THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Frostquake

HOW THE FROZEN WINTER OF 1962 CHANGED BRITAIN FOREVER



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INDIA KNIGHT

JULIET NICOLSON

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Juliet Nicolson is the author of two works of history, *The Great Silence: 1918–1920 Living in the Shadow of the Great War* and *The Perfect Summer: Dancing into Shadow in 1911;* and a family memoir, *A House Full of Daughters*. She lives with her husband in East Sussex, not far from Sissinghurst, where she spent her childhood.

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The Perfect Summer
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For Charlie, my BH.
And for my beloved daughters
Clemmie and Flora.

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Frostquake n. a seismic event caused by a sudden cracking action in frozen soil. As water drains into the ground, it may freeze and expand, putting stress on its surroundings. This stress builds up until relieved explosively in the form of a frostquake.

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In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers.

T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets*

Well, I know now. I know a little more how much a simple thing like a snowfall can mean to a person.

Sylvia Plath

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Introduction

The winter of 1962–3 was one of the coldest Britain has ever known. After a week of catastrophic, lung-clogging smog in early December in which many hundreds of people lost their lives, snow began to fall on Boxing Day 1962 . . . and did not stop for the next ten weeks. With blizzards, treacherous ice and temperatures lower than -20°C, the winter of 1962 was even colder, longer and more life-impacting than the remarkable winter of 1947. At times the entire country was paralysed. Aeroplanes were grounded. Trains, lorries and cars came to a halt. Bicycles, tractors and even snowploughs failed to make their way through huge wind-swept drifts. Animals and birds struggled to survive. Food was rationed. Many, especially the elderly, found themselves confined to their homes. Schools were closed. Families were separated, unable to travel to see each other in such exceptional weather.

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For many of those who had fought in or lived through one or both world wars this interminable winter felt fearful, like the ending of a way of life, the loss of familiarity, of certainty, of the old way of doing things. And for those who had been hopeful about the new decade, a new beginning, a sloughing off of the old, the very real prospect of another – and even more terrifying – world conflict was starting to shake their optimism. When John F. Kennedy became President of the United States in 1961 he was warned that a nuclear war with Russia would probably kill a third of humanity, with most of those deaths concentrated in the USA, the Soviet Union, China and Europe. Even after Kennedy's negotiations with the Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev in October 1962 had defused the Cuban Missile Crisis, the nuclear threat and the fragility of world peace continued to monopolise domestic and international agendas as well as private thoughts and terrors.

The winter crystallised a growing tension between the old and the new. Although a December 1962 Gallup poll found that sixteen to eighteen year olds considered Winston Churchill, who had just celebrated his eighty-eighth birthday, to be Britain's most respected adult, this loyalty to the old ways was an exception. In his 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, Colin MacInnes describes the divide between teenagers and those referred to as 'squares' by the eighteen-year-old unnamed hero. 'Every time I open a newspaper or pick up a paperback,' he says, with scorn in his voice, 'I hear nothing but war, war, war. You pensioners certainly seem to love that old, old struggle.'

Wherever possible, post-war Britain was trying to catch up with the pacy, modern, convenient world we saw across the

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Atlantic. As the old industries of steel and shipping declined and Victorian factories gave way to scientific advances, office blocks of shining glass and chrome were built in the rubble-filled spaces left by bombs that had dropped twenty years earlier. Ownership of television sets, refrigerators and other labour-saving gadgets was on the rise. John Bloom, opportunist and direct-mail marketer, cut out the middle-man shopkeeper and sold washing machines bought cheaply in Belgium directly to newly-weds and housewives. By 1962, at the age of thirty-one, Bloom had become a millionaire four times over. With a Rolls-Royce the colour of a black tulip, two yachts, a villa in the South of France, a flat in London's Park Lane, a swagger and a neat little goatee beard, his marriage to Anne was celebrated in the Savoy Hotel. Two huge wedding cakes dominated the ceremony, one in the shape of a washing machine and the other a spin dryer.

But in the inner cities of Britain and in the countryside alike, laundry was still done by hand and the contrast between the affluent and the struggling was as acute as it had been immediately after the war. In 1961 fifteen million people still lacked a plumbed-in bathroom, with many washing in a tin bath in front of a coal fire. In 1963 six million Britons shared a lavatory with others in their street. Three million people, or nearly 7 per cent of the population, were estimated to be living in slums. In London, 155,000 households were confined to one room each.[1]

And yet, and yet . . . beneath the frozen surface a process of incubation was taking place. Just as the spring bulbs were

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stirring under the earth, the ground was cracking imperceptibly beneath the ice, and society was preparing for the moment when a different landscape would emerge. This was a winter in which despair and hardship both personal and political contrasted with a burgeoning sense of liberation and opportunity. It was a winter in which the old structural pillars of class and entitlement – a world in which swings in public playgrounds were locked up on Sundays and a nation's sense of joyfulness felt wanting – were starting to fragment and crumble.

Throughout the early winter months of 1962–3 rumours about a government minister said to have betrayed state secrets through his relationship with a twenty-year-old 'model' swirled and eddied. Like snowflakes they sometimes melted in the air as they fell, but sometimes they settled on the hard ground of credibility, attaching themselves to a new generation disillusioned by privileged self-protection and hungry for change. As the momentum of this scandal grew, one unchallenged rule for the elite and another for the bulk of the population began to feel increasingly wrong. This was a winter in which a fertile silence gave birth to a summer alive with sexuality and song. Old institutions and old viewpoints no longer made sense; what had been 'correct' – the acceptable norm around clothes and accents and sex and class – was being upturned. By the end of ten astonishing weeks the circumstances of the rich, the immigrant, the homosexual, the musician, the politician, the woman and above all the young had been spotlit and shaken up. Eager to seize their moment, the new generation was bent on dismantling archaic prejudices, injustices, hypocrisy and restrictions, and on creating a world of inclusivity and opportunity. As Ian

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McEwan wrote in *On Chesil Beach*, his 2007 novel set in the early 1960s, being young was no longer 'a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure'. Suddenly youth was a state to be envied.

I was eight years old that winter and can remember the feeling of living on an edge. I knew my parents were unhappy with each other, even though my mother was expecting her third child in the spring. The prospect of new life in the new season was the energy that propelled her forward. And I was aware of secrets being kept from me when I overheard exchanges that were sometimes subdued, sometimes tearful, rarely cheerful. More publicly, the prospect of a third war was never far from my parents' discussions or from my own thoughts. Like images flashing past a train window, these overheard conversations remain vivid in my mind. And we were living with my recently widowed grandfather, who, like so many of his generation, was bemused and confused by a world that he found unrecognisable, grieving for his wife and struggling to understand his part in a new environment. His despair was my education in the power of compassion.

At the same time we had just moved to a place that seemed to me the loveliest on earth. And by the autumn of 1963, along with almost everyone else on the planet of whatever age, I had fallen flat in love with four irreverent, exuberant singers from the grimy streets of Liverpool. After five years of hanging around seedy basement cellars, the few outside their home city who had heard of them before the snow began falling on Boxing

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Day 1962 considered the band to be little more than an uncategorisable novelty act. By the end of the winter they had become the most famous band in Britain.

There are moments when society, however embedded, shifts on its axis. The long and lingering hardships of the paralysing winter of 1962–3 encouraged, even enabled, change; the very effect of shutting down empowered a thawing. Forces of social change that had been building over many years now found their moment of release as they broke through the icy surface. As the country froze it melted.

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Chapter One

Driving through mustard

On the morning of Monday 3 December 1962 Paulene Stone was driving her blue Mini across London from her flat in South Kensington.[1] Her boyfriend knew something about paint and had sprayed the car her favourite colour. As she turned into the Mall the roads were almost empty and the smog was so thick and yellow that it was like driving through mustard. Slowly Paulene edged her way round the small island on which the statue of a seated Queen Victoria reigned serene, impervious to the appalling weather, her marble skirts spread out gracefully in front of her. Paulene was on her way to meet her photographer boyfriend at his house in Petty France, even though she had heard the man on the wireless warning people not to go outside unless it was absolutely necessary. Cars should only be driven in an emergency: visibility in some places was down to fifteen feet.

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Paulene went everywhere in her Mini, her independent, nineteen-year-old mind very much her own. And today would be no different, whatever the BBC said. She was proud of her little car, complete with its sun roof and its distinctive colour, and confident of her status as one of the new, beautiful, breezy young models who turned every head on the King's Road. Their fashionable androgyny was maintained by a diet of Ryvita, the wheat-based biscuits which made you feel full up and ensured a willowy figure, as did Limmits, the brand-new cellulose crackers that promised in a television advertisement that you could 'eat and be thin'. No matter whether you chose the mint, chocolate, orange or cheese variety, Paulene admitted, 'they all tasted of cardboard' but would swell up inside you and replace the need for at least two meals a day.

Paulene's mother, an expert dressmaker, sewed all her daughter's clothes so Paulene had never owned a shop-bought dress and had no idea of her frock size when in 1959 she won a modelling competition run by *Woman's Own* magazine. She had made her name in 1960 with a photograph taken for a *Daily Express* feature called 'Autumn Girl' by David Bailey, a twenty-two-year-old up-and-comer from the East End of London. At the shoot, Bailey (always known by surname alone), described by the newspaper as 'a cocky, confident, energetic, handsome lad' in a black leather jacket, asked Paulene to crouch down on the floor. Wearing a fluffy sweater and a tight skirt that ended above the knee, Paulene was invited to flirt with a 'live' squirrel (it was actually stuffed). The combination of the pretty young redhead and the lens of 'David Bailey who makes love daily', as the tabloids had begun to chant, was dynamite.

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Paulene never took the Underground; why would you when the London traffic moved at a steady speed and the pavement provided convenient off-road parking right outside the door of any destination? Reaching her journey's end, slightly surprised that in her rear-view mirror she could still just make out the reflected outline of the regal statue at the top of the Mall, she passed a figure in an abnormally elongated fur hat, some impressive railings and a wide-open gate that she did not recognise. A blue cloth sleeve with shiny buttons straight out of television's current police drama, *Dixon of Dock Green*, suddenly rapped on her window. 'Ere, ere, ere? What do you think you're doing? You can't park here.'

'Am I in Petty France?' she asked, confused.

As the policeman told her quite firmly to turn round and take her Mini straight back into the smog in the direction from which she had just come, she realised she was talking to him from the parade ground inside the forecourt of Buckingham Palace.

It was that time of year when daylight hours decrease with dispiriting speed and it is dark by teatime. And during that first week of December the noxious fog veiled the prominent buildings of the city, obliterating the white lines in the roads and disorientating Paulene Stone. Temperatures nose-dived and half a million coal fires began to burn in fireplaces across the capital. Sulphur dioxide filled the air, suffocating ninety people to death in twenty-four hours before it spread outwards to twenty-two further counties. The Ministry of Health warned those with heart and chest problems to 'stay indoors and rest

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as much as possible'. *The Times* reported on 4 December that the only aeroplane given permission to land at London airport came from the Blind Landing Experimental Unit at Bedford. The delighted pilot jumped at the chance to try out his new automatic landing equipment in optimum conditions. However, on 6 December Richard A. Prindle, an American medical researcher on a business trip to London's St Bartholomew's Hospital to discuss potential links between cancer and air pollution, was able to land at Gatwick. The moment Prindle's plane door opened the 'overwhelming' combination of sulphur and coal hit him and on reaching the city he was confronted by 'a continual metallic taste in the mouth and irritation of the nose, pharynx and eyes'. However much Prindle blew and coughed, he could not get rid of the taste as the 'misty gray-brown fog that was cold and made one cough' rolled though the streets edging its noxious way into every crevice.[2]

London was almost empty. It was as if some dreadful warning bell had sounded, telling people to remain inside. The Ministry of Health issued further advice to vulnerable citizens to wear home-made masks, and Prindle passed a few determined people with handkerchiefs tied across their mouths. As he watched them feel their way along street railings, they were brought to a complete standstill, lost in the smoggy environment, choking on engine fumes expelled by car-owners flouting the official advice not to drive. A very few, very ancient Londoners told *The Times* they still remembered first hand the old Dickensian fogs that had turned the ethereal violet hour a still deeper purple. The newspaper speculated that the Victorian novelist's 'master-hand might have exaggerated those famously dense

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nineteenth-century pea soupers known as the "London Particulars".' But this smog was no fiction. The sulphur levels were even higher than in December 1952, when an estimated 12,000 had died from smog-induced illnesses and a further 150,000 had been hospitalised. On 8 December the *Times* leader, headlined 'Poisoned Air', criticised the 'atmosphere of lethargy' and the 'failure to move promptly over the creation of effective smoke control areas' as outlined in the 1956 Clean Air Act. But everyone knew that the new smokeless fuel laws were often not observed and not monitored. As visibility in the city dropped to ten yards, four lives were lost in impossible driving conditions on motorways. The air smelled old and stale, sluggish and worn out. The smarting in Richard Prindle's eyes reminded him of peeling onions and he was disappointed to find that smoking cigarettes in such an environment had suddenly 'lost all its usual pleasure'. By the end of a smoggy four days, 106 people were dead and 235 had been admitted to hospital. A red warning was sent out by London's Emergency Bed Service that many more were going to be needed.

Up in Leeds sulphur dioxide levels also rose dramatically and in Glasgow pneumonia cases were three times higher than usual. In Salford the smoke pollution was 400 per cent above average for the time of year. Diana Reich, an undergraduate at Manchester University, already weak with chicken pox, felt the polluted air begin to settle on her chest. Within days she was diagnosed with pneumonia and rescued by her parents to recover at home. Concern over pollution had been spreading especially for those like Diana with a weakness that could be further compromised by the contaminated air.[3]

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Harold Evans, known to everyone as Harry, was the thirty-two-year-old crusading editor of Durham's *Northern Echo*. His father had been a train driver and his mother a machinist in the local Stockport cotton mill. In the spring of 1962 Harry had been 'taking the air' with his wife Enid, a biology teacher, and their newly arrived baby Kate on the village green of Hurworth-on-Tees, four miles from Darlington, when a mist swirled in, blotting out the bright sky. It was not, he explained, 'a mist of mellow fruitfulness' but instead an all-pervasive stink, reminiscent of decomposing fish and rotten eggs, so powerful it made Harry gag.[4] Heading straight home, Harry tried to console Enid. 'They'll do something about it,' he told her, in what he suspected was a hopeless effort to cheer up not only his wife but himself. He knew as he spoke that he actually had no idea who 'they' were and even if he had he was pretty certain 'they' wouldn't do anything at all.

Hugely popular with his writers, photographers, subeditors, copy boys and inky-fingered, shirtsleeved printers, Harry Evans never failed to praise those who landed a good story or an arresting photograph. His bow tie was adopted by several of the staff, mirroring Harry's enviable jauntiness of mood, his infectious energy and his likeability. But Harry had a private reason for being troubled by the dark skies and thick smoke of Darlington. Not only was he the father of two young children but he was also concerned about the health of his own father Frederick, who had spent long days shovelling coal on the footplates of steam engines. During the war, the sound of Frederick's debilitating cough had punctuated Harry's nights. The cough had never disappeared and Harry, conscious of its

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cause, was adamant that he would fight the pollution in the spirit that 'something *could* be done and something *should* be done and we weren't just the detritus of the war'.

He was not the only one who felt frustrated by a way of life that was 'all stuck' in an out-of-date world. And he was not the only one who felt the 1960s should be the decade to condemn 'capital punishment, unemployment, the ubiquitous lung-clogging coal slags, prejudice against sexual choice, against people whose skin was a different colour and above all against women'. Harry was increasingly conscious of 'the huge ferment brewing' within like-minded members of his generation. In his position as the editor of a local Northern newspaper, far from the green benches of Westminster, he pledged to himself and for the sake of his father and his wife and children that nothing was going to stand in the way of his campaign for change. Filling the columns of the *Echo* with articles about the poisonous fumes that belched from the exhaust of lorries and roared through northern town centres, he also wrote about the clouds of chemicals that billowed unchecked from dozens of surrounding factories. He printed highly personal stories, such as that of an exasperated housewife who arrived at a Teesside council meeting in the spring of 1962 carrying her polluted laundry as evidence of her case. In the morning she had hung her best white sheets out to dry; by mid afternoon they were black. He spoke to the men who cleaned out the tanks in the chemical factories all round Stockton and Durham. They confided that their wives wouldn't touch them, wouldn't go anywhere near them, let alone go to bed with them; the smell was so bad. The workforce had claimed 'marital rights compensation' but had not been awarded a penny.

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For a while, despite Harry's determination, nothing changed. The factories ignored him. The economists dismissed him as a 'fancy writer with fancy ideas'. 'Forget it,' they said. 'It is part of the PROGRESS of industry,' they said. But Harry was not to be rebuffed. What on earth did the 'economists know about black smoke while sitting in their comfortable offices down south'? Suspecting that the Imperial Chemical Industries' (ICI) plant at Billingham was the chief culprit for the 'Teesside smell', Harry had tried to bottle the mist in a test tube to send to London so that the Prime Minister could sniff the evidence. But the fragile glass tube broke before Harry could pack it off to Downing Street. And then the smell went away and Harry thought he had imagined the whole thing. But in December 1962, as the cities of Britain were cloaked in smog, the smell came back and this time it was worse than ever.

At lunch with Rowland Wright, the chairman of the local ICI office, Harry raised the stinking issue. 'But we don't have any pollution,' Wright told him. Any irregularities were caused by a fret coming off the North Sea, a national phenomenon that Harry should interpret as 'God's work'.[5] Harry assured Wright he had '*seen*' this smell. 'It exists,' he insisted. Back in the office Harry gathered his staff. He wanted one of the photographers to record the smell. 'He's gone off his bloody head again,' they said, as all but one of them laughed. That one, Ossie Stanford, came to see Harry a day later to tell him he had got the evidence. Ossie was holding two photographs. One showed a clear blue sky two miles outside Stockton-on-Tees; the other, taken fifteen minutes later in the city, showed

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how it was impossible to see a hand in front of your face. 'There's your smell,' Stanford announced.

Harry ran the two photographs facing each other as a double-page spread. The telephone rang. Rowland Wright, 'an extremely decent man', was on the other end. 'Yes, you've got us.'

Wright had discovered a small leak from a plant containing ammonia combined with methylamine. The mixture had produced a murky, fetid cloud capable of drifting up to a thousand miles. The mood in the *Northern Echo* was triumphant. ICI pledged to halt any leakage and replace the faulty worn-out plants. A new mobile laboratory ensured the smell was minimised and the workers were given a pay rise of 6d an hour to mitigate any lingering loss of satisfaction in the bedroom.

During the same week that the smog was causing such havoc in Britain, a major conference about pollution was taking place in Washington, DC.

A new book, *Silent Spring*, by American scientist Rachel Carson, was already one of the city's main talking points. In the book Carson described the unrestrained use of pesticides sweeping over rural America's fields, woods and farmlands, and how the presence of a 'grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed'. She spoke of how 'The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials'. Of particular concern were eight million hectares across nine Southern states, an area fifty times the size of Greater London, which had been sprayed by the American Department of the Environment with one of these chemicals. Pesticides were

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thought to be the culprits behind the alarming drop in numbers of the bald eagle, America's national bird.

Pesticides were indiscriminate in their destruction and Carson warned that the consequences of their continued use would be to 'still the song of the birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film and to linger on in the soil'. To some this seemed far-fetched in the extreme, but millions of Americans were traumatised by Carson's cry for action and by her warning that if the rate of chemical contamination of the planet continued, insect and birdsong, animal life, even the quieting of humanity, would result in a silent world. The male-run chemical industry was furious with Carson and contemptuous of her outspokenness. They tried to sue her publisher and publicly discredit her authority. They launched a campaign to attack her for over-reacting, for being unscientific and above all for being a single woman. A letter published in the *New Yorker* magazine said 'we can live without birds and animals but as the current market slump shows, we cannot live without business. As for insects, isn't it just like a woman to be scared to death of a few little bugs?! As long as we have the H-bomb everything will be OK.' And a former Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, wrote to Former President Eisenhower with the most deflating accusation he could think of when he charged Carson of being a likely communist. Nonetheless, the book became a bestseller. And a movement had begun.[6]

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Chapter Two

A television set can be as lethal as a gun

The persistence of the December smog kept people off the streets, out of the parks and away from the pubs. Television offered an alternative form of companionship for the entire family. Children like me were on close terms with Andy Pandy in his voluminous pyjamas, who lived in a picnic basket with his friend the ragdoll Looby Loo. We all knew Bill and Ben, the terracotta men who lived in flower pots and spoke in a satisfying adult-excluding code, and the bumptious conjurer-bear Sooty and his weedy little doggy companion Sweep. All these characters held a significant place in my early imaginative life. The programming on adult television was less sophisticated. The BBC's 1948 censorship guidelines had remained unaltered and unchallenged. They included an absolute ban on 'jokes about lavatories, effeminacy in men and immorality of any kind'. There was a ruling against suggestive material including

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honeymoon couples, fig leaves, ladies' underwear (e.g. 'winter draws on') and animal habits (e.g. 'rabbits'). And there was a total embargo on 'anything that can be construed as personal abuse of Government Ministers, Party Leaders or MPs'. But by November 1962 it had become clear that the nation's broadcaster needed to catch up with a new movement infiltrating every part of the media.

In 1960 a small group of like-minded undergraduates had set out to use satire to knock the complacency of the British establishment for six. Their influence was already licensing a growing exasperation with the unchallenged deference shown towards stuffy institutions like the Church, the monarchy and Westminster itself. And when satire emerged on television in the winter of 1962 it seemed to give voice to what so many had already been privately thinking.

Beyond the Fringe, an amateur theatrical review, had first appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1960, written by and starring four young wags: Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller (friends from Cambridge University) and Dudley Moore and Alan Bennett (friends from Oxford).

In early 1961, Richard Ingrams and Willie Rushton, who had both been at Shrewsbury School, joined forces with Christopher Booker, a contemporary of Peter Cook's at Cambridge, and cartoonists Gerald Scarfe and Ralph Steadman to launch *Private Eye*. The first issue of the fortnightly satirical magazine resembled a student publication, printed on cheap, yellow, absorbent paper such as one might find in a lavatory.

Although Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore both came from working-class backgrounds, some of the other satirists had grown

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up firmly rooted in the privileged world that they aimed to dismantle. No venerable or prejudiced institution or viewpoint was exempt from their merciless scrutiny. Their chief target was 'The Establishment', a term first used in 1955 by journalist Henry Fairlie to describe the golden circle of protection that surrounded the two spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. Peter Cook had also adopted the term to christen the club that he had opened in Soho's Greek Street in October 1961, where a medley of music, monologue and irreverence erupted from The Establishment's tiny stage. A beautifully framed, full-colour portrait of Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister, complete with wartime medals and old Etonian tie, was the tongue-in-cheek bonus gift for all those who signed up for a lifetime's membership.

Barry Humphries, a young Australian comedian recently arrived in London, explained how the 'character' of the club was dictated by its 'early Brutalist' design, the architectural style that was a reaction against artificiality and instead conveyed a look that was raw and unadorned.[1] Sean Kenny, the stage designer of the moment, created the club's interior, where performers would lounge against the long wooden bar at the front, chatting up what Humphries calls the 'satire groupies'. Most of these 'enthusiasts' were friends of Dudley Moore, 'pale–faced girls with fringes' who hung about with their 'pearlised lips and eyes like black darns'.[2] A typical evening at the club consisted of an hour-long show involving a varying cast of entertainers followed by dinner and then jazz. Some of the skits had attracted a favourable press. The *Sunday Pictorial* was a particular admirer and loved the parody on the Crucifixion in

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which the two thieves complained that Jesus Christ was getting preferential treatment because he had been given a taller cross. The newspaper praised The Establishment for 'serving some of the meatiest jokes in the business'.

But not everyone was amused. Many of the performers, including Barry Humphries, were Peter Cook's personal try-outs. Peter had first made friends with Barry in the Lamb and Flag pub in Covent Garden, where the cast of *Oliver*, in which Humphries was playing Mr Sowerberry the undertaker, would meet between matinees and evening performances. Although Barry found Cook to be 'languid to the point of undulation', he 'never diffused an aura of vanity'. But Cook was intrigued by Barry Humphries, who was perfecting his own dual stage persona. The shrill Mrs Everage (not yet a Dame), whose monologues revolved around her discovery of London, was inspired by the kind of socially ambitious, self-deluded Melbourne housewife that Barry had known since childhood. His second character, Sandy Stone, also Australian, was 'a desiccated old man of the suburbs'. Since his arrival in England in 1959, Barry had been living in straitened circumstances in Elgin Crescent, round the corner from the stalls of Portobello Road Market, where he had learned to rummage for lost threepences in the upholstery of ancient armchairs in order to afford the bus fare to theatrical auditions. Recently he had moved to the superior environment of Highgate and, after leaving a sticky job in the raspberry ripple department of an Acton ice-cream factory, had landed his part in *Oliver*. But the job at The Establishment offered him a chance to try out his own acts on a new and potentially lucrative market.

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Ned Sherrin was watching when Edna, Barry's 'slightly pathetic matron clad in a homespun dress', first took to The Establishment stage. John Betjeman, self-described 'poet and hack', was also among the handful of people in the audience. Onstage, Barry plugged on with what in retrospect he felt to be a 'woeful act', delivering the somewhat poignant monologue of Sandy Stone, all too aware of the critics 'crawling out half-way through the performance'. But the *Spectator* critic Bamber Gascoigne forced himself to stay, and his review grudgingly admired 'the care and accuracy of each tiny detail' of the monologue, although he found the overall effect 'distinctly soporific'. The *Daily Mail* described Barry, with his 'lank dirt-coloured lady hair', as like 'an emu in moult'. But that night, after Barry had wept, drunk some sherry and kicked himself for not including a single crowd-pleasing mention of Harold Macmillan, he cheered up when John Betjeman emerged from the shadows and pronounced his act to be 'sheer genius'. In Sandy, Betjeman had found echoes of Mr Pooter, George and Weedon Grossmith's classic comic character, but with Mr P. transported to Melbourne. And although Barry regarded the evening as 'a misjudged performance' from which he 'prefers to avert the memory', the wonderful legacy of his early wit was a lifetime friendship with John Betjeman. Peter Cook also remained steadfastly loyal to a grateful Barry, who was 'never reproached for producing The Establishment's only flop'. Instead, Peter encouraged him to join the illustrator Nicholas Garland in creating *Private Eye*'s Barry McKenzie comic strip, while Sandy Stone lived on in different form as the progenitor of Peter Cook's brilliant E. L. Wisty monologues.

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The taste for British satire was also crossing the Atlantic. As Barry Humphries made his debut on The Establishment stage, Peter Cook had been in New York promoting a production of *Beyond the Fringe*, which had been a continuous sell-out since the late autumn. The show had opened in Washington to what the London *Sunday Times* critic described as 'constant convulsive laughter', before moving to New York's Broadway. Unsure whether the British humour and irreverence would travel successfully, the cast was surprised and delighted when *Beyond the Fringe* was greeted with delirious reviews; such a reception meant that the President himself was expected in the audience imminently. Peter Cook was also in the city to launch the American branch of his Greek Street club. Veteran Establishment Club performer John Fortune was in New York preparing for the New Year's opening night when he was asked by the club manager whether he had an 'understandable' objection to working with Theodore Wilson, a black pianist who had been chosen for reasons of economy. Wilson, known as Teddy, who had recorded sessions with all the greats including Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, was one of the outstanding musicians of the day. Fortune felt he might as well have been asked if he 'minded whether the interior decorator is going to be someone called Picasso'.[3] Early on in the run, John Bird, another member of the cast, hit a nerve with an off-colour joke about sexual performance and how 'there are things you can't do when you've got a bad back'. President Kennedy's office rang the following day warning that 'if that joke is repeated the club will be closed down'. While the President's problems with his health, and specifically his back, were known to journalists if

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not always to the wider public, the President's prodigious love life was strictly off-limits. But it was impossible to stem Kennedy gossip and Bird did not, of course, heed any injunction to stay away from 'sensitive' topics: subjects like these were the satirist's life-blood.

A little late in catching the satirical wind, Grace Wyndham-Goldie, Head of BBC Current Affairs, and Hugh Greene, the new Director-General, set about creating a live, late-night television programme that would 'prick the pomposity of public figures'. Greene's plans for a shake-up show had in part been inspired by the German political cabaret of the Weimar Republic. But it was the enthusiasm of Ned Sherrin, producer of the BBC's live *Tonight* programme, that finally convinced the high-ups to make the radical move. Attempts to televise journalist Michael Frayn's satirical *Guardian* columns had not come off, but on 24 November 1962 the first episode of *That Was the Week That Was* had attracted an audience of four million. The programme was fronted and produced not by angry young men, but by 'Exasperated Young Men', their exasperation fuelled by 'Britain's recurring failures, by hypocrisy and the shabbiness of its politics'.[4]

TW3, as it quickly became known, had picked up with pinpoint antennae the emergent mood of 'ferment' that Harry Evans had also detected. The programme was fronted by David Frost, the son of a Methodist preacher from Kent, who dressed in an ill-fitting grey suit, his forward-brushed hairline arranged with precision. The appointment of the twenty-three-year-old former occasional cabaret artist who had performed in Cambridge University's Footlights was greeted with some uncertainty by

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his colleagues. Peter Cook accused him of being a 'bubonic plagiarist' for stealing Cook's own imitation of Harold Macmillan. Old Etonian actor Jonathan Cecil congratulated Frost on 'that wonderfully silly voice', only to discover that his distinctive nasal tone was not a put-on. But the presenter's name, as well as suiting the chilly season, carried with it the hint of cynicism associated with self-confident, well-informed, sharp-as-an-icicle youthfulness, and Ned Sherrin knew that in Frost he had found the best front man for the show.

In a television interview years later, Frost explained how the intention had been 'to be as free late on a Saturday night as people are in conversation and to be funny about important things rather than about mothers-in-law with frying pans on their heads'. *TW3* targeted, teased, mocked, exposed and satirised every twitch and blink and dearly held, privileged and bigoted idiosyncrasy of Britain's upper-class and professional institutions and because the programme came under 'current affairs' it could get away with a lot more than if it had been classified as 'entertainment'. No topic was taboo, even the monarchy, although when the live audience was invited to propose a 'subject' for coverage the ever-quick Frost reminded them that 'the Queen was not *a subject*'.[5]

In 'The Consumers' Guide to Religion' David Frost discussed whether the best all-round deal was to be found in Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism or the only non-secular religion, Communism, 'whose chief prophet appears to have no background in the industry at all'. The programme concluded that the best buy was the C of E, 'a jolly good little faith for a very moderate outlay'. The Bishop of Swansea

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