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Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-79

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Given the amount of excellent accounts of post-war Britain that have appeared in the past decade or so, one is tempted to state that readers of contemporary British history have never had it so good. Both Peter Hennessy and David Kynaston have reached the 1960s with their respective accounts of post-war Britain.(1) Dominic Sandbrook however, chose to take Suez as his starting point. He covered the period 1957?70 in *Never Had So It Good* and *White Heat; Seasons in the Sun* is the second volume of a pair of books covering the 1970s, picking up where its predecessor *State of Emergency* left off. The title comes from Terry Jacks? 1974 number one single; often held up as one of the aesthetic disasters that the decade regularly served up. Yet it was extremely popular at the time, and slightly mawkish though it may have been, it provided a form of escapism that more often than not the era required.

The decade is generally remembered in popular memory and to an extent historiography as a kind of post-war counterpart to the 1930s; a bleak period best forgotten. Reading the recently published memoirs of Alastair Horne and Patrick Collinson, it is striking how having both lived abroad during the 1970s, they describe Britain as a thoroughly depressing place to return to.(2) The 1970s ?saw two Prime Ministers broken by the unions, inflation heading towards 30%, sporting occasions regularly disfigured by barbaric hooliganism and hundreds of people murdered by terrorists not only in Northern Ireland, but in the streets of

London and the pubs of Birmingham? (p. xx). England?s football team, World Cup winners in 1966, failed to qualify for either the 1974 or 1978 tournaments. The country which had given birth to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones sent singles by Telly Savalas and Billy Connolly to the top of the charts. The ?Evenin? All? of Dixon of Dock Green had been replaced by ?We?re the Sweeney son ... and we haven?t had any dinner?. (3)

In 1970 Harold Wilson went into a general election expecting to win and lost. In 1974, the ?who governs? election looked set to mark the end of his political career with a second successive defeat. However, with Labour unexpectedly winning 301 seats he ended up being invited to form a minority government. But he was yesterday?s man; arriving at Downing Street, his ?shoulders hunched, his smile thin, his eyes weary, Wilson looked older than his 57 years, a white-haired little man in a crumpled suit? (p. 8). He became increasingly dependent on drink. His cabinet looked similarly clapped out; Tony Crosland was past his best, while Roy Jenkins only reluctantly accepted the Home Office. Even the ?new? addition, Michael Foot, was over 60, and sometimes came across ?like a relic from Gladstone?s day? (p. 35). The inevitable second election of 1974 was generally marked by despondency and apathy on all sides; the only light relief provided by Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe?s hovercraft sinking off the Isle of Wight. After the election Wilson?s drinking continued to spiral out of control. Roy Jenkins went through the motions at the Home Office; Jim Callaghan half-jokingly talked of emigration. By the mid 1970s Britain was coming to be seen as a basket case, the equivalent of the pre-war Ottoman Empire as ?the sick man of Europe?.

In his recent book *Strange Days Indeed* Francis Wheen portrays the 1970s as a bizarre period dripping with paranoia and conspiracy.(4) Such a description certainly fits Wilson?s government; while inflation soared and terrorism gripped the mainland, Wilson was completely under the control of his political advisor Marcia Williams, who ? apparently anticipating Malcolm Tucker by about 30 years ? called Wilson ?a little cunt? in front of his officials (p. 59). Wilson?s personal doctor Joe Stone subsequently had several conversations with officials in which he quite seriously suggested that Williams could be murdered in such a way as to make the death appear to be from natural causes. That three of Wilson?s aides ?seriously considered murdering his political secretary speaks volumes about the atmosphere inside Number 10 after March 1974? (p. 60). Wilson himself became increasingly paranoid, convinced the security services were plotting against him. Meanwhile, from the files marked stranger than fiction, bankrupt MP John Stonehouse tried to fake his own death by drowning in California, only to be apprehended in Australia. He then re-took his seat in the Commons while awaiting trial ? a move surely not even his fictional doppelganger Reginald Perrin would have undertaken. This was all small beer however, compared to the fallout that followed the shooting of a Great Dane called Rinka on Exmoor in October 1975.(5) A month later, in a magistrate?s court in Barnstaple during a trial over benefit fraud, a man called Norman Scott complained of being hounded because he had once had a sexual relationship with the Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe. Subsequently, the Sunday Times published a letter that Thorpe had sent to Scott in 1962, which included the line ?Bunnies can (and will) go to France?. Thorpe resigned as Liberal leader the next. On 3 August 1978, Thorpe was one of four men charged with the attempted assassination of Norman Scott (the assassin had bungled the job and ended up shooting Scott?s dog Rinka instead), but was later acquitted. Strange days indeed.

Edward Heath's second general election defeat in 1974, meant that he had lost three out of four elections, and most Conservatives felt it was time for him to step down as leader. Naturally he refused to step aside, so the question turned to who would stand against him. After Keith Joseph ruled himself out of the running by making a public gaffe about population control, Margaret Thatcher ? the token female member of the cabinet and shadow cabinet under Heath ? stepped forward. The odds on Thatcher becoming Conservative leader at the beginning of 1974 would have been too long to calculate. When she told Heath she was challenging him, he predictably gave the Coolidge-esque reply ?you?ll lose?. But she beat Heath in the first round of the leadership ballot by 130 to 119. Many MP?s tactically voted for Thatcher on the basis that when other candidates joined the contest in the second round they would transfer their vote. But as the *Daily Telegraph* put it, to do so after Thatcher had won the first ballot so convincingly would look as though ?a whole herd of faint hearts left it to a courageous and able woman to topple a formidable leader? and then ?ganged up on her to deny her her just reward? (p. 251). In the second ballot Thatcher crushed her nearest rival, Willie

Whitelaw, by 146 votes to 79. Labour reacted to the news with undisguised glee: ?No need to worry about the next election, it?s a foregone conclusion? (p. 252). Wilson characteristically reacted to the news by pouring himself a large brandy. As for Heath, he would refuse to serve under Thatcher, and ?wallowed in one of the most spectacular sulks in British political history, an epic tantrum that lasted until his death thirty years later? (p. 257).

Given what was to follow, the election of Margaret Thatcher as Conservative leader has become an episode like the Russian revolution ? as E. H. Carr put it, those have suffered directly or vicariously from an event desire to register a protest against it: this takes the form of writing history and ?letting their imagination run riot on all the more agreeable things that might have happened?.(6) If only Enoch Powell had not committed political suicide; or Reginald Maudling not been a drunk with financial problems; or if Willie Whitelaw had stood in the first ballot ... but these things did not happen. Powell famously said that Thatcher was ?opposite the spot on the roulette wheel at the right time, and she didn?t funk it?, forgetting that, in Sandbrook?s words, ?it had taken exceptional single-mindedness, courage and timing to ensure she was in the right place when the wheel stopped turning? (p. 254).

In March 1976 Harold Wilson stepped down as Labour leader and Prime Minister. He had trailed his decision for a few months, but most colleagues were shocked when he resigned, as few had actually believed him when he said he was thinking about going. Despite winning four out of five general elections, history has not been kind to Wilson; in particular ?his two-year administration after March 1974 was probably the worst in modern British history? (p. 429). It was a classic case of fiddling while Rome burned: instead of devoting his energies to ?turning the economy around, he wasted his time arguing with Marcia Williams, sorting out the bizarre squabbles about lunch arrangements or consoling himself with the brandy bottle? (p. 429). The resulting leadership contest turned out to be a damp squib; Crosland was yesterday?s man, while Healey and Jenkins had too many enemies in the party. The biggest surprise was the number of votes for Michael Foot was able to garner from the left, but in the end Jim Callaghan beat Foot by 176 votes to 137.

As Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher was mediocre at best and poor at worst, easily dealt with at the dispatch box and viewed with increasing condescension within her own party. Yet by the end of 1979, she was in Downing Street. Throughout the summer of 1978 Callaghan dithered over whether to call an election, before ultimately deciding against it. What followed has become entrenched in popular memory as the Winter of Discontent. Sandbrook?s description of how the country slowly descended into chaos is the high point of the book. As historians we have all been warned about the dangers of writing ?Good Queen Bess/ Bad King John? history, but it is very hard not to pass judgement on some of the cast of characters from the period. Moss Evans, in particular, was singularly inept as Jack Jones' successor at TGWU, resembling not so much a leader as a ventriloquist?s dummy (p. 713). Tony Benn cuts a similarly contemptible figure, constantly setting the standard for self-righteousness and disloyalty. The crisis wore Callaghan out; all that he had believed in had crumbled away over the winter months. The no-confidence motion that triggered the general election of March 1979 provokes some more purple prose from Sandbrook; it should be compulsive reading for anyone who thinks narrative history is dead.

In theory a Conservative victory should have been inevitable; in practice, it was closer than anticipated. But the Winter of Discontent was an extremely big millstone for Labour to try to shake off, and statements such as, ?if Mrs Thatcher gets in I will say to the lads, ?come on, get your snouts in trough? from the leader of the railway union didn?t help matters either? (p. 789). As Bernard Donoughue noted on polling day, people weren?t so much voting *for* anything as against something ? union thugs who had barred the way to hospitals on picket lines, local authorities that had allowed rubbish to pile up in the streets. The Conservatives polled 339 seats to Labour's 269; ?for the first time since 1966 the voters had produced a clear and unarguable mandate? (p. 800). Typically, after the election Benn called for an ?inquest? into why Labour had lost; Callaghan immediately put him back in his box by snapping ?I?ll tell you what happened. We lost the election because people didn?t get their dustbins emptied, because commuters were angry about train disruption and because of too much union power. That?s about it? (p. 803). Butler and Kavanagh would be hard pressed to argue against that verdict.

Of course, the book deals with much more than simply the politics of the period. The devolution movement, the evolution of race relations and Scotland?s ill-fated 1978 World Cup campaign are covered. Popular memory is usually faulty to some extent, and ? as in his other books ? Sandbrook is quick to point out that the accepted narrative of the period doesn?t always chime with the historical record. Take punk for instance. The music magazine *New Musical Express* (*NME*), recently voted the Sex Pistols' ?God Save the Queen? as the most important song of the 1970s, and the emergence of punk must play an important role in any cultural history of Britain at this time. If the ?Beatles? northern backgrounds, irreverent populism and good-humoured optimism had matched the public mood in the second half of 1963, so the Sex Pistols seemed the perfect accompaniment to the plight of the pound, the surge in youth unemployment and the gnawing humiliation of the IMF bailout? (p. 545). And yet ?the fact is that punk *was not very popular*? (p. 565). It provided an important alternative to be sure, but it never enjoyed mass appeal, contrary to what the *NME* and *Melody Maker* would have had you believe.(7) If anything, the real musical revolution of the 1970s was the emergence of disco ? but this does not easily tie into the standard narrative of a bleak, confrontational decade.

As ever, Sandbrook is at his best when using the popular culture of the time as a microcosm of what was happening at a national level. The book opens with the trials and tribulations that George Lucas underwent while filming *Star Wars* in England. The film crew ?began work at 8.30 before a mandatory tea break at 10. At 1.15pm they had an hour for lunch, and another mandatory tea break at 4.30pm. At 5.30pm the day ended. Lucas had assumed this meant they would begin wrapping up, but by the second day of filming he realised that stopping at 5.30 meant stopping at 5.30. Even if he were in the middle of a scene, the crew would stop dead when the clock reached the half hour? (p. xvi). He enquired if they would consider working overtime, and was told it would have to be put to vote each morning; whenever they voted on overtime, they invariably voted no. Such were the circumstances in which a film regularly voted to be one of the best movies of all time was made.

If there is a cultural leitmotif for *Seasons in the Sun*, it is surely Basil Fawlty. The decline of Britain in the eyes of the world is reflected in Mr Hamilton?s rant upon entering the hotel (?... couldn?t find the freeway. Had to take a little backstreet called the M5?); part two of the book is entitled ?A damn good thrashing?, in reference to an episode where Fawlty?s car breaks down ? (a symbol of the poor quality of British industrial products), while his tirade against men who carry themselves like orang-utans reflects the anxiety that the middle classes felt about changing social circumstances. Would it be going too far to say that anyone who wants to understand the British middle-class psyche in the 1970s should take *Fawlty Towers* as one of their starting points?

What is most enticing about Sandbrook?s work is that he always provides a fine read. In the brave new world of 21st-century historiography, narrative history might be looked down upon as outdated, writing in a reasonably engaging way is way down the list of virtues promoted in undergraduate history courses. Yet, as Lawrence Stone put it many years ago, historians ?should not be content to throw words down on a page and let them lie like cow flops in a field?.(8) If there is a criticism of *Seasons in the Sun*, it is that essentially it and its predecessor *State of Emergency* are one book, with topics such as feminism and the rise of the gay rights movement covered in the earlier tome. The two works should really be read together, like a novel by Dostoyevsky, if you have the stamina to tackle them in one session. When Messrs Hennessy and Kynaston reach the 1970s in their own respective projects, they will find that the bar has been raised several notches.

Notes

1. Peter Hennessy, *Never Again* (London, 1993) and *Having it so Good* (London, 2010); David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain* 1945?51 (London, 2008) and *Family Britain* 1951?7 (London, 2010).Back to (1)
2. Alistair Horne, *But What Do You Actually Do? A Literary Vagabondage* (London, 2011); Patrick Collinson, *The History of a History Man* (Woodbridge, 2011).Back to (2)
3. When *Life on Mars* premiered thirty years later, DCI Gene Hunt uttered a similarly memorable line:

?It?s 1973. Dinner time. I?m ?avin hoops?.Back to (3)
4. Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed* (London, 2010).Back to (4)
5. Ironically a week or two before I received this book to review I had read Simon Freeman and Barry Penrose?s *Rinkagate* (London, 1997).Back to (5)
6. E. H. Carr, *What is History* (London, 1992), p. 97.Back to (6)
7. Again, coincidentally, as I typed these words it had just been announced that John Lydon had been invited to appear on the BBC?s heavyweight political discussion show *Question Time*.Back to (7)
8. Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (Abingdon, 1989), p. 75.Back to (8)

The author did not wish to respond.

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