

In Darkest London, Part 1

by R.J. Stove

Chronicles - London
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*The following is written by a white male Catholic convert, 48 years old, who has no specialist theological training whatever, is of strictly average intelligence, and represents no interest group or political movement. It derives solely from a recent visit to London, in which nothing spectacularly horrible occurred, and which was spent mostly among people neither very rich nor very poor.*

WHEN YOU REACH HEATHROW, the four things that hit you in the face are the ear-splitting noise, the confusion, the burqas, and the prevailing smell of vomit. Chicago's O'Hare is said to be the busiest and most confusing airport in the world, but O'Hare is a dream to navigate compared with Heathrow. Signage is limited and usually inaccurate; no passerby can help with directions, or if he has the knowledge to do so, he lacks the ability to convey it in comprehensible English. No policemen are visible, though CCTV cameras abound. Almost everyone is talking on a cellphone, to what purpose remains unclear, since the noise levels—one would have supposed—largely preclude thought, let alone conversation. The burqas are of a type unfamiliar in Australia, with no slits for eyes. Yet their wearers walk around assuredly enough. You are reminded of flying foxes, which are said to travel unimpeded even when their eyes are covered by blinkers.

After you finally board a London Underground train that is not so crowded as to prevent any passengers from entering, you experience a continual roaring that makes the airport proper seem as quiet as any Trappist retreat. Again, this fails to prevent the most animated cellphone conversations, consisting largely of four-letter

words. After half an hour of this, you suddenly realize what is so striking about such frenzied talk—namely, that you have not heard a single educated middle-class accent. Received Pronunciation (RP), common when you were last here in 1990, appears to have died out. So has anything like a regional dialect, familiar from the Yorkshiremen who used to abound on British—and Australian—television's cricket broadcasts (*où sont les Fred Truemans d'antan?*). What you have is the sort of *patois* that only 20 years ago remained largely confined to the most insalubrious public-housing apartments.

And so, for the rest of your stay, it goes. Multilingual information centers at chief rail depots—centers familiar enough among benighted "wops," "wogs," and "Krauts"—are mostly unknown in London. You cannot buy a ticket from a machine because it will not take your money, or any money. You cannot telephone for a taxi because the public call boxes are vandalized or simply refuse to operate. You cannot ask an official because there is no official to ask.

By this time you have discovered the joys of getting on an escalator. Everywhere you look, the hoardings' advertisements are of a salacity that would alarm a Times Square pimp. (This is even truer of public pay phones, where the more complete the vandalism, the more plentiful the flyers advertising prostitutes.) Not that you will be left long to contemplate in peace the titillating posters, because at both the beginning and the end of your escalator journey you will be kicked, shoved, gouged, punched, thumped, and cursed by your fellow passengers, eager to overtake you before the ticket barriers must be negotiated.

A few days later you will notice a pattern to this kicking, shoving, gouging,

punching, thumping, and cursing process. It is always carried out by whites, especially young white women. You suddenly hear the words "Excuse me, please" uttered in perfect RP English. You look around and see that the speaker is Indian. Or Pakistani or Bangladeshi or Ugandan or Nigerian. You had better cherish this courteous request while you can, because you will never hear anything like it from the local whites, unless they have Irish or Italian accents.

The Irish sales clerk or the Italian waitress will always smile. She will sometimes call you *sir*.

ON ABOUT YOUR THIRD day of London life, you appreciate that in one respect it is unlike any other Third World city in the First World—Los Angeles, say, or Detroit—that you have ever visited. The slums of L.A. and the Motor City were jungles, with the robustness as well as the vice of jungle life. This is also true of the Washington, D.C., suburb in which you stayed during the "crack wars" of the early 1990's, and which was said to have the highest murder rate in the United States. You have been accosted by gypsies in Rome who looked, and smelled, as if they had not bathed since Aldo Moro's assassination.

London is different. It is marked by two features above all: slovenliness and credulity.

The slovenliness must be seen to be credited. Traffic lights are now as routinely ignored in London, and car horns as ubiquitous, as in Athens or Cairo. Almost nothing works as it should: showers, baths, light switches, and (as already noted) most public telephones. E-mails and phone messages hardly ever generate a response. Allegedly competent businessmen will answer

the phone by saying, not "Acme Enterprises, John Doe speaking," but "Hello." Even billionaires cannot afford a decent education for their children. (Homeschooling, it is reliably asserted, would be punished with the full ferocity of the law, just as Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has dusted off Nazi-era legislation in order to hound homeschoolers in her country.)

Yet the slovenliness is as nothing compared with the credulity. To the spite of a Parisian concierge, the average Londoner (especially if elderly and female) adds a most unconcierge-like capacity for believing the most outrageous myths. If these myths involve blacks, Arabs, or Catholics—let alone black Arab Catholics—so much the better.

The omnipresence of the squalor, whether physical or moral, cannot be emphasized enough. Rich Los Angelenos can live in gated mansions guarded by Rottweilers and electric fences. Rich Mexico Cityites have their former viceregal 18th-century palaces guarded by loyal retainers. For the rich Londoner, no escape of any kind appears to be possible. A fashionable post-code is wholly inadequate to protect anyone from the prevailing sordidness.

There is a couple in prosperous South Kensington with whom I have been in occasional contact since the 1970's. They are grandparents, former bank clerks. Approaching 80 years of age, they both must nevertheless do odd jobs because their old-age pensions long ago failed to keep pace with inflation and they lost their little nest egg when their bank collapsed. In 1980 they would have had a Belgian or Dutch *au pair* to do the chores. Now there is no one.

One of their sons has moved back home. He attended a prestigious, very expensive local school. When he speaks at all, it is in truculent monosyllables. Somewhere in his past there is a sociology degree from a 1960's glass-box institution calling itself a university. This degree unfits him for blue-collar tradesmen's jobs. If he were a plumber, he

could earn £1,000 per week, according to a 2002 report in the *Guardian*. (No doubt the figure is higher today.) A thousand pounds buys you a lot of spare time touring Gstaad or Barcelona or Innsbruck. His mother is proud that he "has an education."

On the Underground, a loud, geriatric female voice cuts through the mechanical thudding and the screeches of cellphone ringtones. It is a voice with a Lady Thatcher edge that keeps fading and then returning. "So, the trouble is, if you wanna start fighting against global warming, you have got to start culling the population. It's a population problem, because the nignogs, they keep breeding. A one-child policy, that's what we need around here. Like the Chay-nese government, know what I mean?" Her hair is blue; she might be, by the look of her, the wife of a retired stockbroker. Except for her male companion, nobody seems to be paying her any heed. You notice that the train has now stopped at your desired station. You get out.

In 1990 Londoners frequently conversed on nonpolitical subjects. This former aversion to politics has now grown rarer and rarer; the topic seems to be the preferred drug of addiction. In pubs, in restaurants, Gordon Brown and David Cameron (the latter embarrassingly appeased by the mass media, much as Tony Blair was for so long) appear to inspire equal contempt. The British National Party seems to generate outright horror even among those who might, in view of their ancestry, be expected to vote for it. Yet the chief bogey is, without doubt, the European Union.

Britain has an entire media industry based on condemning the European Union in the most strident terms. These terms are not the trenchant but measured and thoughtful criticisms that, for example, Brussels resident and author Mary Ellen Synon has offered in the pages of *Chronicles*. These are expressions of pure gobbling hatred. Reading *Private Eye* (above all) on the matter gives you a taste of what

*Der Stürmer* must have been like when Julius Streicher was at the height of his creativity. Since there is no E.U. threat to human freedom that has not been preempted, and usually surpassed, by the British Nanny State from Thatcher's accession to the present, you might wonder why all the sound and fury is raging. Then it hits you: a snide editorial here, a throwaway TV gag there. When your average Englishman insists that "the E.U. is a bunch of Brussels bureaucrats trying to destroy Britain as a sovereign nation," he does not really care a snap of the fingers for "Britain as a sovereign nation," since he is happy enough to see this sovereignty handed over to paper shufflers on Wall Street or to slave-driving factory owners in China. No, he is just using a polysyllabic version of "No Popery." He probably is no more aware than were the mobs described by Daniel Defoe, 300 years back, of whether "Popery" is a man or a horse. Yet he knows what he hates. And he hates the European Union because, in its origins, it is Catholic.

**MOST OF THOSE LONDONERS** whom I met in 2009 were (when I knew their religion at all) either Protestants or pagans. With London Catholics the story is somewhat dissimilar. Here I do not mean such eminent Catholics as the novelist Piers Paul Read and the *Catholic Herald* columnist Stuart Reid, both of whom I had the pleasure of encountering. I mean, rather, Catholics unknown to this magazine's, or any magazine's, readers. Insofar as they permit generalizations, they were marked by one main trait in their ordinary talk to total strangers.

That trait was visceral hatred of Irish Catholicism, and of Latin Mass Catholicism among any people. The recent scandal concerning Ireland's orphanages aroused plentiful media attention in England. Never once did it occur to these Catholics—non-literary but still belonging to the formally educated classes—that the mass media habitually calumniate; that they bellow their

anti-Catholic agenda from the housetops; that for years the British government has wanted to destroy Catholicism altogether (most notoriously by compelling Catholic adoption agencies to deal with sodomites); and that one should therefore greet government-backed media revelations on Catholic themes with a certain skepticism. No, the *Times* had spoken, so the case was closed.

When conversing, these Catholics acknowledged no theologian earlier, deeper, or less heretical than Auberon Waugh (who once referred in print to Solzhenitsyn as “a nasty old fleabag,” and whom his own father, Evelyn, correctly called “clumsy and disheveled, sly, without intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual interest”). As for the Society of St. Pius X—whose representatives are now in mutually respectful talks with Pope Benedict XVI—one well-dressed

old man seemed about to have a heart attack when talking about it. “Lefebvrists! Stinking Fascists! Filthy stinking Nazis!” It was not clear where (other than, perhaps, television coverage of Bishop Richard Williamson) he had acquired evidence for his reckless charges. But he appeared to believe that no Catholic’s opinion could be licit unless it had been vetted and endorsed by Benjamin Netanyahu.

In short, among those like that old man, a strange Stockholm syndrome occurred. His was not the Catholicism of Cardinal Manning, upholding doctrine at all costs and regarding Hibernian dockside workers as human beings. Instead, his was the Catholicism of the Old Catholic aristocrats, haunted by an absolutely terrified question: “What will the Establishment think?” I once wondered why a Catholic duke of Norfolk used to march with gus-

to in Loyal Orange rallies. I once wondered why, when St. John Fisher opposed the Henrician coup, none of his fellow bishops could be bothered to join him. I wonder no longer.

Of course, such paradigms as those I observed are by no means confined to modern London. Pseudo-Catholic despots, from Louis XIV to Austria’s Emperor Joseph II, have often aimed to set up a *de facto* national Catholic Church, Gallican or Josephinian as the case may be. But what I observed seemed to be an entirely lay-directed, rather than hierarchy-directed, provincialism. Perhaps such ecclesial balkanization had always been present among English Catholics, but had been kept in check before Vatican II.

(To be continued . . .)

R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia.

## The Long View

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Christopher Check  
Executive Vice President  
The Rockford Institute  
928 North Main Street  
Rockford, Illinois 61103

(815) 964-5811

## In Darkest London, Part 2

by R.J. Stove

*This is the second part of a two-part article written by a white male Catholic convert, 48 years old, who has no specialist theological training whatsoever, is of strictly average intelligence, and represents no interest group or political movement. It derives solely from a recent visit to London, in which nothing spectacularly horrible occurred, and which was spent mostly among people neither very rich nor very poor.*

IN PART 1 of this report (see *Correspondence*, May) I attempted to give some idea of the cultural, political, and moral squallor that has overtaken London since 1990. Here I endeavor to give an account of the two phenomena—two alone—that gave me hope for the city of which Dr. Johnson said, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.”

One was an exhibition at the National Gallery: “The Sacred Made Real,” a collection of 17th-century Spanish religious art. If someone had told me fifteen or even five years ago that Londoners would flock to see some of the most hyper-realistic Crucifixion statues ever made, I would have laughed at the notion. But this very thing happened in my presence. Tickets were so scarce as to require 24 hours’ advance notice for booking. The crowds bore no resemblance to those I had seen at the nearby National Portrait Gallery a day earlier. There, Americans and Chinese surrounded me. At the Spanish exhibition, the conversations were all in British accents or German.

Why are people in London viewing these terrifying artifacts at all? Is it, for them, the hip modern equivalent to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*? The sheer nightmarishness of the paintings and sculptures pre-

cluded, surely, mere aesthetic interest. Do the viewers feel toward God on Golgotha the same panic that ultimately overcame Pinkie Brown, in *Brighton Rock*?

Nevertheless, the news reportage is extraordinary. At a preliminary viewing, journalists who had spent their entire adult lives publicly defending Mossad agents, merchant bankers, and masturbators were seen to weep. Adrian Searle, an atheist *Guardian* writer, wrote on October 19, “Full of great and terrible things, this is a marvelous and often disturbing exhibition. . . . I left devastated and deeply moved.” The *Observer*’s Laura Cumming, also non-Christian, wrote six days later, “This is the most powerful show the National Gallery is ever likely to hold.” Public-relations girls—whose cultural awareness had hitherto been confined to memorizing every episode of *Sex and the City*—were briefly exposed to the astonishing fact that once upon a time in a faraway galaxy lived a Man called Jesus Christ, and there had been people who believed in His death on a Cross without ever having been silenced by Christopher Hitchens. (Hang on—didn’t some of these images resemble a Mel Gibson movie? Don’t remember the title, but it had something to do with passion. No Sarah Jessica Parker in it, though, so it can’t have been very important.)

THE OTHER SMALL SIGN of hope for London can be found, with great difficulty, once you leave the Marble Arch Underground station and turn to the right. Inlaid on a traffic island separating Bayswater Road from Edgware Road, there is a round plaque that marks the spot where once the Tyburn gallows stood. No policeman will admit to knowing where Tyburn Convent actually is, but the Muslim tour

guide will tell you.

On the door to Tyburn Convent is a placard: “MOBILE PHONES MUST BE SWITCHED OFF BEFORE ENTERING THE CHAPEL.” Even here, it seems, modernity must be warned against. Upon entering, you are suddenly overwhelmed by a vast silence, broken only by the occasional whine of ambulances outside.

Behind a white grille, a Tyburn sister kneels, reverently but impassively, before the Blessed Sacrament. There are two ladies in the pews, each of whom is saying the Rosary. And there is myself.

What happened to me, in the 20 minutes that I knelt there, I cannot profess to say. Perhaps I briefly went insane. Perhaps I only then appreciated for the first time what being a faithful Catholic means. Whatever the explanation for those 20 minutes, it was somehow as if St. Edmund Campion and all the other 104 Catholic martyrs of Tyburn were, in a strange way, actually present.

I guess it was the spirit of the place. The realization that on this very soil, Catholics like me were not worrying about how to get to the nearest Tube station or when the traffic light was going to change or whether they had all the documents for their forthcoming cross-Channel trip. They were worrying about how not to betray the Church when the hangman first plunged his knife into their bowels.

From a biography of Campion published in 1867:

There was standing beside the block where Campion was being cut into quarters a young man named Henry Walpole: he was still a Protestant, and had gone merely to see. As the hang-

man was throwing the quarters into the caldron of boiling water a drop of the bloody mixture splashed out upon Walpole's clothes, who afterwards declared to Father Ignatius Basselier, S.J., that he at once felt he must be a Catholic. On his conversion he joined the Society [of Jesus], was ordained priest, and sent into England, where he was apprehended, and like Campion condemned and executed . . .

Suppose I had been Henry Walpole on that frightful December day in 1581, and suppose Campion's blood had splashed out upon my own clothes. Would I have had the courage to react as Walpole did?

My fear is that in the 16th century, sheer physical and moral cowardice could well have led me to do what I see so many otherwise intelligent and decent Englishmen and Englishwomen doing at present: in short, trying to reach a *modus vivendi* with Anglicanism. Those who behave thus in London today—when no threat of the scaffold, or even of lasting social ostracism, exists to keep them within the Established Church—would seem to believe that Anglicanism remains the same broadly Christian movement that once succored T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis. This, *naturellement*, raises the question: How incoherent, how femocratic, and how sexually perverse does England's contemporary Anglicanism—presided over by Canterbury's Rowan "Arch-Druid" Williams—have to become before these Londoners will have the courage to desert it?

DURING THE 1950's and early 1960's, millions imagined that Britain's leading dramatist was John Osborne. In 1994 Osborne drank and drugged himself to death after no fewer than five marriages, the fourth to an actress (Jill Bennett) whose suicide he greeted with open pleasure, lamenting only that the funeral directors had

inconsiderately deprived him of the chance to defecate on the eyes of her corpse.

These days he is largely and happily forgotten, though there exists a languid scholarly debate as to whether he or Bertolt Brecht was the more blatant and talentless liar. To the extent that Osborne is remembered at all, it is less for his once-touted plays—whose cretinous *proletkult* amateurism even the British left now admits—than for his putrid erotic life and his 1961 *cri de coeur*, this latter published in the cryptocommunist weekly *Tribune* under the title "A Letter to My Fellow Countrymen." Most of the document (written just after, and intended to justify, the building of the Berlin Wall) is of purely psychiatric significance, but the best-known passage from it possibly warrants quoting:

There is murder in my brain [Osborne insisted], and I carry a knife in my heart for every one of you. [Prime Minister Harold] Macmillan, and you, [Opposition Leader Hugh] Gaitskell, you particularly. I wish we could hang you all out, with your dirty washing, on your damned Oder-Neisse Line, and those seven out of 10 Americans, too. I

would willingly watch you all die for the West, if only I could keep my own minuscule portion of it, you could all go ahead and die for Berlin, for Democracy, to keep out the red hordes or whatever you like.

You have instructed me in my hatred for 30 years. You have perfected it, and made it the blunt, obsolete instrument it is now. I only hope it will keep me going. I think it will. I think it may sustain me in the last few months.

Till then, damn you, England. You're rotting now, and quite soon you'll disappear. My hate will outrun you yet, if only for a few seconds. I wish it could be eternal.

The Tyburn nuns offer England a very different message from Osborne's harangue. By their mere existence, they say, "Bless you, England. Bless you, and in the Name of the Crucified God, in the name of every Catholic exterminated by the Penal Laws, recover your soul."

R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia.



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