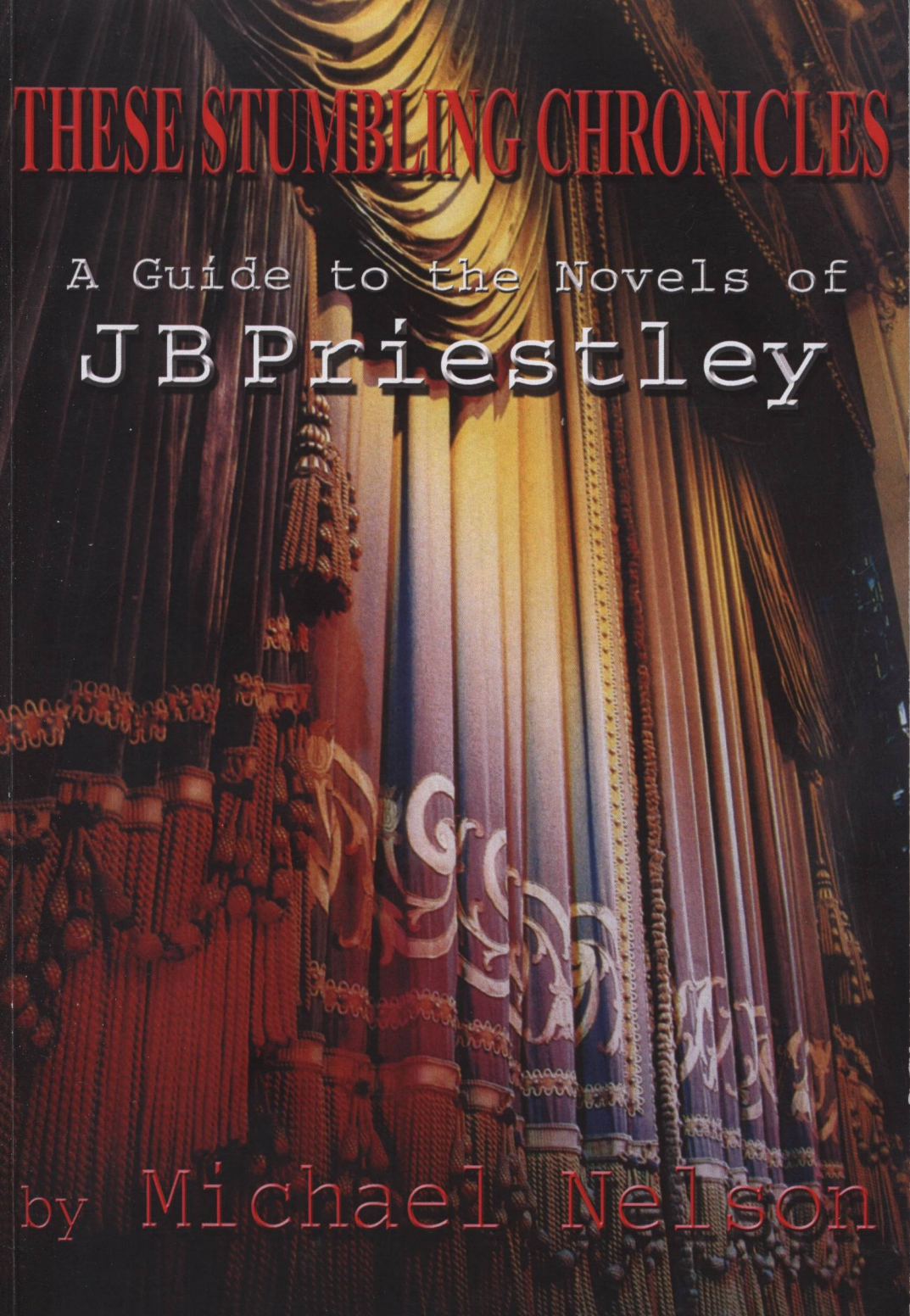
THESE STUMBLING CHRONICLES
A Guide to the Novels of
JB Priestley
by Michael Nelson

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of J B Priestley

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The J B Priestley Society

By the same author

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Author's Note
I would like to express my thanks to Janice Hardman for her cover design. This is entirely appropriate when it is considered how much the theatre features in Priestley's novels, the obvious examples being *The Good Companions* and *Lost Empires*.
Michael Nelson.

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In this place, whether we call it Bruddersford or Pittford Falls perfection is not to be found, neither in men nor in the lot they are offered, to say nothing of the tales we tell of them, these hints and guesses, words in the air and gesticulating shadows, these stumbling chronicles of a dream of life.

The Good Companions

INTRODUCTION

In 1999 I wrote a short guide to the novels of J B Priestley, too short in retrospect (a mere 12 pages to cover 26 titles) but I hoped sufficient for those who bought the guide to gain a quick flavour of the works in question. Since then there has appeared Professor Holger Klein's monumental survey of the whole of Priestley's fiction (*), which in some 800 closely-packed pages offers clear evidence of meticulous and painstaking research and scholarly insight. One imagines that few, if any, writers of fiction have been accorded such detailed attention in a single volume. This present guide, whilst rendering my earlier one totally superseded, in no way attempts to emulate Professor Klein's authoritative work - it is still essentially a guide rather than a full-scale critical analysis - but seeks to give the reader rather greater guidance than before. This is augmented by a selection of key passages from many of the novels and notes on those, too few in number, which have been adapted for the stage, film, television or radio.

As before, I have ignored the novels *Farthing Hall* (1929), which Priestley wrote with Hugh Walpole, and *I'll Tell You Everything* (1932), which he wrote with Gerald Bullett; nor have I included two long stories *The Carfitt Crisis* and *The Pavilion of Masks*, published in 1975 and originally conceived in dramatic form. The same exclusion goes for Priestley's delightful story for children, *Snoggle* (1971). (These last three stories are covered in other publications by The J B Priestley Society.) I have, however, included *Found, Lost, Found* on the grounds that the dust jacket does describe it as a novel rather than a novella, comparatively slight though it is.

Until two years ago the position on the availability of Priestley's novels in print was dire - in fact so far as I was aware *none* was in print. This appalling situation has been rectified by the enterprise of two enthusiasts - Lee Hanson, a totally committed member of The J B Priestley Society for whom standing still on the Priestley cause is not an option, and Barry Cox of Great Northern Books in Ilkley, West Yorkshire. The result has been a project by Great Northern Books to re-issue a number of Priestley's major fiction and non-fiction works in an enhanced format,

incorporating not just the text but valuable extra features such as testimonies from a number of distinguished figures in the worlds of the arts and politics. (We can forgive politicians much if they are shown to be book lovers in general and admirers of Priestley in particular !). The whole enterprise also bears the imprint of the author's son, Tom Priestley, who is tireless in his endeavours to keep his father's great achievements in the public eye. So far two titles have been issued and two more are in the pipeline. It is a cause for rejoicing for all devotees of Priestley.

The extracts from Priestley's work are re-produced by kind permission of Tom Priestley and The Estate of J B Priestley. I have also had grateful recourse to Professor Klein's book mainly for certain background details and his references to my earlier guide.

Michael Nelson

(* *J B Priestley's Fiction (Peter Lang, 2002)*)

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ADAM IN MOONSHINE 1927

No one is more critical of Priestley's less successful novels than the author himself. Of this, his very first attempt at the medium, he wrote in *Margin Released*

Adam in Moonshine was all fine writing and nonsense, a little coloured trial balloon. But the story does not move effortlessly like a balloon : it moves stiffly, creaking with self-consciousness.

It might best be described as a fantastic romance, using the word 'fantastic' in its literal sense as meaning 'extravagantly fanciful, capricious, eccentric' and 'romance' in the literary sense of 'prose with scenes and incidents remote from everyday life'. The novel's central character is an impressionable young man, Adam Stewart. On a train journey to spend a holiday in the Yorkshire Dales he is mistaken for the true (Stuart) heir to the English throne by a fellow passenger who is a member of a secret society called the Champions of the Rose. In the adventures that befall Adam there are three beautiful girls, including a Russian temptress by whom he is almost seduced, a police inspector and his not very bright sergeant, a larger-than-life Baron, various other odd and colourful characters, a fine mansion in the Dales, good food and wine, escapes and chases, and an ending in which Adam, having succumbed to the charms of all three girls, sadly finds himself with none of them. There is, in truth, a paucity of genuine plot, a lot of rather too fanciful writing and one finishes up by not believing a word of it. Nevertheless it does provide a pleasant diversion and has one definite quality, which is its evocation of the beauty and grandeur - a sometimes forbidding grandeur - of the Dales. Once more Priestley provides confirmation of what the reader can readily perceive :

What was truest in the tale was my feeling for its background, the Yorkshire Dales country, for which I had - and still have - a deep affection. It was the moors and the trout streams below them, the grey stone bridges and the whitewashed farmhouses, not the ravishing girls I tried to create, that had the magic.

In sum *Adam in Moonshine* is, indeed, only a little coloured trial balloon but even little balloons can give delight before they inevitably burst.

(Klein, in asking himself what novels are, in his view, most significant as contributions to the genre in the twentieth century, arrives at *The Good Companions* and *Angel Pavement, Bright Day, Festival at Farbridge* and *Lost Empires* and adds a codicil 'that for sheer charm, the converted play *Jenny Villiers*, and *Adam*, his very first novel, merit special attention or what in the evaluation of very different human exploits would be called a beauty prize'.)

BENIGHTED 1927

It is a dark, stormy late evening somewhere deep in the Welsh countryside. The rain is lashing down, floods and landslides are imminent. A car is uncertainly negotiating a hillside road that has become little more than a track. Its occupants, returning from a weekend house party, are Philip Waverton, a young London architect, his somewhat superior wife Margaret, and an acquaintance of theirs, Roger Penderel. Given the appalling weather and the state of the road, such as it is, there is an understandable tension between them. It soon becomes clear that they must seek refuge for the night. And they seem to be in luck for there out of the darkness emerges an old house standing at the end of a drive. There are lights but no sign that the occupants are alarmed by the storm raging around them. The travellers get out of the car and go up to the great front door. Penderel applies the knocker. Eventually the door is opened and so begins a nightmare experience for the three travellers - and for two others who, in like circumstances, join them later.

Here is a house and occupants straight out of some Gothic melodrama. The house turns out to be owned by a family called Femm. The travellers' nominal host is Horace Femm, an elderly man of a distinctly odd disposition who reluctantly agrees to let them stay but offers only limited hospitality and no beds. They are also 'greeted' by Horace's sister Rebecca, nearly deaf, a religious bigot and physically repellent. Upstairs, bedridden, lies the dying head of the family, Sir Roderick

Femm, whom the travellers discover to be the only 'normal' occupant of the house. Locked away in a room, for his safety and that of the rest of the family, is Saul Femm, a dangerous homicidal maniac. And, also dangerous when drunk, is Morgan, the large brawny man, a sort of dumb Caliban (from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) who has opened the door to them.

So begins a night that none of the travellers, those who survive, will forget. The two late arrivals are Sir William Porterhouse, an elderly industrialist, and his girl friend, Gladys Du Cane (as she calls herself), a product of a working-class family in Fulham and an ex-chorus girl of limited accomplishments. At this point the novel ambitiously divides itself into a psychological study of the five travellers and a full-blown tale of horror and death. The contrasts become clear - between abnormality and normality, between madness and sanity, between darkness and light (both literally and symbolically). The house and the Femms unwittingly become the means by which the travellers separately 'find' themselves. Thus, the tensions in their marriage being experienced by the Wavertons are resolved. Penderel has bitter memories of the war, compounded by a broken romance and a failed African adventure. He has become a drifter with no discernible purpose in life but when he and Gladys (who is revealed to have far more about her than might be expected) fall instantly in love his life suddenly seems to hold real promise. Porterhouse, who in a 'truth game' they all play, reveals a ruthless streak, finds himself able to view the loss of Gladys with unselfish equanimity and later reveals that he was even prepared to help Penderel find his feet. Gladys's initial detestation of Margaret disappears in their mutual ordeal. But the horror prevails : when Saul is released from his prison room by Morgan and threatens to commit murder Penderel sacrificially closes with him and after a fierce struggle both fall to their death from an upstairs landing. The new day eventually breaks and the four survivors are left to come to terms with what has happened.

Although this is not a major work Priestley deserves praise for having tried a literary experiment (though a failed one in his view) that is light years away from what might be called the 'endearing normality' of his

next novel, *The Good Companions*. It would be easy to dismiss it as an absurdly over-wrought melodrama but that would ignore its undoubted merits as a thoughtful examination of ordinary people in an extraordinary personal crisis.

He couldn't see at all now; he had to fight for each stabbing breath; and the blood drummed relentlessly in his ears. One hand found Saul's throat and tightened on it, but he could no longer hold his ground and fell back inch by inch until at last he seemed to be lifted off his feet. He went crashing against the banisters; something was breaking; the life was being squeezed out of him; but still he held on. Now they were clear of the banisters again, for Saul had relaxed his pressure for a moment and had been compelled to fall back a step, with Penderel still clinging to him. Saul put out all his remaining strength in one tremendous heave. 'I'm done, I'm done,' Penderel was crying, crying through a black night of crashing, splintering woodwork and rushing air. And then there was no more pain.

(In the United States *Benighted* was marketed as a straight thriller and given the title *The Old Dark House*, resulting in its being, as Klein reports, 'quite a hit'. This, as well, is the title of the Hollywood film version that was released in 1932. Directed by the English expatriate James Whale (who had directed the original *Frankenstein* (1931) and went on to direct *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)) it stars Melvyn Douglas as Penderel, Raymond Massey and Gloria Stuart as the Wavertons, Charles Laughton as Porthouse, Lilian Bond as Gladys, Boris Karloff (who else?) as Morgan and Ernest Thesiger as Horace Femm. The movie enjoys a high reputation as a cult classic, at least among critics: Halliwell's Film Guide calls it 'a stylist's and connoisseur's treat; whilst the Monthly Film Bulletin critic averred that 'the film never puts a foot wrong'. Viewed today its old fashioned style has to be taken with some indulgence and the more thoughtful features of the novel are predictably not covered (there is a happy ending for Penderel and Gladys) but the director certainly conveys the story's essentially dark horror. The film (whose credits misspell Priestley's name!) is available in a Region 2 DVD with an audio commentary by horror historians Kim Newman and Stephen Jones and a commemorative booklet by Kim Newman, among other extras.

The 1962 remake of *The Old Dark House*, as released on video-cassette, can be dismissed out of hand. It does no more than offer up an indigestible and ludicrous mish-mash of so-called comedy and so-called horror that bears little relationship to the original (there is the old house and the storm melodramatically raging outside and that is all). Starring, if that is the word, Tom Poston (a justifiably unknown American actor), with Robert Morley, Janette Scott, Joyce Grenfell and a particularly over-the-top Fenella Fielding, it beggars belief that Priestley's name should be attached to it, especially since the title is attributed to him in the credits when it was a purely American/Hollywood invention. What Priestley himself thought about it one hesitates to imagine.)

THE GOOD COMPANIONS 1929

In the 1972 reprint of J B Priestley's novel *The Good Companions* there is a pertinent editorial comment on the then prevailing critical attitude towards his place as a novelist -

Priestley, like some other popular and successful novelists, is curiously ignored by the mandarins of the modern literary establishment. It is as if critics - good men who in other spheres would perhaps die for the principle of 'One man, one vote' - are sworn to crush democracy in the literary world. Where the author of novels of such solid worth as The Good Companions is concerned, this can hardly be allowed.

This observation touches upon the distinction between the Novel as Literature and the Novel as Popular Fiction - 'popular' in the sense of a particular genre which by its character appeals to a large number of 'average' readers. It is a genre which, because in modern parlance it is 'reader friendly', achieves a much wider popularity than do literary novels. The question of 'quality' is irrelevant because both genres can produce well-written novels which are good of their kind.

Whether or not *The Good Companions* is 'popular fiction' and not literature (an arguable premise) there is no doubt that since its publication in 1929 it has achieved an almost unique status. Quite apart from

selling in its millions it has spawned a large number of adaptations in other media - the stage, film, television and radio. Its success, overall, has been so enormous as to prove something of a millstone around its author's neck - and this despite the considerable financial benefits it must have brought him.

Before analysing the reasons for this success it is necessary to summarise the plot. In the industrial West Riding town of Bruddersford Jesiah (Jess) Oakroyd, a respectable middle-aged joiner-cum-carpenter, finds himself perpetually at odds with his shrewish wife and their son Leonard, on whom she dotes, whilst desperately missing the understanding and affection of his adored married daughter Lily, now living in Canada. When he loses his job he decides to cut his losses and go on the road 'down South' in a vague search for work and a more contented life. At the same time, in the Cotswold village of Hitherton-on-the-Wole Elizabeth Trant, a spinster (but an attractive one) in her late 30s, has devotedly looked after her widower father for 15 years. Now, on his death, she has at last acquired the freedom - and some money - to please herself. She decides to buy her impecunious nephew's car from him and go off on a tour of England's cathedral cities. (Twelve years previously she had met and briefly became firm friends with a tall bony young Scottish doctor, Hugh McFarlane, but, alas, he had let her go without saying a word.) Meanwhile, on the edge of the Fens, at a second-rate preparatory school called Washbury Manor an engaging but rather slapdash young master Inigo Jollifant (BA (Cantab)) pursues his profession with no great enthusiasm. He tends to fail gloriously in almost anything but does have a distinct talent for playing the piano and composing amusing little tunes. One evening he falls foul of the school's proprietor, Mr Tarvin, and his dragon of a wife, gets his notice and impulsively walks off into the night.

These three disparate characters have some unexpected adventures which culminate in their finding themselves together in Rawsley Station Refreshment Rooms. There they are joined by another itinerant traveller, one Morton Mitcham, banjo player and purveyor of card tricks, with whom Inigo has found himself performing on the road. Also in the Refreshment Rooms are the remains of a stranded and out-of-work con-

cert party, the Dinky Doos, among whom are numbered (as it turns out) two highly talented performers, a young soubrette called Susie Dean and a dancer and light comedian, Jerry Jerningham. Miss Trant, quite against her nature, decides to become the troupe's 'angel'. They change their name, at her suggestion, to 'The Good Companions'. Inigo is engaged as the new pianist, Mitcham also joins up and Jess Oakroyd is taken on as the stage carpenter, props and baggage man and 'odd jobber'.

The novel then concentrates on their travels through the length and breadth of England, playing in all manner of places varying from the quite grand to the quite awful. They finish up in the Midland town of Gatford where Susie's benefit night (on her 21st birthday) ends in both triumph and (temporary) disaster. This being an essentially romantic tale all, or almost all, ends happily : Susie and Jerry are seen performing by a prominent theatrical producer and are whisked off to stardom in the West End; as is Inigo, in his capacity of composer of hit tunes, which duly make him rich; Miss Trant, abandoning the theatre, meets her Scottish doctor again and marries him; Jess, now a widower and with some money in his pocket, joyously sets off for Canada to live with his beloved Lily; and the rest of 'The Good Companions' find gainful employment in the 'profession'. The only moderately sad outcome is that Inigo does not win Susie, with whom he is hopelessly in love, but, in an Epilogue, the author suggests that he might do one day.

One of the most generous tributes paid to Priestley came from his fellow novelist Anthony Burgess, who, in *The Novel Now*, said that

It would be foolish to disregard his achievement and make little of his vast creative energy.

The Good Companions is not for the literary fastidious. Is it not too loose in structure, are not characters allowed to chatter on for too long, is it not a little too 'full of itself' ? No matter : this is a novel of tremendous life and gusto with many memorable characters and incidents and, most importantly, much rich humour. It also, incidentally, gives the reader a fascinating picture of provincial England of the period,

sometimes fair, sometimes foul, as in the passage about the grim town of Tewborough. Here we have an early example of the way in which Priestley interpolates in his fiction (and non-fiction like *English Journey*) his harsh, even bitter, observations about the wretched state of some of industrial Britain during the years of the Depression. Indeed, although the novel is, as previously remarked upon, essentially romantic in character (using that adjective in its widest sense) it has its dark side. Tewborough, where 'The Good Companions' have a 'black week', is part of that side and so are the passages concerning Jess's return to his dying wife, incarcerated in a grim Bruddersford hospital.

What is liable to strike the reader most on reading the novel is its Dickensian character - and its foreshadowing of other Priestley books. The author was once referred to as 'the gasfire Dickens' and the analogy is not misplaced. The spirit of such as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* stalk its pages and just as Dickens introduced so many minor odd and/or physically 'distorted' characters so does Priestley. As for his other books, the later *English Journey, Festival At Farbridge, Let the People Sing* and *Lost Empires* all have echoes of *The Good Companions*. The Dickens connexion returns us to the tedious business of Literature and Popular Fiction. If *The Pickwick Papers* is properly the former why is *The Good Companions* not also ? Yet this argument need not be pursued. Let the reader revel rather in the first passage quoted below, which affectionately satirises the theatre of concert parties.

One final observation on this novel in which some dreams come true : Priestley was not, by nature, a poet but he could be a poetical writer. His opening and closing panoramic descriptions of the Pennines and its towns and people are full of poetry. And even at the moment when Inigo, having persuaded a West End theatrical producer to come and see Susie, gets his tantalizing reward there is a poet at work.

So why has *The Good Companions* been so popular ? Could it be because, at heart, it is a truly lovable book ? Priestley would have bitten through his pipe and let out a Yorkshire snort of disapproval at hearing such a word (as would Jess Oakroyd). But lovable - and the stuff of

dreams - it has to be.

The advertisement, which was from The Stage, ran as follows :

Wanted Known
Offers from 3 Sept, onward

THE DINKY DOOS

In a Non-Stop Programme of Clever Comedy and Exquisite Vocalism. Played to enormous business at Little Sandmouth, last. Many thanks T Browning, Esq, for hearty welcome, and Mrs James, G Hudson Esq, and R A Mercer, Esq, for inquiries. Refer. Refer. Next, Pav Shingleton.

Miss Trant read it through once, wrinkled her forehead, then read it again.

'Wrote than myself, Mr Nunn remarked, not without pride. 'Always wrote the adverts for Mildenhall. Neat and effective, don't you think ?'

'Yes, I should think so. But tell me, what does 'Wanted Known' mean ?' she inquired. 'Why 'Known' ?'

'Oh, I always put that in. And, of course, 'Known' - well, you see - it's 'Known' - isn't it, you see ?'

This was not very clear to Miss Trant, but she said she supposed it was. And after that, she thought, it would not do to ask what 'Refer' meant, nor even to hint that it must be difficult to play to 'enormous business' in a place called Little Sandmouth, of which she had never heard before.

.....

For a minute or two he held her there. No, not for a minute or two. These were not minutes, to be briskly ticked away by the marble clock on the mantelpiece and then lost for ever; the world of Time was far below, wrecked , darkening ruin, forgotten; he had burst through into that enchanted upper air where suns and moons rise, stand still, and fall at the least whisper of the spirit. Let us leave him there. We must remember that he was a romantic and extravagant youth and very much in love - a young ass. Nor must we forget that such asses do have such moments. Isis still appears to them as she once appeared to that Golden Ass of the fable, and they still feed upon her roses and are transfigured.

(*The Good Companions* won The James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

Its first adaptation, by Priestley and Edward Knoblock (an American), was as a stage play with music. This opened at His (now Her) Majesty's Theatre, London on 14 May 1931, with Edward Chapman as Jess Oakroyd, Edith Sharpe as Miss Trant, Adele Dixon as Susie Dean and John Gielgud, early on in his brilliant career as a mainly classical actor, as Inigo Jollifant. Richard Addinsell, later to achieve undying fame as the composer of the *Warsaw Concerto*, wrote the musical score, including two songs, *Going Home* and *Slippin' Round the Corner* (with lyrics by Harry Graham and Frank Eyton). The J B Priestley Society possesses a recording of the two songs. The show ran for nine months.

In 1933 the first - and better - of two film versions was released, a production of Gaumont/Welsh-Pearson (T A Welsh and George Pearson), directed by Victor Saville, music and lyrics by George Posford. It was adapted from both the novel and the play by W P Lipscomb, Angus MacPhail and Ian Dalrymple and stars Edmund Gwenn as Jess Oakroyd, Mary Glynne as Miss Trant, Jessie Matthews as Susie Dean and John Gielgud reprising his stage role as Inigo Jollifant. Despite its age and budgetary constraints this version is well-regarded by critics and helped to make a star of Jessie Matthews. The film is the subject of a highly-favourable article by Charles Barr in *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland* (Wallflower Press, 2005).

In 1956 (1957 in alternative sources) came the second film version, in Technicolor and Cinemascope, a production of the Associated British Picture Corporation, directed by J Lee-Thompson. The adaptation, which unwisely updates the story to the 1950s, is credited to T J Morrison, John Whiting (who achieved some success as a playwright) and J L Hodson. The music and lyrics are shared between Paddy Roberts, C Alberto Rossi and Geoffrey Parsons with lavish orchestral arrangements by Laurie Johnson. Here the principals are Eric Portman as Jess Oakroyd, Celia Johnson as Miss Trant, Janette Scott as Susie Dean (a part originally intended for the then little-known Audrey Hepburn) and John Fraser as Inigo Jollifant. This is something of a travesty of the

novel but works reasonably well as a British attempt to match the classic Hollywood musicals of the period. It was unsuccessful at the box office, coming out at a time when juvenile tastes in pop music were changing fast. An enthusiastic appraisal of this version, by Roger Mellor, appears in Volume One of The Journal of The J B Priestley Society, October 2000. Halliwell's Film Guide, however, delivers a harsh, albeit perhaps too harsh, a verdict : 'Faint-hearted remake.... unwisely Cinemascoped and leaving no impression'

Neither of the film versions has been released on DVD (and is unlikely to be so) although the present writer possesses an American commercial videocassette (Hollywood Gold Volume 17) of the first version. It is of adequate but not outstanding quality.

The first of two outright musical versions of the novel appeared in 1974, adapted by Ronald Harwood, directed by Braham Murray (later the Artistic Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester) and with music and lyrics, respectively by Andre Previn and Johnny Mercer. John Mills, then in his middle 60s, was Jess Oakroyd (the late Sir John started out in the theatre as a song and dance man), Judi Dench, then in mid-career, was Miss Trant, Marti Webb played Susie Dean and the part of Inigo Jollifant was taken by principal ballet dancer turned actor Christopher Gable, who later became Artistic Director of the still-flourishing Northern Ballet Theatre in Halifax. The show, which opened at Her Majesty's Theatre on 11 July 1974, was only moderately successful (it ran for 252 performances) but the score is an excellent one, revealing the abilities of the two Americans to capture the Englishness of the novel whilst providing some of the flavour of Broadway. The compact disc of the Original Cast Album has surprisingly never been issued in this country but has been obtainable on line from the United States. The three principals, despite not being professional singers, acquit themselves admirably. The musical received its premiere in the United States at The 42nd Street Moon Musicals in Concert, San Francisco in August 2000 and was later produced in New York. An appraisal of the musical by the present writer also appears in Volume One of The Journal of The J B Priestley Society.

There is a second musical version, of more modest provenance, by Bob Eaton and Sayan Kent. Dating from 1995 it was produced at the New Victoria Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme before being staged, in 2002, at The Theatre By The Lake, Keswick in a highly-enjoyable production. It had a further production at The New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich in 2003. The musical numbers are serviceable rather than memorable.

What may be regarded as the definitive adaptation of the novel is that by the eminent playwright and Priestley enthusiast Alan Plater (*) for a nine-part television series transmitted in 1980 by Yorkshire Television (now absorbed into the general ITV network). Directed by Bill Hays and Leonard Lewis and with a musical score by David Fanshawe it starred John Stratton as Jess Oakroyd, Judy Cornwell as Miss Trant, Jan Francis as Susie Dean and Jeremy Nicholas (composer and instrumentalist as well as actor) as Inigo Jollifant. This quartet is arguably better than those in the film versions. From memory the drawback to the series, which, again, has unfortunately not been made available on DVD (and was not really successful), is the musical interludes. These are rather second-rate but one would like to have the opportunity to view the series again to discover if a re-evaluation is necessary.

On radio the most recent adaptation, by Eric Pringle, was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 as *The Classic Serial* on 4, 11 and 18 August 2002 (and repeated on BBC Radio 7 in 2006). It was directed by Claire Grove and had music composed by Mia Soteriou. Philip Jackson was Jess Oakroyd, Jemma Churchill, Miss Trant, Helen Longworth, Susie Dean and Nicholas Boulton, Inigo Jollifant. The present writer possesses an audio-cassette of this version. More recently an attempt has been made to repeat, on BBC Radio 7, a 13-episode reading by Wilfred Pickles originally broadcast in 1968, but the absence of a recording in the BBC Sound Archives has prevented this.

BBC radio, or as it was in 1941, 'The Wireless', provided an update on the story of Jess Oakroyd and his journey to Canada : a play called *The Return of Mr Oakroyd,* written by Priestley, was broadcast on 27 December 1941. There was an explanatory note in *Priestley's Notebook,* Radio Times, 19 December 1941 :

Since Priestley's Notebook had to end, how could it end better than by his conjuring up some of the characters he created so superbly in The Good Companions ? We shall hear what some of them have been doing since the story finished. Jess Oakroyd, back from Canada to help the war effort, talks to Sam Oglethorpe. He has a surprise and meets one or two of the old troupe.

In the spirit of 'what happened next' the present writer paid his own tribute to Priestley and his life-enhancing, evergreen novel in the story *The Return of The Good Companions.*

In 2007 Great Northern Books re-issued the novel in a considerably enhanced edition, marred only by some disappointing photographic reproductions. This was the second issue in what is hoped will be a whole series of re-issues of Priestley's major fiction and non-fiction. Surviving artists associated with the various versions write with pleasure and affection about their experiences. They include John Fraser and Janette Scott; Judy Cornwell, Jeremy Nicholas and Simon Green; and Andre Previn and Ronald Harwood. (See also the section on *Bright Day.*)

Some of Dame Judi Dench's not altogether happy experiences in the Previn/Mercer version of the novel are recounted in *Judi Dench With a Crack in Her Voice* by John Miller (1988) (Weidenfeld and Nicholson). However, these are countered by more pleasurable remembrances by Dame Judi herself in her Foreword to the Great Northern Books edition.

* In his screenplay for the wonderful television film *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* (2000) Alan Plater's principal character has distinctly 'Miss Trant' overtones : she too is called Elizabeth, has just lost a close relative (her husband) and follows 'a dream of life' (she sets out to revive the ladies' dance band in which she played as a schoolgirl in the Second World War). She also meets a man from her past - Patrick (Ian Holm), who was the only male member of the band (playing in drag and whilst on the run from the Army). For Dame Judi, a Miss Trant herself, there must have been something of a *deja vu.*)

ANGEL PAVEMENT 1930

When Priestley achieved such a spectacular success with *The Good Companions*, his third novel, the task of getting down to write a successor that would not appear diminished in comparison must have seemed a daunting prospect. Yet not only is *Angel Pavement* the finer novel, it can lay claim to rivalling *Lost Empires* as the best of his 26 solo works in the genre.

In a little-known by-way in the City of London - Angel Pavement - the small firm of Messrs Twigg and Dersingham ekes out a steady if not exactly prosperous existence as agents for the supply of inlays and veneers to the furniture trade. There is no longer a Mr Twigg but Mr Dersingham survives as head of the firm - a somewhat reluctant and distinctly amateurish businessman, who is little more than a decent, kindly but stupid soul, as the author describes him : a product of a minor public school, who, back home with his wife and family in a lower maisonette situated in Barkfield Gardens SW3, attempts rather desperately to keep up a respectable middle-class appearance. Then there are three employees of Twigg and Dersingham who will figure prominently in the story: Turgis, the clerk, a thinnish, awkward young man of singularly unprepossessing appearance and manner who forlornly seeks Love and Romance (the initial capitals are deliberate) from the confines of his dreary lodgings; Miss Matfield, the typist, a spirited, personable young woman in her late twenties who 'might have been handsome if someone had kept telling her she was pretty', who lives discontentedly in a women's hostel and who 'nurses some huge, some overwhelming grievance against life'; and Mr Smeeth, the cashier, a conscientious, undemanding toiler at ledgers for whom safety and security are the watchwords of his working life and worthiness and respectability (that all-important respectability) those of his home life. These four people, in their different ways, have scruples but, to a varying degree, can be said to be among life's 'losers'. Whereas James Golspie and his devastatingly pretty daughter Lena have few, if any, scruples and, in defiance of the laws of morality and justice, may be counted among life's 'winners'. Golspie, a striking-looking man in his late forties, is something of a vagabond and a buccaneer, rather myster-

ious of background and dubious of reputation, who, having acquired on the Continent a source of cheap veneers and inlays, offers this to Twigg and Dersingham. The offer is accepted but Golspie contrives to more or less take over the business, collecting large commissions in the process and bringing it a sudden but, as it turns out, fatally illusory prosperity. This sets the scene for Priestley, firstly, to fill in the background of the four 'Dersinghams' and then to show how Golspie and his daughter between them manage to shatter their fragile lives. Thus, by manipulating the firm's financial ruin and leaving it high and dry, Golspie effectively ends Dersingham's career as a businessman and consequentially causes Mr Smeeth to lose his job and realise his worst fear. As for Miss Matfield, he persuades her, against her better instincts, to go away with him and then, by failing to keep their appointment, brings her shame and humiliation - and she, too, loses her job. Lena Golspie plays her part by cynically and selfishly teasing the wretched Turgis and exacting a comparable humiliation. This results in his attacking her in a blind fury and nearly murdering her. But although it seems that the two interlopers have left a wreckage of lives behind them they unwittingly create a situation where the four victims, in various ways, find sympathy and understanding from those nearest to them and a gleam of hope for the future.

Rarely elsewhere in his novels does Priestley collectively exhibit his skill as a storyteller, as a descriptive writer, as a delineator of character or as an observer of the frailties of the human condition quite so persuasively as he does in *Angel Pavement*. And that is not in anyway to devalue the great qualities of the finest of his other novels - *The Good Companions*, *Bright Day* and (particularly) *Lost Empires*. What impresses more than anything in this novel is the convincing and obviously committed way in which Priestley engages the sympathy of his readers in the lives of his characters. We are caught up so inextricably in the small, sad worlds of Mr Dersingham, Mr Smeeth, Miss Matfield and Turgis that we come, finally, to share the desperate hope that the first-named *will* find a new career; the second *will* find another job, against all the odds (for this is the Depression era); the third *will* break out of her stultifying existence; and the fourth *will* find a girl to bring him love. But the Golspies are just as necessary to the narrative for they

represent the excitement, the colour, the sense of danger so signally absent from the characters and lives of those who work in Angel Pavement. It is they, glamorous and romantic beings that they are, who tempt their victims with the exotic fruits of sex and success and then, like creatures of the night, vanish as quickly and as dramatically as they came. We cannot approve of them but we grudgingly, perhaps secretly, admire them and envy them.

Angel Pavement abounds in splendid set pieces which find Priestley at his most inspired : the disastrous dinner party that the Dersinghams give to welcome Golspie, at which Lena Golspie arrives belatedly and proves herself to be the most unwelcome of guests - a long, finely-sustained sequence occupying some 30 pages of the text; Mr Smeeth's memorable visit to a symphony concert at the Queen's Hall - a classic piece of 'Priestleyana'; Turgis's second 'Arabian Night' with Lena - his first and, as it turns out, only entry into a veritable palace of delights; and the last homecoming of Mr Smeeth, who, his job gone and his nightmare having become a reality, erupts into a fury of which we have had no warning and which leaves us as shocked as his family.

But the merits of *Angel Pavement* are not yet exhausted for it has two more which are worthy of mention. Firstly, firmly set though it is in its time, 1930, it yet remains curiously undated : are there not still thousands of souls like the employees of Twigg and Dersingham disconsolately lost in a great, impersonal city, clinging desperately to a sometimes lonely, often precarious existence, yet wanting equally desperately to break out of it ? And then, finally, there is another character in the story, perhaps the most memorable of all - London itself. The city figures, sometimes sketchily, in a number of Priestley's novels but here he describes it with an artist's eye - streets and squares, highways and byways, the fashionable and unfashionable, the glitter and the drabness, river and docks and wharves, trams and buses, teashops, cinemas and pubs. London frames the story and permeates it, giving the novel a solidity and a reality to counterpoint the dreams, the frailties, the desperation and the humanity of the people who pass through it on their way to Angel Pavement.

Then, just when it seemed as if something was going to burst, the twanging and plucking was over, and the great mournful sounds came reeling out again, like doomed giants. After that the whole thing seemed to be slithering into hopelessness, as if Brahms had got stuck in a bog and the light was going. But then the great moment arrived. Brahms jumped clean out of his bog, set his foot on the hard road, and swept the orchestra and the fierce man and the three foreigners and Mr Smeeth and the whole Queen's Hall along with him, in a noble stride. This was a great tune. Ta tum ta ta tum tum, ta tum ta-ta tum ta tum. He could have shouted at the splendour of it. The strings in a rich deep unison sweeping on, and you were ten feet high and had a thousand glorious years to live. But in a minute or two it was gone, this glory of sound, and there was muddle and gloom, a sudden sweetness of violins, then harsh voices from the brass. Mr Smeeth had given it up, when back it came again, swelling his heart until it nearly choked him, and then it was lost once more and everything began to be put in its place and settled, abruptly, fiercely, as if old Brahms had made up his mind to stand no nonsense from anybody and anything under the sun. There, there, there, there, <u>There</u>. It was done. They were all clapping and clapping and the conductor was mopping his forehead and bowing and then signalling to the band to stand up, and old Brahms had slipped away, into the blue.

.....

Turgis was by temperament a lover. His thoughts never left the other sex long; happiness had for him a feminine shape; the real world was illuminated by the bright glances of girls; and, at any moment, one of them might reveal to him an enchanted life they could share together. It would be easy to see him as a lonely lad seeking sympathy in that crowd in which he was lost. It would be just as easy to see him as a figure of furtive lusts, whose mind descended and there lived eagerly in an underworld of tiny mean contacts, seemingly accidental pressures of the arm and the foot. Yet behind both these figures was a lover. And this, in spite of his shabbiness and unprepossessing looks, the shiny baggy suit and the frayed tie, the open mouth, that slight pastiness and spottiness, that faint grey film which seemed to cover and subdue his physical self. He was no dapper lady-killer. But then if Turgis, even within his scanty means, did not try very hard to make himself superficially attractive to the sex that despises crumpled clothes, matted hair, pasty cheeks, youth that had lost all vividness and glow, it was because he believed that the cry from within, urgent, never ceasing, must receive an answer. He knew that he had little to offer on the surface, was nothing to look at, nobody in particular, but he felt that

inside he was different, he was wonderful, and that sooner or later a girl, a beautiful and passionate girl, caring nothing for the outside show, would recognise this difference, this wonder within, would cry 'Oh, it's you', and love would immediately follow. Then life would really begin.

(*Angel Pavement* was adapted twice for BBC television, in 1957 and 1967. The cast of the second version included Anthony Bate as Golspie, Judy Parfitt as Miss Matfield, Cyril Luckham as Mr Smeeth and Murray Melvin as Turgis. It is surprising and disappointing that it was never made into a feature film.

The novel was savagely dismissed by George Orwell (writing in *The Adelphi* still as E A Blair) : '(the writing) does not touch the level at which memorable fiction begins' Was Orwell's opinion of the novels of his contemporary ever less disdainful than Graham Greene's ?)

FARAWAY 1932

William Dursley, 40 years old, unmarried and the owner of a small malting business, leads a quiet, uneventful life in the Suffolk town of Buntingham. One day he is visited by his Uncle Baldwin, a retired teacher and a larger-than-life character with a fund of stories about his adventures in the islands of the South Pacific. He stays on but because of a bad heart condition it is evident that he has not long to live. Just before he dies he tells his nephew of his chance discovery of a remote island in the Pacific, which he calls Faraway and which has large deposits of pitchblende, a substance used in the manufacture of radium. He explains to William that he has given the latitude and longitude of the island, separately, to two men who once did him a good turn : a retired Royal Navy officer, Commander Ivybridge, and an American called P T Riley. He wants the three of them to go to the island and share out its unusual treasure between them. When his uncle dies Dursley sets out to claim his bequest and the novel describes his adventures in the company of Ivybridge, John Ramsbottom, a Lancashire businessman who comes into the venture as the Commander's financial backer, and Terry Riley, the beautiful daughter of P T Riley, now de-

ceased. The outcome of their adventures is somewhat complicated. Dursley and Terry form a brief but ill-fated romantic liaison. The three men eventually find the island, only to discover that it has been annexed by Chile, whose authorities have granted a concession on its resources to a mysterious and disreputable ex-acquaintance of Uncle Baldwin's called Garsuvin. Ivybridge dies on the journey back to civilisation. And Dursley, after not very enthusiastically marrying a young English widow, returns home to a safe and quiet life of domesticity, whose underlying frailty is disturbed by an unexpected visit from the still disturbingly desirable Terry.

This fifth novel of Priestley's is, like its immediate predecessors, *The Good Companions* and *Angel Pavement*, a long one but whereas they fully justify their length, with little or no padding, this one does not. In truth it must surely be accounted one of the author's weakest novels. As can be gleaned from the synopsis the basic notion of the transition from a life of routine to one of exotic adventure and romance (in both the literal and the literary senses of the word) is the very stuff of popular fiction, the epitome of what we now call 'escapism' The problem seems to be that having visited the South Seas (and, presumably, other locations featured in the story, such as San Francisco) Priestley felt the need to describe them at length but chose a fictional form to do so rather than that of a straightforward travel book. The result is a novel which is much too long for its material. (It is significant that his three principal characters do not even arrive at their destination until page 442 !) Moreover, Priestley makes the mistake, in terms of the novel's structure, of decreeing that *two* lengthy attempts have to be made to reach the island from Tahiti. *Faraway* is unsatisfactory in at least two other ways : the sequence involving the American film company using Tahiti as a location is so much padding, quite irrelevant to the main narrative; and Dursley's and Terry's doomed romance descends into the lower realms of the novelette without any saving grace of parody.

The plethora of descriptive writing does include some striking passages such as Dursley's journey from Oakland to San Francisco and his observations of the people around him. Priestley's colourful picture of Papeete is also a vivid one. And in purely narrative terms the author

goes a little way to redeem himself in the last 20 pages or so : the death of Ivybridge, Dursley's final disillusionment with the Pacific and his acceptance of a second-best life without Terry all have a certain poignancy. But *Faraway* long outstays its welcome and one suspects that Priestley could have written a more effective novel of romantic adventure at half its length. It is a book which, uncharacteristically for its author, cannot finally refute the charge of actually becoming tedious.

WONDER HERO 1933

Wonder Hero is very much a novel of the 1930s, but like the author's *English Journey*, written in the same year, it has uncanny parallels with 1980s Britain and even beyond. And, as is so often the case with Priestley - the point can never be overstated - social sub-texts are much in evidence. Indeed, in this case they assume such an importance as to stand firmly within the main narrative.

Charlie Hubble, a young fitter employed by Associated Coal Products in a small North Midlands town, becomes involved in preventing the spread of what could have been a catastrophic fire at his works. He is immediately (and unjustifiably) exploited as a hero by Hal Kinney, a celebrated but unscrupulous journalist who works for a couple of popular national newspapers and who happens to be in the area. Taken to London, Charlie becomes the partly-willing, partly-reluctant victim of a huge, corrupt and blatantly cynical publicity machine. In this he is joined by the newly-crowned Miss England, a girl called Ida Chatwick, who comes from the same part of the country and who accepts the sudden limelight more openly and naively.

The first part of the novel is really a savage attack not only on the more sordid features of popular journalism but on what would now be called the 'haves' of London's West End - and their hangers-on. These worthless and so undeserving creatures (in Priestley's eyes) idle away their lives and fritter away their money in expensive, over-furnished and over-heated modern hotels, in noisy and over-crowded night clubs and at equally noisy and rather pointless cocktail parties.

As the narrative develops Charlie learns that a favourite aunt is seriously ill. This prompts him to turn his back on London and his spurious fame and travel to Slakeby, the grim Northern shipbuilding town where his aunt and her family live. Priestley's intention seems now clear, for he is concerned to contrast what he clearly regards as the obscene unreality of what Charlie has experienced in London with the equally obscene reality of an industrial community on which the slump has already pronounced its death sentence. The tone of the story takes on the same bitterness that Priestley was currently expressing in his description of the grim reality of some parts of *English Journey.*

Charlie uses some of the money given to him by the newspaper to help his relatives and returns to London with the dual purpose of finding Ida and making some recompense to the man who really was the 'wonder hero' of the fire - Kibworth, a Communist agitator whom Charlie had allowed to take refuge at the works and whose prompt action had stopped the fire from spreading (in truth a rather far-fetched plot contrivance). Charlie and Ida - now, of course, abandoned as 'news stories' - are eventually re-united in one of Priestley's more usual happy endings. But in the final analysis what is significant about *Wonder Hero* is not its conventional young hero and heroine and their brief careers as celebrities but the disgust with which Priestley surveys his targets. And how topical these remained at the time when Priestley died 50 years later. Then we still had cheque-book journalism of dubious morality, cynical publicity machines, severe unemployment in the old industrial areas, over-heated, impersonal hotels and a 'two-nation' economy. Indeed, to a marked degree, are these not with us yet ?

The river was still as dirty as ever, but now there seemed no particular reason why it should be dirty. Only one ship - and that a tiny coasting vessel - was to be seen there; one miserable little ship where there used to be dozens. Where were the shipyards and slips he remembered all along the bank ? The sheds were there and a crane or two, and that was all. Everything else - finished, gone. He looked at the tall chimneys on every side. Most of them might have been so many monuments, for not a wisp of smoke was coming out of them. Some of the towns in the Midlands had been knocked sideways by the Depression, but this place had been knocked flat. There was an unfamiliar glim-

mer of green in the empty spaces between those rows of sheds and the black mud of the river. He stared hard. That was grass. The grass was growing where they used to build ships. This wasn't an industrial town any longer : it was a graveyard, with the grass growing over it and with its cold chimneys as monuments.

THEY WALK IN THE CITY 1936

.....I made a hash of this novel.....It ends in melodrama, and not even good melodrama. I had to finish the thing somehow, wanting to get rid of it, not because I thought it worthless - there are some good things in it - but because I knew I had failed to realise my idea. If I had such a novel on my hands now, when I lead a quiet life, I would put it on one side, hoping to return to it and make it better; but at the time, in the middle Thirties, I was a kind of three-ring circus of authorship. I had undertaken to do so much that almost everything I did was hit-or-miss. Though I had planned to write a big ambitious novel, in which there was to be far more social criticism than the babes-in-the-woods theme might suggest, They Walk in the City was a miss, not because reviewers and readers didn't like it (I can't remember now how it was received) but because I didn't. And I have never spent five minutes with it since I passed the proofs, if I did pass the proofs. Serves me right.

So wrote Priestley, in *Margin Released*, about this, one of his least-known novels. It bears the sub-title *The Lovers in the Stone Forest*, and is not to be confused with his 1943 morality play *They Came to a City*. Faced with such frank self-criticism - the passage also tells us something about Priestley's general approach to novel writing - it might seem pointless to offer a contrary opinion and, in truth, he seems to have got it about right.

This novel, to a certain extent, continues the theme of *Wonder Hero*, written three years earlier - innocents spiritually lost in the huge, alien 'stone forest' that is London. Edward Fielding and Rose Salter are two young people who live in the West Riding town of Haliford. Both are somewhat at odds with their surroundings, possessing a sensitivity that sets them apart from their family and friends. One day they meet by

accident on the moors, fall in love, and arrange to meet again. But chance keeps them apart, there is a misunderstanding and Rose decides to start a new life in London. Edward follows, sets out to find her and eventually does so, only to lose her again. The final part of the story, Priestley's 'melodrama', finds Rose falling (in a very contrived fashion) into the hands of a vice ring, a murder is committed in the house to which she is taken, but Edward, now cast in a knight errant role, fortuitously arrives to lead her thankfully back to Haliford.

As with *Wonder Hero* the interest is not so much in the slightly idealised principal characters or the rather convoluted lost-found-lost plot as in the worlds - familiar and unfamiliar, exciting and dull, glittering and dreary, dangerous and secure - through which the young hero and heroine, sometimes uncertainly, pass. It is the description of these worlds which find the author at his familiar best. Particularly notable is the way in which he illuminates the lure of the moors above Haliford (an autobiographical touch, surely) and his vivid portrait of London itself, somewhat echoing his treatment of it in *Angel Pavement.* There are a number of other striking passages : about a music hall which Rose visits; Edward dining in one of the Corner Houses; an evocation of the sort of universal happiness which the two of them experience when they find each other and penetrate the stone forest together; that same forest's rich daily pattern of artistic and scientific events; an ugly confrontation between Fascists and Communists in Trafalgar Square. And there are other interesting bits and pieces scattered throughout the text, such as the description of the little group of unemployed, middle-aged men who gather in a cheap cafe and who help Edward to find Rose once and for all. *They Walk in the City,* like *Wonder Hero,* is valuable also for its social comment but for all its incidental merits it simply does not add up to a very good novel and is nowhere in the class of, for example, *Angel Pavement.*

In Greater London, a stone and brick forest nearly thirty miles long, thirty miles broad, eight million people eat and drink and sleep, pay their insurance money, send for the doctor, and die. Through the centre of this vast area of asphalt hills and paved valleys, these orchards of lamp-posts and traffic lights, the River Thames goes winding, looking from above no more than a silvered

thread lying across an arterial road. Yet the river made all this. The river brought the old Roman galleys (one of them could be floated on the weekly milk supply of the modern city) from Ostia to the port of Londinium, for those cargoes of wheat and lead that might be taken as symbolic of the later national character of these island people. The river carefully laid along its terraces a nice mixture of clay and sand, that brick earth out of which this forest grew. The inhabitants drink the river, run it through their wash-basins and bath-tubs, two hundred million gallons a day. Do they think about the river ? Some do, even apart from those who still work on its greasy dimpled flood. Everything that man has thought about is considered here by somebody, from the diameter of Betelgeuse to the smaller parasites of the flea. Not since the City of the Golden Gates sank with all Atlantis has there been, in any one area of the world, so much thinking about everything as well as so much stupidity about everything, as there is here.....The thoughts, the dreams, the old shuddering fears of these eight millions depart along fantastic wavelengths, leaving our own familiar space-time continuum, to build little heavens and hells in new time and strange dimensions of space. In exchange, radiations from distant stars penetrate the haze and perhaps bring to the pavements below obscure news that cannot be found in the evening papers.....there are eight million private dreams being acted in this jungle of brickwork and cement, where steel-clawed ravenous monsters like bankruptcy and unemployment and angina pectoris and starvation and cancer come crashing though the thickets, where a favourable bank balance and a good digestion and an easy mind and love-found-and-fulfilled occasionally light the jungle ways with a flash of blue wings. But there are also eight million parts being acted here in a gigantic mystery, with green globes and moons and suns and black space as scenic sets, a few tattered pages as a prompt book, and two famous illusionists Here and Now, as stage managers. And what this is all about, nobody knows. The youngest of six half-starved children, listening to the rats in the darkness of a back room in Hoxton, does not know. The expensively educated and comfortably maintained elderly clerical gentleman who writes for the papers telling us all is well (or as well as is deserved) with this youngest of six in Hoxton, does not know. The gaunt young man hard at it in the Reading Room of the British Museum, preparing to denounce the elderly cleric and all his kind, does not know. Eight million, with all their houses, furniture, knick-knacks, mortgages, insurance policies, bills of sale, prescriptions and love letters, rolling on in one gigantic Mystery. And eight million busy with their own private dreams, making the whole stone forest steam and hum.

THE DOOMSDAY MEN 1938

Priestley describes this novel simply as an 'adventure' and it was obviously inspired by a visit to the Mohave Desert in California. Indeed, the dedication to Dorothy Brooke, in verse form, makes this very clear and the reference to the novel being 'fantasie, a fairy-tale in Western rig' perhaps conveys its flavour more accurately than the simple title page description.

In thematic terms *The Doomsday Men* is nearest, among Priestley's other novels, to the much later and even more elaborately plotted (but not more successful) *Saturn Over The Water*. He uses his familiar device of bringing together, by chance, three very different characters to share a common experience. The first of these is Malcolm Darbyshire, a young English architect whose purpose in coming to California (and, in due course, the Mohave Desert in particular) is to try and find the beautiful girl, by name Andrea MacMichael, whom he met, loved and lost in the French Riviera during a tennis tournament. (The novel opens with a detailed description of a mixed doubles match.) The second character is George Hooker, a young American atomic physicist, who is on the trail of a fellow scientist, Paul MacMichael, brother to Henry MacMichael, a multi-millionaire metal dealer and Andrea's father. The trio is completed by Jimmy Edlin, Irish-American crossed with English, a retired jack-of-all-trades, who has gathered evidence that his brother, a newspaper reporter, has been murdered by a fanatical religious sect led by a third MacMichael brother, John. The three adventurers eventually discover that the brothers are ensconced in a well-guarded hideaway deep in the mountains of the Mohave where, by exploding an atomic device developed by Paul MacMichael (very prophetic for 1938), they intend quite literally to bring to an end a world which they see, in their collective madness, as irredeemably caught up in a tide of misery and hopelessness. (As can be realised we are very far indeed from the cosy world of *The Good Companions* !)

In the time-honoured tradition of popular fiction fate decrees that the brothers' lunatic plan fails but one imagines that Priestley's purpose - apart from the obvious one of writing an enjoyable adventure thriller

spiced with romance - is to warn, not very hopefully, against entrusting money-mad industrialists, perverted scientists and fanatical religious leaders with the destiny of mankind.

The most striking, indeed quite brilliant, passage in the book is the world's reaction to the news that the brothers' plan has gone, for them, disastrously wrong. But there are descriptions of the Mohave Desert and of the view at the beginning of Death Valley that testify, yet again, to Priestley's skill at word painting. As for the novel as a whole it succeeds better as a romantic adventure thriller in a fantastic setting, which is what it basically is, rather than the slightly pretentious apocalyptic vision into which the author finally turns it.

It was then as if the world, which had laughed at the warning messages of last night, was suddenly awakened by the final crash itself, or the air that had fled screaming from the valley had carried with it rumours of catastrophe; for within a few hours planes filled with reporters, cameramen, radio and news-film commentators, and the like, were roaring and circling over the ruins, and a host of cars were burning up the road through Bastow, which, distant though it was from the actual scene, now became the headquarters of the news campaign and found itself suddenly famous. All that night the world stared at its headlines and listened to its broadcast news in wonder and amazement that were clouded with a new apprehension. A shudder of fear went through the world as the commentators drew vivid and largely imaginary pictures of the narrow escape everybody had just had, as distinguished scientists, dragged out of their quiet sane laboratories into the shrieking arena of big news, talked of this possibility and that, as photographs of the ruined remote valley went jerkily across myriad screens to the accompaniment of shouting voices explaining what had been attempted and what might have happened, those voices so hot with human interest and yet so strangely inhuman in their amplified mechanical excitement. Now that they were dead and gone, the three MacMichaels suddenly cast shadows that stretched menacingly across whole continents and oceans. Their sinister biographies blackened innumerable columns. Dubious dots to represent their faces were flashed from capital to capital. Thus as the arch-criminals of our time they towered while what remained of them on earth still lay beneath their own ruined tower. To end the world ? Millions of men and women stared at each other, their minds busy with crashing images of destruction. For an hour or two, clouded by this vision of what might have

been, the producers forgot to blame the distributors; the distributors forgave both producers and consumers; the industrialists and the bankers were at one; the farmers stopped disliking the city folk; men who worked in black coats made common cause with men who worked in overalls; associations of employers made light of trade unions; capitalists and proletarian remembered they shared the same earth; fascists and communists were haunted by the same vision; patriotic imperialists failed to salute the battle-torn flags waving above their dividends; foreign secretaries neglected the draft agreements that nobody intended to keep; the Class Struggle, the Red Menace, the Fascist Will, the Jewish Problem, the German Destiny, the Failure of the New Deal, the Decadence of Britain, Japan Over Asia, Italy Over Africa, Stalin Over Russia, the Threat of Democracy, the Decay of Liberalism, the Collapse of Civilisation, all were temporarily forgotten, and for a few hours all the currents of prejudice and mistrust and fear and hate were dammed behind one gigantic barrier, and though men were haunted by this one dark vision of doomsday, somehow for that little time they breathed a larger and nobler air. It did not last long, of course, for we live in an eventful age and have a magnificent news service, and so, flinging a few last curses at the memory of those three insane brothers who had tried to destroy the world at one stroke, men returned to their ordinary tasks and thoughts, perhaps to destroy the world piece by piece.

(As with other Priestley novels one cannot help regretting that *The Doomsday Men* was not turned into a film. Klein records that 'various people expressed an interest in making a film...., some even taking up options - but nothing materialised. In all I counted 11 such moves...' Consider what happened when Ian Fleming mined this sort of territory and what the film moguls made of it.)

LET THE PEOPLE SING 1939

The provenance of this novel is, if anything, of more interest than the work itself. The author's Preface tells it all :

As a number of episodes from this novel will have reached the public through their wireless sets before it is published, a few words of explanation are necessary. Six months ago the BBC asked me to write a novel they could serialise over the air before publication. I had already

refused to allow my novels to be serialised in newspapers or magazines before they appeared in book form, but now I agreed to let the BBC have a novel, partly because I felt we might be at war in the autumn - when they were going to serialise it - and that broadcasting would then be extremely valuable to the public. I stipulated that they could cut and shape such episodes as they required, and that I should go ahead and write exactly what I wanted to write and as much as I liked (I wrote three times as much as the BBC required), always bearing in mind that the tale must appeal to an enormous mixed audience. The later - and, I think, better - chapters were written during the anxious and darkening days of August, and I broadcast the first instalment on Sunday, the Third of September, the very day war was declared.

It seems evident that Priestley wanted his novel to be a cheerful, escapist, optimistic entertainment that would help to remove just a little of the acute apprehensiveness that ordinary people must have felt when war broke out. An overtly propaganda work would not, perhaps, have been appropriate yet it is interesting to note the novel's references to the barbarism of the Nazis, a ridiculing allusion to Hitler, and the way in which the hitherto torpid citizens of Dunbury spontaneously rebel against those who have tried to dominate and constrain them. Is Priestley - one wonders - already half calling to his fellow countrymen to 'wake up' and show a similar spirit against the implacable enemy who was about to put them to their greatest test ? Be that as it may *Let The People Sing* is, in essence, a comedy that finishes up as a farce or, perhaps more accurately, as burlesque.

Of echoes and foretastes of other Priestley novels there are a number : *The Good Companions* is evoked in the chance coming together, as prospective public entertainers, of Timmy Tiverton, a music hall comedian down on his luck; Professor Kronak, a Czech refugee from the Nazis, a serious-minded academic who turns out to be able to play popular tunes on the piano (shades of Inigo Jollifant); and the beautiful, high-spirited, if only modestly talented Hope Ollerton (some shades of Susie Dean). Timmy might also, of course, have worked in many of the author's *Lost Empires*, and *Festival at Farbridge* is adumbrated in the way in which three travellers, with the incidental help of others, like the

itinerant auctioneer Mr Hassock and the outrageously larger-than-life Sir George Denberry-Baxter (strangers all) contrive against many odds finally to save Dunbury Market Hall for its ordinary music-loving citizens and so prevent it from falling into the hands of the over-bearing local nobs (who want to turn it into a museum) or the faceless bosses of United Plastics (who want to turn it into a showroom and offices).

As often with Priestley, the radically-minded social subtexts are conspicuous by their presence. The upper classes and those who appear to support them (including the police) are guyed mercilessly (there is a particularly funny scene where they are at full flow in a committee meeting), whilst Priestley is equally scathing about the high-powered business methods of United Plastics, who assume that their seemingly docile factory hands will work even harder for no more money. Against these, Priestley cannot resist putting into the mouth of the rebellious Councillor and town band leader Tom Largs a characteristic clarion call to the 'ordinary folk'- who were 'coming out into the sunshine' - to assert themselves, a call which ends with the rousing exhortation to 'Let the people sing' (the title, incidentally, of what became a popular song of the period). This sounds as though, subconsciously, Priestley is already anticipating the triumphant outcome of a war which has only just started - and, as he later asserted, became a citizen's war. Note, too, what the Professor, as a foreigner, has to say, when at the public meeting which is to decide the fate of the Market Hall, he is invited to describe what he thinks are the great traditions of England. The interesting thing about this passage is that it seems very much to have been deliberately interpolated into the narrative in order the let the author make a statement of faith at a crucial moment in England's (ie Britain's) history. It is though he wanted to ask, even compel, those all around him to listen for a few moments to a particularly relevant set of home truths that would help to carry them through the dark days ahead.

Allied to the comedy, the satire and the social comment is Priestley's characteristic penchant for plain, old-fashioned sentiment and romance, which manifests itself in the way Timmy meets up with Daisy Barley, an old artiste friend from the music halls (who finishes up by proposing to him) and in the initially proud but subsequently humble Hope falling

for the initially hesitant but subsequently decisive Roger Liss.

In no way can this essentially lightweight work be called a major, or even significant, novel. Priestley cheerfully stretches the elastic of coincidence well past breaking point and gives every indication that he intends the whole thing to be, essentially, a sincerely-felt tribute to the 'little people', who like so many workaday St Georges bravely fight the dragon of English provincial philistinism (and who were to be faced with battling against a far more ruthless dragon). In this he is totally successful.

(This is one of only three Priestley novels that have ever reached the cinema screen. It was filmed by British National in 1942, directed by John Baxter, who also directed the film version of Walter Greenwood's rather better known novel *Love on the Dole*. The cast of *Let The People Sing* included Alastair Sim, Fred Emney, Edward Rigby, Patricia Roc and Oliver Wakefield. It has never been issued on videocassette or DVD nor, so far as the present writer is aware, has it ever been shown on television. In his *British Sound Films - The Studio Years 1928-1959* David Quinlan dismisses it as 'Good idea, but execution lacks mobility'. Halliwell's Film Guide has a more favourable assessment : 'A development of *The Good Companions* which compares quite nicely with the Capra films from across the water : naive but entertaining, with good star performances'.)

BLACK-OUT IN GRETLEY 1942

This is one of three novels by Priestley written to the background of the Second World War, in which he reached his zenith as a national, as distinct from a literary, figure. Like *Daylight on Saturday* and *Three Men in New Suits* the sub-texts - surely representing very much the author's own attitude to the war - are at least as interesting as the stories themselves, although, as will be seen, there is rather more substance in *Daylight on Saturday* than in the other two.

Gretley is an industrial town in the North Midlands (this seems to be one of Priestley's favourite 'depressed areas'), to which Humphrey Neyland,

a counter-espionage agent with a personal hatred of the Nazis, is sent to investigate the possible presence of enemy agents as well as 'the usual Fifth Columnists' (Gretley, it is quickly revealed, is the location of two important factories involved in the war effort.) Neyland's systematic uncovering of a spy cell, via the murder of two people with whom he comes into contact, makes for a close-knit and absorbing, it not especially remarkable, thriller. But what gives the novel its real interest is the oblique view it takes of the general wartime situation and, more importantly, the wider social context. In one significant passage Neyland/Priestley inveighs against those responsible for the sort of dismal town that Gretley is and calls on its citizens to strike back. (Here we are somewhat in *English Journey* territory and that of the controversial *Postscripts*.) In another passage there is a combination of criticism of official propaganda, support for the Russian as well as the British war leader (remember, this *is* 1942) and a belief that these leaders are acting in the interests of the 'ordinary people'. Elsewhere, in another interesting - and very perceptive - passage we find Neyland/Priestley remarking on the complicated effect of the war on people ('we happen to live in very strange times, when people's minds are working in very strange ways'.) But perhaps the most significant passage of all is the one reproduced below, partly because of its timing (at one of the lowest points in the Allies' cause) and partly because it seems to sum up the author's feelings about the war at this time. In its combination of ill-concealed passion (and compassion), its unflinching patriotism and its despairing puzzlement it is, in the best sense, absolutely typical.

Before I try to tell all that happened that last day, Saturday, when, because of some mounting impatience I'd never felt before while working for the department, I bustled the whole job into the bag, I ought to give you a sketch of the background, so that you can keep it in mind all the time. A cold wet Saturday late in January, 1942, with the Japs swarming nearer and nearer Singapore, and pushing down towards Australia, temporary stalemate in Libya, no bombing of Germany because of the weather, and a general feeling of uneasiness and disillusion. A cold wet Saturday in Gretley, with a half-hearted sort of market in the square, dripping queues here and there outside the shops and, later, the picture theatres, and everywhere the steam and reek of wet clothes. Never quite full daylight, and with the black-out waiting just around the corner. If you thought of the war as a kind of tunnelling from one sunlit

valley to another, then this was about the middle of the tunnel, where you smoked your last cigarette but one in the damp raw gloom and wondered if you ever had sat about laughing with your friends. And through the scene, this background to the action, moved the patient people, taking what was given them and asking for no more, except in their hearts, remembering absent faces, waiting for letters that never came, willing if necessary to die for a Gretley that had hardly come to life for them. Their slow patience, their lack of fire and fury, puzzled and half-angered me, perhaps because I could never make up my mind whether they were half-dead or simply better people than any I'd known before. I wanted them to blast Hitler and all his kind off the face of the earth, and then tear down Gretley and everything like it, throwing the last of its dirty bricks at the retreating backs of the gang that had kept them imprisoned there. I mention all this because I think something of this impatience and bitter bewilderment, fed too by my hatred of the cold wet dingy town, found its way, that Saturday, into my handling of the job.

DAYLIGHT ON SATURDAY 1943

In his book *Out of the People*, published in 1941, Priestley eloquently expressed what he saw as the essential characteristic - or, at least, one essential characteristic - of the Second World War

It so happens that this war, whether those at present in authority like it or not, has to be fought as a citizen's war. There is no way out of that because in order to defend and protect this island, not only against possible invasion but also against all the disasters of aerial bombardment, it has been found necessary to bring into existence a new network of voluntary associations such as the Home Guard, the Observer Corps, all the ARP and fire-fighting services, and the like....They are a new type, which might be called the organized military citizen. And the whole circumstances of their wartime life favour a sharply democratic outlook. Men and women with a gift for leadership now turn up in unexpected places. The new ordeals blast away the old shams. Britain, which in the years immediately before this war was rapidly losing such democratic virtues as it possessed, is now being bombed and burned into democracy.

Daylight on Saturday, one of two novels written both in, and about,

wartime Britain is a fictional affirmation of this concept of 'The People's War' (a title which the historian Angus Calder used in 1969 for his excellent book about the Home Front). Priestley's description of *his* book is simply 'a novel about an aircraft factory' and his largely unsung heroes and heroines are the men and women, skilled and unskilled (mostly the latter), young, middle-aged and old, committed and uncommitted, admirable and less than admirable, upper-class, middle-class and lower-class, who, under the system of 'direction of labour', were brought together in their thousands to make the aircraft and tanks and guns and shells and all the other instruments of war that were vital to achieve victory. (The same theme was a feature of the film *Millions Like Us*, produced by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, which also appeared in 1943.)

This is a vivid and intensely human novel, in which Priestley never makes the mistake of either glamorising the work of the factory or writing the equivalent of a piece of official propaganda. Not for a moment is he unpatriotic but, typically, he is far from non-political - thus making the book a development, as students of Priestley will readily observe, of the *Postscripts*.

The ambience of the aircraft factory is memorably evoked as early as the second page in a passage which is also interesting in the way in which it reveals the relative economic prosperity which the war brought for many people who had either found jobs difficult to get or who had suffered from low wages. The importance of the factory and the hundreds of others like it is firmly established in a passage which ties in with the *Postscripts* - unqualified support for the war effort (the Ministry of Information itself couldn't have expressed it better) but with a subtle hint that after the war the 'people' should have a better deal than they had before it.

Thereafter, although we are constantly reminded of the factory as a workplace, Priestley concentrates on the workers as human beings, beginning with Cheviot, the general manager (a somewhat idealised figure), Blandford, the assistant manager, and Elrick, the works superintendent. It is the last-named who is the pivotal character and the

central figure in the tragic and shocking climax to the novel. Priestley draws a sharp contrast between Blandford and Elrick : the former, 'pale and grey', 'a cold exact mind', 'high honours in mathematics and engineering', 'socially aloof'; the latter, 'crimson and dark blue', 'a ripe, bursting sort of man, who had worked himself up from the shop by a driving, battering energy' and who is good with men. Elrick, not perhaps surprisingly, 'took fewer and fewer pains to hide his hearty dislike of Blandford, whom he was for ever denouncing, quite wrongly, as a snob'.

Elrick's unhappy background is etched in ('outside the factory, (he) was a lost man, raging up and down a blind alley'). The other characters are introduced : Joyce Deerhurst, the quiet, refined, attractive girl for whom Elrick develops an unspoken and, finally, fatal longing; Edith Shipton, the welfare officer with the guilty secret (an affair with a married man); Ogmore, the Communist charge hand (but this being wartime, also a patriot); little Nelly Ditton, the simple country girl; the very odd Stonier, given to dangerous fantasies; Sammy Hemp, with whom life has dealt harshly but who is the epitome of undemanding cheerfulness; Appleby, the young, up-and-coming, self-confident engineer; and so on. Priestley's roll call of characters is a long one and their lives and loves are such as might prompt his many detractors to accuse him of writing, in modern parlance, one long soap opera. But although, inevitably, *Daylight on Saturday* does sometimes read like that, the depth of much of the characterisation and the skill with which Priestley sketches the sometimes awkward, sometimes desperate, sometimes moving relationships between his many characters lift the novel above what could otherwise have been an enervating banality.

Typically, and prejudicially, Priestley indulges in his favourite role of Tory politician 'basher' (and remember that this was 1943 when there was overwhelming support for a Coalition Government with a large Conservative element and led by a politician who was of that persuasion to his fingertips). His victim is the fictional Lord Brixen and the author's venom is deadly ('He might be described, not unfairly, as something between a second-rate administrator and a first-rate confidence-trick man'). A little later Elrick is the mouthpiece for ano-

ther vitriolic attack.

All this is, perhaps, the slightly tedious side of Priestley as a wartime novelist but in general *Daylight on Saturday* is a very *astute* novel because it cleverly combines human interest, social comment and covert political propaganda in a way that is quite inimitable. It may be that only the climax mentioned earlier strikes an unnecessarily false note. Elrick is passed over as Cheviot's successor in favour of Blandford and this fuels his inward rage and desperation. Drawn hopelessly towards the enchantment represented by Joyce Deerhurst he presses his attentions on her, is discovered and has to be told to go. Then, in an unexpected twist of fate, he saves Nelly Ditton from a murderous assault by the plainly insane Stonier but is fatally injured by falling machinery. This seems an oddly unsatisfactory - and melodramatic - ending to Elrick's story.

Cheviot is given what is, in effect, the novel's peroration in a passage whose idealistic tone may raise a smile now, over 60 years and many disillusionments later, but who can doubt Priestley's sincerity ? After all, it could be reasonably claimed of him that he was 'The People's Novelist'.

....there is no daylight inside the factory. There are no windows. The roofs are darkened. The factory inside is like a colossal low bright cave, lit with innumerable mercury-vapour lamps that produce a queer greenish-white mistiness of light. In there three in the morning and three in the afternoon look just the same. Nothing tells you except the rhythm of the work whether it is noon or midnight. You might be deep in a mountain or at the bottom of the sea. The pageant of the hours, sunrise to high noon, sunset to glittering night, and the old procession of the seasons, all the budding, flowering and withering of the world, all have vanished. For this is a cave life. It is a magic cave, with money - perhaps more than you have ever seen before - adding itself for you, with hot-pot and ginger pudding simmering and steaming in electric ovens, and unending streams of thick, dark tea, with music, hot or sweet, screaming above the machine tools, with ultra-violet rays and radiant heat and M and B 693 to be had for the taking....

(For an authentic picture of conditions in a wartime armaments factory see the short documentary *Night Shift* (1942), sponsored by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Supply and produced by the well-known documentary film maker Paul Rotha. It is included in the invaluable DVD set *Land of Promise : The British Documentary Movement 1930-1950*, released by the British Film Institute. This set also includes *Britain at Bay* (1940), a short compilation film sponsored by the Ministry of Information, written and narrated by J B Priestley, and by way of being a visual version of one of his *Postscripts*.)

THREE MEN IN NEW SUITS 1945

Priestley's political stance - as a non-Party radical - was always transparent and it made him unpopular and even disliked in some quarters. During the Second World War, when his evening broadcasts - the famous *Postscripts* - turned him into a national figure, he aroused the enmity of the Right because of his espousal of a new, more egalitarian (ie Socialist) political and economic system rather than a return to, as he saw it, the discredited, class-ridden system of the 1930s. It seems to be generally accepted by those who sympathised with him that this advocacy led to his being taken off the air. (The story, a fascinating one, of the *Postscripts* has been scrupulously researched by Priestley's stepson Nicolas Hawkes and his findings have been published by The J B Priestley Society *.)

Something of this social or socialist reformist vein is to be found in *Three Men in New Suits*, written at the end of the War. As a novel its canvas is small but it is nevertheless an effective, touching even moving (if, in retrospect, somewhat naive) little work. Partly this is because Priestley takes care to depict his main characters as real and essentially decent human beings troubled by the uncertainties of their return to civilian life.

Three soldiers of different social backgrounds have forged a common bond of comradeship, friendship and mutual understanding. One, Alan Strete, the younger son of a titled country family, has declined a com-

mission in order to stay with the other two. They are, respectively, Herbert Kenford, the son of a prosperous farmer, and Eddie Mold, a quarry worker and they come to respect Strete as something of a father figure. The novel traces their initially problematical attempts to come to terms with the realities of their respective backgrounds. For the 'democratised' Strete there is the uncomfortable realisation that the complacent class-consciousness of his family has not changed and is unlikely to do so. For Kenford the assumption by his family that he will fit into the narrow, self-centred existence they have planned for him (albeit with good intentions) evokes a feeling of puzzled rebelliousness; while Mold finds to his dismay and disgust that the prospect of a contented home life to which he looked forward so eagerly has been ruined by his wife's unfaithfulness.

Fortunately for Kenford, at least, he quickly finds a kindred spirit in Doris Morgan, a factory worker whom Priestley presents as a sort of female shop-floor activist of a type that in later decades became rather more familiar than in 1945. But this is a woman whose fieriness is tempered by tenderness and her vigorous plea to Herbert to take a new direction already has in it the seeds of love.

For his part Strete almost succumbs to Mammon, first by agreeing to work for a hack newspaper tycoon and then nearly entering into an adulterous relationship with the beautiful but shallow Betty Southam, a friend of the family. But a chance encounter with his two friends brings him to his senses, whereupon Priestley (in a manner which admittedly opens him to criticism) turns the novel into something of a political tract. Strete becomes the slightly contrived mouthpiece for the author's characteristic brand of post-war, non-doctrinaire Socialism. Some of it is essentially the doctrine on which the 1945 Labour Government was elected to office. (It should, however, be remembered that Priestley, for all his radicalism, was never a member of the Labour Party and, indeed, stood an independent candidate in the 1945 election.)

If, as was indicated earlier, this is all rather naive (and the reality, in due course, sadly confirmed this) there is little doubt that it was very much what Priestley sincerely felt. At the end, though, what gives this slight

novel its flavour is not the politicising but the perception with which the author depicts the problems of adjustment for men for whom the war has cut deep into their sensibilities. There is no final tidying up of the story - merely an assertion that the empathy that sustained the three men in new suits has now helped them to face an uncertain future with fresh heart.

(* *The Story of J B Priestley's Postscripts* (*The J B Priestley Society*, 2008)).

BRIGHT DAY 1946

Bright Day (the title comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*) was written shortly after the end of the Second World War and since it is broadly contemporary with two of his finest plays, *An Inspector Calls* (1945) and *The Linden Tree* (1947), it belongs to a period when his powers as a creative writer were at their peak. As it happens *Bright Day* and *An Inspector Calls* have certain points in common : both are set in what Priestley sees as a golden period just before the First World War, both feature a seemingly well-ordered middle-class family and both are concerned with the way that sense of order is implacably destroyed. (This theme of a family in crisis also provides a link to *The Linden Tree* and to another of Priestley's classic plays *Time and the Conways* (1937).)

With quite a lot of the author's most memorable work, music, and even a particular piece of music, provides the catalyst for the release of certain emotional responses within one of the principal characters. For Professor Linden in *The Linden Tree* it is Elgar's Cello Concerto (and Elgar was one of Priestley's favourite composers); for Mr Smeeth in *Angel Pavement* (albeit at a lower, or different, emotional level) it is Brahms' First Symphony; for Gregory Dawson in *Bright Day* it is Schubert's Piano Trio in B Flat Major, whose slow movement is the pivot around which the whole narrative revolves. To carry the analogy of music still further there are, in *Bright Day*, notes that are deeper, tones that are darker, than are to be found in any other of Priestley's novels except, crucially, *Lost Empires*.

Dawson is a middle-aged film script writer (an occupation that Priestley himself practised in Hollywood as well as in Britain) who, in order to concentrate on finishing his latest commission, goes down to stay at a remote hotel on the Cornish coast. There, the playing of the Schubert by the hotel trio and the discovery that two of his fellow guests are old acquaintances strip away layer after layer of remembrances of his youth in the West Riding city of Bruddersford (Priestley's own Bradford in other words). Orphaned then, he is taken in by a kindly aunt and uncle and finds a job in a firm of wool traders, although he has ambitions even then to be a writer. (Some of this, of course, sounds autobiographical except that Priestley has to a large extent disavowed such a connexion.) In due course he enters what to him becomes a magical world of the Alington family - father (who manages the wool firm), mother, two sons, Oliver and David, and three daughters, Eva, Joan and Bridget - together with various friends. The Alingtons seem to be a thoroughly stable family, contented, charming, cultured and lively, not to say fascinating, and Dawson quickly falls under their spell. His early observation of the Alington clan, *en masse*, at a symphony concert (the musical theme again) and his reaction to this is expressed in one of the novel's most memorable and evocative passages.

Thus is Dawson drawn into the magic circle but one of the Alingtons' friends, the wise and impressive Jock Barniston, warns Dawson against being seduced by them and incidentally gives him a philosophy to live by ('You can go a long way - and give us something good - if you travel easily and lightly, seeing people as they are, just as people and not as symbolic figures, and not leaving parts of yourself behind, frozen in some enchantment.') This warning is, in a sense, highly prophetic for the Alingtons' magic is savagely destroyed by subsequent events : on a day out in the Yorkshire Dales Eva is killed in a rock fall, ostensibly by accident, in reality by Joan, who is later revealed to have been mentally unbalanced; Oliver is killed in the carnage of the Western Front (as are other important characters); Bridget, whom Dawson comes to love, goes out of his life and makes an unsuccessful marriage; and Mr Alington allows others effectively to take over the running of the wool business and dies during the war. Thus does Priestley develop the theme of disillusionment, loss, the destruction of euphoria, the 'bright

day that brings forth the adder'. As for Dawson himself, his recollections, 30 years or more on, induce an emotional crisis in a life which is outwardly successful but has already become inwardly flat and sterile (he has never married) and this produces tensions in his relationships with the film people with whom he is currently working - most particularly with a close actress friend, Elizabeth Earl. (It can be seen that Priestley creates parallel narratives - the past and the present - which are skilfully interwoven.)

Despite having no other prospects Dawson decides to turn his back on Hollywood and the life he led there prior to the Second World War. But Priestley, never the outright pessimist, contrives his usual hopeful ending. Malcolm Nixey (now Lord Harndean), the man who, back in Bruddersford, had contributed (with his wife) to the Alingtons' tragedy, and whom Dawson meets in the Cornish hotel, contrives to introduce him to a woman trade unionist, Laura Childs, who wants to set up a new film company dedicated to making 'real' pictures' (one suspects another piece of Priestley post-war propagandising). It turns out that, as a child, she had known Dawson and had been an unwitting participant in the Alington story. She offers Dawson an important role in the new venture, which he accepts, and the novel ends with the promise of a fulfilling personal and professional relationship between the two.

This is a work which shows the author's ability as a story-teller at its most accomplished and the characterisation is at a very high level. (It also sheds a perceptive light of the ramifications of commercial film making, although this remains secondary to the main thrust of the narrative.) Above all, its warmth, its vitality and its overpowering sadness give it an emotional resonance not, perhaps, to be found in any of the other novels. As often with Priestley there are a number of significant and characteristic sub-texts. The most important of these is the affectionate and detailed evocation of Bradford/Bruddersford middle-class life just before the First World War. The view may be through rose-coloured spectacles - were there not also many thousands of Bradfordians living meanly, in poverty and wretchedness ? - but it is very much Priestley's own vision. Thus he writes with wonderful detail about Dawson's Uncle Miles, about Christmas in Bruddersford and

about various of its citizens. Then there is Priestley's familiar plea for Socialism, as expressed through the mouth of the Labour Councillor Knott. One has to remind oneself that this was written in 1946 when the first Labour government with a working majority had only recently been elected to office.

In another vein, there is a typical passage expressing disgust at the tawdriness - and worst - of London's West End, post-Second World War ('London looked horrible, like the shabbier side of some third-rate American city.') The passage is a powerful one but to the extent that it is Priestley himself who is thinking it - rather than Dawson, the character - its sour tone perhaps presents the less agreeable side of the author, the grumpiness and touch of intolerance. No one, perhaps, would dispute the general tenor of its invective but are not the 'bad-tempered or bewildered suburban homes' to which he refers deserving of a little more compassion after six long, wearying years of war ? We may forgive this because what remains of the greatest importance in *Bright Day* is - or should be - the reader's sharing of the principal character's emotional journey through time and it is this which makes the novel as moving and as resonant a work as its author ever wrote.

It was the slow movement of Schubert's B Flat Major Trio, as I knew at once when the 'cello began the exquisite quiet tone, slowly and gravely rocking in its immeasurable tenderness. A few moments later, when the 'cello went wandering to murmur its regret and the violin with its piercing sweetness curved and rocked in the same little tune, I was far away, deep in a lost world and a lost time. I was back again young Gregory Dawson, eighteen, shy but sprawling - in the Alington's drawing room in Bruddersford, before the first World War, years and years ago, half a good lifetime away. The thin ribbon of sound pulled back curtain after curtain. People and places that I had thought had dwindled and faded to the dimmest shades of memory, to smudged scrawls in an old diary, came flashing back, burningly alive, as the music went winding through my heart like a slow procession of fire-raisers. The Alingtons' house....the office and warehouse in Canal Street....and the cottages on the moors....and all the Alingtons - Oliver, Eva, Bridget and the rest - and their friends....Uncle Miles and Aunt Hilda and the whist-players....and Ackworth and Old Sam and the others in Canal Street....and the wool samples in their blue paper seemed close to my fingers....and somehow I could smell lilac and the bitter scent, so long forgotten, of summer dust pitted with raindrops.... and

over the ling of Broadstone Moor the larks were rising again.

.....

Gladstone Hall was nothing to look at - it was a square ugly building seating about four thousand people - but it made a fine concert hall, and its acoustics, especially in the great gallery, were magnificent. My ticket, which worked out at nine pence a concert, was for one of the Side Galleries, the North Gallery. Unlike the superior people in the West Gallery, we had no reserved and numbered seats, so I took care to be one of the first to charge up the long gaslit flights of stone steps, and I found a place on the front row towards the centre, and therefore with a good view of the front row of the West Gallery. It was a Halle Orchestra concert, and I could remember the very programme : Prelude to the Third Act of the Meistersinger, Strauss's Don Quixote and Brahms' Fourth Symphony. In those days Gladstone Hall had electric lighting round the walls and in the corridors but still kept its enormous gas chandelier, which was like a vast swarming of luminous and twinkling bees above our heads, and brought to the great auditorium that cosy golden mistiness, that October glow, which vanished from our stages with gas lighting. Before the oboe, far below, had plaintively signalled its tuning note to the other instruments, I was staring across a few yards of this golden mistiness to the Alington group, which was assembled in full force, so full indeed that I was not quite sure where the group began or ended. Mr Alington was there, and the handsome woman who might be Mrs Alington. There was a bright cluster of girls - Joan, Bridget (bouncing with excitement) and the smiling sleepy Eva, and two other girls I did not know. Mr Alington's son, the tweedy untidy youth, was there, also the big black-haired chap I did not like, and another man, whom I had seen at the Playgoers' Society, a tall, bony but powerful man with greying hair and a brown face, a man who always looked cool and amused. Yes, it was the group most formidably arrayed, with a hundred orchestral players below tuning up, and Brahms, Wagner and Richard Strauss waiting in the wings, so to speak to heighten the magic. Joan saw and recognised me, smiled and waved, and then obviously mentioned me to her father, who also smiled and waved; and several of the others looked my way. I experienced that feeling - common in childhood, rarer in youth, and almost unknown in later life, at least among men - of cosy enchantment, that sense of having snugly to hand, under the same protecting roof, almost all this earth's most precious persons and things; which is the secret of a child's Christmas.

As with other Priestley novels it is source of frustration that *Bright Day* has never been filmed either for the cinema or for television. Stan Barstow, the author of *A Kind of Loving* and other novels, dramatised *Bright Day* for BBC radio's *Saturday Night Theatre* and has expressed his regret that a five-part TV dramatisation failed at the last fence.

In 2006 the novel was re-issued in a considerably enhanced edition by Great Northern Books, the first issue in what is hoped will be a whole series of re-issues of Priestley's major fiction and non-fiction works. Also in 2006 The J B Priestley Society published *Bright Day : A 60th Birthday Celebration* by Ken Smith and Michael Nelson.)

JENNY VILLIERS 1947

This is another of Priestley's lesser-known novels and one reason for this may be that it is more of an extended short story or novella than a novel *per se*. Its time-scale is no more than an hour or two and it takes place entirely in the Green Room of an old provincial theatre. It is here that Martin Cheveril, who has come to the theatre to rehearse his new play but who is undergoing something of a personal and artistic crisis, has a dream - or is it delirium ? - in which he sees re-enacted before him theatrical events that happened a century past, many of them in the same room. In particular he forms an emotional link with a brilliant young actress of the period called Jenny Villiers, who falls in love with the handsome leading man in the company, is deserted by him and dies an early death. Through these visions, this link and a meeting with a contemporary young actress who seems to be a reincarnation of Jenny, Cheveril recaptures his zest for life and for writing, and recommits himself to the Theatre.

This is an intriguing and entertaining ghost story, if somewhat slight in effect, but it is possible that the author wrote it as much to express his own faith in the Theatre as self-renewing in its excitement and richness. This faith may have been re-enforced by the fact that in 1946, the year before, he had seen what is now regarded as one of his best plays, *An Inspector Calls*, produced by the Old Vic Company with a cast that in-

cluded two of the most admired and brilliant of English actors, Ralph Richardson and Alec Guinness. That year had also seen the premiere of his sophisticated comedy *Ever Since Paradise,* and his first play for the still fledgling medium of television, *The Rose and Crown.* Moreover, two other great names in the Theatre, Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson, husband and wife, were to grace another successful Priestley play, *The Linden Tree.*

A further facet of *Jenny Villiers* (which itself had originated as a stage play) is that it carried the same sort of message of post-war hope (if less sharply focused) that characterised both the immediately preceding novels, *Three Men in New Suits* and *Bright Day.* It is significant that whenever the contemporary theatre or some feature of it is touched upon in the later novels (for example in *Festival at Farbridge* and *Sir Michael and Sir George*) the tone tends to be more satirical, sometimes lightly so, sometimes harshly. As with many post-war developments Priestley's disillusionment became more and more transparent.

(In its original form as a play *Jenny Villiers* had its first performance at the Theatre Royal, Bristol on 13 March, 1946 but there is no record of this version having survived. It has not been published commercially and no typescript is available. Priestley evidently determined that it would work better in prose form although its theatrical setting does suggest some viability as a stage work.

There is a Russian film version *Prizraki zelyonoy komnaty* (*The Ghosts of the Green Room* (1991).

This is the other novel to which Klein awards a 'beauty prize'(see section on *Adam in Moonshine.*))

FESTIVAL AT FARBRIDGE 1951

It took the Festival of Britain to inspire Priestley to return to the novel form after a gap of four years. In *Margin Released* he tells us that he welcomed and never sneered at the Festival, that huge public celebration - brave and heart-warming to some observers, misguided and foolish (and a political football) to others - by which the somewhat beleaguered Labour Government intended the austerity-weary British people to re-discover themselves and, above all, enjoy themselves. Priestley, one supposes, was all in favour of fun and laughter, music and dancing, fireworks and parades, gaiety and jollity, art for the people rather than for its own narrowly intellectual sake. And if good fellowship, romance and old-fashioned sentiment were also present - well, so much the better. All these desirable things are to be found in abundance in this very long, densely-packed novel with 129 listed characters of infinitely varied sizes, shapes, ages, attributes, vices, virtues and persuasions. Clearly it was a labour of love (however much Priestley might grumble about the mental and physical effort involved) and the result is what might be termed in modern parlance - which, however, I suspect the author would have detested - a 'fun novel'.

In the dedication of the book to his publisher and friend A S Frere Priestley seeks to disarm criticism by declaring that he does not 'suppose this book is a contribution to Literature, which is rapidly becoming something that hardly anybody is allowed to contribute to' - a clear and barbed reference, one imagines, to that portion of the English Literary Establishment which viewed his avowal of the 'common touch' in his novels with lordly disdain. Not that *Festival at Farbridge* is - or should be - above criticism even by the most fervent of Priestley's admirers. It is too long for its material, with rather a lot of repetition and padding (the references to characters about to imbibe, in the act of imbibing and having just imbibed would themselves almost fill a novel - and, again, Priestley cheerfully draws attention to this point in his dedication). It is clearly derivative, with heavy borrowings from earlier novels, *The Good Companions* and *Let The People Sing.* Again, some of its targets for satirical barbs are rather easy and well-worked ones - modern poetry, verse drama, American film ballyhoo, phoney radio per-

sonalities and so on. (The 'anti-arty' tone of the novel, which runs right through it, must have infuriated his more intellectual readers, supposing they had deigned to read it.) But this is a work of tremendous gusto, vitality and good humour, and one which is typical of the best of its author.

The basic plot is quite simple : three assorted characters at a loose end (how Priestley likes his threesomes) meet by chance in a cafe in the small South Midlands town of Farbridge. They are Laura Casey, 'a secretary and our heroine', Theodore Jenks, 'a handsome young man from the East' and 'Commodore' Horace Tribe, 'a much-travelled man' (and of many parts, some of them rather less than quite respectable). Finding an empathy and a like-mindedness between themselves they resolve to organise a festival in Farbridge as part of the national celebrations. In doing so they summon up much support and much opposition, make many friends and some enemies and, after the inevitable disappointments and vicissitudes, duly rout the philistines and bring their festival to a triumphant conclusion. On the way all sorts of individuals, institutions, organisations, conventions, customs and events are held up to the bright light of comedy, high and low, light and heavy, satirical and farcical, innocent and mischievous. And of course Priestley being Priestley romantic liaisons are finally sealed - between Laura and Theodore (of course); the 'Commander' and Grace, 'a mysterious but nice woman'; Group Captain Trevone, a light industrialist, and Philippa Hookwood, 'a very handsome actress'; Captain Archibald Mobbs, 'Conservative Agent at Farbridge' and Maggie, a landlord's daughter; and Jimmy Fettercairn, 'conductor of string orchestras' and Helen Weeks, 'Personnel Manager at Whatmore's'.

The novel abounds in wonderful set pieces. They include the public meeting which is held to discuss the holding of a festival and for which the cast of major characters duly assemble; a survey of the Festival programme itself; and finally - and memorably - the climax of the Festival Ball, with all the leading characters very much in evidence and, to varying degrees, determined to enjoy themselves. This latter, in particular, finds Priestley at his comic best.

The *Manchester Guardian*, as it still was in 1951, said of *Festival at Farbridge* that 'What it all amounts to is really a Festival of Priestley'. No more apt summary of this very funny, hugely enjoyable novel could be imagined.

The Mayor appeared and performed a stately waltz with the Mayoress before disappearing, presumably to discuss municipal affairs with many a 'which' and 'Pzzzz', in one of the smaller rooms. Huntley, with all the appearance of being anaesthetised, danced very carefully with the Paisley-shawl headmistress, Mrs Coote, and the Barr girls. Mr Hookwood and the Group Captain (waiting for his Philippa to arrive from the theatre) danced with Liz and Dulcie, the Mayoress and Mrs Gisburn, and other matrons and frippets. Old Mr Jordan, very energetic but never varying his step, danced with anybody who could not avoid him. Hatchet-Ferrers was there, looking enormously rich, unhealthy and solemn in the fullest possible evening dress, and divided his attentions between Mildred Sawkins, all peculiar curls, spangles and gypsy devilment, and Madge Bulfoss, in pale pink and very much on the look-out for Pat Gorbarry. Major Bulfoss kept popping into the buffet, but would return, stiff and rather goggle-eyed, to do his duty on the floor, where he took his partners round as if they were mobile petrol pumps. Mr Mortory, still looking dusty, had a desperate quarter of an hour with Lady Barth, glittering and jangling and screeching out awful remarks about everybody; and then he retired, gloomily, to eat sausage rolls. Mrs Mortory, cinnamon eyes watching for Gorebarry's arrival, wore her cream-coloured heavy silk with the full skirt, looked very handsome indeed, danced with anybody who claimed her, and smiled a tiny secret smile. Maggie, looking like a great warm apple, jigged round in turn with the garage proprietor, the farmer, and Archie Mobbs, not one of whom danced with anybody else when she was not available but departed hastily to refresh themselves. Sir Barclay Gishforth, a notable performer in the early Night Club style, circled the floor with Lady Felicia, an adept at the same style. After singing a foxtrot chorus or two into a microphone, Johnny's April, as slim, bright and hard as a platinum watch, condescended to mingle with the dancers....

(The book sold quite well, but no more. Sadly, the reviews in Britain (as recorded by Klein) were 'mostly very negative' and this hit Priestley hard. Klein also remarks that (although two film companies made inquiries) 'no film was made - a pity, of so many suitable Priestley novels for the medium this one would have seemed a particularly pro-

mising subject'. It did result in a BBC radio adaptation of nine instalments of 55 minutes each which were transmitted twice every week from October to December 1976. The J B Priestley Society has in its possession an audio-cassette of the last instalment but the series has never be issued in this medium on a commercial basis - more's the pity. For the present writer this is his one Priestley novel for a desert island, never mind its detractors.)

THE MAGICIANS 1954

Sir Charles Ravenstreet, a distinguished electrical engineer, is ousted from his position as Managing Director of New Central Electric in a Board Room coup. Thoroughly disillusioned, he leaves the Company and whilst trying to work out an uncertain future is brought into contact with Lord Mervil, a powerful and ruthless financier with notably fascist tendencies. Mervil offers him the opportunity to take part in a business enterprise to be devoted to the manufacture and marketing of a new 'wonder drug', a tranquilliser discovered after years of experiment by a chemist called Sepman. Ravenstreet is persuaded to try the drug (which is claimed to be harmless) himself, finds that it appears to work and under its influence agrees to discuss the project further with Mervil and his associates. Then, on the way from London to his home in the country, he meets three strangers in unusual circumstances and invites them to stay with him for a while. These three claim to be, respectively, a retired part English, part Balt civil engineer, an optician from Bordeaux and a Bulgarian merchant, and seem to have strange and mystical powers. These manifest themselves in an ability, firstly, to induce Ravenstreet to relive - and learn from - episodes in his past life (to exist, as they call it, 'time alive') and, secondly, to influence events and people in such a way as to expose Mervil and frustrate his plans. Through their help and influence Ravenstreet climbs out of the depths of increasing hopelessness which have engulfed him since his departure from New Central Electric, unexpectedly discovers whom he can benefit and care for and looks forward to a new and meaningful life. In a key passage he acknowledges the magicians' benign influence but only at the very end does Ravenstreet find out that the three 'magicians', now departed, never

apparently existed....

Interesting though it is, there is something oddly unsatisfactory - as well as *deja vu* - about this little-known novel, in which Priestley seems to be ploughing several familiar furrows at once. First, there is a return to his favourite theories of time (made famous in the plays *Dangerous Corner*, *Time and the Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before*) : the notion that people can move from one time zone or scale to another and benefit from the experience (Ravenstreet is enabled, painfully, to see himself as a young man who selfishly and foolishly rejected the girl who really loved him and whom, although he did not know it at the time, he had made pregnant). Then there is a reminder of the mysterious police inspector in *An Inspector Calls* with the three 'magicians', symbolic or allegorical, even vaguely religious, figures who can seemingly reveal or re-awaken people's true selves. Also we have Priestley the part disgusted, part despairing, part merely grumpy social observer, inveighing against Britain in the 1950s, with Ravenstreet voicing his (or Priestley's) basic disillusionment ('These New Elizabethans, herded by the Government and the unions, stampeded in any direction by the popular Press, spending their evenings watching dons and actresses playing parlour games on television !'). Mervil's cynical creed is chillingly spelled out a little later on in the book ('Now we're rapidly arriving at a time when a few men, who know their own minds, can dominate and use millions of people who have to have their minds made up for them. It's as simple as that.') Ravenstreet agrees with him. Mervil expands on his philosophy ('At last people in the mass are getting what they want. They want reasonable security, food and clothes and shelter and medical attention, some education but not too much, easy work, no trouble, no worry, no loneliness and fear, mass emotions, mass entertainment, a smooth road from the cradle to the grave.'). And again Ravenstreet acquiesces. Finally, there is in this novel some familiar Priestley invective against big business, party politicians, assorted officialdom and those who frequent London's West End (a theme going right back to *Wonder Hero*); and an equally familiar identification with the 'ordinary people' who live their lives openly, honestly and decently and with mutual understanding and affection.

All this contrives to make *The Magicians* something of an untidy ragbag and, unlike the author's best works of fiction, a prey to criticism that he is merely using the form of the novel to indulge in what might be called 'secular moralising' (since Priestley is essentially a humanist). This is a case of the parts not making a very satisfactory whole.

LOW NOTES ON A HIGH LEVEL 1954

Priestley's description of this novel is a 'frolic'. Another way to describe it would be a 'burlesque'. Sir Lancelot Telly (what a name to start with !) is the flamboyant, womanish, only moderately-talented Musical Director of the English Broadcasting Company. His young, handsome and rather more talented assistant is Alan Applerose. Both are delighted when Stannsen, the Norroland - and the world's greatest - composer announces that he has at last finished his Tenth Symphony and that in recognition of an official visit to Britain by the Norroland President he has offered the honour and privilege of the first performance to the EBC Symphony Orchestra, of which Sir Lancelot is, of course, the conductor. But there is a snag : the score includes a part for the Dobbophone, a seven foot high cross between a Sousaphone and a large contra-bass bassoon. This is the creation of an eccentric inventor called Dobb, who is its only performer. It seems that he and Stannsen were once friends and used to play the obscure game of Strunshka together. On the last occasion, he, Dobb, won but Stannsen refused to accept defeat gracefully. They quarrelled and Dobb told Stannsen that unless he apologised and admitted defeat, their friendship would be at an end. Now, according to Dobb, the inclusion of the Dobbophone in the score of the new symphony is Stannsen's way of trying to cheat and bully him into going back on his word. Dobb refuses to take part. How this impasse is sorted out with the help of the beautiful Inga Dobb, the inventor's niece and the composer's god-daughter, together with other, larger-than-life characters, makes for an amusing tale, if with a sag in the middle. And there is a rumbustious climax in the Royal Festival Hall when Applerose deputises for the injured Sir Lancelot (he stepped back off the rostrum at rehearsal) and the Dobbophone makes, as it turns out, an unexpected muted appearance (Dobb can't get a note out

of it at the crucial moment). On the way the author playfully satirises, in his familiar manner, the broadcasting media, particularly the Third Programme (as it then was) with its lunatic fringe of *avant garde* poets and playwrights, and inane panel games on television (and their too receptive audiences). One episode has Dobb, with Applerose's help, setting up a pirate radio station and using it for a short-lived bout of mild anarchy. Also featured are various Norroland customs which involve the heavy imbibing of schnapps; and a quartet of comic-looking inventors of musical instruments as outrageous as the Dob-bophone, who, after being turned down as substitutes, are signed up as an hilarious act at the North London Hippodrome.

Here is Stannsen battling with the philistines of the BBC after Sir Lancelot has had to bow out :

Air Marshal Block arrived, the strong man in a crisis. One of his dithering entourage introduced him to Stanssen. 'Nuisance, this, Dr Stanssen,' he said bluffly. 'Can't cancel tonight, y'know. Everybody's coming - everything fixed up - can't possibly cancel. We'll find you a decent conductor somehow, though. Beecham, Boult, Sargent - one of those fellas, if he's free. Don't worry.'

'I don't worry,' said Stanssen. 'Here is conductor.' He pointed to Alan. 'He knows work now. Good musician. I am happy for him.'

'I dare say you are.' The Air Marshal made a barking sound that was meant to suggest laughter. 'But are we ? That's the point. I don't think so. Can't have Applerose, I'm afraid. Various good reasons. Doesn't carry the guns, anyhow.'

'Guns ? We do not want guns. We want good musician.'

'Well, we'll find you a reliable fella. See you through. Don't worry.' And he was about to turn away.

Stanssen exploded into Norrolandish, probably dreadful oaths from remote and bloody sagas.

'I don't get you,' said the Air Marshal, frowning. 'By the way, I'm Air Marshal

Block - in charge here.'

'And I am Stannsen-Stannsen-Stannsen. And I say this younger Applerose take my work tonight.'

'Sorry, can't agree. Question of policy.'

Stanssen roared like a wounded bull. The executive EBC types who had been clustering round now stepped back, looking alarmed. 'You go fly airplanes,' he roared. 'This is music-music-music. And I say - no Applerose, then no Stanssen symphony, no concert, no nothing. I care not. I get fifty orchestras - hundred orchestras - play my work. I say go to hell. Where is leader of orchestra ?' he bellowed. 'Come here, leader of orchestra.' People made way for Jarritt, the leader, one of Alan's friends, with whom he often played chamber music. 'I ask you, leader,' said Stannsen, 'is Applerose good conductor for your orchestra ?'

'If he knows the work,' Jarritt began, giving Alan an enquiring glance.

'I know the work, Jarritt,' said Alan quietly.

'Then we'll be very happy with him, Dr Stanssen. He's handled us often.'

'A very important occasion tonight, remember,' the Air Marshal growled. 'A junior fella conducting - fella mixed up in this Dobb business too - it won't look well.'

'Look well - look well ? I wish it to sound well,' roared Stanssen. 'You bring new conductor now to read my score - it will sound damned stinking awful.'

And Applerose duly gets his big chance, is a great success, is launched on a glittering career - and, of course, gets the girl. Good fun. Not so much a novel - more, well, a frolic. It would have made F R Leavis - Priestley's arch detractor - spit blood.

SATURN OVER THE WATER 1961

This novel appeared seven years after the previous one, *Low Notes on a High Level.* It ended a fallow period not only for Priestley as a novelist but for his reputation as a dramatist. True, he had continued to write plays (*The Scandalous Affair of Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon, Take The Fool Away, These Our Actors, The Thirty-First of June, The Glass Cage, The Rack*) but compared with those of his vintage years - 1937 to 1947 - they made, at best, a limited impact and several have become mere titles in the great canon of his literary works. (But a recent revival of *The Glass Cage* has rescued a fine play from obscurity.) When Priestley finally resumed his role as a novelist what he produced seemed, again, disappointing compared with his best work in the form.

It is, indeed, difficult to know quite what sort of novel Priestley intended *Saturn Over The Water* to be and this very uncertainty makes it a puzzling and, finally, rather unsatisfactory work. In one sense it belongs to the genre of what might be termed the 'international adventure thriller' and has some affinities with Ian Fleming's James Bond 007 novels, what with exotic locations, beautiful, beddable females, car chases and a group of criminal madmen of assorted nationalities intent on encouraging the Northern hemisphere to destroy itself so enabling them to start a new, authoritarian social system in the Southern hemisphere, based on science and technology. This is acceptable enough on its own level but the plot becomes not only more and more implausible (with co-incidence and chance encounters piled higher and higher) but more pretentious, developing eventually into something nearer to fantasy.

In brief, the story concerns a young painter, Tim Bedford, who promises a cousin, who is dying, that he will go to South America in search of her husband, a bio-chemist who went to work for a research institute in a remote part of Peru and seems to have vanished. The action begins in Cambridge, moves to London, then New York, on to Peru itself, Chile and, finally, Australia. In the course of his travels Bedford has many adventures, pleasant and unpleasant, meets and falls in love with the beautiful Rosalia Arnaldos, granddaughter of the millionaire owner of

the research institute, finds the missing scientist, Joe Farne, and through the medium of a mysterious Irish clairvoyant, Pat Dailey, discovers, finally, the secret of 'Saturn over the water' In truth, despite Priestley's usual professionalism, this finishes up as a rather too fantastic (and sometimes muddled) bit of nonsense, which would be better shorter, simpler and possibly more satirical of its genre.

And the explanation of the title ?

Saturn represents age, weight, authority, a cold exercise of power. So Saturn over the Water means that the world begins again - only in the Southern Hemisphere at first - under the absolute rule of a few, the masters of millions of slaves. And they announce how they will create a rigid system. It's all there in Saturn over the Water. For water is also an ancient symbol of the unconscious. And if Saturn is over the water, then the masters of this system will not only control men's conscious minds but also their unconscious.

(Klein quotes the present writer's verdict (in *The Novels of J B Priestley A Short Guide*) as 'a rather too fantastic (and somewhat muddled) bit of nonsense' as 'a viable stand even though it is debatable. What is not debatable is Nelson's verdict : 'Not really 'Priestley' at all.' On the contrary, it is very much Priestley.' The point it was intended to make is that the true essence of Priestley, the *echt* Priestley, is not to be found in a novel that could have been written, perhaps more expertly, by specialists in the genre. But Klein could counter with '*The Doomsday Men* ?' Which might be a fair point.

As regards film treatments Klein records that 'Unluckily, as in so many other cases, various projects for turning it into a film fell through, yet the history of its dissemination had its odd global moments, from a pirated broadcast version on Icelandic radio to a pirated translation into Persian.')

THE THIRTY-FIRST OF JUNE 1961

This story tells us how Sam Penty, of Wallaby, Dimmock, Paly and Tooks, fell in love with Princess Melicent, daughter of King Meliot of Peradore. Its realism and keen critical spirit, Mr Priestley confesses, are doubtful. He also declares that it has a limited audience : it is unsuitable for readers under twelve and over ninety. He thinks it must be funny because he could hear his secretary laughing in the next room, as she copied the story. We think it is funny too, and so, we believe, will you.

Thus the publishers' note to this wholly delightful little fantasy - a sort of adult fairy tale - which is nevertheless dedicated to the author's six granddaughters 'in the hope that a few copies of (the) tale will still be around when they all feel ready to tackle it.' The light heartedness of its satire matches that of *Low Notes on a High Level* and *Found, Lost, Found* amongst Priestley's other books but exceeds them in inventiveness - even though none of the three can truthfully be called a novel in any substantive sense.

Here, characters in modern-day London, notably those who work in an advertising agency, and others - a king, a princess, ladies-in-waiting, sorcerers and so on - in the ancient Arthurian kingdom of Peradore travel to each other's place and time, assume different disguises (for example the head of the agency is turned into a dragon, the princess appears as a model on a TV chat show) and finally come together to celebrate the marriage of Sam and Melicent. The author's sense of the mischievous is evident from the opening paragraph when he compares the idyllic life of Peradore with that of 60s London ('...no old buildings were knocked down to make room for office blocks, no take-over bids were being made, no traffic problems were giving the subjects of King Meliot ulcers or nervous breakdowns, and no office workers were packing themselves into trains that ran under the ground.') And there is more amusement to be had when Sam and Ninette, one of Melicent's ladies-in-waiting, exchange notes at an Arthurian lunch *de deux* :

'I'm afraid I hadn't time to order anything very special,' said Ninette carelessly. 'But you may like the cold peacock and swan, the honey-and-almond castle - and the goose pasty is supposed to be rather good.'

'A smashing lunch.'

'Do sit down, Sam. Let me give you some wine. Help yourself to the goose pasty.'

After eating and drinking heartily for some minutes, Sam felt he might risk a question or two. 'By the way, Ninette, what age are we in here ?'

'What age ?'

'Yes. What king's reigning ?'

'Arthur is still High King.'

'Of course - all Arthurian. Legendary really. Then I suppose everything is still in full swing - knights, enchanters, dragons, giants - '

Ninette looked surprised. 'Naturally. The usual Arthurian way of life. Who rules your mythical kingdom, Sam ?'

'Nominally, a queen, Elizabeth the Second,' Sam told her. 'But actually, the executive committees of the Conservative and Labour Parties, the Trades Union Congress, the Federation of British Industries, the Bow Group, the Fabian Society -'

Ninette laughed so much she spilt some wine on the roast swan, 'Sam darling, do stop it, I know you're making it up.'

Lovely stuff ! And there is still more fun when Sam is required to fight the dragon in order to win Melicent's hand and the two of them, together with the King, consult an old manuscript which gives instructions about how to deal with the different kinds of dragon ('It says here that if the beast be shovel-tail, then you must crouch low and to the left when it makes its first spring. Do you think you can remember that, darling ?')

A *jeu d'esprit* if ever there was one - and the most charming of gifts for anyone's granddaughters.

(Like *Jenny Villiers*, *The Thirty-First of June* started as a stage play : it was produced in February, 1957 in the Old Theatre at, of all places, the London School of Economics. But no doubt because it proved to have no commercial possibilities (the staging and special effects are quite elaborate) Priestley converted it into fiction. As regards its potential for other media Klein comments that 'there were inquiries for French television and radio rights, and several film companies seriously considered it, two going to the length of paying considerable sums for the film option, though no film was made. In 1962 someone wanted to adapt the story as a musical, which likewise did not materialise, but in December 1982 (another source gives May 1983) the BBC transmitted a 90-minute radio adaptation.' According to IMDb ('Earth's Biggest Movie Database') there is also a 1978 Russian TV film version, *31 iyunya*.

Klein quotes the present writer's favourable verdict (among others that are favourable) in *The Novels of J B Priestley A Short Guide* and then punctures that verdict comprehensively : 'It seems to me the weakest, most superficial and most lame work of prose fiction in the Priestley canon.' More than, say, *Faraway* ? One man's meat..... But contrary views are the proper stuff of criticism.)

THE SHAPES OF SLEEP 1962

Towards the end of his career as a novelist Priestley produced a number of books which give the impression of a desire on his part to 'keep his hand in' (and perhaps move with the times) rather than having any sort of inspirational motivation. This is such a novel. It is basically the sort of investigatory mystery thriller that moves briskly from one locale to another and in which the principal character is either a private investigator or a secret agent. In either case he will be outwardly hard-boiled, inwardly sympathetic and be ready at any moment to desert his post for the bedroom - a melange of, say, Ian Fleming, Raymond Chandler (from an older tradition), John le Carre and Len Deighton.

Here the hero, or anti-hero, is Ben Sterndale, a journalist down on his luck and with a failed marriage behind him. He is invited by a friend who works in an advertising agency to find a sheet of green paper with some figures on it which has been stolen from the desk of the agency's Head. Sterndale accepts but after making some progress the latter calls off the deal. Sterndale is then, however, invited by the boss's boss to continue the investigation and is offered a handsome payment, and a job in the organisation, for his trouble. Again he accepts and follows the trail to West Germany, a trail that gets steadily more complicated as various characters with various motives, honourable and otherwise, cross and re-cross his path : Wanda Brent, an American sociologist; Max Atlan, a homosexual night club singer; Dr Kirchner and Sir Frederick Axdown, who turn out to be members of an organisation devoted to combating political and commercial brainwashing; Professor Martin Voss, a Communist agent whose experimental, so-called 'shapes of sleep' might, in the organisation's view, be used for such a purpose; and Major Churton-Spencer, ostensibly a member of the Secret Service, in reality a double agent working for nobody but himself.

For much of its length this is an entertaining, if undemanding, 'read', in which Priestley is quite successful in creating the ambience of the genre but spoils it with a rather weak ending to the increasingly labyrinthine plot. There is also a slightly curious tailpiece in which Sterndale discusses the state of modern marriage and women's place in the world with his advertising agency friend and the latter's wife. Not one of the author's better or more interesting novels, and his description of those present in a homosexual night-club in Hamburg is about as far from dear old Bruddersford as it can be.

SIR MICHAEL AND SIR GEORGE 1964

Sir Michael Stratherrick is the Director of COMSA - the National Commission for Scholarship and the Arts. Sir George Drake occupies a similar post in DISCUS - the Department of Information and Cultural Services. In other words they are deadly rivals in the world of public subsidised arts, each partly jealous, partly contemptuous of the other's

position. And whereas Sir George is a sober administrative civil servant who is not particularly interested in the arts, Sir Michael is a libidinous Highland Scot with no great love of administration. Moreover, his afternoons and evenings are spent as far as possible in the company of one or the other of his numerous lady friends, amongst whom is numbered Alison, wife to Sir George. Sir Michael is not the marrying type but when Tim Kemp, an ex-employee of COMSA, now with DISCUS, plants a beautiful young typist onto the COMSA staff Sir Michael's carefree existence is shattered. And as the two organisations try to out-manoeuvre each other Her Majesty's Treasury already has plans to abolish both and set up a new, expanded arts department within the Ministry of Higher Education with its Head ranking as an Under Secretary.....(Not a Deputy Secretary, JB ?)

As will be clear this is a full-blown satire on arts councils, which is replete with characteristic Priestley barbs directed at the whole world of contemporary arts and those who support them with the public's money, not forgetting civil service types and politicians generally. It must be said that Priestley is aiming at some easy targets although his critics will no doubt - and with some justification - point to this novel as a damning indictment of his reactionary approach to modern drama, yesterday's playwright sulking grumpily in his tent. Nevertheless, he makes some arguable points for those who may or may not be the true philistines. There is, for example, a highly amusing episode when Sir Michael reluctantly attends the British premiere of an *avant garde* American play in a Midlands town, satirising not only such plays but the more austere type of modern playhouse. Sir Michael also voices what is no doubt Priestley's view, again a barbed one, of the Establishment's attitude to the arts when he meets the improbably named man from the Treasury, I B C T N Jones ('Most people here don't give a damn about scholarship and the arts, and they include nearly all the men who are running the country. They may pretend to, but they don't really care.')

The description of the in-fighting and back-biting of the rival organisations provides a fair quota of amusement although Priestley seems to sympathise with, as much as he savages, his various characters. These

include, apart from the COMSA and DISCUS types, quite a rich little gallery : the aged composer Mountgarret Camden (what a name !), who achieves the unique feat of discomforting the two knights simultaneously; the eccentric Lady Bodley-Common, who wants either COMSA or DISCUS to help her turn a large mansion she owns in Derbyshire into an artists' colony; the appallingly rude but, to Alison Drake, dangerously fascinating painter Ned Greene; and the six larger-than-life members of the O'Moore West of Eire Touring Company. Rejected by DISCUS the O'Moores are sponsored privately by Sir Michael and Tim Kemp, who proceed to make a small fortune out of them - very much, one suspects, with the author's approval.

Although it never quite escapes from the impression of being rather too lightweight and the unlikely romance between Sir Michael and the slightly unbelievable typist, Shirley Essex, seems to belong to another sort of story this is one of Priestley's more entertaining post-War novels. Moreover the public subsidisation of the arts has continued to be controversial ever since Priestley wrote this novel.

'What do you think of the theatre ? They're tremendously proud of it here.'

'You mean about a hundred people are proud of it, and the other six hundred thousand are either hostile or indifferent. For once I join the majority,' Sir Michael continued, with that relish with which we taste our prejudices. 'I'm old-fashioned - very square - about theatres. I really like pretty lights, red velvet, cupids round the dress circle, that kind of thing. These overgrown lecture halls for schools of surgery make me feel bored or depressed, even before their plays have begun. They're so grimly functional that they're like extensions of the new factories round here. But then you know more about that than I do, Jeff. Do you remember how, just before a play began, the footlights magically illuminated the lower folds of the curtain, and how the music from the orchestra below began to fade ? Now there's no curtain, no music, and often no play. Well let's see.'

'Tremendous success off-Broadway,' Byrd muttered as the auditorium darkened.

After twenty minutes of 'The Dummies' Sir Michael was so bored that he tried to think about something else, anything that was not supposed to be happening in New York between a young man, who shouted, and a young woman, who whispered, obviously falling in love. There were only these two characters. All the others were dummies. You had to guess what they were saying - and either it was too easy or impossible - by the responses, shouted or whispered, of the young man and the young woman. Once again, he reflected with no particular satisfaction, the avant garde had been trapped into trying to make a full-length play out of an idea for a ten-minute sketch for a highbrow revue...Meanwhile, dummies came, dummies went, the young man shouted, the young woman whispered, and the skyscrapers winked above the skeleton sets. And at last the one interval, thank God !

Well, there *are* such theatres and such plays !

LOST EMPIRES 1965

It is always heartening when very late in life a writer (or, indeed, any sort of creative artist) suddenly produces a work as superior as those of his early maturity. Priestley was turned 70 when he wrote *Lost Empires*, a novel which reaches and even surpasses the high level of *Bright Day*, written nearly two decades earlier. And although it could be argued that he was merely swimming with the tide of public acceptance of a franker attitude towards sex in literature and the other arts his introduction of this rather over-familiar subject into his work here has a sense of rightness that, in literary terms, is wholly admirable. Moreover he returns to ground on which he proved in *Bright Day* to be at his most convincing - the remembrance of characters and experiences in that period just before the First World War when one sort of life was going out for good and another, at once determinedly worse and infinitely better, was waiting to emerge.

Priestley's Empires are not those of Colonial expansion - or exploitation - but the variety theatres, great and small, splendid and shabby, which were to be found in cities and towns all round the country and are now no more. Into these steps his hero, Richard Herncastle, an aspiring young painter from the West Riding who, on the death of his mother,

agrees to join a troupe of theatrical artists led by his uncle, Nick Ollanton, otherwise 'Ganga Dun', a successful mock-Indian magician and illusionist. The long narrative describes Herncastle's life on the stage from October 1913 to August 1914 when he joins the Army and leaves his uncle and the variety theatre for good.

It is Priestley's purpose to depict the outwardly glamorous but in reality rather shabby world of the footlights where genuine talent and heady success are inextricably mixed up with desperate mediocrity and bitter failure; friendship, affection and companionship uneasily cohabit with animosity, malevolence and violence; easy promiscuity can lead to dangerous sexual tensions; and tedious Monday morning band calls, fickle audiences, dreary lodgings and tedious Sunday journeys have to be endured as the price to be paid for applause and success. In this purpose Priestley succeeds admirably and although, as ever, true love wins through in the end there is, first, for Herncastle a tempestuous but inherently loveless affair with the beautiful and worldly Julie Blane, an incitement to sexual corruption and being an accessory after the fact of a murder. *Lost Empires* has a far harsher tone than is to be found in any other of Priestley's novels.

The author's treatment of sex is integral to the novel's period, characters and ambience. The narrator is Herncastle himself and there is a striking passage where he sets out the general attitude to sex at the time and his own feelings about it ('I don't say that when I accepted Uncle Nick's offer to join him, I had sex in mind, but I did very soon find myself infected by a confused sexual excitement, an increasing sense of anticipation, that made hypocritical bosh out of my pretence that I wanted to get to know everybody and be friendly. All I really cared about were the two girls and the woman.')

The two girls are Cissie Mapes, Uncle Nick's assistant and his mistress, and Nancy Ellis a pretty young dancer, who proves to be Herncastle's true love. But it is Julie Blane, the assistant and mistress of the comedian Tommy Beamish, who is the most vibrant expression of this sexuality. In another key passage Nick Ollanton, who, in his disconcerting mixture of ruthlessness, misanthropy, loyalty and compassion,

is one of the author's most memorable character creations, brutally places Julie Blane in context ('She was a good actress and began playing leading parts. But then she took to the bottle.....She was drinking so hard that one night she fell flat on her face on the stage of the Comedy Theatre. Then it was goodbye to the West End. She had to take what she could get, and what she got was Tommy Beamish, twice-nightly on the stage and once-nightly, but with trimmings, round the bed.')

Eventually the inevitable happens and Herncastle, having seen Nancy apparently going out of his life, begins his ill-fated affair with Julie. Their first sexual encounter is described by Priestley with a compelling sense of the erotic. And he is equally convincing in, for example, the way in which he sees the 'worm in the bud' of an audience's reaction to Beamish's antics as a comedian. But there is a dark and dangerous side to him which Herncastle all too clearly perceives ('He made me feel sometimes that behind that droll mask, through which he glanced so restlessly, was an awful blank desert where he really existed, among bleached bones in a cruel emptiness, without innocence, with hope all gone. And at these times I felt he hated us all, even Julie.')

It is this sort of passage, with its clear perception of the disparity between appearance and reality, that helps to lift *Lost Empires* into something of a class of its own among Priestley's novels. In sum, this is a work in which the septuagenarian but still vigorous writer discards his secondary roles of social reformer, moralising humanist, political propagandist and licensed jester and concentrates with outstanding success on the simple art of story telling. With its rich gallery of larger-than-life but believable characters (some of whom have a distinctly Dickensian air about them), its wide variety of incident, its vivid sense of place, atmosphere and period and, above all, its wide range of mood and feeling this, finally, ranks as the very finest of all his novels.

Something happened then that was never to happen again. For several moments, while she smiled and kept silent and I never spoke a word, I took in her beauty as I might have done that of a landscape or a noble picture, outside desires, without wanting to possess her. Nowadays we live in a world of

nudes and semi-nudes, of tanned arms and shoulders, calves and thighs, so often exposed and browned that their skin seems like a kind of clothing; but then, when women were covered from top to toe, a nakedness like this was an extraordinary revelation, as if a living statue, pearly, opalescent, faintly glowing, had miraculously stepped out of the dark huddle of clothes. And Julie really was beautiful in her nakedness. Below the loosened dark hair and the delicate, slightly ravaged face, her body was full, almost opulent; the firm half-globes of her breasts a surprise after those hollow cheeks; her thighs magnificent above the rounded knees, very feminine and having a kind of touching innocence, that she was keeping pressed together; and I had time even to wonder why painters could have offered us a sort of pinkish pulp instead of that dark triangle of pubic hair which gave the intricate pale rose-and-gold modelling of the body the final sharp accent it needed.

.....

He had to make a very funny exit during the sketch, to examine a bathroom while the fuming father and bewildered daughter wondered what kind of lunatic they were having to endure; and I remember that at the Tuesday second house, his eyes gleaming, followed by the huge hard rattle of laughter, he stopped near to me to get his breath and to slow down for his next entrance, when he would be quiet and bewildered, a man lost in a strange world.

'Listen to that, old boy,' he panted. 'Just listen to it. Eh ?'

'It's tremendous.'

'So it is - so it is. It's what I'm here for. But - I'll tell you something - old boy. It's the cruellest bloody sound in the world - just people laughing like that. Gives me the creeps sometimes. Well - on we go !'

And then as he crept back on the stage, his face a mask of bewilderment deepening to despair, and the huge hard rattle rose again, I knew what he meant. It wasn't innocent and natural, as the soft laughter between friends could be; there was something fierce and vindictive about it, not coming from a happy people but from those whose bewilderment deepening to despair was not a mask; and I noticed after that, as we played in so many different towns, that the poorer and darker the streets surrounding us, the closer we were to misery, the louder and harder the laughter was.

(For a more detailed appraisal of this novel readers are directed to another publication of The J B Priestley Society - *All The World's A Stage A Critical Guide to Lost Empires.*

Few, if any, of Priestley's novels have more potential for film treatment than *Lost Empires*. Victor Saville, who had directed the first film version of *The Good Companions*, acquired the film and television rights but over a period of some 20 years failed to exploit them. Eventually, in 1985, the Cambridge Theatre Company, in association with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, presented a musical version in an adaptation by the experienced Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, and with music by Denis King. It was an ingenious production and a gallant and by no means unsuccessful attempt to capture the essence of the novel even though its deeper elements, perhaps inevitably, failed to come through. There is evidence that the touring production (with a capable, but non-star, cast) was not a commercial success (when the present writer caught up with it in Darlington the audience was insubstantial) and it never reached the Old Vic Theatre in London, for which it was originally intended.

At about the same time Granada Television (which had achieved considerable success with their blockbuster series *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*) announced the production of a £3million eight-hour dramatisation by Ian Curteis and this was screened in 1986, two years after Priestley's death. Directed by Alan Grint, it was a sumptuous, perhaps too sumptuous, production which was generally faithful to the novel although the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* (in both of which Priestley himself appears as a narrator/character) were understandably omitted. The cast is a large and interesting one : Colin Firth (Richard Herncastle - the actor was then comparatively unknown but now seems to appear in every other British film and achieved his greatest success as Mr Darcy in the BBC's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*); John Castle (a wonderfully sardonic Nick Ollanton); Gillian Bevan (excellent as the pathetic but lovable Cissie Mapes); Brian Glover (Tommy Beamish); Carmen du Sautoy (Julie Blane); Laurence Olivier (the biggest name, as the ill-fated Harry Burrard); Beatie Edney (Nancy Ellis); and Pamela Stevenson and Alfred Marks as the corrupt

and repellent duo Lily Farris and Otto Mergen, who, with Tommy Beamish, show that Priestley could create evil characters. The series was shot in a number of locations, including the beautiful Buxton Opera House. Klein states that it was 'apparently not too well done or received' although no evidence is adduced to support this. In the opinion, admittedly a biased one, of the present writer it certainly was well done and yielded only to *The Jewel in the Crown* (possibly the best classic TV drama series ever) in overall quality. If, indeed, it was not well received by the critics and the viewing public this may be because the latter, particularly, while seeming never to tire of TV adaptations of Jane Austen's novels (which come up with monotonous regularity) is simply not interested in stories about the old-time variety theatres; nor, since the TV version of *The Good Companions* was also not a success, those about end-of-pier concert parties.

Significantly, the DVD version of the series has so far not been released in Britain, although it has been available from the United States in a Region 1 format. When the series was shown on television in the latter country, each episode was introduced in enthusiastic terms by no less than Alistair Cooke. (It might be added that when, prior to its conversion to DVD, Granada Television was approached about supplying a single copy on video-cassette it quoted a price of £2,400. The imported DVD cost something like £27, including shipping.)

In 1994, for the Priestley Centenary, the BBC broadcast a version on radio but, predictably, this has never been released commercially. Tom Baker, a one-time *Doctor Who*, played Nick Ollanton.

It is hoped that *Lost Empires* may be included in the Great Northern Books series of re-issues of some of Priestley's major works. This might provide the spur to the release of the DVD version in Britain or even a new transmission. Perhaps it could then be re-evaluated.)

SALT IS LEAVING 1966

This novel, unusually - if not uniquely - in the author's output, was first published in paperback. A murder mystery, it finds Priestley rather far from his usual territory but amply demonstrates his versatility and, by any reckoning, is both expertly written and a 'good read'.

The Salt of the title is a young-to-middle-aged GP in a Midlands town who is ready to leave it for good when he discovers that one of his patients, a girl called Noreen Wilks, who is suffering from a kidney disease, has unaccountably gone missing. Simultaneously, Maggie Culworth, the daughter of an elderly bookshop owner in the next town, becomes concerned about *his* sudden disappearance. When these two events become linked Salt and Maggie team up and the plot traces their attempts to unravel a mystery that involves murder, suicide, corruption, sex natural and unnatural, attempted blackmail and intimidation. Anything else would seem too much of a good thing. For Priestley, the style tends uncharacteristically and not always absolutely convincingly towards the colloquial and the racy - what with good time girls, minor hoodlums and the occasional expletive. More recognisable is his penchant for romantic liaisons (two in this case) and social comment (the dreariness of English provincial life, the dubious amenities of modern hotels, the aimless pursuit of night-time pleasures). *Salt is Leaving* is the stuff of hundreds of contemporary paperback entertainments and TV serials but what lifts it slightly above the average (apart from the social comment) is the detailed characterisation of Salt himself and the development of his relationship with Maggie. No doubt this is just the sort of potboiler that has led Priestley's detractors - the literary intelligentsia - not to regard him too seriously as a novelist. His admirers are likely to take a more tolerant view.

(A projected - and updated - TV adaptation sadly appears to have run into the ground. But given the inordinately long time these things apparently take to reach the screen nowadays perhaps there is still hope.

A BBC radio adaptation was broadcast in September 1975.)

IT'S AN OLD COUNTRY 1967

The 'Old Country' is England and it is a journey to it and subsequently through parts of it that Tom Adamson, an Australian university lecturer, makes in search of his father, who abandoned the family 30 or more years earlier in the course of a career as an actor and painter. In his travels in London, the Midlands and the West Country Adamson meets and visits all sorts of disagreeable, as well as, agreeable people and places. Eventually he finishes up in a Devon village where he finds not only his father, now working as an hotel bar waiter, but himself and, in a typically Priestley fashion, the love of just the sort of lively, essentially warm-hearted girl he wants and needs.

In truth, this is, as a piece of story telling, rather on the tedious side since neither of the Adamsons is intrinsically interesting as a character. But as the title suggests the *real* central character is England - or perhaps Britain - of the 1960s (as others of the author's novels have been at least partly about the Britain of earlier decades). Here is Priestley in his familiar role of social observer and commentator extending a line that goes back at least to his documentary *English Journey*, written in the early 1950s. And again, as is his custom, he likes little of what he - mainly through Adamson - sees. In one particularly trenchant passage his central character describes a new-style variety club in the Midlands with a disgust that marks out Priestley, not for the first time in his work, as basically a moralist - for surely it is he who is pronouncing judgement.

In another passage a member of the younger generation whom Adamson meets gives a view of life in the 1960s that is full of confusion and doubt and contradiction ('Half the people I know think the spades - y'know, the coloureds - ought to be thrown out, and the other half think they're all bloody marvellous. So where are you ?')

But then Priestley reminds his readers that he is also something of a non-conformist and a non-Party man in his own very particular way. When Adamson meets an old military type the latter's predictable condemnation of modern youth provokes a spirited response in favour of 'the beat lads and girls' over those young people who 'pass all exam-

inations neatly and nicely on their way to the right degrees, are very careful and tactful, have no real opinions of their own, and you know will always say Yes to anybody in authority for the rest of their lives' It's an arguable proposition (would the country's well-being really be improved if many careful young people did *not* obtain the right degrees ?). Yet it *is* Priestley's own proposition - if we accept that he is speaking through his character. Again, his more vitriolic side re-emerges with a denunciation of the kitchen-sink-angry-young-man school of writers by Judy Marston, with whom Adamson falls in love.

Adamson decides that neither Australia nor England is really for him but that the role of a roving, international do-gooder might be. In a way this is the reverse of the decision of Joe Dinmore, the hero of Priestley's 1943 morality play *They Came to a City*, who declines to join what looks like an ideal community in favour of trying to improve the 'real world'.

It has to be said that, overall, *It's An Old Country* is - or might be seen to be - Priestley at his least endearing, with his grumpy and crotchety complaining at much that his principal characters experience. But he cannot be accused of inconsistency, for one of his most persistent themes has been the worst of England : the snobbishness and complacency of its class system; its bad food and bad hotels; the general dreariness and vulgarity of its provincial life; the awfulness of its 'smart' London cocktail parties; the hypocrisy of its party politicians and so on. However much one might be in sympathy with this view of England it is a pity that in *It's an Old Country* it gets rather too much of the upper hand - but at least the tone is unmistakable.

Now the keen dark man - it must be Vic - returned to the mike, and it was obvious at once that the act he announced, Dally and Dolly, marking their third triumphant appearance at the Club, was the event of the evening. Everybody there except Tom was waiting for Dally and Dolly, ready to be rolled down the aisle. Dally, a fattish middle-aged man with a grotesque wig, was rapturously received when he came on and pretended he was about to recite; and so was Dolly, a kind of battle-cruiser blonde, when she arrived to interrupt his recitation. From then on, all was laughter and glory. This was

the stuff for Vic and Molly's patrons. Tom was neither a prude nor a prig but he detested this pair as he had rarely detested any other performers. To begin with, they had no real talent, unless their knowledge of what would please their audience amounted to a talent. They had between them not even a suggestion of genuine wit and humour. Tom couldn't imagine them indulging in the tiniest bit of clowning when they were away from an audience. They were as far removed from gaiety, high spirits, authentic drollery, as a pair of money-lenders. They had learnt a lot of gags, some silly, some very dirty, and bashed and banged away with them to keep the Club roaring, yelling, screaming, applauding. The world out of which these gags came, the world it helped to create in that Club room, was a kind of hell of automatic and dreary lechery, of cheating husbands and suspicious wives, of sneering and sniggering and cheap cynicism, a grey and chilly hell without warmth and light or any real values of heart or mind. And this apparently was what the people there, the new English who were certain - foolishly, in Tom's opinion, and he knew more about it than they did - they had left all insecurity behind, wanted for their entertainment and delectation. They were now Dally and Dolly people.

THE IMAGE MEN 1968-69

If one excepts *Found, Lost, Found*, which is in any case more of a novella, *The Image Men* is Priestley's last novel. It also, somewhat surprisingly, became his favourite, superseding *Bright Day*. The paperback edition, which usefully combines the two volumes, entitled *Out of Town* and *London End*, in which format the novel was originally published, quotes an admiring assessment by Anthony Burgess, himself a novelist of repute. (And in his biography of the author, John Braine, his fellow Yorkshireman and novelist, refers to it in generally appreciative terms and quotes a favourable review in *The Bookman*.) Yet despite these impressive credentials the present writer considers that this is a badly flawed novel, although a richly textured and, in its way, a clever one.

The two principal characters are a pair of able, if slightly disreputable, middle-aged academics - Professor Cosmo Saltana, whose subject is philosophy, and Dr Owen Tuby, teacher of English language and literature and with an increasing interest in sociology. They find themselves out of luck and out of a job after many years abroad. They

meet Elfreda Drake, English widow of an American millionaire, who has come to Britain to set up a Sociology Foundation to complement one in Oregon. The three quickly become friends and Mrs Drake agrees to establish the two men as the Director and Deputy Director of the 'Institute of Social Imagistics' - dedicated to the devising of 'images' for people and products - with herself in charge of the business side. Initially they attempt to attach the Institute to the new University of Brockshire but when this is resisted by the University Establishment they turn themselves into a straightforward public relations agency - still specialising in 'images' - in London; whereupon they proceed to earn a small fortune by advising clients who include everyone from film stars to politicians and who want images for everything from fabrics to breakfast cereals, as well, of course, for themselves. Saltana's and Tuby's final coup is, separately and in mischievous conspiracy, to devise images for the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in preparation for the next General Election. In the end, happy and in love (Saltana with Elfreda, Tuby with Lois Terry, an English tutor at Brockshire) they sell out and decide to set up a sort of glorified 'Over 40s Institute of Further Education' in, of all places, the Isle of Man.

Structurally and stylistically, *The Image Men* is nearest to *Festival at Farbridge*, being a long, very long, rambling narrative in which a seemingly endless list of characters parades by, there is much drinking and general conviviality and the author displays his penchant for satire at the expense of everyone in authority or the public eye. But whereas the earlier novel largely and enjoyably survives its inordinate length and clutter of detail this one does not, basically because, having established the principal theme - the absurdity inherent in the very idea of 'image' - it does little more than vary it endlessly and repetitively. This is essentially why it is a flawed novel. Moreover, it is difficult quite to believe in many of the characters : Saltana and Tuby, for example, are portrayed as effortlessly clever and apparently irresistible to women (sex plays a not inconsiderable part in the novel) despite neither of them being very prepossessing physically. There is no doubt of Priestley's intentions - to expose mercilessly the shallowness and cynicism of the 1960s, not to mention the unending pomposity of politicians, and to do it entertainingly. But although the book has some delightfully comic in-

terludes it succeeds in its satirical intent no better than, say, *Sir Michael and Sir George*, or even *Low Notes on a High Level* and lacks their relative, and welcome, brevity. Put another way it might have been just as effective or even more so at half its length.

Reference to a few passages will give the novel's essential flavour. In one Tuby tries to convince the doubters at Brockshire University of the importance of various types of images :

Let us say you have projected your party leader as a modest fellow, a family man, a decent quiet chap really. But there are crises. At home and abroad, the scene is darkening - 'Light thickens and the crow wings home to the rooky wood.' Your only chance now is the 'Reverse Image'. You project the huge, bold, defiant, born leader of men.

The fact that Tuby makes all this up on the spot illustrates the novel's underlying strain of cynicism. And in another foray Saltana is found working on the image of Simon Birtle, a newspaper magnate:

But the truth is, if you don't mind my saying so, Mr Birtle has chosen - and is still busy projecting - quite the wrong image. I'm not blaming him. He might be said to have inherited the image with his career. It's the Napoleonic image of the newspaper proprietor. Harmsworth began it and probably took the title of Northcliffe so that he could use the Napoleonic initial - N. This tradition has been closely followed, and your husband is one of the latest victims of it. This image demands a dictatorial style, an over-bearing manner, policies really based on sudden whims, wild alternations of parsimony and generosity, of camaraderie and savage tyranny, roars and insults on Monday and cheek-pinching on Tuesday - the whole Napoleonic outfit. It's no longer a good image, from any point of view, and your husband should not only change it but completely reverse it.

In the same vein is the 'image' treatment accorded Ben Hacker, a TV interviewer, which resonates even today when members of his tribe sometimes adopt an overbearing or inquisitorial manner very liable to alienate viewers. And Saltana sums up the purpose of the London-based agency in terms that are downright cynical - but, at least, honest

Apart from doing an occasional favour for a friend, what we want here is

- money. We leave public service, the good of the common weal, to our clients. What we propose is to screw as much out of them as we can. So - again of course excluding friends - if they look like money, we want them. If they don't, turn them away.

And this was when a Labour government was in power, when the idealism of the wartime and early post-war period was but a distant memory. One senses, as so often in Priestley's later novels, that it is the author's own view of the times which is being expressed here.

When, near the end of the novel, the two likeable rascals get to work on the Party leaders Priestley, using them, we suppose, as his mouthpiece, strikes home with heartless but devastating accuracy. This is Tuby speaking of the Leader of the Opposition :

His audiences, especially on television, are mostly incapable of giving serious consideration to such thoughts, opinions, conclusions, because they're not really politically-minded and anyhow most of the problems we have to solve are now far too complicated.

The overall tone of *The Image Men* - and this can only be the view of the present writer - is essentially related to Priestley in, of and on Britain of the 1960s, with which, one suspects, he was clearly out of sorts, as, indeed, he seemed to be with Britain from 1951 onwards. (The advent of a Conservative government in that year no doubt had something to do with it.) A final subjective opinion is that we read him here with interest and sometimes with admiration and delight but the best of him, the novelist, emphatically lies elsewhere.

(Hardback sales of the novel were 'piteously little', to quote Klein, and, like so many of Priestley's novels, failed to produce either a film or television adaptation - except in Poland !)

FOUND, LOST, FOUND 1976

Found, Lost Found or *The English Way Of Life* is Priestley's last novel and, indeed, his last work of fiction. Dedicated 'with great affection' to one of his biographers, Susan Cooper, it is the lightest of lightweight works that reads, in its mere 135 pages, rather like a series of revue sketches with, here and there, dialogue which might have come out of a Marx Brothers film.

The story concerns Tom Dekker, a fairly senior but still youngish civil servant in the 'Ministry of Export Development and Promotion' (MEDEP ?), who suffers from something of a drink problem and a distressing tendency, for one of his kind, not to take his duties or his life seriously enough. Sent on six weeks sick leave he meets Kate Rapley, a budding female playwright, who, like him, is a divorcee. They become friendly, but uncertain of herself and of her feelings for Dekker, Kate tells him that she is going into the country. She will not say where or with whom and challenges him - in a reforming spirit - to find her, with the promise of 'a beautiful welcome' if he succeeds. He accepts the challenge, does succeed (naturally) and so gets the welcome, the nature of which will be fairly evident.

Here we are yet again journeying through Priestley's England, but for once the arrows are only lightly tipped with venom : psychiatrists, bogus Italian restaurants, the 'Community Research Social Science Council', amateur dramatics, pop groups, movie types, women's lib, trade union officials, Empire loyalists, spurious fortune tellers, trendy theatre directors who 'interpret' Shakespeare in contemporary terms - all these get the treatment. Here is one of the last-named doing his worst :

Batters had begun explaining his production of As You Like It for some University town in the Middle West. 'From the first I'd cut all that boring Forest of Arden stuff. My Arden was a little town in the Middle West.'

'Modern dress then, naturally,' said Ripkin.

'Not quite, old boy. About 1910. I was trying to tie it up to one of the earliest

motorbike rallies in those parts. The Duke was a senior official of the rally who's had to resign. And now listen to this. Against a lot of opposition, I insisted upon taking out all the middle seats and building an easy ramp from the back up to the apron, so the cast could enter through the audience on motorbikes-'

'Now wait a minute, Batters old son. Don't tell me you had the cast riding motorcycles up a ramp-'

'Not possible of course. I'd only four chaps who could manage that ramp, but what with helmets and goggles and leather togs nobody knew who they were. They rode off on the prompt side and then after a minute the people playing Rosalind and Celia and Touchstone and Orlando and Jacques made their entrances.'

'What about trees and deer and all that jazz ?'

'Out - the lot. That worked okay. After all, the people round there had never seen any big trees or deer. Moreover, I did some original casting. Not only did I have a young actor playing Rosalind - as they did at the National a few years ago - but I also had a girl playing Orlando - and I don't believe that's ever been done before, outside girls' schools of course. Created a sensation - that and the motorbikes. I've got another year's contract.'

It's all very inconsequential but a nice way for the 82-year-old author to sign off his 50 years as novelist.

PRIESTLEY AS NOVELIST

A Personal Re-assessment

I never think of myself primarily as a novelist, I'm not sure I'm a very good novelist. I'm a very good writer, but I'm not sure the novel is the form that expresses me best, I don't think it does.

Priestley made that public statement in 1979, only five years before his death, when he was in a position to look back and survey what had been a long, influential and eminently successful career as a writer and public figure. At the same time Ronald Harwood, himself a writer, who had adapted Priestley's most famous novel, *The Good Companions*, as a musical play, commented that 'I think Priestley does himself an injustice, I think he's fallen into a contemporary fashionable trap about denigrating himself as a novelist'.

So how is Priestley nowadays rated as a novelist ? Here is one indication :

1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die, whose General Editor is Peter Boxall, was published as recently as 2006. Its fly leaf states, *inter alia*, 'From the popular drama of Louisa May Alcott to the stomach-churning cult fiction of Chuck Palahniuk you'll find critiques of the most important and best-selling fiction ever written'

Not one work of fiction by J B Priestley is included. And these are 1,001 books, not 101.

It cannot, I think, be denied that nowadays and, indeed, for a long time Priestley's standing as a novelist has been way below that as a dramatist. A relatively large number of his 48 stage plays, with the emphasis on *An Inspector Calls*, *When We Are Married* and *Dangerous Corner*, are performed every year by amateur theatre groups, including those abroad. In 2007 there were 110 notified productions in this sector. Abroad, plays have been recently performed in countries as far apart as Spain and Singapore. Also in recent years there has been a steady stream

of professional productions, with important and widely praised revivals of neglected plays like *The Linden Tree* and *The Glass Cage*. The critical and commercial success of the Royal National Theatre's 1992 production of *An Inspector Calls* has been nothing short of phenomenal and this play is currently undergoing a long run at the Shaw Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada.

Compare all that with the situation of the novels. For a long period up to two years ago, out of the 29 novels identified by Klein only *The Good Companions* was in print and that not continuously. Only three of the novels (*Benighted, The Good Companions* and *Let The People Sing*) have been filmed, compared with five of the plays (*Dangerous Corner, Laburnam Grove, When We Are Married, They Came to a City* and *An Inspector Calls*). Only three, *The Good Companions, Angel Pavement* and *Lost Empires*, have been adapted for television, whereas at least seven of the plays were televised by the BBC between 1974 and 1994. (The fact that none has been televised since then testifies to BBC TV's complete abandonment of classic English drama of the 20th century.)

I may say that in referring to these statistics I am deliberately ignoring foreign language film and television versions of the novels as they have no currency in this country and their credentials cannot therefore be examined.

But it is no use admirers of Priestley's fiction bemoaning the facts. Actions speaks louder than words. That is why what happened in the autumn of 2006, to which reference is made in the Introduction, is so heartening.

A considered re-assessment of Priestley's novels, with no false claims, is what is needed to encourage a revival of interest. This book and, within it, the re-assessment that follows are intended to be a contribution to a wider debate. I hope that others will add to that debate.

Priestley's novels offer no sense of sustained progression or development. Rather, they tend to give the impression of being written very much 'one at a time', forming, as they do, only a relatively small

part of a vast literary output that also took in not only plays but essays, travel books, screenplays, biographies and autobiographies and much else. Priestley's industry was truly prodigious. In some cases there is evidence of an obvious care and commitment to the task of writing a novel, first and foremost; in others, there is a suggestion that the author is writing 'to order' or with at least the secondary aim of serving a social, moral or political, rather than an essentially literary, purpose; in at least one other case haste or impatience is detectable (*They Walk in the City*). The infusion of what I have called 'at least the secondary aim' represents both a strength and a weakness. The strength is precisely that the infusion (of what might also be called 'the other Priestleys') provides an added interest and relevance - part of Priestley's extraordinarily wide vision of the times in which he lived. This is not something one finds in the novels of Graham Greene, to quote an obvious contemporary. The weakness is equally precisely that this 'role playing' sometimes assumes such a dominance that it seriously detracts from the novel's worth as a novel - it 'gets in the way'. This is one reason why Greene, with his avoidance of external themes, is by some way the better novelist overall.

As early as *The Good Companions* there is a glimpse of Priestley, the political radical and social commentator, in his description of the fictitious but symbolically recognisable town of Tewborough. In *Wonder Hero* these elements are even more marked and, indeed, the savage indictment of 'popular' journalism and the contrast drawn between the almost obscene affluence of London's West End on the one hand and the appalling decay of the industrial North on the other are the most striking features of an otherwise unremarkable novel. Yet the contemporaneous documentary *English Journey* is an even better exposition of the sharp contrasts that characterised England (and by extension Britain) in the 1930s - and were still present in the England of the time when Priestley died.

With *Let the People Sing* the social comment is incorporated into a more light-hearted narrative (with its echoes of *The Good Companions* and its adumbration of *Festival at Farbridge*) But it also emphasises, in the shadow of a world war, Priestley's espousal of the 'ordinary people',

whom he sees as victims of social, commercial and industrial exploitation, deserving of something better in their lives. (The young couples in both *Wonder Hero* and *They Walk in the City* are natural members of this great mass of English citizenry.) This espousal is continued in the three novels written to a wartime background, *Black-Out in Gretley*, *Daylight on Saturday* and *Three Men in New Suits*. These all, to varying degrees, make clear Priestley's political creed - unimpeachably patriotic but very much a radical and an angry and even bitter one at that.

With the ending of the war and the emergence of a Labour Government a note of optimism appears - as in *Three Men in New Suits* and *Bright Day* (insofar as this relates to the post-war period). This optimism is celebrated in full flower in *Festival at Farbridge* as the 'ordinary people' (and those who, like 'Commodore' Tribe, identify with them) defeat the philistines in the battle to bring colour and gaiety - if only briefly - to a somewhat beleaguered and drab post-war Britain.

With Priestley's next novel, *The Magicians* (written after a gap of three year) a distinct change of tone occurs as the author's clear disillusionment with Britain in the 1950s manifests itself. This disillusionment recurs constantly in the later novels. Sometimes it is expressed in terms of relatively benign satire, as in *Sir Michael and Sir George*; at other times, as in *The Image Men*, it has a harder, more cynical edge; at yet others, as in *It's an Old Country*, Priestley eschews the leavening element of satire altogether in favour of an ill-concealed disgust. Politicians (of course), industrialists, academics, trade union leaders, media people, artists, entertainers, even the 'ordinary people', all receive a lashing. And it is this external preoccupation with the shortcomings of Britain in the 1950s and 60s that gives some of Priestley's novels of the period this interesting, sometimes striking, extra dimension yet reduces his stature as a novelist. While not wishing to press the matter unduly it is something of a relief to turn to the good-humoured pages of *Low Notes on a High Level* and *The Thirty-First of June*.

But what of the novels simply as novels ? Many have something to commend them without ever reaching the stature of major works.

Among these may be included, in chronological order, *Benighted*, for its interesting juxtaposition of Gothic horror melodrama (suitable for the cinematic treatment it actually received) and psychological study; *The Doomsday Men*, for it main setting of the Mohave Desert and its prophetic foretaste, expressed in terms of a fantastic thriller, of some unimaginable disaster; *Let the People Sing*, for its cheerful and warm-hearted escapism with a social message, suitable for a people about to be faced with a long, wearying and costly war; *Three Men in New Suits*, for its quietly moving portrayal of the people (the 'ordinary people') trying to adjust to the uncertainties of peace after that war; and *Sir Michael and Sir George*, for its entertaining and perceptive exposure of the way in which the State seeks to bureaucratize the arts.

Otherwise, the three determinedly light-hearted satires, *Low Notes on a High Level*, *The Thirty-First of June*, and *Found, Lost, Found* are so lightweight as hardly to qualify as novels at all but find the author in his most good-humoured (and often, indeed, most inventive) post-war mood. The second of these is quite delightful, a little gem - but perhaps in need of protection from too much critical analysis. Butterflies are easily crushed. *Jenny Villiers*, scarcely known, is more of a novella or a longer than average short story. Its effect is slight but evocative and intriguing.

Of the rest, *Adam in Moonshine* is a self-confessed unsuccessful first attempt at the form; *Faraway* suffers from too great a length (a not uncommon feature with Priestley), some uncharacteristically novelettish writing and plain narrative tedium - in sum, possibly his weakest novel; *The Magicians* is an interesting but rather muddled mishmash of a novel and a prime example of the author's unfortunate tendency to 'externalise'; and *Saturn Over The Water* is an over-written and, finally, rather unconvincing attempt at a modern international thriller with, like *The Doomsday Men*, apocalyptic overtones. *They Walk in the City* and *Wonder Hero* share the common theme of 'innocents abroad' (specifically London) but are more interesting for their background detail than as narratives, as is *It's an Old Country*. *Black-out in Gretley*, *Salt is Leaving* and *The Shapes of Sleep* are competent, readable but minor thrillers of no special distinction.

That leaves seven novels out of the 26 which are, I suggest, worthy of the most serious attention and upon which it seems to me Priestley's stature as a novelist rests.

The Image Men, longest of all the novels, presents a real difficulty : it is clearly a major work quite apart from its length and carries the imprimatur (rather fiercely asserted by him in a television film) of being the author's favourite. The intention is clear, the craftsmanship everywhere apparent and its vein of heartless satire sometimes funny and often clever. But for me it suffers from the fatal flaw of being much too long, too cluttered in detail and, above all, too repetitive in its endless variations on a single theme. Perhaps, to be fair to the author, my dislike of it rests with the society it depicts rather than the way in which the author depicts it. If so, I plead guilty to a possibly unworthy bias.

Daylight on Saturday is, by some way, the best of the three wartime novels and stands up well even outside its immediate context. It gives a most vivid and convincing picture (whether accurate or not) of the curiously 'other worldly' ambience of a wartime aircraft factory and of the people of all types and social classes who are obliged (or not) to work in it for a common cause. (Would that Britain could find such a common cause today !) The tensions of the characters' relationships in such claustrophobic surroundings are well caught and one senses that this was very much 'how it was' in what Priestley himself described as 'a citizen's war'. (It also reminds us of another truth that should not be ignored : that the men and women, some of them highly skilled, who worked in these factories contributed just as much to the war effort as those in uniform even if they were not on the front line and in constant danger.)

Were it not for (again) some clutter of detail and plain padding (with a great many references to alcoholic drink being consumed) *Festival at Farbridge* would rank among the very finest of Priestley's novels. It is nevertheless a hugely joyous and heart-warming (all right, sentimental) book written with tremendous gusto and containing some of the greatest - if not *the* greatest - passages of comedy that Priestley ever wrote. And let us not forget that he can be a very funny writer indeed.

If I could have only one Priestley novel with me of that desert island (the book to go with the eight gramophone records and a case of single malt whisky) I am not sure this would not be the one. A minor curse on those who cannot love it.

So we are left with *The Good Companions*, *Angel Pavement*, *Bright Day* and *Lost Empires* as Priestley's finest novels. Each bears the imprint of that care and commitment that I referred to earlier; each sustains its length without noticeable strain; each tells a memorable story of memorable characters, events and places; each has an emotional resonance and impact that engages the sympathetic reader from first to last.

The Good Companions, that millstone, albeit a profitable one, around Priestley's neck, those 'stumbling chronicles of a dream of life', would suffer (or perhaps suffer even more) from its immense fame were it not that its sheer memorability compels both affection and admiration, its sense of euphoria tinged even at the end with wisps of regret, a realisation that happiness can never be quite complete.

Angel Pavement, perhaps Priestley's most perfectly realised novel, is a marvellously detailed study, set against a meticulously observed background, of the way in which the sometimes sad, always fragile lives of some people, some 'ordinary people', can be cruelly shattered by the heartlessness of others.

Bright Day is no mere exercise in nostalgia, a poignant, bitter-sweet remembrance of things past, but a vivid and moving evocation of a particular place and period and of the gradual disintegration of a seemingly euphoric existence; but also of 'the crack in the wall' (a symbol at the end of the novel) that signals a new hope, a possible new emotional fulfilment.

Lost Empires is set in the same period as *Bright Day*'s principal narrative and is, if anything, even more vivid, depicting as it does a world in which surface gaiety and glitter hide an often harsh reality. In this novel Priestley shows us the darker side of the human condition more

persuasively than anywhere else in his output, not to mention a raw but compelling sexuality only hinted at in other novels. This, I suggest, is the novel most worthy of Olympic gold.

So how can Priestley best be summed up as a novelist ? There is ample evidence of his being devalued and even ignored by the literary intelligentsia on the grounds that he is a popular novelist - or, more precisely, a writer of (sometimes best-selling) 'popular novels' (in the genre sense) and thus not worthy of serious appraisal. But is a novel unworthy or lacking in substance because it is appreciated and held in affection by a great mass of, shall we term them, 'average readers' ? Does anyone ever suggest that the popularity of a Mozart symphony or opera in any way diminishes its worth ? Certainly, Priestley's novels are invariably easy to read and it is clear that he eschews any sort of deeply intellectual approach or literary experimentation. (Contrast some of the plays, which are much more significant in this respect.) His concern is rather to tell a good tale and if there are any embellishments they tend to take the form, as I have tried to illustrate, of social, political or moral comment or criticism, one suspects to his literary disadvantage. Throughout his immensely long and distinguished career as a writer he retained something of the image of the bluff, hard-headed, pipe-smoking, no-nonsense Yorkshireman, distrustful of Metropolitan sophistication and literary fastidiousness, for all his wanderings his heart still attached to the sometimes gentle, sometimes bleak beauty of the Yorkshire Dales, surely his true spiritual home. Somehow I, than whom he has no more devoted admirer, see him as, in one way, a romantic visionary who lost his vision (but not, happily, his love of life or sense of humour), but rather more as a sort of modern Dickens, a comparison I cannot think as being other to his credit (and Dickens, together with Shakespeare, clowns, tobacco, the Dales - and women were his passions). And is it not too fanciful to suggest that he also assumes - in another guise - the air of a literary Falstaff (one of his favourite characters) - gregarious, a lover of life and of living, delighting in harmless roguery, yet at the end more than a little sad and disillusioned ?

One can only regret that John Boynton Priestley was so prolific and

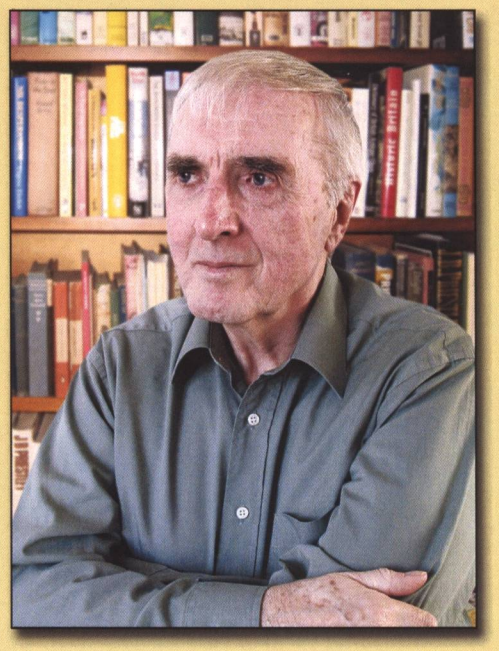
compulsive a writer (albeit, at his best, a very good one) that he did not have the fastidiousness to concentrate on writing fewer and more uniformly satisfactory novels. But that was the man and we must be grateful for his half dozen best novels, not to mention the many others that give real, if lesser, pleasure. No one else could so compellingly and with such a feeling for the passing parade of humanity have taken us from Bruddersford and its nearby moors and tarns on a 50-year journey through this land of England.

(A shorter version of this section of the book was first published in *By Tram From Bruddersford* (1999) published by The J B Priestley Society.)

The Novels of J B Priestley A Short Guide

What we have here...is not the type of sterile and pontifical criticism that eviscerates a novel, at inordinate length, ripping out all the pleasures, and replacing it with anguish and despair, but a warm appreciation of its merits, encouraging people to read the novel in question, not deterring them.

Alan Day
Editor-Compiler, Walford's Guide



As one of the founders and an Honorary Life Member of The J B Priestley Society Michael Nelson has been heavily involved in all aspects of the development of The Society, not least of which has been his production of a number of publications on various aspects of Priestley's writings. His short guide to Priestley's novels was already one of his earliest works but this revised edition is considerably longer than the original and this has allowed him to treat his subject in greater detail. In spite of a very full working life as a civil servant Michael's great love has always been writing and he was already a published author of a considerable number of short stories, articles and poems before membership of The Society gave him the freedom to write extensively about his favourite author. His adaptations of Priestley's works include *Time and the Family*, performed by The Hope Theatre Group in 2004, and The Uneasy Peace, which was staged at the 2006 Ilkley Literature Festival. It is sometimes said that life imitates art. In Michael's case he recalls that the staff at the office where he first worked after leaving school resembled the characters who people the offices of *Twigg and Dersingham* in Priestley's masterpiece *Angel Pavement*, proof, if this were needed, that Priestley had a great gift for portraying the characters of ordinary people

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