

In Pursuit of the English

D.Lessing

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This is not fiction but billed as a documentary report, but given the detailed conversations reported it is hard to believe that there has not been a lot of fictional editing. Thus the story reads with the vividness of fiction and to that is added the fascination that this is real life not the arbitrary fantasy of an indulgent mind.

It all starts out in Cape Town where our protagonist is stuck for some time waiting for her passage to England, whiling away her time in a pension sharing quarters with a lot of other temporaries. This is but a prelude, the real story begins upon arrival in London. About the passage and seafaring along Africa there is nothing, although this journey alone would have been worth some report.

Well in London she needs to find quarters with her young son, a mere toddler, get a job so as to be able to pay the rent and then find time for her own writing typing away.

The scene is of postwar London, more exactly 1949-50, when the scars from the Blitz were still very much in evidence. It is also an England of relative poverty both individual and collective, rations still being in effect. To find a place to live is as noted a necessity and means sharing apartments. The author ends up by chance at one which will provide the scene for the rest of the book. What is presented, although ostensibly out of life, seems more like a modern rendering of a Dickensian turmoil. There is Rose a single woman pining for her boyfriend but too strict to go to bed with him; there are the landlord couple Flo and Dan, she a very good cook and very ebullient and their common daughter Aurora as well as Flo's older son Jack, who is at logger heads with his step father. Then there is a married couple with a whining child with the husband at the end of his tether insisting on regular intercourse with his oppressed wife (who later attempts an abortion by throwing herself down stairs). Our author is at first given a room up at the attic but is able to negotiate a better deal. And then there is the elderly couple who the landlords desperately try to evict ostensibly on grounds of the filth they generate, but really to be able to rent it out more profitably. But evictions is never an easy matter. In fact at the end it goes to court, where they eventually win in spite of their total cluelessness and ineptitude thanks to the elderly woman being even more inept and clueless. The encounter with the court is however a traumatic experience for Flo and Dan, they do not even realize that they won in the end, because the judge seemed so unfriendly when he announced his verdict (which was more in the nature of flipping a coin than due to careful deliberation). Some of the court scenes are admirably described by the author giving to the account a touch of magical realism, and thus standing out in the book. At the end of it all an older prostitute moves temporarily into the house. Our author befriends her to the disgust and consternation of Rose who is scandalized by her presence and can never forgive this transgression of her friend the narrator. The prostitute turns out to be regular middle aged woman who has taken to the tricks by necessity. It is so easy to fool men, she reveals, a few tricks and some French. Sex does not interest her at all, but it serves a useful purpose keeping her head above

water. The author is rather fascinated by her and her developed literary tastes. And after that interlude the book ends with our protagonist moving away. For her the shared living was just an episode furnishing her with material on observing the working class, the real English of the book's title. It was written in 1960, some ten years after the fact, and in a Nation split through by class differences, it provides for much exotic material for the curious well-to-do in the nature of: so this is the way the lower classes live? A rather sordid life, yet spiced up by various antics. A life of no real culture where books are oddities and writing books something unbelievable and strange.

No doubt based on reality, as all fiction, yet one wonders how close to actual events the story is, as it does read as fiction, in fact as modernized Dickens. A good way of checking is to consult her autobiography, does it contain recollections that would correspond to the story told? I pick up the book¹ which I read sometimes in the late 90's but do not recall much of a detail of. In this autobiography she actually refers to 'In Pursuit of the English' and claims that it is indeed true enough but has the form and pace of a novel, not of real life which is far more formless. She also admits it is Dickensian in tone, that she saw London through a veil of Dickens. Then there creeps in an element of nostalgia, this early postwar London does no longer exist. It was a city severely war damaged, with ugly tottering buildings and a general austerity no abundance of smart restaurants and fancy shops, whatever smart and fancy was only for the rich and tucked away and beyond access. Her stay at the place of Flo and Dan appears in her autobiography as a mere episode which was prolonged for the simple reason that her toddler son liked it so much, soon enough she would move on to better things. And of Flo there is only once reference, namely to the Italian lady who was such an excellent and resourceful cook. And then of course the tele. At that time television came to English homes and it would effect a deplorable change for the worse. The lively verbal culture that reigned around the kitchen would be asphyxiated by the arrival of the TV-set around which everyone was fixed in a semi-circle and the gorgeous meals and its sharing at a dinner table would be reduced to snack food to hold in your lap. Talkative faces would be replaced by transfixed ones. People got used to socializing without any conversations.

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¹ Walking in the Shade (1949-1962) 1997