

God Bless The Child

The British don't like children. They prefer dogs in fact. **James Runcie** gives chapter and verse

The British, when all is said and done, do not like children. Like Mary Lamb, they believe 'a child's a plaything for an hour' that should then be kept quiet for the remaining 23 hours of every day. In fact, as a nation, we prefer dogs. For a start there are more of them (7.3m dogs as opposed to 6.6m children under 10); and their food is more extravagant (in our grocery supermarkets, canned pet food is the single largest selling item, its market value grossing £950m a year). Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. In 1693 William Penn wrote that, 'Men are generally more careful of the breed of their horses and dogs than of their children.' Nothing has changed.

Our neglect of children begins in the maternity hospital. Despite the valiant concerns of doctors, nurses and midwives, the provision of anything beyond paper sheets, basic care and a ratio of one bath per nine beds is something only enjoyed by the Bupa subscriber. Once out in the wide world, the still-frozen child benefit of £7.25 per week does not even cover the cost of nappies (eight nappies per day at 14.7p each for seven days equals £8.23 in case you are wondering, Mr Clarke of Rushcliffe, Notts).

It is you and your baby against the world.

A recent journey I made from my home in St Albans to meet a friend for lunch in London should serve as an example. I left the house in the morning, only to find that my way was obstructed by builders who had failed to cordon off their site or provide adequate crossing arrange-



ments. This meant that I had to take my child and buggy on to the main road in order to proceed any further. Negotiating fast and heavy traffic, planning to stop off at Mothercare on the way, I soon passed a pet shop. In St Albans, there are as many shops and stalls selling provisions for pets as there are for children (eight of each); but let that pass.

At last I saw Mothercare. Seeing it, however, is not the same as reaching it, because at the nearest pedestrian crossing the pavement is too narrow for a parent to stand behind a buggy without the buggy jutting forward into the road, obstructing oncoming traffic. Furthermore, there are only half the required number of lollipop ladies in the whole of St Albans to help children cross (13 vacancies out of a total of 26 posts). Because this is a small town, the Mothercare only has limited stock, and so the item required needed to be ordered. Never mind. I proceeded on the way to the station, passing three more dangerous crossings (two of which have had broken pedestrian signals for over eight months) and arrived at the railway station.

Here I had to climb up one staircase and down another, carrying a buggy as I went, ignored by the dog-loving financial investors, insurance advisors and tax specialists hurrying off to earn their £571.60 per week (*New Earnings Survey* 1989). At this point my daughter needed a change of nappy. Unfortunately, the toilets were out of order. Almost needless to say, there are no baby-changing facilities at any British Rail station or

on any British Rail train; in fact the only place where there are baby-changing facilities in a man's toilet is in the store Ikea, a Swedish firm, some 25 miles distant.

The journey was, by now, ridiculous, simply because no public architecture is designed with the child in mind. On British Rail, it is impossible to change platforms without climbing stairs. On the London underground, where escalators are a necessity, there is no help available for women with children, pregnant mothers, the elderly or the disabled. The new automated ticket facilities are too narrow for a parent with a buggy, and dangerous to pregnant women. Yet I chose the tube because buses have inadequate storage spaces and insufficient space in the gangways to move with a child.

Arriving at the restaurant, there was no high chair, no children's menu, no offer to blend the food specially. This would be ridiculous in a country like Italy or France, but in Britain it is the norm. A bowl of water for the dog? Why, yes of course. A high chair for the child? You must be joking. Only in Britain could a publishing venture recommending hotels and restaurants 'at which children are welcome' be considered profitable (*The Family Welcome Guide*, Futura £6.99).

On the continent, such an idea would be laughed out of existence, since children are welcome everywhere. A baby is considered a joy and a grandparent a source of wisdom. In Britain, however,

the first and seventh age of man are still considered simply a matter of proceeding from 'mewling and puking' to a state of 'sans teeth sans eyes sans taste sans everything' - with the emphasis on the everything. Children in Britain are considered a nuisance. They must be seen and not heard. If a child dribbles on the table of an Inter-City train you are asked to keep your child under control. But if a dog jumps up and slobbers over your face, 'he is only being friendly'.

I returned from lunch (avoiding the rush-hour) and thought about childcare. The creche where I work will come into operation next month. There are 60 places for over 15,000 employees. In Britain, creche is more a style of knitting than a means of childcare. Our nursery provision is appalling; only 44% of three to four-year olds are in publicly-funded services (as opposed to 95% in France and 87% in Denmark). A woman wanting to get off the dole in central London needs to find an average of £150 per week for someone to come and look after her child, or £100 per week for a registered childminder. There is, of course, no tax relief for childcare.

I'm sorry. This was going to be a light-hearted article about the way in which we prefer dogs to children. Must stick to the point. But I can't. Children in Britain are ignored, exploited and abused. They are handicapped, and treated to the same blind-eyed ignorance as those with disabilities. Only in England can the kidnapping of a baby be seen as an investment opportunity. This is Simonetta Hornby, the solicitor to Dawn Griffiths, auctioning the baby-snatch story to the press: 'We're talking heart not money here. But we will not go for less than £40,000, and personally I'm looking for offers between £50,000 and £100,000.' A baby disappears. This is tragedy. She returns and the story becomes farce. In Britain, you cannot leave a baby in the back seat of a car in South London while you visit a cash dispenser. You cannot let your seven-year old child go to the shops in Brighton without fear of attack. Child-line receive a thousand calls a day. In the period between November 1, 1988 and October 31, 1989 they counselled 267,725 children. This is a child-hating nation.

Our attitude to children shows just how emotionally stunted we really are. Britain is riddled with the fear of love. We dare not risk the challenge, the potential for wonder and loss, and the responsibility of parenthood. We dare not spoil our children. We suffer a fantastic lack of imagination, and the sins we visit on our children return a thousand-fold in the frightened, cynical, untrusting adults we become.

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