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The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers



AUTHOR  
Founded in 1935

## **The SCPSW office bearers**

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Humbert Wolfe (1935–40)  
Lord Vansittart (1940–57)  
Sir George Rostrevor Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967–68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
Lord Snow (1975-80)  
Charles Neilson Gattey (1980-2005)  
Alan Sedgwick Watts (2005-2016)  
Terry Rickson (2019 - 2022)

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Starts in October 2025

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\*Cover photo by Ethel Corduff

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## **Editorial**

The summer has come and gone. Why is it that time seems to speed up as one ages – like watching things rush by, while sitting in a moving train? Anyway, we are approaching Autumn as I write this. Enjoy, not ‘mind’, the gap.

Some new members have joined us and I echo the welcoming words of our Chair. Our membership numbers have dwindled due to the sad loss of some of our long-standing members. Our Chair, by her sheer perseverance and charm, has persuaded most of the unresponsive members to pay their subscriptions. Kudos to Ethel for her hard work.

A member had written to me regarding the issue of AI and how it has the potential of stealing the livelihood of creative people. Some others have also subsequently emailed me echoing similar sentiments. Our Meetings Secretary, Bernie, did some sterling research on copyright issues with AI. She came up with a very pertinent letter that our Chair sent to the relevant MP (see News, Announcements, Notices). We await a response from the Secretary of State who was contacted by the MP. The response will be published in the Winter issue of *Author*.

Having completed a doctorate in the use of AI to solve an engineering problem, back in 1999, I hold a different view

on this issue. Perhaps I am an outlier among our members, but my take is that computers can only pretend at being creative. Everything an AI system knows and regurgitates is a synthesis of existing human work. I don't make a living by writing – so it is easy for me to say this: Mr AI, fill your boots, have all my writing for free. I have gained a thousand times from you than you would from me.

Seriously, being creative is truly and uniquely a human trait. Therefore, AI can never beat us because it learns from us while we invent new things. In almost every field of human endeavour, AI is helping us make massive progress – from healthcare to climate change to mathematics to astronomy to disaster recovery to assisting the disabled – the list is endless. I use AI mainly to proofread copies received for publication in *Author* and to check my own work. It has saved me hundreds of hours in the editing process – what used to take me several full days to proofread now takes a few minutes. It does slip up sometimes and makes mistakes – keeps me on my toes.

There are downsides to AI, I won't deny it. The almost insatiable demand for electric power and cooling water for running its servers, the built-in bias against minority groups, and of course the theft of intellectual property – are some of them. However, these problems are gradually being addressed. The use of AI in current warfare is sinister, especially when one side is heavily disadvantaged. The problem here is the human being – not AI. You can use

a hammer to drive a nail or to crack a skull. Don't blame the hammer.

The technology is now all pervasive. It is not going away. I am reminded of the famous riposte by economist Richard Baldwin when asked if AI would take over human jobs: "AI won't take your job," he said, "but someone using AI will."

Let me get off my soapbox. I am happy to correspond with any member who may want to write to me or even publish their views as letters to the editor. Meanwhile, don't let the pen run dry. If you are stuck for ideas use the writing prompts our Competition Secretary Alex has supplied. Write, write and write some more.

Gopi Chandroth

# From the Chair

Hope you have all enjoyed a brilliant summer, and that you coped with the heatwave days. I found I could not go out in it, and it gave me an excuse to sit and relax with a cool drink and a book, but unfortunately, it did not prompt me to write. I am pleased to announce that we will have a new treasurer later this year: Nimmi Channa, a new member and known to me as a member of Croydon Writers. Much appreciation to Nimmi for offering.

Alex Tyler is doing a splendid job as competition secretary. Bernie Bickerton is an excellent host of the monthly Zoom meetings and has a regular following. I urge more to join in. Editor Gopinath (Gopi) Chandroth produces a very professional, interesting *Author*, and I hope you enjoy our 90th anniversary issue.

It is quite an achievement for a writers' society to have survived ninety years, especially keeping going through the Second World War and the aftermath. Dedicated committee members over the years have

been responsible for its longevity. At one time the society had about 500 members, with many social events and prominent members. Most civil servants then were working in London and could meet in person, but this has changed completely, and many members have aged, become ill or died. As a result, we have fewer members, fewer in the London area, and we are having to do more online. We are actively recruiting, and we have had several new members this year. If any member can display a small notice in their workplace or library, please contact me on [ecorduff@hotmail.com](mailto:ecorduff@hotmail.com).

We have an extra competition to celebrate our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I hope you will all enter our 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary short story competition, closing date 15 November; more details are in this issue. Postal entries will be accepted from those not online for this competition only.

Unfortunately, the subscription will have to be raised next year. It has not been increased for many

years, and the costs of printing and postage and other expenses have gone up.

Elsewhere in *Author* you can read about the ‘Early Days of the Society of Civil Service Authors’ as it was then known. Looking back to what happened in Britain ninety years ago, here are some other events that took place that year.

In 1935:

- \* The UK celebrated King George V Silver Jubilee nationwide.
- \* There was a general election in November, which changed the leadership of both the Conservative and Labour parties. Stanley Baldwin became prime minister.
- \* The Ramblers Association was founded.
- \* Only one security guard was on duty per shift at Croydon Airport, then London’s major airport. A gang of men had acquired a duplicate set of keys, entered the strong room, and stole £21,000 in gold bullion.

- \* T. E. Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia, was in a serious accident in Dorset and died of his injuries.
- \* Driving tests became compulsory on 1 June for all drivers who started driving after 1 April 1934.
- \* Penguin Books published the first mass-market paperbacks in Britain.
- \* The first all-talking, full-length film of Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol', 'Scrooge', was released.
- \* Kit Kat began as the 'Rowntree's Chocolate Crisp' when a worker suggested a chocolate bar for a lunch box.

Ethel Corduff.

# The early days of the Society of Civil Service Authors

Ethel Corduff

The seeds for the formation of a Society of Civil Service Authors first germinated in the mind of AA. Rayner in the latter part of 1935. The idea was mulled over with two of his colleagues, I.O. Evans and Bernard Newman, firstly in the Office of Public Works (later to become the Ministry of Works) and later on in the comfort of the aptly named Pub, The Two Chairmen, in nearby Dartmouth Street.

But it was not until 18th February 1936 that the first recorded meeting of the Society took place, and it was held in the conference room of the Office of Works, Westminster. Included at that meeting were several who were to become very prominent members, such as James Lever, Vincent Brennan and Charles Neilson Gattey, then in his teens, who would become a long serving President.

Bernard Newman took the Chair and spoke of the two

principal aims of the proposed new society 'The development of the social possibilities of such a corporate body of authors and the practical assistance which might be rendered one another amongst them'. Membership was open to both serving and ex-civil servants who had had at least one book published (not at their own expense) associate membership was extended to civil servants who were freelance journalists, contributors to journals and other aspiring authors.

Subscriptions of ten shillings and sixpence for full members and five shillings for associate members were agreed. The Committee would consist of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer and nine other members. It was also agreed that Humbert Wolfe (Director of Establishment at the Ministry of Labour) should be asked to be the first President of the Society and James Lever of the Victoria and Albert Museum to be invited to serve on the Committee.

The first general meeting of the Society was held the following May at the Two Chairmen with about fifty members and prospective members present. It was decided that future meetings would take place at the Camera Club in London's Adelphi. Committee elections took place every six months then. In April 1938, Jackson Budd was elected Chairman.

The Society suffered a double blow in 1940, when the President Humbert Wolfe died aged only 54, and the Camera Club was bombed during the Blitz. Despite these setbacks, the Society was kept alive then by the energy of the Committee led by Jackson Budd. Part of this work was keeping in touch with members who were on active service, and presents of cigarettes and tobacco at Christmas were reminders the Society had not forgotten them. One such member was Peter Jackson, a successful author of boys adventure stories, who sadly was lost in the 'Dunedin' in 1941. In 1945 a poetry competition was held in his memory, the theme being the 'Sea'.

Occasional lunches and meetings were held during the war years, and the first competitions were organised during this period. Mrs Phyliss D. James won a poetry competition held in May 1940 for her poem 'Mr Dagleish'. Lord Vansittart became President in May 1940, and his distinguished and warm personality made him popular with the membership.

Lively speakers were invited, and annual dinners with prominent guests of honour were held but the dinner of 1948 was cancelled and none held for some time because of the austerities. During the early days the Society had a flourishing social side with outings to places of interest,

visits to the theatre and many enjoyable garden parties at the homes of various members.

In 1948, the distinction between full and associate members was abolished. Open nights of critiques were held and a postal criticism scheme was organised between small groups of members for criticism and comments. The first Lord Vansittart Drama Festival was held in Spring 1949. The winners of which were awarded the Lord Vansittart Drama Trophy donated by Lord Vansittart to encourage playwrights. Six festivals were held up to 1979 when the trophy was withdrawn because of lack of support from Civil Service Drama Societies to produce plays by members of the Society.

It was not until January 1948 that the Civil Service Author made its first appearance, a quarterly magazine of modest size supplied free to members. The magazine continued to be issued in this format for almost ten years. In 1957, because of costs, a cheaper format was produced monthly except in the Summer months.

Despite the losses and setbacks occasioned by the war and prewar austerity, the Society continued to grow and celebrated its twenty-first birthday in 1956 and its 90th birthday in 2025

*Using extracts from earlier research by a former treasurer, Beryl Jones*

## Sentences from Stephen

Stephen Bibby

France has it all: climate, scenery, history, architecture, a relaxed informality and, unquestionably, superb food.

Staying in La Rochelle, my wife and I took a day's drive to The Île de Ré. Originally three islands, it was united by the creation of vast salt pans. Today, it is approached via an elegant modern bridge arching across a sheltered strait on the Bay of Biscay's easternmost edge.

There was one site in particular I was keen to view: the location of a forgotten battle between the British and the French. A helpful lady at a local information office produced map and marker pen, highlighting an area of salt marsh near the village of Loix. Her guidance was invaluable for, as she regretfully explained, no memorial marks the spot.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, La Rochelle was a Huguenot stronghold, proudly independent of the French monarchy. Under the orders of Cardinal Richelieu, the city was besieged in 1627 to force acceptance of Louis XIII's

authority. The opportunistic English, arrogantly assuming that fellow Protestants would welcome foreign support, arrived in July with a large naval task force. It was commanded by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, the upstart favourite of King James I of England and now principal adviser to Charles I.

Discovering that the Huguenot burghers were suspicious of unsolicited assistance, Buckingham anchored his fleet off The Île de Ré and blockaded coastal St Martin, the heavily fortified capital. Over four months the French managed to slip through the naval net while on the mainland La Rochelle suffered, unrelieved. Desperate for a breakthrough in a blaze of glory, at the end of October 1627 Buckingham personally spearheaded a direct assault on St Martin's stout walls. It was a foolish, incompetent and disastrous foray. The scaling ladders proving too short to reach the battlements, the English soldiers were decimated by musket shot. Tumbling to the ground, the 1,000 survivors fled, floundering across the salt marshes, until overwhelmed in a final confrontation on the causeway to Loix.

Here we stood, gazing at a tranquil coastal scene. Thick saline crystals sparkled in the hot sunshine bathing a checkerboard of salt pans while wading birds

nonchalantly ignored us. It was sobering to recall that 400 years ago this was the site of a massacre.

The British often deny disasters: Huguenot history often slides over submission to Richelieu. Our minute's silence was the only memorial.

Then we were back in the car to complete a circuit of the island before returning to La Rochelle for a seafood feast. I unhesitatingly recommend 'Le Panier Crabe', where we enjoyed a gargantuan platter: oysters slipping down with tangy salinity, crab, crayfish, prawns, shrimps and whelks all accompanied with fresh French bread and a crisp Muscadet.

Exactly a week later we were further east in Aubeterre-sur-Dronne, a hillside village on the border between Charente and Dordogne. Medieval in origin, its narrow steep streets lead down to the broad but gentle River Dronne. We stepped from temperatures up to 35 °C into the cool confines of a unique underground church, carved into a tall limestone cliff.

This is a remarkable piece of construction or, more accurately, excavation. In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, using handheld chisels, skilled craftsmen chipped at the limestone in planned precision, hollowing the rocky mountainside to leave behind a vast cavern, in space and height resembling a cathedral. Cruciform in design, it contains elegant arches, enclosing nave, crypt and gallery. To the left sits a large cross carved in bas relief, to the right a monolith. This stout column of limestone, remaining once other rock was removed, was carved to resemble Christ's sepulchre and inset with niches to house religious relics.

A stone staircase leads 60 feet up to what church architects would term a clerestory, although, as it is subterranean, this high arcade of open arched windows admits no illumination. Instead, it served as a gallery from which the nobleman of the château and his retinue could observe the rituals below.

This unusual cave church was the creation of Pierre de Castillon, a local potentate who, from 1066 to 1069, joined the First Crusade. Returning with precious souvenirs, supposedly holy, he designed a unique place of worship. It was later expanded by Benedictine monks until it fell into disuse, eventually being sold as a quarry

in 1817. Never used for that purpose, it was sealed and rediscovered only in 1961 when a manoeuvring heavy truck caused a rock collapse.

Enthralled by what we had seen, we strolled along a narrow street to Aubeterre's unpretentious central square, amply shaded with lime trees. Here we lunched at a local restaurant, dining al fresco on crisp green salad with goat's cheese, more French bread and a delightful rosé.

It was yet another perfect day. France indeed does have it all.

# My First Bike

Fleur Hogarth

Gabrielle had a grey Raleigh with drop handlebars, and Pauline had a solid sturdy green bike with thick tyres and a nifty basket on the front to hold all her stuff. Sally's Dad had bought her a reconditioned bike, painted it red in his garage, and stuck silver stars all over the frame. I was the only one who didn't have a bike. When we met up, I was the one running behind the others as they sped off down the road.

"Can't I have a bike, Mum?" I asked. I might as well have asked for the moon.

"No, you can't. We can't afford to buy anything at the moment, until your Dad gets his promotion and things start looking up!"

Dad worked for the Ministry of Labour, as a clerk and not a very well paid one.

"But all the others have got one and I haven't," I moaned.

"Well I'm sorry. But we can't always have the things we want, can we? Shoes and vests are more important than bikes!" retorted Mum.

I put the question to Dad when he got home from work.

"A bike? What do you want a bike for? When I was young Doug, Ken and I used to go off cycling into the country

every weekend. We followed route maps and stayed at Youth Hostels, but things were different then, cleaner and safer. Anyway we were boys, and it was easier for us. We knew how to change the tyres and dismantle the bike, and put it back together again in the right way. What do you know about looking after a bike, eh?" He stumped upstairs.

"You've never even ridden one!" he threw back down at me from the top of the landing.

"I know I haven't," I shouted, "but I'm sure I could! Anyway, I'll never know until I get a bike of my own, will I?"

Mum came out of the kitchen wiping her hands. "Don't be cheeky, or you'll never get anything!" she warned.

I was unhappy. The others looked very sporty when I met up with them that evening.

They all stood astride their bikes, chatting, as I came up.

"Hi," I said slightly daunted.

"Oh, hi." They returned to talking about last night's TV programme.

"This bloke came on and he couldn't answer the question at all. He was a right idiot. I thought everyone knew when King Charles was beheaded!" Gabrielle was the cleverest of us all and would go far, I knew. The others laughed.

"Let's go down to the field and see if the frogspawn in the pond is developing." Sally was a tomboy with bigger brothers who taught her to play darts and pool. "I'm going

to take some into school and put some down Michael Smith's back!" Michael was the class bully, and terrified me.

Sadly, I watched them go. Suddenly, they stopped mid road, wheeled round and came back.

Pauline, who was the kindest of my friends, said excitedly, "Penny, we've had an idea. Why don't you borrow my old bike to ride?"

My heart leaped – a bike!

We went to their garage, and Pauline climbed over the old boxes and paint tins stacked in it. Under the lawn mower we spotted wheels. "Here it is!" shouted Pauline, and we helped her to move the junk.

My heart sank. The others burst out laughing.

"It's a fairy cycle," I blurted out.

"Well, yes I know," said Pauline awkwardly, "but it is a bike!" She tried to placate me. "I had it when I was younger. I've only just stopped riding it now I've got this one." She was looking at me as if expecting me to be grateful.

I wasn't.

"OK, I'll ride it now – just for tonight – just to keep you all company," I agreed rather half-heartedly.

I didn't know if I could ride the thing. I'd never been on a two wheeler before, but I was determined not to let them know that.

It was a very small bike, and when I sat on the creaking saddle I was able to place my feet quite firmly on to the road. I pushed off, and pedalled like mad. Somehow, miraculously I was staying upright and balancing and it was going to be OK!

I had to pedal furiously to catch up with them. My little bike was no match for theirs, and I knew I looked a funny sight.

When I caught them up, and stopped with difficulty, they were laughing.

"Oh shut up," I shouted angrily, "Anyway my Mum and Dad are going to get me a bike in a few weeks. Just have to wait for it to be delivered."

"Oh great!" Gabrielle was genuinely pleased. "You'll be able to come up to the Park, and we can ride round the paths there."

When we all got back home, Mum was in the kitchen doing the ironing. "I've been thinking," she said as I went and sat at the kitchen table. "It's not fair really, that you haven't got a bike." She folded the clothes over a chair. "I know we can't afford one like your friends have got, but we may be able to do something about it."

"Really Mum, you mean I can have a bike!" I couldn't contain my excitement.

"When can I get one?"

"Well we may be able to do something about it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! Oh Mum, thanks, that's great!" I was so happy. I had felt so out of things with my friends and now I would have a bike too! It was wonderful.

A day later my Grandfather appeared at the house with his old van. I went out to meet him.

"Hi, Grandad, what are you doing here?" I asked.

A man of few words, my Grandad. He slowly climbed out of the van, shut the door, and went round the back. He opened the back doors and beckoned to me to look inside. "Your bike!"

"What! You don't mean it. Where! Let me see!" I was hopping up and down in excitement.

I ran over to him, grabbed the door and pulled it back.

Inside was a black ladies bicycle with a pump attached to it, and handlebars which are known as 'sit up and beg'.

"It was hers." He pointed indoors to where my Mum was looking out of the window. "Her old one. It's a good one though. Tough, strong, bit rusty but that'll come off with a rub. I bought you a new saddle and a puncture repair kit for the tyres."

What could I say? I thanked him, waved thanks to my Mum, and wobbled up the road to show my friends my bike.

In the distance I could hear my Dad shouting, "Keep over to the left hand side more! – and don't sway about so much!"



# Poem Collection

Kevin Morris

## TEDIUM

Nurses go to and thro.  
While on the ward  
The patients mostly feel bored.  
Some watch daytime TV  
Or sleep the day away.  
As for me  
I look forward to visiting time  
And meantime rhyme.

I find the nurses are kind.  
They will chat  
Of this and that.

I grow fat  
But try to exercise.  
Its no surprise  
That food breaks up the day  
So patients eat  
To keep the boredom at bay.

At boarding school  
The lights went out at 10.  
The hospital's rules  
Are similar to them.

Here there is no beer.  
Lights stay on longer,  
(But the nurses control them).

I grow stronger  
And desire my own bed  
And private time  
To indulge in rhyme.

(Editor's note: With apologies to the author for duplicating  
the poem 'Seizue' but under the title 'Tedium', in the  
Summer issue.)

### **Caught Up in Our Nightmares**

Caught up in our nightmares  
Of what may, or may not occur,  
We forget the beautiful sunset  
And that the earth in the wood  
Smells good when wet.

Living in fear  
We fail to hear  
When birds sing.

Our spring  
Is so brief.  
Nightmare's teeth  
Pierce our hearts.

Yet we have art

And nature's beauty  
Ere we depart  
Into that sleep  
Where we are unaware  
Of beauty or nightmare.

### **Summer Rain**

A summer rain falls.  
And birds sing.  
The earth smells fresh.  
But I recall  
I have bills to pay.

Yet returning home  
To my working day  
I carry birdsong  
And the rich earth  
In my heart.

Nature's art  
Feeds my poetry.  
Yet she  
Outshines all poetry.

# An Ominous October

## Phil Cook

We all have memorable dates that we carry in our head and usually look forward to. Birthdays and wedding anniversaries, of course, and perhaps the date on which we first met the love of our life or enjoyed some other memorable experience. But why did 23 October have to stick in my mind every year for over seven decades? In 1953 I certainly was not looking forward to it. It was the day on which I started my two years' National Service. I recently rediscovered a box of my letters home from that time which my mother had hoarded away and were eventually returned to me. I enjoyed reading about things half-remembered or forgotten altogether.

My first week was spent at the reception camp at Cardington, where the 'Welcome to the RAF' sign at the gate was a cynical echo of the "Arbeit Macht Frei" signs at Nazi concentration camps. The first day involved endless form-filling, and receiving knife, fork, spoon and one-pint tin mug (fondly known as mug and irons) and bedding before being marched off to our billets and getting to know the blokes we were to share the next few

days with. Quite an assortment, mostly very different from recent schoolmates.

We were soon issued with uniforms and, having sent our civvies home, became numbers instead of people. Mine is engraved on my memory, just as housewives' Co-op numbers used to be. We began learning the obsessions of service life – boots, spit and polish, webbing and Blanco, buttons and Brasso. Cold water shaves at 6.15 am became the norm, and your first haircut cleverly removed any protection for your neck against those stiff service collars. Then the first of countless bull nights, when we had to keep the slummiest of billets spick and span with basic equipment – under the threat of dire consequences if the NCO was dissatisfied.

I omitted from my letters the graphic films about the dangers of consorting with women. Needless to say, crude jokes abounded. The tea at Cardington had a strange taste and some said it was laced with bromine to help protect us against those evil women. We underwent brief medicals, presumably to ensure that the warnings had not come too late!

At the end of the week we were dispersed to various holiday camps for eight weeks of square-bashing in earnest. I found myself at Hednesford, in the Midlands, with another completely new and varied set of blokes. We soon developed the good camaraderie of shared

adversity. The camp had allegedly been condemned several times, being liable to subsidence as it straddled old coal mines. It had a Wuthering Heights bleakness – winters really were winters in those days – with regular howling winds, pelting rain and perishing temperatures. You soon got used to being cold even under five blankets at night. Hungry, too, because the meagre food hardly matched the unaccustomed expenditure of energy, though you could sometimes fill up with bread or something stodgy at the NAAFI, if you could afford it, or even the occasional luxury of a food parcel from home.

Reveille was at 5.30 am to start a day filled with parades, PT, drill, lectures and ground combat training. And much of the evening was spent polishing brasses and boots, pressing uniforms, and ‘bulling’ the billet. In one letter I said: ‘Our life is brightened by a species of animal life known as corporals who shout their heads off all day long and are ever ready to pounce on some real or imagined trivial misdemeanour.’ The threat of extra fatigues or worse was always present.

Ground combat training included bayoneting dummies and firing rifles and Bren guns – all far less exciting than my boyhood imaginings. We also had a brief experience of a gas-filled room. Unpleasant, but probably better than some of the inoculations, where the same needle seemed to be used on a couple of dozen men, becoming

steadily blunter. I swore that for the big typhoid jab, the needle went in two and a half inches.

Other joys included a fatigue week when we widened our skills by cleaning the sergeants' mess, picking litter, shifting scrap metal, stoking fires, gardening, cookhouse chores and even playing with the corporals' kittens, which they treated rather better than us erks.

By the time Christmas leave came, I reflected on how drastically my life had changed since the year began with its pre-occupation with A-level examinations. I could only wonder, 'What next?'

# The Beer Party

Andy Millican

A Blue Moon shone through the Banks of Cloud and the stars were like Double Diamonds in the east above the Doom Bar where the Beer Party was taking place.

The Abbot, Chimay Trappist, Northern Monk and the St Bernardo Monk were congregating in a corner of the courtyard keeping themselves to themselves. They were supposed to be a Party Seven but here they were a measly Party Four.

“Have you sampled The Bishop’s Finger yet?” asked The Abbot of his learned friends.

“Oooh, ouch, steady on,” said Chimay, “what is it with you progressives?”

Sheepishly, St Bernardo put his hand up. “I have,” he whispered.

“Good heavens!” they exclaimed. “How was that?”

“A penetrating examination... of my true beliefs.”

“I’m expecting a summons myself from that Old Speckled Hen, his secretary,” said Northern Monk.

“She is that exactly: Old Peculiar, a right Hobgoblin, an Old Growler,” whispered St Bernardo.

“She does a Proper Job for the Bishop. She’s got them at his Beck and call,” said Chimay.

“Yeah, but she Fosters an atmosphere of fear.”

Just then they spotted the arrival of a fearsome quartet.

“Bloody hell, who invited the Mexican Cartel then?” they opined together as Desperados, San Miguel, El Bandido and Corona came into view. They sat down, bit the tops off their beer bottles, and together with bits of tortilla chips, Grolsched them out into a nearby bin with a loud clang. Some attendees got Delirium Tremens and thought shots had been fired and ducked for cover.

“Wimps,” said The Abbot, retreating strategically behind Chimay.

“What a bunch of Piraats,” said Northern Monk.

Meanwhile, the naval contingent turned round across the courtyard. They were on shore leave from the shipyard, especially Adnams Ghost Ship, the supposedly haunted London Pride trawler.

A rugby-ex-military type sat alone by a table. The waiter was saying, “Will Carling do, or could you tackle something else? We haven’t got a Diana but we have another Blonde – Hazy Jane or maybe Estrella courtesy of Mrs Haversham or her shrunken cousin Stella Artois. She’s been around a long time but is very satisfying.”

“Coors, that would be great. Thanks,” said the lonely man.

St Bernardo stated, “He used to be a good ’un – a Wingman. He could take off like a Spitfire.”

“I heard he got binned and sent off as a Black Sheep. Apparently he was always in Beavertown, sniffing about like a badger in Holts.”

“Buds-a-lot, wiser than he used to be in fairness. We’ve all been there,” sympathised Chimay.

They all turned to stare at Chimay as if fondly remembering something.

Meantime, Timothy Taylor and Sam Smith were huddled deep in conversation, bemoaning the Kaliber of beer. They were bitter that they no longer had the same custom; it seemed that the new brewers and brands who were taking over had just left Skol.

“Amstel not happy about it,” moaned Timothy.

“Maybe we need to think of a really Special Brew?”

Back in the corner, the four monks were still discussing the merits of The Bishop’s Finger.

“Anyway, moving on,” said Chimay. “Has anyone tasted Virgil’s Root?”

Northern Monk nearly choked on his drink.

Just then there was a silence as the mysterious Cranborne Poacher strode steadily and silently into the courtyard. En route, his elbow bumped the head of El Bandido, but he strode on stoutly. The Mexican quartet jumped up shouting after him and drew their empties.

“Hey Gringo, you Brewdog. We’ll send you to Camden Hells, then you play your Harp,” they shouted. Poacher walked over to an empty table where he summoned a waiter.

“What ails thee?” called Poacher casually to the spitting Mexicans. Meanwhile, everyone was scrambling for cover. Before the quartet could move, he sprang like a Cobra, and simultaneously, whipping his automatic Moretti .725 and German Lager from his Holstens, fired off a tremendous volley at the four Cervezas. They tumbled backwards about their chairs, and Sombreros rolled across the floor.

“Phew, that was close,” said St Bernando. “Glad I don’t have to clean up. Now where were we?”

Chimay said, “You were telling us you’d sampled the Bishop’s Finger. Take us through that again...”

# Crime Corner – A Personal Reflection

Andy Millican

*Should the punishment fit the crime* (Geoff Parkes, Author, Summer 2025) posed an interesting question which readers may have taken time to consider. I certainly did.

It's a question I have asked myself several times since I retired six years ago from HMRC Criminal Investigation Division. I spent thirty years in various iterations of CID, 10 as a Senior Investigation Officer (SIO) responsible for the conduct direction and management of criminal investigations undertaken by teams under my supervision.

During this period I managed teams investigating alcohol, cigarette and tobacco smuggling, tax evasion, VAT and subcontractor or lump fraud. In addition I managed Tax Credit (TC) Criminal Investigation teams before this changed to Universal Credit and returned as a function under DWP administration. Hundreds of Tax Credit investigations resulted in the prosecution of predominately women and very few men. Why, because women were the main claimants and beneficiaries of Tax Credits and invariably they signed the form which included a prosecution warning. Behind most but not all of these women was a male partner whose existence they failed to mention and whose income

was therefore not taken into account and was likely to negate any claim to Tax Credits. Occasionally those convicted of fraud which included aggravating features – length/timescale and amount of fraud were given custodial sentences. Some of these received national press coverage because they were so blatant. As an example *search Cheryl Henwood (Liverpool)*.

Did any or all of those successfully convicted receive a sentence commensurate with their crime? I have had a long time to consider that where the women were concerned the answer was no. Did any individuals get off lightly? Absolutely. If so then what ought to have been a punishment that fitted the crime. I'm afraid I haven't come up with a definitive answer but I have concluded that most women who were sentenced to a custodial sentence should not have done so even where the amount fraudulently claimed (or let's be honest stolen from the public purse) exceeded £100,000. *Search Jayne McKnight as an example.*

In respect of other criminality committed against HMRC such as alcohol cigarette and tobacco smuggling it is a bit like the drugs trade. As soon as you remove one smuggling gang another steps into the void. Only the names, amounts, smuggling methods and routes change. It's a never ending cycle and another aspect of criminality that is very difficult to break. Like the drugs trade, there are ringleaders, lieutenants and "low hanging fruit" as they are often termed: individuals often unemployed and desperate for money who are the first to be caught. They are often used as bait to try

and capture the much bigger richer fish at the top of the smuggling chain. In fairness, in my experience the sentences handed down usually reflected the various roles those convicted had in the gang.

My unease with those women given custodial sentences may be a reflection of my advancing years. I am now able to look back in a far more objective and compassionate light than the subjective view I and colleagues held back then in the thick of investigating criminality. I have thought many times about those individual Tax Credit claimants who were jailed but I still don't know what the most appropriate punishment should have been.

# The Ox

Mike Sedgwick

The waning moon was two nights past full when old Mbele arrived outside Desalu's hut, assegai spears in one hand and his shield in the other.

'You promised to return my ox by full moon, Desalu.'

'I'm a busy man, Mbele. Come back in the morning.'

Mbele remained outside Desalu's hut, standing first on one leg, then on the other, sometimes leaning on his assegai. The moon set, and in the darkness he heard animals roaming around outside the kraal. As the morning sun rose, Desalu appeared, hustling and bustling, always in a hurry to be somewhere else. 'Maybe tonight,' he said, and went to his fields.

Mbele stood. Desalu's wife, wearing her largest earrings and many beaded neck bands, motioned him to enter the hut, but Mbele knew he would never see his ox again if he went with her. The sun's heat scorched his skin. Desalu pushed Mbele aside when he returned that evening.

Two dawns later, Desalu emerged gingerly from his hut, avoiding Mbele's gaze.

'You still here?'

Mbele stood, waiting, expecting, hoping. To pass the time, he scratched patterns into the dusty earth with his assegai: home, food, and ox.

The next night he heard raised voices inside the hut. At dawn, Desalu emerged scowling and shoved Mbele to the ground.

‘Get out of my way, old man.’

Desalu’s wife shouted after him, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself, treating him like that.’

She brought Mbele water and a bowl of mashed beans to eat. As the crescent moon rose, he picked up his assegai and shield and prepared to leave. His ox was lost. Desalu would never return him. As he left the kraal, he saw Desalu approaching from his toils, leading the ox by a tether. He handed the tether to Mbele without a word and firmly touched his shoulder.

# The Good Samaritan

Michael Smith

**January 1939, Kurfürstendamm, Berlin, Germany**

Startled by the cry, Helmut Kuhn almost lost his balance on the icy pavement. Five yards behind him, a young woman was sprawled on her back. He noticed the yellow Star of David badge on her coat. In Nazi Germany, Jews were now required to wear these badges. He helped her to her feet and then picked up her two bags of shopping. 'Thank you, you're very kind.' Her smile revealed small, even teeth in a round face framed by dark, glossy hair. 'You're not hurt?' Helmut said.

'No, just a bit shaken up.'

'Playing the Good Samaritan, Untersturmführer? Very commendable.'

Helmut knew the voice well. He turned to face the speaker. 'Thank you, Hauptsturmführer.'

Helmut's senior officer smiled thinly and walked away.

When he was out of earshot, the woman said, 'You're in the SS?'

'Yes.'

'You'll be in trouble for helping me.'

'Probably,' said Helmut.

'Yet you still helped me.'

'You needed help.'

'Well thank you again. I'll be all right now.' She reached

for her bags.

‘Wait. How far away do you live?’

‘About ten minutes’ walk.’

‘I’ll walk with you. I don’t want you slipping over again.

My name is Helmut Kuhn, by the way.’

‘I’m Jutta Kaufmann. It really isn’t necessary. I’ll be more careful this time.’

‘Even so, I insist. It’s dark and you could easily lose your footing again.’

‘In which case, I won’t argue.’ She favoured him with another smile. ‘My very own personal SS escort.’

‘The only one you’ll ever have, I hope.’

They walked in silence for a while, then Jutta said: ‘Why did you join the SS? You’re not like the others I’ve seen.’

‘Family pressure. With a father and two brothers in the service, I was expected to follow suit, and I enlisted as a junior officer.’

Helmut’s gaze was drawn to the bright lights of a large department store on the opposite side of the thoroughfare.

‘My parents used to own that store,’ said Jutta. ‘Then the Government appropriated the business and an Aryan family took it over.’

*Appropriated*, Helmut thought. *Stole would be a better word*. He knew that such action by the authorities was widespread. He looked down at his companion. Her face showed not anger but sadness.

‘What will you and your family do now, Jutta?’

‘We’re lucky, I suppose.’ She laughed ruefully. ‘My parents, sister and I have been given exit visas and we leave for Sweden in a few days’ time. We have relations in Stockholm.’

‘Good luck, Jutta.’ Helmut extended his hand.

‘You too, Helmut,’ she replied, grasping his hand.

### **Summer 1950, Stockholm, Sweden.**

Jutta Karlsson had a good life. She and her husband and three-year-old twin daughters lived in a luxury flat in an upper-class district in the capital.

However, she had never forgotten the young SS officer who had come to her aid on the icy pavement in Berlin all those years ago. She had often wondered what had happened to him, and one day after the war in Europe had ended she had asked a friend in the Swedish Diplomatic Service whether he would make enquiries. For a long time she had heard nothing, but finally she was given the news that after the outbreak of war, Helmut Kuhn had requested a transfer to the Wehrmacht, the regular Army. His application had been successful and he was posted to France. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, he was transferred to the Eastern Front. Sadly, there was no happy ending for him. He was killed in the Battle of Stalingrad.

# Through the Door

Vivienne Orr

It has been said that while running the Marathon is not easy, the hardest part is going out through the front door.

Six a.m. and the mist hung damply over the small garden. He let the curtain drop and swung into his morning exercises, arms out, twist at the hip, stretch down each side, one-two-three-four-five. He was slowly warming up and by the time he had put on his running shoes, one knot, two knots, skip, skip on his toes he was ready to go. Down the stairs, through the door checking his watch and setting the time.

Now he was off at a smooth pace, comfortable, slightly loping. He had been told he had a loping stride and rather liked the sound of it. Loping, loping around the corner, a good steady stride, a loping stride.

She was well ahead as usual. This morning wearing a pink tank top, fair hair tied up, swinging, swinging. Long legs encased in black kicking up in shoes with pink soles.

For the past two weeks she had been there, running at a distance ahead of him as if in response to the same starting pistol. To his knowledge she had never once looked behind her. She was concentrating, checking her watch, just as he was. They had a lot in common in their preparation for

running the Marathon. She would have got out of bed, stretched, done her exercises and gone through her own front door, just as he had each morning. Afterwards she would have gone back through her door, a quick shower and then off to work, just like him. They were plainly of the same mind and it must follow that they would meet by happy accident in the park.

He had it all worked out. Today was the day. When she turned right inside the park gates he would turn left and circuit the park towards her. A bright smile, a friendly greeting and then casually turn around and run alongside her. There was plenty to say, after all they had the Marathon in common. It would be quite natural to arrange to meet for a drink and in due course run the Marathon together side by side. It had to be today.

He pounded after her, feeling light, airy, free, his goal tantalising, those pink-soled shoes inviting him to keep in touch.

Steady now, she was slowing. This was not right. She had stopped outside a row of houses bordering the park and was looking up at one of the windows. Should he stop, re-tie his laces or speed past her? He was in a dilemma and realised he was sweating heavily. His breath was uneven. She had never done this before. How could she throw him off his stride, his loping stride? Now she was climbing the steps to the front door. His legs refused to change their momentum and he sped past the house, averting his gaze.

Reaching the park he desperately swung into a wide circle inside the gates so as to keep her in his sights. The door of the house was open and a masculine arm was reaching out to take her by the hand and lead her through the door.

This was too much. She always circuited the park, turning right and round by the children's play area. He would maintain the same distance behind. Didn't she realise that this was the recognised procedure? He had made the effort to overcome the hardest part, going out through his front door when he could have stayed another ten minutes in bed. And here she was going through someone else's door. He felt sick and sat down heavily on one of the park benches beneath a canopy of dripping trees. It was too much, the effort, the unbroken pattern of the last two weeks, the hope. And now, what now?

His vest was saturated and he was trembling from head to foot. There was no point in staying.

He would leave the park, run home and go back to bed, maybe stay there and take a day off work. But nothing functioned, his limbs had turned to jelly and his head swam.

A woman stopped by the bench and asked if he was all right, her small dog sniffing at his ankles and its paws leaving a muddy imprint on his vulnerable feet.

Through the door of the house near the park came the girl. As she reached the street she looked up at a window and waved. Her face was flushed and she set off jauntily back

the way she had come, away from the park, her running shoes kicking back their pink soles, issuing a challenge to anyone who might be following.

# Meant To Be

Tom Oulton

Edward carefully pressed the counter flap back into place. His face wore a look of amused resentment as he recalled the previous day's ticking-off from his father for leaving the flap in its upright position. He was, after all, 33 years old and an Army captain.

He closed the shop door with equal care and started the walk to Manchester's London Road Station. He hadn't gone twenty yards before meeting the postman.

“Mornin’, Ted. Letter for you. Do you want it?”

“Um...No, I've got a train to catch. Leave it at the shop.”

\*

Edward and Paul reclined on the grass in a spot partly sheltered from the wind near the summit of Ivinghoe Beacon. Edward looked out over the benevolent and very English landscape of the Vale of Aylesbury spread before them under a blue and white sky. Yes, we had to fight. We couldn't have that barbarity stamping over all this. And that meant me losing the best years of my life. He was almost reconciled to that, but the extra year's delay before he was

demobilised still rankled, even if Judith had been around for some of it.

“I never really understood why you two split up,” said Paul.

“You reading my mind?”

“Not hard. It’s no accident we’re walking in this neck of the woods, is it?”

“No.”

“So what’s changed?”

“I want to see her, that’s all.”

“Good enough.”

“Look, Paul, I was worried that she was too good for me, and I still am. There really are hindrances, you know? I left elementary school at fourteen with nothing. She went to Oxford.”

“Yeah, but the Army knew better, didn’t it? Picked both of us out as officer material in pretty short order. And you outranked her.”

“You and I never really belonged to the officer class, did we? I never felt like it with those public school types. Rugby under the carpet, riding a horse upstairs to the mess and then having to carry it down the stairs to get it out.”

“Which only goes to show that they were bloody idiots.”

“You know her father works on the King’s finances? He might well get a knighthood.”

“You’re an accountant. Something to talk about with him.”

“I’m an auditor, Paul. Accountancy qualification went west with the war. And would she give up teaching in a smart school and move to Manchester?”

“You said that she walked round Palestine with you, and you even had kids throwing stones at you. After that, even Manchester can’t seem so bad.”

Edward laughed briefly. “All right. I hope I can find the house.”

“If you can walk across the Kinder plateau without even taking a bearing and get three hundred men across unknown territory in Italy, you can find a street in St. Albans.”

“You don’t mind being left for a day?”

“Of course not. I’ll go into Tring and sample a couple of bars. You’re no fun in a bar anyway. You always want to be somewhere else.”

“I saved almost all my Army pay rather than spend it in the mess. And I, Paul, have the deposit for a house.”

\*

Edward turned into the sort of suburban street often described as leafy: mostly semi-detached houses, giving off a secure and confident middle-class prosperity.

A black Wolseley occupied the short drive. With its running boards and prominent headlights, it looked as if it might be at home in an American gangster film. The house was a large pebble-dashed semi. There was a garage to the left of the porch, a bedroom above it.

Edward stood in front of the door and thought that on the whole he'd prefer to be in that shell-hole in the sands of El-Alamein; but he didn't need Paul to tell him that having come all this way, he couldn't turn round now. If he didn't knock, he would regret it the rest of his life.

He knocked; and the door was opened almost immediately – by Judith.

She seized his hand and pulled him into the hall.

Presently she said, "So you got my letter."

"What letter?"

"You know, the one I wrote you suggesting we saw each other again."

"Well, I've not seen it, but I think I know where it is."

"Where?"

"At home. I met the postman when I was setting out for here. I had him leave it at the shop."

“No, Ted!...But you’re here anyway! Oh!”

The couple were of a height, so it was easy for them to stare at each other.

“So you were deciding to come here at the same time as I was writing to you”, said Judith, trying to order her mind. There was a short silence. “And neither knew what the other...”

A faint “Gosh!” was as much more as she could manage. Edward was unable to speak at all.

A man in late middle age and an ancient, patched sports jacket, came out of the kitchen into the hall. He was carrying a pipe and a copy of *The Times*. He glanced at the couple and proceeded into the lounge. He was not noticed.

# News, Announcements, Notices

## **Zoom evening on Walt Whitman Tuesday 30 September**

The next Zoom evening will be on the American poet, Walt Whitman, on Tuesday 30 September at 7.30pm - 9pm. Members will be asked to share their favourite Whitman poems. If you wish to participate in this event please contact the Meetings Secretary, Bernie Bickerton at [scpswmeetings@gmail.com](mailto:scpswmeetings@gmail.com).

## **SCPSW competitions**

### **90th Anniversary SCPSW Short Story Competition**

To celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we are having a special free competition with a prize of £100 from the Chair. The theme will be 90 (number) or ninety (word) maximum 1,500 words, no name on story, but added separately.

Closing date 15<sup>th</sup> November.

Online preferably, to [ecorduff@hotmail.com](mailto:ecorduff@hotmail.com) but members not on the internet may send postal entries with an S.A.E for their return if required to

E. Corduff, 10 Malcolm Road, Woodside,  
London SE25 5HG

Judging will take place with the help of some  
Croydon Writers members. The winning story  
will be published in the Winter issue of *Author*.

### Regular SCPSW competitions (2026)

Month	Format	Word limit	Theme
January	Short story (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	1000	Making a change
March	Herbert Spencer Poetry (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	Max 50 lines, 2 entries	Open theme
May	Lewis Wright short story (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	2000 words	Open theme
July	Flash fiction (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	Max 250 words	Open theme
September	Vee Bradley humorous poetry (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	Max 36 lines, two entries	Humour
November	Non-fiction piece (to <a href="mailto:scpswcomps@gmail.com">scpswcomps@gmail.com</a> )	Max 1000 words	Open: e.g. nature,

			<b>memoir, travel</b>
<b>December</b>	<b>No activity</b>	<b>N/A</b>	

## **External competition**

The Croydon Writers free open to all Michael Round prize competition in memory of their late Chairman who was the previous SCPSW Chairman, editor and competition editor:

- Theme ‘Far and Wide’
- Stories up to 1,200 words
- Opens for entries from 1 June to 30 September 2025
- No entry fees
- First prize £100 and second prize £50

Please read the full rules [here](#) before entering. Send your entries, formatted as Word or PDF, to [writerscroydon@gmail.com](mailto:writerscroydon@gmail.com).

## ***Author Deadlines and Schedule***

<b>ISSUE</b>	<b>Submission</b>	<b>Publication</b>
Spring	1 March	15 March
Summer	1 June	15 June
Autumn	1 September	15 September
Winter	1 December	15 December

## **Submission guidelines for *Author***

**Poems** submitted for publication in *Author* must follow these guidelines:

Minimum: 12 lines or 75 words

Ideal range: 15–25 lines (100 - 300 words)

Very short forms (haiku, couplets, etc.) must be submitted as a collection reaching the minimum indicated above.

Maximum: 1600 words.

**Prose** should be between 300 and 1,600 words.

## **Writing prompts**

Our competitions Secretary has suggested some writing prompts for the months when there are no competitions. Members may use these prompts to produce copies for *Author* in prose or poetry form. Please follow the usual word limit guidelines given above.

<b>Month</b>	<b>Theme</b>
February	Not enough time
April	Blue
June	Jealousy
August	For the last time
October	What happens after dark

## **Email to MP concerning Copyright issues and AI**

Sent 30 June 2025 by email.

Dear Natasha Irons,

Copyright, AI and Data User Access Act 2025

I am one of your constituents and I live at 10 Malcolm Road, Woodside, SE25 5HG.

I am Chair of the Society of Civil and Public Service Writers. Our members are serving and retired members of the Civil Service and other public services who write short stories, poems and articles. We produce a quarterly publication called 'Author'.

Our writers own the copyright to their works. However, I am concerned about reports in the Press that the Data User Access Act 2025 will afford less protection to owners of copyright particularly in respect of AI.

To protect our copyright I understand there may be an option for writers to "opt out". However, there appears to be no guidance available on how writers should do this. I would be most grateful if you could please ask the government minister responsible for this area of policy on how we can protect our copyright and how we should "opt out" if this is what we need to do.

Yours sincerely,

Ethel Corduff

Chair, Society of Civil and Public Service Writers

# Poetry Workshop News

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Chair: Mike Boland (Address below)

Treasurer: Ethel Corduff –10 Malcolm Road London SE25  
5HG

[ecorduff@hotmail.com](mailto:ecorduff@hotmail.com)

Zoom Events Coordinator: Bernie Bickerton –  
[scpswmeetings@gmail.com](mailto:scpswmeetings@gmail.com)

Editor 'wavelengths': Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane,  
Harrow, Middx, HA3 6JU – [gothic.garden1@btinternet.com](mailto:gothic.garden1@btinternet.com)

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Greetings from the Poetry Workshop.

As summer slips into autumn preparations are in hand for the publication by the end of the year of **Waves 2025**, the annual anthology of poetry by members the Workshop. Always a major event, full details will be given in the winter edition of **wavelengths**.

Also due for publication this autumn is the new issue

of *wavelengths*, Production of the magazine has been hampered by a severe lack of material from members for inclusion in the issue. Can I once again make an appeal to all PW Members to send me material such as poems, articles on poetry or poets, any news views you may have on related topics or on the PW itself.

Members are reminded of the existence of the folios, postal and online , which are a fine way of improving your work and interacting with fellow members.

Best wishes

*Mike Boland*

## **Folios**

The PW organises a circulating postal folio in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. There is room for any member of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. The PW also runs an e-folio for members who have access to the internet. Any PW member interested in joining one of the folios should contact **Mike Boland** at the e-mail address given above.

**wavelengths**

This is the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine which is issued free to all its members and consists of twenty pages of poems, articles on poetry / poets and all the news of the group's activities. It appears regularly in the spring, summer, autumn and winter. The editor is always looking for new material. Contributions to **wavelengths** are invited from members of the Poetry Workshop. Articles of about 500-1500 words on all aspects of poetry or poets will be particularly welcome. Please send no more than **four poems** at a time - multiple submissions cannot be considered - on any subject or form – maximum 30 lines including stanza breaks - or **one** longer poem.

**Please do not** send the same poems to both 'wavelengths' and 'The Author'.

Selection of poem(s) for each issue will be made entirely subjectively by the editor. SAE please if you wish your poems to be returned. Submissions to the Editor: **Mike Boland** at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex, HA3 6JU. Electronic submissions are welcomed and can be sent to:

[gothic.garden1@btinternet.com](mailto:gothic.garden1@btinternet.com)

For those submitting by post and who require a reply and/or the return of their manuscripts, please include a SAE.

### ***The Poetry Workshop***

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## Active and Passive Verbs

Ivy Hudson

I must check the washing outside  
it may be nearly dry.  
I must check the blueprint  
e-mailed to me for conference invites.  
This room is untidy  
I must clear up,  
But what am I trying to do?  
Wait on the Lord  
meditate,  
read Isaiah  
with all the promises of the Bible.  
Passively active, I am quiet  
and speak to my Maker.  
Only then am I now fit  
to be a wife, mother, grandmother,  
servant of the Most High,  
in touch with my Maker  
instead of a jumble of 'must dos'  
waiting in the silence for  
a feast prepared for me  
not content with five minutes of a few crumbs.

# Flamingos

Mike Sedgwick

‘There are flamingos up-country in Mannar. I want to see them,’ stated my wife.

I’m happy reading and watching the fish eagles soaring over the river in Kandy. The barman knows when to bring me another ice-cold beer. But madam insists I give up this leisurely life to travel the pot-holed roads in a car whose air conditioning warms the cabin. After six long bouncing hours, we are driven across the bridge onto Mannar Island, where wild donkeys scratch themselves against baobab trees.

At dawn the next day, we set out for where the flamingos are. At the tip of the Mannar peninsula, a lone soldier with a Second World War rifle defends Sri Lanka from an Indian invasion. Across the shallow seas and sandbanks of Adam’s Bridge, India forms a smudge on the horizon. A flock of stints runs back and forth on the beach, dodging the waves and stopping to peck at tiny crustaceans.

Nowhere in the green scrub, the black brackish lagoons behind us, the shimmering golden sand, or the blinding blue sky is there a hint of the salmon pink we seek. If flamingos were geese, it would be a wild goose chase.

Back at our hotel, for a late breakfast, the young man on the desk explains, ‘I know where they are. I’ll take you there tomorrow morning.’

Another dawn start when the air is cooler. We drive along tracks and around dunes and stop in an area of sand and scrub. With feet dragging in the sand, I think of my bed, checking the cricket scores on my iPad and waiting for breakfast. Instead, we creep past a dune. ‘Shush,’ whispers our guide, ‘move slowly.’

Around another dune, we spy a briny, black lagoon with a pink cloud of feeding flamingos, brilliant against a backdrop of dark trees. Their grunts and honks float across the water, and we watch their heads rise on their long necks as they look around. Shuffling in reverse with their backwards-pointing knees, their feet disturb the water creatures, which they gobble up through inverted beaks. The black-tipped beaks rise up as they swallow their prey. A nearby know-it-all explains that what appear to be knees are actually ankles that bend that way.

The vision of thousands of pink rumps, black beaks, long necks and twig-thin yellow legs moving across the dark waters trumps any cricket score. Once the flock has fed, it will fly across Adam’s Bridge to the Coromandel Coast of India.

We’ll come again tomorrow. This sight ennoble the soul.

# Sporting Changes – For Better or For Worse?

Geoff Parkes

First of all, if you are not keen on sport, please go and feed your guinea pig or water your nasturtiums. This article is not for you.

As we know, change is inevitable in all walks of life, and I am not the sort of old fogey who drones on for hours about the good old days. That said, not all change is necessarily for the better. I've selected five sports for examination here, and after considering what's happened to them over the past few decades, I offer my verdict on whether they're now better, worse, or much the same. Feel free to fume if you disagree.

A quick general observation: just about every sport you can think of has seen changes in diet, equipment, clothing, training routines, and female participation, but overall the biggest change has been...money, money, money.

## **Football**

Oddly, one aspect which strikes me greatly is men's shorts! They have gone from very long to very short to medium.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that the "short" phase coincided with Mary Quant's miniskirts.

The second big change has been the buying of foreign players, which began in earnest in 1978, following a European Court of Justice ruling allowing the free movement of workers. The process accelerated after 1995, when the Bosman ruling removed EU-wide quotas on players. In the 2023/2024 season, no fewer than 66% of all Premier League footballers were foreign nationals. That's an average of 18 players per squad.

Then there's advertising. Every team has the name of its main sponsor emblazoned on its shirts. In post-match interviews, hoardings behind the interviewee are plastered with adverts from multiple organisations. And now we have mobile, ticker-tape style messages continually flashing round the barriers while the game is on. I find the latter most annoying. Yet is our anger justified? What may be little more than a tax write-off for a ticker-tape advertiser might provide essential spondulicks to help a club pay 100 million pounds for an Argentinian striker.

What about penalty shoot-outs? After drawn matches in competitions, there used to be whole-match replays, but these were phased out between 2000 (semi-finals and finals) and 2025 (first round). Now, don't get me wrong: I enjoy the drama of penalty shoot-outs. I'm biting my nails along with the rest. The problem is, they're just not fair. Nobody can claim after a penalty shoot-out that the better team won. The whole thing is reduced to a lottery.

Lastly, players' skills. With many sports, like athletics and swimming, there is a measurable improvement in ability over the years. This just hasn't happened in football. Today's players do not exhibit greater skills than Pelé, Johan Cruyff, George Best, or Stanley Matthews.

**Verdict: Worse**

## **Cricket**

The biggest changes have come in formats of the game. Test matches were traditionally always five days, and whilst aficionados often appreciated the long, drawn-out struggles, many spectators found them too boring. We now also have one-day internationals, Twenty20, and The Hundred, all of which are much shorter and faster than test matches. They are undoubtedly far more exciting for the vast majority of spectators, since aggressive hitting is essential to achieve victory.

Add to this the trend away from all-white clothing towards colourful strips, coupled with the fact that matches can take place at night under floodlights, and it's easy to see that the atmosphere of the game has completely changed.

**Verdict: Better**

## **Tennis**

The first major change came in 1968, when professionals joined amateurs at Wimbledon for the first time. This marked the beginning of “The Open Era”.

Perhaps the most noticeable change has been in the racquets. Previously they were made of wood and strung with “catgut”. Now the heads are bigger, and the frame is usually made of lightweight, carbon-based material. It may be mainly graphite but contain a blend of titanium, tungsten, and fibreglass. Cheaper racquets, which are also lighter than the old wooden ones, often contain aluminium.

The shape and composition of modern racquets enable players to hit the ball much harder than in the old days. The ball flies faster, and rallies are generally more exciting for players and spectators. Overall, tennis is probably more entertaining than it was.

The other major change has been the introduction of Hawk-Eye – a computer vision system used to track ball trajectory. It is used specifically to determine if a ball lands inside the lines of the court or not. This is generally regarded as a good thing. In 2025, however, its use at Wimbledon became controversial, as it seemed to have totally supplanted real-people line judges. Some felt this went against the spirit of the tournament.

Lastly, post-match interviews. These are conducted on court by TV commentators who occasionally stumble upon the odd intelligent question to ask. Mostly they are cringeworthy.

### **Verdict: Better**

**Athletics** Diets are stricter, training is harder, dedication is all. Unlike football or rugby, a very small percentage of results in athletics is down to luck.

The old cinder tracks, like White City, have long since been replaced by synthetic, rubberised surfaces laid on tarmacadam. Materials are evolving all the time – so much so that it is now commonplace for athletes to enthuse about “fast” tracks in Tokyo or Paris, where records may be broken more easily.

Performance-enhancing drugs, which were endemic in countries like Russia and East Germany in the sixties, are still with us. Detection labs are playing catch-up while drugs are becoming more sophisticated: it’s a perpetual game of leapfrog. If there’s one big thing that still taints the sport, this is it.

Thanks to the Diamond League, even athletes who finish seventh or eighth in races receive generous payouts, and race winners routinely receive 40,000 dollars. This may not sound much compared with the 3.1 million dollars the winner of the Open Golf Championship received this year,

but athletics has long been one of the poor cousins in sport, and at last things are looking up.

Pacemakers are much in evidence at most meetings, and especially when an attempt to break a world record is to be made. Their earnings vary, but they'll typically be paid 2000–3000 dollars, plus a bonus if they hit the target times for all of their projected stretch. In addition, we now have moving lights of different colours flashing round the inner boundary of the track. These may indicate world record speed, world lead, or national record.

**Verdict: Same**

## **Table Tennis (and *please don't call it ping-pong!*)**

Yes, yes, I know this is not a mainstream sport like the others above, but – rather like fishing – it is a mass participation sport that receives little attention, at least in Britain. Whilst I've dabbled in the four sports above, table tennis is the only one which I played competitively, and it is the one I know most about.

Let's start with bats. Before 1950, they consisted of a piece of wood with a sheet of rubber stuck on each side. The side glued to the wood was smooth, whilst the outer playing surface was pimped rubber.

In the early 1950s, Japanese players began using bats where the pimped rubber was ditched, to be replaced by a layer of

sponge – not unlike the sponge you may use in the bathtub, but thinner. This gave a massive advantage, since the sponge imparted great spin and made for fast hitting thanks to a trampoline effect.

In 1959, pure sponge bats were banned, but a compromise was reached. A thinner layer of sponge could be stuck to the wood as long as a sheet of pimples rubber was stuck on top of the sponge. And here's where the biggest, most surprising change in the whole of table tennis history took place. Some bright spark said, "OK, we'll use the sheet of pimples rubber, but we'll *invert it*, and stick the pimples-rubber side to the sponge." The whole purpose of the pimples was to facilitate better grip on the ball, but now it would be the smooth, non-pimples side of the rubber which struck the ball! Anyway, the net effect was that the game became much faster.

In 2001, the traditional, best-of-three sets, with a 21-up scoring system, was replaced by a best-of-five sets (or best-of-seven in major championships) – and 11-up, not 21-up. Also, for some inexplicable reason, the word "set" was changed to "game", and the server changed after every two points, not every five.

The idea, as with cricket, was to make the game more exciting. It has certainly become faster, but one consequence is that there is now no such thing as a defensive player. It's all-out attack for all concerned, and there are hardly any long, suspenseful rallies. Wham, bam, finish. The idea worked with cricket, but it doesn't work with table tennis.

**Verdict: Worse**

# Love Amid the Bullets

Andrea Taylor

It was December 1989, a dark day and bitterly cold in Timisoara, the biggest town in Transylvania. Daniela was taking a short walk before returning to work. She knew it was a bit of a risky walk just then, but had felt an overpowering need for a short break.

There was a lot of unrest across the country following the fall of the Berlin Wall the previous month. Romanians too were fed up with the deprivation caused by the policies and activities of their communist dictator. Timisoara, formerly part of Hungary, had only been part of Romania since the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Perhaps that was part of the reason Timis' population was in the forefront of the present unrest here now. Daniela was musing this over as she walked.

Whole families lived in flats of thirty square metres. Heating for the bitter winter ( $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  or lower) was centrally controlled by district; even in individual homes, there was no choice whether heating was on or off and no temperature control. No one had enough to eat; travelling around you could see cabbages piled high, filling

ramshackle balconies on the drab grey jerry-built apartment blocks that were home to most people in the towns and cities. Families existed on little but cabbages the entire winter. Rural areas were different but equally deprived. To have no running water and no electricity was not uncommon. Agriculture hadn't really changed for centuries. The co-operative farms didn't benefit those who worked on them.

Daniela was as fed up as everyone else. She supported a local pastor who was evicted for fabricated 'crimes'. An outspoken critic of the dictator, the pastor was a target of the Securitate – the secret police. Daniela was not one of the pastor's parishioners; she had no experience of 'uprisings', nor of demonstrations, peaceful or otherwise. Neither had anyone else. Half of her wanted to be in the thick of it, and half of her was terrified. The pastor, of Hungarian descent, knew about the days when Transylvania was a wealthy, relatively sophisticated region before its partition to Romania in 1919. Perhaps that history made the pastor's dissatisfaction more vigorous.

A crowd of demonstrators developed, quickly swelling by hundreds of students. Orders from the authorities to disperse were ignored; water cannon came out, stones were thrown. Eventually there was a vicious crackdown by the

military, with many shots fired. It was already dark. Every shadow was a threat.

Daniela crouched down in an inconspicuous doorway and almost immediately a young man collapsed in front of her, with blood running down his jacket.

“The bastards shot me,” he gasped with shock and pain.

“Let me have a look,” said Daniela. “What’s your name?”

“Bogdan,” he stammered, “student – Uni.”

For a few brief minutes in that dark, dirty, freezing doorway, with bullets flying everywhere, there was no-one else in the world. They were in a capsule, just the two of them, despite the dark, the damp and scattering snow. Daniela saw an occasional spark as a bullet hit a building and a soft clatter as small pieces of stone tumbled to the ground.

Daniela and Bogdan looked silently at each other for what seemed a long time, but was probably only a moment. They

were each weighing up how much they could trust the other. In those days, when Romanians met a stranger, they were immediately conscious that it might be someone who was an informer for the Securitate. Around them the noise escalated.

Daniela wondered anxiously whether they were going to get away safely. That anxiety was replaced by determination as she took responsibility for the wounded man, remembering the pastor's family, knowing they would help.

“Try to stand up, pretend you are my boyfriend, then I can support you. I know where we can get help and have the wound bandaged. It will be painful for a while, but I think it's only a flesh wound. You should go to hospital.”

Bogdan hesitated.

“No hospital – someone will tell the Securitate and my whole family will disappear.”

Though neither knew its significance then, Timisoara's demonstration began the ending of dictatorship in Romania.

As Daniela and Bogdan celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in Bucharest in 2016, Daniela could hear, see and smell every moment of that terrifying time as if it was yesterday. She glanced at her husband happily; he smiled back and she knew he was thinking about that 1989 night too.

If you ever visit Timisoara, bullet scars can still be seen on some buildings: a reminder of a different nightmare world.

# Comeuppance

Andrea Taylor

Almost nobody liked Suzy Pierce – she was the star of the chemistry class, and always the first to volunteer to do an experiment. She enjoyed playing mean tricks on people and she hated Miss Stock, the teacher.

We were doing something with sulphuric acid and gases, involving the fume cupboard. Theory and teacher's demonstration on day one, with students' practice on day two. Suzy missed the first day – no one knew why – but unbeknown to us all, she had managed to sneak into the lab and remove the fuse from the fume cupboard extractor fan. She thought that students' practice was on day one and the teacher's demonstration on day two.

On day two we went straight into students' practice. Miss Stock called for volunteers.

'Suzy, it had better be you as usual.'

By this time Suzy knew that she had been mistaken the previous day and therefore had no intention of volunteering. She sat still, looking horrified. She went slowly to the fume cupboard as we watched, puzzled by her reluctance. She began the experiment, trying to hold her breath as fumes started to rise. She began to cough. In a few seconds she came stumbling out of the cupboard, eyes streaming and still coughing! We stared at her, amazed, wondering what had happened.

Miss Stock quickly identified the problem and inserted a spare fuse without any comment. The fumes rapidly cleared. Suzy was asked to stay behind after class. We all lingered nearby, waiting until Suzy appeared looking thoroughly embarrassed.

Suzy had got her comeuppance all right, we all agreed amid laughter, once we knew what had happened. Talk about being hoist with your own petard!

# The True Origins of the English Civil War

Tony Oswick

The invitation arrived with one of the King's Men on horseback.

“The King wants you to have this personally, Mr Cromwell,” said the messenger, handing me a scroll wrapped in ribbon. “He'd appreciate your presence at his Garden Party next week.”

Appreciate my presence? It was enough to make the most puritan of Puritans giggle.

*'Dear Olly,' it read. 'How's life in sleepy Norfolk? Fancy an afternoon of wine, women and song?*

*Then come along to my Garden Party on Wednesday.*

*Look forward to seeing you. Charlie Rex.'*

All very cosy and friendly. But why on earth had he invited me?

When I got there, I found lots of flirty women, most of them falling out of low-cut dresses. They stared at me as if they'd never seen a commoner before.

“Ooh, you do speak funny,” they kept saying, “but we do so love your round head.” Upper-class hussies, all of them, lusting after a bit of rough. But I kept them at bay with appropriate quotations from my Pocket Bible.

Then I was introduced to the King's awful son who kept boasting, “I'm going to be King Charles II one day, don't you know?” He spent most of the afternoon

chasing little girls and trying to kiss them. What a womaniser, even at his young age! When he got fed up with that, he played hide-and-seek in an old oak tree.

Then there were those horrible dogs. My friends had told me the royals always owned dogs. But they, the dogs that is, kept sniffing at my breeches and snapping at my legs. Someone said they were King Charles' King Charles spaniels - which sounded a rather repetitive name for a dog breed.

Despite their awfulness, I could just about tolerate the women, the heir apparent and the dogs. But the King himself? What an arrogant and disagreeable piece of work.

Whenever anyone went near him, there was lots of curtsying and genuflecting and tugging of forelocks.

And, despite the heat, he and his courtiers were all dressed in their gaudy finery, bright garb and fancy wigs.

“We’re extremely cavalier here, old bean,” the King told me. “Have to say, you look a bit plain and dowdy. Couldn’t you have dressed up a bit?”

But worse was to come. “Those warts on your face are *so* distinctive, Olly. They ought to call you ‘Walter’. Ha, ha! Get it?” He paused. “But I guess you Norfolk yokels haven’t got a sense of humour. Never mind, help yourself to a tankard of mead or some such plebian drink.”

That was the final straw. It was, I decided, time to get rid of the pomp, pomposity and impoliteness of His Royal Highness and his hangers-on. So, when I got home, I started making plans and new models of armies.

Now, twelve months later, I'm almost ready. It's time for a revolt. Time for war.

But, unlike King Charles, I intend to be very, very civil.

# Left Uppercut

Vivienne Orr

He went down like a sack of potatoes, his head hitting the pavement with an unpleasant squelching noise.

She had not really wanted to join the girls at their regular Friday night get-together in the pub. It had been a rotten day at work and she would have preferred to get back to the flat early, have a long soak in the bath and pack a bag ready to spend the weekend with her parents. However she was persuaded and in fact was enjoying their company when a group of guys came over and started to chat them up. It was all pretty light-hearted until one of the men who was rather the worse for drink made a play for her and did not respond to her good-natured but meaningful hint that he was not her type at all. To her annoyance he persisted, and she knew the only way to get rid of him was to leave. Bidding goodbye to her friends she set off towards the tube station. She could hear his voice calling her, and his heavy footsteps following. He was plainly very drunk and infuriated by her indifference began a tirade of abuse. Had she not had a few glasses of wine she would have laughed in his stupid face. However she rose to the bait, turned and lashed out, her closed fist landed solidly on his chin and down he went.

She backed away, clutching her wrist, and looked at the man, expecting him to move and wondering in a vague sort of way what his reactions might be towards her. He was heavily built and in his inebriated state must have lost his balance when her fist connected and felled him. It was inexplicable, considering she was five foot four and a girl. Now here he was, flat out with his mouth open and possibly dead. There were troubling visions of police, photos of her on the spot, the perpetrator of a possible serious injury, perhaps murder!

It was amazing that the sight of a prone man on a fairly busy street did not attract immediate attention. Time seemed to stand still as she continued to back slowly away, shocked at what she appeared to have done.

There were people gathering around him now, a few taking pictures. Someone was calling the emergency services. No-one looked at her. Why should they? An alert young man took in the significance of the scene and called out to her, asking if she knew what had happened.

She shook her head and turned away pulling on the hood of her anorak. As she hurried towards the station a woman's strident voice reached her. "He's drunk, serves him right. Women are not safe in the street with men like that around."

# Crime Corner

Geoff Parkes

## Young Killers

Over the past 60 years, UK courts have had to deal with depressing numbers of crimes committed by minors. We take a brief look here at some of them. The purpose of this article is not to shock – we are all well beyond that stage by now – but to see how these minors have been treated and to ask what, if anything, we have learned.

**Mary Bell** (1968). Age: 10/11. Detained: 11.5 years.

Bell was tried, along with co-defendant Norma Bell (no relation), for strangling Martin Brown, aged four, and Brian Howe, aged three.

The trial at Newcastle Assizes was remarkable in many respects. The country had never seen anything quite like it, and the legal system was unsure how to handle it. The courtroom was a normal, adult court, and – despite pleas from defence counsel – the identities of the two defendants were not hidden. Names and photos of the two girls were published. Norma Bell was acquitted. Bizarrely, Mary Bell was acquitted of murder but convicted for the lesser crime of manslaughter.

On leaving a young offenders' institution, she was given a new identity and granted anonymity for life – a privilege later extended to her daughter and grandchild. Her identity had to be changed a second time in 1998, when her whereabouts were unearthed by the press and she had to be whisked away with her daughter to a safe house in another part of the country.

**Sharon Carr** (1992). Age: 12. Detained: 33 years so far.

At the age of 12, Carr randomly attacked and killed 18-year-old trainee hairdresser Katie Rackliff. She was found guilty of murder and ordered to serve a minimum of 14 years. She thus still ranks as Britain's youngest female murderer, since Mary Bell was not convicted of murder.

Why is Carr still incarcerated after 33 years? Because she has carried out multiple further attacks in prison, shows no remorse, and writes glowingly about killing in her diary: "I'm a killer. Killing is my business. And business is good."

**Roger Thompson and Jon Venables** (1993). Age: 10. Detained: 8 years.

In the much-publicised James Bulger case, two ten-year-olds abducted, tortured and murdered a two-year-old. Like Mary

Bell, they were given new identities and granted lifelong anonymity, despite their photos being published at the time. Venables has repeatedly been returned to prison for child pornography offences, and his identity has also been changed again.

**Lorraine Thorpe** (2009). Age: 15. Detained: minimum 14 years – 16 so far.

Thorpe was convicted of killing 41-year-old Rosalyn Hunt. Nine days later she killed her own father to prevent him from informing the police of the first murder. Interestingly, her co-accused, Paul Clarke (41) was sentenced to a minimum of 27 years, but committed suicide in 2013 after just four years in prison. Thorpe is Britain's youngest female double murderer.

**Eddie Ratcliffe** and **Scarlett Jenkinson** (2023). Age: 15. Detained: 20 years and

22 years minimum respectively.

These teenagers carried out the carefully planned murder of transgender girl Brianna Ghey after luring her to a park in Warrington. Ratcliffe was diagnosed with autism and selective mutism, as a result of which he wrote answers

down at the trial. After their flimsy alibis collapsed, they tried to blame each other.

**B.G.I. and C.M.B.** (2023). Age: 12. Detained: minimum 10 years (increased from 8.5).

This case was remarkable not only for the extent of the violence and the age of the defendants, but also the fact that two twelve-year-olds had attacked an adult. Nineteen-year-old Shawn Seesahai had travelled to Britain for cataract surgery, which he was unable to obtain in his native Anguilla. During his recuperation, while relaxing in a park in Wolverhampton, he was subjected to an entirely unprovoked machete attack. The identities of the killers have not been released; compare this with other cases in the list. Race was never mentioned at the trial, but you can draw your own conclusions.

**Axel Rudakubana** (29 July, 2024). Age: 17. Detained: minimum 52 years.

Rudakubana was charged with three murders, ten attempted murders, and (later) various crimes related to terrorism, including the manufacture of ricin.

This has arguably been the most high-profile case of the last decade, and has probably caused even more outrage than most of the cases listed above. It is interesting to note that, though his identity was initially withheld because the crimes

were committed when he was under 18, this anonymity was reversed by the recorder at Liverpool Crown Court on 1 August. Since the defendant would turn 18 years of age on 7 August, nine days after the crime, his identity would become known anyway.

The case was also notable for the claims of undue leniency in sentencing, and the attempt to change it to a whole-life tariff, but this option was – and is – not available for offenders aged under 18 at the time of the offence.

\* \* \*

What are we to make of all this? Firstly – and it comes as no surprise – nearly all offenders have come from an appalling background. Mary Bell's mother was a prostitute (dominatrix) who tried to kill Mary as a baby, and at one stage actually sold her, only for a relative to retrieve her. Thorpe was brought up around alcoholics, including her own father. Belize-born Carr, who never knew her biological father, was brought up in extreme poverty and witnessed violence from an early age. Nearly all were brought up in social and economic deprivation, many with one parent missing. However, even Mary Bell has admitted (to biographer Gitta Sereny) that her upbringing cannot excuse her behaviour.

The second point is that offenders under 18 – and especially under 14 – stand a good chance of avoiding a very long sentence. The rationale seems to be that ten- or twelve-year-old killers didn't really comprehend the gravity of what they were doing. They shouldn't be locked away for too long and should be given the maximum chance for reintegration into society. (Carr is here an outlier, considered too dangerous for release as she shows no signs of changing her ways.)

The third striking point is that there is inconsistency about who should or should not be granted anonymity, and if so, when. The phrase "(not) in the public interest" crops up time and again in this context on the lips of judges, barristers, and the press. The problem is that the final decision usually appears to be taken by one person, i.e. it is dictated largely by personal opinion rather than fixed guidelines. We know Sharon Carr's name, but we don't know the names of B.G.I. or C.M.B., who were convicted at the same age as Carr.

Fourthly, a system of punishment dependent on the cliff-edge age of 18 looks extremely suspect. Suddenly, you're an adult and must be treated accordingly. Rudakubana at 17 years and 356 days had to be treated as a minor. It might make more sense to increase culpability, and maximum prison sentence, in steps – say at 12, 14, 16 and 18.

Another change since the time of Mary Bell is that defendants are almost invariably diagnosed with autism, ADHD, psychological problems, or a personality disorder. This may or may not have a bearing on the sentence handed down, and may determine whether an offender ends up later in Broadmoor rather than prison. The modern approach is much more differentiated than it was 60 years ago, and is light years away from the assertion that all killers must, by definition, be mad. However, the outcome still often fails to meet with public approval or to satisfy victims' relatives.

We saw at the beginning that the judiciary had little idea of how to deal with Mary Bell. How could they? They had no experience. For nearly 60 years, we have witnessed lawyers learning by doing, yet whatever actions the courts take, the young offenders keep coming. Knife crime cases in particular have loomed much larger in courtrooms. We often hear that society gets the criminals it deserves. Does it follow that society gets the trials it deserves?

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