

Diary of a bilious old git

To retain your sense of outrage about the way other people are treated, you need to feel at odds with the world

Term is over, and at last the students have cleared out of Oxford, my home town. No one who lives here is sorry to see them go, except the proprietors of the off-licences. There's something about the way they walk while wearing black tie which drives me beserk.

One May morning, I was distressed to see that the police had erected metal barriers along the parapet of Magdalen Bridge. Since time immemorial, Oxford students have demonstrated the principles of natural selection by jumping off the bridge and impaling themselves on old shopping trolleys. Now that this tradition has been brought to an end, it surely behoves the police to find some other means by which Nature might be permitted to run her course.

TRY AS I MIGHT, I can't help coming into contact with the most obnoxious of them: the swaggering but spectacularly immature young men who somehow contrive to dominate undergraduate life here. From time to time I am invited to the world's most overrated debating chamber, the Oxford Union. Its members always succeed in choosing as their presidents the most pompous, tiresome and emotionally-retarded creeps ever unleashed upon an undeserving world. The pictures on the walls show that these social lepers are destined to become our lords and masters: the union committee in any particular year turns out to contain half the cabinet and half the country's newspaper editors, 30 years thence.

They always ask me to sign the visitors' book and, incensed by their revolting

mixture of sycophancy and self-aggrandisement, I inscribe such tender sentiments as “this is where the corruption of Britain begins”, or “why is it that those least-suited to power are the most likely to obtain it?” I don’t know whether they still teach them to read at this university, but somehow I’m always invited back.

NOW THAT A BOOK OF MINE has finally been noticed by the literary editors, I feel that I can speak out without being seen to suffer from sour grapes. There appears to be an unwritten rule in literary London that radical political books don’t get reviewed. Editors will grant no end of space to biographies of dead political writers, but almost none to the works of the living. Potentially world-changing books, such as Alastair McIntosh’s *Soil and Soul* and Bernard Lietaer’s *The Future of Money*, pass without comment. As TV and the news sections of most of the papers are now, if not quite dead from the neck up, at least constitutionally incapable of taking serious issues seriously, books, lectures, the web and minority magazines are about all that’s left. Of these, books are the most important. But the literary editors seem to feel that a book doesn’t qualify as literature unless it is removed, by time or by imagination, from the here and now. The result is that many great works are stillborn. The editors, of course, are light years behind the readers, among whom those few political books permitted to see the light of day, such as *Stupid White Men* and *Fast Food Nation*, are enjoying a popularity unexampled since the 18th Century.

REVIEWING THESE ENTRIES, it strikes me that I am becoming rather bilious. Perhaps that’s just as well. I think it is true to say that to be a well-rewarded writer but to retain your sense of outrage about the way other people are treated, you need to feel at odds with the world. Much has been written about the recent political conversion of several formerly leftwing journalists. It has been discussed by the press in reverential tones: something momentous is happening; the left is in fullscale retreat; the intellectual momentum has shifted to the right. To which I will deploy a word used to excess by one of the more prominent of these apostates: bollocks.

A middle-aged man discovers that, for the first time in his life, he is making money, getting invited to the smartest dinner parties and hobnobbing with ministers and editors. He begins to identify with his new friends. He no longer sees himself as an outsider, but as a member of the cultural and political elite. He accumulates loyalties towards the people he once took pleasure in knifing. His politics shift to reflect his circumstances, and we all fall about in astonishment.

Of course, the press loves a convert to the right, with the result that just as a journalist pulls away from his readership, he is licenced to impose himself upon it as

MONBIOT | DIARY OF A BILIOUS OLD GIT

never before. The paradox of journalism is that those with the most opportunity have the least to say, as they come to owe so many favours to so many powerful figures that the only people they can attack are the weak and the voiceless. This explains why it is that the bigger they get, the smaller their targets become.

So it seems to me that, if I am to retain my interest in social justice and human rights, I must become even more of a bilious old git than I am already, while alienating as many of the people who might do me favours as I can. Here then is a message to all those editors, reviewers, executives and ministers whom I have not yet offended. Kindly boil your heads. #

George Monbiot's book, [The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order](#), is published by Flamingo.