

THE LISTENER

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AUTUMN BOOKS:

Angela Huth on the Booker Club

Jonathan Aitken on the stale buns of a TV critic
Germaine Greer's uncharitable view of Aid in Ethiopia

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John Simpson files the lead story from the Bahamas and gives the background to Mrs Thatcher's 'victory' at the Commonwealth Conference and the part played by the British lobby correspondents. John Cole analyses prospects for the Anglo-Irish Summit and wonders if any lessons have been learnt since Sunningdale failed. Germaine Greer gives a controversial view of Aid in Ethiopia. The Langham Diarist, Derwent May, this week celebrates 20 years as THE LISTENER's Literary Editor. His Autumn Books section includes Jonathan Aitken, Mary Warnock, Keith Waterhouse, Donald Trelford and Hortense Wackett. And just when you thought you had heard the last of the *Real Lives* controversy, why here's John Naughton. R.T.

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John Simpson: The Commonwealth Conference

One against 46: an easy victory for Mrs Thatcher

Mrs Thatcher was alone in opposing sanctions against South Africa at the Commonwealth Conference in the Bahamas. She had to make concessions, and a package of measures against the Pretoria government was approved, but, as she had hoped, the word 'sanctions' did not appear in the final agreement. John Simpson explains how Mrs Thatcher took on the rest of the Commonwealth and triumphed.

It always looked like being a more difficult affair than it really was. Smoothly dressed Foreign Office men would make apprehensive jokes about Mrs Thatcher's chances of survival. Her own people said little about it, even in private, but they were planning their campaign along familiar lines. Like the Roman army, which worked out a serviceable set of tactics and stuck to it for 500 years, whether the enemy were Gauls, Carthaginians or Parthians, Mrs Thatcher and her advisers approached the Commonwealth Conference in the Bahamas with the same feints and manoeuvres, the same reliance on the shield wall, the same outsized catapults throwing boulders too big for the occasion that she had used in a dozen or so battles, against French Presidents, German Chancellors, British miners, and all the rest of them. History now records that in the Bahamas she won, at some cost to other people's tempers—and if Sonny Ramphal, the archetypal man of goodwill who is the Commonwealth's Secretary-General, did not actually say it was a victory for common sense, it was probably because he was too grateful that he still had something to be Secretary-General of.

Still, Mrs Thatcher's officials took no chances. They appear to have encouraged the journalists of the Westminster lobby to accompany her to the Bahamas, for instance—presumably because they felt there was a strong possibility that she would be given a pasting by the other members of the Commonwealth, and that it could damage her at home. The lobby is a much misunderstood group of people, who are often accused, quite wrongly, of being mindless toadies who will write anything they are told. In fact, they vary as much in independence as in ability; they are almost as often at war with the spokesmen of Downing Street as they are at peace, and there is usually a fine strain of hostile questioning at lobby briefings. But cosmopolitan the lobby is not—and by encouraging lobby correspondents to come along, Mrs Thatcher's people knew they were providing her with a protective shield which would ward off unfriendly foreign comment by the simple device of failing to notice it.

There were honourable exceptions, but for the most part, like war correspondents, the lobby was content to report the progress of the battle on the basis of what was visible from the British

trenches. Viyella shirts and ties with strange devices were seen in bars that normally entertain T-shirts and shorts; heavy black shoes trod the white sand of the beaches, and pale skin turned the colour of freshly grilled bacon under the Caribbean sun. Gordon Reece, the man who is invariably described in the British press as the man who restyled Mrs Thatcher's hair and who subsists entirely on big cigars and champagne, once said that the only headline he liked to read was 'MAGGIE TRIUMPHS AGAIN'. He was joking, being a man of wide horizons. The lobby, whose horizons are smaller, wrote precisely that.

But it was in every way the kind of victory that Mrs Thatcher has made her own. Trotsky, after 1905, defined the doctrine of impossibilism, which involves setting oneself and one's political followers targets immensely difficult to achieve, in order that they will be radicalised by the treatment they receive from the organs of the state when they do, indeed, fail to achieve them. That is not of course, Mrs Thatcher's way; but she does appear to set herself immensely difficult targets, and she then has to bend all her energies and her remarkable tenacity to attaining them.

A conference at which Mrs Thatcher does not start from a minority of one in order to conquer some unscalable position is a boring affair, and even when she tries to sit on the sidelines and encourage the others to do the talking, they are inclined (as France and Germany did at the EEC summit in Milan last June) to set her up and attack her anyway, out of sheer force of habit. In the Bahamas, however, she was not taking on anyone of her own weight. From the point of view of numbers, perhaps, the line-up was spectacular: one of Mrs Thatcher against 46 other Commonwealth leaders, each of whom believed in the moral necessity of demonstrating to the government in South Africa that its policies were so wrong and so short-sighted that it would not be allowed to be part of the civilised world unless it reformed itself radically. The fact that the majority of those 46 run one-party states and some are so fragile politically that their heads of government thought it wisest to stay at home is beside the point—what counted in the Bahamas was the total lack of preparedness and forward planning carried out by the majority of leaders. Mrs Thatcher, whose preparation was superb,

LANGHAM DIARY

Derwent May

It's 20 years ago this month that I joined THE LISTENER as its literary editor. In some ways, the literary scene seems to have changed rather little since then. For example, in the first novel round-up that appeared in that October, 1965, the authors reviewed were Muriel Spark, Francis King, Roy Fuller and Edna O'Brien—all of them still very pronouncedly on the literary scene today. And the following round-up, a fortnight later, was of novels by Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis, Thomas Hinde and Simon Raven. One can forget that writers often go on producing good work for 50 years or more—so that at any given moment, there will always be far more established writers energetically writing books than new ones. The frenzied hyping of the new these days tends to obscure that fact. Most literary presences are not like meteors—they are more like medieval churches, taking ages before their stones have settled into place and they reach their final form.

But the man who wrote those novel round-ups—Jocelyn Brooke—is dead. And looking back, I find the change that I am most acutely aware of is deaths. I often think of Stevie Smith and miss her. She would bring me in a poem or review to the Langham (where THE LISTENER had its offices then), and I'd see her down to the Green Line bus-stop in Portland Place, from which she could be whisked quickly back to her little house in Palmers Green. In the hallway of that house there were dried bulrushes that she had picked as a girl—and she still wore, in her sixties, round-toed school-girl shoes. But she herself was not nostalgic. Everything she wrote and said was witty and brisk, even if it had a note of underlying sadness. Once, on that bus-stop, she told me about a wedding she'd attended where she'd found herself sharing a pew with an Indian. She imitated for me, with a deep, approving chuckle, the remark he'd made to her as they came out of the church: 'They doo promise a lot, doan't they?' It matched exactly her own feeling about human hopes and human fate.

A very different kind of reviewer—waggish, but with more than a touch of malice—was Tom Driberg. The first piece he wrote for me contained what I thought was a totally irrelevant obscenity; so I cut it, taking the view that it is best to save your published obscenities for times when you really need them, to make a point or get some otherwise unobtainable effect. He drew a world-weary and sarcastic complaint at me down the phone when he saw what I'd done—and included some similar obscenity or disgusting aside in everything he wrote for me after that, which I equally invariably cut. It became a sort of comic ritual between us, my cuts and his complaints—but one that I couldn't mind, because I was always effortlessly the winner in the game. I think

Tom only went on playing it because he couldn't stop himself—he was an obsessive for whom results didn't really count. All that mattered was asserting to the world what *he* was—a devil, a shocker, a subversive—time and time again.

What about people who turned down books to be reviewed? I have a small anthology of reasons given me for not taking on a book, of which the best are 'The Princess is coming to stay with me for three days' and 'At the moment I find I can read nothing but the most beautiful prose.' I won't give the speakers away, or the books. However, I'm sure that Henry Reed, the poet, won't mind if I say that he gave the best reason I've heard for cancelling a lunch invitation at short notice: 'I'm afraid I'm not hungry this morning.' (He came out to dinner instead.)

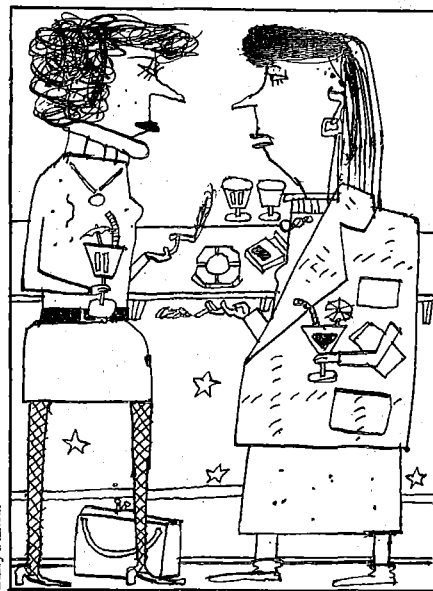
Change is certainly visible in another milieu that interests me—that is to say, among birdwatchers. I spent a few days of this Indian summer at Blakeney and Cley in Norfolk. Innumerable migrant birds from the north arrive on that stretch of coast in October—wild geese, duck, wading birds, seabirds—and there seem to be almost as many birdwatchers waiting there to meet them. What is new is that the birdwatchers are now bowed under the weight of high technology. I went down the village

street at Cley at half-past six one morning, and ahead of me in the dusk I could see two dark-clad figures making their way towards the shore. What was it they had on their shoulders—longbows, shotguns? Anyway, they looked like huntsmen setting out in a Brueghel painting. But the long, dark objects they were carrying were telescopes and their tripods; and on the high shingle rampart, when I got there as the sun was just rising, there were already 20 or 30 men crouched behind their scopes, looking intensely out to sea for skuas and divers and anything else on or over the waves.

The extreme cases are the 'twitchers', as they are called by everybody—the birdwatchers whose chief excitement lies in seeing a different rare bird every weekend, and who will dash from one end of the country to the other in their cars or even by aeroplane in pursuit of such thrills. They often go in parties equipped with walkie-talkie radios, to call each other up as soon as one of them finds some prey. The word 'twitchers' began as a jeer, but like 'whig' or 'tory' it is now completely neutralised: one man said to me quite unselfconsciously, 'I don't mind doing a bit of twitching occasionally but I really prefer watching birds in their normal habitats.' Cley proved to have a café which is practically a national clearing-house for twitchers, with a slate on which are recorded all rare sightings in Britain as people phone them in, and the phone continually ringing with inquiries about what is on the slate that day. By convention, whoever is sitting there eating his toasted teacake answers the phone. 'Local or national?' he asks the inquiring twitcher.

However, humour survives even birdwatchers' obsessions. At Cley, a fairly uncommon bird, a glaucous gull, took up residence on the beach for several winters. It was known to the watchers as 'George'. It finally disappeared, but one autumn a year or two later another glaucous gull settled down on the beach and has since been a regular winter visitor, like its predecessor. I saw it myself two weeks ago—an enormous, pale-winged gull, standing on the stones, looking out to sea by the side of the ornithologists. But it is not called 'Son of George'. It is called 'Boy George'.

For one reason or other, I've been staying a lot in small English hotels this year, and have one complaint about almost all of them. An agreeable thing is the way they all now provide electric kettles, cups, plenty of teabags and sugar in one's bedroom, so that one can make a cup of tea at any time. What is horrible is the UHT milk—can it mean ultra-high toxic?—that is provided in tiny plastic pots. Must long-life milk taste so bad? The exception I found was in Bath, where I stayed one night at the Hole in the Wall restaurant, which has a few rooms above it that cost no more than any Egon Ronay Scale E hotel. Not teabags, but a caddy full of breakfast tea stood beside the kettle; however, there was no milk at all. But when I came back in the evening, not only had the covers on my bed been turned down, but on the tray there was a jug of fresh milk. How sad, really, that something so simple should have been such a pleasure to find.



'Karen wanted to celebrate the Gillick ruling, but she's not old enough to drink.'