

# The Higher Naivete

BRITAIN: A FUTURE THAT WORKS. *By Bernard D. Nossiter.* (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1978.)

American commentators on the British condition tend to fall into two categories. The first is the school of apocalyptic chic. Fashionable and misinformed, uncomprehending and sometimes uncomprehensible, they descend tut-tutting upon Britain every time there is a sterling crisis. (Their obsession with the exchange rate is usually a symptom of their economic illiteracy.) They tour a few selected spots to obtain local color; they glance carelessly at a few statistics; and they reach verdicts particularly prolific with such essentially meaningless terms as "collapse" and "bankruptcy." My favorite example of this breed is the vice president (no less) of an American television network who came to do a Condition-of-Britain program in the wake of a sterling slump not so long ago. After he had been filming in the country for some days, he announced to puzzled British assistants that he wanted to do something on "shortages." "How long," the buffoon inquired, gesturing towards Harrods (of all places), "would I have to wait if I went in there and ordered light bulbs?"

Such, dear American readers, are your eyes and ears on the world!

The other type of commentator lurches to the other extreme. He endures the sort of bad service which he would never put up with in the U.S.A. and pronounces everyone here wonderfully friendly. Or he observes, for example, the National Health Service and is so blinded by the fact that it is "free" that he fails to notice that it is singularly deficient when it comes to curing diseases. He insists on excusing our indolence. He avers that all the bits that fall off his British car are fine items of craftsmanship. He declares that Britain has "something" the U.S.A. has not (which in my view is certainly true), but rarely succeeds in finding it and he ends up by endowing Britain with virtues it does not possess.

Bernard Nossiter, who is the chief of *The Washington Post* bureau in London, has written a view of us in *Britain: A Future That Works*. It manages, with amazing skill, to combine most of

the absurdities of both approaches. Nossiter is worth studying, not because he is a typically American liberal — though he is, with all the right causes pinned visibly on his breast like a row of medals — but because he exemplifies the sloppy, unthinking methodology which passes these days for the higher journalism (in both our countries).

Nossiter has a particular taste for absurd declarations. We read at one point that pollution had until recently killed *all* the fish in the Thames, that better houses “simply are not . . . sold to colored citizens,” that the police assigned to demonstrations and marches carry full length riot shields as a matter of course, that *no* “executive car” taking a businessman home is seen on the roads after 5:30 p.m. This is the sort of nonsense which positively intrigues. It is real no-light-bulbs-at-Harrods material. Has Nossiter, one wonders, ever looked at a map of the Thames (primarily a rural river)? Can he explain how people could be prevented from selling their homes to black or brown people? Or how such people with better homes have acquired them? Can he tell us the magic component in the riot shields that police carry at demonstrations — since they are, on most occasions, totally invisible? And, has Nossiter actually driven on any roads in London at 5:30?

The author uses this sort of sweeping assertion as part of his excuse for writing the book in the first place.\* He cites various critics of the British scene such as Milton Friedman, Irving Kristol, the Hudson Institute, certain British journalists and so on. Then, with breathtaking certainty, he declares that “*all* the commentators agreed . . . that the British system was at the end of its tether” (my italics).

A country about which “all the commentators” agreed would indeed be a unique historical phenomenon. Britain certainly does not fall into that category.

### Some Examples of Inaccurate Reporting

For a journalist to report so inaccurately is the height of sloppiness. For that journalist to attack other commentators for their slovenly approach to facts seems to me sheer im-

\* One gathers his book is meant to be a kind of reply to *The Future That Doesn't Work* (edited by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., Doubleday, N.Y., 1977). This earlier work was reviewed in *Policy Review*, Summer 1977.

puddence. This inaccuracy is also illustrated in his chapters on the economy. Friedman, for example, has said some silly things about the British economy. Nossiter rebuts them with a look at the statistics. Fair enough. But then he goes on, having rebuked Friedman with a hefty sneer, to "prove" his case about the moderation of British trade unionists by citing the international comparisons of man hours lost through strikes — a statistical snare and delusion if ever there was one. In the light of this approach, it was no joy to learn that Nossiter was once the National Economics Correspondent to *The Washington Post*. One wondered what sweeping nonsense he fed to his American readers in that capacity. American economic journalists, one fears, may be every bit as bad as British economic journalists. In economic policy Nossiter appears at first sight to be not only a liberal but also a Keynesian. But this would be to underrate his versatility. For he is at times a monetarist as well. Thus, the great British inflation of the mid 1970s was, he says, caused by the lax monetary policies of the Heath Administration. The subsequent cure for the inflation, however, has been due to the incomes policy supported so nobly by the trade unions!

Where this book does not deal in plainly controvertible facts, it all too often misleads. Ulster, of course, is misunderstood. "Race" is approached just as if it were the same problem as it is in the U.S.A. and is, thus, massively misunderstood. (Are there no Americans who can understand what the British "race" problem is about?) Nossiter also has a habit of injecting silly sneers into his comments. Thus, the Editor of *The Times* is scorned as writing "from the sanctuary of his office." Well, where else should he write from? The top of a bus?

Nossiter's case for optimism about Britain's future turns on the following beliefs: that Britain is wisely turning from manufacturing to service industries; that the British choice of leisure over goods is deliberate; that the subsidies to the arts are an indication of civilized values; that the usefulness of the loss-making public industries as subsidies of commerce is underrated; that Britain has trade unions which are models for others.

Concerning the latter belief, one can only murmur sadly, "*res ipsa loquitur*." Since the book was published, obdurate trade unionism has driven *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (the latter, one of Nossiter's curious favorites) out of print.

As for state subsidies of the arts, it may suit a middle-class person like Nossiter to have his pleasures subsidized by the working classes, which is what art subsidies amount to. But this is not an indication of civilization, only of the political muscle of the arts lobby. Besides, some very uncivilized regimes (for example, Hitler's) have been noted for their generous arts subsidies. Nossiter claims that the choice of leisure over goods by the British people is deliberate. He cannot know. It has been a long time since Britain has had a system which has made it possible for employers to offer an even-handed choice between leisure and real earnings. As for the state sector, Nossiter misses or at any rate avoids the issue. The point is that state industries can "subsidize" and still cause the recipients loss. For example, the British Steel Corporation can simultaneously make a loss and fail to provide steel at a competitive price.

Nossiter's claim to have analyzed the secret of Britain's successful future by detecting the switch into service industries is typically superficial. This is not to say that the trend is not important. Clearly it is. And clearly the British are temperamentally unsuited to factory life. But this is far from new and it is far from clear that Britain is equipped for further big changes in that direction.

The antiquity of the trend is known to anyone who has made even a modest study of Britain's economic history. Britain has had a surplus on her visible trade on only a handful of occasions in the last one hundred years or so. Her service industries have always been crucial. Indeed, there is a view that Britain's role in the Industrial Revolution was an aberration — that she always was a country suited to trade rather than manufacture and that the industrialization of the nineteenth century was an uncharacteristic phase. But, the prospects for Britain as a sophisticated supplier of services are poorer than Nossiter assumes. The progressive educational system which he appears to admire has led to a catastrophic decline in basic standards. The general levels of literacy and numeracy among school graduates are alarming. Precisely at a time when the country needs a work population well-fitted to manning sophisticated service industries, the educational system is churning out, at one end of the scale, hordes of scarcely employable sociologists living hopelessly beyond their intellectual means while at the other, it churns out vast numbers that are equipped for being little more than factory

fodder. But Nossiter, "writing from the sanctuary of his office," appears neither to notice nor to understand.

The future which Britain faces is, in fact, rather somber and dismaying, with inflation and racial conflict as only two of the grave threats to an otherwise normally stable and agreeable society. But, there is another and longer story, certainly one beyond the one presented by people like Nossiter who are to journalism what the Ugly American was to diplomacy.

Andrew Alexander

## The Educational Wasteland

### DECADENCE AND RENEWAL IN THE HIGHER LEARNING.

By Russell Kirk. (Gateway Editions, South Bend, Indiana, 1978).

The dust jacket, with its stark pale lettering on a solid black background, conveys the tone of this book.

"Were I to indulge my taste for Jeremiads, I might succeed in outwailing the New Left people at the Ivory Tower's western wall," Russell Kirk reports midway through the volume. To tell the truth, Kirk *has* indulged his taste for jeremiads — *Decadence and Renewal*, yes, but mostly decadence. Only in the last forty pages does the author get around to outlining his program of reform for higher education (an equal space is devoted to the prior question of primary and secondary schooling), and even then he cannot avoid the impulse to instruct by negative example, showing contemporary American schools as models of what *not* to do. Nor is Kirk's tone optimistic. The book is divided into two major sections, entitled "Progressive Decadence" and "Conceivable Renewal." The renewal is "conceivable," not actual, in most cases, or even likely.

But a jeremiad is not inappropriate. The original Jeremiah might not have been a cheery sort, but he survives as a great prophet. And Kirk gives ample reason for his lamentation, reciting an endless catalog of academic transgressions. Decadence, says Kirk (following C.E.M. Joad), comes about when people lose sight of their object. Since American colleges and universities have reached that state, there is no sense