

Out of Hours

Unhistoric acts

For a quarter of a century I practised in a place described by the late landscape historian WG Hoskins as 'the rock bottom of English provincial life ...'¹ Much of the practice area comprised tight rows of slate-roofed terraces hastily put up in the late 1800s to house brick factory workers. The stairs inside these 600 homes were vertiginously steep, the treads just wide enough to support the forefoot. The tiny living rooms had barely space for a gas fire, a 2-seater sofa, a telly, a birdcage, and a polyester rug.

Over the branch railway line lay an estate of plain and modest semis and bungalows built in the 1960s. Parked out the front might be an economical Korean car. Beyond each half-glassed kitchen door was a rectangle of grass patronised by a small dog, while along the lap-panel fence was a flowerbed planted with Wilko perennials. The shopping street included a discount carpet outlet, a chiropodist, a white goods store, and a bap shop. A bingo hall offered transitory entertainment and conviviality. Two pharmacies cashed the prescriptions that half the population depended on to mitigate the ordinary ailments of provincial England. Employment was mainly in unglamorous work: care home workers, builders, check-out staff, small business proprietors.

Whenever I glimpsed the highbrow artistic life of London or its high-octane fashion outlets, or the postcard villages of the Cotswolds, or I travelled along, say, the Majorcan coast, I was reminded that the place that I worked in could well be described as drab, flat, and unscenic. Implied in all of this is that I practised in a place as 'profoundly dull'¹ as one might expect from a place making such prosaic items as vests and pants, shoes, biscuits, and bricks. Implicit in this is that the people waiting at the bus stop to take them shopping in the city centre were as dull as the place they lived in.

But I can't help remembering what George Eliot wrote:

... human nature is lovable — the way I have learnt something of its deep pathos,

*its sublime mysteries — has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace ...'*²

I came to discover over the years that this humdrum urban landscape was rich in those sublime mysteries. There was the special-needs teacher refusing to take sick leave on being diagnosed with a life-threatening condition in case she upset the children in her class by not being at work. There was the single mother who chirpily looked after her mentally and physically-disabled daughter, making heroic efforts to get her down to the surgery rather than call anyone out. There was the couple whose children died of progressive neurological disease, always unnecessarily appreciative of any help they received and giving their children a normal family life without a climate of despondency. There was the man who went on playing successfully in his brass band long after he became profoundly deaf. If there was quiet goodness and courage, there was also deep pathos.

There was the reclusive old man and his 40-year-old bachelor son who sat numb in their uncleaned sitting room, hardly eating for weeks after the death of the old man's wife, asking repeatedly, 'What can we do now we've lost mother? We never, ever, expected to lose mother. What can we do, now mother's gone?'

There was the man in his mid-30s who I saw kneel down beside the bed — straight-backed, head bowed, silent — with his hands resting on the hand of his suddenly-deceased wife. Apart from the occasional trembling of his shoulders, he stayed still for a full minute. Then he stood up, dried his tears, and went downstairs to tell his young children of their mother's death. I looked at his beautiful wife, dead of a pulmonary embolism while undergoing treatment for breast cancer, and hoped that she had known how much he had treasured and respected her.

I found these citizens of rock-bottom provincial England to be unpretentious, stoic,

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grateful, dignified, and able to retain their sense of humour in the face of adversity. They were, of course, not saints. There were instances of fear or desperation, sometimes a standing on entitlement, and occasionally hot temper. In short, there was humanity in full bloom, thorns with the roses.

Quiet and noble people can be found of course among any population anywhere in the world, including in a glitzier society in a grander place, but in the cramped terraces and identikit semis there were no affectations, no posturing of the one-upmanship of genius or wealth to negotiate through in order to find the qualities that lay beneath. They were worn on the sleeve. These were merits that contribute to the 'good of the world' that is 'dependent on unhistoric acts'.³ Eliot might have been referring to the people of provincial England when she wrote:

*'... things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been ... half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life.'*³

Yes, I worked in a place that some might call rock bottom, but I came to see that this provincial life with its unhistoric acts could be considered not to be rock bottom, but rather to be a bedrock for what is humane in society that has persisted long after Eliot's time. Perhaps that's why WG Hoskins also wrote of the place '*... there is something profoundly moving about it.*'¹ I'm glad that I had the privilege of participating in it.

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REFERENCES

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2. Eliot G. *Adam Bede*. London: Penguin Classics, 2008.
3. Eliot G. *Middlemarch*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

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