

The English at Home: Bill Brandt the Photographic Contriver

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Documentary photography as ‘factual’ authority?

In 1937 the Left Book Club published George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which was commercially successful¹⁾ but was considered by Victor Gollancz and the other editors of the Club to be flawed as a factual account of working life and a distortion of socialist politics. Gollancz therefore changed the book by writing a foreword and inserting some photographs into the text. This, without permission from Orwell, was meant to take advantage of the convention that photographs were straightforward documentary proof of what Orwell was alleging. In fact, 33 photographs were printed on 32 plates. Drawn from various photographic agencies, they showed slum conditions and aspects of mining in various parts of Britain. None of them showed places which Orwell had talked about, though they illustrate the activities he described. As John Taylor argues, this omission was probably ‘fortuitous’ rather than deliberate policy, given the speed at which the publishers were working.²⁾ Alternatively, it is possible that by the time the book was published, housing was a national issue and the images of various places in Britain were therefore included to address this point. In any case, the generalised notion of seeing-is-believing showed that ‘appalling housing conditions’ were spread across the country, giving Orwell’s remarks more general validity.³⁾ These photos were thought to make the book appear more factual. By the addition of the journalistic photographs, it was thought, there could be no doubt that the value of Orwell’s text was supposed to signify no more, but no less, than ‘accurate observer information’. Here the photojournalistic truth-values

1) Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980) 311.

2) John Taylor, *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist’s Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994) 167.

3) Ethel Mannin, *The New Leader* (12 March 1937) 5.

used to change Orwell's book were based on the myth of the eyewitness, that is, the photograph as a transparent window on the world. Gollancz and other editors thought the Orwell's text could not stand on its own.

In this paper I shall look at Bill Brandt, the photographic contriver. When realism was a privileged discourse in documentary photography, Brandt made the greatest use of the power of photography-as-authenticity, in order to represent the social structure in a visually effective way. His devices remained unnoticed at the time, and his approach was accepted as that of a documentarist within the documentary trend in the 1930s. With the eye of the foreigner and also that of an anthropologist, Brandt succeeded in exposing Britain as a class-divided country; as an uninvolved outsider, he was able to present the British social problem objectively and sometimes artistically, without any of the dilemmas which some English-born photographers such as Humphrey Spender had to face. This was because of Brandt's powers as an artist, rather than because the British allowed him to do so. I want to call attention especially to his devices, such as contriving, directing and constructing the image of 'the English' in his books and magazine photographs. Through Brandt's photographs we will also see some social considerations arising in the 1930-40s. From the controversy over Pratt's photostory we will see the social concern with democracy; and from Bournville's commissioned work we will observe the social desire to enlarge local matters to a national level so as to share a social problem with the rest of the nation.

[1] **Eyes of a foreigner/ anthropologist**

Brandt was a 'threshold figure', Taylor argues, because unlike Spender, who was from the English upper-middle class, he was a foreigner.⁴⁾ Examination of his family background and his entry into photojournalism reveals why he was interested in British society, and why he approached this subject as he did. Brandt was born in 1904, in Hamburg. As the son of an English father and a German mother, he was persecuted by German schoolmates throughout the First World War because of his Englishness. From this situation he began to long for an idealised 'Britain'. His homeland seemed unearthly, a perception learned from images. He took up photography around 1927 and for a short time in 1929 worked as a pupil in the

4) Taylor, *A Dream of England* 173.

studio of Man Ray in Paris. Although he received little attention and less instruction during this time, he became familiar with the nascent approaches to photography as a medium-specific form of art. Brandt notes later, '[A]lready two trends were emerging: the poetic school, of which Man Ray and Edward Weston were the leaders, and the documentary moment-of-truth school. I was attracted to both, but when I returned to England in 1931, and for over ten years thereafter, I concentrated entirely on documentary work'.⁵⁾

For various reasons, possibly because he was artistically attracted to the contrasts of English society, or possibly because of his father's English background, Brandt adopted England as his new home. He settled in England in 1931 and began work as a freelance photographer supplying images for a range of publications. His first book, *The English at Home* was published in 1936. In 1934 Brandt's pictures began to appear in *Weekly Illustrated* and in 1937 in *Lilliput*, and later he started to provide photographs for *Picture Post*. Throughout this period, Brandt devoted himself to photography as journalism, and faithfully documented the state of English society which was 'familiar and yet strange' for him.⁶⁾ Undoubtedly Brandt's mixed heritage later influenced his photography. In 1936, in the introduction to *The English at Home*, Raymond Mortimer wrote of Brandt's advantages. He argued that Brandt's eyes were foreign and they belonged to an artist.⁷⁾ Unlike any English traveller, Brandt saw England afresh, because though he was 'British by birth . . . he has spent most of his life abroad, and has thus been able to pick out what makes this country different from others'.⁸⁾ Brandt observed strangers from a position unoccupied by the English; he was neither truly inside nor outside. Mortimer went on to say that Brandt was an 'anthropologist [who] seems to have wandered about England with the detached curiosity of a man investigating the customs of some remote and unfamiliar tribe'.⁹⁾

The 1930s cult of commonness and the myths of English identity on which it was

5) Bill Brandt 'Bill Brandt' [Statement], *Album 2* (1970) 46-7.

6) Brandt, *Camera in London* (London: Focal Press, 1948) 11.

7) Raymond Mortimer, 'Introduction', *The English at Home*, by Bill Brandt (London: Batsford, 1936) 6.

8) Mortimer, 'Introduction' 4.

9) Mortimer, 'Introduction' 4. For further discussion of Bill Brandt's anthropological approach, see Patrick Roegiers, 'Bill Brandt and the England of the 1930s' *CIMAISE 37* (Nov-Dec 1990) 41.

based, were consciously reconstructed by outsiders such as Brandt. Stefan Lorant, the chief editor of *Weekly Illustrated*, *Lilliput* and *Picture Post* was a Hungarian Jew, and many of his magazine's chief photographers were German emigrants. Many others involved in the documentary project were English nationals who felt like outsiders in their own country, or who had actually lived for many years in foreign countries, such as Spender, Orwell and Tom Harrison, the founder of Mass-Observation, or else critics whose approach was informed by the perspective of the outsider looking in, as in the popular anthropological approach. These outsiders were the most sensitive to British national identity and the most successful in mobilising its cultural myths. For instance, Orwell describes a scene in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in which he imagines an idealised working-class home with father reading his newspaper, mother in her rocking-chair, the children playing on the floor, and the dog rolling by the fire; but the completeness of such a scene, he says, can only be seen by those who are not sufficiently of this culture to be able to stand back and view in from the outside. Perhaps because most of the people involved with documentary were not sufficiently of this culture of the 'ordinary English people', they, too, could best display it as an idealised unity from the outsider's point of view.

[2] Representing working-class lives

(1) Magazine works

During the 1930s, Brandt worked for the magazine industry, and began to contribute to *Weekly Illustrated*, *Lilliput* and to *Picture Post*. In *Lilliput* and *Picture Post*, in particular, Lorant largely allowed him to formulate his own assignments, and this gave him wide latitude in his choice of subjects. Particularly striking to Brandt's foreign eyes was the profound inequality of English society during the inter-war economic depression. In *Weekly Illustrated*, the series 'Underground Lives' was regarded as 'the most thorough of the magazine's documentaries'; it was a series of photographs taken in the Rhondda Valley in Wales by Brandt, who spent several days living among miners. The series depicted home life in the mining communities and the lives and recreations of children. The article 'Pull down the slums' represents, for example, a grating as the 'front window' of a basement and a view down into backyards, both of which Brandt took as types of *exposé* photography (Figure 1).¹⁰⁾ One of the photographs in this article was used to illustrate the text of Orwell's *The*



Figure 1: *Weekly Illustrated*, 'Pull down the Slums!', November 17, 1934: 14-15.

Road to Wigan Pier.¹¹⁾ In the articles on the 'Mid-Rhondda' region, 'Children of the coalfields' and 'Week-end in a mining village', Brandt's iconography recalled the fire-side bath, a miner's living room, a dog foraging in a back-to-back street and a pub seen from behind the bar.¹²⁾ As regards the work in *Lilliput*, Brandt's photographs such as 'The Tick-Tack Men'¹³⁾ and 'Children in England'¹⁴⁾ were used for anti-Nazi propaganda (Figure 2).¹⁵⁾ Besides these, Brandt frequently offered rich-poor

10) *Weekly Illustrated* (November 17, 1934) 14-16. Cf. 'Enough of all This', *Picture Post* (April 1, 1939) 54-57; Brandt's images of children in London's East End illustrate an article about poverty and rent strikes.

11) The photographers of the 33 photographs in *The Road to Wigan Pier* remain unknown so far.

12) *Weekly Illustrated* (January 11, 1936) 13-15, (January 18, 1936) 2-4 and (February 8, 1936) 17-19.

13) *Lilliput* (March 1938) 244.

14) *Lilliput* (February 1939) 146.

15) 'The Tic-Tac Men', *Lilliput* (March 1938) 244; this is given as a Keystone picture, and



Figure 2: *Lilliput*, ‘The Tic-Tac Men’ and ‘The Chancellor of Germany’, March 1938: 244–245.

juxtapositions in his photographs such as ‘Poor man’s child’ in which a smeared child in front of a cake-making spread at a table is put opposite a Keystone picture and ‘Unchanging London’ in which his photographs were featured side by side with Gustave Doré’s engravings (discussed below).¹⁶⁾ While Brandt offers photographs of working-class lives and slum dwellers as he did in *Weekly Illustrated* and *Lilliput*, his major articles for *Picture Post* in 1939 illustrated days in the lives of working women, such as an artist’s model, a waitress, a barmaid (Alice of ‘The Crooked Billet’, a pub near Tower Bridge) and a parlourmaid (Pratt, who worked for the older Brandts in London) (discussed more fully below).

(2) Photographs constructed by text, text constructed by photographs

For the ‘foreigner’ Brandt, Britain’s image had been constructed by text: literary

is placed opposite Hitler as ‘The Chancellor of Germany’. ‘Children in England’, *Lilliput* (February 1939) 146; schoolgirls at desks, confronting ‘Children in Germany’, giving the Nazi salute.

16) *Lilliput* (September 1939) 299.

works and *Cherry Stones*, a child's picture book. Brandt admitted in 1980s that 'It was my childhood book(s) that inspired me to be a photographer'.¹⁷⁾ There is an episode which shows how the writings of Shakespeare, the Brontës, and Lewis Carroll were important for the construction of his images of Britain. Later in the 1950s he visited Italy and left after only a short stay. He had 'failed to recognize it', since he hadn't read the literature of the country.¹⁸⁾ In 1937 he visited the industrial north of England for the first time, having been moved by reading J.B. Priestley's *English Journey*. Although he rarely photographed without an assignment, he made a report of the economic and social situation in the major industrial cities of the Midlands and Tyneside, as well as Newcastle, Sheffield, Halifax and Jarrow. Again, his theme was social inequality, with an emphasis on the living conditions of working-class people. For instance, 'A Sheffield Back-yard' (1937), 'Back Street in Jarrow, Tyneside' (1937), 'Coal-miner's Bath, Chester le Street, Durham' (1937), 'East Durham Coal-Miner Just Home from the Pit' (1937), and 'Coal-searcher Going Home to Jarrow' (1937) reflect Brandt's interest in the lives of the working class (Figures 3-1 to 3-3). What we should note is that, to borrow Warburton's phrase, although in the late 1930s Brandt's photographs of poverty and of social contrasts in these magazine works were frequently assumed to carry a socialist message, he remained aloof from the left-wing concerns of the day.¹⁹⁾ It was, for the most part, the visual contrast between rich and poor that interested him.

And a photograph of someone far from the North of England, 'Young Housewife in Bethnal Green' (1935) was another of Brandt's important photographs of this period, which inspired Orwell to write one very important scene in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Figure 3-4). This photograph depicts a young working-class woman kneeling to wash the doorstep of a house in Bethnal Green, East End, London. Valentine Cunningham and Keith Williams suggested that Orwell's 'snapshot' of the young woman clearing the waste-pipe may have been inspired by this woman's gaze.²⁰⁾

17) David Mellor, 'Brandt's Phantasms', *Bill Brandt: Behind the Camera*, Photographs 1928-1983, by Bill Brandt (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985) 81.

18) Mellor, 'Brandt's Phantasms' 80.

19) Nigel Warburton, 'The Career', *Brandt: The Photography of Bill Brandt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999) 292.

20) Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* 14-15. For the relationship with Brandt's photographs, see Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,



Figure 3-1: 'A Sheffield Back-Yard', 1937.



Figure 3-2: 'Back Street in Jarrow, Tyneside', 1937.



Figure 3-3: 'East Durham Coal-Miner Just Home from the Pit', 1937.



Figure 3-4: 'Young Housewife in Bethnal Green', 1935.

1988) 239-240: Keith Williams, 'Post/ Modern Documentary: Orwell, Agee and the New Reportage', *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, eds., Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997) 179. Both of them, however, have misunderstood *The English at Home* as the source of this photograph.

Though their suggestion is not based upon much evidence, we can see at least the relationship between literary documentary and photo-journalism in the 1930s. In this account, not only does Brandt's photograph support the text (Orwell's *Wigan Pier*), but the text (Priestley's *English Journey*) also supports his photography.

[3] Posing or directing?

(1) Contriving the 'fact'

Brandt's method was deliberate, his subject and compositions often carefully planned. According to Mark Howarth-Booth, sometimes he even made 'preparatory drawings'.²¹⁾ In his introduction to *English at Home*, Mortimer claimed that the real divide between rich and poor was evident in Brandt's photographs, which were 'not of actors in realistic stage-sets, but of people as they are in their real and unescapable surroundings'.²²⁾ He claimed that the book was mixing two other levels of signification: realism, which was reserved for the anthropological study of the working class; and theatre, which provided the stage-sets for many of the scenes of upper- or middle-class life used to contrast with the squalor of the slums. As David Mellor makes clear, 'a very great number—perhaps the majority—of the photographs are posed by his English family . . . staging and restaging residual memories and childhood fantasies under his direction of their family dramatics'.²³⁾ In addition, Brandt used friends and members of his family as 'social actors' to stage scenes in rooms or in the night-time streets of the East End of London (See the 'Changing Britain' photo in *Lilliput*). Mortimer may never have known the extent of Brandt's staging. In any case, he could never have openly explored it in the climate of the period, when so much store was set by the documentary truth-value of photography. Realism was a privileged discourse in documentary; but the myth of 'truth' in photography depended on realism or eyewitness (historical truth) rather than interior states or fiction (imaginative truth). Mortimer claimed that *The English at Home* was realistic because this enhanced its status as anthropology.

Here I want to discuss the possibility that his photographs were sometimes faked

21) Howarth-Booth, 'Introduction', *Bill Brandt: Behind the Camera, Photographs 1928-1983*, by Bill Brandt (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985) 26.

22) Mortimer, 'Introduction' 7.

23) Mellor, 'Brandt's Phantasms' 83.

and the significance if this was the case, giving three examples. The first is 'Coal-searcher returning home', one of Brandt's representative images. This was taken in 1936 but first appeared in *Picture Post* in 1947.²⁴⁾ The title of this photograph is: 'THE WASTED YEARS: THE MAN WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN HEWING COAL IN TONS, SCRATCHES FOR OUNCES ON THE SLAG HEAPS'. The caption reads; 'An unemployed Durham miner on his way home in 1936 after a day's search for coal to heat his home. He was one of an army of 1,880,000 unemployed. One miner in five was out of work. They were part of the price we paid for failing to modernize our industries and falling back on restriction, wage-cutting, price-fixing. We are paying another part of the price today in empty grates and half-time factories'.²⁵⁾ Brandt himself mentioned to this image in 1948; '[L]eaning over his bicycle; the man's clothes were black and the grass by the side of the path was black, as it is near pitheads. The scene was dreary in the extreme, yet moving by its very atmosphere of drabness. A dark print of the photograph added to the effect of darkness associated with the miner's life'.²⁶⁾ And later in 1970; 'My most successful picture of the series [from the industrial north], probably because it was symbolical of this time of mass unemployment, was a loose-coal searcher in East Durham, going home in the evening. He was pushing a bicycle along a footpath through a desolate waste-land between Hebburn and Jarrow. Loaded on the crossbar was a sack of small coal, all that he had found after a day's search on the slag-heaps'.²⁷⁾ But, if we happen to discover that this photograph was deliberately contrived by the photographer himself, his statements come to sound differently; let us compare it with the next photograph, of a man with a wheelbarrow. This was taken by Vadas, a Hungarian photographer, and appeared in *Lilliput* in October 1938 under the title 'The World is Beautiful: The Evening Road'.²⁸⁾ Eight East European village idylls taken by Vadas, including this photograph. It appeared in 1938 in *Lilliput* magazine, but actually was taken and available from news photo agencies in the early 1930s. As Warburton acutely points out, it is likely that Brandt had seen this photo before he took the famous coal

24) *Picture Post* (April 19, 1947) 15.

25) *Picture Post* (April 19, 1947) 15.

26) Brandt, 'A Photographer's London', *Camera in London* (London: Focal Press, 1948) 14.

27) Brandt, 'Bill Brandt' [Statement] 46-7.

28) 'The World is Beautiful: The Evening Road', *Lilliput* (October 1938).



Figure 4-1: 'Northumbrian Miner at His Evening Meal', 1937.



Figure 4-2: 'West End Shop Basement Shelter', November 7, 1940.

searcher photograph; that is, we cannot discount the possibility of Vadas' photo as a prototype for Brandt's coal searcher. Brandt possibly constructed this image in order to emphasise the severe living conditions of the Northern working class.

We can see two other examples of his faking. In the portrait of a miner at home and eating (Figure 4-1), the miner is at his dinner with his face unwashed, again from the 'Journey North' photographs. It all rings true, the details of the room, the unceremonious approach. There is just one fatal fault in the realism; in his effort to get the picture of the miner at home, Brandt has missed the one fact – that a miner would never sit down to his meal without scrubbing off first.²⁹⁾ As the third example, let us see his Blitz photos (Figure 4-2). Exempted from military service for health reasons, Brandt was assigned by the Home Office to show how Londoners reacted and protected themselves during the Blitz in Nov-Dec 1940. In the corridors of the Underground, transformed into shelters, he observed the daily life of refugees who played cards or chess, drank tea, read and sleepily dressed. In fear, proximity and sleep, all are equal; there are no more social differences.³⁰⁾ Here again, however,

29) As for this point, see Caroline Tisdal, 'The Camera's Ministry of Truth', *Guardian* (March 19, 1975) 12.

30) During the Second World War, Brandt also took photographs of the most important

Brandt contrived the images, even for this Government-commissioned work. According to Michael Seaborne, people would not at that time have brought their own quilts into the shelters and slept with their heads in the direction of the trains, and furthermore they would not have slept in such a position that others would have had to walk over their heads.³¹⁾ The reason for such photographs must have been Brandt's wish to add to the authenticity of his report, of emphasising the exceptional nature of life in the underground shelter or of the visual effectiveness of the scene as art.

(2) Typical figures in the juxtapositional layouts

From his magazine photographs, Brandt produced two collections during the 1930s: *The English at Home* in 1936 and *A Night in London* in 1938. Throughout these books he emphasised the contrasts between rich and poor. For instance, *The English at Home's* covers contrast, on the front, elite spectators on Royal Hunt Cup Day at Ascot with, on the back, a miner's family in wretched circumstances (Figure 5). As for another example of juxtaposing images of Mayfair homes and the East End, Brandt comments, 'The extreme social contrast, during those years before the war, was, visually, very inspiring for me.'³²⁾ In addition to the device of juxtaposition, according to Mellor, Brandt relied on 'long-coined textual and figural stereotypes from the archives of British culture', such as the prostitutes, theatre-goers, night-workers and policemen, which 'were well sedimented in the British imagination as stock figures', a vast discourse of 'London types' stretching back into Victorian and Edwardian storytelling.³³⁾ In *The English at Home* 'the two Englands gaze[d] at each other' in contrasts too tendentious for the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* who complained that 'Mr Brandt has hammered his point till it is in danger of being

buildings in the capital in case they were destroyed, commissioned by the archives of the Ministry of the Interior and the 'National Buildings Records'. Published in *Picture Post*, this report punctuates Brandt's interest in social documentary.

31) Interview with the author on 3rd November 2002. Besides these faked photographs, Brandt took some artistically photographed pictures of the shelters, i. e. the photos emphasised only on a spot on the wall, not persons.

32) Brandt, 'Bill Brandt' [Statement] 46-7.

33) Mellor, 'Brandt's Phantasms' 82. Roegiers also discusses the point that Brandt's photographs were based on representations of types and of stereotypes. See Roegiers, 'Bill Brandt and the England of the 1930s' 37.

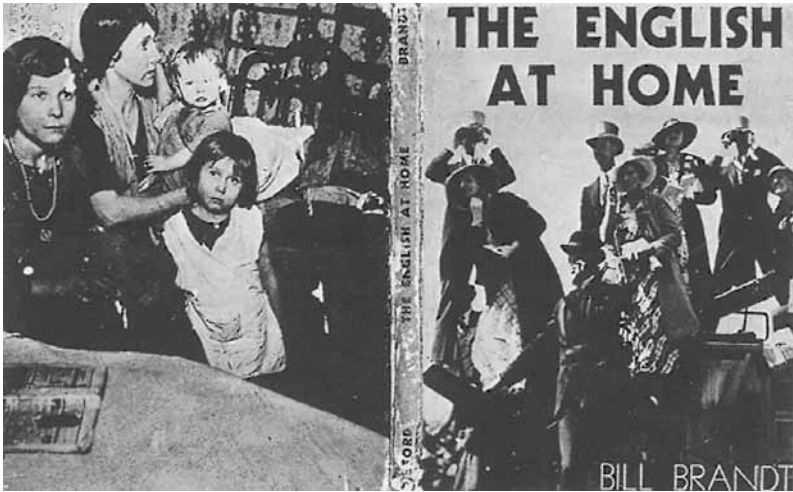


Figure 5: Front and back covers of *The English at Home*, 1936.



Figure 6-1 to 6-3: *Picture Post*, 'The Perfect Parlourmaid', July 29, 1939: 43-47.



6.30 a.m. **The Parliament's First Bath**

The first thing to be done in the morning is to wash the members of the House of Commons. The water is heated in a large boiler in the kitchen and is then poured into a large bath in the dining room.



7.55 a.m. **The House Member's Bath**

The members of the House of Commons are given a second bath in the dining room. The water is heated in a large boiler in the kitchen and is then poured into a large bath in the dining room.



9.0 a.m. **The House is Clean the Floor**

The floor of the House of Commons is cleaned by the women of the House. The floor is made of stone and is polished with a special polish.



Arranging the "Family" Breakfast

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



Cleaning the Dining Room Windows

The windows of the dining room are cleaned by the women of the House. The windows are made of glass and are polished with a special polish.

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



Supervising the Housemaids

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



Setting the Common Table

The common table is set by the women of the House. The table is made of wood and is covered with a white cloth.

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



10.0 a.m. **The House the Day of the Morning Table**

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



12.00 noon **The President at the Members' Lunch**

The President of the House of Commons is given a lunch by the members of the House. The lunch is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



12.50 p.m. **The House the Day of a Dinner**

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



1.30 p.m. **The House of Commons**

The members of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



3.30 p.m. **The House the Dining Table**

The dining table is set by the women of the House. The table is made of wood and is covered with a white cloth.



4.0 p.m. **The House a Lunch Room**

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



Cleaning the Floor

The floor of the House of Commons is cleaned by the women of the House. The floor is made of stone and is polished with a special polish.



Trying the Members of

The members of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.

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Lighting for the Dining Room

The dining room is lit by the women of the House. The lights are made of glass and are polished with a special polish.



See that the House is Light

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.

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5.0 p.m. **The House a Lunch Room**

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.



6.0 p.m. **Setting the House of the House for Dinner**

The dining table is set by the women of the House. The table is made of wood and is covered with a white cloth.



8.0 p.m. **The End of a Parliament's Day**

The women of the House of Commons are given a family breakfast in the dining room. The breakfast is prepared by the women of the House and is served to the members of the House.

blunted'.³⁴⁾ Brandt used the genre of a collection of types and stereotypes of the nation and represented it by critical juxtapositions, as we see in the rich/ poor contrast in the pairing of wealthy diners and a tramp searching through the restaurant's dustbins while a waiter looks on, or in the rich/ rich pairing of golf and a garden party.

Significant as Brandt's typical figure is Pratt, the head-parlourmaid in the house of Brandt's uncle and aunt. She appears in both books and is Brandt's favourite subject, representing a quintessential Englishness with her stern reserve and acute sense of propriety. *Picture Post's* series of twenty-one images also followed her from dawn to dusk in July 1939 (Figures 6-1 to 6-3).³⁵⁾ 'Pratt' photo-story when it was published aroused controversy among the readers for the next two weeks.³⁶⁾ Some of the letters from ex-waitresses and staff in active service, for instance, indicated not a few incorrect details in the story; no Head Servant in those days would consider sleeping in an attic; no servant would dream of walking on a bathmat and so on. Here we find the trace of Brandt's contriving the image again. Among the letters were those expressing hatred for the existing British class system, with words such as 'loathsome', 'boil', 'indignation', 'disgusted', 'the complete dictator' and 'tyranny'. One letter with the headline 'Is This Democracy?' says ' . . . Although the subject of the perfect parlourmaid is pretty loathsome, that of a human being having to wait and serve on others, the captions underneath make one boil. "Under-servants must not speak to upper-servants unless they are spoken to . . . But Pratt is free to give an encouraging word to a good housemaid." How condescending of her, in fact the complete dictator! After looking at the photograph of Pratt carving the joint, and the faces of the undermaids, I wonder if it is a major or minor breach of discipline to smile at thinking that we live in a democratic country. It is this petty class distinction which makes English life under the surface a dog fight . . .'³⁷⁾ At the same time as these readers' letters in *Picture Post* show us the contemporary atmosphere of or longing for 'democracy', we can recognise Brandt's contriving devices in the Pratt photographs. More noteworthy is that besides taking posed pictures of Pratt, the other figures seen in this series are Brandt's relatives; most of the photographs are of his posed English

34) *Times Literary Supplement* (November 1936) 8.

35) *Picture Post* (July 29, 1939) 43-47.

36) *Picture Post* (August 12, 1939) 63; *Picture Post* (August 19, 1939) 66.

37) *Picture Post* (August 12, 1939) 63.

family: his father, brother, sister-in-law, nieces and his wife.

(3) Commissioned project for Bournville Village Trust

For another commissioned project, Brandt made two visits to Birmingham in 1939 and 1943, working on behalf of the Bournville Village Trust. Between 1939 and 1943 the Cadbury family and the Bournville Village Trust commissioned him to produce and supply a series of photographs documenting housing in Birmingham and London. Some, but not all, were used in their publications such as *When We Build Again* (1941) and *Changing Britain: The Industrial Revolution 1750-19...?* (1943). The prints in the Bournville Village Trust Album are laid out in six groupings. Three of the groups follow a distinct narrative sequence, taking the cycle from waking to sleeping as their theme – a device often used by Lorant and Brandt in *Picture Post* photo-stories in the 1930s. The juxtaposition and contrast of individuals as stereotypes or groups of photographs was also a device with which Brandt was familiar and had used both in his magazine work and in *The English at Home*. Using such devices, Brandt's photographs document and contrast living conditions in a range of housing types—from back-to-back slums built in the nineteenth century to 'modern' municipal estates built in the 1930s. He 'takes a series of key indicators—light, ventilation, living and sleeping quarters, personal hygiene, the preparation and consumption of food, play areas for children, gardens, and the proximity of shops and work—to make these contrasts' (Figure 7).³⁸⁾

There is no clear explanation why photographs of London were included in the Bournville album. Brandt often preferred to use locations close to his home in Camden Hill, north London, for his photographs and this seems to be a case in point. It is said that whenever he took 'his camera away from London', it was 'because he had been commissioned to do so'. By the time the book *When We Build Again* was finished, housing was a national issue. Like the first edition of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the Bournville commission may have included images from elsewhere in Britain to draw attention to this point. The incorporation of the London photographs may have been prompted by a feature entitled 'Unchanging London' published in *Lilliput*, May 1939 (Figure 8).³⁹⁾ This juxtaposed nine of Brandt's photographs and

38) *Rebuilding the Homefront* (Birmingham: exhibition pamphlet, 1995) 5.

39) Two of the photographs, of a ramshackle grandstand at Epsom and of a London coffee



Figure 7: Commissioned works for Bournville Village Trust, 1939–1941.

seven engravings by Gustave Doré made in the 1870s.⁴⁰⁾ One of these engravings was used in a similar juxtaposition with a photograph by Brandt in *Changing Britain: The*

stall, were previously unpublished.

40) *Lilliput* (May 1939) 500.



Figure 8: *Lilliput*, 'Unchanging London', May 1939: 488-489.

*Industrial Revolution 1750-19...?*⁴¹⁾

This paper has investigated Bill Brandt's point of departure and the devices he used, which contributed to the nascent documentary school in the 1930s. Using the myth of 'truth' in photography depended on realism or eyewitnessing, but Brandt represented 'the documentary tendency of the decade' in the process of documenting the class system. The political significance of this outsiders' view lies in the way in which it revises and reappropriates the notion of England and the English. In this revision, the English are neither the aristocrats nor the working class, but the nameless multitudes in between. In myths which documentary realism developed, England is not the Empire, but is to be found, more locally, in one's own backyard; the English work hard, play hard, love their homes and their families and care for their own. This self-portrait, or family album of England tried to encourage the ideals of social cooperation by visually presenting these ideals as part of the natural national

41) *Rebuilding the Homefront* 9.

characteristics.

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