

Keeping On Keeping On

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Introduction

Since diaries make up the bulk of this book a diary entry is an appropriate start:

10 December 2015. Trying to hit on a title for this collection I pick up Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings* . . . a presentation copy inscribed to me by Larkin at the request of Judi Dench back in 1969 when she and I did *An Evening With* . . . for the BBC. Looking at Larkin is a mistake as I am straight away discouraged: his poems are full of such good and memorable stuff that to plunder them just for a title seems cheap. Though it's easier for Larkin, I think, as at eighty-one I'm still trying to avoid the valedictory note which was a problem Larkin never had, the valedictory almost his exclusive territory. I find nothing suitable though *The Long Slide* is a possibility, which seems valedictory but isn't . . . *The Long Slide* is to happiness not extinction. Would *Pass It On* do, Hector's message at the end of *The History Boys*? But pass what on . . . I'd still find it hard to say.

Nothing else done today except a trip over to Profile Books to sign copies of *The Lady in the Van*. The driver who takes me there is a big nice-looking young man with close-cropped hair and curling eyelashes. He is also a noticeably courteous driver. When we get to Clerkenwell I compliment him on his courteous driving but not (the subtext) on his eyelashes though it's something at eighty-one I'm probably allowed to do. No danger. Not that I ever have been.

In one particular respect the valedictory is not to be sidestepped as it was in 2006 that Rupert Thomas and I said farewell to Gloucester

Crescent, the street in Camden Town where I had lived for nearly forty years, moving (though only a mile away) to Primrose Hill. It's said that newcomers to London often settle near the point of arrival and this was certainly true of me, who could be taken to have arrived from Leeds at King's Cross and been a denizen of North London ever since.

I started off my life in London in 1964 when I had a top-floor flat for £10 a week in Chalcot Square not far from where we have moved to. I was nervous about the move. In Gloucester Crescent I'd worked in a bay window looking onto the street where there was always enough going on to divert me in the gaps of my less than continuous flow of composition. In Primrose Hill I was to look out over a tiny back garden where the only excitement would be the occasional squirrel and I was nervous lest the spell of the Crescent such as it was, would be broken. Could I actually work there? This was such a real concern that for a month or two I kept office hours, cycling back to the old house and the table in the window that I was used to. But this soon palled so saying a reluctant farewell to the vibrant street life of Gloucester Crescent (drunks, drug dealing, snogging by the wall and the occasional stop and search) I embraced the tranquillity of the back garden in Primrose Hill and just got on with it.

In another respect, too I was hoping it would be a new beginning. Having failed in our old house to turn back the rising tide of paper I looked forward to a new start. I wasn't yet ready for a computer but I resolved to make fewer notes, not write so many drafts and generally keep paperwork to a minimum. This has not happened and having fled one nest I now have made another. I am not proud of being computer-illiterate and this too I hoped to alter so we did get a computer. However its sojourn was brief as it was the single item stolen in a break-in one afternoon and in this respect Primrose Hill proved hardly more law-abiding than Camden Town: my bike, chained to the railings outside was soon stolen, a would-be burglar tried to con his way into the house and a neighbour was badly mugged on our actual

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doorstep. Still it's a friendly neighbourhood and a socially mixed one and even if I can't quite cosify it as 'the village' as some do, most people speak or pass the time of day though whether it will survive when HS2 senselessly rips the guts out of it remains to be seen.

Shortly after we moved house in 2006 we entered into a civil partnership. Rupert and I had first got together in 1992 though we didn't live in the same house until 1997 after I was operated on for bowel cancer as is related in *Untold Stories*. We had now been together for fourteen years, our partnership domestic long before it was civil, so the ceremony was hardly a landmark. And even less so, thanks to me.

It was a rainy morning in Camden Registry Office, with the registrar performing the rites in the presence of Rupert's parents, his brother and a few friends and with scant ceremony, so scant in fact that even the registrar felt it a bit of a let-down, with the happy couple and everyone else doing nothing more celebratory afterwards than adjourning for some coffee on Great Portland Street. This was entirely my fault as, never keen on parties, had a more festive occasion been envisaged I might have jumped ship. It was only later that I realised how closely our ceremony mirrored the early morning marriage of my parents which is also described in *Untold Stories*. They, too, had had only a few relatives present with my father immediately afterwards dashing off to work where he was a butcher at the Co-op. Their only concession to the occasion was a visit that evening to the Theatre Royal and *The Desert Song*. We didn't even do that (or its equivalent). It's something (if only occasionally) that I am never allowed to forget.

In the ten years covered by this book politics has impinged more than I care for and like the woman in the fish shop the day after the 2015 election I fear that there will be a Tory government for the remainder of my life. And with it England dismantled. As the government continues to pick the state clean one marvels at its ingenuity in finding institutions still left unsold. And why should it stop? If there is money to be made out of the probation service why not still

exhibit the insane? How long before even the monarchy is sponsored and government itself put out to tender? Is there any large corporation nowadays which one wholly trusts and which doesn't confuse honesty with public relations?

Some of these sentiments I more moderately voiced in King's College Chapel in 2014 in the sermon printed here. I could have suggested then that taking a leaf out of the government's book the Church of England too should be run solely for profit, parsons given targets and made to turn up at Epiphany with statistics of souls saved. Except that the trouble with such jokes is that they are a joke no longer and in this senseless world in which even the bees find government arrayed against them, moderation is hard to hold onto.

Eschew the valedictory though one tries to do, anything one writes at this age is bound to be to a degree testamentary, with the writer wondering what of anything he or she has written will survive and for how long. I can't say I much care since I shan't be around to see it though I hope that any posthumous assessment will at least be comprehensive, taking in not just what I've written but what I've said about it myself and this collection includes the preface and programme notes for four plays – *The Habit of Art* (2009), *Hymn*, *Cocktail Sticks* and *People* (all 2012). The introductions to my plays often say as much as the plays themselves, including as they often do cherished passages cut from the playing text, generally on grounds of length. But I have always written too much and one of the reasons why my collaboration with Nicholas Hytner has been so long and fruitful is that he is among other things a ruthless surgeon with no hesitation about wielding the scissors or pressing whatever key it is on the computer.

I have also been fortunate in my writing life that the *London Review of Books* has been prepared to print what prose I have written and the National Theatre produce my plays. I have been edited by both but rejected by neither and seldom put under pressure. Of course I might have written more had I been less complacent about finding a market for my work but I wouldn't have had such a good time.

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One of the diary entries for October 2015 is about doing *Private Passions*, Michael Berkeley's always excellent programme for BBC Radio 3. It was nicely edited so that after my final choice, 'Softly and gently', the final passage from Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, I was allowed a little coda. As a boy at concerts in Leeds Town Hall I used to sit behind the orchestra. The music I heard seemed to hold out a vision of love returned, of transcendence and even triumph. But that was just the music and life wasn't like that. What was to become of me? Could I slip into the seat behind I would put a hand on my young shoulder and say, 'It's going to be all right.'

And it has been all right. I have been very lucky.

Alan Bennett

2005

9 *January*. To Solopark near Cambridge, a vast but highly organised architectural salvage depot where (with unexpected ease) we find four suitable blond flagstones for the hallway. Something of the abattoir about such places and still there are the half dozen pepperpot domes from Henry VII's chapel at Westminster which we saw when we were here last and which were taken down by Rattee and Kett in the course of their restoration of the chapel in the 1990s. They are, I suppose, late eighteenth-century or early nineteenth-century and so less numinous than their predecessors would have been – though even these will have witnessed the fire that destroyed the House of Commons and the original Palace of Westminster.

13 *January*. Papers full of Prince Harry who's been to a fancy-dress party wearing a Nazi armband. Not a particularly bright thing to do though what I find sympathetic is that he can no more draw a proper swastika than I could as a child, none of my efforts looking other than a lot of silly legs chasing one another in a rather Manx fashion and not the chilling symbol one saw on the pitiless arm of Raymond Huntley or Francis L. Sullivan's over-filled sleeve.

18 *January*. To lunch at the Étoile with Michael Palin and Barry Cryer, nice and easy with Barry telling innumerable stories and jokes and Michael reminiscing about *Python*, particularly Graham Chapman. I contribute less in the way of jokes or reminiscence, though we talk about the Cook–Moore play, something similar now threatened for the *Pythons*. We're all of us very different. I'm the oldest by a couple of years but all of us still have a good head of hair with Michael

as handsome as he was when younger though his face more leathery and Gary Cooper-like. Both of them say how utterly dependent they are on their wives, Michael's routine currently disrupted because Helen has had to have a knee replacement so his household doesn't run as smoothly as he would like. God knows what he would make of our routine but I tell them they're very lucky.

Michael is fascinated by Graham Chapman and his sexual boldness. Tells how booking into a hotel somewhere, Graham hadn't even signed in before he disappeared with one of the hotel staff and like Orton in his capacity to detect or to generate mischief.

Says G. was probably the best actor of the group, his performances often utterly serious however absurd the dialogue and instancing Graham's meticulously named 'Vince Snetterton-Lewis' telling how he used to have his head nailed to the wardrobe in a performance of documentary straightness.

28 January. Fly to Rome for a British Council reading. It occurs to me that a lot of the camp has gone out of British Airways and that as the stewards have got older and less outrageous so the service has declined. This morning there is scarcely a smile, not to mention a joke, the whole flight smooth, crowded and utterly anonymous.

The British Council reading is packed, with two hours of radio and TV interviews beforehand. All the interviewers are well-informed, with sitting in on the proceedings a simultaneous translator, Olga Fernando. She's astonishingly clever, translating aloud while at the same time taking down a shorthand transcript of what is being said, a skill she normally employs in much more exalted circumstances; next week for instance she is accompanying the Italian president to London to meet Jack Straw and she also translated for Bush on his visit to Italy last year.

The library at the British Council is busy and full of students who only leave when it closes at 8 p.m., and seeing these young Italians reading English books and magazines, watching videos and generally

finding this a worthwhile place to be is immensely heartening. The British Council can still be thought a bit of a joke but like the BBC World Service it's a more useful investment of public money than any number of state visits, or, in Blair's case, holidays with Berlusconi (who, incidentally, I never hear mentioned throughout).

29 January, Rome. Seduced by its name, first thing this morning we go to look at Nero's Golden House, or such parts of it as have been excavated. It's a mistake. Walking through these tall narrow chambers, none with natural light and few with more than the faintest fresco, I feel it's no more inspiring than a tour round a nineteenth-century municipal gasworks, which it undoubtedly resembles. Most of the party wear headphones and follow the cassette guide and so become dull and bovine in their movements with sudden irrational darts and turns dictated by the commentary. Deprived of one faculty they become less adept at the others, and when they talk do so in loud unregulated voices. Wayward and dilatory in their responses they are seemingly without purpose, though of course they are the purposeful ones. What to us are featureless alcoves of scrofulous masonry (and with no evidence of gold) presumably echoed to the orgies and barbarities which are even now being detailed on the cassettes to which everyone else is listening intently.

On Saturday evening to the Campidoglio where the Capitoline Museum opens late, if to very few visitors and we are virtually alone in the vast galleries, though there are more people looking at the pictures which we skip in favour of the sculpture. I stroke the back of the Dying Gaul and would have done the same for the Boy taking a Thorn from his Foot, but the attendant is there. Afterwards we brave the wind and go round the corner onto the terrace to look across the Forum but it's too dark to see much and what one can see means nothing – the biggest handicap in Rome as in Egypt or China that I have no perspective on its history.

Eat at a friendly little restaurant down the street from the hotel,

and recommended by the British Council – and twice, Saturday lunch and Sunday dinner, at La Campana, off the Piazza Nicosia not far from P. Navona – a lovely old-fashioned restaurant recommended by Matthew Kneale, and reminiscent of the old Bertorelli's – tiled floor, blond wood, old waiters and a huge menu. Note how unobtrusively friendly the Italians are, both neighbouring tables, to which we had not spoken during the meal, say good night to us when they leave. We tip, which perhaps doesn't do here and which probably does us no favours but one wants to reward the waiters (and the restaurant) for still being as they are.

Our waiter could well be played by Michael Gambon, though what a monologue by an old waiter could be about I can't think.

4 February. Condoleezza Rice announces that the US has no plans to attack Iran at the present moment, the implication being that we should be grateful for such forbearance.

One forgets what a vile paper the *Telegraph* still is. Last Sunday I was sickened by a vicious profile of Clive Stafford Smith, which implied that he was unbalanced and that his (to my mind saintly) efforts on behalf of those on Death Row in America were an unwarranted interference in the democratic process – and that if the people of Texas want to condemn their fellow citizens to death, justly or unjustly, they should be allowed to do so.

9 February. I use proof sheets as scrap paper and today it's one from *Afternoon Off* (1978), a TV play we shot at Whitby with a scene in a café and a long speech by Anna Massey. Stephanie Cole plays the other part, but it's hardly a conversation as she only has one line with Anna doing all the talking. And I realise, as I haven't until now, that I was writing monologues long before I specifically tried to, only in the earlier plays they were just long (long) speeches. *Afternoon Off* has several, because the leading figure is a Chinese waiter with very little English so everybody talks at him.

13 February. As with Havel once, I seem to be the only playwright not personally acquainted with the deceased Arthur Miller and with some line on his life and work. Many of his plays I still haven't seen, though years ago when I was reading everything I could get hold of on America and McCarthyism I came across Miller's novel *Focus*, in which a character begins to look Jewish when he takes to wearing glasses. It's a powerful piece and in retrospect rather Roth-like. No one quite says how much of his street cred came from his marriage to Monroe, though paradoxically more with the intellectuals than with Hollywood.

19 February. Shop in Settle, calling in first at Mr Midgley's antique shop at the end of Duke Street. It's closed and as Mr Midgley has been ill we assume it's that and are going away when Mrs M. comes to the door to say that John died yesterday. Both of us much affected by this, partly because we were fond of him but also because it will alter the landscape, visits to the shop always part of our Saturday morning routine.

Mr Midgley was originally an architect, trained at Leeds but who had had an antique shop in Settle as long as I can remember. His stuff was good and not dear, ceramics and glass mainly and over the years I must have bought dozens of rummers and heavy Victorian tumblers, the latter £2 or so for many years and even today only £10 or so. Whatever you bought from him would have a meticulously written label attached describing exactly what the piece was and its date and whether it was damaged – though he was such a skilled repairer you often couldn't tell where the chip or the crack had been. These labels were almost scholarly productions particularly when relating to the umpteen nineteenth-century potteries south of Leeds and I've kept some of them on the objects concerned lest the information be lost.

Once upon a time shops such as his were a feature of any small town but as rents have risen actual antique shops are seldom come