

HACDY TRAVELLING BRITONS  
WEEK 10 (E. ANGLIA)  
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## Chapter 13

# Norwich and the Cost of Learning

I felt like a character in a David Lodge novel as I arrived on the outskirts of Norwich. A Lodge character, an academic, at Rummidge (Birmingham) University would be coupled with another academic somewhere on the eastern side of the country, and much commuting would be necessary. They'd have met at Cambridge and their pursuit of university posts would have forced them in opposite geographical directions. The journey between Birmingham and Norwich is not speedy: the roads are not fast and, in my case, the long-distance coach was routed through Cambridge.

I can hardly bear to mention the problems at Birmingham coach station. Suffice it to say that the coach was late and, once again, I found myself running around to find out (a) why it was late, and (b) why we were not told, and ending up with (c) an impolite exchange with an irritable coach driver. This one overheard me questioning the inspector and interfered, with his mouth full of sandwich, to tell me that he was having his meal break come what may. I assured him that it wasn't my intention to rob him of a well-deserved feed – which, in all fairness, he appeared to be having standing up and at a speed that could not have been good for his digestion – all I was asking was for Tannoyed information so that I knew what was happening. The system was weird anyway and guaranteed to provoke anxiety: you had to stand in a long queue marked A, B or C and wait to be told which bay the coach or bus would be leaving from. The station was huge and noisy, which made it altogether possible to miss a call and be standing patiently in a queue while the bus slipped silently away. As it was the journey was going to take me six hours, and it wasn't a ritzy coach with lavatories – I think they must keep those for a couple of the main inter-city routes. We started twenty-five minutes late and our stop at Cambridge was reduced to ten minutes to catch up on the late start.

David Lodge's characters wouldn't be using the bus of course; they might have low salaries compared to merchant bankers and always be complaining about lack of money, but they would all have cars. When they weren't discussing personal poverty their conversation revolved around a four-letter word. And when my sloppy old bus finally reached Norwich my conversation, I was certain, would be dominated by the same four-letter word: cuts.

Most of the country's forty-four universities have been put on a compulsory diet. Just like the hospitals, they too had been told to streamline their operations in order that public spending could be curtailed. They like it not: they bewail their fate. But the impact is nothing like the same; the state of the universities is very much a minority concern. It should not be, but it is. The whole of higher education is a minority concern; only 14 per cent taste education beyond the age of eighteen, and only 7 per cent study at universities: far too small a percentage. Within that figure a mere 21 per cent come from the homes of manual workers. The current aim is to lift the total of 14 per cent to 20 per cent, but 50 per cent would be a worthier target. Alongside these unappetizing figures, the public perception of academic life is at best poor, and at worst distinctly unappealing. And here the universities are their own worst enemy: most of the unappealing portraits are painted from inside. The vice-chancellor of Cambridge, Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, as he retired in 1981 said he was aware of those 'who merely give the same ageing lectures from the same ageing lecture notes . . . Here, as in every university, there are academics who draw a full day's pay for half a day's work.' One academic made a study of the image of his profession as seen through television, films and the novel. The conclusion was most amusing: the last British professor to get a good press was Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. In the main we are drenched with images of academics, if youngish, as lazy, lusty and left wing, and if old, deaf, daft and out-of-date. (In America, of course, dons are dashing, but that's another story.) Since it is academics, in their writing, who provide these images, it can't be argued that ignorant outsiders are to blame for this state of affairs. From Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, through Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* to David Lodge's *Nice Work*, the dons of fiction have fared badly; they've become figures of fun and targets to tease. I wondered what would greet me in Norwich: my destination was the University of East Anglia, with 4,500 students and a budget of £21 million; a 'new' university, but that now means twenty-five years old. I might with luck be spared too many of the deaf, daft and out-of-date, although I doubted if I'd be spared the sound of folk feeling under-valued, under-funded and under attack.

I'd been invited to stay on the campus, and I accepted with relish. My months in boarding-houses had well prepared me for the spartan student life and I felt instantly at home in my neat and tiny room. At least it had a table which I soon covered with mineral water, yoghurt and fruit (from the campus shop) for my breakfast. There was a communal kitchen close by but I wasn't staying long enough to get the hang of all that. The bathroom was close by too: it was the size of an airline lavatory. And it didn't have windows. Windows were, however, the main feature of the neat and tiny room – they provided a stunning view across acres of lawn to a man-made 'Broad'. That the university was a product of the sixties, I could tell at a glance. Red-brick, that derogatory description given to older, non-Oxbridge universities, does not apply here. There is no red brick to be seen. UEA is a concrete university. UEA was designed by Sir Denys Lasdun, who was also responsible for the arts complex on the south bank of the Thames (now being revamped to make it more pleasing to the eye). Some people like concrete: I have a problem with it – I've tried and I can't like it. It's austere and forbidding, the weather stains it, making it sadder looking with each passing year. It's anti-style and desperately functional, like plastic gloves, or wind jackets. They each do their job, but they never adorn. Concrete is so intensely practical that I want to walk on it, not look at it. Whatever the merits of the design itself, the effect is ruined in concrete. Two of the student-accommodation blocks, including the one in which I was staying, are pyramid-shaped terraced storeys which remind me of the Barry Island Butlin's that I'd seen in south Wales. Lasdun says they are meant to resemble a temple. The shape is officially known in architectural circles as 'ziggurat', after the pyramidal Sumerian temples. Who knows, perhaps Butlin's at Barry Island was meant to resemble such a temple! The buildings look their best at night; then the bland, boring, stained concrete surfaces hide in the darkness, giving prominence to the lights twinkling from each room and forming a tableau of lanterns. Inside, because of the tiered storeys, there are stairs and stairs and more stairs. Concrete and uncarpeted of course. Outside there are walkways and walkways and walkways. The accommodation block is linked to teaching buildings, library and restaurants by high-level walkways. Walkways have a bad name in council-house building and are being removed on the South Bank. They are without cover and are cold and draughty. On the best of days the breeze plays havoc with your hair and on the worst of days I found myself instinctively bending to the shape of a banana in order to combat the gale. How anyone could have thought it was a good idea to have raised and exposed walkways in this exposed and windy part of

the country is something of a mystery to me. But there it is, concrete buildings with walkways, surrounded by 270 acres of parkland.

The University of East Anglia has a low profile. To the people of East Anglia this is not so; they are well aware of a clutch of distinguished academics like Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby who appear regularly on television and radio as well as in print; they are well aware of several distinguished schools, most notably English and American studies and Environmental Sciences; above all, they are much pleased with the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. Sir Robert Sainsbury and his wife have given the university their private art collection spanning prehistory to the present day and including African tribal sculpture, North American Indian and Eskimo arts and oriental antiquities. With the help of an endowment from David Sainsbury, this eclectic collection is housed in a building, designed by Norman Foster, that has won numerous awards for 'the use of aluminium', for being 'low cost' - which means cheap to build - for being a tourist attraction and for being a decent museum. The building is thoroughly modern, a huge hangar, a simple tin shed, which I find neither attractive nor unattractive. Inside, however, the space is used cleverly, with cosy corners and objects viewable from all angles - nothing is merely dumped on walls. At first the collection was seen as an adjunct to the history of art department, its main purpose to introduce students to non-western art. Now its claims are much broader. It has become the public face of the university, an invaluable town-gown link. Outside East Anglia its fame is restricted, mainly because Norwich is seen as isolated, an outpost on the eastern side of the country. Most people above a certain age confuse UEA with Essex, which was a hot bed of radicalism in the seventies and was constantly grabbing newspaper headlines for demonstrations and 'sit-ins', which were then the vogue. You don't hear much of Essex now. And you don't hear much of UEA. Universities have never had to sell themselves, either to potential students or to the rest of us. That is all changing. Glossy brochures are the order of the day. UEA has to compete for students and it has to compete for private funds. As government support diminishes, vice-chancellors have stopped chatting among themselves and started a new line in rivalry: competing to see who can whip up the highest percentage of private funds. There's no point in blaming Mrs Thatcher alone for this. 'Cuts' (which has become the sort of word that demands quotation marks) were a feature of the seventies. A UEA chronology notes: 1974: cuts; 1975: freeze on appointments; 1976: freeze re-imposed. By 1981, 'cuts' are no longer worth a mention; they are a fact of life. No party it seems is willing to write the cheques;

and the Conservative government has been fearless, not to say savage, as it looks at the cost-effectiveness of the unpretentious polytechnics and compares their figures with those of the universities. In 1981 UEA was presented with a 12.5 per cent cut in its grant. It responded by what it describes as selective cheeseparing across the university, and by increasing the number of overseas students, particularly from the Far East, where governments are only too happy to pay students' fees, and from America, where both parents and students are well used to shouldering the cost of higher education and come to Britain because on the whole the price of a degree is less. Home-based students were reduced in number. Overall the university felt it had done well. It was rewarded with a further cut of around 16 per cent to be achieved by 1990. UEA, along with eleven other universities, received the largest cut in its grant. From the outside it looked as though UEA was being cuffed across the ear for poor academic performance. The assessors had taken a look at the quality of research and found UEA below average in three disciplines, including physics. The university accepted this criticism, pointing out that it has an outstanding research record in three areas (applied mathematics, economic and social history and art history), and claiming that the real reason why its money was docked was because its teaching costs are high. Its teaching costs are high for three reasons: it offers a wide variety of inter-disciplinary courses, which in translation means a student can pick a combination of courses and end up with something akin to a tailor-made degree. To give students such options is an expensive business. The university also leans heavily on the seminar system rather than lecturing students in large halls. This is an expensive business. And the university assesses its students continuously, rather like the new GCSE examination, and the final examinations count for only 50 per cent of the degree. This is an expensive business. In other words, the university was being penalized for trying to give its students a better than average deal. No wonder I expected to find folk feeling under-valued and under attack.

The vice-chancellor, Professor Burke, who was appointed in 1986, did not give me a lecture on a philistine government with no commitment to higher education. He seemed resigned and pragmatic. Resigned, no doubt, because he came from Canada knowing that his first task would be to engineer cuts totalling 16 per cent, and pragmatic because of his background: he is aware of the world beyond the university. A native of Birmingham and a graduate of Birmingham University, he is internationally known for research work which led to the discovery of Interferon as an anti-cancer agent. He became vice-president and scientific director of Canada's largest biotechnology

company, Alexix, where he initiated seven joint programmes with universities. It's an impressive track record, and his experience in industry and his ability to see the potential for closer links between university and industry make him seem an ideal vice-chancellor for the nineties. Furthermore, he is reluctant to winge; he'd rather look forward to the future.

Listening to Professor Burke outlining his blueprint for making cuts in a way that didn't destroy the university was a great deal more interesting than I had expected, and emphasized how little we understand of the process. And if we don't understand the process, how can we assess whether or not the government is wrecking the system or making it leaner and fitter? Burke inherited a draft proposal for cuts which had to be abandoned in part and which, he says, taught him much. It contained a proposal for closing the music department. It's a small department of six, and at first it was thought that if it took its share of the cuts and was reduced to five, it would become non-viable and have to go altogether. The proposal produced an outcry in the department which promptly proved that a department of five could indeed be viable, but more importantly it produced a bigger outcry from the people of Norwich and Norfolk, who claimed that the presence of the music department had done much to enhance the level of music performances available to the region. The professor of music, Peter Aston, had conducted the Aldeburgh choir for seventeen years, and the thought of losing him provoked letter after letter. Professor Burke realized that to take the university down a path that damaged its relations with the region was not the way forward. The music department survives with five people and an appeal was launched to raise £150,000 for performing scholarships for students. And it survives by working harder, warmed by the knowledge that it is valued both inside and outside the university.

Development studies also faced part-extinction: there was a proposal to abolish undergraduate degrees, but to keep the postgraduate programme. There was some feeling that the undergraduate course attracted students with low A-level scores and therefore could be abandoned. Apart from the fact that it was soon realized that this would erode the graduate programme, another impressive campaign was mounted. The vice-chancellor received 800 letters. 'It was a highly orchestrated campaign among those who misunderstood our proposal and who thought we intended to kill the whole department. None the less the Third World lobby got together, and we had letters from the House of Lords and from MPs. They argued that if UEA abandoned its course then the country would lose something of value, since there is only

one other similar course in the country, at Cardiff. So once again we came to realize how much something was valued, and we decided to keep the undergraduate course, but reduce the intake by 15 per cent, which went some of the way to answering those who said the A-level scores were too low. We then asked the department to raise some money of its own. Many of its members act as overseas consultants, and in the past this has operated at break-even level because we didn't want to make money from the Third World. However, since it is largely international agencies that fund this work, and they operate by making a small profit, the ideological obstacles were overcome. Thus, with income generation and a cut in students we have kept the department, and I really do think they have come through the experience a lot stronger than they were before.'

Physics was not so lucky. It was a small department and its answer to this deficiency was to expand in order to compete with the civic universities of Sheffield and Birmingham. Burke did not think this a good idea. He did not feel the department was strong enough academically to argue for expansion, and anyway, he thought it a strategic mistake to try and compete when Norwich was so far from the major employers of physicists. His answer was to go in another direction – not to offer a single physics honours degree, but to offer instead a new degree in physics and its applications. He admits it led to a showdown in which he said it was either a new structure or closure. Inevitably, some academics left, reducing the department from fifteen to nine.

All the university's 'schools', which divide into one third science, one third social sciences and one third arts, have had to bear a share of the cuts. The aim was to lose twenty-eight members of staff, mainly through early retirement. Some areas were cut more easily than others: sociology has been reduced from twelve to four. History and biology proved the most difficult, and outside advisers were asked to help solve the problem. Professor Burke's conclusion is that this process of rationalization, a word often used in business and which means selling fewer lines, has curbed student choice upon which UEA prided itself. Others of course argue that by offering so much choice quality suffered, and whereas no one wishes, say, all history students to be studying exactly the same areas, the curtailment of a few options is no great loss.

Professor Burke also feels – rather like the hospitals – that he is now running his university much closer to the edge, and that he cannot take further cuts. He dreads the thought that having coped with this round of cuts, the university will once again be rewarded by another squeeze. Having said that, however, he is generous enough to point

out that the whole exercise has concentrated minds on strategic directions for the nineties. The nineties present problems: the number of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds in the population is going to drop by 30 per cent. The largest drop is going to be among social classes four and five, who take up a mere 8 per cent of university places. Social classes one and two, which take the bulk, will drop by around 10 per cent. I thought this might provide an excellent moment to improve the numbers of working-class entrants, but Professor Burke dashed these hopes in a second. He argues that it will worsen the situation. With school-leavers in such short supply, they will be courted by employers and thus have no incentive to struggle through sixth form, let alone university. In Norwich itself, Norwich Union could absorb all the O-level students produced in the area in the coming years. The answer to the demographic change is for the universities to break the pattern of dependence on A-level school-leavers. They will still form 60 to 70 per cent of the intake, but entrants must be sought from those with less conventional qualifications. One idea is for the university to work hand in glove with Colleges of Further Education so that it is possible for HND candidates to move to the university for a two-year course. The two are already cooperating on course content to make the transition easier. There is also increased demand from people in jobs who want to do part-time courses such as a master's degree in electronics or management. To increase the number of part-timers doing first degrees appears to be difficult: they are subsidized by the university since it is impossible to charge such students the going rate of around £1,500 for tuition fees – the market wouldn't stand it. It would seem an ideal moment for a campaign to persuade the government to pay the tuition fees and prove their commitment to continuing education.

Professor Burke is not optimistic. He sees student loans as inevitable. 'We already have *de facto* loans. Student grants have been frozen over the last ten years and are now 20 per cent less than in 1979, so that students have had to take loans.'

'How do you feel about this?' I asked. He parried the question, so I asked again.

He paused and then said: 'Bad. It's short-sighted. Britain is going to need all the brain-power it can get. But higher education is not as highly valued here as it is in other countries. In North America it is seen as the way out of the ghetto.'

'What then are we going to do to make it more highly prized? Analysts have said time and again that Britain's economic future depends on having an educated workforce. What more can be done?'

'Somehow or other we have got to *prove* to people that it is worth

the money. One of the ways is to get the community involved, so that they can see, and another is to do something about our public image and improve our public relations. We have been complacent about this in the past, but we now need to explain what we are doing. I think it will take a generation.'

Improving public relations will also help the task of fund-raising which the government has urged on the universities. UEA has appointed its first development officer, held gatherings of former students in the hope that they will make donations and run two successful campaigns, one for the music department and the other to raise £100,000 for the Centre for East Anglian Studies.

'I feel that the government is over-optimistic in what it thinks the universities can raise by themselves. Right now they see us as unwilling to work hard for our own future, so we have tried to raise money just to show that we are doing all we can. In the end, of course, you can't run the skilled manpower needs of the nation on charity. We are prepared to do our bit, but such efforts will only provide money at the margins. Seventy-five per cent of the university's budget goes on salaries, which doesn't leave much to play with, so any extra raised by the university gives us a measure of independence.'

The mood on the rest of the campus was not quite as cool and pragmatic. Half the senior staff have been there since the beginning, which is not altogether a good sign. One can feel the mental cobwebs. There isn't enough movement between our universities, but now that tenure has been abolished for newcomers to the system, perhaps that will change. Several of the long-stayers recall the heady days of the sixties, when public spending was not seen as a monstrous Russian vine that would grow at huge speed; when they would not have stood accused of threatening our economic well-being. They are nervous of a future where industry is encouraged to fund research, not only because this might change the nature of research projects, but because the independence of research may be jeopardized. Research coming from universities has always been seen as impartial. Would this be so in future? Universities are places where people can have visions; where people have time to think, and this might well be curtailed with heavier teaching loads and under the constant glare of purse-string holders. University staff are not well paid. I think they should be more highly regarded and rewarded – as should all teachers. Academics relish their lifestyle, but they should not be penalized for being lucky enough to have jobs they enjoy.

I managed to find the head of the physics department before he quit the country for Texas. His views were understandably sharp and defiant.

'I'm happy to be leaving this country. I don't like the social mood. I think things are appalling at all levels. The whole attitude towards the future is unproductive. I get the feeling that the government is running the whole enterprise down. Some measures were necessary, but they have gone over the top. I feel desperately sorry for young people; all they can look forward to is a series of training schemes where they move boxes around – that's going to be their future.'

Dr Roy West left school at fifteen and came late to higher education. He intended to be a chemist and finally settled on physics. He has fought hard to maintain and expand his department. The research record was poor, he argues, because the department was too small and teaching took up too much time. His problems started in the early seventies, when student numbers fell because there was general disillusion with what science had done and could do. This, he argues, was a world-wide phenomenon, but whereas in other countries, most notably America, the soul-searching gave way to the excitement of Star Wars, in Britain scientific potential beyond the level of *Dr Who* does not excite the public's imagination.

'My salary in Texas will be two and a half times better than here, but I'm not going for the money. I earn twice the national average anyway: I make around £20,000 and that is OK by me. I'm going because I've spent a long time training myself, and I want to make the best possible use of the next fifteen years. I don't want to go on fighting the philistines. My university changed my life and I know hundreds out there who could get more out of life if they had the chance. In Texas they are determined to get an education. No, I don't know why they have such a different attitude to us. I don't know what has hit this country. I don't find myself in tune with the population. It won't make much difference when Labour gets back in; it will take twenty-five years to recover from the last ten.'

Most evenings I called in at the campus pub in search of student conversation and in the end managed to get a group together, having promised to provide a couple of bottles of wine in exchange for their views. The university has a high percentage of women, nearing fifty-fifty. When it was set up, UEA went out of its way to attract women students, perceiving this to be a gap in the market. My group reflected this mix, and reflected genuine affection for the university and the city of Norwich, even though none claimed UEA as their first choice. Most had chosen a civic university, gone to look at it, been disappointed and then chosen UEA unseen, fearing that a visit might prove just as disappointing. Those who had made a prior visit had been impressed

by how friendly and eager the staff were. They were particularly impressed that they had been treated like adults, made to feel sought after and offered a glass of wine! What impressed me most after a couple of hours of chat was their ability to live on very little money – their grants have been cut by some 20 per cent since 1979 and a full grant is around £2,000 for living away from home at a university outside London. They are eligible for some welfare payments, and they make much effort to supplement their grants with work both in the vacations and during term time. One girl worked in a Bingo hall three nights a week and one boy told me that his parents – his father is the head of a northern art college and his mother a teacher – had tried to raise a second mortgage on their home to send their children to university. The Building Society had refused, so his parents had taken in students from the local university to provide the necessary funds. The young man said that he felt guilty at taking his father's money. All of them said that they wished grants were non-means-tested and available to everyone, since they were well aware that some 50 per cent of parents who should have contributed to their children's maintenance did not do so, either because they could not afford it or because they would not. On balance the group preferred not to be tied to the parental purse; they preferred independence. And the lack of parental support was so common that it was taken for granted. I was the only one that was shocked by parents' meanness and selfishness; I was the only one who felt that parents had a duty to their children to help them through a first degree. The introduction of loans demonstrates an inconsistency in government policy; the whole thrust of that policy has been to cut taxes and give individuals more money to spend as they choose. Since many adults have been given massive tax cuts, it would seem logical to ask them to pay more towards their children's education. Means-tested grants for higher education were the one means-tested allowance that had a good name. It was calculated on residual income (income after allowing for such payments as mortgages, pension payments and life assurance) and no contribution from parents was sought until this figure reached £9,000. Once the government realized that 50 per cent of parents were not paying towards their children's maintenance costs, it should have realized either that this figure was too low and needed to be increased, or that it was fighting a losing battle with parents and, for the sake of the nation's future, it ought to find the money to fund higher education. To dump the problem on young people seems a cop-out.

The students did not approve of grants giving way to a loans system even though they would have left university by the time proposals

were in force. They were well versed in the arguments for and against student funding, and one neatly encapsulated the various parties' attitudes.

'The Tories say we are here for individual gain and therefore we should pay towards the cost because we will get higher-paid jobs at the end; the Labour party says we are here for society's benefit; the Democrats say yes, but . . . and waffle, and the hard left say it is wrong for the working man to have to subsidize us!'

They all felt that first and foremost they were at university for their own benefit, for their own fulfilment, leaving me to argue that society would benefit – they'd all end up paying higher taxes and being better fathers and mothers, better citizens, perhaps. I wasn't playing the devil's advocate. It is what I believe. Health and education are better dispensed by the state and the state should find a way of paying for young people to consume as much education as they are capable of digesting. It should start by paying them a small allowance in the sixth form and it should pay them to live – not handsomely, but above the breadline – at universities, polytechnics and colleges. I can't find one good argument for accepting the government's proposal for students to take out loans to part-fund their journey to a BA or BSc. It could keep young people away from university and it could drive young people into the arms of their nearest university so that they can live at home, as they do in Australia and America. Parents too mean to pay towards grants are often happy enough for their children to stay at home for a few more years. That way they can exercise power and influence for longer.

The 'future' was the topic on which they were least impressive. They seemed to have no clear idea of what they wanted careerwise, and defended this position by suggesting that most arts students were similarly undecided. They acknowledged that life at UEA made them feel wrapped in cotton wool. The outside world was 'horrible'. 'The idea of having a boring job is horrible. A friend who graduated last year had to get a job in a bookshop. She thought it would be for a couple of months, but she is still there and she hates it. And so many of our parents and their friends retire and say, "Thank God that's over."'

'All of us dread that. We dread having to take jobs where Monday is something we'd rather not talk about and Saturday is the big night out.'

The school of English and American studies is famous. Many members of the faculty review books in Sunday newspapers, appear regularly as critics on radio arts programmes and claim friendship with real writers.

They enjoy interviewing writers on video to give their students a glimpse of the real thing: the live writer. Sometimes they prevail upon the writer to visit the campus. It means much to students, or so it seems, to say that they have seen Doris Lessing or Harold Pinter in the flesh. Arthur Miller is another favourite. There is now an Arthur Miller Centre. Malcolm Bradbury is probably the best-known of the professors. He says, quite rightly, that our most successful world product is the English language, but that the English language would be like Welsh without America. That is an uncomfortable thought. If the pilgrim fathers had shunned English, adopted or invented another language, English would be like Welsh. I shall never again carp about the way in which the Americans have messed around with the English language, I shall just be grateful that they chose it. Within the school of English and American studies, Professor Bradbury is convenor of an MA course in creative writing – indeed, he was the founder of the course, in 1971, together with Sir Angus Wilson. At the time English departments were drunk on ghastly words like 'structuralism', and hooked on high theory, and Bradbury felt inclined to remind folk that literary creativity was of value for its own sake. There was also a lot of talk about the decline of serious fiction in Britain; there is still much talk about the decline in serious fiction, but at least Bradbury had the courage to try a new idea. Twenty years later such a course is still an oddity in this country. There are plenty of them in America at undergraduate level, where they teach composition and claim to teach the art of writing. We do not believe it is possible to teach anyone to write. The course at UEA is for postgraduates and students are chosen on the basis that they have talent and show promise, and that a year to write and talk about writing with other writers and cross-examine each other's work in progress will help the best to the bottom rung of the ladder to publication. They must be doing something right: previous students include Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Clive Sinclair, Rose Tremain, Adam Mars-Jones and Maggie Gee. Some argue that such talent would have succeeded without the course; it seems fair to answer that the course at least accelerated that success.

Part of the course demands study of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel, which is designed to encourage awareness of the history of fiction and of narrative and critical theory. The rest of the time students undertake their own creative writing and once every four or five weeks they must be prepared to submit it to the rest of the group for analysis. Professor Bradbury warns students that this is tough: it is not meant to be destructive. I was intrigued. I asked Malcolm Bradbury if I could attend a workshop and he said yes, provided I was willing to

read the work submitted for analysis *and* join in the discussion. I hesitated. I am well used to dissecting journalism and non-fiction, but not fiction: my comments might not be helpful.

The group was mixed, four male and four female, and ages varied from early twenties to middle forties. The work to be discussed that afternoon was by Mark Innis and Michael Brown. Mark Innis submitted nineteen pages of *A Chinese Summer*, which might turn out to be a novel or a novella. Bradbury encouraged him to outline the plot so that we could glimpse the context of the nineteen pages. Innis, a self-confident and mature young man in his early twenties, said that his work was one of mood rather than action. His central character was a youth who was in despair at the ending of a relationship; he would be involved in some kind of accident and that by the end he would be mentally restored but there would be a question-mark over his physical condition. Professor Bradbury, puffing away on a pipe and filling the room with delicious sweet smell, said he found the writing of the first nineteen pages to be superb, the central character was firmly in position, but he was anxious about the central incident: the individual scenes were marvellous, but where was the narrative drive? At the end of nineteen pages he had begun to think that nothing would happen. Now if this sounds hard-hitting, it is the fault of my précis, because that was not how it came across; Bradbury could not have been more supportive. He spun out his words, decorated his phrases, questioned Innis patiently, dragging from him a few of his intentions that had clearly not crystallized in the writer's mind. It was a masterly performance: I got the message and much admired the diplomatic and constructive way it had been delivered.

The group pitched in. There was discussion on the use of mixed tenses, and the merits of short sentences, on the novella – how many characters it could sustain and what was the ideal pace – on the use of specific phrases in Innis's work and the purpose of certain descriptive interludes. The sad youth was much given to walking in the park and looking at children, which the author said he had learned from Salinger: when people feel alienated, when they feel outsiders, they often turn their attention to children. The group was very praising. I began to feel a web of approval being woven around Innis. There was no competitive nonsense, although one older student's tone was a touch abrasive, and he niggled about the double use of a nice line describing how the letters on a plastic bag changed shape when the bag was full. No, said the rest of the group, using the idea twice is splendid! It came to my turn, and I stuck firmly to the notes I'd made the night before when I had first read it. It was a fresh and youthful piece of work –

unlike the others, I had not known in advance the age of the writers – but I was bothered from time to time by missing details: a paragraph would raise questions that I would have liked answered. The characters around the youth, particularly the parents, were too sketchedly drawn, I felt. Mark Innis became defensive. He said he wasn't interested in the parents, they were going to disappear from the story and he didn't want to give further details. The group closed ranks: answering my queries would definitely spoil the delicacy of the writing. Professor Bradbury took the reins and pointed out that writers could withhold information deliberately, but not leave out information unwittingly. He preferred the reticent approach. At first I felt my comments had been unhelpful, but then I changed my mind: at least we now knew that details could and should be left out. Innis had been reassured and readers like me could stop being inquisitive.

If I was beginning to feel that the group's ability to secrete a protective shell around itself was too cosy, detrimentally cosy if it precluded tough comment, I was soon proved wrong. Mike Brown had submitted the opening pages of a film script. The group ganged up on him; they didn't bother to analyse the script, they merely queried why he was bothering to write it. It was abundantly clear that they thought their own attempts at novel and short-story writing were infinitely superior to his attempt to write a film script. As it happened, Brown had positioned himself at one end of the room, facing a horseshoe of other students. I felt a wave of superiority floating across the gap. Bradbury, who knows about these things, having turned Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blues* into a television series, pointed out that there were drawbacks: when writing a novel the author can paint on a huge canvas, encompassing the Napoleonic wars, but as the writer's pen touches the paper with a film script, the first question is, how much am I spending? Michael held his ground.

'I'm not here to write a novel. I want to make a film.'

The assault continued: one member who had something to do with film-making warned that it wasn't a writer's medium, the script writer would be faced with rewrite after rewrite to suit the whims of others. Film-writers were not important. Film-writers were 'invisible', said an Irish girl. Michael held his ground: he said the idea of working in a team and having close relationships with those involved on the same project appealed to him. As long as the director understood the aims of his script, rewriting would not be a problem. I was rooting for him; I wanted him to go on arguing his case.

'Can we discuss what I have written? I haven't got too much out of this discussion so far.'

I said a silent, 'Hear, hear!'



The mood worsened. A girl said that when she read the reference to 'a big building' and a Porsche car she said to herself, 'Oh, shit, this reminds me of Dallas.' At this point I wrote in my notebook: 'This is appalling.' The previous evening when I had read the film script, I'd made up my mind not to make a contribution to the discussion because I have no experience of reading film scripts. The previous evening when I read the film script I did not know that Michael Brown was an American. I cannot help but feel that this influenced the group's attitudes. For an American, to want to write a film script is a worthy ambition: America has a film industry. We do not have a film industry of much consequence, so we look down our supercilious noses at the medium. I did not feel that Malcolm Bradbury had done enough to ease the tension, and afterwards suggested that he should seek out Brown and make an effort to massage his mangled morale.

It is said that Michael Brown is a man of 'great enthusiasms'. He eventually abandoned the film and started work on a novel. At the end of the year he returned to America to take another course, in law and business. Mark Innis's *A Chinese Summer* was published by Bloomsbury. The book is autobiographical. This was not evident from the first nineteen pages, but was evident when completed. The sad youth suffering madly and badly from a lost love also lost his leg through cancer. Mark Innis lost a leg through cancer.

The city of Norwich was a magnificent surprise. I saw it first at night, in the rain, and it was beautiful. I'd been advised to see it at night; Norwich is special by night. The city has fallen in love with the spotlight. Many of its historic buildings and a sprinkling of its numerous churches are stunningly lit. The city claims thirty-two pre-Reformation churches, a number it can no longer sustain and which it expects will in time decline to twenty. Meanwhile it is caressing the best with floodlights – not the garish white light of football pitches, but more appropriate, gentle, warm beams. And it isn't just majestic buildings that benefit, but open spaces like Market Square and streets like Elm Hill. To stand at one end of Elm Hill, by Stamp Corner, looking down a cobbled street bathed in lantern light is so pleasing it made me smile, even though a fine drizzle was falling on me. The scene had a Christmas-card perfection, unreal but not artificial, and deeply satisfying. I thought of J. B. Priestley who on his thirties journey commented on the chill gloom of Norwich, on the feeble light of the occasional street lamps and, just to underscore his view, he added: 'Norwich is not brilliantly illuminated at any time.' Perhaps it was this gibe that goaded the city council into devising its award-winning lighting scheme.

After this night-time glimpse, I rushed back the next day to see what else would be revealed by a city of which I'd had no image apart from thoughts of prosaic insurance companies and Colman's mustard. I went straight back to Elm Hill to see if the magic had disappeared in the morning light, and found it equally pleasing; the golden glow had given way to colour-washed prettiness. The oldest house in the street, a thatched fifteenth-century cottage, is now a coffee-house. It had once been the home of worsted weavers, and of leather workers and shoemakers. It mirrored the history of the city. All the pre-Reformation churches indicate how prosperous and important the place once was and, indeed, in the fourteenth century Norwich was awash with craftsmen and entrepreneurial wool and cloth merchants generating wealth. The word is that in 1450 it was the richest town in the land. Certainly by 1700 it was the second city in England, a centre of trade with Europe's northern cities, dominated by the weaving of worsted. It was on the right coast, facing the right way. But Norwich lost out to Yorkshire during the Industrial Revolution: Yorkshire had the fast-moving streams and cheap coal needed to power looms. People and wealth moved northwards. It's odd how much we hear now of people and wealth draining from northern towns to the south, with little thought of how this operated in reverse in the first instance.

Norwich and East Anglia's greatest advantage now is that it was bypassed by the Industrial Revolution. Never having had heavy industry it has not had to face urban decay, nor the vast task of adjusting to a diverse and service-dominated economy. It had to find the answers much earlier; it had to learn the importance of flexibility and adaptability by diversifying into silk and paper and, of course, leather and shoes. In time shoe-making was to suffer from foreign competition and something else had to take its place. The service sector, upon which so much of modern prosperity is based, has been strong in Norwich for decades. Its largest employer is a financial institution, Norwich Union. The little coffee-shop knew its place. I wanted to linger, to sit in the coffee-shop and be lazy, but curiosity propelled my feet forwards through the narrow, winding alleys and streets free of traffic. I glanced at two of the six bookshops and walked through the 200-stall open provision market, with its brightly coloured awnings. I spent an hour merely wandering without purpose and marvelling at how Norwich had managed to avoid the worst effects of twentieth-century development. Practically the whole of the city centre is a conservation area: tower blocks are few. How on earth did Norwich manage to keep its head when all around were losing theirs? Some argue that it is more by luck than judgement, since the place is slow to

change and decidedly untrendy and therefore, by the time it caught up with what was happening elsewhere, it could see that the modern fads were not for Norwich. Others give credit to political stability: the Labour party has dominated Norwich for as long as anyone cares to remember, and continuity yields consistency. While others were building supermarkets on the outskirts of their towns, Norwich remained faithful to city-centre traders. It needs more shops, since it is the centre of the fastest-growing region in Britain but such expansion is not going to be allowed to ruin what has been so carefully preserved. Instead there's a visionary plan to put a new development *underground*, beneath the site of the old cattle market. A landscape park will be created at surface level. I wished it well and headed for the past.

The castle and the cathedral dominate the skyline. The castle, which for 500 years was a prison, is now a museum housing among other things a fine collection of paintings by John Crome and John Sell Cotman. Crome, the son of an innkeeper, was the founder of the group that revelled in painting the local countryside and who adopted the phrase, 'Nature is still our Goddess and our Guide,' as their motto. One of his pupils was the brother of George Borrow, who was a clerk in a lawyer's office. It is said that Borrow spent much time in the cattle market, with the gypsies, listening to their tales, some of which found their way into *Lavengro*. Norwich is the only city in England to claim its own school of painting recognized at a national level. And that school was undeniably influenced by Dutch painters, demonstrating the close links between Norwich and the Netherlands which existed since the medieval period, partly through an influx of immigrants fleeing religious persecution. Both the Dutch and the Flemish found Norwich a haven. I have a weakness for Norman cathedrals, and Norwich's is more enchanting than most: it is surrounded by houses, which help to soften the usual image of a cathedral being above and aloof from the intimate dwellings inhabited by man. I decided I'd like to live in one and was told that I'd have to wait at least a hundred years. So, fickle as ever, I continued my walk and found an alternative. Alongside the River Wensum at Anchor Quay, rehabilitation and development has produced a batch of town houses (both council and private), in an idyllic setting; the idea was to encourage folk to contemplate life in the city centre rather than in the countryside. I don't normally find myself attracted to the thought of living in new buildings, but these were deeply appealing. The way in which cities have developed their riversides in the eighties is cause for celebration.

By the time I had finished my walk I could see why Norwich had been nominated as Britain's most attractive city in a report com-

missioned by the EEC and undertaken by Reading University. Norwich was the only British city in the top twenty-five of the European league table that based its assessment on four main areas: the income of the citizens, unemployment rate, people moving into the area and the attractiveness of the city to tourists and business travellers. In 1971, Norwich was thirty-seventh, below London and Leicester, but by the late eighties London and Leicester had slipped, and Norwich had been placed just below Paris and just above Rome. Well, it's a jolly PR line and I went off to lunch with Patricia Hollis, the leader of the council, ready to ask her how much she'd had to bribe the researchers to achieve such an accolade! I finished lunch, some hours later, with reluctance. Patricia Hollis is – quite simply – one of the most impressive women I have met in years. In her late forties, she is a senior lecturer in English history at the university. She revitalizes both the image of the don and of the local councillor, and she demonstrates how the city has benefited from the presence of the university. She came to UEA in 1967 and became a councillor in 1968. When she joined the council she was the only graduate. Since she joined, she has chaired housing and finance and been leader since 1983. She has also been on Norfolk County Council, East Anglian Economic Planning Council, the BBC Regional Advisory and so on and so on. She is married to a philosopher, has two grown-up sons, and has also written books and been a Parliamentary Candidate. Her enthusiasm for Norwich is boundless. She calls it a pint-sized Great City; she believes in *local government*: the city council should decide what is best for Norwich without too many orders from the County Council based in King's Lynn, let alone interference from central government. She dismisses charges that lengthy control by Labour has in any way made the place complacent, and proudly points out that the average age of Norwich councillors is thirty, and that 35 per cent of its members are women.

'We are accountable to the electorate and they clearly like the way we run the city. The city has always had radical leanings and we all know that we have to work hard to maintain our success. We are constantly looking for new growth areas in the economy; for new firms and factory spaces to provide more employment. We are constantly looking at ways of improving our communications, and traffic flow in the city, and new pedestrian areas, as well as enhancing our leisure facilities and new ways of attracting tourists.'

It was education, however, that dominated our conversation. Patricia Hollis was the founder-director of the university's part-time degree programme and a passionate believer in the need to widen access to further education. Our present system she claims is divisive. The

## CHOPPING DOWN THE CHERRY TREES

expansion of higher education in the 1960s benefited the middle classes and women in particular, but not the working classes as a whole. Her solution was that no one should enter the workforce until they are eighteen. An allowance should be paid to those over sixteen, and all education over that age was to take place in tertiary colleges rather than in sixth forms. Working-class students find it easier to be in colleges of further education than in schools, where they don't feel comfortable. Such colleges should provide much improved vocational education where students could sample a variety of trades from painting and decorating through plumbing and car maintenance, as well as majoring in one. The much derided YTS scheme would be a dead duck overnight. The tertiary colleges would also provide A-level studies, but with much wider courses and with all students taking both arts and sciences. Those that went on to higher education, whether immediately or later, full or part time, whether in polytechnics or universities, would be offered mixed arts/science degrees. All through the system teachers should be highly valued, highly paid and given frequent retraining. We mulled over vocational education for a while: the numbers concerned are vast, and we have failed and failed and failed since the middle of the last century to get the recipe for training right. There are 2 million people unemployed, and yet the building industry is short of craftsmen and may well be driven to recruit in Europe. Industry has a very poor training record: it doesn't seem able to plan its manpower needs. One day it decides it needs skilled men, and hasn't allowed time to train them. The Thatcher government has put considerable effort into improving this area, and has succeeded in going round in a circle. In the early seventies the Tories, realizing that employers failed to give adequate training – apprenticeships had been abandoned rather than modernized – introduced state intervention in the form of the Manpower Services Commission. That was hardly a resounding success. First attempts to revamp the scheme ran aground when the TUC played up and important sections of the membership decided to boycott the whole thing. The government had to think again and turned once more to the employer: two thirds of the members of the Training and Enterprise Councils (Tecs) will be employers from the private sector because 'it is they who are best placed to judge the skill needs'. Maybe employers have changed; maybe, frightened by the prospects of a shortage of school-leavers, they have seen the error of their ways. Maybe.