

Valerie Grove

– Introduction –

In a cloud of pipe smoke, J. B. Priestley told his son Tom: ‘I always knew what I was going to do with myself, and I’ve never regretted making writing my profession.’ After another puff, he added, ‘I’m more a writer than a human being, I think.’ This strikingly self-aware declaration was made in front of Tom’s camera, during what was planned as an affectionate television portrait of his father for his 90th birthday. But since JBP died at 89, the film went out on his death, in 1984.

The programme showed viewers the familiar image of John Boynton Priestley, OM, popularly known as Jack, in the library of Kissing Tree House near Stratford-upon-Avon, the splendid Georgian manor where he spent his last twenty-five years with his third wife, Jacquetta Hawkes. Here was that scowly, jowly face, usually photographed under a black hat. ‘A stocky figure in a plum-coloured velvet jacket and a mask of melancholy resignation’, as one biographer put it. Priestley agreed. Coming from the West Riding of Yorkshire, which ‘favours the grumbler’, he wrote, ‘I have always been a grumbler. I was designed for the part, for I have a sagging face, a weighty underlip,

what I am told is a “saurian eye” and a rumbling but resonant voice from which it is difficult to escape. Money could not buy a better grumbling outfit.’ This is from ‘The Grumbler’s Apology’, the opening essay in a 1949 volume called *Delight*, about the variety of things – 114 in number, varying from dancing to making stew – that bring him joy.

Readers of Priestley’s novels love his characters, brought to life via their distinctive voices, including Dickensian quirks that make even villains appealing. Playgoers admire Priestley’s ingenious plots, generally likeable dramatis personae, strong messages. But with a handful of notable exceptions, his essays have tended to be more ephemeral. The essay defies classification, but a habitual essayist must have a vigorously singular voice – it came naturally to Priestley – to be permitted to say, as Hazlitt put it, ‘whatever passed through his mind’. Priestley’s output was prolific, even in his twenties. The essays translated into 15-minute broadcasts during World War II, when Priestley’s *Post-scripts* were regarded as more powerful than Churchill’s broadcasts, and just as inspiring. In the 1950s, the pieces he wrote for Kingsley Martin at the *New Statesman* began to influence public opinion, especially his 1957 piece on why Britain should ban the bomb. He is still regarded as a founding voice of CND.

Readers of the early essays in this collection will discover a younger Jack Priestley, not yet famous or polemical, an amiable, inquisitive fellow, curious about

everything, prone to find magic in unexpected things. The display and artifice of his youthful essays places them in the Victorian tradition, animated by a talent to amuse.

J. B. Priestley's antecedents were proletarian – one grandfather worked at the mill, his grandmother's family were silk weavers – but his father, Jonathan, had been sent to teacher training college. Jonathan Priestley 'was the man Socialists have in mind when they talk about Socialism,' Jack wrote, 'but never joined the Labour Party.' (Nor did Jack.) Priestley senior rose to be headmaster of an elementary school, the first in the country to provide meals for its pupils. Jack describes Bradford as 'a city entirely without charm . . . but it has the good fortune to be on the edge of some of the most enchanting country in England.' Enriched by the wool trade, the Bradford of his youth possessed all the progressive and cultural hallmarks of a flourishing Victorian city: two theatres, a permanent orchestra, two choral societies, two music-halls, three daily newspapers and well-stocked libraries. Having left school at sixteen, Jack was aware of this luck: 'It was not that I went to the right sort of school, but that I was living in the right sort of town.' Its very atmosphere encouraged intellectual growth. And with his articles and reviews for a local paper Jack Priestley could learn his craft, writing in his bedroom with its fierce little gas fire 'that could not begin to warm the room without grilling your shins'. His day-job was as a clerk with Messrs Helm & Company

in Swan Arcade, wool purveyors, where ‘I was allowed to be a little eccentric’, his personality being ‘a peculiar mixture of the insufferable and the enchanting’.

He believed the years 1911–1914 were his most formative and rewarding period. *Bright Day*, for many devotees the favourite Priestley novel, and the most autobiographical, reflects those years, telling of a young man’s enlightenment in the carefree years before the Great War, via a cultured and musical family with several lively daughters. In an early essay, Jack had written wistfully about a Yorkshire family, the Thorlaws, at whose hospitable house folks gathered. There Jack sang comic songs ‘by the hour, without shame’. The people who thronged to the Thorlaws’ were ‘nothing like the beautiful, the clever, the distinguished persons whose acquaintance I can boast today’ (he was writing this in 1927), ‘but dimly consecrated in my memory by a happiness that something seems to have withered away, shining there in a queer kind of Golden Age, strangely compounded of provincial nobodies and cheap port and chaff and comic songs.’

But overshadowing *Bright Day* was foreboding as well as nostalgia. That Golden Age was summarily disrupted by the outbreak of World War I. In 1914, Jack volunteered with the 10th Duke of Wellington’s West Riding battalion, of the 23rd division. He celebrated his twenty-first birthday on the front line, ‘among shells and bloodstained barbed wire’. His experiences in the trenches ‘when the guns began to roar and the

corpses piled up' remained 'an open wound that never healed'. The Great War afflicted him deeply. He was luckier than the doughty lads who joined the Bradford 'Pals' battalion, 'the most eager, promising and finest members of my generation' who were butchered on the Somme on 1 July 1916. So he was deprived of most childhood friends ('The men that were boys when I was a boy are dead'), and he very nearly died himself. He never wrote of his experiences, but he read voraciously and observed human behaviour. 'Reunion Battalion Dinner' tells of his reunion in Bradford with survivors of his platoon, seventeen years on, in which he expresses his outrage that some old comrades were absent because they could not afford to pay for, or to dress for, such a reunion dinner.

Home from the trenches, Lieutenant John Priestley, aged twenty-four, took advantage of the ex-officer's grant to go to Cambridge, to read English literature at Trinity Hall, switching to history and political science. Cambridge did not dazzle him; he had 'left too many illusions flattened in the Flanders mud'. He could hardly enjoy undergraduate life on a grant that scarcely kept him alive. 'I had never felt really happy there, never even felt cosily at home.' The literary critic known as Q, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, tried to persuade him to stay on and teach, but he was 'too bloody-minded a fellow to fall in with academic life, or to take a teaching job'. Besides, he had already published his first book, *Brief Diversions*, 'a little book of undergraduate odds

and ends'. His original goal was to rent a cottage on the edge of the moors, aiming to make twenty five shillings a week by his pen. But *Brief Diversions* prompted him to take his new wife Pat, already pregnant with their first daughter, to London 'with some vague introductions and capital of about forty seven pounds' and launch himself as a freelance. After all, he had sold his first piece to a London periodical as long ago as 1910. He would never live in the north again – but he never forgot his roots, and his ashes are buried at Hubberholme in Wharfedale, Yorkshire.

Living by his pen, he took to 1920s London: 'English life in brick, chimney pots, old squares, smoke and mist.' Financially, he became successful enough to inhabit London's more prosperous quarters – Kensington, the leafy heights of Hampstead and Highgate, and the exclusive enclave of Albany, Piccadilly. But he ended up in a country house in Alveston, Warwickshire, far from 'the intolerable strain of contemporary metropolitan living, the growing defeat of human zest and sympathy by the mere mechanics of existence.'

Looking back on how his writing career began, he realised that it all started with essays. 'I was rather clever, I now realise, at avoiding journalism and not becoming an employee.' Essays were still a flourishing market, despite being already 'almost an anachronism'. Periodicals such as *Lilliput*, the *Spectator*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Daily News* and the *London Mercury* were his outlets. 'I prefer a wide audience,' he said in his son