Blue Chip City

Provided you are under no obligation to reach a meeting, there is something not altogether unpleasant in arriving in a large city you have not visited before, having no bearings whatever, and trying to locate the main shopping area. It is surprising how difficult this can sometimes prove to be. It proved difficult in Bristol because, like Nottingham, the city centre seemed to sprawl and not to have an immediately noticeable focal point drawing you toward it at all. Bristol did, in fact, seem dull and disjointed, with none of the airy dignity of a Leeds or a Manchester. It appeared to offer nothing but the kind of big city environmental muddle, with the familiar staggered hotch-potch of office blocks, street patterns destroyed to accommodate motor vehicles, and pedestrians channelled hastily out of the way, that you expect to find anywhere. This, along with the episode in that bad lodging-house, was a disappointing introduction to a city I had long wanted to visit. Priestley visited Bristol, for the first time, near the beginning of his journey round England, when he admitted he was still in an optimistic mood. He liked the place. He thought that what was admirable about it was that it was both old and alive, not a museum piece living on tourists and the sale of bogus antiques. He thought it had an air. You could wander about it and wonder and admire, he said, and he liked it so much that when he left he hoped soon to renew the acquaintance. I do not know if Priestley did return to Bristol, but ten years after he first went there, much of the city he saw was bombed into rubble; just as some ten years after that, greater damage still was inflicted by city planners and inadequate politicians than the Luftwaffe ever managed.

I experienced Bristol, for the first time, toward the end of my journey round England, when I was feeling drained, irritated, and far from optimistic. I did not much care for the place, at any rate not to begin with. If it retained any qualities that were admirable and still worth emphasising, it was that the cars and figures swirling round it in the centre contrived to suggest it was still alive, that commerce was ticking over, that people were going about their business, but not a great deal more. I certainly did not wonder and admire, for it is a farce, an utter farce, to talk about big, slovenly industrial cities as though they were a characteristic only of the urban landscape north of Watford. (You could make a good start by looking at Watford itself.) Bristol had the same ring of neglected suburbs grafted onto it, the same scruffy Victorian shops petering out where the butchered main roads trailed away from the pull of the commercial nucleus, that are possessed by major provincial cities throughout Britain. It could have been the sunny weather that had suddenly brought them more out

into the open, but I also saw more beggars on the streets of Bristol than anywhere else in England, though you do sometimes hear it said that such people congregate where there is more wealth and hence a greater degree of passing trade. Yet Bristol, which is where the popular television series *Casualty* is made, did not feel to me anywhere near as prosperous as Manchester, even if, like Manchester (and Birmingham), it claims to be the second financial capital outside London. The dirty corrugated-shed describing itself as the city's main bus station, carpeted with cigarette-ends and lined with another assortment of vagrants requesting cash from the Bristol working class, is one of the most desolating spectacles I have ever had the misfortune to come across. The bright new bus stations in some of the old South Yorkshire mining towns feel luxurious in comparison. Bristol was, I could quickly see, far from genuinely old, though I should imagine that, like nearly everywhere in the emerging historical theme park called Modern England, it will be increasingly content to live on tourists and the sale of bogus antiques: to promote the notion that once it was actually very old indeed. This is what was so interesting a contrast with what Priestley saw, particularly in view of his observation that back then, when it was still possible to find masts and funnels straddling the central streets where the ships swelled up the floating harbour almost into Broad Quay, he thought it was old but 'not living in the past'. For if Priestley were still alive, and had seen the Bristol I saw, if he had read the opening paragraph to one of the city's most recent official guides, which states confidently that 'without doubt Bristol is fast emerging as one of the most dynamic centres for tourism in the British Isles', then he might well have found himself disliking the city today for the very reasons he once endorsed it.

Though I was not surprised to find myself contemplating any of this, I was surprised at how hilly Bristol was. My impression after a couple of days walking and bussing around it was that it can be split roughly into two distinct shopping areas, with a sort of nondescript section containing banks, the Old Markets, and the huge open traffic island above Broad Quay, pushed somewhere in between. If you walk up the hill from College Green, up to where the road begins to level out onto Queens Road to form the beginning of Clifton, Bristol's most prestigious suburb, an abundance of impressive nineteenth-century building begins to group itself. Not far beyond that hangs the suspension bridge spanning the grand Avon gorge, its outline described by thousands of small bulbs when it is lit up at night. With the rush of traffic pouring up and down Park Street, with the imposing bulk of the Wills Memorial Building standing monumentally at the top in brilliant winter sunshine, you feel that you are entering a somewhat different Bristol to the shopping centre-and-department-store version simmering in the haze below, as indeed you are. It is at that moment when the observations I made a paragraph or two above this one begin to shift into rather a different perspective. For Clifton has something vaguely Oxford about it, due of course to the presence of the university, which has an excellent reputation. The shops are good. The window displays, bristling with mannequins in commanding postures, and arrays of stylish chrome pans, are catering for people with genuine aesthetic awareness. The further you walk up Park Street, the more exclusive, the less commercialized, Bristol appears to become. There is a selection of decent bookshops, interspersed with a succession of pleasant cafés, bistros, and wine bars. The lunchtime I was there, the pavements were busy, in places congested, far more brisk and assertive in their sense of composure than the ordinary shopping area in the city below, with its slow shuffling crowds and its chorus of bronchial coughs. In Clifton there was Christmas music in the air again, plenty of well-groomed faces, and continental-looking women of the kind you bump into down quiet mews in Kensington, with confident expressions, and swept back hair flowing around distinctive Georgio Armani sunglasses. The streets had a satisfying, vigorous, cosmopolitan air that good city centre universities always generate as their immediate offshoot. The very bone structure of the faces, the mild contemplative quality of the expressions, the long stripy scarves knotted stylishly around the supple necks – all testified quietly to the presence of the educated English middle class. Here was a wide city thoroughfare that could so easily have become neglected and plastered with bill posters had it not been for the presence of the university.

Being a major port, and an ancient city, Bristol used to have a reputation for having an economy based around mixed trade, meaning it could escape the worst effects of recession. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it grew rich on its trade with the West Indies, chiefly in sugar, tobacco, and rum, and more notoriously, its bartering of African slaves. Later came chocolate, shipbuilding, and a hundred other industries. But what is surprising today, considering that Bristol and the south west were largely uninfluenced by the Industrial Revolution, is that for a city situated so far south a considerable amount of manufacturing industry has become established there, chiefly in connection with Defence contracts for the government. Bristol has for some time now been heavily dependent upon the Defence industry for much of its economic stability, and manufacturing growth in the area has supposedly been higher in recent times than anywhere else in the country. There are, or there certainly have been until comparatively recently, a staggering twenty-five-thousand people employed in the city working on Defence contracts in one form or another. This makes up nearly half of Bristol's commercial activity, most notably for the firms of Rolls-Royce and British Aerospace, which is why it is worth remembering that the first Concorde aircraft was built in Bristol. But now, mainly because of the improving international situation, as we are all well aware substantial cuts are being made in Defence spending, and Bristol looks like it is going to suffer as a result. Fortunately, some years back, it began marketing itself vigorously as the Blue Chip City, in an attempt to target more high-technology industry and attract it into the area. That it has had considerable success is perhaps to Bristol's credit rather than it is to the nation's as a whole, for if there is one characteristic that distinguishes our economic record it is our failure to modernize and to come to terms with advanced technology. And I suppose there must be something deeply ironic in that throughout the duration of the Cold War years, massive staple industries could remain buoyant because of the threat of conflict with other nations, and once this threat diminished, something which ought to have been to the relief of everyone, with it should come the sort of impact on peoples' economic stability more normally associated with conflict.

Still, I was assured by the knowledgable young lady I spoke to in the offices of Bristol's Economic Development Unit that the Blue Chip City initiative appeared to be reaping dividends. There were, she said, a quantity of highly-skilled, highly-qualified people beginning to come onto the local labour market from Defence-related occupations; people who are being absorbed quickly into new high-technology concerns – possibly adding substance to the notion that Britain's supposed skills shortage is one of the major contributing factors that lies at the heart of its endemic economic problems, and its chronic unemployment. If that is indeed so, let us hope that some of the money saved in Defence cuts can be redirected into worthwhile training programmes. Or, much better than half-hearted schemes designed to massage the unemployment figures, tax incentives for industry to invest in better training skills and plant machinery, and do the job properly for itself.

The General Practitioner

The subject of Bristol's rich and poor cropped up when I travelled out through one of its less prosperous quarters to speak with a doctor whom I had been recommended to see while still in Norwich. He was about my own age, and his constituency took in people from a residential area in the city, as well as from several run-down council estates, where in recent years there have been a number of riots. He claimed there were disturbances happening in one form or another in Bristol much of the time, but that they are generally not important or dramatic enough to make the headlines. I heard this in a number of cities I visited throughout England, where minor incidents, perhaps a small group of youths turning over a couple of cars and firebombing them on their way home from the pub, are quite routine.

When the last of his patients had left and he pulled down the blinds to shut out the sunshine, we began talking about the changes in the running of the National Health Service, which have been in the process of materializing for a number of years

now. Most people will be familiar with the rough form these changes are taking, so there is no need to go into the argument for or against them here. What worried this doctor was that the reforms had meant an increase in his workload. He now had to become distracted by administration work, something he did not train for and did not wish to involve himself with when he made his choice of career. This startled me, not because I thought I shouldn't have to listen to such grievances, but because I heard a repeat run, almost sentence for sentence, of what I had been told by my old art school lecturer when I was in Bradford, when he explained what had been the derogatory effects of educational reforms on the quality of his teaching. Both men were speaking independently of each other, but it was as if they had been referring to the same script, and I am not meaning to imply anything sarcastic by saying that. Just as I was told in Bradford that the effect of educational reforms meant a situation had developed whereby for the college to receive adequate funding it was encouraged to attract greater numbers of students, so the doctor said the chief effect of the health service reforms for him meant that the amount of remuneration he received – his operating budget and his income from the NHS – was now directly dependent upon the number of patients he had on his register. (It is perhaps not as widely recognized as it should be that GPs are not employed directly by the NHS. Unlike doctors working in hospitals, they are self-employed, working for the state under contract, rather as authors work for publishers under contract, and allocated budgets with which they must work accordingly. It follows that if there was one thing about which this doctor was most adamant, it was that the reforms were beginning to undermine the traditional independence of GPs.)

He could appreciate that the government had genuinely believed that in adopting a more businesslike approach to the running of the NHS, making doctors more accountable to their funds by creating internal markets, this would tighten up the system and give better value for money. But once the medical welfare of people becomes mixed up with human instinct, he said, that is not necessarily the way things work out. Because doctors were being encouraged to take on more patients he thought this was starting to undermine the amount of time they spent attending to them. If that is true, then you can see that doctors are probably being placed in positions of moral difficulty with increasing frequency, particularly at their station within society. If they generally are, as this young Bristol doctor certainly is, competent at their jobs, people who are caring and humane and have a degree of social responsibility motivating them in what they do, they may elect to run their surgeries longer, to accommodate everyone sitting in the waiting room. But this may begin to interfere with their personal lives outside surgery hours, something that must surely happen already. What if they have arranged to go out for the evening? Under pressure to finish quicker they might feel obliged to skip the finer points. But though it might hurt to say it, and hurt even more if you happen to be one, doctors are probably being encouraged now to work with greater professional responsibility, to tighten up the competency and the speed with which they work. This Bristol doctor could see the logic in that, but for him it had meant an increase in personal stress because he cares about his patients and detests the feeling that he should be forced to compromise in the way he treats them. The one-to-one relationship was suffering, he said, the very essence of the medical profession, because the needs of one patient are not entirely the same as the next. Just as at my old art school I was told the one-to-one relationship between tutor and students, which I remember so well, had deteriorated since I was there, and consequently the quality of the product coming out at the other end (the students) had suffered, so this doctor told me there was now a real danger that the quality of patient care might begin to suffer as well. If you have the same number of doctors being employed to look after more patients in the same amount of time as before, if they are under pressure to increase productivity, as it were, to retain adequate funding and earn for themselves an adequate salary, the quality of the service will be affected accordingly. In a situation influenced by market practices, a multi-layered, and more often than not, two-tiered system generally develops because the bargaining nature of market forces ensures that you do not so much wish to give better value for money than your competitor as oust your

competitor altogether. Obviously, doctors are not trading in a free-market situation, but the same thought processes inevitably begin to apply. While still strapped to an essentially centralist system loosely tacked onto a few market reforms, I was told that the effect of the health service reforms might prove only to be a tightening of the existing system, a holding in of the fat so to speak rather than a getting rid of the fat altogether, with the existing quality of service being the chief casualty. For instance, as a GP's budget begins to run low, he might well be forced to shop around for a cheaper service, if one of his patients requires specialized treatment. Doctor A in Bristol might have a patient that needs such-and-such an operation. But opted-out hospital X just down the road is asking too high a price for the operation because it employs better surgeons who are paid better salaries, although they could get the patient onto the operating table straight away. So Doctor A might have to travel many miles, perhaps all the way up to Newcastle, to hospital Y, where a surgeon can operate more quickly, at a more competitive price, but whose credentials are altogether more dubious. However, because there are already other doctors who are feeling the pinch financially, as is Doctor A, there is already a waiting list. Doctor A has to join the queue. What develops is a two-tier system, with the patients on the receiving end of what amount essentially to cuts in public expenditure, and the people comfortable enough not to be affected going private when it suits them. This doctor in Bristol believed the patients on the receiving end would be concentrated in parts of the country already at a social disadvantage to begin with, which generally means the inner cities. This is the nightmare scenario, of course, one we are assured, what with the talk about safety nets and so forth, will not be allowed to happen. But from what I could gather, it is beginning to happen already.

For a long time it has seemed to me that what we really mean when we say we want to reform the funding of the NHS is that we want to reform the management structure, in other words the way the funding is actually administered. The problems with the NHS lie in the fact that its enormous bureaucracy is not seriously accountable to the profit motive, which still appears to be the best way of getting human beings to operate efficiently. There is a lack of business flair in the huge health organization as it stands. That is the real issue at stake here, and a market approach makes superficial sense because it creates incentives. But sensible funding would be more likely to follow if the management structure were sufficiently tackled. Surely it would be better to examine the problem more fundamentally from the Human Resource angle than it already is being. Britain's bad management record is not so much to do with the control of funding as it is to do with bad management. Plenty of large companies in this country are quite simply badly run, because the people running them are poorly trained or have often been over-promoted, or are so absorbed in job security that incentives are continually undermined. And it is much the same with state monopolies. If this problem were seriously tackled, the financial problems might begin to sort themselves out. But in something of a knee-jerk fashion it is always taken for granted that money lies at the root of the problem. Money is simply a method by which human beings regulate their behaviour, yet we assume that by looking at the thing financially the behavioural problems will resolve themselves accordingly. In reality it is the other way round.

The doctor told me about some of the social problems and pressures a good number of his unemployed patients suffer. He loathed the ignorant right-wing attitude that assumes poor people such as them are spongers siphoning every available penny they can from the State. He told me, with a degree of feeling that would be difficult for the most pitiful reactionary to ignore, that he goes into the homes of these people and sees their suffering, listens to their problems, and knows first-hand how alienated many of them feel from the rest of society. He said he would like to help such people. But the tax-cutting, make-what-you-can philosophy did, in his opinion, exclude such people from participating effectively in the mainstream organization of society. He asked, as so many people asked that I met travelling through England, why we cannot obtain the midway point. He would not mind paying a little more tax – again how often I heard this, from one end of the country to the other, like the refrain of a poem – if it meant a better, safer, more just society. Unlike those hugely wealthy hypocrites who

say this, he really meant it. Here was no naïve socialist who spent his years at university sitting in the corner of a dingy union bar rolling tatty cigarettes, developing a middle-class idealist's grudge against the ugliness of society, and dreaming about Marxism. Nor was he a liberal sentimentalist. He was a smart young man from a secure background, who admitted he had voted Conservative and as a student had been a vigorous believer in capitalism. But as we lingered at the door and watched the traffic passing at the end of the street, he asked why, as millions of others must do, *why* cannot we achieve simple, level-headed economics with a social responsibility? Probably because there are not enough decent people like him in positions of influence, with a sensible understanding of society, who are close enough to the rough texture of society, to understand what such phraseology even means.

I rode back into Bristol on the upstairs of a double-decker bus. The roads were busy. Some of the shops had crates of fresh fruit and vegetables arranged colourfully along the wide pavements. The video shops had pictures emphasizing guns and fists and chiselled masculine jaws glued to the windows. Groups of children could be seen climbing up and down slides, launching into the air from swings in passing recreation grounds; and above was the sky, the sky high, high above. Every so often, the bus lurched and hooted over to the side of the road and collected clusters of working-class passengers, some of whom might well have been patients of the doctor I had just left behind. There seemed to be a marked amount of coughing coursing throughout those smoky upstairs seats, a background noise I have associated with an assembled body of working-class people since I was young. As I looked at the cheap shops with their hideous facades and their discount notices filing past the windows, as I stared up row after row of Victorian terraced housing running at right-angles to the wide main road where once the trams would have groaned, I reflected on what the doctor had said. In spite of the reforms he was fortunate in that he had a personal interest which he had since been able to cultivate and turn into decent paying work. Because of what he had experienced to be their negative effects, the NHS reforms had, paradoxically, made him broaden his own horizons, and so he was in the process of becoming a part-time GP. But that is not what he, or the government, ever intended, of course. He had wanted to become a doctor since he was a child because he wanted to help people and do something useful with his life. Because he was now expected to perform duties that he did not spend his years at university training to do, for no commensurate rise in income, he was distancing himself from the profession because he was becoming disillusioned. With an ironic shrug of the shoulders he had admitted that he, too, could sell part of his time and his talent in the market-place, for greater remuneration with a reduced amount of stress. He had a wife and family, and various debts accumulated over the years appropriate to his class. He did not see why he should lower his standards. Though he passionately wanted to help human beings and cure disease, he was not prepared to sacrifice his family for the sake of being a doctor. Ultimately, he said he would even be prepared to leave the profession altogether and do something entirely different. I had no doubt that I had listened to the voice of a committed man. I knew I was on the side of the government in that I had no doubt that the running of the National Health Service was in need of a serious review. I knew also that one can pontificate endlessly over such sensitive matters as these, that there is a great deal of emotion bound up with any serious discussion of the subject of the funding of the NHS.

What I was less certain about was to what extent that doctor's decision to become a part-time GP had been a side effect of what the government has been claiming all along is necessary to the more efficient running of the National Health Service – namely, the application of market forces.

Bristol Past, England Present

The bits of Bristol I saw that were very old were interesting enough. I discovered a well-known little alley in the city called Christmas Steps, which surprised me by offering a tiny glimpse of Bristol the medieval seaport. It rather resembled a slab

of Lincoln or Canterbury that had been wrenched up and deposited rigidly on a cobbled incline, and is the kind of ancient thoroughfare anywhere would be quite happy to hear itself remembered by. With its gnarled shop fronts and worn flagstones and freshly-painted gas lamps running straight down the middle – the street 'steppered, done and finished, September 1669', at the personal expense of one of Bristol's wealthiest wine merchants – Christmas Steps offered a glimpse of the authentic old Bristol. A small glimpse these days it is true, one which peters out very quickly when you come out onto the streets crowded with tower blocks and traffic at the bottom, but a genuine glimpse nevertheless. Small patches like this can be found elsewhere, but in general Bristol the ancient seaport has long gone, and has been in the process of fading away for many years now. Even the famous Merchant Venturers' Hall, which no old guidebook could fail to gloze over, was blown to pieces during the war. For a long time, anyone thinking about Bristol probably thought of three things – Wills cigarettes, the city's most famous firm, Harvey's Bristol Cream, and Fry's chocolate. I saw something to do with the Harvey company, which is alive and well, down a back street near the university. As for the firm of Wills, cigarettes are no longer manufactured in the city at all, only cigars. The old firm had been absorbed in another great industrial merger, one of the commercial scions of our time, not long before I arrived. Its name has been changed and all cigarette production moved up to Nottingham, though the Wills family, who did not mind ploughing considerable chunks of their fortune back into Bristol, have left a worthy legacy to the city architecturally, one that will live on for many years to come.

That I found Christmas Steps interesting was underlined by the fact that I was drawn back there twice more – perhaps in reality I was trying to escape – on each occasion at night, to eat in an interesting little restaurant I found tucked away down among the duskiness. With a bit of mist gathering at the top of the steep steps blurring the glow of the gas lamps, with long shadows stretching over lumpy gables, with the city reasonably quiet at that hour, with darkness filling in the gaps between buildings hiding who or God knows what, it was possible to imagine something of the seafaring Bristol as it exists in guidebook imagination. After all, if there is one type of environment we probably still expect to find enveloped permanently by subtle swirling fogs – other than the London of the Whitechapel murders, or the city England as portrayed in hackneyed American films – then it must surely be an old English seaport. But though I could see the appeal of these ancient streets, and appreciate the aesthetic congruity of Clifton higher up the hill, I was now growing rather tired of antiquity. And Christmas Steps has none of that marvellous sense of cloudy vagueness during the daylight. As I emerged from the bottom of the alley for the final time, and passed beneath some modern brick architecture struggling feebly to echo the seventeenth-century nook and cranny braced against the incline behind it, a pair of police cars screamed past on the main road, I am sure through traffic lights that were still at red. Their hideous electronic sirens were wailing, their blue lights were flashing, and for a moment the modern Bristol lifting before me had the air of being only another sector of downtown America. Watching the cars disappear out in the direction of the docks made you realize that in broad twentieth-century daylight, you cannot escape the feeling that the emphasis placed upon ancient English thoroughfares such as Christmas Steps, on clusters of sagging timber-framed buildings, is all wrong. All the time, wherever you go, you find yourself walking up and down these oldy-worldy streets, staring in antique and craft shop windows, sitting in cafés or restaurants or pubs jangling with authentic beaten copper jugs playing gentle melodies in warm summer breezes, pandering to this continual idealization of the past, and are led to the cynical conclusion that nobody is interested in what places are like any more, only how they used to be.

During that final afternoon, I found my way through some impressive streets making up the bulk of Bristol's banking and old market quarters, walked across into the city's central shopping area grouped around Broadmead, and there sat on a seat surrounded by the busy crowds. Once again I took out the official Bristol visitor's guide. It was a substantial booklet, and from one end to the other emphasised nothing – almost

nothing – but the historic aspects of the city. It contained hardly anything but pictures celebrating the glories of the past. I turned the pages at random and found photographs of fluted columns and drawings of Norman castles. I flicked the booklet open again, I promise entirely at random, and saw a photograph of an elderly couple sitting atop a turn-of-the century motor car. Again, and this time a painting of one of Bristol's most famous citizens, John Cabot at the moment of his departure to discover the mainland of North America in 1497. Again, and I saw photographs of Wells Cathedral in Somerset ('the smallest city in England'), the grey ruins of Tintern Abbey miles away in Gwent, and a long cobbled street peppered with reproduction gas lamps. Again, and now I was looking at a picture of Brunel's *SS Great Britain*, and reading about a restored 1937 steam locomotive and an Industrial Museum. Pictures of newly painted barges, a woman dressed in period clothing in a nineteenth-century kitchen, warped timbers, restored alleyways, ancient engravings, Victorian ironwork, absurd indications that among a morass of ferro-concrete and glass you can find a handful of 'original' buildings that have actually survived – in other words, that what has survived is all that is worthy of being given credibility by your emotions or your perceptions. And so it goes, with an occasional reference thrown in, to the city's credit it has got to be said, to a science museum intended to make people more aware of the technology buzzing in the world around them, thank God; and finally a picture of the odd modern building, usually a church. But you have to search very hard indeed for much reference to anything that is associated with the world as it has really developed during the twentieth century. And it is worth remembering that the official visitor's guide for the city of Bristol could have its title changed and be promoting the official outlook of any major town or city in the land.

Throughout the writing of this book, I have felt myself torn constantly between the pros and cons of this emerging late-twentieth-century English cultural atmosphere; between the virtues good and bad of the new post-industrial nostalgia. One half of me appreciates the decent aesthetic qualities inherent to almost anything that is old; the half which enjoys a pleasant afternoon's stroll around it, and a browse among pot-pourri-smelling shops, with my family. But the other half steps back and understands the technological, political, and economic reasons behind the accepted social and aesthetic failures of much of the post-war era – something our official sentimentalists rarely do, least of all in doting guidebooks – the half that is continually aware of the huge amount of goods being sold in these historic shops that are now made in the developing countries of the East. It is this other half of me that questions seriously that a society that devotes so much of its energies to a systematic celebration of its past does so only because it does not, I say again, have a viable concept of the future with which it can feel comfortable or at ease. Why else look backwards unless you have no enthusiasm pulling your attention forwards? It is the underlying manifestation of decline. But then, I suppose it is inevitable that a society that is no longer officially geared to devising and making things should begin to idealize the period in its history when it was considered to be the workshop of the world, and made things all the time. Human beings need to devise and create, and if they can no longer do so via predominantly economic methods, they will find ways of doing so during their pastime and in their dreams. Perhaps there is some hope to be found after all in the fact that a people that still feels the need to extol so thoroughly the virtues of its past is at least feeling the need to extol the virtues of *something*, which is better than not extolling the virtues of anything at all. And here, inevitably, you come back again to our ailing economic performance, our inability to modernize, our badly educated and underskilled workforce – in effect, our lack of a sense of purpose or direction. In this modern nostalgia England, you step outside your medieval tea-room and glance appreciatively up at a string of bow-fronted Dickensian shop fronts. But, if you look hard enough, though of course you don't really have to look very hard at all, you begin to notice the little burglar alarms speckling those pleasant sagging facades made of real lath-and-plaster, making something of a mockery of your aesthetic awareness and feelings of historical romance welling inside. You see the real England that is quietly emerging. Notwithstanding these

contradictory observations, it is claimed that in the emerging post-industrial scheme of things we can all happily become dealers in the atmosphere of the past, dealers in knowledge, dealers in other peoples' manufactures, dealers in distribution, dealers in tourism and dealers in leisure; the neat little video cameras and the colourful little burglar alarms protecting us from the headbutting antics of the poor unfortunate savages, packed in between the slabs of pebble-dash and concrete a mile or so beyond, who are no longer required economically to play a part in the emerging scheme of things at all.

At such moments, you step back and begin to understand with a bang the nature of the powerful economic forces that really are at work beneath the surface of the late twentieth century Western world. Forces that are obscured, in this country at least, behind the veneer of dried-flowers hanging in baskets in shop doorways; behind beautifully restored dock buildings; behind the science parks stylishly clad in reflective glass and plastic laminate of the kind I had seen in Birmingham, with business-suited women wearing slender high-heels and sheer stockings weaving between the Japanese communications technology. Forces that are obscured behind restored railway locomotives and little cassette tapes relaying through hidden speakers perfectly the sound of a steam powered past. Forces obscured by the heritage-this and the heritage-that and by the talk of an easy-credit based economy dependant on the buying and selling of huge quantities of imported goods, that mysterious generalization 'invisible earnings' making up for the shortfall in our balance of payments. We are told, in fact, that our emerging post-industrial economy is as inevitable as it is desirable. The future emerging for the Bristol that was expanding all around me that day is the future emerging everywhere. It is a future we are confidently assured, and we can clearly see by using the eyes in our heads, is enabling us not only to deal in our past, but clean up our past and rediscover its aesthetic virtues. (This is the same past that was blown apart by those meddling moral aesthetes and social engineers, and corrupt private sector building companies and political crooks, given a free hand during Harold MacMillan's premiership.) The future that is emerging is a future whereby we can devote more of our energies to the cultivation, presumably, of our sensibilities, now that we are free from the restraint of enforced clumsy labour; enforced, clumsy, dirty manufacturing. It will be a society which is essentially information-based. Its wealth will be generated through what are ambiguously termed desk-based, knowledge-based industries in business parks and new towns and a handful of massive tower blocks being built above the old – as though the manufacture of components in a modern factory were not dependent upon the accumulation of extensive knowledge and experience, and comprehensive research and development!

This, we accept to be the broad face of the England of the future. Except for a minority of highly-skilled, high-technology industries employing limited numbers of people, manufacturing – the serious art of *making* things, outside a bit of part-time embroidery and basket-weaving on adventure holidays – will become a thing of the past. Instead the rapidly industrializing East will become the hot-bed of low-tech manufacturing which the West will neatly exploit. Because the West – the First World – will control the finance, the design, the processing of the essential information that makes the world economy tick, the Third World will in effect become our assembly line. Many of those countries' goods fill our shops and our mail order catalogues and our childrens' toy-boxes already, now that the old industrial heartlands of Britain and the United States are being wound down, their grime stripped away, their aesthetic qualities restored, romanticized, and assessed anew.

This, roughly, is the way things are going according to a number of observers and economic forecasters who from time to time make sweeping statements favourably to something of the effect of what I have written above. But there is in my opinion a very significant knock-on effect that could materialize if this great service-sector scenario were to become a reality on the sort of scale that is talked about; an effect none of the comfortable apologists of the post-industrial scheme of things appears seriously to have considered at all. And that is the social consequences this state of affairs might have on the mind and the spirit of our people, for it is always worth remembering that it is the social consequences that generally

mess up the economics. On the other hand, we should not be in the least bit surprised that commentators who have made a life out of economic forecasting, whose upbringing and education and subsequent lifestyle and careers have kept them a special distance from the nuts and bolts of what really goes on, who come nowhere near the workings of industry in a practical capacity, who have little understanding of the aspirations common to people who make and manufacture things, should have a profoundly different kind of aesthetic outlook on life to those that do. That they have little understanding of the way people think whose talents come alive when they are *producing* things, attending to practical problems and giving something constructive back to society, is not so much to do with ignorance as it is to do with the kind of environments and stimulations to which they have been subjected and how they were brought up. You only have to talk to people who manufacture or make things, dozens and dozens of whom I met during this journey both inside boardrooms and out, to understand there is a profound difference in psychology between practical people and many of the thinkers and politicians influencing our affairs. You only have to examine the difference in personality producers exude, as against so many of the dull windbags you come across who simply deal in things or try to organize them. Producers come across as being *interesting* people. Strongly motivated, they often strike you as being enthusiastic about the things they do and the world that surrounds them. They view society as a gigantic mechanism to which they are contributing a useful component, and by doing so this gives them a certain amount of personal satisfaction. It does not matter whether you talk to large-scale pottery or textile manufacturers, or small-scale engineers or manufacturers of over-bath shower screens in the back streets of Rochdale. You perceive in such people a quality of enthusiasm that is almost impossible to put down on paper seriously without being dismissed by that marked quantity of ignorant intellectual observers, who have no comprehension of the workings of industry, as 'sentimental', or 'naïve'. There are plenty of manufacturers and industrialists who are lousy employers, of course, and who would happily make their money in another easier, less responsible way if they could, had they not got bogged down in things the way they have. But they are outweighed by the manufacturers and industrialists who are absorbed by their businesses and their work, and who offer this country the best hope it has got. They are often filled with entrepreneurial flair, bursting with real patriotic feeling, none of your Little England and No Turning Back nonsense. They know instinctively that a nation that is proud of what it makes has its head more firmly on its shoulders than one that isn't.

The frame of mind that does not understand this, like that wider think-tank of boring economists, is, at bottom, constantly justifying its own emotional outlook on the world to itself in everything it thinks and says. Because, as a class, it enjoys a certain amount of intellectual influence and social prestige, it assumes the values it has accumulated at its own spectatorial level of society are automatically the correct ones. It is unlikely it will have much grasp of, or much interest, in science or engineering, for instance. Or that it can begin to comprehend the benefits of sound investment in research and development, and its importance to the growth of a modern civilized people; that it strengthens a society from below, not interventionistically from above. Once you do have an understanding of these things, it profoundly affects the way you contemplate the world that exists around you, because what is wrong with the world becomes depressingly clear. The ordinary people shovelled aside in debates, papers, and policy studies, the people still filling our factories, will not be content to be consigned to a dustbin of low-skilled jobs in a service-based economy, selling sandwiches or delivering laundry, nor should they be expected to. They are generally much happier as human beings when they are producing something, bringing out the personal expression in themselves. It is typical that the sort of middle-class academics who make money from the cultivation of their intellectual abilities, and profoundly influence our affairs instead of honing useful skills out in the market-place of the real world, should have no understanding of this, because it is outside their own rationality or experience, or the ambitions and expectations socially they take for granted as a class. Claiming that we have the wherewithal to design and conceive our manufactures then setting up production

lines in the factories of the Third World – as a good number of astute-minded gentlemen are doing in this country already, totally oblivious to the fact they are helping their country to fall slowly on its sword and bringing the day of reckoning ever closer – simply is not good enough. As a philosophy, it is contemptuous and irresponsible in the extreme. It fails to take into account the aspirations of huge numbers of people, from the industrial engineer through to the skilled lathe operator, who happen to be part of our economy, and who unfortunately, will need to be provided with jobs in the blossoming post-industrial Utopia.

Every time I hear someone talking smugly about the elimination of manufacturing as an important commodity of the 'post-industrial' British economy, I see those people I saw in factories in the Potteries and elsewhere being slapped squarely across the face. I see their sensations, their expression, their value as people, being indirectly condemned by naïve economists, social theorists, and inappropriately-educated politicians, who have never performed a proper day's work in their lives, to exist in an economic graveyard, padded out with a low-skilled, poorly-paid, inadequately-educated workforce. And with it I see their sensibilities becoming numbed, which for the future stability of our society I find deeply disturbing, as I suggested back in Liverpool. But we should still remember that, contrary to popular belief, it is industrial manufacturers, and a substantial body of skilled workers, who still earn this country its basic living. We ought also to visit, while we are at it, the end of year shows at some of our design colleges, our art schools, and our universities, if we really believe we needn't bother to manufacture things any longer, that we should dispense with the making of things industrially as a nation, that science isn't important, and that such an intellectually bankrupt situation ought even to be *desirable,* for Christ's sake. I am well aware of the statistics, though I admit it somewhat reluctantly, that point out that manufacturing need not necessarily form the bedrock of a sustainable economy, though I have my doubts even about that. What matters to me, as someone who has yet to come across a substantial body of post-industrial, service-biased apologists with a sound aesthetic awareness, or a practical understanding of what really makes the world and ordinary human beings tick, are, I say again, the social consequences in the medium to longer term – the same term when my own son, and millions of other children like him, will be embarking on their adult lives.

To me it is bad, *spiritually* bad, for a nation to lose the desire to produce things and assume all virtue lies inside an accountant's or a solicitor's or a money dealer's head. A skilled labour force is central to a sophisticated manufacturing economy. And a skilled labour force means better developed minds that are able to tackle the solving of problems, which means a more intelligent people, which means better overall brainpower, which means a nation with greater common sense, which means a stable, more successful, more civilized people. This needs to be shouted from the rooftops by every politician worth his salt. We have got to pull ourselves together before it is too late. An unskilled, increasingly illiterate, subservient workforce will have no means of releasing its emotional energies, or for that matter of being absorbed in anything deeply enough to contain them and enable them to attain maturity. Doped up on asinine television ramming home the prospect that nothing worthwhile can be achieved in life through personal initiative and effort, only by winning it on patronizing quiz shows or through dozy competitions; looking increasingly for stimulation to the bit of tatty excitement offered via its nightly dosage of violent video tomfoolery; swirling around in a vortex of drugs, cheap alcohol, crude thrusting sex, and crude sensations; kept down in a society which no longer possesses the economic framework to invest in them and train them properly, give them decent opportunities or a sense of function in life – a society that does not, in fact, value them constructively at all – then we might be in the process of lighting the fuse to a slow social timebomb. A timebomb that could explode with devastating consequences. But notice how in reality the fuse to that timebomb has already been lit, for a vicious circle is already established whereby the brutalization of masses of ordinary minds, this need for workers who are unskilled and lowly paid by day, masturbating mentally over the sound of machine-gun fire and explosions in their living rooms by night, not requiring to become educated, absorb

knowledge, or develop their minds, is becoming an important ingredient to a substantial private sector of the post-industrial economy. What is more, in the post-industrial scheme of things, in this burgeoning reassessment of ourselves from one-, two-, or three-hundred years ago, when one of the chief characteristics of society was its brutality, this body of people is going to grow. Not only is the wheel of irony coming full circle.

Of course, one tires of listening to a handful of snobs who despise the imbecile nature of popular mass culture; who bray endlessly about the crassness and the moronic stupidity of the working classes. One tires of being showered with spittle from a series of raspberries blown continuously by they-that-disapprove, in the same way one tires of reading again and again the barrage of abuse denouncing video culture, youth culture, pop music, satellite dishes, junk food, Spanish holidays, etc, *ad infinitum*. What a pity these people lack the intellectual depth to understand how important this gutter culture is, and will increasingly become, to them retaining their superior social positions as worshippers of a watercolourist's delicate past; just as they fail miserably to understand the economic reasons behind its growth as a social phenomenon at all. Meanwhile, a number of those rapidly-industrializing Third World countries, eager to bring themselves up to First World standards, see the need to produce a well-educated workforce, as the Japanese and the Germans have been busily doing since 1945, if they are to become the hotbed of manufacturing which the developed countries will continue neatly to exploit. If the current post-industrial climate is indeed the way things economically are going to go, then fine; there is not much that can be done about it. But make no mistake, sooner or later the indirect effects of that climate might come back at us like a boomerang, dragging behind them storm clouds we can as yet not even begin to comprehend.

The West is powerful, of course. Iraq knows clearly enough what can happen when the economic stability of the West is threatened. But if we can be bothered to look deeply enough, we might find that the battlefield that is quietly emerging is going to be a very different kind of battlefield indeed. The outcome of that battle, the seeds of which we can see in the economic

decline going on all around us, might not be quite so certain, if we happen to be up against societies that for the past fifty years have committed a major proportion of their energies to producing a highly-intelligent workforce with real brainpower.