

# Modernity Britain

Opening  
the Box,  
1957-59

DAVID KYNASTON



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MODERNITY BRITAIN

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# Contents

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## Part One

- 1 Isn' 'e Smashin'?
- 2 A Lot of Mums
- 3 Never Had It So Good

## Part Two

- 4 Catch a Falling Sputnik
- 5 Not a Matter of Popularity
- 6 A Worried Song
- 7 Stone Me
- 8 Get the Nigger
- 9 Parity of Esteem

## Part Three

- 10 Unnatural Practices
- 11 Morbid Sentimentality
- 12 A Merry Song of Spring
- 13 We're All Reaching Up
- 14 Beastly Things, Elections

## Notes

Acknowledgements

Image section

Picture Credits

By the Same Author

## Author's Note

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*Tales of a New Jerusalem* is a projected sequence of books about Britain between 1945 and 1979. The first two, *A World to Build* and *Smoke in the Valley*, are gathered together in the volume *Austerity Britain*; the next two, *The Certainties of Place* and *A Thicker Cut*, in the volume *Family Britain*. Accordingly, *Opening the Box* is the fifth book in the sequence, and in effect comprises the first half of the volume *Modernity Britain*, which is intended to cover the years 1957–62.

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This book is dedicated to Lucy

# PART ONE

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## Isn' 'e Smashin'?

'Council tenants and potential council tenants are today a much more typical section of the population at large than ever before,' declared a junior housing minister, Enoch Powell, to the annual conference of the Society of Housing Managers on Thursday, 10 January 1957 – at almost exactly the moment that Harold Macmillan was calling at the Palace to succeed Sir Anthony Eden as the new Conservative prime minister. Later that afternoon, discussion turned to the nonconformists. 'I find that, generally speaking, there is no cause for complaint about the standard of decoration of those tenants who "decoration regulations" and do their own,' conceded Lambeth's director of housing, Mr C. C. Carter. 'They carry out the decorations to a standard which is usually very satisfactory. I am not sure whether the day has not arrived when you might well let tenants do their own internal decorations.' Next day's main address was given by Mrs E. Denington, vice-chairman of London County Council's Housing Committee. 'I think that the natural way for people to live is in houses,' she insisted. 'I should like to sound a word of warning to authorities which are thinking of building flats. I believe that no more than 5 per cent of the population want to live in flats. Do not build them unless you have to, and if you have to then do make provision for children, because if you do not you have no right to grumble if they are a nuisance.'

Judy Haines as usual was at home in Chingford on Saturday the 12th. 'Fed up,' she noted flatly. 'Girls went to pictures, John [her husband, earlier known as Abbé] to London, and here I am. Decided to please myself and blow housework. Therefore I enjoyed some needlework – Pamela's frock and curtains.' Another diarist, Allan Preston, the 25-year-old son of an English teacher, went to Burntwood Park in the afternoon. 'The first half was very entertaining,' he recorded of the home team's First Division clash with Leeds. 'Both sides attacked crisply and at half time Bolton were winning 4–2. The second half was more dismal. Two goals only were scored and there were one or two unpleasant incidents.' Stay-at-homes could have watched Percy Thrower's *Gardening Club* and *The Lone Ranger* on BBC television, while 7.30 saw another favourite, *Dixon of Dock Green*, back for his third series. 'The whole family has been eagerly waiting for the return of Dixon,' reported a viewer, 'and judging by this edition [characteristically called 'Give a Dog a Good Name'] this series is going to be even a bit as good as the last.' *Hancock's Half Hour* by this time was on both radio and television, and on Sunday evening the Light Programme broadcast 'Almost a Gentleman', episode 14 of the fourth radio series: overlooked once again in the New Year's Honours List, the anti-hero of 23 Railway Cutting East Cheam is persuaded he needs etiquette lessons, with predictably disastrous results. Perhaps revealingly, Philip Larkin seems never to have evinced any interest in, let alone enthusiasm for, Tony Hancock. 'An utterly lonely Sunday, spent indoors except for the usual excursion to the pillar box,' Larkin wrote from his flat in Hull later that evening to Monica Jones in Leicester. 'I have sat doing nothing since about 4 o' clock, & am now slightly drunk on rum and honey & hot water. The usual revolting insufficient meals – an awful tinned steak pudding, like eating a hot poultice, & sausages. I can't ever remember being so dead since about 1947.'<sup>1</sup>

'Top People Take *The Times*' was a new poster from Monday the 14th, as the PM sought to finalise his administration. 'Many considerations had to be borne in mind,' the Old Etonian (like his predecessor) would reflect after a difficult process. 'The right, centre & left of the party; the extreme



“Suez” group; the extreme opposition to Suez; the loyal centre – and last, but not least, U & non-U (use the jargon that Nancy Mitford has popularised), that is, Eton, Winchester, etc. on the one hand, Board school & grammar school on the other.’ Top people also had to face the cameras, and Macmillan on the 17th found himself on fraught terms with the new-fangled teleprompter as he gave a ministerial broadcast. Reactions were mixed. ‘In its *extremely* clear intimation that we were neither second-rate power nor a satellite [i.e. of the USA], it gave me a lift of the heart such as I had never hoped to experience again,’ wrote the once-Marxist novelist Patrick Hamilton to his brother. But a 61-year-old housewife in Barrow, Nella Last, was appalled to read next morning in her *Daily Express* about Macmillan’s apparent promise to move decisively towards what she called ‘free trade with Europe’: ‘I’m not either clever or well read, I don’t – can’t – decide the issues of such a step, BUT I *do* disagree utterly with one man coming to a T.V. screen, & calmly announcing such a step . . . As tidied round I thought that many cleverer heads than mine would feel the same sense of “shock”’. Labour’s television guru Anthony Wedgwood Benn was abroad, but heard disturbingly favourable reports on his return. ‘His television performance was evidently a very dramatic one,’ Benn noted. ‘His call for an “opportunity state” has created interest and discussion just when things looked soggy in his own Party.’ The Edwardian actor-manager was indeed not someone to underestimate, though Malcolm Muggeridge soon afterwards had a bit of fun in *Life*. ‘The lean, sinewy neck pulsates,’ he told his American readers, ‘the tired grey features wear a smile; the voice, soft and sibilant, emerges from the drooping moustache. A publisher? No. A civil servant? No. A Prime Minister.’<sup>2</sup>

Modelled on the Parisian jazz club Le Caveau, the Cavern opened in Liverpool the evening before Macmillan’s broadcast. Nearly 2,000 people queued outside, only 600 were able to get in, and (reported a local paper in a brief story about ‘Liverpool’s New Jazzy Club’) ‘dressed in jeans, skirts and sweaters, they filled every corner of the club, standing packed between the bricked arches’, they listened to ‘various jazz bands’ plus the Coney Island Skiffle Group. The foreign influence was spreading. ‘The snack bar near Kew Gardens station was crowded out,’ noted the solipsistic and emotionally impenetrable civil servant Henry St John on Saturday the 19th. ‘There seem no times or seasons for anything now; people seem to fill cafés day and night, whereas they used to be almost deserted except at meal times.’ The old insularity was also starting to go in football, with Manchester United the first English team to take part (in defiance of the football authorities) in the European Cup and soon afterwards – on 6 February – beating Bilbao 3–0 to reach the semi-finals. Next day the *Listener* reviewed Lawrence Durrell’s novel *Justine*, the first volume of what would become an exotic literary phenomenon, *The Alexandria Quartet*. ‘Less fiction than incantation,’ reckoned Ronald Bryden, ‘beautifully conceived, only too consciously beautiful in the writing.’ Durrell himself lived in Provence and was fond of calling England ‘Pudding Island’, a view that in certain moods the young American poet Sylvia Plath (recently married to Ted Hughes) shared. ‘It is often infuriating to read the trash published by the Old Guard, the flat, clever, colorless poets here,’ she wrote back home a few days earlier. Little was as unashamedly English as *At the Drop of a Hat*, the musical revue by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann playing since 24 January to packed houses at the Fortune Theatre. ‘None of their songs are very melodious and not all of them are really amusing,’ grumbled Anthony Head, a local government officer in St Pancras and inveterate first-nighter, but Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times* relished the ‘kindly satire’ and ‘the crisp, neat, elegant, cultured jokes about gnus, bindweed, the monotonous lot of the umpire in the Ladies’ Singles at Wimbledon, the very contemporary furniture of his flat, and the disastrous season of 1546 in the English theatre’. Flanders (bearded and in a wheelchair) had, Hobson added, ‘an inner merriment which, when he is not speaking, communicat



itself to the audience'.<sup>3</sup>

The day after Flanders and Swann opened in the West End, five shop stewards at Briggs Motor Bodies, the Ford Motor Company's body-making plant at Dagenham, were suspended – one of them an extrovert, free-speaking Cockney from West Ham called Johnny McLoughlin, indefinitely. His offence was that, during working hours, he had defied the wishes of his foreman by ringing a handbell in order to call a meeting in his toolmaking 'shop' to discuss possible strike action, following the suspension of two fellow shop stewards for unauthorised absences. Within days the 'bellringing' incident had led to a walk-out by some 8,000 employees. 'The workers of Briggs know very well that the Company is trying to exploit the situation of unemployment and short time which exists at Dagenham at the present time,' declared the Strike Committee, in the larger context of continuing post-Suez petrol rationing causing problems for the motor industry as a whole. 'They are trying to force a return to the bad old days when "Fordism" was a by-word for non-trade unionism, low wages and bad working conditions.' Talks to reinstate McLoughlin broke down, with the man himself declining to look for another billet. 'What chance would I have after all the publicity this has brought me?' he explained on 12 February to the *Daily Mail*. 'Wherever I go I am known as "the man who tolled the bell".' That same day, the Tory MP for Hornchurch, Godfrey Lagden, told the Commons that Briggs had 'the most unfortunate collection, above-average collection, of shop stewards who are practically Communists', adding that generally for the workers there 'it is extremely dangerous not to come out when they ring the bell'. Dagenham's Labour MP, John Parker, spoke of how at Ford (including Briggs) 'no attempt is made to treat individuals as live men and women, but to just take them as industrial cogs'. Two days later, Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) members at Briggs voted decisively for further strike action, though leaving time for government intervention. Through all, there had been something else on the collective Briggs mind: the home tie (on 9 February) for the company's football team against the Amateur Cup holders, mighty Bishop Auckland. At a packed Rush Green, the visitors squeaked home by the only goal – 'very lucky', according to the *Barking Advertiser's* 'Onlooker', against 'the motor boys . . . firing smoothly on all eleven cylinders'.<sup>4</sup>

Almost everywhere, whether in Dagenham or County Durham, the shared daily reference points were shifting from sound to vision. 'Mrs Atkinson keeps asking when we are coming in to see the Television,' Nella Last noted on the last Wednesday of January about her persistent neighbour, '& I'm a rather difficult task of explaining how my husband would never stay up to see any play.' Radio that evening included a road-and-housing-development storyline in *Educating Archie* and some typical boy play in *Take It From Here*. Standing outside the house he shares with his father, Ron Glum is kissing his girlfriend Eth goodbye when he realises he is locked out. He rings the bell to wake up Mr Glum senior, who opens the door:

*Mr Glum:* Eth? What you coming round this time of night for?

*Eth:* I'm going.

*Mr Glum:* You mean you got an old man like me out of a hot bed just to tell me you're going? Oh, I dunno what's come over this generation. It's all them Elvis Parsley records.

Most people's focus that Wednesday, though, was on *Double Your Money*, in particular whether Lynda Simpson, a 13-year-old schoolgirl from Sutton Coldfield, would take the £500 she'd already won through her spelling prowess or try to double it. 'It's your decision, my girl,' her father was reported in the *Daily Mirror* as having told her, while Lynda herself calmly announced at the start of the programme, 'I think I'll disregard everybody's advice and go on.' So she did, entering the see-through box and successfully spelling five words: *manoeuvre*, *connoisseur*, *reconnoitre*, *chlorophyll* and

*hypochondriac*. ‘What are you going to do with the money?’ asked compère Hughie Green. ‘I’m going to buy a tape recorder and put the rest in the bank,’ Lynda replied. ‘I hope to go to a university and it’ll help to pay for that.’<sup>5</sup>

Lynda had presumably passed her 11-plus, but that was not the case for the majority of the nation’s children. Two days later, on 1 February, the BBC showed a largely reassuring television documentary about the exam, presented by the Canadian political analyst Robert McKenzie and featuring a secondary modern in north London. A chemist noted disapprovingly that ‘there appeared to be no expense spared in this school to buy every bit of modern equipment possible’, but a teacher’s wife preferred to accentuate the positive: ‘How wonderfully the children behaved. There was no glancing at the cameras, etc, which is so apt to distract the viewer.’ This proved a relatively uncontroversial programme – unlike the following Monday’s *Panorama*, which included a clip from a film by Ian Grantly Dick-Read (whose work had inspired the recently founded Natural Childbirth Association, later National Childbirth Trust) showing a natural childbirth through relaxation. Only two people ran in to complain, but the headline in the right-wing tabloid *Daily Sketch* was ‘REVOLTING’, and a columnist ‘Candidus’ condemning the film as ‘part of the exhibitionism that is the growing weakness of our day and age’.<sup>6</sup>

Between those two programmes, on the evening of Sunday the 3rd, Britain’s first rock ‘n’ roll star Tommy Steele, and his band were giving two performances (each lasting barely 20 minutes) in Leicester. ‘The act itself is simple enough,’ wrote Trevor Philpott in *Picture Post*. ‘It’s ninety per cent youthful exuberance. There is not a trace of sex, real or implied. The Steelemen, bass, drums, saxophone and piano, all writhe around the stage with their instruments – even the pianist doesn’t have a stool. All the antics they, as professionals, freely admit have nothing to do with music. As Tommy would put it: “We do it for laughs.”’ As for the audience, it was ‘happy – hysterically so,’ reported the *Leicester Mercury*. ‘They were saying (in rock ‘n’ roll jargon): “Isn’ ’e smashin’?” “Isn’ ’e a luvly colour?” “Isn’ ’e berrer than that other feller?” and “Aren’t you glad you came, Elsie?” Others didn’t say a word. They just shouted.’ In fact not everyone was entirely happy. ‘I felt rather ashamed of my sex on Sunday night,’ an 18-year-old from Kibworth wrote to the paper: ‘I’m not square, but it was shocking. Silly girls go to make fools of themselves by screaming and shouting, the whole of the show through. I attended the show but have no idea what he sang. I’m a great fan of Tommy’s, but I like to listen not scream.’ An immediate riposte came from Diane, Judy and Pat of 212 Wigston Lane, Leicester: ‘We think he is the mostest and the best recording artist Britain has ever produced. THE WAY HE DIGS ROCK ‘N’ ROLL SENDS US ALL SCREAMING WITH DELIGHT.’

In spite of the attendant noise and hysteria, there was little dangerous about the 20-year-old Steele, a former merchant seaman called Tommy Hicks who was, in Philpott’s words, ‘an ordinary, likeable British kid who obviously gets a kick out of life’ – nor was there about the appreciably older, rather podgy Bill Haley, who arrived in England with his Comets two days later. Besieged by fans at Waterloo station, Haley remarked, ‘I’d rather the kids would show more restraint.’ Over the next few weeks, for all the audiences’ jiving in the aisles, his underlying middle-of-the-roadness was epitomised by his regular, benign refrain to journalists that ‘all young people have a certain amount of vim and vigour and they like to let off steam and I really don’t see too much harm in that’. Still, especially with Steele, *something* – just for a moment – was going on. ‘There was a croak in his voice like he meant the words,’ recalled Ray Gosling about walking down East Street market in south London around this time, as his latest hit, ‘Singing the Blues’, sounded out from the record trestles of the market stalls, ‘and there were photographs of him bulldog-clipped to the stalls and Tommy Steele looked like us – cheeky British youth with tousled hair and pouting lips and a cockney so-fucking

what look.’<sup>2</sup>

There would be all too few market stalls in the Stepney–Poplar Comprehensive Development Area (CDA). ‘Poplar will have its 19-storey skyscraper’ was the *East London Advertiser’s* main headline on 8 February, having learned that the Minister of Housing, Henry Brooke, had just given his approval to the London County Council’s scheme for Tidey Street – thereby overriding the wishes of the local council, whose leader had recently described the scheme as a ‘monstrosity’. Indeed, the considered view of the council was that high blocks of flats were ‘just a load of trouble’. The *Architects’ Journal* in its next issue disagreed: ‘Tidey Street is unlikely to prove the best advertisement for tower blocks but it is a great deal the better for having one, and may even convince the Poplar Borough Council that some of the objections of their tenants to high blocks can be overcome by improved design.’ Brooke was not the only approval, for on the 8th the Secretary of State for Scotland signalled the green light for the Hutesontown/Gorbals CDA. ‘That guarantees an end to the dingy squalor that is Gorbals’ was the unambiguously welcoming response of the *Glasgow Herald*. Accompanying photographs showed on the one hand a model of the new Gorbals with its ‘spacious layout’ and on the other a squalid back court in Florence Street, ‘an example of the conditions which will be eliminated by the Glasgow Corporation plan’.

Of the human aspect of what would be involved in ‘comprehensive development’, not a word. A few days later, Wilfred Pickles was in the East End to present a live edition of radio’s still very popular *Have a Go!*. One contestant was Sam Ward, a council park attendant living in Dagenham: ‘I’d soon be back in old Poplar; you can’t beat the neighbours.’<sup>8</sup> One can perhaps exaggerate the neighbourliness of those neighbours, but (as in the Gorbals and, in due course, many other rundown inner-city areas) they were about to be cast to the four winds, as their intimate, intensely human world disappeared for ever.

Other issues, reported the *New Statesman’s* Norman MacKenzie from the ‘slightly dingy dormitory area’ of North Lewisham, were on voters’ minds ahead of the by-election there on Valentine’s Day:

I liked that Gaitskell until he started running down our boys [i.e. British troops during the Suez crisis]. It isn’t right for Labour to do that. They should get on with doing something for the old people. That’s their business. (*Housewife*)

I thought Macmillan would be different. But he’s giving in to the Yanks, too. He should go on and teach those Egyptians and Indians a lesson. (*Shopkeeper*)

I don’t care about foreign policy. If anything I’ve always believed Eden. But I’m going to retire next year, and they tell me that this Rent Bill will put my rent bill up 15 shillings a week. I won’t be able to afford it on my pension. I know it sounds selfish but I’m going to vote for myself. (*Teacher*)

The Blues have always come and fetched me, and I’ve put one in for them. But they can find someone else this time. The doctor told me it was Mr Butler who put that money on my medicine, and I don’t see why I should go out and catch my death for him. (*Pensioner*)

I don’t like what Labour did over Suez. But that isn’t what the voting is about, is it? They’re against the Tories, and so am I. (*Busman*)

Hugh Gaitskell’s Labour Party duly took the seat from the Tories, the latter’s ‘most positive setback since the 1945 General Election’ according to the *Sunday Times*. The three most obvious reasons were the Suez debacle, inflation and the legislation under way to de-freeze private-sector rents, but for the respectable ‘middle England’ people – natural Tory voters – something else was increasingly agitating them: excessive taxation and the unacceptably high cost of maintaining the welfare state. ‘We have worked hard and saved all our lives, and the worry of modern conditions may yet drive us into mental institution,’ a couple in their sixties from West Bromwich wrote to the *Birmingham Mail* on the day of the by-election. ‘Can’t the Government, who do everything for the lazy and extravagant, do something for the thrifty and careful? They’ll take most of what we have left when we die, anyhow’

So too in Barrow earlier in the week. ‘Mrs Atkinson was in a “militant” mood,’ recorded Nella Last. ‘She said “Welfare State” – time it got working smoother & not throwing money about.’ Mrs Atkinson then proceeded to tell Last about a woman ‘in a nearby road’ who was ‘never economising’ but became widowed, and was now getting her rent and rates paid. ‘It’s a queer world,’ the diarist reflected later. ‘No wonder there’s unrest & discontent, no one seems to have the idea of standing on their own! I hear grumbles from OAPs & mothers drawing allowances, as if they feel there’s a bottomless purse for the Govt to draw on, & it’s their *right* to have an increasing share!’<sup>9</sup>

Another matter of state was vexing Last that Monday the 11th. ‘I often say nowadays, though with ever lessening frequency, “nothing would surprise me nowadays”,’ she noted, but

the guarded hints on the front page of the *Express*, of differences between the Queen & Duke of Edinburgh, was a bombshell . . . I felt *sick* with pity for the Royal Family, with ‘spies’ & ‘disloyalty’ in those near to them. I hope there’s no foundation in the rumour, but they don’t have a *lot* of shared interests on the whole. The Queen has horse racing, & he the sea. They don’t seem to ‘give and take’.

With Philip in Gibraltar near the end of his four-month world tour, the couple not due to be reunited until the following Saturday (in Portugal at the start of a joint visit there), and stories in the American press leading to official denials of any ‘rift’, the *Daily Mirror* was especially strident. ‘FLY HOME PHILIP!’ it demanded on Monday, followed on Tuesday by ‘DUKE – WHY NO ACTION?’. The Palace remained unmoved, and briefly the focus switched to the Queen’s younger sister. ‘When Princess Margaret going to be her age (which is 26) and behave like a member of the Royal Family instead of a half-baked jazz mad Teddy Girl?’ another royal-watcher, Anthony Heap, asked himself on Friday. ‘For what should be reported in this morning’s papers but that last night she went to see the latest trashy “rock ‘n’ roll” film [*The Girl Can’t Help It*] at the Carlton – she never goes to an intelligent play or film – and, taking off her shoes, put her feet up on the rail round the front of the circle and waved them in time with the “hot rhythm”.’ Next day the Queen duly flew out in the Viscount, the Duke (with hearts on his tie) went into the plane at Montijo airfield for some private minutes, and when they emerged together he had, the *Sunday Express* was able happily to report, ‘a tiny smear of lipstick on his face’.<sup>10</sup>

The couple missed a notable few days on the small screen, not least the controversial end of the so-called ‘Toddlers’ Truce’. This was the government-enforced ban on television programmes between 6 and 7 in the evening, to make it easier for parents to get younger children to bed, a ban that the commercial television companies had found increasingly irksome. ‘Keep the Toddlers’ Truce’ insisted the *Sketch*’s ‘Candidus’ in December 1956. ‘The most docile children who are taken away from a fascinating programme will be tearful and deprived, and will lie awake thinking of what they are missing.’ But the Postmaster General, Dr Charles Hill, was adamant that ‘it was the responsibility of parents, not the State, to put their children to bed at the right time’, and 16 February was set as the date for the start of hostilities. The BBC’s new Saturday programme to fill that slot would be explained the *Radio Times*, ‘designed for the young in spirit who like to keep abreast of topical trends in the world about them’, with ‘plenty of music in the modern manner’.<sup>11</sup>

On the 16th itself, following a news bulletin, the *Six-Five Special* came down the tracks right on time, with a catchy signature tune (‘over the points, over the points’) and two definitely non-teenage presenters, Pete Murray and Josephine Douglas, doing the honours:

*Pete:* Hi there, welcome aboard the *Six-Five Special*. We’ve got almost a hundred cats jumping here, some real cool characters to give us a gas, so just get with it and have a ball.

*Jo:* Well, I’m just a square it seems, but for all the other squares with us, roughly translated what Peter Murray just said was,



What followed over the next 55 minutes included rock 'n' roll from the King Brothers, jazz from Kenny Baker and his Dozen, ballads from Michael Holliday, a group of youngsters from Whitechap singing a couple of folk songs, an interview with the film actress Lisa Gastoni, an exercise demonstration by the former boxer Freddie Mills and two muscular Hungarian refugees, an extract from a Little Richard film – and, a gloriously Reithian touch, the concert pianist Leff Pouishno playing a movement from Beethoven's 'Pathétique' Sonata and then, 'just to show that we, too, can play fast and loud', Chopin's Prelude in B flat minor.

'There was plenty of evidence to show that the older the viewer the less he (or she) enjoyed the programme,' was the predictable conclusion of BBC audience research, adding that though some older viewers were tolerant ('Of course we must cater for youth,' said one), others found it 'utterly trashy' and 'quite intolerably noisy'. As for teenage viewers, there were two perhaps representative responses: the first by an apprentice panel beater: 'I am what is known as a "square" so how could I enjoy this? And why do we have to have so much Rock 'n' Roll lammed at us?' 'This is what many of us have wanted for a long time and I just cannot say how much I enjoyed it. But my dad was grumbling all the time. He said it was "just a lot of noise".' The *News Chronicle* critic tended to agree with Dad – 'noisy, clanking special' – while the *Daily Telegraph's* L. Marsland Gander confirmed all the instinctive prejudices of his readers: 'A hundred "cats" were let loose on unsuspecting viewers. Grimaced, many of them oddly dressed in tight trousers, they jived and did their dervish dances to loud, brassy noises.' But it was arguably the shrewd, level-headed Peter Black, the *Daily Mail's* TV critic who called it right: Murray was 'jaunty', Douglas was 'arch', and 'the whole thing smelled fragrant of bread and butter'.<sup>12</sup>

Next day, Sunday, BBC programmes were set out in the *Radio Times* with television coming before radio, for the first time, while Monday saw the arrival of lunchtime television in the shape of *Lunch Box* on ITV. 'People now eat from trays,' presenter Noele Gordon said in advance, 'so they can watch the show and pick up our catch phrases.' The show itself, focusing on viewers' birthdays and wedding anniversaries as well as plenty of baby snapshots sent in by mothers, drew some predictable flak – 'the most folksy, matey, cuddly programme yet', reckoned Maurice Wiggin in the *Sunday Times* – but again Black was perceptive, describing Gordon as 'absolutely first-class, an elegant chum who catches perfectly the desired blend of charm and class-war neutrality'. Yet it was not for *Lunch Box* that 1 February 1957 has gone down in television history, but for the launch of the BBC's weekday evening programme to replace the *Toddlers' Truce*. '*Tonight*', promised the *Radio Times*, 'will be kaleidoscopic but it will not be superficial; it will be entertaining but it will also be intelligent.'<sup>13</sup>

The first edition of this current affairs magazine, presented by the avuncular, unflappable Clive Michelmore, featured 12 items over 40 minutes. These included the FA Cup draw, a survey of the morning's papers, a topical calypso by Cy Grant ('Future sociologists may well speculate/On the impact of *Tonight* on the welfare state'), a nude statue of Aphrodite that was causing consternation in Richmond-upon-Thames, an interview with the Dame of Sark, a humorous sketch by a young Jonathan Miller about Charing Cross Road shops, an interview by Derek Hart with the veteran American broadcaster Ed Murrow on the subject of post-Suez Britain, footage of conductor Arturo Toscanini's funeral in Milan earlier in the day, and Cy Grant again, this time singing 'Kisses Sweeter than Wine'. The critics were qualifiedly positive: 'kept on repeating itself', but 'I applaud the programme's attempt to develop a free-and-easy topical programme' (Raymond Bowers, *Mirror*); 'had variety and some spice and reasonable pace but lacked compelling interest and gaiety' (L. Marsland Gander);

promising start', though Miller's sketch 'invaded the territory that Johnny Morris has made his own and was duly slaughtered by the comparison' (Peter Black). Viewers themselves gave large, favourable feedback about the first week's editions as a whole, with Grant's up-to-the-minute calypsos (sometimes written by the journalist Bernard Levin) 'particularly enjoyed' and 'the "personality" interviews' holding 'pride of place in viewers' estimation'. For Michelmore, an anchorman, praise was almost unanimous: 'Viewers on all sides commended him as "a good mixer, friendly and informal in his approach to participants in the programme, and a clear and relaxed speaker, with the ability to cope quickly (and effectively) with any contretemps.'

*Tonight* was a breakthrough moment. For almost a year and a half, since its launch in September 1955, commercial television had been trouncing BBC in the ratings and, more generally, exposing it as stuffy, unimaginative and deeply paternalistic. *Tonight* – the inspiration of a brilliant, difficult 30-year-old Welshman, Donald Baverstock – was different. 'The aim would be to get on to a level of conversation with the viewers which means that the presentation and the manner of the people appearing in the programme would be very informal and relaxed,' he had written in early January to BBC superior (Grace Wyndham Goldie), and over the next few years that was what, working closely with Alasdair Milne (a future director-general), he drove through. The tone was deliberately light, even irreverent, news mixing seamlessly with entertainment. Pioneering use was made of vox pop material, and above all the programme consciously placed itself on the side of the citizen and the consumer rather than the minister or the official. 'A kind of national explosion of relief' was how Goldie herself would contextualise *Tonight*'s impact. 'It was not always necessary to be respectful; experts were not invariably right; the opinions of those in high places did not have to be accepted.' None of this happened overnight, not least in the field of planning and architecture, but a broad, unstoppable process was under way, and *Tonight* – for all its preponderant middle-classness – was an indispensable outsider.

For truly mass audiences, however, television's future lay elsewhere, and Tuesday the 19th saw the final new programme in this rather breathless sequence. Originally entitled *Calling Nurse Roberts* and set in the fictitious hospital Oxbridge General, *Emergency—Ward 10* was ITV's first high-profile, twice-weekly soap opera. 'Should run for ever,' Maurice Wiggin confidently predicted, adding:

It is bound to delight all who gulp in euphoric draughts of an atmosphere of iodoform and bedpans. It has just about everything: a flawless blonde probationer nurse, and a dedicated brunette one, and a rather sleazy doctor, and a martinet sister, and a crotchety 'character' patient with a heart of gold. All it needs is for Dan Archer to be wheeled in by Gran Grove and operated on by Dr Dale, and that's the millennium, folks.<sup>15</sup>

## [A Lot of Mums](#)

‘It was reading Hoggart forty years ago,’ recalled Alan Bennett in his preface to *The History Book* (2004), ‘that made me feel that my life, dull though it was, might be made the stuff of literature.’ C. as David Lodge characterised the impact of Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (published February 1957, going into Pelican paperback in 1958 and reprinted four times in the next seven years) ‘In those days it was a kind of Bible for first-generation university students and teachers who had been promoted by education from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds into the professional middle class.’ From the start, the chorus of critics’ adjectives revealed this to be the right book for a particular cultural moment – ‘challenging’ (*Daily Herald*), ‘invigorating’ (*Daily Telegraph*), ‘urgent’ (*Observer*), ‘required reading’ (*TLS*) – while the *Manchester Guardian* devoted an editorial to Hoggart’s ‘moving and thoughtful’ work:

The first part is an exquisitely drawn picture of the urban working-class life in which the author (now an extra-mural tutor at Hull University) grew up; hard, sometimes harsh, conventional, gregarious, mother-centred, with an outlook limited in range but realistic within its limits. The second part describes the erosion of some old landmarks by the irrupting new media of popular culture – the cheap magazine with its sex and ‘bittiness’, the cheap novel with its sex and violence, the juke-box, some radio, much television, all ‘full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions’, and all leading to a broad and shallow condition of mind, a hazy euphoria, and an increasingly ready response to (a significant phrase) ‘sensation without commitment’.

Hoggart himself (born in 1918) had grown up in the Hunslet district of Leeds, the *locus classicus* of the book’s wonderfully vivid, often very autobiographical opening half. The cultural historian Richard Johnson has offered perhaps the most acute assessment of why, over and above those who identified with the ‘scholarship boy’ theme, *Uses* had such appeal: ‘It was surely the fact that working-class culture was described intimately, from within, that made the book so powerful. For the middle-class reader, it was a solvent of assumed cultural superiorities or a lesson, at the very least, in cultural relativities.’<sup>1</sup>

Two months later in 1957, another, more explicitly sociological, study (also in due course a best-selling Pelican) likewise hit the mark. ‘I suppose that, having in our various ways in our previous jobs been on the fringes of the Establishment, we are in revolt against it,’ Michael Young had reflected the previous year about himself and his colleagues at the recently founded Institute of Community Studies. ‘We feel,’ he continued,

that our former associates in the Cabinet’s Ministries and Parties were in a strange way out of touch with the ordinary people whom they so confidently administered, and we feel that we want to put them right. For this purpose a mere first-hand description of what people’s lives are like seems to us justified . . . We pin our faith on our powers of observation and our more or less literary skill in describing the results. Then too we are in protest against the contemptuous attitude which the intellectual department of the Establishment seems to have towards the working classes . . .

In the event, *Family and Kinship in East London*, co-written by Young and Peter Willmott, had an even greater initial impact than Hoggart’s *Uses*. During the last eight days of April, the *Star* (one of London’s three evening papers) ran a five-part serialisation (‘Londoners under the microscope’); there were major stories on the book in the *Herald*, the *Mirror*, the *News Chronicle* (‘Strangers in a Council



Paradise’) and the *Telegraph* (‘East Enders Dislike Spacious New Estates: Family Links Are Missed’) *The Times* had a long leader (‘The Ties that Matter’) endorsing the housing aspect of the central argument that most Bethnal Greeners preferred to stay in their familiar local community rather than move out to the less friendly new LCC estate in ‘Greenleigh’ (in fact Debden), while the *Daily Mail* ran a big feature story (‘The wife-beater doesn’t live here any more’) highlighting the claim that Bethnal Green husbands were becoming increasingly domesticated:

It is a refreshing change from the deluge of treatises on problem families, Teddy Boys, juvenile delinquency, broken homes, and child neglect which have created an impression that working-class families are disunited, unsocial, and unhappy.

Mr Willmott lived in Bethnal Green for two years during the researches with his social-worker wife, Phyllis, and two young children. He enjoyed the rich, down-to-earth, companionable life so much that he left only because he wanted a garden for the children.

The reviews themselves were largely positive, typified by the conclusion of George Bull’s in the *Financial Times*: ‘This shrewd – and in places extremely amusing – book combines warmth of feeling with careful sociological method. It should make us look at the new towns and estates with a keen eye.’<sup>2</sup>

One avowedly left-wing critic (whose own Fabian pamphlet *Socialism and the Intellectuals* had made a mini-splash at the start of the year) took on both books. ‘The main trouble with Mr Hoggart’s diagnostics is that they are as thin in illustrations as his reminiscences are rich’ was Kingsley Amis’s negative reaction to the second half of *Uses*:

He sees his ‘mass publications and entertainments’ from the outside. He tells us in a note that ballroom dancing is the second-largest entertainment industry in the country with its 500-odd ballrooms, but he might never have been in one of them for any sign he gives of understanding the part they play in their patrons’ world. His account of modern popular songs is evidently based upon an exiguous, ill-chosen sample and is riddled with precarious intuitions about such imponderables as the kind and degree of self-consciousness displayed. He does not know what television programmes are like or how people behave while they watch them; he does not know that *Astounding Science Fiction* prints some of the best works in its genre despite its name and cover which are doubtless all he has seen of it; he does not even know that there is more than one kind of comic strip.

Amis’s final sentence was a disdainful flick of the wrist from someone who had himself come a long way in barely three years: ‘It would be pleasant to say of the book written out of such obvious earnestness and decency of feeling that it represented an achievement, but it is only an attempt.’ He was on the whole warmer towards *Family and Kinship*, praising Young and Willmott as ‘observant, tactful, sympathetic, humorous – and able to write’. But he did wonder about the key element in the treatment of community in Bethnal Green:

The central figures of this network are the mums, educators, providers of the family meeting-place, non-technical obstetric consultants, child-care advisers, regular lenders of that vital ten-bob note. I hope I can say without undue disrespect that if I were a working-class girl in Bethnal Green I should probably find somewhere like Holyhead or Wick a handy place to conduct my relationship with Mum after marriage, but then I am not, and on the evidence here presented I cannot doubt that my feelings are shared by few. Or I would not doubt it if I were certain that the authors never confused seeing Mum every day and liking it with seeing Mum every day and being too pious, too timid or too lazy to complain.

‘Anyhow,’ as he added with a certain weariness, ‘a lot of Mums are seen a lot of the time.’

Other readers also had their reservations, with undoubtedly the spikiest intervention coming in March from Leonard Cottrell, a BBC producer who for several months had been researching the New Towns clustered around London (including Stevenage, Bracknell, Crawley and Hemel Hempstead). Declaring himself ‘sick of middle-class reviewers and sociologists who persist in sentimentalising the working

class', he continued in a riposte in the *Listener* to its recent favourable review (by an academic psychologist) of *Family and Kinship*:

'Mum' is a monster . . . In my investigations I have found, time and time again, that working-class wives are happy and relieved to put thirty miles between themselves and 'Mum'; that she is no longer there to interfere with her aboriginal warmth, her glutinous, devouring affection. Young wives who had been dominated throughout childhood, adolescence, and marriage by these stupid, arrogant, self-pitying matriarchs have suddenly found that they can do without them, to the benefit of their own happiness and that of their husbands.

Strongly suspecting that the same was true in 'Greenleigh', and lamenting that Young and Willmott 'will not face up to the fact', Cottrell went on:

In my experience a small minority of New Town residents long for the pubs, the fish-and-chip shops, the 'chumminess' of the crowded streets; perhaps three or four per cent, not more. The rest are extremely glad to have, for the first time in their lives, a home of their own, with fitted carpets, 'contemporary' furniture, and a washing-machine – all the middle-class trimmings over which middle-class social investigators shake their heads but which working-class people value, when they can get them.

The trouble is that some middle-class people, such as authors and book-reviewers, will persist in romanticising aspects of working-class life of which they themselves have had no direct experience – 'neighbourliness', 'kinship', etc., and the stifling, claustrophobic intimacy of crowded tenements, which have been forced upon working people by sheer economic circumstance.

That autumn, in *Encounter*, Tosco Fyvel called 'surely too romantic' the authors' 'sweeping conclusion' that 'Bethnal Greeners should be rehoused on the spot so that their family ties could be kept intact', arguing from their own evidence that at 'Greenleigh' the 'significant answer was the one given to the investigators even by discontented families: that they would not think of returning to Bethnal Green because of the undisputed advantage of the new Estate for their children'. Sooner or afterwards, a damning-with-faint-praise review in the *TLS* ('their field work was reasonably careful') took particular issue with how 'the authors deplore the fact that workers moved to Essex developments in the middle-class, particularly lower middle-class, ways':

The fact is that in Bethnal Green these families were isolated from those social patterns increasingly characteristic of Great Britain. It was rather in Essex that they encountered the current face of things for the first time. The authors regret the destruction of working-class traditions, but their own remedies will hardly alter the larger movement of British society.

Perhaps the most suggestive review was in the obscure pages of *Case Conference*, 'A Professional Journal for the Social Worker and Social Administrator'. Justifiably praising the book's many-sidedness, and Young and Willmott's 'ear for language', the young housing expert David Donnison thought aloud about whether 'Greenleigh' itself (depicted by the authors as cold, non-communal, materialistic, etc.) was *really* the prime culprit for the feeling of loss and helplessness among many Bethnal Greeners newly or recently settled there:

Could the *old* community also be to blame – a community with so sheltered a social life that its warm human relationships are all ready-made for children to grow into without ever consciously 'making' a friend? It may be that the cosy neighbourliness of our traditional, long-settled working-class areas has been achieved at the cost of a dangerous isolation from the outside world: people may feel surrounded with friends and relatives in neighbouring houses and streets, yet look with suspicion on those who live the other side of the main road, or in the next borough; people may achieve a warm sense of comradeship with other working men, and nurse an unreasoning hostility towards foremen, managers, clerks and professional workers.

'Communities such as Bethnal Green have many strengths which our society needs to preserve', Donnison concluded, 'but in other ways they may be as unfitted to the modern world as the streets that are scheduled for clearance.'<sup>3</sup>

For Young himself – the driving force in what was a fruitful, complementary partnership with Willmott – the appearance of *Family and Kinship* was the justification of his decision some six years earlier to move away from party politics and into sociology and social policy. ‘Yours is a study of *living* people, who come and go, all through, – rather like a novel, and at times like scenes from a play,’ his benefactress and co-dedicatée Dorothy Elmhirst wrote to him from Dartington Hall after receiving her copy:

I feel I know the individuals, – they seem to come right out to greet me. Surely this is a new method, – I mean the interweaving of charts, statistics, factual statements with the spontaneous, individual voices of human beings speaking their thoughts and feelings. The effect is vivid and exciting. And how well you bring out the contrasts between Bethnal Green and Greenleigh! The implications of migration are quite startling, aren’t they? – the shift in the whole balance of family roles, the class distinctions that arise, the importance of possessions, and that dreadful competitive struggle to keep up with the neighbours. And yet surely the only answer can’t be to improve conditions in Bethnal Green. Will you be challenged, I wonder, in that conclusion?

Michael, – this is an important book – and it achieves something that Chekhov used to talk about – the art of saying serious and profound things in a light vein.

Essentially a shy, reserved man who had known relatively little love in his life, Young replied with a deeply revealing letter:

It is certainly true that B. Green is somewhat idealised. Some days, walking through the streets, I see it all in a different way, cramped, grey, dirty, with all the beauty pressed out of it into the pitiless flag-stones; and that vision is perhaps as true as the one that I usually have, which is not of the place but of the people, who live with such gusto and humour, are earthy although there is little of it there, and who are admirable (& maybe have much character) just because they have imposed life upon such a terrible city environment. The people of an Indian village even, have more cultural resource in their surroundings. I hardly dare talk about the people, & tried not to make judgements on them in the book, except obliquely, because when I get away from the description, I become sentimental. My unconscious engages gear. The secret of why I am so attached to these working-class people lies buried there, and has remained inviolate even to the analysis.

‘It is disconcerting, but somehow exciting (if one could bring it out),’ he finished, ‘to recognise that the book is not about Bethnal Green but Michael Young.’<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the psychodramas involved, the two books – *Uses* and *Family and Kinship* – bequeathed, taken together, three significant legacies.

The first was the way in which they decisively moved the working class into the centre of the cultural frame, after 12 post-war years of what seems in retrospect almost perverse marginalisation. In 1955, in his coruscating *Encounter* essay on British intellectuals, Young’s American friend and colleague Edward Shils had forcefully made the point that the absence of the working class – at least two-thirds of the population – was the glaring, seldom-discussed elephant in the room of British intellectual life, whether in terms of treatment or of the personal backgrounds of the intellectuals themselves. From the late 1950s on, this would no longer be the case, at least as far as subject matter was concerned. There were, however, two problems, both owing at least something to *Uses and Family and Kinship*. One was that the working class now at last getting proper attention tended to be the *traditional* working class – just as that very class was starting to fragment, not least through the devastating impact of huge slum clearance programmes. The other problem was the implicit exaltation of working-class over middle-class ways of life and values – an exaltation that in time would influence not only the unnecessarily brutal destruction (irrespective of the underlying rights and wrongs) of the grammar and direct grant schools but also the disastrous emergence by the 1970s in the Labour Party (and on the left generally) of what the commentator David Marquand has helpfully called ‘proletarianism’.

The second legacy also had political implications. This was the profound, puritanical mistrust

modern, commercial culture and American-style, TV-watching materialism – that ‘Candy-flo World’ vehemently denounced by Hoggart, that competitive acquisitiveness in ‘Greenleigh’ described by Young and Willmott with understanding but without warmth or approbation. By the late 1950s the Labour Party’s relationship with affluence was becoming increasingly tortured – theoretical acceptance of its desirability combined with visceral dislike of its manifestations – and these two much-read, undeniably moralistic books (especially *Uses*) played their part in delaying for over three decades a resolution of this troubled relationship.

Finally, especially with *Family and Kinship*, there was the bittersweet (but for many years mainly bitter) ‘urbanism’ legacy. If the main thrust of 1940s-style planning had been towards dispersal epitomised by the New Towns programme, by the late 1950s the prevailing mood – at least among the ‘activator’ intelligentsia – was the other way, and undoubtedly Young and Willmott, with their powerful, emotionally charged exposition of the virtues of community in traditional urban settings like Bethnal Green, helped to fuel it. Yet there were two fundamental ironies involved: not only did most Bethnal Greeners of the 1950s and after, especially younger ones, have a much greater desire to leave the area and move upmarket than *Family and Kinship* suggested (as the authors would explicitly concede in their introduction to the 1986 edition); but in the climate of the time, ‘urbanism’ inevitably meant the wholesale demolition of rundown (if often homely) Victorian terraced ‘cottages’ and, in their place, the large-scale erection of high-rise blocks of flats – this *despite* Young and Willmott’s adamant insistence that such blocks were at best only a partial solution to the housing problem. ‘One of the most extraordinary aspects of this sorry affair is that in practice the new flatted estates had little in their favour,’ they would ruefully reflect in 1986, in relation to inner-city areas all over the country, not just Bethnal Green, during that fateful, transformative period between the late 1950s and early 1970s.<sup>5</sup> It was a sad legacy for an inspiring, life-enhancing book.

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Even if they underestimated its attraction, Young and Willmott were absolutely right to pinpoint the importance of ‘Greenleigh’, emblematic of many other dispersed estates and settlements that had been built since the war and mainly housed manual workers. Indeed, one commentator, Charles Curran, claimed in the *Spectator* in 1956 that, in the context of the full-employment welfare state, the estates had been responsible for creating a new class in the shape of those living there: ‘They have been lifted out of poverty and also out of their old surroundings. Now they form the bulk of the inhabitants on the municipal housing estates that encircle London and every other urban centre. They are the New Estate of the realm.’ The rest of his piece was mainly derogatory, especially about the culture of this ‘New Estate’ – ‘a place of mass-production comfort, made easy by hire-purchase . . . ideas of furnishings are derived from the cinema and from women’s magazines . . . books are rare on bookshelves rarer still’ – as also was a radio talk given by June Franklin not long before the publication of *Family and Kinship*, about the experience of living in Crawley New Town with her family. Emphasising that they had given it every chance – ‘we have joined local organisations, two of our children attend local schools, and last year my husband was a candidate in the parish council election’ – she now admitted defeat: ‘The social life is simply that of a village. I tried, but I found it difficult, to work up enthusiasm for an endless round of whist drives, beetle drives and jumble sales. It bored me. I feel my life shrinking. And I don’t think it’s really a good way to make friends, in spite of the official advice handed out to us to “join something”.’ Almost certainly middle class, Franklin was looking forward to moving to a place into which she could get her ‘roots’ – and ‘bury the memories of five years in Subtopia’.<sup>6</sup>

Debden itself, aka 'Greenleigh', has not yet been the subject of a systematic historical study, but we do have contemporary surveys of comparable places. When Margot Jefferys in 1954–5 interviewed housewives at South Oxhey, an LCC out-county estate in Hertfordshire, she found three-quarters of those transplanted Londoners 'on the whole' glad to have made the move, with only one in twelve 'entirely sorry'. Perhaps predictably, those who had found the transition difficult, causing loneliness and even mental illness, tended to be older women. In the late summer of 1958 it was explicitly with the Young/Willmott findings in mind that Manchester University's J. B. Cullingworth conducted a detailed survey of 250 families who had moved to an overspill estate at Worsley, eight miles from the centre of Salford. A common pattern emerged: a six-month honeymoon (i.e. the vastly improved living conditions), a year of disenchantment (often relating to lack of external facilities) and then pragmatic acceptance of the new environment, which did indeed tend to be less 'communal' (fewer pubs and clubs) and more home- and TV-centred. 'Although nearly half said that they had not wished to move to Worsley,' he reported, 'only 17 per cent wanted to return to Salford. The majority of families seemed to have settled down to their suburban way of life whether or not they wished to leave Salford.' The following summer, Cullingworth conducted a survey in Swindon – in other words an overspill from London – and found broadly similar results, with improved housing conditions again being the single most important criterion for most people.

A particularly judicious, well-informed overview of the whole question was provided by Hilary Clark, deputy housing manager at Wolverhampton, who in December 1958 gave a paper to the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health on 'Some Human Aspects of Overspill Housing'. Observing at the outset that building flats in central areas was not *the* answer – 'houses are preferred because they are more suitable for family life – people cannot be conditioned on a large scale to believe that flats are good' – and that therefore overspill housing was necessary, she confronted the pessimistic 'Greenleigh' version: 'In my experience, a new estate is thought of as remote and unknown at first but as it grows and brothers and sisters of potential residents move there, it becomes less forbidding to the families who are deciding whether to go.' Overall, she had found, 'a high proportion of local authority overspill tenants seem to settle down well after the first few years'.<sup>7</sup>

By this time four of the biggest concentrations of new or recent settlers from the inner city were Glasgow's peripheral estates: Pollok, Drumchapel, Easterhouse and Castlemilk. During 1957, the year of *Family and Kinship*, the sociologist Maurice Broady conducted a series of interviews with tenants on the huge Pollok estate, mainly members of tenants' associations. Their general, not necessarily representative, view was that things were improving and that such blights as vandalism and sectarianism were on the decrease, though more shops would be appreciated, as well as such facilities as children's playgrounds. Not everyone, though, was happy, among them Mrs Stewart, living in the Craigbank district:

She complained very sorely about the rough people on the buses and about the noise made by the people upstairs. There was invariably a rough family in each block. She was particularly concerned that her little boy, who goes to a private school, should not pick up bad habits by associating with the other children in the scheme. As the local children were coming out of school she took me to a window to show me what was apparently an every-day occurrence: several little boys standing urinating in a circle. Many of the local children also swore badly. If you went to see a mother to complain about the children stealing things, for instance, she would ask the children whether they had done it, and if they said no, would defend her children against you . . .

Mrs Stewart had been an active member of the Craigbank Tenants' Association since its start in 1954 but, as she was compelled to admit about those around her, being a law-abiding tenant was one thing, being an active citizen quite another:



Two complaints particularly were made: that South Pollok should be at the entrance to the scheme, giving the area as a whole a bad reputation, and secondly that the houses were noisy. One young couple whom Mrs Stewart knew, who had been badly troubled by the noise made by a neighbour, had been told by Paton, the local factor, that if they could produce a petition with six signatures complaining about this neighbour he would be prepared to take some action. In the event however, although many complained, only one signed.<sup>8</sup>

## Never Had It So Good

‘The first-floor gallery, known to our regular visitors as “gadget gallery”, is maintaining its high standard this year,’ reported L.E.W. Stokes-Roberts, organiser of the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition. ‘But because gadgets and labour-saving notions are so popular we have also originated another section for them, called “That’s a Good Idea”.’ Stokes-Roberts was writing in the *Mail* on 10 March 1957, the day the Queen and Prince Philip were due to visit Olympia for a special preview, and the exhibition was opening the following morning for four weeks, with visits scheduled from Prince Charles, Princess Margaret, the Duchess of Kent and other house-proud royals. A highlight this year at the Village of Progress was ‘The Woman’s Hour House’, furnished by Jeanne Heal according to the results of a *Radio Times* questionnaire relating to her ‘Castle in the Air’ broadcasts. ‘The front has a pillared porch, wooden shutters, and a balcony reminiscent of an American colonial-style house,’ noted the *Mail* about this expression of listeners’ taste. ‘But inside, the rooms are modern with doors which fold back to make an open-plan living area and an eating bar which seats seven between the dining-room and the kitchen.’ The exhibition itself – some 600 stands across 14 acres as well as a range of display houses, flats and shops – was its usual roaring success, but Anthony Carson in the *New Statesman* could only sound a regretful note, comparing the whole thing to ‘a sort of florid uncle with an endearingly excruciating taste’. As for the thousands flocking there, ‘Where do the Ideal people come from? They come from the smaller columns of the evening newspapers, from television competitions, from public libraries beyond Hither Green. They are the untroubled, the stolid backbone, the beloved floating voters.’

Forty-one per cent may in a recent Gallup poll have expressed the wish to emigrate if they could (the highest figure since 1948), the Bank of England’s new £5 note may have been (in *Punch*’s words) ‘rather like a Victorian sampler as seen in a nightmare by the Council of Industrial Design’, but the Ideal Home Exhibition was the annual sign that spring was in the air, even in Glasgow. There, a huge municipal campaign began on 11 March, involving over the next five weeks the X-raying of 87 per cent of the city’s population in order to identify carriers of TB. ‘Wonderful new treatments have greatly improved the outlook for patients with tuberculosis,’ declared the Medical Officer of Health in an advance letter to all households, adding reassuringly that ‘there will be no undressing, and all results will be entirely confidential’. Poverty as well as disease existed in all sorts of pre-gentrified places. Later in March, the then unpublished writer John Fowles went with his wife-to-be Elizabeth to Kentish Town and Camden Town ‘to scout round for old furniture’ for their flat in Hampstead. ‘Peeling, pitted, endlessly dirty houses; children playing in the streets,’ he recorded. ‘The people are poor, or flashy; junk-shops, cheap grocers. E remarked that when she asked for half a pound of cheese they cut it and cut it again till it weighed exactly what she wanted; not as here, where nobody mind paying for a two-ounce miscalculation.’<sup>1</sup>

A month later, the Wednesday after Easter, the 22-year-old Brian Epstein – a student at RADA and living alone – was not so far away, in Finchley Road, when he found himself being arrested for ‘persistent importuning’ earlier in the evening in the public lavatory at Swiss Cottage tube station. ‘The damage, the lying criminal methods of the police in importuning *me* and consequently capturing *me*, leaves me cold, stunned and finished,’ he wrote immediately afterwards. Next morning, however



on the advice of a detective, he pleaded guilty at Marylebone Magistrates' Court and was fined rather than being imprisoned.

For Manchester United's 'Busby Babes' it was the cruellest of springs: that same Thursday they went out of the European Cup, after a pulsating 2–2 draw against Real Madrid in front of a raucous bellowing Old Trafford crowd, prompting the *Manchester Guardian's* 'An Old International' (Dorothy Davies) to reflect that 'Bedlam after this will hold no terrors.' Nine days later, on 4 May, the unfairest, most unreconstructed of Cup Finals saw United lose their goalkeeper Ray Wood to a cynical assault by Aston Villa's Peter McParland ('one of those things that can happen in football', the TV commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme reassured the nation), play most of the match with effective ten men and eventually go down 2–1, with a brace for McParland. For one spectator, Harold Macmillan, 'the Cup-Tie Final' was the end of 'a particularly tiresome week', but 11 days later he welcomed petrol coming off the ration after five post-Suez months. Hull University's librarian could muster at best only two springtime cheers. 'This institution totters along, a cloister of mediocrity isolated by the bleak reaches of the East Riding, doomed to remain a small cottage-university of art and science while the rest of the world zooms into the Age of Technology,' Philip Larkin wrote to a friend near the end of May. 'The corn waves, the sun shines on faded dusty streets, the level-crossing clank, bills are made out for 1957 under billheads designed in 1926.'<sup>2</sup>

'1926' indeed, for it was a spring of industrial troubles. 'When it's a question of capital and labour there's no such thing as impartiality' was the reaction of the 'bell-ringer' Johnny McLoughlin to the news in late February that the Minister of Labour, Iain Macleod, was appointing a court of inquiry under Lord Cameron to investigate the dispute at the Ford-owned Briggs plant in Dagenham. McLoughlin was talking to *The Economist's* 'special correspondent', who also listened to some of the men as they had a smoke outside the factory gates. 'I reckon an inquiry's what we want,' said one. 'What this plant needs is a dose of salts, and not just for the management either.' Some six weeks later, Cameron came down almost wholly on the side of management: it had been justified in not reinstating McLoughlin, who was characterised as 'glib, quick-witted and evasive', with 'considerable capacity' for 'agitation and propaganda'. More generally, the shop stewards at Briggs were described as a Communist-influenced 'private union within a union enjoying immediate and continuous contact with the men in the shop, answerable to no superiors and in no way officially constitutionally linked with the union hierarchy'. Even so, if those were the headline findings summed up by *The Times's* ensuing castigation of the Briggs shop stewards as 'a cancer on the body of trade unionism' – Cameron did also note 'a certain insensitivity in the mental attitude of the Company towards those whom they employ' and 'a desire to impose, rather than agree to, negotiation'. The episode as a whole left at least one lasting legacy: McLoughlin was reputedly the ultimate inspiration for Fred Kite, the character so memorably played two years later by Peter Sellers in *I'm All Right, Jack*.<sup>3</sup>

That satirical film would accurately reflect the increasing national focus on the unions and labour relations, with the spring of 1957 seeing a palpable ratcheting-up. 'The *shipbuilding strike started*' recorded Marian Raynham in Surbiton on 16 March. 'And there are 900 million pounds of orders at stake. I think it is wicked.' Anthony Heap agreed, and on the 20th, with the shipbuilders out and a national engineering strike imminent, he reflected that 'Union bosses have got too big for their boots'. Meanwhile the more intelligent and industrious Germans and Japanese will continue to capture our world markets by competing with manufactured goods at much keener prices – and good luck to them!' At about the same time, Malcolm Muggeridge discussed the 'strike situation' with the radical journalist Claud Cockburn: 'Thinks, as I do, that we may now really be for it – strikes becoming

general strike, possibly civil war. On the other hand, perhaps not. Anyway, sooner or later, crack-up inevitable.’

To gauge the mood among the strikers themselves, the journalist John Gale went to the Cammell Laird shipyard at Birkenhead, where ‘a slim man with floppy brown hair, faint sidewhiskers and big eyes’ told him: ‘Myself, I’m dead against the strike. Honestly, 75 per cent don’t want it, but they are behind the unions . . . A lie-in for two days is all right but I’ll be definitely relieved when the strike is over. I don’t like painting the house. I haven’t got to wheeling the pram yet. My wife isn’t very pleased. All the women blame the top union men.’

As for government, Macmillan talked a tough game to himself, expressing determination not to repeat the ‘industrial appeasement’ of ‘the Churchill–Monckton regime’. But in practice, as events unfolded, he let Macleod have his head, and that highly capable minister was unwilling to fight a battle he was far from sure he could win, not least with sterling fragile and public opinion overall marginally more sympathetic to the strikers than the employers. ‘The only possibility is some form of arbitration’ had been his view from the outset, and over these weeks he applied considerable pressure on the employers, to ensure that by early April (with over six million working days already lost) it was possible to appoint a court of inquiry, to be chaired by Professor Daniel Jack. ‘The news that the great shipbuilding and engineering strikes had been called off caused an enormous wave of public relief here,’ the writer Mollie Panter-Downes told her *New Yorker* readers on the 4th, adding however that ‘most people seem to feel cautiously that the situation is not as yet anything better than a truce in this bitter industrial battle – a battle of which the country as a whole is heartily weary and critical’. Four weeks later, Jack gave the unions more or less what they wanted, leaving the employers (above all the Engineering Employers’ Federation) bitterly frustrated and the government looking rather impotent. But as Macleod had already explained to Macmillan while awaiting the Jack findings, ‘there is no short cut to the problem of making men get on better with each other and there is little we can do either by government exhortation or by legislation’.<sup>4</sup>

Another vexed area, ripe for re-evaluation, was defence. On 4 April the *Evening Standard* covered the continuing trial at the Old Bailey of Dr John Bodkin Adams, the Eastbourne doctor accused (but eventually acquitted) of hastening rich old ladies on their way, and slipped in an item about the retirement of a stockbroker called Herbert Ballard, known for many years on the Stock Exchange as ‘the Mayor of Tooting’ even though he had never lived in Tooting and never been a mayor. The main story, though, made a particularly direct appeal to the nation’s youth: ‘Call-Up Planned To End By 1961’. The phasing out of National Service was part of *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, a White Paper presented by Duncan Sandys, son-in-law of Winston Churchill and nicely evoked by Ferdinand Mount as ‘that formidable slab of old red sandstone’. Other key elements included a general reduction in overseas forces, in the explicit context of Britain’s reduced economic means, and a pivotal role for the nuclear deterrent, with the *Standard* quoting Sandys: ‘Development of the hydrogen bomb and rocket weapons with nuclear warheads has fundamentally altered the whole basis of military planning.’ The White Paper was a cardinal document, and the historian Jim Tomlinson has helpfully elucidated the driving political-cum-economic motives: not only would a nuclear strategy ‘free trained manpower for the civilian sector’ but it would ‘reduce the claims of conventional weapons development and production on economic resources which could better be used to raise the standard of living’. In short, ‘nukes would replace guns to allow more resources for butter’.

For the British aircraft industry this was a major hit, leading to the cancellation of many projects and much downsizing, while more broadly the White Paper fitted into a post-Suez narrative of national decline. ‘England is now too olde to have reason to be merrie’ was the motion put before the

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