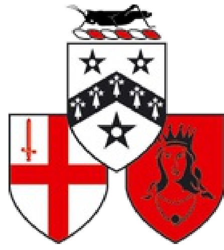

The Lost World of 1962 Transcript

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The Lost World of 1962

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Imagine that, whether through science or magic, you woke up this morning and found yourself mysteriously catapulted back in time by fifty years. It is not 5 July 2012, but 5 July 1962, then as now a Thursday, but an unusually cold and rainy day. Perhaps, to get your bearings, you pick up a daily paper – the *Times*, let's say. You look at the headlines on the front page and you blink with surprise, because of course there aren't any.

The first column reads 'Births', and your eye scans the list of solid and sensible names: Roger Alford, Bridget Evans, Peter Green, Rachel Morgan, Robin Reeves. Under Marriages, it turns out that Arthur Montague and Mary Allen of Fort Road, Guildford are celebrating their silver wedding anniversary, 25 years after they were married in 1937 in the university chapel at Glasgow. Under the headings Deaths follows a long line of septuagenarians and octogenarians, people who were born in the reign of Queen Victoria, lived through the reigns of her son, grandson and great-grand daughter, and saw two world wars, the high point and decline of the British Empire, and the advent of the cinema, television, air travel and even the space race – something that makes you realise that today's Britons are not the only generation to have experienced extraordinary change.

On the second page you find the Appointments and – a telling word – Situations. The latter surprises you a little. You read that an 'attractive, intelligent lady, 37, wishes to learn bar and some reception duties in a good class country club', and that a 'gentleman, Mayfair flat' requires a 'house parlour-maid of first-class experience' to join his cook and daily maid. In Kensington, a lady wants an experienced governess for her 14-year old daughter. And in Cirencester, Colonel Gibbs at Ewen Manor is looking for a 'superior married couple or two friends, experienced cook and houseman', with 'exceptional references'.

And yet some things never seem to change. On the second page, the computer giant IBM is advertising for men and – unusually – women to teach data processing skills to the scientists and engineers who are building the world of tomorrow. The sports pages are full of the joys of Wimbledon, with the peerless Rod Laver having just beaten the former champion, Neale Fraser, in the men's semi-finals. At the Old Bailey, where 15 youths are on trial for causing a fight at a Finchley dance hall, the judge has stern words for the gentlemen of the press. One of the boys, it turns out, was temporarily released on bail so that he could sit his A-level exam. He was followed all the way to school by representatives of the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*. And according to the judge, the *Mail* man went as far as to smuggle himself into the exam hall and even stole a copy of the exam paper. In other school-related news, the Education Minister is demanding an inquiry into standards of primary education, where Britain is apparently falling behind its European competitors, while a new report alleges that there are too few science laboratories in the nation's schools. In girls' schools in particular, we learn, 'all too frequently, lessons are merely chalk and talk'. Yet there is hope for Britain's children. 'Before even a stone of the University of Essex has been laid', says a report, 'its promoters and planners are looking far into the 21st century, academically and physically.' The new university is not merely aiming for a whopping six thousand students; it's drawn up a radically forward-thinking curriculum. In particular, undergraduates will be asked to compare British politics with that of the United States and the Soviet Union, and to 'compare and criticize our literature with American and Russian literature.' The aim, a spokesman says, 'is to deepen students' understanding of the modern world and of the ways of life of its two great champions.'

But as you flick through the paper's pages, there is a palpable sense not just of a vanished world, but of a country hurtling towards the future. The newly issued Pilkington Report into the new miracle of television envisages not just two channels but eventually SIX, with at least some, excitingly, in colour. At the Methodist Conference, there is much alarm at the so-called delinquency of the bingo craze. In London's casinos, says the Labour MP George Thomas, 'fortunes are changing hands overnight' – and the Betting and Gaming Act has been 'an unmitigated disaster for this country'. The Commons is still debating the possibility of a Channel Tunnel – or more plausibly, a gigantic bridge – and Britain's car manufacturers say they are ready to fit seat belts in all their models as soon as the government confirms that they are now compulsory. But the Times itself is not convinced. 'It would be almost inhuman,' an editorial says, 'if at this early stage in road safety research, any Government were to decree that the motoring public must be compulsorily strapped into the cars.' A good deal more thought is called for, it concludes, 'if we are not to become a harness happy nation, regarding the safety belt as panacea for immunity from our own careless driving.'

Philip Larkin famously claimed that sexual intercourse began in 1963, between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP. If he was right – and he wasn't – then 1962 would look like the last year of the old order. In reality, it was a year of tremendous innovation. It saw the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, a temple to peace and reconciliation rising from the ashes of wartime. It saw the opening of Britain's first casino, the first episode of Steptoe and Son and the first live satellite television broadcast from America to Britain. The Rolling Stones made their debut at the Marquee Club; the Tornados had a number one hit with Telstar. Ford launched the Cortina, one of the best-selling cars in history. Britain and France signed a deal to build the Concorde aircraft, University Challenge made its debut on the BBC, Safeway opened its first British supermarket in Bedford, and Golden Wonder introduced its first flavoured crisps – cheese and onion, if you're wondering. The biggest hits of the year were 'Stranger on the Shore', 'I Remember You', 'Let's Twist Again' and 'The Young Ones'. Len Deighton published *The Ipcress File*, Ian Fleming wrote *The Spy Who Loved Me*, PD James published her first

detective novel and Doris Lessing published the feminist classic *The Golden Notebook*. James Hanratty was controversially hanged for his part in the A6 murder case, and other notable casualties of the year included the Beatles' original bass player Stuart Sutcliffe, the actor Charles Laughton and the writer Vita Sackville West.

Merely to describe 1962 in facts and figures is to conjure up a Britain in the coins were heavier, the air dirtier, the streets quieter, the people paler, the clothes darker. It was a world in which nine out of ten people had never been on an aeroplane. One in three people still lived without access to an indoor bathroom or hot running water. Most houses relied not on central heating, but on the warmth of a coal fire, and millions of people still bathed once a week in a tin tub. In major cities, smog was still a severe problem: that summer, the smog in London was so bad that trains and flights were cancelled, traffic around the capital ground to a halt and the AA warned of a 'no-visibility' zone in the South East of England. Most people still lived in the towns in which they had grown up. Schools were divided into grammar schools, secondary moderns and technical colleges: almost everybody sat the 11 plus, but fewer than 20 percent of people passed. Very few people went on to university: there were barely 100,000 students in 1962, compared with 2 million today. People often ate the same meals every week: roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on a Sunday, cold beef on Monday and beef stew on Tuesday, sausages and mash on Wednesday, perhaps a pie on a Thursday, fish on a Friday, and sandwiches on a Saturday. Outside a few big cities, curry houses, kebab shops, even Chinese takeways were still virtually unknown. And in the evenings, millions of couple still entertained themselves separately, the husband in the pub, the wife at home with friends or family. But entertainment was changing; the box in the corner was slowly taking over the living room, and by the end of 1962, more than three out of four households had a television.

In many ways the facts of life in Harold Macmillan's Britain tell a story of enormous change. There were only 6 murders per thousand people in 1962; now there are 13. Some 20,000 people were in prison then; now there are 84,000. Yet in other ways things were not as different as we think. There were no scandals about MPs' expenses back then, and on the face of it they were paid much less than their modern counterparts – just 1,750 pounds a year. Yet convert that into today's money, you get a rather different picture: that would be worth about 75,000 pounds today – more than a modern MP is paid. Similarly, our national debt today stands at a record 800 billion pounds, a record -- which is why the newspapers are so full of doom and gloom. Fifty years ago, national debt stood at just 26 billion. But again, if you convert that into modern money, you get a figure of 1,500 billion – more than twice the level today, reflecting the massive financial obligations left over from the Second World War, and the cost of keeping so many British troops scattered across the Empire. And on the face of it, people were paid much less than. The average male salary in 1962 was about 550 pounds a year. But in modern money, that works out as about 23,000 pounds – only two thousand pounds less than the average Briton earns today.

What I want to suggest this evening is that if you had to choose one year as the hinge between past and present, looking back to Britain's Victorian past but also looking forward to the age of computers, air travel and globalization, then you could do a lot worse than pick 1962. Even the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, seems an extraordinarily transitional figure, poised between old and new. He was the last prime minister to have fought in the trenches, and the last to worn a moustache. But he was the first to make effective use of television and the first to appeal to the newly affluent middle classes and floating voters. With his tweed jackets and grouse moor image, he seemed like the soul of Edwardian tradition. But it was Macmillan who famously boasted that 'most of our people had never had it so good', and sought to exploit the political potential of the new consumer society.

This was a world captured in Philip Larkin's poem 'Here', published in 1961, in which he describes the people of Hull, the 'residents from raw estates, brought down the dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,' who 'push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires -- cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, / Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers.' An apocryphal story has it that Macmillan's campaign manager, Lord Poole, used to drive out from his country estate into Watford, where he would watch the suburban shoppers wandering through their new supermarkets or signing hire purchase forms for televisions and washing machines. He would nod happily to himself, and then he would drive home again. And a cartoon in the *Spectator* after Macmillan had won the 1959 election summed up Supermac's appeal. The prime minister is sitting in his Downing Street study; around the table are also sitting a car, a washing machine, a television and a fridge. 'Well gentlemen,' he says, 'I think we all fought a good fight.'

Indeed, all the doom and gloom about the economy in 2012, we can only gasp with envy at the apparent economic success story that was Britain in 1962. The newspapers worried that the economy was not growing fast enough, but at barely 2 per cent, unemployment was almost non-existent. Every month saw more families buying their first homes, their first cars, their first televisions or washing machines. A nation of scrimpers and savers was becoming into a nation of shoppers and debtors, and the motto "Make do and mend" was giving way to "Live now, pay later."

There were those who hated the new affluent society; on both the old Labour left and the old-fashioned reactionary right, the sight of youngsters keenly devouring the adventures of *Dan Dare* and throwing their new pocket money away on dance halls and cinemas was evidence of moral and cultural degeneration. The Conservative journal *Crossbow* grumbled in 1962 that the affluent society was 'a vulgar world whose inhabitants have more money than is good for them … a cockney tellytopia, a low grade nirvana of subsidised houses, hire purchase extravagance, undisciplined children, gaudy domestic squalor, and chips with everything'. But nobody was listening. For most people affluence meant real change and real opportunities - not least for women liberated

from the drudgery of housework. The cookers and washing machines that dominated high-street showrooms in the Macmillan years probably did more to expand opportunities for women than any number of turgid feminist tracts, for they spared the housewife the gruelling labour of washing and drying clothes by hand, or slaving for hours over a hot stove. And plenty of people never forgot their first glimpse of their own home, their own garden. "I wept because I was simply so happy," said one woman, remembering the day her family moved into a new home in Hemel Hempstead. "We had a garden for the children to run in. We had a house, a home of our own, and we didn't have to worry about anybody."

This was, of course, the heyday of the teenager: three years earlier the *Daily Mirror* had become Britain's first newspaper to run a teenage page, with tips and anecdotes about romance, growing up, and above all, entertainments, clothes and desirable purchases. The very word teenager was originally a marketing term, coined in America in the 1930s, and its origins remind us that what made teenagers new and different was that they were young people with unprecedented economic freedom. They had more free time, thanks to school holidays and paid holidays for youngsters in work. The new labour saving appliances meant that they no longer had to spend hours helping their parents in the home; instead they could go into town, earn and spend. For as one writer put it in the early 1960s, "the distinctive fact about teenagers' behaviour is economic; they spend a lot of money on clothes, records, concerts, make-up, magazines: all things that give immediate pleasure and little lasting use." On average, a teenage boy in 1962 spent 71 shillings a week – the equivalent of 62 pounds in today's money – while a girl, who would be paid much less, spent 54 shillings. Then as now, much of this went on clothes and shoes, on drinks and cigarettes, on cinema and dance hall tickets, and of course on magazines and records.

Teenagers' elders often fretted that they were on a slippery slope to debauchery and degeneration, and the government ploughed millions into youth clubs in an attempt to distract them from the perils of rock and roll, dance halls and the back of the bike sheds. No doubt the clubs' intentions were good, but many of their efforts to distract the young seemed bizarre to say the least. In 1962 the London Union of Youth Clubs, 'seeking to mould the citizens of tomorrow', sent a hundred teenage girls on an 'initiative test' to spend the night at sea in a ship full of sailors. The point of this exercise was never entirely clear, but it takes little imagination to speculate that that the evening did not unfold quite as the youth service would have wished. A year later, the National Guild of Teenagers prohibited its members from playing bingo, attending late night jazz clubs, reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, seeing *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or *Room at the Top*, and even from visiting Brighton. As one commentator put it at the time, 'the lunatic fringe of the establishment is still at work'.

What really interested most teenagers in 1962 was, of course, pop music. But although we often think of this as the heyday of early rock and roll, most people at the time thought that rock music was on its last legs. In the *NME* readers' survey at the end of 1962 the top six acts were Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, Frank Ifield, the Shadows, Acker Bilk and Billy Fury – almost all of whom had been around for years. Indeed, the BBC producer and disc jockey Brian Matthew wrote that rock and roll had merely been a passing phase, a short lived fad that would soon give way to more lasting musical genres. Looking back on the music scene of 1962, Matthew wrote that 'the thump and crash form of beat music was clearly on the wane.' 'What had been exciting in its early stages,' he thought, 'soon became boring. Here was a real case of familiarity breeding contempt.' Already, he noted, publishers and managers were looking for 'signs of the next craze'. 'You may remember,' he explained, 'that we were told frequently and loudly not long ago that rock was dead and next in line would be the calypso – but it wasn't!'

Instead, he advised his readers, 'the way things are at the moment it looks as though the sixties may well come to be labelled the ten years of Trad.' Indeed, extraordinary as it might sound, he was not alone in his view that Trad Jazz, not rock and roll, would be the soundtrack of the next few years. After all, perhaps the year's biggest musical star was none other than Acker Bilk, a clarinettist and bandleader from rural Somerset who was always immaculately turned out in a striped Edwardian waistcoat and a bowler hat. The 'Bilk Marketing Board' made sure that he was always billed as 'Mr Acker Bilk', and his publicity usually read like an elaborate pastiche of a Victorian advertisement, complete with excruciating puns and parodies: 'An Acker A Day Keeps The Bopper Away', 'There IS No Substitute for Bilk', or 'Spinna Disca Bilka Day'. His instrumental record 'Stranger on the Shore' had originally been written for his daughter, but then became the theme of a children's television programme. It spent a record-breaking fifty-five weeks in the British singles chart, peaking at number two, and twenty-one weeks in the American chart, where it reached number one in May 1962.

As one commentator put it, Bilk was 'quite possibly the only man to top the American charts wearing a bowler hat and a striped waistcoat'. And when a compilation album, *The Best of Ball, Barber and Bilk*, reached the top of the British LP chart in 1962, traditional jazz seemed to be sweeping all before it. The BBC ran a television series entitled *Trad Fad*, and almost every week trad bands appeared before twenty million viewers on *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. In the film *Band of Thieves*, Bilk pulled off a series of dashing diamond heists, while Richard Lester's film *It's Trad Dad* gave audiences the opportunity to see Bilk, Kenny Ball, Chris Barber, and the Temperance Seven, as well as dozens of other stars of the day, on the big screen. 'Trad jazz is indestructible,' wrote the historian and jazz aficionado Eric Hobsbawm in the *New Statesman*, 'because it is today the basic dance-music of British juveniles.'

Perhaps it was not surprising, then, that so many experts thought rock and roll was finished. On New Year's Day, Decca's young executive Mike Smith went to their West Hampstead studio to hear an audition by four

aspiring beat musicians from Liverpool. He had little hesitation in turning them down; in commercial terms, he explained, rock was 'dead'. All the evidence of the charts suggested that ballad singers and trad jazz bands were the music of the future. As Decca's head of A and R, Dick Rowe, explained tothe Liverpool band's manager, Brian Epstein, 'Groups are out; four-piece groups with guitars particularly are finished.' Even after George Martin had signed the Beatles to EMI's Parlophone label, many executives were pessimistic about their prospects. In September 1962 Martin told a meeting of EMI label chiefs that Parlophone was about to put out the Beatles' first single. Most of the other executives thought that it was another of George Martin's comedy records, and one even asked: 'Is it Spike Milligan in disguise?' 'I'm serious', Martin told them. 'This is a great group, and we're going to hear a lot from them.' But nobody took much notice; why would they? And indeed, when Love Me Do came out on 5 October, its performance was solid rather than spectacular, peaking at number 17. At that stage, worldwide fame and fortune seemed a long way away.

It's one of the lovely coincidences of history, I think, that the Beatles' first single, which became such an emblem of the swinging Sixties, came out on exactly the same day that another symbol of the decade – the first James Bond film, *Dr No*, opened at the Pavilion Cinema in London. Entertainingly, the Bond franchise was another unlikely and unanticipated success story. Its producers, Albert R. Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, did not have high hopes. When they privately showed the film to an audience of American distributors a few weeks previously, the reaction was not at all enthusiastic. 'Well, Harry,' one man said to Saltzman, 'all we can lose is 950,000 dollars.' 'It simply won't work in America,' agreed an executive at United Artists. 'Connery will never go over.' The first reviews, meanwhile, were lukewarm at best. '*Dr No*: no, no,' wrote the *Spectator*'s critic. 'Too inept to be as pernicious as it might have been.' Some critics conceded that the film made for diverting entertainment, but few were impressed by Sean Connery's interpretation of Ian Fleming's secret agent. The *New Statesman* described him as 'an invincibly stupid-looking secret service agent', while the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which called the film 'tame', thought Connery was 'a disappointingly wooden and boorish Bond.' And yet as it happened, the film was brilliantly timed. It was adapted from one of Ian Fleming's more fantastic novels, the story of a freakish scientific mastermind working for the Soviet Union and undermining the American test rocket programme from his futuristic base off the coast of Jamaica. If nothing else, it proved a welcome contrast to the gritty, introspective New Wave films that had dominated the screens for much of 1961 and 1962. And when a real Cold War crisis involving missiles in the Caribbean began to unfold just two weeks into the film's run, James Bond's reputation for modernity and relevance was assured.

Of course, unlike the adventures of James Bond, the Cuban Missile Crisis was no laughing matter. For thirteen days, as Nikita Khrushchev and Jack Kennedy confronted one another over the issue of Soviet missiles in Cuba, the world seemed to be teetering on the brink of a third world war and a nuclear holocaust. From a British perspective, one of the most terrifying things was that we were so irrelevant. Should war break out, then Britain would undoubtedly have been one of Moscow's chief targets; yet even at the time, it was very obviously the Americans, not Harold Macmillan's Cabinet, who were calling the shots. All Britain could do was sit and wait. One Vulcan squadron commander at RAF Waddington remembered that for more than a week, he and his crew were on permanent stand-by in a flight hut twenty yards from their bomber; in just ten minutes, they could have been airborne and on their way east. 'If the hooter had gone, we would have gone,' recalled another man from the same base, a navigator. 'Nobody would have given it a second thought. We were doing a job. I never heard a conversation on the rights and wrongs of dropping a nuclear bomb.'

Yet in the wider public, many people were understandably terrified at the thought that the world was heading for atomic Armageddon. Government contingency plans envisaged the evacuation of nearly ten million women and children from the cities to the countryside, but amid the panic of an impending nuclear attack, it's hard to imagine such an operation going to plan. Indeed in those last fraught days of October, most large towns saw protests and demonstrations of one kind or another. In Sheffield, however, a group of students spotted the opportunity for a practical joke and mocked up newspaper placards with the headline: 'War Declared, Official'. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the circumstances, the university immediately suspended them.

What the Cuban Missile Crisis confirmed, though, was that Britain no longer mattered as it once had. The crucial decisions were taken in the White House and the Kremlin, not in 10 Downing Street. And just a few weeks later came more evidence of Britain's fall from grace. On 5 December, the former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, one of the most respected American experts on foreign policy and President Kennedy's special adviser on NATO affairs, gave a speech at a conference at the West Point Military Academy. There was nothing controversial in his words - nothing except for three sentences that found their way into every newspaper in Britain and, for many observers, encapsulated the decline in the nation's international reputation. 'Great Britain,' he said, 'has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate power role – that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'Special Relationship' with the United States, a role based on being the head of a 'Commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity, or strength and enjoys a fragile and precarious economic relationship – this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to work alone and to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct a policy as weak as its military power.'

Harold Macmillan, for one, was outraged at Acheson's words; the night he heard the news, he wrote in his diary that Acheson 'always was a conceited ass'. But there was no denying that Britain's world role was changing. In 1960, Somaliland, Cyprus and Nigeria had become independent, and in 1961 they had been joined by Sierra Leone, the British Cameroons and Tanganyika. The empire was dying. Not everybody liked it; indeed, many white

settlers in Africa felt cheated and abandoned. 'We've been thoroughly betrayed by a lousy British government,' one Kenyan farmer fumed in 1962. 'We'll throw in our allegiance with somebody who's not prepare to pull the bloody flag down.' Many of them had fled Britain to escape Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government, but now found the wind of change catching up with them. Others, like the farmer in Kenya, simply could not stand the idea of being ruled by black Africans. 'I'm not a missionary,' he told the press. 'I hate the sight of the bastards.' But the tide was irresistible. In 1962 Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda all gained their independence; they were followed in 1963 by Malaysia, Zanzibar and Kenya, and in 1964 by Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.

And in its way, the rapid progress of decolonisation spoke volumes about the priorities of a Tory government that looks much more liberal in retrospect than it seemed at the time. Indeed, the man who had been Macmillan's most influential Colonial Secretary, the young reformer Iain Macleod, made no secret of his domestic social goals. 'The people of this country think that the society which we have created is not sufficiently just,' he told the Conservative Party conference in the autumn of 1962. 'They are puzzled by the fact that still in this twentieth century the child of a skilled manual labourer has only one chance in a hundred of going to the university, while the child of a professional man has 34 chances. They are puzzled that 42 per cent of the people in this country still earn £10 a week or less. The just society that we seek is a society which can confidently invite the men and women who compose it to make their own way in the world, because no reasonable opportunity is denied to them. You cannot ask men to stand on their own two feet if you give them no ground to stand on.'

For Iain Macleod, as for most other politicians of his generation, the answer to inequality was not radical political change but rapid economic growth. Affluence, it seemed in the Sixties, would wash away all the social ills and economic discontents of the past. And yet even in 1962 there were growing mutters of discontent, and murmurs that British industry and British businesses, having been too introverted and too complacent for too long, were falling behind their European competitors. Indeed, in April 1962 a *Guardian* headline proclaimed that Britain was 'bottom of the class', having finished last in an annual table published by the Secretariat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.Britain, the paper reports, has the 'sorry distinction of being the only Western country whose volume of national output was practically unchanged from the previous year', and is 'the one country where the employment situation has seriously deteriorated.' In the nation's boardrooms, the news only strengthened the view that the United Kingdom simply must join the new European Common Market, from which Britain had stood aloof in the 1950s. Indeed, Harold Macmillan had already made it clear that he saw Britain's future inside the European Community.

But not everybody was quite so pro-European; indeed, polls showed deep public suspicion. 'We must not join Europe', declared the intensely conservative Viscount Montgomery of Alamein in June 1962: 'I stand for the British Commonwealth with the Queen at its head … There is only one race under Heaven which could stand between the Western world and utter destruction. That is the British race to which we belong –united by close ties of blood, speech and religion the world over … Let the Mother of Nations gather her children about her to the call of common kindred; do not let her cast away the affection of her offspring. Let her grasp the hand of her children and draw them closer to her – rather than desert them.' Other Euro-sceptics put it rather more earthily. In September 1962 the Tory chairman Iain Macleod advised the Cabinet that local party agents were reporting 'increasing distrust of foreign political connections and indeed of foreigners, and fears that we are going to be "taken over", "pushed around" "outvoted", "forced into the Common Market to serve American interests" or "to surrender our independence to 'Frogs and Wogs.'" And even Macmillan himself had his doubts about Britain's European future. 'The *French* are opposing us by every means, fair and foul,' he wrote in his diary on the night of 1 December. 'They are absolutely ruthless. For some reason they *terrify* the others – by their intellectual superiority, their spiritual arrogance, and their shameful disregard of truth and honour.' Perhaps he wasn't far wrong; only a few weeks later, his old wartime ally, Charles de Gaulle, vetoed Britain's first attempt to join the European Community.

Deep down, though, most ordinary people were less interested in international politics than in their domestic pleasures. In particular, Britain was falling in love with television. ITV's biggest draw was that perennial favourite Coronation Street, then not yet two years old, while the BBC's most popular shows were *The Black and White Minstrel Show*and *Steptoe and Son*. But the really controversial programme of the day – and the one, I think, that says most about the tone and texture of life in 1962 – was a series that set out to use the cops and robbers genre to explore the lives of a northern, working-class community in an age of change. Its name was *Z-Cars*, and one of its creators, the playwright John McGrath explained, it was designed as 'a kind of documentary about people's lives in these areas and the cops were incidental – they were the means of finding out about other people's lives.' Indeed, the BBC publicity for the new series made very clear that it was not just half an hour's escapism, but a social documentary confronting the problems of urban life in the sixties. 'Life is fraught with danger for policemen in the North of England overspill estate called Newtown,' the *Radio Times* told its readers. 'Here a mixed community, displaced from larger towns by slum clearance, has been brought together and housed on an estate without amenities and without community feeling.'

The very first episode, in January 1962, begins with the shooting of a bobby on the beat – for many viewers, a shocking reminder of the rising crime that they found so disturbing. The Newtown police react by sending out crime patrols in the radio cars Z-Victor 1 and Z-Victor 2, occupied by the four toughest constables they can find – the Scottish rugby player Jock Weir, the Lancastrian Bob Steele, the Ulsterman Bert Lynch and the Yorkshireman Fancy Smith – while supervising operations by VHF radio from the station are the irascible

Detective Superintendent Charlie Barlow and his faithful deputy, Detective Sergeant John Watt. The episode is packed with incident: on top of the shooting, we have a pub brawl, a subplot about teenage runaways, and the appearance of an escaped axe-wielding lunatic. But what really made *Z-Cars* controversial was that like so many series ever since, it confronted the domestic problems of the policemen themselves. So we discover that Sergeant Watt's wife has left him because of the demands of his job, while an argument between Bob Steele and his wife leaves her with a black eye. And although the Lancashire Police had originally advised on the show's plots, because they thought it would bolster the image of the police force, they were horrified to see their officers being shown as real flesh-and-blood human beings. The Chief Constable of Lancashire demanded that the series be cancelled, since his men had reacted to it with 'disgust almost to a man', while one of the Chorley Crime Patrol told reporters: 'It was awful. We all thought it made us look fools. And our wives thought it made them look fools too.' The audience evidently liked it: nine million people tuned in for the first episode, and by the end of 1962 *Z-Cars* was commanding 14 million viewers a week. But in a sign of things to come, it continued to attract fierce criticism from moral guardians who believed it was corrupting the nation. An educational psychologist even told the *Manchester Guardian* that its 'vivid visual presentation of sexual perversion' could damage the mental health of any children watching'.

Watch it now and *Z-Cars* might look painfully old-fashioned. But to viewers in 1962, used to the much more reassuring pieties of *Dixon of Dock Green*, it had the shock of the new. Its very setting, a new town haunted by domestic and juvenile crime, a setting of brutalist tower blocks and social deprivation, screamed modernity. It addressed the issues that other programmes ignored, from teenage delinquency and extra-marital sex to everyday racism and domestic violence. But it was not the only new BBC series making the headlines. Indeed, if any of the shows of 1962 really captured the irreverence of the Sixties, it was a new series devised by the BBC producer Ned Sherrin. What he wanted, Sherrin said later, was 'a sort of revolutionary programme … a mixture of News, Interview, Satire and Controversy', 'an experimental two-hour mixture of conversation, satire, comedy, debate and music'.

And what he got was *That Was The Week That Was*, which first went on air just before eleven on the night of 24 November 1962. To modern eyes the material hardly looks sensational: a spoof of by-election coverage, a sketch about the army becoming involved in politics, a song parodying the hit 'Love and Marriage', but changing the lyrics to 'Love before Marriage'. But to younger viewers in particular, it seemed refreshingly daring. Only 4 million people saw the first edition. Soon, though, 8 million were tuning in, and by April 1963 it commanded 12 million viewers a week, a staggering achievement for a show going out so late at night. Its most outspoken stars, David Frost, Millicent Martin and Bernard Levin, because household names. But not everybody liked it. In his parish magazine, onevicar called Millicent Martin 'a repulsive woman' and Bernard Levin 'a thick-lipped Jew boy'. And one Shropshire schoolteacher thought it was 'the epitome of what was wrong with the BBC – anti-authority, anti-religion, anti-patriotism, and pro-dirt'. Her name was Mary Whitehouse, and in the years to come, she too would become a familiar fixture in the nation's newspapers.

When you reflect on the emergence of shows such as *Z-Cars* and *That Was The Week That Was*, as well as the release of *Dr No* and the first Beatles single, then 1962 looks more and more like a hinge moment in our modern history. For many people, of course, life went on much as usual. And yet when you read through the newspaper of the day; when you think what people were watching and buying and listening to; and when you reflect on what came afterwards, then 1962 feels like a tipping point. For my money, Britain was on the cusp of three tremendous changes, which marked the transformation from a comforting, complacent, claustrophobic but settled world of the 1950s to a more ambitious, insecure and individualistic one. The first, and perhaps, looking back, the most important, was the disappearance of the empire. At the time, few people mourned the loss of Britain's colonies; they were too busy making and spending money to worry about it. But Dean Acheson was right. Britain did struggle to find a role in the years after 1962, and our global influence was unquestionably diminished. Before then, we had been globalisation's architect, but now we were no longer in control. And by the 1970s, when the Arab oil shock exposed our vulnerability to international events, it was obvious that we would have to make a very painful psychological and economic transformation if we wanted to make our way in this harshly competitive new world.

The second great change was the coming of affluence. Only a few years before, commentators had talked about the age of austerity; but by 1962, millions of people seemed to be in thrall to supermarkets, televisions and seaside holidays. Affluence gave us opportunities our predecessors could barely have imagined, but it also made us more selfish, more materialistic, and more insecure. Those Rogers and Bridgets and Peters and Rachels born in 1962 would lead richer and more comfortable lives than their parents and grandparents; but their expectations would be greater, too. They would live longer and healthier lives, own many more things, go on more holidays; but they'd be more worried about keeping up or falling behind, about crime and schools, pollution and terrorism. Many of them, no doubt, cast their first votes for Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s – a politician who at the beginning of her premiership, enjoyed great success with first-time voters, because she appealed both to their dreams and their anxieties. If you're one of them, then this year you're turning 50. And perhaps only you can say, half a century on, whether things turned out as they should have done.

And if you are part of that 1962 generation, then you've also been at the forefront of the third great change. People born in 1962 were much less deferential than their elders. They grew up in a world shaped by the sceptical, satirical spirit that animated *That Was The Week That Was* - a spirit that doubted whether the man in Whitehall really knew best, a spirit that said everybody should have his say, and nobody's opinion was better

than your own. Just a year later, the Profumo scandal exposed the apparent hypocrisy at the top of British politics, and when Harold Macmillan resigned at the end of 1963, his passing marked the end of an era in which British politics was the preserve of the tweedy Edwardian gent. In the new age, authority itself seemed suspect. The road from 1962, when David Frost and Bernard Levin were poking fun at Britain's politicians, to 2012, when most people automatically assume that MPs care more about their own pockets than the national interest, was not such a long one.

Of course in many ways our world is better. We're more tolerant, more open-minded, more cosmopolitan and more comfortable. We don't persecute homosexuals, we don't put up signs reading 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs', and far from suppressing difference and dissent, we often positively welcome it. But we also live in a Britain that is greedier, more violent, more individualistic and more unequal. In many ways our predecessors would be astonished at how far we have come; in others they would be shocked by how far we have fallen. Not everything in 1962 was rosy, but when you watch newsreels and films of the day, and see the simple joy of people sunning themselves on Blackpool beach, waving excitedly out of train windows, chatting affably to their neighbours on the street corner, or throwing their caps aloft at football matches, it is hard not to feel a stab of regret at what we have lost, as well as pride at what we have gained. We can't turn the clock back, of course: for good and ill, the days of pipe smoke in pubs are gone, never to return. But we should never be so arrogant as to believe that our predecessors have nothing to teach us.

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