

What Seventy Years Have Wrought

Three novels written in the year of the author's birth provide insight into how England has changed.

by Theodore Dalrymple



The past has always interested me more than the future. This backward-looking tendency has only been reinforced by reaching, somewhat unexpectedly, the age of 70. I can't say that I don't feel my age because I don't know what feeling any particular age is like—but one repeatedly hears that 60 is the new 40, 70 is the new 50, and so on; certainly, the human aging process has slowed since I was born. When I look at photos of people who were 50 in the year of my birth, 1949, they look much older and more worn-out than do 50-year-olds now; and if I had lived only to my life expectancy at birth, I would be dead these last four years.

So progress must have occurred in the intervening time, despite the pessimism that infects those who, like me, are of

retrospective temperament and hypersensitive to deterioration. It is not hard to enumerate many things that have improved. They relate principally, but not only, to material conditions. My best friend when I was very young was one of the last children in Britain to suffer from polio, which paralyzed him from the waist down. The quickest form of written communication was then the telegram, and anything other than local telephone calls had to go through an operator. To call across the Atlantic required a reservation and was ferociously expensive; the resultant conversation always seemed to take place during a violent storm. In England, the food was generally disgusting, and meals were to be endured as a regrettable necessity instead of enjoyed (it puzzles me still how people could have cooked so badly). Cars broke down frequently, and every November, pollution produced fogs so thick that you couldn't see the hand in front of your face (I loved them). Rationing continued for eight years after the war, and disused bomb shelters, present in every park, were where illicit sexual fumbles and smoking took place. Incidentally, for an adult male not to smoke was unusual (75 percent did so); we must have lived in a perpetual fog of foul-smelling tobacco, to judge by the distaste caused by even a single lit cigarette in these virtuous times. Poverty, as raw necessity, still existed. Murderers were sometimes hanged—as well as, more rarely, the innocent. Overt racial prejudice was, if not quite the norm, certainly prevalent.

Yet not everything has improved, though the deterioration has been less tangible than the progress. To give one example: by age 11, I was free to roam London, or at least its better areas, by myself or with a friend of the same age. The sight of an 11-year-old child wandering the city on his own did not suggest to anyone that he was neglected or abused. I remember, too, the evening papers piled up at newsstands; people would throw coins on top of the pile and take their copy. It never occurred to anyone that the money might get stolen; nowadays, it would never occur to anyone that the money would *not* be

stolen. The crime statistics bear out this sea change in national character.

The enormous progress and increase in prosperity notwithstanding, I have not been able to rid myself of a nagging awareness that I was born into a country in relentless decline, of the kind, say, that Spain went through from the latter two-thirds of the seventeenth century to the present day. Of course, Britain's decline has been relative, not absolute, but Man being a creature who compares, it is felt all the same; and whether an increase in life expectancy compensates for an increased, and justified, fear of crime is a matter of individual judgment.

In an effort to assess what has changed, for better or worse, and what, if anything, has remained unchanged, I thought it would be interesting to consider three English novels published in the year of my birth. I am aware that this is not a scientific procedure: I chose the novels simply because they had long rested unread on my shelves and were the first ones published in 1949 that I came across. A novel, moreover, is not necessarily a true reflection of anything, let alone a complete depiction of a complex modern society. Indeed, the very difficulty or impossibility of grasping such a society whole is one of the causes of a prevalent anxiety, for no one can truly say that he knows what is going on in his own society, or that he fully understands it. Still, we feel impelled to try—and novels, whether they intend to or not, reflect the time and place of their writing, and therefore may help in our understanding, both as to the way things were and the way they are.

Two of the novels were by, respectively, Nigel Balchin and R. C. Hutchinson, writers well regarded in their time but now mostly forgotten, while the third was by Ivy Compton-Burnett, who still has her admirers. They were quite different authors, but each had an unmistakable quality of unreconstructed English national identity, such as no writer about

London—where two of the novels are set—or anywhere else in the country could now convey.

It is not that foreigners could not be found in 1949 London, which was then still a port city of some importance. In Hutchinson's book, [*A Sort of Traitors*](#) and Compton-Burnett's [*decline in the value of money*](#). In *A Sort of Traitors*, for example, one of the main characters considers buying himself a full meal (almost certainly not a good one, but a meal nonetheless) for one shilling and ninepence. In nominal terms, the cost of that meal would now buy you about one-ninth of an inland postage stamp, or a 40th of a cheese sandwich in a gas station. Not everything has risen in price so drastically as cheese sandwiches, however. To buy a novel such as *A Sort of Traitors* or *Two Worlds and Their Ways* would cost you, in nominal terms, only about 25 times as much as in 1949, the year of my birth.

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