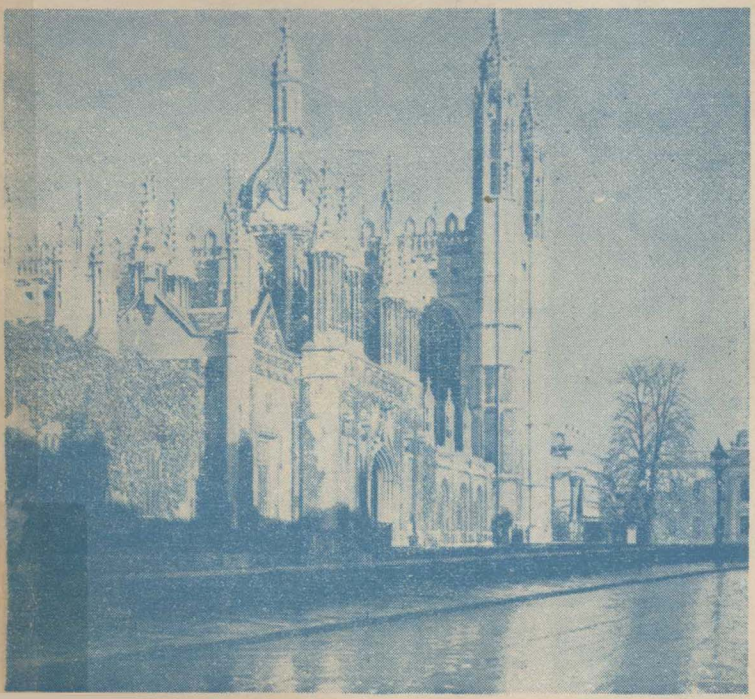
Peter Bromhead

Life in Modern Britain



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Preface

This book attempts to present a picture of the British country and people as they are at the present period, in the second half of the twentieth century. Its main objective is to convey information about the political, social and economic arrangements by which the British people manage their affairs. History is kept to a minimum. The emphasis is mainly on the features of British life which seem to be distinctive or characteristic of Britain rather than of Western Europe as a whole, or which seem likely to be of special interest to observers from outside. It is not my purpose to praise or to blame, to attack existing institutions or to defend them, to suggest reforms or to argue that reforms are not needed, but rather to present the facts as objectively as possible. Inevitably the process involves some choice of emphasis in which subjective elements must have some influence. The life of the British community, like that of any other, has its difficulties and its irrationalities, and many features which produce friction and dissatisfaction among elements of the British people themselves. Without some recognition of these the whole picture would be lifeless and inadequate, so wherever the facts suggest problems, I try to indicate what the problems are and to discuss them.

Great Britain is an island on the outer edge of the European continent, and its geographical situation has produced a certain insular spirit among its inhabitants, who tend, a little more perhaps than some other people, to regard their own community as the centre of the world. The insularity produces a certain particularism among the numerous groups of whom the whole community is composed. Every Englishman, in so far as his life has various aspects corresponding with his work and his personal interests, is involved in several different particular groupings. But each group tends to produce its own special language to describe its own activities, a language which cannot be easily understood even by other Englishmen.

In this book I have been constantly anxious to avoid the use of insiders' language when dealing with any particular aspect of British life, but to look at each aspect from the outside, both in the use of language and in the attitude from which the different problems are approached. I have assumed a fair knowledge of ordinary literary English, and have tried to realise that all the problems of social and political organisation which are discussed present themselves in other communities as well as the British. Many British institutions may seem mysterious even when they are explained, just because the language of the explanation is insiders' language; I have tried to use language which takes the mystery away.

The English love familiar things but they share a world in a twentieth century which is full of change. In our own generation the people have become accustomed to rapid changes in the laws regarding social services and the activities of the state, and new changes are taking place from year to year. So it is impossible to keep exactly up to date with all the details of the system of national insurance, for example; also the relations between Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth are changing from year to year. Many countries, formerly under colonial rule, became independent members of this group in its new form during the 1960s and are altering its values. This book is concerned mainly with the actual life of the ordinary people of Britain, and so does not attempt to deal with the vast and interesting questions of the Commonwealth, except in a short section of the final chapter, where something is also said of the position of Britain as a member of the European group of peoples.

I should like to say how grateful I am to my wife and to the many friends in Britain, Sweden and elsewhere, who have encouraged me in writing this book, suggested ideas for inclusion in it and read sections of the text. Their generous interest has saved me from many errors of fact or emphasis, and the book owes a great deal to their help.

For this fourth edition very extensive revisions have been made, to take account of the political and social developments of the early 1970s. New statistics of many kinds have been brought in, the reform of local government in 1974 is discussed, and some other new trends, in events and in ideas, are brought into the picture.

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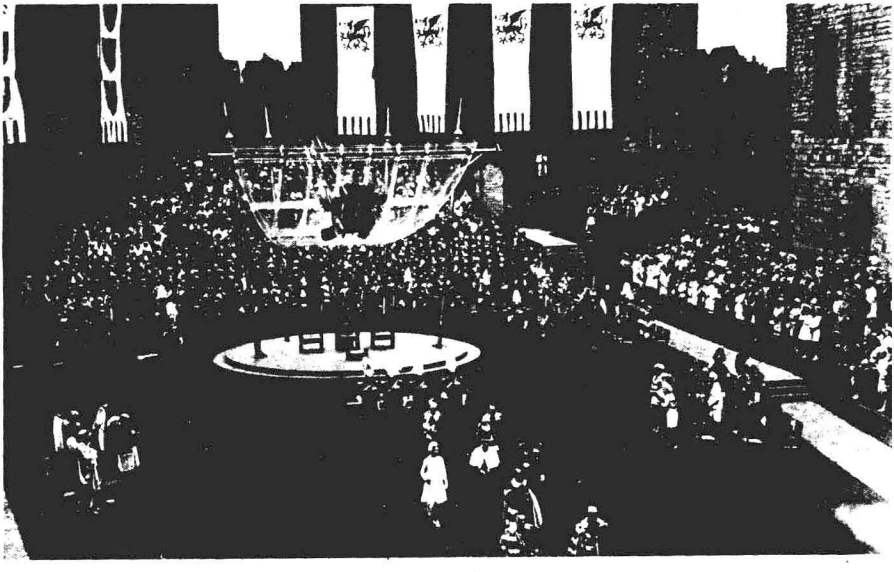


RIPON
COLLEGE
STUDENTS UNION
STUDENTS UNION
EDUCATION
NOT A PRIVILEGE
NECESSITY
"NOW IS THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT"

1

The Country and the People

English people tend to be rather conservative—a little more so, perhaps, than most others. This conservatism is not quite the same thing as that of the political Party which calls itself 'Conservative', and about half of the population, sometimes a little more and sometimes a little less, are prepared to vote in elections against the Conservative Party. In fact, the conservative attitude, with a small letter 'c', is probably strongest of all among Labour voters; it consists of an acceptance of things which are familiar, and an important aspect of it is an inclination to be suspicious of anything that is strange or foreign. Walter Bagehot, one of the most effective writers about the English, described this characteristic, and assessed its effects on life and politics most effectively, in his *Letter on the New Constitution in France and the Aptitude of the French Character for National Freedom*, written in 1852: 'I fear you will laugh when I tell you what I conceive to be the most essential mental quality of a free people, whose liberty is to be progressive, permanent and on a large scale: it is much stupidity.' He goes on to cite the ancient Romans as an example ('for, with one great exception—I need not say to whom I allude—they are the great political people of history. Now, is not a certain dullness their most visible characteristic?'), and continues:

I need not say that, in real sound stupidity, the English are unrivalled. . . . In fact, what we opprobriously call stupidity, though not an enlivening quality in common society, is Nature's favourite resource for preserving steadfastness of conduct and consistency of opinion. It enforces

Above: the investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales at Caernarvon Castle in 1969.
Below: Students demonstrating for higher university grants.

concentration; people who learn slowly, learn only what they must. The best security for people doing their duty is, that they should not know anything else to do; the best security for fixedness of opinion, is, that people should be incapable of comprehending what is to be said on the other side. . . . Nations, just as individuals, may be too clever to be practical, and not dull enough to be free.

It was suggested to the keeper of a petrol filling station that it would be a good idea to keep a stack of pieces of paper to wipe the dipsticks of cars, used for measuring the engine-oil. His look of incomprehension and obstinate hostility, as he brought from his pocket the same old filthy rag which he used for this purpose, ten or twenty times every hour, day after day, expressed exactly the spirit Bagehot had in mind. In much the same way most English people have been slow to adopt rational reforms such as the metric system, which is expected to come into general use in 1975. They have suffered inconvenience from adhering to old ways, because they did not want the trouble of adapting themselves to new. All the same, several of the most notorious symbols of conservatism are being abandoned. The twenty-four hour clock was at last adopted for railway timetables in the 1960s—though not for most other timetables, such as radio programmes. In 1966 it was decided that decimal money would become the regular form in 1971—though even in this matter conservatism triumphed when the Government decided to keep the pound sterling as the basic unit, with its one-hundredth part an over-large 'new penny'. Temperatures are now measured in Centigrade as well as Fahrenheit. Most garages do now provide dipstick papers and dispose of them in a civilised way.

English conservatism does not imply a high degree of conformity in attitudes; rather it is a distaste, arising partly out of laziness, for any inquiry into the validity of familiar ideas or practices. English people tend to be hostile, or at least bored, when they hear any suggestion that some modification of their habits, or the introduction of something new and unknown into their lives, might be to their advantage. This conservatism, on a national scale, may be illustrated by reference to the public attitude to the monarchy, an institution which is held in affection and reverence by nearly all English people. There may be a few mild grumbles to be heard in some places about the high cost, in money terms, of the trappings of the monarchy, and in particular of the royal yacht, but there are virtually no republicans in England. There are in fact

many sound and reasonable arguments in favour of the monarchy in its modern form. It embodies, in a most satisfactory way, the continuity of the life of the state and of all its people; it supplies the need for a symbolic head of the state with much more glamour and interest than could be provided by a figure-head president, probably with more efficiency even from a political point of view, and without any embarrassing need for periodical presidential elections; and the personal comings and goings of the Queen and of the other members of the Royal Family, both on great occasions like royal weddings and on small occasions such as the laying of foundation stones and visits to institutions, provide a sum-total of interest and pleasure to the people which must be worth far more, even in terms of money, than all that the whole apparatus costs. But most people prefer not to explain their feelings about the monarchy in these terms; rather they accept it, just because it is there and because they are familiar with it. Probably it can perform its rationally-acceptable functions all the better for the absence of rationalisation about it.

Apart from the conservatism on a grand scale which the attitude to the monarchy typifies, England is full of small-scale and local conservatisms, some of them of a highly individual or particular character. Regiments in the army, municipal corporations, schools and societies have their own private traditions which command strong loyalties. Such groups have customs of their own which they are very reluctant to change, and they like to think of their private customs as differentiating them, as groups, from the rest of the world. In time people may be ready to replace one habit with another which is more agreeable, but the change in attitude is rather slow, and it is often difficult to predict whether or not a particular innovation will be readily accepted.

One thing is certain. People do not accept change because they are told to. The constituted authorities in central and local government are objects of suspicion, faced by a critical public. The proportion of people who join protest groups is high: not just groups to protest against the nature of society, and to plan revolution, but groups which identify some definite plan or happening which they think is wrong and organise themselves to find a remedy. For ten years the Concorde aeroplane project has been vigorously attacked as a scandalous waste of resources; far more so than in France.

Meanwhile foreign travel, ever more widespread and beginning

at a lower age, is changing tastes and preferences, irregularly and unpredictably.

Modern methods of cooking, by electricity or gas, were accepted long ago, and few people would now favour the old type of coal-fired grate; but the new cookers still produce the same roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on Sundays. For the business of heating houses many English people remain strongly attached to the open coal fire, although it causes a great deal of work and adds to the pollution of the air, and sometimes pours smoke into the room which it is heating. The owner of a large house, when she was converting some upstairs rooms to serve as living rooms for lodgers, spent a great deal of money and trouble in putting in dummy fireplaces, which would never be used; she thought that a living-room without a fireplace would be a room without the basic characteristic of cosiness which it was her human and hospitable duty to supply. Many rooms are in fact heated by gas or electric fires, but these are usually placed in front of old-style fireplaces, and many people choose electric fires designed so as to look like coal fires, with imitation pieces of coal which are lit when the current is turned on.

Another English characteristic which Walter Bagehot observed, closely linked with conservatism, was what he called 'deference'. In his day English society was fairly rigidly stratified, and each man knew his place in it. The development of industry and trade was indeed making it possible for a man to rise in the world if he was hard-working, ambitious, enterprising and fortunate, but nevertheless every man was ready enough to be deferential towards those who were, at a given moment, superior to him in wealth, status and power. (The Scots, however, were always much more inclined to believe that every man was as good as every other.)

Since Bagehot's day belief in equality has spread rapidly, so that the deference, which he regarded as a solid foundation of social stability, has been mixed with a contrary spirit. People who are politically on the left have regarded the pursuit of greater equality as the main objective of political action, and even the Conservative Party has taken care not to dissent too openly from the egalitarian trend. The old deference of the inferior towards the superior has by now been largely replaced by an assumption that there should be politeness and decent human respect between man and man, irrespective of status. But the change has not been altogether smoothly accomplished, and there have been resentments and

bitterness where people have felt that they have not been getting the recognition that is their due. On the one hand there are complaints from the already-established classes that the welfare state is making the country rotten, by providing too much security and other benefits, so that nobody bothers to work on his own account. At its worst this attitude reflects resentment that security is no longer a privilege distinguishing a few and that the road to success is more widely accessible than it used to be. On the other hand there is resentment that any authority except that of the mass, any social or economic privilege, survive at all.

When we look at the social changes of the past twenty years we may feel that this old conservatism is dead. It is remarkable how some of the social criticism of the 1950s seem out of date now. At that time, the critics said, Britain was still really controlled by a group of people enjoying positions of privilege and superiority, and the term 'The Establishment' was used to describe them collectively. This term, derived from the older idea of an established and dominant church, was first used in print in this new sense in 1955, and in 1959 an interesting collection of essays on the subject, entitled *The Establishment*, was published. Its editor, Hugh Thomas, wrote:

> The word 'Establishment' simply indicates the assumption of the attributes of a state church by certain powerful institutions and people; in general these may be supposed to be effectively beyond any democratic control. . . . It is probable that the introduction of the word indicated a certain increase in looking at English politics in a French style; those who detect an 'Establishment' at work in England are the cousins of those who in France have detected the more obvious role of 'the 400 families'.

It is easy to trace a British group of 200 families at the very centre of power and influence. Their members still hold many of the leading positions in the world of finance, banking and insurance. Yet many people who begin as complete outsiders make their way right into the middle of the Establishment and are quickly assimilated by it.

Much of the talk about the Establishment was critical of the supposed injustice of a social order in which personal ability and merit did not have as much importance as the 'right' family connections in assigning positions of influence. The supposed social injustice could seem to damage the whole working of the society and the economy by creating feelings of resentment; at the same

time it produced inefficiency by not making the best possible use of the talent spread out among the people. The criticism had great effect. Another notion arose, given expression in Michael Young's book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Merit, or intelligence together with effort, hard work and dedication to tasks, came to be seen as the valid qualification for positions of influence; the old Establishment has become less easily identifiable, more diffuse, less based on family, much less self-confident. Its traditional figures look rather stodgy in the world of Mr Wilson, trade union power and pop stars.

Even the Conservative Party has become rather suspicious of hereditary privilege. In 1955 almost all the English members of the Conservative Cabinet who were not themselves peers (i.e. lords) were closely related, themselves or through marriage, with holders of hereditary titles going back for three or more generations. By 1974 the main leaders of the Conservative Party were people from various types of middle-class background, like the Labour leaders and the civil servants with whom they work as ministers.

Another development, more purely social, may be noticed. Until the 1950s social difference was much based on factors which were not relative to occupational status or money, but on characteristics associated with at least two or three generations of family privilege. It was important, if a person was to be socially acceptable, that he should at least speak with the 'right' accent, standard English rather than some local pronunciation. There were unwritten social rules about the choice of certain words rather than other words, and some types of behaviour in very trivial and insignificant matters were quietly regarded as signs of being outside the right circles. The 'right' people were not taught these things; they just did them without thinking. Such subtle distinctions were not mentioned in public until about 1960 after an expert in linguistics, Professor Ross, analysed them and invented the terms 'U' and 'non-U' (upper-class and non upper-class) to describe them. Nancy Mitford's book *Noblesse Oblige*, which reprinted Ross's analysis, sold over 200,000 copies. The public discussion may have helped to kill the distinctions. Anyway, by 1970 the whole subject had come to seem old-fashioned. 'U' children are showing their dislike of the old social distinctions by adopting 'non-U' habits and speech. Social leadership among the young has in some respects passed to the pop-singers, to Carnaby Street and its successors. Teenagers often know each other by Christian name only, and

don't think of looking for signs of social identification in one another.

It would be too much to say that there has been a great social revolution. There are differences between generations, though the older do not want to seem to have been left behind. Having been anti-authoritarian in their relations with their children, they have seen their children develop values of their own and, for the most part, have found some attraction in these values, which favour freedom and openness as well as equality. Within all social circles there is an increasing readiness to accept each individual for what he is, and a decline in conformity.

Instead of a single Establishment the trend is towards a development of several distinct élites, each with its own values yet each prevented by the proximity of the others from thinking too highly of itself. People who want the satisfaction of belonging to an exclusive group can find it through freemasonry, or clubs, or dozens of other devices, each important in its own way to its own members, but no more than that. British society is becoming steadily less inward-looking, and one factor that has led to the change has been the assimilation of more than a million people from India and Pakistan, the West Indies and Africa.

The United Kingdom includes four nations, and there are discernible differences between them. Both in Wales and in Scotland there are strong demands for more recognition of their national distinctions through the system of government. Each of these countries' people have always been more attached to the idea of social equality than the English, and in both there has been more equality of opportunity. Scotland has always fostered education on a democratic basis, and has always had a separate educational system. The Union with England preserved a separate legal system and distinct local administration; there are distinct Scottish customs and ways of speaking the English language. Wales has been assimilated administratively, but in recent years has been given special arrangements. But Welsh people (like the Scots) are more conscious of family connections than the English. Most Scottish and Welsh people live in small and heavily concentrated areas of coalmining and heavy industry (Glasgow–Edinburgh in Scotland, Glamorgan–Monmouthshire in South Wales), but they are very conscious of the mountains and empty spaces that cover most of their countries. Northern Ireland, similarly divided between industrial Belfast and a mountainous countryside, is

tormented by differences between Protestants (who are strongly attached to England and Scotland) and the big Catholic minority whose sentimental links are with the Irish Republic.

Within England there are differences between the hard North, with its reputation for straight speaking and suspicion of hypocrisy, and the supposedly more artificial South. These differences are becoming less real than they were, with the increasing tendency of people to move from one part of the country to another. The higher one goes up the social scale, the less the regional differences. But the mere fact that the differences are supposed to exist keeps them alive to some extent.

The North is always associated with the harsh heavy industries, coalmining, iron and steel and textiles, that developed in the nineteenth century, in Lancashire, Yorkshire, and the far North-East—and with the bare, harsh, steep hills of the Pennines. Together these influenced the life of the people. The South of England has always been less definable. Some of it is flat, some undulating, but except for the moorlands of the South-West the hills are no more than three hundred metres high. The countryside is green and tame, with small fields and many hedges. Outside London there are few large towns, but small towns and suburbs spread and wander everywhere, so that the countryside has a townish feeling.

This dynamic southern and south-eastern area is, not very surprisingly, more prosperous than the rest of the country. Relatively fewer people leave school at sixteen, fewer die of bronchitis, more are in the two highest social classes. In spite of the great increase of population, fewer people live in overcrowded homes than in the midlands and north. (London itself is bad in some of these respects.) Although much new industry has been developed in the 'dynamic' south, only a third of the people are engaged in manufacturing industry, as compared with half in the midlands and north.

Although England is so small a country the distances within it always seem to be greater than one would expect. This is partly because quite a short journey brings many changes of scene, partly because the crowding of so many people into so small an area makes travelling rather slow. England itself has 46 million inhabitants in 50,000 square miles (125,000 square kilometres)—nearly the same population as France, which is more than four times as big. Wales, with 2,700,000 people in 8,000 square miles,

and Scotland, with 5,000,000 in 30,000 square miles, are less crowded. Round London and Manchester and Birmingham, one can travel quite long distances without ever being clear of houses, but there are still some parts of the country which are empty and wild.

England is highly industrialised and was the country in which the earliest developments of modern industry took place. Many of the great inventions which were the foundation of modern industrial processes were made by Englishmen or Scotsmen, and there were men at the same time who possessed the vision and ability to put the new inventions to use. The original basis of British industry was coalmining, and the early factories grew up not very far from the main mining areas. Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne, each on a convenient river, became great centres of engineering and shipbuilding. Lancashire produced cotton goods and south-west Yorkshire woollens, with Sheffield concentrating on iron and steel. Birmingham and the other towns of the midlands developed light engineering, and later became the chief centre for making vehicles. More recently, oil has taken the place of coal for many purposes, and instead of a million coalmine workers in 1900 there will soon be only 200,000. The world does not go to Britain to buy textiles or ships as it did in the past. New light industry, much more diversified, has grown up in place of the old, and much of it cannot be so conveniently situated in the old industrial north. All regions are becoming less specialised, but the new industrial growth has been mainly in the south and midlands. The population in these areas is growing fast. Government action is encouraging new industries in the old areas, and without it the relative decline of the North would be faster still.

The central parts of the old industrial areas, with their long rows of red-brick houses, are still rather ugly and grimy. A hundred years of winter fogs have left their mark. In some ways it is unfortunate for England that so much of the earliest industrial development took place here. Those responsible for the growth of the factories in the nineteenth century had to make their own plans, and could not learn from the mistakes of others. It was in and around Manchester in the middle of the century that Friedrich Engels found such impressive evidence of what he interpreted as the horrors of capitalism, while his collaborator Karl Marx worked over his books and papers in the British Museum in London.

By now the really bad slums of the central areas of towns have