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An Intimate History of Social Mobility in Post-War Britain

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the concept of social mobility through the lens of my own family history. My parents were baby boomers, beneficiaries of the 1944 Education Act and the opening of new universities in the 1960s. They were helped less by the meritocratic ideal of elite education than by more widely available benefits, such as public libraries, student grants, free time and a sense of not feeling driven into purely pragmatic choices. I argue that our stories of social mobility should pay more attention to how wider social histories interact with the idiosyncrasy and contingency of individual lives.

KEYWORDS

Social mobility; class; family history; schools; education

‘Social mobility’ is an emotionally freighted subject, both awkwardly personal and inescapably social. The questions it raises – why one person succeeds and another fails, and why it matters so much that we ‘succeed’ or ‘fail’ in certain highly circumscribed ways – cut to the heart of who we think we are, what kind of work (and workers) we value, and what kind of life we want to live. Social mobility has as much to do with ideas and feelings as it does with the statistical analysis of university enrolments, income redistribution or changing patterns of work. It is also inseparable from the stories we tell about it. Most of us want to see our life course as an upward trajectory and nourish hopes and ambitions of increasing our stake in the world and leading useful, prosperous and socially esteemed lives. In post-war Britain, though, this normal urge became attached to a set of largely unexamined ideas about what a mobile, aspirant and worthwhile life looked like.

Mike Savage and Magne Flemmen, analysing interviews with 50-year-old participants in the longitudinal National Child Development Study, found that they often resisted these dominant narratives of social mobility. They saw their own lives not in terms of ‘straight lines’ or clear trajectories ‘up’ or ‘down’ but as ‘a series of jagged movements’, with turning points, interruptions and contingent events.¹ Savage and Flemmen’s work is part of a recent effort by historians ‘to re-inject the personal into social mobility’² – to see the process as shaped by our emotional investments in distinctive, situated and richly textured experiences. Only through this kind of approach can we open up what Peter Mandler calls ‘the “black box” of motivations and behaviours’ that is so hard to unlock with quantitative statistical analyses and rational choice theories.³ The study of social mobility demands the particularising work of social and cultural history.

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This article tries to ‘re-inject the personal’ in a quite literal way – by exploring social mobility in post-war Britain through the lens of my own family history. My mother was born in September 1945 and my father in April 1946, at the start of the post-war baby boom. They were both beneficiaries of the 1944 Butler Act that made secondary education free but selective. They came of student age in 1964, just as the plateglass universities were opening to keep pace with the ‘bulge’ (the post-war rise in the birth rate) and the ‘trend’ (the tendency for young people to stay on in education). This confluence of events means that my parents’ generation is now at the heart of a disputed historiography about a supposed ‘golden age’ of social mobility. By mapping their lives, I try to understand social mobility as both a lived experience and as a set of stories that society tells itself.

My use of family history is partly inspired by Patrick Joyce’s recent ‘history of my times’, which bleeds memoir into history in fertile ways. Joyce (a contemporary of my parents, born in 1945) tries to make memories ‘speak with greater purpose and direction than they might otherwise have done’ while taking history ‘along jagged, uneven paths, into subjects and times that history writing does not usually attend to’.⁴ Some details of Joyce’s life, like the details of my parents’ lives, are instantly resonant of the collective experience of a generation; others remind us that each individual life is intractable and uncontainable. Even the most fiercely idiosyncratic life is ensnared in generational and societal shifts; even the most blandly conventional one resists the simplifications and distortions of collective memory. Every life is both irreducibly unique and drenched in commonality.

Grammar school girl

My mother, Winifred, was born in Earlestown, in the middle of the South Lancashire coalfield, to a Lithuanian father and Welsh mother. As a chief cutter at Lyme Colliery, her father was well-paid for a miner. The family also evaded the blight of working-class households in the 1940s and 1950s: poor housing. They were homeowners, the deposit paid with compensation that Winifred’s father received from the Coal Board for a leg injury down the pit. When she was very young, they had moved out of a tiny rented terraced house and bought a house nearby with bay windows, a pocket front garden, a bigger outside toilet and a parlour kept for ‘best’.

She was part of a loving, voluble and sociable family. The talk, which often lasted into the small hours, was a babble of English and Eastern European tongues: almost every Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Pole in the town ended up in their living room. The house was always warm, since every miner at the pit had free coal delivered every Friday. Winifred was well-fed. The planned fairness of rationing remained until she was eight, augmented by produce from the council-owned allotment that her father kept with her uncle. Her diet mixed Lancashire and Lithuanian cuisine: hot pot and red cabbage, pigs’ trotters, tripe in vinegar, latkes, gherkins, rye bread and sauerkraut. She got free milk at school, and free supplements, Virol and castor oil, on the new National Health Service. Her parents had both left school at fourteen but they valued learning and encouraged her love of reading.

In short, she was just the kind of bright, bookish, well-cared-for girl from the ‘respectable’ working classes who would do well out of the Butler Education Act. Miss Ryan, one of the mostly unmarried Irish women teachers at her Catholic primary

for girls, oversaw a large class of ten and eleven year-olds. She selected half a dozen, including Winifred, to gather round her desk each day to be coached for the eleven-plus exam. While the abandoned rest were given copying tasks, the anointed few worked through past papers each day. Winifred excelled at English and general knowledge, filling in gaps in phrases such as ‘As *den* is to *fox* so is . . . to *bees*’, or giving the opposite word to *clean* or *weakness*. She struggled more with finding the sum of all the odd numbers between 10 and 20, or working out how many whole eggs remained if, on opening a box containing 6 dozen eggs, you found 23 broken ones. Luckily her father was good at maths and coached her at the dining table each night.

While Winifred was sitting the eleven-plus, Brian Jackson, after graduating from Cambridge in English, was working as a primary school teacher. His research on streaming grew out of this experience, during which he chose to teach the D stream.⁵ He found that primary school streaming, which had intensified with selection for secondary schools, divided along class lines. Those born early in the school year, like Winifred, were also more likely to be in the top stream. Streaming was underpinned by the belief that only a few were grammar school material. As one West Hartlepool teacher told Jackson, ‘In the training of racehorses and athletes, we are most careful to cream and train; why not with children?’⁶

Winifred passed the eleven-plus. Her new school, Notre Dame High for Girls, was an hour-long, two-bus journey away in Wigan. Like most grammars, it took working-class children away from their localities, into the city centres and well-heeled suburbs.⁷ The bus delivered her to the top of Standishgate, a street in Wigan town centre. She walked down to school past shops far more opulent than Earlestown’s – including a modern, glass-fronted C&As that she thought the height of style. Like most church schools, Notre Dame had benefited from the Butler Act, retaining control of its curriculum while offloading most of its running costs. In 1946 it had gone direct grant, allowed to continue charging fees in return for offering a proportion of free places. Before her first day at the school, Winifred’s parents had sat her down and told her to say, to anyone who asked, that her father was an electrical engineer. She elaborated on this with tales of the pony she kept in Delamere Forest and her detached house in the leafy suburbs. It meant that she could never invite school friends to her home.

She was only internalising the social sorting practised by the school itself. The nuns favoured the fee-paying girls whose parents might help with fundraising. They gave Winifred disapproving looks when she backed her exercise books with her father’s wallpaper offcuts – wallpaper being seen as flashy and common compared to plain brown paper. She was taken to task for her threadbare, ill-fitting school uniform. The uniform was expensive and every bit of it, right down to the brown knickers, had to come from the approved outfitters, Henry Barrie of St Ann’s Square, Manchester. Her parents got round this by contacting the parents of a girl on their road who had just left the school. This meant that Winifred wore a hand-me-down outfit, two sizes too big. It led to her being put on the back row when the whole school lined Standishgate to wave Union flags in June 1959, as the Queen Mother drove past on her way to open the new Heinz factory at Kitts Green. In disgust, Winifred threw her cheap paper flag in a bin.

In class they sat in rows. The main teaching style was reading round the class; the textbook was *God* and there was no group discussion. Science lessons were shaped to their future lives as housewives, focusing on the constituents of washing powders and the

effects of hard water on laundering. Biology lessons skipped over human reproduction. A handful of the nuns and other unmarried women teachers did manage to convey their love of their subjects, even through the endless chanting of verb declensions. Rote learning worked reasonably well with English and foreign languages, Winifred's best subjects.

She had one crucial motivation to perform well academically: the desire to leave Earlestown. Soon after starting at Notre Dame, she began to lament her background. She had been an avid reader of Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* series and now moved on to the boarding school stories of Angela Brazil, Elsie J. Oxenham and Elinor Brent-Dyer. The schools in these books were in ancient buildings in scenic settings: manors with moats, castles on clifftops, hillside chalets. Why, she now wondered, could she not have gone to one of these schools, with midnight feasts, pranks, and ardent friendships with girls called Avelyn, Winona and Jemima? As Kathryn Hughes argues, these stories appealed to a broad demographic. A typical heroine was a social misfit, only at the school because a rich relative was paying her way or her scholarship paper got confused with someone else's. 'By identifying with a precariously privileged hero', Hughes suggests, 'working-class girls were able to spin for themselves a Cinderella narrative in which they were, for a few hours at least, able to attend The Gables, Uplands or Manor House'.⁸ Nancy G. Rosoff and Stephanie Spencer argue that these school stories presented all classes of reader with a world grounded in recognisable reality, while allowing them to skip easily over irrelevant details. They offered a space for the imaginative rewriting of their own lives.⁹

Notre Dame may have offered a mediocre education but it did have a certain aspirational grandness. Winifred was impressed by the school's late Victorian building, with its imposing frontage with Gothic turrets, its polished parquet floors and oak panelling. The votive candles in red glass containers that lined the corridors made flickering patterns of light and shade, adding to the building's air of secrecy and mystery. In the main hall, the Salle, the stained-glass windows dispersed the light into soft colours. A lovely, open-plan art room sat high up in the eaves.

For Winifred, the urge for social mobility did not coalesce into thoughts of a well-paid or high-status career. It arose out of the simple wish to be somewhere else. Earlestown was a grey-looking railway and mining town. It consisted of rows of terraced houses with outside privies and dirt patches for backyards, against a backdrop of slag heaps, pitheads, goods sheds and wagon works. 'Earlestown has sadly little to recommend it, being bylaw housing encased in the usual C20 spread', wrote Nikolaus Pevsner in 1969. Its bare, asphalted market place he thought 'desperately sad'.

The only building in the town that Pevsner thought worthy of note was the small Carnegie Library, with its 'nice little top-lit octagonal entrance hall'.¹⁰ Carved above the front doors, as with all the Carnegie Libraries, was the motto: 'Let there be light'. For Winifred these words had a literal meaning. The library's spacious reading room, with its large windows and high corniced ceiling, was bathed in natural light, and contrasted starkly with Earlestown's squat and poorly-lit terraces. As Alistair Black, Simon Pepper and Kaye Bagshaw argue, the British public library has been 'first and foremost a place, a spatial experience'.¹¹ At the age of thirteen, Winifred tricked her way into the adult section of the library, and proceeded to read the whole of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Reading about Pemberley and Thornfield Hall gave her more raw material for

imagining another life. By now the family had acquired a television and she came to admire the clipped tones of the BBC announcers and the eloquence of Lady Isobel Barnett and Gilbert Harding on *What's My Line?*. The Lancastrian and Lithuanian-inflected English she heard all around her sounded clunky by comparison.

This standard adolescent desire for flight morphed gradually into the ambition to go to university. An important piece of field research was Granada Television's *University Challenge*, which began in a late evening slot on ITV in September 1962, as Winifred entered the sixth form. It quickly proved so popular that it was moved to 7pm on Tuesday nights. At this time every week she got a glimpse of those exotic, besuited beings, students, with the genially donnish Bamber Gascoigne presiding. Winifred lived in the northern Granadaland region, and she would have known that the programme was filmed in nearby Manchester. Under its chairman, Sidney Bernstein, Granada combined commercial acumen with a high-minded ideal of the north as a citadel of auto-didacticism and cultural self-improvement. With its displays of esoteric knowledge, *University Challenge* did not condescend to its primetime audience. Here was a world in which cleverness meant kudos, even if, or especially if, one did not receive a cash prize or white goods as its reward, as on *Double Your Money* or *Take Your Pick*. Fraser Noble, Vice-Chancellor of Leicester University, said in October 1963 that his university's success on the show had led to a surge of several thousand in its applications.¹²

The Notre Dame nuns, however, assumed that Winifred's highest ambition would be to train as a librarian. Most of the staff had attended teacher training colleges and knew little about university entrance. Selina Todd argues that grammar schools at this time were little help to bright working-class pupils, especially girls. Many were not even made aware of the existence of student grants. University applications were largely left to pupils and their parents, which naturally favoured middle-class children.¹³ Brenda Hale (born 1945), attending Richmond High School for Girls, found similarly that her grammar school's expectations for its pupils were unadventurous, leaving them to pursue their university ambitions alone and discouraging unusual career choices such as Froebel teacher training or occupational therapy.¹⁴

University places were scarcer for women anyway: most colleges at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham excluded them. Women in the early 1960s made up only 23 per cent of the student population, a fall from nearly 30 per cent forty years earlier.¹⁵ But Winifred was cussed and had done her research. She insisted on putting herself in for the entrance exam for English at University College London. Her teachers were unwilling to give her extra tuition and annoyed about having to make special exam arrangements. Predictably, she failed. When she applied to other universities, her personal statement consisted of fabrications about loving the music of Edvard Grieg, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and horse riding. She was lucky to be offered a place to read English at the new University of Lancaster without being called for interview, where these fictions would have been exposed. But she was also unlucky, because no one had thought to tell her that the truth about her life was far more impressive.

She was by now familiar with the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and Dickens – albeit through *Classics Illustrated*, an American comic that condensed books into cartoon-strip form. They were more expensive than other comic books but with her generous pocket money she could afford them. The poet John Cooper Clarke (born 1949) has written of how, growing up in a working-class family in Salford, this series

introduced him to the works of Victor Hugo, Mark Twain and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Clarke recalled being impressed by the high-minded exhortation in the final frame of every edition: 'We strongly urge you to read the original'.¹⁶ Winifred ignored this exhortation just as Clarke did. But Earlestown Library did introduce her to Jean Anouilh and George Bernard Shaw long before she had been to a serious play, and to the then vogueish poetry of Jacques Prévert and Yevgény Yevtushénko. Perhaps she did not mention these authors in her personal statement precisely because they were so personal – serendipitous finds made with no thought of impressing an admissions officer. They were simply a reprieve from the set texts at Notre Dame. These all had safe Catholic connections, the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins featuring heavily.

By now, Winifred was an orphan. When she was twelve her mother had died of breast cancer. For years afterwards she was haunted by her mother's howls when the priest came round to the house to administer the last rites. The following year, her father was killed down the pit, when part of the roof collapsed on him. It was the day after the annual holiday, the most dangerous time for the chief cutters as they attacked the newly settled seams. Winifred's uncle moved in and did his best to look after her and her seven-year-old twin brothers. But she had to take on the housework and cooking, and most evenings her uncle disappeared to the Irish Club. She was left to fight with her brothers to get them washed and into bed so that she could settle down to do her homework with the television on as comforting background. To entertain the thought of university in such an environment was a feat of what was not yet called 'resilience'.

In Winifred's story we find some of the familiar, even clichéd tropes of baby-boomer social mobility, from the momentous passing of the eleven-plus to negotiating the class anxieties of grammar school. But her story had its unique and knottier elements. She had a supportive extended family and local community that allowed her to escape the care system when she was orphaned. She had just enough bloody-mindedness to override her ignorance about university entrance and to turn what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb would later call 'the hidden injuries of class' into motivation rather than discouragement.¹⁷ And the unloveliness of her surroundings encouraged dreams of elsewhere, largely culled from television or recreational reading, which provided a propulsive force even when that elsewhere was half-understood or a fantasy.

Secondary modern boy

While Winifred was in one of only 179 direct grant grammar schools in England and Wales, my father's experience was more common. He was in one of the 4000 secondary moderns, which schooled 1.5 million children, three-quarters of the age group.¹⁸ The life of these secondary modern children is mostly unwritten and unmythologised. The writer Michael Rosen, born a month after my father in May 1946, passed his eleven-plus and went to Harrow Weald County Grammar. Rosen has wondered all his life about the 'invisible generation' who went to the secondary moderns. A regular character in his poems is his primary school friend, Harrybo, whom he lost touch with when he failed the eleven-plus. Years later, he found out that Harrybo had died, aged seventeen.¹⁹

But my father, Michael, had not failed the eleven-plus. He had arrived in Smethwick, Birmingham from west Clare, Ireland, in the summer of 1959, aged 13. My grandmother took Michael and his younger brother, aged five, to the local primary school. The

headmaster took one look at Michael and said: 'He'll have to go to the Secondary Modern'. This, went the assumption, was the natural destination of an Irish immigrant child. That September, he started at Cardinal Newman RC Secondary Modern, with the same instruction from his parents that Winifred had received: to describe his father, a manual worker, as an engineer if asked.

The school had only just opened, with a young and energetic headmaster, Arthur Hunt. It was housed in a new, well-equipped building in the concrete-and-glass style of post-war utilitarian state modernism. It was sited in Bearwood, a bus ride away from Smethwick and a step up in social terms, with pleasant parks and homes built for the lower-middle classes. The school sat in a quiet residential area with what seemed to Michael like houses of unimagined splendour. According to Google Street View, they were, and are, just fairly substantial semis.

Up to that point he had been taught in the Irish Christian Brothers school in Kilrush, Clare. The brothers abused their charges verbally and physically, with a blackthorn stick lodged in the chimney of the turf fire to season it. After this, Cardinal Newman was a pleasant shock. The teachers occasionally raised their voices, but were mostly affable, with gentle joshing their weapon of choice. Mr Hunt possessed a cane but had never been known to use it. Michael proved hopeless at the practical subjects at which the secondary moderns were meant to specialise, such as woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing. In the Christian Brothers school, this serial ineptitude would have been a recipe for multiple beatings. All it produced at Cardinal Newman was wry exasperation from his teacher. Maths and English were well-taught and he was soon top of the class in them.

Laura Carter argues that secondary modern schools did not always fit the academic/vocational model conventionally used to understand the grammar/secondary modern divide. Nor were they the blackboard jungles of popular myth, familiar from books like Michael Croft's *Spare the Rod* (1954) and Edward Blishen's *Roaring Boys* (1955). Instead, many of these schools bequeathed a legacy of all-round, liberal, progressive education to their successors, the comprehensives. The student-centred teaching methods in comprehensives were less a product of the 'excesses' of the 1960s, as their critics believed, than of these longer-term trends.²⁰

Michael's favourite part of the day was lunchtime. Like most children, his peers bought into the folklore around the awfulness of school dinners. But he had never seen such plenty: huge helpings of meat and potato pie with thick pastry crusts; fish and chips every Friday; and jam roly-poly or cornflake tart for pudding. The 1944 Butler Act had stipulated that all LEAs should provide school meals that took into account the possibility of deficiencies in a child's home diet by being 'suitable in all respects as the main meal of the day'.²¹ Custard, which Michael associated only with birthdays, was on the table every lunchtime in large tin jugs. After everyone else had finished eating, he would cruise the tables emptying what was left in the jugs into his bowl. He grew about six inches in his first six months in England, which he later put down to this chalky liquid made of Birds' Custard Powder and powdered milk. Perhaps these benefits, given freely and matter-of-factly, also suggested implicitly to Michael that his life mattered. As Carolyn Steedman (born 1947), argues, universal benefits like school dinners and free milk provide more than material sustenance. They told her, she writes, 'in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something . . . that I do have a right to the earth'.²²

In 1956 Patrick Joyce, growing up in an Irish working-class family in Notting Hill, passed his eleven-plus. But the only grammar school places on offer were at non-Catholic ones, which his parents vetoed. So he went to Cardinal Manning RC Secondary Modern for Boys, North Kensington. Cardinal Manning, he writes, ‘enabled a blessed release from the class condescension and pressures to conform suffered by so many working-class grammar school children’, as well as ‘a release from a grammar school education itself’. This ‘profoundly influential educational expression of British cultural identity’ had produced, he argues, ‘a certain technical excellence alongside a marked intellectual provincialism’.²³ My father would have endorsed this view, not least because of his later experience in a grammar.

Unlike Winifred, Michael did not come from a family that valued learning. His self-education proceeded via the benign neglect of his elders. Like Winifred he was older than his siblings by several years, and like her learned to develop solitary interests. His parents both worked long hours, his father as part of the maintenance team at the Birmingham Metals factory and his mother at various cleaning jobs. The family’s finances had improved greatly with their move to England. Michael now had disposable income – not exactly pocket money, more ad hoc subs from his mother to get him out of the house. With this he funded an emerging reading habit. He had not owned a book until he was thirteen, bought with the shilling he had received as a going-away present on leaving Clare. Smethwick had no bookshop, but there was a second-hand book stall in the market full of cheap paperbacks. His purchases were random: the first book he bought was about the French resistance group the Maquis, and then he acquired a brief passion for Agatha Christie novels.

He had also discovered Smethwick Library (‘very poor Gothic’ – Pevsner²⁴) with its large reading room and high windows. As with Winifred, this rare encounter with light and space had an elevating effect, social aspiration beginning with a literal ‘looking up’. He was amazed to find that using the library was free, and that, just by giving his address, he was handed three tickets. He gorged himself indiscriminately on its stock, especially prolific popular authors such as Frank Richards and Edgar Wallace. Like Winifred, Michael probably benefited from the fact that reading was an unpoliced and unvalued activity. It was not sacralised, as it is today, as a source of educational advancement and personal fulfilment. Reading for him was an entertaining distraction; in another age he might have become addicted to television or computer games. His pleasure reading led to other kinds of reading. The library took the daily broadsheets as well as the *Spectator* and *New Statesman*. He was soon going there first thing on Saturday morning to read the latest editions.

He also began to use some of his money from a part-time job at Tesco to buy the *Observer* every Sunday. His local newsagent had to order his copy in especially. The *Observer* was just coming to the end of its post-war zenith as Britain’s leading serious newspaper. In Liverpool, Paul McCartney’s working-class parents got the *Observer* rather than the *Mirror* ‘because they wanted us to try to better ourselves’, his brother Mike later recalled.²⁵ While many of its Conservative readers had cancelled their subscriptions after its editorial opposing Suez, they were replaced by a younger, post-imperial generation of sixth-formers, students and young graduates, drawn to its progressive stance. As the newspaper’s advertising director put it: ‘We had readers who had gardens but switched to readers who had window-boxes’.²⁶ In its pages Michael began educating himself about

apartheid, colonialism and racism. But it was the paper's stable of eccentrically brilliant writers – Neal Ascherson, Michael Frayn, Philip Toynbee, Katharine Whitehorn – that kept him reading. Like many of its readers, he consumed the paper backwards from the book reviews. He read Kenneth Tynan's theatre reviews keenly long before he had set foot in a theatre – which would have necessitated, he was fairly sure, wearing a suit.

At sixteen, already a year older than the school leaving age, he sat three O levels. Maths and English Language he passed with modest grades; History he failed. Two O levels led nowhere in schooling, and his mother was anxious that he start to bring money into the house. He had fixed up a job with the Co-op, as a delivery boy on the wagons that brought bread and milk to his block of flats. At this point Arthur Hunt intervened. My grandmother was summoned to the school – the first time she had set foot in it, since Michael always threw away school reports and successfully concealed the existence of parents' evenings. Mr Hunt had been a master at St Philip's Grammar School about a mile further down the road in Edgbaston, a still further climb up the social ladder. Now he told my grandmother that he had used his influence to shoehorn her son into St Philip's sixth form – an amazing achievement when no one was normally allowed in without five O levels. Courtesy of Mr Hunt's Catholic string pulling, Michael entered St Philip's in September 1962.

The strange deal that had been done was that, with only two O levels, he would 'convert' to five by taking three new subjects at A level: English Literature, History and Geography. He soon discovered that he could write essays of comfortable A-level standard in all of them. This was just as well because, in contrast to Cardinal Newman, everyone who taught at St Philip's seemed tired and bored. He realised that, with the aid of Smethwick Library, he would have to teach himself.

By autumn 1963 he had decided that he wanted to go to university, knowing even less than Winifred did about what this meant. His home had no television, so he hadn't even seen *University Challenge*. He had formed the ambition while walking through the campus of Birmingham University, near his school in Edgbaston, partly because he liked the look of the refectory. Birmingham, and most other universities, were out of reach: they required at least five O levels (including English, maths and a foreign language) along with A levels. With the requisite nous, or advice, he could have entered and passed an O level in Irish, which he had been fluent in at thirteen. But his grammar school was, as Winifred's had been, indifferent to his ambitions. He discovered, rummaging in the school store cupboard where the university prospectuses went to die, the existence of a small group of new universities. Perhaps, he dared to hope, they did not impose such strict entry requirements. He applied to the two universities due to admit their first students in 1964: Essex, which rejected him, and Lancaster, which put him (as it did many others) on a waiting list.

Lancaster was due to open a year ahead of schedule. Its small, red and grey prospectus was not sent out until November 1963, too late for applicants to go through the universities' central clearing house. This is why Winifred had escaped an interview: Lancaster held no interviews at all. Nor did it have entry tariffs. The Vice-Chancellor, Charles Carter, said that Lancaster considered pupils who had missed 'the straight ladder of the grammar school'.²⁷ It was prepared to look twice at applicants like Michael – and like Winifred, who had failed her Maths O level three times, her grade getting worse with each sitting, before being advised to give up. She had no father to help her with her Maths any more.

At the time, the opening of these new universities was ‘the greatest single expansion of higher education that England ha[d] ever known’ and ‘in terms of conscious national policy . . . the first’.²⁸ The recommendation of the 1963 Robbins Report – that university courses should be open to ‘all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ – was only an acknowledgement of demand and demographics. The new universities were already open or had been approved by the time Robbins reported. Post-war education policy has been, as Mandler argues, ‘uniquely sensitive to demography’.²⁹ The ‘bulge’ and the ‘trend’ were due to hit universities head-on in 1964, as the first baby boomers came of age.

For Michael, thanks in part to Lord Robbins and demography, everything now hung on what happened between Monday 8 June and Monday 29 June 1964, the duration of his A-level exams. There was no assessed coursework and so in the space of those three weeks he was to be examined, unseen, on the whole syllabus. The exams consisted of two papers in each subject, lasting three hours. Eighteen hours of toil would decide his future. The stakes were high, as was the chance of failure. A levels, introduced in 1951, had been designed in such a way that a large number of the already select group that took them would fail. About 10 per cent of candidates got failing grade Fs, with another 20 per cent awarded only an O level.³⁰

But Michael was a perfect specimen of the sort advantaged by the exam system. The Christian Brothers had made him quick-witted under pressure, because he had to answer fast in class to escape being beaten. He had a good memory and the ability to write to order and to time. Like Winifred he was highly driven: success was his ticket out of Smethwick. Smethwick had been a liberation from the subsistence life of Ireland’s rural west in the 1950s. But like Earlestown it was begrimed and unprepossessing. The blast furnaces of its iron foundries turned the sky red, gave off acrid smoke and blackened every building with soot. Its canals were now polluted and derelict. Its housing was a mix of cramped terraces and new concrete blocks like the one Michael lived in, his flat reached via litter-strewn stone steps. After Easter, teaching at the school virtually stopped, and he could spend long hours in the quiet of the small upstairs reference section of Smethwick Library, which was open from nine in the morning until eight at night. He had an inkling that he would over-perform in the examinations. At the end of each exam he was utterly drained, and his right wrist ached from three hours of non-stop writing.

His attitude to his grammar school can be gauged by what happened next. He was meant to turn up for the last fortnight of term after the end of exams, but he just left without saying goodbye to anyone. He threw his school cap and blazer down the rubbish chute at home. All he left at the school was a stamped addressed envelope which, in mid-August, delivered his exam results. As soon as he opened the envelope, he knew he would get into Lancaster. A few days later he got the formal offer of a place.

The end of the ‘golden age’

Michael and Winifred arrived in Morecambe, where their digs were, on the same day: Tuesday 6 October 1964. Each had one suitcase; Michael’s was made of cardboard. They both wore going-away coats. Winifred’s was a pale blue one with a white fur collar, bought from the Standishgate branch of C&A; Michael’s was a beige Gannex mac, as

modelled by the new Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. As for almost all the new students, this was the first time they had set foot in either Morecambe or Lancaster. Michael's idea of undergraduate life came largely from reading Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, on the strength of which he had bought a paisley dressing gown, believing that being a student was all about sitting around until noon so attired. It was folded inside his cardboard suitcase, to be quickly discarded when he realised it was *infra dig*.

Alighting at Morecambe Promenade railway station, on the branch line from Lancaster, Michael thought he had arrived in paradise. The first week of October saw the last knockings of an Indian summer and the tourist season was only just dying down. With foreign package holidays yet to take off, Morecambe was then near the end of its glory years as a resort. He had a longish walk along the prom to his digs on the east side of town. It never occurred to him to take a taxi, since he had never been in one. He had arrived at dusk. The outline of the south Lakeland fells was fading across the bay and the illuminations were just coming on. Morecambe bay is vast, a nine-mile wide inlet of the Irish Sea, and the horizon must have seemed headily expansive after Smethwick.

By 1964, going to university had become synonymous with leaving home. Since, like most working-class teenagers then, my parents had barely been anywhere, this meant migrating to an unknown land, just a couple of hours away by train. The plateglass universities had joined an inexorable trend for universities to draw on a national catchment area. The 1962 Education Act guaranteed that tuition fees and maintenance grants would be paid by local authorities, although it was only formalising a system that had already arrived. This greater financial support made the redbricks, which had traditionally relied on students who lived at home, less local in intake. By 1953, more than half of students came from beyond a thirty-mile radius of their university.³¹ The flourishing youth culture of the baby boomers encouraged them to seek independence from their parents. Becoming a student supplied it.

The plateglass universities had been conceived as self-contained campuses, partly by accident. They needed sites of at least two hundred acres, and land prices in city centres were too high, so they were built on green fields out of town. At Lancaster my parents would encounter a revival of the medieval ideal of the university as a self-sufficient society of scholars. Campus life was meant to avoid the redbrick phenomenon of 'the 9 to 5 university'.³² In fact, the out-of-town Bailrigg campus was not yet built, and would not fully open until 1966. The main university building, for now, was an old Waring and Gillow furniture factory in the centre of town, its bare brickwork given a quick limewash and its floorboards covered with asphalt. A Congregational church nearby became a student common room. The rundown Grand Theatre was rented for lectures.³³ After a 40-minute bus ride from Morecambe, my parents spent their waking hours on campus, socialising until late in the evening, often in the Shakespeare pub next door to the main building. Most days they got the last bus home.

In spite of these makeshift beginnings, or perhaps because of them, this was an exciting time. My parents were two of only 296 undergraduates (174 men and 122 women) in that first cohort. It made for what Max Beloff, in his book about the plateglass, called a 'kibbutz atmosphere' on campus.³⁴ Lancaster was not blackened with soot like Earlestown or Smethwick. It was a handsome county town, with a Georgian centre and fine views of the castle, the bay and the fells. My parents, on full maintenance grants of £300 per year, were richer than they had ever been. The age of majority was still

21, so the university was *in loco parentis*. It looked after its adoptive children well. Students paid a flat £3 10s for their approved lodgings, bed and breakfast and full board on Sundays, and they could get very cheap meals at the refectory. But there were none of the class-ridden strictures of grammar schools, against which both my parents had chafed, nor the curfews and dress codes of Oxbridge colleges. A rule about Lancaster students being required to wear gowns was soon waived in the face of non-compliance. In a 1971 survey, nearly 30 per cent of nineteen-year-olds who had come to university from grammar schools said that what they liked best about it was 'no petty rules [and] being treated like an adult'.³⁵

Winifred, like everyone studying English, had been given the holiday task of writing an essay about her favourite poets beyond the A-level syllabus. To her surprise, her essay was read out in the first lecture in the Grand Theatre by the lecturer, David Craig. Craig praised her for researching beyond the canon and discovering Coventry Patmore and A. E. Housman. She had 'discovered' these poets in an old set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that her father had been given for one of his moonlighting decorating jobs. 'I'm going to get away with it here', she thought. Michael, meanwhile, was thrilled at what he was being asked to do: take away long reading lists and disappear to the library in the basement of the main building. This was an official sanction of the learning style he had acquired in Smethwick. Once, he became so absorbed in his reading that he got locked in overnight.

Getting into university was the transformative moment of my parents' lives. The democratisation of higher education in the early 1960s had been very modest; university education remained accessible to just a few. While Lancaster and the other plateglasses featured in newspaper and magazine pieces about the new student age, this was quite out of proportion to their size and significance. Lancaster in 1964 was smaller in both footprint and enrolments than a typical secondary school. The redbricks took by far the largest share of the increased student numbers of the period.³⁶ Lancaster, along with the other plateglasses and despite its more relaxed entry requirements, was just as middle-class in intake as the established universities.³⁷ But its small number of working-class students, including my parents, enjoyed a certain cachet. Thanks to public figures like Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay and the Beatles, being working-class and upwardly mobile, especially if you were from the North, was in fashion. At Lancaster my parents grew in social confidence, learned the customs and vocabulary of the educated middle classes, and met and married each other. Here they entered the antechamber to the rest of their lives. My father became an academic and my mother, along with over 70 per cent of women graduates in her generation,³⁸ became a teacher.

My father just missed being part of the first birth cohort study, initiated by James Douglas in 1946 and used by sociologists and historians ever since to track social mobility and the multiple variables that affect it. It focused on babies born between 3 and 9 March and my father was born in Smethwick on 13 April (although if he had been included, his family's return to Ireland would have made him hard to track). But his life does exemplify one of the main findings of the 1946 study: men in that cohort were the most upwardly-mobile group of the twentieth century.³⁹

The data from the successive birth cohort studies suggests that, for those born between 1958 and 1970, relative social mobility – the likelihood of moving up or down the socio-economic ladder relative to one's peers – declined. Income became more closely tied to parental income; the advantages of private education and inherited wealth grew more

marked. Poverty became what Helen Pearson, in her book about the birth cohort studies, calls 'a stickier glue'. In the years between the 1958 cohort starting school and the 1970 cohort leaving it, student numbers rose (although not as steeply as in the mass expansion of the early 1990s onwards). But middle-class children, with greater access to cultural capital, gained most from the expansion.⁴⁰

The term 'social mobility' has been a familiar one in academic social science since the 1950s. But it only entered British political and popular discourse in the 1980s, and only in the 21st century has it become a fixation of public policy, supported by an abundance of historical commentary and quantitative data. Numerous studies based on the millennium birth cohort study, launched in 2000, reveal the same pattern as the 1958 and 1970 studies: the slowing or decline of social mobility, at the same time that it has come to preoccupy government policy and research.⁴¹

As Christina de Bellaigue, Helena Mills and Eve Worth argue, 'the language of social mobility having stalled, frozen and shattered in twenty-first century Britain implies some previous period in which it was alive and well'.⁴² And the most powerful story that has emerged to explain this in the wider political and public culture is of the transformative effect of grammar schools. The end of selection, this story goes, deprived clever working-class children of the chance of an academic education and a route to the elite universities. Conservative leaders, notably the grammar-school educated John Major and Theresa May, have made periodic calls to bring back grammar schools. In his memoirs, Tony Blair writes that 'the way comprehensives were introduced and grammars abandoned was pretty close to academic vandalism'.⁴³ The reality is more complicated.

In 1964, the year my mother left school, Wigan council had adopted the principle of comprehensive education, but Notre Dame was not a maintained county school and so was out of its control.⁴⁴ It was, however, running out of pupils. The borough's population was declining as people moved into the surrounding residential suburbs. In that same year, the council had to lower the pass mark for the eleven-plus to fill empty grammar school places.⁴⁵ Notre Dame closed in 1974, at the end of Margaret Thatcher's period as Education Secretary, during which she approved a record number of comprehensive schools. My father's old grammar, St Philip's, closed to new entrants in 1976, continuing (as many old grammars did) as a sixth-form college.

Between 1965 and 1979, comprehensives grew from 5 per cent to just under 80 per cent of secondary schools in England and Wales.⁴⁶ This was a bipartisan and mostly popular policy. Well before Labour adopted comprehensivisation as national policy in 1965, most LEAs, both Tory and Labour-run, had moved decisively in that direction. They were guided by the unpopularity of the eleven-plus among parents, and the need to build new schools quickly and cheaply to fill the rising demand for secondary places from 1956 onwards, because of the 'bulge'.⁴⁷ Public opinion throughout the 1970s remained broadly in favour of comprehensives and against selection.⁴⁸ By now, though, what Stephen Ball calls a 'discourse of derision' had begun, aimed at comprehensive schools and their teachers in newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* and the much-publicised Black Papers on Education (1969–77).⁴⁹ Moral panics about bad behaviour in these schools were common. The word *meritocracy*, popularised by Michael Young in 1958 as a satirical term, now took on the positive sense it has retained ever since.

As Selina Todd has shown, the limited gains in increased mobility among my parents' generation were not primarily due to education becoming more meritocratic. They reflected the widespread benefits of a post-war economic boom, population growth, full employment, universal healthcare, free education, enriched diet and improved cultural provision.⁵⁰ What helped my parents far more than selective education and the erratically distributed gains of meritocracy was a sort of unofficial welfare state. It consisted of public libraries, pocket money, plentiful part-time jobs that funded newspaper and book-buying habits rather than tuition fees and maintenance, generous student grants, free time, and an overall sense, in the boom times, of not feeling driven into purely pragmatic or short-term choices.

This unofficial welfare state was especially important in their case because, for different reasons, they were left to their own devices. Lucinda Platt has shown how certain immigrant groups to the UK in the post-war period, such as Indians, made use of education to achieve high rates of upward mobility, partly through parental influence and expectation.⁵¹ Although my parents were also the children of immigrants, this had little bearing on their upward mobility because their parents were either no longer alive or played no part in their educational choices. Instead, the benefits of the official and unofficial welfare state, available to more than the few who made it to university, gave them a fighting chance against what sociologists call 'effectively maintained inequality' – the tendency of more affluent families to strategise and over-exploit increased opportunities.

In the last few decades in particular, education has been a key driver of effectively maintained inequality. Middle-class children have benefited from inherited social and cultural capital and their parents paying for private tutoring and buying into good school catchment areas in a period when the housing market was mostly unregulated and house prices soared. This made it more likely that they would get into the elite universities. In the graduate job market they have profited from personal connections, unpaid internships and employers' instinctive rewarding of their confidence and social ease.⁵² Still the belief persists that elite education is a kind of solve-all for social mobility – a hope confounded by all the post-war evidence.

Conclusion

In British public life, the concept of social mobility is now underpinned by a series of largely unquestioned assumptions. First, social mobility is seen as an unalloyed good. No member of the current British political elite would dare argue, as Raymond Williams once did, that the idea of a social ladder is 'the product of a divided society' that 'weakens the principle of common betterment' and 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy'.⁵³ Second, academic ability is seen as a scarce, innate and measurable commodity; opportunities must therefore be carefully rationed according to strict meritocratic principles, with a small number of poorer children being led up to their true place in society. Finally, the market, in the form of competition within and between schools, universities and individual students, will establish a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. These assumptions, gaining traction gradually from the late 1960s onwards, just as my parents finished their education, have become our new common sense.

This market-led understanding of social mobility struggles to imagine individual lives sociologically, as enmeshed with other people's and shaped by a complex system of public goods rather than simply one's educational experience or home circumstances. Exploring the history of singular lives, with all their uneven contours, textures and material details, interrupts this story's smooth linearity. The experience of my parents suggests that social mobility is a multi-layered process that requires many different parts of a life to slot into place. They relied on universally available benefits and informal networks of care and social solidarity that enriched the thin pickings of the education system as they experienced it. Seemingly trivial affordances – being able to learn on a full stomach, enjoy the facilitating silence and space of a library, or draw on enough spare cash and free time to follow their own interests – mattered as much as, if not more than, formal schooling.

My parents' aspirations were also guided by barely articulated feelings and intuitions rather than any straightforward economic, felicific or status-seeking calculus. They went to university on a hunch – the hunch that it would make their lives better. They saw social mobility in the more literal sense of moving somewhere else, not in its metaphorical sense of moving up a social or economic ladder. The rational-choice economics that now dominates British public culture holds that human beings are driven by a clear-cut calibration of costs and benefits. But people do not always behave, or want to behave, as opportunity-maximising actors in a market for meritocratic rewards. Their lives continue to 'succeed' or 'fail' in unique and incommensurable ways, as they play out against the stubborn specifics of time and place and the deep mysteries of chance, luck, disposition and temperament. My own intimate history of social mobility suggests that a life can flourish, as Daniel Pennac writes in his memoir about being a school dunce, 'as unpredictably as a cloud formation'.⁵⁴

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