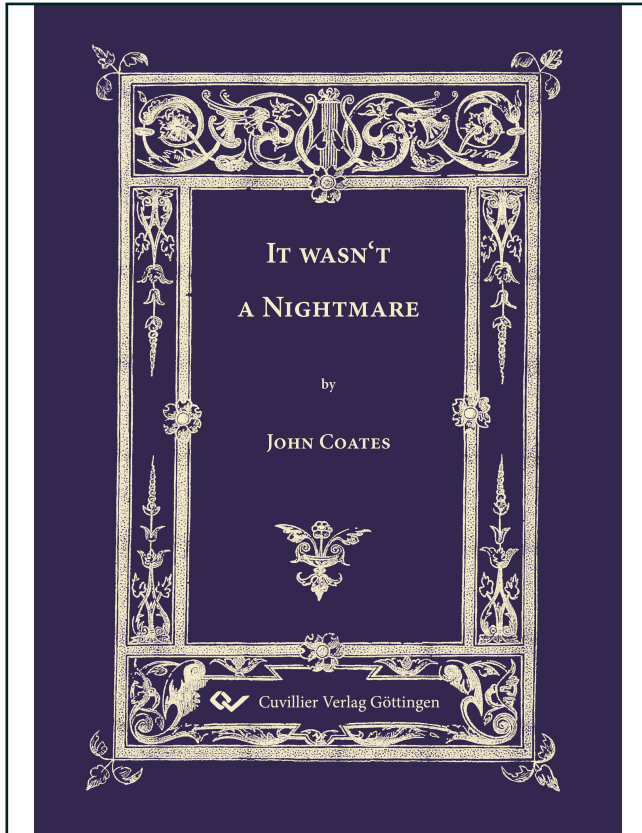




John Coates (Autor)
It wasn't a Nightmare



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Foreword

In my earlier collection of stories *Pleasures on the Periphery* I instinctively used the snapshot approach in order to try and capture for the reader what everyday life looked like, and felt like in Sicily, Hungary and Poland in the days when I lived there.¹ Later, I criticized myself: weren't these snapshots just things of the moment, 'there' but not 'here', descriptions instead of explanations?

Unintended support came in the end from a close friend and former university project partner of mine, Laci Löb, a Hungarian Jew who spent time in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, as a 10-year-old, in late 1944. He followed his to me most surprising comment on this time ("I was bored ...") with the inestimable gift of a booklet entitled *Postcards from Bergen-Belsen* with several contributions by himself,² and including a rationale for this unusual kind of presentation: the snapshots, line drawings and very brief descriptions (for example, the various expressions on the faces of the two German guards, and their nicknames) seek to reveal the sufferings of the inmates by employing two guiding literary principles: the first minimation; the second, the 'representation of the abstract and the intellectual through the concrete and the visual'.

I'd like to give three examples of the literary snapshot approach to explain why I attempt it, too:

1. *The People of the Abyss*, written by Jack London and first published in 1903. In chapter XII entitled 'Coronation Day' he describes an interview with an unemployed woman who has spent the previous two nights on the street, and with no future prospects. She has been ill and isn't "feeling up to much".³ She begins: "Ow dirty I am, (...) I'm Irish, (...) My nyme's

¹ John Coates, *Pleasures on the Periphery*, (2022) Cuvillier.

² *Postcards from Bergen-Belsen : István Irsai and his graphic art*, with contributions from Ladislaus Löb, Thomas Rahe, Miryam Sommerfeld-Irsai, (2014) Verlag Stiftung niedersächsische Gedenkstätten.

³ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, (2013) The Workhouse Press, p. 83.

Eyethorne.” (...) “Spell it.” “H-a-y-t-h-o-r-n-e, Eyethorne.” (...) “What do you expect to do in the end?” (...) “There’s no ‘ope for me, I know, but I’ll die on the streets, no work‘ouse for me, thank you.”⁴ Jack London was an expert photographer. His photographic ‘snapshots’ speak for themselves. There’s no picture of Miss Haythorne, but the unashamed prose says it all. The passage answers the question of how Britain, in 1903, the country with the greatest Empire the world has ever known, has turned into the funny little island that it is today.

A postscript: Jack London, after spending an hour or two with Miss Haythorne, walks away. I, an Englishman, would not have been able to do this, and neither, I suspect, having read most of his correspondence, would my maternal grandfather, who was around in 1903.

2. Laurie Lee’s *A Moment of War*, an account of his experiences at the sharp end of the Spanish Civil War in the winter of 1936-37. He was from an unpolitical rural working-class background and writing, long after the event, from memory. His motive for fighting was to ‘help his friends’, simple people from Almuñécar who had been kind to him the previous year. The short, grim descriptions answer the question how the Republic managed to lose the war.

3. *Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood, a colorful account of life in Berlin 1932-33 during the rise of Hitler (first published in 1939). Isherwood was a self-conscious Cambridge-and-London middle-class intellectual, anxious at that time to make a name for himself in the theater and film world: in the book he coined the phrase “I am a camera” – that is, pure description, no political or intellectual theorizing. Some of the less juicy, less film-worthy snapshots are worth attention. Here, for example is Lothar Nowak, the dour older brother of ‘Otto’, Christopher’s theatrical, bisexual friend, at the parental home:

⁴ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

“We were still eating when Lothar came in. He threw his cap on the bed, shook hands with me politely but silently, with a little bow, and took his place at the table. My presence did not appear to surprise or interest him in the least: his glance barely met mine. He was, I knew, only twenty; but he might well have been years older. He was a man already. Otto seemed almost childish beside him. He had a lean, bony, peasant’s face, soured by racial memory of barren fields.

‘Lothar’s going to night-school,’ Frau Nowak told me with pride. ‘He had a job in a garage, you know; and now he wants to study engineering. They won’t take you in anywhere nowadays, unless you’ve got a diploma of some sort. He must show you his drawings, Herr Christoph, when you’ve got time to look at them. The teacher said they were very good indeed.’

‘I should like to see them.’

Lothar didn’t respond. I sympathized with him and felt rather foolish. But Frau Nowak was determined to show him off:

‘Which nights are your classes?’

‘Mondays and Thursdays.’ He went on eating, deliberately, obstinately, without looking at his mother. Then perhaps to show me that he bore me no ill-will, he added: ‘From eight to ten-thirty.’ As soon as we had finished, he got up without a word, shook hands with me, making the same small bow, took his cap and went out.”⁵

Well, here you have it. Hitler and his strutting Nazis may well have appeared comical to English eyes, but they provided an aspiring mechanic with the chance to get a training, and to work. Everything, in fact.

⁵ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, (1989) Minerva, pp. 138-139.

Tormore

There were seventy of us, aged between 8 and 13. We were allocated to various dormitories named after British generals, some of these worthy role-models (Wellington), others less so (Haig). Sometimes after lights-out we would hold forbidden conversations about how we felt. 'What part of the day do you like best?' 'The night!' was the reply we agreed on. I remember those conversations well: there were some parts of the day that we liked more than others, but we agreed about the night. Some boys wept during this time. Rudimentary friendships sometimes developed, sympathy and moral support, but more often not. I was one of the luckier ones: I didn't cry so often or so bitterly, and I didn't wet my bed.

Tormore was a 'prep.' school, that is, a boarding school specialized in 'preparing' boys to win scholarships (not just to pass entrance examinations) at more or less prestigious public schools. Some prep. schools aimed high, at the 'top five' (as they then were) including Eton, Winchester and Harrow. Others like Tormore lowered their social sights and were content with the middle ranks like King's School Canterbury, Lancing and Haileybury. Also Westminster, which is today higher up the scale. Tormore was astonishingly successful, winning an average of seven such scholarships a year (how do I know? They were publicly displayed for everyone to see, especially parents, on large 'scholarship boards' in gold lettering). In addition, Tormore was fearsomely successful in competitive team sports, especially rugby football, and the terror of the other prep. schools in East Kent.

I entered Tormore in January 1946, the beginning of the grim post-war period. I believe that its brutal regime relaxed a little in the 1950s, after I'd gone, and I know for a fact that the school no longer exists today.

I am not the first person to denounce his old prep. school. Such accounts have tended to concentrate on homosexuality, on religious instruction or on social class. They are nearly always too long. My memories of Tormore are of brutality, squalor, sadism and rote learning. Also of hunger – but this

was not Tormore's fault, food was scarce in England in 1946 – and hunger is a leveler and a flattener of mood and instinct, hence the absence of sexual interest in the present account.

In the early summer of 1946, as the evenings grew longer, the head of our dormitory, an older boy called Renshaw, had made a rule that we must not talk after 8 p.m. But in May it was still light, and the temptation was there. His clever habit was to leave the room around 8, under some excuse, with the threat that anyone who talked during his absence would be punished. On his return all six of us, the 'inmates', would be interrogated in turn. 'Did you talk while I was away?' Answer yes: you were hit four times, hard, across the face. This was called 'clipping'. Answer no, and you were hit six times, four times for the offence, two extra for lying, accompanied by a legalistic explanation of why this was justified.

There must be some reason why I remember these regular scenes so vividly: Renshaw's face (nice-looking, pinkish, curly blond hair), the soft evening light, the arrangement of the beds in the room, and the fact that the headmaster would sometimes be present on these occasions, when he felt obliged to administer other forms of corporal punishment, usually by 'slippering' on the bare bottom, for some daytime offence. There was no nonsense about 'this hurts me more than it hurts you'. He enjoyed it. It could also be seen that he knew about Renshaw's behavior, and condoned it.

Other beatings were less acceptable. I recall one boy, Kirkby, who froze in a French lesson, publicly failing to recall that 'de' followed by the masculine definite article becomes 'du'. The master beat his head against the wall until blood came out of his nose and ears. Another boy got the same treatment for stammering in front of the class. Two masters, and, surprisingly, one mistress derived obvious pleasure from these sadistic scenes.

Now to rote learning. A common pedagogical practice at Tormore was for the teacher to give the boys a page or two to learn of French, Latin or

Greek (rules and exceptions), or the Scriptures. We would have 20 minutes for this, memorizing in silence. Then the test: we would have to stand in front of the class and answer the teacher's questions. In the jargon of educational theory, behavior (short-term memory and the ability to 'spit out' what had been memorized) was being promoted by means of negative reinforcement. Also negative modeling: if you don't get it right, the same fate that Kirkby suffered will happen to you.

Methods like these are effective in the short term – witness the well-filled scholarship boards, and the satisfied parents, who could see that they were getting value for money. And in the long term? Accepted educational theory says no. Fear it seems, may well promote skills of a stimulus-response nature,⁶ but not curiosity, not understanding. Even so, the 'fear' method has its advantages: at Tormore we had to learn large portions of the Scriptures in this way, which meant memorization, repetition and negative reinforcement, and, still today, I notice that I am well ahead in my ability to quote from the Bible, accurately and at length.

It took me many years to find my way out of the morass – and by an improbable piece of luck. The light was brought to me by a priest in the small Spanish village of Bellaterra during the late Franco era. I was doing a long internship in a nearby town in an Opus Dei school, where corporal punishment was routine and severe. At weekends I helped the priest and his sister with the village children. He was an intelligent man, and had better ideas. He showed me that the effect of the kind of punishment that we had suffered at Tormore and which I was expected (but refused) to inflict in the Opus Dei school, was to extinguish in the battered pupil any belief in the truth of what he was being commanded to learn, or in the instructor personally, and, by extension, any figure of respect. I went back ten years in my mind, to my very first visit to France. St. Malo: bright sunshine, wide awake off the ferry in the early morning. After negotiating

⁶ During World War Two, American servicemen, terrified of capture, learnt Japanese rapidly when exposed to this kind of teaching – the so-called 'Army method'.

customs without comment, I had gone into the terminal to get something to eat and drink. With bravado I ordered champagne, bringing out my best school French. I had always been top of the class at foreign languages, using the old-fashioned French one was taught in those days. Yet, secretly, I had never believed that it was French that was being stuffed into me, rather some other virtual language.

The friendly St. Malo lady laughed at me: "Yes, here, have a glass, it's very old, 'très vielle.'" What a surprise. She'd understood me, I'd understood her. So the previous ten years or so hadn't really been wasted after all.

* * * * *

I have to end this chapter on a somber note. Tormore wasn't funny. For myself, I've survived to a good age, but even today I still have the conviction that my house is built on sand. In the past I've had many happy days and nights camping in wild places, often literally on sandy soil. Apart from the freedom, I can see that I was able to achieve in that fashion some consonance with my feelings of insecurity inherited from Tormore. For other boys, things did not turn out so well. Some facts: I kept up with, or ran into later by chance, a total of 13 boys who had been to Tormore at the same time as me. Of these, seven were apparently leading well-adjusted lives: five were not. The thirteenth boy was the one I got to know best over the years, a confused and confusing person, an uncategorizable enigma: a battered face (he had been a formidable boxer at Tormore), a dramatically scarred body, with stories of mercenary soldiering in Africa and dangerous love-for-sale activities in Amsterdam. Still, seven passes, five fails out of thirteen, with one question mark, isn't much of an endorsement for the kind of 'preparation' given to boys at Tormore.

I have still found it hard to relate to Orwell's seminal account of his school days at St. Cyprian's. There was no finely-graded social snobbery at Tormore: what counted was the ability to keep out of the sights of the farmer's gun like a rabbit at harvest-time – but a clever, somewhat dishonest rabbit. However, one little passage at the end of his over-long

account has rescued it for me, and I recognize a brother: "I even conceived a prejudice against Sussex, as the country that contained St. Cyprian's."⁷ My hatred of Tormore led to a similarly deep-rooted dislike of the county of Kent: even today I have a profound feeling of satisfaction when they lose a cricket match in the County Championship.

My reckoning with Tormore should, I know, from the point of view of literary style, end here. But, I would still like to ask Cicero's question: '*cui bono*'? Who stood to profit from Tormore? Obviously, the headmaster, his wife and family. Less obviously, the parents, who had to pay stiff fees (there were no grants, 'scholarships' or other free lunches): a 'detriment', but with the 'benefit' that they were not bothered with responsibility for their sons for three-quarters of the year (my parents made this clear to me). Still, the equation doesn't seem to add up.

Now look at any photograph of an annual gathering of a District Officer surrounded by his subordinates and staff in the old British Empire. Compare this with the annual photographic record of Tormore or of most other preparatory schools in those days. The similarities – the three long rows, the internal hierarchies (look at the people's faces) – are plain to see, as is the simple difference: the Empire officers are all wearing military uniforms.

A sense of affiliation to the British Empire was one of several values that were inoculated into the boys at Tormore, sometimes by suggestion, sometimes explicitly. Another was aversion, a sort of 'disaffiliation' to the working classes – elderly, faithful gardeners, 'nature's gentlemen' were ok, but people who voted Labour (there had been plenty of those in 1945), or who joined trade unions, were not. Class tensions ran high between 1945 and 1950, and it was made clear to us at Tormore what side 'we' were on. I remember how shocked I was – two years after leaving Tormore – when a casual acquaintance told me she was a "socialist".

⁷ Quoted from: <https://orwellsociety.com/orwell-the-essayist-such-such-were-the-joys-1947/> (last accessed 29 December 2022).

Religious intolerance was less explicit, but applied to fellow-pupils, and by extension other people, who were not Church of England – in other words, in that small world, Catholics, Jews or Methodists. More upsetting for me personally was the underlying contempt for all the arts (I liked poetry and music), and, even worse, for any kind of intellectual excellence. This was a harsh double bind (in the technical sense used in clinical psychology) for me to live with at the age of 12, since the headmaster had once told my father, who recounted it to me without warmth, that I was the best pupil he had ever had. I took the sensible step of playing the part of the cheerful sportsman, the teamplayer. This was not too difficult, as I was quite ‘good at games’ (school slang in those days) – good enough for the position of vice-captain of the ‘B’ team, so to speak.

Dubious, hinted-at precepts and models that aren’t in line with real life can at worst lead to mental breakdown; at best they take up too much of the victim’s time before he sees a bit of the light. Such a pupil did not profit from Tormore. Even today, I still feel stupidly ashamed when I read a ‘difficult’ book and understand it. If I am really honest (as I look out of the window, I can see that it was about this time of year, a pleasant, cloudy windless September day about 35 years ago), the achievement that I am most proud of in my life is breaking the course record at my local golf club in an important competition – helped by two outrageous pieces of luck, and broken again by one shot three weeks later by some bad man from an outside club.

An incident at the saw-bench in South Oxfordshire

It turned me around in the space of time it takes to unshutter a window. A conversion. Many years on, the colors shine as brightly, and the images are as sharply outlined, as they were in 1956, when I was a teenager.

I was working for a haulage constructor in a small line of business, including timber, in the Thames Valley. Our work (there were two of us, me and Don) at this point included clearing a large wood of lying timber, and bringing the six- or ten-foot lengths down to a water-meadow by the village where they would be split and sawn up to make logs for fire-wood.

We enjoyed each working day, even when it was raining. I have tried to describe the atmosphere in the chapter *The White Colony* in an earlier book.⁸

In the middle of the water-meadow stood a pre-war saw-bench and circular saw, out in the open. The mechanism had to be assembled specially each Saturday. It was a rough-and-ready system, run off a tractor using a pulley and belt. The work was rather dangerous: the saw-man was obliged to wear protective gloves, head-wear and goggles, and to carry a certificate of training. He worked with some ceremony, and attracted admiring attention from the two or three men who were always hanging around hoping to be noticed and given the chance to pick up a bit of experience; then there were Don and me, keeping him busy with lengths of wood. When the weather was good (this May it often was) it was a memorable atmosphere. The smell of freshly sawn cord-wood (as we called it) was in our nostrils, and the working week was nearing its end. There were good things to look forward to in the afternoon – and you were getting paid. I can still remember the names of some of the men, old-fashioned names like Toby from times gone by. Our village was very cut-off – a relic of the farming system in this part of England, based on extensive tracts of land worked by a number of farms (five in our area)

⁸ *Pleasures on the Periphery* (cf. footnote 1), pp. 37-40.