

THE POETRY OF JB PRIESTLEY AND *THEY CAME TO A CITY*

Poetry was only genre JB Priestley did not write but his plays and some of his novels have poetry at their heart and in their inspiration. The play and film *They Came To A City* has a title and theme inspired by Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, for example and reflects an interest in time and seeing into the future, which also bespeaks poetry. Priestley himself felt he was too prolific and diverse in genre to be taken seriously, but it was his feeling for the common good in his work that makes him, arguably, just as poetic in feel and sensibility as other poets of the twentieth century.

While some poets were writing personal visions of various kinds of despair, Priestley was celebrating the songs of commonality. This happened in novels like *The Good Companions*, which is all about songs and performance and in lesser known ones like *Three Men in New Suits*, as well as in his wartime essays/ broadcasts of resilience. *Postscripts* contains his epic description of the little boats which helped evacuate Dunkirk. He virtually invented the version of the tale that many still know today. He was like a people's poet laureate of the time, immensely popular and celebrated, who refrained from writing actual verse. Later, he quoted Yeats and AE in *Man and Time* and he is notably with TS Eliot, his highbrow parallel, in mid-century playwriting, as well as sharing a deep interest in time, openly discussed in their work.

His thinking and expression was poetic, as was his adherence to tradition and good sense. He might not be a modernist in form, but, like Yeats, he was modern in content and, however popular, deeply serious in the way poets have been attuned to bigger themes in their work, tending towards the prophetic.

When I was asked to give a short talk to introduce the film version of *They Came To A City* (1944), these thoughts began to form in my mind. I quickly realised that I had far too much to say about him and about the film for only twenty minutes. I also needed to gather my interest in him, which went back at least forty plus years, into some kind of focus. I knew I had a few books by him, scattered through my working library, some with the fiction, some with drama and some among non-fiction of various sorts. When I had actually assembled them, I had almost twenty books and I have added a couple since then too. He was more important to me than I had realised.

I looked up the Whitman poem, present in the film's title and text and thought about how Priestley's reputation, if he was remembered at all, was as a kind of 'middlebrow', with all the damning of faint praise that implies. He is known now only to school exam takers, for *An Inspector Calls*. I had seen the Stephen Daldry production of this in the early 1990s, with its spectacular staging, which started the revival of interest in it, though I always preferred the old Alistair Sim film. In twenty years of university teaching in a literature department, I never heard him mentioned but it occurred to me that his work kept somehow bobbing up now and again and at least some of his work is always in print, having been rediscovered.

Patronised in his day by posh Bloomsbury types, who called him things like 'the tradesman of literature', he had committed the unforgivable sin of being popular from the start. He had a partly working-class background and was devoted to being accessible and for ordinary people. I suddenly had the idea of starting my talk by reading the DH Lawrence satiric poem 'To Be Superior', from another patronised part working-class writer. This begins:

How nice it is to be superior!

Because really, its no use pretending, one is superior, isn't one?

I mean people like you and me –

And ends:

I've never got to the bottom of superiority.
I should like to.

The obvious thing to do was to follow this with the Whitman poem which inspired both play and film, before drawing comparisons. This begins:

I dream'd in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks
of the whole of the rest of the earth,
I dream'd that was the New City of Friends
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love ...

I made a note of what Lawrence said somewhere, which I knew from memory: 'In those days people were always calling me a genius, as if to console me for not having their own incomparable advantages.' Priestley's title is itself a lyrical reinvention of Whitman's lines.

But, as I looked at the poems, it dawned on me how much Lawrence's *Pansies* (1829), which contains 'To Be Superior', was influenced by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I had written about *Pansies* as a student but not realised the connection which now felt so obvious. The short, publicly open poems of Whitman's multitudinous work were echoed in DHL's turning to satire and quick, short poems in this collection. Even the plant-based multiples of grass and flowers, each with their own faces, as DHL said, of his 'little thoughts' (after Pascal's *Pensées*) echoed each other. Lawrence had written quite critically of Whitman in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, while acknowledging his influence. Reading it again, I found to my joy that he says of Whitman that he broke through the 'superiority' of poetry! The influence seemed even more pronounced and useful to me.

Priestley too, had written in some way negatively about Whitman, while acknowledging his influence, in *Literature and Western Man*. In this 60s book Priestley defined his alternative view of twentieth century writing as often being too neurotic and narrow, as the alienated writer is driven to pessimism. He had a workable alternative, which I had acknowledged before, which seems very present in *They Came To A City* with its echoes of Whitman.. How much had the nineteenth century Whitman freed twentieth century English writers from the technical restraint which seemed to stifle poetry from connecting – and some say still does? Allen Ginsberg called Whitman a 'courage teacher' It needs courage to go against the poetry as perfection convention, or seeing it as unconnected with other genres.

This led me to start thinking about my own interest in Priestley, which started just when his reputation was at its lowest, in the 1980s. As someone in the folk music world, I was looking for inspiration in Music Hall and Variety songs, as well as finding parallels in the English-sounding synth-pop and punk of the time, some being from my home country of Essex. I bought old LPs from charity shops and the new car boot sales and looked out for films on TV. One afternoon they showed Jessie Matthews in a 1936 film version of *The Good Companions*. This novel from 1929 was all about a variety troop and a principal character is a songwriter. I really enjoyed the film and quickly bought the novel. My Dad, I found, had seen Jessie Matthews

live and told me she was a really magical and inspired performer. Later in the decade there was a documentary about her life and, after seeing this, I wrote a song about her.

As a novel, *The Good Companions* had been a huge bestseller and was Priestley's first great success. It predicted a continuing motif in his work of songs, performance and of the public world of popular engagement, which was what I was also seeking. I began finding Priestley's books everywhere and for not much money. He published more than a hundred volumes in a long life and I often found first editions and ones I had never heard of, so discovery was always at hand. I did not know anyone else who shared my interest, but I was used to that. A recent BBC Archive Hour Radio documentary, called 'Whatever Happened to JB Priestley?' says that the 80s was when he started to disappear. They didn't know of a one-man revival in an obscure Essex town.

I do not know which channel of the four available showed the film *They Came To A City*, back then. I had never heard of it, but had seen Priestley's name. in the Radio Times. It struck me as strange, fascinatingly positive and a bit futuristic and I always hoped to see it again. When Talking Pictures TV started in recent years, I guessed they would show it one day. So, eighty years after it was made and forty years, probably, after I'd seen it first, it suddenly appeared this year, 2024.

What I hadn't realised was that it was first a play and also that Priestley was at the height of his public fame and powers at the time it was made. He already had published, before the war, *English Journey* (1934), where he asked many, as he travelled, what they thought about the future and is a documentary/ piece of psycho-geography often emulated but never equalled, as well as being a state of the nation work. More recently, his wartime *Postscripts*, broadcast in 1940, had added to his status as a decent left-wing figure with a common touch. He was unable to go about easily at the time, as he would be besieged by fans, because of this. Churchill's cabinet had him quickly taken off the radio for being too popular and left-wing. This kind of thing still happens, as we know.

The play did well but the film is less known and not usually highly rated. I was excited about it being on and was not disappointed. Someone overheard we enthusing about it, the following week, in The Open Road Bookshop in Stoke-by-Nayland, which led to me being asked to come and talk about it. I watched it twice on Talking Pictures TV and once via a Russian website, where it can be seen for free. The BFI now have it for £16.99 on DVD, released a few years ago.

It still struck me as being strange and strangely brilliant. What I had not realised was the brilliant stroke of not actually showing the utopia they came to. In my own writing classes, based on myth and magic, I had an exercise where students were asked to imagine a door, like a portal and describe all the feelings and hopes and dramas in the approach to the door without going through it. Was it some hidden memory that made me invent this, as Priestley's action does exactly what I asked? *They Came ...* strikes me as being, in this way, the most successful of his 'time-plays', although it is not often listed as one, as the supernatural element is never really seen, save in its effect. The magic or shift is useful to the plot and not just strange.

An Inspector Calls has the presence and absence of the mysterious inspector, but *They Came To A City* only needs a door, which is open or closed. It has a kind of minimalist set and is stripped back to allow the existential situation to unfold for the characters. It describes and allows the situation of war, of life and death and the imminence of death and of the need to live. Its question is 'Can we make something good together?' - which seems to me always to be a good one. Disparate characters are thrown together, as in wartime. This also reminded me again of *Three Men in New*

Suits (1945), where, as in the film, class barriers are challenged by men of different classes, in the aftermath of war.

The film was ahead of its time in these challenges, prefiguring the 60s so-called 'kitchen-sink' dramas. Priestley was ahead of times anyway, having been also one of the founders of CND in the late 50s. For comparison, I had watched the highly praised *Things To Come* (1936, based on HG Wells' novel *The Shape of Things to Come*), on TV on the same day. This now struck me as unsubtle and melodramatic, as well as being a propaganda film for 'progress', although undoubtedly more 'filmic'. A better comparison might be made with Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter Of Life and Death* (1946) and I imagine they must have seen Priestley's film, when they made their own.

Both films have their 'meta' aspects. Added to JBP's play are the scenes where the pipe-smoking author stops to chat to a picnicking couple, who are discussing the future, at the start of the film. This effective but slightly absurd scene is repeated at the end, commenting on the tale, but, significantly, also in the middle, discussing how we should interpret it.

Another feeling about the film was that nothing much has changed in our socio-political world since then, or at least since the 80s, which is maybe why his alternative voice spoke to me then. Among the books I discovered I had by him was one I had forgotten even buying,; *Out Of The People* (1941). He must have been writing this at the same time as the play. The opening paragraph describes how

Before midsummer of last year it had been fairly common talk in the United States as it had in the Fascist countries, that Britain was decadent, that the old lady was on her last legs. Some of us ... found ourselves arguing against this opinion ... the British people themselves had not been heard from lately, and that these people must not be confused with the small select mob of place-keeping politicians, bankers, industrialists, and senior civil servants [with] their combined pathetic wire-pulling ...

The 80s and now feels to me exactly and sadly the same. I somehow hope that when JBP died, in 1984, the titular year of the famous Orwell dystopia, aged 89, he had not realised this truth. The message of *They Came To A City* needs hearing again, in hope: 'somebody's got to go back and tell the truth.'

Pos- war optimism and even post-war utopian visions are part of the work of poetical seriousness, as displayed by DH Lawrence in his famously ignored novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The opening lines of this book are exactly about this: 'We live in a tragic age so we refuse to take it tragically ... we start to have new little hopes ... We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.' In the same way, *They Came To A City* is about hope, in the same spirit as the 1951 Festival of Britain. Priestley's concern with time is timely too, in the same way that TS Eliot's wartime and post-war concerns were echoed in *Four Quartets*. Eliot's localism, or his specifics of place in all four of these poems looks in contrast to JBP's no-place, but the specificity balances and contrasts with the bigger picture of mythological time.

Addressing the times means looking at time. Time as cyclic, or mythological in that sense, gave JBP his extra vision, to raise his ordinary people to heights of vision. Here, his interest in time brought him to give an added dimension to his work, which arguably makes it poetic. He is a kind of down-to-earth metaphysician, which helps him in a popping up again way, where popping up is a characteristic of his posthumous career. *They Came* ... is a bit sci-fi, or even magic realist, and another

unusual work by JBP was republished in 2014 by a sci-fi publishers. This is the novel *The Magicians* (1952), where again businessmen encounter magic, as in *They Came ...* There is perhaps an unexplored chain of English magic here, as seen in novels from David Lindsay's *The Haunted Woman* (1922), to Colin Wilson's *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969) and Lindsay Clarke's *A Chymical Wedding* (1989), and even in the darker work of Christopher Priest.

Even JBP's concern with the dominance of business seems still prescient in today's world. This novel would also make a good film, with its elevated themes and down-to-earth qualities.

Utopias are notably more difficult than the fashionable dystopias, with the latter's scope for conspiracy and the ego's spectacular ride to big death. Who reads *Paradise Regained*? It is worth remembering that Thomas More's ancient original title, pre-Shakespeare, means 'no place', so, with William Morris' *News From Nowhere* (1890), JBP was there, or not there, in this way. The city they come to is a no-place or a place of ritual contemplation, of re-visioning of the past and future, a vantage point.

Film is a time-strange medium anyway and watching it speak from eighty years back is strange enough. We have to suspend our linear sense of time as progress, even as we merely view old films at all, and we have to suspend disbelief, just as we do of poetry and even more of utopia. We enter the poetic world of Coleridge's 'poetic faith', which is what he called 'suspension of disbelief' in *Biographia Literaria*. Not showing the new-made world is a clever theatrical move but also a poetic one, as it sustains the imagination in its opportunity for vision. We have to ignore the things we find absurd but there is less kitsch to smirk at here than in other futurism; we have to take it seriously or not at all. The positive strangeness of the film is witness to its potential. Bob Dylan's song 'In Scarlet Town' with its traditional motif and where everything seems amplified in its possibility comes to mind, as does Herbert Read's odd novel of comparative worlds, *The Green Child* (1935).

In the sense of being an artist of the community, if not a community artist of the immersed type, JBP was again ahead of his time, so is overdue to pop up again on that count. This sense of the common good still feels lacking from most commercial and experimental art, with a few popular but experimental exceptions, such as Jeremy Dellar's recent work on the first World War. Writers still often seem to be rare creatures and often posh too. The divides between high and low art seem to me irrelevant though, somehow, but public and private art might be a more useful distinction worth thinking about. In *They Came ...*, the depiction of women as more positive and thoughtful seems likewise ahead of its time, with the female Mentor figure, the wise old woman, leads the way and the Googie Withers character leads the questing. The male hero unusually is shown to be beaten, to be vulnerable and disillusioned.

Whitman was a self-styled man of the people and is seen as a bit ludicrous by Lawrence and Priestley, though his influence in this offered both a kind of freedom of attitude, as well as expression, in their work which pervades still much US writing and art. The US section, 'The Dry Salvages', of TS Eliot's time-poem *Four Quartets* some, notably Donald Davie, suggested has a Whitman influence in its prosy looseness.

Priestley can be prosy too, in his novels but his plays are quite tightly written, sometimes even formal-seeming in language and archetypal characters, but he uses this to effect. At his best, he has an accessible and inclusive attitude, like Shakespeare or Dickens, and the positive 'attitude of mind' shows a festive imagination. The

positive fragility of the post world war spirit, for me, is symbolised by the later destruction of the sculptural 'Skylon' of the Labour government's Festival of Britain, but the image of hope haunts his work.

At present, I am exploring Priestley's fiction from the 50s, as well as dipping into a 50s Penguin self-selected anthology, *The Priestley Companion*. Probably the best way to buy his work is still by rambling about second-hand bookshops, jumbles and charity shops, however. I wrote about the *Companion* in my own *Boot Sale Harvest*. I confess I have resorted to the internet to get *The Magicians* (1954), finding a first edition for less than most new books cost. His sense of possibility I tried to show when I told the film's audience, 'Utopias are not places to go to, but places to take home with you', but this is better summed up by JBP himself, in chapter three of *The Magicians*, when one his characters says, 'But the world in which such things couldn't happen is merely the world you have constructed for yourself.'

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