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## NORTHWEST LONDON BLUES

Last time I was in Willesden Green I took my daughter to visit my mother. The sun was out. We wandered down Brondesbury Park toward the high road. The “French Market” was on, which is a slightly improbable market of French things sold in the concrete space between the pretty turreted remnants of Willesden Library (1894) and the brutal red-brick beached cruise ship known as Willesden Green Library Centre (1989), a substantial local landmark that racks up nearly five hundred thousand visits a year. We walked in the sun down the urban street to the concrete space—to market. This wasn’t like walking a shady country lane in a quaint market town ending up in a perfectly preserved eighteenth-century square. It was not even like going to one of these farmers’ markets that have sprung up all over London at the crossroads where personal wealth meets a strong interest in artisanal cheeses.

But it was still very nice. Willesden French Market sells cheap bags. It sells CDs of old-time jazz and rock and roll. It sells umbrellas and artificial flowers. It sells ornaments and knickknacks and doodahs, which are not always obviously French in theme or nature. It sells water pistols. It sells French breads and pastries for not much more than you’d pay for the baked goods in Greggs down Kilburn High Road. It sells cheese, but of the decently priced and easily recognizable kind—Brie, goat’s, blue—as if the market has traveled

unchanged across the Channel from some run-down urban suburb of Paris. Which it may have done for all I know. The key thing about Willesden's French Market is that it accentuates and celebrates this concrete space in front of Willesden Green Library Centre, which is at all times a meeting place, though never quite so much as it is on market day. Everybody's just standing around, talking, buying or not buying cheese, as the mood takes them. It's really pleasant. You could almost forget Willesden High Road was ten yards away. This matters. When you're standing in the market you're not going to work, you're not going to school, you're not waiting for a bus. You're not heading for the Tube or shopping for necessities. You're not on the high road where all these activities take place. You're just a little bit off it, hanging out, in an open-air urban area, which is what these urban high streets have specifically evolved to stop people from doing.

Everybody knows that if people hang around for any length of time in an urban area without purpose they are likely to become "antisocial." And indeed there were four homeless drunks sitting on one of the library's strange architectural protrusions, drinking Special Brew. Perhaps in a village they would be sitting under a tree, or have already been driven from the area by a farmer with a pitchfork. I do not claim to know what happens in villages. But here in Willesden they were sitting on their ledge and the rest of us were congregating for no useful purpose in the unlovely concrete space, simply standing around in the sunshine, like some kind of community. From this vantage point we could look ahead to the turrets, or left to the Victorian police station (1865), or right to the half-ghostly façade of the Spotted Dog (1893).

We could have a minimal sense of continuity with what came before. Not so much as the people of Hampstead must have, to be

sure, or the folk who live in pretty market towns all over the country, but here and there in Willesden the past lingers on. We're glad that it does. Which is not to say that we are overly nostalgic about architecture (look at the library!) but we find it pleasant to remember that we have as much right to a local history as anyone, even if many of us arrived here only recently and from every corner of the globe.

On market day we permit ourselves the feeling that our neighborhood, for all its catholic mix of people and architecture, remains a place of some beauty that deserves minimal preservation and care. It's a nice day out, is my point. Still, there's only so long a toddler will stand around watching her grandmother greet all the many people in Willesden her grandmother knows. My daughter and I took a turn. You can't really take a turn in the high road so we went backward, into the library center. Necessarily backward in time, though I didn't—couldn't—bore my daughter with my memories: she is still young and below nostalgia's reach. Instead I will bore you. Studied in there, at that desk. Met a boy over there, where the phone boxes used to be. Went, with school friends, in there, to see *The Piano* and *Schindler's List* (cinema now defunct), and afterward we went in there, for coffee (café now defunct), and had an actual argument about art, an early inkling that there might be a difference between a film with good intentions and a good film.

Meanwhile my daughter is running madly through the center's esplanade, with another toddler who has the same idea. And then she reverses direction and heads straight for Willesden Bookshop, an independent shop that rents space from the council and provides—no matter what Brent Council may claim—an essential local service. It is run by Helen. Helen is an essential local person. I would characterize her essentialness in the following way: "Giving the people what they didn't know they wanted." Important category.

Different from the concept popularized by Mr. Murdoch: "Giving the people what they want." Everyone is by now familiar with the Dirty Digger's version of the social good—we've had thirty years of it. Helen's version is different and necessarily perpetrated on a far smaller scale.

Helen gives the people of Willesden what they didn't know they wanted. Smart books, strange books, books about the country they came from, or the one that they're in. Children's books with children in them that look at least a bit like the children who are reading them. Radical books. Classical books. Weird books. Popular books. She reads a lot, she has recommendations. Hopefully, you have a Helen in a bookshop near you and so understand what I'm talking about. In 1999 I didn't know I wanted to read David Mitchell until Helen pointed me to *Ghostwritten*. And I have a strong memory of buying a book by Sartre here, because it was on the shelf and I saw it. I don't know how I could have known I wanted Sartre without seeing it on that shelf—that is, without Helen putting it there. Years later, I had my first book launch in this bookshop and when it got too full, mainly with local friends of my mother, we all walked up the road to her flat and carried on over there.

And it was while getting very nostalgic about all this sort of thing with Helen, and wondering about the possibility of having another launch in the same spot, that I first heard of the council's intention to demolish the library center, along with the bookshop and the nineteenth-century turrets and the concrete space and the ledge on which the four drunks sat. To be replaced with private luxury flats, a greatly reduced library, "retail space," and no bookshop. (Steve, the owner, could not afford the commercial rise in rent. The same thing happened to his Kilburn Bookshop, which closed recently after thirty years.) My mum wandered in, with some cheese. The three of

us lamented this change and the cultural vandalism we felt it represented. Or, if you take the opposite view, we stood around pointlessly, like the Luddite, fiscally ignorant liberals we are, complaining about the inevitable.

A few days later I got back on a plane to New York, where I teach for a part of each year. Logically it should be easier, when a person is far away from home, to take bad news from home on the chin, but anyone who has spent time in a community of expats knows the exact opposite is true: no one could be more infuriated by events in Rome than the Italian kid serving your cappuccino on Broadway. Without the balancing setting of everyday life all you have is the news, and news by its nature is generally bad. Quickly you become hysterical. Consequently I can't tell whether the news coming out of my home is really as bad as it appears to be, or whether objects perceived from three thousand miles away are subject to exaggerations of size and color. Did a Labour-run council really send heavies into Kensal Rise Library, in a dawn raid, to strip the place of books and Mark Twain's wall plaque? Are the people of Willesden Green seriously to lose their bookshop, be offered a smaller library (for use by more patrons from other libraries Brent has closed), an ugly block of luxury flats—and told that this is "culture"?

Yes. That's all really happening. With minimal consultation, with bully-boy tactics, secrecy and a little outright deceit. No doubt the local councilors find themselves in a difficult position: the percentage cuts in Brent are among the highest in the country, mandated by the central government. But the chronic mismanagement of finances is easily traced back to the previous Labour government, and so around and around goes the baton of blame. The Willesden Green plan as it stands so obviously gives the developers an extremely



profitable land deal—while exempting them from the need to build social housing—that you feel a bit like a child pointing it out. In this economy who but a child would expect anything else?

Reading these intensely local stories alongside the national story creates another effect that may be only another kind of optical illusion: mirroring. For here in the Leveson Inquiry into the “ethics of the British press” you find all the same traits displayed, only writ large. Minimal consultation, bully-boy tactics, secrecy, outright deceit. Are some of the largest decisions of British political life really being made at the private dinner tables of a tiny elite? Why is Jeremy Hunt, the secretary of state “for culture, Olympics, media and sport,” texting Murdoch? What did Rebekah promise the prime minister and the prime minister promise Rebekah in that pretty little market town of Chipping Norton? During another period of expat existence, in Italy, I sat at a Roman café table in a Renaissance square rolling my eyes at the soap opera of Italian political life: wiretapped politicians and footballers and TV stars, backroom media deals, glaring conflicts of interest, tabloid culture run riot, politicians in the pockets of newspapers. I used to chuckle over *La Repubblica* and tease my Italian friends about the kind of problems we didn’t have in our basically sound British parliamentary democracy.

And so I recognize myself to be an intensely naive person. Most novelists are, despite frequent pretensions to deep sociopolitical insight. And I retain a particular naivety concerning the British state, which must seem comical to many people, particularly younger people. I can only really account for it by reaching back again, briefly, into the past. It’s a short story about debt—because I owe the state, quite a lot. Some people owe everything they have to the bank accounts of their parents. I owe the state. Put simply, the state educated me, fixed my leg when it was broken, and gave me a grant

that enabled me to go to university. It fixed my teeth (a bit) and found housing for my veteran father in his dotage. When my youngest brother was run over by a truck it saved his life and in particular his crushed right hand, a procedure that took half a year, and which would, on the open market—so a doctor told me at the time—have cost a million pounds. Those were the big things, but there were also plenty of little ones: my subsidized sports center and my doctor’s office, my school music lessons paid for with pennies, my university fees. My NHS glasses aged nine. My NHS baby aged thirty-three. And my local library. To steal another writer’s title: England made me. It has never been hard for me to pay my taxes because I understand it to be the repaying of a large, in fact, an almost incalculable, debt.

Things change. I don’t need the state now as I once did; and the state is not what it once was. It is complicit in this new, shared global reality in which states deregulate to privatize gain and re-regulate to nationalize loss. A process begun with verve by a Labour government is now being perfected by David Cameron’s Tory–Lib Dem coalition. The charming tale of benign state intervention described above is now relegated to the land of fairy tales: not just naive but actually fantastic. Having one’s own history so suddenly and abruptly made unreal is an experience of a whole generation of British people, who must now wander around like so many ancient mariners boring foreigners about how they went to university for free and could once find a National Health dentist on their high street.

I bore myself telling these stories. And the thing that is most boring about defending libraries is the imputation that an argument in defense of libraries is necessarily a social-liberal argument. It’s only recently that I had any idea that how a person felt about

libraries—not schools or hospitals, libraries—could even represent an ideological split. I thought a library was one of the few sites where the urge to conserve and the desire to improve—twin poles of our political mind—were easily and naturally united. Besides, what kind of liberal has no party left to vote for, and feels not so much gratitude to the state as antipathy and, at times, fear?

The closest I can find myself to an allegiance or a political imperative these days is the one expressed by that old social democrat Tony Judt: “We need to learn to *think* the state again.” First and foremost I need to become less naive. The money is gone, and the conditions Judt’s generation inherited and my generation inherited from Judt’s are unlikely to be replicated in my lifetime, if ever again. That’s the bad news from home. Politically all a social liberal has left is the ability to remind herself that fatalism is only another kind of trap, and there is more than one way to be naive. Judt again:

We have freed ourselves of the mid-20th-century assumption—never universal but certainly widespread—that the state is likely to be the *best* solution to any given problem. We now need to liberate ourselves from the opposite notion: that the state is—by definition and always—the *worst* available option.

What kind of a problem is a library? It’s clear that for many people it is not a problem at all, only a kind of obsolescence. At the extreme pole of this view is the technocrat’s total faith: with every book in the world online, what need could there be for the physical reality? This kind of argument thinks of the library as a function rather than a plurality of individual spaces. But each library is a different kind of problem and “the Internet” is no more a solution for all of them than it is their universal death knell.

Each morning I struggle to find a seat in the packed university library in which I write this, despite the fact that every single student in here could be at home in front of their MacBook browsing Google Books. And Kilburn Library—also run by Brent Council but situated, despite its name, in affluent Queen’s Park—is not only thriving but closed for refurbishment. Kensal Rise is being closed not because it is unpopular but because it is unprofitable, this despite the fact that the friends of Kensal Rise Library are willing to run their library themselves (if All Souls College, Oxford, which owns the library, will let them). Meanwhile it is hard not to conclude that Willesden Green is being mutilated not least because the members of the council see the opportunity for a sweet real-estate deal.

All libraries have a different character and setting. Some are primarily for children or primarily for students or the general public, primarily full of books or microfilms or digitized material or with a café in the basement or a market out front. Libraries are not failing “because they are libraries.” Neglected libraries get neglected, and this cycle, in time, provides the excuse to close them. Well-run libraries are filled with people because what a good library offers cannot be easily found elsewhere: an indoor public space in which you do not have to buy anything in order to stay.

In the modern state there are very few sites where this is possible. The only others that come readily to my mind require belief in an omnipotent creator as a condition for membership. It would seem the most obvious thing in the world to say that the reason why the market is not an efficient solution to libraries is because the market has no use for a library. But it seems we need, right now, to keep restating the obvious. There aren’t many institutions left that fit so precisely Keynes’s definition of things that no one else but the state is willing to take on. Nor can the experience of library life be

re-created online. It's not just a matter of free books. A library is a different kind of social reality (of the three-dimensional kind), which by its very existence teaches a system of values beyond the fiscal.

I don't think the argument in favor of libraries is especially ideological or ethical. I would even agree with those who say it's not especially logical. I think for most people it's emotional. Not logos or ethos but pathos. This is not a denigration: emotion also has a place in public policy. We're humans, not robots. The people protesting the closing of Kensal Rise Library love that library. They were open to any solution on the left or on the right if it meant keeping their library open. They were ready to Big Society the hell out of that place. A library is one of those social goods that matter to people of many different political attitudes. All that the friends of Kensal Rise and Willesden Library and similar services throughout the country are saying is: these places are important to us. We get that money is tight, we understand that there is a hierarchy of needs, and that the French Market or a Mark Twain plaque are not hospital beds or classroom size. But they are still a significant part of our social reality, the only thing left on the high street that doesn't want either your soul or your wallet.

If the losses of private companies are to be socialized within already struggling communities, the very least we can do is listen to people when they try to tell us where in the hierarchy of their needs things like public space, access to culture, and preservation of environment lie. "But I never use the damn things!" says Mr. Notmytaxes in the letters page. Sir, I believe you. However. British libraries received over 300 million visits last year, and this despite the common neglect of the various councils that oversee them. In northwest London people are even willing to form human chains in

front of them. People have taken to writing long pieces in newspapers to "defend" them. Just saying the same thing over and over again. Defend our libraries. We like libraries. Can we keep our libraries? We need to talk about libraries. Pleading, like children. Is that really where we are?

Postscript: Not long after this piece was published in the *New York Review of Books*, the library and bookshop were torn down. But the collective fuss made by activists had an effect: the library built in its place is a functioning one, with fewer books, it's true, but plenty of students, families and readers filling its shelf-light spaces, while on its second floor, a small but beautiful local museum took a few thousand square feet of prime real estate from the developers.