



THE MAN IN THE BLUE SUIT BELT

English Literary Fauna—Their Habitat and Life-Cycle

By JOHN WAIN, *thirty-one, whose first novel, "Born in Captivity" (Knopf, 1953), has won him a place in the species he studies here.*

IN ENGLAND authors are not thought of as forming a *bloc*. Nor do they, on the whole, have any special status. The intelligentsia is a specialized wing of the middle class, and literary artists are a specialized wing of that specialized wing, but no one thinks of them as set apart from other people. It is still felt that one man might naturally be a novelist or playwright where another is a biologist or an architect. In France, where an author is felt to be in a class by himself, anyone who has written a successful novel is liable to find himself asked, quite seriously, to make pronouncements on the future NATO or the ethics of euthanasia; but in England he would just give his views as an ordinary citizen. It is part of the traditional English disrespect for the arts, yet it has its merits. A man who writes books is not made to feel like an elephant at the zoo, cosseted because he is expensive and unusual.

In Paris, again, writers have their

own quarter to live in, but in London there is no *quartier latin*. Painters, it is true, tend to congregate in Chelsea, because it is the most paintable bit of London, and also to some extent at Hampstead (because of the Heath), but if you went strolling about these two areas you would not necessarily see any authors sitting in cafes or striding about the streets. The place to see that is Oxford, which has a higher author-rate than any other English city. There they run over you on their bicycles.

London plays a central part in the life of every English man of letters—so much so that his whole existence is likely to be conditioned by the attitude he adopts towards her. In the first place, every English writer has to look towards London for recognition. The publishers have their offices in London, the newspapers and magazines are edited there, the people who shape public opinion live there, the radio and television programs go out from there. In a tiny country like England there is not room for more than one capital city. Now and then some provincial titan strikes an attitude ("What Manchester thinks today the world thinks tomorrow"),

but what has Manchester thought for the last thirty years that anyone cared tuppence about? Thus, the English writer depends wholly on London.

Add to this the fact that most English authors are born and bred in "the country." Few of the major English writers have been Londoners born and bred; Milton is the greatest exception. Usually the writer gets himself born in some more-or-less provincial, more-or-less dreary corner of the island. As soon as he begins to think about writing, however, he begins to think about London. Dylan Thomas, in his story "The Fight," described the process (the characters are fifteen years old):

In the still room, that had never been strange to me, sitting in heaps of coloured wool, swollen-nosed and one-eyed, we acknowledged our gifts. The future spread out beyond the window, over Singleton Park crowded with lovers messing about, and into smoky London paved with poems.

That just about hits it off. The old Dick Whittington kind of fantasy, that the streets of London are paved

with gold, is replaced in the mind of the aspiring writer by the idea that they are paved with poems. Anyone you meet might be a publisher; you might sit next to John Lehmann on the bus and not know it was him—so you study his photograph carefully, just in case. That tall man feeding the ducks in the park—it *must* be Stephen Spender! Nobody else is as tall as that.

IN THIS mood the aspirant comes to London. He takes a job. Any job will do—after all he hasn't got to stick it for long—and he starts to write. As quickly as he finishes things he tosses them over the wall, bombarding the magazine editors, the publishers, the BBC—anyone who might use them. This goes on for, say, three years. At the end of those years the aspirant has either got nowhere, and given it up in despair, or he has begun to climb up the ladder. Let's assume he has got his foot on one of the lower rungs; that he does a little reviewing now and then, has had some of his work broadcast in one of the fairly numerous avant-garde literary programs put out by the BBC, that he's met a number of other young writers like himself. He is now launched. If anyone asks him what he is doing he replies, "I'm writing." What he is actually doing, of course, is schoolmastering, or working in a bank, or French polishing, but writing only in his spare time.

At this stage the Young Hopeful is very "literary." He is, at the age of twenty-one or two, conscious of his great future. His relatives in Little Mudville, when he goes down to visit them for a few days, find him insufferable. And he is insufferable—absurdly vain of his not-very-interesting work, quite convinced that the kindness his elders have shown him is no more than his due. Before we brush him aside with contempt, however, let us remember that he is probably very poor, that London is a dirty, smelly, wet, foggy, and unhealthy city, and that he probably lives in a back bed-sitting room and cooks over a gas ring. London is, notoriously, hell if you are short of money. It has not the insouciance of Paris, the long warm summer and bracing air of Berlin, the easy calm and soft climate of Dublin. Our Young Hopeful, in order to get along at all, needs some sort of sustaining conceit to make him tough enough to "scorn delights, and live laborious days."

Suppose another few years go by, and our young writer continues to climb the ladder. By the time he is crowding thirty he will probably have

a novel or two published, and be able to get a book to review from one paper or another about a dozen times a year. (Reviewing is terribly important to young writers; it is fairly well paid—few papers offer less than £3 a thousand words, and many go up to £5, on which a young man can live for a week. That is why the standard of reviewing is so low. Literary editors tend to be kindly men who give work to Young Hopefuls out of benevolence.)

The writer now faces a crossroads. What he does next will depend on how much money he is able to earn by writing. Also, of course, on how much he needs, because writers, like other people, have been known to get married and breed. If the Young Hopeful now finds that he can earn a living wage with his pen he usually chooses this time to move away from London and settle down where living is cheaper and quieter. Where does he go? This raises problems. It is bound up with the question of what he has been writing *about* all these years. A lot of English literature, like any literature, is "provincial," in the sense that it sets out to interpret the lives of people who inhabit certain definite places, these places being remote from the metropolis. If the Young Hopeful comes from, say, Yorkshire he might be tempted, on leaving London, to go back to Yorkshire and settle there, in order to get back to his tap-root of inspiration and subject-matter. Dylan Thomas, for instance, settled down in a small Welsh town by the sea. Alternatively, he might go abroad; many European countries offered cheaper living and healthier climates than England.

WHAT he does in most cases, however, is to settle in the rich and beautiful countryside of Southern England. At least three out of ten of the picturesque cottages you see in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Sussex, and Kent are occupied by novelists, furiously banging the typewriter all morning, slouching round the leafy lanes all afternoon, and laying down the law in the "local" at night.

The writer will still gravitate to London. If he can afford it he will have a small flat there, where he can entertain and spend the night after a social evening. In any case, he will not cut his London roots, and consequently will have, for the rest of his life, two addresses if he possibly can. J. B. Priestley lives in the Isle of Wight; in London he has a flat in Albany, off Piccadilly, which is about as select as you can get. (Graham Greene and Harold Nicolson are other Albanians.) And for

every one who manages it on this large scale there are fifty who keep up two small establishments rather than one ordinary-sized one. In either case the essential point is the same: once he can afford to live by his writing the author *leaves* London. It is too big, too noisy, and too expensive. Most of the typical "metropolitan" men of letters who fifty years ago would have lived in town now live in the country and commute. V. S. Pritchett, for instance, the star critic of the *New Statesman and Nation* who is associated in most people's minds with the most metropolitan attitudes and fashions, lives in quite a remote country district. Evelyn Waugh has a country house. Robert Graves had a "London period," but now lives abroad—"except," as he puts it, "in wartime."

FOR EVERY writer who gets to this stage, who is able to support himself by writing, there are forty who never quite make it. They are "in," all right. Their names are known; you read them in the weekly press and hear them on the radio; their books are in the shops. But they cannot quite break away. Many a man by the time he is thirty-five has a sound regular job, a literary reputation of a kind, plenty of literary friends, and an undoubted niche. But he cannot face leaving his job to "devote himself," as the phrase runs, "to literature." He cannot be sure of making a living, for one thing. A lot of his work consists of occasional reviewing and broadcasting, and he has the uneasy feeling that this would dry up if he were not on hand to see that it keeps flowing.

There is nothing for it. It has to be London, and a fixed life, for him. He accordingly joins what I shall call "the Blue Suit Belt." This is made up of writers from thirty-five onwards who work in offices and adopt the protective coloring of the middle class as a whole. A member of the Blue Suit Belt will usually, having put his Young Hopeful days behind him, make a conscious effort not to look, or to seem, "literary." His wife and kids will be like anyone else's wife and kids; he will go to work on the tube, or the suburban commuters' train, at a normal time and come back at a normal time. His writing will be done in the evenings and at week-ends.

What sort of office does he work in? Well, it may be anything, but many Blue Suiters find a place in some quasi-literary organization, such as a publishing firm or the literary wing of the BBC. It is a sad fact that this kind of work, which is half-

creative—a little too close to the working of the creative imagination without really giving that imagination any genuine work to do—often tends to hamper the writer's real work. Still, the Blue Suit Belt goes soldiering on, producing a fair amount of respectable writing. And, after all, what are these people to do? They cannot—or dare not—trust themselves and their families to the very chancy life of a professional writer; and equally, they cannot walk out, like Rimbaud, and leave the whole thing. They are trapped, but they manage to live fairly well in captivity.

THAT, then, is the picture. If you come to London and look about you for “writers” you may be lucky or you may not. The young man you see in the street wearing a picturesque garb and needing a haircut is probably a painter, or (most likely) a plain idler who wishes to be taken for a painter. If he is a writer he will be a Young Hopeful. You will have heard of him, but only if you have been reading the “little magazines” such as *Mandrake*, *Nine*, or *Nimbus*. On the other hand, the podgy middle-aged man, wearing pince-nez, who sits next to you in the tube with a briefcase on his knee may be someone whose books you have been reading for years. But the Big Game you won't see unless you happen to be hiding in a tree when they come down to drink at some secluded waterhole. They will stampede if they catch the least glint of your lens.

Everyone's address, by the way, is in *Who's Who* if the editors of that extraordinary volume happen to have heard of him. And not just the addresses either. The “recreations” make good reading. William Sansom, for instance, gives his as “watching.” (Watching *what*?) And one of the Young Hopefuls, James Kirkup, tells us that his recreation is “standing in shafts of sunlight.” It ought to be easy enough to spot him.

But I hear a storm of protest. Surely every city in the world has some centers where literary and artistic people tend to gather? London can't be a complete exception. What has happened to the famous taverns, from Dr. Johnson's Mitre to Yeats's Cheshire Cheese?

I have been exaggerating, but for a serious purpose. I wanted to knock down any cardboard castles you might have been building, because I have seen too often the disappointment these fantasies can cause. I wasn't anxious to sell you the idea that the streets of London are paved with proofsheets. It is a fact that there are a few pubs, a few restaurants,

which do tend to attract writers. The myth of Soho, for instance, is largely baloney, but not *entirely* so. If you wander down Dean Street, Soho, you might try looking into a pub called the York Minister. If the *apéritif* hour doesn't bring any luck there you could go on to have a meal at Les Caves de France, in the same street. After dinner, assuming you have drawn a blank still, try the Mandrake Club, a few yards down an alley, still in the same street. Or you could try the Fulham Road. If you have read an amusing novel by Robert Kee called “A Sign of the Times” you'll remember that two pubs come into the story. Kee calls them “The Clement Atlee” and “The Admiral Benbow,” but their names actually are “The Anglesey” and “The Queen's Elm.” They're both in the Fulham Road.

AGAIN, if you want to see the sort of place that London writers live in when they're not doing too well take a walk round the Warwick Avenue district. It's called “Little Venice” because there is a canal there, but I think the name has a dash of irony in it, like “Wigan Pier.” For a real pilgrimage station yourself outside a rather grim block of flats called Carlyle Mansions, in Chelsea, facing

the river; Mr. Eliot lives there. Don't wait for him in business hours, because he spends those at the office of Faber and Faber, Ltd. Does this make Mr. Eliot one of the Blue Suit belt? No, because poets are different. They know, and have known from the start, that they would never make a living by their work, and have planned their lives accordingly. You find poets scattered about London: William Empson in Hampstead (occupation: professor), Louis MacNeice in a fine house overlooking Regent's Park (occupation: radio feature-writer and producer), Stephen Spender in St. John's Wood (occupation: magazine editor), and then of course the Young Hopefuls.

The truth is, London is too big. If it had wanted to stay really literary it would have had to remain as small as it was when Shakespeare lived there; in his day you could visit anyone you wanted to see in fifteen minutes on foot. But London didn't want to stay really literary. What city does? As it is, London is a kindly foster-mother to the young writer from the provinces, but once he has reached maturity he's better out of the place. The Blue Suit Belt offers him security and comfort, but that isn't what he came for in the first place.



LONDON: The capital of empire, the sanctuary of sterling, the second city of the world, “a kindly foster-mother to the young writer, who, once he's reached maturity, had better get out of the place.”

THE LITERARY SAMPLER

EXCERPTS FROM NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS

Life at the Top

CCULTURE? Executives do tend to have broader tastes in music, reading, and the like than their less successful contemporaries. But that, as executives themselves concede, isn't saying very much. Most of those questioned were conscious that they didn't read enough good books about something besides business, and some executives went out of their way to berate themselves on that score.

But where, the executive asks, can he find time? Much as he might like to read more history or take in more plays, he looks on this as too marginal, too little relevant to his career to warrant making the time. His judgment is debatable on this point, but that is another story. The fact is that he doesn't see much relationship, and thus, as with the long-deferred project to build a boat with the boys, he will keep on planning that reading he hopes to get around to. One of these days.

Hobbies? Even here the executive applies the yardstick of business relevance. While some executives are genuinely absorbed in a hobby for the sheer creative bang of it, for a larger number the pursuit carries strong therapeutic overtones. For them the hobby is not a joy in itself but simply a means of restoring themselves between rounds. To this end some executives go through an almost compulsive ritual—like watering the flowers at a regular week-end time whether or not it has just rained. To borrow an old phrase, they are never less at leisure than when they are at leisure.

We have, in sum, a man who is so completely involved in his work that he cannot distinguish between work and the rest of his life—and is happy that he cannot. Surrounded by a society ever more preoccupied with leisure, he remains an anomaly. Not only does he work harder, his life is in a few respects more ascetic than the businessman's of half a century ago. His existence is hardly uncomfortable, yet, save for the Cadillac, the better address, the quarter acre more of lawn, his style of living is not signally different from that of the men in middle management. And the fact doesn't concern him overmuch; the aspects of luxury that he talks

about most frequently concern things that are organic to his work—good steak dinners, comfortable hotels, good planes, and the like. No dreams of Gothic castles or liveried footmen seize his imagination. His house will never be a monument, an end in itself. It is purely functional, a place to salve the wounds and store up energy for what's ahead. And that, he knows full well, is battle.

—From *"The Organization Man,"* by William H. Whyte, Jr. (Simon & Schuster, \$5).

Quaker City Mores

PHILADELPHIA society had a pattern of its own. It was not like New York society, whose walls had often been breached in the old days by the mere weight of money, and whose low modern fences could be jumped if you were mentioned in enough gossip columns. Nor was it like, say, Detroit, which had an assembly-line society that automatically took in all the top people in the automobile industry. You needed more than money or power to win acceptance in Philadelphia. And if you enjoyed the neon glare of the gossip columns you had better stay

out of Philadelphia, which preferred candlelight.

People often made the mistake of comparing the social organization in Philadelphia with that of Boston. Once there had been many similarities. But in Boston they had forgotten to take their cod liver oil. They had forgotten that any society gets anemic if it refuses to admit new members. Boston society had closed ranks against the invading Irish and Portuguese and Italians, so it had no new blood. It had lost the knack of making money. The only thing that kept it solvent was the spendthrift trust, developed to protect the old shipping and manufacturing and banking fortunes; Boston society lived on the interest from money its grandfathers had made. To fit into the Boston pattern you had to come from an old family, and accept the kind of taboos people would call superstitions if they saw a primitive tribe obeying them.

Philadelphia society had long ago worked out a procedure for taking in new members. Money and power were important, but Philadelphia wanted to see if you could produce children and grandchildren who could handle money and power. Marrying well was part of it, but Philadelphia wanted to



—From *"Modern Japanese Prints"* (Tuttle).

"Sanjo Bridge" by Tomikichiro Tokuriki.