

## Review of Beckett's book in the Guardian by Hanif Kureishi

In his superb previous book, *Pinochet in Piccadilly*, Andy Beckett presented us with some bewitching Gabriel Garcia Marquez-like scenes: a sick General Pinochet in an English country garden being served by his butler, awaiting leave to return to Chile; our former chancellor, Lord Lamont, after attending a pro-Pinochet rally at a Blackpool cinema, scuttling nervously out through a side exit, "like a court defendant".

Now, with a slightly different cast, Beckett takes on the 1970s, and obviously the material is more familiar. I can remember a huge ironic cheer going around our suburban neighbourhood during the miners' strike when the lights went out. But Beckett's avid eye and novelistic flair for detail render the characters as weird as if they were Chilean.

Reality does assist him. For a start, there are Arthur Scargill and Edward Heath, the latter interviewed by Beckett not long before he died. And then there was Harold Wilson, already losing his mind, making the Dylanesque pronouncement to a pair of young Observer reporters shortly after his resignation in 1976: "Sometimes I speak when I'm asleep. You should both listen. Occasionally when we meet I might tell you to go to Charing Cross Road and kick a blind man standing on the corner."

By the mid-1970s, the Labour government was in a state not unlike that of the present one. Knackered, in other words, without ideas or ideals, and most of its talented people dead or gone. Then it was called "declinism". What was known as the "60s" had lost its way; peace and love would be replaced by anarchy and hate, living standards were falling, the price of property had crashed and there was a stock-market slump. Punk was foreshadowing the destructiveness of Thatcher. In the

winter of 1974, Jim Callaghan, the foreign secretary, said: "Sometimes, when I go to bed, I think that if I were a young man I would emigrate."

With the story of the 1970s, as with a rerun of a football match, you know what's coming and it's always Mrs Thatcher. But it's easy to forget that when the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, and we began to talk about "the transformation of Britain", this meant the devastating economic crisis of the 1980s, inflation at 20%, high unemployment, IRA violence and race riots.

Not that the 1970s, along with the other postwar decades, were entirely lacking in creativity. There was Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing and JG Ballard, and the films of Lindsay Anderson and Derek Jarman. And there were the theatre workers - writers, actors, directors - building on the oppositional legacy of John Osborne and the Royal Court Theatre; the 1970s were a high point when it came to a theatre of dissent and opposition. Along with the Grunwick dispute, which was led by a diminutive Bangladeshi woman, with Labour ministers attending the picket line, the Gay Liberation Front, Spare Rib, union recognition and Rock Against Racism were all formed. This culminated, in April 1978, with a concert in Victoria Park, east London, attended by Asians, rastas, punks and hippies. It was the biggest anti-fascist rally since the 1930s.

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Now that global capitalism is in its deepest crisis for decades, having been brought down not by Marxism, Islam or the trade unions, but by its own lack of self-control (if it were an individual, the person our state would most resemble would be a teenage crackhead), we yearn for the return of the parents, for regulation and nationalisation. Thatcher was proud of having sold off the council houses, something many Labour ministers regretted not doing. But it was giving mortgages to those

who couldn't afford them that helped precipitate our present condition.

In the 1980s, our democracy gave away too much power to entrepreneurs whose most significant virtue, from Thatcher's point of view, was that they had no sense of moral responsibility. Like her, they pretended not to know what "society" was. Beckett reminds us that in the 1970s, Britain was more egalitarian than today, there was more social mobility and the abyss between rich and poor increased during Blair's tenure without much complaint.

Now, though, in the middle of what is more of a dive than a decline, it seems obvious that we have lost more than we understand. We can get some of it back - cohesion, social purpose - but only if, this time, the people retain their power. Beckett's excellent account of the 1970s is a necessity if we want to understand now as well as then.

Hanif Kureishi's most recent novel is [Something to Tell You](#) (Faber and Faber).

**Review of Andy Beckett's book in the London review of books, by Ian Jack, followed by two readers' letters about it.**

The fashion is relatively recent for slicing up history into ten-year periods, each of them crudely flavoured and differently coloured, like a tube of wine gums. Growing up in Britain in the 1950s I never heard the past, however recent, specified by decade. There was 'the war' and 'before the war', and sometimes, when my parents were burrowing into their childhoods, 'before the first war'. The 20th century lay stacked in broad layers of time: dark moorland where glistened an occasional white milestone marked with a year and an event. Sometimes the events were large and public. The General Strike happened in 1926 and Germany invaded Poland in 1939. But often they were small and private. In my own family, 1944 wasn't remembered for D-Day but as 'the summer we went along the Roman Wall on the tandem'.

When did 'decade-ism' – history as wine gums – start? The first decades that took a retrospective grip on the popular imagination were the 1890s and the 1920s. It may not be a coincidence that both have been characterised as fun-

loving eras that chucked out staid manners and stale customs, whose social revolutionaries were libertines (Mae West) and gangsters (James Cagney). Perhaps more than any other agency, it was Hollywood that defined those decades for people too young to know them. The American experience became the way the 1920s were remembered, even though only a tiny proportion of the world's population in 1925 drank hard liquor out of teapots in speakeasies; or danced – danced, danced, danced! – often in a cloche hat and with a long cigarette-holder pointed riskily at their partner's crotch. It took thirty years for the 1890s to become established as 'naughty' or 'gay' – Mae West's *Belle of the Nineties* came out in 1934 – but the 1920s were quicker off the mark. *The Roaring Twenties*, with James Cagney as its star, branded the decade only nine years after it ended. The Wall Street Crash and the ending of Prohibition, by utterly changing American life, had quickly sealed off the 1920s as history.

Subsequent decades didn't easily offer themselves for styling. In 1970 it would have been hard to look back and stick a persuasive label on Britain in the 1930s, though adjectives such as 'hungry' and 'anxious' made excursions in book titles. The 1940s were entirely blotted out by 'the war', while the 1950s had still to become the caricature of pipe-smoking dads and orderly (or repressed) family life that now brings the shout, 'Oh, just like the 1950s!' from visitors to such English seaside resorts as Southwold and Frinton. A few years later, however, we could look into the rear-view mirror and see the 1960s, the Swinging Sixties, unquestionably the most famous ten-year stretch of world history. Yet the 1960s didn't happen everywhere at the same time or to every generation: I'd never come across a recreational drug, for example, before I left Glasgow for London in 1970, and I'm sure my dear parents never came across any at all. But, all in all, the notion is hard to contest that the 1960s was a transformative decade for most people in the Western world who lived through it. This made it majestic in retrospect and set loose a popular, attractive way of looking at the recent past. If the 1960s had a definable character, why couldn't the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s? These were paler and weaker wine gums to be sure, but television producers in early middle age did their best with shows in which minor celebrities recalled with well-briefed spontaneity their favourite moments on *Top of the Pops* or the first time they ate in an Angus Steak House and enjoyed a slice of Black Forest Gâteau.

Of these recent decades, the 1970s is the most reviled. I once had a colleague who'd been a little girl in the 1970s, and not a particularly poor one, yet she would shudder and say: 'Oh, it was like Eastern Europe then, all stews and root vegetables and wet holidays in caravans.' Her austere picture didn't fit with my own memories, which are of myself becoming richer, but it remains a popular view: Britain before the fun got going. As Andy Beckett writes in

his introduction, the statement ‘Above all, we don’t want to go back to the 1970s’ has been a relentless theme in British political life almost since the day the decade ended. They are the bogeyman years, regularly invoked by politicians of all parties as the nadir of postwar Britain. David Cameron (though it could just as easily have been Gordon Brown) read out the charge sheet at a Demos meeting in 2006: ‘economic decline . . . inflation, stagnation and rising unemployment . . . deteriorating industrial relations’. Nearly 30 million working days were lost to strikes in 1979, mainly during the Winter of Discontent – more than in any other year. We know what happens next in the script. The country rejects the worn-out panaceas of the Labour administration and elects Margaret Thatcher, and she, with what Cameron calls ‘huge courage and perseverance’, sets Britain on a dynamic new course towards its now tremulous destiny as financial capitalism’s leading counting house.

Thatcher is the phoenix; the 1970s, the ashes. Beckett’s method is to rake through these ashes, usually by revisiting – quite literally, as in ‘travelling to see them’ – the people and places that affected the course of the decade. The author turned ten in 1979. Some of what he discovers will come as no surprise to readers who lived through those years as half-awake adults: that, for example, environmentalism, feminism, gay rights and Rock Against Racism were for many people more important as politics than the parties led by Wilson and Callaghan, Heath and Thatcher. Sometimes he tells us just a little too much about the journey, how cloudy it was or how sunny, which mode of transport he used, what magazines he bought in W.H. Smith. But the point is well made when he writes:

British politics in the 1970s, for all the Gothic prose it usually prompts, was about moments of possibility as well as periods of entropy; about stretches of calm as well as sudden calamity. Politics was rawer and more honest – in the sense that conflicts between interests and ideologies were out in the open – than perhaps we are used to nowadays. It was also more obviously connected to everyday life – not just through the much higher turnouts at general elections, but through the disruptions wrought by strikes and other shocks, by voters’ living-room lights suddenly going out.

I back him particularly on the ‘stretches of calm’. Up against coal shortages and surging oil prices, caused respectively by a miners’ overtime ban and the Yom Kippur war, Ted Heath announced ‘emergency measures’ in a special broadcast to the nation on 13 December 1973. The result during the first two months of 1974 was a three-day working week and an organised programme of power cuts, from which Beckett takes his title. I worked on a newspaper then, but my memory of the three-day week has been reduced to two scenes. I remember sitting in my car and seeing the Tottenham Court Road suddenly plunge into darkness. I remember going with a photographer to find

somebody – anybody – who was working in picturesque candlelight. Compared with my copious recollection of other and much less significant moments – the blazing summer of 1976, say – this is poor stuff, and not easily explained until you take into account the social atmosphere of the time. Even during what Beckett calls ‘sudden calamity’ – the gravest economic crisis since the Second World War – the country by recent swine-flu standards stayed remarkably calm. There were some alarms and amusing excursions: Patrick Jenkin, the energy minister, advised people to save electricity by cleaning their teeth in the dark (and then newspapers printed pictures of Jenkin’s own house ablaze with light). But the winter was mild and people coped. Output per labour hour actually increased. Workers worked harder over shorter weeks and then went home to trim the wicks of antique oil lamps and pay more attention to their children and gardens. The three television channels closed down early at 10.30 p.m., streetlights were dimmed, offices cooled their heating to 65°F; but the world did not collapse. Trade at fishing-tackle shops and golf courses boomed. The emergency, in Beckett’s words, became ‘a sort of extended national holiday’. In 1974, after all, most people over forty could remember the blackout and much greater sacrifices made in ‘the national interest’ – a public memory which fed into Heath’s calculations when he decided to face down the miners with his Churchillian appeal on television. Reading the speech now, I can see Heath’s uncomfortable frame – Beckett tells us that an underactive thyroid made him plump and sluggish – filling the television screen: ‘We must close our ranks so that we can deal together with the difficulties which come to us, whether from within [miners] or from beyond our own shores [sheikhs]. That has been our way in the past, and it is a good way.’

Heath, Beckett says, was convinced he was battling with the NUM’s Communist wing, but ‘difficulties’ was the nearest he came to his successor’s ‘enemy within’. And of course he lost. The miners escalated their overtime ban to an all-out strike, Heath called an election that posed the question ‘Who governs Britain?’, and the electorate by a very small majority decided that the answer wasn’t Heath. The miners, meanwhile, got most of the 31 per cent pay rise they wanted through the intervention of one of those benign ‘conciliation and arbitration’ bodies, in this case the Pay Board, which were then such a feature of industrial life. Another strike two years earlier had ended when another intervention (this time by the specially summoned Wilberforce Inquiry) awarded the miners 20 per cent. That strike had featured the famous ‘Battle of Saltley Gate’, when pickets fought a long struggle with police to prevent lorries collecting coke from the Saltley depot in the West Midlands. The police had neither riot shields nor truncheons (‘We’d have been bloody bollocked if we’d used truncheons,’ a retired policeman tells Beckett) and relied for crowd control on pushing and shoving. Sheer weight of numbers eventually beat them; pickets, including

Arthur Scargill, had travelled long distances. Heath's government was humiliated and inside the Tory Party the scar lasted for years. Beckett quotes Thatcher from her memoirs: 'For me what happened at Saltley took on no less significance than it did for the left.'

So there she was like Mrs Tam O'Shanter, nursing her wrath to keep it warm, while trade unions went on increasing their membership, and organised labour (what a historic phrase that now seems, like the 'Poor Law') grew from strength to strength. In 1968, 43 per cent of the British workforce belonged to a union. In 1978, the figure was 54 per cent (halved to 27.4 per cent by 2008). It made sense to join one. Power within unions had migrated down the hierarchy to the shop floor – the number of shop stewards quadrupled – and the simple mechanism of industrial action not only brought material rewards, but also a kind of spiritual uplift. Raphael Samuel, quoted by Beckett, thought that 'strikes, for those who took part in them, took on something of the character of [religious] Revivals . . . an occasion for mass conversion, a time when all things are made anew.' Little of Samuel's appealing notion applied to my own industry, newspapers, where workers in the press room would walk out for an increased bonus and walk back in again when they got it, which they usually did; bonuses cost less than the revenue lost when an edition failed to make the streets. Nobody imagined this was 'responsible' or 'reasonable' trade unionism – adjectives that all politicians stressed – any more than most of us understood the fear that partly explained the miners' militancy: that their time was running out (in 1971 oil replaced coal as Britain's chief energy source).

Trade unions became an immovable fact of everyday life; they were, as Beckett writes, at their zenith. From friends on unsympathetic newspapers I learned the term of art for the front-page formula that ran a big headline next to a mugshot ('The man who is stopping your trains tonight!'). They called it the 'crucifixion layout'. It implied that strikes were caused by some ranting Messiah leading 'reasonable' workers astray, rather than (as was usually the case) the same reasonable workers taking a self-interested decision to maximise their wages. It became obvious, however, that governments needed the assent of trade unions to succeed. Together with capital and government, they made up the wobbly three-legged throne on which Heath sat. Later, three legs became two when Harold Wilson and the trade unions' grandest grandee, Jack Jones, reached the agreement known as the Social Contract, whereby workers agreed to moderate their wage demands so that the two-figure inflation rates could be beaten. Opinion polls decided Jones was the most powerful man in Britain. 'Vote Jack Jones, cut out the middle man,' the election graffiti said. Conflicts resolved over 'beer and sandwiches' at Downing Street became one of the clichés of the era, though

Jones is said to have preferred goujons of sole. The right depicted the arrangement as trade unionists ‘holding the country to ransom’, while some on the left attacked it as a sell-out. In the view of the NUM leader, Joe Gormley: ‘Our role in society is to look after our members, not run the country.’

It seems inconceivable now that British governments would kowtow to, or at least try to persuade and seduce, organisations of workers rather than bankers and financiers (‘Vote Barclays, cut out the middle man’). But the economy was different then. Most of the heavy industry and infrastructure were publicly owned. British power stations and steel plants burned British coal. British-owned factories still made ships, cars and lorries, railway locomotives and textiles. We smoked British brands of cigarettes, drank our own Watneys, ate our own sweets. Not all of these products were flawless and often the quantities they were made in were diminishing, but they moored Britain to ways of thinking and living that were all its own. On the day Britain joined the EEC in 1973, the *Daily Mirror* published a survey into British attitudes towards the social changes that membership might bring. Only 18 per cent of those polled favoured all-day pub opening, only 23 per cent regular wine with meals, only 13 per cent continental breakfasts over bacon and eggs, only 5 per cent Sunday shopping. This might suggest a reasonably happy – if high-fat – contentment with the way things were. In fact, a low-energy fatalism had overcome large parts of an elite that once believed change, particularly economic change, to be both essential and possible. As Beckett notes, the idea of ‘declinism’ had nagged away in political conversation ever since anyone could remember; economic decline had been a fear even when Britain was at its most imperial. Between 1950 and 1970, when Britain’s share of the world’s manufactured exports shrank from about a quarter to about a tenth, it turned from a worrying prospect into an apparently unstoppable reality. Failing manufacturing industries were kept alive by state subsidy. Sterling crises were never far away. There was inflation on the one hand and unemployment on the other, see-sawing problems that were difficult to tackle together (if one went down, the other went up). The problem was, the people didn’t understand. Beckett quotes a conversation, recorded in a diary, between two senior civil servants in 1975. The first asks the second how he is, and the second replies: ‘Like everyone else, waiting for the collapse.’ James Callaghan, then foreign secretary, wrote in his memoirs: ‘Our place in the world is shrinking; our economic comparisons grow worse . . . Sometimes when I go to bed at night I think that if I were a young man I would emigrate.’

It was around that time that pessimism became a general condition, though the middle classes felt it most keenly. Inflation ate into savings, share dividends dwindled, a three-year slump in property prices, from 1974 to



1976, devalued homes. During the mid-1970s, according to Beckett, declinism

truly began to pervade the national consciousness. It filled doomy books . . . It became a melodramatic staple for newspapers, magazines and television programmes. It darkened the work of artists, novelists, dramatists, film-makers and pop musicians. It soured foreign commentary on Britain . . . And it shifted in tone; from the anxious to the apocalyptic.

In John Fowles's novel *Daniel Martin*, published in 1977, the expatriate narrator says of his homeland: 'England is already a thing in a museum, a dying animal in a zoo.' Beckett pulls many other examples (Lessing, Drabble, Spark) from what he calls the 'crisis fiction' of the time, but crisis seems too noisy a word. What I remember is the kind of hush that comes down in a fog. We ambled onwards. Politicians became blurred silhouettes in the distance. Returned to office in 1974, Harold Wilson was one of the weariest prime ministers in history, his 'clever eyes' fixed from the start on early retirement rather than any vision of national salvation. In conversations with Wilson's former colleagues, Beckett finds near universal contempt. Denis Healey says: 'He was a terrible prime minister, actually.' Gavyn Davies, then a Downing Street adviser, remembers him as bored and 'slightly an absentee prime minister'. Drink got him through the day: 'Brandy from midday till late evening, when he is slow and very slurred,' according to the diary of Bernard Donoughue, one of his kitchen cabinet. Like Heath, Wilson was ill – 'run-down', as people used to say. Persistent colds, stomach pains, a racing heart, moments of forgetfulness and bewilderment: all of these attended cabinet meetings along with the scent of Courvoisier and cigars, and may well have been early warnings for the Alzheimer's and bowel cancer that were diagnosed a few years after he quit.

One of Beckett's best discoveries is Dr Richard Stone, whose father, Joe Stone, had been Wilson's GP since the 1940s – a job that the junior Stone took over for the last 12 years of Wilson's life. 'Harold had been the master of the detail, and then he didn't have the detail,' Richard Stone told Beckett. 'Heavy drinking cuts off one layer of your thinking. You lose sharpness, facts, precision. And it's the sign of someone who's burning out. In the 1970s, Harold knew it was downhill from here.' Joe Stone became one of Wilson's closest friends, and the prime minister would often be driven in his official car to Stone's house in North London. The two men would talk for an hour or two. Stone was a good listener, a loyal keeper of confidences – he committed few details of Wilson's ill-health to paper – and had no political axe to grind. 'Part of an afternoon or an evening would slip by, the Finchley Road a distant, lulling drone,' Beckett writes. 'The prime minister's driver

would wait outside in the car. Britain's many mid-1970s problems would await Wilson's attention.' The vignette, so suggestive of a scene from *Smiley's People*, lacks the topics of their conversation. Beckett doesn't speculate, but it would be odd if they didn't include Smiley's People themselves. Wilson firmly believed that he had enemies inside the intelligence agencies and that they wanted to bring him down. At first his colleagues thought, like Shirley Williams, that he was 'off his trolley' when he pointed out bumps in the ceiling and said they held listening devices. Williams remembers a conversation in the cabinet chamber:

'That's a bug. They're bugging me.'

'Really, Harold?'

'Absolutely. They're listening to everything I say. And they're determined to get me out.'

The obvious explanation, that these were the paranoid delusions of a crumbling mind, needs to be revised in the light of later disclosures that sections of MI5 and the CIA had determined that Wilson was a long-serving Soviet puppet, if not actually a spy. Williams now believes that there was 'a real attempt to try to undo him of a non-constitutional kind'. But really there was no need to supplement the exhaustion, alcohol and poor health that were already undoing him. When another sterling crisis hit Britain in 1976, Wilson's biggest worry was that dealing with it might affect his plans for retirement.

One thing about decades it may be important to understand is that the actors and a lot of the scenery date from previous ones. They don't arrive at the studio flat-packed and in mint condition, the common fault of historical feature films in which, say, a 1920s romance will have a 1920s house with a 1920s cocktail cabinet and a 1920s car in the drive, none of them with a speck of dust or a scratch of wear and tear. In 1976, Wilson was 60 and his successor that year as prime minister, Jim Callaghan, four years older. Even in a decade when it was still possible – in a newsroom, say – to think nothing of working next to a man who had fought in the war, the memories of both men had a noticeably sepia tone. In his last volume of memoirs, *Final Term*, Wilson recalled that he'd told the party in 1974 that he saw his role as being like 'a deep-lying centre-half – I instanced Roberts of the prewar Arsenal team – concentrating on defence . . . moving upfield only for set-piece occasions (witness, as I had done, Roberts's famous winning goal in the sixth round of the FA Cup against Huddersfield in 1927)'. Callaghan, just as nostalgic and even more socially conservative, told Bernard Donoughue that he'd been unaware of homosexuality 'until well into adult life'. From the podium of the 1978 party conference he sang one of his favourite Victorian

music-hall songs, 'Waiting at the Church', to suggest, like a winking uncle, that he wouldn't be calling an autumn election. Most of his audience was baffled, though there were still men and women alive who knew he'd misattributed the song to Marie Lloyd when in fact it was Vesta Victoria's. The conventional wisdom now is that he should have called that election. Labour was roughly level with the Tories in the polls and the electorate in 1978 much preferred Callaghan's personality to Thatcher's. If she'd won, as she wrote in her memoirs, the pay revolt by public-sector workers that winter might have broken her government instead of ending Callaghan's. Even as it was, with the unburied dead and 'Crisis, what crisis?' and so forth, Labour increased its vote in the general election the following May by 75,000 compared with October 1974. The Tories' majority of 43 seats was owed mainly to defections from the Liberals, the Scottish and Welsh nationalists and the National Front. Within two years Britain had fallen into its biggest recession since the 1930s and opinion polls registered Margaret Thatcher as the most unpopular prime minister since polling began. 'General elections, like the beginnings and ends of decades,' Beckett writes, 'are rarely as decisive as they seem.'

Yes indeed. The truth is that the 1970s, like most decades, was a wine gum of many colours. The two years between the IMF bail-out and the collapse of the Social Contract, roughly from the autumn of 1976 to the autumn of 1978, were far sunnier than those for some time before or after. Oil from the North Sea had begun to come ashore and with it the promise of lasting prosperity. Disposable incomes and house prices rose – the latter by 50 per cent in the five years to 1980 – while unemployment and inflation fell. In a book entitled *Britain: A Future That Works*, the *Washington Post*'s London correspondent, Bernard Nossiter, was by early 1978 able to wonder if the mid-1970s 'crisis' had not been 'a case of hypochondria'. Nossiter felt London to be 'the last inhabitable great city', full of relaxed citizens who had discovered what would now be called a happy work-life balance, as opposed to what Nossiter described as the 'nervous intensity' of the crowds in Paris and New York. Britons, he suggested, might be 'the first citizens of the post-industrial age . . . choosing leisure over goods'. As Beckett points out, Nossiter was known to have sappy Anglophile tendencies; still, there was something to what he wrote. If greater equality nourishes happiness and the public good, as many have come to believe, then it should never be forgotten that in the late 1970s Britain became a more equal country than it had probably ever been and certainly than it has been since. Beckett's book is not all out revisionism; the facts of industrial turmoil can't be revised away. But that one fact of greater equality suggests that the received wisdom of the 1970s as Britain's nightmare decade is little more than a politically convenient libel which suits a narrative of redemption. We must never go

back to the 1970s? Perhaps we should be lucky. There are worse places, as we may shortly see.

## Letters

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Ian Jack's review of Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out* is marred by a fearful howler (*LRB*, 27 August). It wasn't Jack Jones who insisted on goujons of sole at monthly meetings with Treasury ministers, but Hugh Scanlon.

Joking apart, the IMF visitation of 1976 is still reliably posted as the ultimate failure of a Labour government. In fact, the IMF-precipitating episode of 1976 was sparked by someone at the Treasury, never identified, selling pounds for dollars in the wake of the cuts imposed and recovery achieved in 1975 by the chancellor, Denis Healey. Derek Mitchell, then permanent secretary at the Treasury, would later tell me that the entire 1976 episode, IMF and all, had been 'strictly a headline crisis'. Indeed as the crisis broke, the scarcely pinko *Investors Chronicle* had asked: 'why now, when the real crisis was last year?'

A few other important things haven't made it into the received record. The voluntary incomes policy, so successful until late 1978, owed its melancholy collapse essentially to James Callaghan, but for deeper reasons than the famously complacent 'Crisis, what crisis?' Callaghan had played with the notion of replacing Healey with the protectionist Tony Crosland and had withdrawn support in cabinet for a 2 per cent increase in the minimum lending rate until Healey threatened resignation.

Initially sceptical about the voluntary incomes policy, when it prospered he promptly pushed it too far. An amazed and derisive Roy Hattersley tells how in 1978, a civil servant from the PM's office, Kenneth Clucas, informed him that 'Number Ten is thinking about 3 per cent.'

There had been sufficient warning across that year from union conferences – including the T&G's, where Jack Jones had been booed – that even 5 per cent could not be held. However at the outset, November 1976, Healey had been advised by his Leeds constituency party chairman, Ashoke Bannerjee, that the influence of differential earnings was such that for the policy to work, 'benefits ought to be lower compared with earnings.' Healey had agreed and argued in cabinet for a year's freeze on benefits. The cabinet's refusal may be the single most significant cause of the Winter of Discontent, a revolt of the low paid if ever there was one. Callaghan's later insistence on yet deeper wage restraint simply compounded his initial failure to fight for this painful but realistic principle.

By and large, Callaghan has had an indulgent press, but his own judgment of his actions can be found in the nervous breakdown, paralysis of will and complete failure to communicate with civil servants and ministers he suffered across two to three weeks at the end of 1978, going into 1979 – something related to me by his private secretary, Kenneth Crowe, but not included in the standard narrative. The 1970s are perhaps best remembered as a failure so nearly a success as to approach tragedy.

### Edward Pearce

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It was disappointing to read Ian Jack echoing rather than challenging all the old prejudices about Harold Wilson's premiership (*LRB*, 27 August). He must by now recognise that many of the fables and legends about Wilson are unfair and

inaccurate. Wilson was a more effective figure than, say, Tony Blair both as prime minister and as leader of the Labour Party – and not only in his policy on Vietnam compared with Blair and Iraq.

The gossip about his drinking habits is quite out of place. Until his final years he was an extremely modest drinker. His ‘brandy period’ was entirely reflective of seriously failing health. At the height of his powers he was unmatched as a parliamentarian, and only now are we beginning to appreciate his handling of that most complex period, the 1960s, which Ian Jack describes as ‘a transformative decade for most people in the Western world’. At the same time he was far from ‘off his trolley’ in suspecting the attempts to destabilise his government, as I explain in my book *From Bevan to Blair*. I worked closely with Wilson in the 1970s and he was in my view one of the most important, talented and civilised of our postwar prime ministers.

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## **When the Lights Went Out, By Andy**

### **Beckett (Review in The Independent)**

In the lexicon of British political abuse, "the Seventies" has become shorthand for "failure". This was the era of strikes, power cuts and the three-day week. Weak governments struggled to stay in office with small majorities. Three successive prime ministers – Edward Heath, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan – came to be hated by many in their own parties.

Part of the problem sprang from a global crisis produced by the rise in the oil price after the Arab/Israeli war of 1973, but this was also a decade (perhaps, come to think of it, the last decade) when there was something specifically "British" about British problems. Politicians were obsessed by their country's decline, particularly in relation to France and West Germany, and sometimes convinced that "going into Europe" would solve their problems. Ugly new words and phrases – stagflation, relativities, phase three - suggested an economic crisis

that was, like some monster on Dr Who, simultaneously terrifying and faintly ridiculous.

Andy Beckett's stimulating and scrupulously researched book put the Seventies into a new perspective. Rather than painting everything in black, he portrays a decade of multi-coloured political and social psychedelia (he suggests at one point that the "real sixties" happened after 1970), marked by the rise of feminism and environmentalism as much as by strikes and the weakness of sterling.

The left seemed like an incongruous coalition of disparate, often mutually hostile, interests.

Demonstrations against the Heath government's Industrial Relations Act attracted middle-aged trade union officials, leather-jacketed revolutionaries from North London Polytechnic and members of the Gay Liberation Front, some of whom carried placards that read "Poof to the Bill".

Beckett is particularly good at resurrecting the fantasies of the 1970s. Sometimes these were fantasies of apocalypse as serious people prophesied the arrival of a right-wing dictator or the collapse of urban life. Sometimes they were fantasies of hope as the inhabitants of squats and communes believed that they had created a new kind of society.

Looking back, however, the wildest fantasies of all often seem to have been those projects of technocratic modernisation that the government itself entertained. Edward Heath was particularly taken with a proposal to build a whole new town around an airport constructed on Maplin Sands in the Thames Estuary.

At times, I wondered whether Beckett's attention to the complexities of the 1970s had not obscured two simple, and partly related, divisions. The first of these was chronological. Margaret Thatcher's accession to the leadership of the Conservative party (in 1975) and, perhaps more importantly, the conversion of some Labour leaders to monetarism (in 1976) reflected a changing political climate. The brief and violent career of the Sex Pistols (who released their first record in 1976) blasted the orthodoxies of youth culture. Thousands of teenagers decided, almost overnight, that flared trousers, long guitar solos and *The Lord of the Rings* were pathetically uncool.

The second division was social, and cut across the chronological one. The great crisis of the mid-1970s was experienced most sharply by elites. This was conspicuously true in the sphere of economic policy; civil servants, academics and politicians were filled with morbid gloom at a time when many ordinary people seem, if retrospective opinion surveys are to be believed, to have been happy.

Part of this was a matter of class. The 1970s was an awkward time for the middle classes. It was they who most resented inflation, the abolition of grammar schools and the sudden sense of relative weakness that came from the realisation that a strike by, say, university professors was unlikely to bring the country to a halt. The big winners from the 1970s were the working classes, or rather those parts of the working classes - white, male and, in Ulster, Protestant - that were most effectively represented by trade unions.

Class, however, did not account for it all. The punk revolution was also played out among a certain kind of elite. The Clash replaced Led Zeppelin on the John Peel Show, but on mainstream radio neither was played much. With his intense distaste for the cosiness of the post-war years, Johnny Rotten, of the Sex Pistols, had more in common with Peter Jay, the earnest Wykehamist who preached against inflation in the pages of *The Times*, than either man had in common with the mass of the population.

Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee of 1977 illustrated the gulf between elites and the masses. Their record entitled "God Save the Queen" brought the Sex Pistols into conflict with the workers from the pressing plant, who walked out in protest at "treason". However, the Jubilee also worried Norman Tebbit and Nigel Lawson, who thought that it revealed a country that was still too conservative for their radical variety of Conservatism.

No one will agree with all that Beckett says but even, perhaps especially, those of us who have our own memories of the 1970s will profit from reading this book. He captures the mixture of high drama and surreal absurdity that so often marked the period – as when a group of negotiators from the International Monetary Fund hid themselves away in a changing room at a fashionable Mayfair tailor. His greatest strength lies in a willingness to take the 1970s seriously on their own terms. He resists the temptation to treat the decade as a mere prequel to Thatcherism. Indeed, in this account, Thatcherites often emerge as rather marginal figures swimming against the current of their times. Airey Neave is as much a bad-tempered ex-soldier ranting about a free



pop festival as he is the cold-blooded mastermind behind Thatcher's takeover of the Conservative Party.

Beckett's artful interviews with people who lived through the events that he describes are often more revealing than thousands of pages of government documents. He talks to a taxi driver in Armagh who insists that he is proud of the years that his father spent as an IRA prisoner, but Beckett catches the mix of hesitation and over-emphasis which tells us so much about what it was like to grow up as a child of the Troubles. There is also an elegiac quality to the way in which many interviewees describe a lost decade when the radical left could still feel optimistic. Beckett talks to Philip Bellingham, who worked next door to the Saltley Coke depot, closed by Arthur Scargill and his flying pickets in 1972. Bellingham recalls how someone painted "The miners will win" on a wall, and how the graffiti was still there after the miners' strike of 1985 had been defeated.

*Richard Vinen's new book is 'Thatcher's Britain' (Simon & Schuster)*

### **Close calls and high turnouts**

Labour lost power in June 1970 when Edward Heath gained a 30-seat Tory majority; in the "Who governs?" election of February 1974, Harold Wilson returned with a minority Labour government. That October, Wilson scraped a majority of 16. Labour hung on until Mrs Thatcher arrived in 10 Downing Street with a majority of 26 in June 1970. Turnout during the decade shamed later, apathetic times: in February 1974, it was 78.8 per cent, almost 20 points higher than in Blair's second victory of 2001.

Review in The Daily Telegraph, by Roy Hattersley

## When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies by Andy Beckett: review

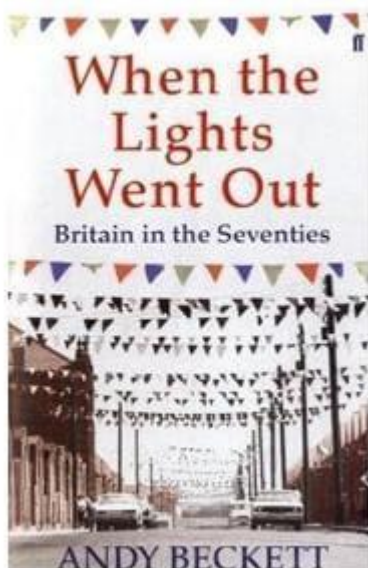
Roy Hattersley enjoys a requiem for old Britain, reviewing *When the Lights Went Out* by Andy Beckett

Email

By Andy Beckett

3:52PM BST 30 Apr 2009

Sometimes it seems that I am the only person in Britain who enjoyed the Seventies. So it was a great relief to read that, according to the Measure of Domestic Progress – an “index of social and economic wellbeing” – 1976 was the best year in the second half of the 20th century. It was also the year in which Britain borrowed £2.3 billion from the International Monetary Fund. But that apparent humiliation was not as bad as we thought at the time. In *When the Lights Went Out*, Andy Beckett tells us that it was the 15th occasion on which Britain had asked the IMF for help. I was a cabinet minister when the loan was negotiated. Why did I not know that our application was routine? My ignorance may help to explain how we got into the crisis in the first place.



When the Lights Went Our by Andy Beckett

As Denis Healey says towards the end of the book, we did not even need the money. The Treasury had miscalculated the size of the public sector borrowing requirement.

Beckett's account of the crisis is not wholly reliable. One chapter would not be very different had it been taken down from Tony Benn at dictation speed. There are even quotations from speeches that Benn noted making to the cabinet. In the Benn version, while cowards flinched and

traitors sneered, he argued that “cuts and deflation will not be acceptable”. I do recall him insisting that his “alternative economic strategy” did not require deflation.

### **Ways With Words Festival 2010**

At the time, Healey was carving away at the newspapers with a razor blade. He paused to demand the name of a reputable economist who supported that view. Quick as a flash the answer came: “Wynne Godley”. Holding aloft a cutting, Healey read aloud a couple of paragraphs from a letter which set out the need to depress the economy. Then, in a dramatically hushed voice, he added “Signed, Wynne Godley, King’s College, Cambridge.”

Beckett’s slanted description of this event should not prejudice potential readers against this beautifully written and hugely entertaining book. The author has the ability to make the prosaic seem exciting and some of his characters would be at home in a Victorian melodrama. Ted Heath, near the end of his life, was “standing on his own, hugely stout, in a suit so pale it was almost luminous... an air of immense contentment about him”. Arthur Scargill “wore a black suit which emphasised the paleness of his face” and “spoke in a thin but piercing voice that leapt unevenly in tone at moments of emphasis”.

On the other hand, Jack Jones, the veteran transport union leader who died last week, “spoke in an unhurried level voice, as if he expected people to pay attention”.

I knew Jack Jones for 40 years, but it was not until I read this book that I recognised that defining characteristic.

Beckett gives due prominence to the miners’ siege of the Saltley coke depot which made changes in industrial relations law both irresistible and highly prescriptive. Did John Hoskyns, one of Margaret Thatcher’s early advisers, really claim that in 1979 the Conservatives were “saved from defeat” by the unions alone? If so, he was wrong. By then the country had lost faith in collective solutions and wanted rugged individualism. Nothing made that clearer than Jim Callaghan’s speech to the 1976 Labour conference: “We used to think that we could spend our way out of a recession... I tell you in all candour, that option no longer exists.” Together with the “winter of discontent”, that speech marked the end of old Labour. Beckett describes both turning points in admirable detail. He does not, however, give enough emphasis to entry into the Common Market in 1973. That was the end of old Britain.

The treatment of Callaghan’s speech clearly benefits from the help Beckett received from Peter Jay (the former prime minister’s son-in-law)

who persuaded him to lay deficit financing to rest. Regrettably, Beckett is not so revealing about all his sources. The origin of some information is obvious – at least to the authors of the books in which it first appeared. But notes are necessary, not to pamper egos, but to allow the reader to make a judgment about reliability.

Beckett's clear intention is to explain that the Seventies were not as unceasingly awful as they are regarded as having been. He would have achieved this more convincingly had he dealt not only with the events that commanded front pages, but also with theatre, music or sport.

From the three-day week that gives the book its title to the election of Thatcher at the end of the decade, pleasures – untouched by Whitehall and Westminster – abounded. Only the politics possessed a desperate excitement. But that was enough to make me enjoy 10 turbulent years. Roy Hattersley's 'Borrowed Time: the Story of Britain between the Wars' is published by Abacus

# The twilight zone

A new study of Britain in the  
1970s argues that there was  
more to the decade than a  
slow slide toward

**BY DAVID MARQUAND**

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**When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies (Review in the New Statesman)**

**Andy Beckett**

**Faber & Faber, 586pp, £20**

The sudden collapse of the rampant casino capitalism of the recent past has been a shot in the arm for a left demoralised by New Labour's treachery to the old gods of Keynesian social democracy. Market fundamentalism has been discredited, and Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman have been toppled from their perches. The rational economic actor that a generation of economists put at the centre of their conceptual universe has turned out to be a myth. In the crucial financial sector, at least, the herd instinct has turned to count for more than cool-headed calculation. As a result, the state has come in from the cold. Fiscal prudence is no longer a virtue. In the United States and Britain, at least, deficit financing has become not just respectable, but mandatory. To many – perhaps most – social democrats the moral seems clear. At long last, history has put a swath of clear, red water between left and right, and the task is to return to the good old days when Keynes was in his heaven and all was well with the world.

All this gives an urgent topicality to Andy Beckett's new history of Britain in the 1970s that he cannot have expected when he started work on it five years ago. For the Thatcher revolution did not descend miraculously from a clear sky. It was a child of the crises of authority, the state and the social order that racked Beckett's Britain. It was during the 1970s, and thanks to what happened in the 1970s, that Margaret Thatcher herself became a Thatcherite. Before then, she had been a medium-level Conservative politician, with nothing but her gender and her more than usually rebarbative accent to distinguish her from myriad other Conservative politicians. Even her trailblazers, Enoch Powell and Keith Joseph, were not yet fully fledged Hayekian ideologues. Still less were the great mass of Conservative MPs and constituency associations. What made them Thatcherites – what made Thatcher herself a Thatcherite – was that the governing philosophy of the postwar period collapsed in failure and humiliation, leaving a vacuum that its custodians could not fill.

Not that Beckett draws that moral from his story. Indeed, he does not draw explicit morals at all. His book is high-quality, vivid journalism, not academic history or social science. He has tried to tell it like it was – to “bring the decade back to life”, as the dust jacket puts it – and he does this by focusing on a series of more or less revealing episodes, not by telling a connected story. Some of the incidents are familiar, but others have been virtually forgotten. His account of the notorious Battle of Saltley Gate during the 1972 miners' strike, when Arthur Scargill's pickets overwhelmed the police and in effect closed the coke depot to lorry traffic, is brisk and accomplished, but it does not

add much to the existing record. However, I learned a great deal from his mordant account of the Maplin Sands saga, in which Edward Heath and his colleagues first trumpeted their intention to build a monster new London airport on a wasteland of mudflats off the Essex coast, and then abandoned the scheme to moulder in an administrative limbo until it was killed off by the next government. “Heathograd” is Beckett’s title for that chapter, and it is wonderfully apt.

So are his pen portraits of the participants he interviewed. The Heath he bumped into at a Balliol College reunion in 2000 was “hugely stout, in a suit so pale it was almost luminous”. When he interviewed Heath some time later, he was struck by the “small determined eyes, the proud dagger nose, big plump cheeks barely lined despite his lingering yachtsman’s tan”. Harold Wilson (whom he didn’t interview) had a “wily bloodhound face”. At 76, Teddy Goldsmith, the slightly dotty far-right environmentalist, was “very bony”, but with a residual “messianic strength to his blue eyes”. Ralph Harris, the first director of the neoliberal think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs, wore “a yellow cravat, a pale, wide-brimmed hat, a tweed jacket in a dapper faint check, enormous black-framed glasses and a moustache straight from the Forties”. Jack Jones at 90 looked about 70; a sense that “his life was part of an ongoing age-old struggle lingered strongly in the room”. In retirement, Sir Clive Rose, chairman of the Civil Contingencies Unit during the Winter of Discontent, was “immaculate on a scorching day in pressed caramel trousers, red socks and a pink shirt in a tiny check”.

Yet even though these and similar cameos are fun, they do not give the reader enough to chew on. Reading Beckett is like watching an endless kaleidoscope. His pieces are always in flux, and a pattern never takes shape.

In an unpretentious sort of way, Beckett is a revisionist. He has tried to rescue the complexities and contingencies of the time from the simplifications that hindsight has so often imposed on it. This is well worth doing. Hindsight is always dangerous. Contingency is part of the human condition – above all, perhaps, of the political condition. Had James Callaghan called an election in October 1978, he might have won. Had he won, Thatcher would almost certainly have disappeared into the oubliette that the Conservative Party reserves for discredited leaders. We cannot know what would have happened thereafter. (I think myself that Labour would have operated a kind of corporatist Thatcherism rather like that of Bob Hawke’s Australia.) But our fate would certainly have been different from what it actually was.

However, counterfactuals like this are little more than an intellectual parlour game. Karl Marx got it right when he said that “men make their own history”, but not “just as they please”. Trends can sometimes bend, but they do exist. Beckett is right to point out that 1970s Britain was in many ways a good place to live in and that many

of the social and cultural changes of the times were making it better. The fact remains that the British were living beyond their means; that successive governments, not just in the 1970s but ever since the late 1950s, had failed to put things right; and they failed because the Keynesian social democracy pioneered by the wartime coalition and by the postwar Attlee government had become a busted flush.

Beckett is right in saying that 1970s Britain was not a second Weimar Republic. Apart from anything else, Callaghan was not Chancellor Brüning and Thatcher was not Adolf Hitler. It is true, however, that it was no longer possible to run Britain's political economy in the way it had been run for the preceding 20 years. Indeed, the overwhelming impression left by Beckett's book is precisely that. Decent, patriotic, mostly honourable and, in many cases, highly intelligent men and women were caught in the toils of a system that had become dysfunctional.

Something had to give. To conclude from the present crisis that the Keynesian social democracy of the past ought to be resuscitated – or even that it offers helpful lessons for our times – is historically illiterate. Today's left will have to chart its own course, and discover its own teachers.

*David Marquand is the author most recently of "Britain Since 1918: the Strange Career of British Democracy", published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (£25)*

This article first appeared in the 27 April 2009 issue of the New Statesman, [\*Rise of the Geek\*](#)

## Review

# The 1970s, mainly viewed from the top

DAVE GORTON reviews *When The Lights Went Out; Britain in the Seventies* by Andy Beckett. (Review published in *The Socialist*)

THE NINETEEN seventies was a tumultuous decade, politically and culturally. There was the humiliation of the world's greatest super power in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal; revolutions in Portugal, Ethiopia, Iran; military dictatorships in Chile, Greece, Brazil and Argentina.

Closer to home, there was industrial strife in [Britain](#) with millions on strike towards the end of the decade; hundreds of thousands on the streets marching against racism and police brutality; bombing campaigns in Britain's cities; the explosions onto the musical scene, firstly of reggae music internationally then punk music, both politically motivated and the music of the youth.

They were also my formative years; in primary school at the start of the decade, having left home by the end. With a wealth of memories, good and bad, I was looking forward to reading Andy Beckett's book. Sadly, 500 pages later, I felt let down.

For this is not really a book about a decade in 'political' history. It is more the story of the four prime ministers (Wilson, Heath, Callaghan and Thatcher) who were in power during the 1970s. And the trouble with basing a book 'at the top' is that the real feelings and day-to-day existence of ordinary people become secondary or even missed altogether.

Andy Beckett is a good writer; what he covers he mostly does well, especially for someone who, born in 1969, had to rely on research and interviews rather than personal memory. When *The Lights Went Out* is not boring but it not only pays too little attention to non-parliamentary issues, it fails to penetrate the psyche of working class people in Britain in the 1970s.

So we get interesting chapters on the fledgling green movement including some startling links with the ultra-right, the free festivals at the beginning of the decade and what you suspect is an obligatory chapter disparagingly entitled *Marxism at Lunchtime* in which the reader can giggle with the writer about the antics of a few middle class student radicals in universities.

But there is precious little on the anti-racist movement, nothing on the various community campaigns for decent, affordable housing instead of the slums that were still prevalent in many urban areas at the beginning of the decade, nothing about the prevalence of weekly outbreaks of mass violence at football matches - a sure sign that all was not hunky dory in Britain.

Having had the dig at the 'student left', one would have hoped for a more sober analysis of the growth of the ideas of socialism during the decade. But a quick flick through the index reveals no reference to Militant (the forerunner of the Socialist Party) despite the capitalist press of the period spending thousands of words (and no shortage of banner headlines) condemning us.

And the changes in Britain's [musical](#) scene in the 1970s are largely ignored, yet these were of major importance in both reflecting and expressing the political views of youth in particular. For most of us who were teenagers in the second part of the decade, the energy, lyrics and message of bands like The Clash, Steel Pulse, Tom Robinson and Stiff Little Fingers signalled a crossover between our daily lives and 'culture'. Songs about the streets rather than wizards and hobgoblins!



How much better this book could have been if, as well as interviewing ex-prime ministers and leading trade unionists from the era, Beckett had spent a bit more time with 'ordinary folk'.

However, there are some very readable chapters in the book, particularly around two major industrial struggles (the 1972 miners' [strike](#) and Grunwicks) and the situation in Northern Ireland. The chapter simply entitled Close The Gates! is an account of the momentous battles during the 1972 miners' strike where the focus turned to Saltley coke depot in Birmingham and the mass picket that forced its closure.

20,000 trade unionists, mostly from local [Birmingham](#) factories, converged on the depot on the morning of 10 February, completely filling all five roads into Saltley. Beckett interviews a police officer on duty with 800 colleagues that day: "We heard that some pickets were coming over the Saltley viaduct. The plan was to block off the bridge, steer them away. But' - he made a helpless, sweeping gesture across the café - 'I can still see it now, them coming over the hill..."

When The Lights Went Out, six years in the writing, is to me a missed opportunity. It could have been the definitive biography of a turbulent decade. Unfortunately, through its concentration on the higher echelons of British political life, it is a less interesting read than it should be and, ultimately, a frustrating one.

Book review: When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies

14:4616:16Thursday 30 April 2009 by Andy Beckett Faber & Faber, 550pp,

£20 Review by DAVID ROBINSON

(Review published in The Scotsman)

REMEMBER THE SEVENTIES? THE doom decade, the decade style forgot? Remember the TV stopping at 10.30pm, the streetlights dimmed, the floodlights switched off for football matches, the maximum car speed set at 50mph? Remember candlelit evenings and the three-day week? Britain was a different country; we did things differently then. For how differently, here's the Wall Street Journal commenting on Denis Healey's 1975 budget. It was a full year before the IMF crisis, but already Britain was being dismissed as a third-world economic basket case. After highlighting the 52 per cent corporate tax rate, 83 per cent marginal tax rate on earned income and swingeing 98 per cent tax on unearned income, the newspaper concluded that the British government was intent on confiscating all wealth. "The price can only be still slower economic growth and still lower living standards for all British, rich or poor. Goodbye, Great Britain, it was nice knowing you." Without even mentioning the Winter of Discontent, the rats running around piled-up rubbish, hospital union shop stewards blocking deliveries of vital supplies and all the rest of it, that's the picture of the decade that's sunk deep into the collective memory. The years of the

locust, not the lotus; of a country that had lost its way and was floundering in economic failure. Our Weimar, Beckett calls it. The worst of times.

Now let's take another point of view – also American, but from three years later. In 1978, in *Britain: A Future That Works*, Bernard Nossiter, the Washington Post's London correspondent, ridiculed the notion of Britain on the rack. To Nossiter, British tax and spending were average by European levels, decline was wildly overstated, poverty was shrinking away, educational opportunities opening up, and life expectancy figures climbing. True, productivity levels were higher in many other countries, but that wasn't the whole picture: Britons weren't as obsessed by materialism, they were happier, and made better use of their leisure. In opinion polls they reckoned themselves the happiest people in the world. And why shouldn't they have been? In 1977, Britain was effectively a more equal society than it had ever been, or has been since. Social mobility was greater than before or since too.

Unemployment was climbing – I remember interviewing the then Employment Secretary as the dreaded two million figure came into view – but no-one talked about it as "a price worth paying". Yet precisely because the Thatcher Revolution was so complete, because it transformed Britain so absolutely, the decade before it happened now seems remote, almost to the point of invisibility. So when we think about the Seventies, the same stock images of the way the decade sputtered to a halt in the biggest wave of strikes since the General Strike are what spring most readily to mind. Governments either in hock to trade unions or brought down by them, or sometimes – as in 1979 – both at the same time. Strikes, Saltley, Scargill, social contracts: even for those of us who lived through them, the Seventies seem to have passed by without leaving a mark on the way we live now. Yet to Andy Beckett, the Seventies aren't just the hangover after the Sixties, but a revolutionary decade in their own right – "when the great Sixties party actually got started". From gay rights to green politics, feminism to anti-racism, this is the decade where we started to think in new ways. Of course, not everyone did – the homophobic, casually racist, anti-feminist DI Gene Hunt in *Life on Mars* isn't such a parody of Seventies attitudes as all that – but that does not invalidate Beckett's thesis. Yet just as, when watching *Life on Mars*, the thought "Did we really live like that?" is never too far away, reading Beckett's fresh, stylish, perceptive and, above all, brilliantly researched portrait of the 1970s, it's impossible not to feel similar moments of incredulity.

Were Britain's university campuses really so completely dominated by hardline Marxist student leaders? (Absolutely.) Was Britain really effectively run by a cloth-capped trade unionist who had been lectured by Edward Heath in the Spanish Civil War? (Almost: though the late TGWU leader Jack Jones's palpable decency still shines across the decades.) Did Britain really

have a Prime Minister as paranoid as Harold Wilson? (Yes. Sample: "I see myself as a great fat spider in the corner of the room. Sometimes I speak when I'm asleep. You should both listen. Occasionally when we meet I might tell you to go to Charing Cross Road and kick a blind man standing on the corner.") Above all, why, when there were candidates like Willie Whitelaw around, did the Tories choose to be led by someone like Margaret Thatcher? It didn't even make sense at the time.

Peter Walker, a Heathite liberal Tory, told Beckett a revealing story about Harold Macmillan's reactions to watching Mrs Thatcher's first party conference on television. "I've always been to these conferences," Macmillan said. "You sat on the platform and you would listen to incredible remarks being made from the floor. You know, they wanted to birch them before hanging them, things like that. Then you'd get up and make a speech. You wouldn't mention anything that had been said from the floor. And they were terribly nice, they'd give you wild applause ... Watching her last week, I think she actually agrees with them."

Apart from Mrs Thatcher herself, in the last five years Beckett seems to have interviewed almost every one of the Seventies' movers and shakers, from Edward Heath (a brilliantly nuanced portrait) to activists remembering Britain's first gay rights demonstration in 1970. He's travelled through the foreign country that is 1970s Britain, from Maplin Sands (where Heath wanted to build "Jet City" alongside Britain's first ecological airport) to Sullom Voe. And like the fine feature writer he is, he puts the two stories together, telling the tale of the decade with flair and understanding. When it is written as well as this, history can constantly take you by surprise. You find yourself gripped by a subject – the IMF negotiations of 1976, for example – which might sound numbingly dull yet turns out to involve clandestine meetings in a Picadilly tailor's shop on one side and a country potentially two weeks away from bankruptcy on another.

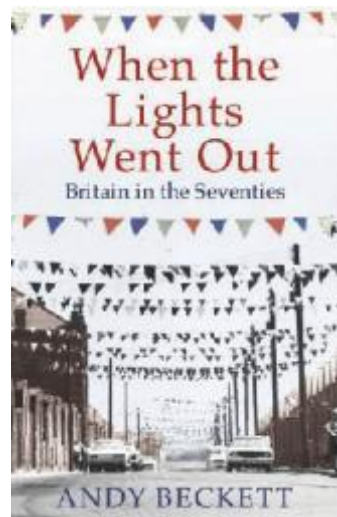
The other quality a good history book possesses is that it makes you realise the past was never inevitable, that it was once as seething a mass of possibilities as the present. All this resurfaces in the interviews here with the old warriors on either side of the political divide, when the gleam of old campaigns often seems to return to his interviewees' eyes. It's the mark of his triumph that something similar can happen to those of his readers too. Beckett may have been only ten days old when the 1970s began, but it's hard to imagine anyone writing a more lucid, revealing and enjoyable book about the decade.

Read more at: <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/book-review-when-the-lights-went-out-britain-in-the-seventies-1-1036419>

# When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies

*Keith Laybourn* appreciates the colourful detail of a challenging decade in Britain

Friday 7th August 2009 (in History Extra)



**Author:** Andy Beckett

**Publisher:** Faber and Faber

**Reviewed by:** Keith Laybourn

**Price (RRP):** £20

Aline in a song by the popular 1970s Lancashire folk group The Fivepenny Piece, asks the last person to leave Britain to “turn out the lights”. There were certainly moments in the 1970s when this request seemed justified, not least in the time of the three-day week at the beginning of 1974 when the lights did go out.

The industrial unrest of the early 1970s provide witness to an age when Britain seemed to be in terminal economic decline and decay. There were two major coal strikes, the poor industrial relations in-between when the social contract between the government and the unions failed, the intervention of the IMF, and the Winter of Discontent of 1978–9, strongly associated with the inability of councils to bury the dead.

Here was an age also of political turbulence which saw the Edward Heath government being effectively brought down by a coal strike in 1974, the chronic weakness of two

Labour governments and the eventual, almost inevitable, rise of Thatcher. The dramatic events of this period justifies the pessimistic statements of *The Fivepenny Piece* but it is a view that is only partly endorsed by Andy Beckett whose new book suggests a richer tapestry to an age that has also elsewhere been described as one of “pigs, punk and prawn cocktails”.

Here, indeed, was an age of industrial conflict but here, also, was an age of the hippie anarchists of the free festival movement and of the Gay Liberation Front. The Sex Pistols were formed in 1975, and reflected upon the depressed culture of the 1970s while a host of writers and dramatists, including Doris Lessing, John Fowles, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Stephen Poliakoff, wrote of the decline and depression of Britain in the 1970s.

The television programmes suggested decline – with laughs – in *Fawlty Towers* and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. Andy Beckett suggests, in presenting these snapshots of the 1970s, that there is more nuance to the age than is often supposed.

This is certainly a readable book which captures the liveliness, deathliness and the mood music of the age. Its strength is that it is an easy and absorbing read. That is all it claims to be and for that it ought to be applauded. Nevertheless, its weaknesses emerge from that very narrative rather than academic style, for it offers no explanations. There are a lot of useful quotes from the numerous interviews and primary evidence but there are no footnotes. These deficiencies are annoying because some thoroughly documented attempt to analyse the dramatic events of this period would have added greatly to the purpose of the book.

The conclusion on the Seventies finished with a reference to a semi-history lesson from Jim Callaghan’s grandson when in fact a history lesson from Beckett would have been more in order. This is an enjoyable book but requires proper reflection and analysis rather than impassioned colour.

*When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies*, by Andy Beckett. Faber and Faber, 448 pp.

(Review by John Green in Irish Left Review)

About a quarter of the way into *Guardian* journalist Andy Beckett's impressive account of Britain in the 1970s, self-satisfied Labour Party politician Denis Healey, who served as Harold Wilson's chancellor of the exchequer, observes that he knew "bugger all about economics" when he was appointed to the post, but soon learned, as chancellor that "economics is just a branch of social science" and was able to get on top of the job within the space of three months. It's a striking admission not just for what it tells us about Healey's complacency and the lack of expertise required of a politician even at the giddy heights of government, but also because it draws attention to the fact that much of what matters in history actually takes place elsewhere. Beckett might have done well to heed the content of Healey's observation and pursued its implications. Economics is indeed no more than branch of social science, but you wouldn't know this from what is, by Beckett's own admission, a history of the period confined to political and economic events.

This isn't to belittle his achievement, since the book is substantial and stands in its own right as a well-researched and thorough piece of journalism within its own self-defined parameters, but a good deal of context is lost if significant social forces-demographics, crime, scientific and technological developments, deskilling, shifts in religious allegiance, patterns of geographical and social mobility, changes in youth culture, etc., etc.,-are treated as epiphenomena or mere ephemera that have no enduring structural impact. It's a history that only the vulgarest of Marxists could love.

Beckett has also taken a top-down approach to history, interviewing the individuals at the heart of things, as though they were the key players rather than merely representative or indicative of larger social forces and mass movements. To interview the founders of Spare Rib or Sid Rawle, the "king of the hippies," is all well and good, to the extent that they embody the rise feminism or the free festival movement, but the idea that these individuals were the prime movers or somehow "led" the movement rather than just surfed a wave (some may even say, cynically, "took advantage") of those movements is to mistake cause and effect. In sum, I would have preferred to read a People's History of the 70s rather than a one-sided Great Man's History of the 70s.

The definition of politics used by Beckett is conventional, too. It's what you'd expect of a *Guardian* journalist, touching all the right bases-gay rights, feminism, Grunwick and Saltley Gates, Northern Ireland, the rise of

environmentalism, the increasing visibility of minorities-but because of the limitations he places on himself there is precious little on, for example, the anti-Apartheid movement, Britain's relationship to the Commonwealth, immigration from Uganda, or the issues of Rhodesia and Cyprus; nor is there any indication that Beckett understands the political significance of other aspects of everyday life, such as youth culture, most notably punk rock and its entire DIY ethic, the role of sports in generating nationalist sentiment (this was a decade that saw not just the British Lions tour South Africa but also Buster Mottram joining the National Front, of hooliganism, of Virginia Wade winning Wimbledon, Scotland going to World Cups and England not), nor the importance of the mass media in generating a set of communal values, along with the accompanying marginalization or demonization of "outsiders." Such a change in terms might well have required Beckett to do double the legwork required to produce the book he has (he tells us it was five years in the making), but it would have yielded a more comprehensive, more rounded and contextualised account of the period while also countering the standard Spenglerian "decline of empire" narrative that is usually imposed on the decade. The 1970s were certainly turbulent, but they were also colourful and exciting and brimming with new possibilities, with hope, with resistance and struggle; they just need to be looked at from a perspective other than that of a Telegraph reader.

Lest I be accused of some *nostalgie de la boue*, I'll happily acknowledge to growing up in the 1970s and that consequently I'm prone to a rose-tinted view of those years. Even the blackouts caused by power cuts were a source of excitement, our generation's equivalent of the Blitz. But I'd make the point, too, that my elders who saw the 1970s in apocalyptic terms were themselves guilty of romanticizing earlier decades, as though the Second World War was a triumph of communal spirit and victory a demonstration of British superiority, the empire and commonwealth a source of pride rather than shame. The message to take away, I'd suggest, is to be very careful when compartmentalizing the past, either chronologically or sociologically, because the process of categorization carries with it implicit assumptions that will inevitably shape the final result. The truth lies in the interstices