

Who are you and what do you think you've been doing all these years?

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► *Iron Curtain*
and its publication

NK: Could we start by having you say something about the book you've just completed? I gather it's, at least in part, a history of 'the iron curtain'.

PW: I began with the idea of investigating the Iron Curtain as a political metaphor that had shaped the second half of the twentieth century. I started out believing, like Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair and almost everyone else, that this grimly symbolic apparatus was first lowered into the world in 1946 and then lifted with comparable suddenness when the Berlin Wall was breached in 1989. So I went to the assumed place of origin, Fulton in Missouri, where Churchill gave his famous speech, and the plot started to unravel from there.

Fulton is a fairly typical small town in the Midwest: you can get at least halfway there by imagining a brick-paved Main Street and a courthouse, paling fences and wide-porch timber houses, some of them considerable mansions on large, tree-covered plots. Yet it turned out also to be a place of memorialisation and international pilgrimage, devoted to the considerable cult that has since been made of Churchill's fleeting visit. It's got a fairly predictable collection of statues, plaques and an 'English' memorial garden too, but it also boasts larger structures. The town's most prominent building is a large seventeenth century church by Christopher Wren, shipped there as a blitzed ruin from London in the 1960s. Close by stands a stretch of the Berlin Wall, imported, reassembled and converted into an art work by Churchill's grand daughter at a later date.

Looking at these unlikely presences, and reading the speeches of the various leaders who have come to Fulton to speak out in Churchill's wake – Thatcher, Reagan, Walesa, Gorbachev etc. – I found myself wondering what was going on. The Iron Curtain may well have been among the most influential political metaphors of the twentieth century but, as I investigated the speech and its reception, it became abundantly clear that it was only in Cold War mythology that Churchill's 'oration' could be seen as the beginning of the story. For more than forty years it suited both sides to believe this – for Stalin, the idea that the Iron Curtain was launched in Fulton made it a product of western aggression, while in the west this 'origin' supported a symmetrical ideological accusation. I went to Fulton intending to write a book that would open with Churchill's 1946



Berlin Wall and church of St Mary the Virgin, Fulton Missouri, 2003

'oration' and then proceed towards the present on a more or less chronological basis, but the inadequacy of this approach quickly became obvious. Instead, I've placed Churchill's Iron Curtain in a longer history, which suggests different questions about the Cold War decades. Rather than coming forward from Fulton, I've gone back to the eighteenth century theatre, where 'iron curtains' were first introduced as anti-fire devices. The political metaphor emerges in 1914, launched by members of the British anti-war movement who'd once had the Liberal Party in common with Winston Churchill. These internationalists used the term to condemn the war between Britain and Germany, and then went on to apply it to the Allied blockade of Soviet Russia in 1920. So I've been writing a book about the way in which this political metaphor functioned over a longer period – it's a history that is connected to a wider theatricalization of international politics in the twentieth century – before coming back to question the widely held belief that the 'Iron Curtain' disappeared with the Berlin Wall, with which it did indeed become so closely identified in the sixties and seventies.

NK: It's being published by Penguin in the States and Faber here, isn't it?

PW: Well, that was the idea, but not any more. I thought this approach would interest my contracted publishers, who surely have no need for another predictable trudge through the Cold War, but this wasn't how things worked out. I sent a lot of the text to Faber in September 2004. A long and deadly silence followed and then, about a year later, an abrupt cancellation was communicated to my then agent. When Viking Penguin received the draft at about the same time, they too declared it quite unpublishable – I never really found out why, or whether their reaction was in anyway co-ordinated with Faber's, because my editor there lost his job a few days later.

I could (and, of course, did) speculate about the collusion between persistent Cold War ideology and the stupefying market 'realism' of bad trade publishing but, to be honest, this is the way nearly all my books have gone. I'm used to dragging them through disintegrating contracts with publishers who, if they are feeling polite, use words like 'original' and 'brilliant' to mean 'unworldly idiot' and 'it will never sell'. *The Village that Died for England* nearly expired on its way through this corporate thicket, and *Tank* had an utterly chaotic journey to publication on both sides of the Atlantic. So I have had another round of familiar problems with the new book – more delays and arguments about long since spent advances, new additions to my already long list of ex-publishers and ex-agents. Faber told me they would struggle to sell 300 copies, but I am glad to say that the book was well received at Oxford University Press, who immediately saw the point of what I was doing and will be publishing it as *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* on their trade list in October 2007.

► *Tank* and its reception

NK: What did you think of Peter Wollen's review of *Tank* in the *London Review of Books* (www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n22/wollo1_.html), later collected in his *Paris Manhattan: Writings on Art*? It was a piece that conveyed praise and enthusiasm, he said your book was "fascinating", but also seemed to imply a slightly distanced disagreement.

PW: I thought it was agreeably odd, and, of course, not really a 'review' at all. As I recall, Peter didn't really comment on the book. Instead, he took it into the library, read his way back into its sources via the footnotes, and then chose his own quotations to assemble a parallel version of his own. In the end there were two tanks, separate even if parked on the same lawn. His, being a hybrid of art and virtual reality, was more Californian, and perhaps also more like a surfboard, than mine.

Perhaps he thought mine was a bit old-fashioned. When we met a year or two after his article was published, he commended the stained glass tanks in my book – the ones that are to be found in memorial windows installed in British churches at the end of the First World War. I couldn't figure out whether he was really interested in the wider project. I opened with the well-known image from Beijing, 1989 – the moment immediately after the massacre in Tiananmen Square, when a single Chinese protestor heroically arrested a whole column of tanks by standing in front of them as they tried to pass along Cangan Boulevard.

I did so because I wanted to investigate the symbolic powers of this normally overwhelming machine, and to establish that these were neither a matter only of prehistory and the largely fictional inspiration of the very early prototypes, nor of a secondary 'reading' in which the tank is exploited as an 'image' or sign. Writing with a civilian's eye, I wanted to investigate how the tank had come to exist as a terrifying representative of state power that, as I found out, was first engineered out of Edwardian British fantasy. But I also wanted to show how the so-called 'moral effect' of the tank on onlookers remained an essential part of its military utility throughout its history, and surely not just in the early years when the machine was still technologically primitive and had little more than its forceful and unexpected appearance to go on.



Tank in Poznan military museum fitted with crocheted floral 'tea cosy' by Jerilea Zempel, 1998.

I wrote the book at the end of the Cold War and in a period when people were still talking of beating swords into ploughshares. I remember being impressed by the sight of a scrapyards full of old tanks in what is now Slovakia and, a year or so later in 1993, visiting the tank gunnery ranges at Lulworth in Dorset to watch the British army blowing up surplus tanks in front of Russian observers, in accordance with the new Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty. I suppose my book was also informed by that optimistic climate – a post-Cold War attempt to dismantle the tank, or to 'convert' it back into its cultural components.

NK: What specific problems did you encounter getting this argument into print?

pw: There *were* difficulties with *Tank*, not least because the project was quite hard to grasp. I remember a Polish former general looking at me quizzically and saying that, surely, a tank has nothing to do with culture, which he took to be my proper concern. Some, who had read my earlier books, thought I had gone astray, as if to write about such a machine was inevitably to submit to macho fascination and technological pornography. Meanwhile, the hardware freaks found their own ways of being appalled by the result (if you are really interested, you can check their reviews on the Amazon.com page). Editors were torn between their own appreciation of

the project and a resigned conviction that the only likely market lay firmly in the 'guns n ammo' camp. I had to fight quite hard to keep the chapters arguing that J.F.C. Fuller, a British pioneer of the strategy that latter became known as the blitzkrieg, was actually rephrasing his earlier description of the poetics of Aleister Crowley, the poet, occultist and scandal-ridden advocate of 'sex magic'.

I was also late in completing the book – these projects really don't fit into tidy deadlines, especially if your advances only cover a fraction of the time they take to write, and if you allow research to reconfigure your thinking as you go along. It went through two British publishers before ending up with Faber. After a brief accommodation with another American house, it was bought by Michael Nauman at Holt. I was still working on the book when he went off to be the Minister of Culture in Germany. His successor was blatantly uninterested in the project and, after another of those long and indolent silences, demanded to be repaid. So the contract got cancelled just as I was finishing. My then agent was optimistic that he could get a better deal, so we agreed to refund Holt and then found that no one else was interested after all. The book was being rejected by the more obscure American university presses by the time an editor at Viking/Penguin eventually picked it up for less than we had agreed to repay Holt. I don't want to moan about this, but it could not be said, on the basis of my experience, that the trade press is a particularly good place to be if you are writing anything that doesn't closely coincide with somebody else's often quite ignorant commercial calculation!

NK: We've mentioned the Peter Wollen review of *Tank*. Were there other reviews that proved critical to the book's reception, and sales?

PW: In Britain *Tank* was assaulted early – you can often spot the spoilers by the fact that they come out before the publication date in an attempt to influence other reviewers. It got hit in the TLS by the Conservative military historian, John Keegan, who is the right person to have as an enemy as far as I'm concerned. While writing the book, I had phoned him to ask what he thought of the Tiananmen Square image, and he abruptly dismissed it as being 'of no military significance'. So in a sense the book was written against that outlook and the idea that the tank is only a matter of rivets and gun tubes and clean-cut manoeuvres of the kind that military historians like to represent as sweeping arrows on maps. No room in this mentality for the tank as a dictator's podium, an emblem of state power, a raiser and breaker of morale, a crusher of civilians, a silent 'peace-keeper' or, for that matter, for the historical fact that some of the most significant tank campaigns of the First World War were actually fund-raising operations conducted on the home front, in which the tank served as a travelling 'bank', using its considerable powers of compulsion as a 'patriot tank' to encourage working class investors to buy war bonds etc.

As an affronted gatekeeper, who would later tell me that the problem with 'culture' is that it licenses anyone to write about anything at all, John Keegan was full of irritated contempt. Indeed, he suggested it was a disgrace that Faber had seen fit to publish the book. The *Guardian* gave it to a military rivet-counter who also missed the sound of 'squealing sprockets', as I remember. But there were more intelligent reviews, including one by General Sir Michael Rose, the British soldier who had been in charge of UN peace-keeping operations in Bosnia in 1994. He welcomed the book as a useful source of ammunition for anyone involved in trying to reform the military.

I was very lucky in the United States, where it came out in 2002. The *New York Times* sent it to a Canadian named Bruce McCall, a slightly surreal cartoonist who used to work for *Mad*, and who also does *New Yorker* covers, and he loved it. McCall has produced a wonderful series of drawings

showing hypothetical vehicles from the fifties – he calls them ‘the cars Detroit forgot to build’ – and he understood that it was neither by accident nor incompetence that the book did not consist of hormonally driven battle narratives. He wrote a very enthusiastic review and the day it came out, I was phoned by the publisher’s publicity people who asked me about the book as if the review was the first time they had ever heard of it. As I understand it, the entire hardback edition sold in a few days: 9000 copies went out. Then came 9/11, and the paperback, which appeared shortly afterwards, sold less than the hardback. I’ve always hated the suggestion, which was sometimes to be heard during the rise of ‘theory’, that critical thinking and writing now belong exclusively in the university, but I can’t claim that publishing gets any easier for those who try to work between that system and the wider public.

► *On Living in an Old Country*

NK: What were your employment circumstances when you were writing your first book, *On Living in an Old Country*? You weren’t in university work, you had returned to England after doing a Master’s degree in Vancouver, and I gather from some of your other publications around this time that you were working for various charities and cultural organisations. It was around this time you published things like *What a Way to Run a Railroad*.

PW: *On Living in an Old Country* really started off as a collection of essays written in the early eighties, when I was also working full time, mostly in the voluntary sector. I had come back to England from Canada in 1979 with absolutely no sense of what I could do, completely detached from any sort of coherent employment possibility. The book might have been a Ph.D dissertation had I been able to get funding. I was at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham for a year in 1979/80.

I had applied there after reading *Policing the Crisis* while still in Canada, but I was in no position to sustain that connection and, although I kept in touch with the ‘popular memory’ group there for a little longer, I took my own project in different directions. We had these radical transformations going on under Margaret Thatcher, and I had dropped out of a university system in which life – mine at least – had come to seem like one long reading list obsessed with methodology and too disengaged from actuality. I’d taught English 100 courses in Canada, and I remember thinking that there’s one thing I know I can do, I can teach writing. So I was soon making a living by teaching communication skills in workplaces up and down the country.

► Voluntary sector

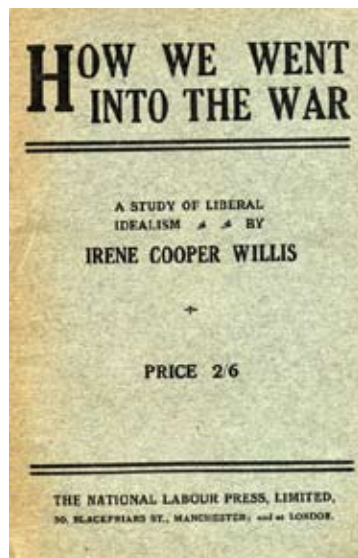
To begin with I worked with a management training charity called the Industrial Society, since dismembered to create an endowed base for the journalist Will Hutton. I got pulled into the voluntary sector from there. At that time, I was one of the few people in the country who, by sheer accident, could combine some experience of management training with at least some familiarity with the values of mutual aid and campaigning groups. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations set up a management development unit, and I was asked to be the head of it.

It wasn’t just a managerial indoctrination job. We were trying to clarify what the desirable organisational culture and procedures were for ‘not for profit’ agencies that were increasingly being drawn into state programmes under the rubric of ‘welfare pluralism’ or, in Thatcherite language, of ‘rolling back’ the state. We aimed to develop an organisational culture in the voluntary sector, which enabled agencies to be both effective and in control of their relationship with state funding. A lot of organizations at that time would get involved in youth training schemes, say, and then they would rapidly become service-providing bodies and they would lose *all* their genuinely voluntary qualities: they would become lowcost – sometimes actually quite good but sometimes not – runners of youth employment schemes.

I did that for about five years, and while doing it I wrote *On Living in an Old Country*. The NCVO office was in Bedford Square, which happens to be conveniently placed for both the British Library, then still in the British Museum, and the University of London Library at Senate House, so the two sides of my life were quite easily reconciled in those years. *What a Way to Run a Railroad* was a provocatively incomplete pamphlet in which I, Charles Landry and others connected to Comedia (formerly the Minority Press Group), tried to argue against the often deliberate blindness that oppositional projects and publications at that time often showed to matters of management and organisation.

► Cultural Studies? NK: Do you see yourself as a practitioner of 'cultural studies'?

PW: In a limited sense, yes, but only if we get over the idea that 'cultural studies' was invented at the University of Birmingham in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and then transmitted to the American academy from there. There are other tributaries that are surely worth remembering. When I was working on the Iron Curtain, for example, I came across the work of three women



who were writing in Britain during and after the First World War: Vernon Lee, who, as it happens, took the iron curtain from the theatre and turned it into a political metaphor on Christmas Eve 1914, her friend Irene Cooper Willis, and their follower Caroline E. Playne.

Writing as active members of the anti-war movement (they were all connected to the Union of Democratic Control), these three offered an uncompromisingly critical analysis of the ways in which the belligerent states occupied and manipulated the minds of their peoples. They paid close attention to the machinery of censorship and state propaganda, the exploitation of jingoistic forms of national patriotism, the war-sustaining closure of thought imposed through press, pulpit and other agencies. They also tried to show how Liberal ideals were used to prolong the war, by turning it into a 'holy' war to end all wars.

There are all sorts of things to argue about in the various books these three published in the twenties, but theirs was a cultural analysis of the public mind in the broad sense of that term and one that can be linked, I think, to the movement for 'clear thinking' that emerged in educational circles after the First World War – a time when various individuals and groups tried to establish ways of freeing the citizenry from often nationalistically expressed distortions. Much of this drive for public enlightenment is, of course, nowadays too easily dismissed as so much 'elitism' even though it was far more an argument against distortion and manipulation, than an attempt to impose meaning on the masses.

► *On Living in an Old Country*

NK: How did you come to place your first book, *On Living in an Old Country* with Verso?

PW: That happened after I wrote a short article on the archaeological recovery of Henry VII's flagship, the 'Mary Rose', which was lifted from the bed of the Solent in 1982, and how, in media rhetoric at least, it seemed curiously to coincide with Margaret Thatcher's military recovery of the Falkland Islands. I wrote the piece as a Sunday lecture for the South Place Ethical Society, at Conway Hall, and afterwards sent the text, already published in SPES's bulletin, the *Ethical*

Record, to *New Left Review*. Robin Blackburn, who was then editor of NLR, suggested that we might produce a book, and handed me over to Neil Belton at Verso: I think it was probably one of Neil's first books there.

So that's how it came about. I was writing those essays at night or on weekends, and also at a guarded distance from the culture I was describing. I had the eye of an ex-Canadian returnee, a bibliography dominated by the Hungarian émigré philosopher, Agnes Heller, and the freely given assistance of my friend Andrzej Krauze, a Polish cartoonist who had worked for Solidarity publications, and whom I had first met in 1982, when he and his family were still living out of a couple of suitcases in London and struggling to convince newspaper editors that his drawings were really not too harsh, unsettling and alien for English taste.

I used to argue with Raphael Samuel, of History Workshop, about my perspective in that book. I think he thought that the phraseology in some parts of *On Living in an Old Country* reflected a distance from British ideas of tradition and history that was more my problem than anyone else's. There was certainly some truth in that, yet there can surely also be no doubt as to the necessity of maintaining a critical perspective in this field. I may not have signed up unconditionally to the 'people's history' perspective of that time or even to that other creed of the moment, Gramsci's conception of the 'national-popular'. The book was provisional and no doubt also flawed in many ways, but I was at least trying to deepen the theme, not destroy it, and to indicate how much, besides old timber, bricks and mortar, could be at stake in these public invocations of history and 'heritage'.

On Living in an Old Country was partly stimulated by the archaic and weirdly disconnected ideas of Englishness I had seen entrenched in Canadian culture, but that wasn't the only way in which it developed as a dialogue between British and North American perspectives.

► Mary Butts

Take the writer Mary Butts. I first came across her work through the interest of Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and other West Coast poets, and in my chapter on her I was reading her work back into its English contexts: a move that meant confronting the organicism and also the anti-Semitic narrative that Butts engaged in her defensive portrayal of the since militarized landscape of the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. This dimension is still entirely and, I think, systematically ignored by the North American and feminist readings of Butts, even though it surely makes her a far more interesting writer to consider nowadays.

As for the book's essayistic approach, in part that reflected the fact that I did not have the time to pursue a more unified perspective. But I guess it also shows my impatience with the combined political dogma and abstract theoreticism governing so much academic discussion of culture at that time. I sidestepped that aspect of the academic apparatus and worked by picking up sometimes fragmentary actualities and stories, and interpreting them. It suited me to work on the assumption that even fleeting realities could come alive given that kind of attention.

► Student life in the 1970s

NK: Your Master's degree is from Simon Fraser, and you spent five years in Vancouver. How did you come to fetch up there? But first, how did you get there from undergraduate study at Kent?

► Canterbury 1970-4

PW: Well that's a story of its time. For me, the University of Kent was a very good place to be. I was there from 1970 to 1973, having arrived after a school career defined more, as I only found out later, by tuberculosis than by anything resembling academic achievement. The place was only five years old, and the Humanities Faculty was interdisciplinary, and really ambitious in that regard. The university then was a new world – many of its buildings were still under construction – on a

hillside overlooking Canterbury. Anyone who studied English or American literature there in their first year, was asked to read one book before they arrived, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

Well, that's clever isn't it? You read this book with all these founding arguments of the 20th century, set in this TB hospital on a Swiss mountain, and then you end up in this new and not just geographically isolated campus on a wind-swept hill with carefully placed windows framing views of the old world, represented by Canterbury Cathedral a few miles away. Everyone in the humanities started with a two term course entitled 'Britain in the Contemporary World': whether you studied English, History, Modern Languages, Philosophy or Film, you all worked on the same range of courses for the first four terms. So when I later heard about this interdisciplinary approach called 'Cultural Studies', I was inclined to wonder what the fuss was about.

I still feel that I learnt a lot at Kent about how to think about modern culture – how to pose a question and then pursue it through various fields of enquiry. Many of the best lecturers at Canterbury at that time had, of course, come from Oxford and Cambridge. They brought certain rituals with them, and also the collegiate and tutorial system, but they also devised some genuinely new perspectives. I knew someone who went to read English at Oxford the same year I went to Kent, and the contrast between the two approaches was striking. I guess it was always clear that I would not be the one who ended up working on the TLS, but I was never in any doubt which was the most desirable route: we were reading Orwell, Sartre, Pavese and Robbe-Grillet while he was still embarking on the chronological assault from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf.

So we were in this new space, which was already under pressure. Academics were already retreating back into Oxford and Cambridge as opportunities arose – returning to their disciplines as well as to colleges with proper wine cellars etc. And a wider sense of denigration was in the air. I can't remember whether Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* was already running on TV, but disconcerted reactionaries were certainly muttering that higher education should never have been expanded beyond the traditional elite: 'the more the worse' as the curmudgeonly Kingsley Amis was railing at the time.

I understand that the interdisciplinary focus has since been scaled back – partly thanks to more recently introduced funding protocols which have made it necessary for departments to 'own' their students more closely. But in the early seventies, Kent was ambitiously open in its approach, and I'm sure the same was true of other new universities in Britain at that time. You could go there without having proved yourself a brilliant student, you could be taken on as someone who'd made nothing but a mess of his school years, and then you could re-orient yourself. I think I still owe a lot to the interdisciplinarity of that period – a time before the so-called 'moment of theory', although I recall being excited by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and also by Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*: arguments that seemed brilliantly suggestive before they were institutionalized. It was certainly there that I realised that contemporary prose did not have to abide by the inherited categories still used by publishers and booksellers, with their ossified division between fiction and non-fiction.

And then there was Canterbury itself. For the last two years I was in Kent, I lived in a house at 5 St Radigund Street with a group of people from the university and the art college. We were still quite counter-cultural in our thinking then, and the house was full of the usual distractions of student life in that period. It also had strong musical connections, having been a hub for the so-called 'Canterbury Scene', with members of the bands Spirogyra, Caravan and others on the early Virgin circuit, including Hatfield and the North. As for my own demeanour, I can say that I was not among those who wore a Mao jacket in honour of the Cultural Revolution, and I never mistook

myself for a hobbit on acid either. Both options were available, as I remember.

We had a vast poster from the Labour Party's 1970 general election campaign on the wall going up the stairs – the one that showed the Tory leadership as hideous little mannequins dubbed 'Yesterday's Men' (it was a harsh image that Harold Wilson would later blame for his defeat). But politics was not our strong point. I remember marching against Enoch Powell and going to the mining village of Aylesham in search of common cause but I'm afraid the student radicalism of that period always seemed to me too theatrical and herd-like (you didn't have to be a feminist to dislike the cult of male revolutionary leadership), too detached from wider reality and too much inclined to mimicry of the real sixties, which already seemed long gone.

We shared an alternative, more or less conservationist outlook. I remember reading Theodore Roszak's *Where the Wasteland Ends*, the Don Juan fictions of Carlos Castaneda (which, like so many people at that time, we read as real documentaries), and also Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America*, but I wasn't interested in joining the hippies who lived in the woods, foraging for what Richard Mabey described, in his bestseller of the period, as 'Food for Free'. As for the Trotskyists who used occasionally to come round and warn us that, nice enough as we were, we would surely be going up against the wall when the revolution came, I suspect they have long since converted themselves into management consultants and New Labour policy advisers.

NK: I am imagining a combination of *The Young Ones* meets *Withnail and I*.

PW: You might be right. Whatever it was, we carried on while the coalminers struck, and the electricity came and went. It was that period of acute crisis that was quite interesting, but also pressing. When we graduated in 1973 or so it was obvious that things were going to have to change. The university seemed to me spectacularly disconnected from mainstream reality. There were some routes into employment – a lot of people I knew went into public sector administration, social work and teaching.

Beyond those, however, the university careers advisory service seemed like a fiction: we used to joke, no doubt quite unfairly, that the man in charge was a poet who had at least managed to find himself a job. At that time the pressure to find work was eased by the existence of since cancelled forms of benefit. Students today can't claim *anything*, but we could go down to the Labour Exchange and draw unemployment benefit in the vacations: Easter, Christmas and Summer too if you wanted. The minute your term ended, you could sign on. Once you had a degree you could even put your name on something called the 'Professional and Executive Register,' which obliged the authorities to make some show at least of seeking appropriate employment for you: I knew one person who wrote 'I want to be the editor of a literary magazine' on his form, and was then allowed to draw benefit for many months in the utterly predictable absence of any offers.

After the oil crisis of 1973–4, it became obvious that this wasn't going to be enough. I remember looking at the sky from an orchard – we did a lot of fairly addled sky-gazing in those years (and Kent still had a lot of orchards, many of them since grubbed up in line with European Community agricultural policy) – and deciding that the way out of this situation would have to involve aeroplanes. I had an American friend who, thanks to the Cold War, had been in Germany as a G.I. He was from Los Angeles, and he said why don't you come over to the US this summer? So I did. He met me in Denver with a 1942 Dodge pick-up truck and, together with some West German friends, we drove for months and ended up in this juniper forest near Mt Shasta in northern California, where he had a little shack. I can't remember how he got it. I stayed there for quite a long time. I think it was from there that I applied to graduate school in Vancouver. I

► Vancouver
1974–9

started at the University of British Columbia, where I did not like the English Department at all, so I shifted to Simon Fraser, which was, I suppose, a bit like the University of Kent at that time: another new campus, although this time the mountain beneath it was altogether more formidable and on many days of the year you really did have to drive up through clouds to reach the place.

NK: You would have been at Simon Fraser when Anthony Wilden was writing his Lacanian stuff, and eventually writing his book, *The Imaginary Canadian*.

PW: I did a seminar on communication theory with Tony Wilden, who had indeed published *The Language of the Self*, although he was then teaching from his later book *System and Structure*. It was pretty delirious stuff, but Wilden was very interesting, as I remember, on Gregory Bateson's idea of the doublebind and on the power of framing and contextualisation. He had also begun to turn his back on the abstracted nature of academic writing (his work was already dropping off the bibliographies of the various rising dukes of theory), and was beginning to engage with Canadian reality, 'imaginary' and otherwise. I was not persuaded by his suggestion that the seminar should convert itself into a 'society for collective self-defence' and take to the streets in some imprecisely specified way.

I worked with the poet Robin Blaser eventually too. There were some very good people there, some of them having moved to British Columbia from the United States during, or in response to, the Vietnam War. I knew I had nothing going in England and in hindsight I suppose I exploited Canada as a preferable limbo – a largely congenial way of not being a permanent supply teacher in Kent. People used to say that in Vancouver the 1960s had never really ended. Certainly, it was an interesting place to be. The university was fairly informal in its orientation and its attitudes, there was a big writing scene in the city, and, with generously renewable teaching assistantships, you could spend your time more or less as you wished. I did the longest MA anybody could imagine, 5 years!

In the end, though, I didn't find a way of staying in Canada. There was no sign of work beyond the student visa, and I really didn't want to be an expat. I'd read Wyndham Lewis's bleak and misanthropic book about his own years in Canada, *Self Condemned* (politely kept in print by the Canadian publisher McClelland and Stewart). I had seen enough bitter ex-Brits in Canadian universities, some of whom had a horribly patronising attitude towards their students, and I certainly couldn't engage with the antiquated tea ceremonies still associated with such Anglo outposts as the Empress Hotel in Victoria. So, when my life there came undone, I fell back to England.

In Canada I had started thinking about national culture in its English and expatriate British variants. I was later pleased to read Benedict Anderson and his insistence that if you want to understand modern nationalism, you should start anywhere but in Europe. Yet I was interested in the problem of English nationalism as it had been posed by Tom Nairn and others. Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* also came out before I really got busy in the field, as did Zygmunt Bauman's brilliant and, I think, still insufficiently registered study *Memories of Class*. But Canada is where the trail began for me: Wilden's *The Imaginary Canadian* certainly, but also the warning that nationalism could be alarmingly small-minded in its claimed collectivity, which for me was provided by the Canadian literary polemicist Robin Mathews, who was constantly condemning foreign influences in Canadian life, as I believe he still is to this day.

► What kind of
writing?

NK: What models inform your modes of cultural analysis? Which writers do you admire?

PW: I gave the George Orwell Lecture at Birkbeck College a few years ago, and afterwards Paul Hirst, who had introduced me, stood up and told the audience, with a certain smile, that they had seen my 'method' in action. He himself had long since broken with his Althusserian past, but I've no doubt that he was teasing me when he suggested that this 'method' consisted of pulling at a loose thread and then gleefully exhibiting all the weird and unpredictable clobber that comes out with it.

It is really not for me to judge how successful I may be, but I like to think that I practise a kind of cultural critique that is open to discovery and finds significant dynamics even in apparently marginal realities. As someone who has never been a fulltime academic, I guess I write more out of a sense, vague as it may sometimes be, of citizenship rather than professional discourse, and I've also learned a lot from literary poetics. In Canada, I was much taken by Charles Olson's ideas of archaeology, of space as the fruitful dimension of enquiry rather than time (which Olson saw as the axis of war and state power), and his suggestion, made in the bibliography on America that he compiled for Ed Dorn, that what matters is less your choice of object than the way you dig into it.

And I suppose that, like many people at that time, I was mindful of writers like Walter Benjamin and the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*. I also became very interested in Agnes Heller's arguments about historical consciousness as something that exists in everyday life rather than just the professionalised methodologies of historians. I ended up aspiring to a kind of critique that works by allegorising, that constitutes the territory of its enquiry as it goes along, that dramatises cultural pathologies in order to undo them or to make them more explicit, and that is open to taking itself by surprise. For me, that has meant a prose of collection, quotation and arrangement as well as of argument: one that is, I hope, not embarrassed sometimes to fall through the floor of its own inadequate presuppositions. I also use archives a lot, not just as repositories of detail that can be lined up as evidence to justify preconceived conclusions, but as a way of defamiliarizing and questioning present conformities. Raymond Williams and George Orwell were part of my background too.

► Orwell and Hitchens

NK: Christopher Hitchens published a piece on Orwell in *Critical Quarterly* a few years ago and now his book on Orwell has appeared, *Orwell's Victory*.

PW: After 9/11 I was horrified to see an apparent queue of ex-radicals, leaping in to play the Orwell card – claiming that the left was blinded by its own hatred of western life, and would rather fellow-travel with al-Qaeda than modify its visceral anti-Americanism. No doubt this tendency does exist: Fred Halliday has rightly condemned those on the left who would prefer to imagine the future emerging from the backstreets of Fallujah than to identify their aspirations with any aspect of western society.

However, I still thought this reflex was all much too quick. It was as if Hitchens knew that only one person was going to get a lift from Orwell this time around, and it was going to be him who jumped aboard first. I've subsequently talked to Hitchens about Orwell for a radio programme. I like much of what he says about Orwell, and I like what he *likes* about Orwell – including the anti-Stalinism and the contempt for show trial connoisseurs such as that 'hired liar', the barrister D.N.Pritt – but I still think that his mobilisation of Orwell was a hedge for dire inadequacies in his own view of the "war on terror".

I re-read Orwell recently because I had some students who wanted to talk about the 'England your England' section of *The Lion and the Unicorn*. It's been an interesting text to reconsider during this recent government-stirred debate about Britishness, which has entailed yet another round of

searching for a list of essential British values, this time fired by a desire to contain devolution as well as by the combined shock of domestic Islamism and large scale immigration from Eastern Europe. The list Orwell drew up in 1940 is altogether more English than British, but it is thrown remarkably wide, compared with the more Conservative versions that preceded it. His inventory of 'characteristic fragments' includes the Labour Exchange queue, and it embraces the northern industrial town as well as the urban working class.

Despite the maiden aunts cycling to communion, he actually makes few concessions to the reactionary Tory pastorate left over from Stanley Baldwin, Arthur Bryant and the rest. His list has still got all the problems of being a list of characteristic national traits – a set of future clichés in the making as subsequent attempts to recycle it have proved – but he *did* try, and not just in that wartime moment, to encompass a wider society, and he also insisted that you can't have a 'heritage' without it being open to additions in the present and future. Much 'Little England' thinking in the 1930s, especially that framed in the Chestertonian tradition, was all about being innocent of the Empire. With Orwell, as Paul Gilroy has recently pointed out, the Empire and its responsibilities are still in the picture.

In this respect, Orwell is weathering well I think. He repeatedly offended the left wing orthodoxy of his time, but I don't imagine him looking forward to the bombs falling on Iraq, or promising, as Christopher Hitchens did, that he would soon be sitting in Baghdad raising another glass with his liberated Iraqi friends. I suspect he might also have some interesting things to say about the ex-Marxist commentators who, since 1989, have gone along with an already established tendency to identify the British welfare state with its totalitarian Soviet equivalent, thereby collaborating in the situation where both disintegrating systems have been dragged to the market together.

► G. K. Chesterton and the English as a 'secret people'

NK: Speaking of Chesterton, I see you published a longish piece dealing with him in the *Guardian* recently, where you quote that poem 'The Secret People', which I hadn't come across.

PW: I was very keen to track that poem down and to review its persistence as the informal credo of a certain kind of Englishness – it's the one in which Chesterton hymns 'the people of England,



that never have spoken yet' and it was published in *The Flying Inn*, just before the First World War. The *Guardian* published my piece as 'Last Orders', whereas the original version, which was written for a conference and website organised by English Heritage, was 'Last Orders for the English Aborigine.' The *Guardian* sat on the piece for several months, and by the time it finally appeared I had revised it as a contribution to the debate surrounding the ongoing general election of 2005. I noticed in the run-up to this campaign that the old question was coming out, 'what is Britain? It was mostly the Labour Party producing it actually, saying 'we need a new Britishness.' And then our disgraced former Home Secretary, David Blunkett came out and said 'we need a new Englishness' too.

However, it was Michael Howard who led the Conservative Party with a campaign that seemed unhealthily preoccupied with metaphors of organic belonging and threatened corruption. His campaign was, it seemed to me, alarmingly reliant on tacit appeals to semiarticulate instincts that might have been more appropriate to the British National Party. I had already been thinking

about the way in which Englishness is so often defined as an organic inheritance threatened by various modern encroachments.

I don't think it's the dominant culture but it still lurks in the shadows of our political discourse, a habit of seeing Englishness as a historically constituted and largely closed identity that has to be defended against myriad forces that threaten to dilute or change it. The English elegy can be a soft and gentle lament for the passing of an old way of life, but it can also cover for vicious acts of aggression against people who, in Sartre's memorable image (in *Anti-Semite and Jew*), might be able to claim legal ownership of a wood but will never be able to lay claim to the more 'authentic' kind of cultural proprietorship of those who have been to that wood to carve their name on a tree in childhood and then gone back to see their initials enlarged decades later.

So I was trying to make the connection again between the political temptations of that moment in 2005, where we had a Conservative Party lead by the son of a Romanian-Jewish immigrant, which was appealing, more or less explicitly, to these potent fears of contamination. Whether it was asylum seekers, foot and mouth disease, anti-biotic resistant bacteria in NHS hospitals, the alleged 'Scottish Raj' in the British Labour Party, or the rules and procedures of the European Community, there was a sense of symbolic excess about the Conservative articulation of these issues: one that overshadowed whole areas of policy with an ambient sense of alarm and even panic.

I thought this was reprehensible, when you consider that we're sitting in one of the richest countries in the world, and we're *not* in crisis and there *are* political questions to address, and they're not even in the frame. So that was why I started trying to get hold of the roots of this tendency. It was, in a sense, a return to the territory of my first book, *On Living in an old Country*. Chesterton is one of the figures I only mentioned in passing. I had never really read him, and yet I now think he stands close to the source of this particular idea of Englishness, he and Hilaire Belloc.

NK: I guess that, really, these are the long-standing reactionary instincts of the English right.

PW: I thought so too, but the full story is nothing like that simple. Chesterton's beleaguered England is touched with the memory of guild socialism and Magna Carta, and I suspect it draws something from William Morris too. In the first years of the twentieth century, it was shaped by opposition to the Fabian idea of the centralised and expert-led reforming state. It includes a defence of beer against interfering state-empowered teetotalism, and of representational art against modernist distortion.

However, it also draws on the English radical impulse that says the British elite is corrupt and expropriating. It is fuelled by anti-imperialism as well, and by a determination, evident in Chesterton's argument with Rudyard Kipling, to separate English virtues out from the policies of the British Empire as enacted during the Boer War. You can follow this strand of thought into later thinkers of the left: it's surely a thread in the radical Englishry of the Communist historian A.L. Morton and I suspect E.P. Thompson picks it up here and there too.

So these are not innately Tory ideas at all, but they do, I think, still represent a problematic way of thinking about modern society. Many politicians and commentators have since cited Chesterton's lines about the 'secret people' who 'never have spoken yet' but hardly anyone quotes the later line in which the 'cringing Jew' is hauled in, along with his accomplice the 'staggering lawyer', and I'm afraid that *is* a point that needs to be faced. If you define your nationality as an inherited organic identity, then you are going to be susceptible to these dramas of encroachment and contamination, and that, rather than any particular political slant, is the issue that I keep trying to address. In

that *Guardian* piece I was reviewing that way of seeing Englishness as a sort of violated realm, and suggesting that it was not simply a rational response to present-day problems of border control, devolution or whatever, and to suggest that this semi-instinctive structure of feeling is not an adequate basis for a renewed English culture and politics in Britain today.

I suppose this is connected to the wider discussion we have been having about 'heritage' in Britain over the last two decades. You might also trace this Chestertonian tendency through post-war Ealing comedies such as *Passport to Pimlico*. When I came back from Canada in 1979, one of the first things I went to was a summer school in Stirling run by *Screen* and the British Film Institute. We discussed those films there.

NK: A friend of mine, Ed Buscombe, remembers you from that period.

PW: That's right, he was teaching on some of those seminars.

► History Workshop NK: Was it also around this time that you became involved with the History Workshop project?

PW: I went to a number of History Workshop conferences in the early eighties. They were very impressive gatherings, with enough people to fill the Pavilion in Brighton or that huge, redundant church St Paul's, just along the road from Ruskin College in Oxford, where I remember E.P. Thompson delivering his famously savage assault on Althusserian cultural studies at the end of 1979. History Workshop wasn't just a more or less academic journal in those years: it was this wonderful wandering argument and discussion, which had factions, projects and improvised venues up and down the country.

I started talking with Raphael Samuel in those meetings, especially over the Patriotism Conference of 1984 where I first presented my reading of Mary Butts, but there was always a sense of awkwardness when it came to *History Workshop Journal*. I can't remember whether it was two or three of the articles that eventually went into *On Living in an Old Country* that were solicited by Raphael. They duly went to the editorial collective, and then months would pass before either Raphael or Michael Ignatieff would write or phone up and say that they had been rejected. Of course, this is what academic editorial committees are like, but I was irritated at the time and suspected that I had encountered some undeclared law of trespass. I'm quite sure my various pieces could have been better but, looking back, I still think that some members of the collective did not find it at all easy to accept that this kind of critical argument should be applied to public awareness of history. The History Workshop project, after all, had aimed to build and articulate popular historical consciousness, as part of creating solidarity, awareness, movement.

I was sympathetic to that, yet it was also increasingly obvious that, in the wider culture of the eighties, ideas of history were being manipulated for political ends, and that this had to be addressed more directly. Ideas of national tradition and 'heritage in danger' were being phrased in racist terms, and the conservationist agenda had become increasingly overshadowed by social polemic in which the allegedly superior past was invoked against the failing efforts of post-war social democracy. There were also some bad architectural and planning initiatives which suggested that 'heritage' might sometimes amount to little better than a system of place-annulling environmental exploitation.

When I sat down to finish *On Living in an Old Country* as a book, the whole premise I had in mind was to find a way of establishing a critical argument about this field of activity, because it was susceptible to toxic variations and instrumental manipulations done by political elites or

► Arguing with
J. H. Plumb

whoever. The challenge was to find and develop a critical argument without moving into disdain or contempt for non-academic forms of interest in history. This was why, for example, I took my distance from J.H. Plumb, with his idea, expressed in *The Death of the Past*, of the historian as a bearer of superior truth whose mission is to dissolve 'the past', conceived as the manipulated illusions about history entertained by everyone else – i.e. by people who hadn't had the benefit of a Cambridge education. That book is still revered in some quarters. Indeed, it was recently republished as something resembling a teledon's charter and justification.

► Arguing with
Raphael Samuel

Years later, when Raphael produced *Theatres of Memory* in 1994, he included this chapter called 'Heritage-baiting', which really annoyed me, and not just for its title's apparent recycling of anti-McCarthyite language. I felt that it threw us back to the very beginning, that we were once again in the situation of not being able to establish a critical voice in the whole territory of historical consciousness without being accused of elitism. I was, of course, annoyed to be included in Raphael's list of offenders, partly because I had previously expressed my own reservations about the tone of some mockery of open air museums – 'sneering at the theme parks', as I had called it (in an article in *Block* that Raphael was certainly aware of, since I had sent him a copy some years earlier).

I had also questioned the manner in which the Plumbian historian David Cannadine seemed to dismiss conservation as nothing more than a stately home owner's ruse in his book *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990), and I didn't like being so closely identified with Robert Hewison's un-nuanced denunciations. So I wrote a negative review of *Theatres of Memory* for the *Guardian*, saying, if I remember, that while this book is full of interesting stuff it is also seriously flawed in its rejection of critical perspective.

In fact, there are some really exceptional things in that extraordinary repository of a book, and there is no better account of the emergence of conservation as a popular cause during the sixties and seventies – territory Raphael covered from steam engines to pearly queens and the popularity of brick. However, I still think that, in gathering up this vast array of detail, Raphael was inclined to overlook the political freight carried by some invocations of 'national heritage' in those post-war decades.

► Heritage and
'Decline'

In *A Journey Through Ruins* I had tried to identify this drama under the name 'Brideshead and the tower blocks': a battle between architectural symbols that extended from the late forties right into the early eighties, and dramatised the decline and defeat of the post-war settlement with its ideas of state-led social reform. The fact that people were also concerned with railway history, industrial archaeology and family genealogy does not, I still think, invalidate this point.

It is often assumed (see Richard Weight and Peter Mandler) that the argument linking 'heritage' with 'decline' was directly about the economy – and that it can be satisfactorily dismissed with the simple observation that conservation and tourism can actually serve the interest of economic regeneration. As I saw it, however, the decline was not be counted in money alone but also in the sense of political possibility that had accompanied the social democratic idea of the state. The culture that supported it in the post-war decades involved a polarization between old and new ideas of national identity, which acted as a closure of thought, limiting what was conceivable in the public imagination. You surely only have to read Prince Charles's utterances on this matter to see that the question of 'heritage', conservation and 'classicism' as represented by the revivalist architecture of Quinlan Terry, John Simpson and others, became closely involved in this wider political drama.

Raphael construed his 'heritage-baiters' as metropolitan literary snobs mocking the idea of conservation from outside. There had indeed been some dubious expressions of disdain, and yet

it seems to me that the critical impulse has actually always been part of the movement itself, and that this perspective became curiously lost from view in that chapter of *Theatres of Memory*. William Morris started the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments in order to protect historical buildings against bad restoration: it was an 'anti-scrape' campaign, intended to prevent the Church of England and its advisors scraping away all the features of a church that did not conform to their idea of proper 'period' style. Douglas Goldring, who founded the Georgian Group in the 1930s, did so in order to oppose destructive property development in the name of the public interest. He was a patriotic radical, formerly a romantic admirer of Bolshevism and an anti-war campaigner who was also much concerned about the defence of civil liberties. He had no sooner formed the Georgian Group than he left in disgust at the disdainful aristocrats who quickly took over his committee and started treating him as their unpaid servant.

And so it would go on into the nineteen eighties. For some reason, it is now widely believed that the phrase 'heritage industry' was coined by Robert Hewison when he produced his book of that title in 1987. In truth, however, it too emerged as a critical term from within the conservation movement. It was used by Colin Ward (about whom Raphael wrote marvellously, incidentally), and others connected with the Town and Country Planning Association and also the Civic Trust. They had been trying to develop 'urban studies' for inner city schools, in an attempt to avoid the rural bias built into the idea of field studies. They got some centres up and running in various cities, and then during the preparations for European Architectural Heritage Year (1975), their far from past-orientated activities were bureaucratically reorganised under the name of 'heritage', a categorization that threatened to obscure the whole point of their initiative.

NK: So what do you think lay behind Raphael's reluctance about the critical perspective you mention?

PW: I don't really know. I once asked him this, pointing out that the whole History Workshop project was a critical intervention of the sort I have just mentioned, and that he himself had previously said some particularly critical things about, say, the 'Georgianising' of Spitalfields or certain attempts to film novels by Dickens. He told me, simply enough, that he had changed his mind. I remember thinking at the time that Raphael may have succumbed to a kind of defensive, more or less Marxist sentimentality. I speculated that he couldn't bear the erosion of certain socialist frameworks, which of course was a hurt for many people at that time, and that this left him just generally warm about all forms of popular involvement with history. Raphael looked incredulous when I suggesting this, but I still suspect there might have been an element of that behind his new and, I think, increasingly defensive stance.

I also wondered whether Raphael's turn might have something to do with his sometimes uneasy proximity to Oxford University. It interested me, for example, that Raphael approved of John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. I was suspicious of that book. I knew that English intellectuals could be culpably idiotic, and also that snobbery was an abiding sin of the caste. It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to point that out.

Yet it seemed to me that this argument, which was extended through Carey's reviews in the *Sunday Times*, was actually being delivered in the interests of a Thatcherism that had its own quite different reasons for pouring contempt on intellectuals. Having talked to someone who attended the Oxford lectures from which that book was derived, I was inclined to suspect that Carey was actually peddling a smart kind of cynicism that was all too well adjusted to the times. So I wondered whether being jammed up against all those patrician attitudes makes one peculiarly and

in some senses perhaps excessively sensitive about 'elitism'. But who knows? Raphael was much engaged in defending the school history curriculum at that time, and he may just have felt that the time for taking things apart had gone. He used to talk about the weakness of the 'cultural studies' approach, which stood outside the object of its analysis, and saw deconstruction as its main purpose. This was, I now think, generally a useful caution.

Anyway, our argument came to an end when Raphael died in 1996. I like to think we might be in agreement by now had he lived, but there was only limited sign of that at the time. When he was really very ill, he came to a conference at Lancaster, where I then had a temporary toehold at the university. I remember him wagging an accusing finger at Robert Hewison and repeating the charge that he was a 'metropolitan literary snob'. Turning to me, he read out a marvellous list of the many ways in which the recovery of the Mary Rose had since added to historical understanding of its period – it was fair comment even though it didn't seem to me entirely to invalidate the question I had raised before any of these investigations began.

He definitely saw what he called 'the mark of the convict' on me, declaring that *On Living in an Old Country* was the reason Blair's New Labour party was so dismissive of history. I'm quite sure this considerably overestimated the influence of a book that has never sold more than about 4,500 copies, and which was certainly not in Blair's pocket when he entered Downing Street the following year. We met once more after that, and he kindly wrote me a letter suggesting that we should argue more often for the pleasure of making up. He was really a great loss, and a whole world seems to have ended with his passing.

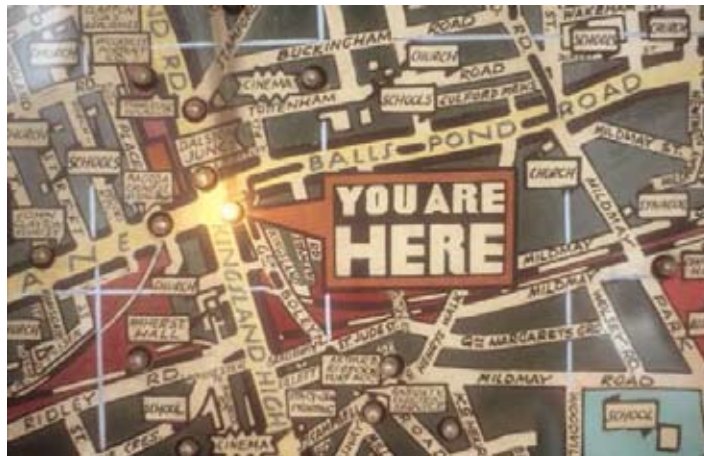
► Two prismatic
English roads

NK: Can you say a bit about how you moved from *On Living in an Old Country* to *A Journey through Ruins* and on to *The Village that Died for England*? What perspectives were you bringing to bear in each case?

PW: In *A Journey through Ruins*, I tried to map the Thatcher government's works through a relatively small area of east London where I was then living. At that time the English literary world seemed preoccupied with travel books in which people would go thousands of miles to step into another culture in the hopes that there at least their often quite pedestrian British attitudes would become exotic and interesting. I disliked all that stuff, so I thought of mine as a travel book for people without air tickets. The idea, which occurred to me as I was writing the book, was to base my investigations around a short length of Dalston Lane, which was simply the street where I used to catch the bus into central London: I used that area as a prism through which to get the measure of the political dynamics of that time.

I was writing nearly fifty years after the end of the Second World War, at a time when the commemoration of the blitz coincided with a fierce assault on the culture and institutions of the post-war welfare state built in its name. And I was also writing when you could still see in the political symbolism of the time a very strong opposition between the post-war state and the resurgent imagery of the old organic nation it was launched in order to reform. So I was trying to map out the way those arguments actually worked on the ground. The book's got a scratchy, slightly bad-tempered voice in places, partly because I felt I was writing in a microclimate that sometimes seemed to prefer correct statements of position to a more direct engagement with the things that were happening under our noses.

The argument about 'political correctness' was yet to come, but the radical culture of that time was much preoccupied by what was ideologically sound. Perhaps it was all in my head, but it seemed a time when people would quite literally say that if you were a man you couldn't talk about, say, a



Hackney Town Guide Cabinet,
Dalston Junction, 1991.
Photo: Andrew Holmes.

woman's experience, and I thought, we've got to stop playing like this, not having conversations, not having arguments, not presuming to describe what's going on in front of our eyes.

I was also interested in the idea of the road, and I guess here I was actually in debt to Chesterton and Belloc among others. In the nineteen thirties topographically-minded publishers like Batsford, used to put out books in which writers followed 'green roads,' disused droves and tracks through modern England – books in which the 'old way' was often portrayed as direly threatened by modern encroachments. And I thought, why not reactivate this more or less defunct genre of writing? Those earlier books about England were often extraordinarily doomstruck – convinced that the end was coming and that the modern world was going to destroy everything that was valuable.

Well, clearly, by the time I was writing, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that vividly imaged threat of destruction had taken place, and yet we were all still here. So I thought I'd take some sections of road that might conceivably once have been leafy English lanes of the sort Chesterton associated with the winding course of the 'rolling English drunkard', but which were now submerged in modern conflicts and conditions. The first of my overthrown roads was that length of Dalston Lane in East London, and the second was a road in south Dorset, which ran from Lulworth Cove and up through this classic piece of Thomas Hardy country, which was also a tank gunnery range where huge disputes about the nation and the state, and the nation and the military, and the land and the people, had gone on.

I have never yet managed to get *A Journey Through Ruins* and *The Village that Died for England* to be available and in print together, but they are serially connected books, which use their chosen territories, urban and rural, to map some of the historical tensions of their period. I like the fact that the Crichel Down scandal of 1954 (a key moment in the history of the postwar state) brings the Dorset chalk into the London book. There is also a thread connecting the world of the amateur metal detectorists, evoked in *A Journey Through Ruins*, and the methodology of *The Village that Died for England*, which applies its own form of metal detection to a landscape captured by tanks.

► Sinclair and Petit NK: Does this aspect of your writing connect with Iain Sinclair's writing, and his film collaborations with Chris Petit?

PW: The years I'd spent in English departments left me pretty familiar with modern poetics: that's what I spent a lot of my time studying in Vancouver, so I was interested in what Iain Sinclair was up to. I got to know Iain when I was writing *A Journey through Ruins*. In October 1987, I'd

published a review of his *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* in the *London Review of Books*, a piece that has since become incorporated as an early item on the bibliography of 'Rodinsky's room' in Princelet Street. This wasn't actually that mummified room's first airing, because I was told about it by Dan Cruickshank or, perhaps, Gavin Stamp, one of the conservationists concerned with Georgian Spitalfields. That part of East London has long been what geographers call a zone of transition where houses were first occupied by Huguenot refugees, then by the great wave of Jewish refugees that came through from the 1890s and more recently it has become home to a considerable immigration from Bangladesh.

It's right next to the City of London and in the 1980s, there was a conservationist project going on down there: all these Georgian houses were being pulled back into their architecture, were being recovered from multiple use and sold on under covenant as restorable Georgian buildings. It would have been bad to lose those houses, yet their recovery prompted fears of displacement, as often happens when gentrification hits the urban core.

One of the houses acquired by the conservationists was this forsaken synagogue in Princelet Street, built into what had previously been a Huguenot weaver's house. It had been disused and empty for several decades, and it had this abandoned room in the attic up above the synagogue, completely full of evocative debris, with all these weird diaries, books and newspapers lying about among the rags and clothes. It was like a Marie Celeste story. It was said that a man named David Rodinsky had lived there, as the caretaker, and that one day he had mysteriously disappeared. So I wrote a review of Iain's book and introduced this room as a kind of motif for the time-folded Whitechapel he was after, and suggested that the story of the disappearing immigrant is always to be viewed with a certain amount of suspicion when Bohemian or just rich incomers are buying up the old ghetto's houses. He and I met after that article was published, and some years before he teamed up with Rachel Lichtenstein, whose demythologization of David Rodinsky's story came later.

When I was writing *A Journey through Ruins*, in 1988–90, that sort of time, Iain was writing *Downriver*, and we met to talk and share sites: we visited a lot of East London places together, and they appear in both our books. I remember taking him into the largest estate agency in Hackney, and interviewing the boss, Alan Selby, about how much money they were making off particular properties – we were like potential libel witnesses for one another.

I also remember going to the Bow Quarter, the converted name of the old Bryant and May match factory. I still have a picture somewhere of Iain holding up the lemon he found in a bowl on the table of the first tranche of show flats. I felt that *Downriver* was a book that was much more widely engaged with the city than Iain's earlier stuff with its fossicking about in various arcane symbolic traditions. And I like to think that's part of what was happening to him on those shared perambulations.

When I read *Lud Heat* and all that stuff about Hawksmoor and the curse built into the city, I refused to think it could possibly be intended as true. I looked at it as an impressive rhetorical strategy which enabled him to talk about the demise of the welfare state. I treated it not as a crazy system of belief, but as an image of malign enlightenment or of enlightenment maligned. But I'm not at all sure that Iain has ever been really content with that polite limitation. He likes things strange. I started to keep my head down when I realised that I had already become a figment-like character in *Downriver*, but Iain and I remain in touch and I was pleased, more recently, to write a chapter on Emanuel Litvinoff, one of the most interesting writers to have emerged from the Jewish East End, for his recent collection, *London: City of Disappearances* (2006). In the end, I guess my thinking is more conventionally grounded. I try to write a prose that is worth reading, but I don't

mind doing without the literary jabber of what now passes as 'psycho geography'.

NK: You have that lovely 'literary' scene near the start of *A Journey Through Ruins* where a Tory politician gives a speech and you enter his consciousness in a kind of free indirect way, and have him look at the racial mixture of the crowd that is listening, 'so alien'.

► Documentary
fiction

PW: The funniest thing happened when *A Journey through Ruins* was published in 1991. By then I'd started doing a few pieces for the *Guardian* and they said they'd like to take an extract. And we thought, well, that's great. And then they said, we're taking the first chapter, and the first chapter is a *fiction*: it's the scene you mention where I involve two leading Tory politicians, Keith Joseph and Alfred Sherman. I chose these men because they were accustomed to talking about the urban underclass in highly derogatory terms and from a comfortable distance. I put them both in an imaginary limo, drove them up from the City a couple of miles to the south, and deposited them on the pavement by the old gentleman's public lavatory at Dalston Junction. I then constructed a scenario in which they bring out soapboxes and start to address the gathering crowd about the degeneration of the inner city.

In the early stages of this account I did include the remark that 'I must have fallen into a reverie'. I used that phrase in order to indicate that this isn't real, that, you know, this event did not actually take place, folks. I didn't exactly put words into their mouths either, since I used quotations from their own articles to reconstruct their arguments about urban degeneration: all those terrible stories of social decay and dissolution. But the *Guardian* ran it as if it were a piece of actual reportage: they illustrated it with a picture of the local eel and pie shop and stuck it on the front page of their cultural section.

I thought I was in real trouble when I got a call from Howard Jacobsen the morning it came out: he told me how I lucky I was to have been there to see the impromptu speech. Alfred Sherman immediately wrote to the *Guardian* saying this is an outrage, I never did it. And then Brian Sedgemoor, the Labour MP for Hackney South and Shoreditch, replied, saying that whatever actually happened, the political charges in the article were fully justified. I, meanwhile, was sitting in Dalston, relieved that the words I had put into their mouths were at least their own.

My justification for creating that scenario was that more or less fictional narratives were being used to define the prospects of inner city areas like Dalston. In answer, I thought, let's use a different kind of fictional technique to bring those normally distanced onlooking 'visions' and their purveyors right into the area and have a closer look at how they might go down on the street. So I did use some fictional ploys, and I still do to some extent, in the service of argument and in order to get material to *move* in a book.

NK: Do you have a favourite among your books?

► England's last
ditch

PW: *The Village that Died for England* is probably the one I am most pleased to have written, and I hope not because it reflects an unhealthy obsession with the world I grew up in. I feel pleased to have got away with it, to have been able to take so much time recovering the dramas played out over a small stretch of land and allowing that place to declare and redeclare itself in different times and dimensions.

Hilaire Belloc was talking about Ely when he wrote, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that 'the corner of a corner of England is infinite and can never be exhausted'. By the time I found that phrase it had been attached to this militarily expropriated landscape in Dorset, and

I was striking out against the more manipulated and impoverished ideas of English heritage and tradition. Having been critical of much activity in that field, I wanted to show what a different kind of investigation might look like and to put some depth back into the way we view landscapes and places. In the introduction, I described it as a study of the 'strengths and woeful inadequacies of English Idealism,' and I think it is both. I would like *The Village that Died for England* to be read more in connection with work on race and the increasingly important question of cultural mixture. I think we need to keep a watchful eye on appeals to organicism, and continue to separate out malignant forms of particularism from those traditions of local resilience that can still be helpful. But I'm not seeking to strip everybody of all sense of patriotism or attachment to place.

► *The River*

NK: Can you say how you came to make the TV programme of *The River* and write the tie-in book.

PW: It was, I suspect, all a bit of an accident. I didn't know it at the beginning but the BBC also woke up quite early on to the fact that they had probably got the wrong person. I was asked to do this series on the Thames, and I said fine, this is an interesting idea because it'll take us to the heart of a lot of interesting questions about Britain at the end of the twentieth century. The offer was pretty irresistible. I was self-employed at the time, which in my experience always means being at least partly unemployed, and they came up with enough to see me through a couple of years. So we made four films, and I wrote the book too.

The original idea, as I remember from early discussions, was that we would begin at the source and proceed downstream to arrive at Greenwich in time to bring the twentieth century to a reassuring close at the Millennium Dome. And I *really* wasn't sure about that, because boosting the Millennium Dome was no part of my intention. So I went into discussion with the series director James Runcie, and we agreed that we were going to do the estuary first.

By that time, I had researched the literature enough to know that the Thames was in many ways like a model of the English class structure, and that its chroniclers could be divided between two distinct approaches. Most of the picturesque tour books start in Gloucestershire, where the Thames has its source in a little puddle close to an old ash tree, and then proceed downriver to London, where they are inclined to stop. Yet there are other downriver writers who have approached the Thames from the opposite direction. Conrad of course is one of them, as is L.T.C. Rolt, and also the German writer Uwe Johnson who lived in Sheerness before his death in 1984 and wrote memorably about the estuary.

I thought, this is meant to be a programme about history not physical geography and from that point of view the source of the Thames is obviously not an often dry little puddle in Gloucestershire. It is actually via the sea and the estuary that history has entered the river.

So we decided to open there, and we made a film about this rugged, raw and disconcertingly posthumous-feeling place where, if you come in on a boat, the first things you see are these sea forts left over from the Second World War, which have had these strange men living on them, running them as pirate radio stations. One of them is a tiny little concrete platform which was been turned into an independent 'principality' called Sealand. The owner had been selling passports and even driving licences, though you could hardly mount a bicycle on it without falling into the North Sea.

So we filmed this strangely disconnected world with its rich collection of historical debris. This part of the Thames is full of people who live in apparently shitty places: the seafaring river's been largely closed down, the boats are gone, the freight's nearly all containerised, and a lot of bad

housing has been built where wharfs and warehouses used to be. And you go up and talk to the people, and they may well start off saying, 'Oh, so you want to know what it's like to live in Grays, Essex? Well let me tell you. Grays is a total shit hole. . .'

Yet if you concluded that they mean what they say, you'd be quite wrong. It's actually a preemptive strike. What they're saying is that they know that's what *you* think, because you don't come from there and no other perspective is *really* available to the visitor. And then you start talking to them, and they turn out to have this amazing sense of history, they know exactly where they are – unlike many upriver types whose knowledge of their area may consist of little more than a constantly updated tally of property prices. I was impressed by the ungentle ways of life to be found on both sides of the estuary in Kent and Essex, this comparatively off-the-map part of England which the government has recently earmarked for massive redevelopment as the Thames Gateway.

The other thing we tried to do in that series was use literary and historical texts as texts. I was keen to avoid dramatisations of the kind that the BBC often does – turning extracted scenes from novels into little dramatic interludes, in which all the actors tend to be young and comely. When I questioned this emphasis on youthfulness with a senior BBC manager, suggesting that it was out of touch with the demographics of the ageing audience, I was told that they do it because they've had focus groups look at what people like, and these had established that even old people like to imagine themselves young and attractive!

It sounded to me like an argument that might be more appropriate for pornography. Anyway, we decided to avoid that approach altogether. We would use old photographs and passages of old films, but we also tried to make historical texts speak without dramatisation. We had extracts recited by people who have some close connection with the place or area concerned. So, for example, we asked a number of Essex women – a soldier, a magistrate, a school girl – to recite parts of Queen Elizabeth I's famous Armada speech, and we tried the same with an account of William Hogarth's famously riotous 'peregrination' through Kent.

Our researcher found this guy who drove oil tankers for a living, who drove oil back and forth from refineries, and we gave him this piece about Hogarth going through his part of Kent. In the course of his 'peregrination' in 1732 Hogarth had found the grave of a big man in the area, and the stone was engraved with abjectly deferential words from a servant girl saying how wonderful this fellow had been. Hogarth was obviously horrified by this cringing praise for a man he was sure had been a pig and a dog. So we had this paragraph, written by one of his fellow peregrinators, describing how Hogarth had a motion on the grave, and how he finished his business against the church door.

This lorry driver loved it. He spent days learning the extract, and we had him driving along just looking like, well a guy driving an oil tanker, and then he turned to the camera and started off about Hogarth 'having a motion' on the grave, and finishing his business against the church door. And it was great, he loved it, and then we took it back into the BBC and we were told that it would be seen as patronising to the working class, and that it had to go. I could not believe it. So we had difficulties of that sort. But we made the series, and did what we could.

NK: How long did it take to make?

PW: We took over a year to do the whole thing, and I hope we did alright. Some of it I quite liked and I still think the estuary film, *In Search of an Afterlife*, was a pretty good shot at the reality of the Thames rather than just the fictions. And the book helped to make the year's work pretty

handsome financially. I'd made all these snooty remarks to the publishers about how I wasn't prepared to do a typical tie-in book, that I was actually going to write it properly rather than just cobble it together from the researcher's notes. So that is what I tried to do, in the very short amount of time available. Let me tell you, the rumours are true, the so-called big history books, the ones with big names on them, the people who write considerable tracts of them don't always get their names on the cover!

NK: Books by writers like Simon Schama?

PW: You'll have to ask him yourself. What I can say is that the idea of the television historian as a supremely intelligent individual commanding the heights of history is to a considerable extent a fictional product of the medium. It's a fact that successful presenters, as well as the optimistic and perhaps also rather hungry-eyed historians such as Peter Mandler who have commended the so-called 'history boom' of recent years, are not inclined to emphasise. The researchers and producers do a great deal of the work, and much of that is carried over into the books. I did write every word of mine but, while working with the publisher, BBC Worldwide, I also saw into the world of celebrity ghost-writers. There's quite an industry behind the scenes of those publications. The book of *The River* sold about 12,000 copies, but I've hardly met anybody who's read it: it's pretty much dematerialized as far as I know.

NK: Now you've met someone who has read it, and seen the series. Have you tried to do more TV since then?

PW: None too hard. I made a couple of suggestions, but it rapidly became clear that I wasn't the presenter the BBC was looking for. I wanted to go north, taking the Great North Road to do something about England, Scotland and Britishness. I wanted to revisit Tom Nairn country in the aftermath of devolution but they wouldn't do it. I also proposed some films on the Anglo-Chinese encounter, because I'd been researching that history too. From their side, I couldn't deny that I was white and middle class and male and probably too tall, and had no claims to celebrity and didn't have the right clothes, all that stuff. And since I am not a film maker or a programme producer, I pulled back to concentrate on activities that I could at least control.

There is nothing unique or even particularly meaningful about this: the world is full of people punting programme ideas unsuccessfully. I think television is a pretty horrible industry. There are, of course, good people working in it, and some of them get to make worthwhile programmes too, but the general atmosphere in this industry strikes me as very demoralizing. Even without the cuts now going through under Mark Thompson, it's an increasingly casualized world where everybody's trying to outsmart or second guess everybody else, and where the audience is calculated in pretty insulting terms. It looked to me as if commissioning and editorial decisions were being made on a fairly wayward basis by perhaps fewer people than used to make comparable decisions in the Soviet Union!

► Mimetic Desire
in medialand

René Girard wrote about the mimetic nature of human desire, and his theory is certainly confirmed by the media these days. I don't think it necessarily a bad thing that the old Reithian standards have gone – after all, the apogee of broadcasting can hardly have been Kenneth Clark saying 'I may not be able to define "Civilization" but I know it when I see it' – but in the absence of any other criteria, the whole industry seems to operate in a self-referring bubble of mimetic anticipations. You want what other people want, so the successful media career belongs to the guy who manages to keep popping up here and there and everywhere – doing columns in the

newspaper, holding forth on radio programmes, and generally exploiting the fact that desirability comes from being as thinly spread about the place as possible. Hence the hectic rush for visibility, and hence also the fact that the people running television get by with very small address books, and an even more reduced list of people whose calls actually get returned.

Focus groups are also used to re-employ the familiar. A focus group can hardly license the new or the unexpected, so we get endless programmes trying to ape the last success. As for the ratings used to assess audience sizes, it is not easy to discover exactly how these figures are derived. People who have got close to the process report that the whole edifice is based on a remarkably small sample of people with an extra button by their television set: allegedly, these diligent folk are rewarded with Argos supermarket vouchers if they remember regularly to press the button after they have watched programmes. Still, we do have better television in this country than many other places. There are opportunities, especially on the recently established channel BBC4, even though the audience is now very fragmented and often pitifully small. *The River* came out on BBC2, before that fragmentation had really gone through.

NK: What was the budget?

PW: I don't know for sure, although I know we spent more money than was originally intended. I think the BBC sank something like £600,000 at the series. I appreciated it, and I don't resent the fact that I wasn't converted into a permanent television presenter in the process. Television doesn't always change people for the better even if it does pay the bills. I remember Dan Cruickshank in his pre-television days when he was in the Spitalfields conservation movement. I once heard him give a speech about Georgian pointing, about lime mortar and the different ways of finishing a brick wall. It was not a subject I would ever have expected to find interesting, but it was a *wonderful* talk. He knew *so* much about it and he knew it all so passionately and exactly: he could walk down those early Georgian streets and almost tell you who had done each course of brickwork, and where the builders had knocked off for a break. I much prefer that Dan Cruickshank to the one who has been seen on television recently – with all his knowledge and enthusiasm subordinated to his TV persona as some kind of nutty opium-eating eccentric, flying to Afghanistan or the Middle East to wave his arms about in front of things he knows nothing whatsoever about. Television can be very destructive – and its exposure can also be like that of the medieval pillory.

NK: But you have also done a lot of work in radio.

► Farewell *Night Waves*

PW: Well, I've made quite a lot of documentaries and I presented *Night Waves*, BBC Radio 3's cultural analysis program for about five years. I was one of several presenters. I didn't do it as often as some, and I was never really in the front rank. I still participate in some radio programmes, but I'm a lot less busy in that area than I was. It's partly that I decided to concentrate on writing as my main activity, but the focus groups were looming in that quarter too.

I remember I had an argument with the then editor of *Night Waves*, which I think says a lot about this pressure in broadcasting. The very idea of applying focus groups to a channel like Radio Three seems to me pretty bizarre, and not just because the channel could only afford to commission about three of the things. Anyway, one of my programmes was put to the test, and a negative verdict came back. It wasn't just that I was not a familiar media personality, although that point was made strongly. Somebody had apparently also remarked, 'I feel as if I'm listening in on a conversation I'd never normally have.'

I knew what was coming, but I said to the editor, well, great, isn't this *exactly* what Radio Three's speech programmes should be about? You produce conversations that enable people, if they want, to tune into worlds they may hardly have known existed. Of course the obligation is on you to make the conversation as clear and as accessible as you possibly can. But when I said this, the editor said, no you don't understand, we can't do this anymore, we've got to please a wider demographic. So even in that area, there's this enormous pressure to get the figures up, and constant temptations to hire a user-friendly cheeky chappy to appeal to the listeners that you almost certainly aren't actually ever going to get listening to Radio Three at ten o'clock in the evening. Anyway, the axe fell, as it does every few years, a new lot of presenters were brought in, and I suspect the audience stayed more or less exactly what it was before.

When it comes to serious late evening cultural programmes on radio, the reality is that you are going to get a few dozen listeners in every town, and some interesting clusters in isolated rural settlements (there's a considerable radio audience in the highlands and islands of northwest Scotland, for example). Nobody quite knows how large the total audience is but, on a good night, it may well only amount to 60 or 70 thousand listeners in the whole country. So that's it: that's the audience for this kind of stuff. And it is not contemptible.

Yet all these producers are under enormous pressure to boost the ratings, to justify the license fee. People in this country pay £135 per year for a remarkably wide range of public service broadcasting, and yet politicians and pundits still complain about every threatened rise of a few pounds. The BBC is now embarking on a new wave of cuts, and allegedly even considering such options as closing BBC 4, and all because the government would not allow an increase worth about half a packet of cigarettes on the annual fee. It's pathetic.

I'm not saying the BBC shouldn't be accountable. But to constantly destabilize it on the basis that everything should be judged in terms of the mass audience it is failing to reach seems to me an absurd way of running things. And sadly the people at the top of the BBC are often creatures of this pressure. Meanwhile, too few commentators outside the system are prepared to say these things in public, perhaps because so many are trying to hold or get a job on telly, or because they feel constrained by a widely dispersed fear of appearing 'elitist'.

► Alan Yentob's
'Imagine'

I wrote a very critical piece about the first three programmes that BBC 1 made when they launched a new strand of Arts documentaries called *Imagine*. The first one was about the art collector Charles Saatchi, and the presenter, Alan Yentob, who is also a senior BBC manager, was just standing about sipping champagne among his friends, showing no resistant intelligence at all, and not remotely interested in exploring the fact that Saatchi was a man of immense influence at the same time as apparently having no coherent aesthetic outlook at all. The result of this absence of perspective was a metropolitan freak show, in which everyone who appeared seemed fawningly sycophantic – including the normally abrasive TV critics A. A. Gill and Brian Sewell, both of whom were featured as interviewees in a fairly blatant attempt to head off criticism in advance.

I was asked to review the first programmes for the *Guardian*, so I did. They headlined my article, 'Take this man off the telly' – a message that certainly went home at the BBC, although for them 'this man' was not Yentob but me! I was making a BBC4 documentary at the time, and the day the piece came out, the acting controller of that channel phoned my director and said she was not to meet me again until he had phoned me. So she was travelling up on the train from London on the way to my house, while I was awaiting this call. Eventually, and partly in order to ease her situation, I phoned him to find out what the situation was.

He was disconcerted to be called. I could tell by the sound that he was having his lunch in a

restaurant and he gave me this terrible stuff about how I was not the kind of person they wanted to make programmes with, and suggesting – as if it was some kind of concession – that we should complete the ongoing one and then think again. We did finish that programme, as it happens, but there was never any question of thinking again. I'm quite impressed by the length of the silence that has followed, since I'd come to think that, under John Birt, the BBC had become like a huge bazaar with a big revolving door at the front and no-one inside who was really able to control who went in an out, at least not for more than a few months at a time.

NK: So in part you're talking about the proliferation of magazine format and lifestyle journalism across formerly serious areas of broadcasting?

PW: In that article I suggested that Yentob, who had admitting that the BBC had 'lost the plot' on arts and cultural programmes under his watch, was at least partly responsible for the 'grassing over of BBC 2' because you've got all this stuff about gardening and lifestyle and house redesigning. I am not sure that anyone at the top of the BBC has a real idea of what cultural programming might be, beyond a kind of fashion parade or a trip through Alan's address book (and they really were talking about that as a rare resource).

► Offscreen dues?

I also think that people making decisions over television are inclined to forget their accountability to the outside world, which really is not just the dull place where a nameless audience lives and failed presenters go to die. The temptation is to be confined within a *phantastikon*, a bubble in which presentation replaces reality altogether. I got irritated, for example, when one of the BBC's star presenters and senior editors, John Simpson, was allowed to put on a burka and 'liberate' Kabul. I felt much the same in the eighties, when a pugnacious and notoriously rude commissioning editor for Arts programmes at Channel 4 used to knock back proposals with the insistence that television was not a social worker for the arts: that it was a form of its own, and that it didn't owe anything to sad little initiatives in the world beyond its programmes. I get the same feeling watching BBC2's current programme called 'QI', which seems unnecessarily preoccupied with establishing that its presenter, Stephen Fry, is the most intelligent and well informed man in the entire world. It's tiring, all this corporate solipsism, and it should be called out.

NK: It's also become a convention that many cultural topics must be handled comedically. Television programmes on books, films, and popular culture must contain a comedy element.

PW: Yes, and that improves the climate for jackass presenters too. There's a demand for a similar type of columnists in newspapers too, not least because it doesn't actually cost much to run a big mouth, spouting views that you may very well prefer not to know, and which you gain nothing from, except a general coarsening of sensibilities. But they put a lot of this stuff out, partly for economic reasons, and then you get this sick culture of celebrity built on people who've done absolutely nothing except be visible.

If you want to engage the wider public, which we should surely do, you've got to think about how you do it. Do you operate in the *London Review of Books* or the serious papers? Of course you do, but if you get opportunities to do things in the electronic media, I don't think you should take Regis Debray's approach and conclude that the whole thing is impossibly corrupting and best avoided altogether.

I think you should do what you can, but try to take some otherness in there, and not just conform to the lights. And if the managers curse you, or even resent your modicum of success, and you

don't get asked back? Well, that's just what happens. Anyway, being publicly visible is stress inducing. I console myself with the thought that I escaped just in time. If you're on television a lot, your face can get weirdly plastinated, have you noticed that? Perhaps its vanity, or a strange reaction to the absence of make-up. But people who live by television do tend to get this curious sheen on their faces. It strikes me as a mark of emptiness even on faces that are not empty: a characteristic of people who live in constant expectation of the imaginary life that viewers project onto them.

► John Berger

Despite all the talk of hyper-reality and simulation, let's hold out for the possibility that there is still a reality offscreen. In 2005 we had a wonderful series of live events in London on John Berger. Berger himself came, as did Michael Ondaatje and Anne Michaels from Canada: all these people were suddenly around, and a whole profusion of committed and intelligent writing came into view. And what happens is that just about every event is sold out.

I chaired the opening discussion at the South Bank Centre and The Queen Elizabeth Hall was full: people were being turned away. The organisers tried to get the interest of BBC4, which is the one channel that really should have pushed the boats out and said, we'll make a night or a week of this, we'll show *Ways of Seeing* again, or we'll dig out some of those films Berger made with Alain Tanner, and we'll gather up some of Jean Mohr's photography, and we'll run it. Somebody was just about commissioned to make a film about 'John Berger now' but the controller of BBC4 cancelled it, making it clear that she didn't want this troublesome 78-year-old man on her channel. I was told by one very distinguished film maker that he'd been informed that 'her interest was in discovering the Bergers of tomorrow not the Bergers of yesterday'.

It was such a cruel and stupid remark. Anyone who thinks that Berger could have started out as a young over-promoted TV presenter, I mean, we're talking death of the mind here, we really are. I think it is time to name this stuff. There are kids growing up now and trying to get their heads together – you see them coming into the classroom as students – and they deserve better material to work on. It's hardly surprising if they see our generation as a load of smug gits who did alright for themselves while at the same time denying them resources that might help them get a grip on the world.

► Adam Curtis

There's no question that television can do marvellous things, but for me, really, writing books is the way to go. There is no image-führer leaning in to object to your clothes or your haircut as you pass from one sentence to the next, or to ask whether you are really the right person to be doing this – although the publishers are certainly working on it! There are things that can't be done on television. Film makers like Adam Curtis are always worth watching. I mean his 2004 series 'The Power of Nightmares' which suggested a parallel between the rise of Islamism and Neoconservatism, or, more recently, 'The Trap – what happened to our dream of freedom?' (2007) But even then, I wonder whether sharp editing and dramatic visual juxtaposition can really make an adequate argument, just as it sometimes seems that, in the world of television documentaries, things that can't simply be shown – which in archival terms means things that haven't already been filmed – may not be allowed to exist at all.

► Sinclair and Petit

NK: We got those Curtis films in Australia, I think. But so far as I'm aware free to air television in Australia hasn't shown those Petit/Sinclair films.

PW: In Britain, these things tend to go out as isolated, late night, low budget things if they are broadcast at all. Iain and Chris Petit worked out a way of making them very cheaply with ordinary DVD cameras and a lot of old super 8 film shot by Iain in the sixties. They are produced through Illuminations, a production company that has managed, by various adroit economies and also a

shift to art institutions, festivals and the internet, to continue its output despite the difficulty of securing television commissions.

Indeed, one of them was called 'Asylum: the Last Commission'. I think at least three of those four films went out on Channel 4 but they aren't so much screened as allowed to evaporate in obscure slots and without promotion. As for Patrick Keiller's film, 'The Dilapidated House', also made by Illuminations, that was never broadcast at all, even though Channel 4 funded it! So they would not be high on the list of programmes media moguls would spend time trying to sell abroad. They tend to circulate through international film festivals, although I think the most recent one, London Orbital is now being sold as a DVD.

NK: How would you characterise your current work in relation to your earlier writing?

PW: I suppose I'm still trying to track the way in which cultural phenomena operate in the wider political domain. In general, I think one project tends to suggest its successor. So it was that the material in *Tank* emerged from the Dorset landscape of *The Village that Died for England*, and the *Iron Curtain* book seemed like a logical step on from *Tank*. I've recently started work on a research council funded project concerned with landscape and mobility with the film maker Patrick Keiller and the geographer Doreen Massey. So this is an opportunity to review old ground, and bring in new concerns too, I hope.

► Present interests

NK: What is your current reading?

PW: In the wake of the *Iron Curtain* project I'm still rooting around in early twentieth century internationalist writing – stuff from that optimistic period between 1871 and 1914, when many imagined a peaceable internationalist future emerging alongside a relative decline of the power of the nation state. I am also getting immersed in China as it figured for the Europeans who travelled there to attend the fifth anniversary celebrations of the Maoist 'Liberation' in 1954 – an attempt at rapprochement that I find interesting, partly as an alternative to the American mythology of 'Nixon in China', according to which significant western 'contact' with Communist China really only opened in the early seventies.

As for more literary writing, I've been reading the twentieth century German novelist Uwe Johnson, whom I find a very interesting writer, and one who shows that literary form can still do the business when it comes to articulating political reality. I've also been amazed by the recently discovered work, of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, an extraordinary and previously largely unpublished Russian writer from first half of the twentieth century- an English translation of his, *Seven Stories*, has recently appeared from Glas Publishers in Moscow: it is available even though it's something that you have to go out of your way to get.

I'm sure I'm missing things but I tend not to follow the agenda of mainstream publishers too closely. I can't muster much interest in the current spate of memoirs by chaps going off to excavate the difficulties of their British childhoods. So I use the second hand market a lot, and I still spend a lot of time in libraries. The books are the main attraction, but I like the public access libraries for their human mixture as well: striving, curiosity and brash confidence, but also despair, defeat and sometimes mental illness too.