

## BIG MEETINGS AND A SENSE OF PLACE

### The DLI Museum Art Gallery exhibition, 'Big Meetings' by Julian Germain

Don't expect fireworks or robust images of even more robust cornet-players! Instead, this is an exhibition of subtle hints and minor domestic miracles. Like all the other DLI exhibitions I've seen this one has the familiar hallmark of a curator expecting us, the visitors, to think. There is no handing-on-a-plate from Germain who has coupled his own work with old photographs from the Durham Miners' Archive. It is in this technical dichotomy that much of the power of the exhibition lies. All Germain's work is in colour and printed large. Whatever camera he's used the depth of field is impressive and the vibrancy of the colours powerful. Photographing assembled Brass Band members renders those at the back of the hall in as much detail as those at the front. The printing is sharp (even "pin sharp") and without ambiguity. You know on whose side Germain is.

However, the groups of people gathering around the Pit Lodge Banners appear to have little in common with the static images from the 1920s and 1930s: those hand-tinted faces with pale-red jackets and stiff smiles (if they smile at all). Look through the façade of these tinted memorials and you discern a structure, an unwritten set of rituals: there is the ritual of formal dressing, even down to the brushed caps and starched collars; there is the ritual of a close relationship to the historic faces on each of the banners. These men (predominantly men) see themselves as part of a socialist brotherhood and "related" to the likes of Kier Hardy and Lansbury as if by some osmosis. This use of icons includes Marx and Engels and even Lenin looks earnestly down at the gathering. This is the visible manifestation of a way of life that bound comrades together and threaded hope and resolve through communities up and down the country. These pre-war men have ideals and a way of life that is threatened by the pit owners so they tell tales of the General Strike and dream of Nationalisation. The rituals and the accumulated iconography of the Big Meeting become symbolic of political desire and belief in what amounts to an alternative religion.

The images from 2011 are more "ragged" in their uncertainty. These are men (AND women) readying their instruments for a day's performance. They smile and look out at the Germain's lens and see themselves as entertainment. No doubt there are some who still harbour true socialist beliefs but can that be true of all the musicians. I spoke with members of the Harrogate Band this Big Meeting gone and they were a motley crew most of which had never heard of Kier Hardy and as for Lansbury "Isn't she Jessica Fletcher?" What these latter-day Big Meetniks think or feel is hidden in the complexity of their differing reactions. Whereas the "old" men knew their "place" and their music; their traditions and the cohesion of work and shared political beliefs these modern parades-people have few of those certainties.

There is a group portrait of a local Socialist group meeting in a clubroom, but it is disparate in its composition as they sit facing the camera with their collecting tin and empty beer glass. There are a dozen of them but there are a smattering of young idealists whereas the group of six pacifists fit easily into a middle-class, middle-aged front room.

There is an intimate, gentle even, photograph of the banners receiving their blessing in the Cathedral. It is subtly lit which adds texture to its "feel". Organised religion has a purpose in this great event as long as the two sides share a common set of beliefs:

compassion, tolerance and a sense of “fair play”, but the Anglican role is never a central one. The Nonconformists occupy that place. But the blessing of the banners is part of the day adding an element of respectability; a very British compromise. Would Lenin have tolerated its inclusion? British socialism has never been as radically violent as that in other countries. Besides, we got that out of our system when we killed King Charles I.

On a TV display screen a brass band performs but there is something in the way it has been constructed that at first makes you believe it is just one of the still photographs. Slowly, person by person there is movement as every member is “activated”. This is a Germain speciality for he repeats the process. In an adjoining room there are two large screens at right-angles to each other. To the right there is an image of an elderly man with what could be an E flat Tenor Horn cradled on his lap. He sits comfortably enough in front of his front room fire. The ceramic fireplace displays a scattering of past holiday souvenirs. On the other screen stands a child (the old man’s grandson?). He’s in his stocking feet and stands on the red, quarry tiles of the kitchen. Behind him is the washing machine. The two of them stand watching and you can be excused for thinking these are frozen frames as you look from one to the other until you notice the wrinkling of the boy’s toes and the old man’s occasional blinking.

The old man raises the horn to his mouth and plays “The Red Flag!” It’s not concert standard but more moving for being raw. The roughness of the performance, its halting progress, is a counterpoint to the soft voice of the boy as he sings the anthem, putting the time-honoured words to the tune. Does the lad understand the passion, the history and meaning of the words? The wrinkling toes and the boy’s awareness of being filmed becomes something of a metaphor for contemporary youth. Would he prefer to be out playing footie with friends or engaging a demonic presence on his X-Box? Perhaps he does understand? We shall never know and are left with the unresolved feeling that the song has as much relevance to him as “When Irish Eyes are Smiling”, or “I Belong to Glasgow”? But the voice keeps time with and matches the notes of his grandfather’s horn. How many other children learned the song in the same way, standing in the same place, being encouraged by their elders?

The two films run their course and the noise dissipates leaving you in silence. There, on their canvas and paint banners stand the young boy and sitting by the fire is grandfather with his horn. They stare at you in anticipation as you stand and tiptoe away.

There is a script on the wall making it clear what Germain’s intentions are. We must consider what has happened over the years between the plate photographs and his coloured images. How much has the light of Socialism dimmed in the in between times? Gone is the fervour of the Russian Revolution. Even its legacy has failed as has dreams of a Socialist Paradise. The events of the past few years have revealed the shallow fabric of the consumer society and how ineffectual the political structure is to redress the imbalances.

Seeing the large, colour photograph of the Esh Winning and Bear Park band rehearsing (together with the small, monochrome image of a previous incarnation) may not have the dramatic resonance of the painting of Lenin arriving at the Finland Station BUT in its own gentle, very British way it has the potential to celebrate as powerful a societal change. It has the “feel” of some sort of remodelling, of a group of people prepared to come together of their own free will and work co-operatively to a shared goal. We live in a world of individual aspirations and self-determination. However, a dozen Socialists

attempting violent revolution and being confronted by the six pacifists might just be the spark we need. The sound of 80,000 people booing George Osborne in the Olympic Stadium is an encouraging start but it may even be something more mundane that starts the new revolution: perhaps, when the going gets really tough Vince Cable will finally enter a red telephone box and emerge as the superhero he always was.

What the DLI exhibition underscores wonderfully is a sense of place, and of time. There is still the grand spectacle of the banners and the speeches and the overwhelming crush of the crowds. But the technology that existed between the Wars obviously limited the presentation of the bands and the committees. Social convention and Labour Party fashion demanded the stiff style with its air of commitment and respectability. There is none of that in Germain's images. What you see is how relaxed the current generation is with a camera thrust in their faces. To convey the enormity of the Big Meeting it is left to the anonymous painting's (which dominates one wall) Impressionistic style; full of vigour and the dynamism of the day. Another painting, of jolly revellers with their less-than sober friends, achieves in paint what the DPS has constantly recorded on film and in pixels. It is this one image that links the past to the present: beer and jollity, smiling women in colourful headscarves and men with half-empty beer glasses. This sense of occasion which adds a Thomas Hardy-like element to the Big Meeting is something reassuring: that the politics may have become dilute but the power of the day to add colour to lives, to be a Prinkum Prankum for the modern man where beer is drunk in copious amounts and girls succumb to the advances of ardent youth. Oh how predictable human kind can be, and how reassuring that is.

Two weeks prior to my visit to the DLI exhibition I was in London seeing another photographic exhibition; this time at Tate Britain. *"Another London... International Photographers Capture City Life 1930 - 1980"* was an eclectic collection of images made by some of the greats of the past: Bill Brandt; Cartier-Bresson; Elliot Erwit; Bruce Davidson; Eve Arnold and Marc Riboud to name but a few. Every image was in immaculate monochrome and hung with due care and consideration.

It is a myth that the "natives" are the only photographers/writers/etc capable of capturing the essence of a place because they have been immersed in its culture and life since their birth. It is equally true that the myth of the observant outsider being the only one capable of getting to the heart of place because they remain "untainted" is rubbish. What this exhibition does is to reveal different viewpoints, different positions from which to consider the city in this, its momentous year.

Well-curated, thoughtfully arranged, the 1937 Coronation pictures made by a young Cartier-Bresson show Trafalgar Square crowds as keen and anticipatory as those waiting to welcome the Olympian parade, though not as vocal and certainly not as ardently colourful. The bespectacled lady in the tweed skirt does wear what looks like a Union Flag scarf but she is sitting on the shoulders of her husband (he'd better be as he holds her ankle!) and a friendly bus driver who proudly wears his World War One medals across his left breast. Behind them people clamber on the lion statues vying for the best view.

People being idiosyncratic are the hallmark of HCB's work. Not so the Soviet photographer Ivan Shagin who photographed the street artist chalking a dull, foggy

street in post war London. But it is the two women passing by and not caring that Shagin highlights. Bill Brandt contributes a menacing 1933 image titled Footsteps coming nearer which is darkness personified with the bulk of a man on the left and the highlighted leg of a woman wearing white shoes on the right; Hitchcockian in its content and implication, though the coming together of these two characters might be entirely innocent.

Lartigue photographed his wife, Bibi, in 1926... the earliest image in the collection. Irving Penn recorded cleaning ladies and young cricketers in the 1950s; Martine Franck captured a family waiting for Princess Anne's wedding procession in 1973; Robert Frank worked in the dull greyness of 1950s London making powerful images of a bored bulldog at Speaker's Corner, the open door of a hearse in one of the poorer suburbs of the capital as a little girl runs down the otherwise empty street.

In many ways this exhibition is not the sum total of parts. You see individual masterpieces and yet wonder about other images. There is the uncomfortable feeling that this has been put together to capture the visitors and offer them little gems from the famous and the not-so well known. René Groebli's two images of Westminster Bridge are evocative of the coal-smoke tainted world of 1949. The lone couple with their Silver Cross pram in one image and the stalled tram in the other are made anonymous by the grain and the gelatin silver printing. I confess to never having heard of Groebli before, and that is my loss.

Elliot Erwitt has two images in the collection: a gathering of dogs that is a little confusing and according to David Hurn (of Magnum fame) it isn't one of his best BUT the slightly tilted photograph of Eric Ambler taken as he stands on the rain-washed pavement in 1952 is masterly.

Though the names are impressive and the individual images generally superb, the Tate Britain exhibition lacks the moral cohesion of the DLI's and the mental shifting from one image to another at the Tate takes some getting used to. From Robert Frank's ghostly businessman walking across St James's Park in the fog (1951) to James Barnor's powerful portrait of the beautiful Afro-Caribbean Eva made in 1965 requires a mental pause while you adjust. It was a pity that the Tate garnered vast numbers of visitors whilst I was alone in the DLI Gallery. Both exhibitions were very good and I would have encouraged anyone to visit them had they been running for longer. From a personal point of view I find any exposure to good photography can only serve to ultimately benefit my own work. You become accustomed to "reading" an image, you refine your own vision and slowly, unconsciously, work towards developing your own "voice".

As for which gives a better sense of place; it would be hard to say, yet my feeling is that the Germain exhibition says more about the North East than the Tate does about London. Small can sometimes be just what is needed and careful selection can leave you with a better sense of your original intention. And this is from an ardent lover of monochrome photography! Whatever next?

John Cogan 2012