



POINT of ARRIVAL
ANDREW
GRAHAM-YOOLL



Point of Arrival

**Observations Made on
an Extended Visit**

Andrew Graham-Yooll

PLUTO  PRESS

London • Concord, Mass

First published 1992 by
Pluto Press, 345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA
and 141 Old Bedford Road, Concord MA 01742, USA

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7453 0671 3 hb
ISBN 0 7453 0672 1 pb

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Graham-Yooll, Andrew.

Point of arrival : observations made on an extended visit / Andrew Graham-Yooll.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-7453-0671-3. —ISBN 0-7453-0672-1 (pbk.)

1. Great Britain—History—Elizabeth II. 1952– 2. Great Britain—
Social conditions—1945– 3. Great Britain—Civilization—1945–
4. Graham-Yooll, Andrew. I. Title.

DA592.G68 1992

941.085—dc20

92-2729
CIP

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Palatino
by Stanford DTP Services, Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain
by Billing and Sons Ltd.

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In Spanish

Tiempo de Tragedia, Argentina 1966–1971 (Ediciones de la Flor, Buenos Aires, 1972)

Tiempo de Violencia, Argentina 1972–1973 (Editorial Granica, Buenos Aires, 1974)

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*To Micaela,
who said it was time
to come to England.
And to Inés, Luis and
Isabel, who had to come too*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Micaela Graham-Yooll, David Holden, Moris and Nina Farhi, Susan Ashe, Eduardo Crawley, Norman di Giovanni, Biba Singh, Humma Ahmad, and Lesley Baxter, among others, for reading and commenting on many passages.

And thank you for their support to Stephie Tomalin, Lita Vogelius, Pat and Eve-Ann Prentice, Hugh and Mavis Ogus, Philip and Jane Spender, Ruth and Ronnie Ramirez, Celia Szusterman, Juan Antonio Masoliver, Patricia Feeney, Inger Fahlander, Martin Ennals (1927–1991), Richard Gott, Nicholas Shakespeare, Daphne and Dennis Lovelace, Edward and Julie Rooth, George Gibson and the Anglo-Argentine Society, Miriam Frank, Matthew K. George, Michael Simmons, Lorry Leader, David Elstein, John Fielding, Martin and Angela Smith, Rebecca Leith, Janet and Stuart Russell, Dr Kathy Wilkes, John and Liz Illman, Steven and Nina Lukes, Walter Jeffrey and Marie Banks at the Writers Guild of GB, Jenny Pearce, The Lord Avebury, Dr B. Golden, Isabel Hilton, Peter Elstob, Elizabeth Paterson, Josephine Pulleine-Thompson, Harold Harris, Isabel Quigly – and all at English PEN – Richard and Cristina Whitecross, Oscar and Patricia Grillo, Betty, Liz, Richard and Penny Graham-Yooll, Molly, John and Gillian Tovar, Monica Tovar, Graham and Jane Rooth, Rita and David Twiston Davies, Hugh and Georgie O'Shaughnessy, Lydia and Moises Spitz, Sylvia Libedinsky, Agustin Blanco Bazan, Freddy and Evelyn Fishburn, John King, Susan Meyer-Michael and Hans Smith, Sabine and Pi Comberti, Paul and Jeanette Kriwaczek, Judith Vidal-Hall, Helen Bamber, Benjamin Pogrund, Sylvia Oclander, Roger and Mary Omond, Hugh Thomson, Peter Grimsdale, Miriam Frank, Anthony Whittome, Euan Cameron, Frank and Marsh Taylor, Jasper Ridley, Alicia and Steven Merrett, Adam and Margaret Raphael, Alan Ross, Jason Wilson, Matilde and Joel Gladstone, Liz Calder, Margaret

Busby, John Hatt, Anne Beech, Roger van Zwanenberg, Linda Etchart, Aleks Sierz, Fern Bryant, Mike Petty, and many many more.

The interviews referred to or used in the writing of this book took place as follows:

Salman Rushdie, writer, 30 October 1981;
 Mulk Raj Anand, writer, 16 April 1984;
 Chris Mullin MP, 19 July 1988;
 David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, 21 July 1988;
 Anthony Sampson, writer, 31 August 1988;
 Anthony Howard, journalist, 31 August 1988;
 Jeffrey Archer, novelist, 5 September 1988;
 Joan Ruddock MP, 7 September 1988;
 Paddy Ashdown MP, 9 September 1988;
 Derek Nimmo, actor and director, 13 September 1988;
 James Berry, poet, 14 September 1988;
 Diane Abbott MP, 18 May 1988 and 15 September 1988;
 John Smith MP, 19 September 1988;
 Bernice Rubens, writer, 22 September 1988;
 Paul Bailey, writer and broadcaster, 1 November 1988;
 Norman Willis, TUC Secretary General, 20 December 1988;
 John Heath Stubbs, poet, 10 July 1989.

I am grateful to all of them for their help and patience.

A shorter version of 'Spooks' (p. 24) appeared in *So Very English*, edited by Marsha Rowe (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990).

The passage from Paul Ferris' *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters* (London: Dent, 1985) on page 20 is reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates.

Preface

In the mid-1980s the writer and novelist Margo Glantz, at the time Cultural Attaché at the Mexican Embassy in London, suggested that we should try to explain to ourselves and to each other the countries we had chosen to live in. Both our families had known expatriation – hers from the Jewish Ukraine, mine from Scotland, which is another form of wandering Jewishness – which had taken them across the world from their places of origin. We agreed that if a destination, a point of arrival, is not explained in all its goodness, kindness, discomforts and wrongs, and in all the terms that affect the small existence of each individual, no lasting relationship with a city, a country or a society can ever be hoped for. Margo Glantz returned to Mexico at the end of her posting and we started a rich and copious correspondence. My notes to her soon filled hundreds of pages. These impressions of England, as written to Margo Glantz, have been extracted from all that paper. The result may have a scattergun effect at times but, like correspondence, the writing is wide ranging. Clichés, such as the English cup of tea, are omitted as other, personal clichés are created. Really, this book is about a personal failure to come to terms with a place more than it is a text ‘against’ that place. Still, the pleasures and the pains, the great little satisfactions, the disappointments, the moments of ecstasy and laughter, of genuine happiness, were many and varied. The books listed aided and, sometimes, illuminated the long process of acclimatisation since my arrival from Argentina in 1976.

Andrew Graham-Yooll
London, January 1992

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1

Arrival

To London, and to all of England, I owe many lives – my own, my wife's, our children's. The new life that we were given at Victoria station Customs office on arrival cancelled the past in all but the remoteness of memory.

Flight into exile produces an impression of victory by creating a sense of relief; but the successful escape postpones realisation that exile is defeat. England does not understand exile. Hence she demands coming to terms with her rules immediately. All former rights are lost in the attempt to enter another's land. There is no one to turn to. Solidarity is non-existent among the tired tourists who carry their bags under their eyes and pant their bad breath with the hostility of insult.

I wanted to shout at the visitors that we were alive.

'Please, look, we survived; we escaped being killed; we are not travelling for fun but out of necessity.' But there was no response. Yes, we all have problems, a man seemed to say.

That was at the end of 1976. Another life started after passing through Immigration.

Say something friendly at the beginning. There is all of eternity in which to grumble. Praise for the host may ensure favourable reactions towards the exile.

Where else in the world do you get the traffic to stop by stepping off the pavement on to a set of black and white lines? In what other great capital does a taxi, a London black cab, offer so much security, comfort, space and insulation from city turmoil? Where else in the world do you find such wonderful television; unarmed – and disarming – policemen, still the most likeable anywhere; and shopkeepers who call a customer 'Love'?

Where else do you find 'train spotters', people on railway stations who note the numbers of trains they will never board? In many countries, noting such numbers is a breach of security.

Where else in the world's great capitals is life still respectably relaxed? The life in one year in London equals the strain of ten minutes in New York or the stress of one week in Rome.

Where else do so many of the fantasies of children's stories, exported to the Empire as part of Pax Britannica, become so palpable, as the English search for a childhood they were robbed of at their schools? Dick Whittington's cat sits frozen in statue near the A1 in north London; the cross still stands at Banbury; the sites and sounds of nursery rhymes and songs are preserved throughout the land so that adults can play at being the children that domestic discipline forbade them to be.

Where else do you find pragmatism taking the sting out of unpleasantness? The thought is prompted by the filthy streets of the main cities. Criticism is countered by the argument that Britain is not just its big cities; go and see the rest of the country, forget the dirt. It seems to me that innate meanness makes it a crime to waste water by hosing pavements clean. Hence they are not flushed or swabbed, and stations look neglected however many sweepers may be employed. This stinginess explains the resistance to showers and bidets and a preference for baths. Unless the water is seen to go down the drain brown with grime it has not been well used. Pragmatism determined that the 'Keep Britain Tidy' slogan should be abandoned because there was no tidiness to up-keep. It became the 'Tidy Britain Campaign' in the first half of 1990. It is impossible to get annoyed, seriously or for any length of time, with London's road transport. The London red buses fit the city like clothes on a person.

The list of happy experiences, important or very minor, is long. The low angle of the morning sun penetrates sitting rooms deeply and conveys a picture-postcard warmth. In long, dark winter evenings lights go on before curtains are drawn and permit the passer-by to snatch a sinful peep at what I dream must be an untroubled domestic existence.

The haphazard beds of flowers in public parks and gardens fill the soul with colour, at once wild and in a nurtured order that is a reminder of the wilderness carefully preserved. Late August picnics on the heath in Hampstead Garden Suburb, with cloths on folding

tables and the unique summer scene of men in white playing cricket, are a joy and a calming sight. Wooden benches inscribed 'In Memory of Mrs Ena Brown who ate her sandwiches here for 30 years', offer a place of rest and an impression of civilised unhurriedness.

Oh, to arrive in London while the sun shines, for that is when people speak to one another in the street and in cheerful tones. In the sunny intervals you can see the English. But by teatime when the days grow grey, these same people fall silent and moody. Conversation about the vagaries of the weather, a national joke glumly told, may be the nation's disguise for its feelings. In fact, the weather never changes. The forecast is always the same whatever way it is read: 'Sunny intervals and scattered showers', the frequent repetition of which has become, in my own thoughts, 'Scattered intervals and sunny showers'. But that is a perversion of memory, just as my mother never got accustomed to the Creed at Sunday service when, instead of parroting 'He suffered under Pontius Pilate ...', she always rattled off '... suffered under a bunch of violets'.

The weather report regularly brings a forecast of change, but constancy seems the main climatic characteristic. How were ancient travellers ever guided by the stars in a land where the stars are seldom seen? The weather is a distraction. Pragmatism demands realistic assessments, which should attempt to be friendly.

I want to be positive in the beginning. When newly arrived, I wanted to walk in the drizzle in Bridlington and shout, 'England, I love you for letting me be here!' But that, in Yorkshire or anywhere in the kingdom, would be described as an outburst of passion by a foreign romantic. England is not romantic; it is comforting, reassuring, stoic and sometimes even stolid, but not romantic. It is lovable, but not romantic. So the fantasy of romance and a declaration of love could be dispensed with on arrival.

Settle for what is familiar and really likeable. There is a reason why so many regard London as the last inhabitable great city. To be sure, the skyline is pockmarked by the excrescences of the property speculator, huge and rude towers of glass, steel and cement. But it is not dominated by them,' wrote the North American journalist Bernard Nossiter in *Britain: A Future that Works* (1978).

The Polish journalist and author Ryszard Kapuściński (1932-) once said that he could not write a book about England because the English never became excited enough about anything to give him

sufficient material for a book. At first that is the island's undoubted beauty. People like to frighten each other with desperate situations and improbable scenarios from which they draw comfort in the assumption that such extremes cannot happen here. And sometimes, as a result of this confidence, people are not prepared for emergencies when they do happen. They muddle through when trouble arises, and without preparation for a repeat occasion. The dramatic instances of poverty in the great cities, the many aspects of domestic brutality and the complexity of political mismanagement are discussed with clinical coldness or not at all. There is still an unspoken belief that certain matters are not suitable for conversation, while non-existent issues are discussed with the certainty of realities. These are English myths. One recurrent myth is that most English institutions are better than those of any other place, be they justice, the health service, or the national sense of fairness. Whatever their faults, they are still superior to all else.

Without passions of their own or much knowledge about those of others, the British see their kingdom as quite safe. Conversation is not encouraged as social entertainment. Gossip, the weather and other trivia form the bulk of intercourse at English dinner parties. Opinions are stated briefly and are final, and discussion is curtailed by the sarcastic rejoinder. Correspondence is preferred for communication. Is there a theory to be drawn from this? A good postal service has evolved from the bad weather, which encouraged an indoors existence and letter writing rather than public communion. Where the climate is hot, postal services are inefficient and outdoor personal contact essential. The telephone provides a middle way, but subscribers are convinced that such an instrument could only have been invented to enslave the more talkative peoples by high indebtedness. Will higher temperatures, like those of the summers of 1989 and 1990, change such customs and services? Wide-open windows now make English domestic upheaval audible from the pavements. The rows or the music from inside other homes could replace indifference with curiosity.

England, on arrival, still offers the pleasure of finding families in the suburbs who collect milk bottle tops for charities and raise money for a society to protect hedgehogs. It is a reward for arriving exiles with nerves on edge to discover that England is safe enough to be able to ignore politics and worry about greenfly on the roses or little white bugs on the leaves of the potted yucca.

What a delight it is to hear the English answer with absolute conviction that they are not sure. It is comforting to hear unquestionably firm opinions delivered with disarming understatement. It is so much easier to adapt to such discretion hesitantly articulated. Foreigners are not wanted, but nobody says so. Like flu, the foreigner is something that happens; he is always there, and no way has been found to be rid of him. The old clichés are still here. England is still afraid of foreigners as an entity – particularly Germans who make war, Italians who bed fair English females, French who eat garlic and Japanese who creep about everywhere and are without humour.

The English still do not seem concerned about what individuals are, so long as they can be ignored. Elsewhere people are judged by the objects and possessions about them. And yet, in the century's last quarter, the English have become less trusting, more materialistic, more noticeably racist, traditionalist and conservative. It is not easy to come to terms with the change in the deep-seated decency hitherto attributed to them. And yet ... how can such generalisations be made to stick when I remember staring at two Jews, their wide-brimmed hats flapping, their patchy beards windswept, tiny eyes behind bottle-bottom glasses, arguing on Golders Hill Park, interrupting their heated discussion only to count their numerous children, who played with the many offspring of a large Muslim in white *kurta* who stood by a wife covered in black shrouds?

There is an air of enduring acceptance still that says the decency is not over. Or is it just the line of least resistance disguised as tolerance? The British use superlatives for their own leniency shown in their great cities – except when distracted by talk of the weather, dry rot and public transport. They hope that the crowding of their narrow, inadequate city streets will be a temporary problem to be solved one day soon, perhaps by a bolt of lightning which will melt down all cars to a blob of metal – preferably with a foreign driver still at the wheel.

People are proud of London but do not like cities, which are places in which to work and where only the very unfortunate – such as foreigners – live. Real life lies in the leafy suburbs and in dreams of villages, in market towns and in country houses. Green belts and gardens stir more sentiment than famous museums. And when the ideal country haven is not found, the country is moved to the towns. The secret longing for village life can be found in the

reluctance to give full addresses; offices, theatres, cinemas and many houses are given names but no street numbers, for after all, in the mind, any address is just up the road.

How do you fall in love with a new country when you were born in another? How can you fall in love with one woman if your mind is on another? Do you discover a country by a sense of timing, the way a man finds a woman? Will the emotions be reciprocated?

How is a country, a city, discovered? Stop gazing at it as an outsider, perhaps, and become a participant. Read all about it. The city will never stop supplying information about itself. Amid such a richness, where is the starting point for this latecomer's tribute?

Where are the authors who can write about revisiting places, the sounds and the tastes, without regretting change? Few have captured their own island in words of affection that are not mere photographic descriptions. Few can portray a place and invite its exploration without indulging in the sickly sweetness of nostalgia.

I think I have been here before, but know I have not. Writers, like expatriates, know that a person can return to a point of departure he or she has never been to or never started from. Even if this point is a place that has never been occupied physically, writers and expatriates retain in their mind scenes from a past that is not theirs, and report on its dynamic humanity and inspiring energy as if it were their own. But not always can they convey this rich imagination. A city has poets to paint it and artists to describe it, but how do they discover, uncover and reveal what has been gazed at often by many? In 'The Philosophy of Sight-Seeing' in the book *The New Jerusalem* (1920), G.K. Chesterton found – ahead of my exploration – that everything to be discovered had been seen before. 'It may be called a contradiction in terms to expect the unexpected,' he wrote. 'It may be counted mere madness to anticipate astonishment, or go in search of a surprise.' Yet in London it did not seem unreasonable to seek the unforeseen, for that was also what Chesterton sought. 'I wanted to be entertained at the firesides of total strangers, in the medieval manner, and to tell them interminable tales of my travels.' But the listeners had already heard the same tales from earlier, ingenuous visitors. Robert Browning offered reassurance in *Home-Thoughts from Abroad* (1842), telling those Englishmen in foreign lands that they could be home by simple recollection of Spring, which in memory was all year round. The non-English quoted Browning, 'Oh, to be in England/ Now that

April's there,' and remembered what they wanted to imagine was England. W.H. Auden in *Look, Stranger!* (1936) encouraged the outsider to imagine the old discoveries and reassured him or her that they were real. 'Look, stranger, at this island now.'

If brought up on selected passages of George Orwell, such as extracts from *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1940), the stranger is offered the revelation that the England arrived in has always been and will not go away. 'The gentleness, the hypocrisy, the thoughtlessness, the reverence for law and the hatred of uniforms will remain, along with the suet puddings and the misty skies.' Orwell went on: 'It needs some very great disaster, such as prolonged subjugation by a foreign enemy to destroy a national culture ... But England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and, like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and remain the same.'

Browning, Auden and Orwell offered a strong sense of nation, and plunged the newcomer into intellectual confusion. It remains difficult to understand the English sense of national identity – there is no reverence for a flag, no beliefs outside of the palpable narratives of heroism at war nor a decently composed anthem – yet one is assured vehemently that a sense of nation exists.

Transmitted impressions are the most easily accepted before personal discovery. The ideas of Britain that I received before my arrival were those of a great nation about which all was once worthy of imitation by others overseas. More recently I have found that much of what I admired was fading rapidly. But those of us from 'abroad' believed what we had been told about the greatness of the metropolis. It was only on closer inspection that the social codes and rules of behaviour of the old imperial capital did not stand up to scrutiny. However, Britain still wonders why the customs it exported at a time of economic domination have been dismissed as opportunism. If they were good for the English, why not for the world? Why can't the world be like England?

This is why the English do not understand exile. They have the only country in the world to which a native-born son or daughter has always been able to return. They are convinced that their country has no past to expiate, no memory which could or should threaten that of others or make the present uncomfortable. There have been no pogroms here, no concentration camps, no holocaust.

England was never closed to the English, as so many other borders were shut to their own nationals. To the English, exile is romantic, at times titillating, at times a source of impatience; for, once the alien has gained a safe haven, why should the lamentations continue? Thus exile is a state of mind with which many find it impossible to connect. With words of sympathy used for any occasion, such as a discussion of the weather, a person can side-step, skirt and avoid the small matter of foreign difference.

Before my arrival, England had been a place of other people's memories. Their experiences were the past, but not the place of my future. England had been an immovable rock to which dying expatriates from colonial careers and foreign postings returned. The dreams of expatriates were of future days remembered, and which may never have existed. Fantasies had been set in green gardens bathed in a summer sun. In some Buenos Aires houses I knew, one clock had been set at Greenwich Mean Time as a reminder of 'home'. Picture calendars – ordered from Harrods in London – fixed the woodland colours and countryside contours that fired the imagination forever. The expatriates longed for return to a 'home' about which absence had made them almost ignorant. And when that dream future arrived and became the present – in the planned retirement, with a small pension in a southern county – then, in turn, the expatriate past became brighter. The chintz of the distant colonial sitting room, kept as it had been at 'home', in retrospect looked cleaner in the long-vacated remote company house. The past could again be safely smiled at.

In Argentina, the gentleman described by the social historian Mark Girouard in *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (1981) was the epitome of Englishness.

He was always ready to give up his own time to come to the help of ... those less fortunate ... He was an honourable opponent and a good loser; he played games for the pleasure of playing, not to win. He never boasted. He was not interested in money.

This was what any Anglo-Argentine, perhaps any neocolonial, aspired to. And in the camaraderie of the club bar it was compatible with the humorous definition of the English abroad as given by Major C.S. Jarvist, CMG, OBE in *The Back Garden of Allah* (1939).