

## ***An Inspector Calls* and J B Priestley's political journey**

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- Themes: [Exploring identity](#), [20th-century theatre](#), [Power and conflict](#)
- Published: 7 Sep 2017

Alison Cullingford explores how J B Priestley's childhood in Bradford and experiences during two world wars shaped his socialist beliefs and fueled the anger of his play *An Inspector Calls*, a work that revolves around ideas of social responsibility and guilt.

[An Inspector Calls](#) poses troubling questions: how can people live together? To what extent are individuals responsible for others? Gareth Lloyd Evans described the play as 'perhaps the clearest expression made by Priestley of his belief that "no man is an island" – the theme is guilt and [social responsibility](#)'.<sup>[1]</sup> This article explores how and why [J B Priestley](#) came to this belief.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **'Substantial and heavily comfortable': Bradford before the War**

Priestley was born in 1894 in Bradford, in Yorkshire's West Riding. Bradford was an industrial town soon to become a city (in 1897), which had grown very quickly around the wool and dyeing industries. Young 'Jack' Priestley himself found work in the wool trade, as a junior clerk with Helm and Company, whose offices were in the (now demolished) Swan Arcade.

Jack found this work dull, but otherwise, for a youngster who enjoyed sport, landscape, literature, music, art and socialising, Bradford had much to offer. In his novel *Bright Day*, he looked back from the austerity of 1946 to a golden age of freedom, plenty, hospitality, conviviality, generosity, solid comfort and strong community, where, at Christmas,

brass bands played and choirs sang in the streets; you went not to one friend's house but to a dozen; acres of rich pound cake and mince-pies were washed down by cataracts of old beer and port, whisky and rum; the air was fragrant and thick with cigar smoke, as if the very mill chimneys had taken to puffing them.<sup>[3]</sup>

The bright young lad realised even then, though, that Bradford was not perfect. Working and living conditions had improved from the hellish days of the 1840s, when cholera and starvation were serious threats, but many still lived in poverty. Priestley's political views were heavily influenced by the West Riding's strong Nonconformist socialist traditions, embodied by the *Bradford Pioneer* newspaper and epitomised by his schoolteacher father, Jonathan.

Jack also noticed that the city's respectable folk could be smug, even hypocritical: 'badly-divided men' were pompously religious on Sundays, but on Saturday nights 'coarsely raffish',<sup>[4]</sup> ill-using young women. In *When We Are Married* (1937), Priestley made great comedy of turning the world of three respectable couples upside down when it emerged that they had not been legally married. *An Inspector Calls* also shattered the world of such a family, this time, however, revealing the true social and political consequences of the selfishness of the Birlings and others like them.

## The First World War: men thrown away for nothing

This world was itself shattered by the Great War, which broke out in August 1914. Twenty-year-old Jack, drawn to prove himself, went alone to Halifax to volunteer for the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment. He served in the British Army for five years, as a private and [lance-corporal](#), and, much later, as an officer with the Devonshires.

### Photograph of J B Priestley as a lance corporal, 1915



J B Priestley volunteered for the army in September 1914 at the age of 19. This photograph was taken in the summer of 1915 just before he was sent to the Western Front.

Despite being buried alive by a trench mortar explosion and gassed, Priestley survived relatively unscathed physically; but the experience of war changed him forever. [He bore witness to the horrors of the front](#) and his realisation of the implications of social inequalities that went far beyond what he had seen in his home city. As he wrote in his memoir, *Margin Released* (1962):

The British command specialised in throwing men away for nothing. The tradition of an officer class, defying both imagination and common sense, killed most of my friends as surely as if those cavalry generals had come out of the chateaux with polo mallets and beaten their brains out. Call this class prejudice if you like, so long as you remember ... that I went into that war without any such prejudice, free of any class feeling. No doubt I came out of it with a chip on my shoulder; a big, heavy chip, probably some friend's thigh-bone. <sup>[5]</sup>

Bradford could never be the same for Priestley after the war: so many of his friends had been killed, many of them in the 'Bradford Pals' battalions destroyed at the Battle of the Somme. After a venture into academia, taking his degree at the University of Cambridge, he decided to focus on writing and moved to London. The 1920s were years of hard work to make a

living. We have the sense that he had a kind of survivor's guilt: he had to make something of his life when so many better men had been killed.

His 1929 bestseller, *The Good Companions*, gave him the financial security to experiment with new literary forms. Priestley turned to drama with great success: he was to re-use the thriller form of his first effort, *Dangerous Corner*, in *An Inspector Calls*.

Celebrity also gave him a platform to share his increasing social concerns. In *English Journey* (1934), he described what he saw when travelling around England by motor coach: the remnants of old rural England, the shocking deprivation of the declining industrial cities and the glamour of the modern Americanised world of arterial roads and cinemas. Of the 'grimy desolation' of 'Rusty Lane' in West Bromwich, he said:

There ought to be no more of those lunches and dinners, at which political and financial and industrial gentlemen congratulate one another, until something is done about Rusty Lane and West Bromwich. While they exist in their present foul shape, it is idle to congratulate ourselves about anything.<sup>[6]</sup>

Priestley confronted his own wartime past at a regimental reunion in Bradford. He was outraged to learn that some of his fellow veterans were too poor to afford evening clothes to attend the event. They had given their health, their futures, everything they had, for a society that did not care. This righteous anger would be seen again in *An Inspector Calls*.

## **The staggering power of broadcasting**

During the Second World War, Priestley's fame rose to new heights, largely thanks to his [BBC radio broadcasts, the 'Postscripts'](#). In his first Postscript, of 5 June 1940, he helped create the narrative of the Dunkirk evacuation as mythic victory, paying tribute to the frivolous little steamers which saved so many lives. Throughout that momentous summer and early autumn, Priestley continued these weekly broadcasts, boosting morale through homely, often funny, reflections, musing, for example, on a pie which survived the bombing of Bradford and some happy ducks in a pond.

## **Photograph of J B Priestley at the BBC, 1940**

Priestley took an active part in a debate that went on in Britain throughout the war: was it appropriate to discuss what should happen afterwards, and if so, what should that be? He used the Postscripts to influence opinion on this issue, calling for a better, fairer society after this war was over. Carefully gauging what might be acceptable to broadcast, Priestley used everyday examples likely to be familiar to his listeners to make his points. His most outspoken Postscript, of 6 October 1940, uses the problem of the 'idle rich' occupying scarce hotel rooms from which bombed-out families could benefit to make the point that:

We are floundering between two stools. One of them is our old acquaintance labelled 'Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost', which can't really represent us, or why should young men, for whom you and I have done little or nothing, tear up and down the sky in their Spitfires to protect us, or why should our whole community pledge itself to fight until Europe is freed? The other stool ... has some lettering round it that hints that free men could combine, without losing what's essential to their free development, to see that each gives according to his ability, and receives according to his need.<sup>[7]</sup>

The wording of that second stool, which as Priestley reminded his listeners was the stuff of Christian sermons, is almost exactly Karl Marx's famous 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' which appeared in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

It is often stated that the then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had Priestley 'taken off the air' as a result of this sort of discussion, and for using the Postscripts as a platform for sharing his views on building a better world post-war. Certainly, Priestley's radio talks worried many politicians and journalists; the end of the Postscripts was, however, at least in part his own decision and the hand of the Prime Minister cannot be definitely traced in it.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **A new and vital democracy?**

Away from the airwaves, Priestley could be much more candid about his views. *Out of the People* (1941) came out of his role as chairman of the 1941 Committee, a group of writers and politicians whose statement 'We Must Win' called for a declaration of national 'ideas and objectives after the war'. In *Out of the People*, Priestley outlined the need for a 'new and vital democracy', an end to the waste and unfairness of social inequalities, a world in which everyone was responsible for others. The upheaval of war was shattering old systems and bringing people together to work for a common goal. Why not build on this, rather than going back to old failed systems as had happened after the previous war?

Priestley's Postscripts and other broadcasting and writing certainly played their part in encouraging people to think about the shape post-war society should take, and thus helped pave the way for Clement Attlee's Labour Party to sweep to power in the general election of July 1945. The Labour mandate was to create a 'welfare state' and a national health service, eliminating the shocking poverty observed by Priestley and so many other reporters.

However, the new government was not quite what Priestley had in mind. He disliked the centralised planning and bureaucracy that became synonymous with state socialism in the 20th century. Indeed, he stood unsuccessfully as an independent candidate in the 1945 election!

## **A Russian journey**

*An Inspector Calls* was born out of this tumultuous wartime debate about society, though Priestley had first thought of using a mysterious inspector years before. He had then mentioned the idea to a theatrical director, Michael MacOwen, who reminded him about it during the autumn of 1944. Priestley was enthused by the idea, found it in his 'little black notebook', and quickly wrote a playscript based around it.

No suitable theatre was available in London, so in May 1945 Priestley sent the script to his Russian translator to see if there was any interest (his work was already popular in the Soviet Union). *An Inspector Calls* was thus first seen in productions by the Kamerny Theatre and the Leningrad Theatre in Moscow, followed by a European tour ending at the Old Vic in London.

Priestley could not find a London theatre for *An Inspector calls* so he sent his script to Moscow. This is the original poster from the world premiere of the play at the Leningrad Comedy Theatre, Moscow, in 1945.

Priestley and his wife Jane later travelled to the USSR, as guests of the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries; he wrote about his experiences for the *Sunday Express*, his articles being reprinted in the pamphlet 'Russian Journey'. Priestley found the Russian people highly congenial and wrote sympathetically about a country that had recently been Britain's wartime ally. Later he was to realise more about the nature of the regime.

### ***Russian Journey* by J B Priestley, 1946**

The play embodies Priestley's reasons for calling for the 'new and vital democracy' by showing the personal consequences of a selfish society, and the future that would result if lessons were not learned about being 'responsible for each other': 'If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in blood and fire and anguish'. This future might be the Great War which Priestley's 1945 audiences knew was just two years ahead for his 1912 protagonists, or it might be a terrible revolution yet to come: his Russian audiences had seen just that when the frustrations of an unequal society had led to violent revolution and terrible suffering.

Such ambiguities Priestley leaves in the play, along with its origins in his own past and his deepest beliefs, allowing it to work for audiences worldwide ever since, despite its historical origins in a complacent 1912 and his bleak yet hopeful 1945.

### **Footnotes:**

[1] Gareth Lloyd-Evans, *J B Priestley: The Dramatist* (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 184.

[2] Parts of this piece are based on blog posts by the author, from the University of Bradford sites *100 Objects Bradford* and the Special Collections blog.

[3] J B Priestley, *Bright Day* (London: Heinemann, 1946), p. 81.

[4] J B Priestley, *Margin Released* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 63.

[5] J B Priestley, *Margin Released*, p. 137.

[6] J B Priestley, *English Journey* (London: Heinemann and Gollancz, 1934), p. 115.

[7] J B Priestley, *Postscripts* (London: Heinemann, 1940), p. 90.

[8] Alison Cullingford, *Postscript Sunday 20 October 1940*, <https://specialcollectionsbradford.wordpress.com/2010/10/20/postscript-sunday-20-october-1940/> Blog post summarising what is known about the end of the Postscripts and linking to further sources of information on this still controversial issue.