeler's fish restaurant. It was the perfect invitation: we licked our lips. Only trouble was, when we got to Brighton we found a picket outside the restaurant: the staff were in dispute with the management over pay and conditions. Richard and I (and our partners, both union members) were clear – oysters and Chablis were off, alas. The four of us went to the pub.

Richard was one of the early casualties of the Spanish Civil War – almost certainly the first British one. In his popular history book about the war\* he describes "the extraordinary atmosphere of exhilaration" in Barcelona in the summer of 1936 as foreigners flocked to join the popular resistance to the Nationalist uprising led by General Franco. Richard was one of four young people on the fringes of journalism and politics who travelled together by train from London to Perpignan in southern France and crossed the frontier on foot.\*\*

\**They Shall Not Pass: The Spanish People at War 1936-9*, Wayland, 1974

\*\*The other three were: Tony Willis, like Richard an ex-public schoolboy who'd been an army cadet; Lee Aylward, a Canadian woman; and her companion, Paul Boyle.

Because two of the four were Trotskyists they all joined the POUM\* militia, rather than that of the anarchists or the Communist-orientated PSUC, to take part in the attempt to recapture the island of Mallorca from Franco's forces. The attempt failed and Richard was wounded. According to the *Daily Worker* in a report sent from Barcelona: "Richard Kisch, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, is in hospital here...Kisch was stooping forward, climbing uphill when a machine-gun bullet entered behind the shoulder and passed out through the ribs at the back."

\*the POUM, which George Orwell also joined, was the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista; the PSUC was the regional Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (as opposed to the national PSOE, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español)

You could say that, after being hit, Richard was lucky: his militia comrades got him back on a stretcher to their ship and he recovered well enough to live an active life – but some other people who took part in the invasion certainly weren't lucky. In the confusion of retreat some of the dead and wounded were left behind; survivors were shot by the Nationalists. According to the historian Paul Preston: "Prisoners captured by the rebels were immediately executed. They included five nurses, all aged between 17 and 20, and a French journalist."\*

\* *The Spanish Holocaust*, Harper Press, 2012

Although Amanda and I failed to find the place where Richard was wounded we stayed quite by chance at a country hotel run by a woman who turned out to be the grand-daughter of two men who had fought in the Spanish Civil War – on opposite sides. She made it clear that her sympathies were with the one who'd been a member of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and was visibly moved when we told her why we had come. She gave us an important local contact\*\* who introduced us to another.

\*\* Bartomeu Gari Salleras (author of "Porreres: desfilades de dia, afusellaments de nit", 2007) and Antoni Tugores (author of "La Guerra civil a Manacor: la Guerra a casa", 2006).

I can't agree with Preston's use of the word "holocaust" to describe the killings in Spain but the savagery he documents in what followed the battle for Mallorca certainly explains the inflation of language. To emphasise the point quoted above: he says that every single person taken prisoner by Franco's forces after the failure of the Republican attempt to regain Mallorca was slaughtered, whether wounded or not. And the killings of civilians that followed – "at least 1,200 and probably as many as two thousand" – were clearly examples of pre-emptive strike rather than reprisal.

Here is another account: "In Mallorca there were no crimes to avenge so [Fascist terrorism] could only have been a preventive action, the systematic extermination of suspects." This quote comes from *A diary of my times*, the English version of a book on the Mallorca killings by the French right-wing Catholic writer Georges Bernanos. He has no sympathy with the left and admits that "on principle I had nothing against a coup d'état by the Falange" but he is shocked by their reign of terror. "For months in Mallorca killer gangs...shot down in cold blood for everybody to see thousands of persons who were held to be suspect but against whom the military tribunals could not produce the faintest legal allegation."

In a preface to the second edition of his book he answers a critical Jesuit reviewer of the first by saying: "It was not so much the awful killings which disgusted me as the fact that they were approved by the great majority of secular priests, monks and nuns..." What makes Bernanos a convincing witness is the fact that he comes from the other side; he is particularly disgusted by the Mallorca killings because his lot – the right-wing Catholics – have lost the moral high ground; they're in the gutter with what he obviously sees as the revolutionary scum.

But here's a response to Bernanos from an unexpected quarter: Simone Weil, the Jewish radical quasi-Catholic mystic who at the start of the Spanish Civil War is emphatically in the revolutionary camp. She tells Bernanos that her natural sympathies are with the anarchists, which is why she goes to Barcelona in August 1936 and joins the Durruti column. But she is shocked and disillusioned

because a 15-year-old boy, fighting with the Falange, is captured and then executed because he refuses to join the anarchists.

Weil also provides a chilling postscript to the failed attempt to retake Mallorca. She writes that she is in Sitges on the Costa Brava in September when the militia return having lost nine of the 40 who set out from there. The following night there are nine punitive raids – and nine “fascists” or so-called fascists are killed “in a small town where in July nothing happened”. As Preston shows, the Franco forces commit by far the greater part of the atrocities – but the Republican side are also guilty of senseless killing and the anarchists are prominent in this.

So I don't think there is any “moral high ground” in the Spanish Civil War. I think that is the most important point. But the next question is why. Why was there such brutality, cruelty, savagery? On the Franco side I don't see a difficulty in understanding what took place. The various elements of the Franco coalition – the landed gentry/aristocracy, the officer class of the army, the explicitly fascist Falange, the hierarchy of the Catholic church – were individually and collectively committed to the extirpation of the anti-Christ, the Reds, the revolting proletariat. The unashamed personal account of Gonzalo de Aguilera Munro lining up his tenants and shooting six of them *pour encourager les autres* shows a total disregard for a lower form of life. It's like the contempt of Europeans for native Africans, of white southern Americans for their black slaves.

But what about the libertarian left, the revolutionaries and dreamers and planners of the good life?

The best attempt I have read to explain why so much blood was spilt by, if you like, our side, the goodies, the people who believed in the future, the free society – above all, the anarchists – is by Gerald Brenan in *The Spanish Labyrinth*\*. He points out that Spain never experienced a successful Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; so in 1936 Spanish peasants and workers were reacting against centuries of oppression by the Catholic church, a hypocritical and tyrannical ally of the ruling classes.

\*CUP, 1960

What followed was revenge and a settling of accounts but also a moral crusade against what the revolutionaries saw as an evil to be extirpated: churches were sacked and sometimes burnt; priests, monks and nuns – as well as bosses and landlords – were humiliated, brutalised and killed; thus the way was cleared for libertarian communism. If it helps, you could see the bloodletting as a throwback to the savagery of the Thirty Years War in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe between Catholic and Protestant – and don't forget, much closer to home, the killing and torture of civilians in Northern Ireland carried out by the murderous gangs on both sides, Catholic and Protestant, with the British army guilty of its own atrocities.

Inevitably, with active support from Hitler and Mussolini – and the “non-intervention” (that's to say compliance) of, particularly, Britain and France – Franco won the war in 1939; and for another 36 years until his death he imposed an authoritarian straitjacket on the Spanish people. Subsequent attempts to revive anarchism as a mass movement – Europe's only one worthy of the name – have ended in failure. As a whole the Spanish now have no appetite for revolutionary struggle and in the case of the Mallorcans they never showed much, though many certainly suffered for their opposition to Franco. Today Mallorca is, mainly, a tourist destination specialising in sun, sea and sangria.

As for me, I last waved the black anarchist flag half a century ago. Am I an anarchist today? Certainly, I am in the negative sense of opposing the authority of the state in principle; the imposition of compulsory state schooling with its glorification of “British values”; the taxation of the poor so that

the rich can continue to flaunt their wealth; the use of the “armed forces” in foreign conflicts and the constant threatening of war, whether nuclear or not; and the control of everyday life by police, law courts and prisons. Certainly I don’t vote in British parliamentary elections (for years, as a veteran expat, I didn’t even have the right to). But if anarchism is activism I’m not entitled to claim to be anything more than a sympathetic spectator of today’s radical libertarian movements – an armchair anarchist, if you like.

St Aulaye, July 2022

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