The 1960s: butterflies and real dreams

In 1960 I left school and began what turned out to be the great mythic decade of the 20th century, the 1960s. The plan was that I would go to university the following year after doing the entrance exams for Cambridge in the autumn and that I would get a job in the intervening time. This scheme was devised by myself and the problem with it was that, having decided that I wanted to study physics at Cambridge, no one at my school had any idea how one actually went about applying. They were somewhat hazy about other universities; I was the only pupil in either my year or the preceding one actually to apply to university let alone go to one. The standard ambition after taking A-levels was to go to teacher-training college and I was cautioned against setting my sights too high. (In 1960, about 5% of children went to university, the majority from private schools). But application to places other than Oxford or Cambridge was at least fairly straightforward. One wrote for an application form from an address found in the local library, filled it in and waited. They occasionally interviewed you but mostly they just set a standard for your A-levels. Oxbridge was quite different however. First you had to apply to a specific college. After some discussion, my teachers came up with two names, Downing and Selwyn, the former, I later learned, specialising in English literature, the latter being mainly reserved for the sons of English clergymen. Quite how a London atheist studying physics would have fitted into either remained a mystery but at least it provided addresses to write to.

The second hurdle was that one had to take an exam in Latin to get into either college even if one was taking physics and that they also conducted entry examinations separate from A-levels. My school had no Latin teacher so I spent a couple of months in my school library, sometimes interrupted by the classes held there, reading an elementary Latin textbook and mugging up on Greek and Roman history as I had found out that these were also examined. I became rather proficient in these and to this day I have a reasonable grasp of the Punic Wars and the Athenian expedition against Syracuse and can tell my hoplites from my legionaries. I even still have a tattered copy of Xenophon's *The Persian Expedition* in my bookcase. The Latin language was not so easy. When it came to the exam, held in some red-brick mausoleum in Cambridge, I did not proceed much further than the opening words of the set translation which, if my memory serves me, were "Julius Caesar". After some thought about this problem I solved it by copying the work of the boy in the next desk who seemed to know what he was at. He wrote out a translation at great speed then, on completion, crossed it out and wrote down another, presumably better version. I may have gone too far in crossing out my own work and copying out this version as well.

The actual exams for entrance or, as I understood, for scholarships were a lot more serious and meant staying for a week at Downing College, an elegant classical building surrounded by lawns. I shared a room with a boy from the Highgate School who was there with a group of boys from the same public-school all up for entrance exams in various subjects. Downing it seemed was favoured by Highgate School. My first surprise was that they had been studying papers from previous years for the last six months through the summer; apparently although not quite on public sale they could be obtained on application by the school. My second surprise came in the maths exam when I realised that about a quarter of the questions were on areas which I had never touched such as imaginary numbers. Again, I learnt that syllabuses were available on request though from where I never found out. I did well enough in the three set papers to miss the 'cut' when a limited number went on to do the practical exams but that was as far as I got. I never, as I recall, obtained any results from these

exams nor was I ever interviewed by a college. There was just no further communication which we interpreted as meaning I had failed.

It occurs to me now that perhaps some further stage of application was required. In retrospect it seems odd that nothing ever came back from the colleges, though possibly I might have been judged to be guilty of cheating and thus not the right type, but at the time it seemed entirely in keeping with the whole rather mysterious process to which I had had a brief glimpse at Downing. It left me with a residual bitterness, a sense of unfairness which has never quite dissipated and a lasting dislike of the intertwined Oxbridge/public school nexus. It was the one and only time in my life that I have actually come face-to-face with what may loosely be called a class barrier. But at the time it simply confirmed the feelings of both my school and my parents that Cambridge was pushing it a bit too far. I had argued with my headmaster about taking four A-levels and then about going for a State Scholarship and had been proved right. I had argued with my parents about going to Cambridge, where they though would be unhappy, and no one seemed very disposed to take things further. So I sent in a clutch of applications to various solid and more accessible institutions and went off to get a job, to enjoy London and to save the world.

The first two were easy enough. I had no particular preferences outside Cambridge and when Durham University, the college my maths teacher had attended, offered me a place I accepted it by return. I got a job as a laboratory technician in the chemistry laboratories of the Regent Street Polytechnic thanks to a contact of my father. This paid a few pounds a week for the not very onerous tasks of setting out apparatus and tidying it away. The only task of which I have much memory is that most Friday afternoons we had to supply a large amount of urine for use by a group of hospital technicians learning how to perform various tests. The volume was easy enough given that Friday was always a pub lunch but I have always wondered about the standard of the technicians trained to believe that slight inebriation was the norm so far as urine samples went.

In 1960, London was by current standards a dreary place. The local cinema and the local pub were the basis for most leisure along with football on Saturday. After 11 at night, the only place I knew of to which an eighteen-year old had entry was the 24-hour bowling alley near London Airport which meant a long drive in the green Austin van, which my parents had just acquired, just for a cup of coffee. But dotted around were a few places which were I suppose the first shoots of the leisure explosion which lay a few years down the line. A few coffee bars; one, the Partisan in Soho set up for chess-playing and revolution by rather gloomy left-wing intellectuals, others in basements around Monmouth Street which had folk-singers most evenings. Two art-house cinemas, the Academy in Oxford Street and the Curzon in Mayfair showing Bergman, Antonioni, Truffaut and the rest; the National Film Theatre on the South Bank had just opened. A restaurant in Greek Street, Jimmy's, which sold huge portions and rough wine; Bertorelli's north of Oxford Street had Italian food and dour waitresses. On Saturday nights, the Ballads and Blues folk club took over the top floor of the cinematograph union's headquarters in Soho Square whilst in the week there was a jazz club in the Fishmongers Arms in Wood Green.

As before, my main activity outside the undemanding hours of a laboratory technician was C.N.D. I had by this time given up most of my local group's organisation having been elected to various regional and national committees. CND was at the height of its impact, huge marches from Aldermaston at Easter and, apparently, winning the Labour Party for unilateralism, but it was also increasingly riven by internal disputes and was on the point of meeting the full hammer of the Labour Party machine in reversing the victory gained at the Labour conference. Hugh

Gaitskell had vowed to “fight, fight and fight again for the party we love” which meant in effect using the same methods used to exclude Communists and left sympathisers in the 1950s to reclaim the union votes which had been so surprisingly won for unilateralism.

The complexity of the issues raised by the originally simple demand for Britain to renounce nuclear weapons proved in the end too much for the fragmented coalition which had begun by marching to Aldermaston in 1958. In two years something quite extraordinary had been achieved; the major supporting partner to the USA inside NATO and the chief repository of its nuclear arsenal had come to the edge of dumping its nuclear weapons and withdrawing its permission to have US ones stationed here. This was the crucial point. The British nuclear bomb had always been a curious anachronism, the fig-leaf to cover the loss of imperial power and the humiliation of becoming the junior partner to the USA in resisting communism in Europe. But if, morally, we were to renounce our bomb then how could we also allow US bombs to remain on our soil? But such a move would in effect push Britain towards withdrawing from NATO, the keystone, allegedly, in keeping Russian communism at bay. It became possible in this way to portray CND as supporting crypto-Communist policies to support the Soviet Union. The fact that Communists inside CND, along with most of the far-left of the time, refused to denounce Russian possession of nuclear weapons seemed to confirm this position. The Russian bomb was a ‘workers’ bomb’, ours was a ‘bosses’ bomb’, an argument which seemed incomprehensible to most outside the far-left.

Oddly, being both born inside and yet not really part of the Communist Party protected me from much of the snake-pit left politics of the time. The multiple faces of the left _ left Labour/Trots/Communists/New Left and the various sub-divisions of these _ seemed virtually incomprehensible alongside the simple moral decision about nuclear weapons. Yet the very simplicity of such a position was itself incomprehensible to those accustomed to seeing the world in equally simple terms but along different fracture lines.

Late in 1960, I went as a visitor to a meeting of the Govan and Gorbals Young Socialists. Unlike my previous encounter with the Young Socialist in London, there was no problem here with convincing them of the righteousness of CND; they had been enthusiastic participants in the instantly legendary efforts to board the newly arrived US Polaris submarines in the Holy Loch with a flotilla of canoes. “*Christ, it’s the fucking Eskimos*”, a baffled US sailor is believed to have shouted as they pushed them away, and the Glasgow Eskimos they stayed. The point was that for the G&G YS blockading the supply boats of the US Navy was simply opening a new front in the fight against US imperialism. The main item of discussion at the meeting was the opening of a new fund to be used to buy guns and just how this could be organised within the strict accounting practices of the labour movement. For all I know, given these strict accounting principles, there it lies to this day.

I was at this meeting on the way to the first march to the Polaris pier near Dunoon, the base from where the US nuclear-missile submarines slipped out to the open sea. These deeply ominous, smooth black hulks which just dipped under the water and went away to deep waters seemed more than anything to symbolise the horror of nuclear weapons as well as intent of the USA.

Earlier in the year, the fundamental split inside CND had burst open between those who saw it as part of a general left movement inside the unions and the Labour Party and those who regarded it as a broader, more diffuse moral crusade with ambitions less defined by specific political agendas and more by a general shift in moral perception. With hindsight it may be possible to see the beginning of the rifts

within the left which would destroy it some decades down the line. At the time it was expressed in terms of specific actions of non-violent civil disobedience, partly symbolic—sitting down in Trafalgar Square rather than standing up—but gradually escalating into invasions of nuclear bases. The first Trafalgar Square sit-down was an odd affair. Beginning in the afternoon, those taking part in a traditional rally, listening to largely inaudible speeches from notables, were invited to sit-down in, as I remember, the south-west part and so break the law. Evening drew on and the police started to carry away, quite carefully, these lawbreakers. Various of my friends joined in, others did not. Roughly, those of us who saw ourselves as conventionally political (Labour Party, Communist Party, trade unions) disagreed with civil disobedience. It was a diversion, a kind of un-British, undemocratic short-circuiting of the process of meetings, votes and agitation which would lead, had left, to shifting the policy of the one agent seen as capable of altering state policy, the Labour Party. Those who saw the whole business of party politics as essentially compromised wanted, simply, to stop the bombers flying. They saw a mass movement based on Ghandian principles which could intervene directly and quite simply stop the state from functioning.

So as darkness fell, some of us walked away to make our symbolic choice, others, myself included, watched and, of course, felt vaguely ashamed as though we had somehow been corrupted.

At Trafalgar Square, the arrests had been very gentle. Bertrand Russell and John Osborne had been lifted away in time, as Osborne notoriously did, to have tea afterwards at the Ritz. As the disobedience turned to the nuclear bases like Swaffham, it was rather different. When demonstrators cut through the fences they were roughed up badly and got serious jail-time. The idea that a few ragged idealists could actually block the big birds clearly freaked the authorities.

At Dunoon in early summer, the sun was very hot. We marched up to the base, legally, then those who were blockading the entrance to the pier carried on and the law-abiding ‘serious’ faction stopped. The police moved in fast and hard, throwing people like sacks out of the way, clearing a path rather than making arrests. And as fast as they dragged the bodies and dumped them on the verge, others moved in, sat down and blocked the pier again whilst those who had been dragged off simply returned. I looked along the line of people waiting to be dragged off and saw my old history teacher. He smiled at me and I just moved across the point of symbolic action, sat down and shifted along to the point where the big Ayrshire police, red-faced with effort, swearing as they grabbed whatever piece of body was closest, were at work. The dust rose up so that it was difficult to see anything but one’s closest neighbours, reassuring each other that it was nothing at all to be flung around without making the slightest effort to resist and all the time singing that most ironic song, *We Shall Not Be Moved*. In the beginnings of the strange osmotic internationalism of the time, the feeble defiance of this secular hymn linked us with such as the Americans on the Freedom Ride which had set off for New Orleans in May and who were suffering far worse in their similar non-violent actions. Soon along the same unknown channels, the runic CND sign would flow back across the Atlantic to be daubed on the helmets of dissident grunts in Vietnam.

In the end the police had to resort to arrests and so we ended up in cells, six or seven or us together, to be charged with a mysterious Scottish offence of ‘Deforcing the Queen’s Highway’. We were as high as kites and amused ourselves by banging on the door demanding to be given a toilet break every five minutes. After an hour or so a large policeman came in and asserted that he wasn’t scared of us and any more noise and there would be trouble. A small Glaswegian walked carefully around him, looked him up and down and observed that maybe he was right but that he looked a touch

frightened. Released on bail after a few hours, the court next day settled our cases in quick-fire order, cutting short the speeches as politics and handing out three month sentences or a hundred pounds fine. At the time, I had three months to spare before going to university and would have taken the three months in Barlinnie. And probably regretted it. But some unknown Scottish benefactor had handed out enough to pay the fines *en masse* so I went back to London.

This form of political protest entered into a kind of backwater for years in favour of the more conventional politics of the meeting and conference hall rather than the road. Even so, it would stay the course better and, decades on, become almost the only outlet for radical protest. In 1961, such an outcome would have seemed to me so outlandish as to be not worth discussing. It would be just forty-one years before I returned to it.

Soon afterward the Dunoon demonstration, I left my laboratory job and set off for a two-month swing hitch-hiking through Europe *en route* to a stint at a Voluntary Service Overseas camp mending a road in southern Austria. Even in 1960, helping the poor overseas still meant parts of Europe rather than Africa or Asia. In Styria on the Yugoslav border, I worked with a bunch of, mainly, Germans clearing ditches and culverts along a dirt road leading up to small mountain villages. After a month of that I went through Salzburg down to Italy, passed by Lerici, where Shelley drowned, and up through France back home on the ferry. Hitchhiking is a lost mode of travel, largely boring waiting on the outskirts of town or motorway slip-roads, very grubby as one slept outside by the road as often as inside a youth hostel but cheap, very cheap. Necessary as Britain was still locked into a maximum of fifty pounds for overseas travel.

Returning, I packed a trunk, sent it off on the railway and followed it up to the University College at Durham University.

Durham

One could see Durham as the real world in contrast to my politicised metropolitan circle or, alternatively, as some kind of parallel universe living in a different timeline. Whatever, it was very different. I remember sitting at the back in the main lecture theatre in the science block listening to an induction lecture. In front were rows of tweed jackets finished off, unseen, by pairs of grey flannel trousers and sensible brown shoes. There was hardly a woman's head; the overall female proportion in the university was about 20%, almost all taking English, French literature, geography and suchlike, virtually none science. The colleges were, of course, single-sex, locking up at 11.00 pm every evening which, after hours, meant a relatively simple scramble across a wall for men and opening the chapel window in the main women's college. College dinner was taken at seven o'clock in the Great Hall of Durham Castle at long wooden tables, us young chaps wearing tatty, black cloaks called gowns whilst a set of elderly chaps in less tatty cloaks sat at their dinner on a raised dais.

The college I was at was based in Durham Castle across a wide green from the great Norman cathedral. The green was surrounded by university buildings including the arts library and the Union Society. This latter provided decent afternoon teas, a snooker room and a weekly debate which was the effective focus of student politics in the university. The main controversy in my first year was over the compulsory wearing gowns at debates. The key left-wing demand was freedom from gowns and to this end, radical speakers would stand up wearing off-the-shoulder rags or sharing a gown with a neighbour or, alternatively, conservatives making a point of wearing a

decent suit or, if they were on the Union committee, evening dress and a full black cloak.

I remember only one debate in any detail, it was probably in my second year, when the general secretary of the boilermakers' union was an invited speaker. The boilermakers were the key group in the notoriously fractious Tyneside shipyards and their general secretary was the kind of tough, vaguely left-wing Geordie with a strong local accent who would front such a union. After his speech, a succession of men of the gown-wearing faction tried to condescend to him essentially about the problems which arose when working-class chaps tried to get above their station. I eventually lost my temper and shouted what was probably a largely incoherent speech which focussed on the fact that it was through the unions and groups like them that people like me had got their chance at university and indeed any kind of education at all. It also included various references to stupid bigots who passed through life charmed by their parent's money knowing nothing about the reality of life.

Presumably I felt that my stint with a shovel in Styria and with the chemicals at Regent Street had given me a unique insight into the reality of working life. But it summed up my general feelings about Durham, that the other male students were over-privileged, stupid and, most importantly, extraordinarily dull. After three years I left with just two male friends whom I ever saw again, There was Bill, in his twenties, a mature student from Shildon nearby in County Durham where his father worked in the coke-ovens. He carried an even bigger chip on his shoulder than me about the gowns and other flummery and was a Trotskyist. Thus we spent many hours arguing about just who betrayed whom in the course of the Russian revolution which, for him, had finally lost its way in the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising. The other was Peter, a sharp Birmingham lad who regarded the flummery as the arena in which one operated, who charmed the upper-class girls, owned an immaculate evening suit to wear at the various college balls and who eventually worked his way up London journalism. One summer we spent a couple of weeks driving a borrowed convertible around the fruit orchards of Worcestershire, picking plums and spending the money picking up girls.

The woman students were a different matter. Being a small minority it was very tough to get entry and they were often a lot cleverer and more interesting than the men. Luckily for me, being left-wing and lower-class had recently acquired the sexiness that it was to keep for a couple of decades more, so with my new Viking-style beard and a felt Beatle-style jacket bought, fortuitously ahead of fashion in Graz, I had no problems in making women friends rather than male. This was helped by the fact that most male students, daunted by the apparently small number of women and suited to the college life by the bad food and bullying of their previous public schools, stayed mainly inside the colleges or in a select few of the numerous pubs in Durham.

There were at the time about eighty pubs in Durham City plus a Chinese restaurant, two cinemas and an ice-rink. Mostly our small band of socialists spent our evenings in the Buffalo's Head, which was suitably working class, brown with cigarette smoke, but not real tough like the miners' pubs near the bus-station. Durham City was then still surrounded by working pits though the steady closures had already begun. Miners travelled from pit-village to pit via the Durham bus-station and would drink steadily before going on to night-shift. Students were cordially disliked by most of these and students went in very few pubs in town. The toffs went for an evening out to the Royal County or Three Tuns hotels while we stayed inside the Buffalo or the Half Moon, dingy but still comfortingly close to the colleges.

The city was a small conservative enclave inside the mining county of Durham dominated by the mighty miners' union which was in turn dominated by a right-wing

machine thug called Sam Watson. He ran the union and the regional Labour Party from a baroque union headquarters inside the city called the Red House. He was ferried around meetings in the evenings in a police car and no sparrow fell in County Durham unnoticed by Brother Sam. In my second year, the university CND tried to organise a public meeting in the town. We hired the city town hall and got as a main speaker Abe Moffat, one of two brothers, both Communists who had run the Scottish NUM much as Brother Sam ran the Durham. We put up posters, handed out leaflets then found, a day or so before the meeting, that the hall had become unavailable. It turned out that all the school halls in the town were also surprisingly unavailable so when Abe turned up at Durham station we had no meeting room. In the small square in the centre of Durham, there is an equestrian statue of a Marquess of Londonderry, best known as a Vane-Tempest and, once, the biggest coal-owners in the county. Moffat expressed little surprise at our problem. He seemed to expect, almost look forward to such treatment, so he suggested we held the meeting in the square speaking from the steps of the statue. Which we did to the couple of hundred who pitched up.

In all my three years at Durham I ventured into the surrounding coal country on only a handful of occasions and that was probably more than most other students. The pit towns and villages were like a foreign land with natives who spoke a language that was almost incomprehensible and who were not particularly friendly. The only purposeful trips I ever made were to visit once or twice a Communist miner, George, in a west Durham village called Chopwell. He had been a delegate to a Party conferences on occasion and stayed at my house. I went to see him when my mother visited and returned again after she left, the last time just at the onset of the bitter winter in 1962/63 when the waterfalls froze and there was snow on the ground from November till March. The pit has gone now from Chopwell; headworks grassed over and turned into recreation rounds. But the rows of houses remain. The ones below the site of the old mine, council-built though probably not all now council-owned. There are Lenin, Marx and E.D.Morel Terraces from the thirties betraying the times when Chopwell was known as ‘little Moscow’, a title which still lingered on in the early 1960s. One post-war addition is called Dalton Terrace, a sign that although the left-wing council still ran the town then, its ideological reference points had begun to shift. These terraces challenged the older terraces of the houses built along with the mine which ran in parallels above it. Closer together and grimmer though now without the outside privies and, probably, lack of bathrooms which featured or not when they were built.

George was from the generation after those who had built Lenin Terrace and tried to run the town as a Soviet enclave. He had joined the Party in the early 50s and still worked in same pit, a face-worker in a two foot seam. He was very bitter and disillusioned, not with the ‘cause’ but with his fellow workers. “They cross the road when they see me coming”, he said, “In case I ask them for money”. The pit was closed when I went back to Chopwell eight years later. I was helping to research a show by the R.S.C. about the General Strike and Chopwell would become the symbolic centre of the worker’s side. I had my doubts what George would have thought of this—interviews about past struggles with old men, Chopwell as theatrical symbol—nor did I want to run the risk of his knowing the way my politics had shifted. I had become a bit tired of hard, bitter Party men by then so I never called.

Apart from this I cannot recall leaving Durham City apart from the odd excursion to Newcastle cinemas and the regular walk out to the Nevilles Cross junction with the A1 to start hitching to London. This usually took eight to ten hours and I made the journey once every month or so at the start to go to meetings and keep up with my social life, then tailing off as I lost touch with the flagging CND movement. Almost my last ‘official’ duty was as part of a delegation from the youth CND invited to the

USSR by some alleged equivalent in the Soviet 'peace movement'. This organisation was funded a touch differently from our ragged lot and they were able to pay our fares from East Berlin, the last point where their writ ran.

The cheapest way for the dozen members of the delegation to go appeared to be to buy collectively an old minibus and to drive to Berlin. In my first summer vacation I worked for a month or so to get my part of the funds then took the minibus off on a swing round various YCND centres to rally the morale of the troops who were, I think, beginning to realise that the old monsters in the Labour Party were going to win. We finally set off in September and drove through the night to Berlin. This was a complex business, going through the checkpoints at Helmstedt, the beginning of the northern autobahn corridor through East Germany, then the entry checkpoints at the boundary of West Berlin then finally through the Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. We were not there at one of the really 'hot' times when tanks faced each other across Friedrichstrasse with their engines running but even so it was an edgy place. The Wall had just been built and there were clashes along it almost every month.

Finally we arrived at the Berlin headquarters of the Frei Deutsche Jugend outside which the bus broke down. The FDJ staff politely ignored this and our rather battered appearance and took us to a large hotel. We stayed there a couple of days and the second evening were taken to the Berliner Ensemble at the Schiffbauerdamm to see *Arturo Ui.* We sat in the 'state' seats at the front of the dress circle, separate armchairs, and behind each pair of us an FDJ interpreter whispered a simultaneous translation. And, yes, it was a knockout. At the climactic scene when the gangsters were killed, doors opened at the back of the stage and dazzling car headlights slashed straight out into our eyes so that it was difficult to see what was actually happening. That, of course, was the point.

From Berlin, we went by train to Moscow through Poland, waiting at the Bialystock crossing through the laborious process of changing to the Russian track gauge, being searched by border guards, sleeping on each other's shoulders. Planes make one almost insensible of borders now, boundaries which are, in any case, now largely obliterated in Europe. In 1962, to get to Moscow we passed through five sets of suspicious, uniformed and armed men who were oblivious to fatigue, hunger and the transparent innocence of a dozen students.

In Moscow we passed into ten days of quasi-serious meetings exchanging opinions about such matters as the desirability of world peace (all agreed), the suspension of Soviet nuclear tests (a good thing in principle but a few temporary problems), and a set of trips, the Bolshoi, the Lenin Library, that kind of thing. I think that our delegation had been put on the number-two circuit which meant that we were dispatched first to Volgograd, once Stalingrad, then back to Moscow then finally to Minsk on our way home. In Stalingrad, the name used in casual conversation, they were rather blasé about the frequent foreign delegations; the preserved ruins, the film show, the Volga barrage—a Soviet achievement as counterpoint to the fascist destruction—the line of miniature T34 tanks marking the closest line of German advance, the landing stage where the 13th Guards Rifle Division may have set up my destiny in September, 1942.

On the plane down to Volgograd I had fallen into conversation with a young woman who invited me to see her in Moscow. It was rather alarming—she was visiting her husband, a major in the army who was in hospital in Volgograd—but having followed instructions about how to get an outside line at the hotel and get a taxi to her apartment, I spent the evening with what I suppose were in some way semi-dissidents. We talked about *Doctor Zhivago*, which they had read in a typed copy,

Khrushchev' secret speech, nuclear war, and, after a brief snog with my young woman I slipped back to my hotel room past the sleeping landing guard.

Minsk was different to Moscow and Volgograd. They had few foreign visitors and treated us like a state delegation with a live slot on the regional TV news and a reception at the main theatre. We walked in through an empty foyer to find a packed audience giving us a standing ovation and the expectation of a couple of speeches. The following day, our last, we were taken to a collective farm and where shown around the fields and pens by a huge, grizzled war veteran, the collective chairman, followed by a large lunch at which we all got totally plastered. We had a farewell dinner, at which we got plastered again, hugged our travelling interpreters and passed out in the sleeping car bunks. The border guards must have done their bit on comatose bodies as I woke in Berlin.

The bus now stood in the FDJ courtyard, running as sweetly as it could, and we were given some special travel documents to smooth our way down the autobahn and allow us to circle the city without entering the Western Sector. The political mood of the day for the East Germans was for causing some medium aggro on the exit route so the traffic tailed back in single file for twenty miles or more as each car was searched for illegal occupants. I drove the bus down the empty outside lane ignoring the waving hands from the stalled cars until we reached the Helmstedt border guards who looked at the magic letter and waved us through, our FDJ flag hanging from the window. The West German border police were not so friendly.

These were deeply ambiguous times. The year-old Berlin Wall was not yet a symbol of repression but of two great powers at each others throats who had no clear-cut moral advantage. The Stalingrad ruins were still too fresh to be simply a theme-park of war; black men and women were being beaten by state-troopers in Birmingham Alabama and murdered on side-roads; the purpose of the big bombers and black submarines which set off eastwards from Britain seemed only to clear. We could see the political irony in the very name of the FDJ but could also enjoy sticking its flag up the noses of the nascent German bourgeois snarled up in their Mercedes outside Helmstedt. What we felt, what we were in the end, was not yet quite a cliché; young, untainted and free, not bound by old moralities. We existed somewhere along a spectrum which included Arthur Seaton and Cliff Richard going on a summer holiday, which was a lot less hung-up than Jimmy Porter but was not yet Gethin Price. Ali had won his Olympic gold two years before, John Lennon wrote *Please Please Me* much at the same time we passed through Helmstedt and Guevara had come down from the Sierra Maestra three years before.

So back in Durham with my cultural icons in place there was little for me to do but study in a desultory kind of way and to fall seriously in love. I remember almost nothing about the former except that the requirement that science students went to practical sessions most afternoons seriously impeded the latter especially as, in my second-year, the college boarded us at a large, *faux* castle at Lumley just outside Chester-le-Street, a half-hour bus-trip from Durham. My laboratory technician experience revealed the secret of the practicals; that in the technicians' room there was large notice-board with an planner for experiments, students vertical, experiments horizontal. One colour pin meant "To be done", another "In progress", a third successfully completed and marked. Judicious shifting of pins solved the problem of actually going to the laboratories more than once a week whilst knowledge of technicians' habits provided a method of access during the lunch-break.

Falling in love was, I suppose just as easy and inevitable. I met Julian when she acted in a Lorca play, very tall, long black hair and, too vain to wear the glasses she really needed, she walked around with a slightly aloof expression as though she was

not quite sure where she was or whether she was where she wanted to be. She was, inevitably, a toff, the daughter of some kind of diplomat and had had the kind of childhood which the English upper class specialise in, serial abandonment. Her mother had died young and her father at his death from some mysterious ailment had left her in the care of three of his mistresses, ex- or current I never quite found out. One of these ladies, lived in a big house in Notting Hill, the other two were married and lived in Surrey. Julian had a cut-glass public school accent and was studying English Literature at St Aidans College, the one women's college actually in the city—though she lived out of town in a small residential hall—and the poshest with a principal of terrifying presence particularly in moral defence of her charges.

We travelled down to London together at Christmas going via Cambridge for some reason to stay with a lecturer whom I suspected of being a previous lover and of whom I was wildly jealous. There was actually no one at the flat and, somewhere along the line, we decided to get married. I have no memory of how this came about but, in one of those odd images, I remember that in this cold flat she cut open the flap of skin between thumb and first finger on a chipped cup. In London over the holiday, I bought her a ring of garnets in Portobello Market just round the corner from her live-in guardian, Paddy, the only one of the three who seemed to be happy with the arrangement. It was, I think, the one who lived near Sevenoaks whose first question on being told on the telephone that Julian was engaged was to inquire what school I had gone. Her voice was loud enough for me to hear that after learning that I had gone to a grammar school ("*A grammar school*" and I swear that she said it as Edith Evans said: "*A handbag*") she finally asked what I was studying. Physics. "*Oh well, at least he has some interests then*" and I have never had any idea what this was meant to imply.

We visited this woman in the Easter vacation to get her approval for the marriage. She was married into some branch of the Rootes family, who had made their money in cars a generation before, and lived in some style. On the mantelpiece of the living room was a prominently displayed invitation to a Royal marriage at Windsor castle whilst spotlighted in the dining room were a couple of small, minor Italian old-masters. Our dinner had been seen as of particular importance by Julian in winning her over and I had even had a lesson in how to eat an orange with a knife-and-fork. This proved not be necessary as the dessert turned out to be banana fritters. My life-long dislike of bananas was sublimated by love, I suppose, so I managed to get it down. Later in my, naturally separate, bedroom I vomited in a bowl which, as had been carefully pointed out to me, was genuine antique Wedgwood.

Oddly, this woman did actually give her grudging consent. The second seemed much more amiable, married to the owner of a chain of garages, and apparently happy to engage in a rambling discussion about morality, politics and life in general. In Durham, Julian was reduced to tears by this woman telling her on the phone that I was evil and she could never sanction our marriage. She was, I suppose, outvoted.

We rented a cottage in Broome Park, a defunct pit village near Durham where Bill, who had suddenly married another upper-class girl the preceding summer, lived. Julian was in her final year and would stay on teaching whilst I did my finals. We never actually spent a night there. Things fell apart as they had to and, around the time of the examinations, she broke it off. It was, I think, more the competing attraction of moving down to London instead of staying on to teach at Darlington High than any of her guardian ogres which persuaded her. Not of course that this was how it was phrased nor how it was received. I had at least the satisfaction, one difficult evening, of phoning up the St Aidans' gorgon to tell her that Julian was staying with me that night as she was too upset to return and discovering, as is the way with such things, that this was accepted quite easily. After the exams in which she did rather well and I

bombed, she left. We had a brief reconciliation in London and then parted for good. She asked, I remember, if I minded if she kept the ring.

My final year at Durham passes me by, almost without incident and without memory. I took up with one of the few working-class women students who turned out to be, in principle, a pillar of conservative politics. I sent her a Christmas card with a joking reference to the recent elevation of Alex Douglas-Home to Conservative leader and she was deeply affronted. It finally fell apart when she realised that we could never be married in church as, unbaptised, I was technically a heathen. Luckily, in other matters she was of a more practical bent. I had taken to wearing my engagement ring on a chain around my neck and she soon told me that, as it kept hitting her in bed, either it went or she did. So off the bridge it went.

Georgia became the first woman to be President of our Union, still the place of the gowns, and her final gift was for me to be invited as the Durham representative at a annual event, the Glasgow University Debating Society invitation debate. Not that the choice was very wide. This debate took the shape of a freeform political motion with the invitees allocated to political factions and Durham had drawn the Socialist (non-Labour) straw. The initial block was the requirement that the speakers wore evening dress. After discussion with Bill, we settled on Lenin's response to the first Soviet ambassador to London who had also been required wear fancy-dress. If it serves the proletariat then you dress up, said Lenin, which was good enough for me. So I borrowed Peter's suit and set off for Glasgow.

The first part of the evening was dinner at which we were plied heavily with booze. Then we marched in the debating chamber already packed with, so far as I could see, equally drunk students. This it turned out was part of the game which was to reduce the largely English invitees as close to tears as could be managed. One hapless lad from Oxford had prepared a speech in rhyming couplets. For a few seconds there was total silence as the audience recovered from the shock then the waves of derision and laughter hit him and he almost fell over.

In this bear-pit I had two advantages. First was the past experience of speaking to the likes of Royal Marines on Portsmouth promenade and all that. The other was that, alone of all the English, my politics had a solidarity which crossed the border. There were not many Communist students, but they had a few Marxist allies and a sense of proletarian internationalism which transcended old nationalist grievances. Using the classic fuck-you strategy, I sequentially insulted the various other factions. The Conservatives for their being privileged, stupid oafs whose fathers had bought their education and who would soon buy them jobs; the Nationalists for being dew-eyed fantasists stuffed up with Gaelic fairy-stories; and the Labour supporters for being the tools of a corrupt, bankrupt party machine in the pay of American imperialism. Well, they were the truthful bits, the rest I invented. And as the various factions shouted back, my Communists whooped an increasing counter-point in the pauses between insults. I even got a few seconds silence in the final sentences. "*We don't eat and drink with our enemies; we don't take money from our enemies; we don't sleep with our enemies; we just fight our enemies. And win*". Thus went the rhetoric of the times. After that, I suppose we all got legless for I woke up in the morning on the first train to Durham still in my fancy dress.

And that was about it. In late-June, 1964, I watched from a room up in the castle which was our college as they pinned up the results of the examinations. I had done so miserably in Part 1 that I needed a decent score even to get an average degree and that was what I needed to get a grant for the next stage of my scientific career, a Master's course in theoretical physics at the new Sussex University near Brighton. Suddenly, as on such occasions, I felt vulnerable for the first time in all my cocksure passage

through the university. But it turned out fine. Buried down in the middle of the page, my 2:2 and safety. There was a few weeks of term left for the Summer Balls and the like. But Julian was long gone and Joy, Georgia, Lesley and the others seemed to have evaporated. I packed up a trunk, the same one as when I had arrived, sent it off by rail and left.

Brighton (1964/65)

The moment at which I returned to London was a very particular one in British social history, a moment of almost wholly false hope and illusion yet still gilded with a wistful aura. When we had bowled along the autobahn to Helmstedt, cheerfully waving at the enraged German burghers in their stalled cars, we had thought ourselves to be something special, a morally untainted group set apart. What we did not see, nor could be expected to, was that this sense of moral distance had worked through enough of society to become a cultural force in its own right. It was a superficial force in that it had far less social support than its own arrogance demanded and it was circular in that it moved within an almost closed loop. It was also geographically confined in that almost the only place outside London where the 'swinging 60s' definitively existed was the town which I was headed, Brighton.

There is an irresistible pressure to describe this time in a set of clichés using words like youth, innocence, colour and pleasure. It is easy enough now to see the ways in which all these would shift into other things, how much of it all would become either soured or manipulated. In retrospect, one of the most significant cultural events of the time was the beginning of the *Sunday Times Colour Supplement* in early 1962, the first time a newspaper became seriously enmeshed in the presentation of life-styles rather than current events. Photography and clothes, photographers and models, David Bailey and Jean Shrimpton, working class lad and posh totty; it was in one sense, the moment at which representation and reality started to mix, in which hope and aspiration began to be seriously exploited as commercial artefacts. It was also the point at which the conventional politics of the time were turned on their head and in which one could glimpse the possibility of revolutionary change without resort to civil war.

The change can be seen in two films of the time, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) from Alan Sillitoe's novel and *Billy Liar* (1963). Albert Finney, playing Arthur Seaton in the former, is the archetypal 1950s trapped working-class lad. A week's work at the Raleigh factory is blown away in Saturday night boozing and sexual encounters which end either in a forced marriage or being beaten up. Seaton has no style of his own other than a sullen dissent nor any way in which his interior life can be given any outward form. He is forced into channels of despair which are immutable, forced back into the working-class cliché of 'don't let the bastards grind you down', knowing that they will, they will. It took Sillitoe until 1965 to find his way out of all this in *The Death of William Posters* (working the interior meaning of this title out is a good indicator of age) and, in keeping with the spirit of the age, it was found by walking out into a fantasy, in this novel decamping to the Algerian war. In *Billy Liar*, these fantasies of escape are given reality in the form of the young Julie Christie, still with chubby adolescent cheeks, striding off to catch a train to London in a white miniskirt. Billy himself is left hanging in the air as to whether he will himself make an escape, again in the inevitable spirit of the times, to write scripts for television.

The social rationale for the shift is simple enough. In 1962, I was twenty and the oldest of the first generation that had no real memories of the war, certainly not of the pre-war era. We were the first who shared neither bitterness nor guilt nor blame for

war, fascism, unemployment and all the other things that hung over our parents. Some of us had for a few years protested and marched against the bitterest symbol of how those times had turned out and had seen the obvious truth of our protests turned down by just those people who should have welcomed them. The great victories of our parents, a universal free health service, some improvement in education, the thing which perhaps seemed the most magical of all to them, almost full employment, seemed to us just an obvious birthright. What swayed us much more was the seemingly implacable rigidity of social structure, the grim acceptance by the likes of Arthur Seaton that this was all there was. In 1956, John Osborne created Jimmy Porter, who shouted and railed at all this, cheated on his girl-friend then went back to shouting and railing in total, if momentarily satisfying, circularity. Around 1963, there was a breakout from the circle, amongst my generation and those a little younger; a massive, culturally a virtually universal, sense of fuck-it and fuck-you too.

This was the time when, almost overnight, it seemed as if the walls could be brought down not by conventional political action but by derision. It was the moment of *Oh, What a Lovely War* and of *Dr Strangelove*; the time when youth culture was invented; the moment of the Beatles and the Kinks and the Who, a collective levitation of mockery, love and stylish clothes which could only be worn if you were under twenty-five. Mods on scooters had tribal fights with rockers on motor-bikes in seaside resorts. Courreges brought out the most famous collection of clothes ever seen in Paris, arguably the only one ever to have changed the way young women actually looked; geometric shapes, mid-thigh skirts, white boots, no sleeves. I remember seeing Julian walk out of a changing room in a Newcastle shop wearing a lime-green mini that was the first clothing I had ever seen that was not just a young version of older women's styles.

Not that there was an awful lot of this in Durham. At the Christmas Ball in December, 1963, to which I had gone with Georgia in search of social redemption, the Swinging Blues Jeans had played the *Hippy Hippy Shake* but the highlight was sweating young men in evening dress and women in posh frocks doing the Gay Gordons. Either you know what this looks like or you don't; it is indescribable.

The University of Sussex had only opened for trade in 1961, on a site a few miles out of Brighton. It was all new; styled in award-winning red-brick modern, a kind of Oxbridge collegiate without colleges in a fold of rural downs near the seaside, it was a brilliant representation of a new England. It offered new kinds of degrees like European or American studies which cut across old classifications such as literature or history. It was staffed, by and large, with clever, leftish young academics and its first students were, by and large, clever, leftish, mostly southern and certainly modern. The *Sunday Times Colour Supplement* had a special feature on it. The students largely lived in Brighton in guest-houses which doubled as student hostels outside the summer and in cheap basement or top-floor flats in the squares and terraces near the sea front. Brighton has always been the resort closest to Chelsea or Hampstead just as Southend was the resort of the East End. Never completely smart, certainly not prosperous like Eastbourne or Worthing, it was ambiguous, theatrical and very sexy. I arrived there in time to canvas and then knock-up the Labour voters in the tightest contest of the 1964 election. Dennis Hobden got in by six votes after several recounts in the early hours for Brighton Kemptown and those six were all down to me.

The main quality of life there for me was an extraordinary sense of lightness. The Kinks singing *Lola*, maybe, or Manfred Mann and *Pretty Flamingo*; cool, light, ironic and confident. It was not that the students were not serious. In a number of ways they were far more serious than in Durham. In one flat which I visited a lot, they listened every night at 11.00 to the financial news as though one could only be a serious socialist if one paid attention to the movement of wheat prices. They studied seriously, writing their weekly essays on Freud or Walt Whitman, and they were serious about being in love and about friendship. They were also serious about politics. A few months before I arrived, a significant part of the student body had marched from Brighton to London protesting about apartheid in South Africa and the latest round of trials there. My own politics were taken seriously and, although when I arrived I was the only British communist there, when I left there were half-a-dozen and the makings of a small branch. I would hesitate to say that this was down to my evangelism. A more charismatic source was Thabo Mbeki, then studying for a degree, the son of a famous South African political prisoner and, although not openly a Communist, a tacit supporter whose nod and wink was enormously influential. Four years on in a Bloomsbury pub, Thabo would try to convince me that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was a necessary and correct measure, almost the last time I ever saw him.

Yet despite this seriousness, there was this overall lightness, an optimism which denied the gloom of previous years. In part this flowed from the political shift from thirteen years of Conservative government which had achieved nothing to break down a moribund social order. In practical terms, Conservative governments had done things which, in retrospect, were quite respectable. They had undertaken a massive housing programme, maintained full employment, retained all the key aspects of the health

service and the education reforms of the Labour administration, even retreated grudgingly from Empire. And for these solid and safe achievements they had been rewarded in successive elections with secure majorities. They had ridden out fiascos like Suez, a succession of nasty little wars in Malaya, Cyprus, Aden and Kenya, the re-militarisation of Britain with the H-bomb, all in the name of keeping Britain secure and respectable. Osborne wrote Jimmy Porter's furious rants about Britain less than half-way through their long stint in government; there was said to have been a new cultural wave in Britain and yet in 1961 even Ken Tynan, the propagandist of the new wave, commented that the plays put on in 1961 were much the same as in 1951. The New Left formed after the mass exodus from the Communist Party in 1956, had set up its magazines and reading circles, CND had marched the length of the country and the political structures seemed just to absorb it and move on.

Suddenly around 1964, it all fell apart not because of any grand failures or growth in significant opposition but because of an accumulation of farce or perhaps even of shame. They hung poor simple-minded Hanratty in April, 1962. I remember his father collecting signatures for a last-minute petition at the bottom of Whitehall at the end of that year's Easter march. There were still six men who would be hanged before the election of 1964 but a Labour Home Secretary would never again sign a death warrant. There were rumours abounding at much the same time about John Profumo and Christine Keeler which finally became public in 1963. Even then those punished were Steven Ward, who killed himself, and Keeler who went to jail. Profumo himself left Parliament and devoted his life to charity, a Mother Teresa-like gesture involving an administrative job in an East End charitable foundation set up to provide a place where Oxford students could spend their vacations helping the deserving poor.

In 1964, England was a place where gay men were herded through the courts; where new theatre plays were licensed by a Royal censor; and where the remedy for a woman made pregnant after rape was to have a knitting needle poked up her vagina. Unless, unless of course one knew the secret and had the money to avoid such embarrassment. In the late-50s, Frankie Vaughan had had a hit single, *Green Door*, the refrain of which was "*Green Door, What's that secret you're keeping*?" The secret was that The Green Door was a gay club, mainly for women, which flourished under secure protection in the West End in the 1950s. It was the perfect in-joke; a gay man flaunting a pelvis-twitching sexuality before teenage girls in a song about a real secret hidden inside a metaphor about teenage desire.

In the same way, for those with the inside knowledge and, naturally, the money, there were discreet clinics off Harley Street or in Switzerland whilst for the discerning theatregoer there were always club performances in the small arts theatres. For the rest, and by the early 1960s this included a mass of people who owned their homes and considered themselves modestly well-off, it was, as a character in a Hare play would later remark, "*Bang, the knitting needles*".

The speed with which much of this changed was remarkable. In 1968, I helped a woman whom I had made pregnant get an abortion, legally and safely. It was not cheap; it cost £180 at a time when I was earning around a thousand a year but it was safe and without shame if not without tears and stress.

Even so, in the end, the political shift was a close-run thing. The October election produced a Labour majority of four. Without my half-dozen people pulled out of a Brighton council block at eight-thirty it would have been two. Even the grotesque spectacle of a prime-minister who had been a belted earl until he renounced it in the interests of the nation had only shifted things marginally. But in the end it was enough.

So I could spend a year in Brighton without any great stress, sharing a flat with a clever, loving woman, engaging with a group of friends and working for a degree which I should never really have undertaken. I had ended my time at Durham in a fairly bad way. I had an ulcer and a tendency to panics that I was having a heart attack. I discussed all these with the head of the University Health Centre, who was, much in the spirit of the place, also the doctor of John Gollan, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party. He was very much involved in the psychological problems of students given, as he observed, that physically they were a pretty healthy bunch. Wisely, his main remedies were the advice to drink Mackeson rather than bitter (for the ulcer) and to read various books on the roots of mental disturbance.

The hardest thing about Brighton was the work. I had been accepted for a Master's course in Theoretical Physics without having much more than a mediocre grasp of the basic mathematics required. I suspect that I had got a place largely because it was the first year the course had been run and they needed to fill it up. A quick interview at the start of the year had indicated the gaps in my knowledge and I was steered to the easiest option, solid state physics rather than the cutting edge nuclear stuff. Even so, I spent much of time in the lecture rooms in a state of deep bafflement. I remember, in particular, a course on 'The use of Green's functions in solid state physics' which was so incomprehensible that I was left in doubt as to whether the functions were so named after their discoverer or whether they were in some strange way green as distinct from red.

Someone once explained to me how mathematicians can hold complex patterns in their heads to a greater degree than ordinary folk and intuit connections between apparently diverse structures. The parts of the brain used are, apparently, much the same as those used in composing classical music. As one of the ordinary folk I was left relying on a form of rote learning which, luckily, worked in solid state physics. Nuclear physics was on the point of diving into a world of complex symmetries in which the only reference points are the mathematics itself but the theory of solids retained enough metaphors of the real world to provide hooks for the essentially non-mathematical. Still, it was hard enough and I doubt I scored much above the bare minimum pass level in the exams. I spent the summer of 1965 in a sunny flat in Kemptown writing a dissertation whose title I still remember—The Spectra of Point Defects in Face-centred Cubic Crystals—but whose actual content has long passed from my mind. But it did the trick.

At some point in the summer, I looked for a job. No one ever suggested to me that I was probably better suited to a non-scientific job so this, in those far-off sunny days, is how I went about it. The careers centre suggested three companies who were looking for science graduates. I wrote to each and went to an interview at each. One, IBM, who were looking for system analysts was rather inquisitive as to my reasons for wanting a career in computers. At one point, he asked if I wanted to get married and, receiving a vague affirmative, asked I how I thought this would affect my career. I remember feeling that this was not quite the way round that I would put it and probably failed the commitment test. The other two had a more robust view of the duties of employment and both offered me jobs, one in Runcorn and one in Newcastle. As Runcorn, reasonably, did not attract and I knew some people in Newcastle, I took the latter. The fact was that in 1965, when the 'white heat of technology' in Harold Wilson's rhetorical phrase was still burning, it was hard not to get a job as science graduate.

Newcastle, 1965/66

International Research and Development were in a large L-shaped laboratory block at the top of Byker Hill in east Newcastle. It had been formed as the R&D wing of Parsons, a big engineering company, who mainly built the kit for power stations. Caught up, like almost every other engineering company in Britain, in the craze for nuclear power which permeated the times, they had established a big R&D team which was then spun off as independent contract research operation working, in practice, mainly for Parsons or for the government.

Parsons is long gone now of course. It merged with other engineering companies in the area to form Northern Engineering Industries, with hindsight a name with bankruptcy spelt out in every word. Now, at much reduced scale, it is part of Siemens, a large German corporation. But then every company I ever worked for, bar one, has now disappeared. In the mid-1960s, it was still one of the big two employers in Newcastle. Vickers-Armstrong in east Newcastle along the Scotswood Road made tanks and guns, Parsons made power-plant turbines and associated gear. It was big, heavy stuff; large pieces of steel forged into shape, machined down to mirror-finish then welded and bolted together into rotating machines designed to turn a million tonnes of coal a year into electricity. The assembly halls and machine shops through which I had a vague licence to wander were great caverns full of hugeness; massive cranes and tracked dollies carrying the component parts around, and also of details, men working on small lathes to make some tiny part of the whole. There was no production line as such nor any sign of order. There were no robots or automation. The machine tools all had individual operatives working from individual drawings making components eventually assembled in machines so big that they were never tested, could never be tested, until they were finally put into place in the power-station and linked to the boilers which made the super-heated steam to turn the turbine blades which produced the electricity.

The machine hall at Parsons could stand as a working metaphor for Newcastle as it then was; dirty, rough, disordered but with a functioning social order just below the surface. I found a couple of furnished rooms in a terraced house in Crown Street just off the Elswick Road in west Newcastle. It was just that, bedroom and sitting room off the hall with a small kitchen down a short flight of stairs. No bathroom—that was used by the upstairs tenants—and a lavatory outside in the yard. Heating was by coal fires, so the bedroom stayed cold year-round whilst in winter I would come home, lay and light the fire in the kitchen and turn on the gas cooker till it heated up. Although dreadful, it was luxury compared to the other tenants who lived as families in much the same space.

Housing, the private rented stuff which housed a large number of Newcastle families, was ferociously expensive. I earned about eight hundred pounds a year at IRD, normal for a graduate which meant I took home about sixty pounds a month of which some twenty five went on the two rooms. The area was desperately poor. Long swept away in slum clearance and replaced, thank god—which in this case means the City Labour Party—with reasonable council houses, the dream towards which most residents still aspired.

I thought I knew something of slums but these places were something quite else from the back end of Finsbury Park. Upstairs there was a family whose young son once wandered down to my kitchen. I gave him an orange whose rind he bit and spat out then ran away. He had never touched an orange before and thought I had tried to poison him. The small shops in Elswick Road would sell anything singly, not just cigarettes but carrots, onions and potatoes. It was common enough to see kids buying two potatoes and a small tin of luncheon meat for supper plus five fags for mum.

The area was sufficiently used by prostitutes to be called a red-light district though this might give a false glamour to the trade. The house next door seemed to be a brothel though I never discovered its precise degree of organisation. The women hung around the pavement with their price chalked on the sole of their shoes. A possible punter, basically most unknown male pedestrians, would be greeted by the slightly bizarre sight of the woman turning her back and flipping up her foot so that the sole was visible. After a while they knew me and I could pass them by as though I was invisible. I am afraid that the legend of the cheery tarts treating a young lad to a neighbourly smile and more must have been born somewhere else. These were not cheerful women. Street prostitution had been swept away in London and they worked the streets on the basis of some convivial agreement with the police, an agreement probably arranged and financed by the Tams, a well-known criminal family based in Rye Hill just down the road. I only knew this because one of the family, temporarily a guest of Her Majesty in Durham Jail, was allowed out, tightly handcuffed, to attend his mother's funeral, a much photographed gangsterly affair. A local Party member explained the criminal organisation in rather abstracted fashion as though it were something rather detached from reality, a non-political matter and therefore something of little importance.

The local Party was the basis of my social life for the year I spent in Newcastle, that and a few Trots who I met in The Bridge Inn, the gathering place for the active left in the town who could comfortably fit into the lounge bar there to wrangle over just how much of a betrayal the Wilson government represented. Degrees of betrayal were really the defining feature of the British left at the time, just when and who and where formed the defining moment of selling out, the moment so to speak when the ice-pick went in. The Communist Party in the city, indeed in the whole area, was small and beleaguered. The Labour machine in the north-east was mean, highly-organised and deeply corrupt. Their politics were so right-wing that they even eschewed the red rosette worn elsewhere in elections in favour of an orange-and-yellow confection. They had long-ago hounded Communists out of any union position and as union-backed Labour councils had the whole region as their fief there was precious little room for any effective opposition. The left-Labour/Communist links which existed in some other places were simply non-existent in the North East. It was a little before the roaring days of T. Dan Smith, Poulson and Alderman Andy Cunningham, Newcastle City Council leader, bent architect and regional General and Municipal union-fixer respectively, the period when the volume of corrupt practice grew so large that even an indolent local press and national indifference could not conceal the smell. It is even possible that the grim tower-blocks on the nearby Scotswood Road were built on an entirely honest basis, unlikely but possible as very little was actually ever proved and only these three ever went down.

The result of years of grinding down was that Communists in Newcastle were very much the last ditch who stayed in and battled on for reasons that were often rather obscure. There were two or three young intellectuals, including me, but the bulk of the membership were rather tough union men and, perhaps surprisingly, a large number of middle-aged women most of whom popped up during the annual bazaar. There was Tom, the parliamentary candidate for West Newcastle, a brickie long-blacklisted from every local site, who periodically travelled away to places where he was not known to earn a living. There was John, a similarly black-listed seaman who had gone on a Murmansk convoy aged sixteen and spent two weeks in a lifeboat when a torpedo had taken the ship from under him. There were two full-time Party workers, financed from London, and one full-timer, John, euphemistically called the *Soviet Weekly* representative whose financing was only too obvious. *Soviet Weekly* was a glossy, colour magazine depicting life in the Soviet Union and the satellites. It was, I

suppose, the *Hello!* of left-wing journals and, apart from the faithful who took subscriptions, was mainly distributed as a free sheet from pavement bins which John kept intermittently filled. Frank, the branch secretary and one of the full-timers, lived in a terraced crescent just down from me off the Elswick Road. The crescent seemed, uniquely, to have retained some of the status of the area before it fell apart. It was neat, the small front-gardens looked after and the road did not glitter in the sun with the fragments of broken bottles like Crown Street. I once suggested to Frank that, as part of a local election, we might run a clean-up-the-streets campaign. Vaguely, Frank asked why, what was going on?

My impression was that the working class which Frank and the others wanted to lead, the unionised proletariat which still flooded into Vickers and Parsons, had drifted away from the long lines of terraces between the Elswick and Scotswood Roads, rehoused in the big council estates which ringed the city. In their place had come growing numbers of the fragments which did not quite fit into the neat categories of Party work, broken families, immigrants, disabled and unemployed, the old and the young mixed up into the melange of the dispossessed which is now so familiar. The council estates were served by the big yellow buses which ploughed eastward to mysterious places like Three Balls Lonnen. Yet at the weekly Party meetings, no one ever suggested that we should venture out into these places. Instead we covered the same ground as tradition demanded, leafleting, canvassing and selling the *Daily Worker*, just at that moment being transformed into the *Morning Star*, a shift which was not well received amongst the cadres in West Newcastle. It had a soft, metropolitan feel something about which the Trots, whose papers had names with various combinations of Socialist and Worker and Action in them, could and did make derisive comments. Selling the 'Worker' as it was still termed really formed the centrepiece of the work outside elections, in particular the Saturday morning round. This involved delivering the enlarged six-page edition of the paper on Saturday mornings to those whose support did not extend to ordering it from the local newsagent. After some weeks of this one went back, knocked on the door and tried to get paid for these papers. I had been given a list of contacts as my round and most of my time went of trying to find someone in who was willing to stump up the cash. Almost invariably this was at best a protracted affair of finding odd pennies; sometimes it brought expressions of blank amazement as though the concept of a Saturday paper delivery was something strange and alien; sometimes it was tinged with hostility as it was admitted that their commitment to socialism did not actually extend to reading a paper. Once in the Gibson Street flats which formed the heart-land of my round, a young woman asked me in and I found that she was in the process of breaking up a chair to provide some heat in a flat which was virtually bare of furniture save for a cot and a mattress. The situation was so bizarre that we both had to burst out laughing.

The only moment when the outside world broke into this pattern was during the seamen's strike in 1966. South Shields still provided a large part of the British merchant marine and was home to many of the coasters which still worked the North Sea. These were tied up three deep along Shields Quay on both sides of the river and mass pier head meetings were held every week or so. John still had contacts in the union which had several Communists in the leadership as well as the young John Prescott. Mostly I sold *Morning Stars* on the periphery of these meetings, afterwards drinking in Shields' pubs with John's friends.

The strike was a harbinger of several things; of young militant men ignoring a leadership which had become very close to their employers, the grooming of some of these young men in a rough and direct form of political agitation in which a successful strike call was the main ambition and, with hindsight, the first of the long-protracted

series of last stands as an industry went into terminal decline. Within twenty years it would be hard to find a cargo ship flagged in Britain with a British crew.

The job at I.R.D. proved something of a disaster. I was placed in the advanced metallurgy laboratory to work on a project concerned with the magneto-mechanical properties of a particular kind of steel called QT35. These were unusual in that when put under pressure the steel became slightly magnetic, which is not so unusual, though when the pressure was released it stayed magnetised, which is rather odd. Our team was charged with investigating this behaviour under a contract with the Admiralty research centre at Portland. I was not allowed to read the basic files on the work until I passed a security check, Portland being the main centre for underwater defence activity.

The check consisted of an interview with the company secretary who had a large desk, bare save for a sheet of paper with a large diagonal coloured stripe. He took a sheet of tracing paper, placed it over the sheet and then asked me my name, address and my job and whether I had ever been abroad. He wrote down the answers to these on the tracing paper in pencil, apologised for having to ask personal questions and that was that. It never occurred to anyone that I might fail the check and I was invited along to a series of lectures after that on the various risks with which those involved in secret projects might be faced. These involved having too much to drink in bars when abroad and hints of being placed in compromising situations with young women. Veiled with the customary reticence of the times it was a bit hard to make out just what was involved as the film clip cut away very fast after a brief glimpse of the subject and the young woman walking down a hotel corridor to the receipt of a large envelope through the post and ashen faces all round.

I never found out in so many words that I had failed the check though one of the personnel officers did greet me in the corridor by mentioning that he never knew that I had been involved in CND. I just never got to read the files which rather hampered my work. Still, it gradually emerged that QT35 was the steel used to build the new generation of British nuclear submarines which had the rather alarming defect of coming up from a deep dive and then sticking to the first ship they came alongside. Whether they still do I have no idea; certainly I did nothing to alter the situation one way of the other. In the absence of any deep thoughts on the theory of magneto-mechanical effects I spent my time at IRD mostly in pottering about, reading scientific journals or accompanying my colleagues on visits.

One of these was to the vast Scotswood works of Vickers-Armstrong, an even worse mess than Parsons heavy machine shop. Here I saw men sitting on the edge of vats of cyanide eating their sandwiches by holding them in newspaper to avoid contamination. There were long rolling mills reducing steel ingots to armour plate and forges hammering out the barrels of guns. The same apparent disorder, smell and a constant clanging noise as in Parsons' machine shops

The job was to discover the reason why the armour plate rolled in these mills was failing at apparently random intervals with long cracks appearing as the plate was in its final stages. Some months of detailed investigation in the laboratory and inspection of the manufacturing process had led nowhere and my colleague was on the point of writing a long report admitting defeat. He paid one last visit to the works and came across some men at the very beginning of the rolling process where the hot ingots were taken out of a soaking pit. They sat there to attain an even temperature and were placed for a short time on a dolly before moving to the rolling mill. The nearest lavatory was some hundreds of yards away and to save the bother the men had the habit of pissing on the hot metal. This was enough to cool it unevenly and thus induce

cracking later in the rolling. He rewrote his report recommending new urinals and the problem vanished.

No one seemed too bothered either at my subversive potential or my lack of productive work but time began to drag. I was also rather lonely and bored with a solitary and chilly life in Elswick so I got another job this time with a large company in the Midlands, Associated Electrical Industries, at their central research laboratory at Rugby.

Rugby 1967/68

Associated Electrical Industries was a huge industrial conglomerate built up in the twenties from, amongst others, British Thomson Houston, originally an American company which had set up its British subsidiary in the railway town of Rugby. In the Depression, it had been swept up into the combine of A.E.I. which, along with the General Electric Company and English Electric, made most things electrical or electronic. Their central research laboratory was located on the edge of a huge, sprawling red-brick complex of factories alongside the mainline railway. You can still see its remains on the right-hand side as you go to Manchester or Birmingham from Euston. At one time, the locomotives on the newly electrified line, which were made in the English Electric factory on the other side of the line, had the embarrassing habit of blowing up and coming to a halt at regular intervals just outside the place of their birth. Now, of course, both factories are closed and Rugby station is half-dismantled. The remnant of the AEI factory is some kind of test-centre for gas turbines made by a French company.

Although they shared one thing, huge factories making rotating machines, Rugby was and is almost the exact industrial and social opposite of Newcastle. The factories closed in both places but whereas in Newcastle they rotted where they stood, in Rugby they regenerated as housing estates or some new kind of enterprise with a vague name. Rugby was prosperous and smug, on one side it was bounded by the fortress-like walls of the public school which kept strictly aloof but cast a kind of sanctimonious gloom over the town, on the other by the railway and the huge factories along it. It was a working-class town even though it still had a cattle market every week but of a particular and, for me, novel kind. North London's working class was disorganised, shifting, criminalised and rather fun; Newcastle was organised, violent, fixed and often not much fun at all except drunk. Rugby was also union town but careful, prosperous, law-abiding and deeply and constantly dull. Going back to the town where I lived for eighteen months was like re-visiting a geographical blueprint. I knew instinctively where each road went, that one to the station and the plant, that one to the cinema, that one to Hillmorton where I rented a flat. But not one street contained a human memory. Walking round I realised that I have only one social memory of Rugby; going to the Odeon to see *Bonny and Clyde*. Nor can I remember the name of a single person who lived there. The only place which I clearly remember is the station. Excellent mainline connections meant that either I was there on late-afternoon on Friday going to London or Manchester or anywhere that was not Rugby or on Saturday morning going to a football match.

My work in the AEI research laboratory was not hampered by security problems even though it was mostly funded by government contracts. This time it concerned the acousto-electric effect in a family of semiconductors called II-VI compounds, mainly a crystal called cadmium sulphide. The acousto-electric effect involved a coupling between electric and sound waves and the experimental rig used to measure this involved passing large pulses of high-voltage current through small crystals cooled by liquid nitrogen. After I had narrowly escaped sudden death by fiddling with the

innards of this machine whilst it was still live I was effectively banned from doing much in the way of experiments by my technician, a middle-aged, taciturn man, so I was once again largely devoted to reading journals and writing up experimental results.

Perhaps I should pause here for there is something going adrift with these memories of the 1960s. We have reached the beginning of 1967 after five or six years moving around England and not a lot is happening. A little civil disobedience in 1961 and then a tour round the north, the south, the north again and finally Rugby, almost the dead centre of England. Things will begin to liven up from now on; the 60s will happen if you like. But the fact was that at the end of 1966 they manifestly were not. There is no single explanation for what happened after 1966 and, conversely, why so little seemed to happen before. Rather there were a set of factors which shifted independently of each other until around 1967, they moved into alignment rather as planets occasionally fall into line along a radius stretching from the sun.

One of these was international. All through the 1950s, Britain had conducted a series of shabby little holding operations throughout the fragments of Empire. Although they had been nasty—massacres in Aden, brutal detention camps in Kenya, killings in Cyprus, Malaya and so on—a broadly passive media and the pervasive racism associated with white settlers had prevented these ever becoming big political issues. During this time, continental Europe was to most people an unknown place; the limits placed on foreign currency ownership until well into the 60s meant that few people took holidays abroad and the general vision of Europe remained that of a war-torn and generally backward place. Remember that as late as 1961, I was sent as a VSO volunteer to southern Austria to help build roads for the impoverished locals. The European Economic Community was generally ignored as something the frogs and krauts had dreamed up to pretend that they were important. This was also the height of the Cold War leading up to the head-to-head stand-offs over Cuba and Berlin. In this conflict, America was to most people, broadly the good guy, stupid, moronic almost but still the good sheriff whilst the Soviet Union after suppressing the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was, roughly, the baddie.

After 1960, these perceptions began to shift in various ways, perhaps in part because Britain rather quickly divested itself of nearly all its colonies. One by one, Kenya, Gold Coast, Nigeria, Uganda, Cyprus and all the other parts of the globe still coloured red on school geography books were sent on their way with a quick ceremony, lowering one flag and raising another, thank you and goodnight. It was all done remarkably quickly with just one hiccup, the ugly and intractable Southern Rhodesians who declared unilateral independence under their own white semi-fascist rule. Perhaps perversely the abandonment of empire led to a wider focus on just what was happening in the rest of the world. Suddenly, the odd dream of tropical possessions, palm trees, the exotic background to lives which almost without exception had no contact at all with its reality, was gone.

In this wider world, a major shift was underway; its political focus was shifting from a face-off between America and Russia to what seemed like an almost concerted uprising of the oppressed of Africa, Latin America and Asia. One of the things now sadly lost is the extraordinary sense of potential liberation which existed in the late-60s, a sense which derived in part from this uprising of what Fanon termed ‘the wretched of the earth.’ The anti-colonial struggles had thrown up a set of remarkable men (I can think of only one woman and she belongs in a different section) whose names have suffered with time but who then seemed like new-born giants. In Africa, there was Amilcar Cabral and Augustino Neto from the Portuguese territories still occupied and there were imprisoned ANC men like Mandela; in the newly

independent ex-British countries, Nkrumah, Kaunda and Nyerere, Fanon and Ben Bella from the slaughterhouse of Algeria; in Latin America, there were the Cubans, Castro and Guevara, in Brazil, Carlos Marighella. And then there were the Vietnamese and in Vietnam, the Americans.

Some of these names have passed into shadows, others slumped into a slow decline of their reputations to the point that it seems unlikely that they could ever have been inspirational. Yet around the mid-60s, they stood out as shining beacons of the force of liberation. They were in retrospect limited idols. They were ultimately doomed by their adherence by the only available model of socialism, the rigid central-planning system of the Soviet Union propounded in Africa in particular by the many advisers who flocked out to Accra, Kampala and Dar es Salaam, some of them friends of mine. The reverse of this was the desire by some of us to see in these struggles for national liberation a model of revolutionary change. I remember talking on a gloomy December day in 1967 with a woman friend from Sussex that if things did not change then we would leave and find our way to Guevara in Bolivia, presumably to change things there though even then I think we realised that our impact would have been, to say the least, slight. The fact was that although these violent shifts in international power had a major psychological weight, it was not very obvious just what relevance they had to us except as rallying points. The biggest impact was, in the end, malign. Marighella's famous maxim became the justification in the next decade for a series of violent movements throughout Europe as well as Latin America and the USA:

> *It is necessary to turn political crisis into armed crisis by performing violent actions that will force those in power to transform the military situation into a political situation. That will alienate the masses, who, from then on, will revolt against the army and the police and blame them for this state of things.*

Reading this little aphorism again after many years, it strikes me as almost without meaning and certainly mad. At the end of the 60s, it seemed to some the only way forward.

The international shift in political effort away from the Cold War in Europe and towards national liberation struggles also gave a decisive shift in the balance between the two great antagonists in the Cold War, the USA and the Soviet Union. The invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Khrushchev's revelations about Stalinism had meant that the moral balance between these had been altered. The anti-nuclear protests of the late-50s had all struggled with the problem of wanting to support neither the USA nor the Soviet Union in a context which seemed to demand one commitment or the other. From the early 60s onwards, this balance began to shift again, this time decisively against America.

The America of the 1960s was one which was internally torn apart almost to the point of civil war by its racism and discrimination. At the time we were sitting down outside Dunoon pier, protesting against the US Polaris submarines, the Freedom Riders were travelling down to Mississippi to meet up with Bull Connor's attack dogs and fire hoses. Some never made it that far but were ambushed and murdered en route. In Birmingham, Alabama, five black children were killed by a bomb in a church; I remember playing Joan Baez' song about this along with Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind* on my Dansette record-player placed beside the open window of my ground floor room at Durham University. As I write this, I have a newspaper cutting showing white National Guard soldiers with fixed bayonets walking through the ruins of Detroit after the 1967 riots. It was pinned up on the wall of my laboratory in Rugby. Outside the USA, whether in the Portuguese colonies, Latin American republics or east Asia, it

was evidently and obviously the Americans who propped up dictators. I went on a small march in central London, mainly of African students, carrying flaring torches lighting the evening dark and mournfully chanting *Vive Lumumba, il est mort* in surreal counterpoint that transcended the oxymoron. None of us had any doubt that the US was backing the thugs who killed Lumumba and as Tshombe progressively looted Zaire we were shown to be right. Above all else there was Vietnam.

In the summer of 1967, I walked through Hyde Park on the fringes of the Rolling Stones' Free Concert when thousands of butterflies were released. I was walking to Notting Hill where at the top of Portobello Road my girlfriend had a flat. She was an ASM at the Royal Court helping put on production of *The Three Sisters* in which Marianne Faithful played Masha, scandalising the ladies of Sloane Square by going to rehearsals wearing a string vest with nothing underneath. Later in the summer we went to the 'Twenty Four Hour Technicolor Dream', an all-night rock concert at the Alexandra Palace where a black hustler who we knew from Notting Hill cheerfully took the entrance-money and which had amongst other entertainment a free helter-skelter down which stoned hippies tumbled. It was the final moment of the brief illusion that some kind of shift in life-style could significantly alter the world. In 1968, it all fell apart.

The year 1968 carries myth and misconception as well as mystery. The greatest misconception is that it was the height of happiness, the final peak of the joyful 60s. In fact it was a bad year, the beginning of unhappiness and the first harbinger of defeat. Woodstock took place in 1967 like the Stones free concert in Hyde Park. Altamont happened in 1968. The mystery is just why it all happened; just why in that one single year there was such a world-wide collusion of events which no rational mind could connect but which in their totality seemed to suggest that the world was spinning out of control. Vietnam, Czechoslovakia, France, the US black ghettoes, each produced self-contained convulsions which seemed to suggest that entire social orderings were being displaced. Poor nations beating rich and exploitative; the Soviet system challenged by internal dissent; rich capitalism breaking apart under attacks from its poorest and most alienated. None of this actually happened. Even the Vietnamese had to endure a further four years of war before they could claim victory. The Tet offensive itself was a ghastly slaughter. The Prague Spring was followed by the return of Russian tanks in the autumn. But, then, the defeats seemed like momentary setbacks along an inevitable passage to a hitherto undreamed victory; a simultaneous and world-wide uprising against oppression. In early 1967, I had talked with a woman, not even my lover then, in all seriousness of our going to Bolivia to fight with Guevara. In 1968, it seemed unnecessary. The war was coming home. In any case, Guevara was dead, another iconic defeat on the road to victory.

The best portrayal of the central feel of 1968 is at the end of Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The film is laboured and ponderous throughout most of its journey through the basic training of novice grunt marines and their progress through the Tet offensive. Despite the non-stop action and aggression whether in the field or in boot camp, there is a feeling of enervation, of sluggish repetition encapsulated in the spare monotone of the narrator. Then having gone through hours of engagement with an unseen enemy, the marine squad traps a Vietcong sniper in an abandoned factory building. In one swoop of slow-motion energy and rage, the sniper, a young woman, turns on them, firing her gun and shrieking as they shoot her down. All energy, all passion, she breaks the pattern of sullen and forced obedience of the marines. They finally kill her in a ritualised execution and then continue their dazed drudge across the wasted landscape. (The irony is that the actual setting for all this scene is the wasted landscape of industrial England in the early 80s turned into Hue by the addition of a few sad palm trees. In 1999 it was transformed into the site of the

Millennium Dome.) As they trudge they chant in grim parody of their training doggerel “M-I-C-K-E-Y-M-O-U-S-E. Who’s the leader of our gang? Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse” The woman is our icon. The energy, the passion, the fury and commitment that we too wanted to have and hoped we saw in the uprisings of the oppressed. But it’s the marines who are us. Their rhythmic derision, CND peace symbols and mock-heroic slogans on their helmets, sloping back home, somewhat corrupted but still sane and taking no more bullshit.

In 1968, after a massive merger of the electrical industry, engineered by Tony Benn then Minister of Technology and rather enamoured of tinkering with capitalism, the newly formed giant company, GEC, began to close down the research laboratories it had gathered under its wing as being surplus to requirements. One of these was my Rugby laboratory and I was asked to transfer to a London establishment. This abrupt end intensified the doubts which I had about my largely ineffectual scientific career and I decided to switch disciplines and become an economist. I did this by taking an A-level in economics from knowledge culled from the *Financial Times* and applying rather at random to a few universities. I remember that I missed an interview at one of these, Southampton, by getting on the wrong train at Birmingham, and so ended up being accepted for an M.A. at Essex. The basis for this was rather odd as at my interview the academic concerned observed that he could hardly ask much about economics as I clearly knew very little while he could also not talk much about mathematics as I obviously knew a lot more than he did. Still, as they were very keen on mathematics in the Economics Department at Essex, it seemed worth having me so the deal was that I would spend year going to courses in the undergraduate then, if I passed them well enough, I would go on to the M.A. And in those halcyon days the department would give me a grant in the first year from their own funds whilst I would get a state grant in the second

I spent the spring and summer assisting in the rather desultory protests against the closure becoming for the only time in my life a union representative, an actual shop-steward, then having spent a couple of months at GEC’s Wembley laboratory, I left for the university campus at Colchester. I had claimed a rather large moving allowance conditional on my staying with the company for a year and I left hastily by a back entrance as a personnel man was walking in the front door to claim the money back.

Essex 1968/70

Essex University in 1968 had already acquired notoriety as a hotbed of dissent following a riotous demonstration against a visit by scientists from the Porton Down laboratory, the centre for government research in bacteriological and chemical warfare. Three students had been suspended after this, one who would become the General Secretary of the Labour Party, and it was confidently expected that it would continue in this spirit. The May events in Paris had provided a blue-print for students sparking national revolt which, absurd though it now seems, was taken seriously on all sides. In October there was to be a national demonstration against the Vietnam War which was expected to be even more violent than the spring demonstration in Grosvenor Square which had teetered over the edge of a full-scale riot.

In the first week of the new term, there was a large meeting about this and it was decided the we should pre-empt the London march by our own and so the next day we gathered in the centre of Colchester where a pedestrianised centre was surrounded by a rectangle of roads. About two hundred of us marched round this spreading over the road, blocking the traffic and surprising the hell out of the police who, of course, had not been informed of the demonstration. Once round, twice round and there seemed no

reason to stop until passing in front of the police station, the cops tried to arrest us, all of us, in one big sweep pushing us *en masse* into the station. They eventually cornered some fifty students in the squad room, shouting and heaving and charged us with obstruction.

October: Students march through Colchester's town centre.

The following day at yet another mass meeting in the university, there was much talk of the right of free demonstration and it was agreed that we should march again. So we gathered and marched around the centre again. I have the newspaper cutting; a front line, linking arms across the road, the police hanging around the edge, no one quite sure what to do. In the end we just went once round, made the point and went home to get ready for the London march.

We took three or four coaches down, hired under some rather uneasy cover, and got out in Russell Square, formed up in the space in front of the School of Oriental and African Studies, linked arms and marched off singing the *Internationale* to the head of the march forming up in Malet Street. No one objected to us taking such priority, it seemed just the natural thing to do. I never saw anything quite like it again for twenty years until I watched another couple of hundred students swing out of university gates, carrying red flags, laughing while singing the same *Internationale* on their way to Tianamen Square. It is an asymmetric comparison but I have no doubt that we would have marched on to tanks if there had been any. But in fact the revolution was delayed and instead we marched by the LSE, temporarily occupied by students, chanting "*Free, free the LSE; Save it from the bourgeoisie*" which even at the time seemed a touch banal.

After this it all becomes confused, a set of events to which I find it difficult to pin any continuity. Immediately afterwards there was an occupation of the University computer centre for reasons I completely forget. I do remember going to the campus shop and buying some bars of fruit-and-nut chocolate as it seemed likely to be a long day. In the event, it became the kind of symbolic ritual which we were to go through several times. As one of the only occupiers with any idea as to what a mainframe computer actually was, I went round the centre with a couple of the staff seeing where the really delicate stuff was so we could avoid damaging it as we had agreed that we were not actually going to break anything.

I did not really feel part of these rebellious students. I was, for one thing, a crucial six or eight years older than most of them and had seen, so I thought, much more of the world. Most of all I could not understand why they were so angry, so irreversibly, so deeply, pissed-off. In the three or so years since my rather light-hearted time in Brighton, something rather harsh had entered into the lives of these same, clever, rather privileged, mostly southern students. They were, of course, in a minority even in the student population of this small university but it was a minority which always held a kind of moral hegemony over the rest. Somewhere in the black residential tower-blocks and rat-maze main building, which some malign architect had willed on the campus, the likes of the young Virginia Bottomley passed their student years in obscurity presumably hating all the turmoil around them. But whenever the issue arose, in one of the mass general meetings which the left held almost obsessively to ratify their actions, we would invariably win approval.

Some of this harshness came from external frustration at being located in a time and place where great world events seemed to be taking place all around except in Britain which still seemed to rely on Carnaby Street and the Beatles as its lifeline to the future. But also the various cracks in social life, including the new sexual freedoms, were creating a lot of personal tensions particularly within families. There were, I suspect, a large number of the radical students who rather dreaded going home. Life at Essex was not, as I remember it, a great deal of fun.

In February, 1969, we organised a Festival of Revolution or rather such an event happened. The idea for this had come about at a rather drunken party and created a small flurry of enthusiasm. I booked all the rooms in the main lecture block for three consecutive days in February in the name of the almost defunct Socialist Society (no one at the time would have ever dreamt of organising a meeting to *discuss* socialism, the point was to organise it), something allowed by the vague rules of the university. Various posters were printed with slightly mysterious slogans. One had nothing but a breaking chain, the dates and the place, University of Essex. Another had the slogan *All Passion Spent?* again with just the dates and place. These were sent around the country to colleges and political groups. In large part, we then just forgot about it all.

Come February and a vague unease spread amongst the staff that the campus was to be taken over in violent disorder. One was said to have phoned up the local army barracks asking for protection. On the evening before in the main lecture block some of us pinned toilet rolls from the balcony overlooking the foyer down to the floor so they formed a hanging barrier. We pinned a notice saying *'Please do not disturb the barricade'* to it and wandered out into the cold evening.

In the event, the Festival was both more and less than anyone expected. A few hundred people pitched up including assorted poets and playwrights. Jean-Luc Goddard wandered around filming so there is to this day, so I am told, some kind of record. A car was towed into the square and set on fire. Various meetings were held and disrupted in desultory kind of ways. There is a long description of one of these by Shelia Rowbotham in her memoir of the 1960s in which I appear in an unflattering

way and which could pretty much be described as the founding moment of the Women's Liberation movement in Britain.

> *While visiting Essex University the students told me they were planning a 'Revolutionary Festival' on 10th February [1969]. Partly because of the Black Dwarf Women's Issue it was decided to have a meeting at the festival on women. This was to be our first public meeting*
>
> *It was a freezing winter's day and the isolated campus of Essex University had the air of besieged space station in some bizarre science fiction other world. Roberta Hunter-Henderson remembers trailing around with Jean-Luc Godard who was there to film for British Sounds, lifting the long dresses which we now wore, to prevent them from becoming sodden in the much trampled snow. I have no recollection of this myself. Essex and Cambridge produced a new spirit of anarcho-situationist politics which targeted well-known media figures as sinister agents of the 'spectacle'. John Arden and David Mercer were to receive rough treatment at the festival.*
>
> *The women's meeting was in a large lecture hall and it was packed. Amongst the chaotic atmosphere of the 'Revolutionary Festival', Branka Magas from the New Left Review, began to read a theoretical paper, she held her head down speaking in a low voice with a Yugoslav accent. Reason and analysis did not cut much ice that day. You could feel the current of emotion charging around the hall. It was a cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof kind of meeting not an academic seminar. Yet the fight for space to speak undisturbed felt like a life and death struggle.*
>
> *The situationist influence on what later came to be called 'libertarianism' was attuned to many incipient features of the new capitalism which was coming into being. But it also justified an irrationality which I found arrogant and thoughtless. One of the students came in laughing with a woman on his back. Someone threw toilet paper from a balcony and it cascaded down in long white tendrils. The lights were turned on and off.*
>
> *In the discussion a sedate member of the Communist Party (which was regarded as the equivalence of the right wing) tried to take another tack. When a woman complained about having to type out the leaflets, he stood up to explain that there had to be some division of labour. Not everyone understood what should be put in the leaflets. By this time some of the women in the audience were in an angry mood and we hissed and booed - this time in alliance with the libertarians who did not believe in any form of direction or leadership.*

> *We weren't about to let it go at that and announced a follow-up meeting. Two men came along to this smaller meeting. One was a bearded Sikh maoist from Hemel Hempstead who was always known as Mr Bras. A man of uncompromising and dogmatically held opinions he had already provoked a fight in RSSF. The Hemel Hempstead maoists were to play a disastrous role in women's liberation and Mr Bras was to be responsible for a decision to ban men from Women's Liberation conferences when he refused to stop speaking despite an overwhelming show of hands voting for him to shut up at an early conference in Skegness. Mr Bras at this first meeting told us we should read Mao, Lenin and Stalin. This didn't go down very well. Then the other man at the meeting told us we sounded like a women's tea party because we kept giggling in high-pitched voices.*
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> *Militancy was being thrust upon us. 'I always rewrite his bloody leaflets when I type them anyway' hissed one exasperated new recruit to feminism.*

Odd how one's memory plays tricks. I had arrived at Essex with a blue Olivetti Lettera portable and had always remembered being the only person there who could type the stencils for the endless leaflets. But in the wider frame, Sheila is, of course, right. It was easy enough in early 1969 to be sedate about just where in one's priorities, women's rights stood. It became rapidly clear that they should stand, would be required to stand a good deal higher than they had before. Purely personally, I am relieved to find, scrolling through e-mails sent to the web-site of the Essex-68 reunion, one from a woman writing about "*Mike Prior and Gaby persuading me to support feminism*" but in general it was not difficult to support feminism as a student. There was a fairly straightforward equality on the campus once the grotesque imbalance between sexes was taken as a given product of the outside world. It was of course true that men dominated left-wing political meetings and structures but as these were largely absent from Essex this hardly mattered. There were men at the first national conference of the Women's Liberation Movement in Oxford though we left after my first and last contribution at such an event proposing that the men should leave the conference to act as a collective presence on a march through the town supporting a college sit-in. It took a couple of years before the full impact of feminism became clear whether in personal relationships or in society at large. It wound up the personal pressure on the women students, sometimes to an intolerable degree. There were probably more women who dropped out after a year than men and in some cases it was clear that this was a result of the abnormal stresses of the place. Oddly, my own experience was that these promoted rather close, supportive relationships which mostly blew apart in the outside world.

And this outside world really was very outside. As Sheila writes of Essex as being a *besieged space station in some bizarre science fiction other world* and that is really how it felt. After the Festival of Revolution was over, I wandered round the lecture building and found, in a basement, a small hideaway which some couple had made with blankets and posters and where, perhaps, they spent the rest of their time at the university. Later in the year, there were rumours that some chemistry students had found a way of making explosives in their laboratory and were going to blow the dam retaining the lake above the main campus buildings.

Summer, examinations and holidays took their normal rhythmic pattern. It was rather pleasant, idling away time at the waterfront pub in Wivenhoe or playing tennis

on the University courts. I had discovered that the economics taught in the university was something of a confidence trick; diagrams with straight lines intersecting each other representing a world in which everything was static and in some kind of ideal equilibrium with neither history nor future; simple mathematics pretending to the mathematically illiterate that such child-like representations had some relation to a real world. There was one seminar held by a renowned Japanese economist, said to be a Marxist, who was spending some time at Essex. His first seminar was packed out with the left hoping at last to hear the real thing. He covered the blackboard with mathematical equations speaking all the while in a low monotone. At the very end, when he had reached the bottom right-hand corner, he wrote one last equality, looked up, said, rather indistinctly, '*Maybe this is class-struggle'* and giggled. There were the usual six at his next gathering. I had little incentive to study much for the MA course in the following year.

There was, of course, something more subtle going on underneath which I failed to see, probably out of sheer apathy and condescension. There were some clever men at work on this simplistic façade, not so much rebuilding its foundations as adding on storeys and renovating its interior, generally making it more attractive and desirable so that when Marxism collapsed under the weight of its similar pretension there was something more solid as an alternative. In the summer of 1969, I would probably have greeted with laughter any suggestion that neoclassical economics with its obvious fallacies and ideological bias could ever be other than an intellectual joke. How easy it is to be both intellectually right and historically wrong.

In the autumn, life returned to its normal abnormality. The reputation of the university was by now such that there were an even higher proportion of students who seemed to have come just for the action. New building had stopped, the capital budget was frozen and the vision of its founders of Essex as an expanding dynamic centre of modern learning had all but foundered in the wake of its well-publicised troubles. It had never been seen as a 'real' university in an older sense. Entire areas of learning had been abandoned or only given a token presence. Virtually all the humanities and most engineering were absent. You would look in vain for such things as history in any traditional sense. There were big computer science, economics and sociology departments, the kind of thing expected to be fashionable and to attract big outside grants, all of which were foundering on the ability of some of the students literally to destroy anything of which they disapproved. This hostility was heightened in the course of the year by the discovery at Warwick University of files detailing just how close was the relationship between that university and business and how files were kept on the political persuasion of staff and students. There was a great scandal about these and court injunctions were taken out to prevent their wider publication. The result of course was that everyone became convinced that all universities kept such records and that, in particular, there were filing cabinets full of incriminating documents in the various administration offices. The administration in its turn heightened such suspicions by introducing new disciplinary codes and university officers devoted to such matters to be called (and this was really original) proctors. In addition, students suspended for previous offences returned while others were themselves suspended and, under new regulations, banned from the campus. Others failed their first year examinations, allegedly from political bias, which provoked various campaigns for their reinstatement. It was, altogether, an irritable combination.

There problem was that all this irritability had so little place to go. In principle, the left should have formed a revolutionary alliance with Colchester's working class and I remember that the university's sole member of Militant, a Trotskyist sect later to achieve greater fame, who always insisted on wearing a jacket and tie to show his affinity with the workers, going off rather ostentatiously to do just this. The problem

was that in spite of the general militancy of the unions, Colchester's working class remained determinedly moderate. The local branch of the International Socialists, precursors to the Socialist Workers Party, believed in the theory of proletarian alliance and had large parcels of leaflets to this effect sent to their address, a house in Colchester. They had painted a large slogan 'Why Work' on their front door and after some time, the local postmen, fed up with banging on the door to rouse the late-rising revolutionaries whilst staring at this, declared a boycott of the house. Mainly, the radical students prowled around looking for the key revolutionary issue that would ignite the campus. Meanwhile the more obtuse staff seemed set on expelling as many of the radical students as they could fit up. A lot of the moderate staff simply moved down to London and kept their heads down or applied for sabbaticals.

This whole year now seems just a confusion of various partial images. A demonstration at the campus Barclays Bank against its support for apartheid followed by an attempt by three students to firebomb it. They were arrested and given terms in youth detention. A day of harassment of the various administration officers which ended in occupying the Vice-Chancellors office. Meetings of the University Senate (I was by now the elected representative of the graduate students on that body) trying to get them to tone down new disciplinary codes and to give up investments in companies with South African interests. Finally, towards Easter, the blockade of the Senate.

This came about, so far as I remember, at the end of the long-drawn out process connected with some students failing their first-year examinations. Senate met in the early evening and as they proceeded through their agenda, students gathered outside the meeting room. Sitting inside, it was possible to hear the growing rumble of this crowd as the meeting along to the inevitable endorsement of the exam failure and their exclusion. At some point, I must, as they say, have made my excuses and left for when the meeting finished the students refused to allow the Senate to leave, suggesting that they reconsider their decision. A half-hearted attempt by some staff to break through the blockade resulted in a stalemate until some time towards midnight it was discovered that a large number of police had arrived and were preparing, presumably, to evict us. I suggested that we should vote either to all leave or to all stay and, narrowly, it was decided to leave. And that, roughly, speaking was that.

In the end, they got me. This may sound a touch dramatic but I think as things turned out that the university administration must have decided that a Communist and a graduate had to have some leading role in the disturbances despite the fact that Communists were largely regarded as only just acceptable within the broad spectrum of the left. I was charged under the new disciplinary code with various naughty things relating to the invasion of the Vice-Chancellor's office complete with witness statements. It was all, as it happened, lies. The evening of the sit-in, Manchester United were playing in the semi-final of the European Cup and on the way to see this on television I had skidded on ice on my small motor-bike and damaged, mildly, my arm. I had in fact never been near the office in question though almost certainly I would have been if the football had not been on.

The problem lay not with proving this, which would have been easy enough, but with what might be called the revolutionary etiquette of the situation. On a few occasions, I had gone along to the proctor to suggest that charges against particular individuals should be dropped because they were not really serious radicals and were genuinely upset by the prospect of being disciplined. Usually this was accepted in a slightly weird but essentially reasonable acceptance that only if one was really serious about changing the system should one be disciplined and that such seriousness was essentially self-defined. The etiquette of the system demanded therefore, in reverse,

that if one was serious about change then one should accept one's guilt *in absentio*. It never occurred to me to defend myself on the basis of the untruth of the accusation as, on a deeper level, I was guilty. So on the appointed day, I refused to recognise the disciplinary tribunal and walked out. Shortly afterwards they produced a set of judgements relating to the Vice-Chancellor sit-in—fines, exclusions and one expulsion, me.

After some thought I realised that this was taking things a bit far. I appealed and with my family's help (who naturally regarded being expelled as normal for any Communist) contacted a good Party lawyer to conduct the appeal. Late in the summer term, the appeal came along and my lawyer pitched up with a pile of law books and proceeded to scare the pants off the good souls on the appeals tribunal. We had agreed that it was at this point difficult to contest the factual base of the charge but on everything else up to and including my fundamental human rights and taking in on the way just about all the disciplinary processes of the University, he took them apart. All in a day's work for a good labour lawyer, he gave me a modest bill and took his pile of books back to London. The appeals board dropped the penalty to a year's suspension and I was promptly banned from the campus.

It was June and lazy summer. The exams were over and the year ending. I made a short speech in the campus square which got a couple of paragraphs in the local paper and went home to pack my bags. The timing of the suspension meant that all I actually had to do was write and submit an M.A. dissertation a year later than I would have done otherwise. Gaby had stolen a large tome from the bookshop entitled *Optimal Control Theory in Wireless-Guided Systems* which I intended to use to write a highly mathematical piece on how optimal control of model aircraft was no different to optimal control of economies (at least in theory) and I could do that in London as well as in Colchester. So off I went.