

HARDY TRAVELLING BRITONS WEEK 9
(YORKSHIRE)

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J. G.
RAMSAY

West and South Yorkshire

To Bradford via Robin Hood's Bay

When I left Great Ayton my plan was to travel down the eastern flank of the North Yorkshire Moors, through Whitby, until I reached Robin Hood's Bay, where I intended to stay the night. But when I reached Robin Hood's Bay, a tight cluster of pantiles and pebbles arranged picturesquely at the foot of a very steep hillside on the east coast, I was running a day or so behind and so decided to press on and try to reach Bradford before nightfall instead.

I did, however, spend an hour wandering in the blustery sunshine around the perimeter of the little village before I left. The most startling sight at Robin Hood's Bay, and it threw everything I had seen over the previous several days into sharp perspective, as well as being yet another symbolic snapshot, was that a fox-hunt was just about to get under way from the car park at the top. I shall never forget the almost surrealistic moment when I drove into the upper part of the village, with a combination of moody synthesizer and melancholy saxophone music playing loudly on the cassette in my car, suddenly coming upon the pack of hounds and red-and-black-jacketed riders sipping glasses of wine, eating pastries being handed round from a solid silver tray, and everything backlit atmospherically by the lowering rays of the afternoon sun. As obvious as it sounds, it was impossible to

avoid considering how this quintessentially English scene, and the depressed urban landscapes I had seen over the previous week, actually existed beneath the same section of the Earth's sky. Where were those two Geordie youths from the ferry across the Tyne now? Where were the muted industrial waterfronts, or the long, high, bulbous thick retaining walls, mottled with the stretching shadows of figures and lamp posts and passing traffic, along the old dock road I had seen in Liverpool? Where were the sunken and cracked paving stones, or for that matter the high-technology business parks and layers of mirror-finished glass and the slinky secretaries? Ours appears ever to be the country of sharp social contrasts.

I stopped for a late lunch at Pickering, a pleasant and quite busy little town at the edge of the moors, some distance past the Fylingdales early warning station. It is one of those small towns – like nearby Malton, where it was market day when I passed through – that you are always stopping at to eat lunch when you are travelling, to which you intend to go back and explore more comprehensively at some future date, but, like the Norfolk villages you are forever coming upon in spring sunshine, when you do go back you inevitably find you are hurrying on to somewhere else, and once again are only passing through. A railway preservation society has its headquarters there, but the town has remained authentically picturesque and generally intact, without the dreadful commercialization and seaside gift-shop mentality of places such as Haworth. Many of the shop fronts are original, so that it is pleasing to observe the way they have sagged naturally with age. The same could not be said about the long rows of shabby Victorian shop fronts I passed late that afternoon, when I eventually made my way with a stream of traffic into the outskirts of Bradford, having reached the city by way of York and Leeds. By then it was raining again and it was almost dark, so that in the blue half-light, with these old sagging terraces strung out on either side, their cheap illuminated signs intensifying against the darkness and stepping down the hill toward an eruption of murky tower blocks rearing at the bottom, the city looked run-down and quite depressing.

I knew there was more to the place than hasty generalizations

such as this, of course, because Bradford was the city I knew better than any other that I visited during this journey; more so than Manchester. One of the reasons being that, quite a few years ago now, I began to make a comprehensive photographic study of all the old textile towns in the West Yorkshire area, and Bradford was one of the places with which I became completely absorbed. Strange as it might sound, or perhaps as obvious as it might sound, I was motivated to do this when I moved away from Yorkshire and began working in and around London. I say I moved away, but I maintained a house in my home town and used to return to it most weekends. This was at about the time many of the old mills began to shut down due to the effects of the 1979-81 recession. My house was situated in an industrial suburb of Huddersfield, and there came a point when I was returning at the weekends from the south when more and more of this suburb appeared simply to be disappearing. There was a mill built only a few feet behind the back wall of my house, and when that too started to be pulled down I would walk down the road from the bus stop late on Friday evenings, struggling with my baggage on my way back from London, and despite the darkness, would squint and be aware that the chimney-pots of the row of terraced houses where my own home was situated were beginning to reveal themselves beneath the cool glow of the moonlight, as the different levels of the mill were stripped away. I used to wonder what the daylight would reveal. This process went on for months and months. The whole area was devastated by the carnage of industrial decline. To spend a week away from it would mean to return and find an enormous expanse of sky had suddenly dropped in to fill in the view where once vast stone walls had risen and teetered against the sunlight before a ceiling of moving clouds. The suburb where I lived was one of the most heavily industrialized areas of Huddersfield, and this awareness of the sky beginning to take up more and more of your ground level vision, as high walls disappeared, is the strongest sensation I can remember from that time. To give you some idea of the scale of the annihilation, if it had been possible to place the point of a pair of gigantic draughtsman's compasses on the front doorstep of my house, and scribe a perfect circle with a radius of about half a mile,

some thirteen textile mills were demolished inside the line of that circle over a period of only twelve or eighteen months. It was certainly an unlucky number for the economy of the area, though it goes without saying that the demolition contractors, of which Huddersfield has a number who quickly became very rich, as it does scrap-metal merchants, made a fine killing. Those were the days when you could buy full-blown redundant textile mills at virtual giveaway prices, pull them down, ship the stone to building companies on the Continent or to other parts of this country, to be used in the construction of new executive dwellings, and make a pretty pot of money. I watched lorry-loads of Yorkshire textile mills drive in columns in and out of the area, leaving the narrow back lanes dusty and grey from the pother of demolition. Nothing was wasted. The hugely thick greasy pitch-pine beams holding up the floors and roofs of the mills and attached outbuildings were stripped and sold as second-hand timber from new yards that sometimes opened up on the sites of textile buildings still in the process of being demolished. I designed some cupboards and the kitchen I had installed in the house I lived in at the time, and had them completely hand-made by a Huddersfield craftsman. Much of the beautiful wood from which he built them, now planed up and smelling resinous and new, came from the streets where I grew up; where in its previous manifestation it had almost certainly supported dozens of textile machines, or acres of rain-lashed slates, for the better part of a century. And we are not talking here about small quaint buildings, but enormous five or six storeyed monsters that dominated the landscape. Mills that were visible lifting from some dip in the land, or lifting bulkily at the end of nearly every street, or towering alongside railway viaducts wherever you went, so that there were nearly always exclamation marks rearing at the end of your environmental thoughts.

It was with these awarenesses in mind that I became conscious of seeing my native part of the country in a rather different light, when I moved away from it to work and saw it slowly dismantled from a distance. So much so that ironically it made the bond I felt toward it grow stronger than ever, encouraging me to go back there and spend months and

months walking the moors and all the towns. Over a period of several years I took photographs in rain, snow, and sunshine, absorbing the feel of the places as they were now. In many ways I became aware of their historical significance for the first time, or at any rate perceived them with a broader depth of appreciation and understanding, and the frame of mind nurtured in me back then has overshadowed almost everything I have thought, and more especially written, since. One of the places I meticulously explored was Bradford, where there can be few streets I have not negotiated at some point or other over recent years. Bradford's textile industry suffered badly at about the same time the industrial area I have outlined above suffered badly. Vast areas of the city have changed shape and been cleared, though I think it is true to say the eventual collapse of textiles had been inevitable for some time. There must be fewer mill chimneys projecting from the skyline of modern Bradford than any other industrial town of comparable size in the north of England. Like its red-brick antithesis at the other side of the Pennines, Oldham, you feel that Bradford has been making a concerted attempt to rigorously remove any association with its once most prominent industry from the skyline. When I was there this time, two more mills were in the process of being demolished. Their half-eaten remains, their exposed interior stairwells, their rows of sturdy cast-iron supporting columns, were lifting morosely behind lengths of wooden hoardings fronting onto the pavements along a couple of the city's main roads. The familiar grind and clatter of bulldozers and demolition lorries, lined up to dispose of the re-usable architectural clumber in an oh-so-familiar pattern, was sounding again noisily in the background, though not with the frenzy of ten years ago because that has long since subsided.

A number of recent studies similar to the subject matter of this book have generally concentrated on race relations when discussing Bradford. Bradford has the largest Asian community concentrated within its boundaries anywhere in Britain. There are more than sixty-thousand of them living in the city and there are parts of it they completely dominate, chiefly because the cramped, often squalid industrial quarters

they first settled in were seen as undesirable habitations in the eyes of the existing Bradford population at the time. The Asians first came to work the night shifts in the mills during the late 1950s, when the textile industry was still going strong and there were not enough people available in this country who were prepared to tolerate the then poor working conditions, or accept the low wages. The Asians were fortunate in that Bradford, like Liverpool and a number of other northern cities, had a tradition of accepting immigrants. There was a wealthy German and German-Jewish influence in Bradford for many years during its Victorian heyday. There were so many Germans living and working in Bradford, in fact, that when the First World War broke out it was said half the population did not know which way to turn. After the Second World War a quantity of Poles and Ukrainians arrived, escaping pogroms of the kind that are casting their unpleasant shadow over Eastern European countries again today; and there has long been a substantial quantity of Irish. The people from the Indian sub-continent were part of a continuing tradition that had long denoted Bradford to be one of the most cosmopolitan of provincial cities. But, while the influence of earlier groups of immigrants has more or less evaporated, and during the early 1950s there were a mere three-hundred-and-fifty coloured immigrants living in Bradford, the Asians have consolidated their hold. Among the usual plethora of down-market taxi ranks, take-aways, restaurants, clubs, and cinemas that have been part of the fabric of modern urban ethnic England for some time, in Bradford there are now Asian banks, solicitors, accountancy firms, retail chains, and a number of unobtrusive millionaires. There are even Asian estate agencies operating in the city today, and their signs written in Urdu are scattered throughout the old industrial parts of the city. This sharp contrast created by the influence of a different pair of cultures can produce curious results. There are parts of Bradford where you can pass along shabby cobbled streets lined with small Victorian terraced houses at dusk, full of lingering darkened nineteenth-century atmosphere, and there is the smell of curry drifting in the air. Be they Sikhs, Pakistanis, or Indians, it is impossible to spend five minutes in Bradford without becoming aware strongly of

the presence of Asians. For this reason, a mill owner I spoke to when I was there during this journey said that someone had forecast to him that by the mid-twenty-first century Bradford will have become the centre of the Muslim faith in Europe. That you can believe.

But with all of this admitted, as someone who knows Bradford and hopefully retains something of a feel and a sort of gloomy affection for the place, to me Bradford is, and always has been, a place I have pre-eminently associated with textiles. There is more to it than the farcical comments uttered by the Centre for Peace Studies at the city's university during Gulf Wars. There is more to it than the much maligned and misunderstood Ray Honeyford, effigies of Salman Rushdie being burned in the streets, and the Bradford Council for Mosques. Though they are visible on the streets in some profusion, when I think of Bradford I do not think first of Indians and Pakistanis. I think first of the history of the Yorkshire wool textile industry, the legacy of which is stamped right across the face of the city. Then I probably think about Indians and Pakistanis. That more and more of Bradford has been eaten relentlessly away by the march of progress is more or less irrelevant. Whatever social and architectural changes might have accrued over the years, worsted textiles built Bradford, and Bradford built worsted textiles. The industry has of course contracted enormously since Victorian times and is not the major employer that it was. (The city council is Bradford's largest single employer today: a fact that will not come as any surprise to a good number of readers.) But that does not matter. If you stand back and contemplate Bradford from one of the hills rising gently around it, most of what you see laid out before you, chiefly thousands and thousands of stone terraced houses rippling in rows up and down the slopes right around the edge of the city, is there because of the nineteenth-century textile industry and nothing more. A book reviewer in a reputable local newspaper was most perturbed when another writer, who was not a native of the area, passing through Bradford during a study of Britain, made a similar point. This was unfortunate, though I suspect the reviewer's consternation was based on his assumption that the writer in question was

making the usual derogatory observation, whereas the writer was doing what anybody with eyes and a brain in their head and a feeling for history could easily see for themselves – he was simply stating a truthful fact. This nineteenth-century enigma, as butchered and battered and decrepit as it might be, to me creates a major focal point to Bradford that is impossible to ignore; a framework to which everything contemporary, including the arrival of the Asians thirty years ago, whose children now swarm and multiply along the back streets, the growth of new industries, and the flood of EC money into the city's recent roadbuilding and urban regeneration programme, is directly and inextricably attached. The legacy of Victorian industrialism is the focal point from which nearly everything else you contemplate when you move about Bradford today naturally evolves, however remote the power and importance of that legacy might now appear to be.

The focal point of my attention when I crawled through the torrential rain into Bradford, late that Saturday afternoon, was the old Midland Hotel in Forster Square. I had never stayed there but felt that now would be as good a time as any. My aspirations remained unfulfilled. When I found the hotel in the very centre of the city, a blank facade of boarded-up windows met me at the opposite side of an abundance of traffic lights and an expanse of glistening darkness flaring with a confusion of headlights. The hotel, a grand building in the finest Bradford nineteenth-century tradition, had closed down since last I was there. There is no worse an initial impression when arriving in a city than to come upon a formerly prestigious hotel, centrally positioned and once of some importance, to find it has been abandoned. It is as disheartening a sight as that of trackless or overgrown railway platforms. I had seen a disused hotel like this already. In Liverpool the huge Great Northern Hotel that backs onto Lime Street Station had been abandoned by the time I arrived. But Liverpool has other hotels of quality and distinction. There were no other hotels I knew about of quality and distinction in Bradford. Tired of driving, I was in no mood at that hour on a miserable early evening to begin casting about in search of anything else in the dark and wet. Because I have a number of friends and former professional associates

living well within the boundaries of Bradford, I had made some alternative arrangements in case I encountered difficulties. So I turned round immediately and left the shadowy hulk of the Midland Hotel behind, drove out of the city and stayed at a house high in the hills. I was not as close to Bradford as I would have preferred, but under the circumstances, and because I was travelling in my own car, this did not matter. I was soon being welcomed to a warm fireside and given a hot drink and a meal and wondering why I bothered to endure the insular misery of hotels in the first place; hoping the one I had seen in Bradford would not prove to be an unfortunate portent of the things I was to encounter over the ensuing days.

Millsapes in the Winter

It rained heavily throughout the night and for most of the following day, the Sunday, and for most of the day after that. The rain came down with such steady and unrelenting determination that my first couple of days in Bradford were, in fact, uneventful and rather sluggish.

Under the circumstances there was not a great deal that I could do, so I spent much of my time socializing or driving randomly about the area, looking at Bradford and Halifax and Sowerby Bridge, and at most of the towns along the Calder Valley. I visited my old art school several miles outside Bradford, and had a talk with the best lecturer who ever taught me anywhere. It was the first time we had seen each other for more than ten years, and unfortunately, though some of my best memories are as a student in his class, the story was rather gloomy and despondent, because of what I was told were the detrimental effects of educational reforms since I was there, and their impact on the quality of teaching. I even drove as far across as the Colne Valley on the outskirts of Huddersfield, a superb north country landscape with which I was acutely familiar, and which remained as uniquely distinctive as ever. All the time I was conscious of the feeling that there was so much I wanted to say, but as usual not enough space in which to say it.

Driving through these darkened industrial landscapes again, I was also conscious that the old West Riding was conforming to the stereotyped picture still embedded in many people's imagination. This pleased me enormously. It was as though the weather were deliberately behaving as anyone new to the area, or a stranger conducting a journey through England, would expect it to behave. You could have said it was up to its old tricks. I should add that I am not opposed to these conditions, and I was not opposed to them again when I was there this time. There is something intensely satisfying about driving through these West Yorkshire towns in the rain, then calling at the homes of friends where there are flurries of raindrops humming against the windows and the pleasing smell of food and coffee is emanating from kitchens. These are not sentimental perceptions but sensations that are very real in a landscape where the climate often holds the upper hand. One thing I have often noticed about the vernacular architecture of the area is that when it rains as constantly and as thoroughly as it is capable of doing up there, the wet seems to permeate the very texture of the darkened stone and turn it even darker, almost black. Despite the fact that the architectural countenance of the whole region has been in the process of lightening for some years now, both because of a concentrated programme of stonecleaning, and because of the effects of the rain gradually washing away years of industrial grime, you notice this darkening on the old buildings and you notice it on the old dry-stone walls running along the sides of the roads or disappearing across the fields. It is the same effect as when clothing becomes wet, and I cannot honestly say I have noticed it anywhere else in the country. With heavy grey clouds constantly shifting overhead and hanging in tatters above the chimney-pots, it creates a tremendous sense of atmosphere. When I climbed the hills overlooking the Calder Valley on the Sunday afternoon, for a few moments acres of apparently mirror-finished slates were visible stepping away into the mist far below. This was unusual because such effects are most commonly created by the sudden appearance of the sun, but there was not a glint of sunlight showing anywhere.

When there was a short break in the weather and I stopped at an empty Todmorden Park the same day, some distance from

Bradford, where I walked about in the bitter cold and wet, this tremendous sense of north country atmosphere was suspended thickly in the air. There were footpaths sodden with decaying leaves. There were crows moaning with a funereal enthusiasm among the black dripping branches. A large, brick, former cotton mill – unusual for a predominantly stone-built town, though it may help to explain why it is sometimes said the people of Todmorden are not quite sure whether they live in Lancashire or Yorkshire – rose into the sky, its windows lit up against the gathering dusk. For the most morose of half hours I felt like I was the only person alive in the whole world. A little further on I came upon the greeny-bronze statue of John Fielden MP, standing serenely in the gloom. I stood beneath my umbrella, surrounded by falling leaves that were so yellow they seemed to be glowing in the murky half-light, and read the inscription. It said that the statue had been raised by public subscription by the people of Todmorden over a hundred years previously, as gratitude for Fielden succeeding through perseverance to obtain the ten hours act during the late 1840s. That is the kind of history you find yourself contemplating in this rugged but to my mind most invigorating and unique of landscapes. That it has been substantially destroyed in places; that the wealthy cottage-converters have completely ruined many old properties with hopelessly indecorous extensions and the playing out of their childish social fantasies in gardens; that more and more original windows are being superseded by crass and clumsy uPVC replacements; that more and more rooflines are becoming spattered with satellite dishes, has not yet managed to destroy the authentic atmosphere, provided you experience it during the appropriate weather conditions.

I was still thinking of this when, at what could only be termed the perfectly appropriate moment during a mood of deep contemplation before an old statue, it started to rain again. I ran for cover beneath a somewhat dilapidated Edwardian public shelter that smelt of damp cigarette-ends at the other end of the park, alongside the deserted children's playground. By now it was coming dark. There was an attractive blonde-haired woman and her small son, who seemed to me unusually bright and articulate for his age, also sheltering in there. For

about twenty minutes we sat talking, our breath shooting out in cloudy gasps. While the rain thrashed the tarmac outside and dripped off the motionless swings and roundabouts and the painted parrots and horses, and the puddles intensified on the adjacent muddy playing fields, and the steep hillsides rising around the town became indistinct grey silhouettes, she told me about her work with business management in and around the nearby city of Manchester. This was a job for which it appeared she was quite highly paid, and was, I suppose, the very last type of career sceptics would expect to end up discussing with someone in a wet Yorkshire mill town. Then the temperature must have dropped a degree or two further and it actually began to snow. To my astonishment the snow quickly became a raging blizzard. Traffic crawled and slithered along the streets. A few figures were huddled in hoods against the sideways torrent. Those blackened streets and houses, and outbuildings with sagging stone roofs, and dry-stone walls, and serrated weaving sheds running along the sides of main roads, the handful of remaining mills, and the great striding viaducts, now stood out even blacker against the valley sides, the grass of which first turned grey and then rapidly intensified to the purest white. This was the landscape I remembered from my childhood, and it was obliterated in a matter of minutes. It was marvellous to see it behaving like that so unexpectedly. It might be assumed that some of the spontaneous coincidences and occurrences that I have referred to during the writing of this book were in some way fabricated to assist the flow of the narrative. The authenticity of reportage has long been suspect. The atmospheric moments I found myself suddenly experiencing were not fabricated. They really happened how they happened when they happened. And the way the snow came down that afternoon was perfectly appropriate to the conception of such a magnificent and invigorating English industrial landscape as this. When the snow comes like that it works wonders and binds the dullest and most mundane of urban townscapes together. Under those conditions the modern rubbish, the columns of tacky chalet bungalows dithering along the edges of fields, the solemn flat-capped old men shuffling across pedestrian footbridges slung between the prefabricated

concrete sides of dual carriageways, the black entrances to underpasses, the dirty grey banality cluttered unevenly that makes up the bulk of the centre of modern Bradford and bears a striking resemblance to photographs you see of parts of Eastern Europe, appear almost comely. The snow that Sunday didn't last, of course. By late evening it had changed back to rain, and by daybreak it had disappeared altogether.

Tuesday morning rose to shine down upon Bradford the most brilliant sunshine and revealed there to be not a single cloud anywhere in the deep blue sky. It was the fifth of November, Guy Fawkes night, and there were the distant sounds of exploding fireworks thudding in the air throughout most of the day and late into the night. The greyness and the rain and the snow had gone but scarf and glove weather had finally arrived, for there was a bitter cold filling the busy early morning streets. Little Germany, a few minutes' walk from the centre of Bradford, where I had arranged to meet an old friend, was a dense network of tall blue-black shadows contrasting perfectly against the sunlit mid-Victorian stonework forming the high gulleys of the streets. Little Germany became known by this name because it was originally built by the German and German-Jewish merchants who came to the city during the nineteenth century to set up in the wool business, a number of whom were already associated with the clothing industry in nearby Leeds. Until their arrival in the 1830s, the old Cloth Halls and Piece Halls had been where finished woollen goods were traded, when textiles was still very much a cottage industry – literally – supported by thousands of small and independent manufacturers based in domestic houses out in the surrounding countryside. But as the industry grew and factory methods intensified and became concentrated in the developing cities, during Bradford's industrial heyday Little Germany quickly expanded and became very much the textile merchants' and yarn storing quarter of the city, where the finished goods were bought and sold. There is only a small amount of textile-related business carrying on there today, and for some years the city council has been cleaning up and renovating the gaunt warehouse buildings, which are distinctive for their simple linear facades and overhanging cornices, as are

many of Bradford's old commercial buildings. Some Victorian-style street furniture has been installed, and a number of cultural activities and businesses have been encouraged to settle in the area, including an art gallery in a converted mill. The idea has been to promote Little Germany as a sort of Covent Garden of the north. It was difficult to decide whether or not this undertaking was succeeding when I was there that morning. Little Germany seemed to me to be very quiet, almost dead, though there was the constant hum of traffic in the background from a new section of ring road that has recently been built and now embraces the top side of the quarter. In the past when I have been there at the weekend the streets have never been exactly thriving. There is, however, the small and thriving Bradford Playhouse and Film Theatre situated at the edge of Little Germany near the main Leeds Road. It is housed in an interesting Art Deco-inspired building fitted in among a terrace of Victorian buildings and offices up a sloping side street, and it has claims to be one of the most accomplished arts organizations in the northern part of England. Much of the original impetus behind it, when Bradford was very much a theatrically orientated city, was the work of J.B. Priestley. This was the Civic Theatre of which he happened to be president that he referred to when he was in Bradford in 1933, conducting his English journey, though when he was there it was housed in a different building to the one it is today, because in 1935 the original was burnt down. The theatrical side of things continues to be, as it was during the 1930s, a voluntary organization run and maintained by amateurs. It is interesting to observe that, for a serious arts establishment, it receives no external funding or grants of any kind, but depends entirely on box office receipts, private sponsorship, members' subscriptions, and so on. (The film theatre part of the operation does receive arts funding.) Many visitors to Bradford will be aware of the beautifully refurbished Alhambra Theatre alongside the Museum of Photography and the bronze statue of J.B. Priestley. But I wonder how many are aware of Bradford's other important little theatre?

I do not mention any of this as yet another excuse to bring Priestley's name into the structure of this narrative, but

to link it to the Northern Theatre School that at one time was based on the Bradford Playhouse premises, and which has had among its more well known graduates Billie Whitelaw, Thelma Barlow, Gordon Kaye, Bernard Hepton, and Tony Richardson. The old friend I had arranged to meet up with that morning in Little Germany was a student at that drama school during the early 1950s, when she won one of the first arts scholarships to be awarded by Leeds City Fathers after the war. She went on to become a young professional actress working in repertory theatre throughout the country. Though she is no longer an actress (she is now a painter, having reared a family in the meantime) she retains the agreeably silvery-haired tanned good looks and impeccable presentation often associated with women from her old profession. When I first got to know her about ten years ago she spoke such perfect and eloquent English I once asked if she had been to a finishing school when she was a girl. I was laughed at, because her background was about as unlike that of a rich little English schoolgirl as it is possible to be. She was Italian by birth (this probably explains why she has retained her complexion), she was born into poverty, and for the first eight years of her life could not speak a word of English because she was brought up in a convent where the girls were beaten if they were found sleeping with their hands beneath the sheets. When we met up again it was the first time she had been back to Little Germany for nearly forty years.

What was interesting about her recollections of Bradford Playhouse when she was a student, something that is perhaps not so very widely known, is that John Braine almost certainly based the amateur theatricals central to the plot in *Room at the Top* around this very same theatre. In addition to being a functioning theatre it was very much a sort of private club, where a particular stratification of Bradford citizens with intelligence and money would congregate. She remembers quite vividly when she was there during the early-to-mid-1950s that the young Braine used to come in and sit down and scrutinize their performances, both in the theatre and in some rehearsal rooms owned by the drama school nearby, and make copious notes in a little book. She believes that several of the characters that appeared in the novel, and consequently in the film, were

directly influenced by some of the people working alongside her. In some respects, the drama school was seen by a quantity of the Bradford industrial elite as being a type of finishing school, and she says it was quite likely the naïve and rather shallow character of Susan in Braine's novel was inspired by a wealthy mill owner's daughter who was a student with her at the school at the time. This girl was the authentic Yorkshire mill owner's daughter who has all but disappeared today: very beautiful – the kind of lithe beauty that can flower comfortably on inherited money – very much a part of the sports-car-and-riviera-holidays, yachting lifestyle, and with a history of several abortions behind her. She used to invite my friend to her house, but being technically a foreigner, and due to the terrific, almost overwhelming contrast in lifestyles, my friend was always too conscious of herself to be able to go. She loathed and detested Bradford in those days. She says that many people accept that Bradford is depressed today, and that, like the entire country, it is beginning to live increasingly on the memories of past glories and the accepted wisdom that things are not the way they were. As we walked the bright clean streets of today's Little Germany she reminded me that the Bradford she remembers was a filthy, horrible city that seemed to exist in a permanent bleak twilight, though she admits that her unpleasant memories, beginning the day she arrived at the station deep in the smoky railway cutting up at Laisterdyke, might have been influenced by the fact that she lodged in a foul attic room down Manningham Lane, where the landlady sometimes used to serve tomato soup for dinner that was made from several spoonfuls of watered-down ketchup.

John Braine was, it is said, a one novel man, and it is sometimes claimed, too, that the success behind *Room at the Top* was that it painted a picture of the north of England as it really was. (In other words, it showed the sharp hierarchical contrasts between rich and poor that you still see today, even if the central portion has widened itself out.) I believe the real appeal of it was the honesty of the Joe Lampton characterization – a manifestation of Braine's own suppressed personality that probably resulted in his eventual clumsy rightward move – whose emotions and desires many people, in particular a crucial body of influential book reviewers, could strongly identify with.

Even into the 1950s, despite the smog and the blackness and the austerity, despite the effects of rationing and the immediate post-war depression, it was possible to feel the influence in Bradford of the tail-end of the old industrial dynasties that had once been a sort of aristocracy within the area. The lasting achievement of Braine's novel is that it depicted something of this rich industrial family and social-ladder-climbing elitist side to the modern north; a side few people in southern English literary circles knew about, when there was still enough of it left to describe.

Yorkshire Textiles Today

When you are in the Bradford area you frequently hear people harkning back nostalgically to the lost Bradford, and claiming that the dilution of family influence lies at the root of the textile industry's general decline, and the deterioration in the quality of the city's public life. They are generally people who have never been connected to the textile industry in a working capacity, it is worth noting, but who warmly remember the atmosphere of the smoky industrial city of gas lamps, dog racing, and trams all too easily. It is true that, though there are still a number of old family firms operating in Huddersfield and neighbouring Halifax – both towns that have always produced finer and more expensive cloth than Bradford – their influence has all but died out in the Bradford textile industry today. One of the main reasons behind this is that the very large Yorkshire mills were mostly centred on Bradford, and when outside interests became involved in the purchase of going concerns some years ago, they tended to go automatically for the bigger companies. Most of the others went out of business altogether when the industry tipped into its final disastrous period of decline.

It is a different story to what these old sentimentalists believe if you speak to some of the mill owners and associated people working in the city today, with their noses very much to the economic grindstone. I met quite a few of them when I was in Bradford, and was shown round their mills. One of

them, an executive purchasing director with one of Bradford's more important textile concerns, was the very last in the family line of what I suppose could be termed something of the original Bradford mill-owning stock. I should guess he was only a few years older than me, but he had seen enough to be able to tell me that much of the reason behind the Yorkshire textile industry's eventual decline was that until fairly recently the people running the old firms tended to be more than merely blasé in their attitude toward the changes taking place out in the wider world. Because these mill owners had produced a particular type of cloth or spun a certain yarn for generations, they complacently assumed that was exactly what they would carry on doing. They had got fat on good profits but unfortunately had a poor record for re-investing in the modernization of their factories. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, they persisted stubbornly in this attitude toward the workings of the market place. Trade had fluctuated in the past but it had always come back, they told themselves. So they sat back behind their broad leather-topped desks in their old panelled offices along Bradford's steep industrial streets and waited for it to come back again.

Well, most people will be aware that the difference this time was that trade had fluctuated for good and it did not come back. A decline in the British textile industry that had been increasing steadily since the end of the war, and almost certainly had its origins as long ago in time as the sunset years of the Victorian era, intensified; the mills that had managed to hang on with their antiquated attitudes finally collapsed. The industry proceeded to suffer horribly from the effects of cut-throat foreign competition. Much of the cheaper end of the trade that had once formed the bedrock of Bradford textiles went to the Italians. The better quality worsted side was hit by the rapidly-industrializing Third World. An industry that had a workforce of a hundred-and-fifty-thousand when the Conservatives came to office in 1951 had dropped to only forty-thousand by the time they came to power again in 1979, when they prompted a massive industrial shake-out, much of it sorely needed it has to be admitted. Unfortunately the government presided over policies that worked very much to

the advantage of the spectatorial, parasitical element of society, of dealers in currency and dealers in other countries' wares, crippling the competitiveness of the productive, active element of society, of the hapless makers of goods in this country, and limiting their ability to recover. And yet despite all of this, in the face of overwhelming odds, the textile industry managed to turn itself round. Bearing in mind that almost three quarters of remaining British textile production is concentrated in Bradford and a handful of surrounding Yorkshire towns, it still manages to be our sixth-highest export earner, selling its goods in a hundred-and-sixty countries worldwide, and manufacturing enough cloth each year to be wrapped around the globe one and a half times. We are all familiar with the contraction of the textile industry, but how many of us could honestly say we knew textiles continued to be one of our major export earners? The success of the remaining firms in Yorkshire lies in the fact that they are now very much closer to the market, and that they are willing to respond quickly to changes in the nature of demand. Things are not easy, and you do not need to speak to very many managing directors to realize this. Representatives go out in search of business with a fierce determination to secure it, and everybody I spoke to reminded me of that fact before they said hardly anything else. It is true that large quantities of jobs have vanished. Over a five or six year period, from the end of the 1970s to about the middle of the 1980s, 50% of Bradford's manufacturing jobs in textiles and its other important industry, engineering, were lost. But textile jobs have disappeared not only because of recessions and industrial shake-outs, but because of the shaking loose of those staid attitudes and dated working methods that for so long hung like a ball-and-chain around the industry's ankles. There is still a need for genuine skills in some areas, such as in the setting of spinning machinery for the production of fine yarns – here the industry has specialized and managed to remain strong – but on the weaving side skills have gradually been squeezed out by the relentless onslaught of better and better technology. Where a man could once work four looms, he can now work twelve, and more often than not their performance will be monitored by computers. Management structure has been tightened up and

thinned down. The result of this wholesale restructuring, and a massive investment in better machinery, is that productivity has improved significantly, enabling the industry to perform well throughout most of the 1980s, though it does not need to be said here that under the economic circumstances at the time of writing things have rather tailed off. The companies that have survived have survived largely because they have carved their own niches and got their marketing strategies right. I was shown round Drummond's mill up along Lumb Lane, just off the city centre in Bradford, where there are so many Asians congregated that twenty-five years ago it was known locally as the Burma Road. The mill looks like the archetypal Yorkshire mill massively rearing in everyone's imagination. It still has a towering jet black chimney – no longer used, of course – and a jumble of Victorian terraced housing is gathered all around. But 90% of the cloth woven in that mill ends up in the men's suit departments of some of Britain's most well-known high street stores, thank God. I saw some of it being woven in one of the sheds. There was a tremendous hazy perspective of blurring machinery where the only sharply defined shapes visible were the blue-overalled weavers moving slowly up and down the aisles, scanning the looms. You walked into a veritable wall of sound (the weavers I saw were wearing ear-muffs, incidentally, and I was also offered a pair) that was so phenomenal it actually caught in the throat. It was the sound that used to fill the streets, muffled through thick walls or behind closed doors, suddenly intensifying when you passed an open loading bay, in the area where I lived as a teenager. But all that machinery in Drummond's mill was coming out at Christmas and being updated and replaced in readiness for the opening up of the single European market. Elsewhere in England someone told me that he thought this country would continue to become not much more than a vast warehouse for South East Asia, and that Britain's remaining industry would be crucified when the international barriers finally came down. The Drummond Group PLC in Bradford was one of the firms I saw that was intending to make sure the new trading conditions worked very much to its advantage, and I should say it spoke for much of the Yorkshire textile industry.

Many of the other mills in Bradford tend to be concentrated on smaller specialist or emerging markets. For instance, a market that hardly existed at all until comparatively recently was the manufacture of textile fabrics used in the upholstery of new cars. It was not that long ago when cars were still upholstered with leather, and later plastic. Now they are generally upholstered with fabric and that fabric needs to be woven in mills. There are also other industrial applications for specialist modern fabrics that might seem unlikely, that come under the umbrella of the modern textile industry. I know of at least one mill in Huddersfield that experienced phenomenal success during the 1980s and substantially rebuilt and expanded its premises. It might still bear something of a resemblance to the traditional stone-built mill from the outside, or it did until its chimney came down about five years ago. But go inside and you find a ultra-high-technology factory producing the polypropylene fibre used in motorway netting construction, and, when it is blended with other fibres, in the manufacture of a hardwearing carpet. In addition to the vast amount of cloth produced by the industry, some of the more unusual things it makes are the green baize used in the covering of snooker tables, typewriter ribbons, even the cloth that is used to encapsulate tennis balls. I have occasionally listened to arrogant anti-manufacturing persons laughing about the north of England's industrial history during games of tennis on warm summer afternoons. The next time they toss a tennis ball into the air before they serve, they would do well to remember that its hairy surface has probably been woven in British textile mills that are quietly serving them.

This is the kind of frivolous, outdated prejudice that the textile industry has been making strenuous attempts to overcome. It is true that you can still walk through the gates into traditional mill yards that look like they have looked for the last hundred years. Out along Bradford's busy Thornton Road, where there is still a sizeable concentration of textile architecture, is situated Daniel Illingworth's mill, where yarn is spun for the Nottingham and Leicester hosiery trades and where yarn was also being spun to make police uniforms when I was there. This is the mill that was used in the film adaptation of *Room at the Top*. The puddle

that Laurence Harvey threw his cigarette-end into, with the tall chimney reflected in the water, is still there in the mill yard after all these years; a detail I include simply because when I remembered it I was taken by the arm to see it. Looking across that expanse of cobbles toward the end of a winter's afternoon, with the sun low in the sky gilding the upper storeys of the mill against the deepening sky, with clouds of your own breath surrounding you in the freezing air, you cannot fail to respond to the awesome sense of presence these old buildings and their great thick chimneys exude, simply as solid objects positioned squarely upon the surface of the Earth. Similarly, you can walk into beautifully panelled foyers that are almost as unchanged as they were the day the last line of mortar was trowelled into position outside during the reign of Queen Victoria. But to keep these observations in perspective, to appreciate that this is far from an antiquated industry propped up by memories of its participation in classic British cinema, you need to keep one eye on the rows of blurred green computer screens flickering through the original ornate etched glass panels of the reception area. You need to listen to the chattering of print-outs coming from behind closed doors. You need to remember that part of everyday phraseology in much of the Yorkshire textile industry today, as it is in many industries, is CAD/CAM – Computer Aided Design and Computer Aided Manufacture. Textile design used to be a very laborious and time consuming process, but patterns can now be changed on screen in a matter of moments, sometimes with clients watching over the shoulder of the designer and making on-the-spot suggestions so they get precisely what they want.

That the Confederation of British Wool Textiles, with its headquarters in Bradford, where I spent some time talking with the director, states emphatically **FIRST THINGS FIRST – FORGET THE PAST** in a booklet it recently put out, intended to attract young people to a career in textiles, speaks volumes. It makes for an interesting contrast against the general social atmosphere hanging over the country at the present time, where we are busy idealizing the industry of the past and carefully destroying much of our remaining industry in the present. When you drive past Yorkshire mills today, when you climb

high above the suburbs and see them rising in the distance above a confusion of tiny rooftops, it is important to remember this. It is important to realize that these fine old buildings, many of which have their upper floors empty but are maintained at the expense of the firm because they have been listed of architectural or historical importance by some sentimentalist in a remote office, who probably sees them chiefly as objects in the distance rising above a confusion of tiny rooftops, belong to a forward-looking, high-technology industry. Are we generally aware of this as a country? We are not. Do we care? We do not. In the meantime, a typically English paradox asserts itself. An industry that continues to be perceived largely as an odorous nineteenth-century smokestack caricature finds itself struggling to be taken seriously in a culture that prefers to settle back and respond favourably to certain of its aesthetic aspects from a hundred years ago instead.

This topsy-turvy age of burgeoning rose-tinted Victorian-embracing nostalgia, this gruelling obsession with old industrial artifacts we are living through, does not greatly help the stigma that is attached to modern manufacturing industry in this country. By causing us to look back it does not encourage us to seriously look forward, a fact which is itself merely a reflection of the terrible lack of direction there is hanging over our affairs. One of the detrimental effects of this situation on the quality and flavour of national life is that it affects the way industry in general is perceived, not to mention the textile industry and much of the north of England. Nor does it help the perception of cities in transition such as Bradford, or help wipe away old muck crusted around brassy Fleet Street eyes. The principle in the textile industry of changing untreated wool fresh from the sheep's back into fine cloth or yarn might not have altered for centuries. But that does not mean manufacturing methods have stayed the same, or that commercial applications have remained unsophisticated. Examine the textile industry close up today and you see an industry that is far from 'quaint' for heaven's sake. And it is not an industry that is superfluous to our transition into an 'advanced information-based economy', as a number of clever economists with no social dimension to their thinking arrogantly believe in the present intellectual

climate. But though we are on the slippery slope and have not yet managed to lose our footing entirely, I fear there is not much likelihood of these realities being seriously comprehended. Our culture is too deeply mired in decline, our clever economists too prosperous and remote from everyday society for that to happen. The scandalous ruination and maltreatment of British industry will doubtless carry on unabated. Meanwhile, a number of respectable public figures with comfortable south-country majorities, who genuinely believe that recessions are a result only of inflation getting out of hand, who remain oblivious to our underlying economic and cultural weaknesses that are themselves linked to why inflation gets out of hand, will remain impervious to the fact that their country is slowly degenerating into an unimportant third-rate power living on the sentimental proceeds of past imperialist glories. This should appeal to the economic wisdom of the Machiavellian harbingers of permanent mass unemployment, and its incumbent social problems, who scurry to set up production lines in the cheap labour countries of the East, like the idiots who fell over one another to sell tools and materials to Hitler when he was arming Germany in the 1930s.

Two Faces of Sheffield

I travelled the short distance from Bradford down to Sheffield using the M62 for a little while, then the M1. As I overtook the thundering articulated lorries, it struck me that this was a useful way to approach the capital city of South Yorkshire, for during the nineteenth century, industry and population became concentrated around the then new and expanding railways, though much the same processes are at work today with motorways and lorries. At the point where the M1 bisects the lower Don Valley at junction 34, and Sheffield spreads itself in the distance over to the right, the carriageway becomes a double-decker road bridge, and what you see gathered alongside that bridge junction there is one of the clearest indicators I know to the changes underpinning the social and economic dichotomy

our age. On one side are two giant concrete cooling towers, around which is gathered a clutter of industrial paraphernalia and railway lines spanning a hundred-and-fifty years. In the background at the other side is the extensive factory works of British Steel Stainless, its perimeter fences coming almost up to the northbound hardshoulder, and, with its smokeless countenance, its giant corrugated simplicity, and its acres of perfectly landscaped grass, looking more next century than last. Crawling up from the belly of the valley are Sheffield's great swathes of socialist housing – council estates and dozens and dozens of high-rise tenements seemingly grafted to the hillsides and visible for miles around. Before you, and suddenly roaring up far too close behind you flashing their infernal headlights, teem the articulated lorries to and from the country's, and Sheffield's, neat new industrial estates. But it is when you contemplate what lies immediately adjacent to the bridge on the Sheffield side that you begin to get an inkling of the world that is being shaped around us, not only aesthetically, but culturally and economically and anything else important you can think to include in major social generalizations.

For here, a much-needed splash of brick-and-green domed fantasy against the surrounding grey monotony, where only a very few years ago there were still scum-coated streets crossed by railway lines through which I used to pass by coach to see my friends in London when I was a student, where the very tail-end of Victorian industrialism belched steam and smoke from yards piled high with rusting scrap iron, has been built one of the biggest shopping centres in Europe. It is called Meadowhall. They don't tack on 'shopping centre' to the end of its official title as they do with most places, but describe it simply as 'Meadowhall'. With its own High Street and its fashionable Park Lane the idea is, I suppose, that it is so big they want people to get into the habit of thinking about it as though it were just another suburb, a new sector designate of Sheffield like a small town or village. Indeed, with its palm trees, its tacky Mediterranean facades and plaster columns (they sound hollow when you knock them), with its ambiguous mixture of Art Deco-cum-Victoriana styling, Meadowhall is not so much a shopping complex as a small town within a town, or perhaps more

specifically one ought to describe it as a giant retail theme park, superintended with the same calculated commercial intentions as any overblown Disneyworld. It is fascinating to observe the contradiction manipulating the ideological free-marketeers who denounce social planning of any kind, who claim society's structure should be determined entirely by market forces, when much of the way market forces work is contrived to influence society's structure in a way that is anything but natural or spontaneous. In these big shopping malls you have this hypocrisy thrown at you by the bucketful. Nine-million people live within an hour's drive of Meadowhall. It claims to employ seven-thousand people, not many of them ex-steelworkers I should imagine, but passive school leavers versed, no doubt, in knowing how to win friends and influence people, seeing as they are generally no longer required to produce the goods that many of them sell. MacDonalds had their busiest first hour of opening at their Meadowhall unit than anywhere else in the country. The millionth customer entered the centre's temperature-controlled, air-conditioned environment when it had been open for only ten days. It has a full-time Show Director to choreograph an in-house store of entertainment. It has its own TV station offering studio and production facilities, advertisements playing out, along with Warner Brothers cartoons for the munching children, on a gigantic 'vidi-wall' prominently positioned in The Oasis food hall, the biggest restaurant in Europe (actually a number of cafés combined), and cooking up some twelve-thousand meals daily. Meadowhall's Lower High Street is supposed to be one of the busiest high streets in the land. It has its own transport interchange and its own ring road, can accommodate up to four-hundred coaches daily, and has buses and trains arriving every few minutes from a catchment area extending across several regions. It is hardly surprising, then, that with all this hustle and bustle, the colossal number of visitors shuttling to and from Meadowhall on Saturdays (thirty-five-thousand vehicles) prompted one of Sheffield's traffic engineers to claim that it is like dealing with two Wembley Cup Finals on the same day, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The place captures in an instant the drive behind the consumer-led energy that ruled in the 1980s, of the continuing de-industrialization

of Britain. I had already been near a complex of this type on Tyneside. The MetroCentre at Gateshead began the trend of fantasy land megamalls back in 1987. There are similar structures at Dudley in what used to be described as the Black Country, and at Dartford in Essex. But Meadowhall, which is rather better looking, with its large central dome and spoke-like configuration, and is a little softer on the environment than its predecessor further north, is fairly centrally positioned and presented itself quite conveniently during the course of this English journey, when I was making my way down toward the Midlands.

It is obvious that Meadowhall has been successful. The Christmas-shopping crowds I mixed with that day, which presented a reasonable cross-section of social types, from leather-skirted Harrogate sloanes through to cloth-capped very broad-vowelled pensioners, were ample testimony to that. But it does seem almost statutory for any thinking person these days to dislike modern shopping centres. Most of the people I know rarely have anything favourable to say about them, and in talking about them usually begin by making criticisms that promptly descend into witticisms. I was thinking about this when I parked my car in the largest retail car park in Europe when I arrived at Meadowhall (twelve-thousand spaces), on an area of tarmac big enough, I am certain, to accept light aeroplanes, walked through the House of Fraser where there was a bow-tied young gentleman playing a glass grand piano, and entered the main atrium. If it is the prevalence of artificial light that often disconcerts people about these places, in addition to the emphasis on artificial sensations and fabricated reactions, then I was pleasantly surprised to find inside Meadowhall that the central avenues were lit almost entirely by natural light. What I disliked about it, and this is where shopping malls fail in their attempt to compete with outdoor shopping in a controlled environment, is that you have no landmarks to guide yourself so that you know roughly where you are at any given time. Walking along normal streets there is usually something in the background by which you can place yourself geographically, perhaps a distant hill or a building. But in these giant shopping malls you are forever coming back on yourself and getting lost.

Everything looks the same, and once the avenues are thronged with wall-to-wall bobbing heads a strategy for going about your business efficiently becomes impossible. You find it difficult to know precisely where you are, so that if you want to get back to your car, for instance, never mind go back to a shop you saw earlier, you can spend ten minutes trying to find the entrance where you originally came in. This is hampered by the constantly-shifting morass of figures not being cleaved apart by roads or traffic. I heard one woman that morning, who spoke with a southern accent, say to her husband, from the top of one of the grand marbled staircases, that it 'looked like a bloody football crowd down there'. That was very apt. Amidst that glut of humanity I thought I had taken the correct turning to find a cashpoint, but the next moment I was passing the same shop I had noticed a few minutes earlier when I thought I was walking in an entirely different direction. This happened again and again and was due partly I should think to the underlying proclivity of these malls being to deaden sensation. Like many things in a world of increasing technological perfection, they tend to remove the need for thought or feeling and immunize the need to perceive creatively. The point of moving through a real townscape to me is that you experience changes in shadow and light, you feel the wind or the rain, you see condensation on shop windows, smell pastry and coffee as you pass doorways, observe the pattern of street-lights reflected in wet gutters, all of which serve to remind you that you have faculties and that you are actually alive. The temperature inside shopping complexes is generally controlled, so that you need not bother with scarf and gloves during winter, and therefore need not build up a natural appetite and appreciate more spontaneously the comfort of a hot drink or a meal. In real towns and cities, you can sit and eat your lunch and watch the activity out in the street – one of the most interesting pastimes I know – not merely the shuffling crowds, but passing lorries with names and phone numbers painted on their sides, men arriving to clean windows, aircraft flying overhead, all of which encourage you to contemplate the interconnecting nature of society and of the wider world, that people are going places and things are happening beyond the confines of your own tiny bubble.

But these giant centres never really arouse in you a sense of wonder, perhaps only a sense of unease. I wonder whether or not, by bringing vast crowds of people together beneath their domed roofs for the rather self-indulgent act of leisure shopping, in a curious way they encourage people to become less sociable and to grow mentally further apart by forcing them to think about themselves. They seem to have evolved under the pretext that people visiting them will wander aimlessly, their thoughts occupied with canned music and little electronic voices telling them where to spend their money, instead of going into a shopping area to purchase something for a specific purpose, then getting out as quickly as possible to do something constructive, as many of us do. You simply move from one evenly-heated space to another, upon which nature plays none of its special tricks or works any of its exquisite wonders. Perhaps I am missing something important here and the Meadowhall crowds were all being highly amused at my expense. Perhaps like many people who are ruminative I tend to see virtue only in the sublime and am possessed by the instinctive urge to analyse things instead of merely accepting them as they are. Maybe this synthetic perfection is really all very desirable. Maybe once you have become conditioned it is possible to enter a sort of consumerist stupor that enables you ultimately to evolve to some higher level of consciousness so that in the end you can become truly content by not bothering yourself with such trivialities as the whims of the English weather. But I doubt it. If it is possible to attain a different level of consciousness, I suspect it will be because the mind will have been diverted from the need truly to think constructively for itself and will have degenerated into a sort of pleasure-seeking vegetable on legs. We might not have 1984 totalitarian-style thought control, Big Brother's face staring from a telescreen set into the wall, and everyone wearing the same blue boiler-suits shuffling morosely along dim-lit corridors. But we might have gigantic 'vidi-walls' pushing our thoughts along in a particular direction by encouraging us where to go, what to do, what to wear, and ultimately what to think. We might have television sets in our living rooms, not dictating to us menacingly but titillating us, shaping the culture of what we think we know. We might have the spending power

and the freedom to clothe ourselves democratically, and shuffle contentedly up and down brightly-lit shopping malls, whereas subconsciously we might find we are in reality conforming to an overall dreary monotony which is merely boiler-suit standardization in another calculating, if frivolous, disguise. Perhaps that frivolity is in the end more dangerous to the human spirit because having achieved eternal synthetic happiness you are never morose enough to strive toward something better. Of course, consumer society has been the focus of enough suspicion and the butt of plenty of jokes, and no doubt there are astute people who would claim it is harmless and that the confusion of shopping malls adds an element of mystery and adventure to modern leisure shopping. But in Meadowhall I kept arriving back at The Oasis, and began to get slowly infuriated in the process. I do not consider myself especially claustrophobic, but I came as near to feeling it as I have done in a long while when I was inside Meadowhall, and by lunchtime that day my overriding awareness was of the urge to get away.

Meadowhall was built on the site of one of Sheffield's biggest steelworks, and it is this that places it into a wider context when you walk about the car park outside. For in addition to being considered for a long time to be the poorer end of Sheffield socially, still with some very rough quarters indeed around the decayed back streets and old pubs of Attercliffe, this eastern quarter of the city has traditionally been the industrial end too. In the background when you arrive and depart from Meadowhall is the continual basso-profundo wheezing-and-thumping of some kind of huge industrial hammer coming from inside the British Steel works situated just across the way. I had the opportunity of standing next to that hammer when I drove back to the steelworks the following morning, and, after being shown an introductory film and given an introductory drink, was taken right around the plant. The steel industry in this country is now a highly-efficient and competitive business, no longer dogged by the industrial relations problems that threatened to destroy it during the 1970s. The hammer I heard from the car park at Meadowhall was actually stamping flat large steel ingots under enormous pressure, then feeding them between massive computer-controlled rollers that were capable

of squeezing the hot material to within thousandths of an inch. But that came later. It was what I saw at the beginning and throughout much of the morning that summed up everything I had always imagined to be the gargantuan forces capable of being harnessed during steel production, of the monumental yet oddly graceful business of steel making itself.

This plant is one of the world's most advanced steel-making facilities, and concentrates on the manufacture of one of several different grades of stainless steel (British Steel manufacture heavier grade steel up in Middlesbrough) that is made chiefly by recycling scrap. It was this operation – what they describe artfully as a ‘meltdown’ – that summed up the Promethean grandeur of the steel industry when I was in Sheffield. Priestley described shipbuilding on Tyneside, of bending iron and riveting steel against steel, as being ‘man’s work’. So is steel making, and I don’t much care if it sounds dated or sentimental to say it. Advanced technology, robotics, space travel, microchips, all these things astonish and reflect the ingenuity of humankind, but they are nothing compared to the scale and power of heavy industrial processes like steel making, however many computers are keeping their eye on its fabrication today. I suspect it is because the explosive nature of steel making is reminiscent of what we imagine to be the forces that created the Earth itself, that from time to time are capable of rending the planet asunder, and hence they awaken in us some deep empathy toward cosmic powers that remains buried at most normal times. So that it can be melted down, the scrap stainless steel is loaded into a huge bin called an electric arc furnace, which has a lid like an old fashioned pressure-cooker that swings out of the way until the container is filled. Though my guide described the great bins carrying the scrap to the furnace every few minutes politely as ‘ladles’, these were no mere oversized caricatures of kitchen utensils suspended from quaint wooden beams in authentic farmhouse kitchens. They were massive bucket-shaped bins a couple of storeys in height that weighed upwards of fifty tonnes. Protected by asbestos-type clothing, safety helmets, and goggles, the two of us walked along narrow catwalks above tiny figures and diggers flickering stroboscopically in shafts of daylight slanting through

open doorways far below, and watched these bins being hoisted to and fro. Everything was shimmering from the heat. There were enormous dark objects, momentarily touched by a rim of fire, forever moving through the smoke in the background and suspended on the end of awesome crane hooks fashioned from layer upon layer of steel plate several inches thick. In another direction, through the vast opening of an adjoining shed, the great hardened ingots were suspended beneath gantries, moving vertically at the same time as they were moving horizontally, computerized LEDs measuring the weight in tens of tonnes and superimposing themselves vividly against the brown darkness. Nearer to us, molten metal – somewhere in intensity between molten lava and liquid gold, with the surface of black clinker bubbling from the heat as though it had only lately gushed down from the mountain – was being poured, as effortlessly as one bowl of soup into the next, from one gigantic ladle into another. It was this constant feeling you had that enormous vague shapes were moving continually on the end of thick cables, their perspectives forever shifting and overlaying one another, that gave everything a tremendous sense of energy. •Running throughout was a relentless thundering of sound that somehow got beneath the fillings in your teeth. The blackness would suddenly explode, and showers of sparks would chase one another across the floor of the factory and men would dance out of the way. We watched the giant bins full of scrap hoisted with a lumbering dinosaur-like motion into position by a crane operated from a tiny control-bubble somewhere beneath the ceiling, then, with an ear-shattering clatter, tens of tonnes of scrap stainless steel was shot into the empty container. The sound was fantastic, like the noise of church bells falling down heaven’s distant stairs, and you were only left wondering how close you could stand to such a racket without suffering some kind of permanent damage.

To generate the ‘meltdown’, colossal graphite prongs several feet in diameter are slid vertically through holes in the lid of the closed furnace. They resemble the oversized bars of a giant electric fire, and as they are lowered into position, the scrap steel screams and rends in agony as the prongs bury themselves in the bowels of the container beneath. There is a pause and then

it begins. Thunder and lightening slowly surrounds you. The graphite prongs start to turn molten orange and have enough power put through them to power a town the size of nearby Doncaster. Again the fillings in your teeth are disturbed as molten electricity grinds and crackles and turns more than a hundred tonnes of solid metal back into liquid. Nothing impressed me during this journey more than the sight of steel being made in that giant smelting plant in Sheffield. The thick electric cables powering the graphite prongs jumped and twisted and thrashed as the power surged through them. Sparks and smoke and flames licked out from beneath the closed lid of the furnace, turning from red to purple as they found their way between the gap and suddenly touched the air. Miniature bolts of fork lightening crackled upwards. That was the moment when you felt like you really were staring at something that verged on the phantasmagoric. The sound was unbelievable, easily the loudest I have ever heard, and so powerful that in an odd way it began to bring a lump to your throat as you stood there and stared. There must have been something close to atomic fusion, to the act of universal creation itself, going on inside that blazing cauldron during those pandemonious minutes. It was as if an immense ball of energy were straining to be free. Never have I felt so near such a colossal harnessing of energy, of such raw inestimable power.

Just as you wonder if you have been staring into the depths of an active volcano, into the gaping maw of molten hellfire, as if that were not impressive enough, alongside the furnace the extraction chamber comes into life, and into that are blasted the fumes built up during the meltdown. As I try to convey the feeling of this steel making spectacle, it occurs to me how words are such feeble things. I say that this fume extraction looks exactly the same – and sounds just as loud – as a rocket erupting into life moments before it leaves the pad. But how can that awesome sight be seriously conveyed upon the two-dimensional restriction of a sheet of paper? These fumes are filtered and recycled, which explains why, when you are driven onto the British Steel Stainless site, there are no chimneys pumping filth into the Sheffield sky and clogging the lungs of slum children any more. Concentrate on that solid column

of fire thrusting sideways into the extraction chamber and you are looking at the close up shots of one of the space shuttle engines on *Tomorrow's World*. There seemed little to distinguish one blast of energy from the other, and it is only astonishing that the whole smelting apparatus bolted to the concrete floor of that steel plant, perhaps the entire Shepcote Lane works, did not lift off as well, so awesome was that immense crescendo of power.

These steelworks are so big that you do not walk from building to building, you drive between them. We went back out into the sunlight again, back into the twitter of birdsong on a dazzling late-autumn morning. When I was shown the rolls of finished stainless steel gleaming innocently in the storage sheds, waiting to be despatched and transformed into sinks and cutlery and buildings and a hundred other industrial applications, the surroundings seemed almost peaceful. No doubt my ears were numbed.