

But one newspaper preferred to concentrate on another, rather more obscure name. For the *Finchley Press*, the only real story was the appointment of the area's local MP to the post of Education Secretary, her first taste of Cabinet office. The paper's interviewer even wondered whether she would like to be Britain's first female Prime Minister. Despite the social and cultural changes of the sixties, she thought it was too soon. 'No,' Margaret Thatcher replied, 'there will never be a woman Prime Minister in my lifetime — the male population is too prejudiced.'¹⁵³

EPilogue

At twenty past eight on the evening of Wednesday, 31 July 1968, in a small town on the South Coast, a lavish and convivial dinner was winding towards its conclusion. To cheerful applause from his guests, the chairman introduced the guest of honour, 'a man of many parts — banker, soldier, magistrate, alderman and secretary of the Rotary Club — a good fellow all round'. Clambering to his feet in front of a large Union Jack, the rotund little figure of George Mainwaring spoke for the first time on British television:

Mr Chairman, Mr Town Clerk, ladies and gentlemen. When I was first invited to be guest of honour tonight at the launching of 'Walmington-on-Sea's 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign, I accepted without hesitation. After all, *I have always backed Britain*. I got into the habit of it in 1940, but *then we all backed Britain*. It was the darkest hour in our history: the odds were absurdly against us, but young and old, we stood there, defiant, determined to survive, to recover, and finally to *win!* The news was desperate, but our spirits were always high.

With that, the picture dissolved. Bud Flanagan's famous theme song began, and seven million viewers settled down to the very first episode of BBC1's latest situation comedy, *Dad's Army*. Half an hour later, with Britain at the mercy of the Nazis, Captain Mainwaring had assembled his men — Sergeant Wilson, Corporal Jones, and Privates Frazer, Godfrey, Walker and Pike — and had announced his intention to turn them into 'ruthless killers'. The episode ended with another oration by the redoubtable little man:

Remember, men, we have one invaluable weapon on our side: we have an unbreakable spirit to win. A bulldog tenacity that will help us to hang on

while there's breath left in our bodies. You don't get that with Gestapos and jackboots! You get that by being British! So come on, Adolf: we're ready for you!¹

Of all the cultural success stories of the late sixties, *Dad's Army* was not only one of the most unexpected, but one of the most enduring. Few people had guessed that this mild-mannered comedy about the wartime Home Guard, written by David Croft and Jimmy Perry, would be such an enormous hit. During rehearsals, the actor John Le Mesurier, who played the languid Sergeant Wilson, told his friend Barry Took that his new series was 'a disaster': 'I really can't tell you,' he went on, 'oh, it's absolutely appalling, it can't possibly work, no, no, my dear boy, it's an absolute disaster!'²

He could hardly have been more wrong. An audience figure of more than seven million represented an encouraging start, but there was even better news from the critics, who almost unanimously enjoyed the programme. In the *Sunday Telegraph* Philip Purser thought that the characterisations had been 'maturing over a dozen years and in some of the greatest cellars in comedy', while in the *Observer* Tom Stoppard wrote that *Dad's Army* was 'liable to bring a smile and a tear to every lover of England and Ealing'.³ The *Daily Express* even predicted that it would become 'a classic comedy series', appealing to young and old alike. 'Give me a week or two and I'll tell you whether this is really comedy's finest half-hour,' wrote the newspaper's television critic, Ron Boyle. 'All I say now is that the possibilities are tremendous.'⁴

Although there were many enduring and memorable television series in the late sixties, from *Till Death Us Do Part* to *Mom's Flying Circus*, few matched the enormous and steadily increasing popularity of *Dad's Army*. At the end of 1968 the show had more than eight million viewers; by the end of 1972, its regular audience numbered more than sixteen million. *Dad's Army* won British Academy awards, Writers' Guild of Great Britain awards, a special Variety Club award and even the Ivor Novello award for its theme song. Its cultural sweep included a feature film, a West End musical, a comic strip, activity books, annuals, board games and bubble bath, and its stars appeared in everything from variety shows to advertisements.⁵ When the series finally came to an end in 1977 the *Guardian* mourned its passing with the comment that it had 'given us finer farces, straighter faces, richer characterisation and a good deal more social observation than most of the more pretentious dramas, and always kept us guessing which would turn up next'.⁶

The continuing appeal of *Dad's Army*, hardly the most fashionable of television programmes, is hard to exaggerate. Of the iconic series that began in the 1960s, only *Coronation Street* and *Doctor Who* matched its enduring popularity with ordinary viewers. Even thirty years after the series began, repeats of the most popular episodes attracted more than ten million viewers; the famous 'Don't tell him, Pike!' scene was often voted the funniest in television history; and several polls found that the series remained the nation's favourite comedy.⁷ In 2000 the British Film Institute placed the show thirteenth in its list of the best television programmes of the twentieth century, observing that 'purely in terms of its sustained popularity the show is without equal'.⁸

Dad's Army might seem an incongruous monument to the culture of the 1960s, but just as much as any of the Beatles' records or the trendy films of Swinging London, it captured the spirit of the age. Rather than appealing to a small group of well-educated, wealthy young people, it reached out to millions of ordinary families from the South Coast to the Highlands: young and old, rich and poor, men and women. It formed part of a new common culture diffused across the United Kingdom through the mass media. It benefited from the new technology of the day, switching from black and white to colour at the end of 1969, but its gaze was fixed firmly on the past. It celebrated a lost era of austerity and collective endeavour, but its appeal depended on the domestication of leisure and the new individualism of the affluent society.

The *Dad's Army* phenomenon would never have been possible had it not been for the changes of the fifties and sixties. Like so many other national institutions, the BBC encouraged a spirit of adventure and enquiry, so that a comedy series poking fun at the record of the Home Guard, which might have seemed too close to the bone fifteen years before, now seemed perfectly acceptable. The technological advances of the time meant that cheap televisions were delivered to high streets the length and breadth of the country, while, thanks to virtually full employment and rising wages, millions of middle-class and working-class Britons were able to invest in their own private entertainment and instruction. In just over a decade the popularity of the television and other household appliances had utterly transformed everyday life. Men now stayed at home to watch programmes like *Dad's Army* when they would once have gone out to the pub with their workmates; women, liberated from hours of housework by the invention of cheap labour-saving devices, now felt free to put their feet up in front of the screen.

Yet the success of *Dad's Army* also hints at the serious limitations of what some historians still insist on calling the 'cultural revolution' of the sixties. Indeed, its enormous popularity is hard to understand without reassessing the clichés associated with the era. The delight with which audiences greeted the squabbles between the petit-bourgeois Captain Mainwaring and the patrician Sergeant Wilson suggests that, for all the waffle in the mid-sixties about the 'classless society' and the 'new class' of 'swinging Englishmen', class distinctions still meant a great deal to most people. Similarly, for all the talk about the new morality and the sexual revolution, it was remarkable that the most popular comedy series on British television contained very few references to sex and no major female characters, and projected a distinctly old-fashioned moral code, leavened by the good-humoured tolerance associated with the national character.

Although the sixties is often seen as a period of utopian optimism, the culture of the time, from the albums of the Beatles and the Kinks to the poems of Philip Larkin and the novels of John Fowles, was suffused with a powerful sense of nostalgia. Like the Ealing comedies of the fifties, *Dad's Army* looked back to a kinder, simpler age of neighbourhood corner shops and village banter, a settled, orderly society untroubled by the corrosive effects of modernity.⁹ It was no accident that the first episode opened with George Mainwaring's address to the local 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign in 1968. For millions of viewers, whatever their politics, the story of Britain since the mid-sixties had been one of moral decay and economic decline. According to Mainwaring himself, the country needed not the spirit of 1968 but the spirit of 1940, what one historian calls 'shared effort and sacrifice, common purpose and good neighbourliness and justified struggle against a wicked enemy'.¹⁰ And even amid the hurly-burly of the late sixties and seventies, millions of people shared the old-fashioned vision of England lovingly described by Sergeant Wilson:

Every day, I walk up the high street to work, and, as I pass those little shops, a nice, friendly, warm atmosphere seems to come wafting out — I mean, even from that *dreafy* fellow Hodges's greengrocer's — and then I stroll on a little bit further and I pass Frazer's funeral parlour, and then before I cross the road to come to the bank there's Jones's butcher's shop — white tiles all gleaming and shining, and old Jones standing there with his straw hat on and wearing his striped apron, and giving me a cheery wave — and do you know, sir, it sort of, I don't know, it sort of sets me up for the day. I feel it's my time, you see.¹¹

Class consciousness, cultural conservatism, a deep sense of nostalgia: these are not values that we readily associate with the sixties. It would be absurd to deny that things changed during the era: it was only thanks to the unprecedented consumer affluence and technical innovation of the day, after all, that people could even watch programmes like *Dad's Army*. But most of the changes associated with the period, from working-class affluence and the changing role of women to mass immigration and permissive reform, actually had their roots in earlier periods of British history.

It is true that by 1964 the pace of change had greatly increased, thanks largely to the economic boom of the day. But although popular accounts of the era concentrate on the small group of affluent, self-confident young people who welcomed change, millions of others clung firmly to what they knew and loved. Perhaps an editorial in *New Society*, referring to the magazine's famous survey of social attitudes at the end of the decade, best captures the ambiguity of public opinion:

Shouldn't one talk of the Cautious Sixties, rather than the Swinging Sixties? Hardly any of the obsessions of the metropolitan mass media rate favourably; some of them don't even rate strongly. You emerge with the very strong impression that if the 1960s meant anything special to most people in Britain it was because they got, during them, a better chance to lead a not-too-poor, not-too-insecure life . . . Despite the way the 1960s have often been portrayed, this has not become a wildly changed country; people are not that keen on being disturbed.¹²

This sounds very like the British people described by George Orwell back in 1941: 'a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans'. Yet Orwell had also observed that 'in Slough, Dagenham, Barnet, Letchworth, Hayes . . . the old pattern is changing into something new'. In these 'vast new wildernesses of glass and brick' he discerned a new world of council houses, concrete roads and swimming pools, 'a rather restless, cultureless life, centring around tinned food, *Picture Post*, the radio and the internal combustion engine'. He even foresaw the coming of Harold Wilson's scientific revolution, a world of technicians, airmen, mechanics and chemists, 'a civilization in which children grow up with an intimate knowledge of magnetoes and in complete ignorance of the Bible'.

In this world of technological progress and cultural revolution the nostalgic vision of *Dad's Army* was supposed to have been swept away. But the sixties are best understood not as a dramatic turning point, interrupting the course of the nation's history and sending it off in a radically new direction, but rather as a stage in a long evolution stretching back into the forgotten past. The national characteristics that Orwell recorded in 1941 — the 'mild knobby faces... had teeth and gentle manners', the 'horror of abstract thought', the 'love of flowers', the 'addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations' — still distinguished British life in 1970. And despite the innovations of draught lager and foreign holidays, Britain was still marked by its 'abhorrence of foreign habits', since most people still laughed at foreigners, refused to learn their languages, and looked askance at schemes promoting European unity. 'Their old-fashioned outlook, their graded snobberies, their mixture of bawdiness and hypocrisy, their extreme gentleness, their deeply moral attitude to life': all of these things endured.

For, as Orwell understood, the continuity of national history was much stronger and more resilient than the transient whims of fashion. For all the Minis and mini-skirts, the sex, drugs and rock and roll, Britain in 1970 was still fundamentally the same country it had been twenty, thirty or a hundred years before. National character, Orwell wrote, is 'continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps in the mantelpiece? Nothing except that you happen to be the same person.'

The Stock Exchange will be pulled down, the horse plough will give way to the tractor, the country houses will be turned into children's holiday camps, the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten, but England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and, like all living things, having the power to change out of all recognition and yet remain the same.¹⁵

THE END

NOTES

Documentary references beginning PREM, T and so on are taken from papers at the National Archives in Kew.

References to 'Benn diary' are taken from Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries, 1963-67* (London, 1987) and *Office Without Power: Diaries 1968-72* (London, 1988).

References to 'Castle diary' are from Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries, 1964-70* (London, 1984).

References to 'Crossman diary' are from Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Volume 1: Minister of Housing, 1964-66* (London, 1975), *Volume 2: Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, 1966-68* (London, 1976), and *Volume 3: Secretary of State for Social Services, 1968-70* (London, 1977).

References to 'King diary' are from Cecil King, *The Cecil King Diary, 1965-1970* (London, 1972).

PREFACE

1 *Daily Express*, 25 January 1965; *The Times*, 25 January 1965.

2 Richard Crossman diary, 30 January 1965.

3 Jonathan Dimbleby, *Richard Dimbleby: A Biography* (London, 1975), p. 384.

4 *The Times*, 1 February 1965.

5 Quoted in Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (London, 2002), p. 455.

6 Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years: Britain and the Sixties* (revised edition: London, 1977), p. 403.

7 Weight, *Patriots*, pp. 455-456.

8 *The Times*, 1 February 1965.

9 *Daily Express*, 1 February 1965.

10 Dimbleby, *Richard Dimbleby*, p. 386.

11 Levin, *The Pendulum Years*, p. 403.

12 Crossman diary, 30 January 1965.

13 *Observer*, 31 January 1965.

14 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 140.