

Variant Readings

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OF course Hunslet is not Gorbals! And of course Richard Hoggart's early days may have been cast in shallower waters of proletarian misery, or his memory may work on the Freudian principle of easily forgetting the unpleasant—or it may be that he is too much of a "gentleman" to mention such things as mass unemployment, the "Mean Test" and the hunger-marchers. But it is hard to find the working-class of one's childhood and adolescence in these quaint characters with their stereotyped phrases, their peculiar reading habits and apolitical, jingoistic attitude to life.

Hoggart writes as a visiting anthropologist of a behavioural persuasion might: he has captured something of the naive verbalisms which serve as the small-change of working-class social intercourse and sometimes as a substitute for thought. He has captured some of the atmosphere and a little of the sound common-sense of the working class, and there are some authentic details: enough to make one realise just how thinly the skin of academic training covers the raw integument of proletarian experience. Perhaps it is the Irish in me (my earliest memory is being sung to sleep with Fenian laments and triumphal verse—"Kevin Barry", "The Smashing o' the Van") but this quasi-urbane, meticulous dissection of the superficial verbal behaviour and some of the leisure activities of the great working-class recalls to mind the scathing (and probably irrelevant) comment of my Irish grandmother whenever an Englishman was inadvertently mentioned in the course of conversation. She would screw up her face as though

tasting the bitterness of death in her folk-memory of the Irish potato famine and would declaim with full Celtic vowels: "John Bull—with his belly full!"

What is missing in Hoggart's picture? Above all else, the *gaiety* of working-class life, as one remembers it from a proletarian childhood and youth in Gorbals. It was a stew of nationalities—Jews, Indians, Italians, Poles, Russians, the natives, and, thank God! the Irish. And the politics!—there were anarchists, communists, syndicalists, Irish Revolutionaries, there were even a few members, or rather, supporters of the Labour Party (this before the National sell-out!). The songs, the jokes, the political arguments, the fights on Saturday nights, the parade of drunks frog-marched each by four or five policemen, and used as battering-rams to open the swing doors of the police station, the gang-fights, even the occasional murder, the "characters" like "Nimble Jock" who sold you a gold watch for a shilling, the old man whose name escapes me, forty years in an asylum and according to him the only sane man in Glasgow for he had a certificate (his discharge!) to prove it, the blind beggar on Jamaica Bridge and the harmonium-player, and the street artist. It was true that not everybody had a mother who could sing a different song every hour of every day, a walking repertory of the old-time music hall; not everybody's grandmother (the Scots one) was a pipe-smoking, beer-drinking, flea-catching cantankerous "character" because of her miserly habits, her suspicion of the "catholic Irish" and her addictions to snuff, tobacco, beer and food. But life was

gay and colourful; not the drab, club-singing chara' outing, psalm-singing monochrome which Hoggart depicts.

It was serious too, and the most serious thing in life was education. It was a way of escape from the derelict slums, the reeking tenements with their semi-public lavatories, their scabrous stairheads, their relatively astronomical infantile mortality and T.B. rate, their overcrowding, their bug-ridden interiors—but most of all, their lack of privacy. Education was a right and a duty, but it was above all a way of escape from the insecurity of life and employment, from back-breaking and soul-destroying work.

For this was the other serious undertone and overtone of working-class life: the bitterness at the injustice of it all; the craftsman's pride in his job humiliated in the dole queues, the prying of the "snoopers" from the "burro" (Min. of Lab.), the unavailing search for work. The

tradition of John MacLean was the flux which united the two elements: the hunger for education and the resentment at social injustice. And from John MacLean the threads ran out in all directions: first consul of the glorious Soviet Republic for Clydeside; the man who marched the unemployed of his day into the flash West-End churches; the teacher who organised classes on Marx for working-men; who went to prison . . . who did everything admirable, a perfect proletarian knight. If one worked hard enough one might even become a teacher like him (or Annie Maxton if one was a girl) . . . who knows, one might even organise a class on Marx for working-men.

And then, omnipresent was the ferment produced by the Irish. What *was* the correct periodisation of the new era—was 1916 or 1917 the dawn? Jim Connolly, or Lenin? A Nation Once Again, or the Workers' International?