
Gloucestershire and the Journey Home

Cheltenham

After such an unpleasant start when I arrived I found that, like J.B. Priestley before me, I was in the end quite reluctant to come away from Bristol, rather as had been the case when I left Newcastle. There was more of the city that I felt I still wanted to see. I did not see much of the old docks, for instance; and I would like to have seen more of Clifton. Bristol did seem like a natural place to conclude the journey, though I still had another week of scheduled travelling to complete. Ahead of me lay Cheltenham, which I had chosen to investigate instead of Bath as a typical modern English spa town, and where I had arranged to meet up again with my wife for the final weekend of the journey, and where we intended to stay with some relatives of ours who run a flourishing company in the centre of the town. Being situated where it is, Cheltenham would also serve as an ideal springboard from which to move on for a few days' contemplation of the ancient honey-coloured stones of the Cotswolds, at the western approach to which it is located. Finally, there would be a short spell amidst the steeples of Oxford, and hopefully some conversation with an historian at the university.

Thinking about all this, and perhaps being distracted by it, as I left the Royal Swallow Hotel and the sunny expanse of College Green behind, and traipsed back across the city for

the last time, I became lost. I could not find my way to Temple Meads Station. Laden with heavy bags I found I had walked around in a complete circle when I passed the main entrance to Debenhams for the second time. Becoming increasingly aerated, and with one eye on the train times to Cheltenham, I suddenly stepped into a taxi that appeared alongside me somewhere near a very good new shopping centre I had been into a day or so previously. My last physical memory of Bristol city centre, with the air of the place still touching my face, so to speak – my final memory of big city England during this assignment – was the familiar sound of a Salvation Army Band playing *Good King Wensleslas*, and the incessant blur of rim-lit Christmas shoppers thronging sunlit pavements beneath a cloud of exhaled breath. As I pushed my bags roughly onto the back seat of the car, that jumble of figures swirling this way and that seemed to be a suitable impression to carry away – a final symbolic snapshot, perhaps, one that felt curiously reassuring and yet so quintessentially English, despite the crime statistics and the bad architecture. Then I was away, and the taxi driver was telling me there had been a collision between two trains that morning inside the Severn Tunnel, and I could expect delays when I boarded my own train to Cheltenham.

He was wrong. I did not experience delays, though the train was very full. Most of the passengers were en-route to South Wales. This became evident when the train stopped at Bristol Parkway Station, on the outskirts of the city, and the guard walked through the carriage, informed everybody about the accident in the tunnel and, amidst an all round exhalation of weary breath, said that passengers travelling in that direction and beyond must alight there and board a bus waiting outside the adjacent ticket office. This would take them to the appropriate juncture from which they could resume their journey comfortably by rail. Fortunately I was going the other way. After such an exodus the train, which was an old one that rattled and squeaked and had a bell that rang inside the driver's compartment each time it went past a signal, was nearly empty. I settled back to enjoy the ride as it wound its way slowly through the outskirts of Bristol suburbia, beneath embankments scattered with bent supermarket trolleys and domestic rubbish

and clumps of petrified undergrowth, all cheerfully refrigerated beneath a huge canopy of deep blue sky. Then the final band of housing slowly gave way to wideness and green, and the train trundled contentedly along some very straight sections of track, on into the Gloucestershire countryside, until, after about an hour, it began to curve sharply round into the outskirts of Gloucester, a city steeped in historical anecdote, but one that from the vantage point of a train offered the familiar abysmal spectacle of a clutter of trashy housing, weed-infested railway sidings, and vandalized carriages you normally find on the perimeter of modern industrial towns.

And then, after the train doubled back on itself and rattled along for perhaps another ten or fifteen minutes, finally to Cheltenham, the town among the trees, as they say, at the foot of the Cotswold hills. Cheltenham, with its jokes about retired gentlefolk, especially spinsters who used to believe miners drank champagne and kept coal in their baths, and who have today, it is said, moved on to Marbella by way of Bournemouth instead. Cheltenham, with its impeccable Ladies' College, where the descendants of Miss Beale's nineteenth-century girls are not only taught traditional academic subjects but are expected to master the use of computers as well. Cheltenham, with its exclusive Gentleman's College, which by the end of the last century had become the second largest public school in England. Cheltenham, the first garden city, with its plethora of stucco-faced Regency architecture, its crescents and its elegant squares, the biggest and most complete town of its kind ever built, and reminiscent in places of the Brighton and Hove I had only recently left behind. Cheltenham, with its acclaimed explosion of floral display during the summer months, permanently at the top of the Britain in Bloom competition and well-known for it. Cheltenham, which they used to call Poor, Proud and Pretty because of the number of ex-Indian Army colonels who retired there on modest pensions, who were educated and able to speak well, who had exceedingly stiff upper lips, but who were unable really to spend well, like some of their English bourgeois counterparts struggling to keep up appearances back then on working-class incomes did, and in pockets today staunchly continue to do. And Cheltenham

– where I could not believe how far the railway station was located from the town centre proper.

The tone of this last observation aside, there did in fact used to be three stations in Cheltenham, one of which was in the very centre of the town. But two of them have long since disappeared and the one that has been kept, nowhere near as big as you would expect for a place of its size, is about a mile and a half from the shops. A mile and a half might not be very far, but it is a sufficient enough distance to suggest that it might discourage people from arriving in Cheltenham by train. It is also a very frustrating space to have to negotiate when you are carrying cumbersome baggage. When I arrived in Cheltenham I was over an hour early for the time I had arranged to be picked up by my wife. I was hungry so I decided to walk into the town centre to try and find somewhere to eat. But by the time I had struggled with my bags down a wide residential road, where I registered there was a section of pavement designated for cyclist use only when a bell sounded behind me, and reached the periphery of the shops at a place called Montpellier, it was almost time to walk back.

Traversing that length of self-satisfied tree-lined avenue, I entertained the cynical and perhaps rather inequitable thought, reinforced by a conspicuous lack of taxis outside the station (I was told afterwards they were otherwise engaged at the races), that it was perhaps not so much a case of how far the railway station was from the centre of the town, but how far the centre of the town had been kept from the railway station. I could have believed the distance had been calculated to deter visitors, probably because Cheltenham held a high and exclusive opinion of itself. The stout buildings I passed were square-fronted, with balconies and verandas delicately woven with ornamental wrought-iron Hampstead-style canopies. It was plain to see that many had been converted into flats. When I saw them they were all glowing beneath the watchful eye of the late afternoon sun which was now dropping out of sight behind the trees, the windcreens of the cars parked on the drives beginning to mist over as a prelude to frost, a noticeboard in front of one explaining it was a 'home for retired gentlefolk', true to Cheltenham form. In pleasant, leafy, impeccably English

provincial spa towns such as Cheltenham, just as in Harrogate or Bath to which it is related and which have a similar social veneer, the feel of the people you see walking the streets is very different to the feel of the people you see walking the streets of Blackburn or Middlesbrough, of that there can be little doubt. You see this reflected in the very bone structure of faces and their proportion to bodies. In fact, I saw enough of Cheltenham in five or ten minutes that afternoon to establish that any high and exclusive opinions the town might hold about itself were neatly reflected in the comfortable, fiscally secure expressions you see walking the streets there, the faint whiff of private schools and genuine leather upholstery hanging in the bitter cold air above their heads. The quality of the shops emphasised it at a glance. They made the salubrious frontages I had seen near the university in Bristol look decidedly down market. Looking along those beaming stucco facades, interpreting the century-and-a-half of English boudoir cultivation and petty-gentry snobbery they implied, equating them to some of the extreme contrasts I had encountered travelling around this country today, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I ought to be reaching some kind of a generic conclusion about the journey. But if there was a definitive conclusion to be reached about contemporary England at all, and I'm sure there isn't, then I had probably got nearest to it when I was in Basingstoke. I made my way back through the deep dusk to the station car park. My wife's car was now visible, but there was no sign of either her or of my son. I walked up and down the footbridge, went in and out of the booking hall, and then, aching and tired, suddenly recognized a tiny voice shrieking excitedly from the opposite platform.

The Cotswolds and Oxford

We spent the weekend in Cheltenham where we enjoyed much good food, hospitality, and late-night talk. Our relatives were prospering and had recently opened a new shop, not far from one of the others, in effect to take the overflow of customers.

This in the middle of a recession, from people who admit their trade has suffered accordingly. They were talking of selling up soon and having a house built to their own specification in the heart of the Cotswold countryside. Their eldest son attends one of Cheltenham's private schools, and they have a cruiser moored somewhere in the Mediterranean. As at all such moments, late at night at a dinner table, drowsy with wine, pushing cheese and biscuits into my mouth chiefly to fill the gaps between sentences until it was time to speak, staring hypnotically at a candle flame quivering in the lamplight, I seriously wondered why I was motivated to write books when life could conceivably be so much more interesting and less mentally excruciating.

The previous few days had seen the beginning to an extremely cold spell of weather. On the Sunday we drove for miles and miles. We saw magnificent glittering panoramas, watched over from a huge cloudless sky by a sun that seemed to be gawping at the immense frozen distances, at the clusters of rooftops and the gauzy-grey hollows in which huddled the delicate white lace traceries of trees, with almost as much fascination as we were. I couldn't help thinking how typical it was that the weather should finally have changed for the better, and adopted such an intensely biting, atmospheric feel at that late stage of the proceedings. On the Monday I was driven into the Cotswolds. The intention was for me to be deposited in Bourton-on-the-Water, where I would spend the night, before following up a few leads and making my way across to Oxford a day or so later. But when we arrived at Bourton-on-the-Water, early in the afternoon, I was disappointed. There were probably a number of reasons why I should have reacted to the Cotswolds the way I did, not least of which was the tremendous feeling of anti-climax the last few days of travel were beginning to take on. Regardless of that, I have nevertheless thought for a long time that the Cotswolds, where they inform you proudly that some of the hedges have been carbon-dated to be over two-thousand-years-old, not only cover a much smaller area than you expect, but are enormously overrated. They are nothing compared to the Yorkshire Dales, which offer far more than the Cotswolds architecturally, are possessed of a genuine sense of mystery that really does arouse your sense of wonder when you are in some of

the more remote valleys, are much bigger, and are much more topographically interesting. As I stood and surveyed Bourton-on-the-Water's much-photographed succession of small stone bridges that afternoon, and tried to remember the name of the river which I had read about a hundred times (the Windrush), I decided the essence of the Cotswold villages was merely the essence of the thatch-roofed villages I had seen in Suffolk, in a different vernacular guise, and in much the same sort of countryside. The most noticeable difference between them was that in the Cotswolds there were actually people walking in relative profusion along some of the streets. Perhaps the stories some of those people would have to tell could be written about another time.

We looked at the usual places that day – at the two Slaughters, at Chipping Campden, at Broadway, and at the wide slippery square of Stow-on-the-Wold, where we ate in a very old café, and struggled to prevent our son from dropping pieces of Lego into his soup. We skirted Cirencester and paced up and down village high streets and attached lanes. We stared up at ancient steeples gleaming full in the sharp sunlight, built on the prosperity of the woollen industry that was once the economic mainstay of the area. We commented on the heavy stone slates sagging with the weight of centuries, and I mentioned how, if they had been situated in some of the mill towns in Yorkshire, they would have been looted and sold for cash by astute builders and roofers for new executive dwellings long ago. We stared across gauzy fields at tiny cottages floating in a pearly-white gossamer haze. We caught sight of twisting lanes and silhouetted figures walking dogs up remote dirt-tracks. We slowed down and gave the pairs of well-groomed women out riding their horses a wide berth. And, of course, even at that time of year, we noted the presence of the ubiquitous American accents, and the United States recommended-accommodation boards tacked to gnarled tree trunks, some of which looked as though they could have been as old as the ancient hedgerows themselves. As we went my wife was driving, and I watched the tracery of distorted trees reflecting on the front of her sunglasses as we glided past clusters of ancient gables and wooden gates glinting with ice, so that I felt like I was participating in one of those surrealistic

car commercials you see on television. It was something to do with the contrast between the abiding nature of the Cotswold landscape, and the very real sensation of being carried along in a piece of growling technology that was very much a product of an automated age. Each was as perfect a representation of its own moment as the other, thereby striking an uneasy balance somewhere between the two. We made a thorough but leisurely tour of the entire district, which offered food for the senses and inspiration for any camera or watercolourist's palette, perhaps even inspiration for poets. The villages and hamlets and clusters of farm buildings suddenly appearing as backlit outlines dripping tears of golden moisture all looked pleasant enough – but I had seen enough.

While inside a shop in one village I suddenly decided what I wanted to do. I went back out and told my wife I thought it was pointless to carry on with the journey any longer, and that I wanted to be sitting in front of my own fire by nightfall. And that was it. Though we lingered for a while in the sub-zero temperatures, I was, nevertheless, determined to reach my final intended destination for the journey. Toward the end of the afternoon, when the mists were gathering again across the distant plains, we left the Cotswolds by the eastern exit – they seemed to finish abruptly once you reached the top of the high street at Burford and joined the dual carriageway there – and drove across to Oxford. We crept through the centre of the city, searching for somewhere to park, noting the familiar scribble of bicycles padlocked to railings, and the row of weighty steeples crowding the wide main street bulkily in the deepening dusk. But we found the accelerating rush-hour intimidating and decided instead not to stop. There the street-lights began flicking on, firstly the same shade of pink as the afternoon sky, along the bottom edge of which the final shreds of day were still hanging; and then, dissolving imperceptibly – as imperceptibly as the moving hands of a clock – to the same fiery orange as where the sun was going down, sending the shifting perspective of Oxford rooftops and chimney stacks and television aerials and leafless trees trailing past us into a dense blue-black silhouette.

Then we began the long drive home. On the way, the mists began to thicken when the sun had disappeared and

the landscape became engulfed by a thick wintry fog. The further away from Oxford we drove, the more dense the fog became, so that our speed dropped and dropped, until we began to crawl through a shifting grey murk that swirled in the path of the car's beams so artificially it looked like dry ice being pumped through a flexible tube onto a stage set. There was nothing substantial left around us, nothing but diffused headlights flaring for a moment from the opposite direction, the lurid glow of street lights, frozen verges that appeared then disappeared, and the vague outline of passing gables vanishing into oblivion like ships lost in the mist. I thought how ironic it was, and yet, I suppose, how appropriate; that I should conclude my journey creeping through precisely the same kind of gloomy weather conditions, abandoning the trip as it petered out almost of its own accord, as J.B. Priestley had done nearly sixty years before me. I had never set out with the intention of re-tracing his original footsteps, as Beryl Bainbridge had done ten years before me. I had, in fact, always been anxious to avoid this. But increasingly over the previous three months, as I sat down to contemplate the things I had seen at the end of each day, I had heard the gravelly voice of J.B. Priestley echoing sombrely in the background. I felt it especially after I saw parts of the Tyne, and wondered afterwards what on earth had really changed, apart from a few superficial details, that much since the autumn of 1933.

My Country Left or Right

A number of people have travelled round England since Priestley and written about what they saw and heard and felt and thought. Daniel Defoe and William Cobbett did it long before him in a completely different age. Only a few years before Priestley, H.V. Morton went off in search of England for the first time, as did S.P.B. Mais shortly after him. With their irritating one-sentence, two line paragraphs, both fastened together sentimental passages of words that generally avoided mentioning the real world altogether, though the sober tone,

and the style of the prose, to Morton's introduction to his *In Search of England*, which is the only readable part of the book, suggests he might have been more shrewdly aware of what was going on around him than the light-hearted tone of delivery for the other two-hundred-odd pages suggested. During my own journey through England, a newspaper journalist said that Priestley's book not only did its job, which was to give a rounded impression of the England of the day that was both realistic and fair, but that it was also a work of art. He might have added that it bumped up against the economic system of the day, to which all those fine descriptive passages, all those back street experiences and factory tours, were connected. That was the secret to its success, why Priestley's book has endured, and why the nonsense put out by the other people has vanished into oblivion. Priestley has never been taken very seriously by the literary intelligentsia, of course, probably because he was too much an artist, sold too many books, and revealed his feelings too easily to retain credibility among more enlightened circles. Nor was he consistently good enough. But his *English Journey* is still the best, still the most poignant, still the most quoted, still in my opinion one of the best combinations of polemic and description to have been written, still the best and most readable thing he ever wrote, far superior to his novels, which I cannot read. And he pre-empted some of the things said afterwards by other writers who were taken seriously by the literati by at least several years.

In Priestley's day, socialism was the direction in which the will of the English people was pulling itself. The philosophy of capitalism had been largely discredited, and by the end of the war was well on the way to being consigned to the dustbin of political history. Capitalism *does not work* italicized George Orwell confidently in 1941, commenting on how the war had demonstrated that private enterprise, operated solely for private profit, could not deliver the goods. I think Orwell is probably the only English writer who has ever really mattered. But it does not prevent one from concluding, with substantial justification at the beginning of the 1990s, that it has been established that socialism *does not work* either, because it too cannot deliver the goods – or at any rate, could not deliver them in the Soviet

Union and Eastern Europe, where it appeared in its most thorough manifestation, and where it was seen to produce a form of corruption that destroyed countries from the inside out. Socialism, too, as a philosophy has been largely discredited and confined to the dustbin of political history, for the time being anyway, outside the circles of a few cranks and a minority of Communists who persist in living in a vacuum. That socialism *has* been discredited in the West, where it never materialized beyond a few shallow social reforms but where it was conceived and planned, ironically accelerated its decline in the Soviet Bloc, where it did materialize. The truth is that both capitalism and socialism would be capable of working if they were adhered to correctly, if there were no human emotions involved. It is the human beings that cause the difficulty, not the soundness or otherwise of the economics. Elsewhere, Orwell observed that if we really wanted to sort out our problems the economic system applied would hardly matter. That is correct, of course. The trouble is that it is the human race that is not mature enough emotionally to control its primal urges that appears to be at the root of our problems. In the same essay in which he suggested the future of capitalism was in doubt and that socialism was an inevitability, Orwell observed that such a state of affairs was materializing at all because that was what the English people wanted. Sufficient enough pressure was being exerted from below to influence the potential for political change and to force it in a particular direction.

Well, that might have been the case fifty years ago. But for the past thirty or forty, the pull has been the other way, and it was started by the result of the 1951 General Election, the year after Orwell died. As I suggested earlier, my conclusion having grown up in a working-class environment is that the working class has an essentially reactionary caste of mind, and, in spite of much romantic hogwash spouted over generations, probably always has had. (Possibly the only serious thinker to understand this objectively is Enoch Powell.) There are exceptions, of course, sizeable numbers of exceptions, but not enough to influence the strength of the emotional swings that influence societies during different periods in their histories. Probably the clearest indicator to the emotional quality of what could still be regarded

ostensibly as the English working class is the feel of *The Sun* and *The Daily Sport*, or more especially their letters' pages, which are perhaps the closest to what would once have been described as genuine proletarian literature that we have yet managed. There is no question that the content of such newspapers, with their cheap sensation and their insipid gimmicks, continues to keep the present set of circumstances carefully balanced. But it is unlikely this is done with the ruthlessness and cunning Marxists and left-wing playwrights popularly like to believe. (It is unlikely because it is doubtful if the editors of these papers are possessed of the necessary level of objective intelligence.) Marxists always delete from their consciousness the uneasy awareness that the gutter press and junk TV, like junk food, might be what the working class actually prefers. When hating capitalists, they forever parry intellectually by claiming that the working-class wants only what it has been conditioned to expect, thereby pinning the blame for everything on the manipulative forces at work at the root of capitalist society. At the same time, they will idealize working-class customs and expression, even its emotional outlook, whilst failing hopelessly to understand that these are a direct result of the fact that the hierarchical structure to which they are opposed exists in society at all. Such naïvety makes no allowance for the gravity of the situation as it stands. For this reason the Left often talks as though the entire capitalist scheme of things is part of a carefully calculated, huge premeditated plot. The Left, especially the extreme Left, likes to believe that politicians and businessmen scheme among themselves the continued suppression and exploitation of the working classes in smoky back rooms, probably somewhere off a corridor in Whitehall. They like to believe this because it answers so many difficult and complicated questions so very quickly and easily. One must never forget that opposing on principle the implication that the present set of social circumstances are unlikely ever to be *able* to be changed is part of the standard ammunition cartridge loaded confidently into any left-winger's verbal machine-gun, especially the gattling-gun of the doctrinaire Marxist. It compensates for their feelings of inadequacy. It compensates too for the deep sense of frustration Western revolutionaries feel, moderate

Union and Eastern Europe, where it appeared in its most thorough manifestation, and where it was seen to produce a form of corruption that destroyed countries from the inside out. Socialism, too, as a philosophy has been largely discredited and confined to the dustbin of political history, for the time being anyway, outside the circles of a few cranks and a minority of Communists who persist in living in a vacuum. That socialism *has* been discredited in the West, where it never materialized beyond a few shallow social reforms but where it was conceived and planned, ironically accelerated its decline in the Soviet Bloc, where it did materialize. The truth is that both capitalism and socialism would be capable of working if they were adhered to correctly, if there were no human emotions involved. It is the human beings that cause the difficulty, not the soundness or otherwise of the economics. Elsewhere, Orwell observed that if we really wanted to sort out our problems the economic system applied would hardly matter. That is correct, of course. The trouble is that it is the human race that is not mature enough emotionally to control its primal urges that appears to be at the root of our problems. In the same essay in which he suggested the future of capitalism was in doubt and that socialism was an inevitability, Orwell observed that such a state of affairs was materializing at all because that was what the English people wanted. Sufficient enough pressure was being exerted from below to influence the potential for political change and to force it in a particular direction.

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or extreme, civilized or uncivilized, middle class or genuine working class, at their subconscious knowledge that not only are they supported by the system to which they are opposed, but nothing fundamentally is likely ever to be changed.

Behind this kind of thinking lies a persistent stubbornness that fails to consider the realities. It also fails to consider the past hundred-odd years, perhaps even the past two-thousand years, of world history. Socialists have tried and tried, but they have failed to influence the basic psychological shortcomings that lie at the root of the basic human condition; that keep the present set of circumstances intact on a global scale, and that consequently keep human behaviour at the level it is at. Socialists have lost the argument, and it is largely a high-minded illusion these days to believe that they haven't. But then, the failure of socialism connects directly to the mental weaknesses I indicated at the end of the preceding paragraph. All the time they are influencing the perceptions of the sort of people who nowadays still think socialism is a tune worth trumpeting, as they always have, so that they are manipulated continually into a hypocritical acceptance of the benefits they obtain from capitalist culture. The left-wing playwright rails against capitalism, but breathes a sigh of relief when his latest West End work is so successful it earns him the freedom to froth at the mouth for another twelve months, and indulge in the creativity he could not enjoy were he forced to take a mug's job out in the ordinary world. Similarly, the half-baked form of state capitalism that materialized for a few years in this country after the war, masquerading as socialism, was half-baked only because the people responsible for its eventual momentum – a body of the educated English upper-middle class, with a few scholarship boys from the working class thrown in as a token gesture – considered themselves collectivist, but were in reality not much more than a by-product of capitalism imbued with a guilt-complex. They could never bring themselves to let go completely of the tastes and prejudices their upbringing had bred into them, with the level of commitment that would have been necessary to create any chance for genuine progress. The Labour Party might have been primarily an organ of the working class to begin with. But by the time it had managed

to achieve any serious political impact, it had degenerated into the sort of shallow liberal reformism that appeared with the post-war Labour government, once the educated classes had got hold of it and injected their own sentiment between the lines – the same sentiment that causes that left-wing playwright to breath his sigh of relief today at the creativity money buys him, and indulge his taste for good food and decent wines. The working-class unions also had a direct interest in the workings of capitalism, particularly during the days of the Empire. The political swing of opinion that was left was at bottom born of the cultural outlook of the pampered liberal conscience that remains with us today. It was essentially a manifestation of the brave reforming impulse that develops in the minds of sensitive, intelligent people who perceive the aesthetic incongruity of the world, who feel uneasy within themselves at the prospect of man's relative inhumanity to man, who believe it is possible to get rid of social injustice, but who are manipulated in their moral behaviour by the automatic assumption that their own secure social positions will remain basically intact. It does not matter what the issues might be. Whether domestic or international, theirs is chiefly a reaction against the basic untidiness of the world. But their motivation is primarily self-centred. Listen to their chuntering long enough, and you soon begin to understand the reason so many of them become agitated by, for instance, the hopeless plight of the underprivileged locked in the crumbling squalor of the inner cities, is not so much that they have any realistic comprehension of what it is actually like to be such a person, as it is that having to drive through such squalid environments deeply offends their aesthetic sensibilities. It goes against the grain of how they feel civilized human beings *ought* to be able to live. But their conception of how civilized human beings ought to be able to live harmoniously is gauged by the standards of their own physical comforts. They fail to understand that to retain the freedoms they presently enjoy – and the intellectual freedoms they have long taken for granted – to finally get rid of poverty, would entail a severe lowering of their own living standards.

You saw this dreary phenomenon assert itself most acutely

during the Gulf War. In squealing for a peaceful solution, both the comfortable socialists sitting around log fires in pine furnished country cottages praying for peace on at least twenty-thousand a year, and those in parties of political opposition who would have pulled their punches rather than get involved in a fight, were stupid enough to transfer their moral and cultural allegiances, but most importantly, their expectations from life, into the mind of a brutal dictator, reared in an entirely different culture. They believed he would have the decency not to allow his people to starve to death if threatened by sanctions because they would not have allowed such a horrible situation to come about *themselves*. That is the crucial point. They took it for granted his values would conform to their own. That was an essentially Western creed, born of a culture that, despite feminist carping, treats women as human beings and can show deep feelings of sentimentality toward animals and the countryside. Much of the Left's political stance was a direct result of this sort of humbug thinking, and of how it had been taught morally to behave. At a crucial moment, the Left would have compromised and stalled for time. And yet the way the Left had been taught morally to behave is a product entirely of Western free-market prosperity. Only the kind of people sheltered by prosperity, who have never comprehended the meaning of the phrase 'freedom from want', never analysed for a moment the economic foundations of their political convictions or their aesthetic outlook, could believe purely diplomatic measures alone would have worked. Did one risk killing a lesser number of people in order to prevent the annihilation of more significant numbers of people in the future, to prevent your own economic stability from suffering, and to retain the balance, or did one not? In a way, the spectacle of a broad section of the Left, and the odd flabby Conservative, innocently believing it was possible to come to an arrangement with Saddam Hussein over Kuwait was reminiscent of Chamberlain waving his white handkerchief as he emerged from the aeroplane in 1938. Chamberlain really believed, in his naïve upper-class way, that Hitler would do the decent thing and keep his word after Munich – because morally, his own schooling had taught him that is what he would have done under the circumstances. Then, as now, it

reflected a deep lack of moral courage and an inability to face up to the way the world really works.

It is symptomatic of the conceited air of Western civilization – of the self-indulgence and the self-pity prosperity enables people to cultivate – that such a frame of mind can only truly develop once putting enough food in your belly each day to keep yourself alive is no longer your chief concern. Consequently, while shockwaves from nauseating political complications reverberate throughout the world, and coffee growers are starving in Africa because of their country's debt burden to Western banks and the corruptiveness of their own governments, we can throw up a charity devoted to the welfare of animals that can raise more than twice the amount of revenue of a charity devoted to the welfare of children. We can produce a body of literature that throws itself into tantrums over the aesthetic consequences of modern architecture. The spectacle of civilized people being roused passionately over such ostensibly mundane issues must appear pitiable to an intelligent starving Somalian, who has had enough experience of the internal combustion engine not to take it for granted. It is one of the fundamental flaws of the British Left that it fails to grasp any of this. The prosperous liberal social conscience remains oblivious to the fact that its emotional attitudes, its political predilections, its squirming sensitivities, and the democratic ease with which it can stand up and blow raspberries, are a direct consequence materially of almost everything it opposes. It fails to see its buffered position is a result of millions of people beneath it, in its own country and elsewhere, being nowhere near as prosperous or as enlightened as itself. This cannot be evaded, and we should remember it every time we load big spoonfuls of coffee into our traditional-styled cafetieres. The world behaves one way. A considerable tribe of wealthy, chattering socialists and squashy-minded liberals, some of whom are prominently in the public eye and could be seen lurking in the shadows during Kinnock's closing election campaign rallies, wish to God it would behave another. Meanwhile, their own bank balances continue to fatten under the existing system, giving them an ever-greater freedom to oppose comfortably the nature of the prevailing orthodoxy. All of them hated Mrs Thatcher as a matter of

course. All were able to discharge powerful condemnations about social injustice during radio interviews, or criticize the breakdown of community values, during her remarkable reign. But every one of them prospered throughout her premiership, and in particular under Nigel Lawson's review of income tax thresholds for the better-off. In hating Mrs Thatcher they were really hating themselves, for capitalism bought the big guns of the Left the freedom to think socialistically, as it always has.

So they console themselves by claiming *they* would not mind contributing a little more tax to the building of a better, more caring, more tolerant society. The arrogant implication if you read between the lines of these sorts of high-minded claims is that all decent people would automatically do the same – as though everybody else, meanwhile, makes a living in the highly rewarding and satisfying manner that they do! It is very easy to drift ethereally among the clouds like that, to the permanent sound of cuckoos; to despair at the ostensibly selfish motives of millions of ordinary voters – as Kinnock pseudo-suggested during his pitiful resignation and Election defeat speeches – when you are comfortable enough never to have to try and survive in the same mortgage-endowed universe as everybody else. Very easy indeed to wave your fists defiantly in the air on stage at open-air pop concerts, and make vituperative remarks about the country that has given you millions of pounds stashed securely in the bank, along with the social position and the mental space to cultivate your grievances publicly. Very easy indeed when you are a privileged ex-Oxbridge socialist to rail indignantly from the security of a newspaper column about the brutalizing effects of capitalism, when you need not perform a proper day's work in your life, or subject yourself to the rigours of the common market-place, just as you never have and probably never will.

During this journey I was stopped in the street by more than one anti-Establishment clone and asked to either sign petitions or make a small donation to various political causes. Each time I met these people, I thought back to some youngsters I saw travelling to London during the Gulf War on a specially chartered bus to participate in a major public demonstration against the hostilities. NO WAR FOR OIL! such people

shrieked and sprayed across walls throughout Britain, failing to notice that it was the same oil that enabled them to travel hundreds of miles economically, to take for granted a standard of living and the relative democratic freedom, to oppose distant wars in the first place. The same people are always violently pro-Pacifist, sliding over the fact that the soldiers fighting on their behalf in the Gulf were also fighting to allow them to retain their comfortable positions as thinking subversives, who generally do not have to worry about where the next meal will come from or whether or not the light will come on the next time they flick a switch, and who would run a mile at the prospect of being put into a situation where they might have a real gun-barrel shoved up their nostril. Such people usually spin the line about the armed forces, like the police, really being defenders of the ruling class and their vested interests. Yes, but does it ever occur to these people that in so doing, the ruling class might also be defending their freedom as political activists opposed to the prevailing orthodoxy as well? That it is possible to see *Living Marxism* on sale in a popular bookseller like W.H. Smith is a case in point. It indicates a democratic freedom the Revolutionary Communist Party that publishes the magazine – a party as diametrically opposed to the prevailing orthodoxy, not to mention the motives of W.H. Smith shareholders, as it is possible to be – would not tolerate for one moment if it were to achieve power, what with the rubbish it talks about establishing dictatorships and the like.

The kind of naïve political thinking I have been discussing is a special characteristic, perhaps an unpleasant by-product, of prosperous capitalist societies like ours with strong hierarchies and strong social traditions. The fact that it has existed in one form or another for as long as it has, but failed to have much impact on the way the rest of society behaves, only serves to underline its remoteness from ordinary thinking and the texture of ordinary emotions. It was inevitable that when placed in a position of political influence during the twenty or thirty years after the war, its outlook torn between understanding what needed to be done and the mental school of conduct, the aesthetic outlook to which at heart it still belonged, it would pull its punches when the pinch finally came. The only reason

the working class tolerated it for a few years was because the implication of the promised reforms – nationalization of industry and the creation of a Welfare State – seemed more likely to give the people in the street what they wanted – a better standard of living – than the economic order had hitherto been able to give them. But that, as they say, was before the consumer boom. The shape English society has taken since then, the catalyst being the election of the Conservative government in 1951, is simply too vast a subject to discuss in these pages. For my purposes here it is sufficient to say that, after three decades, the bulk of the working class has had its social aspirations moulded largely by television, by the popular media, and by one aspect of the advertising industry, into one of habitual acquisitiveness; a stupefaction kept in check by the emerging gutter culture I referred to in Bristol and the sort of infantile television programmes we can see every day dominating our television screens. The result is that we are now living in an age when socialism is less likely to become a reality than ever before, and a queasy, brutal form of neo-fascism more likely than ever.

The implication from what I have just written may appear to be that I am assuming socialism is the only serious hope for humankind. I do not believe seriously that it is. If one contemplates the potential for socialism and looks at the types of people that have flocked to man its ranks over the years, the only realistic conclusion that can be reached in the face of enormous odds is that there is little point in trying to cut a concrete cake with a paper knife any longer. It is not even certain that social equality is truly desirable for the human species if it is to survive, which is not necessarily the same as saying if the world is to survive. Socialists who lack the objective level of thinking to understand that should seriously examine their own motives. The politics hardly matter, or at any rate the party politics hardly matter. We live in a rotten, stinking, corrupt world manipulated almost wholly in the interests of the vain and the emotionally immature. You have to assume, if you are possessed of decency and integrity, that you will be crushed and exploited emotionally, directly or inadvertently. You then have to adjust your behaviour by taking nobody at face value

and looking permanently back over your shoulder after every move you make. You have to survive. If you have an instinctive commitment toward honesty, if you feel that clutch in the centre of the chest each time you know lies are circulating, remember that the people in positions of influence and authority, to whom you feel you ought to look for guidance, are probably corrupt, useless, or inadequate, and do not have the degree of wisdom or integrity you were naïve enough to imagine they had (in other words, that you have) after all. This is the dilemma faced by decent, genuinely intelligent human beings. They have to learn how to reconcile their thoughts against these things, how to remain afloat economically and conduct their lives safely in the face of unpleasant realities, how to come to terms with the organized dishonesty and stupidity that keeps the world spinning, yet manage to retain peace of mind within themselves.

Like millions of others, I once vaguely believed myself to be socialist. But my political beliefs were, as I have suggested they still are to innumerable socialists, essentially aesthetic in origin. I failed to see that the very things I struggled against were the very things that provided me with the freedom and prosperity to be able to develop the mental space to decide what I thought was wrong with society in the first place. As with people I come across quite frequently, I had nurtured a frivolous comprehension of capitalists and capitalism, though it was always the benefits I perceived in it that held me back from fully embracing socialism. I made no allowance for the benefits the things which I fought against had actually played in moulding my own outlook. By saying these things, I am not saying that I automatically considered myself 'right-wing' and doctrinaire capitalist, because I think the old classifications are no longer adequate. To see this in perspective, you have only to remember there is a very fine line indeed between common sense and that which the Left would normally term 'reactionary'. John Casey pointed out in *The Sunday Telegraph*, when questioning the value of a chunk of the modern English liberal intelligentsia and its infantile political posturing, that 'politics is not a science but an application of practical wisdom'. Travelling around England today has only served to reinforce my belief that this is true.

It is not enough merely to say that one should not feel a sense of guilt about the freedoms and prosperity we enjoy, irrespective of the exploitations or cruelties caused by these things further down the line, and that our priority should be to use what we have achieved in order to change the world into something better. For, bearing in mind that we are living at a crucial moment, it now seems to me that if one considers carefully the development of the human race (or to be more precise, the development of Western civilization) since the Industrial Revolution, if one contemplates the recent political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and why they came about, there is only one position that can be seriously adopted politically in a country like ours, or in a part of the world like ours. And that is, it is not really a question of socialism or capitalism, Labour or Conservative, free-market economics or state planning and state control. It is a question of which form of corruption is preferable to the other in the way it influences the living standards of the vast majority of ordinary people, and that is about the best one can hope for. Politics is also, as Hugo Young has written, about managing an imperfect world. And it is worth remembering that Young really meant it is imperfect people that make for an imperfect world.

What we desperately need are not the politics of Left or Right, of Centre-this or Centre-that, but the politics of common sense. But we are less likely to obtain those than we are to obtain socialism. I do not say that as a pessimist, but as a realist. Broadly speaking, the choice politically will always be between various sets of inadequacies, because any power unit will gravitate automatically toward a defence of its own privileges. I said as much in the car as we drove through the fog early that December evening, and I tried to reach one or two conclusions during the closing moments of my journey. But I still found my mind riddled with doubts and contradictions. England has changed enormously since J.B. Priestley made his journey through it towards the end of 1933, but has it really changed all *that* much? Have the basic human impulses at work at the centre of our society and our civilization really changed all that much either? They have not. They have merely been re-distributed, and it is that which really matters. The rest of

the underlying forces that have been at work, such as the impact or otherwise on our relative democratic freedoms of recent political legislation, or the fact that the terrible, quite frightening emotional immaturity that lies at the very centre of the world's social affairs is now bound up so strongly with the influence of showbusiness and entertainment, or even the change in the design of traffic bollards for that matter, are mere technicalities. Whatever the tugging this way and that between one economic philosophy and another, or all the newspaper leader writing and think-tank proselytizing in the world, I found myself saying that when one gets down to basics, despite the crime statistics and the bad architecture, and the bullet-shaped vehicle I was being driven in through the fog-bound Oxfordshire countryside, and other minor cosmetic changes, nothing changes much at all really. Not fundamentally anyway. Except, perhaps, the speed and the performance of cars.

But then, as I have already suggested, that is what is so terribly, terribly frightening.