

Chapter 16

Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (1975)

The ‘Swinging Sixties’ changed the world and all our lives forever. Remember (if you are old enough) Yuri Gagarin, the first man to venture into space; the civil rights movement in the US; John F. Kennedy, the court of Camelot and the Cuban missile crisis; the Beatles, who took the musical world by storm; Harold Wilson, the most under-rated of Prime Ministers, and ‘the white heat of technology’; the contraceptive pill, which opened up sexual freedom; Carnaby Street, Mary Quant and mini-skirts; the 1968 student riots in Paris; the hippy sub-culture. ‘You’ve never had it so good’, Harold Macmillan had declared in 1957, but now the years of post-war belt-tightening were finally over and things were even better.¹ The consequences of all this were played out in Britain’s universities – particularly the ‘new’ universities established in the early 1960s, which are satirised with such devastation and delight in Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* (1975).

I have a particular affection for *The History Man* because (so I like to think) I was fortunate enough to be an undergraduate at the University of Watermouth at about the same time as Howard Kirk (the Kirks arrived in 1967, when Howard had been appointed as a lecturer in sociology, and I enrolled in 1968), though I left a year before the notorious party which takes up most of the first 100 pages of the novel and certainly would not have been invited. I did not study sociology

¹. Speech to a Conservative rally in Bedford, 20 July 1957.

and never had to endure any of Howard Kirk's seminars. But I did study English Literature (trendily called English and American Studies) and half remember George Carmody (with whom I had much in common back then), and I wonder if one of my tutors was not actually prim Miss Annie Callendar. *The History Man* brings back so many memories: the brutal white concrete (now turned grey with streaks of algae-green) in which the University of Watermouth was built; the lifts and the corridors like something out of George Orwell's *1984*, the politics and the protests, and the extraordinary cast of academics and students. The *piazza* came after my time.

Of course, as the Author's Note to *The History Man* makes clear, the University of Watermouth did not, in fact exist, nor did Howard Kirk and Miss Callendar, nor any other characters in the novel, nor (apparently) did 1972. But the University of East Anglia, where I really was a student, did exist in its infancy, though in Norwich rather than Watermouth and so a little distance from the sea. The School of English and American Studies (which back then was adjacent to the School of Social Sciences in the half-completed 'teaching wall') was a special place. As well as Miss Callendar (who wasn't there), there was an inspirational faculty – among others, Nicholas Brooke, J.B. Broadbent, A.E. Dyson, Lorna and Vic Sage, and Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury himself, who were establishing their groundbreaking postgraduate course in creative writing.

Angus Wilson was a lovely man, a brilliant mimic, a shrewd and accessible critic, and an encouraging teacher, but although I have tried my hardest, I have never found his novels easy to read and they feel especially dated now.² Malcolm Bradbury always appeared more serious, but his writing has an incisive wit and his three campus novels conjure up the changing university experience of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, though behind the humour there is a sense of emptiness. His first novel, *Eating People is Wrong* (1959), is an often-hilarious take on life at a Midlands red-brick university in the austere post-war era, when 'even the dogs walked soberly, and there were almost no girls'. His second novel, *Stepping Westward* (1965), has its roots in his transatlantic adventures as a research student in the early 1960s. According to Bradbury (in an

² *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), Angus Wilson's first and most conventional novel, is arguably one of his best. It is also about disputing academics. His perceptive and very readable critical works are *The World of Charles Dickens* (1970) and *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (1977).

unpublished afterword), its naive central character, James Walker, ‘goes into a world far more experienced – sexually, politically, historically – than his own provincial and domestic one at home’.³

Then in 1975 came *The History Man*, Bradbury’s acknowledged masterpiece, satirising the heady days when radicalism and protest were sweeping through the western world and through many of Britain’s universities. In truth, radicalism and protest rather bypassed the University of East Anglia (there is much that bypasses East Anglia, which is why it is such a special part of the country) and it was the neighbouring University of Essex that was in the eye of the storm. All three of Bradbury’s campus novels both celebrate and question the place of old-fashioned liberal values and new radical ideals in a changing world, and they share a belief in the importance of people behaving properly to each other. In *Eating People is Wrong*, in the 1950s, Professor Treece worries that his students are too ordinary and lack any radical zeal, but twenty years later, in *The History Man*, radicalism is out of hand and Howard Kirk, the ‘history man’ of the title, is eating friend and foe alike.

It is usual for narrators in novels to delve beneath the surface of the characters and so guide our response (though, as we have seen in Part III, some narrators deliberately disorientate us). However, this is not the narrative technique of *The History Man*, where the prose is superficial, there is no revealing of thought and motive, and as readers we are left to make our own judgements without a narrator’s steer. Objects and actions are described just as they appear or happen, and much of the time they are under the deadening glare of the sodium street lights. Even the paragraphs are long and featureless, like the free-form architecture of the Watermouth campus. Thus the language of the novel is wholly and eerily appropriate to this dehumanised sociological world where (so Howard Kirk believes) people are no more than players in the inevitable march of history. Take, for example, this exchange between Howard Kirk and his wife Barbara as they drive to the town:

‘I don’t want you to feel bad,’ says Howard. There is a turn to the left, barred by a red arm; it is the entrance to the high multi-storey car park on the edge of the precinct. ‘Well I do feel bad,’ says Barbara. Howard makes the turn; he stops the van in front of the arm; he takes a ticket from the automatic

³ http://www.malcolmbradbury.com/fiction_stepping_westward.html

machine. 'You know what you need?' he says; the arm rises, and Howard drives forward. 'Yes,' says Barbara, 'I know exactly what I need. A weekend in London.'⁴

The short sentences, the paucity of adjectives and adverbs, and the lack of any decoration in the language almost remind of Ernest Hemingway. Notice, too, how the dialogue is delivered in a monotone ('say ... say ... say'), woven into the prose without paragraph breaks. When we start reading it can be disconcerting, as if we are lost in this featureless place, but it is not long before we get our bearings and happily join in.

The Kirks are, on the surface, radical and progressive, though most things in the novel are on the surface and it is full of sly contradictions. They are introduced as just 'some people called the Kirks', but in the same sentence as 'a well-known couple'. They have chosen to live in a slum-clearance area of the town, surrounded by derelict houses and drug-ridden squats, and have become the focal point for radical students and faculty. They grew up in the north of England, part of the respectable and religious middle class; in Watermouth, however, they have put all that behind them and despise the bourgeoisie (but we might notice their 'bright pine kitchen' where always 'a new kind of Viennese coffee-cake' was on offer, and their shopping bags and alarm clock from Habitat).⁵ Since Barbara's one-afternoon stand with Hamid, a psychology student, which Hamid proudly reveals over tea that evening while Howard is prodding at his phallic sausages, they have allowed each other to engage in extra-marital affairs – Barbara with a young actor called Leon, whom she meets on her 'shopping' weekends in London (he buys her expensive Biba dresses), and Howard with a steady and willing stream of colleagues and students at the university. Barbara and Howard are, they tell us, expressing their own separate individuality, but in fact, behind the facade, it is a rather patriarchal set-up, with Barbara 'trapped in the role of wife and mother, in the limited role of woman in our society' and wanting to write books, while Howard goes off to work (and to his serial liaisons) and writes books

⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), chapter 1.

⁵ *The History Man*, chapter 2.

which are fashionable but not very well researched.⁶ Exploited students, first Anne Petty and then Felicity Phee, lodge with the Kirks, to help with the chores and the children, reinforcing the female stereotype.

Today the Kirks are throwing a party, as they always do at the start of the academic year (though they are ‘very fresh and spontaneous people’ and it is by no means a tradition), so after breakfast, over wine, they make a plan – a ‘loose frame of reference surrounding the encounter’. They set off for town in their camper van (what else?) to do the shopping, leaving behind ‘the domestic social annex’ and heading for ‘the urban stage ... where traditional role descriptions breed ... where the public life that determines the private one is led’.⁷ The novel indulges happily in this sociology-speak – the language of Howard Kirk’s books. Barbara describes him accurately as a ‘radical poseur’.⁸

Howard likes holding parties, because, in the half-organised chaos of drink and drugs, he can encourage things to happen. He is ‘the creator of a serious social theatre’; he makes ‘the house itself the total stage’; ‘the code is one of possibility, not denial. Chairs and cushions and beds suggest multiple and obvious forms of companionship.’⁹ Myra Beamish arrives early. Myra and Henry are old friends of the Kirks and it was Henry who suggested that Howard should come to Watermouth. But, unlike the Kirks, they have become absorbed into the bourgeoisie. They live outside the town in a smart converted farmhouse where they make their own wine and grow organic onions. Henry has become fat and lazy, and Myra is bored and has decided to leave him:

Barbara says: ‘Myra, has Henry done something to you?’ ‘No,’ says Myra ‘... he never does anything to me. That’s why he’s so boring’ ... ‘You’re not leaving him for anyone?’ ‘No,’ says Myra, ‘I’m leaving him for me.’¹⁰

So the guests arrive; they eat, drink (copiously) and discuss; they dance, smoke pot, embrace, and move to the cushions and mattresses. Someone has been talking to John Stuart Mill, another to Rainer Maria Rilke, and another to Sigmund Freud (who has reportedly gone off

^{6.} *The History Man*, chapter 1.

^{7.} *The History Man*, chapter 1.

^{8.} *The History Man*, chapter 2.

^{9.} *The History Man*, chapter 4.

^{10.} *The History Man*, chapter 5.

sex); the German lectrice has taken off her see-through blouse and the bra-less girl is wandering around asking after Hegel. In his basement study, Howard discovers one of his more demanding students, Felicity Phee, furtively reading the manuscript of his next book. She is a dark-eyed, troubled soul, with 'tight-knuckled hands and bitten nails', and, Howard typically observes, 'a mottle of spots above her breasts'.¹¹ She has decided she is no longer a lesbian and is in need of a man; to be precise, she is in need of Howard, on whom she is fixated. All this is secretly observed through the basement window by curious Miss Callendar, a newly arrived lecturer in English Literature, until Howard, who does not believe in privacy, draws the curtain and not very reluctantly submits to Miss Phee's advances: it is his pastoral duty. It seems Barbara is also missing from the party, as is young Dr Macintosh, a new addition to the sociology faculty, whose pregnant wife has succumbed to labour pains and left. Meanwhile, in the spare bedroom, Henry Beamish, having learnt that Myra is planning to leave him, pushes his arm through the window and brings it down hard on the shattered glass. It was an accident he will say; he slipped on an ice cube. Since Howard and Barbara are each otherwise carnally engaged and unaware of the incident, Flora Beniform, the large social psychologist, takes him off to hospital in an ambulance. Her field of study is troubled marriages. She takes troubled husbands to her rhythmically moving bed as part of her research. Howard, who appreciates large ladies, is a very willing subject.

Back at the university, Howard Kirk leads a seminar on theories of social change. Before it starts, and because it is a democratic place, he has all the tables removed from the room so there are no barriers to discussion. George Carmody, a dull conservative student, has been asked to lead the seminar. He is wearing a badged university blazer and carries a polished leather briefcase and a tower of books, all of which define his character. He has prepared a lengthy paper, which he is intent on reading. Most of the other students are grudgingly sympathetic, but Kirk is not: 'I think you've made a heavy, anal job of this, because you're a heavy, anal type, and I want you to risk your mind in the insecurity of discussion'.¹² The matter of Carmody will dominate Howard Kirk's term. He has marked Carmody's anal essays as failures and Carmody wants them remarked by someone different. Carmody also wants to be moved

¹¹. *The History Man*, chapter 5.

¹². *The History Man*, chapter 8.

to a different teaching group. Kirk sees both requests as questioning his professional competence and refuses. While the requests are escalated to the Dean and Vice-Chancellor, Carmody embarks on a campaign of blackmail. He knows of Kirk's philandering and has photographs of Kirk and Felicity Phee in the basement at the party. Kirk's job is on the line. He seeks solace with Miss Callendar.

Now it is the end of the autumn term and the Kirks are holding a spontaneous party, as they are wont to do. The radicals have won and George Carmody, the victim of student sit-ins and the 'Work for Kirk' campaign, has fled. Myra Beamish is back with Henry, but on her terms, though Henry is not here, having been injured by protesting students while introducing a lecture by Mangel, a notorious right-wing academic – although Kirk hates everything Mangel stands for, it is he who has gleefully organised both the lecture and the protest. It is ironic and unfortunate for Henry that Mangel never, in fact, turns up at Watermouth having died the previous night, but the forces of anal conservatism and woolly liberalism have nevertheless been successfully put to flight. The bra-less girl has discovered Hegel. The Macintoshes are here with their newly born twins – but while Mrs Macintosh is breast-feeding the babies, her husband is upstairs in the guest bedroom comforting Felicity Phee. Later, in the basement, Howard is laying prim Miss Callendar on the cushions; and in the guest room, vacated by Felicity and Dr Macintosh, Barbara has put her hand through the window and sliced it open on the broken glass. There is no escaping the inevitable march of history.

In the twenty-first century, *The History Man* is as outdated as C.P. Snow's *The Masters* – probably more so, since Oxford and Cambridge have somehow managed to hang on to their old traditions and have maintained to an extent the ideal that education is a good in itself and it is their role to undertake disinterested research and to pass on the wisdom of the ages. But fifty years on at Watermouth and a hundred universities like it, education has become utilitarian, with a range of dubious vocational courses whose main aim is to prepare students for the world of work, churning out engineers, lawyers, journalists or computer geeks as the economy demands – though these days, and thanks in no small part to *The History Man*, there are few sociologists among them. Howard Kirk would be too busy form-filling and writing scholarly articles to augment the university's research score, and too aware of the importance of student evaluation of his own (academic) performance to have time for his sexual encounters; George Carmody, appalling though he is, would be protected by double-marking, fierce external examiners

and politically correct examination boards, and anyway would probably be regarded as a model student; Felicity Phee would be swept up by 'Student Support' and its well-meaning counselling service; and if Howard did have the chance to take advantage of a vulnerable student, the long arm of Human Resources would quite rightly have him marched off the campus in an instant.

However, outdated though it is, in Howard Kirk *The History Man* brilliantly creates a moustached monster typical of the time and leaves the reader to pass judgment. In spite of our moral selves, we may find he is as much hero as villain. His academic life is a sham; he disrupts for the sake of it; he is wholly selfish, intent on self-gratification, and rides roughshod (often literally) over all around him. But he is also the bringer of energy and, whatever his motives, he makes things happen. When the establishment is people like Henry Beamish and George Carmody, he is perhaps a necessary evil. For those of us whose memories stretch back that far, and even if we only hovered nervously on the fringes, he is a reminder of all the excitements and insecurities of the 'Swinging Sixties', before they were submerged in the cold utilitarian flood.

I returned to what was not Watermouth some years after I graduated and was told by one of the professors (not Beamish, but someone like him) how dull the university had become in the Thatcher years.¹³ Students were now only interested in working for their degree, getting a job and making money. It seemed like a worse sort of selfishness than that exhibited in *The History Man* and now that students pay fees and have become customers (who, of course, are always right) things have deteriorated further. Perhaps it is time for more Kirks, not fewer, and since I am no longer like Carmody and regret my wasted student voice, this time I might even be invited to the party.

¹³. Margaret Thatcher was the Conservative Prime Minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990.