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## Working, travelling, and identity: J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934)

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### ABSTRACT

The motivation for travel is central to its form and content. This article addresses an under-represented area of travel writing: the travel text that results from a journey undertaken for work purposes. By considering J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* as a case-study, it argues that the text's critical reception, at first disorientated and confused, and later dominated by historical and political readings, has resulted from Priestley's emphasis on work rather than leisure. In his text Priestley explores the relationship of work and identity, and his own position as writer and traveller is central to this, symbolised in his preoccupation with the figure of the travelling salesman.

### KEYWORDS

Work; motivation; England; twentieth-century travel writing; cities

Writing a review of *English Journey* for *The Fortnightly Review* in May 1934, John Prioleau begins by expressing his confusion about the genre of Priestley's text:

Mr. Priestley has written a book on which it is difficult to express a judicious opinion as upon any non-fictional travel-book except the early Baedeker and other serious works of reference. Written in places in definitely guide-book mood, more than once in uncompromisingly guide-book style and phraseology, it is not exactly a guide-book, not quite a travel book. (Prioleau 1934, 629)

The remainder of Prioleau's review, "Mr. Priestley Sees it Through", whilst being largely positive, persists in its uncertainty about the various elements of which it is constituted. "Narrative, opinion, description, irony, humour go to the ambitious mixture that is *English Journey*, but they do not always blend well, and although some of the ingredients are of the first quality, many would have been better left out" (1934, 630). Prioleau was not the only reviewer or critic to be unsettled by the wide-ranging and challenging content of Priestley's text or to be unsure how to categorise it. While J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* has received considerable attention by scholars from disciplines such as social and political history, it has received less critical focus as a piece of travel writing than many of its contemporaries; and of the discussions of the text in the years since its publication in 1934, many early reviewers like Prioleau found it difficult to appraise, or have challenged its status as a piece of travel literature. In this article, I argue that this critical

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obfuscation is rooted in Priestley's subject matter, and its discordance with established notions of both travel writing and its authorship. Priestley's focus is work rather than leisure, and on the places of work, rather than naturally-existing or human-constructed aesthetic wonders.

The field of travel writing studies has been dominated by accounts from the extremes of a spectrum of privilege, ranging from narratives by leisured travellers to more recent considerations of writing by those forced to travel, around which there remains a debate as to whether their journeys can ever constitute 'travel' (hooks 1997, 343). An important group along this spectrum, and within which there are considerable contrasts and nuances, are those whose mobility is tied to their employment. Work is identified by John Urry in *Mobilities* (2007) as a motivating factor in four of the twelve categories of main mobility forms in the contemporary world and yet in the field of travel writing studies, the representation of and differentiation between categories of working travellers, travellers who work, and travellers who move to find work, has received little attention. Here, I focus on Priestley's preoccupation with employment in the text, his own work and that of others in the urban centres of Britain in the 1930s, and use *English Journey* as a case study to suggest that it allows us an insight into the identity or the typology of the traveller, expanding this beyond constructions of the traveller as leisured or self-directed. The theme of travelling and working draws attention to restrictions on mobility and the way in which we regard places differently if we travel for work.

J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* is saturated by working, both in terms of the motivation of its author, and his preoccupations within the text. In addition to the political and ideological inquiry underpinning his text, sites of work, that is industrial centres and places of production, structure the route. Furthermore, Priestley's accounts of serendipitous encounters with working people provide poignant vignettes to support his views about ordinary working life in Britain. Beyond this fascination with the working lives of others, Priestley uses the journey to explore his own metier, that of commissioned travel writer. Priestley refers frequently to the travelling salesmen, whom he finds himself alongside in his choice of hotels. A derided and slightly unseemly persona in whom the author finds resonance, the travelling salesman figure is a central motif in this text; someone like Priestley, who is judged of inferior class to his contemporaries, and whose presence is unsettling to others because of his simultaneous occupations of working and travelling.

Priestley's motivation for both his journey and the text is renowned. Priestley's text was one of several, including George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1934), commissioned by publisher Victor Gollancz. It was simultaneously commissioned by Heinemann as one of a series of travel texts, of which Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey* was a companion (Dodd 1982, 128). Chris Baldick, in his account of *The Modern Movement* (2004), roots Priestley's work in a general movement of knowledge gathering and sharing about industrial northern regions and about the situation of mass unemployment. Priestley's travel writing followed that of H.V. Morton, who had written two popular accounts of tours of England in the late 1920s. However, in contrast to Priestley and Orwell, Morton, while acknowledging labour conditions and industry in the north of England in his second book, largely focuses in the former on "an Olde England of ruins, relics, and survivals" (Baldick 2004, 312). Priestley's text, and that by Orwell and later articles by Aldous Huxley, had a grittier agenda, focussing on the life and landscapes of the north and Midlands, and commenting on the effects of the economic depression on Britain. In *The Book Window* in 1934, Priestley said,

This was an exception to my rule. Hitherto I have always written what I wanted to write [...] but when it was suggested to me that the time is ripe for a book which shall deal faithfully with English industrial life of today, and that I was the man to write such a book, it seemed my duty to undertake it. (cited in Priestley 2018, 10)

Priestley's prompt, the fact that he is travelling to write about industrial life, colours the shape and content of his journey. Both the route travelled around England and the writing's thematic preoccupations with class and the state of Britain in the depression of 1930s emerge immediately from the text's left-wing politics and the commission of its author.

### Scholarly and critical responses to *English Journey*

Early reviews of *English Journey* were polarised between an appreciation of Priestley's emotional and detailed account of England's fading industrial urban life and a harsh critique based on his popularity and his choice of focus. Ivor Brown, for example, in the *Manchester Guardian* was one of those who appreciated Priestley's depiction of life in northern cities:

English life is urban, and a full, true English book must be full of streets and mills and rivers running ink and pitch. Very few people are writing about Blackburn and Stockton and "huddles of pit-men" and Rusty Lane, West Bromwich, and the women who "make do" with bread and margarine and say "Mustn't grumble" or "Lots are worse off than us." And this he has done with the quick eye and wrist of a great observer and of a great master of simple, fluent, compelling prose. (Brown 1934, 11)

James Hilton, writing in *The Bookman*, argued that the text, "revealed a furious anger against the despoilers and uglifiers of all those parts of England that the fashionable Englishman never visits" (1934, 147). John Prioleau, likewise, prioritised Priestley's account of unattractive settings, sardonically assuming, "I take it that the author's main preoccupation was to give a clear account of the ugly situation in English manufacturing towns" (1934, 629). In spite of praising the text, these reviewers miss the point that Priestley's main focus is not about the aesthetics of the urban centres, rather it is the lack of work and the absence of substance and sustenance of lives in these urban centres. These initial reviews and their comments on Priestley's choice of unattractive, ordinary, industrial destinations illustrate some common assumptions about the nature of travel writing, namely that such places did not conventionally form the focus of travel literature. Although some travel accounts included descriptions of urban poverty, writing on conditions of northern industrial cities was associated more with the nineteenth-century novel. Hugh Ross asserted that Priestley's text is "good journalism", whereas more negative accounts see Priestley's writing about "dismal small town streets" as "futile degeneration" [*sic*] (Ross 1934, v; Maine 1934, 757). It is unclear in Maine's review, from what Priestley is digressing. Likewise, Ashley Sampson highlighted a divergence from textual expectations, noting:

There is less about England in "English Journey", [...] than there is about, "what one man saw and heard, and felt, and thought during a journey through England" – particularly what he thought; but as that man was Mr. Priestley himself, he should have a large audience. (Sampson 1934, 734)

Here, Sampson, as Maine does in his article, presents Priestley's popularity in pejorative terms and insinuates that the author takes advantage of his captive audience in order to extemporise his views. It seems that whatever *English Journey* was, it did not conform to the expected constituents of travel writing. Contemporary reviewers struggled to identify Priestley's text as travel writing and failed to note the merit of its discussion of industrial landscapes and lives. Its focus on work has, for reviewers and scholars of literary studies, largely derailed its appreciation as travel literature.

The critical trajectory moved from early responses reading Priestley's work as hackneyed and conservative in response to changes in modern Britain, to readings of the text as radical and progressive as a result of his negative comments about American influences on English culture (Wiener 1985, 365; Fagge 2007; Gale 2008, 17). Priestley's emphasis on manufacturing towns and changing industrial landscapes in England is perhaps the reason that the principal critical ways of approaching *English Journey* have been in terms of its status as polemic about the state of the country during the depression of the thirties and of its contribution to constructions of nationhood. Indeed, a main focus of critical work on Priestley's writing more generally, and which *English Journey* exemplified for social and cultural historians, is that of the author's life-long concern with "Englishness". In their re-reading of the text Simon Rycroft and Roger Jenness observed that *English Journey* had received attention largely by scholars from the fields of History and Geography. Rycroft and Jenness, themselves social geographers, turn to the landscape of Priestley's Bradford as prompt for and underpinning of the text, and what they see as Priestley's "critical provincialism of London and England" from the England he observes (2012, 939). Chris Waters's contribution to scholarship on Priestley in the 1990s outlined Priestley's life-long construction of a belated, nostalgic and, according to Waters, ultimately fictional notion of "Englishness":

His search for England in this period began, as it did for others, in a panic about the present, especially about the ways in which the advent of mass culture seemed to imperil everything he cherished. The most elaborate articulation of that panic appeared in the pages of his *English Journey*, the work that established his credentials as a social critic. (Waters 1994, 210)

Waters sees Priestley as "alarmed by what he perceived as the growing Americanization of the English culture" and falling back on a "rural nostalgia" (Waters 1994, 211). For Waters, Priestley's descriptions of people he meets along his journey is likewise a nostalgic trope, "drawing heavily on character types in the works of Dickens, an author who he greatly admired" (217). John Baxendale's later work has likewise focused on Priestley's shifting conception and construction of a sense of "Englishness"; asserting that "no-one did more to think through England's twentieth-century experience" (2007, 4).

Such close attention to the notion of "England" and "Englishness" in much of Priestley's work, and as has been shown, in the discussion of his work by scholars, should not obscure the fact that during his diverse writing career, he showed considerable interest in travel and travel writing. Priestley travelled extensively, not least during his military service in the First World War and wrote a number of travel books and essays, other than *English Journey*, including *Midnight on the Desert* (1937) and *Russian Journey* (1946). Priestley's changing relationship with America features in critical readings of *English Journey* which identify the author's concerns about the social and cultural effects of American mass consumerism on Britain. Roger Fagge, for example, notes a

shift from Priestley's early enthusiasm and extensive travels in America which "became more sceptical about a more powerful, commercial America and its influences upon the world" (2007, 482). Although captivated by America, Priestley also made clear his interest in places off the beaten track. In his essay "Reminiscences of Travel", published in *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* in 1927, Priestley describes having to note his intended place of destination on his passport application. He feels compelled by convention, he writes, to add "France and Italy", but then "having a sudden impulse to strike [them] out [...], and to insert in their place, in block capitals, the following destinations: Slavonia, Ruritania, Grünewald, Cravonia, Eppenwelzen, and Maritime Bohemia" (1927, 301). It is Priestley's deep concern with the prosaic, ordinary places of England and their foundations of employment and industry that forms the richness of his response to his travels in *English Journey*.

Baxendale outlines the later critical reception of Priestley's work describing how, "he is not given the serious attention accorded to the modernist writers of the 1920s, the 'Auden Group' of the 1930s, or the ever-present (and almost untouchable) George Orwell" (2007, 1). "One reason for this", he continues, "is to do with his cultural status. Priestley was a serious writer, but a popular one" (2007, 1). The popularity of Priestley's work and his prolific rate of production drew repeated critique from the reviewers, scholars and fellow authors. Priestley's wide commercial success across a number of genres and forms was identified in a contemporary review by Hilton in *The Bookman* as a source for his low critical status: "it is", he asserts, "of course the fashion to sneer at Priestley nowadays. Nothing fails like success, and he has committed the misdemeanour of not sticking to one sort of success" (1934, 147). The most famous, and perhaps most critically enduring appraisal of Priestley's work was that by Virginia Woolf and her according Priestley the label of "middlebrow". Priestley had written several pieces, including an essay in *The Saturday Review* in 1926, attacking both "high-brows" and "lowbrows", and had produced a review of Woolf's *The Second Common Reader* for *The Evening Standard*, with which Woolf was disappointed and angry (Baxendale 2007, 23). The "battle of the brows" ran through the late 1920s and 1930s across a number of media including, magazine articles in *The New Statesman* and a BBC radio interview and has since informed the foundation of "Middlebrow Studies" through which Priestley's work has received considerable critical attention (Baxendale 2007, 23; Hill 2011, 38–56). However, Priestley had preferred to call literature which appealed to a wide section of the population "Broadbrow" rather than "Middlebrow", and turned away from presenting literature as superior to other art forms (see Priestley 1925a; Collini 2006, 110–119; Baxendale 2007, 23–6; Hill 2011, 51). As seen in the early reviews and in the subsequent critical responses, Priestley's breadth of focus was, along with the commercial success of his work, responsible in part for the unease with which critics regarded him. In her biography, Maggie Gale challenges some assumptions which had been made about the text's thematic interest and intellectual rigour. She writes that Priestley's work "had more in common with the modernists than the contemporary critiques of his work suggests", and she identifies his "strong sense of the urban/rural divide, an interest in the idea and experience of time, a desire to experiment with form – especially in the theatre – and a repeated investigation of the psyche" (Gale 2008, 19).

Amongst Woolf's scathing and snobbish judgements of Priestley, however, one particular designation reaches the heart of the issue about the lack of critical response to *English Journey* as a piece of literary travel writing. In her diaries from 1929, in response to the enormous commercial success of Priestley's novel *The Good Companions*, Woolf imagines Priestley speculating, "Why don't the highbrows admire me?" and in response Woolf notes, "And I invent this phrase for Bennett & Priestley 'the tradesmen of letters'" (Bell 1980, 318). The title of "tradesman" identifies Priestley as lower-class than his Modernist contemporaries and indicates his status as a "worker". *English Journey* is written by someone who sees himself as a worker talking to other workers using a literary genre, which had for several centuries been employed to express the leisured journeys of the upper-classes, or at least those travels featuring destinations beyond the everyday north-ern working towns. Thus as a travelling "tradesman", Priestley finds himself in a dubious and unsettling category.

### Working and travelling: the structure of the route.

Priestley's route around England is structured by prioritising places of working-class employment, going first south to Southampton and its cruise-ship building, and then heading north zig-zagging west and east, taking in Bristol's docks and cigarette factories and Swindon's railway works, before pausing in the Coltswoods. Even this rural area of Middle England and its "Arcadian" appearance is read by Priestley as "actually a depressed industrial area" ([1934] 2018, 69). Priestley moves east to Coventry, "one of those towns that have often changed its trades", where he visits a car factory, before travelling by bus into Birmingham, which leaves him unimpressed by its legacy of the "black slavery of industry" and this now "dirty muddle" (83, 90, 91). His journey then moves through the metal works of the Black Country and the hosiery factories in Leicester.

There is an extended interregnum in the route as Priestley makes a painful and disorientating visit to his home town of Bradford before more industrial towns and regions in the north form the remainder of the tour: Stoke-on-Trent and the Potteries, Liverpool and its docks, and Manchester, where Priestley's own employment is absorbed into the journey and his account of it. "I will confess then that I was not here in Manchester entirely on your business, as readers of this book", he admits:

I had other business of my own to attend to, and was at the old, difficult, never-turning-out-quite-satisfactorily trick of trying to kill two birds with one stone. The larger bird, at that hour, was a new little comedy of mine, that was being "tried out" in Manchester before opening in London. (227)

Here Priestley's identity of travel writer is abandoned, and he admits that he was "no longer the enquiring traveller but a worried dramatist" (228). After watching the opening-night of his comedy, *Laburnum Grove*, which premiered at the Palace Theatre, he continued with his journey to the cotton mills of Lancashire, the depleted shipyards of Tyneside and finally Norwich, where it feels as though Priestley has to use an industrial metaphor, run out of steam, unable to summon the will to consult his "economic geography" book about the area and anxious to return home to London (Wearing 2014, 323; Priestley [1934] 2018, 332).



Encounters with working people form touchstones which make Priestley reflect on and recalibrate his understanding of the connection between career and identity as well as structuring his text. For example, in the Cotswolds, Priestley is introduced to “old George”, a stonemason. Priestley admires George’s skill and his way of life.

Being a real craftsman, knowing that he could do something better than you or I could do it, he obviously enjoyed his work, which was not so much toil exchanged for so many shillings but the full expression of himself, his sign that he was Old George the mason and still at it. (1934 (2018), 71)

For Priestley, George is both a worker and in the product of his work, the walls he constructs, he gives an outward sign of his own (solid) presence. His presence gives structure to Chapter Three of the text, with George introduced partway into its second section, and being drawn on again at its end ten pages later in a point about comic but irritating Church of England clergymen, stating that their God is not the one for whom “Old George the mason still builds a noble dry wall” (81).

To illustrate the character or philosophy of working people from particular geographical locations, Priestley uses other strategies such as drawing on conversations and stories, or symbolism. Anecdotes are relayed within the text, such as that of the weaver’s husband told to him by a group of “jovial business men” who formed a lunch club in the upstairs room of a pub in Manchester once a week. Priestley begins his recounting of the tale with elements of the speaker’s own dialect, writing, “A weaver up Blackburn way had just lost her husband.” Priestley delivers the remainder of the anecdote through the direct speech of the woman and her neighbour:

“Ah’ll tell yer what Ah’m going to do wi’ th’ ashes,” said the widow. “Ah’m going to ‘ave ‘em put into an egg-timer. Th’owd devil wouldn’t ever work when ‘e wer alive, so ‘e can start doing a bit now ‘e’s deead [*sic*].” ([1934] 2018, 231)

Although Priestley’s incorporation of the anecdote is ostensibly to illustrate “Lancashire’s grimly ironic humour” (231), it revolves around the theme of work, or in this case, the lack of it. In the case of Priestley’s description of the re-purposed ship, the *Venture*, in Tyneside, it is the ironic symbolism which underlines his theme of work and identity. The *Venture* had been a tug for one of the large liners, which Priestley describes “rusting in a row” on the estuaries of the Tyne (273). Bought by local people, the vessel was being used as a fishing boat. Priestley presents this as a depressing symbol of the times:

The effort that she represents is something more than a brave gesture, though it is that all right. It means that these men, who were once part of elaborate industrial machinery but have now been cast out by it are starting all over again, far away from the great machine, at the very beginning, out at sea with a line and a hook. And it will not do. (274)

The vision of demoralising and inadequate work seems to have a physiological effect on Priestley, and he describes how “chilled and aching, I stood by the side of the river and looked at the mud and coal dust below” (274).

For Priestley, the identity of the worker extends beyond their workplace, or lack of it, to their cultural interests. Much criticism of *English Journey* centres on the author’s critique of mass, Americanised entertainment. Chris Baldick, for example, discusses Priestley’s reference to the change of many provincial theatres into cinemas, noting that “he resolutely avoids blaming the debased tastes of the urban masses”, and describes how Priestley



asserts that, “the true challenge, rather, is to reconstruct an England that allows those people on the pavement to expand themselves, to work and play more fully” (Baldick 2004, 313; see also Fagge 2007). However, this aspect of the text, I suggest, also emerges from Priestley’s focus on working. As Baldick remarks rather than blaming working people for accepting, and enjoying, what may have been seen as inferior entertainment or worthless pastimes, Priestley emphasises the importance of the working environment, and the role of the employer, in providing opportunities for workers to develop their creative and spiritual identities. Visiting the Cadbury factory in Bourneville, Priestley describes how

[t]heir workpeople are provided with magnificent recreation grounds and sports pavilions, with a large concert hall in the factory itself, where midday concerts are given, with dining rooms, recreation rooms, and facilities for singing, acting, and I know not what. ([1934] 2018, 103)

The remainder of the chapter features Priestley’s evaluation of such practices by “paternal employers”, coming to the conclusion that “the workers in places such as Bourneville have so many solid benefits conferred on them [...] they are better placed [...] than the ordinary factory worker” (103, 106). However, he concedes that such a system may educate its workers to aspire to other forms of employment and so be “sowing the seeds of its own destruction” (106).

Priestley’s understanding of the identity of the worker is gendered however. Although there are references to generic “workers” or “workpeople” in *English Journey*, where women-only workforces are under examination he stops his general discussion to reflect on the effect of this. For example, at a cigar factory in Bristol, Priestley is intrigued by the conditions and of employment and the methods of production. He describes it in detail, calling attention to:

the most ingenious machines in almost every department. One of them has only to be fed regularly with cut tobacco, mile-long reels of paper, printing ink, and paste to turn out cigarettes by the million [...] but the human element remains and indeed dominates the work of the factory. Girls perform most of the tasks, whether feeding the machines or doing some completely manual act, such as stripping the leaf; and this great factory is a warren of girls, in green, pink, brown, blue overalls, every department having a different colour. ([1934] 2018, 55)

Priestley’s detailed account of the processes of production is followed by his reference to the gender of the workers. The issue of women working is an important aspect of his discussion of the changing composition of the workplace, which forms a vein through the text as a whole. Seeing working women in factories is one of the aspects of the text which unsettle Priestley and leave him with unanswered questions. Whilst he appreciates their dexterity and hard work, he sees women as providing cheap labour, replacing male workers. This refrain is repeated when he visits Leicester. As a centre for hosiery, Leicester features in Priestley’s book in Chapter Five. He writes of the importance of the Wolsey Company, which he notes, “has factories all over the town”. Underlining his interest in industry, Priestley describes his visit to three hosiery factories in Leicester in one afternoon. The experience of seeing the automated systems, which it was claimed would reduce the number of working hours needed, and increase the leisure time for workers, makes Priestley reflect on the comparisons between the experience of working and

having free time. "The trouble is that a man does not want to work at something he despises in order to enjoy his ample periods of leisure; he would much rather work like blazes at something that expresses him and shows his skill and resource" (132). Priestley's use of the male pronoun "he" here is unpicked later in the paragraph,

Women undoubtedly take more kindly to these monotonous tasks and grey depths of routine, chiefly I suppose because they expect less from work, have no great urge to individual enterprise, have more patience with passivity and tedium, and know that they can live their real lives either outside the factory or inside their heads. (132)

Priestley's musings on work and gender continue into a series of rhetorical questions and bring him, before he leaves Leicester, to reflect on the central role of travel and travel writing. Hill acknowledges the ambivalent nature of Priestley's discussion about women in the factory workplace:

Moreover, although Priestley sometimes seemed to be in tune with the labourite agenda of reviving so-called "men's work" in a travelogue text such as *English Journey* (1934), he was also sympathetic to feminism. In 1935 he wrote a newspaper article about the dangers of "masculine pig-headedness" in politics, advocating giving "women a chance" to display their skills as "born arrangers, organisers [and] negotiators" at the highest level of society. (Hill 2011, 53)<sup>1</sup>

The assertion of Priestley's support for women's public role at points in his career is well-founded; however, in *English Journey*, I would suggest that the premise of the text is what he sees as the contested and threatened identity of the working man, with Priestley playing out that role as he writes and travels on his commission. This premise then is at odds with other versions of "the worker", including that of the women working in industry in Bristol and Leicester for example.

Priestley's self-identity is closely tied to his reflections of the nature of work and place in *English Journey*; and his text is punctuated by moments when he identifies a connection between his own history and the place he is visiting. For example, the itinerary includes a visit to his home town of Bradford, of which he notes, "I think the place itself has changed more than I have" ([1934] 2018, 150), noting its economic decline from being a centre of textile production. In making sense of both his own history, through the reminiscences about the places of his childhood, and that of Bradford, Priestley notes the outward-looking nature of the town, a place inclined towards movement and connections beyond itself. Again the parallels between birth-place and author are evident:

Bradford was always a city of travellers. Some of its citizens went regularly to the other side of the globe to buy wool. Others went abroad, from Belgium to China, selling yarn and pieces. They returned to Market Street, the same sturdy Bradfordians, from the ends of the earth. (152–153)

The visit to Bradford takes Priestley through memories of his war-time experiences as he attends a reunion dinner. The event surprises and disappoints him in many ways and is understood by Priestley entirely in terms of the connections between masculine identity and employment. Priestley relishes the camaraderie of the dinner and celebrates the "endearing quality of affectionate leadership" provided by the regiment's major. The account moves towards a climax and then heart-breaking bathos as the men, having eaten and drunk in the "bursting" dining room, stand to toast their dead comrades.

There is bathos, as a “very tinny piano” apparently playing the Regimental march but sounding like a polka, cuts through the silence. Priestley follows this scene by an account of withdrawing to a different room with survivors from his platoon, and notes poignantly that although many of the men had clubbed together to pay for those who could not afford to pay to attend the dinner, their unemployed and impoverished comrades had not attended “because they did not have decent coats to their backs” and were embarrassed ([1934] 2018, 162).

During his journey, Priestley negotiates between his identities as a writer and a traveller and attempts to make sense of the relationship between the two. In Bristol, he identifies the way in which his journey is different from those of other travellers. “Not many travellers for pleasure find their way to Bristol”, he writes, adding, “which is a pity, for there is much to see in the city and it makes an excellent centre for excursions” ([1934] 2018, 56). This gets to the heart of the matter for Priestley, that Bristol is not a holiday destination and he feels unsettled in visiting it as a traveller, albeit a working one. His work also structures his reactions to and experience of the places on the tour. He writes of trying to write in a hotel in Birmingham:

Having some work to do, I stayed in my room and tried to collect my thoughts and some words for them. It was difficult because of the shattering noise. Are we breeding a race of beings who find it possible to think or rest or sleep in rooms vibrating with the roar of changing gears and accelerating engines, rooms that do not merely admit noise but that shake and ache with dreadful sounds? ([1934] 2018, 97)

Priestley’s inability to cope with the distractions and writer’s block erupts into the text as a protest about increased noise and the intrusion of the very industrial sounds, which elsewhere he celebrates.

In *The Art of Travel: Essays on Travel Writing*, Philip Dodd argues that an important convention of travel writing of the 1930s was the overt “stance” or political view of the traveller (Dodd 1982, 127–138). He asserts that *English Journey*, in contrast to travel texts by Muir and Orwell, assumes a particular “intimacy” between place and traveller with Dodd suggesting that this is an unstable position, indicative of Priestley’s view of “division and conflict in England in 1934” and shown by the way in which he makes a “rapid alignment of himself with various groups” (1982, 10). Although, as shown, Priestley’s text embodies an intimacy with the places he visits, these connections are rooted in his own identity and history, rather than in any concordance with specific groups. In Southampton for example, after exclaiming enthusiastically about the glamour and impressive sight of a cruise ship, Priestley meets a steward whom he has met previously on board a ship, standing at a bus stop. The steward’s candid comments about the “rotten life” of working on board a cruise ship provokes Priestley’s reassessment of the “Louise Quinze drawing rooms and Tudor smoke-rooms” on board. He writes:

Their owners would do well to make a few less elaborate plans for our comfort and a few more for the comfort of their staffs [*sic*]. It is not pleasant, to say the least of it, to remember that the poor devil who is waiting upon you may have been washed out of his quarters the night before and has not sat down to a square meal since the voyage began. ([1934] 2018, 41)

Here, although Priestley does empathise with the stewards on the ship, it is part of the author’s recalibration of his own experiences; having travelled on a cruise ship, he understands what it means to work and travel, rather than travel for leisure.

In the many examples of working travellers in the text, Priestley seems to have a particular fondness for the travelling theatre and music hall troupes. In Swindon, for example, his account of the “scenes alternated regularly between song and dance affairs with the chorus and badly rehearsed comic scenes”. He highlights the “little chorus girl” “who transformed that forlorn place into a theatre” with her dancing ([1934] 2018, 63). Priestley’s vivid descriptions of the touring companies, both in Swindon and Manchester, recalls his earlier fiction, particularly *The Good Companions* (1929). In this text, which is composed around the journeys of three contrasting travellers, the various protagonists Jess Oakmroyd, Elizabeth Trant, and Inigo Jollifant, are brought together by joining a travelling theatre group. Although all three central characters have their own distinct reasons for setting off on a journey, Oakmroyd, a working-class carpenter, has mistakenly been given a large amount of money by a drunken man, is so concerned he will be arrested for theft that he leaves his dismissive wife and grown-up son to see some more of the country. Elizabeth Trant, a middle-aged, middle-class spinster, decides to do a motoring tour of English cathedrals following the death of her elderly father. And Inigo Jollifant, a school teacher, is prompted to travel, when he is sacked for drunkenly playing the piano after hours. The motivations and class backgrounds of the protagonists in Priestley’s novel become subsumed by the federating capacity of travel (Klein 2002, 40). All three characters find great joy and interest in their new experiences and new acquaintances, and in some cases, like that of Jess, in working whilst travelling.

Of all working travellers, it is commercial travellers, or travelling salesmen, who seem to hold the most fascination for Priestley and it is telling that his first encounter in the text on his way to Southampton by coach is with a man travelling around looking for business opportunities in sales. Priestley paints him as a slightly desperate figure, on the edge of ruin.

Perhaps he is still in Winchester, with the right opening, or back in London, or up in Newcastle with a fresh supply of raincoats, or trying the wireless trade again in Birmingham. But wherever he is and whatever he is doing, I am sure that he is looking keen, sensible, and energetic, and steadily losing money, and beginning to think about another opening. ([1934] 2018, 37)

The salesman is presented as a faintly comic and desperate figure, moving about the industrial centres of early twentieth-century Britain to try to earn money.

In Bristol, Priestley describes his evening in the hotel bar chatting to the travelling salesmen. Whilst his account of his interactions with them has a mildly mocking tone (as did that with the first salesman he met on the way to Southampton), their world clearly interests him. He notes how:

My hotel was filled, and almost full up with commercial travellers of the more prosperous sort [...] They were good fellows and when the hour was late and we had given and consumed several orders, they took leave of the more sordid views of commerce, with which they had entertained me earlier, and developed the wide vision and the noble sentiments of typical commercial Englishmen who are drinking late. ([1934] 2018, 56)

Priestley’s view of the salesmen negotiates between this position of observation, one conventionally associated with the travel writing genre, and a more complex identification with them, when he notes:

It is odd that though there must be excellent material in the lives of these commercial travellers – for why shouldn't I mention my own trade for once? – you rarely meet them in novels, or plays, or films. Yet, they would make admirable subjects for all three, for there must be frequent drama in both their business and their personal lives; their minds must always be clouded with hope and fear; and like so many of the most satisfying figures of fiction, whether Ulysses or Don Quixote, Tom Jones or Mr. Pickwick, they are forever on the move. ([1934] 2018, 39)

Buried in the aside in this passage is Priestley's attempt to identify with these men – he too is travelling for work, and their work informs and gives life to his own.

The motivation for travelling is at the centre of literary travel writing. All aspects of the journey and the content are underpinned, enabled or restricted, highlighted or overlooked, as a result of the purpose of the author's travels. For Priestley, the motivation for his *English Journey* leads us to its central theme – work. As a key constituent of his identity, his role of writer and here travel writer, is brought into relief against other versions of work and the loss of it, with which he comes into contact during the journey. Such reflections are psychically de-stabilising; as he notes at the end of Chapter Three, "For one little piece of knowledge it offers me, this journey seems to uncover half a dozen great pits of ignorance. Already I stare into them in dismay, then leave them gaping behind me" ([1934] 2018, 132). These uncertainties are cumulative, and by the end of the text, they amass into a real and metaphorical dense fog, which curtails his journey. Having presented rather a dour and depressing view of the north of England, he turns for London, anxious to get home for a cup of tea.

But whether we stopped or went groaning on into nothing out of nothing, no staring of mine could help; and so I lit a pipe and huddled down, dismissed this England that was only blinding vapour for the England that I had already seen on my journey. ([1934] 2018, 335)

It is striking, given what Stuart Maconie, himself a writer from the north of England, calls the text's "elegant and readable", "lyrical and romantic" prose, that *English Journey* has received so little attention as a piece of travel literature by literary critics; and certainly the combination of travelling, employment, and enjoyment may not seem an obvious combination (in Priestley [1934] 2018, 21). However, despite its rather dour ending in a November fog, full of questions about the state of work, class, identity, politics and foreign relations, Priestley's travel writing highlights his own pleasure at being commissioned to be on the road, his search for companionship and his connections with fellow working travellers.

## Note

1. Hill cites Priestley (1935). See also Priestley (1925b), 261–262.

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