



“Writing the Obituaries”: An Interview with Patrick Wright

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Each Britain gets the (re-)discoverers it deserves. For Thatcher’s and post-Thatcher Britain one of them, and perhaps the most intrepid is Patrick Wright. His particular field of exploration lies where two opposing forces crosshatch each other to create tensions and paradoxes: on the one hand, the fiercely modernising thrust of a new market economy dismantling the ethos and structures of the Welfare State, together with traditional ways of living and thinking; on the other, the resurgence of ecological and cultural conservatism and the recycling of British history in a new heritage industry.

His three books so far explore these tensions and paradoxes in different places and, together, form a trilogy on a Britain that is decidedly no longer ‘Great’. *On Living in an Old Country; the National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985) is a series of interconnected essays and stories on the political uses of nostalgia, revolving round the central story of the triumphal recovery, in 1982, of the ‘Mary Rose’, Henry VIII’s flagship that had lain in the bed of the Solent for more than four centuries, and its coincidence with Thatcher’s triumph over the Falklands in the South Atlantic. ‘The Falklands adventure made a new combination possible: this small war enabled Thatcher to draw up the legitimising traditions of the “nation” around a completely unameliorated “modernising” monetarist programme. This new and charismatic style of legitimisation fused a valorisation of national tradition and identity with a policy and programme which is fundamentally destructive of the customary ways and values to which it appeals.’ (186) Other stories, some of them bordering on the bizarre, focus upon the commodification of national heritage and the English countryside as, for instance, in Shell’s advertisement campaigns that have linked motoring with the appeal to ‘Discover Britain’, or upon attempts to save historical heirlooms from destruction that range from institutions like the National Trust to quixotic individual initiatives like Miss Savidge’s wholesale removal of her Tudor home from Hertfordshire to Norfolk.

A Journey Through Ruins (London: Radius, 1991; Paladin paperback edition 1992; enlarged Flamingo edition, 1993), dedicated to Lady Margaret Thatcher, is brilliantly misnamed: there is very little journeying going on in the book, which preserves a classical unity of place in exploring the ‘Condition of England’ by focussing on one part of it - London’s East End or, more specifically, Hackney or, even more specifically, Dalston Lane. This epitome of Britain suffices for this in-depth explorer to study the history of the post-war Welfare State in terms of the rise and fall of the tower blocks and the conversion of Victorian ‘hell-houses’ into luxury flats. The trope

that unifies this travelogue en miniature is architecture: the fortunes of buildings lost or preserved - buildings as small as Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's red telephone boxes or as large as tower blocks and country houses - of streets that change under the impact of a new multi-ethnic population, or of whole areas for which gentrification re-invents historical roots. This involves a critical engagement with the various conflicting discourses of architecture and urban planning and their political implications - most notably with Prince Charles' indictments of an un-English modernism in which, once again, conservationism and a revivalist 'Vision of Britain' is shown to be linked up with a rejection of values that are part of the very Great Tradition to which it appeals.

In his most recent book, *The Village that Died for England; the Strange Story of Tyneham* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995; Vintage paperback edition 1996), Wright moves from the town to the country. This move does not, however, come as a complete surprise. *A Journey Through Ruins* has already built a number of thematic bridgeheads for it: country houses and the ambivalences of their conservation and celebration, telephone boxes ancient and modern, or metal detecting which, in its anarchichally individualistic archaeology, provides an apt metaphor for the author's own detection and discoveries. Here, for once, Wright tells *one* story - the story of how Tyneham, the picturesque, even Arcadian village on one of the most beautiful stretches of the Dorset coast, was destroyed by the advent of tanks, for which this remote area of Hardy's Wessex has proved an ideal testing ground and gunnery range ever since the Great War. This one story explodes, however, into an intricate maze of stories as it is mainly told in terms of the responses it has elicited locally and nationally. What is at stake here is, again, conservation - the conservation both of historical monuments, traditional lifestyles and the natural environment - and again the issue of conservationism is made to function as a magnifying glass that focusses the wider political or ideological conflicts and contradictions of 20th century Britain.

Born in 1951, Patrick Wright has degrees in English Literature for the University of Kent at Canterbury and Simon Fraser University, Canada. He turned to freelance journalism in the '80s, has made various television and radio programmes and writes regularly for the *Guardian*, *the London Review of Books*, *the New Statesman*, *the Observer* and *the Independent*. In 1990 he was involved in organising the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition Recording Britain. After many years of residence in the more unfashionable parts of London (Stoke Newington and Hackney), which he used to explore together with Iain Sinclair, he now lives near Cambridge.

This interview was recorded on 3 January 1997 at BBC Broadcasting House, London.

Mr. Wright, our interview will feature as the concluding part of a collection of essays called The Discovery of Britain - a collection of essays that attempts to delineate for the first time the history of the British touring, mapping and describing their own country in non-fictional texts. These texts have, for half a millennium, contributed vitally to constructing a sense of identity for England or Great Britain that goes beyond the merely geographical. We have chosen the metaphor of 'discovery' to highlight the fact that the discovery of the new worlds beyond the Atlantic actually coincided with the first attempts by British cartographers and chorographers

systematically to explore and describe their own country in its entirety: both projects started in the 16th century, you could say, and both were tied up with a new sense of national identity.

Yes, this is true; and all sorts of more aesthetic conventions of internal travel and observation were produced in the same process. So I agree with you. There seems to be a coupling in which the discovery and colonisation of distant domains comes to be combined with an often very fanciful ‘discovery’ of what Britain itself may be.

So you find the metaphor of ‘discovery’ of Britain helpful? It is a metaphor after all...

A metaphor yes, but one that is historically justified, since many of the observers who have made these interior journeys into Britain have explicitly presented themselves as ‘discoverers’. If the metaphor has value, it is partly because it reveals the artifice involved in the process it describes. Plainly, we are talking about a rhetorical strategy rather than a literal process of discovery. This is true whether one is thinking about those 18th century travellers who ‘discovered’ the picturesque in places like the Lake District and the Vale of Festiniog in Wales, or those more recent internal voyagers who have set out to ‘discover’ the inner city deprivations of East London, unemployment on Glaswegian housing estates, or the Kashmiri world of Bradford. Like other literary conventions, this one is fairly pliable: Britain has been ‘discovered’ from diverse and often contrary points of view. The results of the ‘discovery’ can be used in very different ways too. I’m interested in the way a particular ‘discovered’ construction of Britain, and perhaps especially of England, was used as a kind of schoolhouse device all over the British Empire. If you look at what was being taught in Caribbean church schools in the 1920s or even the 1950s, it’s as if Beatrix Potter’s Flopsy Bunny and Jemima Puddleduck and all that stuff was still running. Many people who later came to Britain as immigrants, discovered what it is like to arrive in a country that is wildly out of harmony with its own carefully fostered overseas image.

We actually have one essay on that particular topic in our collection, Tobias Doring’s “The Empire is travelling back” contrasting such expectations with first-hand experience.

So I think this metaphor of ‘discovery’ is a potent one, but I also think that once you have said ‘discovery’ you have to move on pretty fast to consider the context, and ask, well, by whom, where and why, and at what time and with what results? And then one sees that the most beautiful or evocative aspects of discovered England are often tinged with fairly morbid contents, so that, for example, the most innocuous pastoral celebration of ancient continuities in the landscape may be, not just historically false, but functionally exclusive in the present. Leafy green England was an inspiration for nineteenth century socialists, but it is also held most dear by people who can’t stand immigrants. These patterns are part of the story as well.

Such discoveries or their descriptions are, indeed, rarely innocent.

I agree, and yet they are not always entirely guilty either. One of the things that I was most interested to discover while writing my last book, *The Village that Died for*

England, was that throughout the twentieth century there is this tradition of people going out into the rural areas and trying to discover an England of connectedness: not of picturesque views, not of landscape reduced to a scenic resource for urban visitors, but an England of local vitality, which was still in touch with the traditions of the yeomanry and peasantry, with crafts and pre-enclosure land rights too. Throughout the twenties and thirties there was an increasingly desperate pursuit of relics, rural relics, which told the story of an industrious, independent and almost Guild Socialist type of rural life - something that William Morris would have recognised and approved of. Once you start looking at this, and its battle with a rising urban and touristic rural aesthetic, you realise that one 'discovery' can be very much in conflict with another.

Of course there is a lineage too of one traveller 'citing' the place that the last one went to. For a radio programme, I recently talked to Richard Holmes, the biographer of Coleridge. He has walked the parts of the west country where Coleridge wrote many of his poems, and has discovered the routes that are implicit in the development of the narrative and metrical patterns of some of his best poems. Holmes was describing how he found a cave that Coleridge had mentioned and, with great excitement, discovered the letters 'S.T.C.' carved in the stone. A moment later he realised that the inscription was recent, carved by another admirer who had gone there before him. So there are these artificial traditions of initials reinscribed on oak trees and limestone, which are part of the history as well.

You yourself don't use the metaphor of discovery that much. The metaphors you use are metaphors of archaeology, rather, or even of metal detection - you dig beneath the surface.

The metaphor of discovery strikes me as easily overdone: it belongs in a tradition that I would prefer to assess critically rather than simply sign up to. An imperial explorer like Livingstone could go into darkest Africa and discover things that were then brought into modern colonial administration, albeit often with dire consequences. But to pretend that a literary explorer can do anything similar in Britain is feeble really - at best an ironically reversed imperial convention, and more likely the last resort of the voyeuristic 'travel writer' who can't afford an air ticket, and who certainly couldn't administer even a bad colonial health programme. The metaphor is not one that I would use in the present, because I think modern society confounds simple 'discovery'. What you find is complexity, tensions and this imploded imperial imagery, which Britons both love and hate. I do write about place, but I'm not taken by the idea of a country to be 'encountered' in the style of darkest Africa, or to be surveyed and then mapped from a single and superior point of view - even if the superiority is only presented now as outsiderish wit, as it often is by writers like Bryson and Theroux. I feel more at home with the idea of a *territory* where various interests and forces are in movement - often far from local and sometimes hidden deep beneath the immediate surface of things - and where economic, cultural and political forces meet in ways that can seem both accidental and revealing. So I suppose I do have a conception that is more archaeological.

I can tell you how I came into this though. In 1970, I went to the University of Kent, which was a new university, founded five years previously and still shining on its hillside overlooking Canterbury cathedral. There was a lot of concrete and glass, and

endless construction work too. The campus could hardly even boast a bush in those days; they had only just planted the trees. The first thing any student of the humanities was asked to do before arriving was to read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, a great novel set in an isolated tuberculosis clinic high up in the Swiss Alps, and with hundreds of pages devoted to vast philosophical arguments, many of them the founding debates of twentieth century thought. That's how we began in this new university where everything seemed absolutely contemporary - including the curriculum, which was interdisciplinary, modernist and, so I understand, more culturally ambitious than it is nowadays.

I graduated in 1973, and didn't really know what to do. Those new universities were profoundly disconnected in their early days: no Oxbridge style old boy network, even for those who wanted to use it, and the distances had been widened by much publicised incidents of student rebellion etc. The country was all but immobilised by industrial disputes and the oil crisis, and those of us who had entertained vague counter-cultural dreams of getting by on what used to be called 'the squatting/dole nexus', were having to wake up fast. As a student, I may have spent a lot of time gazing down through plate glass at Canterbury Cathedral, but Britain then was not a tranquil or dreamy place you might want to write travel books about. I had to make a decision about how to get by, how to make a living. I did a bit of school teaching, but quickly felt trapped. So I fled, I mean I left and went to the west coast, where I had friends. First California, and then Vancouver in Canada, a place where the sixties seemed to struggle on for longer than elsewhere. I did the longest masters degree ever. It took me five years in all, but then I always knew that when I was finished - when the visa ran out - I would have to return to Britain.

What was your dissertation project about?

I was writing about the literary modernists, about those people who were in London before and during the Great War, particularly the American Imagist poet H.D., who later visited Vienna to go through analysis with Freud. So there was a project of sorts there, but at the same time I was in British Columbia, a province that is now much more clearly orientated across the Pacific, but was then still full of colonial British residues. You could go to a place called Victoria, a small city on Vancouver Island, where there was a hotel called 'The Empress' where people were still sipping afternoon tea in a Victorian manner that bore no relationship to the England I had grown up in. There was no connection between this frozen expatriate dream of England and the crisis-ridden country I had just left. So I saw a staged version of Englishness, which consisted almost entirely of clichés, of red telephone boxes, regattas and tea ceremonies which rivalled the Japanese for ritual. There was also this fading assumption that if you came from Britain you were OK - especially if you came from a time before the recent decline! There were some exceptions, but the universities I attended had more than their fair share of mediocre British academics - characters who hadn't been able to get a job in Britain and who despised themselves for being there and also their 'dumb colonial' students. I made the decision, which was mixed up with the usual personal confusions, that I didn't want to be a Briton in Canada.

So I came back to England with the old problem of how to make a living still unresolved. I returned in 1979; it must have been summer 1979. And I had to make

sense both of the country I had returned to and of my own distanced familiarity with it. These layers of confusion were the starting point for the writing I went on to do. I got back just in time for my return to coincide with Margaret Thatcher's election as Prime Minister. And the minute she took over the cuts on the higher education system began in earnest. So I found myself sort of structurally unemployable. I mean, I never taught in a university and my first book, *On Living in an Old Country*, started out as an orphaned Ph.D. thesis. I was registered for a year at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, but I couldn't raise the fees to continue.

You taught at polytechnics didn't you?

Well, I taught very briefly.

And in one of your few autobiographical digressions, I think it is in A Journey Through Ruins (p. 42-46), you give us a brief account of...

...of falling out of the bottom of that system too. It's quite true. I managed to get a one-term part-time teaching job at a polytechnic in Coventry, teaching media studies in a department of art historians. Many of them loathed the very idea of media studies, but they were desperate for students, so they started this course that they were not actually willing or able to teach. I joined the list of casualised visitors who were drafted in to run it on a short-term basis. Perhaps I had made the great leap up to the bottom rung of the teaching ladder, but when I looked up all I saw was Keith Joseph, Thatcher's education minister, sawing it off with a mad look in his eye. So I let go, and I ended up teaching literacy around the country. I mean, I spent a year teaching people how to write business reports. I used to teach secretaries letter writing, and mining engineers how to do public speaking.

So you taught remedial English?

Oh, absolutely, and remedial English turned out to be more interesting than I had expected. Go into these organisational situations and it can happen that you find people who are able to write perfectly well to their mothers, their lovers, their spouses and the rest of it, but in their work are rendered all but illiterate. Sometimes they certainly do lack writing skills, but often their inability is connected to the fact that they have no authority to make any decisions at all. And how can you author anything without at least some measure of authority? So quite often I would be hired in to teach grammar, and would actually find myself dealing with something that was quite juicy, a problem that went to the heart of the whole organisational regime. So I spent a lot of the early eighties travelling around the country on trains, staying in cheap hotels - a time of floral wall paper and flip charts. In spare moments I was writing about what seemed to be going on in the national culture, and that was what became my first book, *On Living in an Old Country*, which came out in 1985.

That book hit a nerve, albeit in a rather haphazard way. The peculiarity of my personal perspective as a distanced and pretty alienated returnee from Canada (it's there that Britain is referred to as 'the old country') coincided unexpectedly with the wider cultural and political trends that were activating the idea of tradition in the national context. Margaret Thatcher was a moderniser. Her project was to break

through the traditions of the post-war political consensus, yet it was plain in the early eighties that it also involved the reassertion of older continuities. I noticed, for example, that the Falklands campaign coincided with a major triumph of marine archaeology, the resurrection of Henry VIII's flagship, the Mary Rose, which was pulled up from the bottom of the Solent estuary, where it had been buried for many centuries. It was all on national television, and as that sodden hulk broke into view the excited presenter announced that this was 'the first time *we* have seen this in 437 years'. I was impressed by the parallels with the Falklands war, which happened at more or less the same time, and the celebrations that welcomed the triumphant task force home: there again it was all about how *we* had gone and recovered something that was truly ours. So I noticed coincidences of that sort: this 'we' that was being used in very different domains, and also that the agenda of conservation and restoration of monuments and that stuff, which one associates with fairly specialist, innocent, affably British and perhaps almost eccentric preoccupations, was becoming metaphorically active at the centre of the national culture. Saving the heritage was no longer a matter of propping up the falling walls of Dover Castle, say; it was much more about armouring yourself against the threat of 'the enemy within'. We have the nation, that's us, and then we have these threats. The rhetoric of 'Heritage and Danger' may once have belonged to community activists, art historians and curators, but suddenly it seemed to be all over the place. So, I noticed that going on, and that is where my first book came from.

You are not the only one who made that kind of discovery. I'm thinking of a book like The Invention of Tradition of 1983.

Yes, Eric Hobsbawm's (and Terence Ranger's) book; and the issue had also been broached by people like Tom Nairn, who had looked at English identity from the point of view of a Scot who hoped for a loosening of the British state. I would say that this perception of tradition came out of the left primarily. Conservatives have tended to assume tradition, to want more of it, but not to see it as this kind of problem. But even on the left, it was a thin field at that time. When I started writing on these matters, in 1980 or so, I looked around for people who had thought about it before. I remember going to the library to consult the critical literature on 'nationalism' - for it was obviously a form of nationalism I was observing. And to my amazement, I discovered that, with the exception of Gramsci (then being re-read by Stuart Hall and others), the Marxist tradition - the left intellectual tradition - hardly recognised nationalism except as a third-world development stratagem or resistance movement. The idea that it might exist in a developed European country like Britain, or come to be lined up against the progressivism of the welfare state as seemed then to be happening here, was apparently all but unthinkable.

But this has changed, hasn't it? Your project is part of a larger movement. In the last ten or fifteen years, quite a number of rather good books have been written about nationhood and constructions of nationhood, Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, for instance, or Richard Holgerson's Forms of Nationhood.

It was already emerging as a major theme. Looking back on it, my book seems to have helped create awareness of the way in which conservationist, architectural and curatorial concerns were being overshadowed by broader national issues - ghosted, if

you like, by at times thoroughly morbid social polemic. People involved in museums, archaeology and similar fields found their preoccupations highly active in their metaphorical significance. Their sense of emergency, especially, was finding wider social resonance. For many years, the campaigner's tactic had been to identify a valuable 'heritage', and then denounce the 'dangers' threatening to encroach on it. Anyone who questioned this polarising rhetoric was likely to be condemned instantly as being on the side of the vandals. I have never had any argument with the campaigners who tried to stop speculative redevelopment of the sort that gutted many European cities after the Second World War, But when this idea of heritage goes into wider circulation and is used in a more diffuse way, it can become decidedly questionable; and that certainly happened in Britain in the post-war decades.

Hobsbawm and Ranger's book *The Invention of Tradition* made a very strong argument about the ways in which tradition may be synthetically created by governing regimes at any particular point in time. My own view on the 'invention' of tradition was that basically it's true, but then you must quickly move on to a second question: so what? In bad uses of this argument, you quickly get into a situation where you're behaving as if it is enough to point out that a tradition is 'invented' - as if that was a total falsification, and therefore the end of the matter. But in fact that is where questions should start not end. If traditions are synthetically created, then you have to ask why and consider how they work. You also have to recognise that there may be considerable authenticity in the way in which people experience and think about invented traditions, and that demands careful handling - certainly not just facile deconstruction.

You often chose to write about small, apparently even anecdotal events, and to build up a larger picture through them. As, for instance, the British telephone boxes that feature both in A Journey Through Ruins and in The Village that Died for England. Why?

To describe someone as an anecdotalist would, under many circumstances, be to insult them. It implies triviality, an inability to look beyond minor occurrences, and not being able to distinguish the wood from the trees. But I found myself fascinated by fragmentary events that seemed to have a certain radioactivity about them, and then started exploring and, as it were, unpacking them. Partly this suited my circumstance - I didn't have the time for concentrated work. But I also developed this method, if one can call it that, at a time when British intellectual culture, or at least the part I was involved in, was locked into the most ludicrously abstract theory. This stratospheric conjecturing got a few people into academic jobs or onto the North American conference circuit, but it also made it almost impossible to detect the changes that Thatcher and others were carrying out on the ground. I'm not at all sure that it was helpful for the next generation of students, many of whom never seem to have made it through the endless reading list.

It's true that telephone boxes do loom quite large in my books. That is partly because they were the symbol of public service that English conservatives finally felt obliged to defend in the eighties. But there is something else about these small occasions which can then be proved to have much more general significance. They reveal that there is a role for critical elucidation, that causalities do exist, that there are deeper coherences to be found even in apparently superficial events. For me this is the best

legacy of the western Marxist tradition - I'm thinking of writers like Ernst Bloch, whose book *Heritage of these Times*, fascinated me in the early eighties, and Walter Benjamin too.

He also had that gift for focusing on seemingly irrelevant, meaningless details and then reading them as significant signs...

...and of finding epic currents in apparently superficial little dramas. All my books have been written at a time when the political and intellectual framework that I come from - the left wing intellectual tradition of cultural and historical analysis - has been in considerable disrepair. It has not been advancing, and a lot of energy has gone into entrenchment and holding on to already established and sometimes wholly inadequate positions. But if you go out and look at what is actually going on around you, you can still find things out, and, more important, you can get ahead of yourself and into situations that demand more than the routine application of a threadbare interpretative framework. So it's a way of keeping things open, and certainly not of proving that absolutely everything can be explained from the same static point of view.

What you are calling your anecdotal method... do you see that as in any way related to a larger epistemological sweep over the last thirty years: the farewell and the goodbye to the 'grand recit' to the 'grand narrative'? What we have is stories rather than History, and in many stories we have details and these details can be luminous, or they can be made luminous. My metaphor of "luminous details" is taken from Ezra Pound - you never mention Ezra Pound, but he looms in the background of some of your book.

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• I read Pound a lot when I was in Canada, and I'm interested that you should mention him now. I haven't made any deliberate derivations there, but I got my bearings in that North American school of poetics where the poem is 'a field of meaning', and I've since learned to appreciate what the elderly Pound meant when he wrote about the difficulty of making things 'cohere'. I studied with Robin Blaser, a poet who put his own emphasis on the idea of 'territory'. And I learned a lot about the possibilities of place from the writings of Charles Olson, an American and partly 'Poundian' poet - an 'archaeologist of morning' in his own phrase - who wrote an epic series called *The Maximus Poems* about his home town of Gloucester in Massachusetts.

*I'm not talking about political positions. I'm talking about the textuality of your texts which, like Pound's texts, are texts that bring details and make them luminous. Whole stories are opened up in details, and also they are texts that introduce so many characters, so many positions and so many voices. Some of the details you introduce are individual characters. What I find so impressive about your books and particularly about *The Village That Died for England* is the wealth of characters.*

It's amazing what you find when you scratch the ground in the right places. I look at mainstream histories of British culture in the 20th century and I am depressed by them. The same writers are likely to feature, with one given a bit more emphasis and another thrust back towards the shadows. It's as if the writers are all dipping into the same filing cabinet, and then writing in order to prove that there is really nothing

more to be said. With a lot of this writing you get no sense either that the period was alive with danger and tension, or, more generally, that British culture has produced the most extreme eccentricities of attitude - and moreover that some of the most live stuff is right over there in the margins. A large part of my *The Village that Died For England* is concerned with the twenties and thirties, and yet there is only the slightest correlation between the writers and thinkers featured there and those who appear in Valentine Cunningham's recent book on the literary culture of the thirties.

As for the other matter, of finding a diversity of voices and allowing details to speak, well I am all for it. Minor and accidental things can be pregnant with meaning and indication, but only if at some point you're prepared to say that you don't exactly know where you're going. In that sense I am a travel writer, albeit one who travels with the help of archives and old books rather than locomotion. But I don't actually know where I'll end up when I start these books.

They just coalesce gradually?

I work them through. When I started *The Village that Died for England* I thought I was dealing with an entirely post-Second World War story. I had noticed this moving but also banal story - an anecdote, to be sure - about this remote and insignificant place called Tyneham that kept surfacing in newspapers and radio programmes. They called it 'The village that died for D-Day', and talked about the way it had been evacuated during the war. It was a minor story of patriotic sacrifice, which was then betrayed by the post-war peace. The village was never returned to civilian use, and with it went one of the most beautiful stretches of the southern Dorset coast, the heartland of England, part of Thomas Hardy's Wessex. Now, to begin with I thought this story began in the Second World War, because it was about the village that was evacuated. And I wanted to write about it as a kind of fable that dramatised energies and problems in the post-war period. But of course as I started digging, I realised that I was into something more like an English Pompeii, and that I had to go much further back. I didn't know what I was going to find. I had no idea I was going to come across Rolf Gardiner, for example, the father of the conductor John Eliot Gardiner, and his extraordinary connections with the *Wandervogel* movement and the *Deutsche Freischar*, with, as it turned out, some more disastrous aspects of the German twenties and early thirties.

What you unfold is a whole spectrum of political positions; there is fascism and communism, the orthodox Stalinist Communism of Sylvia Townsend Warner, the poet...

entirely, mixed with Bloomsbury high-mindedness...

... and then you get a number of esoteric, anarchist and ecological groups. Indeed, the book works towards presenting England or Britain in epitome or microcosm. What you present is a model for something greater than the sacrifice of a village. I think that it is the 'pars pro toto' form of representation that holds your books together, that all your books share.

I decided early on that I wanted to write about Britain, and I wanted to write in the present. I didn't want to adopt an entirely literary voice because, although I come

from and am informed by literary studies (I mean I'm more that than I'm a sociologist or historian) I couldn't make any of the available genres work for me. I wanted a contemporary prose that could be descriptive, analytical, dramatic as well as more personal, and sometimes more journalistic too. I could have tried to write fiction, and I could have tried to become a straight-down-the-line literary historian, but the subject matter I was after didn't make that kind of sense.

The question of unity was certainly also an issue. One of the problems of working within a geographical framework is that you're often standing in something like a field full of rabbits, which are endlessly darting into different holes in the ground. You could be following them in a hundred different directions for ever. But I still prefer to be somewhat disorganised around a chosen place than to try squeezing everything into a simplistic chronological unity that imposes an external shape. I wanted a much more open form, and that was the point at which I decided to opt for territory over genre. Mind you, I don't think this is the same as writing purely local history. Publishers and booksellers may sometimes end up filing these books under 'local history', but I think that's quite wrong, partly because that idea of the 'local' implies its own diminishment of place. Anyway, as I said earlier, I think a territory is very different from a place on a map. It's got more dimensions, its not all resolved, and it doesn't disclose itself along a single perspective. It's an argument as well as a locality, and if you work it through properly, you'll find it's a microcosm too, just as you say.

There's actually a time-honoured term for that, for the description of places, and that is 'chorography'. It is, as Bernhard Klein shows in his essay in our collection, as well-established genre of describing a certain territory in the Renaissance. Still, you do it differently from the chorographers of the Early Modern period, who tried systematically to enumerate all the facts and assets of a place: you focus on one rather small territory, say Dalston Lane in London, or Tyneham in Dorset, as small-scale models for the modern British city or the English countryside, and then, still within that territory, you again focus on particular aspects.

That's right, and I've had some interesting arguments about this over the years. Raphael Samuel, the late people's historian, used to be rather wary of my approach, which I think he thought violated the participatory ethics of local testimony. He remarked, for example, that it was odd to write about Dalston without paying due respect to the richness of local dialects, Cockney or otherwise. I'm not opposed to that kind of testimony, even if it can rapidly become sentimental, but rather than just trying to document the human flora and fauna of a chosen territory, I wanted to use that territory as a yardstick, a kind of analytical device. So I chose a place that is not just small but, in its social and cultural content, also as intensified as possible, where sharp differences exist, which is full of history and yet free from any uniform design - including one that might be imposed in the name of 'heritage'. And then I used it as a prism through which to trace wider stories.

And how do you find your territories?

With *A Journey through Ruins*, it was a matter of waking up to where I was already. I used to walk down Dalston Lane twice, three, four, five times a day, and yet I had never really noticed it, except I suppose in accordance with the usual welfare state

perspective of deprivation etc. And then I looked and realised, well, here we are in this absolutely modest and ordinary stretch of East London, with its rotting Victorian buildings, its hard-pressed shop keepers, its chaotic bus-stops, its hobbling public library and its famously corrupt police station; and this huge transformation called Thatcherism is taking place, shaking things out of their customary affiliations. Being unusually dishevelled, Dalston Lane was partly like a posthumous relic of the world gone by. But it was also like a history book: You could see fifty years of failed social idealism in its charity shops alone. And, of course, thanks to the political changes of that time, it was also undergoing what looked like terminal shock treatment. Everything seemed slightly disconnected, and slightly raw. Then I discovered that the street had been scheduled for demolition for almost the entire length of the post-war period, and its unlikely survival gave it extra resonance in the year or two after Margaret Thatcher had been deposed by her own Conservative Party.

This also led me to thinking more generally about the place of the inner city in the wider British imagination. To read a certain kind of British social commentary, which can be found in a liberal paper like the *Guardian* as well as in tabloids like the *Sun*, you would think the inner city was a place where people got mugged and raped and robbed, and where 'multiculturalism' was a major disaster. In reality, terrible things do happen in East London and other inner city areas. Yet despite their problems these areas are, for most of the time, stable and even quite industrious places where people spend an awful lot of time not raping and mugging and robbing each other. So I wanted to use Dalston to measure the distance between the reality of the place and this constant rhetoric of onlooking judgement. I wanted to use it to trace the story of post-war social policy. I also wanted to get into the mix of the city a bit, and to give at least some expression to that characteristic inner city style of perception, where one person's take on the place is never the same as anyone else's. I like that aspect of city life very much: that if you're a sympathetic city dweller, you know that the way you see and use the city is only ever one part of the story. It's like common rights applied to the urban street: we walk and interpret and use the place, in the full knowledge that people with other backgrounds are at the same time doing it very differently. That urban outlook is quite different from the rural way of thinking about place, which, at least in its traditional cultural expression, is all about continuity and deep settlement, single vision and organic placidity.

So Dalston seemed to assemble itself in my mind as I wrote that book, and I decided, well OK, I'm just going to stick with this small stretch of street, and I'm going to use it as a measuring stick for the things that seem to be happening around here. I used to research on my feet, often in the company of Iain Sinclair, the poet and novelist, who has been digging into that patch for many years now. If I'd written it conventionally it would have been a study of fifty years of enlightened social policy, starting with the relief schemes developed during the blitz, which set the precedent for the later welfare state. I was writing the book in the fiftieth anniversary of the Blitz, when so many elderly East Enders were getting out into the parks, and they were flying Lancasters and Spitfires overhead to commemorate the RAF, and also campaigning for statues to Bomber Harris - the man who blew out the lungs of all those people in Dresden. There was something desperate about this delayed commemoration, with its insistence on a war memory that nobody had thought to mark with statues in the years

immediately after the war. So I was seeing the end of that memory, and thinking about what had happened to the Welfare State that came out of the Blitz.

So the book does not just tell stories; the stories do add up to something, and I think that would also apply to The Village that Died for England. One way of putting what they add up to is a sort of apocalyptic vision, which I find to a certain extent disturbing. The subtitle of A Journey Through Ruins is already apocalyptic - The Last Days of London. The tanks in The Village that Died for England are in themselves an apocalyptic image: they might come straight from the Book of Revelation, actually.

And indeed, for the inventors and first observers of those machines, they did.

The Village that Died for England: again death, 'things coming to an end,' a Yeatsian phrase which you take up occasionally. What does that apocalypse consist of? Is it the end of the Welfare State? Is it...

That's a very good question. When I was writing *A Journey Through Ruins* and gave it the subtitle *The Last Days of London*, the publishers were so depressed that in the end I was persuaded to put another, rather stupid subtitle into the third edition. But in truth it was and is *The Last Days of London*. Partly that title came from my observation that in the late eighties there was a considerable interest in debris in the avant garde galleries, a sort of postmodernist celebration of ruin, garbage, junk. Even the imagery of the old slum interior that reformers had worked so hard to abolish twenty years earlier, was being rehabilitated and presented as if it was a kind of ready-made art installation. So partly, when I talked about the last days of London, I was referring to this sort of morbidity, to what happens to an avant garde culture when it loses its social or political base. And the answer is that it gets onto the rubbish tip. I called this the aesthetics of the second blitz, a romanticisation of the ruins of the welfare state.

At the same time, I allowed that phrase to stand as a subtitle because there is a more serious sense of finality in the book. A few people said, this is far too negative, of course London isn't ending. And that is true in one sense, although in another and as you must know, coming from Berlin, death and rebirth are part of the fabric of every city's life. And what was in its last days in the London I was writing about was the post-war settlement, the idea of planned reform that had emerged after the Second World War. That whole idea of the city that was to be rebuilt by the enabling state was dying, both from the failure of its own works, and from the attack unleashed by Margaret Thatcher - an attack that included the sacking of the Greater London Council. The whole structure of that civic understanding was being taken to pieces, and hideous ghosts were surfacing from a suppressed Dickensian past. I remember using one episode in particular. A body was found floating in a shallow ornamental pond in one of Hackney's public parks, and there was this terrible account in the *Hackney Gazette* of how it had been there for weeks. Kids had been fishing and sailing their model boats around it, and the police and park officials had shared the same illusion: namely that it was just a black garbage bag. Hackney's refuse collection service was in its usual abysmal state, and everyone had assumed that this drowned man was just another abandoned bag of rubbish. So that is what 'the end' was about, and I certainly wasn't intending to celebrate it.

Meanwhile, the whole political culture, and certainly the whole public sector, was becoming increasingly dominated by a curious managerial realism, of which we have certainly not yet seen the end. Where once there used to be a sense of cause and effect, people started to talk endlessly about 'change', about 'managing change', as if they were surfers on a wave for which no one could expect them to take any responsibility. Euphemisms like 'creating underspend' started to be used in place of more honest phrases like 'cuts'. This sort of managerial language now covers vast areas of urban administration and policy. If you look at what stands for policy in the Labour Party nowadays, it is exactly that sort of idea. The old levers of state power have been sold off or miniaturised over the years of Conservative government, and what stands in their place is often only this weirdly detached rhetoric of efficiency. All the public policy think tanks, and all the people with an eye on the main chance as it is likely to be under Tony Blair seem to be operating with this language. So it looks to me as if the moral and political centre of post-war public administration has disintegrated too. Now there was enough wrong with those ideas to prevent one falling into simple lamentation at their passing. But there is still this gaping hole in the political culture, which no amount of marketing talk can hide. So I suppose that an apocalyptic tone was part of the business of mapping the loss of those anchors.

But don't you find yourself with strange bedfellows in that sort of construction of post-war English history? Say, with Prince Charles or with Roger Scruton?

I don't regard them as bedfellows at all. I did write at some length about Prince Charles, but then it seemed to me that that he had an interesting moment in the eighties, before the Royal soap opera turned into a drama of marital infidelity, and when the Labour Party was so demoralised that it offered no effective opposition at all. Thatcher was shaking the country to pieces, and Prince Charles, who is constitutionally excluded from addressing mainstream political issues, was poking about in the margins picking up apparently peripheral issues on which he could legitimately take a view: the paranormal, environmentalism, the inner city, architecture etc. There is a fair measure of eccentricity in Charles, and plenty to suggest that his outlook is close to that of the old Tories, who defended an idea of ancient English hierarchy against the transformations of the free market. But it was still the case that many of the themes he picked up in the eighties, turned out to be politically far more active than he or his advisers could have expected. So suddenly there was Prince Charles, talking about public housing and civil liberties - admittedly only in Romania - and taking the side of the urban poor. I was interested in that, but I never saw it as an answer to anything and I would never have joined the camp.

No, I don't see myself as sharing common ground with either Prince Charles or Roger Scruton. Both of them seem to lament the passing of a particular version of English identity - more English than British. I'm interested in tracing out that particular mode of thought. But I don't subscribe to it. I reserve the right to be moved by the sight of an ancient English landscape or barn, but if you put me down in Tyneham village as it was before it was destroyed, I would be itching to escape. What Scruton and perhaps also Prince Charles regret is the loss of a time-sanctioned social hierarchy and the untidiness of mass democracy. I am against the sort of blithe history-less perception that is simply embarrassed by where we come from, but I'm not on the side of these Conservative lamenters. I try to reveal the emotional basis

and power of this nostalgic outlook, but I also try, particularly in *The Village That Died for England*, to show the pathological consequences of defining England in purely insular and perhaps also thoroughbred terms.

Do you see yourself with this project as being in the tradition of British travel writing? Let us take Cobbett's Rural Rides, for instance, and your books. There are, of course, enormous differences, but there are similarities as well. Cobbett has got one big theme, and that is the destruction of agriculture and rural life and culture through enclosures, 'tax-eaters,' tithes and the cancerous growth of London, the 'all-devouring Wen' You also have one big theme. It is the ambiguities, ambivalences, ironies of the relationship between modernisation and heritage. But there is one crucial difference: Cobbett knows exactly what should be done, whereas with you one wonders, and doesn't know exactly what your position is. In The Village that Died for England, I have the impression that you are celebrating the wonderful weirdness and richness of the discourses about Tyneham: fascist, Stalinist, esoteric, ecological and so on. But if in the end one asks oneself, what would you actually like to see done about Tyneham, there is no answer. When it comes to Dalston Lane in London, there is again a wealth, a rich mine of insights and so on. If one asks oneself, what does he want to be done, one only gets suggestions, a recurrent one of them being that state intervention should be more effective...

Possibly... Let's take this in stages, because there are several things here. On Cobbett and travel: in some senses I would describe myself as an anti-travel writer. My sense is that travel writing has been full of spurious exoticism in recent years. Publishers pour out countless travel books by people who were raised in perfectly reasonable middle class houses in various parts in England, but who feel obliged to fly off to the Andes or the darkest jungle somewhere. Nowhere is safe from the British travel-writer. We've had all the possible encounters: the traveller might meet a hostile pygmy or a bear and perhaps have an amorous encounter or two. This is really an ironic, or perhaps just farcical, restaging of old colonial attitudes, although unencumbered by any version of the old white man's burden. The key question in many of these books seems to be how far you have to go before your more or less conventional British attitudes start to seem interesting. There are exceptions of course, from Robert Byron in the thirties, to Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, and some Colin Thubron too. But to judge by some of these books, the whole wide world has become a laboratory for testing out minor British attitudes. What I wanted to do was to see what happens if you turn that convention upside down and venture into your own landscape, with an eye to thick rather than thin description. Of course, I knew that there is a contrary tradition of that too.

This is what our book is about: the tradition that stretches, let's say, from John Leland and William Camden in the 16th century to Defoe and Dr. Johnson in the 18th century, Cobbett in the 19th century and Priestley and Orwell in ours - a great tradition, I would say!

It is a great tradition, and I see that. When I was working on my first book, *On Living in an Old Country*, I came across all these forgotten inter-war books about the English countryside, published by companies like Batsford - books about the old green roads of England in which people walked away from the cities and also from their memories of the 1914-18 war, and followed ancient tracks up onto the limestone,

or the chalk Downs which had such unique and consoling qualities for many of these early twentieth century hunters of rural virtue. These books are often full of a passionate urgency about the places they describe, but they are valueless now, unwanted and scarcely even worth the time it would take a second hand book dealer to catalogue them. I came across a volume or series called 'The Highways and Byways of England', and it was then that I thought of trying to revive this almost entirely defunct genre for my own purposes. I had no desire to be too assertive or explicit about this. But that was where I got this idea of working with small stretches of minor road. Those pre-war writers would dwell on rural landscape, folk traditions, rural crafts, local building materials and probably flowers and butterflies too. I was more interested in matters like social conflict, memory and utopian aspiration. But it wasn't just a post-modern spoof. I like the idea of that kind of close observation. I do use my English lanes as ways of addressing wider matters, but I think there is still a kind of patriotic edge to it. I suspect I'm more in the tradition of moral outrage than of placid bird-watching pleasantries.

Indeed, the tradition of William Cobbett! In contrast to him, however, your books are not travel books because there is hardly any locomotion in them, to start with, and you, as a traveller, are almost invisible in them. Instead of dramatising yourself - as has happened so often in older travelogues and even more so in contemporary travel writing - you try to fade yourself out; you do make only very occasional appearances, where you speak about yourself, your own attitudes. I mean, you are there everywhere, but you are hardly ever present as a person in the foreground, who comments upon things.

I think there is a huge difference between what I do and the activities of some of these more light-footed and, let it be said, incomparably more successful writers like Paul Theroux [in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, 1983] or Bill Bryson [in *Notes from a Small Island*, 1995]. They pass through, rarely bothering to look twice, just taking a note of the appearances as they go. Both Bryson and Theroux took a quick glance at the gunnery range that I wrote about in *The Village that Died for England*, and Theroux didn't even stay long enough to discover that his walk was disturbed by tanks rather than artillery, as he assumed. But then for him the first impression is the whole point, and it hardly matters if its right or wrong.

As I say, I think the difference is between thick and thin description. To begin with, I don't expect my localities to reveal much until I have been there many times over a number of years. I made repeated visits to the territory of *The Village that Died For England* - starting in the spring of 1984, when I went down there to look for the landscape that haunts Mary Butts' novels. So I have seen the place change over ten years, and watched many people come and go too. I'm not interested in the one-dimensional map. I like to see the movement of history and of power in a place before I start guessing at the dimensions of it. And what happened to me in Dorset was that, in a period when everything is being made very similar in the name of 'heritage' - same marketing devices, same logos, same road signs, same sort of idea of how you display and exploit history - I found a genuinely historical 20th century landscape that, for obvious and explosive reasons, had escaped this simplistic sort of exposition. It was a place one could really think about the century with, and if I still like the book it is because I reckon that on that very localised firing range, I found a story that is uniquely telling about modern English culture.

Similarly, with Dalston Junction and the urban territory of *A Journey Through Ruins*: I had lived in that part of London for fifteen years. I do my fair share of walking about and going from one place to another, but I think probably I see my role much more as a sifter and as the person who tries to lay things bare, and to dramatise the meanings in a place. Cobbett, as you say, was doing something quite different. To begin with, he knows what he thinks. He is there with a clearly defined social and political outlook doing the business, gathering evidence. I don't feel that I have the answers to the problems that come up, and I don't see it as my role to tell people what to think. If I make autobiographical appearances in these books, it is partly in order to establish that they aren't written from an omniscient or universal perspective. And anyway, in this time of dissolved political certainties, it is at least better than nothing to keep questions, complexities and also potentialities open.... In the meantime, so to speak....This is meantime writing.

So the local history shelf would be the wrong shelf for the these books?

I think so. I'm not a localist, even though I use localities to articulate what I take to be bigger themes. But the books do end up on the local history shelf, which can be very frustrating. *A Journey Through Ruins* got coded as an east London book, and *The Village that Died for England* sometimes turns up alongside bucolic 'country living' books, although I think having any reference to 'death' in your title makes for some awkwardnesses there. By and large, the conventional academic historians ignore them, sometimes identifying them with the very conditions they criticise - insularity and weak-minded rustic nostalgia - which, I guess, means that they don't bother to read them.

Well that's the consequence of falling between genres, isn't it.

Yes, but where else is there to be? These books couldn't exist without falling between genres - a problem for marketing people, but not for the people who do actually seek them out and read them. *The Village that Died for England* may well be locally situated, in that contested landscape where two versions of the English pastoral - the downland being one and, as I argue, the tank being another - have been in collision for seventy years. But what kept me digging away down there was precisely its wider ramifications. We all know, for example, that environmentalism is good. But nobody ever seems to map the history of the green or conservationist impulse. It's always expressed in terms of immediate necessity, an immediate appeal to the good. And yet on this patch of Dorset, which campaigners have been trying to 'save' from the military for the best part of seventy years, one could see its history - that it has had very different and at times contradictory expressions, some positively alarming. That was one of the wider stories I was after. And as I proceeded, I found that this small area of Dorset was indeed a genuine microcosm, and that the tension between the tanks and the landscape took a different but always telling shape in every decade. So the book became a kind of narrative history of 20th century English utopianism, and a seriously bizarre story it turned out to be. Strange, for example, to find the army, which for decades has been opposed as the despoiler of this landscape, now playing the green card itself, and claiming to have conserved this landscape from even more inappropriate use. These days, even the shell craters are described as habitats for rare downland plants.

And what makes it so bizarre is the range of idealisms and utopias from the extreme left to the extreme right.

Yes, there too I think the story is broadly allegorical. We do seem to live in a century where the edges of the spectrum curl up and meet. If you go to the left now in British political culture, you will find ideas that, five years previously you would have found on the anti-statist right. This cross-over is part of what is being captured or revealed in these books, and it is especially pronounced when it comes to ecological themes. Somebody once told me that I liked to confuse the jump leads, but I think its history that's done that, not me.

Let's take the Gardiner family as an example!

An interesting case, to be sure, and all expressed on a stretch of land that runs along the edge of Cranborne Chase, a chalk plateau in North Dorset. The land is presently farmed organically by John Eliot Gardiner, who is also a major international conductor, known not just as a driving force in the authentic instruments movement and the founder and director of the Monteverdi Choir, but for his strong use of rhythm, particularly in early polyphonic music. My researches were concerned with the generation before that, and with John Eliot's father, Rolf Gardiner, who campaigned for Tyneham in the sixties. He was against the military occupation of that land, which he saw as the culmination of the modern state's extinction of the organic rural way of life. He also opposed a nuclear installation that was built nearby with all the usual, soon to be broken, promises and reassurances. Once the army were removed, he had plans to turn the Tyneham area into a pilot project for the symbolic restoration of an England that he saw as all but extinguished by modern developments, from cars and roads, to centralised state policy, to international finance. Gardiner was an interesting, and in many ways prescient, environmental thinker - a European, rather than just a bunkered little Englander. He pioneered ecological initiatives on his family estates in Malawi, and he was involved in the formation of an early international committee to promote the idea of 'landscape husbandry' in Europe. There is a lot of currency in his arguments about the countryside and its future now that its traditional forms, in which he saw beauty and utility combined, have become agriculturally redundant. And yet this was a man who, twenty years after his death, was still being denounced as a grisly, patriarchal fascist. If he appears in books, it tends to be in claimed association with the Freikorps, and the local memory is pretty rich too. I found that some people who lived near his home in North Dorset remembered all sorts of elaborate folk dancing and ritual and muttered about him as 'that Nazi'.

Clearly, this was an interesting figure, and all the more so, as I say, since Rolf Gardiner was an early ecological thinker - attuned to those themes long before the late sixties, when he made somewhat eccentric utterances about the dawn of the Post-Modern Age. So I started looking into his background, and discovered that Rolf Gardiner had grown up in Berlin before the First World War. His father Alan Gardiner was an Egyptologist, who was in Germany to work on the dictionary of hieroglyphics. So Gardiner, whose family was decidedly well off, was raised in Berlin and came back to England shortly before the First World War. As that war raged he was at school - first Rugby and then the famously 'progressive' and

coeducational institution called Bedales - and then he went up to Cambridge, where we find him immediately after the war, reading D.H. Lawrence, remembering Germany, and trying to keep the two halves of his Anglo-German experience together. In the early twenties he came up with his own programme of war reparations. An ardent believer in the idea of 'youth', he pledged his loyalty to his own 'generation' - an idea that was very prominent after the First World War - and started visiting Germany in the vacations. He went on vast walking tours, organised a temporary theatre company and toured Shakespeare, in an attempt to remind German youth of matters more profound than polarised national hatreds, and he took folk dancing troupes too. By 1923, Gardiner had become much involved with the Bund, with the German youth movements, and, a little later, he took part in the early work-camps pioneered at youth centres - including those run in Silesia in the late twenties by Professor Rosenstock-Huessy, who would flee Germany as soon as Hitler came to power.

As you know better than I, this whole movement, if we can call it this, was overtaken, incorporated and extinguished by Nazism; and Gardiner, who had started out fairly close to thinkers like Ruskin and William Morris, with the naive idea of applying something like Guild Socialism across Northern Europe, started making all sorts of deplorable utterances, even as he disapproved of Nazi excesses. I wasn't interested in diminishing the extent to which he may have been a fellow traveller, but where others have been content simply to denounce him as a Nazi, I wanted to trace out how an English rural revivalist, a folk dancing advocate of 'rhythm' and organic farming who used early polyphonic song as a metaphor for political and ecological harmony, ended up on the fascist road. All this was particularly interesting, since Gardiner was without doubt a genuinely ecological thinker. And he was also remarkably uncontrite about many of his friendships in Germany - he was still writing to Hitler's agricultural minister, Walter Darré, after the Second World War, and he persisted in anti-Semitic remarks too - as, no doubt, did many members of his pre-war circle, who believed that 'usury' was responsible for the troubles of native English agriculture. As for John Eliot Gardiner, I was a little nervous of approaching him, but he was very helpful. He had fought his own battles with his father - and not just about his decision to perform music within the professional domain that his father, who though music should be connected to the soil and performed within the agricultural setting, disdained as the 'discarnate' bourgeois concert hall. John Eliot may farm organically on many of the same acres, and his ideas on polyphony and rhythm may in some way still be connected to the musical outlook of his father, but he long ago took his distance from the dodgy organicism of his father's political vision.

Let us go back to the question of prescription...

I am indeed interested in opening up all these cultural backgrounds, even many that are dismissed as eccentric and peripheral by more conventional historians. I do so in the belief that these histories may still inform the present, or at least indicate the dangers of certain purist positions, including the ecological one. But having done that, why should I tie it all up into a neat conclusion? I don't think prescriptive certainties are particularly useful in this sort of enquiry. I'm not writing a cookbook, after all, or seeking to replace history with recipes for the future. My role is, rather, to identify the sheer range of polarisation and of difference which has existed within English self-understanding, and to show how it has functioned to inspire and also to

limit thought at any particular time. Looking at this thirties ecologism, for example, it is no wonder either that a lot of people had their doubts about greenery, when it resurfaced in the sixties, or that environmental campaigns are inclined to bitter internal disputation.

If you ask me to summarise my main concerns I would say that I'm interested in the extent to which, over the fifty years since the Second World War, we have seen a polarisation between ideas of traditional English identity, symbolised by ancient country houses, the rural landscape etc., and contrary ideas of state-led modernisation gone wrong. In *A Journey Through Ruins* my central image for the latter are the tower blocks, images of alienation which are among the primary architectural symbols of the post-war period. Brideshead versus the towerblocks - that was one of the leading oppositions of the period, and it pitched the traditional time-sanctioned nation against an image of destructive modernisation gone wrong. To point this out is not to say that many other things weren't going on, but that particular polarisation became a primary political metaphor by the eighties, and it certainly determined the way we in this country said farewell to the welfare state. Of course, it was grossly oversimplified and it imposed a brutal closure on public thought.

So your method is that of a dramatist? You actually speak about dramatising meanings and, like a dramatist, you refrain from inculcating a certain interpretation, and allow your readers to draw their own conclusions from the materials you present.

I guess mine is more of a literary method than a theorist's one - at least in the sense that I think readers should be left to make what they will of the results. I'm not pretending to be neutral or omniscient. I'll certainly take positions and make judgements as I go along, but I don't see why a writer should be expected to resolve things that, in actuality, plainly remain unresolved. Chris Cutler, a musician with a zealous left-wing past, once told me that having a fairly simplified political outlook could be vital in your youth - the only thing that enables you to think with any measure of independence, especially at a time when values are so relativised. I reckon that may well be true, but I've had enough of paying dues according to crudely drawn party lines. When you are trying to get the measure of cultural realities, the rush to judgement just gets in the way.

You are non-judgemental. I mean, you don't denigrate your characters, you always try to be fair to them and allow them to put forward their own point of view.

And I also have to ask questions of myself. Do I know, for example, can I be absolutely certain that, had I been living at that particular time, say the thirties, when a certain sort of anti-Semitic attitude was actually quite widely distributed through British society, that I would have remained absolutely innocent of it? I profoundly hope that I would have done, but those attitudes were certainly still around when I was at school in Dorset in the sixties, and I don't think any of us can be entirely sure. This makes the idea of merely denying, or denouncing toxic attitudes in the past seem a little bit too quick to me. The same can be said about poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. It may seem remarkable that Eliot, say, was content to republish some of his more anti-Semitic pre-war lines after the Holocaust, and without any real attempt at explanation. Yet, at the same time, these attitudes do not make him a worthless poet. We have to allow for this range of complexities, if we are going to understand

how ideas work in history. The same can be said for ecology, which, as I discovered, was incubated in a pretty foul cradle here in Britain. I'm all for 'ecological comity', but the folkish kind of eugenic organicism espoused by the thirties ecologists who coined that phrase is repulsive. With ecology, these are not just historical problems either. We should always be watchful when politics becomes biopolitics, when it disappears into the body or into nature - because if you're not careful you end up trading in essences and short-circuiting the whole process of reason and accountability. It may once have been possible to understand Nature as the ground of being and society, but as Marilyn Strathern has pointed out, something strange has happened by the time saving wild habitats has come to be all mixed up with not eating harmful additives in food. I think we need to keep an eye on this confusion of culture and nature, and not rush to turn it into a new ecological principle.

Will you continue to watch that? Or, to put it more bluntly, what are your further projects? You have dealt with the country in The Village that Died for England. You have dealt with the city in A Journey Through Ruins....

I sometimes feel that I'm through with writing about Britain in this concentrated way. I've written two books which are, in a sense, my autobiography. They are about the world I grew up in - that rather uniform world of post-war austerity, which was both virtuous and somewhat rationed in attitude, and which I remember as a child. So I wanted to catch all that - the fate of its reforming state, and meaning of its much loved rural landscape.... But I've done that now, and I'm not hunting for another English 'territory' to dig into. One of the reasons I wrote about England, especially in its rural dimension, was in order to think about and perhaps also expose some of the forms and consequences of our famous 'insularity'. But I don't want to press on to the point where I become a representative of that tradition!

The world outside England is, however, not very present in your books.

No it's not.

It's quite amazing, you know: Europe - in the sense of the Continent - plays a very minor role; apart from this English/German fascist connection it rarely provides a context or background. Equally minor is the role the old Commonwealth plays.

That's right, up to a point. It is there when I can find it in the record. I was pleased, let me tell you, when I finally found someone of Afro-Caribbean extraction walking into the Tyneham valley in the early seventies. But Tyneham, particularly, has served as the Europhobe's heartland - part of its symbolic potency was that it could be mythologised as the England that never experienced immigration or the reforming welfare state, and which never got dragged into the European Community. In exposing that, I was trying to show the levels of eccentricity that follow when the English turn in on themselves and try to refound their world on what is left of their rural roots. So I think this context you mention is implicit in the whole approach, rather than merely absent. And I think it true to say that neither book has provided much consolation for those who would like to think of themselves as English thoroughbreds.

I gave A Journey Through Ruins to one of my students who wrote an essay on non-fictional accounts of multiculturalism in Britain. And she read through it and came back and said, there is very little of it in your book. At first, I wouldn't believe it, but going through the whole book again, I had to agree with her.

That is true, but once again, only up to a point. There is a lot in that book about the response to immigration: the revaluation of tradition against it, the fable of the disappearing immigrant in the gentrifying area of Spitalfields, the wider demonisation of the inner city which is often precisely to do with fears of hybridity and 'degeneration'. These themes are all there in the book. But it is quite true that I did not go into that part of east London saying 'where is the multi-cultural reality and can I appoint myself its recorder, or its oral historian.' This would have seemed presumptuous, since the whole point of multiculturalism is about diversity and a multiplicity of viewpoints, which must be allowed to speak for themselves.

But it is also true to say that I had another priority in writing *A Journey Through Ruins*. I was concerned with tracing out what had happened to particular ideas of administration and planning - a perspective that was sharpened by the experience I had during the eighties. For five years I was responsible for running a small unit for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. We were concerned with devising forms of management for voluntary and community organisations, so I spent quite a lot of time working close to organisations connected to a great many different sections of the urban population, and trying to get things done within a changing social policy framework. So the core of that book is concerned with social policy, privatisation and changing perceptions of the welfare state. This all bears heavily on the shape and possibilities of the multicultural city, as does the managerialism that increasingly seems to stand in for public policy. I'm inclined to insist on this wider political history when I meet advocates of post-modernist 'hybridity', especially those who have long since given up thinking about the state and related matters.

Well let's go back to my last question. What will you turn to, after having turned away from England, its fantasies and utopias?

I hope these books help to blow Little England at the seams and reveal it to be full of toxins as well as balms - something quite other than the sedate, quiet, tranquil, self-contained place of customary description. But I'm not going to do that again. The book I'm writing at the moment is not focused only on Britain, although it has its origins in the Dorset book. It's about the machine I found on that organic landscape - the tank, a gruesome British invention first used during the Great War. To begin with I saw this infernal engine only as a despoiler of the landscape, but I soon realised that it has a compulsive imaginative attraction for many people, and, moreover, that this was one of the reasons why the Ministry of Defence has been able to hold onto that corner of Dorset despite generations of protestation. A fair number of people preferred tanks to aristocratic pastoralism. So I started looking at this machine, and I discovered that it too was an embodiment of English culture, a product in some ways of the literary imagination. H. G. Wells foresaw tanks, and his short-story 'The Land Iron Clads', published a decade before the Great War broke out, was read by the first engineers. The first tactician, whose thinking influenced Hitler's generals as they devised the Blitzkrieg, was a follower of the occultist and charlatan Aleister Crowley, and the first expounder of his deliberately 'transgressive' poetic. And then I realised

that this machine, which started off as a sort of cultural phantom, which was then crudely materialised for military use, still works as a cultural phantom - and that this is part of its effectiveness as a weapon. Whether its Boris Yeltsin standing on one outside the White House, or that famous episode in Tiananmen Square, the tank has become a global icon of state power, history, irreversible force. And so I am trying to deal with this. I want to track this story down, and see how this machine has operated as one of the primary symbols of the twentieth century.

A history of tanks, or of fantasies about tanks...

It's about the fantasy of tanks, but I hope to show how that fantasy has become part of the tank's practical force as a weapon. I will not be writing a book of machine worship of the kind that is often written about weapons - that really would be tank pornography. I've been travelling a bit for this book, as you can imagine - to the USA, Turkey, and into the former Soviet bloc: Poland, Slovakia and other places where people have these machines rolling around in the back of their minds - a different collection for each generation. Under Stalin, the tank became symbolic of the cutting edge of history - it was like the vanguard of that awful idea of progress, so I'm after that as well.

One might also think of the Berlin Uprising or the Prague Spring. Indeed many of the symbolic moments of 20th century history have been provided with an exclamation mark by this Beast of Revelation.

The orthodox military historian's view of this machine seems to be that while it may have been a phantom, a cultural phantom before it became really effective as a weapon, that phase barely lasted through the First World War. My argument is that it has remained a phantom and that is one of the reasons why it has had such power of compulsion. It was probably the people of East Europe who defined our perception of the tank in the fifties and sixties. They were the people who produced the image of this machine as seen from the street by the subjected citizen, whose state has gone to war on its own people. There's a lot to be said about mechanisation as a pre-war philosophy, and also about the moveable nature of the associated 'tank doctrine'. Ideas that were first developed by British tank theorists, and such people do exist, are then developed in Nazi Germany, and after that in Israel. So this idea of concentrated force and mobility, which again is a cultural idea at root, is turned into a moveable doctrine as it passes from one national setting to another through the century. I'm looking into the more recent idea of 'digitisation' too, with the tank reconfigured around the virtual battlefield. 'Digitisation' is very similar to mechanisation as an outlook, and I've been in Kentucky to find out about it. I spent some time at the US Armor Centre at Fort Knox - a place of tanks, gold and country and western songs. I managed to get a five day tour, a surprisingly high level one, with many of the soldiers who ran Desert Storm. They had me driving an Abrams M1A1 through a nameless German town, in simulation of course. And I'm still sorting my way through all these tapes of tank soldiers talking about the future. Enough to say that the fantasy persists. These soldiers are weirdly philosophical: tank-Hegelians, who talk about 'The Army After Next', and have long since dissolved the tank back into its 'concept', in order to ensure that this heavy, lumbering machine will find a place in the 21st century. So at the end of the century, the tank is being dissolved back into its idea - a phantom again, just as it was at the beginning.

So you are abandoning the territorial approach. But what you will retain is to write about fantasies, utopias, nightmares, anxieties and their political power.

Yes absolutely, and traditions too. And there is another word for what all this is about. I was talking recently with Robin Blaser, the poet I studied with in Canada, and who visited Britain last year. We stood outside the BBC's Broadcasting House, with its relief sculptures by Eric Gill, and talked about the passing of this idea of the one truth that this now rather quaint looking building promised to beam, with parental care, over the entire world. He is, I think, rather more at ease with the postmodernist agenda than I am. Flawed as they certainly were, I still somewhat regret the loosening of the supposedly enlightened ideas of public reason and administration, and I can't look back on the decades of the welfare state in which I grew up, albeit rather bored and none too needy, without feeling that too much of that has been abandoned. But Robin Blaser, who is gay, knows very well what that single, normative idea of the world meant for people who didn't fit into it. His view seemed to be, 'Thank God we no longer have one narrative, because it was a bad one for a lot of people', which I am sure is true. But he also described himself as an 'exodist', meaning that to write as he does nowadays is to be perpetually coming out of no longer adequate formations - intellectual, poetic, social, political. The job of the exodist is not simply to obliterate or, in avant-garde terms, to transgress as he leaves or to step out in blithe and regardless ignorance, but rather to work his way through, to sift and record and, indeed, to pay due tributes on the way. I thought that was a wonderful description of the writer's role in the late twentieth century, and I hope that I have been able to do a little of that in my books about England. I am, I suppose, an obituarist. I deal with posthumous England. Perhaps I'm melancholic, and it's a matter of disposition. But I prefer to think that it has been a job that needed doing. History has become this huge accumulation of debris, much of it strangely disconnected, and we have to work our way through it. That does mean writing obituaries, as part of the business of defining future possibilities.

Well, having at last found the genre in which you write - the obituary - I think we can stop here. Thank you very much for your time, patience, and commitment.



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