

Review of *Our Friends in the North* (BBC TV)

In Spring 2006, the BBC repeated its much acclaimed drama serial, *Our Friends in the North*. It is to the credit of its writer, Peter Flannery, as well as its production team and cast that, it retains not only its dramatic punch but also its political relevance 10 years after its first broadcast. The story itself spanned four decades of modern British history. It opens in 1964 at the end of what Harold Wilson, soon to be the new Labour Prime Minister, memorably called "13 years of Tory misrule". The 9th and final episode is set in 1995. The original stage play by contrast had only covered the period that abruptly came to an end with the election of a resurgent Tory Party under Margaret Thatcher.

The narrative is constructed around four friends from Tyneside: Nicky, his girlfriend Mary, plus his boyhood friends Tosker and Geordie. Though the core story is set in Newcastle, several scenes take place in London to which Geordie and then Nicky move for a period. The Tyne Bridge is the setting for the final scene.

Most of the more overtly political action revolves around a series of triangular relationships. At the apex of the most important one stands Nicky, newly returned from the USA and politicised by his involvement in the Civil Rights movement there. At another corner, there is Austin Donohue, a local Labour politician, modelled on T. Dan Smith. Donohue's plans for a new Newcastle soon seduce Nicky into working for him. At the third corner is Nicky's father, Felix, once active but now outwardly disengaged. Indeed he is downright cynical at times, though deep down his principles remain intact. He thereby provides a contrast both to Donohue's corruption and to Nicky's naïve hopes.

In turn, Felix is part of another political triangle, involving his old friend Eddie Wells. The latter is still a political activist, first as a (honest) Labour councillor and later an independent Member of Parliament (shades of the real Eddie Milne saga in Blyth in the mid-70s, though the fictional character, unlike the real one, rejoins the Labour Party). Eddie is in turn linked back to Mary who becomes more and more politically involved as the story progresses, first as a Labour councillor and then MP, partly thanks to Eddie's guidance.

Alongside the political storyline is a more private tale, though the screenplay clearly relates the personal and political in a way few TV programmes have matched. Nicky is politically engaged and idealistic. Contrast is provided by his two friends Tosker and Geordie. Both are essentially apolitical. Tosker, who, for a period, snatches Mary's affections leading to a doomed marriage, embodies the grab-what-you-can mentality that Thatcherism both reflected and encouraged.

Geordie, however, is essentially the loser in this rat race, drifting into the world of seedy Soho strip clubs before being betrayed by one of their owners, the grossly corrupt Benny Barrett. It is this sub-plot that allows the series to take in corruption amongst the Metropolitan Police Vice Squad and later a sleazy Tory cabinet minister (shades of the scandal-tainted Reginald Maudling).

Changing Britain

This narrative structure is used to develop a wealth of themes. They range from issues of a more individual nature such as family ties, loyalty between friends, marital breakdown, domestic violence, teenage delinquency, and the terrible impact of Alzheimer's disease on its victims to wider social matters like the break-up of old working class communities, urban redevelopment, police corruption, media bias, industrial relations, and deindustrialisation.

The presence of Tosker and Geordie in the story is a particularly useful narrative device. It gives the series a social breadth lacking in other political dramas such as *Big Flame* and *Days of Hope*. It creates a much richer tapestry which captures a wide range of social changes and issues in the period covered. There is Geordie's descent into penury and homelessness while Tosker embodies the ex-working class nouveau riche of the times. That said, it is politics that is at the heart of *Our Friends in the North*.

Most of the big events of the period pop up throughout the plot, not least key General Elections and the bursting of the Tory Party economic bubble in the late 80s. But it is the bitter miners' strike of 1984 that really stands out. Careful selection for location filming helps to give a real feeling for place while pop music of the times is cleverly used to reinforce the sense of period.

Of course there had been some memorable social dramas before, not least the widely celebrated *Boys From the Blackstuff*. But even Alan Bleasdale's tour de force does not match the political dimension of *Our Friends*, which manages to embrace both formal parliamentary processes and grassroots activism. Anarchist squatters and Trotskyist entrists into the Labour Party are there as well as 'machine' politicians and shady figures from the Far Right.

Some scenes are particularly sharp. For instance, Nicky stands as a Labour candidate. In the bitter selection meetings, left-wing middle class lecturers and the like, not from the immediate locality, are contrasted with local working class ward members who loyally support right-wing candidates. There is a degree of stereotyping here but it does perhaps touch some raw nerves since there is an element of truth as well.

There is a rather depressing depiction of the quality of the average city councillor (though even Shakespeare had unkind words for the breed as did 20th century novels like *Room at the Top* and films such as *Get Carter*, not to forget negative soap opera depictions in *Coronation Street*). The scenes of Parliament with MPs on all sides braying at each other are also less than endearing. Yet many people will have met intelligent, hard-working and honest councillors and MPs so the picture in *Our Friends* is a wee bit lop-sided. The predominance across much of the media of such portrayals must put many decent people off politics (compare to the more positive image in, say, *The West Wing*)

It might be argued that the series focuses too much on battles in and around the Labour Party. The independent Far Left is largely ignored, though its cadres played a significant role in many industrial disputes of the period. So too is the Liberal Party despite the fact that its local activists have managed to make inroads into some urban areas at the expense of the Labour Party, including, of course, Newcastle.

Our Friends does not fully convey the explosive growth of new social movements and 'identity politics' such as feminism, gay rights, peace and environmental campaigning in the period. Issues like Cruise missile deployment or the construction of nuclear power plant (e.g. Druridge Bay) are left largely on one side, even though many people were involved in related protests. Yet it might well have made the storyline too heavy, if not downright indigestible, to take on board much more. Certainly the addition of one or two non-white characters for the sake of ticking off the 'ethnicity box' would rightly have been condemned as tokenism. If the series were to be remade, perhaps the single biggest improvement to the screenplay — within its own terms of reference — would have been more emphasis on the role of miners' wives in the 1984 strike. That said, Mary's own storyline does capture some of the more general changes in the status and role of women over the time frame.

Changed world

Few TV programmes, fictional or factual have captured so well how society, both particular institutions and general lifestyles, changed in the 1960s and after. The first episodes capture what some critics at the time damned as the growth of a 'promiscuous society'. Growing working class material affluence in those days is also pictured. Family life too is seen to change: single parent households make more of an appearance as do divorce and remarriage (Mary and Tosker are the main vehicle for this dimension). Even the loss of old pubs and working men's clubs in the face of the growing 'clubbing' scene is vividly brought to life (the ghastly *Tuxedo Royale* duly makes an appearance).

The changing physical face of Tyneside is perhaps not quite so well depicted. There is a certain tendency to indulge in visual stereotypes of tower blocks and terraces, though the directors (there were three in total) do feature both terraced houses in leafy Jesmond as well as ones in the older industrial quarters. What is lacking is the dimension of suburbia.

In the early 60s, many well-heeled folk had decamped to Darras Hall, first started in 1910 but really expanding only after World War 2. More affluent workers had begun to move to the new private homes in places like Chapel Park on the edges of the old city. They were also moving to new towns such as Killingworth, Cramlington and Washington all started in the mid-60s (Peterlee, further south, was advertised as "the place to be").

By focusing on slum clearance, *Our Friends* tends to stress the 'push' factor at the expense of the 'pull'. In recent decades, millions of people on Tyneside and across the rest of Britain have voted

with their feet in favour of suburban sprawl, mainly filled with what the Malvina Reynolds song memorably called “little boxes, made of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same”.

Blight-seeing

Our Friends is slightly misleading in its picture of the motives for slum clearance and especially city centre redevelopment. What is missing is the twisted modernist vision that led town planners to gut whole neighbourhoods and tear down beautiful areas like Eldon Square, the old City Library and Town Hall. Some readers may remember 60s Newcastle chief planner Wilfred Burns, author of the revealingly entitled *New Cities for Old*. He dreamed of creating what he called a “new Brasilia” while this reviewer once heard T. Dan Smith talk of Newcastle becoming the “Venice of the North” (with motorways instead of canals!).

No wonder that one local critic, Jon Gower Davies, called such people “evangelical bureaucrats”. The American independent Marxist Hal Draper also had a good name: the ‘plannists’. In other words, it is not just a matter of corrupt deals with worthless architects. Rather the key issue was — and still is — the combination of flawed assumptions, warped visions and faulty processes. Again the contemporary relevance of *Our Friends* is underlined by the fact that Newcastle City Council under Labour recently repeated all the same errors in good old top-down fashion with its “Going For Growth” and “Newcastle Great Park” schemes.

It should also be noted that there was more organised and articulate opposition at the time to what the council was doing in the 60s. *Our Friends* does not do full justice to the fact that locals in areas like Rye Hill were able to expose the lack of real consultation beforehand (the near contemporary construction of Byker Wall did demonstrate that a more participative style of planning was possible). There were also alternatives on offer: revitalisation of existing properties, not wholesale demolition. This is not to deny that some slum areas might have gone beyond the point of no return. Rather it is a matter of spotlighting the extent to which planners, architects and developers can create, not relieve, blight, regardless of whether capitalist profiteering, illegal or legal, play any part.

It might also be argued that *Our Friends* does not do justice either to the cultural richness of Tyneside. It tends to alternate between an Andy Capp image on the one hand and, on the other, a Hen-and-Stag-Party caricature. For instance the three male friends are shown at the start discussing the formation of a pop group. Little is made, however, of the thriving rock, blues, folk, jazz and classical music scenes in the area.

There has also been a strong film culture centred on the Tyneside Cinema while other art forms, not least poetry readings at Morden Tower and exhibitions at the Laing and elsewhere, have not been entirely absent. Thousands of city people enjoy walking in the region’s hills and dales, as much a face of the North-East as the conurbations. The intensity of local football passions needs no comment.

Of course, at this point, Peter Flannery and his colleagues might well protest against the injustice of expecting them to include everything and the kitchen sink. They would have a valid point since they do cover so much ground over the nine episodes (three in the 60s, three in the 70s, two in the 80s and one in the 90s). Perhaps that weighting towards the first half of the 31 years of the storyline inevitably means that there were inherent limits to what could be shown of the extent to which Tyneside and the North-East changed over that period.

Myths of time

It is here that a perhaps more serious charge might be made. There is a whiff of nostalgia hanging around the edges. It is most openly put into words by Eddie Wells in conversation with Felix Hutchinson. He rues modern youth, recollecting how, when kids themselves, they were weaned on the milk of socialism. Thus a golden age of lost political radicalism is evoked.

Yet this is bad history. Socialist agitators in the late 19th century faced violent opposition from not just the authorities but also many working class people. Often religion had a stronger hold over proletarian minds. Many struggles were not driven by political class consciousness but rather more limited goals, be it over craft dilution or rent levels. This is not to say that concern about ‘bread and butter’ issues cannot lead to a more comprehensive radicalisation. Yet often it does not (and sometimes it has benefited the Far Right, not the Left). Stirring images of Red Clydeside and the like abound with much rosy myth-making.

Then, as now, radical socialism had but a small base, especially over the long-term. In the North-East there have been times and places when left-wing groups have established some roots but right-wing Labourism has usually been able to rule the roost, comparatively undisturbed by more left-wing elements. Readers might remember how short a tenure Eddie Milne had as Blyth MP before being kicked out by John Ryman, fox hunter and subsequent Parliamentary absentee. Milne's base quickly folded.

Our Friends is nostalgic in other ways. Much is rightly made of the disastrous impact of community dislocation and the tearing apart of the social fabric of old neighbourhoods. The ageing Felix and his wife are both victims of particularly mindless assaults by local thugs. One can almost hear Tony Blair preaching about the need for a 'culture of respect'. Yet that requirement has been needed for a long time.

Notions of 'good old days' of neighbourliness, decency and tranquillity, ruffled only by minor misdemeanours, are also encrusted with much rosy nostalgia. Thus it is frequently said that people used to be able to safely leave their door open at night. Yet, if they did, one reason was that they had little worth stealing. More generally, much of the much vaunted 'solidarity' of the past might have been more a matter of basic necessity, with individuals having to pull together in the face of adversity. Even if solidarity did exist (and there were many instances of scabbing during strikes and other contrary behaviour), it is something that has been difficult to sustain in the era of mass consumerism.

In many other ways, old working class communities had vices as well as virtues. Many a pitman's wife got the occasional beating while incest was not uncommon in some old industrial areas. Hooliganism marred many sporting events in the 20s and 30s while the tearing up of cinema seats was a popular pastime in the mid-50s. Many parts of Tyneside were unsafe in the late 60s and early 70s due to prowling gangs of skinheads who, at one point, started copying the droogs from *Clockwork Orange*.

Yet *Our Friends* has a point. There is both a more vicious and more random aspect to violence in more recent decades. Certainly drug abuse has well and truly poisoned whole communities. The series features a sink council estate called Valley View where social order has virtually collapsed. In real life, some areas have become no-go areas where even the Fire Brigade is likely to be attacked with bottles and bricks. It is Mary, in argument with Nicky, who voices the observation that such social sicknesses cannot simply be blamed on poverty. On top of social exclusion, there is wilful self-exclusion, a problem that the traditional Left has been loathe to address.

Changing the world or yourself

For readers of this Journal perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Our Friends* is the fundamental question it poses. Many of its events and the choices facing its characters pivot on what is the "way of the world". More than anything this gives the serial its on-going relevance. As the time of writing, some apologists for Tony Blair's government, currently embroiled by financial scandal (loans-for-peerages etc.) argue that this is how things are and that there is no changing how the world works. In other words, 'realism' is about embracing compromise for the sake of getting through some improvements, as opposed to the impotence, such people further argue, that flows from rigid adherence to abstract ethics.

This conflict between pragmatism and principle is of course embodied the most by the Austin Donahue character. It is here that the screenplay most shows its mettle. It would have been easy to depict him simply as a rotten apple in the barrel. Yet he is shown to want to do good. He is prepared to ride the tiger and it is his tragedy that it devours him. After his downfall, he is shown still sticking to some of his early political ideals. Some may feel that the real T. Dan Smith was rather like his fictional counterpart. (We will leave aside the likes of Andy Cunningham and his heirs today)

But Donahue is not the only character who thinks that life's a bastard and that all one can do is to adapt accordingly. There is Tosker, essentially a chancer with his eyes firmly on personal self-advancement, which, at one point, takes in Freemasonry. He embodies that army of working class people who were to embrace Thatcherism, though here the screenplay might have been even more explicit. He is echoed in comedy television by the likes of Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* and Harry Enfield's *Loadsamoney*. There is also Felix who sees how rotten the world is but who thinks that attempts to change it for the better are doomed (though there is a period

where he becomes politically engaged again, helping his friend Eddie to successfully stand as an independent socialist).

Here again is another triangle. At one corner, then, is the viewpoint of cynicism, defeatism, and opportunism. Opposite is the belief that the world can be improved via positive engagement in collective struggle. Here stands Nicky. His politics somewhat shift, however. In 1964 he is canvassing for Labour. When we encounter him later, he is more like an Angry Brigade member, utterly contemptuous of the political mainstream and prepared to support violent direct action (shades of Stuart Christie?).

Later still, he has entered the Labour Party to change it from inside, though he is a bit less boring than the average member of Militant. Humiliated by defeat in what had been a safe Labour Party seat, he puts his efforts into photography which in turn leads to his capturing on film police violence in the 1984 miners' strike. Yet, like so many political activists, he runs out of steam, subsequently going off to live in Italy. He ends up in the final episode with his eyes firmly on the personal: recovering the girl he lost in episode one.

Mary occupies the final corner of this triangle. Like Eddie Wells, she engages with the world and tries to do things that actually will help people. Unlike Austin Donahue, she retains her personal integrity. In marked contrast to Nicky, there is something tangible to show for her efforts. Yet it is also true that the structures at the root of so many of the world's problems remain untouched by the parliamentary reformism she and Eddie support. In its own way, it too is a dead end.

Corrupt compromise is also shown not to be justified by any worthwhile results. Austin Donahue's schemes lead to the construction of disastrous tower blocks that eventually have to be demolished. Tosker struggles to find meaning in his life and is ruined in the stock market crash through, true to type, he is soon back with new schemes to make money. Deep fulfilment remains more elusive.

The more honest characters also pay a price for their choices. Mary's political involvement comes at a cost to her family. Eddie Wells has to shut up in embarrassed silence when he is outmanoeuvred at the Parliamentary Committee where he had hoped to expose corrupt Tory MPs. We last see him caught in the great storm of 1987, his life's work literally and metaphorically blown away as he collapses in the street. The policeman who investigates the Vice Squad corruption crimes ends up totally frustrated by the depth of not just active corruption but also official complacency. The corrupt officers themselves go to jail though they do 'get away with it' in that they receive only light sentences..

The last music heard in the final episode, Oasis's *Don't Look Back In Anger*, would seem to suggest that this is the message of the series. It's all been part of life's rich tapestry and one can only take lasting comfort from the smaller things in life, friends and family, even if they too can bring their share of woes. The point, *Our Friends* appears to say, is not to waste time trying to make big changes to the world but to survive it the best one can. It ends then on a fundamentally conservative note, albeit with the smallest 'c'.

Sandy Irvine