New Blackfriars

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Quite Good Times to be Born

Brian Wicker

David Lodge's latest book, *Quite a Good Time To Be Born* (Harvill Secker 2015) is an autobiographical memoir of his first forty years, up to the moment of his first major success with the novel *Changing Places* in 1975. It also indicates (p. 478) how and why his upbringing as a Catholic has been 'demythologised' and he no longer 'believe(s) literally in the affirmations of the Creed which I recited at mass every Sunday' throughout his childhood and young adulthood. (The development of David's mature agnosticism will doubtless be explained more fully in the promised second volume).

I have been a friend and colleague of David's since 1960. I even merit a brief mention on p. 346 of his book. Indeed for some years our lives were intertwined, since we both spent a major part of our academic careers at the University of Birmingham, he as a Lecturer/Professor of Modern English Literature in the English department and I as a Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in English Literature in the 'Extramural' department, organising and teaching university courses all over the West Midlands. But, unlike David, I have not found it necessary to give up the faith which we have long shared. This article is partly an explanation of how and why this is so.

David and I have many things in common. We both think our birth dates were good times to be born, in my case in 1929 and in his case 1935, partly because we both avoided conscription into the Second World War while being able to remember quite a lot about living through it. And we are both South London suburbanites. David was brought up in Brockley, an inner South London suburb, and educated at a local grammar school. I grew up a little further out in south-suburban London, in a marginally more affluent area between Croydon and Sutton, and went to the local grammar school. We both had especially helpful teachers of English. David remembers Malachy Carroll, who helped him get into University College, London University to read English Literature. I was tutored for an exhibition in the same subject at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford by Kenneth Richards. We were the first family members to go to university, and we both got first class degrees in English Language and Literature at the end of three years.

As teenagers in the aftermath of the war we each had to spend two years as 'national servicemen' in the army. We both hated the army and all its post-war works. In my case I had to do my soldiering from

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1947–49 before going to Oxford, because the universities were chock-full of returning ex-servicemen. So I spent my late teenage years as a sergeant-instructor in the Education Corps at Malvern, teaching semi-literate soldiers to read and write. Luckily the army sent me on several university-run courses on the arts and social sciences, which were the best things that happened to me during my army time. But David did not have ex-servicemen as obstacles in front of him, so he went to university straight from school and was conscripted into the army after graduation. He eventually became a PRI clerk at Bovington Camp in Somerset, rising to the rank of corporal. He too wanted to do something useful by becoming a teacher in the Royal Educational Corps, but the idiocy of army regulations prevented this.

There are other experiences linking our destinies too. We have each been married since the mid-twentieth-century, remained monogamous, and reared three children. And tragedies have hit our children too, in that David has a son handicapped with Down's syndrome, while one of my daughters was killed in a white-water rafting accident in 1991. In later years we have both written MA dissertations which, among other things, bear on the writings of John Henry Newman.

We first got to know each other when I was invited to apply for a lectureship in English literature in the Extramural department of Birmingham University in 1960, while David was appointed to a teaching lectureship in the English Department in the same year. Naturally we shared many common friends and colleagues in the university during that time. David talks about many of them in his memoir and I remember them too as friends and colleagues. Finally, by a curious chance we both spent time, during the 1968–9 period of the Vietnam war, teaching in America. He was a professor at Berkeley, California at the same time that I was teaching at the University of Eastern Michigan and at Manhattanville College in New York State. Even our journeys to and from America were similar. He and his family went out to the USA on one Cunard liner (the Queen Mary) while I and my family came home on another (the Queen Elizabeth).

So much for the many things we have in common. Now for some differences.

David spent much of the war as an evacuee with his mother, to steer clear of the bombing. They only returned to Brockley in between spells away from home. Nevertheless the Lodge family qualified for a 'Morrison' shelter (named from the government minister Herbert Morrison) as protection from the bombs. This was a steel structure which fitted under a table inside the house, and into which you crawled at night. Morrison shelters were mostly for people who could not fit an outdoors 'Anderson' shelter into their garden. (The Anderson shelter was a prefabricated curved sheet-steel nest inserted into a hole in the ground and covered over with turf. It was named after another government

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minister). Both kinds of shelter were given free to those who applied for one, as presumably the Lodge family did.

But if you had the money to pay for a shelter, you had to organise things for yourself. This is what my family did. A local builder dug a big hole in our back garden and built a reinforced concrete shelter in it, about six feet by five in area, for Dad and Mum, plus my sister and myself. So, since we were not in an inner London suburb and therefore evacuated outside London, we spent many months, during the 1940–41 blitz and again during the 'doodlebug' era in 1943–44 sleeping in this shelter. I had to sleep in a bunk about eighteen inches or less from the concrete roof on a piece old carpet slung between two poles like a hammock. The experience of trying to sleep as the bombs and doodlebugs rained down all around us was a major part of my wartime life.

There were some differences between the study of English Literature at University College, London and at Oxford. Of course both syllabuses ignored any books that were being written during our own lifetimes. That was taken for granted. But for David's generation in London the syllabus at least went up to 1900, and therefore included the Victorians. Whereas for me at Oxford the syllabus ended in 1837, so no Victorian literature was included at all. And I assumed that this was perfectly OK. Surely there couldn't be anything wrong with a syllabus endorsed at Oxford! (When the Oxford syllabus was altered to go right up to 1900, soon after I graduated in 1952, the dons were in panic about having to master Browning and Matthew Arnold and other upstarts).

As David's Memoir makes very clear, he had two distinct careers to fulfil: firstly as an academic university teacher, and secondly as a creative novelist. While he was doing his national service in the army he was writing his first novel *The Picturegoers*, and while he was undertaking his post graduate research he was also writing his second novel *Ginger You're Barmy*, drawing on his recent memories of life as a clerk in the Royal Armoured Corps. And of course once *Changing Places* made him famous he was able to give up full-time university teaching to concentrate on his creative career. I too saw myself as having two possible careers, but of a different kind. From the age of fourteen I was learning to play the clarinet, in addition to my academic studies. And having had the good luck to be taught by several distinguished professionals, including Leo Collins from the BBC Theatre Orchestra (ancestor of the current Concert Orchestra) and Frederick Thurston of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, I was seriously considering taking up music professionally. Luckily I decided not to. But after acquiring an adequate technique by practising consistently in the evenings while in the army, I managed to join university orchestras as first clarinet, both at Oxford and at Birmingham, as well as doing a lot of chamber music. And later I learned the saxophone, and formed a saxophone quartet in

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Birmingham. I played the baritone. So I too continued to pursue two quite distinct 'careers', albeit that one of these remained 'amateur'.

But of course the biggest difference between David and myself lies in the fact that he was brought up from childhood in the world of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, whereas I was introduced to it only as an adult while I was an undergraduate in the early 1950s. The difference between these experiences was enormous. For David Catholicism was fed into him with his mother's milk. It was as natural as breathing, albeit that his father was not a Catholic. The promise of maintaining his Catholic faith will have been made on his behalf in babyhood by somebody else. Inevitably therefore his later criticism of the Church became for him a kind of 'demythologising'. Whereas for me criticism of the Church was built into the faith from the start, jettisoning a lot of what David will have taken as normal and indeed an essential part of the fabric. I was introduced to it first of all by my wife Teresa, and then by her father, who was a member of the 'Catholic Evidence Guild'. We naturally had long and often heated arguments, and I had to explain to them and to myself how such an unsatisfactory institution could possibly claim my allegiance. But being instructed by the Oxford Dominicans (together with my good 'Teddy Hall' friend Stan Windass) was part of this process, distinguishing good from bad theology. And the promises we both had to make were, as far as I was concerned, the most solemn I have ever made, rivalled only by my marriage vows.

Luckily for both of us Illtud Evans OP, himself a convert, soon interested us in the Catholic peace organisation PAX (predecessor in the UK of Pax Christi) and its principled opposition to nuclear weapons. For Stan and me the ethics of warfare became a major theological concern, and it remained so for the rest of our lives. Whereas for David the Church's attitude to sex has been the focus of his theological criticism.

For Stan and me, neither of us married or concerned with sexual problems when we were under instruction – sex was not the gigantic stumbling block it became in the 1960s – the church's blanket ban on contraception was simply part of the package. It was less significant to us than its ban on intentionally killing the innocent in war, which was interestingly foreign to the prevailing climate of public opinion then, as it still is now. At that time ecumenism was not particularly significant and we had anyway chucked up the Church of England as a flabby institution which we had grown out of. So becoming a Catholic was like emigrating to an exciting foreign country. Naturally in this new territory you had to obey its laws. And Catholicism was certainly foreign, not because everything important was conducted in Latin, but because the whole ethos of Catholicism was that of a new and different milieu, in which the prevailing way of thinking and behaving was strange and unfamiliar. This was part of the attraction. Whereas for David it must have seemed perfectly normal: part of the fabric of

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his life. And when the teaching of the church clashed, as it clearly did, with the policy of the government over nuclear weapons and (a little later) over the strategy of nuclear deterrence, this made it all the more intriguing to Stan and myself. Meeting Walter Stein of PAX at Spode House was a breakthrough for both of us. And finding out that many of the most interesting thinkers around were of the same persuasion, such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, added to the mix.

Even when we were at Birmingham University together I don't think David ever got to know Peter Geach. Whereas while Peter Geach was in the philosophy department there, before moving off to Leeds, I got to know him quite well. I even attended an evening course on metaphysics which he gave during my first year at Birmingham in 1956, together with my good friend Paul Black, then of the physics department. He began, not with some big metaphysical words like 'substance' but by asking us an apparently simple question: 'how many is a cup and saucer?' He even gave me a few tips when I was writing my MA dissertation on the philosophy of Cardinal Newman And already Stan Windass and I had together consulted Elizabeth Anscombe (then a Fellow of Somerville College), before going to see the Catholic chaplain, in order to make sure that the church's teachings made sense, over against the prevailing logical positivism of the time.

So sex came later. And even when I got married the contraception issue was not very important. If and when babies came along Teresa and I were ready for them. The ludicrous goings-on with the 'safe period', brilliantly but also disturbingly satirised in *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), were not yet on the horizon for us. And even when it did appear we managed to cope with it in a way that Adam and Barbara, in that novel, could not. Although I was convinced by the arguments mounted against *Humanae Vitae* by 'G. Egner' (pseudonym of a distinguished post-Wittgensteinian philosopher/priest) we did not in practice go against the church's teaching. Whereas David and Mary Lodge had to cope with the arrival of a Down's syndrome baby in the mid-1960s, and understandably they immediately went 'on the pill'. David tells us that he thinks they would have done this sooner or later anyway, but the arrival of Christopher clinched it for them. 'We made a simple pragmatic decision, but it was enormously significant: we took responsibility for our own lives, instead of being governed by a code invented by theologians which looked increasingly irrational and had no demonstrable basis in the teachings of Jesus Christ' (pp. 409–10). This sentence is itself extremely telling. It foreshadows what was to fall across the Lodge's lives from that time onwards. If the church is governed by irrational theologians, what is to be made of other bits of church teaching? Well, in the end David seems to have drawn the inevitable conclusion: he no longer believes 'literally in the affirmations of the creed'. And of course the papal condemnation of nuclear weapons is subject to the same criticism as that on contraception and

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abortion: is it not also 'irrational'? Most politicians would say so, despite (for example) Elizabeth Anscombe's impassioned plea, in the 1957 Oxford Convocation, against giving President Truman an honorary degree because he authorised the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And perhaps David's lack of philosophical acumen has led him to say 'literally' in the above-quoted sentence without fully analysing what it means and what epistemological assumptions lie behind it. Perhaps what was wrong with the Catholicism in which he was reared is that it was too 'literal', too tied to the propositions on offer from the catechism. Whereas for me theology has never been naïve in that way. Having read and discussed Wittgenstein from my sixth-form years onwards has had something to do with my circumspection in analysing what theologians say, and led me into the territory explored by the Catholic Theological Association and its annual meetings in Leeds from the 1980s onwards.

Despite his 'going on the pill' David did not at this stage move away from the church. Instead he joined the Catholic Renewal Movement, which was concerned to support the stand taken by Fr. John Challenor, of the Birmingham Oratory, against the teaching of *Humanae Vitae.* In this connection he wrote a pamphlet circulated by the Family Planning Association, in which he detailed the sufferings of numerous Catholic couples because of the ban on contraception. He tells us that 'I doubt if anything I wrote before or after it did as much good' (p.450). And then he went to see Archbishop Dwyer of Birmingham about it. Naturally the Archbishop could not agree with his arguments, and said that 'our faith sometimes require(s) heroic sacrifice'. But David's conclusion is significant: 'is it worth it?'

All that is now past history. In advanced Western countries the 'pill' is now taken for granted, by Catholics as well as others, without constituting a massive ethical dilemma for them. The rights of the individual conscience have taken precedence over the teachings of the Pope in *Humanae Vitae*. And this has raised important philosophical and theological questions about the meaning of conscience itself. I wonder what Newman would have made of it, with the concentration in his theology on the place of conscience in Christian life. Would he have been able to incorporate the rights of the individual, over against the global teaching of the church, to the extent of permitting it to prevail over the 'irrational' opinions of bishops and theologians, who because of their celibacy have no personal involvement? I doubt it. But despite his interest in Newman as a novelist, David as far as I know has not yet faced this question.

Nor, really, has the church itself. Is it possible to limit its teaching in such as way that individual conscience takes precedence in the sexual field without impinging on other areas of ethical teaching? Should it? If so what about the conscientious rights of those who want to justify a potentially murderous global policy like nuclear deterrence against those,

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including Pope Benedict, who have taught us that nuclear deterrence is in itself'baneful and fallacious'. Can a Pope say anything useful in the sphere of international politics when the rights of conscience on the part of individuals who disagree with him, such as the politicians who run the world, seem to counteract what he says? And where should the so-called 'national conferences' of bishops stand, especially when they find it necessary either to disagree with the Pope or keep quiet and say nothing? True, in November 2006 the bishops of England and Wales issued a statement condemning 'the unconscionable threat of nuclear destruction', and by implication the deterrent posture of the UK government. But nobody took any notice and it dropped into a black hole. Only the Scottish bishops, who by a curious historical mischance have their own national conference, have consistently criticised British nuclear policy. And neither the Church of England nor the Catholic bishops have confronted this issue in their guidance about the May 2015 general election. This is a massive ethical and indeed theological problem which the church has not yet adequately addressed.

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