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FROM THE 'FREEDOM OF THE STREETS':

A biographical study of culture and social change in the life and work of writer

Jack Common (1903-1968)

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PhD THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



2007

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FROM THE 'FREEDOM OF THE STREETS':

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PhD THESIS

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The author assesses the life and work of the Newcastle upon Tyne born writer Jack Common in the light of the massive social, economic and cultural changes which have affected the North East of England and wider society through the period of Common's life and afterwards.

He seeks to point out the relevance of Common to the present day in terms of his ideas about class, community and the individual and in the light of Common's sense of rebelliousness influenced by a process of grass-roots education and self-improvement.

In addition, he draws upon his own extensive experience in community arts and education, looking, in particular, at the work he and others have carried out on Common over the last thirty years and assessing its value in the light of recent political changes.

The author draws together the range of biographical and literary criticism carried out by a range of individuals over this period of time and brings into print hitherto unpublished material about Common's life and work by interviewing family members and associates, exploring the Common Archive at Newcastle University and other largely ignored sources, and studying Common's significant association with George Orwell in great detail.

Through all of this, he seeks to argue that Common's life and ideas remain worthy of close attention in the present day.

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Keith Armstrong,

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2007

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

'Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar,
And soaring ever singest.'

(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Jack Common (1903-68) was drawn to Shelley while still a boy and, as his daughter Sally has written (Magill, S., 1998):

'He quoted from 'the moonlight-coloured May' in his prize-winning school essay on Jesmond Dene, written when he was 14. All his life he liked to use the phrase in spring when he saw the May in blossom and thirty years after he died I still remember it each year.'

I have pursued 'Kiddar' for over thirty years myself, ever since working with Huw Beynon and others from the 'Strong Words' collective on an exhibition and event for the Newcastle Festival in 1977. Like Common, I hail from the Heaton area of Newcastle upon Tyne with a strong bond linking me to the history and culture of the city. I believe that this is something which stayed within Jack Common, even though he left Tyneside in his mid-twenties.

When his "Kiddar's Luck" (1951) was first drawn to my attention by a schoolmate at Heaton Grammar School in Newcastle, I was struck by Common's feel for the streets of Heaton and the railway community which worked and played there. He managed to get under the skin of the locality and reading him enhanced my feel for my own local history.

It was also that Common was 'a genuinely working class writer' (Groves, R., 1974), the son of a railwayman, and from a similar background to myself. His formative educational experiences fitted with a tradition of working class learning also encountered, for example, in the lives of the North East pitmen-poets Tommy Armstrong and Joseph Skipsey, the latter of whom wrote:

'I was in my fifteenth year when I found that an uncle of mine had a small library. I borrowed 'Paradise Lost'. They laughed at me when I took it away. 'Why Joe', said my aunt, 'thoo'll nivver be able to understand that'. 'Well', I replied, 'I mean to try'. That book was a revelation to me, I was entranced by it ... My enthusiasm encouraged my uncle to open his whole bookcase to me.' (Skipsey, J., 1991)

This is the kind of 'self-education' that influenced Common himself:

‘As Bill’s gaze wandered along the titles on the bookshelves, he saw that they and their authors were largely unfamiliar to him. Jack London obviously was something terrific, but were all those other strange gods also true gods? If so, he had stumbled on a regular bonanza, a whole Klondyke, of literature. For Uncle Rod seemed exceedingly willing to lend his treasures.’ (Common, J., 1975, p.182)

That Common achieved success in a school essay competition must have been through the individual spark of a particular teacher or through his Uncle, an eccentric with a true disregard for convention, rather than school as an institution, on which subject he is particularly savage when he asserts that:

‘The one faculty with which school infallibly endows its pupils (is) that of being bored. It is very important, of course, that every child should, in the course of time, become fitted with this negative capability. If they didn’t have it, they’d never put up with the jobs they’re going to get, most of them, on leaving school. Boredom, or the ability to endure it, is the hub on which the whole universe of work turns.’ (Common, J., 1975., p.32)

Indeed, the young Common somehow managed to rise above all this doom and gloom to be strongly commended for his writing ability and to also win one of his city’s essay competitions during the First World War, this time on the subject of ‘Thrift’ and read out to the whole school by the Headmaster. Encouraged by this and with his mother’s active support, he escaped the usual factory fate of his fellow schoolmates and studied

for a time at Skerry's College, where he gleaned a basis of routine business training so as to be able to get a foot into the professional door.

Yet Common, despite being so intimate with the streets of his Heaton community and distinctly aware of the history and heritage of his beloved city, was becoming aware of the difference between himself and those around him:

'Bill Clarts, coming this cold night from the small room of a lonely, thinking man, contraband books under his arm, felt himself engaged in a traffic which must alienate him from his kind.

Suddenly he didn't want that ... the presence of the sleepy hosts around felt like a claim upon him. He was drawn to this huge, mute community that lay shut upon half-houses, family by family, under the uniform tile, each of them maintaining a warm hearth against all hazards by the slender defence of a weekly wage.

... Clarts merely fumbled with these premonitions. What he knew was that he wanted both to be good with his kind and at the same time fulfil the separate needs of his nature.' (Common, J., 1975, p.185)

In writing this study of the life and work of Jack Common, I want to investigate the factors which made him a writer; the sources of the 'differentness' which took him away from the job of railwayman which awaited him had he followed in his father's footsteps; and the roots of his attitudes towards education, which led him to perceive school as 'boring'.

In his writings, he

‘explores, in a humorous and uncompromising way, the forging of his own anomalous identity as a refugee between classes and cultures. Illuminating and infusing the whole narrative is Common’s instinctive sense that there can be another – a radically other – social order of imaginative, creative and popular existence. And, for this inspiration, Common ... draws upon the utopian experience of childhood.’ (Pickering, M. & Robins, K., 1984, pp.77-92)

The very area where Jack Common hailed from can hardly be said to be inspiring. ‘The family lived in a railway house in a railway street, one of several unimaginatively called First, Second, Third (and so on) Avenue. To have been born in that place at that time was itself a bit of bad luck or ‘a sad mistake’ as the author (Common) put it.’

(Whitcombe, 1974, p.ix) Despite this, there is humour aplenty in his novel ‘Kiddar’s Luck’. Because without it people like the Commons could not have borne the day-to-day struggle and grind. His mother sought solace in the bottle at the local ‘Chillingham’ public house, partly to kill the pain of her crippled foot and the problems in her marriage, but also to seek company and conviviality in ‘the snug’ where she could loosen her tongue and give vent to those feelings confined in the cramped home up the street. This was something her son picked up on early in life and the pub was always a place for Jack to seek solidarity with his common humanity and to sound off on all things under the sun. Alcohol itself was in many ways an imaginative release which allowed his dreams to escape and fly above the confines of his birth.

The regimented terraced streets were on the face of it dull but running down their back-lanes with his mates in the ‘Sons of the Battle-axe’ gang and playing in their gutters by

the railway junction, with the loco-sparks flying in the night air, could be intoxicating and not far away was the city of Newcastle, itself an excitement.

‘One of the great industrial cities of the North, and a seaport, Newcastle has its cathedral, its ‘new castle’, and its university. There the Romans had a fortress and there George Stephenson built the world’s first locomotives. It has a handsome Georgian city-centre and wide open spaces like the Town Moor for fairs and Jesmond Dene for sedate Sunday walks. At its back lie the wild Border moorlands, at its feet the sea.’ (Whitcombe, V., 1974, p.xii)

Common was simultaneously proud of his roots and, in other ways, alienated from them. His friend Tommy McCulloch alludes to this:

‘Jack realised the limitations of Newcastle. He didn’t like the idea of moving at the outset but, despite the regional pride, he had to if he was ever to get recognised. One thing leads to another in a place like London.’ (McCulloch, T., 1984)

Combined with his strong sense of community and identification with the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, was the knowledge that as a rebel and a writer he was different and needed to escape and reject the values of his father and the local parochialism which they reflected. In this sense, Tommy McCulloch saw Jack Common’s father’s ‘point of view as a man who’s been up in the morning – with ridiculous care! – done his best for his son and two girls, and thought his son an economic cripple, a complete failure, despite his undoubted ability.’ (McCulloch, T., 1984)

Common seems to have been a rebel at a very early age, even from his first days at Chillingham Road School in 1908 when he jibbed at the sign which said 'Infants'. 'I was five,' he says, 'and no infant.' (Common, J., 1975, p.31)

The School loomed round the corner from the house where Common 'came under the minus-sign which society had already placed upon (his) parents. They were of no account ... people who worked for a living and got just that, who had a home only so long as they paid the weekly rent, and who could provide for offspring by the simple method of doing without themselves. I had picked the bottom rung of the ladder with a vengeance.' (Common, J., 1975, pp.5-6)

Escape from this trap came in the 'Freedom of the Streets', his eccentric Uncle Rod and the world of books he introduced Jack to, the cries of the street-traders, the vision of bustling Newcastle from Byker Hill, all of which fuelled Kiddar's imagination yet also drew him apart from the neighbourhood grime and grind he'd been born in.

In 'The Ampersand', Common's sequel to 'Kiddar's Luck', there is a vivid description of the young boy's feeling that he is different from those around him in the Heaton of his youth:

'The sight of those good folk going home somehow inverted his mood. He had now an immense awareness of the living community around him and felt the apartness that it gave him to be an amputation. And so it was indeed. His similars among the more fortunate classes are not likely to be put to so extreme a severance when their nature shows itself. They can usually be drafted into an intelligentsia that is well organised, tolerated, even socially blessed. This is only an oasis they are in perhaps; it isn't wilderness.'

(Common, J., 1975, p.185)

‘His father and he disagreed. His father had the idea that on leaving school you should have the capacity to earn ... He was fairly competent with the pen at Chillingham Road School, his ability as a writer was recognised early on, and I think ability emerges, it’s like athletic prowess.’ (McCulloch, T., 1984)

As Common himself was to admit in later life: ‘There’s no talking to the lightning-struck, the fatally illuminated are always alone.’ (Common, 1975, p.ix) – alone, yet also brought up in a tight-knit community with all the strengths and weaknesses that implies. The River Tyne, like the beer, was in his blood. Living ‘in exile in southern England’, far from his roots, Common remained conditioned by them in that love-hate relationship we all perhaps feel for our home town or village.

And it was this tension between the individual and the collective experience which even today animates ‘Geordieland’, which creates a bond between Novocastrians and their city but, often enough, a necessity to depart the banks of the Tyne for material, intellectual and spiritual development.

John McGahern recognises that Common’s voice is ‘slow and sure as the Tyne itself, a collective as much as an individual voice.’ (McGahern, J., 1976, p.159) But the young Jack was becoming very much aware that there were pulls that took him in unknown directions and out of the orbit occupied by his fellow corner-lads.

Common’s early political education was with groups like the Newcastle Socialist Society and the ‘Progressive Libraries’ to be found on both sides of the river.

This belief in the ‘Common Man’, the voice of the underdog, is carried on in Common’s book ‘“Seven Shifts”’ published in 1938, in which he brings together the writings of seven ordinary workers who describe their day-to-day working lives in their own words

inspiration in part behind subsequent publishing ventures such as ‘Strong Words’ and ‘Northern Voices’. In his preface to the book, Common asserts that:

‘My friends include members of the literary bourgeoisie and lads from the unprinted proletariat. Both parties talk well, and you’d probably enjoy a crack with them as much as I do. But here’s the pity. The bourgeois ones get published right and left – especially left; the others are mute as far as print goes, though exceedingly vocal in public-houses. Now I’ve often felt that it would be good to swap them round for a change.’ (Common, J., 1978, p.vii)

For Jack Common, ‘a better society would never be produced through political programmes designed by intellectuals, planners and professional politicians – no matter how well-intentioned. The roots of a better society had to be established within the daily practices, the hopes and aspirations, of ordinary men and women’. Huw Beynon asks, ‘How is this happiness to be achieved? How can the imagination of everyday life take a hold upon society and shape it? How indeed with the twin assault of mass production and mass consumption. In the face of all this boredom who has the space to think?’ (Beynon, H., 1977, p.1)

In an article written for ‘The Adelphi’ magazine, Common is critical of Western culture, viewing its obsessive individualism as ‘the dangerous courting of the extreme or exaggerated at the expense of the ordinary’. ‘We seem’, he says, ‘to have got caught up in a kind of madly extreme democracy so that we bank all on a tremendous Queen Bee of a Beethoven and millions who can’t sing at all, or having raised a Shakespeare from thence on we content ourselves with smoking-room limericks and advertising slogans.’ (Beynon, H. & Hutchinson, C., 1980, p.82)

Common's preference in all this is for 'a dynamic society' with 'a creative harmony between the intellectual and the common man'. He offers as a prescription for social vitality: 'a constant good communion between the bright nervelet that the intellectual is and the dark unaware life of the commonality.' (Aird, E., 1977, p.4) Tommy McCulloch has this to say in 'Seven Shifts':

'From the point of view of the world in general, we're just hired help, and the dumber we are the better. They want our labour, not our brains or imagination. If we try to use either there's an outcry that we are red desperadoes intent on smashing civilisation ... But don't imagine that my mates are anxious to rush in and seize the means of production, etc. Most of the time we'd be content to let the self-styled clever folk carry on, providing they left us a loop-hole to be free in.' (McCulloch, T., 1978, p.270)

For Dave Douglass, 'when a working man writes about working men he writes for them, on their behalf. He writes to give voice to the dumbness of the silent majority. Every sentence is a struggle rarely satisfied. A struggle to explain, to give sense to an otherwise seemingly irrational, brutish, blind bitterness.' (Douglass, 1976, pp.206-10)

While working on 'The Adelphi', Common became a close friend of George Orwell.

'Although their intellectual relationship was based on shared left-wing affinities, it seems to have been marred slightly from the very start by an almost instinctive class suspicion between Common, a railwayman's son turned writer, and Orwell, an Old Etonian who went slumming among the workers.' (Paul, R., 1982, p.76)

Common felt that 'we have an acquisitive view of learning as of a thing you add to your personality, this being the opinion proper to an acquisitive society. Yet when you learn to swim you are really escaping from doubt and awkwardness into an innate swimming rhythm which everybody possesses, rather marvellously, whether they use it or not.'

(Worpole, K., 1980, p.321)

For, as he argues in one of his essays, 'all the primary illusions, those which children have, those which come to people in love, those which float about the drinking-table, and those which simple people have concerning clever ones, are prophetic glances'. What we all want, he goes on to say, 'is an illusion-becoming-fact, a sign in the heavens which like the high-blown gossamer of the dandelion seed is able to root in the earth and enrich it with a common homely gold.' (Pickering, M. & Robins, K., 1984, pp.91-2)

In studying Jack Common, my intention is to produce a critical biography of the man, bringing together and adding to the fragmented work which myself and several others have already carried out on the subject, as well as analysing Common's life and work through a close look at his published and unpublished writing and personal documents. Some of this material is located in the Jack Common Archive in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne Library, which contains a range of unpublished material, correspondence, etc, hitherto largely ignored. I have also browsed and employed the Sid Chaplin Archive in the same library.

To this end, hitherto unpublished articles and correspondence relating to Common are included in my thesis. I have also taken a close look at the breadth of Common's own writings and located rare correspondence from friends and associates, such as Max Powman and Irene Palmer. In addition, I have conducted interviews at some length with

members of the Common family, friends and associates. This adds an important new dimension to previous studies of the man and his work.

All of this intensive research makes this thesis unique, bearing in mind that no other major biography has been published thus far on Common's life and work. This process has also enabled me to review the various publications, events and activities relating to Common which I have been involved in from 1977 to the present day. In doing this, I have not merely given a valuable account of this work but have attempted to analyse its relevance and questioned its validity in the contemporary political and cultural climate in a time of massive change. This has been particularly useful to me but is also, one hopes, of benefit to the general reader.

Overall, my concern is to explore Common's life and work to reveal how his attitudes and beliefs were conditioned by his background and roots. I have, in particular, explored the influences which made Common something of an outsider, even a rebel, with a desire to leave the community he was brought up in, whilst, at the same time, retaining a great love of the city of his birth and the haunting sensuality of his childhood and adolescent days there. Bearing this in mind, I have dwelt on some of my own feelings regarding Tyneside and the 'Geordie' tradition, seeking to identify both the positive and the negative aspects of such a background, looked at in a global setting. I have investigated the process of 'self-education' and Common's experiences of this on the streets of Heaton, as well as the inspiration he found in his Uncle Robin and his own immediate family, certain teachers, influential friends and mentors in the workers' education movement, including the People's Theatre and Socialist Society in Newcastle and the Bensham Settlement in Gateshead.

Putting Common in context, I have especially analysed him from a class perspective, investigating the elements of working class life which both inspired and confined him, as well as assessing it in the light of the present day. His friendship with George Orwell

is important here and I have looked into this in great depth, from a biographical and from an analytical viewpoint, rescuing Common from being a mere footnote in Orwell studies.

His friendship and working relationship with Orwell and those with Max Plowman, John Middleton Murry and others led Common into intense debates on the role of the individual in a collective and community setting and the conflicts therein and I have looked at the issues raised here in some detail, placing them in a modern-day context, in order to debate their contemporary relevance.

I have also sought to illuminate Common as an essayist and cultural commentator, highlighting this area of his work, as well as looking at him as a novelist, which is usually the key focus of Common studies, to the point of being cliched. This, again, makes my work original and of value in contributing to further debate on the man and what he stood for.

This thesis has given me the necessary focus and momentum to crystallise my previous researches and projects on Common and to further develop my ideas and thoughts on him. It forms a valid basis for a published biography of the man which I intend to publish in the near future. No other such works exists and it brings together my own original researches and perspectives on Common, as well as drawing together the work that others have conducted on him in magazines and other academic accounts of his life and writings. Such a biography is long overdue and will fill a significant gap not only in regional studies but also on an international level. It is hoped that it will heighten understanding of Common and extend his reputation in the North East and, most importantly, beyond the region. It will be very much an illustrated biography, in tune with the philosophy of the man and accessible to both academics and the general

reading public, featuring rare archival photographs of places and people associated with his life and times, along the lines of ‘Jack Common and his World’.

In structuring the thesis, I have sought both to follow the chronological pattern of Jack Common’s life and work, as well as to analyse his political thoughts and writings, with an assessment of his present-day relevance. In this introduction, I have stressed the main reasons why I think Common remains important and outlined the necessity of understanding his roots and influences in determining his continuing relevance. In the following chapter, I go on to describe the methodological reasoning behind my approach to the subject, with an exploration of the concept of biography and an account of the methods I have used to research and compile this work. This sets a theoretical grounding for going on to look closely at the work which Common has inspired in the North East of England through projects like ‘Strong Words’ and ‘Northern Voices’ and placing his life and work in the context of the region’s cultural heritage, rooted in its ballad and music hall traditions and brought up to date by writers like Alex Glasgow, Sid Chaplin and others. I go on to explore Common’s roots in Newcastle upon Tyne and just how this made him the writer and political being he was. An insight is given into both his formal and informal education, his reaction to the institution of school and his intellectual maturing with the benefit of local cultural and political networks. This chapter concludes with an account of his leaving Newcastle for London and the reasons and thinking behind the move, looking at the range of new people he met and how this impacted on his political thought and social life. In particular, I have looked in depth at the political and cultural turmoil of the thirties and the strands and thoughts which affected Common in this crucial period. I have devoted a whole chapter in this context to his friendship and working relationship with fellow writer and activist George Orwell, attempting to raise Common’s profile in this relationship. As well as

highlighting Common's personal battles and struggles to raise a family throughout all of this, I have pursued the development of his life as a writer, giving an account of his post-war life and the continuous development of his thinking, in the social context of the times. The publication in the 1950s of his novels and the subsequent disappointments are looked at in detail and his general decline is closely described up until his untimely death in 1968. Having traced the pattern of his life, work and development in the early chapters of my thesis, I then go on to look systematically at his written work, beginning with his key novels 'Kiddar's Luck' and 'The Ampersand'. These works are particularly crucial, given that they are so revealing of his upbringing and development in Newcastle and demonstrate his skills as a poetic and lyrical writer of prose. The succeeding chapter makes claims for considering Common a significant essayist of his time and looks, in particular, at his writing for 'The Adelphi' magazine, before going to analyse, and quote from, his other published works, 'Freedom of the Streets', and 'Seven Shifts', the former further enhancing his strength as an essayist and the latter demonstrating his belief in giving expression to the words and lives of ordinary working people, and serving as an inspiration for people like myself and Huw Beynon in establishing, for example, the 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices' projects.

I conclude by seeking links with Common and the contemporary political and cultural landscape, claiming him to be of value in pointing out the importance of the individual voice in a setting of rampant globalisation and stressing the value of localism and regionalism as opposed to the over-centralisation of political, cultural and economic processes.

WORKING CLASS HERO

'As soon as you're born, they make you feel small

By giving you no time, instead of it all,

Till the pain is so big you feel nothing at all.

A working class hero is something to be,

A working class hero is something to be.

They hurt you at home and they hit you at school,

They hate you if you're clever and they despise you as a fool,

Till you're so fucking crazy you can't follow their rules.

A working class hero is something to be,

A working class hero is something to be.

There's room at the top they are telling you still,

But first you must learn how to smile as you kill,

If you want to be like the folks on the hill.

A working class hero is something to be,

A working class hero is something to be.

If you want to be a hero, well just follow me,

If you want to be a hero, well just follow me.' »

(John Lennon)

Chapter 2. TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY

No biography of Jack Common has been attempted before and I have, therefore, gone to great pains to gather together as much of the available material as possible, bringing my own extensive work on Common to bear in this task. I have sought to look at Common in sociological, historical and cultural contexts whilst stressing his uniqueness as an individual.

I have been particularly inspired by biographers such as Richard Holmes (his works on Shelley and Coleridge, for example) and Peter Ackroyd (his works on William Blake and on London), both of whom seemed to find ways of getting under the skin of their subjects. Holmes, in particular, has talked in detail of how he tried to achieve this seemingly nigh on impossible task:

‘You could not play-act into the past; you could not turn it into a game of make-believe. There had to be another way. Somehow you had to produce the living effect, while remaining true to the dead fact. The adult distance – the critical distance, the historical distance – had to be maintained. You stood at the end of the broken bridge and looked across carefully, objectively, into the unattainable past on the other side. You brought it alive, brought it back, by other sorts of skills and crafts and sensible magic....

‘Biography’ meant a book about someone’s life. Only, for me, it was to become a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone’s path through the past, a following of footsteps. You would never catch them; no, you would never quite catch them. But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the present.’ (Holmes, R., 1986, p.27)

For Holmes there are two main elements in the process of biography:

‘The first is the gathering of factual materials, the assembling in chronological order of a man’s ‘journey’ through the world – the actions, the words, the recorded thoughts, the places and faces through which he moved: the ‘life and letters’. The second is the creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and his subject; not merely a ‘point of view’ or an ‘interpretation’, but a continuous living dialogue between the two as they move over the same historical ground, the same trail of events. There is between them a ceaseless discussion, a reviewing and questioning of motives and actions and consequences, a steady if subliminal exchange of attitudes, judgments and conclusions ... The first stage of such a living, fictional relationship is in my experience a degree of more or less conscious identification with the subject ...

The past does retain a physical presence for the biographer – in landscapes, buildings, photographs, and above all the actual trace of handwriting on original letters or journals. Anything a hand has touched is for some reason peculiarly charged with personality ...

Just as the biographer cannot make up dialogue, if he is to avoid fiction; so he cannot really say that his subject ‘thought’ or ‘felt’ a particular thing. When he uses these forms of narration it is actually a type of agreed shorthand, which must mean – if it means anything factual – that ‘there is evidence from his letters or journals or reported conversations that he thought, or that he felt, such-and-such a thing at this time ...

The more closely and scrupulously you follow someone’s footsteps through the past the more conscious do you become that they never existed wholly in

any one place along the recorded path. You cannot freeze them; you cannot pinpoint them, at any particular turn in the road, bend of the river, view from the window. They are always in motion, carrying their past lives over into the future.’ (Holmes, R., 1986, pp.66-9)

I have studied the range of Common’s essay writing in ‘The Adelphi’ magazine and elsewhere and sought to place this more centrally than is usual in studies of his work. Where there have been gaps in published material, I have sought out members of his family, close friends and acquaintances and those who were knowledgeable about his life and work and recorded their evidence on tape or encouraged them to write down their unique perspectives. To this end, I have visited, for example, his son Peter in Warrington, Lancashire, and met him several times in Newcastle, talked with his daughter Sally in Malvern, Worcestershire, and in Newcastle, interviewed associates such as Tommy McCulloch in Yetminster, Dorset, John Burke (Common’s colleague from the film world) in Corbridge, Northumberland, as well as film-maker John Mapplebeck in Bamburgh, and Professor David Byrne at Durham University.

Asking people to recount their memories of childhood and their father or of adventures with an old friend is not of course a totally reliable way of providing biographical material. Certain things fade from memory, either through the weariness induced by ageing or because of the understandably selective way the person wants father or friend to be seen as today. In the case of Common there is a lot of pain in his relationship to his own parents (his mother’s drinking and his father’s strictness, bordering on violence, for example) and immediate family, in particular. His graphic accounts of his Newcastle childhood in his novel ‘Kiddar’s Luck’ caused much upset, even threats of legal action, when it was eventually published.

One can try and encourage close family and friends to open up when faced with a tape-recorder but the gaps in what is said must be taken into account. Nonetheless, such interviews do give an important biographical insight into the man and bring to life his relationships and the various environments and landscapes he sprung from and lived in. This is not just a matter of his personal, psychological development, it is also a question of seeing him in the context of the material, historic, economic and political situations and attitudes of his day.

As Eric Hobsbawm has noted (1997, pp.206-7):

‘Most oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing ... At the moment our criteria for judging oral sources are almost entirely instinctive or non-existent. It either sounds right or it doesn't. Of course we can also check it against some verifiable independent source and approve it because it can be confirmed by such a source. But this doesn't get us nearer the crucial problem, which is to know what we can believe when there is nothing to check it against. The methodology of oral history is not simply important for checking the reliability of the tapes of old ladies' and gentlemen's reminiscences. One significant aspect of grassroots history is what ordinary people remember of big events as distinct from what their betters think they should remember, or what historians can establish as having happened; and insofar as they turn memory into myth, how such myths are formed.’

Jack Common liked nothing better than telling tales, often in public houses. He came from that kind of tradition, so it is inevitable that in this study I should seek out storytellers and evokers of memories who could echo the atmospheres that Common himself created in his stories and narratives:

‘Collecting life stories gives one a sense of narration. It is a sense we have forgotten (but which is still very vivid in oral cultures) and which we have to learn again ... Through life stories ... people are able to communicate to one another, through the mediation of sociology. This mediation should not be one of mere transmission. As intellectuals, we do have something to add (the in-depth description of patterns of social relations, their contradictions, their historical movement); however, this can also take the narrative form. We should tell stories; not only the life stories of various people but also the story of such or such a pattern of social relations, the story of a culture, of an institution, of a social group; and also, our own story as research workers.’
(Bertaux, D., 1981, p.44)

Of course, one cannot be content simply to take at face-value the tales that people tell. The narrative needs to be set in a broad sociological context if it is to make any sense of things, past and present:

‘The analysis of life histories does not primarily aim at individual particularities, but seeks to unravel what general elements they contain. By representing individual life histories, the biographical method is meant to give access to the reality of life of social aggregates (strata, classes, cultures, etc.).’ (Kohli, M. in Bertaux, D., 1981, p.6)

Common's own stories were rooted in a streetwise reality. This is what avoided his writing becoming solely abstract and theoretical. His analysis was impregnated with street-cries and smells and was all the more vivid for it.

'There is no such thing as a 'true' biography: however scrupulous the research, nobody has access to another's soul, and the character on the page is the author's creation. One aspect of the creativity is the subject-in-context and it is this that makes the complaint about over-emphasising the role of the individual so off-beam. Indeed, far from underplaying social factors, the good biographer highlights them, to give added precision to the story. Good biography is flexible, making unexpected connections across periods of time.'

(Pimlott, B., 2004, p.23)

Common needs to be seen in a broad light. His writing and thoughts ranged over a wide area and cannot be understood fully without a recognition of a variety of factors – not only the street-corners that he evokes so well but the contexts in which street-corner life was situated, the individual life on a social platform and community understood as the sum of individual lives. Durkheim, a major figure in sociology, was interested not only in observed experiences and attitudes on a surface level but also in what they amounted to as a whole. Viewed in this way, what we might call 'working-class culture' cannot be observed as a range of diverse experiences acted out only by individuals, since it is not these acts alone which add up to a culture but the culture itself which constitutes the acts. For example, and to use an example very much attuned to the back-streets of Jack Common's Heaton, there is nothing more personal and binding than a bet, but 'betting' in itself as a social phenomenon is both cultural and communal and is the social contract which enables the act of the bet itself to happen. What goes for the simple bet also goes

for larger institutions in society too. Durkheim meant us to recognise what is particular about social life in one place compared to that of another.

I have looked at the whole range of factors, both personal, social, cultural and political which inspired and shaped Jack Common in the framework of a past and present approach, setting his personal life within the structures of society and bearing in mind the history and community he stemmed from.

Common himself was very much inspired by the sense of history pervading the streets of his home city of Newcastle upon Tyne. He sought to develop this tradition but also was intent on confronting the often harsh realities of the present day.

‘The continuity between past and present must be maintained, the difficulty is that it is far harder to rethink the way we treat the past than to make the present conform to the image of the past that we have created. There is no denying that the erasures of modernisation and recession have been an enormous disruption but, if we are to make any sense of them, they must be confronted, however painfully. It is no solution to retreat into a fake history: we need to recover the true continuity between past and present by coming to terms with previous failures. If the disruptions they have caused are so great that it seems impossible to make sense of them then we must make new meanings, not retrieve old ones.’ (Hewison, R., 1987, p.143)

‘Cultures do not carry on regardless. In the 1990s, the pit villages of County Durham were offered as examples of moral and material disintegration. Only twenty years earlier, they had been offered as examples of culture and community. A whole civil society had been allowed to unravel. Except for

some particularly feral estates and inner city areas, post-industrial Britain ... is a long way off Durkheim's anomie, but all government agencies are aware of the unravelling and not one of them has a clue what to do about it. Now that Durkheim's 'regular and constant practices' and 'residues of collective experiences' have been broken, it is difficult to measure the rate of the unravelling because it is difficult to know what to measure it against. For a time, it seemed as though Etzioni's new communitarian politics would show how to restore civil society. Yet, although he uses history as a backdrop for what he sees as the disastrous decline of community since the 1950s, in truth, Etzioni shows little interest in historical communities that had once lived.'

(Colls, R., 2004, online, pp.1-26)

Conducting this research has enabled me to look back on the work that myself and others have done over the years under the influence of his inspiration and to consider how far it is of any value to today's issues and the aspirations of successive generations; indeed, how valid was it at the time we engaged in it?

The process of constantly debating the ideas and politics of Common with colleagues and associates in the field and putting them in a present-day context. This has been the case since I first became actively involved with Common through my work with 'Strong Words' starting in 1977. Such a method creates a conflict and friction between past and present and keeps what Common stood for alive in the culture. It has meant the organisation of meetings and events as well as informal discussions and seminars with cultural activists and others, mostly in the North East of England.

I have devoted a whole chapter to his association and friendship with George Orwell, bringing together, again for the first time, the available literature on this and analysing their relationship in some depth in an attempt to rescue Common from the shadow of Orwell and to elevate him from his usual position of a footnote to Orwell's career. I have also dwelt on Common's link with the writer, publisher and activist John Middleton Murry and sought to understand any empathy or differences between the two men.

The thirties was a crucial and fascinating period of our history, a time which saw Common develop and mature his perceptions and political understandings. Its influence carried over into my own work on the man and on other community arts ventures in the 1970s and into the eighties.

Implicit in all of this is the notion of 'class' which I have adopted as a key factor in any understanding of Common. It is obvious that many of the certainties surrounding this issue have manifestly changed since Common's day. I have taken this factor on board in considering his relevance to present day politics and culture. Inevitably this also implies the taking of gender relationships into account and how attitudes have changed in this respect since Common's day.

'On Tyneside as across all the older industrial regions, there were mass closures in manufacturing, and a restructuring of the labour market which involved the virtual disappearance of the youth labour market and the trend towards flexible, part-time, unskilled, cheap, branch plant and service labour. As the big industrial employers shut down and more women went out to work in a greater variety of locations, the female fund of common local knowledge began to dry up. Fundamental shifts in the pattern of work and residence,

including the end of apprenticeship, the bureaucratisation of the labour market, the mortgaging of housing, and the steep fall in the number of married households, all conspired against family and street as a source and a means of communication ...

At the same time, in the minds of metropolitan intellectuals, new ideas about ethnic and gender variability began to replace older ideas about solidarity and things that were supposed to be fixed and forever. In a post-industrial, post-colonial, post- masculine, post-Christian world of fluid identities, ethnic diversities and global markets, the position of white working-class men who stayed attached to one place and a certain way of doing things (their own), looked distinctly uncomfortable.’ (Colls, R.,2004, online pp.1-26)

Like myself, Jack Common hailed from the working class and was confident about his roots. In many ways, he drew strength from them and he understood where he was standing in the big scheme of things. Turmoil was all around him but that background stayed with him as a bed-rock to his character and attitudes towards community and the individual’s place in it:

‘There was among social historians and sociologists a shared presumption that economic change was the key to social change, that social change was concerned with the rise and fall of classes and with the conflicts between them, and that it was the outcome of such battles which determined both the changing structure and the developing issues of politics. The conflict between the classes was the direct, inevitable consequence of the conflict between those who were differently related to the means of production, and it was this struggle which in the end determined the nature and the working of the

political structure. Even if the dictatorship of the proletariat had not yet arrived, as Marx had predicted it should have done, his insights still seemed to offer the best way of understanding the broad contours of the economic, social and political development of modern Britain – insights to which, it bears repeating, class formation, class identity, class consciousness and class conflict were central.’ (Cannadine, D., 2000, pp.7-8)

For a long period through Jack Common’s life and even after his death in 1968 this was to remain as the prevailing orthodoxy but it is not today and is severely questioned by current historians:

‘On closer inspection, the best that could be said of Marx’s three class-conscious classes was that they were ideal types, historical abstractions, which grossly over-simplified the way in which the social structure of modern Britain had actually evolved and developed ... the social structure of modern Britain was more elaborate, and also more integrated, than Marx had allowed ... The class interpretation was also in error in placing so much stress on the unifying experience of labouring activity in the creation of class consciousness. As soon as historians began to study work, it turned out, like so much else, to be a more complex subject than the Marxists had appreciated ... Even for the working class, there was always more to life than work and working.’ (Cannadine, D., 2000, pp.10-11)

I will argue that class cannot be ignored in an analysis of Common’s life and work and that it remains a crucial area of study in the present day political and cultural climate which is too often cast aside in contemporary studies with a disproportionate emphasis

placed on individual identity, race and gender, for example. However, I do admit that we must bear changing social and cultural circumstances in mind in any analysis today:

‘Feminist scholars rightly observe that very few women appear in the canonical texts of social history written in a Marxist mode. How odd it seems to them that books ostensibly about a whole class are only concerned with one half of it ... During the 1950s and 1960s, pioneering social historians were Marxists interested in class. During the 1980s and 1990s, they have more usually been feminists interested in gender. For them, the history of all hitherto existing society is no longer the history of class struggles: instead it is the history of gendered identities and inter-personal relationships ... it is the history of a limitless number of individual self-categorisations and subjective social descriptions – of which class is only one among a multitude of competing and frequently changing vocabularies. All this is merely to say that we now live in a post-modern era of decentred and deconstructed discourse in which grand, traditional master narratives are no longer fashionable because they no longer seem credible ... Among the prime casualties of this new mode of thinking have been those bold, confident, overarching, Marxist-liberal histories built around class formation, class conflict and political revolution. The simple, direct connections so easily assumed but so rarely demonstrated between economic change, the making of class, and revolutionary politics, have very largely been given up ... In its post-war heyday, class was the grandest and most masterly narrative that was available. But today, the only master narrative left is that there is no master narrative whatsoever, only the ‘chaotic authenticity’ of random happenings and unforeseeable events ... The final, precipitous collapse of Victorian staple

industries, and of the traditional working class, means that the number of trade union members has fallen dramatically, and that their political influence is much diminished ... Today's Labour politicians are less interested than their predecessors were in the history of class consciousness and class conflict, a history which was once such an important prop to the party's collective identity and purpose. Instead, they have returned to an earlier notion of more emollient Socialism, by stressing co-operation and community rather than class and conflict ... The key to Blair's politics is the nurturing of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society, and this culture of community and inclusivity leaves no room for the outdated and outmoded notions of class identity, class interests and class war. Underlying the 'fall of class' on the left in Britain is a broader change in the conventional vocabulary of political discussion and social perception: namely the shift from the traditional preoccupation with people as collective producers to the alternative notion of people as individual consumers ... As a result of her policies and her rhetoric, Thatcher thus went a long way towards achieving her ambition of banning the language of class from public discussion and political debate about the structure and nature of British society.' (Cannadine, D., 2000, pp.11-14)

Such developments in British politics and history cannot be seen in isolation. They need to be viewed from a world perspective, in particular, taking into account the collapse of political structures in Eastern Europe and with it the general discrediting of Marxism as an ideology:

‘Communism is dead, therefore Maxism is dead, therefore class is dead: thus runs the argument ... If we accept, as we are surely correct in doing, that class is one of the most important aspects of modern British history no less than of modern British life, then it is at best regrettable and at worst plain wrong for the current generation of historians to show minimal interest in the subject. Even if, in its crudest forms, the Marxist approach no longer carries conviction, that is no reason for dismissing class altogether ... the most important and immediate task is neither that of denying nor rehabilitating old-style class analysis, but of defining the subject afresh and envisioning it anew ... Most Marxists believed that a person’s class identity was collective rather than individual, and was primarily determined by his (or, just occasionally, her) relationship to the means of production. But this is clearly too narrow, too materialistic, too reductionist an approach, and it erroneously assumed that all social identities were shared rather than single ... he also assumed a direct causal link, not only between economic development and social change, but also between social change and political events. This, too, seems excessively crude ...

Where Marx was on to something was in his insistence that the material circumstances of people's existence – physical, financial, environmental – do matter in influencing their life-chances, their sense of identity, and the historical part which they and their contemporaries may (or may not) play ... To write class out of British history and British life is to disregard or misunderstand one of its central themes. Class may not be the essence of history in the way that the Marxists and Welfare State liberals once believed. But nor is it the perversion of history that Margaret Thatcher claims.’

(Cannadine, D., 2000, pp.14, 17, 23)

In his recent study of Marx, Francis Wheen (1999, pp. 4-5) discovered that:

‘The more I studied Marx, the more outstandingly topical he seemed to be. Today’s pundits and politicians who fancy themselves as modern thinkers like to mention the buzz-word ‘globalisation’ at every opportunity – without realising that Marx was already on the case in 1848. The globe-straddling dominance of McDonald’s and MTV would not have surprised him in the least. The shift in financial power from the Atlantic to the Pacific – thanks to the Asian Tiger economies and the silicon boom towns of west-coast America – was predicted by Marx more than a century before Bill Gates was born.’

The aim of Adonis and Pollard (1998, pp.xi,10) was to:

‘explode the fashionable notion that Britain is becoming a ‘classless society’ and to describe the class contours of modern Britain, particularly the impact of a ‘two nation’ education system and the rise of what we call the new Super Class of top professionals and managers, centred on the City, who are as far apart from the ‘middle class’ of white collar workers as are the latter from the misnamed ‘underclass’ at the bottom ...

The old labels ‘working’ and ‘middle’ class make less sense in the context of radically changing patterns of occupation, income, lifestyle and authority. It is a truism that social mobility abounds and that most of the ‘working class’ – meaning manual workers – leads what even a generation ago would have been considered a middle-class consumer lifestyle ... we are witnessing the mainsprings of a ‘middle classes’ mentality embracing the two-thirds or so of

the population who are fully part of today's consumer marketplace. Yet this 'middle-classes' mentality co-exists with old-class mentalities and with brute economic forces making for a more, not less, divided society ...

Underpinning these distinctions are fundamental differences in upbringing, education and occupations. It is here that we confront head-on the public perception of a class system, in the sense of deep structural barriers and inequalities reflecting and intensifying social segregation.'

Ferdinand Mount has recently explored contemporary class attitudes in British society and identifies a troubling schism between what he describes as 'Uppers' and 'Downers':

'What the Uppers are afraid of is the Downers. Just as Wells prophesied, the children of light are afraid of the dark and of the tribes who live in the dark. It is the Downers who burgle Upper houses and hold the house-owners at gunpoint ... it is the Downers who shamle through the streets at closing time, noisy, foul-mouthed and vomiting. Now in reality many of these unpleasant fates are visited not on Uppers but on other Downers. You are far more likely to get burgled in a poor area than in a middle-class one ... But the Uppers neither know nor care about such things. To the readers of the Daily Mail, it is they who are the prime targets of a ruthless army of violent hoodlums which is inexhaustible and unstoppable. It has taken politicians thirty years to wake up to the fact that the poor are the principal victims of crime, and the Upper public has not woken up yet ... In the old days, the classes lived side by side. I don't mean that they lived happily together. On the contrary, there was plenty of hauteur and resentment: condescension, apprehension and misapprehension abounded. But at least the lower classes still dwelled in the cottages between the vicarage and manor house ... In the

towns, too, poor dwellers might rub shoulders with the houses of the well-to-do, and for tradesmen and artisans alike the middle and upper classes were familiar neighbours, customers and employers. One of the greatest changes of modern society has been the geographical separation of the classes in Britain. The rise of council estates and the bourgeoisie's flight to suburbia have introduced an unintended social zoning into the cities ... This separation is taken to its extreme in the appearance of 'the gated community' ... It is not until 1955 that the Oxford English Dictionary records the first British use of 'loser' to mean an unsuccessful or incompetent person, a failure in life. This notion that there is a whole category of people who are doomed to flop in all significant departments of existence was originally American. Over here we would have once felt it indecent to brand people in this way. Not any more.'

(Mount, F., 2004, pp.84-6, 92)

I believe that Jack Common stood for the dignity of the common people and the capability and potential for the poor and disadvantaged to show decency in the face of adversity and to raise themselves up to live a fulfilled and spiritual and intellectual life, whilst showing respect for their neighbours. I think that he learnt this through hard experience; it was not just a romantic myth. Equally, the poor were not then belittled by those in a more advantageous position in society. However, large elements of the left pushed them into the concept of the masses, forming a potent class capable of overthrowing their rulers whereas, I would argue, Common saw their individuality and humanity and understood their day to day lived experiences, feelings, strengths and weaknesses. Attitudes today have certainly changed:

‘There does exist a culture of the poor which has achieved legitimacy among English artists and intellectuals and it is the culture of the industrial working class ... We were not supposed to learn much from the way the independent working classes actually lived. Their value to us was that their traditions of collective agitation would remake society on more just and communalised lines. Since that has not happened – or not happened in quite the way that socialists thought and hoped it would – the civilisation of the English proletariat is now not much more than a curiosity in our discourse, a moment in social history that is fast fading from our memories. In most continental countries, by contrast, the life of the peasant remains an active exemplar. When striking farmers in France blockade the streets with their tractors, this is not regarded by the public as nothing but a bloody-minded nuisance, it is a legitimate act of self-assertion ... People in England look back to wartime with acute nostalgia ... the feeling that everyone was doing his or her bit – bits which added up to a whole – and that feeling legitimated an equality of respect which trumped the continuing inequalities of wealth and power. Naturally this equality of respect included the poor, too, who were ‘for the duration’ endowed with qualities of stoicism and good humour of which they were to be progressively stripped in the post-war period.’ (Mount, F., 2004, pp.104-5)

In ‘What Went Wrong’ (1978, pp. 276, 280) Jeremy Seabrook journeyed around Britain and encountered the pain and resentment felt in working class communities in old industrial regions like the Rhondda and Wigan as well as in new towns in the south like Milton Keynes. Here old Labour activists told of their disappointments and shattered hopes and the young in anger and frustration turned away from socialism and into

violence. Here, Seabrook bemoans the loss of community and yearns for its rebirth. Hope for some kind of an alternative has, says Seabrook, 'been slowly extinguished by the events of the past 30 or 40 years'. Old trades have been pushed aside by harsh economic change. Something else is required, he says, 'to mend the sense of belonging that has been broken by uprooting people and flinging them arbitrarily across the countryside like seeds scattered on the wind.'

A PRAYER FOR THE LONERS

The dejected men,
the lone voices,
slip away
in this seaside rain.
Their words shudder to a standstill
in dismal corners.
Frightened to shout,
they cower
behind quivering faces.
No one listens
to their memories crying.
There seems no point
in this democratic deficit.
For years, they just shuffle along,
hopeless
in their financial innocence.
They do have names
that no lovers pronounce.
They flit between stools,
miss out on gales of laughter.
Who cares for them?
Nobody in Whitley Bay
or canny Shields,
that's for sure.

These wayside fellows
might as well be in a saddos' heaven
for all it matters
in the grey world's backwaters.
Life has bruised them,
dashed them.
Bones flake into the night.
I feel like handing them all loud-hailers
to release
their oppressed passion,
to move them
to scream
red murder at their leaders –
those they never voted for;
those who think they're something,
some thing special,
grand.
For, in the end,
I am on the side of these stooped lamenters,
the lonely old boys with a grievance
about caring
and the uncaring;
about power,
and how switched off
this government is
from the isolated,

from the agitated,
from the trembling,
the disenfranchised
drinkers of sadness.

(Keith Armstrong)

These factors impinge in a major way on any assessment of the life and work of Jack Common. As someone, like Jack, from a white hetero working class industrial community, they also impinge on my own work and attitudes. I have brought this analysis to bear in this thesis.

Common could be described as something of a rebel, a socialist loner. He came to his dissident, questioning attitudes through a process of informal and formal education. He got inspiration through his bookish uncle, from an education on the streets of Heaton and through informal networks such as the Newcastle Socialist Society, the People's Theatre and the Bensham Settlement. He grated against the confines of schooling at Chillingham Road School and Skerry's College and would never attend Worker's Educational Association classes. His most meaningful access to education was largely through autonomous local initiatives and it is these kinds of organisations which have been under attack for a long period. For Ferdinand Mount:

'the final closure of so many working-class institutions is only the culmination of a long and bitter campaign to deride and eclipse them ... those who sought to replace independent lower-class initiatives and institutions by

the hand of the State mostly knew what they were about.’ (Mount, F., 2004, p.202)

And yet manual workers in this country still account for 10.5 million workers, nearly forty per cent of total employment. If you add to this figure clerical workers then the traditional labour force is fifteen million, two in three jobs. Over the last fifteen years the key growth areas have been in traditional, often low paid jobs, many carried out by women, though there has been an increase in high paid jobs in the ‘knowledge’ sector.

‘... The reason for Blair and New Labour’s aversion to class is simple enough. The term is a social and political signifier of an Old Labour world that it wants to be seen to have left behind. Class in general and working class in particular evokes production, collectivism and council housing rather than consumption, individualism and aspiration. Blairite goals are social mobility and meritocracy – raising standards for all rather than closing the gap ... Class has long ceased to be a fashionable subject of interest among social scientists and cultural commentators. We have moved from an understandable distancing from the ‘master narrative’ of class, to a situation where class is a subordinate competitor in the (post) modern politics of identity. Observe the bookshop sociology shelves and they are bulging with texts on gender, sexuality and to a lesser extent race. In addition, like New Labour, most social scientists are far more interested in consumption than production ... We may not be able to re-instate the class politics of old, but we can re-make a politics that addresses class issues. At the heart of that language has to be a re-invigorated politics of equality that talks of opportunity and the means of making it real. Such an approach needs to be

expressed in symbolically different policies that make a difference in class terms at the top and bottom. The most straightforward way of doing this would be a strengthened 'living' minimum wage and increased taxes on wealth.' (Thompson, P. & Lawson, N., 2006, pp.1-3, 6-7)

Bearing in mind my wish to publish this thesis at a later stage, I have also sought out appropriate photographs and documents with which to illustrate any future publication. These include pictures of Common himself and family and friends, the better to sense the real people behind taped interviews and the texts that Common himself left us. Also shots of places where he lived, from the streets of his native Heaton in Newcastle (including interiors of the house where he was born), as well as his haunts in Newport Pagnell where he was to die.

Like Richard Holmes, I have embarked upon a series of field visits to follow in Common's footsteps in the hope of gleaning a more intimate perspective of the man and his family. In particular, I have walked, on more than one occasion, the streets of his birthplace in Newcastle upon Tyne and its immediate environs, including visits to Chillingham Road School, the very Dene where he loved to walk, and the banks of the River Tyne. I have also visited, with his daughter Sally, Newport Pagnell where he died, entered the pubs and clubs, where he once supped and conversed, and walked through the cemetery and fields where he loved to roam.

His lifelong love of Newcastle, and the culture and sense of history it spawned, is a key factor in understanding his life and passions, something which drew him but which also alienated him and led him to London in search of a broader canvas.

I have investigated this paradox in some detail within the context of the history and politics of the city and some of the key figures and the ordinary folk and communities who inspired its development. At times, to achieve this, I have felt it necessary to quote

extensively from Common's own writings. After all, this is a 'literary' biography and I feel that part of my task in writing it is to introduce readers to the essence of his work and the atmosphere and moods which his writing is so adept at reflecting. By quoting at some length from his novels, essays and letters, I have sought to express the rhythms of his voice and of his life so that he breathes in the pages of this academic thesis. His novels are essentially auto-biographical and very revealing of his relationships with his mother and father, for example. In a biography of this kind, therefore, I felt it important to highlight by way of appropriate quotations what the novels reveal of his childhood and family background, his schooling and growing up in Newcastle. Common can best speak for himself in this respect, rather than me re-write what he has already expressed so eloquently.

His letters have never been in print and they reveal the day to day struggles of his life, and the family, friends and associates he interacted with, in a way which I could not hope to achieve in my own words. At its best, Common's writing has a flow and a poetry which I wanted to give full expression to and not to interrupt it as it cascades and careers along, like the rivers he was so fond of.

I have also felt it important to quote from his literary colleagues at some length, writers such as Orwell, John Middleton Murry and Max Plowman, to do justice to their lives and ideas and the conflicts of the times they lived in. I think it is valid to quote from such key figures in depth so that the cadences of their voices can be properly heard in the ways in which they wanted to express themselves; to give space to their beliefs and to let their personalities breathe adequately. Equally, much of this material is either printed for the first time or has been out of the public realm for so long that I have felt it important to highlight it to contemporary readers, since I feel that the kinds of debate it expresses are as important now as they were in, say, the twenties and thirties.

This is also true of the interviews with family and friends I have conducted when, again, I have felt obliged to quote them at length to let them speak for themselves and to make sure that their views and memories are published for posterity.

Where appropriate, I have included some of my own poetry about Newcastle and Tyneside and about the man himself. This is not done out of vanity but to indicate that, like Common, I am inspired by the traditions and culture of North East England, going back to border balladry, folk song and, more recently, music hall and comedy. Common was obviously a man of strong words and ideals which makes me feel that the employment of poetry in this thesis is appropriate to further understanding the man and the background from which he came. In my poetry, and in my use of Common's own, I have tried to capture, more effectively than prose can, the history and atmosphere of place which is so crucial to Common's life and work. The poetry expresses the conflicts of class and community and the role of the individual in these contexts, all of which was so vital to his ideas and writing. Both Common and myself are sons of Tyneside and that kind of Geordie lyricism comes across in our words. It is also present in the work of song-writer Alex Glasgow and writers like Joseph Skipsey, the pitman-poet, who I have quoted from in this thesis to further illustrate the passion and politics of the North East region. I therefore have no problem about the use of poetic form in this work since I feel it is valid to play to my strengths as an experienced practitioner in this field in order to better put across the spirit of the man and his times and, in particular, his value to present-day debates in a massively changed world. There is no doubt that Common was greatly inspired by poets such as Shelley and this is also true of many in his immediate circle, including his own family, members of which I have extensively interviewed as part of my work.

I have tried to bring life to the prose and to inject humanity and passion into the exercise of academic discourse. I also do it as a tribute to Jack Common to reassure him that his spirit lives on in writers from Tyneside today and to demonstrate that his home city of Newcastle upon Tyne is nothing without its history and the whiff of the past in its aged and poetic streets.

Chapter 3: STRONG WORDS FROM THE STREETS

I have known of Jack Common since the sixth form of Heaton Grammar School in Newcastle upon Tyne when I was introduced to his novel of working class life on the streets of my own Heaton, 'Kiddar's Luck', and its sequel on growing up in Newcastle, 'The Ampersand'. He struck me as a man after my own heart. Someone who knew his roots, who had come from the same streets as mine. His father was a railway worker, mine from the shipyards. We had a shared sense of the industrial heritage of Newcastle, and a sense of community. When I walked along the Fourth Avenue where he was born, and down its back lane, the colour of his words and the characters that haunt him sprang to life. A gritty realism tinged with the remembrance of things past, the shouts of the street-hawkers and the cries of kids playing in the gutters of the early twentieth century. He stayed with me as I went to college and began work in the library world in the 1960s, which I later left for community work and the life of the political activist in the seventies, and he is still with me now as a guardian soul looking over my slim shoulders as I try to make sense of his life and work. Sometimes I wish he'd go away.

With a name like Jack Common he had to be on the side of the common folk – and he was. It was through this kind of inspiration that myself and others established the 'Strong Words' community publishing project in the North East of England back in 1977. Its aim was to publish booklets based on the lives and experiences of working people in the area, expressed through the words of the people themselves.

'It is this belief in the importance of strengthening cultural traditions within the working class which forms the strongest link between Jack Common and the 'Strong Words' project.' (Strong Words, 1977)

Through its publications and events, the project attempted to express working class people's living experience in the North East of England through the words of the people themselves; their own stories told in prose, in verse, in conversation. Working people were given the opportunity to publish and communicate their own feelings and ideas – about the past and future; about work and the lack of it; about family life, having children and being a child; about problems and happiness, victories and defeats. And in a booklet that was cheap enough for people to afford.

'Strong Words' was based upon the belief that it is important to retain and strengthen cultural heritage in a way that allows working people to benefit from each other's experiences.

'So much is written *about* working class people (in the press, on TV, in academic books and journals) but very little is written *by* them. The purpose of 'Strong Words' was to 'alter this a little by encouraging people to write of their own experiences or to document them through recorded conversations. In this respect, we hope that these booklets will come as a breath of fresh air. Above all, we hope that they will be read and discussed in pubs and clubs, workplaces and communities throughout the area.' ('Strong Words', 1977)

Jonathan Rose has shown the broad ambitions of working-class 'self-improvers'.

Chartist Robert Lowery discovered in the community of miners of Northumberland and Durham:

'Many superior mathematicians, and the booksellers of Newcastle were known to sell, chiefly among the workmen of the north, a larger number of works on that science than were sold in any other similar district of the

country. Some of these men were excellent horticulturalists and florists ... I was acquainted with one ... as he walked among his flower beds he would sound their scientific names in his provincial tones, intermingling his conversation with remarks on the philosophy of Locke, or quoting passages from Milton, Byron, Shelley or Burns.’ (Rose, 2001, p.71)

Manny Shinwell, the Labour orator and Cabinet Minister, built up from rubbish dumps and hand bookstalls a library of 250 volumes, including Dickens, Meredith, Hardy, Keats, Hume, Darwin, Huxley, Kant and Spinoza. And at the age of 14, Durham miner Jack Lawson found liberation in the Boldon Miners Institute:

‘which was then nothing more than two pit-houses knocked into one. And didn’t I follow the literary trail, once I found it! Like a Fenimore Cooper Indian, I was tireless and silent once I started. Scott; Charles Reade; George Eliot; the Brontés; later on, Hardy; Hugo; Dumas, and scores of others. Then came Shakespeare; the Bible; Milton and the line of poets generally. I was hardly sixteen when I picked up James Thomson’s ‘Seasons’, in Stead’s ‘Penny Poets’ ... I wept for the shepherd who died in the snow.’
(Rose, 2001, p.52)

‘Strong Words’ and subsequent projects could be said to be influenced by the likes of Tommy Armstrong and his fellow pitman-poet Joseph Skipsey, who describes his own background vividly:

‘I had no means of education to speak of. I was born on St Patrick’s Day, 1832, in the village of Percy Main, near North Shields. That was the time of

the great colliery strike. My father was one of the leading men among the miners of our village and whilst trying to keep between his workmates and police was shot dead outside the 'Pineapple Inn' near Chirton. My mother Bella was left with eight children of whom I was the youngest, only four months old.

When I was seven years of age I went to work down the pit but even the mere pittance that I earned was of importance to a family such as ours, for those were times of desperate poverty. I became a trapper boy. I worked from twelve to sixteen hours a day in the bowels of the earth, seeing daylight only on Sundays for this was a life of work and sleep. That was when I taught myself to write. Mostly I sat in complete darkness, but occasionally a kindly miner would give me the end of his tallow candle which I struck against the wall with a bit of clay. At such happy seasons I amused myself by drawing figures upon the trapdoor and trying to write words by copying from hand-bills and notices I found from time to time ... I had begun to write down some of the verses that I had made, and here I ought to explain that I never wrote anything with a view to publication. I made verses because it seemed a natural and delightful thing to do. Most of my smaller pieces were composed as I was walking to and from the pit and some of these have been praised as among the best I have written.'

'Oh sleep,

Oh sleep my little baby,

Thou wilt wake thy father with thy cries

And he unto the pit must go before the sun begins to rise.

He'll toll for thee the whole day long

And, when the weary work is o'er,
He'll whistle thee a merry song
And drive the bogies from the door.'
(Skipsey, J., 1991)

Indeed, it was only when Skipsey attempted to ape the stylistic manner of the 'literati' of the day that his writing ran hollow. In this he was like the Scots border poet James Hogg who, as:

'the self-educated shepherd established his reputation as a writer and came into contact with the sophisticated literary world of Edinburgh, the predictable consequence was that he accepted too uncritically the validity of Edinburgh's opinions and fashions. As a result, many of his works are simply attempts to produce the kind of writing that he thought Edinburgh would admire – and this is one of the main reasons for the existence of the large body of unsuccessful verse which has done so much to harm his reputation ... Most of Hogg's best poetry was written when his object was to please himself rather than Edinburgh. Thus his many excellent songs make no concessions to the taste of genteel society, but are rather written in the spirit of the traditional folk songs he knew as a child in Etrick Forest.'
(Mack, D.S., 1970, Introduction)

Such tensions are as valid today as they were in the days of both Skipsey and Hogg; indeed, I feel them in my own writing and in my concern to speak with a regional non-metropolitan voice.

It is this concern which is at the heart of ‘Strong Words’, ‘Durham Voices’ and ‘Northern Voices’. Listen, for example, to retired miner Fred Scott of Newburn (1983, pp.24-7):

‘There’s a lot who have authority but its only power that’s got a hold of them. It’s not that the man is any different to me. The pollis is only a man the same as me. I don’t think the vicar will be any better than me as regards living, to live a life. To help everybody – that’s been my mainstay in all my life, right from a kid. We were fetched up that way – to care for people, and I’ve just continued on. We’re all born the same and we all go back the same, and I say they shouldn’t be allowed to hold as much land, none of them, because they’re strangling the people with what they’re doing. It’s still going on. The whole lot of them are living off your back. These people are born into it, they’ve got it, and they’re going to make sure you don’t get it – but you’re the man who’s working, you’re the man that’s using the shovel. Freedom’s a fascination. That’s the main thing. Nobody to tell you to do this or do that. Free as the dicky birds.’

And to farmer Joe Yeats of Gilsland in the booklet ‘Missile Village’ (1978), reflecting on the impact of the Blue Streak rocket launcher development programme at nearby Spadeadam:

‘Spadeadam was a good thing in a sense. We had no dole then in this part of the country. It was a big miss when it finished. But to me it was a useless asset. I suppose they would know what they were doing probably, but to me it was still a waste of money. When I was up in them fields out there, I

would see this big puff of smoke over Spadeadam and I'd think 'Hey up, there's a few more thousand pound gone up in the sky there'. That's all it was, a puff of smoke, you know.'

A feature of many of the 'Strong Words/Northern Voices' publications has been the attempt to link past and present by including material from young and old alike to reflect changing times in their communities. This from youngsters Jonathan Scott and Pamela Staley in the booklet 'Here I May Sweat and Dig For Lead: Teesdale Mining Traditions in the Words of Local People' (Northern Voices, 1991):

HANDS

A miner's hands are cold and cracked;
A miner's hands are cold and damp;
A miner's hands are never young;
A miner's hands are worn and dirty;
A miner's hands are sore and aching;
A miner's hands are always painful;
A miner's hands are his life-long tools:
Hands for playing when he is young,
Hands for working when he is strong,
Hands for begging when his life is almost done.

These poems by young people were in the tradition of the Teesdale lead-miner poet Richard Watson, described here by Claude Watson (also in 'Here I May Sweat and Dig For Lead'):

‘Dick Watson was a good poet. He worked at Wire Gill but it was well known that he was fairly useless – and his wife was worse. At Wire Gill, there was a man who worked the horses; he drew the level. This chap used to get up early in the morning to get his horse ready for the start of work. He had a young lad that helped him. One morning he said to the young lad, ‘Now, lad, thou just lie on this morning and watch the pantomime when ‘Poetry Dick’ gets up, what with bits of string and newspaper, ‘tis a bonny pantomime!’ Everything was fastened up with bits of string and newspaper to keep him warm!’

‘Poetry Dick’:

‘Mary, what is there here
But toil and poverty?
As for the friends you’re speaking of,
What have they done for me?
Here I may sweat and dig for lead,
‘Mid smoke and dust to earn my bread,
And I go half clothed and half fed,
Till I can work no more.’

In the publication ‘Where Explosions Are No More’ (Keith Armstrong, Ed., 1988), miner John Egan of Trimdon told his own story, the basis of a touring show which portrayed his life in narrative, poetry and folk-song:

‘The first pony I got was a grand little fella. They called him ‘Spring’. I always remember Spring. I can see him now, Spring, he was grey. All the ponies had names before they came down the pit: Boxer, Whisky, Mottram, Martin, all sorts of names, but my pony was ‘Spring’.’

The booklet also featured poems and stories by local children like Dianne Duddin:

PIT PONIES

Pit ponies are blinded in the sunlight but, down in the pit, the ponies can see in the dark.

And the ponies pull the coal around like slaves, and for their night they rest in peace.

Whilst the pits are obviously gone, the tradition is not entirely lost and the culture is preserved by bands like ‘The Whisky Priests’ (‘Life’s Tapestry’, ‘Whippet Records’, 1996), a young group from Sherburn village, though they are admittedly an exception to the general rule:

‘This village draws me,
I hear it calling me back through the years.
Its people are its life-blood,
I am its joy, I am its tears ...

This village haunts me,
Its whispering hurt tears at my soul.

Oh why did I forsake you?

Welcome me back, welcome me home.

A sacred bond exists here

Between the land and the people it owns.

It grants no escape from the realms of its fate,

It reaps the crops we have sown.

This village has made me all that I am

This village is calling me home.'

A sense of place, of Northumbrian roots, is also crucial to an understanding of the life and work of Tyneside's famous son, wood-engraver Thomas Bewick (1753-1828). It is particularly evident in Bewick's 'Memoir' (1979):

'Well do I remember to this day, my father's well known Whistle which called me home – he went to a little distance from the House, where nothing obstructed the sound, and whistled so loud through his finger and thumb – that in the still hours of the Evening, it might be heard echoing up the vale of the Tyne to a very great distance'.

'From the little window at my bed-stead, I noticed all the varying seasons of the year, and when the spring put in, I felt charmed with the music of the birds, which strained their little throats to proclaim it.'

All of these impressions greatly influenced the art of Bewick. This is also true of the people he grew up with, who gave him a sense of tradition and common learning:

‘The Winter evenings were often spent in listening to the traditionary Tales and Songs, relating to Men who had been eminent for their prowess and bravery in the Border Wars, and of others who had been esteemed for better and milder qualities, such as having been good Landlords, kind Neighbours, and otherwise in every respect being bold, independent and honest Men. I used to be particularly struck or affected with the Warlike music and the Songs. These Songs and laments were commemorative of many worthies, but the most particular ones that I now remember were those respecting the Earl of Derwent-Water, who was beheaded in the year 1715 ...

These cottagers were of an honest and independent character ... most of these poor Men, from their having little intercourse with the World, were in all their actions and behaviour truly original – except reading the Bible, local Histories and old Ballads, their knowledge was generally limited – and yet one of these, ‘Will Bewick’, from being much struck with my performance which he called Pictures, became exceedingly kind to me, and was the first person from whom I gathered a kind of general knowledge of Astronomy and of the Magnitude of the universe. He had, the Year through, noticed the appearance of the stars and the Planets and would discourse largely on the subject. I think I see him yet, sitting on a mound or seat, by the Hedge of his Garden, regardless of the cold, and intent upon the heavenly bodies, pointing to them with his large hands and eagerly imparting his knowledge to me, with a strong voice.’

Bewick is a key figure in the ‘Geordie’ heritage. Indeed, given that he died in Gateshead, an image of him and his work might have been more appropriate on the ‘Gateway’ site now occupied by ‘The Angel of the North’. He worked in Newcastle

when it was the most important printing centre in England outside London, Oxford and Cambridge, with twenty printers in the town, publishing more books than any other provincial city, including ‘songs and schoolbooks, histories and sermons, works in all shapes and sizes, as well as Bewick’s ‘Quadrupeds’ and ‘Birds’.’ (Brewer, J., 1997, pp.504-8). This active publishing trade was backed up by a thriving cultural and social life represented by:

‘nearly fifty clubs and societies, ranging from masonic lodges to floral societies, from debating clubs to political associations, [which] met in coffee houses, club rooms and taverns ... In 1778 Bewick was elected to Swarley’s Club, which met at the Black Boy Inn ... [and] he also spent time with members of a literary club ‘who kept a library of Books and held their meetings in a Room at Sam Allcocks, at the Sign of the Cannon, at the foot of the old Flesh Market’. The society, which included some woollen drapers and the cashier of a local bank, may have served as the model for the Philosophical Society that Bewick, together with a bookseller, land surveyor, coach painter, engineers and dissenting minister, founded in the 1770s to debate literature, philosophy and politics ... The bookplate of Richard Swarley proudly declaimed ‘Libertas Auro Pretiosior’ (Liberty is more precious than gold); government spies broke up the club because of its radical, oppositional views during the Napoleonic Wars. The first occasion on which the radical bookseller and numismatist Thomas Spence set forth his views on the collective right to rural property was at a meeting of the Philosophical Society [from which he was later expelled – K.A.]. His agrarian socialism was controversial and Bewick, who was a firm believer in the virtues of private property, disliked it. On one occasion their differences

led to a fight with cudgels in which the strongly built engraver gave the slender radical a terrible drubbing. But they remained friends throughout their lives. Bewick visited Spence after he had left Newcastle, and the Bewick-Beilby workshop gave Spence the tools and type he needed to publish his new and simplified alphabet.’ (Brewer, J., 1997, pp.507-8)

Bewick and his associates were asserting a collectivist vision from a regionalist perspective and were not interested in merely aping London fashions. They ‘directly challenged any presumption that only gentlemen could be cultured and refined’. The Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society was established in the belief that, ‘Knowledge, like fire, is brought forth by collision; and in the free conversations of associated friends many lights have been struck out, and served as tin for the most important discoveries, which would not, probably, have occurred to their authors, in the refinements of private meditation.’ (Brewer, J., 1997, pp.511-12)

Aware of the kind of tradition which inspired Bewick, Alan Plater has this to say:

‘On the whole, born as we are from generations of disenfranchised voices, Geordie writers live easily enough with their ragbag of realities. The mere fact that we are able to write and see our work performed without being in hock to the Bloomsbury/Oxbridge axis, is awesome enough. On the whole, we are not cursed with Art in the Head. We see ourselves as *makers*, conscientious craftsmen who happen to be writers, just as our fathers happened to be railwaymen, shipbuilders or pitmen ... What we share, to borrow an idea from Sid Chaplin, is love of place and love of work. The shipyards and the coalfield, hideous as the conditions were, nevertheless created a lasting respect for the craft tradition, linked to the notion of

community interdependence. Both of these traditions have suffered grievously during the 1980s, kicked almost to death by the bovver boots of Thatcherism. What survives is the possibility of love, and that survival depends in large measure on the writers ... Memory becomes history becomes legend ... In the North East, we have long memories and a massive burden of history ... an oral tradition, starting in childhood, hardened by inherited rage and love ... our stories should be dream-driven, not market-driven and they should be stories that in one form or another were first heard in a back yard, once upon a time.' (Plater, A., 1992, pp.71-84)

The American broadcaster and oral historian Studs Terkel, whose books based on the recollections of 'so-called ordinary people' have chronicled American history since the Depression, recently attacked what he referred to as a 'national Alzheimer's disease'. 'One of the things failing us today', he said, 'is the elimination of the past, of history. Some of the kids don't know about the sixties, let alone world war two, let alone the depression'. In speech, 'he described lambasting a couple for failing to appreciate their forebears' sacrifices, and insisted people could change once they were educated.'

(Terkel, S., 11/6/98)

It is the belief which underpins the 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices' projects, the kind of belief which motivated North East writers like Jack Common and Sid Chaplin; a belief which is not quite dead, for, in Chaplin's words:

'There are a few people in my life who represent more than father-figures. They are rocks you can strike any time and get living water, trees under whose mighty branches you can shelter – and the fruit and blossom are

constantly there, elemental beings whose voice you can hear at any time.

This is not an explanation but a statement – how it happens is a mystery – but once met they become part of your psyche. There is no need to call up their ghosts. They live on in you.’ (Chaplin, S., 1989, Foreword)

This attempt to keep some kind of cultural heritage alive, led ‘Strong Words’ to stage exhibitions and events in honour of Jack Common, and to publish ‘Revolt Against an Age of Plenty’ (1980), a selection of his essays, and, subsequently, to establish the enterprise ‘The Common Trust’ with the aim of keeping Common’s spirit alive and to ensure that his writing was published and still available (‘Freedom of the Streets’, ‘People’s Publications’ and ‘The Common Trust’, London, 1988). For the values he stood for still carry some weight: the exploration of ideas of community in an increasingly individualistic society, the regard for a sense of history and place in our lives (in some ways, encapsulated in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne), the love of fallible humanity, the bringing together of kindred spirits to talk, celebrate and sing, the need to analyse and articulate our thoughts and feelings, all of these things and more. An exhibition in 1977 at Newcastle’s Central Library, as part of that year’s City Festival, set the ball rolling and stimulated a large degree of interest, further developed by an evening at the Tyneside Cinema where Common’s wartime film ‘Tyneside Story’ was shown and supplemented by a talk by renowned Durham novelist Sid Chaplin on his association with Common. Common’s old friend Tommy McCulloch attended as did his son, Peter Common. The aim was to bring people together across generations to celebrate Common and his links with his home city.

Times have, of course, moved on. The ideas of Common and of the ‘Strong Words’ Collective need to be viewed in this light. ‘There is no counter-culture now’ (Newcastle

artist George French, 2001). Just what can be retained of value in the present context and into the future it is, in part, the role of this thesis to explore.

The use of the word 'community' now has a hollow ring. The traditional organised industrial trade union movement has been splintered. The international 'communist' movement has been dealt a body blow. The 'global market' seems triumphant. And do the terms 'socialism' and 'working class' have any meaning any more? Recently, Jonathan Rose asked at the end of his 'Intellectual Life of the Working Classes' (2001) why 200 years of cultural self-improvement through libraries, lectures, schools and newspapers organised by and for the working class died in the 1960s. He concluded that the alleged egalitarian attack on the 'dead white men' of the classics actually enhanced the privilege of the middle-classes. If there was common agreement on what the canon was, be it Shakespeare or its ilk, it was easy enough for the self-taught to make up the ground. But, since the 1960s, cultural trends have had 'as brief a shelf-life as stock-exchange trends, and they depreciate rapidly if one fails to catch the latest wave in architecture or literary theory' (Rose, 2001). The new waves (be it 'new wave', 'modernist' or 'postmodernist'), argues Rose, 'reflect the Anxiety of Cool, the relentless struggle to get out in front and control the new production of new cultural information'. And as Nick Cohen (2005, pp.31-2) concludes, 'each new wave carries high culture further away from the working class. Once, the middle class left saw the workers as the very vanguard of history; now they are dismissed as sexist, racist and conservative'. Rose searched a database of academic texts published between 1991 and 2000. There were 13,820 references for 'women', 4,539 for 'gender', 1,826 for 'race', 710 for 'post-colonial' and only 136 for 'working class'. As Cohen comments:

‘It shouldn’t be too great a surprise that the humble do not care about education and that they regard intellectual life as alien when the educated care so little for them.’

Jack Common might well be turning in his grave. What once seemed a class that through its liberation and self-education would rise up and change the world now seems locked into the trap of the sink estate and the intellectually starved world of a bemused underclass. So is there any hope? I say there has to be.

Researching the life of Edinburgh’s Robert Louis Stevenson recently, I was made aware of, if I wasn’t before, the dualities of the man and of his beloved home city. One of the greatest inspirations of ‘RLS’ was the eighteenth century Edinburgh poet Robert Fergusson, a man ‘who lived without restraint and who wrote about the real life of the city, about ordinary people, servant girls gossiping on the tenement stairs, dandies getting splashed in the filthy streets, drunks staggering home at night’ (Calder, J., 1980, p.9). Not so far removed from Common’s own ‘Kiddar’s Luck’, you might say, and Fergusson lived from 1750 to 1774, paralleling the lives of Newcastle’s own radicals Thomas Bewick and Thomas Spence.

RLS himself as a young man mixed with those beyond the reach of the law and the establishment as an alternative to the manners and morals of the middle classes.

‘Edinburgh certainly fed his imagination ... a city where still the past is never allowed to lie down and die, where in his everyday comings and goings he could not avoid the continual stimulus of the sombre outline on the ridge, castle, cathedral, kirks and uneven lands, or the sound of bugles and drums drifting down in the evening, and the mingling with lines from those

authors who had already captured something of the city.’ (Calder, J., 1980, pp.8-9)

This duality of dark and light in Edinburgh is reflected in all cities. In Edinburgh’s case it is visible in the culture of the body-snatchers Burke and Hare, in Stevenson’s own *Jekyll and Hyde*, in the thief and magistrate Deacon Brodie and, above all, in the old and new towns of the city, which did not get its name ‘auld Reekie’ for nothing.

That Fergusson and RLS, along with the likes of Robbie Burns and James Hogg, give a city like Edinburgh historical depth cannot be denied. So much so that the city is now a UNESCO World City of Literature and a novelist like Ian Rankin carries on this tradition by setting his Inspector Rebus stories in the city.

Without a sense of such heritage, a grasp of the light and shade which reveals the truth, our cities would be breathing corpses. This is why it is important to remember Jack Common and his evocative writing rooted in the streets and lanes of Newcastle where, like Edinburgh, the past refuses to ‘lie down and die’ and which must reveal its dark side, alongside the glitz of the cultural admen, to any writer worth his bottle of brown.

Chapter 4: THE MAKINGS OF A COMMON REBEL

‘The Enquiry in England is not whether a man has talents and Genius. But whether he is Passive and Polite and a virtuous Ass and obedient to Noblemen’s Opinions in Arts and Science. If he is, he is a Good Man. If not, he must be Starved.’ (William Blake)

I think it is true to say that Jack Common never left behind the streets and back lanes of the Heaton area of Newcastle upon Tyne, the undulating hills and slopes, parks, pubs and monuments of his beloved home city. Its scents and smells and noises fill his senses even when he is bashing away in some confined space in the many abodes he found himself in over his relatively short life as a writer and worded hustler. The sense of community of the avenues of Heaton lived inside him all of his life, and the hardship that went with it never went away, indeed continued to dog him to his dying day.

You can walk along the street of his birth this very day and it looks much the same as it would have in his childhood. Scrape along the back-lanes and you can pretty well live and breathe the sights and smells of the old days, hear the fisher wife calling out her wares, listen for the shouts of Jack’s gang, the Sons of the Battle-axe, echo down the years; ‘the ‘Freedom of the Streets’’. Slip into The Chillingham Pub and you can seemingly sniff his ghost.

DREAMING OF JACK COMMON

I dreamt I glimpsed Jack Common on a train.

He had his nose stuck in a book;

the Newcastle rain seeped from his eyes.

Jack looked sad

and I dreamt he sleep-walked across the station bridge

and staggered down The Side;

he'd had a drink,

and couldn't believe

the thing he saw.

He bowled along the corridors through Milburn House

and stalked the nightmare of his past;

all around him fell bulldozed history

and his suit shook with soot.

He sensed a shallowness in the air,

a city with its guts ripped out.

He blinked at the scale of the new Law Courts

and thought of battles the workers lost;

Sons of Battle-axe,

bands of brass.

The Tyne slid by him

and his big heart

swelled with the agony of years;

a great history swilling in his veins

and the banks of the river cleansed
for millionaires.
We live in hope I would suppose
but how many games must we Geordies lose?
Jack looked down at his shredded roots
and felt his home city shudder with pain.
It was the ache of the starving in an age of plenty,
the shudder of a rudderless future:
the Johnny Riddle trickle of the lonely Ouseburn
running
down the drain.

(Keith Armstrong)

He had the goodness and the bad habits in his heart and soul. The loyalty and comradeship, the petty rivalries and jealousies, the kindness and the bitterness that he inherited from his own parents. He lapped up the workingman's pleasures of beer and tobacco, indeed was addicted to both. Each gave him pleasure not just in the substances themselves but in his enjoyment of them in the social and communal settings of pub and club, something that remained with him to his dying day. Yet these very same pleasures ruined his health and did for him in the end. But then people's awareness of dangers of such addictions was not that advanced in his day. In any case, he couldn't remain trapped behind his typewriter and within the confines of domesticity. He had to get out and the pub was his stamping ground.

But he couldn't stay in the intellectual back-streets of Newcastle. His Uncle Robin told him that, along with the wanderlust induced in his imagination by the plays he witnessed at an impressionable age at Newcastle's People's Theatre and the inspiration of the political ideas he picked up at the Bensham Settlement in Gateshead and at the Socialist Society in Newcastle's Royal Arcade.

As well as the bright eyed wonder reflected in his essays at school, enhanced by his wanderings in nearby Jesmond Dene. This as an antidote I would suppose to the confinement and the feeling of being stifled in the classroom. Indeed he seemed to remain a wanderer in more ways than one throughout his life. Happier to be a freelancer than a factory or office hack. Prepared to battle on with the frequent drudgery of writing in order to be free of movement in other ways with the chance of a few pints at a time of his own choosing and a good political matter to liberate him from life's monotony, first discovered in the boredom of the school.

Common's scepticism and nonconformity goes back to the very heritage of Tyneside, the Geordie humour and sense of cocking a good snook at the metropolitan and the enforced centralism that the political system often represents. Something of the wildness of the Northumberland coast, the smack of an enjoyed dialect and the skirl of balladry and folk song and music hall drifts through Common's work and life. The dilemma might be that though there is a different, alternative world to be had the provincial, it might also be too restricting. I'm sure it was for Common.

In an 'Adelphi' essay, 'The Sinister Side of Socialism' (Common Archive, Newcastle University Library, date unknown), he seems to get at the good and the dark side of 'community' as represented in the streets he sprang from:

'When I was but a little child I often came from the park through a place called Oystershell Lane. My granny lived on the far side of it, especially on Saturday nights. It was lively and gay. But you had to walk warily because somebody's husband was usually busy 'throwing the house out of the window' (as they put it). Sometimes his wife followed, sometimes she came out first and that saved the furniture. Later, perhaps as late as two in the morning, when the old boy was sleeping the sleep of the just, the liquored just, you could see a battered old woman hobbling about and moaning as she salvaged odds and ends from the cobbles, getting her home together again for Sunday. The one and only time I ever saw a woman chasing a fellow with a red-hot poker occurred in this lane. She'd got it nicely warmed up for him as he came back from the boozier. He was singing, poor man, singing 'K-K-Katy' when she rushed at him. It was on account of him sleeping with his eldest daughter, you couldn't help hearing. The gel herself turned up just as the fury was dying down, to find mother panting hard, and father on a friendly doorstep over the way, explaining to sympathisers, 'She had no call, no call for it. Twenty five years of married life, and look how you're treated. 'Sides, do I know the gel's me own child, do I, eh?' 'His own child, his own child,' the woman wailed.

Her daughter took it very coolly. 'Ma, you're impossible,' she said, and tripped off to the fish and chip saloon.

Now this – ah, but you’ve guessed it – was a proletarian neighbourhood, and lumpen, too, that is, it was very nearly bottom of the various grades that make up our internal proletariat. In other parts of the city you’d find very different workers’ homes. Amongst the organised workers, engineers, boiler-makers, railwaymen and the rest, who were at time winning wage-fights and getting a respect for themselves, a gentler more mode of life was already apparent. Books and music and theatres were beginning to count there, though, of course, life still had its coarseness and freshness’s – I’ve sat with a stout-hearted turner after supper listening to Wagner on his gramophone, and this new convert to the love of music couldn’t help interrupting now and then with a loud fart as his supper made itself felt.

And the streets, too, though not Oystershell Lane by quite a bit, were certainly no graveyards.

Jack Common was his own man. He was uneasy in institutions and organisations, from his experiences at school to work situations and political parties. The seeds of all this were sown in the back streets of Heaton, Newcastle upon Tyne. The story of his childhood and growing up in these streets is vividly told in his two autobiographical novels ‘Kiddars luck’ and the ‘Ampersand’ which I deal with, and quote from at length, in chapter seven. The rebelliousness could have come in opposition to the sometimes domineering traits of his father, in the strictures of his schooling, in the mundane streets of his birth, with their serried ranks and conformity, and in the gloomy poverty and lack of opportunity of the times he grew up in. He shared this trait with Robert Louis Stevenson. As Jenni Calder relates (Calder, J., 1990, p.17):

‘As a small boy Louis had sometimes been teased and mocked by other children on the streets. This must have helped to breed in him a studied defiance. As a child he was often lonely. His growing up and his early adult years were often lonely too, yet he refused to adopt the conformity that would have smoothed the way for him. All those who remember him in Edinburgh comment on his unconventional dress and his independent manner ... whatever the attitudes towards him, amused, irritated or resentful, he made an impression on Edinburgh life through his refusal to become part of its established conventions. Although there were others who rebelled, his own rebellion seemed to have a unique flavour.’

Common escaped from his own sense of confinement by walks into the bustling city centre and through the green glades of nearby Jesmond Dene. But he also escaped into the world of books and writing, particularly by visits to his anarchic Uncle Robin’s house which teemed with books and alternative, anti-establishment, ideas. The subversive Uncle stayed with him throughout his life and on such chance meetings are rebel-thoughts founded.

At school, the young Common let his wild imaginings teem out in essays; this was his way of singing, to block out the mundanity and gloom. He was in a sense a poet, albeit a prose one, and was drawn to the lyric verse of Shelley and other romantics. His politics began to echo this, fusing a strong individuality with his experiences drawn from observing workers on strike and in witnessing the possibilities of community and solidarity on the street and in the workplace.

His was certainly a love-hate relationship with the region of his birth and he wouldn't be the first or last in this respect. The gossiping and confinement of Third Avenue was both a joy and a curse – joy in the intimacy, for example, of street-traders hawking their

wares and cursed in that folk got up one another's noses without much understanding of, or interest in, the political and economic forces which dictated their lives from outside the back-lane. London beckoned as a land of opportunity and London eventually grabbed hold of Common the young writer.

It could also be argued that Common comes from a distinguished line of Tyneside dissidents (including Thomas Spence, Thomas Bewick and Joseph Cowen, for example), the kind I try to evoke in one of my own poems inspired by the original apprentice boys of Newcastle who kept falling foul of the Puritan tendency. An Act of the Merchant Adventurers of 1554 railed against their gay dress and 'tippling and dancing ... [and] use of gitternes [guitars] by night!' In 1603, the youths were asked once more 'not to dance or use music in the streets at night': nor are they to deck themselves in velvet and lace – or to wear their 'locks at their ears like ruffians'. All this was to no avail because, in 1649, Newcastle's Puritan elders still found themselves complaining about the wearing of ribbon and lace, gold and silver thread, and coloured shoes of Spanish leather, and nine of the offending youths received the pudding-basin treatment for their hair.

IN BLOOD

In blood I am
an apprentice boy of Newcastle.
Falling foul
of hacks and parkies,
I tittle and prance
and strum my poems at night.
I sing in the Blackie Boy

and tap-dance on tables.
I wear my shoes on my head
like some medieval surrealist,
a Geordie Bosch.
I go fleeing about
down Pudding Chare
with the company of fools.
Pissing music in the dark,
like a ruffian
I wear curls around my ears,
The City Fathers will rail
at all my gay ribbons and lace,
my gold and silver threads
and shoes of Spanish leather
but give me the pudding-basin treatment if you will,
see if I fucking care you bastard Puritans,
you killjoys.
I'm a Jingling Geordie
and freedom flies nightly
in my flowing hair.

(Keith Armstrong)

The local and the universal are central issues in Common's life. He loved the occasional humour and quirkiness in Tyneside life but it could never be enough – he needed also to grapple with world issues, needed to stretch his intellect and spar with great minds in

London. But the humour, irony and eccentricity he learned in Newcastle, handed down through the street balladry and the wisecracks of the music hall, stayed with him all of his life and were essential if he was to be at all adept in cocking that snook at the London literati he bumped into on his trawl through many a middle class drawing room.

James Gregory speaks well on the topic of Geordie eccentricity (2005, pp.164-187):

‘Fascination with local eccentricity reflected local pride and local-centeredness, sentiments that generated an unusual volume of local songs and historiography. As one local Victorian local historian noted, Novocastrians were ‘fond of local lore, and of collecting objects with local associations’. These objects included tales of the eccentric. More recently, those wanting a credible ‘regionalism’ asserted the need for ‘cultural and mythological maps’ as well as economic and political actions. The local characters of the nineteenth century have remained, through the efforts of antiquarians and others, part of regional memory in the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century ... In Newcastle ... closer association between eccentrics and local identity existed. The idea of mental aberration was connected with the original ‘Geordie’ which possibly originates in a term of abuse suggesting ‘idiocy’ ... Some were labelled ‘eccentric’ because of a drunkenness that was in fact common ... Drink claimed the life of ‘Cuddie’ Willie Maclachlan...There is William Martin’s account of his fellow ‘Character’, ‘a simple man that goes about ... playing on a fiddle which he makes himself from the stave of an old tar-barrel, and a fiddle-stick made of a twig from the hedge, with a few horse hairs tied to it ... He goes without a hat in all kinds of weather, without a shoe to his foot, and playing tunes, to the music of which a set of idle people dance in Sandgate.’

‘THE HOT-HEADED GENIUSES OF SANDGATE’

The hot-headed geniuses of Sandgate* are leaping round town tonight
but the place is drunk and the walkways stagger
and there seems no sense in historic streets.

Where old sailors lamented and hand-carts rested
and ships grew up on the river,
the times merge in the swaying crowds
and fancy-dress keelmen swig in the night.

Here’s the ‘hot headed geniuses’
gannin doon with the tide
to plant bites on fresh lasses’ necks,
and the hours keel over
and the days rock on,
as the love-bitten ‘Lass of Byker Hill’
falls in the Keelman’s Arms.

So let the pipers play
this ‘Tyneside Story’
all over again.

It’s a Geordie nightmare,
a black and white dream
all for you,
with knobs on.

(Keith Armstrong/Trevor Teasdel)

(*John Wesley was rescued by fishwife Mrs Bailes from what he termed 'the hot-headed geniuses of Sandgate' when he preached from the steps of Newcastle's Guildhall.)

Gregory continues (2005, pp.164-187):

'From Colls' perspective the early nineteenth century's cultural revolution, a struggle for discipline in a new industrial and political order, meant that 'characters of the old could be increasingly distinguished as eccentric'. Though atypical, they became representative of a lost world which was 'unreal and precious'; and yet also part of a broader ballad culture peculiarizing working men (miner or keelman) ... Newcastle especially made a commodity out of local oddity ... Through ridicule or admiration, communities indicated or reasserted what was normally acceptable or exceptional.'

There is no doubt in my mind that Common inherited this kind of local character, for good or for ill – a character which still gives Newcastle its historical uniqueness and its indigenous population a distinctiveness which accounts for a great enthusiasm in local history, manifested in a wide range of local clubs and associations and a passion, for example, historical photographs of the city and its environs.

This is one side of the coin but, life being complex, if your consciousness is raised through learning and experience making you something of an intellectual, an element of alienation can also come into play and sometimes a city like Newcastle can seem too small and too provincial. This can be true of any place away from the centres of political, economic and cultural power. For example, the renowned Scottish poet Hugh

MacDiarmid had this to say about the good citizens of Edinburgh (Grieve, M., & Scott, A., 1975, pp.247-50):

‘Talking with five thousand people in Edinburgh yesterday
I was appalled at their lack of love for each other,
At their lack of ecstasy at the astounding miracle
Of being alive in the flesh and together with one another,
And amazed that men and women each superficially so different
Should be so obviously the product of the same temperament,
Dyed in the same vat to a uniform hue ...
Perhaps Edinburgh’s terrible inability to speak out,
Edinburgh’s silence with regard to all it should be saying,
Is but the hush that precedes the thunder,
The liberating deonation so oppressively imminent now?
For what are its people standing in their own light,
Denying life infinitely more abundant,
Preferring darkness to light, and death to life? ...
There is no one really alive in Edinburgh yet:
They are all living on the tiniest fraction
Of the life they could easily have,
Like people who live in great houses who prefer
To live in their cellars and keep all the rest sealed up.’

To understand more fully the eccentric, and sometimes riotous, traits in Common’s own personality, as well as his love-hate relationship with his own city and the proletarians whose cause he adopted, we need to retrace his life stories from his grounding in ‘Geordieland’ and his subsequent escape to the south. Not that all of London’s streets

were, or are now, paved with gold. MacDiarmid again:

‘London has flourished like a foul disease
In the wasting body of the British Isles
And drained all the world’s wealth to its pirate’s cave
By its callous and cowardly wiles.’

(Manson, J., Grieve, D. and Riach, A., 2003, pp.42-3).

THE STRANGE TALE OF JACK AND THE SONS OF THE BATTLE-AXE

Salisbury Crescent and Mornington Square,
Fine names for fine houses, fine people live there.
Bloomsbury Gardens and Regency Mews,
Tradesmen use side entrance, no hawkers please.
Judges and generals, all fox-hunting men,
Antiques, au pair girls, villas in Spain.
Grosvenor Mansions, Victoria Close,
Calling out sweetly for Betjeman prose.

Windermere Avenues, Coniston Groves,
Neat little hutches in neat little rows.
Buttermere Crescents and Ullswater Greens,
Three pastel bedrooms for middle-class dreams.
Daddy's out teaching and Mummy will soon,
To pay back the loan on their four-door saloon.
Kiddies well-spoken, well-dressed and well-shod,
Mortgages, miseries – but pensions, thank God.

Paradise Dwellings and Colliery Rows,
Along Co-op Terrace and up Albert Road.
Inkermans, Kitcheners all round the town,
Streets fit for heroes, two up and two down.
Ypres Street, Haig Street, all bronchitic black,
Bulldozers wait to begin the attack.

This year or next year or never perhaps,
new homes for heroes – Paradise Flats!

Turn my eyes to the glass,
And reluctantly I'll tell you what I see.
Turn my eyes to the glass,
They see a babe where no babe used to be.
They see blue eyes, blue unsuspecting eyes,
They see a smile unwittingly beguiling.
And the Tyne slides by, the seagulls cry,
The ships lie safe and silent at the riverside.'

(Alex Glasgow)

It was on the fifteenth of August 1903 in an upstairs flat at 44 Third Avenue, Heaton, Newcastle upon Tyne that John Williams (or Jack) Common was born, the second of the four children of John and Isabella (née Johnson) Common, who had married in Newcastle in March 1901. He had two younger sisters, Lillian (born 23rd August 1908, died 1992) and Jessie (born 14th November 1910, died January 1993); his elder sister died young. His father, a powerful man of 6 foot 4 inches and an engine driver on the 'Flying Scotsman' at the nearby locomotive sheds at Heaton Junction, was born ca. 1872 in High Buston, Warkworth, Northumberland, where his father was a shipwright. Jack's mother was born in the same year in Newcastle and she worked for a spell in a jewellery shop. His father died ca.1925 and his mother ca.1940.

Jack Common writes vividly about his mother's background in the West End of Newcastle (1975, pp.1-2):

‘She was a fool, of course, my mother. Her mother said so: ‘Bella is a fool, I'm afraid, a weak fool. Here she is marrying a common workman, one who drinks and is not a good Christian. She will never know happiness now.’ You would think the old lady was great shakes to hear her.

And she was in her way. Not that she had any money ever, but she made poverty respectable. She brought up a large family in a small upstairs flat in Bath Lane Terrace under the hazard of a husband frequently sacked from a large number and variety of jobs for drinking. At her back-door lay the middens of the Oystershell Lane slum but the front looked out on a row of freshly whitened doorsteps and well-polished door-handles.

... The marriage took place as announced outside the Westgate Road boozier that Saturday night, and he was drunk on his wedding day ... (he) was now a locomotive fireman, earning about eighteen shillings a week in hours that varied from fourteen to sixteen a day, all round the clock. Compared to this his wife had a lady's life, earning more than he did as cashier in a wholesale jeweller's with a bit of buying and selling on the side. Her leisure was full too. She sang in a choir, she danced (at highly respectable balls), she read a great deal, she went to church and to theatres. He had hardly time to live.’

As his son Peter recalls (Common, P., 2000):

‘Jack had a tremendous admiration and regard for Jack London, not only because of the type of work that he did but the fact that he was a waterfront gang-leader when he was sixteen or seventeen and had tremendous physical ability. Jack would fight. I don't know how often he did fight but I know he did fight and he was quite a strong, powerful man. He was proud that his

father was one of the biggest men around the place. When I first went to Newcastle after the War, there were still people around who remembered his father. That would be hard for Jack to follow, I've no doubt. Like I don't try to follow my father, he couldn't follow his. There's nothing worse than being called, as I was at one particular stage, 'Young Jack', even though my name isn't Jack. For about three years my nickname as a schoolboy was 'Young Jack'! Of course, his father was about six foot four-and-a-half, which is tall even by today's standards. Jack would be about five foot eleven, still quite tall, but his father was enormous, he was a powerful man in a man's world, a train-driver on the Flying Scotsman and well revered, one of those strong men in the pub who everyone gave respect to.'

According to Common's old friend Tommy McCulloch (1987):

'Jack's father would be classified as a model workman because of his good timekeeping and regular attendance – two factors much appreciated by authority ... At work he appreciated a good locomotive and saw to it as much as he was able that the mechanical staff effected the necessary running repairs. During the early twenties he was engaged in the Newcastle suburban passenger services running varying trips from ten to forty miles. At leisure, his preference for the slightly better was reflected in his being adorned with the quality blue serge suit of the day, appropriate pipe tobacco and matching drinks whilst in a tavern. An accident seemingly accentuated a latent cancer of the tongue from which he died about the mid twenties.'

Their Heaton flat was owned by the railway and was within the calling area.

‘To have been born in that place at that time was itself a bit of bad luck or ‘a sad mistake’ ... He grew up during that period of Edwardian confidence and prosperity when Britain, perhaps for the last time, was a major power in the world. It was the period of Edwardian elegance which we associate with the Forsytes of the Saga or the Bellamys of Upstairs, Downstairs. But [they] were only a fraction of the population.’ (Whitcombe, V., 1974, pp.ix-x)

At this time, Britain’s population was about forty million. The landed gentry and those living off investments constituted about one million and the middle classes made up four million. The remaining thirty five million, eighty per cent of the population, earned less than £3 a week. In the case of the Commons, Jack’s father earned about £2 a week for working ten or twelve hours a day, six days a week. This did not allow for much in the way of holidays – only ‘such minor pleasures as beer at 2p a pint, tobacco for father’s clay pipe, an occasional visit to a film show in a converted shop or a seat in the gallery of the music hall outside which Jack’s parents first met’. (Whitcombe, V., 1974, p.x)

Their little flat was, of course, rented and they let a room or two to help pay.

COMMON'S LEARNING

‘Jack and Jill are off to serve

A sentence in the child preserve,

Where iron bars confine the extra care they need.

Jack will meet his brothers there,
The baby boilermakers fair,
And Jill will share the fate of her neglected breed.
This is where the world begins,
This is where they'll fly their wings,
And learn that kings and queens are from a different mould.
Losing as they always will,
Down the hill go Jack and Jill,
Down the river where their mams and dads were also sold.

Tim and Joy at private school,
Prepared by every golden rule,
So gently weaned and polished clean for finer things.
Tim is with his kith and kin,
The game is tailor-made for him,
And Joy will win on roundabouts as well as swings.
Tim and Joy swim with the stream,
Born to join the winning team,
And mum and dad can dream of what the future brings.
Little girls and little boys,
Jacks and Jills and Tims and Joys,
please don't make a noise, you'll spoil the scheme of things.

Turn my eyes to the glass,
And reluctantly I'll tell you what they see.
Turn my eyes to the glass,

They see a youth where no youth used to be.
They see a grin; a shy, disarming grin.
They see the hope in blue eyes brightly shining.
And the Tyne slides by, the seagulls cry,
The ships lie safe and silent at the riverside.'

(Alex Glasgow)

There is little doubt that Jack Common was born on the wrong side of the fence. Life on the streets of Heaton was a daily grind and struggle. He learnt to dodge the blows and preserve a cheeky Geordie independence of spirit. His background and the influences of his family taught him to ask questions of the system from an early age. His love of playing on the local streets and back-lanes made him grate against any sense of confinement forced on him at school and elsewhere.

He learnt to be a rebel:

'What I noticed as a young man at school ... was that the well-behaved, the conformist and the compliant were, and would be in life, the most rewarded. What was disturbing was not only that the less bright would go down, but that the dissenters; the 'difficult' pupils ... would be excluded from approval. I suppose I saw myself like that.'

(Kureishi, H., 2002, p.16)

In 1908, young Jack attended the nearby Chillingham Road Council School. Whatever its shortcomings, he met with a degree of understanding and encouragement, particularly from the headmaster Mr R.H. Gillespie. At school he developed his lifelong affection for poets such as Shelley. English was his favourite subject and Gillespie fostered the young Common's ability to express himself in words. So much so that in January 1917 he was one of eight prize-winners for the best essays written by Public Elementary schoolchildren in the city, and his work was read out to the whole school by the headmaster. Young Jack's essay was, prophetically enough, on the theme of 'Thrift'. The Prize was a war loan voucher, value fifteen shillings and sixpence, donated by the Lord Mayor.

Often the schoolchildren were taken to the nearby beauty spot Jesmond Dene in search of inspiration for essays:

'4.6.1915. Scholars are visiting Jesmond Dene this week after which they write Essays descriptive of their rambles there ... 18.6.1915. The Essays on Jesmond Dene have given me much satisfaction. Those in Class 1 were of a high standard of excellence. The Dene Keeper also reported to me that the Scholars without exception had conducted themselves well while on their visits.' (School Logbook)

Common recalled that his mother once bought him a second-hand and severely abridged Life of Johnson for 1d, and he had to read it several times before he even partially absorbed it. He did adopt the great man as his hero and model, including Johnsonian flourishes into his school essays, but:

‘The world of Doctor Johnson was so unknown to me; I couldn’t really see what he was trying to do. He wrote a dictionary – yes, well, you’d only to look at a dictionary to appreciate that that was an heroic job all right. He knew all the words, give him that. And he always won his arguments. But what were they about? Why were they so important to all these gladiators of the verbal arena? Our history lessons, you see, had nowhere near reached the eighteenth century. We were still bogged down among the Plantagenets, and by the same method of slow torture employed in the issue of books for class-reading, it was all too likely that next term would find us starting the Plantagenets all over again. In fact it might easily take us as long to get down the centuries as it did the folks who originally made the trip, except that in one class or another we were bound to encounter a teacher who dropped us quickly down a ladder of dates into an era he had been reading up on.’ (Rose, J., 2001, p.164)

Whilst at school, the young Jack was also active on the streets, particularly with the local street gang ‘The Sons of the Battle-axe’, and throughout his teens his political convictions and activism continued to grow and he became a member of the Clarion Club, the socialist society of Newcastle. He also attended open air meetings in the city’s Bigg Market where groups discussed politics, religion, literature and ethics. His literary ability and his mother’s ambition for him led him away from the railway apprenticeship his father thought natural and proper. As his friend Tommy McCulloch has indicated: ‘His father and he disagreed. His father had the idea that on leaving school with ability you should have the capacity to earn.’ (McCulloch, T., 1984)

Throughout his life, Jack Common

‘entertained no political illusions about the role of the education system in promoting any real kind of radical working class talent. Ideologically, he considered the process of mental conditioning that goes on in schools, colleges and universities to be particularly pernicious, often leading to working class students becoming either intellectually intimidated or spiritually corrupted by the self-serving nature of the system.’ (Paul, R., 1999-2000, pp.131-2)

In a previously unpublished manuscript, some of which is indecipherable, Jack Common writes about his formative experience, as a youngster of 12 years of age, of Newcastle’s People’s Theatre, which still exists today. The People’s Theatre’s first production was in 1911, but was performed under the banner of the Clarion Dramatic Society, like several other Clarion clubs, such as the Clarion Vocal Union and the Clarion Cycling Club, which were established under the wing of the British Socialist Party which held its Newcastle branch meetings in rooms situated in Leazes Park Road. As Common relates:

‘It was probably 1914 [sic] when I first had experience of the Clarion Dramatic Society. Two of us lads were playing in the street a warm September evening when a ‘lady’ came along – we thought ‘lady’ because she was too clean and nicely dressed to be a factory-worker ... or other. She offered us two tickets to a theatre; nothing to pay ... My mate Sam was dubious. Theatres didn’t let you in for nowt, he *knew* that. But I was keen to go ... I’d just been invited to the theatre and I was bowled over by the

experience. I had to go. Sam was accustomed to follow my lead. He weakened.'

The Clarion Dramatic Society was formed in early 1911 at a meeting at Leazes Park Road attended by a handful of people, including four members of the Veitch family who were already experienced members of Newcastle Operatic Society. Colin Veitch was famous as the captain of Newcastle United during the early 1900s when they had won the League Championship four times, as well as the F.A. Cup in 1910. Other early members were Wilf Armstrong, 'a reciter of some local repute', and Tom McEvoy, a clog dancer. Two plays were adapted for the first performance of the Society: an excerpt from 'Les Miserables' known as 'The Bishop's Candlesticks' by Norman McKinnen, and 'Pot Luck' by Gertrude Jennings. The first performance was on 11th July 1911.

'Producing plays had another distinct advantage which appealed to the Socialist Party. Some of the best drama that was being written at that time was sympathetic to the cause of socialism. By choosing certain types of play they could kill two birds with one stone: bringing much needed funds on the one hand, and propagating their doctrines with the other.' (Goulding, C., 1991, p.9)

The Leazes Park Road premises were very cramped and confined, especially with an average of two plays per month being produced by 1913, and by the early spring of 1915 a set of much more suitable rooms (formerly housing the General Post Office) were located in Newcastle's Royal Arcade and the new theatre was opened on December 20th, 1915, with Galsworthy's 'The Eldest Son'. George Bernard Shaw was a later visitor. Common must have been mistaken when he identifies 1914 as the year he first frequented the 'Clarion' because he located the venue as the Royal Arcade:

‘We had to tell our parents where we were off to because the ‘Clarion’ was in town, over two miles from our street ... We walked, of course; it would cost us a penny half-fare to ride’. His article gives us a strong sense of the atmosphere of the occasion: ‘Even in 1914 [sic] the Royal Arcade was a shabby backwater. Architecturally one of the Dobson-Grainger creations it suffered neglect ... up two flights of stairs and we were in a large room with a stage at the end of it ... What we saw was not glamorous, just people in ordinary dress talking, but to me enthralling. Poor Sam probably hoped for Panto ... The play went on and on. It was going to be late ... It was definitely ten. We should have been home by nine ... Perhaps because we didn’t see the end of the play I forget its title ... I came to know the place well and the actors ... It was the left-wing cultural centre of the town ... The Clarion group’s main aim was propaganda for Socialism originally ... I have seen professional productions of plays which were not as good.’

The chance meeting in the streets of Heaton with the theatrical ‘lady’ and her gift of free tickets, proved to be a great stimulus for Common and set off a longstanding link with the left-wing and cultural activities of the Royal Arcade. His friend, railway fireman Tommy McCulloch, a later contributor to “‘Seven Shifts’” which Common edited in 1938 giving seven workers the chance to describe their work in their own words, talked to me at his home in Yetminster, Dorset, in 1984 (prior to his death four years later) of those early days at the Arcade:

‘It was in 1924 when I joined the Newcastle Socialist Society. I left in 1929 before I was coming to London. During that time, the relationship (with Jack

Common) was more and more. There were four of us who formed a little study circle. There was Teddy Cotton, who lived in the West End of Newcastle; Bill Pearson, who was on the Gateshead side – a railway fireman; and Jack, who was unemployed, like Teddy Cotton.

The strength of the Newcastle Socialist Society as a debating institution was due to these people. There were Progressive Libraries on both sides of the river, and all sorts of subjects were debated until the small hours. We used to frequently arrive at meetings late, after backshift, and you could have a couple of hours with the ‘gas-fire philosophers’! It was here that I first met Jack Common.

He lived at Heaton at the time and we often used to walk home because all public transport was finished, and then the debate used to continue at the top of the street, because he left me on Heaton Park Road and went away to Third Avenue and I just turned in. He frequently used to come to our house when I was on such shifts.

We used to discuss the modern drama – socially serious stuff – and politics, progressive politics, socialism, the varying economists, things we had read, and currently how much we differed with points of view in the Society, with whoever had been holding sway ... We were reading Shaw, O’Casey, Pirandello. The People’s Theatre was going then. Whatever they put on ... you would grab ... from the library O’Casey’s books went ‘thump, thump, thump’ (from the shelves), the whole lot went. You’d come into the Society, maybe bought a pie and a cup of tea, and you were in the middle of a furious argument in a couple of shakes; similar to the pubs in Newcastle, more or less mini-debating societies, many of them. You’d go into the ‘Old George’ down the Bigg Market on a Saturday night and all sorts of subjects would be

up. The other pub we used was 'The Tiger' (now the 'Market Lane') on Pilgrim Street, straight opposite the Arcade where the Socialist Society. A room at the back, and it was 'thump, thump, thump', the politics of the day, the latest.'

In his book 'English Journey' (1934), J.B. Priestley describes a visit to the People's Theatre, giving a strong impression of an institution largely unchanged since Jack Common's involvement:

'Its prices range from sixpence to a half-crown, and if you buy a serial ticket for five shillings you are admitted throughout the season for half-price. The productions that season included 'Peer Gynt', 'Widowers' Houses', 'The Insect Play', 'Loyalties' and 'The Trojan Women': good fare, solid tack, value for money. The players are all amateurs. I met one of the theatre's most enthusiastic helpers, whom I will call Bob.'

Priestley's 'Bob' may just as well have been the young Jack Common, given the similarities between the two in terms of background and attitude. Priestley manages to evoke the atmosphere of Tyneside which must have echoed with the mood of Common's times:

'The evening was becoming very unreal, a mad mixture of rain, grill-rooms, trams, rain, peanuts, boxers, trams, rain, Trojan women in coloured mackintoshes, buns in basements, theatricals, rain, buses, remote suburbs, and a never-ending stream of talk about books, plays, railways, shipbuilding, coal, the Means Test, Russia, Germany, politics, sport, life and death.'

Bob is described as a man who

‘spends nearly all his leisure either helping at the (Bensham Grove) Settlement for the unemployed or lending a hand with such activities as the People’s Theatre ... In his amateur theatricals, he is a promising comedian. When a bit of holiday comes his way, he likes to do a little careful water-colour sketching, and what he does is very creditable to an untrained man ... He is not at all sentimental about his own class – except in its theoretical existence as ‘the proletariat’ – but quite sternly realistic in his attitude towards it ... in spite of much disagreement, I thought Bob himself a grand chap, and when he told me ... that he would be spending the next night conducting a rehearsal of some unemployed young men, for a forthcoming pierrot show at the Unemployed Men’s Settlement, I was only too glad to accept his invitation.’ (Priestley, J.B., 1934, pp.298-301)

Tommy McCulloch (1984), Jack Common’s long-term pal, indicates that they were both members of the Bensham Settlement:

‘We got in with the Settlement for a time too, and I got a smattering of French with that, and managed a holiday abroad without any assistance! Whilst we were learning French, there was always one evening when you had to use it and think in it and if you fell into English through difficulty you wouldn’t get an answer. Eric Barber was the tutor. He wanted to put us through Durham University, the four of us (in the ‘little study circle’) were degree material he thought, but we didn’t make it. The Bensham Settlement

was a centre for adult education and spare-time study. Eric Barber was so good, he offered to devote mornings for our benefit when we were late-duty. It was something of a pity we didn't make it to University; it was only a matter of being piloted through.'

The aims of the Bensham Grove Settlement (founded in 1919) were described as follows:

- '1. To provide a centre for Educational, Social and Recreational activities.
2. To promote systematic study of Social, Industrial and International conditions with a view to furthering plans for their improvement.
3. To further the advancement of Education in town and district.
4. By all these means to seek the expression of religion through Fellowship, Education and Service.'

The Settlement Report of 1921-1923 asserts that:

'the Settlements of today and of the immediate future, with their insistence on the spiritual significance of life, and on the necessity of spiritual freedom, have a large part to play in building a new order of Society.

An Educational Settlement must seek to *unsettle* those whose lives are limited by narrow personal aims, or who are content with the injustices and inequalities of the social system in which they live. Its aim must be continually to awaken a reverence for human potentialities, often so tragically undeveloped, to arouse a sense of personal responsibility and to urge purposeful participation in a new way of life.

In an atmosphere of friendliness, and in the common pursuit of truth and beauty, it must seek to make incessant demands upon the deepest things in man's nature.'

The Bensham Settlement was in close touch with the Educational Settlement Association and the Residential Settlement Association and was represented at both the Conference of British Settlements and the First International Conference of Settlements in 1922. Its national links included the Swathmore Settlement in Leeds, which arranged lectures to young prisoners in Armley Prison; the Sheffield Educational Settlement, which ran its own little theatre; and St Mary's Settlement in York, which arranged a Shakespeare Pageant every summer.

The Bensham Settlement was to inspire the establishment of the Spennymoor Settlement in County Durham in 1930 which also had its own theatre and encouraged the likes of writer Sid Chaplin, a long-term associate of Jack Common's, and painter Norman Cornish.

A list of occasional lectures given at the Bensham Settlement in the early 1920s offers an indication of the breadth of study which must have inspired Common's mates and associates:

'Principles of Economics – Miss G. Jebb; Appreciation of Music – Mr. J.B. Cartner; Industrial History since 1850 – Miss G. Jebb; Natural History – Mr. Wm. Carr; Local Medieval History – Mr. Hamilton Thompson; Modern European History – Miss E. Tesby; Scientific Discovery and Progress – Mr. Carr; The Art of Story Telling – Miss Clark; Readings in Browning's Poems – The Warden; French Reading and Conversation Class – The Warden; A Speaker's Class (for Women) – Miss B.L. Browne.'

The report of 1921-1923 also adds that:

‘The printed aims of the Settlement emphasize the need of close study of international conditions. Good audiences attended Mr. Currie Martin’s lectures on Internationalism; and Settlement members have appreciated the opportunity of learning of conditions in Russia from two eye-witnesses – Mr. Cuthbert Clayton and Miss M. Bunsley-Richards.

We have also been indebted to Miss Rinder, of the Women’s International League.’

J.B. Priestley’s ‘Bob’ gave him the guided tour of the Settlement (Priestley, J.B., 1934, p.304):

‘It is established – and has been for a good many years – in a detached house, the only one of that size I noticed in the neighbourhood. A little theatre has been built in the garden, and there are one or two other small annexes. Conditions are probably worse on the Tyne than anywhere else in this country, but it is only fair to say that in no other districts are more determined efforts being made, by means of these settlements and their various activities, to help the unemployed ... There was a play on in the theatre; there were classes being held in various parts of the house; the notice boards were covered with lists and programmes.’

Priestley’s wandering through Tyneside took him past ‘some little streets named after the poets, Chaucer and Spenser and Tennyson Streets’. He ‘wondered if any poets were

growing up in those streets'. 'We could', he felt, 'do with one from such streets; not one of our frigid complicated sniggering rhymers, but a lad with such a flame in his heart and mouth that at last he could set the Tyne on fire.' (Priestley, J.B., 1934, p.320)

These are, I feel, the same instincts of Jack Common plucked from the streets of Heaton for a night at the People's Theatre and reflected in the series of essays, "Freedom of the Streets", published in 1938, ten years after he fled Tyneside for the literary world of London.

THE LEAVING OF THE TYNE

'Willie cannot wait to join his mates
And get the taste of weekly wages.
His eyes are full of fire
With the desire to climb up higher and be a proper man.
Willie hates the school and every rule
That make the classrooms seem like cages.
Willie sees excitement in employment
Where he'll be a proper man.

Willie is equipped to start a shift,
He's had the gift of education.
They filled him full of kings
And things designed to let him grow up as a proper man.
Willie wants to fly and try
His wings and pass his first examination
As worker of the world
Where he's accepted as a proper man.

Willie, shut the door and sweep the floor
And keep your paws out of the way, lad.
Willie brew the tea, then run and see
What won the 3 o'clock today, lad.
Willie watch your lip, you'll get a clip,
So take a tip from me, lad.



You'll get your fingers burned unless you learn
To knuckle down and be a proper man.

Turn my eyes to the glass,
And reluctantly I'll tell you what they see.
Turn my eyes to the glass,
They see a man where no man used to be.
They see the wounds, the life-denying wounds.
They see the eyes conditioned to the waging.
And the Tyne slides by, the seagulls cry,
The ships lie safe and silent at the riverside.'

(Alex Glasgow)

Outside of the smoky confines of Heaton, the prolonged military conflict was beginning to have a deep affect on all strata of society. The economy was placed on a war footing and peacetime industries were changed into armaments producers. Women and girls were mobilized into arms manufacture and took over from men in other areas of work too. 'Your Country Needs You!' bawled the posters and white feathers were delivered by women to young men in the street without uniforms. Casualties grew and grew and the government was forced to bring in forced conscription, with thousands sent off to France with no real military training.

The savagery on the Somme had come to symbolize the meaningless waste of the First World War. The morale of both British and French armies was at rock-bottom and the men were weary of the fight. Amongst the civilian population, there was also a growing unease directed at the politicians and war profiteers who had got rich from the sales of

black market goods. In 1916, armed rebellion broke out in Dublin and when the February Russian revolution succeeded in toppling the Czar it signalled the beginning of the end for the entire war. When the carnage ended on 11th November 1918, ten million had died and twenty million were wounded. The traditional faith in God, King and Country had been shattered.

Britain's entry into the War had caused a split in the women's movement, the leaders of which declared themselves in support of the War. However, the East London Federation, led by Sylvia Pankhurst, openly struggled against the War and pressed for democratic reform. The example set by the many women workers throughout the War made it hard for the government to ignore demands for equality. Following the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, which immediately granted a vote to all Russian women, the majority of male politicians at Westminster gave women over the age of thirty the right to vote in Britain – the rest would have to wait until 1928.

After leaving school in 1917, young Jack had escaped the usual fate of his schoolmates as factory fodder and, with his mother's support, went instead to Skerry's Commercial College in Newcastle, where he hoped to gain a basis of routine business training in order to get a foot in the professions.

This was not the happiest of times for him.

'I set out from my business college, which was a sad swindle by the way, expecting to come into a shining world of efficient moneymaking, and found myself a minor character in a Dickens' story.' (Common, J., 19/4/1950)

Jack Common recalled his childhood in a note to a publisher (Common, J., 1977, p.5):

‘I was brought up in a working class home and should have followed my father to the locomotive sheds. Instead got a job smashing up out-of-date sewing machines. Because it was wartime and labour was scarce, I then got into a law office and became confidential clerk to a drunken solicitor. Sacked from there as a scapegoat and got sunk in the wave of unemployment that had hit the Tyne. Three years on the dole which idleness was invaluable – without leisure there can be no culture. Ran a boot and shoe emporium. More unemployment under the Means Test this time.’

His job in the solicitor’s office paid only 60p a week and whilst there, according to Tommy McCulloch (1984), he had ‘run amok!’

During the hard years of the twenties, he spent three years on the dole and a series of unsatisfying jobs ensued for Common (as a mechanic; work for a relation on Scotswood Road which gave him the necessary experience to be picked off the Labour Exchange for the Christmas sales and a job as a shoe salesman).

Lines by Jack Common, July 1923:

‘Quiet the harbour lies, and anchored ships
Now make a gentle motion on the calm
Untroubled surface of the sleeping sea.
Slowly as a sigh each prow rears then dips
As wells the long-washed tide or slips
The easy-running ripple neath their bows.’

and later:

‘Now the fever ebbs away,
All the frets that made the day
Tumultuous
Die, and the world of action,
With its thousand pricks and spurs,
More dimly whirls and drifts death-stilled,
And faintly-murmuring still towards
The bright quiet of the eternal-gazing stars.
The demons of haste are gone
And stir no more to fury at the sound
Of clinking guineas, the raucous din
Of Commerce and its kings.
Thus suddenly they left me, they
Who all these hours clutched my aching soul
And sped me first to this
Quiet suddenly ...
And looked out upon the silence
Of that winter night, and saw
My shadow, grotesque and all harsh-angled,
Quiver strangely on the frosted grass.’

Britain in the 1920s was a society of marked contrast between the rich and the poor.

Thousands had come home from the trenches expecting homes, work and security.

Many became miners, with coal mining the very backbone of the country’s economic

power. By the mid twenties, coal exports began to fall and the mine owners had no mercy when it came to making swingeing wage cuts and bringing in longer hours. A Conservative government at first tried to appease the fraught situation by subsidies but by April 1926 it removed such help. With coal stocks high, on the 1st of May the miners were locked out of the mines. The T.U.C. called a sympathy strike for May 3rd but the government, refusing to meet miners' leaders, declared a state of emergency and this led to two and a half million workers being brought out on strike to add to the one million miners already locked out of the pits. Thus the General Strike of 1926 broke out.

Factories, mills and power stations were shut down throughout the country and transport ground to a halt. Trades Union Councils of Action were set up to support the Strike at a neighbourhood level, with committees of ordinary people taking over the running of food distribution and keeping order on the streets.

The Conservatives brought in 100,000 volunteers as special constables and volunteers were invited to drive buses and trains. Royal Navy vessels were ordered into every major port and Army tanks strategically placed outside key buildings in London.

Clashes between strikers and 'blacklegs' led to riots in Newcastle and other cities and in the course of only one week some 5000 strikers were arrested and charged with sedition. The 'Flying Scotsman' locomotive was derailed by strikers at Cramlington, just north of Newcastle and violence smouldered everywhere.

The High Court declared the Strike illegal and members of the T.U.C., scared of being arrested and of things turning too 'revolutionary', began to negotiate with the government. On 12th May, the Strike was called off without any warning by the T.U.C. and it gradually began to collapse with the miners hanging on alone for a further seven months before being finally forced back to work under even worse conditions than before. Miners' wages were cut to a pre-war level and hundreds of mines shut down.

The nine day General Strike was a catastrophe for the miners and for the Labour Movement, with the bitterness deriving from it dragging on for years.

In 1927, his great mate Tommy McCulloch,

‘managed to get Jack a typewriter, because his thinking was in front of his handwriting. Having read some of his articles, I recommended publication but they needed to be typed. For a few quid, we managed to get a second-hand ‘Monarch’ and he rattled these things off with great aplomb, sent them round the various magazines and naturally got rejections, until he sent one to “The Adelphi” and it tickled (John Middleton) Murry, the editor at the time, and he encouraged him a lot, nearly promised him a job, which did materialise ultimately. No written contract or anything.’ (McCulloch, T.,1984)

The frustrations engendered by his failure to find employment, allied to Murry’s encouragement, led him to take a chance and head for London in 1928, ‘a poorly educated, dialect-speaking, recently unemployed member of the working class.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.140).

In 1929, 1,341,000 people were unemployed; by 1932 the figure had doubled to stay over two million for three years. In an unpublished essay (entered in a competition organised by ‘The Observer’) Common wrote:

‘The term (the proletariat) was at once appropriated to the working class, who were sufficiently near complete dispossession, God knows. Now, it might be used even more accurately of the unemployed ... Dispossession is

the most obvious outward physical sign that a man is rejected in his humanity by the society around him. A minus sign is put to his qualities, and this means that though he can be used, it will not be for his own benefit, nor in the realisation of his own best powers.’

One of his earliest published pieces was featured in the ‘Manchester Guardian’ of 27/10/1930, about hanging around in the hope of his luck changing while ‘in daily attendance at a hospital for financial incurables’, i.e. the dole office.

He found a job as a mechanic with an automatic machine company but, as he admitted himself, he ‘was thrown out for practising ingenious methods for simplifying the job’. During this time, he continued to submit articles and by 1930 Murry took him on as ‘circulation pusher’ with ‘The Adelphi’. As Common describes it (1977):

‘How come that a poorly-educated, hard-up working-class dialect speaker such as me came to be employed by a literary-philosophical Bloomsbury magazine? While out of work ... I wrote various pieces including one sent to John Middleton Murry, founder of ‘The Adelphi’; that led to a meeting, the promise of a job someday.

We talked, and I was anxious, as a young man, of course, to find out what future I had in London from a man who was then one of the leading literary critics. After a while Murry pronounced: Common, you have the bones of a writer! I went home cock-a-hoop.’

As Eileen Aird says:

‘He was that phenomenon of his time the largely self-educated man and it was this quality of genuine and hard-won commitment which attracted Middleton Murry.’ (Aird, E., 1977)

‘The Adelphi’ had been founded in 1923 by John Middleton Murry, the husband of the novelist Katherine Mansfield and a friend of D.H. Lawrence. Murry’s philosophy ‘was a highly individual mixture of Marxism, Pacifism and Christianity’ (Whitcombe, 1974, p.xiv) and he promoted these causes in the magazine. He was born into a lower-middle class family in Peckham, London and became a forceful figure in the history of modernism. Oddly enough, perhaps a bit like Common, he has become best known for the people he knew, not only Mansfield and Lawrence but also Picasso, Gaudeir-Breszka and Aldous Huxley, to name just a few. However, Murry did make a useful contribution to the development of literary criticism in England, although he might be said to have failed in his primary desire to be a creative artist in his own right, turning out some rather bad verse and flabby novels. Nevertheless, his output was amazingly prolific, producing more than sixty books and thousands of essays and reviews on literature, social issues, politics, and religion during his lifetime.

He was a very shrewd editor of ‘The Athenaeum’, beginning in 1919, and of ‘The Adelphi’, two of the most important periodicals between the wars. It was through a fellow contributor to the ‘New Age’ that Murry met Katherine Mansfield. At first her lodger, he became her lover and then eventually her husband and collaborator. She joined him in editing ‘Rhythm’ and later on the ‘Blue Review’. When she died in 1923, Murry continued to honour his wife in attempts to elevate her reputation to that of a great writer, much to the annoyance of his difficult friend D.H.Lawrence. The Lawrences and the Murrys had a tempestuous relationship, dating from their first

meeting in 1913, through the war years, and even after Mansfield's and Lawrence's death, when Murry had a brief affair with Frieda Lawrence.

A romantic conception of himself underwent several changes of direction, turning him in the direction of Christianity, a kind of pastoral communism, and eventually leading him to become a Pacifist, editing 'Peace News' during World War II, though he later altered his position on Pacifism.

It was J.W.N. Sullivan, a colleague of Murry's from when he was a translator at the War Office during the First World War, who proposed the title 'The Adelphi'. Sullivan felt it fitting in that he and Murry had worked together in London at Watergate House and 10 Adelphi Terrace.

'It was only several years afterwards that Murry, recalling 'Adelphi' meant 'brothers', applied the name retrospectively to the little group presiding over its birth – by which time they were brothers no longer ... As a motto for 'The Adelphi' (Murry adopted) Blake's proverb, 'Religion is Politics and Politics is Brotherhood'.' (Lea, F.A., 1959, pp.106 & 242).

British Periodicals, founded to handle 'The Athenaeum', acted as publisher and an appropriate office was established at 18 York Buildings, Adelphi.

Many of the first subscribers to 'The Adelphi' were from the North, where Nonconformism or Catholicism were still strong, even though the strength of the Churches was weakening. Hogan himself, then a Manchester clerk, was in this respect typical; so was J.H. Watson, a Durham blastfurnaceman [Watson, in his piece 'The Big Chimney', became one of the contributors to Jack Common's book 'Seven Shifts', published by Secker & Warburg in 1938 - K.A.], who has written of Murry:

‘All kinds of people were attracted to his work. A railway signalman once stopped me in the street and said, ‘I believe you know Middleton Murry. He is my arch-priest’. On another occasion, I was with an ardent reader of ‘The Adelphi’ magazine, and the new number had come out that day. He scanned Murry’s article, and dragged me out along the street of a small industrial town. Each acquaintance he met, he stopped, said in a voice like Jove Himself, ‘A new asceticism is upon us’, and to support his words he hauled the magazine out of his pocket and added, ‘It has it here’. Such powerful yeast as Murry leavened many lumps. He was perhaps never read by the mass of the people but those who did read were stirred and influenced to a great degree. Many shared my enthusiasm’.

The late twenties were the least productive of Murry's life but with gifts from readers totalling £300 he was able to keep ‘The Adelphi’ going but only as a quarterly, ‘The New Adelphi’. Murry struggled on alone as editor until 1930 when he was joined by Max Plowman of the Peace Pledge Union and then Sir Richard Rees. Both brought literary nous and political awareness but Rees had a lot of useful contacts from his old-Etonian background, as well as money – ‘he was a socialist with private means.’ ‘Plowman and Rees soon became aware of the lively wit, socialist zeal and journalistic flair of their young circulation pusher.’ (Whitcombe, V., 1974, p.xiv)

Rees had lectured for the W.E.A. and had stood as a Labour Party candidate only to realise, in his own words, that he ‘was not the stuff of which Tribunes of the People are made’.

Mark Benney comments on Rees (1966, pp.105-7) that:

‘He brought a more sober and responsible element of the Cambridge tradition’ to things, and that ‘... he had probably been the most sensitive and successful literary talent scout of his time. Most of the young poets, essayists and novelists who later became the representative ‘voices’ of the thirties first appeared in print in his magazine, and his advice and encouragement, to say nothing of financial assistance, had helped many a now established writer through his lean years ... Unlike so many of his class and generation who developed in the thirties a compassion for the indigent, Richard’s always remained at a personal rather than an ideological level ... If he was distressed by the mere existence of poverty in his world (and his world was larger than most men’s), his distress was compounded when he found it affecting the lives of the talented and cultivated. He collected’ poor poets as another man might collect incunabula ... Early in our acquaintance he introduced me to a number of other young writers, like Dylan Thomas, Jack Common and Rayner Heppenstall, who also had the virtue of poverty in their past as well as a most precarious foothold on the present.’

Of Murry, Rees once said:

‘You are an astonishing man, John. I shall never understand you. You walk straight on, straight into a brick wall that I can see miles ahead of you. You don’t listen to anybody who tells you ‘There’s a brick wall ahead’. You look, with your eyes apparently open, and you don’t see it. And then comes the crash. You run your head into the brick wall. And you pick yourself up and walk on into another. And for some strange reason I admire you for it.’

For his part, Max Plowman said of Murry: 'Though he's never right, he'll never be wrong – Murry is the most valuable man alive.'

Typical of Murry, and to the dismay of Plowman and others, was news of his marriage in April 1931 to Betty Cockbayne, of which Jack Common commented that Murry was 'laying up another Hell for himself'. The marriage was committed at Oldham registry office on May 23rd and from then on Murry and Plowman moved apart, leading to Plowman's resignation, with 'The Adelphi' editorship passing to Rees 'who, needless to say, approved of both God and Betty'. (Lea, F.A., 1959, pp.182-4)

In 1932, Jack Common became assistant editor and, in 1935-6, for a short time, editor. Common was not only a contributor to 'The Adelphi', writing political and social articles, book reviews, and a column called 'Sweeper Up' (until 1936), as well as helping to shape policy and direction by working with the three editors, but he also contributed to journals such as 'New Britain' (as well as serving on its editorial board), 'Tribune' (under the name 'Commoner') and the 'New Statesman and Nation', 'Eleventh Hour', 'Manchester Guardian' and others.

Pacifist and poet Max Plowman, who co-founded 'The Adelphi' Centre at The Oaks in 1934 and went on to become Secretary of the Peace Pledge Union in 1937-38 and editor of 'The Adelphi' from 1938, has this to say about Jack Common in a letter to Mary Marr, dated 26th October 1932 (Plowman, M., 1944, p.454):

'Common and his young woman were here and we listened attentively. That lad has more musical feeling than any man I know and by Jove it's of value to him. It's a regular sheet-anchor that saves him from drift into the sterile logic of the Socialist politician. There are few things more interesting to me

than the point of contact between John (Middleton Murry) and Common.

Common's a fellow who has used politics for understanding and quite unwittingly and perfectly naturally he grows out of exclusive politics a little more every day of his life.

John's comes from above the battle, down into it and he meets Common at just such another cross-road as I met John on 3 years ago. I find myself in entire sympathy with Common. I appreciate and understand his outlook and assent to almost every proposition he can make. Whereas with John, the further he goes on this present tack the further we part.'

Writing to Common from London sometime later in 1936, Plowman (1944, pp.587-8) gives an idea of just how hard working on 'The Adelphi' must have been for Jack and his associates:

'I think most of the folks that have bumped into 'The Adelphi' and all its works have a pretty tough piece of work on hand ... And I happen to be dead certain that Jack has the toughest bit of work on hand of the jolly lot ... And it's in your very virtue that the infernal stress comes ... The road to Socialism has always seemed to you to be a broad and straight path – as indeed in one way it truly is. 'But narrow is the path and straight the gate that leadeth unto life: and few there be that find it.' And as I see it, Jack, you've bumped right into the 'straight gate', and you want to know what the devil it's been stuck there for. 'Tisn't sense. 'Tisn't in line with the road. You're not a rich man; so what the hell's the good of talking to you about the needle's eye and the camel? ... Sweat it out, Jack. Remember, no one's 'right' today ... The chaos is real enough, and not to realise it is simply to be

unreal. Let's accept it, and see what happens. Let's forget all we've ever known and square up to the goary reality without a single recollection. This is incoherent. And I must go. But its very incoherence has meaning. And I'll play you at darts for a pint at the very next opportunity.'

This kind of literary badinage and hurly-burly is reflected by Mark Benney in his memoirs (1966, p.69):

'Then there was Jack Common, a burly young infester of literary offices, whose basic education was in the laws of unemployment compensation, but whose occasional pieces in 'The Adelphi', on such subjects as Baldwin, Spengler, Macdonald, Marx, Roosevelt, Eliot, Chamberlain and Kewpie dolls, breathed the traditional wisdom and hot air of the Carnegie Free Library and the public bar. Jack I had met in that little pub on Dean Street where Paul Rotha's minions used to meet after a day of trying to spin masterpieces of film out of the London Gas, Light & Coke Co.'s publicity directives; there was a little Welshman, Dylan, who had lately had a poem published in the Listener, called Green Fuses or something like that, who may also have come with Jack.'

By 1937, Rees too was tiring of Murry. He had been 'watching his gyrations over the past six months with deepening dismay' and 'saw his worst forebodings realized. Murry was mad ... and he had himself been mad to think otherwise. He would neither edit nor subsidize 'The Adelphi' any longer; and January 1937 saw the magazine reduced to a meagre thirty two pages, supplied by post to some seven hundred subscribers. 'Go Not

To Spain' was the title of an article by Plowman – but Rees had already gone.' (Lea, F.A., 1959, p.106)

1937 also finds Murry closing down the Centre at Langham with great regret but he was later delighted by Max Plowman's subsequent decision to reopen it. However, it all comes to a head in 1938 when Murry is warned that unless he relaxed more he could not expect to live many more years. At the very least, he had to reduce his work to the minimum necessary for him to earn a living. This he did by engaging a part-time secretary and by handing 'The Adelphi' over to Max Plowman.

The personal tangles and passionate debates surrounding 'The Adelphi' were carried out within a frame work of fierce social division and political struggle.

'The thirties were a very important period of both political and literary development for Common, the absolutely necessary preparation for the writing of 'Kiddar's Luck' which is a masterpiece of unembittered naturalism by a man equally skilled in the cut and thrust of political debate. Although the book was not written until the end of the forties, the idea had been germinating for some time; there are several prefigurings of its themes in diaries and writer's notebooks. As early as 1937 the following note is jotted down: 'The wandering star – the convent school – first job'.' (Aird, E., 1977, p.4)

During the 1930s, the world endured one of the most serious political and economic crises ever. Stock market speculation, culminating in the Wall Street Crash in 1929, had

plunged the capitalist economies into a severe depression. In Jarrow, the Tyne shipbuilding town, sixty per cent of workers were without a job, leading to the famous Hunger March to London in 1936. The slump created feelings of hopelessness worsened by government policies, such as the Means Test. Even so, Britain was still the greatest empire the world had ever seen. The rich got richer and the poor were made to suffer for being poor. Parliament was run by a so-called 'National Government', an eccentric blend of right-leaning Labour, Liberal and Conservative under the leadership of Ramsey MacDonald, formed in 1931 to tackle the economic crisis and fend off panic on the stock market. That same year sailors from the Royal Navy, based at Inver Gordon in Scotland, staged a mutiny to protest over cuts in wages. This unstable situation led many in the 'upper-classes' to err on the side of a fascist regime in Britain. So that when Oswald Mosley began building the British Union of Fascists he had the support of newspapers such as the 'Daily Mail', 'Evening News' and the 'Sunday Dispatch'. Allied to this, aristocrats like Lord and Lady Astor, who owned 'The Observer', members of the Guinness family, and many politicians and diplomats began to speak in favourable terms about the Nazis in Germany. Organised anti-fascist resistance culminated in the victorious Battle of Cable Street in London's East End and by 1937 Mosley's B.U.F. was in rapid decline.

Abroad, though, the fight against fascism was only just beginning and Spain was to be the first test of international solidarity. Money was collected all over Britain to purchase armaments for the Spanish democratic republicans and an International Brigade was established. Two thousand British volunteers actively fought against fascism in Spain, with over five hundred dying in battle.

September 1938 saw the new British premier, Neville Chamberlain, meeting Hitler for peace negotiations in Munich. But this 'appeasement' policy proved to be a fiasco and opened the way for a German invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia and, in the

following year, an attack on Poland, leading to the British and French armies mobilizing against Germany in what turned out to be the Second World War.

Poet W.H. Auden saw the thirties as 'a low, dishonest decade' but it can also be viewed as a decade of great cultural complexity and achievement. A lot of artists and intellectuals in this period suspended their personal ambitions in deference to the wider aspirations of working class life and politics. Tom Harrison and Charles Madge founded Mass Observation and encouraged thousands of reporters and diarists to record the daily reality of working class life and culture. And John Grierson pioneered the documentary film movement in Britain, while Victor Gollancz commissioned George Orwell to tour the mill towns of Lancashire for 'The Road to Wigan Pier'.

As Ken Worpole (14/8/1980, p.320) comments:

'We seem to have a better visual record of the 1930s than of any other period in the twentieth century. Yet in all the popular cultural histories, the anthologies, the political and literary group portraits by the Beatons and the Brandts, one important journalist and writer is missing: Jack Common. He was not one for cafe society or literary parties, preferring the company of a few working class friends in the local public bar ... In physical appearance he greatly resembled another shadowy and relatively neglected figure of the period – Malcolm Lowry.'

From 1934-1938, Common lived at various times at two residences at Datchworth in Hertfordshire – a house and a bungalow – where he ran the village shop, experience which proved useful when Orwell needed advice on setting up his own shop in nearby

Wallington. At this time, Common was living with his partner Mary Anderson (1901-1942), a childhood friend from Newcastle who had travelled south to link up with Jack. They had a son Peter (born on 27th April 1934 and baptised at Great Ormond Street on 4th May 1934) and another son, Robert, was born later. They never married but were very close nonetheless.

‘...Oh sweet,
Did you not know that of all the day
That hour alone is blest in which you come,
For it I live, all else is prelude,
Or softly fondled reminiscence
Faintly sweet.

Then love,
Fail not again: I would not have
A second sundering chasm across the path
Where blithely we have wandered. Come!

The wooing winds of Autumn call you,
And we must love.’

(Jack Common, Common Archive, Newcastle University Library)

When Orwell was recuperating in Morocco, Jack and Mary took care of Orwell’s Wallington cottage. War was in the air and though Common, as a socialist, was a dedicated humanitarian, he understood the complexities of life and took a pragmatic

stand on the concept of pacifism which he endeavoured to flesh out in a pre-war essay.

(Common, J., 2/1936, 'The Military Necessity of Pacifism'):

'Since Italy began her deathless crawl on Addis Ababa, large sections of the British public have been stirred by a wave of pacifism. It is most notable in this country but I do not believe it is confined here. Probably in every nation there are numbers of people who no longer accept the ideologies of war, though in many of them their opinion is not permitted to be heard, and though in Britain there is great doubt as to whether when heard it has any permanent effect on the policy of the Government. So we may take it that practically everywhere the decent, enlightened, conscious and progressive elements in the various countries are sufficiently disillusioned about war to be attracted by pacifism.

Yet there's no disguising it, pacifism is not very satisfactory. It suffers from many of the defects of Temperance. You don't know whether the word Pacifist indicates that the wearer of it will refrain from all forms of war completely; whether he will not make the possession of the virtue of non-combatance a licence to prosecute class-egotism, precisely as a youth at a certain stage will stop smoking in order to feel exonerated in his dreams of lust; whether the fellow is really a martyr-seed or just intent on self-preservation. How can you tell? ...

Now permanent revolution is, of course, a Socialist phrase. It is to be fostered by Socialism. Therefore, possibly, it is to the interest of Socialism to keep its adherents clear of war, to be pacifist in the interest of the new era. The trouble is, though, that Socialism is not a fixed scheme, complete with code, creed and ethics like one of the old religions. It is an interpretation of

certain social pressures which are always liable to change in intensity and to produce a corresponding change in the philosophy which assesses them. It seems to me that there will be a point in the evolution of Socialism when it becomes necessarily non-violent. But nobody who has any love for the poor can look forward to that day. For it is only under terrific social pressures that non-violence becomes a necessity for the many, or for their church. You must not decorate any proposals of social change with fancy ethics. Wait until they are called for. So, if Socialism could come easily by the consent of all decent people, we should have it that way; if it could come swiftly by a series of sudden and sporadic revolutions, we'd have it like that; and if it can only be had by a long process of incubation among persecuted masses, then that is the way. Socialism cannot decide for peace or war by any abstract principle of right, but according to the necessity ruling. So it is quite possible you'll find Socialists refusing to fight in Germany while their comrades in Russia are fighting like hell. We know that non-violence is not the inevitable commandment for people who are creating a new world; it is learned in the day of bitter necessity, and unlearned as quickly when the social pressure lessens; that's easy to be seen in the history of Christianity which bred saints or bulldogs according to circumstances ...

'something bare and simple is the want, to be seed to all the unspoilt imaginations of an oppressed world. So we turn to the faith which moves molehills, Christianity's latest grandchild, Socialism, Communism, or X-ism (the becoming has no final name). This is a formula which already girdles the world. It will stop war by giving people a natural reason for being at peace with one another. There's no other formula which does.'

In 1938, he inspired, edited and wrote the introduction to 'Seven Shifts', a collection of seven working class men's tales of work. In the same year the same publishers, Secker and Warburg, published his essays on the political and cultural convulsions of his time and the future of socialism, 'Freedom of the Streets'. A more detailed look at these publications is taken later.

'After the success of 'Seven Shifts', Common began editing, with Jack Hilton, one of the seven contributors and already a published novelist, a sequel about women's work (for which Mary Hilton wrote a piece about cotton spinning). Also planned was 'a collection on working class leisure and a book of critical essays' by 'a sort of pre-Raphaelite brotherhood for the proletarian uglies'. Hilton, Common, Herbert Mannion, James Stirling and others were each to be invited to choose two establishment authors and 'slaughter' them.' (Croft, A., 1990, pp.252-3)

Because Secker and Warburg lost interest, neither of these projects were finished. A year later, war broke out, bringing, amongst worse things, a paper shortage. This halted production of 'The Adelphi' and severely affected his own livelihood. In these troubled times, and with 'The Adelphi' put out of print by 1939, Common sought work as a film script writer and editor for government documentary films and lived and worked in Langham, Essex at 'The Adelphi' Centre, the self-supporting community dedicated to socialism and pacifism set up by Middleton Murry in 1936. Summer schools were held there and Common spoke at the second school on the theme of 'Proletarian Theology'.

Tommy McCulloch, former ASLEF branch secretary, who had first met him at the Newcastle Socialist Society in Newcastle's Royal Arcade, had a lot of time for Murry

and his associates. McCulloch was so close to Common that he and his wife spent their honeymoon at Jack's country bungalow in the south of England. And when the writer's first wife Mary was dying she asked the couple to bring up the Common's eighteenth month old son, Bob (incidentally, a founder member and drummer with the folk group 'The Yetties'), born at Sandon Hill on 26th December 1940, who addressed McCulloch as 'father'. McCulloch:

'One of the virtues of 'The Adelphians' was that they practised the classlessness. They actually lived it. Living in the community I'm referring to. They all lived puritanically in so far as there was the common dining table and separate rooms and all worked on the farm. I thought it could have been a success if perpetuated, though it was criticised as poetic pacifists dodging the war, but it was a little more than that. I agreed with what Murry argued: that religion is politics and that politics is brotherhood and that's a cry to welcome back now, but it'd need backing, it's a risk. Middleton Murry had courage; he came off the Times Literary Supplement to start 'The Adelphi'.' (McCulloch, T., 1984)

As Robert Colls opines (1998, p.195):

'... Jack Common could never really conform to anyone's expectations. In the 1930s he had had trouble finding his own voice because he was stranded amidst so many others. Writing as one of the decent working folk who was also a wry intellectual commentator brought its stylistic difficulties. Trying to be clever and proletarian, literary and casual, found him stumbling into occasional brilliance but with some odd juxtaposing. Caught between at least two regions, two dialects, two classes, and Marxisms old and new, Common

learned how to deftly retain his freedom to criticize one, as a writer, without appearing to have deserted the other, as a working man.’

According to Whitcombe (1974, p.xv):

‘[Common’s] age, his health and his principles were all against serving in the armed forces. His attitude to the war was probably rather like that of his father in 1914. But he did find useful, creative and rewarding work writing scripts for one of the documentary film units which operated under government auspices.’

It was a roaming, insecure life for Common. 1939-1941 found him living at 23 Hope Cottages (now 7 Payne End), Sandon Hill and in 1941-2 he also turns up at Langham Oaks in Essex. Common frequently played dominoes in the ‘Chequers’ pub (now a private house) in Sandon. As his son Peter explains (email 9/8/2002):

‘I believe that Jack’s exemption from Military duty was because of Mary’s ill health, as you know she had been ill with cancer for a number of years before the war. However, he did have to work for a couple of years in directed employment to help the war effort. In his case, he worked firstly in a factory making sticky tape for windows to stop blast damage. The second job was in a factory making shells and bombs. In both cases, the work was 12 hours on and 12 hours off, 7 days a week.’

The other work was with MI3 producing films for training and education purposes. During this period, he made a film on the North Tyne on erecting Bailey Bridges which

was shot in one and a half days, using for the first time multiple, simultaneous cameras recording in a documentary style. Peter also recalls that in the early World War Two years Common and family lived in London at Dane Street, Islington, Micawber Street, Hoxton, and Green Street, Soho (close to the film industry in Soho Square):

‘I frequently saw him at work in the film industry in the mid to late 1940s as a spectator in the Saville Row area and at his offices in Soho Square. As a lad, I would sometimes try and find which pub he was in so that I could cadge pop and crisps etc. I only needed to stand just outside the door and listen for his voice to find if he was in that particular pub. This was in Sandon, Herts. At that time the village still supported seven pubs. He said it was a solemn duty of the drinking classes of that village to ensure that each had a fair share of their custom so that all of them stayed in business. I can remember only two names: ‘The Five Bells’, adjacent to the churchyard, and ‘The Mason’s Arms’, the nearest pub to our house.’

Common also worked on films such as ‘Merchant Seamen Ashore’ and ‘Clyde’ (for Spectator Short Films, 1942), ‘Shipyard Training’, ‘‘Tyneside Story’’, and ‘North East Corner’ (for the Ministry of Information, 1943-6). As an indication of the nature of such films, it is interesting to study the credits for the latter (which lasted 22 minutes), which are given as follows: Director; John Elridge; Scenario: Jack Common; Commentary: Laurie Lee [N.B. later to write ‘Cider with Rosie’]; Producer: Ralph Keene; Cinematographer: Martin Curtis; Film Editor: Henry Kirkley; Original Music: Kenneth Pakeman; Conductor: John Hollingsworth; and featuring Alec Finlay as himself in a closing music hall routine.

“Tyneside Story” deals with the return of workers to the shipyards for the war effort.

Common has the most convincing character say in a broad Geordie accent:

‘To hell with the shipyard. They've no right to play fast and loose with men like this. Not so long ago, they threw us out of the yards to starve or scrounge – skilled men, mind you, brought up to a trade and nobody cared – now they want us back, there's a war on. Next thing you know, the war'll be over and out again you'll go, you mugs. Ah well, not for me. What! Go back to the shipyard? I'll see them in hell first!’

Later in the film, a narrator asserts:

‘As long as Britain calls for ships, the call will be answered by the ring of steel on steel in the shipyards of the Tyne.’

To this, the Geordie character retorts as the film ends:

‘Ah, but wait a minute! Tyneside's busy enough today, aulduns and younguns hard at work making good ships but just remember what the yards looked like five years ago – idle, empty, some of them derelict and the skilled men that worked in them scattered and forgotten. Will it be the same again five years from now? That's what we on Tyneside want to know.’

Middleton Murry's plans to rest up somewhat were dashed by a series of events which came to a head in 1941 with the sudden death of Plowman:

‘He had been forced to pay a visit to Langham in order to set matters right. After the meeting as they were strolling back arm-in-arm to The Oaks, Plowman remarked, ‘John, I wish we saw more of each other – just now. Just to be together and nothing said.’ To which Murry could only rejoin, ‘I wish that too, with all my heart. But Providence has decided against it.’ ‘Well’, was the reply, ‘that’s all that really matters: that we both wish it. It’s the same thing as if it were really so,’ and with that they parted. Three weeks later, on the afternoon of June 3, Plowman died.

His illness, pneumonia, was too sudden and short for them to meet again. Murry arrived an hour after his death. When, having paid his last respects, he proceeded to address the Farm Group, he was still in tears: no wonder! ‘The man who has just died’, he began, ‘was my intimate friend for sixteen years ... And of all of the men I have ever known, Max was the most warm-hearted, the most understanding, the most loving ... The Langham that exists here is not all that he wished to see, or all that I or you wished to see either. But I don’t believe that any of you, even the most rebellious, when you leave here will ever forget the experience of Langham. You will every one leave some part of your heart behind: and the reason for that is, quite simply – Max. And this work which he took over has got to go on. I am as certain as I am of my own existence that it will go on; that Max’s Langham will develop and grow into something beautiful and valuable ...

Soon after Plowman’s death, J.H. Watson was invited to take his place as Warden of the Centre, and two assistant editors were appointed to run ‘The Adelphi’ in Murry’s name. But the loss, to the movement and to Langham, was severe.’ (Lea, F.A., 1959, pp.293-5)

Murry attempted to revive 'The Adelphi' with the help of a part-time assistant editor but it continued to lose £30 a quarter and, finally, in June 1948, twenty five years after the first number, 'The Adelphi' passed away. 'I have', Murry recorded,

'at 'The Adelphi' Centre and here (Lodge Farm), proved the failure of Socialism on my pulses: the prodigious difficulty of creating a new co-operative ethos. Not that we have achieved nothing at Lodge Farm: but that we have learned, by hard experience, how little it is possible to achieve. Individualism must remain the chief social ethos.' And with that, he stepped out of domestic as well as foreign politics, thenceforward voting Conservative.' (Lea, F.A., 1959, p.106)

As Ron Paul emphasises (1982, p.78):

'During the Second World War, when the shortage of paper caused many journals like 'The Adelphi' to cease publishing, Common was compelled to turn his hand 'to a number of sad things'. He managed to eke out a meagre living for himself and his family by churning out reviews and the occasional film script for bodies like the Crown Documentary Film Unit and the Central Office of Information, which were used as film uplifts in the war effort. Most of these films had little or no artistic transcendence over and above their immediate propaganda intention, with perhaps one or two exceptions, such as 'Tyneside Story' for example, a film about the labour shortage in the shipyards, in which a character breaks through the official surface at the end and expresses a profound working-class scepticism about the longevity of the re-employment war-boom. This is typical of Common's

sting-in-the-tail technique.’

‘All in a day, Willie,

All in a day.

She’s leaving today, Willie,

She’s sailing away.

Do you recall, Willie,

The steel wind cutting off the river?

Do you recall, Willie,

The birth plans at the water’s edge?

Will they ever know, Willie,

The life-hours welded on the river?

Is it any more, Willie,

Than so much wages underneath the bridge?

All in a day, Willie,

All in a day.

She’s leaving today, Willie,

She’s sailing away.

And come tomorrow, Willie,

When the peeping toms have canned the final picture.

And come tomorrow, Willie,

When the cocktail party faces stiffen hard.

And come tomorrow, Willie,

The same wind will whistle off the river.

And come tomorrow, Willie,

I'll see you seven-thirty in the yard.

All in a day, Willie,

All in a day.

She's leaving today, Willie,

She's sailing away.'

(Alex Glasgow)

Common was not the sort of character, however, to become overburdened with the pressures of work. He knew how to escape the daily grind of writing and how to unwind. Reg Groves, an early Trotskyite and a contributor to 'Tribune', recalls:

'I don't ever remember him talking about his writing. Jack's favourite topics, apart from some politics and some books, were football, Newcastle football, and music hall. He used to go round the surviving, declining, music halls of London in wartime, in the evenings, the Met, Collin's, one or two more, and talk a great deal about the old stars that were still visible then, chiefly the comedians. He'd savour them in conversation and laugh and talk about that.'

(in Mapplebeck, J., film for B.B.C. 2, 1974)

In the early forties, Common was also active on radio. He engaged in a dialogue on the B.B.C. (2/11/1941) with Professor C.E.M. Joad on 'The Meaning behind the Words: Post-War Reconstruction' and gave talks in the 'We Speak to India' series: 'Peace in Wartime' (8/4/1942) and 'What the War is About' (15/4/1942). He was also a participant in 'Living Opinion: What Matters?' (19/6/1942), a discussion between rival factions representing the streets, on the one hand, and the suburbs on the other. Here he famously asserts that 'I like a good argument'.

REFLECTION:

'I had not known how all my days were lit
By those two eyes that looked so kindly on;
Nor yet how soon the hours would cease to flit
When that bright magnet drawing them, was gone.
And now, four weeks of darkness have I spent;
Long weeks that slowly came, more slowly went
And left me still to trail sad thoughts and
Twilight dreams alone.'

(Common, J., Common Archive, Newcastle University Library).

Mary died on 25th June 1942 from cancer and was buried in an unmarked grave at Sandon Parish Church. After her death, Common moved to Datchworth with their son Peter, then aged 6. From then, until 1945, Common moved to Frating Community Farm in Essex. These Essex addresses were part of a farming society of conscientious objectors, their contribution to the war effort. Peter recalls (28/2/2000):

I was born in Datchworth, Hertfordshire, in 1934. I only have vague memories of the first house. We moved to another house when I was ten months old which I can remember. At the age of about four we then moved to Wallington, Herts, where we lived in Orwell's house and by the time I was about five we moved up to Sandon where I stayed until my mother died when I'd be about seven-and-a-half. After Mary's death, Jack was involved with the Ministry of Information making films for the Army and I was

shipped across to Essex, Frating Hall, where Irene Palmer, my guardian, lived. Frating Hall Farmers' Society it was called, on the road from Colchester towards Clacton. It was an organisation run by a number of people who were conscientious objectors who were all exempt from being in the Army but were directed into that kind of work. Joe and Doris Watson were also my guardians at that particular point in time. Joe was a good Durham lad. I think that they were the link to my father because they had a lot of Fabian leanings and also were from the same background and era. And there we stayed until I was eleven and we then moved to West Sussex and various houses, it was a low time for Jack. West Chiltington was the first one, Fir Tree Lane. We then moved to a council house, when Jack was doing book reviews and films, script reviews and things like that and working in local farming and things like that; at one particular point working on a mushroom farm.

Going back to when we first went to Langham when I was billeted on the conscientious objectors – Irene and Joe Watson, Vera Britten and all that crowd – he reiterated to me, 'We're staying with them, we're not them, I have to put you somewhere while I go away to do what I've got to do, but you are not a conscientious objector' (or 'conshie' as the local village lads called them). The first week at the village school I got into a fight with somebody and got hurt but then was respected and that's something that Jack would have encouraged me to do. He worked for the Army and he certainly wasn't averse to it. There was nothing conscientious-objection wise about his attitude to life.'

Close friend Irene Palmer recalls (letter to Sid Chaplin, 30/4 (no year), from Hillcrest, The Hill, Bunwell):

'I'd been an avid reader of 'The Adelphi' since about 1936 when I joined the Watsons at Langham. I remember asking Joe what he knew about all the regular contributors, Jack amongst them, one evening in the office (I'd already had, and lost, a copy of The 'Freedom of the Streets'). Jack, I was told, was 'a very decent fellow but too fond of his beer, (though) he did get on well with his wife'. It then transpired that his wife was dying of cancer and one of the Watsons, Doris I think, suggested that it might be a good thing if they had his two children to stay so that they should not have to see their mother die. This offer was made and one day Joe got a telephone call to say Mary was dead and could he come and collect the children whilst he (Jack) found himself a job? This must be about 1942. They arrived with Peter aged seven and a half and Bobby aged eighteen months. We hadn't expected the second child to be so young and (he slept) in my room. Having handed over the boys, Jack then put himself in the doghouse as far as Doris was concerned by sloping pubwards and disappointing Joe who hoped he might join in with our discussions. That was how I came to take over the children – Peter, anyway, for after three weeks Tommy and Emmy McCulloch, who had no child of their own at that time, came and took Bobby away and brought him up as theirs, though Jack would never allow them to adopt him officially.

He visited Peter every alternate week. He'd arrive at Colchester and phone me to bring the boy in. Then he'd give us a meal, take us to the pictures and bring us back for the boy's bedtime – then be off to the pub till

closing time with any of the community who cared to accompany him. I usually 'noshed' up something to eat on their return but Doris disapproved of this – if guests did not come in at the proper time, they should go without was her view, but I never could bring myself to go that far ... I reckoned we had a man of some talent or a genius ... on our hands and allowance had to be made. But, of course, Jack's iconoclasm and scepticism went ill with Joe's 'line' and tended to draw off the disaffected. I put a stop to some of that though by joining in myself when others tactfully withdrew! This, of course, led to some misrepresentation and Joe began sarcastically to preface a meeting with the remark 'Since Irene took to drinking' ...! It was never so. I have never had more than three drinks in one day in my life so far! But it served its purpose and kept the non-conforming one in the wings. I had a soft spot for Jack surely but I was also nuts on the community and could not have let his mockery and misdeeds mess things up without making an effort to minimise them, or so I thought!'

Research shows Common working in a latex factory in 1942 where he managed to catch malaria before going on to work on the mushroom farm. Around this time, he becomes the companion of the likes of Dylan Thomas and Reg Groves. Irene Palmer says to Sid Chaplin, that:

'When not in London, he spent some of the time with the McCullochs and Bobby (but this led I suspect to a coolness between the 'two Daddies') and his old Newcastle friends, the McConnell-Woods – Gilbert and his wife Connie, whom he eventually married.

During the buzz-bomb period, he asked if we could have Emmie and Bobby, Connie and her boy Jan for safety's sake – the women to help in the house. They all came but Emmie had to return to look after her parents. I think Jack was making a bid to get his family together under one roof. Bobby was with us during summer I seem to remember, then Emmie came and took him back but Connie and Jan stayed with us till Connie finally decided to throw in her lot with Jack.

I have found two letters from Jack whilst he was away in Northumberland probably whilst he was making “‘Tyneside Story’”. They seem to be a reply to one or more of mine taking him to task. I was probably prodding him to find alternative accommodation for now I was really was holding the ring (?). I knew there was something afoot between him and Connie but the rest of the Community did not and I was most anxious for Jack to be away before the affair got around to the Watsons who I felt had reason to feel they had been made a convenience of (me too!). Actually, I didn't know then that it was the good-natured Connie that was hanging fire, not being able to bring herself to ditch Gilbert all at once. So there was I, a green and inexperienced young woman flapping and shooing at these talented and wayward people, each in their own storm centre, and expecting them to behave normally in a war situation! It was decent of Jack under the circumstances to take me seriously and make a reasoned reply for I only served to underline his dilemma. I feel I must point out that if Jack made a convenience of us he did not do it with any cynical intent. He was just riding out the storm as all too many of us in the Community were, whatever our protest actions might have been, and he was never very good at making decisions or getting on top of events, preferring to let things slide until a

loophole presented itself when he would bolt through it. That would be his 'luck' that he wrote about and he didn't have much of it. Some of his loopholes led him into blind alleys.

Jack did find accommodation and he, Peter, Jan and Connie left for Sussex.

Peter was twelve so it was somewhere in 1945-6 after Jack had been a weekend visitor at Frating for about four years. There was no unpleasantness – only I got a right old dressing down by Doris for aiding and abetting!!'

Common began living with Constance (Connie) Helena, nee Sambidge (1902-1979) in Datchworth, running the village shop. Their daughter Caroline Alison (Sally) was born in 1944 at Great Bentley, Essex, and she was sixteen when her parents eventually married. Twins, Mary and Charmian, were born in 1946 at West Chittington, Sussex. At this time, the family were based in a mock Tudor detached house in Firtree Lane, snooty West Chilmington in West Sussex (described as 'snooty' by his daughter Sally in notes she wrote for me in 1998), where for a while Common finds himself unemployed before writing film scripts, including 'Good Neighbours' in 1946 about a community project in a town in Scotland and a trip to Newfoundland and Labrador in the same year to work on another script, 'The Newfoundland Story'.

Throughout the hard slog of working life, Common kept up his appearances and made sure that the family were well turned-out and watered. He made sure that there was room for fun and games with plenty fresh air. His wit and sparkle carried him through and he fought for the time to relax and unwind by a healthy programme of reading and by listening to the music which he whistled on his walks.

He certainly needed to preserve his acute sense of humour and his music and poetry if he was to get through the many dark days ahead.

GRAMOPHONE

Through all the darkened room this music stirs,
The air is quick with violins,
With hurrying, springing violins,
And from the flight of silver bees
Sweet sound falls, beaten from silver wings.

Upon the crouched lady's cheek
A red glow burns
And along the edge of her cheek and hand.
The heart of the fire is dull red, too,
A crumbling cavern of dying fire.

But the music rises and the darkness is lit
As the invisible musical notes
Climb and poise and so,
In coruscating concord die.

Silence succeeds and is grim.
It is waiting.
A clock remembers Time's tyranny,
And a taxi tells of a world.

I said, 'Shall I put the other side on?'

It was not a brave thing to say.

(Jack Common, Common Archive, Newcastle University Library).

Chapter 5: MR COMMON AND MR BLAIR

The world which greeted Common on his arrival in London could not have been less provincial than the small world of Newcastle upon Tyne. This is personified by his striking up a friendship with George Orwell. The two writers were severely different in terms of class but there was something which transcended all of this. I suspect they were both observers of society from the fringes and, to that extent, both rebels, comforted and yet repelled by their mutual backgrounds and experiences of growing-up as Englishmen. But, where Common was at ease in the company of working class friends and associates, though conscious of their limitations, Orwell was more distant in his association with 'real' people. I have the feeling that Common was a sceptic but that he liked people and was prepared to give them, despite all of their frailties, the benefit of the doubt. Orwell was intrigued by humanity but in many ways revolted by it.

'The trouble was that he (Orwell) identified the masses both with freedom and dirt. He believed in freedom but dirt repelled him. He reflected this quandary when he wrote that 'the thinking person' is usually left-wing by intellect but right-wing by temperament ... He was about six before he became aware of class distinctions. Before that, his heroes were working class people such as the farm-hands, and builder's labourers, and the plumber's children, with whom he went bird's nesting. Soon, though, he was forbidden to play with these children because they were 'common' ... It meant that for him the working class ceased to be 'a race of friendly and wonderful human beings' and became enemies – 'almost subhuman' and 'brutal'. It was drilled into him that they were dirty and smelt ... In Burma, with the Indian Police, the smell of a marching column of soldiers would make his stomach turn: 'All I

knew was that it was lower class sweat that I was smelling, and the thought of it made me sick'. (Carey, J., 1992, pp.39-41)

Orwell's 'pure' background led him to be somewhat mixed-up in his attitudes towards common humanity:

'On the one hand, he reprimands those who idealize the working class, and who pretend their 'dirtiness' is somehow meritorious in itself. On the other hand, he proclaims (on behalf of some slum-dwellers who have objected to being deloused), 'I sometimes think that the price of liberty is not so much eternal vigilance as eternal dirt'. (Carey, J., 1992, pp.39-41)

It is interesting that Orwell should bump into a 'commoner' who was actually called 'Common'! He would not have found Jack 'dirty', it is more likely that Orwell saw hope in Common, in that he was intelligent and articulate, as well as from the working class, although Orwell did, in general, take a strong dislike to the whole idea of working class intellectual self-improvement.

'Orwell was obsessed with class: but when he tried to describe the social structure of his native land, his efforts were disappointingly confused, and dismally commonplace. From one perspective, wearing his Tory hat, he saw England in traditional, hierarchical terms, as a layered society of exceptional complexity, 'bound together by an invisible chain', and 'stretching into the future and the past'. From another standpoint, and as befitted the offspring of an imperial and professional family, he divided English society into upper, middle and lower classes, with himself very much part of the 'middling

people'. From yet a third vantage point, that of a socialist revolutionary, he saw England as fundamentally riven between 'two nations': 'the moneyed classes', 'the ruling classes' and the 'reactionary classes' on the one side, and 'the poor', 'the common people', and 'the mass of the people' on the other – who, he hoped, would soon rise up against their masters in an 'English revolution'. Beyond any doubt, Orwell was astonishingly sensitive towards (and guilty about) the elaborate nuances of social status and social identity: indeed, he once described himself as 'both a snob and a revolutionary'. (Cannadine, P., 2000, pp.144-6)

'The case for the prosecution is that Orwell was a self-mythologising romantic toff who went in for the odd spot of sentimental slumming, sometimes adopting a ludicrous Cockney accent in the process, and ended up in political defeatism and despair. A second-rate novelist and a furtively fabricating social commentator, he was homophobic, anti-feminist, unsociable, anti-intellectual, authoritarian and latently violent. He was also an anti-Semitic, sexually promiscuous, self-pitying little Englander, whose later fantasies about Big Brother and pigs running little farms (they don't have the trotters for it) bequeathed a set of lurid stereotypes and convenient caricatures to the Right. In this sense, Orwell, like Freud but unlike Marx, has passed into the common language. But whereas Gramsci believed that socialism must become common sense, Orwell at his worst seemed to imagine that common sense was socialism ... Orwell was indeed unsociable, anti-feminist and homophobic, and by no means such a dewy-eyed idealiser of the plebs as some have imagined ... when he was at prep school Orwell once dressed up as a footman in a red velvet coat and white

silk waistcoat. It wasn't the last time he was to disguise himself as one of the lower orders, but it was squalor he was in search of in the spikes of Paris and London, not wholesome proletarian virtue ... Orwell's father bore in India the Monty Pythoneque rank of Assistant Sub-Deputy Opium Agent, Fifth Grade, so one can see what Orwell meant by designating his background 'lower upper middle class' ... In a remarkable feat of self-refashioning, he turned his back on a life of middle-class privilege and chose for his companions tramps, hop-pickers, Catalonian revolutionaries, louche artists and political activists. Like any self-transformation, this one was imperfect. Orwell may have castigated Britain's class-ridden education system, but he put his adopted son down for Wellington and kept up his Etonian contacts to the end ... Outside Catalonia, Orwell's contact with Marx did not extend much further than his poodle, who was named after him.' (Eagleton, T., 2003, pp.3-4, 10)

Obviously, it is Orwell that we most hear about these days but for a long time both men struggled in great hardship in parallel together:

'Orwell was a kind of literary proletarian who lived in dire straits for most of his life, and began to earn serious money from his writing only when he was approaching death ... Orwell never seems to have taken the least interest in success, in contrast to those contemporary literary pundits who pride themselves on being plain-speaking, loose-cannon dissenters while cultivating all the right social contacts. Failure was Orwell's forte, a leitmotif of his fiction. For him, it was what was real, as it was for Beckett. All of his fictional protagonists are humbled and defeated; and while this may be

arraigned as unduly pessimistic, it was not the view of the world they taught at Eton.’ (Eagleton, T., 2003, p.1)

Common, of course, never did earn ‘serious money’ at any stage of his chequered life and he certainly can be said to have shared Orwell’s taker on ‘success’, very much at first-hand.

Orwell excluded the militant working class from ‘The Road to Wigan Pier’ because such people undermined his thesis that socialism was entirely a middle class affair.

Elsewhere, he displayed a homophobic detestation of the ‘pansy Left’, showed a deep misogyny at times in his 1984 and, of course, towards the end of his life, handed to the authorities a listing of over one hundred left-wingers whom he thought should be kept an eye on. Yet in 1947 Orwell was promoting the idea of a federation of democratic socialist European states.

That both Common and Orwell were the sum of one another’s contradictions cannot be denied but it was Common, against all odds, who retained a fundamental faith in the capacity of human beings to change and develop and for society and the community to change alongside this.

‘Thus, despite ingrained feelings of political powerlessness, the working class nevertheless exist, according to Common, in a psychological state of ‘permanent rebellion’.’ (Paul, R., 1999-2000, p.135)

It was in 1930 when he was working on ‘The Adelphi’ that Jack Common first stumbled across Eric Blair (George Orwell). Given the literary connections of both men it was an accident just waiting to happen.

Common had written a number of pieces while out of work and had sent one to John Middleton Murry at 'The Adelphi' which led to a meeting and the promise of a job. In an article written in the late 1950s, Common (1984, p.139) relates that,

'My friendship with Eric began in disappointment and grew under mutual suspicion ... We got on fairly merrily by this method of regularly turning over one another's statements to look for the bug underneath, integrity undamaged by intellectual content being a minimum demand of Orwellian intercourse.'

Common worked on the reorganisation of 'The Adelphi' with a job attempting to increase circulation at 'the hard-times rate of two pounds a week.' (Common, J., 1984, p.139) His hope was that this would serve as 'latch-lifter into the world of writers.' And he did bump into Adelphi literati and others in the Bloomsbury Street office after returning from his hard task of pushing magazines. 'E.A. Blair' was a name he had come across frequently and who he was on the lookout for. After all, Eric Blair was 'a rebel ... a tramp' who 'belonged to the underworld of poverty.' First sighting didn't disappoint. For Common, Orwell 'looked the real thing, outcast, gifted pauper, kicker against authority, perhaps near-criminal.' But as Orwell rose from (Katherine Mansfield's) armchair to shake Common by the hand,

'Manners showed through. A sheep in wolf's clothing, (Common) thought, taking in his height and stance, accent and cool built-in superiority, the public school presence.' (Common, J., 1984, p.140)

‘When they first met, he did not like Blair very much. ‘He was a public school man with perfect manners and he had not known the desperation that makes the real tramp’ (said Common). Eventually, however, he came to appreciate his sincerity and ability and he and his wife Mary became close friends with Eileen and Eric Blair.’ (Whitcombe, V., 1974, p.xiv)

The next time they met in the Bloomsbury office, they moaned about the nonsense of Christmas. This tempted Orwell to launch into ‘one of the statements he loved to use for shock value and which made him appear like an *enfant terrible* in decay. He wanted to spend Christmas in gaol; therefore, he thought of starting a bonfire in Trafalgar Square.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.140) Common’s response was somewhat negative. He felt that Orwell was displaying ‘just the public-school-undergraduate sort of fancy that irritated (him) because it mocked the real destitution (he) and (his) folks had known.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.140) Common suggested that rather than indulge himself in such a frivolous venture Orwell should go in for theft instead and thus have a better chance of a Christmas prison-sentence.

In turn, Orwell had his suspicions of Common and also of ‘The Adelphi’. He saw people like Middleton Murry as romantic idealists with cranky enthusiasms and wondered how Common had got involved. Orwell had subscribed to the magazine when he was in Burma and though he was interested in the intellectual cut and thrust of things, it was true to say also that, ‘often the magazine disgusted him and then he used to prop it up against a tree and fire his rifle at it.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.140)

Common was curious about Eric Blair’s adoption of the pseudonym ‘George Orwell’. For Common the reason was that his book ‘Down and Out’ might have caused distress to relatives if they had known that their boy was tramping the roads and sleeping rough. And the name ‘George Orwell’ was also solidly English in the way that ‘rootless,

nondialect speakers of the public school elite are apt to over-value nationality, just as exiles do.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.139) In fact, it sounded so solidly English that it could scarcely be unique! With typically wry humour, Common remarked that ‘it must be hard lines on some harmless young choirmaster or writer of boys’ adventure stories to see his name headlined in connection with a scurrilous work about able-bodied paupers.’ (Common, J., 1984, p.141)

‘The Adelphi’ changed in the thirties and became more overtly political with a range of polemicists sounding off their views. The Bloomsbury office which had entertained Eric Blair over a cup of tea and tolerated his description of himself as a ‘Tory Anarchist’ became a spot for Marxists, fascists and liberals to slag each other off. To keep the peace, and for reasons of economy, a move of office was effected to a room in Rees’ Chelsea flat where Common served as assistant. Orwell would call in here too and now seemed to approve of socialism on moral grounds.

Orwell longed to live in the country and find a home where could finally propose to ‘his girl’; so, when Common, then living in Sandon, had spotted a derelict cottage in nearby Wallington he told Orwell about it. At this time, Orwell’s material success was limited and he looked for non-intellectual work to supplement his income and ease the pressure whilst also perhaps giving him fresh experiences to write about. As Common goes on to explain (1984, p.142):

‘After I had not seen him for some time, I had a letter from him addressed to the Hertfordshire cottage I was now commuting from. He wanted advice. Having himself rented a Hertfordshire cottage (2 St Kits Lane, Wallington), eleven miles north of me (Datchworth/Bragbury End); he had the idea of reviving its one-time role as village stores. I had not long given up my own

experiment in writer's income bolstering, a confectioner-tobacconist place in Chelsea, so might I advise him on how to obtain stocks, a license to sell tobacco, etc? Even in those days of carelessness among writers and other proletarians, eleven miles was not all that far away (I walked to his place once) so my reply was an invitation to a meal. He promised to bike over next Sunday morning ... Fellow-countrymen, men of Herts., we made greetings ... he had far more interest than I'd expected in my efforts to make a garden out of bare meadow. He was negotiating, he said, for a bit of rough land opposite his cottage; he could run hens there and sell the eggs in his village stores. We continued this pleasant chat down to the pub. The landlord ... called him 'sir' tentatively ... Years later I realised that no pub ever knew my friend as 'Eric', let alone 'George'.'

Mark Benney (1966, pp.107-8) recalls meeting both Common and Blair:

'Early in our acquaintance he [Richard Rees of 'The Adelphi'] introduced me to a number of other young writers, like Dylan Thomas, Jack Common and Rayner Heppenstall, who also had the virtue of poverty in their past as well as a most precarious foothold on the present. Eric Blair (George Orwell) was a special case; he came from a much more prosperous background than the others, but in compensation he lived a life of monkish poverty that was only in part dictated by his meagre earnings. In an even more extreme form than Richard, Blair had an odd relish for personal discomfort. I remember that Richard drove me out to Wallington one bleak October afternoon to meet him. We knocked on the door of a little cottage, and it was opened by a tall figure, face and clothes covered with coal smuts, who peered at us

through a billowing cloud of smoke; Blair had been trying to light his first fire of the season, to find that the chimney was in some way defective. An examination showed that some bricks were missing from the flue, leaving a hole that caused a downdraught. While Blair shovelled the offending coals from the grate, Richard and I went out to the back garden to search for bricks or stone to fill the hole. We found some quickly, nice old blocks of granite the right size and shape; but when we came back into the house, Blair looked at our finds, then shook his head regretfully. No, he explained he couldn't use those pieces, they really came from the field behind the garden, which had once been a cemetery; the bits of granite lying around were fragments of old tombstones. I stared at him and began to ask, 'What ...?' But no, he went on reluctantly, he couldn't use those to patch his chimney, he wouldn't feel right about it. I was later to become more familiar with Eric Blair's reverence for traditional things; at the time I simply wrote it off as slightly loony. But later, as we drove back to town, Richard was positively ebullient; he seemed to feel that we had witnessed an impressive demonstration in how to be painfully scrupulous while painfully uncomfortable – an example of fortitudes than any man would want to emulate; he had clearly derived from the incident the same kind of spiritual elation that a fundamental Baptist gets from a revival meeting.'

Orwell's cottage, three miles from the nearest town of Baldock, was where he wrote 'The Road to Wigan Pier', 'Homage to Catalonia' and 'Animal Farm' (Wallington is the Willingdon in the novel). He rented it for 7s 6d a week from 1936 to 1940. 'Owned by a bankrupt farmer, the 17th century cottage had no heat or lighting, and the toilet was at the bottom of the garden.' (Ezard, J., 1997, p.8) The owner, a Mr Dearman, had

economised by re-roofing the two-bedroom house in corrugated iron sheets, which created a thunderous roar whenever it rained. 'In the door between the kitchen and the living room you can still see the four slots which Orwell drilled so that he could peep at shoppers rummaging in the shelves.' (Clark, R., 2003)

Customers entered 'The Stores', as it was called, by way of the 4' 6' front door. Orwell was very poor at the time and he started to develop his tuberculosis symptoms there. He married his first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy (who was born in South Shields, where her father worked for the Customs & Excise) in Wallington Church in June 1936. He bought a bacon slicer but his plans to run the cottage as a general store failed. He then went off to fight in the Spanish Civil War and later, with his wife (who had joined him in Spain), returned wounded in the summer of 1937 to write "Homage to Catalonia". He kept the cottage as a weekend home until 1947, three years before his death from tuberculosis in January 1950.

O'Shaughnessy writes in a long letter from the cottage on New Year's Day 1938 to her friend Norah Myles:

'I have no pens, no ink, no glasses and the candles are all in the room where George is working and if I disturb him again it will be the fifteenth time tonight.'

'The letter mixes routine gossip about the Wallington hens and their poodle puppy, Marx, with a determined spilling of the Spanish beans.' (Taylor, D.J., 10/12/2005, p.5)

‘Homage to Catalonia’ was published in April 1938. Shortly before this, one of his lungs haemorrhaged and during a long convalescence, his doctors advised him that he would benefit from a winter out of England. Helped by a £300 loan from the benefactor L.H. Myers, the Blair’s journeyed by sea to French Morocco in the first week of September. They returned to England in March 1939.

‘Denied military occupation on account of his ravaged lungs, Orwell moped in Wallington while Eileen took a job working for the censorship department in Whitehall. In the summer of 1940 as invasion threatened, he was appointed drama and film critic of the weekly magazine Time and Tide and the couple relocated to a mansion flat in Chagford St NW1.’ (Taylor, D.J., 2005, p.5)

They went on to adopt an illegitimate Tyneside baby son before Eileen O’Shaughnessy died in the Fernwood House Hospital, Newcastle, on March 29th 1945 with the child scarcely a year old. She was buried in Jesmond cemetery within spitting distance of Common’s birthplace. The Tyneside links with Orwell continued to resonate.

Jack Common was invited by Orwell to enter the somewhat muddled and messy scenario of his domestic life. Common, I would suppose, was the handy prole in all this. Someone to offer advice on the practical tasks of running a store, maintaining gardens and the like. In a letter written to Common from Wallington on April 3rd 1936, Orwell writes (1970, p.244):

‘I received an unsigned letter which from internal evidence I decided must be from you ... The feuds I observed among ‘The Adelphi’ followers seemed to

centre round two causes. One was that people in each area in the north seem to be savagely jealous of people from other areas ... besides this ... at 'The Adelphi' summer school people from the middle classes and genuine working-class people didn't get on together and ... working-class people were annoyed by patronizing airs put on by some of the others.'

Later in the same month he dwells again on class:

'Yes, this business of class-breaking is a bugger. The trouble is that the socialist bourgeoisie, most of whom give me the creeps, will not be realistic and admit that there are a lot of working-class habits which they don't like and don't want to adopt. E.g. the typical middle-class socialist not only doesn't eat with his knife but is slightly horrified by seeing a working man do so. And so many of them are the sort of eunuch type with a vegetarian smell who go about spreading sweetness and light and have at the back of their minds a vision of the working class all T.T., well washed behind the ears, readers of Edward Carpenter or some other pious sodomite and talking with B.B.C. accents. The working class are very patient under it all.'

(Orwell, G., 1970, pp.245-6)

Yet in April 1937 Common responded thus in his diary:

'Orwell's attitude towards the prigs and vegetarians of the socialist movement is very Etonian. I do not believe any Etonian truly converted to anything – too drastically conditioned.'

Certainly the two of them suffered from the same hazardous and precarious conditions associated with the struggling freelance writer. Orwell writes in a letter to Common from the Jellicoe Ward of Preston Hall convalescent home in Aylesford, Kent, in late March 1938, that

‘Warburg has just sent me along a copy of ‘Seven Shifts’ which I know I shall read with great interest. He also asked me to give it a bit of a boost ... The trouble is that everyone in writing is torn between three motives, i. Art for art’s sake in the ivory tower, ii. political propaganda and iii. pulling in the dough. But anyway I’ll say what I can about the book and I’ll also see if I can review it for the New Leader.’ (Orwell, G., 1970, pp.344-5)

The two mates shared a similar scepticism though I doubt that Common was quite so intolerant of ‘sodomites’:

‘Dear Comrade Common (I hope by the way you share my prejudice against that accursed word ‘Comrade’ which has kept many a likely recruit from the Socialist movement).’ (Orwell, G., 1970, p.262)

The ‘Comrades’ were also able to scratch one another’s backs. Whilst still convalescing in Aylesford, Orwell writes to Common on July 5th 1938 with a firm proposal to the poverty-stricken Geordie:

‘You know I have to go abroad for the winter, probably for about six months starting about the end of August. Well, would you like to have our cottage rent-free and in return look after the animals? ... You know what our

Cottage is like. It's bloody awful. Still, it's more or less liveable ... As to produce, there won't be many vegetables, as of course Eileen alone couldn't cope with all of the garden, but at any rate there will be potatoes enough to see you through the winter. There'll also be milk, about a quart a day, as the goat has just kidded ... As to looking after the animals. This means feeding etc about 30 fowls and feeding and milking the goats ... Let me know would you whether you would like to take this on. It would suit us, and for you at any rate I dare say it would be a quiet place to work in.' (Orwell, G., 1970, pp.375-6)

Common seemed glad to take up the offer – which must say something about his own desperate plight. By September 26th 1938, Orwell was writing with news of his villa in Marrakech, French Morocco. War was in the offing, so a hint of gloom and doom pervades Orwell's ramblings:

'I don't know whether or not you will be fitting on your gas mask by the time this gets to you, but things look pretty bad ... If war does break out it is utterly impossible to foresee what will happen, but unless I am kicked out I don't think I shall come home, at any rate until the time I was supposed to be coming, i.e. early next spring. The whole thing seems to me so utterly meaningless that I think I shall just concentrate on remaining alive ... in the event of war breaking out you must do what you think fit about the cottage and the animals. The bank anyway will pay the rent for the next six months, and if you are just keeping out of it you would probably be as safe there as anywhere, I don't think anyone will drop a bomb on Wallington and it might even be more profitable to expand the fowl industry a bit, as eggs are sure to

be scarce and sought after ... On the other hand if you feel impelled either to join the army or go to jail or for any other reason to leave Wallington, will you communicate with my brother-in-law? ... he will see to the disposal of the cottage, which could perhaps be let furnished to bomb-dodgers.' (Orwell, G., 1970, p.389)

Soon after, Orwell writes again to Common: 'This morning received your letter in which you didn't sound as though war were really likely, so write now in a more normal mood.' (Orwell, G., 1970, p.244) The gap between the two friends is highlighted even more by Orwell's comments in the same letter: 'It makes me sad to hear you say you've never been out of England, especially when I think of the bastards who do travel.' Orwell seems to have a unique knack to talk about the complexities of society in the same breath as he alludes to mundane detail:

'Dear Jack, Thanks for yours. There were several important items I wanted to talk to you about but they were chased out of my mind by the European situation. The first is, I think we forgot to warn you not to use thick paper in the W.C. It sometimes chokes the cesspool, with disastrous results. The best to use is Jeyes paper which is 6d a packet ... I enclose cheque for £3 ... Could you pay £2 to Field, the potmaster at Sandon, for the rent of the field. It's a lot overdue but F never remembers about it. Field goes past in his grey car, which he uses to carry cattle in, every Tuesday on his way to Hitchin Market, and one can sometimes stop him if one jumps into the middle of the road and waves. As to the remaining £1, could you some time in the winter get some or, if possible, all of the ground in the vegetable garden dug over?' (Orwell, G., 1970, pp.392-3)

In the same letter, Orwell takes a swipe at the left. Whilst his mistrust of such intellectuals echoes that of Common's, they come to the same conclusions from very different directions:

‘What sickens me about left-wing people, especially the intellectuals, is their utter ignorance of the way things actually happen. I was always struck by this when I was in Burma and used to read anti-imperialist stuff.’ (Orwell, G., 1970, p.395)

Soon Orwell is back to the mundanities of keeping goats:

‘About February, we’ll have to think of getting Muriel mated, but there’s no hurry. Whatever happens don’t let her go to that broken-down old wreck of Mr Nicholls, who is simply worn out by about twenty years of fucking his own sisters, daughters, grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters.’ (Orwell, G., 1970, p.409)

Common's son Peter remembers Wallington well: ‘We had to look after his goats. He had one called Muriel which butted me several times.’ (‘The Journal’, 14/9/2002, p.65) He recalls ‘Picture Post’, the influential news magazine of the time, coming to Wallington to do an article on Orwell. Peter, the only child in the village, found himself on the front cover.

In a letter to Eileen O’Shaughnessy, Common's partner Mary Anderson wrote from Wallington (Common Archive, Newcastle University Library):

‘I made arrangements with a friend of mine to meet in Hitchin last Tuesday, the day Jack was intending to go to London, however we found we had about six shillings between us that morning, which I collared, Jack having just enough time to get to the post office before catching his train. So you can imagine how much shopping I did, or didn’t. This situation is fairly general with us around about Christmas: the fatal season usually sees us either broke or nearly so. This year once again we dare not look Santa Claus in the face and planning to escape to the north where they keep the less-expensive celebration of New Year. Some friends of ours have offered to run us up in their car. Otherwise we would have them arriving on us, and getting drunk with the villagers while I cook enormous meals.

We have already made your pubs more comfortable for you, by the way. Mrs Ridley has turned the mangle out of the tap-room, so that it no longer seems to be washing-day there; she keeps a huge fire burning every night, and two oil-lamps. The Derby has gone one better by enlarging its tap-room to twice the size. Really looks like a London cocktail bar now.

There is not much news to give you about the people here. Nobody dies or gets married or commits adultery. Albert has been in hospital with jaundice but is out again, and Fred Hatchett's toe gets a bulletin now and then.

... I'm sorry to say that another hen died last week, one of the old brown ones, and we expect another to go the same way again. Seemingly there is a disease in the ground, but I suppose you know about it. The people here think you shouldn't keep that piece of land and what's more astounding than anything else is the fact that they have not laid an egg yet. Muriel is alright and gives us very little trouble except when her yearning period comes along – last time she bellowed incessantly for two days and nights.’

April 1939 finds Orwell back in Southwold:

‘We are coming down to Wallington on Tuesday ... I’m sorry if we’ve thrown you out with this late arrival ... I hope you’re all flourishing and more or less finished with winter colds etc. If you’re in one of the Council houses you’re no doubt finding it a lot more sanitary than our cottage. We intend to stay the summer and move.’ (Orwell, G., 1970, p.433)

In 1940 Orwell had the feeling that only a revolution could save England. He regarded the 1930s as a decade of failure ending with the disasters of 1940 and demonstrating the deep malaise at the core of British society. For him, the war presented a chance of radical upheaval, even revolution, which would set things right, showing that planning for the common good was possible and with it the end would come for the class system and private capitalism. Orwell wished to capture patriotism from the ‘establishment’ in order to restore it to its radical origins and link an English identity to socialist ideas of the collective and the co-op, concepts marginalised in the Thirties.

‘It was in the Thirties that the failures of economic and foreign policy displayed for all to see the long-term decay of the ruling class. But it was also in the Thirties that new social groups arose who would form the nucleus of the new socialist Britain: a Britain that could only come into being from below, from ‘the people’.’ (Baxendale, J. and Pawling, C., 1996, p.127)

In a war-time diary of 1942 (June 7th), Orwell records straying across Common again:

‘Last Tuesday spent a long evening with Cripps (who had expressed a desire to meet some literary people) together with Empson, Jack Common, David Owen, Norman Cameron, Guy Burgess and another man (an official) whose name I didn’t get. About 2½ hours of it, with nothing to drink. The usual inconclusive discussion. Cripps, however, very human and willing to listen. The person who stood up to him most successfully was Jack Common.’
(Orwell, G., 1970, p.485)

The last record of any contact between the two men is in a letter from Orwell to Common, dated 27th July 1949, from the Cotswold Sanatorium at Cranham, where Orwell was convalescing. He sent Common a loan of £50 and professed that ‘I haven’t ever remarried, though I sometimes think I would if I could get some health back.’
(Davison, P., 1998, p.152)

The academic Eileen Aird has talked of the ambivalence in the relationship of the two writers, describing it as ‘mocking, affectionate, engaged and suspicious all at the same time’ (quoted in Mapplebeck, J., 1982). Filmmaker Mapplebeck remembers this too:

‘After I had somewhat gushingly enthused about the clarity and simplicity of Orwell’s prose, Jack said: ‘Aye you’ve noticed that have you – he used to go through my stuff knocking a word out here and a word out there. I used to think to myself that’s three ha’pence a line he’s throwing away’.

Jack, I think, liked to see himself as what he’d call a ‘wage slave’ rather than a professional writer and beneath the humour and self mockery of that

particular anecdote there was still an echo of the suspicion of his first encounter with Orwell ... There was another reason why Jack found it difficult to come to terms with Orwell's posthumous fame. It wasn't envy – Jack had never lost that Geordie generosity of spirit which I always find one of the most heartening features of Tyneside. No, I think it was genuine puzzlement. Puzzlement that a man of the Left – although Jack maintained that Orwell's early description of himself as 'a Tory anarchist' was no bad description – but I think a man of the Left nevertheless, should have become such a hero to the political Right, both here and in the United States. Puzzlement too that Orwell should have somehow come to be regarded as an authority on working class life, albeit from the standpoint of an outsider.'

Raymond Williams (1971) has argued that when Orwell came back from Burma he was a stranger in a foreign land and he set out to discover an England outside the high walls and hedges that the imperial class built around themselves when they came home. 'For this journey of discovery Orwell needed a guide and Jack Common turned out to be the surest of these guides.' (Mapplebeck, J., 1982) For Mapplebeck, both men were of the 'independent left', sharing a 'dislike of trendy middle class leftism typified, perhaps most of all, by Middleton Murry and a deep distrust of the Communist Party. There's also that contempt for an admass culture and a rather sentimental belief in the inherent but passive virtues of the English working class.' (Mapplebeck, J., 1982)

'In the tone of his strictures on the middle class left or the purtitanical CP members, [Common] showed a much greater depth of understanding than Orwell, whose language so often in that same period and on the same subjects was strident and inaccurate. There were clearly long periods in the

1930s when Orwell must have realised that in matters of working class experience and political characteristics, Common's was the superior intelligence. When Orwell began to achieve literary success and popular attention, Common, it seems, was dropped.' (Worpole, K. 14/8/1980, p.321)

Eric Homberger has this to say (26/12/1980, p.1471):

'For Orwell, Jack Common was that unusual figure, a proletarian writer who preserved the proletarian viewpoint ... there must have been substantial agreement between the two on the defects of the existing Left in England. Common seems to have strengthened Orwell's objections to middle-class socialist attitudes, and to have encouraged Orwell (who, in truth, may not have needed much encouragement) while writing the notorious second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, to spell out more harshly than was politic the inadequacies of left-wing thought and propaganda. Common may have solidified Orwell's view that class was the central problem for socialism in England ...'

(Common): 'It is not a bit of use all our little tomatoes remaining yellow because they fancy themselves mangel-wurzels. Red's their fate and red's their freedom. Hegel's brand.' Orwell would have certainly disagreed: neither writer, however, accepted the vulgar Marxist contention that the economic 'base' had primacy over the social and cultural 'superstructure'. They concentrated more on questions of attitude, class perception and consciousness than other Marxists of the 1930s; of course, these concerns left them with little to say about the narrow Labour Party agenda of

economic policy and parliamentary politics. In political terms Orwell and Common were men without a country.'

It is not without coincidence, I fear, that a batch of Orwell's letters to Common has survived but none of the many that Common wrote to Orwell. In an interview with me at his home in Warrington (28/2/2000), Peter Common comments on his father:

'He could see straight through people who were false and he had no time for them, not at all. He was very open, very honest, very straightforward. One of the reasons why he initially had some problems with Orwell was because he thought he was a poser. It's said that when he went to Wigan he looked through the train window and he saw an 'other world'. Jack was his guide in that 'other world', wasn't he? He [Orwell] wouldn't have understood Wigan; he wouldn't have understood the working-class without Jack's guidance and interpretation. I feel strongly about that. If he had any regard for Orwell it was that, when it really came down to it, Orwell acknowledged to Jack that he needed his help.'

This point is further endorsed by John Mapplebeck (1982) who refers to

'Orwell's description in 'The Road to Wigan Pier' of a working class woman seen from a train window on a winter's day who was 'kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste pipe'. A woman who, according to Orwell, knew what 'a dreadful destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold on the slimy stones of a slum backyard poking a stick up a foul drainpipe'. Reading that, it's always seemed to me that you can feel the cold

plate glass of the third class carriage window between Orwell and his subject. Somebody had to wind that railway carriage window down so that Orwell could get closer to that other England, the other England he celebrates in the later essays with warmth but without sentimentality. That's a job for which Jack Common was uniquely suited.'

Since his death in 1968, Common's work has been largely overshadowed by that of his contemporary Orwell, despite the fact that much of their early political writings covered many of the same class themes. 'While Common's books are almost all completely out of print and forgotten, Orwell's novels and works of social reportage have become established as classic portrayals of slum life in Britain.' (Paul, R., 1999-2000, p.120) Or, as Geoffrey Heptonstall (4/1994) puts it: 'Among the Orwell's that might have been we have the example of his friend Jack Common, entirely forgotten except as a footnote to Orwell (a footnote worth investigating).'

This is something of an injustice, for as the historian Reg Groves has said: 'Orwell leaned on Common rather like Dante leaned on Virgil.' (Mapplebeck, J., 25/6/1974)

A point endorsed by Ken Worpole:

'There were clearly long periods in the 1930s when Orwell must have realised that in matters of working class experience and political characteristics, Common's was the superior intelligence.' (Worpole, K. 14/8/1980, p.321)

Paul, however, detects:

‘A pivotal difference between Common’s attitude and that of Orwell. While expressing genuine anger at the poverty and exploitation of the working class, Orwell nevertheless remained deeply sceptical about the idea of the workers’ capacity to overcome their own conditions of oppression. Thus, to Marx’s insistence that the ‘emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class themselves’, Orwell reacted with profound suspicion, as he did to most other ideological positions within Marxism ... In contrast, Common’s unequivocal support for the self-emancipatory efforts of the workers themselves was central to his own conception of Socialism. A commitment to this tangible link between the individual and the collective was reflected moreover in his preoccupation with helping the working class tell its own story ... Common was keen to point out that one of the things that really characterises working class life was a creative contrast between its collective form of living – the ‘Freedom of the Streets’ as he called it – and celebration of diverse individual talent.’ (Paul, R., 1999-2000, p.123/130)

Ken Worpole (14/8/1980, p.321) concludes that:

‘As we enter the 1980s in which Orwell, for example, having himself no experience of mutuality and community, could only foresee the bitter winds and corrosive dust of 1984 with its defeated proles, Jack Common’s direct experience of working class resilience and liveliness suggests different kinds of possibilities.’

Chapter 6: THE POST-WAR PERIOD OF JACK

The Second World War had been the most destructive war in human history. In the six years of bloody conflict, in excess of 50 million people had died, 20 million in the Soviet Union alone. In Britain, 60,000 civilians and 270,000 soldiers were killed. Churchill had expected to be re-elected as Prime Minister at the General Election held in July 1945, based on his track-record as a war leader. This was not to be – instead, the Conservative Party suffered a most humiliating defeat with a huge swing to Labour, voted in on a programme of fundamental social reform, including a nationalisation programme for gas, electricity, coal and transport and the introduction of a state welfare system with education, health care and social security for all. The British electorate had long memories and had voted for an end to the severe inequalities of the past.

After the Second World War until his death in 1968, Jack Common scraped a precarious living doing various jobs from reading and recommending novels for the film industry to working as a museum caretaker. There were extended periods of poverty, with house-evictions, and there was too the continued neglect of his writing.

1948 brings a period of settlement (until 1956) at a council house at 32 Warren Hamlet, Storrington, in West Sussex. Here he grafts away as a labourer, at a mushroom nursery, and, at night, he toils in the candlelight by working on scripts and reviews, in between times even managing to write some of his own stuff, usually at weekends. In a letter to Irene Palmer, dated 10th December 1950, Common says (Wilkes, L., 1971, p.156):

‘I am as thin as a rake ... terribly sober; a six in the morning riser; and a worker all the hours there are. These read like the qualifications for a very poor job. And I had three till a morning ago. From seven till five, I was a

labourer plying a nimble shovel ...; seven till ten, a critic compiling film reports; Sat and Sun afternoons an author writing his books ... I thought of tendering my resignation. But you know I have never resigned from anything all my life. However, I got the sack – that is more in keeping with my tradition. So now I turn out three film reports on books every week which takes me till Thursday and earns me £4 10s. and then I turn to the book.'

Common further describes the drudgery in another letter to Palmer, dated 2nd April 1951 (Aird, E., 1977, p.4):

'Five months' hard labour at the nursery and the production of some 50,000 words of film reporting simultaneously with people snatching the roof off my head and turning out the electric light and littering me with summonses and my typewriter breaking down in all directions and lack of beer thinning my blood; lack of tobacco making my lungs transparent.'

More film work came his way with Rank Studios as a script advisor and reporter on the suitability of novels as film subjects. He also went on to work as a freelancer for the Associated British Picture Corporation during the 1950s and 1960s, again writing and editing scripts. He continued to produce articles for magazines such as the 'New Statesman and Nation', 'Labour's Voice' and 'Tribune'.

He had an unusual stroke of luck in May 1949 when he was approached by Michael Hodson of Turnstile Press who had read an article by Common on Jack London and was impressed. Kingsley Martin of Turnstile Press published Common's best-known book, 'Kiddar's Luck', in 1951. Despite the hardships, he was only two months behind schedule in finishing the manuscript. 'Kiddar's Luck' is effectively an autobiography

vividly describing his childhood on the streets of Edwardian Heaton in Newcastle. His daughter Sally Magill recalls (1998):

‘At the time that Jack was writing ‘Kiddar’s Luck’, by a strange quirk of fate we were living in a black and white fake Tudor cottage in the stockbroker belt in Sussex, only rented, of course. The lease ran out and we would have been homeless but a temporary place was found for us in a farmer’s cottage with thick stone walls and an Elsan and a smelly cattle-yard next door. A few months later a council house became vacant. There were two other nice respectable council estates but the one we got was the prettily named Warren Hamlet, a general dumping ground for problem families. In our cull de sac, there were two gypsy families. Jack enjoyed meeting them and hearing their stories, learning some Romany words from one man I remember. One September, we went off to the fields of Yalding in Kent with them, hop-picking. When we arrived, we found the gypsies were at the top of the pecking order. They lived in solid stables next to the farmhouse, whereas we lived in tin huts with bundles of twigs and straw for our bedding. The gypsies worked as tallymen, measuring the hops we picked into bushel baskets and recording the amounts so as to work out our pay. I was only eight at the time but I earned some money too!

One year, while the gypsies were away hop-picking as usual, the house of one family was set on fire by their enemies in a gypsy vendetta. It was just across the cull de sac from us.

So, anyway, these three different houses formed the backdrop to the writing of ‘Kiddar’. We were extremely, as opposed to averagely, hard-up at the time. Because of an unpaid bill, the electricity was switched off and we had

to make do with candles for lightning. I remember a birthday party at the time with lots of candles around the room stuck in half-potatoes for holders.’

Writing from 32 Warren Hamlet, Storrington on 9th February 1953 to his friend Tommy McCulloch (Common Archive, Newcastle University Library), Common gives a vivid impression of the nature of his life-style in those days:

‘An influx of Peter’s and Jan’s pals swept the decks of all our home-made wine, and dotted the Warren with youthful drunks ... After all of which merry goings-on, the economic reality of January unveiled its Medusa head. Elstree Studios sacked ninety and cut down on its reading department. This lost me £10 on the month to offset my gain of £15 from Turnstile. A summons for a £6 debt then rolled in to swipe the difference. Thus we go. I’ve cut my drinking down to one hour, three pints, on a Saturday when Storrington belongs to me, some of it. All other evenings, work holds sway. The difficult Ampersand now approaches the half-way mark and gathers impetus whenever I get two consecutive days at it. I delivered a consignment completing the first 30,000 words last week but Lord knows whether I can make my deadline of April 1st – getting very near that is. Had a couple of good fan-letters re ‘Kiddar’. One from Miles Varey, who lived in Third Avenue when I was an infant; and another from Joe Harris on behalf of the Geordie crew of the oil-tanker Red Bank now cruising the Red Sea – he is Potts Street born but went to North Heaton School. The first lad is eleven years my senior, the second has a father the same age as me but both found their school days accurately described in my account of my own. Nice to hear.

My news is necessarily of small matters. I lead a sort of invalid life really, allowed out for an hour's stroll each afternoon, on Saturday morning and evening, all the rest of the week tied to book or typewriter. Not that I kick against this, no, I only wish that I could be sure financially of continuing until such a time as I feel I have worked off my quota. What I do regret is the waste of time involved in trying to keep up with the cost of living. If I was on my own, I'd live on the barest and cheapest like a venerable old monk.

Sal finished up last term top of her class, with the best report I've ever seen anybody get. She laid in wait for Peter coming home meaning to crow over him. She knew he had a rehearsal test for his City and Guilds. But he was top as well, with the incredible marking of 91% (40% passes). If he can do anything like that in the real thing ... he should get an honours pass. He too is teetotal this year, completely. Doesn't smoke either ... Jan gets through about twenty a day ...

I hear nothing from Newcastle, not even a Xmas card. So I take it they are still so offended at 'Kiddar', they've broken off all relations. You know, it never occurred to me that they'd take any notice of the book, one way or the other – my last meant nothing to them. I suppose it was the 'Daily Express' big splash that did it.

Christ, I must get back to bread-earning.'

Joe Archer was the Geordie who wrote to Common from the oil-tanker S.S. Red Bank in the Red Sea: 'It ('Kiddar's Luck') is very popular aboard here', says Archer, 'and is quickly 'snatched up' as soon as someone finishes it. I guess that's because we're nearly all Geordies ... Thanks again for a swell book' (Archer, J., 9/1/1953).

Writing from Storrington, Sussex on 12th June 1953 to his publisher Turnstile Press ('The Hard Times', 1982, p.7.), Common is nostalgic for his home city:

'It is a canny toon – 'canny Newcassel' they call it ... Canny folk are good to be with, canny places good to be in ... Take a bus out East or West – not North, they are semi-posh up that way – and work your way, pub by pub, to the centre. Don't be afraid to have a word with any company you come across. The moment they spot that you are in the unfortunate position of not being able to speak English (that is, Tyneside) they'll do anything for you. The Geordie always has a soft spot for the stranger who is practically dumb. Besides, you will be rare, visitors don't often venture into the rough-looking areas where the true native is bred. The foreground puts them off. Yet because of the hill and vale layout of the city you get wonderful views from such a spot as the top of Headlam Street, say ... For you are now on a literary pilgrimage. I am leading you on to ground covered or about to be covered in my next books. As they also contain non-drinking characters – but only of the feminine sex – you'd better take in a very different stamping ground, Jesmond Dene, but don't go in the front gate. Follow the Ouseburn Valley along and climb upwards. If you haven't a girl on your arm, imagine you have – that'll give you the right approach to the celebrated Northern beauty spot.

... For a wet morning you want to have a bite in 'The Old George'. If it is the evening that is wet, start off at either end of the Long Bar. By the time you have drawn your way to the other door, either it will be fine, or you won't know what it is. One more point of call for you. Down by Pembrey's bookshop in the Cloth Market there is a pub called 'The Oxford', once a

Music Hall. This was 'Bamburghs' – a starting point of the famous trip described in the Tyneside anthem 'The Blaydon Races'. Tynesiders are great singers. If you do want to learn the language it is easier to follow when sung than spoken. Make sure you get some of the crowd singing some time. This is easy. Wherever three or four Geordies are gathered together: three of them can sing, the other one fights.

Well, I hope you come back with some fair idea of why we exiles never forget the funny charm of the old Tyne.'

His son Peter recalls that he

'returned to Newcastle on at least four occasions' with his father. 'Once before my mother's death. In other words, not often. He paid two visits to Paris (ca. 1966) after I joined the Army. He spoke French!' (Common, P., 2002)

Life down south for Common was not quite so charming. The 'next books' he mentions above were to be a trilogy. The sequel to 'Kiddar's Luck' was 'The Ampersand' published by Turnstile in 1954, and which carried on his story after the age of fourteen. He preferred it to 'Kiddar's Luck'. In a letter he said: 'I'm trying to get them (Turnstile Press) to give me an advance on my next which IS a masterpiece.' (Wilkes, L., 1971, p.160)

As Ron Paul says (1982, p.79):

'Common continued struggling, to bring up his 'large family by dint of the most soul-destroying hack-work' (Sid Chaplin), at the same time as he taxed himself to the utmost to follow 'Kiddar's Luck' with a sequel. He

succeeded, temporarily at least, in warding off the gnawing feelings of doubt about his own ability that seemed part and parcel of his working-class make-up, and, three years later, ‘‘The Ampersand’’ was published. It was to be his last act of defiance against his culturally alien surroundings and internal misgivings.’

Encouraged by judicious praise, undeterred by small sales, he began the third volume of his autobiographical trilogy. He was now beginning to enlarge the circle of his admirers, and of his acquaintances among literary people. He was shy and diffident at first until he felt secure enough to relax.

Turnstile went into liquidation two years later and neither book was a commercial success, meaning that Common did not complete the trilogy with his long-promised novel ‘Riches and Rare’ which was set in Newcastle during the General Strike of 1926. Newcastle newspapers turned ‘Kiddar’s Luck’ down and the city’s booksellers showed no interest. Turnstile Press only promoted the regional dimension of ‘Kiddar’s Luck’ after it had won critical acclaim. Indeed, when it was first published, Turnstile was threatened with a collective libel action from the residents of Third Avenue, so accurate was Common’s portrayal of the scenes of his boyhood! Subsequently, both Penguin and Pan Books rejected the idea of bringing out a paperback edition of ‘Kiddar’s Luck’.

John Mapplebeck comments (14/12/1952):

‘Ironically when I first met him in the early sixties, these novels were often the last ripples of the brief fifties fashion for northern working class writing – a tide of fashion that with Jack’s usual luck he had somehow managed to miss. Both his novels were just a bit too early.’

Another novel, *Esther*, remained unpublished with titles for seven chapters, along with five chapters of an untitled, unfinished novel set among the pre-war Newcastle socialists.

'Kiddar's Luck' was published as 'Glueck Ist Trumpf' in Germany by Insel-Verlag in 1953. As Tommy McCulloch recalls (letter from Yetminster, Sherborne, Dorset, to Ron Paul, Gothenburg University, 9/2/1987. Common Archive, Newcastle University Library): 'I remember Jack saying about the German edition of his work, an American edition too. As no figures of sales were boasted, I feared the worst. They must have met with a poor reception.'

Later on, in 1963, the novel was adapted in three parts for the B.B.C. schools radio programme 'Books, Plays, Poems', and, in four parts, for the B.B.C. Northern Home Service (1967).

A strange irony was that in 1953 Common was asked to sit as a model for sculptor Laurence Bradshaw, serving as the brow of Karl Marx for the famous bronze in Highgate Cemetery. As Bradshaw explained (Mapplebeck, J., 25/6/1974):

'I decided to base Karl Max's eyebrows on the fundamental structure of Jack Common's brow for here I found many of the human qualities that I could see in the photographs and I understood from reading the life of Karl Marx: human sympathy, tolerance and a profound understanding and an inexhaustible patience. For Jack had tremendous patience with both his friends and with his own life.'

So the struggle to earn a crust carried on much as before. Next came a move in 1956 to a cottage in Chastleton in the Cotswolds to serve as a guide at Chastleton House, Moreton-in Marsh, Glossop, a posting obtained for Common by Sir Richard Rees, a

loyal friend from the old days of 'The Adelphi'. Common was able to find time here to write in the winter months but major disagreements with Alan Clutton-Brock, the owner of Chastleton House, led to Common having to leave. The accommodation is described by his daughter Sally thus:

'The cottage we moved into was actually four tiny cottages, two at the end of each row! At first, we lived in one cottage (two joined together) and slept in the other two. But this was too much bother so we settled in the one nearest the village well, modernised to a tap. We had to get all our water from it for some time till water was laid on at the cottage. The nearest pub was one and a half miles away but Jack always enjoyed walking.' (Magill, S., 1998)

The original plan had been for Jack to work hard as a guide in the summer months but to have time during the winter to do his writing and film reports, as well as being congenial company for Clutton-Brock. However, 'the old Etonian gin alcoholic and the working class writer eventually got on each other's nerves, Jack was sacked and we lost our tied cottage.' (Magill, S., 1998)

As Sally adds: 'Jack believed in moving every five years to gain new experiences for his writing'.

Mark Benney (1966, pp.103-4) has painted a vivid picture of Alan Clutton-Brock 'and his exotic wife Barbara':

'We were dazzled by this brilliant, seedy, hard-drinking couple whose prodigious talents were so at war with each other that, involuntarily, one inspected the ground around them for corpses. Alan was the most

demonic individual I had yet met. His mind teemed with nervous, graceful ideas, and his body, in intricate polyphonal relation with them, squirmed and twitched and suspended itself like a fifty-piece orchestra ... impalpably but unmistakably Alan bore with his presence the aura of large prosperous Edwardian households with lots of servants and women who dutifully retired when the conversation became interesting ... while the impatience he displayed if his wife ventured to enter a conversation in his presence – ‘Now Barbara, you goose, you know you’re a child in such matters!’ – betokened a long background of mothers and aunts who had sat mutely with their crochet hooks while the men of the family discoursed. But of course for art critics ... there were no retinues of servants, or, for that matter, wives content to leave all interesting discourse to their spouse.’

Writing from Chastleton to Tommy McCulloch (letters dated 10/11/1957, 12/4/1958 and 27/6/1958), Common gives a vivid impression of the ongoing struggle:

‘I’m slowly getting over Asian flu myself, the worst I’ve had since the Spanish flu of 1918. Of course, as usual, I had to stagger up to the typewriter to keep a deadline when I should have had another week in bed. However, doctor reports my lungs not affected so I’m back on the daily round with a fag lit again and the image of the imminent pint before my eyes ... News from Germany is that Peter and Jan managed to meet at last in Munster and had a session drinking the health of Shirley’s twins, Paul and Jacqueline. Jan is marrying a Cornish girl next year, Judy, so will be spending Xmas with her parents. I’ll have to save up for a wedding present, I suppose. Wish I

hadn't spent so much money this summer – it melted somehow, as melt it easily does these mulcting times.

I see that I am just completing seven years work for Associated British, never missed one week in that time, the average over 5000 words a week for them alone and the total well over five million. How well off I would have been if the pay was any good, eh? This is the sort of job that inflation makes most nonsense of, and shows you what happens to folk outside the T.U. defence lines.

Well, it's Sunday night and Johnny Cook is about to start up his car. I'll away with him for a sweet-breasted Guinness, heartily approved of for flu-eneebled cases by my doctor... Hell of a pity we are strewn over so many counties, else, Tom lad, I'd be sitting in your local this sort of night.'

More woes follow:

'Trouble is my three growing girls absorb all the spare cash. Something always blows up whenever I manage to get earnings above outgoings for a few weeks ... The book progresses but slowly. In that this place has not worked out as expected. I'll have to think of some other stunt or find some method of pressuring my energies into doing three jobs at once. Now and then I get the horrible thought that I am slowing down with the years. But when I look up one of my old diaries I find I always had that thought. If only they'd pensioned me off at twenty, what a career I could have had.

Heppenstall is doing a history of the 'Adelphi' mag on the Third Programme.

I contributed a tape recording to it, for eight guineas and exes, the

bastards, same rate as I had in 1942. All right for an hour's work, of course, if they handed it out every week ...

We have a chiropodist in the village now. Dick Thomas, male nurse at the local Looney-bin, has just become fully-qualified. Another lad trying desperately to better himself out of a lousy job.'

Then later:

'Money seems tighter all round ... Expenditure on growing girls increases. Things at the house ever shakier as Brock tries to sell cottages and trees to eke out his decreasing capital. We very nearly parted last winter and this one should put paid to the project. Awkward because of the tied cottage problem. If the sales of two coming up for auction next week go well, he'll certainly want to flog ours ... I haven't had a week free since early 1950 and that was workless but not holiday in the real sense of the word ...

Well, now it's Friday night, raining hard but I have to go out and buy a bit of frozen fish at the 'Red Lion'. They sell all sorts of things there, electric bulbs and toilet rolls – I often have to pop down for a toilet roll. A nice shop, mind you, only it smells of beer. That excites the ancestral thirst.'

A further letter to McCulloch gives an indication of Common's impending departure from Chastleton (Common, J., 8/9/1958):

'We're in trouble ourselves in a different way. A month ago I had a final fall-out with Alan. Ever since he lost his professorial job and joined the ranks of the nearly non-earners, he has resented paying so much (sic). He lives now

by flogging cottages one after another. So I expected him to get rid of me when the big visitor season came to an end. But by chance, he started a row with me in front of visitors. I walked out on him. Connie followed a couple of days later when he was mean enough to demand his cottage back. That latter of course is the rub here. I always knew I was coming out on a limb when I left my safe little council house but there, you see, a man has to have a spot of folly in his life and Lord knows mine have often paid me well. In this venture, the principal gain is improved health from the exercise.'

Also in 1956, Common's Uncle Robin, a decisive influence on his love of books, died.

Common to McCulloch (letter from Chastleton House, 10/11/1957):

'Letter from Lillian tells of Uncle Robin's death last year. Died as he lived, the great lad, a flourishing disciple of Thoreau to the last. His final habitat was a one-roomed shop with a boarded-up window bottom of Byker Bank. It contained an electric fire he'd fixed up himself, a car seat he used as a bed, an empty clock case with his fiddle in it, and books.

'Simplify, simplify,' said Thoreau. Neighbours reported him as being popular and always happy, out every morning first thing for his walk round the Moor or the Dene, coming home with a brown loaf and a bottle of milk, and humming the tunes he was always composing. Asked once if time didn't hang on his hands, he said, 'No day's long enough for me; I'm too busy.' He must have been eighty turned, I reckon.'

The restless journeying continued for the wandering writer. He and his family moved on in 1958 to a rented Georgian house at 14 St John Street in the heart of Newport Pagnell,

Bucks. The house was late Georgian, with a derelict coachman's cottage and a tiny stable complete with hay manger. It was built on the remains of an old coaching inn, whose cellars still remained and 'were 'creepily fascinating' (Common, J., letter, 10/11/1957).

The move was facilitated by Irene Palmer, the family friend from the Frating Hall period.

Newport Pagnell is a market town situated in the North East of Buckinghamshire, at the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Ousel (or Lovat).

The history of the area dates from the Iron Age, and the town itself from the Roman period. The strategic position of the town, commanding the bridges over the two rivers, has greatly influenced its history and development. For many centuries it has been a centre for transport, and staging post for the coaching trade. More recently, the canals and railways added to the town's importance. Many links with the past still survive. Newport has the oldest working iron bridge in the country, and several of the town's hotels and public houses were founded as coaching inns in the past centuries.

'The Newport that I knew

When I was but a lad,

Held such glorious yesterdays

Though, in truth a few were sad.

Yet even from their sadness

Seemed to spring some joy,

To come with fond remembrance

Of Newport as a boy.

A boy who knew the byways
Where the wild violet grew.
Who knew each and every hedgerow
Where the wren and chaffinch flew.
A boy who knew the magic
Of river, brook and stream,
And was ever near to heaven
Where he watched the minnows gleam.
He loved the skylark's song
High in the morning sky
And he loved the haunting music
Of the plover's mournful cry.
The scent of wild parsley
In the hedge, where the wild rose
Competes for nature's favours
With the honey bee's repose.

(from Adams, P., no date, p.49).

Though the marriage certificate is missing, it appears that Jack and Connie were married c1960. Strangely enough, his son Peter is uncertain of this: 'I don't know whether or not he married Mary or Connie. Connie died at Newport Pagnell – I don't know the actual date but I believe it was February or March 1979.' (Common, P., 2002)

Tommy McCulloch reveals the following (letter, 11/9/1978): ‘On 10th February 1979, Connie Common (second wife) passed away in Northampton hospital after a short illness’. As a footnote he adds: ‘She did admit being other than working class – lower middle classification we agreed on.’

Writing from 14 St. John Street, Newport Pagnell to Tommy McCulloch (27/5/1959), Common’s busy schedule continues:

‘Newport Pagnell, centre of England, is a hub-bub at the moment ... I’m tied up financially, having signed a contract with Phoenix House re the Sussex book and cannot get work or money from them till I finish it – a desperate measure to force myself into getting something on the market. My other books are not forgotten, however, still making their way round the ramifications of the body politic. Small write-up in the Sunday Times last Sunday, I’m told, and another in this month’s Twentieth Century, where Rees is now on the Editorial Board ... Irene, a strong W.E.A. supporter and attender at their Oxford weekend schools, opines that the new generation of working-class intellectuals with academic jobs, Richard Hoggart and Hugh Williams examples, tend to take ‘Kiddar’ as a sort of text-book. Our generation are apt to overlook the growing power of the red-brick universities ...

Hell, time’s run out. I’m just off to Oxford to report on a new play at six shillings an hour plus full expenses for two.’

Plans to publish ‘In Whitest Britain’ (a deeply ironic and humorous rendition of both petit bourgeois life in the suburbs of southern England and the local working-class in a

mushroom-growing factory) in 1960 collapsed and Common's life of unremitting toil continued. He worked on film treatments and synopses. He did work for the Associated British Picture Corporation, Elstree Studios, M.G.M., Tempean Films, Sirius Productions, amongst others. It is somewhat ironic that when Common reviewed the highly praised 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning' by Alan Sillitoe for the M.G.M film company he told them that 'it was a bad novel and would make an even worse film'. He was to be proved badly wrong. Common apparently 'doubted the accuracy of its portrait of working class life.' (Mapplebeck, J., 1982)

And he is still fighting old battles (Common, J., letter, 5/1/1959):

'I went to Court to fight Brock's eviction claim, insofar as one can. Wiped the floor with him once I'd got him in the dock and was advised by the Judge to stay where I was as long as I liked. But of course I'd got my house what Irene backed for me. This is it. Another queer one. But what the girls asked for to a large extent. They are fed up with the lonely village, the nothing to do. So here we are bang in the middle of the town (small town though) next to the cinema, a late Georgian country doctor's house built on the site (and keeping the cellars) of a coaching inn, basement kitchen, scullery, still-room, small dining-room with French window, sitting-room, four bedrooms, small garage, stable and coachman's cottage (in ruins). No bathroom. Only water-supply a sink in the basement. Only three electric lights wired. No garden. Needs doing up everywhere, in fact what most people consider pretty horrible.

We are enjoying it. A treat to have space and light, to give the girls a bedroom each for their very own (female nesting instinct coming out). For

me, working conditions remind me of 'Adelphi' days in Bloomsbury, the large, elegant room looking on a backwater, traffic noises there but muted. Here I hope to repair the broken funds (had to borrow a tenner to pay the carter or be broke on our arrival here day before Xmas Eve). I am editing a history of rural England for £50 – wicked pay but where's the editor's union? So perhaps I may assure old pals and well-wishers that once again the crisis may be survived. Can't understand Alan though. I must have over-lived him more completely than I knew. Of course he is a failure and I'm not (I mean as we know ourselves, not as the stock stand in the market) but what perhaps galls more is that he is an Etonian, King's College failure – he fell down even though always well propped up. He should be doing not merely as well as a working-class competitor but better. It may be that anyway something has got beneath his veneer. The result is for a new experience: the feeling of complete contempt for someone I was concerned in. I shall be glad to forget it.'

But there are compensations (Common, J., 12/3/1959):

'Newport is more historic and prettier, being islanded in its two rivers and water-meadows. The best local beer is Phipps of Northampton (bit pricey though at 1/7d the pint) and the pubs are Hertfordshire in style, small, old-fashioned, numerous, with deadly darts-players which make me feel like I'm back in Datchworth again, eight darts to the double sort of thing. (In Wolverton, though, the pubs are working-class urban a la Scotswood Road). I think you'd enjoy a look round the hereabouts - we do.'

Yet the struggling is never far away (Common, J., 12/1/1960):

‘Prospects here not over bright, me having finished ‘59 in debt and without the margins for assaults on town, where anyway competition fiercers and the plums are apt to go to younger men (some of them are very good, you know). However, we scraped through Xmas rather better than the forecast allowed. Peter sent the money for a bird but rather than pay fares to go to market (five of us, see) I relied on local talent, got Bill Worrall’s fine cockerel for fifteen shillings. The real hit of the do though was our boar’s head ...

In the drink field I’m almost a teetotaller. Rees sent his usual bottle of sherry. We drank half on Xmas Day, half on New Year’s Eve. As to beer we had a few pints both Eves, some stood us, none in the house and none other days. In fact for three months now I’ve hardly used the Bull at all, just the odd pint on an unplanned evening to make the day different. It would be fine if this display of virtue paid but it doesn’t. Lacking incentive I take far longer over every job and so reduce my pay per hour considerably. I dare not give up smoking or I might be reduced to complete inertia.’

And again (Common, J., 24/5/1960, 29/6/1960, 4/10/1960, 19/5/1962, 18/4/1963):

‘O.K. for next week and looking forward to it. I’ll try to clear much of the current hack-work so as to be free for it. There is talk of Elstree giving me a paid holiday this year. After ten years of being continuously on call I am perhaps owed something but that is not the way they think.

The awful summer season sets in, fine weather drawing the top executives out of town and cutting down the flow of work to me. I feel stale myself, could do with a holiday. Mind you I enjoyed sharing in yours. Since then I've had only one day off, a trip to Wolverton in the rain buying dress material etc in the covered market. No drinks. Cup of tea, sausage, chips, bread (twice), apple-tart (once) – bill 3/1d. Two sausages each and good ones, beats pre-war you know, and on previous visits I've always scorned the Market cafe in favour of the pie bought off the stall.

Things go moderately well here. Associated British gave me two weeks holiday pay for the first time in ten years. We were to go camping but scrubbed that on account of the weather, took day trips instead. Then I went down with a bad attack of bronchitis, spent three days in bed mostly sleeping because for once I had no need to struggle out to deal with an urgent job. Arose then took the girls to Cambridge, much impressed them by hailing E.M.Forster on the terrace of King's College (they'd seen his birthday interview on telly) and having a coffee and chat with the great man. ... From Malaya we hear that Jan has at last got a bit of promotion to Senior Technician, so some of the black marks on his sheet must have been forgiven him. Judy is to have another baby in January. Peter also has moved up to Staff Sergeant, will be going to Kenya next year, family too. I think he's a bit young for the responsibility of this rank, having to command a unit on his own when necessary, etc., but you cannot halt his enthusiasm and the pay is a bait.

... Things have been extra dodgy this year ... But of course we survive, you know, with the help of the old allies, tobacco and alcohol ... We still

have our caravan at Ravonstone Mill if you fancy a night in the truly-rural, swimming or fishing – we haven't got a boat yet.

Girls are at the pictures next door; it's gone ten; I've done enough work for one day; so – I'm just dashing off on my way to a pint.

... I've been very menaced myself for the last eighteen months and more.

Out on a limb as a freelance, harassed by competition from clever young men out of the universities, their honours thick upon them, and hampered by living out of London, I seemed to be battling on a losing hand. Well it took months to press the issue right up to top brass, then it was touch and go as I gathered by an ungracious give-in letter from the big shot but I won my points. Now I'm on the staff at the T.U. rate of £15.14.6 a week, shockingly low of course but I operate as before from home, have slightly less work on average, am covered for pension and sickness, pay less for insurance stamps. As long as it lasts this is all to the good but they are pretty sure to close down the Reading Department next wave of reform that starts.

... And now I'm going to crown the first night off work for three weeks with a noble pint at the Bull.'

And it doesn't seem to get much better (Common, J., 28/11/1963 & 26/3/1964):

'Meant to write to you in October giving the dates of the three 'Kiddar' broadcasts but was unable to use the typewriter for a time owing to odd accident. I came a terrific cropper in the churchyard one Sunday evening during Harvest Service. Feet shot away, fell heavily on my back, was completely winded. Connie and a gravestone helped me up (Rock of Ages cleft for me) but for the next three week I didn't dare go to bed. Had to

sit upright all night long in frequent pain, snatching a dose how it came. My ankles swelled enormously, more than in the summer by lumps and swathes. This alarmed the doctor: injured kidneys he feared, overhaul ordered.

Next day I took him a sample of my water, lovely it was, star-bright – naturally it having been through Phipps and me, excellent institutions both. ... Rather hopelessly he gave me pills to make me micturate more though I told him half-a-gallon of beer (at 2/- say on prescription) would keep me going for hours. Also sleeping pills – must go to bed. I did, propped up but it was agony after the first two hours of drug.

For the first time in my life, I think, I drew sickness benefit. Meantime, I have the pleasure of listening to 'Kiddar' earning me guineas, a lucky pig in clover in a way. But the firm insisted that I have an X-ray, perhaps be strapped up. Did. X-ray beautiful, finest piece of spare rib I've seen for a long time. But a back one cracked through. Heal in six weeks, no don't be strapped up: if you can stand the pain it is better. So say the moderns.

I couldn't stay sick for six weeks. Being still a freelance outside A.B.C., work came in on me. I had to do it because A.B.C. announce the sacking of two hundred: I am very vulnerable being already over retiring age in this line.

I started doing the odd report for another organisation (breathe not a word of this) more than three months ago, trying to keep a jump ahead.

... Associated British still keeping things going after a fashion ... The short-handed Reading Department find it hard to get enough work going to keep us employed. Hard to see it lasting another year. Ironically 1963-4 is my financial best since '56. This makes my means test re daughter's grants

awkward. Sally is provisionally allowed her full £100 a term but this is not finally approved. Looks as if it is going to be sticky when claims for the other two are put in. Mary has an interview at Birmingham School of Art early April and Charmian sits the London Lycee exam May 1st.'

This humdrum, brain-crushing work is summed up well by John Burke (September 1991), who found work for Common in 1963:

'Some years ago, before I ever met Jack, I worked in publishing as Editorial Manager for what was then the Paul Hamlyn Group, in its early days. One of Paul's fellow directors was Eric Warman, who had for a time run his own publishing house and produced an annual review of the year's films. After a while I left there and went to Shell International, then left there to go into the film business as European Story Editor for 20th Century Fox, who had offices in Soho Square. The job there involved getting every possible lead on to things that might make films – books, plays, and what were known as 'treatments' of basic ideas for films. I had to oversee the preparation of dozens and dozens of reports – three pages of synopsis of a forthcoming novel, say, plus one page of comment as to whether it would make a film or not – churning it out by the yard and sending lots of copies to the New York office. We had a number of very good readers who knew films in their bones, and I would study their reports, or read a thing myself or attend a London theatre first night, and say, 'I think we should buy this'. Then one day Eric Warman rang me and said, 'Look, John, I know you need readers. An old friend of mine, Jack Common, is a bit down on his luck and could do with an odd job like reading'. I had read 'Kiddars Luck' and 'The

Ampersand' – a brilliant book but forgotten; but the moment Eric mentioned it I said, 'Good Lord, Jack Common! Send him round.' Jack did come round, and I thought him one of the most charming of people, and least pushy person I'd met. He just seemed terribly shy, and a bit sad about life. I don't mean that he moaned: he never moaned; but I thought, what a pity. I loved his company and gave him various books to read, explaining to him what it was all about: 'We want a synopsis of the story, your opinion on whether it'll make a film, or what do you think about it on the whole? I'll only want four pages, or make it three if you like. Make it clear and concise.' He would do these things for me and he'd come in to the office with them. But I'd have to be honest: his typing was terrible, it really was pretty blotchy. Several times I would retype it for him or get my secretary to do it, without telling him. New York wasn't impressed. They didn't argue, but they weren't impressed. It wasn't really his line, I'd have thought, but he was such a nice bod to know, and he revived some of my sentimental memories of Newcastle and so on. Every time he came into the office I'd be rung by the Door to say 'Mr Common's downstairs', and I'd say 'I'll be down in a few minutes' and if I'd got something to give him I'd take it down and say, 'See what you can do with this'. I don't remember what we paid then, but it wasn't very much – about five pounds a time, I think. Mind you, I'm going back to '63. Jack didn't ever ring me to say he was coming in, or me ring him; it was just that every now and then he'd arrive without much notice just to see if anything was doing. If I was in a meeting or had to go somewhere ridiculous, I'd tell him 'Sorry' or leave a message, or someone would say 'Mr Burke's not in'. So gradually we drifted apart, which was sad, because he was such lovely company. We used to go round the corner to the pub – my secretary knew

where I was if there was a disaster. We usually went to 'The Crown and Two Chairmen' in Soho, and we didn't always talk shop. We used to talk about his part of the world and things that had happened. Jack never made a big thing of Tyneside, there was no sort of sentimental crap about it at all, he wasn't that sort of bloke, but he didn't belong in London. I didn't even know anything about his wife or anything like that, it just never cropped up. He just struck me as a real loner: lots of things can be a pain, they can be rather boring, but he was awfully nice to be with. I can remember that sort of glow of his. I'd make excuses to go out and have a drink with him even when I knew I hadn't got any work for him. They were just pleasant drinking sessions, just a pint or two – we didn't get as pissed as newts. I don't think he had much idea of what would make a film, really. He needed a few quid and I tried to get it to him because he was such good company. As I've said, he was basically shy, delighted when you said something nice – and you didn't want to say anything that wasn't true. I always think of him coming in looking terribly polite, not smart but in a dark, not very new, suit. He was almost too modest to talk about his own projects. He did no more than a dozen treatments for me. It was hack work. He would provide a very intelligent synopsis and his opinion. Knowing our Head Office, none of it mattered a damn. That he wanted the money was fine by me, but it was unlikely we'd churn up anything out of his reports, and I don't think he thought we would anyway. He knew what it was about. I think if he'd spotted something brilliant he'd have been the first to ring and say, 'Look, we've got something here', but we saw more rubbish than the human brain can conceive. I think he was disappointed that we were giving him rubbish, but it wasn't just him – we were giving everybody rubbish.'

Unlike Jack Common, John Burke went on to become a highly successful full-time freelance author. His first novel, 'Swift Summer', won an Atlantic Award in Literature from the Rockefeller Foundation. His 150th book was a thriller with a musical theme, entitled 'The Second Strain'. Among his other publications have been 'An Illustrated History of England', 'A Traveller's History of Scotland', 'Life in the Roman Villa in Britain', and many other historical studies, novels and short stories. He has 'novelised' a number of successful film and TV scripts including 'A Hard Day's Night', from the Beatles' first film, 'The Bill' and 'London's Burning'.

Burke's memories are endorsed by Reg Groves (Mapplebeck, J., 1974):

'To get a living you had to do ten books a week if you could get them, if not more. Most of them were very poor, rubbishy, books. Your mind at the end of a week of this was like blotting paper, soaking up foul water, and you were incapable of putting down, sensibly, thoughts of your own.'

And age creeps up with all of its mixed blessings (letters to Tommy McCulloch, 11/5/1964, 15/7/1964, 23/10/1964, 29/12/1964):

'Connie has had her operation, the removal of a ranula ... from inside her tongue, five stitches, and is home from hospital living on slops until she can get her teeth in again and the stitches disappear ... me I've got a bad back. Too much typing I blame. Last week I did work for no less than four firms and yet so poor is the pay, all the lot together did not quite make the £25 mark. Twentieth Century Fox have actually cut their reader's rate from £5 a report to three guineas, a savage slash. The shop next door nearly became a fish and chip shop but we killed that by a protest to the Council. Now it is to

be antiques after alterations. Connie has been approached to work there part time. Her sort of thing so a pleasant job and handy if she tires of her pottery. It won't happen till the autumn. By then, who knows? , we might need another earner in the family.

... Now that I am in my sixties I see that I've always been wrong about old men. I imagined they went into a slow, crumbling decline being gradually forced to accept a state of lessened activity and diminishing frontiers. But now I find, as at the moment of going to press, that I am afflicted with a sort of second adolescence, restless, kicking against the boredom of ordinary living and seeking to overcome its limitations in dreams of unlikely conquests or strokes of fortune. I'm afflicted too with unreasonable urges to self-improvement. Thus forty-five year of catarrh have been ended in my six months' old changeover from fags to cigars; and by cutting out bread and spuds (but not beer, have no fear, comrade). I have dropped the weight by a stone. It is all very odd and fascinating; I mark this down as one of the peak years in my life.'

This 'peak' is soon in decline again:

'I'm suffering an attack of my old enemy, the Rash, which I had in 1948, 49, 52, and 55. A bad do this time after the long gap; it drove me to the doctor on Monday. Food-poisoning, urticaria, says he, and gives me the latest in pills. Unfortunately, they are knock-out drops and have to be taken four times a day. Each time, off I go to dreamland – so how am I to work? ... I have a big editing job on as an extra which should be delivered 10th November, a hopeless prospect ...

God, I'm doped and melancholic together, fathoms below par, no support for anybody save in goodwill.'

Christmas brings no great change of fortune:

'There's been a terrible jam of work on here up to the eve of the holidays. Owing to my October illness (not cleared up yet either) I couldn't find the extra energy to handle the book I'm editing for the Roads Beautifying Association. Of course it had to be done in the end: unthinkable to turn good money away. I promised delivery before Xmas. Then came the deluge: no end of jobs from all four of the firms that patronise me. I called on the services of a Typing Bureau in Northampton. They were not much faster than me and they'd only to copy what I'd writ. Finally I had to go in and stand over them on Wednesday, getting the last chapters into registered post before six that day – kept my deadline just.'

Jack Common's political attitudes were becoming out of fashion. When he sent the manuscript of 'In Whitest Britain' (1961) to his friend Eric Warman in London, Warman replied in a letter of 7th June 1961 that he was sorry 'such a bloody good writer' could not 'make a big success at it'. There was too much 'class-distinction' in the book: 'If you will forgive me saying so, the cult of the good honest workman, downtrodden but golden hearted, is in itself a leading cliché and it has always surprised me that a man of your intelligence should be so determined to sustain it'. (Warman, E., 1961)

As Robert Colls adds (1998, p.175):

‘Having been too late (and perhaps unwilling) for the Proletcult of the 1930s, and too early (and perhaps too old) for the ‘Angry Young Man’ marketing of the 1950s, Common found himself too early again for the new left revivals of the 1960s.’

At the end of 1965 (letter to Tommy McCulloch, 30/12/1965) his lot continues to follow its up and down trajectory:

‘Hope you had a reasonably good time over the festive period. We had – or the women folk at least. My fun was moderated by the worst attack of bronchitis yet experienced. This catarrh blizzard hit me a fortnight before and is not entirely over yet. It made me take only a faint interest in such matters as turkey, mince pies or sherry. Even Phipps, the old reliable, failed to charm. However, I did my best to rise to other people’s occasions, so to speak.

Financially we’ve just got over Sal’s twenty-first birthday. Her request was for a gold wrist watch and a good dinner for herself and pal at Gino’s in Birmingham ... We did get to Paris though ... thus achieving the outstanding feat of having the whole family in various parts of the Continent at the same time. By God I enjoyed myself. We hit a glorious spell of weather luckily; my birthday in the middle of it was never better celebrated. On Saturday at midnight we brought it in on brandy at a pavement table on the Boulevard Montmartre (our hotel was just round the corner, next to the Folies Bergere); next morning we went to 11 a.m. Mass at Notre Dame; ... the afternoon was spent picnicking in the Bois de Vincennes; and we ended

the day drinking Pernod and listening to music at the Cafe des Noctambules on Pigalle. Perfect ...

Last year at Xmas I was worrying myself frantic trying to do too much work for five clients. This year I've let all go except A.B.C. and haven't done much for them. There is any amount of reading to be got. And since fifty new cinemas are to be built in the next three years to give a third circuit soon the whole business should be booming.'

THE HEART OF ALL ENGLAND

I met his daughter Sally back in 1998 in his last resting place of Newport Pagnell and where she went to school. Their house at 14 St John Street was next to the old Electra Cinema – ironic in that Jack ended up earning his living on film treatments. Common spent hours in the 'garden' (a cemetery), walking with Connie in the countryside they both loved, and reading aloud to the children anything that pleased him. Sally recalled that:

'Though brought up in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, Jack had always loved nature, starting with Jesmond Dene. He took advantage of working freelance – if it was a nice day they would go walking, sometimes along the canal, stopping off for a pie and a pint. When we were small, living in Sussex, they even pushed us in the pram up the South Downs.

At Newport I remember happy trips to the library – a novelty to have one very close after living in Chastleton, a tiny village in the Cotswolds with one

bus a week to Chipping Norton (it was nearly two miles to the village pub, along a dark narrow lane with brilliant starlit skies sometimes and cows mooing in the darkness nearby).

I remember us returning home and sitting around the fire pinching each other's books and dipping in. My Mum Connie ordered all sorts of arty books – she had been to Art College – and I learnt to recognise the Impressionists and many other painters from them. When she took up pottery I learnt about ceramics from China, South America and Turkey.

(Jack) also read to me 'Omar Khayyam' which I loved and which awakened my interest in eastern religions and all things oriental. (He) pointed out to me the atheistic ideas put over in the Fitzgerald translation, and these appealed to both of us. Amongst Jack's papers there are notes he wrote as a teenager on the astronomy. As with everything he was self-taught, though his Uncle Robin (who was a Flat-Earther!) may have kindled his interest here. I remember him telling me in my teens about the Big Bang theory and Fred Hoyle's ideas.

When I was about thirteen, while we were living at Chastleton, he took us all off to the top of Chastleton to see the Arend-Roland Comet.' (Magill, S., 1998)

Newport Pagnell has more than a dozen pubs in several of which Jack Common held forth over his favourite pint of Guinness. As his son Peter recalls (Common, P., 2002):

'The two nearest pubs in Newport Pagnell were 'The Cannon' and 'The Bull'. The latter being by far his favourite. Others were 'The White Horse Hotel' and 'The Green Man'. He sometimes visited a canal side pub in the

village of Milton Keynes called I believe 'The Poacher' or 'Poacher's Arms'.

I remember Sid Chaplin telling the tale of the time he met his fellow writer in the local working men's club in Silver Street, just down the bank from his house, with Jack perfectly at ease at the bar in his carpet slippers.

'Drinking in pubs was Jack's main interest', says Sally (Magill, S., 1998):

'He considered drinking alone to be a vice, and we never had alcohol at home except for a bottle of wine at Christmas. But he loved to go out drinking in pubs. He enjoyed meeting interesting characters and talking and arguing about everything, especially politics. He liked to meet people rather like himself in that they were working class, had no formal education, but could think for themselves. He liked to read, write and particularly to talk politics but didn't actually do anything to further the cause. He liked to live as an outsider, hated to join anything. This attitude he inflicted on us kids – we weren't allowed to join Brownies or Guides like our friends! And when we lived in Newport he never joined in the WEA classes, either as a student or teacher, in spite of much encouragement from a strong WEA supporter, our friend from Frating days, Irene Palmer, who found us our house in Newport.'

Peter Common recalls (2002):

'He didn't spend a lot of time in pubs or clubs but he felt the need to be out in different company at least for a short spell each night. He selected the appropriate bar according to type of mental stimulation or type

of conversation he felt most in need of. Hence he was just as much at home in a bar used by the Northampton Rugby Union team or the pub used by the skilled engineers next to the Aston Martin factory. Or everything in between.'

Common's position as 'an outsider' is echoed by Tommy McCulloch (1984):

'The nearest we ever got to the Labour party, the established party, was the I.L.P. (Independent Labour Party). We did join in Chelsea for a little bit, some chap convinced us we were wrong and we joined the Chelsea Branch of the Labour Party for a little while. That was the only active political portion of his life I remember, and mine too. Because we were constantly in disagreement with people. You were waiting for the rest of society to come along with you, because your life had been so different mentally to theirs, 'the man-in-the-street' so called. There were too many people lacking the political consciousness that makes an activist. Even a trade union official made you feel apart, you just carried on with it.

The Communist Party never appealed to us. To find an answer to the question, I'd blame the Communist rather than the 'ism'. I could accept Communism much easier than the Communist. They were very unreliable and that carried on into the war-time experience in London as a shop steward. Whenever a chap boasted about being a Communist, you used to look out! From their point of view, we were good material, our type is. The views were advanced enough. But people who've handled the English Communism haven't got away with it.

We supported socialist parties as and when we could, when we agreed

with them. When you're not responsible, by which I mean not being a member, you're not responsible for what these people do. You don't want to agree all the time.

Jack and I were more or less agreed politically. 'A non-bomb throwing anarchist' would be nearest to my political gospel – revolutionary in his concept and his lifestyle and his ways. And he's ready when the rest are. But you cannot drive people; you can only go as fast as they have been going. In the way in which Jack criticized 'the bulky bourgeoisie', he had the class-hatred. He had met so many 'better' people that were really what you'd call 'the generous gentry', but 'the bulky bourgeoisie' he attacked very well in his articles and in 'In Whitest Britain'. I wouldn't say this class-hatred extended to the real gentry because only too often you'll find that they've got that cultural smear, the old-fashioned Christian tolerance, and the generosity. The economic adversity retarded, discouraged and disheartened Jack, comparable to unemployed's despair.'

Talking of his own contribution to the 'Seven Shifts' book of 1938, McCulloch comments:

'I would have been encouraged (to write again) if there had been a view to publishing and payment. But alongside me there was Jack struggling, superior and not earning a sausage for years and years and years.' (McCulloch, T., 'Newcastle Evening Chronicle', c1986)

Whilst, in general, Common was not a great 'joiner', Peter Common (2002) does recall that his father was 'an active member of the Fabian Society'.

Though worldly-wise in the affairs of politics, his daughter points out that this didn't extend to his personal domesticity:

'He had small feminine, ineffectual hands, badly stained with nicotine. Whereas my mum had strong long-fingered, practical hands, usually very rough from all the hard work she did. I can't remember my dad doing anything at all practical in the house. Mind you, he did most of our food shopping, so he did carry shopping bags! He worked at home, and when he needed a break he loved to sally forth into the High Street to haggle with the butcher for a few pennorth of bacon bones.

One Christmas, Jack's present to Connie was an enormous saucepan for the soup – not the most romantic of presents! Connie's present to Jack was the same each year – a big diary, which he filled and preserved for posterity.'

(Magill, S., 1998)

Peter has this to say regarding family life:

'He was a strong family man and very much the head of the household. He controlled the household finances and did most of the shopping at which he was particularly adept. He was a competent and enthusiastic gardener and used to walk about with packets of seeds in his pocket, possibly radishes and lettuce, and sow in any blank spaces. He knew the name of most flowers. I plant my garden with Sweet Williams because I remember them as one of his favourites.'

One sunlit day in Newport Pagnell, I walked the paths he walked and had more than a pint for him. I thought of him declaiming to the clouds that favourite poem of his 'To a Skylark', a long way from his beloved Tyneside, on the banks of the River Ouse in flood:

'Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonies in madness
From my lips would flow.
The world should listen then -
As I am listening now.'

(Armstrong, K., 1998-9, p.2).

PASSING AWAY

'Turn my eyes to the glass,
And reluctantly I'll tell you what they see.
Turn my eyes to the glass,
They see an old man where no old man used to be.
They see the lines, the unrewarded lines,
They see see the eyes defeated in the trying,
And the Tyne slides by, the seagulls cry,
The ship lies safe and silent at the riverside.

Turn my eyes to the glass,
And reluctantly I'll tell you what they see.
Turn my eyes to the glass,
They see a space where his face used to be.
They see a space, a soon-forgotten space.
And the wasted eyes are dust unto the morning,
And the Tyne slides by, the seagulls cry,
The ships lie safe and silent at the riverside.'

(Alex Glasgow)

Jack Common died of lung cancer on 20th January 1968. His funeral was at the crematorium at Far Cotton in Northamptonshire on 24th January. In attendance were his widow Connie, his son Peter, daughters Sally Magill, Mary Common and Charmian Common. Also there were his sisters Lillian Rutherford and Jessie Common, Lillian's son David Rutherford, Connie's son from her first marriage, Jan Paul McConnell-Wood, and Jack's long-time friend, Irene Palmer.

As Peter explains (Common, P., 2002 & 2005):

'His death was caused by lung cancer initially. It spread to the rest of the organs in his body, including his liver. Until he finally succumbed to cancer he had enjoyed generally good health, although strangely he used to get recurring bouts of malaria. I have no idea how he first contacted this disease. When he died he had a full set of his own teeth with no fillings!
My brother Bob wasn't there (at the funeral) and I don't think Tommy McCulloch was either. My wife and children were not there as I

flew back from Germany only four hours before his death. The significant point is the attendance of his sisters Lillian and Jessie as there had been no contact between them and us since the publication of 'Kiddar's Luck'. They were filled with remorse because Jack (or 'Billy' as they called him) had died without them having ended their family feud. Jack's sisters were extremely religious.

This part of the family were very bitter and unforgiving and had no understanding of his reasons for publishing a book ('Kiddar's Luck') which, as they saw it, so publicly slandered and besmirched the memory of their mother. Jessie, in particular, made it plain to me both as a child and later when she visited me overseas that she 'felt sorry for me and didn't hold any grudge against (my wife) Shirley, myself or our children'. Given her's and Lillian's background, it isn't difficult to understand their viewpoint. Lillian's son David, however, never seemed to bear any grudges and visited Jack and Connie frequently at Newport Pagnell. Despite David's religious, non-drinking and non-smoking background, he got on well with 'Uncle Billy'. After the funeral, they resolved to keep in contact with us and Jessie, in particular, visited us twice in Germany.'

For Vincent Whitcombe (1974, p.xi):

'It was largely the pain of her crippled foot and the disappointments of her marriage which sent the author's mother to the comforts of the bottle but she was by no means a singular case. Part of the regular Saturday night entertainment was to gather round the corner pub to see the drunks thrown

out or angry women coming to collect their incapable men folk. In 1905, a typical year, there were 207,000 convictions for drunkenness in England.'

'Close identification with Jack Common meant that Tom (McCulloch) felt something of the cold draught of animosity from those of the writer's family who were 'horrified' by the novels about Heaton life. For them, says Tom, it was a case of the artist's honesty in his work 'betraying' the family – details, for instance, of his lame mother's sad alcoholic in the Chillingham pub' (Jamieson, M., ca. 1986).

Peter, after 22 years in the Army and now living in Warrington, Lancashire, paid tribute to his father as follows: 'He was a good father, a fun father. Given the limitations of the time, I'd have thought he was probably more like a father of today. He had time for children.' (Common, P., 14/9/2002, p65)

'He was very interested in children and grandchildren, which is sad in a way because Bob thought that Jack had abandoned him. Tommy McCulloch had in fact forced Jack into allowing him to adopt Bob as the price for looking after him. He played postal chess with my son right up to the time of his death. Almost the last intelligent thing he said before he died was how much he appreciated the last photos of the kids that I had sent him. He said that 'They had laughing, intelligent eyes'. A nice last memory.' (Common, P., 2002)

'There is a terrible price that the artist frequently pays for his release from restriction through creative success. Taste, imagination, sensibility and

the critical faculty, must often divorce him from his own people; yet he may never feel much or any sympathy with the values and way of life of any other class or group – indeed, he may detest them. This is the limbo world, the no man's land in which some artists live; so that the frustration of a different kind is felt after success is won. It is even worse when the achievement is there with the frustration, but the recognition and success is denied. That is what happened to Jack Common.

Common's literary friends encouraged him by making clear to him how much they admired his writing. He repaid them by talk, hours of talk, on beer (on which he could show astonishing erudition), on politics, on art, on anything in the world that roused his anger or enthusiasm or appealed to his sense of the ridiculous. But his talk, although precious, took up much time that should have been spent in writing. He believed in himself – but only intermittently; and his self-destructive and self-deprecating sense of humour although very funny masked a nightmare sense of despair and disgust. In a letter referring to the death of a child he wrote: 'a senseless calamity which brings one up against the awful grin behind the universe. Everyone has their own technique for producing the boozy half-blindness which is the first condition for continued living. They'll have a way likely, a better way than I have. In any case, there's no talking to the lightning-struck, the fatally illuminated are always alone.'

Wishing for literary recognition, knowing he deserved it, feeling contempt for the self-promoting salesmanship by which it is so often achieved, he never would in any event take himself for long with that sufficient degree of seriousness which is so helpful. Self-derision would keep breaking in.

And even if he won success the painful honesty that went into the making of

Will Kiddar and Clarts (in ‘‘The Ampersand’’) would not have allowed him to be satisfied and fooled by it.’ (Wilkes, L., 1971, p.162)

For Tommy McCulloch (1984):

‘If he had been more successful, there could have been the possibility of a return to the North. Because his second wife was a Northerner and she could have easily returned with him, but circumstances didn’t permit it. He certainly had no offers to return.

He was an essayist I would say. He had the facility and the ability to get a thing. He’d be straight through it and rattle it off. You felt that in some of the essays little more could be said about it. In retrospect, I would say he wasted a lot of time with the film people, writing treatments at very poor rates. If there had been something commissioned for which he was kept going he would have had a lot more to his credit. The last few years of his life he was treating film-scripts, three or four books a week, dreadful for his eyes – after the reading of things, he had to write a treatment – at pre-war rates for a hell of a long time, until a friend said ‘Aren’t you on the staff yet?’ and they lifted him from £4 10d/£6 to the £15. Even that didn’t last long.

Before his death, he had three ideas for novels, which could have been successful if he had got the backing.

His second marriage produced three girls, the first marriage was two boys, and the three girls were expensive. The oldest took a Cambridge degree, and the twins were an expensive job to educate. So the last few years of his life he was very hard up and scatching, comparable to the early 1920s.

It was hard for someone of so much ability to be so unlucky. For 'Kiddar's Luck' or the luck of the Kiddar to persist to the death is rather odd. He was true to himself.

It was regrettable the end, sudden.'

Still, that Common's life was by no means all doom and gloom is evidenced in a letter to his pal McCulloch from 14 St. John Street, Newport Pagnell (26/5/1967):

'We celebrated the twins' (i.e. Mary and Charmian) twenty first birthdays on Saturday. All met in London, Sal too. No fixed plan except that we had seats for Sadlers Wells at night. So via the 'Seven Dials' jellied eel stall, Foyle's Bookshop, the 'Pillars of Hercules', we arrived accidentally at Madame Maurer's for lunch. She entertained the girls with accounts of the Greek Street brothels. From there when fed and wined we moved to the Tower of London, none of us having been in there before and some shower-dodging required. So to dinner at a Greek place and the opera 'Cosi Fan Tutte'. Time for one drink when we got out. Took them to the 'Crown' and 'Woolpack', pointing out to Sal that this was Lenin's pub. But by God he wouldn't like it now. Courage's, no draught Bass, new management just taken over, chaotic bad service and caught me on the prices. Still in a way it is an experience these days to have a pint of sour bitter. Everywhere sweet froth reigns'.

But by the 2nd July in the same year, a mood of foreboding descends:

‘Since our last drink at the end of a pleasant weekend things have gone into flux. In the new distribution of TV contracts A.B.C. lost heavily. I went in to the Studios to find out who would suffer – us, of course. All readers chucked off the staff, made redundant as the jargon has it. Redundancy payments are assessed on length of service as staff, not as employed. So I’ll get four years instead of seventeen. The firm are thus paying out only what they are legally bound to, giving us nothing.

I played hell about this meanness. The Big Chief pleads his helplessness in view of decisions by the Board but thinks he can put some TV work in my way ... And of course as ever the firm finds they’ll still need readers, so we’ll all revert to freelance status at an agreed four guineas a report. We won’t starve on that.

Another interesting development re our housing. I was tipped off by a young estate agent to make an absurd offer for this house. Discussed with the bank my plan of bidding £500. Would they lend me £300 at three years’ repayment, notwithstanding my age. Manager thought they probably would but I could see he didn’t believe I could get the place at under £1500. Well I put in my offer. Turned down but the agents are willing to accept £750.

That’s a ridiculous price for these days. There’s no land round Newport priced under £300 an acre and this bit is main street, centre of the town. So if I can raise the necessary loan, despite my age and loss of staff status, I will.

An alternative would be to get Peter or Sal to undertake a mortgage. Yes, she comes into calculations now since she starts with English Electrics in September at £1100 a year. One difficulty is that all property transactions seems unreal from my angle, not truly for my involvement. Can you see me as a man of property? I can’t. Actually, though, if the scheme

works at all it would make me a mortgage-repayer at perhaps seventy shillings a week, just like many others I meet.

We saw Sally duly cap-and-gowned at the hands of the Chancellor, old Anthony Eden. The ceremony took over an hour, leaving me very dry indeed: we had to catch the 7.18 bus and it was now gone noon, we were surrounded by picture-taking graduates, Sal's pals and their Mums and Dads. However, we were supposed to call in on the Russian Faculty to meet tutors and there were bottles of Beaujolais, Riesling, Bordeaux in abundance. Inspired now I got spinning a theory about language-exchanging to a Russian tutor. This soon unmasked him as a Geordie by birth from Easington – 'Ivery way ye gan ...'

Hope the lads get off to a good start, preparatory to making the pop charts.' (Here he is referring to the folk group 'The Yetties', founded by his son Bob, brought up by McCulloch), on drums, and also featuring McCulloch's son Mark.)

There were pleasant interludes, right enough but, in general things got no better (Common, J., 10/11/1967):

'My news is bad. Having sacrificed holidays to the demand of a special job I had hopes of, I'd just finished the script well within the specified three weeks when I was taken with a fierce bout of the old bronchitis, this time accompanied by a pain in the back of unfamiliar scope. I booked myself in for mass radiography. They thought the picture shows a shadow on the lung. Saw a specialist for a further examination and a bigger X-ray picture. Result no cancer, no T.B., no Hodgkin's disease (whatever that is) but some

effects of long-standing bronchitis and still some slight blurring. After all this I get returned to the ordinary G.P. to be put on a dosage of antibiotics, then come back in a month's time for a final X-ray check. That was clear, the antibiotics having cleared up the worst of the bronchitis. But a few days before that X-ray while rushing off another script job I had an attack of the shits. This is a thing that is always going round Newport only as a rule I don't have it. This put paid to a weekend we were going to have either in Paris or up north. It took a fortnight of medication to stop it and still I felt deathly. The reason is that I was ripening for jaundice. When he saw that the G.P suspected what we are doing is chasing a series of symptoms around, better have me in hospital for more controlled observation. He was going to fix this yesterday and call. No sign of him so far.

On top of all this is the problem of earning. A.B.C. reading department is so drastically cut in the recent economies it is going to be impossible to get a week's work out of them, more like a couple of days at a time. This does not matter so far, the script jobs fill up the coffers, but I can't count on them turning up. So when I get better again, Tom, I must once more attack the hard town of London to chisel a bit of work out of somewhere. Well I suppose everybody has to have a bad run some time or other. Shaw found the early sixties and eighties most dangerous. Certainly whatever the eighties have to show it is a great novelty for me to find myself with no appetite and distaste for beer.

All the best then; congratulations to the lads on their new status, let it be well and truly confirmed.'

That this is a man in terminal decline is further evidenced in another letter to McCulloch (Common, J., 18/12/1967):

‘I still have jaundice. Must eat no fat therefore, not turkey, nor ham, nor salmon, nor eggs, nor nuts ... Alcohol is inadvisable but have just one drink if you must. What use is one? I’ll have a dry Xmas, taking no chances. They have had me ten days in hospital, then bunged me out quick long before I’d even begun to speculate on my chances of getting home for Xmas. All the spare parts were X-rayed or tested, finishing up with a terrible ordeal called a bronchoscopy in which they push down your throat a compendium of searchlight, telescope, pump and pruning clippers. Thus they can look round and take samples of anything they fancy. I was still coughing up blood from this three weeks later.

Well, all the tests proved negative fortunately so they threw me back on the parish. But the original bronchitis is still there, masked under jaundice. And I’m so weak, Tom lad. I’ve lost over two stone and can hardly crawl out of the bath. Don’t overdo it, say the medicos. Overdo what I wonder? Work is out, drink is out, food is out. I am permitted a short walk in the middle of the day if it be fine and a short walk it is, all I can manage. The specialist is leaving me alone for six weeks, no developments expected sooner evidently. Of course the G.P. calls weekly.’

His son Peter sums it up well (Common, P., 28/2/2000):

'I have been influenced by my father more than I'd like to originally recognise or perhaps accept. You can't live with a man like that and not be influenced.

As I look back on things I've done and said, some things I've only recently realised I was influenced by him. Within the last five years, my good lady wife Shirley once said that the one thing you are able to do is to see both persons' point of view; and I hadn't thought about that but I do know it's true and I know it's from Jack.

He liked the thought of 'karma', that some things are fated to be. In his first chapter in 'Kiddar's Luck', he talks about his genes flying around in the stars, and it's true that he had a spiritual sense of what's marked out for you. I didn't know until I was about nine or ten that he didn't believe in religion. He gave me every opportunity and encouragement to go to church and choirs and things like that and I independently came to my own conclusion that there was no room for modern religion and God in my life, and it was with a sense of relief that I found that my parents were agnostic or atheist. I came to the conclusion by the time I was eight that I couldn't believe in this and I tried hard because I thought that my parents did.

This was a random thought found in his notes before his death: 'We live in a world half-way between Communism and Conmanism.' I don't know if he ever used this thought anywhere.

I think his writing is beautiful, I really do. I particularly appreciate it because I know how much work went into making it look easy and free-flowing.

When "Kiddar's Luck" first came out, I read it to my children, they didn't read it initially. He, like Dickens, thought that his work should be read to (people) rather than just read yourself. I don't know if you've ever

tried reading it out loud, but all his work is very easy to read out, it flows, in other words you feel it conversational and because he loved to talk and we all feel that his work was meant to be read out like that. His work is a form of poetry, again, when you read it out, you can tell, it flows, it begs to be read out aloud rather than just read to yourself.

I think the clue to his writing is in “The Ampersand”, the word ‘ampersand’ was his quest for success. You’ve achieved success if you’re known as ‘Common & Son’ or ‘Common & Company’. He felt that a way of achieving success and recognition was at what he could do best and I think that he was aware of this when he was about twelve, very much so. So in his search for success and recognition he went for his ‘Ampersand’ by becoming a writer.

Like anybody who does anything thoroughly he researched his subject very well, not just what he was writing about but the tools of the trade.

I think that there’s a musical quality to his writing as well. I know how hard he worked just to get one paragraph to sound right. The more I think about it the more I’m aware of how music affected his writing.

He wanted success and recognition but he was also frightened in case he got it too big. If you look around this room there’s a lot of wines and spirits in there but you wouldn’t find that in Jack’s house because he’d be frightened of the effect it had on him. Dylan Thomas was an object lesson to him because he ruined his life through booze and Jack said that he was frightened that if he was in the same position the same thing would happen to him. If he was in a position where there was no financial limitations or opening hours, I fear that the game he played about rushing to get there before the pub closed would be lost because it wouldn’t be that game any more.

He felt that he ought to have made a lot more money and Turnstile Press or whoever it was at the time should have made a better job of things than they did.

If only he had achieved some financial success earlier on so that he didn't have to do the hack work that bogged him down for years, the stuff that he hated doing and really only got peanuts out of anyway, then he would have been free to write what he wanted to write. I used to dream when I was young that if I won the Pools I'd be able to finance him so that he wouldn't have to do all that stuff. It was very frustrating for everyone who knew him at that time to see the length of time that he'd lost, wasted literally, and couldn't get on with the third book, the final part of the trilogy.

For something like ten years he was wasting the greater part of his time, in Newport Pagnell and prior to that as well. Hence we had this argument, 'Why don't you write something you can make money out of? Because you've got the ability, write what people want, to make money and then get out of the way, you can write it in about three months the way you write, honestly!' It would have been against his principles, though, and he thought that if he once did that he'd never be able to get back onto writing what he wanted to.

There's something else I owe a great deal to my father for. Schooling during the war years was very, very poor. I was taught to read by my mother when I was four, when I was ill in bed with mumps or something. The result was that when I went to school my reading age was a long way ahead of most of my contemporaries. But it wasn't just that I could read well, it was what I was being encouraged to read. So I read all the classics, you name them, Rider Haggard, Dickens, I read all of them before I was ten and I had a

voracious appetite – I'd go to the school library, for example, get four books out the school library and read one and complete it before I went out at seven-thirty to the Boys Club, that sort of thing. In this day and age, it's hardly ever done like that amongst the young.

There are a lot of books I've never touched at all. I never saw an Enid Blyton-type book or any of those sort, they just didn't exist.

He went for life head-on. I don't think he held a negative view on anything.

That's a good way to remember him.

I thought of him as a dedicated writer but, by the same token, people always came first. He had a nose for interesting people from all walks of life. He was just as comfortable talking to the village poacher or the senior doctor in the local practice.'

For Vincent Whitcombe, (1974, p.xvi) Jack Common is

'firmly in the Dickensian tradition. This is not surprising when we remember that his father, the barely literate railwayman, was devoted to him: 'He read Dickens, very slowly and with an utter appreciation which valued every word. For months the same volume stayed at his side of the fireplace, or was gripped in his pipe-free hand ... He was shy and diffident at first until he felt secure enough to relax. Then he was good company, his manner forthright, his humour sometimes jocular, sometimes sharp and ironic. He was a big man like his father and like his father a great drinker of beer. He never lost his Geordie accent. In the words of a friend (Michael Hodson) 'he was very English, very patriotic' not in a flag-waving way but with a sincere love of this country and its people in spite of his international socialism ... He was

the first of the post-war working-class writers, a little too far ahead of his time, forerunner of Sillitoe, Braine and Barstow and better than them all'.

Eileen Aird regarded him as 'a gregarious, humorous man who had few close friends but many casual acquaintances all his life. A man of integrity, courage and vision, he lived a life of hardship without bitterness or complaint.' (Aird, E., 1977, p.4)

Richard Hoggart, whose book 'The Uses of Literacy' (1957) made a great impact in a changing climate, recalls in John Mapplebeck's B.B.C. film on Common in 1974 how he was 'struck' by the similarity of Common's 'angle of vision' to his own even though Hoggart was to receive a much more lasting recognition.

Eric Warman, a friend, wrote:

'Your friends never realised the extent of any troubles you were enduring because your natural bonhomie gave the impression that all was well with you.' (Warman, E., 11/7/1990).

Writer Sid Chaplin had this to say (12/5/1968):

'There should have been other volumes, on Kiddar in London as a literary gent and as a film serial writer, or acting as custodian of a historic ancestral home, or bringing up a large family by dint of the most soul-destroying hack-work; but somehow the flow stopped short at the Tyne, not counting the letters he wrote for 'The Adelphi' and other magazines. But there was no other book about Kiddar down south. The key wasn't there; it was back over 'wind-clutched Byker Bridge' in the upstairs flat where he was born. Now it is lost forever.'

Common gained what reputation he had as a novelist and essayist but he did turn his hand occasionally to short stories and to plays, including 'The Kingdom of the Future', 'a problem play in three acts' (1922) and a one act play, 'Squall'. He also dabbled with poetry:

Ye've worried yersel till ye can't

Keep yer hands from yer mooth.

Yer eyes have grown dark

Wi' lang lookin' out.

Ye'll fidget and fret, little fool

Til ye're pale as a clout.

Can't ye trust me a bit?

He should ha' cum sooner, he'll not

Come now like what he said.

Some babe he deceives.

A'll never forgive him his lies

As long as A live -

Ah, wait a minute.

A'm comin' as soon as A've made

Five pund an' got me fare

An' a bit mair te take

Ye about an' de a show.

Ye niver would like me te cum

Home broke, well ye know

Ye'd look down at that.

Mebbe a week or two mair

An then, my fedgetty lass,

A'll cum an' tumble ye

Tight in me arms,

An' hold ye there hard.

Till ye can't get yer breath

An' yer eyes look up dancin'

An' ye swear it's yer death

Te have such a lad.

(Jack Common, 1980, p.19).

Soon after his death, his widow Connie relates (Common, C., 13/6/1968):

'Thanks for your letter and the 'Sunday Times' memoir which Irene passed on to me. I am very glad Jack is remembered so warmly in the North, as he was indeed in any of the spots we settled in over the years.

I can't quite believe yet that he has gone and that there will be no follow up to 'Kiddar' and 'The Ampersand'. No chronicle of the General Strike and Newcastle in the years of the Depression and no record of the Socialist Club, that haven of odd characters and the dispenser of pies and peas and endless discussion. We had counted on a fair number of years of retirement when, released from the old treadmill, he could get down to writing again.

That he should die when this was so near was 'Kiddar's Luck' sure enough ... It's very kind of John Bunting to suggest that I might be eligible for help from the Royal Literary Society but I don't really need it. I have the Old Age Pension and an incredibly low rent for these days (£1 a week). If I need any more, I can earn it. I can't help feeling rather acid about this when I think what just a little financial backing could have done for Jack when his books were receiving high praise but fantastically small return in the way of money. If there is any money in the kitty, it would be much better spent on some hard up writer while he is still alive.'

This bitterness from Connie Common is commented on in a further letter to Chaplin by Irene Palmer (18/2/c1968):

'I hope you will be successful in your attempts to get 'Kiddar's Luck' reprinted. I had not heard about your correspondence with Connie ... When I was talking about reprinting it to her one day she said it was all too late, that it was when he was alive that he needed encouragement and that she'd be no party to it. I murmured about royalties coming in handy but she didn't want to benefit by his work in any way. She spoke with some heat, for her, and I decided it had been too soon and I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. If she hasn't replied, it may be she didn't know how to do it without sounding offensive. Also, since the house she lived in has been sold as a laundrette and a modernised flat made for her above it she has less room and may have had a clearout. I appreciate that for her a chapter is closed but think it would be nice for his children to have his reputation enhanced and kept alive.'

As it later transpired, she relented and 'Kiddar's Luck' was reprinted by Cedric Chivers in 1971, by Blackie in an educational edition in 1975, and then by Frank Graham in 1975 in a joint edition with 'The Ampersand'. 'Kiddar's Luck' remains in print with Bloodaxe Books, Tarsset, Northumberland (first published by them in 1990. 'Seven Shifts' was reprinted by EP Publishing, Wakefield, in 1978, a selection of his essays appeared in 'Revolt Against an Age of Plenty' (Strong Words, Whitley Bay, 1980) and 'Freedom of the Streets' was reissued by People's Publications, Newcastle upon Tyne, in association with 'The Common Trust' in 1988. None of these books remain in print.

Chapter 7: COMMON WORDS AND THE WANDERING STAR:

‘KIDDAR’S LUCK’ AND ‘THE AMPERSAND’

To seek out the rebel in Common and the roots of this nonconformity, we need, I would suggest to explore his published works, starting with his two novels ‘Kiddar’s Luck’ and ‘The Ampersand’, both reflecting his childhood and growing up on Tyneside.

Both books penetrate deeply into the community of Heaton seen through the eyes of a young man raised in the homely, yet often rough, atmosphere, of the area. It is very much Common’s youth from his own lips, told honestly and openly, so much so that the words often sting. Common does not pretend to add any more plot to the story – it is simply his own path through childhood and adolescence and into work; autobiographical novels for sure.

He pulls no punches in his description of an occasionally overbearing father and an occasionally drunken mother. You can smell the spit and urine in the back-streets and hear the cries of the hawkers. It is prose but seems to scale the heights of poetry in its lyricism, in particular through his loving descriptions of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, its undulating slopes, along with its up-and-down hopes.

It is a prose laced with wit yet never losing a grip on stark reality. It shows Common to be a romantic realist. For this reason, I have quoted liberally from it, so as to show the sleight of hand of a poetic craftsman at work.

‘Kiddar’s Luck’ is the story of Common’s first fourteen years of growing up in the Newcastle of the early 1900s up to 1917.

‘Nearly all the background facts in ‘Kiddar’ are true, his mother’s limp, his father’s giant stature, and the detailed description of the very house and

street in which he lived. He sees through a child's eyes, the teeming activity in street and back lane, the scramble of vans, barrows, milk chariots, coal carts, steam wagons, the milkman's handbell, the Cullercoats fishwives' cry, the rag and bone man's bugle, the firewood seller's wail and the whole hierarchy of old people, adults, relatives, boy' and girls' street games and the place of the newly born – a whole culture that has gone.' (Wilkes, L., 1971, p.155)

As Common describes:

'Everybody's washing hung across the lane, so that the appearance of a tradesman's cart meant a rush to tuck sheets and things round the rope and to raise the diminished bunting high over the horse's head with a prop. The coal-man was the biggest menace, since a mere brush against his tarry sacks meant a second washing-day. At his cry every housewife instantly rushed out to struggle with the props, and down the lane you'd see one line of sheets after another shoot up a couple of yards and the horse's head appear very black beneath the sky-flung whiteness. Naturally bad lads learnt to imitate his cry. They'd conceal themselves behind the last line of washing, and give vent to a convincing 'Coal ter wagon!', then wait for the scamper.'

(Common, J., 1975, p.18)

Common relates vividly his young life on the Heaton streets and lanes, along with the steady unrolling of his mother's life through the taking of the drink, as well as the looming feeling that his parent's marriage was slowly collapsing around him.

‘Kiddar’s Luck’ gives a vivid, uncompromising description of Common’s folks and the tensions between them that tore them apart:

‘My father respected her [his mother-in-law], but could never come under her command. He stood over her like a northern barbarian, too huge for her reprimand, making jokes about Jesus, and every now and then rising on his toes and bringing his whole weight back on his heels so that the old house shook, and the flower-vase standing on the family Bible trembled and looked like toppling over.

... True, my parents made a handsome couple but, though they did not know this then were totally unsuited to one another. They were brought into each other’s orbit purely by chance. It happened in the street.

...Seeing her look, he suddenly pointed and loudly called, ‘That girl, the one with the curls, that’s the girl I’m going to marry’.

...But the long hours he was away hung drearily on her. She was ambitious of making money by the mysterious process of ‘buying and selling’, and to that end attended auction sales, bought bargains and advertised them for sale again in the local paper. Her triumphs were nothing to father, though; he thought the whole thing dishonest and a reflection on his own inability to earn much money. Moreover, he didn’t like her gadding about and he had the general fear of the railwaymen of that period that their absences would be taken advantage of and adultery go on behind their backs. In any case, more often than not it was an empty house she returned to, an empty house in a hateful suburb. She loved the town and was happiest in company, with the full household of her childhood. True, she was very much in love with her

husband. She'd sit up far into the night waiting for his return, a pleasant enough parcel of pretty wifedom for any man to find at the end of the day's work. But he didn't like it. He was shamed, shamed in his manhood that he was kept like a slave away from her and could only slink back in the late hours when work had done with him and left him too tired and irritable to toss the nice nothings of love towards his waiting fancy. He spoke sharp and hurt her.' (Common, J, 1975,pp. 1-4)

Life was very hard for his mother and the boy Common was acutely sensitive to this fact:

'My mother didn't want to tell me, and wouldn't for a while. Then I suppose she realised I was bound to hear from other sources, so she gave me the bitter barebones of the story. Because she had to tell me like this, out of my right to hear, and not for any pleasure she could have in telling, I felt the gravity of more years than I had to my name buttressing my attention. This was what happened. Yesterday afternoon, on her shopping rounds, she stopped at the Addison for a glass of beer, leaving the pram outside. She only had a couple, but when she came out and was pushing the pram containing younger sister and holding onto the hand of the elder, she had to pass a young policeman. She could feel him staring at her (many people did that, alas!). The awful thought came into her mind that he had seen her coming out of the pub and might think she was drunk (because she walked so badly and her hat and her hair were always being shaken loose by her uneven gait).

her lame foot caught on the sweeping hem of her skirt, the pram-handle went down under her weight, the baby yelled from fright. Over comes the copper to help. Yes, but he did think she was drunk. He wanted to run her in; worse, he did run her in; kids, pram as well, all the way to Headlam Street Police Station.

... It was quiet in here, true, the fantastic spectacle was over, but that allowed her to contemplate more completely the terrible certainty that her husband would have to know about this. She feared his wrath more than anything the law might do. After all, she loved him; the law is just what one abides. But she dared not even hope that he would see this for what it was, a cruel mischance overtaking a woman who was not drunk, but lame, tired and fatally flustered.

... Her husband gave her a thrashing and forced her to sign the pledge.

‘Forced her’ was a phrase she used later to excuse her breaking it.

... I went over lock, stock and barrel to my mother’s side of the argument; I held that whatever she did was forgivable, and that what my father and the police did was not; I cared for her, without approving or admiring, and hell with all the moralities made by fortunate conformers by which they condemned and did not assist her. If she was going to be outcast – and I was sure she’d continue to be – then I would be outcast too. For a start, I’d secretly drop my name of ‘Kiddar’ and become ‘William Johnson’, adopting her maiden name as my standard.

At once the world of outer circumstances gave its chime to this decision.

Forgotten in yesterday’s upheavals there lay in the pram bottom a second-hand book mother had bought for me because it was only a penny and you never knew what I might read next. It was a slim volume meant for the use

of schools containing some extracts from Boswell's 'Life of Johnson'.

Johnson! The very name I'd just put on as symbol of my dedication and a name of very great power indeed according to this book. I read it and re-read it, for Lord knows it was a terribly attenuated version of the huge Boswellian opus; you had to read it many times before the figure of the great Doctor inflated itself to somewhere near the true magnitude. When that happened, he became my hero, this Johnson of Johnsons.' (Common, J., 1975, pp.63-5)

All this within the sensual context of his love of the sights and smells of working-class Newcastle. He is something of a Geordie Proust and this tactile lust for life stayed with him to his dying day – even in his dire poverty at times, he would be listening to the birds at dawn, as well as the babble of the lounge bar.

And this is rooted in a sense of history and conflict, springing from the very title 'Kiddar's Luck', derived from the patter of the streetwise popular Tyneside comedian Jimmy Learmouth who opened his act with: 'Hallo, Kiddars! How's your luck?'

Common was taken on the shoulders of his father to see Learmouth (who died in the late nineteen twenties) at Newcastle's Empire Theatre.

The North East novelist Sid Chaplin, steeped in a similar culture, recognised his own image in the writings of Common and described him as '... the author of that small masterpiece 'Kiddar's Luck' and its brilliant companion 'The Ampersand'.'

'... He was a distinguished writer, perhaps the finest chronicler of the English working class to follow Robert Tressell – and, oddly, though born far apart, there was no great distance between the periods they chose to write about ... To celebrate the man (and the boy-child) that was Jack Common

you must read 'Kiddar's Luck' – 'kiddar' being the Tyneside vernacular for a brother, young 'un, very good pal or any male, depending on the way you see it. As Will Kiddar he could do what he could never do in an autobiography – paint-in the dark, bitter background to the working boy's idyll. It helped with the poetry; it enabled him to spit the poison out. So 'Kiddar's Luck' has two levels. On the limpid surface is the story of a Tyneside street boy coping and probing and making conquest. There are four chapters alone on life before age five, a miracle of total recall, including a description of how it feels to be a bairn in a pram with the sun kissing your face, or crawling and registering every detail of the furniture, every sound and smell, in an Edwardian kitchen, or seeing Mrs Buchan swilling her beer from a jug, or granny dead in her coffin, or chucking over lovely pennies of rain ... On the darker level is the history of a broken marriage, with the mother a hopeless drunk and the 'swashbuckling' engine-driver father going 'courting' again. All this ... down to the 'settling' where young Kiddar lifts his fist to his father. One senses a great hurt here. For irony and controlled vitriolic hatred there is nothing in our literature to touch it. The hurt had to be salved.' (Chaplin, S., 12/5/1968)

For Ken Worpole:

'It is to Common's writings you must go if you want to find the working-class intellectuals of that period, the railway workers with bait tins in one hand and Ruskin's 'Unto This Last' in the other; to have described for you the cramped terrace houses where a dinner would be left to go cold while unemployed fitters sketched and discussed technical engineering problems in

chalk on kitchen walls. The culture with, in his own words, ‘the queer half-lit geography familiar to the proletarian, an affair of boozers, boxing-halls, fried fish saloons, corner-ends where meetings are held, missions, secular society rooms, spiritualist haunts, old debating societies and Labour halls’.

(Worpole, K., 14/8/1980, p.320)

Worpole rates ‘Kiddar’s Luck’ and its sequel ‘‘The Ampersand’’ alongside other novels of national reputation, such as those of Lewis Grassie Gibbon or the Welshman, Jack Jones, and sees Common as ‘a Billy Liar before his time’, speaking ‘directly to the common experience of lack of opportunity and wariness of the future’, with novels full of riches, sparkling with wit and insight, ‘with an abundance of detail and analysis which remains refreshingly modern because Common was in so many ways ahead of his time. Common on night-work, Common on street life, Common on human potentiality – he was a writer of dazzling clarity and vigour’ (Worpole, K., 14/8/1980, p.320):

‘It is difficult to know at which point one can place early memories and begin to introduce them into a narrative which starts out of hearsay, actual evidence, so to speak and s’welp-me-God, which the subject of it can vouch for. There is an impression very far back, so far that I cannot remember when I first remembered it, of leafy branches moving slowly and with a regular undulation across bits of blue sky. Was this something seen as I lay in a go-cart and travelled gently along the paths of Heaton Park? Much too young, then to remember, you think? I don’t know. One of my pals, Laurence Bradshaw, can remember having his bottom blown on by a nurse, that being a fond habit of hers; and if Laurence’s bottom can remember being blown

on, why shouldn't my eyes remember being looked into by trees and sky?'

(Common, J., 1975, pp.10-11)

'The street was my second home. Though for some time mainly passive among its activities I had the freedom of it by right and could come into its full heritage whenever I was able. That part I knew first, the south side, started with a grocer's shop on the corner, ran quite straight past some eighty front doors arranged in twos, one for the upstairs flat, one for the down, and each pair separated from the next by the downstairs garden. These gardens were just narrow fenders of soil laid around the buttress of the bay window but they were magnificently defended from depredation by low brick walls, coped with granite slabs each sprouting a complicated fence of spiked railings.' (Common, J., 1975, p.16)

Vincent Whitcombe (Introduction to 'Kiddar's Luck'. Blackie's Teenage Bookshelf, 1974, pp.xv-xvi) sees 'Kiddar's Luck' as:

'a curious production. Librarians are not always sure whether to classify it as fiction or autobiography. Let us call it lightly fictionalised autobiography. So far as one can tell, the fictionalising goes no further than calling himself Willie Kiddar. Presumably, by adopting this name he intended to suggest that he was writing not only as himself but also as an absolutely typical product of his environment, speaking on behalf of all the kids from the Avenues.

Yet what also emerges, especially from the self-mockery of the last chapter, is that he was and felt different from them. The very fact that he wanted to be

a writer set him, like his Uncle Robin, apart from his class – made him, in the most exact sense, eccentric. The feeling, in this, of loss as well as gain is poignant.

The style, too, is curious. It is the style of a man who is still very conscious of the pleasure of playing with words, still *self*-conscious about putting thoughts and feelings down on paper. He has not worked through to that kind of simplicity which many great writers achieve. The compensation is that it is a very rich style and he has a particular love of imagery drawn from his railway background’:

There is no doubt that the Heaton streets excited the young Common’s imagination:

‘The street was usually lively enough. These were the days of private enterprise; a mad economic maelstrom drew down every thoroughfare debris of competitive endeavour, such a procession of horse-drawn vans, man-pushed barrows, milk-chariots, coal-carts and steam-wagons as could have been achieved only by a separate deadly seriousness on the part of each participant blinding him to the comic glory he was collectively included in. Practically any moment of the day, one or other of these strange craft, ark or pinnace, was bound to come upon our horizon. The hooves of the faster traffic, doctor’s trap or post-office van, shot sparks from our cobbles. Often there was a cry of ‘Whip behind’, and a couple of small boys would drop off the back and pick themselves up with bleeding knees and throwing sharp daring glances at any adults that might be about.’ (Common, J., 1975, p.17)

Common's childhood on the streets and in the parks of working-class Newcastle gave him the imaginative core which illuminated his soul and triggered his pen along the road of rebellion. It conditioned him all of his life:

'Behind our houses, as was general in that district, ran the back lane. It was narrower, of course, with the same granite cobbles, smaller sidewalks, and monotonous brick walls pierced evenly along the whole length with two back-doors, two square openings into the coal-houses, two back-doors, and so on. Though milk and bread were front-door deliveries, greengrocery and fish and coal came to the back-door. Sometimes for days on end, the children would spend all their time in the back lane, in and out each other's yards, sitting on the steps, or swinging on the lamp-posts. Down here came the Cullercoats fishwives crying 'Caller Herrin' in that season and otherwise 'Fresh fish, hinny, straight from the sea'. They wore their traditional dress of dark-blue which so well set off the biscuit tan of arm and face, the salt-white hair, and they were like caryatids walking under the great baskets they carried on their heads.' (Common, J., 1975, p.18)

And it influenced his attitude to school and schooling which is the major thing that he condemns in 'Kiddar's Luck':

'The school was only a few streets away, within the Avenues. There were ten of these, of which ours was third, all built in one plan though not by any civic authority. The First and Third ran parallel to the railway lines, sharing a common back lane; three short ones, and back lanes, were at right angles to the rest, but extended only from Third to Seventh; Seventh, Eighth, Ninth

and Tenth were parallel too; and the long Second ran at right angles to the railway from it as far as Tenth, though where it was not keeping the short avenues company, it was corner-ends owing to the interruption of the lanes and front streets that ran into it. To make room for the school building, half of the north side of Ninth and the south side of Tenth was missing. Our route that fine morning then was across Third into Fifth, down Seventh as far as the back lane to Chillingham Road (that being the fourth side of the square); along the lane past end of Eighth, and into Ninth. Well there we were.'

(Common, J., 1975, pp.30-1)

'A few days of this and I had acquired the one faculty with which every school infallibly endows its pupils, that of being bored. It is very important, of course, that every child should in the course of time become fitted up with this negative capability. If they didn't have it, they'd never put up with the jobs they are going to get, most of them, on leaving school. Boredom, or the ability to endure it, is the hub on which the whole universe of work turns. The genius and the chimpanzee are impatient of it, and here and there in a civilized society occur individuals who hark back to these ancestral types and are resistant to scholarship. Their subsequent careers vary. They may be kicked about and generally deplored like the genius, put behind bars like the ape, or supposing they manage to combine the two acts and show the public chimpanzee playing genius, or genius playing chimp, then they get applauded as Great Personalities. Most of us, however, are unable to survive being educated. We learn reading and boredom, writing and boredom, arithmetic and boredom, and so on according to the curriculum, till in the

end it is quite certain you can put us to the most boring job there is and we'll endure it.' (Common, J., 1975, pp.32-3)

'Out of school, I was beginning to graduate as a corner-lad ... According to the incidence of boy-population about half the corners had their own gangs. I drifted for a time between two of these, Third Avenue, which had its customary headquarters round Daddy Hilton's grocery at the bottom, and Sixth Avenue who congregated at the barber's window right opposite our house. Second could never call a corner its own; Fifth was too short of boys; Fourth had a gang, but they were weak and swamped with their own girls; Seventh were a numerous and lusty lot of thugs; and the rest were too far away to be my concern yet awhile.' (Common, J., 1975, p.36)

Despite all the hardships and stresses, as Whitcombe says (1974, p.xii):

'The odd thing is that it is such a happy, funny book. Or perhaps it is not so odd – for how could people bear such a life without humour? ... What we hear most about from Jack Common is not the grim realities that lay in the background but the compensations. The book, believe it or not, rings with affectionate gaiety.'

A major factor adding to the dynamism of Common's young life is the city of Newcastle upon Tyne itself, its sense of tradition and history, its landscape and architecture sloping down to the Tyne. Writes Common (1975, pp.129-131):

‘Newcastle is a fine town to roam in ... its natural features are excellent since it is all hills, vales, and bridges, and one view succeeds another every hundred paces in a manner which fascinates anyone with an eye for composition in a landscape ... From St. Peter’s you looked down a hillside of staggered roofs and cobbled streets to where the river slid like new-boiled pitch under ships and quays until it took the glitter of the lights on several bridges, high and low, or writhed with reflected flame as a train passed over ... Bridges moved their relation to one another; quays and shipping flattened out ... and the centre of the town began to rise up. Then on the riverside itself, when you were near enough to smell its darkness and the touch of salt that blew from it and to see its scum of corks and half-wrecked crates washing under the sterns of foreign ships, the bridges were now overhead. You saw, too, that it was a fortress-city you were making for. There was a climb ahead of you before you got into the inner gaiety of crowds. Either you toiled up Dean Street, which was a sort of glacier of asphalt and cobblestones coming down steeply and ponderously by a cliff of office buildings and through a black railway arch before it could spread itself out on an easier gradient; or you could try your wind and leg-muscles on the Dog Leap Stairs, in which latter case you emerged just where the old keep of the original ‘new’ castle sits in its breast-high mesh of shining railway-lines. That was probably the oldest path to town. Other nights I took the newest, through the clean air of the parks and crossing the Ouseburn by Armstrong Bridge that is over the tops of cherry-trees and a cackling of geese at a farmhouse below. Or to avoid people altogether, I dipped into the darkness of the Vale, over a bridge so small and low it bent to the muttering intimacy of little waters.’

Walking the lanes and vales of his home city enhanced the young Common's 'self-education'. But it was not just the vistas and panoramas of the river-banks that did this; it was the people he met on his perambulations and the stalls and kiosks they ran with the streetwise patter that went with the throbbing atmosphere. It was also the background to his courting days and brought out the poet, the lover and the socialist in Common, and this river of teeming life on the Tyne ran through his veins for the rest of his life as he travelled from one rambling abode to another:

'There were whelk-stalls, scent-stalls, fruit-stalls, drink-stalls, clothing-stalls, all advertising vocally this fever of Saturday philanthropy they all shared.

And one among them all was mute – the second-hand book-stall.

Sooner or later, I always got round to there. Indeed, lighter traffic tended to get squeezed out that way. Its patrons, you see, were quiet shoveable people, and it stood next to the biggest whelk-stall, at the back of which was a backwater of relative darkness which some folks found handy at times. In its twilight you might see a dark figure in a shawl sucking up mussels with modesty, or a little boy being fumbled with so that he could have a pee, or a bowler-hatted bloke gushing like a water-closet, as he shot out a mixture of pork pie and beer and clutched the back of his neck after each vomit. If you didn't care for these sights you turned to the books. This was legitimate in my case, though boys' attention was properly to be discouraged, because I did now and then buy. I think the proprietor had even some sympathy with me, he so patiently watched my progress from the three-and-sixpenny rows, where it was unthinkable I'd make a purchase, all the way down to the tuppenny and penny boxes, and was so pleased to see me pick up anything

worthy of the name 'book'. In this way, and perhaps to please him, I once bought Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. I didn't read it, then or ever, but Carlyle still has a strong smell of mussels for me.

After the Bigg Market, I hurried through the series of covered markets before they closed. If I hadn't spent my coppers already, there was a couple of kiosks in the Flower Market where they sold old copies of Dick Turpin, Claude Duval, etc., for a ha'penny each. They also sold filthy literature of excellent quality: De Maupassant, De Kock, Gautier, and, of course, the pornographer's Bible, Aristotle's Works.' (Common, J., 1975, p.131)

'Fencing happily as they went linked through the softening snow and tried to avoid splashing into slushy places they reached Byker Bridge.

Here, of course, they had to stop to look down on the Ouseburn valley, for under snow it was quite a sight. It *was*, that is, in the year 1919, when the view from any of the bridges was unobstructed except by other bridges.

Newcastle is, by its situation over hills and vales, naturally the most beautiful of the big English cities. Notably, it had the great valley of the Ouseburn so deep and wide that it swept down from the open fields between slums and suburbs all the way to the river. Now, had it been possible to sell this marvellous civic feature to the L.C.C. to set up by Thames-side, all the world would have become familiar with the name of the new beauty-spot. The City Fathers couldn't flog it, or they would, you bet. But they did see the chance of a small profit by filling the hole in. The fact that this involved long-term planning of the wildest and most utopian character didn't daunt them in the least. Deep in the fattest part of their united heads they had a vision of a flat Newcastle, street after street and house after house in the continuous level

adjacency which is the hallmark of the industrial metropolis. They planned to start a rubbish-dump on the valley floor which in two or three centuries would grow to be a broad platform uniting East and Central Newcastle in one unbroken slum Newcastle-upon-Dump. There was opposition from practical men, of course. Poets and plumbers, left-wing politicians, park-keepers and philanderers, men who have to wrestle daily with the hard facts of life, pointed out the plain craziness of the scheme. No use. Businessmen are visionaries for whom fact is a thing to flee from. They could see nothing but this evil-smelling dump rising up between the hills until it became a causeway and could be crowned with ugly little houses. And so it now is.

(Common, J, 1975,pp. 263-4)

And then there was Uncle Robin, a key influence on the energetic imagination of the young lad, one which guided him in his readings and gave a structure to his swelling rebelliousness, a devilment which had been manifest at an early age, and which was in part acquired from his hot-head of a father:

‘I didn’t do very well. I was no wonder child like the first, nobody admired me. Small, ugly, ailing and full of bad temper, that was my unpromising first appearance. My mother feared for my life; my father now and then pointed out that if she wasn’t careful she’d lose this one, too; and the neighbours, who had so admired my sister but knew after she died that she was too beautiful to live, used to stop mother in the street to shake their heads over this poor baby. They’d peer into the pram (then called a go-cart to distinguish it from a push-chair, both better words than those we use now) and the crack generally was ‘Oh the poor thing, ye’ll have a job to rear that

one, Missus'. My only champion was the doctor, now reconciled because my father paid his bill on the nail and was in an unfortunate position argumentatively owing to Smuts and Co. having got reconciled to British rule. 'This one will live,' said the doctor, 'He's got a temper, he kicks against his troubles'. My mother, pleased, agreed, 'He's a little devil, got some of his father in him'. 'Ah, well, devils get on as well as angels in this world, often better – good morning?.' (Common, J., 1975, p.10)

'One night my rare Uncle Robin turned up. Rare? Oh, yes, certainly: read on. As he hadn't been around for a couple of years or so, my mother re-introduced me with a build-up I didn't welcome. She trotted out a prize essay of mine for him to read and said in a boasting way that surprised me, 'And he's an atheist, too; doesn't believe in the Bible'. Well, that from her! ... You see, I'd forgotten the peculiar quality of my Uncle Robin. He was an atheist. He was a socialist; he was a vegetarian; he was a physical culturist; he was – in short, he was a crank. 'A crank', quoted he, not long after this, 'is a little thing, but it makes revolutions'.

He invited me round to his place and I found it bore him out to the extent of being not unlike a revolutionist's workshop ... Uncle Robin was a working-man all right, an electrician by trade, and a very good one. He was never out of work, and he earned good money – as they called it. But there was no woman in his house.

... He had no end of hobbies; he was always working at them any old time of day or night; he played the piano, the violin, the phono-fiddle; and he was liable to encourage these practices in the many friends, little nephews and nieces and their friends, who so frequently called on him ... Friends married;

children grew up and took to other whims. Robin still sat at his own hearth reading queer philosophies, or perhaps on a Sunday he'd pin up sheets of music all round the walls and spend hours going round this gallery with his fiddle, having a concert all to himself. He was a musician by right. The old Northumbrian tradition is that the youngest son of the family, the one least needed for work or for war, should be the minstrel. In obedience to it, when Robin was old enough my grandfather made him a fiddle and set of Northumbrian pipes, never being in the least bothered by the fact that musical instrument making was not his trade. That fit the lad up for playing at a curran supper or amusing the ingle-neuk of a winter's night.'

'... As a vegetarian and bachelor, he did his own cooking. As a disciple of Thoreau, he did as little as possible.

... There were rows and rows of books about us where we sat, books and magazines. The number of them was astonishing for a working-class room and their contents were more surprising still. You'd perhaps expect Jack London and Wells, Blatchford and William Morris, the Rubaiyat and Whitman, Thoreau, Shelley, Kropotkin, Winwood Reade, Haeckel, Belfort Bax, any amount of socialist pamphlets and Rationalist Press publications, some of these stalwarts certainly. But all around and overlaying them was a weird assemblage of works on theosophy, transcendentalism, anthroposophy, spiritualism, Yoga, Flat-earthism, physical culture, the revelations about the deadly effect of salt, sugar, meat, feather-beds, starch, and the alternative advocacy of raw food, grass or yeast. One or other of these was always being taken down to illustrate a point in my uncle's argument, and given to me to take home. A pile of them accumulated by my chair. Whether I wanted to

read so variously or not, I had to be loyal enough to make a shot at them, and some, of course, I was eager for and really needed.’

‘... I was having some very wide horizons opened to me. I enjoyed this increased power of mental vision, but – it lifted no veil on my future. Worse than that, it deepened my introspection. It took me farther away from my own generation. Was I another eccentric like Uncle Robin? According to mother there had always been a queer streak in the Kiddars; according to Granny there was never any accounting for them – perhaps Robin and I were exceptionally twisted twigs on a family tree. It was our luck to have inherited an extra share of whatever genes were peculiar to the breed. Well, obviously, one way of finding out what I might become was to find out first what I was. Or to put it in a more approachable term, what is a Kiddar?’ (Common, J., 1975, pp.135-9)

Whilst school penned young Jack in most of the time, it did offer glimmers of light and encouraged him to express himself in writing for the first time. This was in many ways down to one key teacher, Mr. Gillespie:

‘He was a real teacher, we felt, couldn’t help being one; the others just did it for money and out of a dislike for boys.

His interest in the written word made him welcome the slightest show of skill in producing it. Sometimes when I had turned in a rather better effort than average, he would hold the whole school in the hall while he read it to them. I think some of the teachers expected me to develop a swollen head over these performances. No doubt I had the pleasant sensation of feeling some of my parsnips being buttered but the thing was so eccentric to the

ordinary course of school events, and so obviously led nowhere, my pride in it was chiefly the small one of having pleased one of us queer characters for whom words were more than words. It was between him and me and the gate-post – the gate-post being that far-distant and miraculous folk who actually wrote books.’ (Common, J., 1975, pp.126-7)

He felt himself up against ‘the system’ rather than individual teachers. English was the only subject in which he was particularly interested and headmaster Gillespie was able to foster this ability of Common’s to express himself in words – an ability which, as today, comes in exceedingly useful with job applications:

‘44 Third Avenue,
Heaton,
Newcastle upon Tyne.
20th August, 1917

The Advertiser,
Box 1313,
North Mail.

Dear Sir,

With reference to your advertisement in today’s North Mail, I beg to apply for the post. I am fourteen years of age, strong, healthy, bright, punctual, clean and willing. My parents are working-class, my environment is working-class, the school I have just left is working-class, and with your kind assistance I feel qualified to become working-class myself.

Because I have known poverty, I am certain to accept the small wage you intend to offer. Because I resent poverty, I am likely to join any organization

or activity which has the object of making you pay bigger wages. Because I know how poverty cripples the humble, I intend to be ambitious, within limits, and ready to advance myself at your expense. As an unconvicted juvenile delinquent, I'd have no hesitation in using dishonesty to gain my ends, but as a mourner over convicted pals I know that the kinds of dishonesty open to the likes of us are so risky and over-policed as to be practically useless for the purpose of getting on in the world. Legal aggrandisement is suspect for a different reason. As a member from birth of the community of the streets I am aware that individual success for one of our sort, if contrived and not accidental, incurs a personal severance from the rest. That makes a man ridiculous, you know. The self-promoted working-man is as much a living anomaly as the wealthy priest, the socially-approved poet, the knighted scientist, or the bearded lady. Hedged off, therefore, as I am from a conventional or an infamous success by these parallel electric fences, it is probable I shall tread the daily round for a regular pittance all my life – that suits you.

... So far I cannot claim to have experienced any exceptionally toward event which might suggest that I'm a destined child of fortune. Nevertheless, as it is high time the luck of all the Kiddars turned, that goes for all of them, I intend to live in every possible way as if it had; and to regard any unblest existence such as most kinds of work still are, as worth only a temporary endurance.

It is this uncertain and qualified endurance I now place at your disposal. No doubt you'd prefer something better. Believe me, what I offer so frankly is what you are increasingly likely to get from any one of that host who might sign themselves as I do.

Yours truly,

Kiddar'

(Common, J., 1975, pp.143-5)

This letter serves as a bridge between the end of Common's schooling and his search for gainful employment. It has a hint of forgoing in its tone, the severance of the young lad from 'the community of the streets' into the all too real world of work.

It is a parody of the class system and the myth that anyone can climb the ladder of British society; it is knowing in that it realises that if unlikely success comes it will also sever the boy from his very roots. In some ways, it is a battle cry for better things to come, for people power against the oppression of the boss.

'The Ampersand' takes Common's life on a notch into the struggles and stresses of the jobs market and the testing pains of growing up on Tyneside and the courting of Geordie lasses. But Common begins this novel with some musings on dialect and the regional voice with the following 'reading directions':

'In this piece of small-crime fiction, or success story taken the wrong turning, most of the characters are of course people who speak in dialect. Seeing that that must be so, readers may wonder why they are not treated to the traditional outbreaks of funny spelling and if in their absence they are expected to regard all dialogue as being conducted in Standard English. They are not. Funny spelling is avoided but not out of a misplaced passion for purity, no, just because it won't work in this case.

It does work after a fashion when a story moves among people who can reasonably adopt one of the accepted stage dialects, phoney Scots or Irish, Lancs-Yorks, B.B.C. West Country, or Cockney. These are so familiar that most readers can mimic them or recognize that they are being mimicked. It doesn't need a lot of typographic contortions to suggest which one is intended. But try to spell the dialects of Aberdeenshire, Walthamstow, Westmorland, old rural Essex, Hawick or Tyneside and the result is something nobody can stand for more than a line or two. Even the lucky reader who comes from one of these parts wouldn't spell himself your way, you can bet on that.

Besides, as a dialect-speaker myself, it would be an odd snobbery to apply the courtier-clown convention and put my characters into semi-phonetics while leaving my own narrative *continuo* so nobly free. Contrariwise, treat myself same as the boys and we all become unreadable. That's worse.

The short way out is to print all plain. This was Boswell's way in reporting Johnson and others: he did not trouble to indicate the clash of dialect. It was Byron's way in reporting himself. Therefore it must serve for lesser strays from the Standard English stable.

That said, you can read on now, free of any false supposition that the frequent absence of funny spelling in the text is meant to show that the cast is high-class. Nobody in this novel is that.' (Common, J., 1975, p.149)

The 'directions' show Common's own torn cultural identity – a severance between the sometimes cosy sense of identity he found in the community of his youth and the lure of the more sophisticated lifestyle of the metropolitan literati, which, while having its

stimulating aspects, lacked a rootedness and the sensuality of the scents and smells of his birthplace.

The grown-up Will Kiddar is Bill Clarts, the yearning teenager in search of work. There is the sense of the outsider in Clarts, the lad who can see straight through the monotony of the grey-suited businessmen and the cloth-capped overalled labourers; the poetic dreamer with his imagination switched on, severely alienated from the commercial bustle of Newcastle workplaces but needy of the wages. There are also the stirrings of the radical young socialist who has begun to understand the potential power of the alienated workers who could overturn the existing social order if they could only learn more about the nature of things and of their own oppression and realise the strength and vitality in their mutual solidarity:

‘... across nearly all these factories, shipyards, a warehouse, office-buildings, there was written up in large letters: ‘Somebody & Co.’

What was this ‘& Co.’? Up and down every street, from one side of the river to another, hundreds of ‘& Co.s’ looked out at one another in a new, though monotonous, heraldry writing on the air, as it almost was, that Smith or Higgenbottom, Robson, Thompson, Patterson, Anyson, was ‘& Co.’. ‘The Ampersand’ counted. To have it was an accolade of sorts. The competition for it might even be the purpose behind all this dingy struggling with the brass tacks of fact. Will Clarts felt his vision restored to the familiar. What he’d mistaken for an industrial ant-hill only was built round a glorious fiction. It was an empire of ‘The Ampersand’s, no less.

Well, then, at that his secondary personality at once took charge of him: it wrote across his mental horizon in great letters of gilt, ‘Clarts & Co.’. All the way along Pilgrim Street this new, mighty conception jostled his being with

the preliminary tumescence of willing. How? That, of course, was the question when he could be cool again. Get an office-job for a start? That meant putting up with the plain scorn of all his mates. In their kind of street only weaklings and mammy's pets took to the clean collar.

... Then, quick as a flash, a possible solution presented itself to him as a picture. Many times in his peregrinations he'd passed by some mid-block premises on a main street where several floors above a big grocery all proclaimed themselves as being Skilbeck's Commercial College. He'd read over to himself the various endowments to be got within. There were Business Methods, Book-keeping, Shorthand, Typewriting, French, German, Spanish, Commercial Geography – this last very high up on a window too small for it so that a 'G' had fallen off and it now read 'eography', something very esoteric and masterly it looked to Clarts's roving eye, not unconnected with cheque-writing maybe. His imagination took fire from these recorded but hitherto unregarded details. There, undoubtedly, was the armoury where one could be equipped to joust for 'The Ampersand'.' (Common, J., 1975, pp.154-5)

As Kiddar had his Uncle Robin, so Clarts had his Uncle Rod, the anarchist bachelor whose working life cannot be separated from play, the searcher after beauty in the everyday, the rebel with a cause, lover of children with none of his own, but with the child still in him. And, above all, the Uncle Educator, the man high on ideas who turned the young lad's life upside down with his learning and passion:

'Bill had seen nothing of his queerest uncle for some years and had indeed almost forgotten his existence. Then a few weeks ago Rod dropped in out of

the blue, wouldn't sit down in case he was tempted to stay an hour, did stay an hour standing because he got interested in a nephew who seemed as if he might have brains, invited the nephew to come and see him, promised to call again, didn't. Bill was at first ardent to take up that invitation. He remembered vividly the old-time charm of Uncle Rod's bachelor perches, the music, the photography, queer meals of unorthodox delicacy, the properties for dressing-up, the small cousins who turned up in number and variety to learn the piano or violin and to say their pieces, certainly to have fun. Uncle Rod was the only adult he knew who could make his life a kind of perpetual playtime.

But these memories belonged to childhood. What gave Bill pause was that he would not be going now as a small boy to exploit the tolerance of a childless man fond of children. Uncle Rod was a man of books and ideas, a rebel against all the received opinion around him. Now Will longed to appear before the man as a promising young similar.' (Common, J., 1975, pp.178-9)

'The Ampersand' only takes the Clarts (or Common) story so far. The future is up for grabs and was, no, doubt to be investigated in the third, unpublished, section of the trilogy. As it is, we are all kept guessing, like the cat along the dripping back-lanes of Common's birth-place:

'A few more steps and he would be into the back-lane and away. But here he was greeted by the big ginger cat mewing a last demonstration of friendship. Bill glanced up at the blind windows all around. No faces there. He bent down and stroked the glad animal's chops to silence it. Then he nipped quickly out the yard-door. The cat reappeared in a second on the top of the wall. As he walked away, it called after him, running along the walls, pausing, coming up abreast of him just when he thought it had given up. In

this wise the pair of them reached the bottom of the lane. That was far enough for the cat, evidently. It stayed on the top of the last coal-house roof, calling no more but its curved tail wavering up in a small question-mark abrupt against the risen sun.' (Common, J., 1975, p.310)

Lyall Wilkes admires Common's work because:

'the writing is without a trace of self-pity and the witty and ironic style is best appreciated by being read out loud ... No writer's growing awareness of the conflict between his background and his art has ever ... been better expressed. The tragedy is, that even as he takes up his pen to write the great novel, the divide between himself and his own people will widen. Yet in these two books, at a cost to himself which only he could know, passing judgment from a lonely distance on himself and his parents with a passionate impartiality, Jack Common catches the very sound and sight and smell of growing up on Tyneside ...' (Wilkes, L., 1971, p.163)

For Robert Colls (1998, pp.190-6):

'Kiddar's Luck' is a song of innocence and experience. It is definitely more music hall than soiree though, as Will Kiddar looks back on all life's little jokes from the vantage of a bloke who knows the score now, even if he didn't know it then ... but the sly hatred of Common's novel appears to have been lost on its reviewers. Thought in the 1930s to have been one of the men most likely to write 'The Great Proletarian' Novel, by 1951 Common wasn't going to do it because no one was. The very idea of such a thing had gone

off. The Cold War wrung its retractions and, undetected in its politics, 'Kiddar's Luck' was given up to another discourse, that of the 'into unknown England' tradition of good-natured appeals from the wrong side of the tracks. In these terms, reviewers generally liked the book. In it they found what they couldn't find elsewhere, and that was a plebby Geordie naturalism. Carrying a sort of calculated spontaneity, this was life imitating art. Swiped from the scullery table, this 'back street realism' was a rich piece of composite northern industrial truth ... In 'Kiddar's Luck', the man who called himself a 'Revolutionary Materialist with One Leg Free' had his wayward way. He does not allow the North East to slump into its own clammy world on the inside any more than he allows Socialism to document all the answers from the outside. True to his place and to his self, the novel stays regional by thrusting from the edge to the centre and it stays proletarian by refusing to move one inch from where it is. He declares the knowing irony of his people ... Common's region was not so much a place as an idiom, not so much a script as a performance, not so much a look as an eyeful.'

Mark Holloway (1/1952) placed Common alongside D.H.Lawrence: 'In a concentrated, well-knit prose, tangy, warm, robust, and full of original imagery, yet conversational in tone, he can respond, and make his reader respond, to all experiences from the Rabelaisian to the lyrical'. For Bruce Bain (25/6/1954): 'Kiddar's Luck' is a book, almost unique in its kind, for it is free from the hero-worshipping caricature of the Socialist Realists or the glum obsessions of the Slice of Lifers'. And for John McGahern (13/2/1976, p.159): 'The voice is slow and sure as the Tyne itself, a collective as much as an individual voice'. Though McGahern is critical of 'The Ampersand', in particular, accusing it of lacking, 'a central

idea or vision', being without 'tension' and dwindling 'to something all too like life.'

Pickering and Robins (1984, p.79) contend that:

'In his novels, particularly 'Kiddar's Luck', Jack Common succeeds in fashioning a particularly sensitive working-class vision within the autobiographical mode. What Common does is to marry literary technique and style, in this process of retrospection, with certain qualities and features of popular cultural expression, ranging from the commonplace but localised traditions of repartee and kidding, through the idiomatic narratives of the raconteur and folk-tale teller, to the more formal characteristics of monologue recitation and stand-up comic turns. Throughout Common's fiction, there is the constant interweaving of a self-conscious literariness with the oral and colloquial tones still flourishing in his native region during the period of his upbringing (markedly, for example, in the north-eastern music hall, as well as in everyday vernacular speech). Particularly characteristic of this is the distinctive irony; humour and self-mockery of 'Kiddar's Luck' and 'The Ampersand' ... In neither does Common allow himself to be limited by the genre of autobiography. He freely fictionalizes parts of his life and combines this with invented detail and story ... These novels are a rare and important achievement within the canon of working-class writing, and a valuable alternative and corrective to the tradition of orthodox 'proletarian fiction'. What we have in these texts is an account of a working-class odyssey through the cultural and social order, tracing the transformation from the creative anarchy of childhood to the disenchanting and disillusioned drudgery of proletarian subordination.'

Common himself thought 'The Ampersand' was superior to 'Kiddar's Luck'; his 'masterpiece'. It is somewhat more complex in its description of the social and cultural predicament that Common found himself in – the Geordie loyalist merged with the intellectual outsider. The story of Clarts is the story of Common himself, of course, and the two lives merge together, 'by extending the personal perspective to that of a new socialist humanity.' (Paul, R., 1982, p.95)

Paul prefers 'The Ampersand' to 'Kiddar's Luck':

'... in terms of internal development, 'The Ampersand' is perhaps much more structurally taut and thematically dynamic than its predecessor, while Common's portrayal of the character of Clarts is made more complex and individualised by the very fact that it is highlighted against a fundamentally contrastive background. In 'Kiddar's Luck', this ideological tension remains rather unpronounced and abstract. 'Kiddar' has become Clarts, a backstreet boy on the make, who soon gets out of his social depth among the petite bourgeoisie until in the end he finds himself, like a fish out of water, almost hopelessly ensnared in a net of individualist intrigues. Through this ironic depiction of an unsuccessful fate in small-time crime, Common manages to bring to life his underlying thematic problematic of working-class alienation. ... Like any working-class street urchin, Clarts takes full advantage of the extended opportunities for 'a fiddle' which his temporary social promotion affords him. His behaviour is meant to represent an indirect rejection of a middle-class perspective, but it also entails an individualist alienation from his roots, the link with which becomes even more tenuous ... Throughout the novel, the road to Clarts's self-emancipation is paved with illicit distractions. He soon becomes disillusioned about the college curriculum and ends up

relapsing into a routine of minimum exertion in class coupled with maximum profit-making during the breaks ... The perspective, however, of Clarts becoming another room-at-the-top working-class upstart, who uses the individualist ethic of the business world as a short cut for his ambitions, is exposed by Common as a socially invalid cul-de-sac, not so much in terms of 'crime doesn't pay' as in the subsequent loss of one's class identity and orientation.' (Paul, R., 1982, pp.91-3)

This alienation comes as a student at Skilbeck's Academy and it is not redeemed by black-marketeering and shop-lifting forays at Woolworth's in an attempt to maintain a 'wide-boy' image. Something had to give and Clarts is out of college before taking his final exams. As Common eloquently puts it:

'he still had the corner-lad's scorn for the namby-pamby, good little boys, as well as the normal working-class distrust of the white collars. These emotions were not mitigated but only made uneasy by his own joining of the white-collar brigade.' (Common, J., 1975, p.235)

To this end, Clarts 'managed the Petty Cash and the Stamp Book with a junior clerk's carefulness plus a corner-boy's corrupt skill.' (Common, J., 1975, p.244)

Faced with the stark reality of the sack from work and the legal repercussions which ensued from it, Clarts/Common is confronted with an urgent need to reappraise things:

'... he could not fight this battle and win. He fought for nobody in this, that's why. For what, then? For the good name of Clarts. But Clarts name was

mud, always had been. Clarts was pre-condemned, by Mabel, by the lads, and now by his sense of what was fated for him. The situation itself was trifling but it showed him the cul-de-sac into which his inferior willing had driven him. The way out was back.’ (Common, J., 1975, p.304)

In going back, Common was thinking of his father again, and millions like him:

‘... he found himself appreciating the big man’s presence with the fervour for reality a disembodied spirit might feel. For there was solid human worth, the muscles and skill exercised in good work, the mind free of self-abuse, no perversion into personality or corruption by petty eminence, just the plain stuff of genuine manhood. Neither a person nor a personage he, but one of a million, secure in its creatureliness.’ (Common, J., 1975, p.308)

The crisis induced by his alienation takes the young man back to his roots in search of a solution which he felt could be found to some extent in the solidarity and collectiveness of community. This understanding Clarts and Common took with them on their journey out of Newcastle in pursuit of a brighter future.

Chapter 8: COMMON WORDS AND THE WANDERING STAR:

THE ESSAYIST, THE 'FREEDOM OF THE STREETS' AND 'SEVEN SHIFTS'

THE ESSAYIST

Jack Common's wife Connie once told me that she thought Jack was at his best as an essayist. She wasn't the only one who thought this. Essays suited his pithy, ironic style and allowed him to give vent to his feelings on humankind, the issues of the day and the past and future. His contributions to 'The Adelphi' fell into three main categories: book reviews, a satirical column 'The Sweeper Up' and political social articles. For Eileen Aird, 'The Sweeper Up' was particularly successful. Initially Rees and Murry refused it as a regular contribution but it quickly proved popular, frequently offering the only light relief in what was often an honest, earnest but solidly over-theoretical issue.' Eileen Aird considers that

'there are two features of Jack Common's 'Adelphi' essays which are outstanding: one is their sheer intelligence, the sense of a lively and unformed mind continually revising its own definitions and the other is their craftsmanship, the fluent use of words, the easy movement from simple to complex and the way in which humour counterpoints conviction.' (Aird, E., 1977, p.3)

One of the major issues his essays highlight is the relationship between the individual and society; the tension between a collective approach and an individualistic one; and a

search for a balance between the two. Though I have not been able to locate Common's triggering essay or letter, this debate is vividly contested in correspondence between Common and his colleague from 'The Adelphi', Max Plowman. Plowman to Common (Plowman, M., 1944, letter from Erskine Hill, London, 26/1/1935, pp.541-2):

'I don't think I've grasped your argument properly. For instance, when you say 'For you there is socialism as politics, and beside it the individual and his ethic', I'm inclined to agree, with the proviso that you've got the cart before the horse and divorced what's married. That is to say, in my view, Socialism that is not firmly grounded in individualism is just a disease of mass-mentality – a belief in the transmutation of elements by shoving them in a common dustbin. Frankly I don't understand you when you say 'I believe that the individual is quite irrelevant except when he is proclaiming the revolutionary community against all others'. I can't think you mean what you say; for if that were true, then that small individual, Peter, is 'quite irrelevant'. Irrelevant to whom/or to what?

Again you speak of the 'social figure' which you distinguish from 'the private man'. Such a distinction seems to me to contain a fundamental dualistic fantasy. I can't even imagine where one ends and the other begins. My position is that I think the social intuitions of the child are true: but he is the expression of individualism that is as yet incapable of socialism. He is wanting in self-consciousness, which of course he'll get when he comes to adolescence. There he expresses the conflict of the individual with society ... when he comes to full-growth (if ever) then he understands that true self-realisation is only to be found through imaginative love and understanding of the other fellow. And that, expressed politically, is what I call Socialism –

not to be come at by any other process. That's what I understand as the *real* transmutation of individualism. I simply don't believe in the mere abandonment of individualism, and the substitution of something called 'Socialism' or 'Communism' in its place. Such a swap-over would be psychologically unsound ... You see I don't believe in Marx's *automatic* salvation of the proletariat by the mere transference of power. It violates psychological law. Such a theory only betrays a power complex inverted. You see it quite clearly when you hear one of the lads saying he is proud of his class and he has no intention of apologising for belonging to it. Such a statement shows he is only a half-baked Socialist: a Socialist by inversion, which means, psychologically, an inverted Capitalist. True Socialism is infinitely superior to any such false simplicity, for it represents a conscious understanding of equality, a faith based on experience, not on substitution ... Did you read G.D.H.Cole in the 'New Statesman' this week? It's interesting, and I think fundamentally specious. He wants to cut Socialism to fit the majority mind. The monkey will steal his chestnuts if he succeeds! But it's just what always happens when people conceive of Socialism as a sort of quick-change remedy for all the ills that flesh is heir to. But I come to think that Marx has destroyed in many minds a realistic conception of history –
There!'

This intense debate between Plowman and Common is fascinating in its pinpointing of a key and crucial issue of the day and one which continues into the twenty first century. Common's socialism remains rooted in his experiences of the back-streets of Newcastle and the collective spirit of the industrial workplace. He fights for his class but seems in doing so to pay too little attention to individuality and indeed a potential state of

classlessness. And so the dispute intensifies (Plowman, M., 1/12/1935, pp.546-7; and 11/12/1935, pp.550-1):

‘You really have got the devil of a beanstalk! How you get up and down it, I’m blowed if I know! I never dreamt you could put on 2 1/2 pages so many things that are completely unintelligible to me ... You say Socialism is the antithesis of Individualism. And I think yours is. That’s what’s the matter with it. That’s why it isn’t good enough: it merely expresses an antithesis and is not the achievement of a synthesis. It exists eternally as the opposition, the proletarian dictatorship without any explanation of the way in which it is going to get out of the mentality of dictatorship. It is, as I said before, mere inversion and substitution, and therefore psychologically fundamentally unsound. And because you are logical about this antithesis, you are obliged to be what (if I may say so without offence) seems to me to be patently stupid! For what could be more obviously stupid and untrue than the statement ‘I believe that the time when the individual was significant is past ... There aren’t any individuals now.’ For there, I say unto you, dear Jack that you lie in your false Communist teeth. Murry is an individual to you. Lenin is an individual to you. Mary is, please gawd, an individual to you. And Peter Common Esquire, Gent. is an individual to you. So if you start with the basic lie that there are no individuals now, and that what there are aren’t ‘significant’, you are in mortal danger of producing a whole beanstalk of lies which may convince some people, but which ultimately won’t convince you. You won’t listen to me; so let me first quote Murry *at* you: ‘But what is the end of Socialism? ... We can desire it only because we believe in and attach supreme worth to the human individual. This does not

mean that the human individual whom we supremely value is simply a potentiality ... He already exists ... The supreme value, the unique validity of the individual man and woman is not a theory: it is an experience.

And since Murry probably won't be enough, let's out Murry Murry and have *MacMurry*. Here he is: 'For all our rational investigation and rational planning of the economic and political and social spheres is without meaning unless it is the means to one end – the living of the personal life of community in joy and freedom.

... If you look into it I think you'll find that the problem which really perplexes you is how you are going to get something for nothing – how to 'establish the kingdom of the world-proletariat ... and this is a sordid job.' ... You seem to think consciousness goes up in the air, vaporises and then becomes the property of those who go down the mine. That, of course, is to make a religion of chaos: it is to imagine that you are being creative in the enjoyment of smashing up the happy home: it's the proof of equality by making everything the same as everything else. It is politics of the 'let's have a bloody good booze-up' order ... The problem is how to live like a human individual in order that you may live socially and communally. And that's not very difficult if you don't lie to yourself. If you pretend you aren't an individual, then it's a hell of a job ... It is by truth to native human instinct that men can behave like men: but if man lies to himself and behaves like a damn puppet at the command of social organisations, how the hell can he hope to sustain a human life? ... The theory that you can gain the whole world by losing your own soul is just utter bunk.

... At the back of Marx is man – not generalised man, but individual man, the basic entity as value: and I think that anyone who forgets that very soon

finds himself talking nonsense ... Art gives you the criterion: its values are individual: and if you don't accept that criterion, well, it seems to me you can have no standard of value at all; for it is its individuality that everything exhibits its value ... I see the individual as the everlasting term of reference. He is the realistic fact: the basis of everything you've got to argue from. And I don't find that premise conflicting with the idea of the class struggle ... while I can understand class-consciousness as a process of political evolution, as a philosophical basis I know that it is mere sand. Why, what's happening in Russia ought to show anybody that clear enough? Therefore as a *religion*, Socialism is, was, and always will be wholly insufficient. Ultimately, it *can* only be a religion of self-worship. In other words, Humanism is not enough, for it doesn't embrace the idea of perfection which is innate in man. Again, it provides him with no contrary; so it leaves him chasing his own tail ... So there you are, my boy, and I trust it doesn't give you too bad a belly-ache!

At the time of the above correspondence, unemployment figures had reached around two million and a severe slump hit the western world. Yet, alongside this unemployment, large scale industrial redevelopment was taking place and, paradoxically, a lot of areas in southern England were to boom throughout this slump. This contrast troubled Common, as reflected in his essays for 'The Adelphi' at the time. He saw, 'in the presence of unemployment alongside mechanisation and the beginning of mass production and a consumption induced through advertising, the makings of a new (and disturbing) society ... A process which undervalued the knowledge and experience of ordinary men and women.' (Beynon, H. & Hutchinson, C., 1980, p.42) This process saw workers forced into a system of interchanging employment, with

money the main force. This was a major threat to working class experience and solidarity. Yet Common stayed optimistic through the changing perspective, seeing in all the insecurity a potential for a revitalised individualism, not based on class exploitation but on a collective interaction and solidarity:

‘One thing which has at last become obvious is that the celebrated Curse of Mammon (which used to be a melodramatic thundering of priests to delight rich congregations) has settled down into the irritation of money. It has become actually intolerable that a society can find no better way of expressing its relations than through a grammar of L.S.D. What a nuisance it is to everybody that a fellow still has to outwit his neighbours in order to prove that he amounts to something: that we have to ruin the eyesight of the poor in picture-palaces, and strain the hearing of the rich in unacoustic dress circles, because the successful know no better way of savouring success than by putting a price-gulf round their pleasures. It is an infernal bother to be always forking out tuppence and fourpences for bus-fares, or to have to walk because of an antiquated habit publicans cling to of collaring all your change when you feel so good with your neighbours that you order an extra ‘last round’ which you really can’t afford. Endless small buying and selling we’ve got to. It’s maddening. You can’t even do a useful job unless you sell it somewhere, somehow, and if you can’t, you must live in weary idleness because unpaid work is not recognised on the Labour Exchange, and no stamps are given for it. The result of so much selling is only that the community is split in twain, divided into successful and non-successful sellers. It’s pretty desperate when you come to think of it, that merely because a man is born in a bourgeois home he has to live his life surrounded

by a social vacuum (like a blasted thermos flask), shut up in private and public schools, saloon bars, and Sunday afternoon streets, forced to regard the vast majority of his fellow-countrymen as a kind of sub-humanity that strikes and engages in mass-struggle. That was a social discipline once, I suppose. It created a class of economic warriors who led the capitalist expansion. That expansion is finished, but the boys are still hanging about, heavily armoured for a fight which has vanished out of ken, like battleships on a mudbank.

... There is only one thing to be done about money: make it completely unimportant. It is the vocabulary of buyers and sellers, as rank was the vocabulary of warriors. A new human relation cannot be expressed in it. You must all be prepared to live a life in which there is no money-shelter between yourselves and the next man, in which the differences between you find no economic expression though they will appear plainer than before in your jobs and your recreations. The pattern of that life has already been sketched out negatively. In the material, non-human sphere the result of intensive individualism has been a mass machine-production which serves men as though they were not individuals at all. In the human world the correlative result is a class called 'the proletariat' because they have no individualist privileges and are indeed 'mass' to those who do not feel with them. The rest of society is rendered sterile because it clings to individualism in the face of an actual equality imposed by the conditions of modern machine-production.' (Common, J., 'Money Talks', 1980, pp.46-8)

Common is wary of conceptions of 'party'. A vision of working class community was central to his thinking. For him,

'...no kind of socialism is worth anything unless it makes real to you that part of mankind which the concentrated consciousness of the last ruling class left in darkness. Beneath all the economic paraphernalia, the careful analysis of capitalist functioning, the arguments for efficiency and whatnot, the essential is that this faith proclaims a new humanity. It raises up the wronged, obliterates the nullifying division of classes, and brings the powers of a total humanity into the light of day. That is why it is revolutionary. A revolution takes place in any individual who is able to transcend the normal imaginative strictures of his time to the point when he realises that the portion of mankind called the proletariat is as rich in human potentiality as those parts which have already realised their powers in the full pomp of material creation. Leave this element out and socialism is an ism ... This is the test which awaits all propounders of movements and schemes; if they would believe in their own manhood they must first believe in the potential, unrealised human force which has until now been kept as a sub-human labour power. The proclamation of that force is the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth, an aristocracy of total humanity ruling a serfdom of machines.' (Common, J., 1980, 'Christmas Carol', pp.109-112)

Community and solidarity were absolute keys to the thinking of Common. Again and again, we are taken by him back to his roots on Tyneside. This is also true of his essay writing. For it was in those Heaton streets that he learnt to be a rebel and non-conformist. This was different, however, from any kind of 'bourgeois individualism'; this was a collective sense of rebellion rooted in the experience of local people at the bottom of society's pile, fighting against authority from the top down and sceptical of

their schooling. He captures this in one essay in particular (Common, J., date unknown, 'Communism and the Corner Lad'):

'... however, it is the diminution which is important. Who, do you think, ever learnt to be a working-man by going to a council school? Our middle-class intellectuals, so often schoolmasters themselves, forget how small a part 'official' education plays in the lives of working-men.

I remember a rather superior sort of council school at which the headmaster was once struck by the idea of having an Old Boys Reunion. The scheme was a flop. The Old Boys refused to reunite. And the reason is, that council school graduates do not retain any lasting affection for the scene of their youthful endeavours. Not, mind you, because the council schools are worse than others. No one hates them with the virulence of the ex-public schoolboy towards his old school. Simply they are not so significant either one way or the other; they don't get deep into anyone's life. What the working-class boy wants to revisit is the working-class street. That is the real scene of his youthful endeavours; it is where he picked up the traditions of his class. The street, which for so many people is merely a corridor between two destinations, is for the working-class boy, and often for his father, too, a place to live in. Where nobody wants to put up with the noise of children in the house more than is necessary, the street gets pretty lively. You come to know it in its special idiosyncrasies as well as you know the corners of your own home. The warm lights of the general shop on a cold night when you huddle up against the panes and play guessing-games using the titles of the goods displayed for names; the corner-end with its tin nameplate rattling loose on the nails from many years of ball-games; the faded blue blind of the

grocer's on a Sunday afternoon in summer, and the little girls on their way to Sunday school pausing there to admire their white dresses dimly reflected in the window glass; the square of cement on the corner chalked out in big rings for marbles and again for hop-scotch later in the year, or alive with twirling skipping-ropes; the doors of the Bottle-and-Jug with their brass streaking as they swing to, while you wait for Ma and hope that she'll send you for fish-and-chips for the supper – these are the hallowed quadrangles a working-man remembers when he thinks of what he learnt as a child. Every corner-end is a little world, for every corner-end has its gang. A gang of boys and a gang of youths. You graduate from the general dealer's window and the square of cement to a place by the fish-and-chip shop and the newsagent's. From marbles to woodbines. And it is in becoming a corner-lad that you learn what is expected of a man. Not in the schools. The council schools never belonged to the working-classes; they are not 'our' schools. The government forced them on us, and the real shaping of the working-class boy goes on after they are shut.

In the schools you are taught a respect for white collars, punctuality, a certain amount of docility, patriotism, religion, and the rest of the half-hearted precepts which school-teachers are unwillingly pushed into spreading. Also, of course, the indispensable mechanical proficiencies necessary to every citizen nowadays, reading, writing and elementary arithmetic. It is a half-hearted affair, and the children know that it is half-hearted. There is no disciplined way of life taught there as in the public schools; merely a series of cautions and a few shabby ideals uneasily combined. That's not enough to prepare anyone for the life which awaits them when they've done school. Yet outside, in the street and in the gang of

corner-lads, there lives a tradition which does breed the qualities necessary for the factory. It is dead against white collars. As in all youth organisations there is a scorn of scholarship and any amount of admiration for physical prowess. But here it is a frank adolescent admiration unlinked to any social ideal. No middle-aged buffers come along to drape an instinctive feeling in the banners of threadbare exhortation, to hitch their wagon to this star of young manhood. The corner-gang lives in a kind of outlawry. No one sees in its outbreaks of hooliganism a fine spirit of youth which may be turned to good account in the next war, class or imperial. The law looks on it with suspicion – it need not; the lads mean no harm and the factory will claim that turbulence for its own and have a harness round it soon enough.

Every working-class lad with any go in him wants to be a hero to his gang. That he can be up till leaving school by being more reckless, more courageous, more full of devilment than the others, but then of course at fourteen he has to look for a job for himself.’

This idea of escape is a constant in Common’s work. A sense of oppression of the spirit, the frustration of people who have it in them to be bright sparks of creativity but who usually settle for second best. This was particularly true in the gloom and depression of the thirties, though there remain echoes of Common’s sentiments in the present day:

‘The times are dismal, without doubt, yet it is curious to reflect that for future historians this dark and troubled twentieth century may yet be known as the Naissance. Something is dying; something is being born. It is a tremendous struggle, the new life pushing uncertainly through a maelstrom of dark forces. The issue of it depends on what strength we have to let the

forces of death bear away what is old and false in us without stifling the stirrings of new birth. The old womb of the world rumbles again in the labour of creation, but few of us dare to believe that there can be anything better than ourselves. Accordingly we interpret signs of change as fulfilment of our present personalities; willing with closed eyes the survival of precisely that part of us which most needs to die. And because we are always proclaiming as new what is really the old Adam, the vultures gather about us scenting death surely beneath its utopian disguises.

... A great negation must be made of all these things which smell of the grave. Say no to death and boredom, and you'll keep a little life yet. A little, freed, is enough. It will grow. It will grow into a new and magical apprehension of people and things. Life will touch life and flower where it touches more marvellously than our state imaginations can believe. There will be a new communication between us, a new salutation, a new spark set flickering into human relations. We will not be linked by a priestly creed, fellow-grovellers all; nor by a military rule, fellow-servants all; nor by money, investors, labour-sellers, and landlords all – we've tried all those entanglements, they wither on us, they stifle the whole of our society so that the sap cannot rise through it any more. They must be cast away, utterly negated ...

This would be a frank recognition of the reality which underlies our present pseudo-variety. We should be all alike. But only for five minutes. What a challenge to genuine individuality! You would see then what mass-production can do for you – and what it can't. You would see what you can do for yourself. Mass-production can satisfy your needs, to use an old

phrase, but, to use another; it can't give you a soul if you haven't one. The pretence that it can is our present mess ...

This process, of which no copyright exists, is the entirely dialectical one of opposing false individualism with its negation collectivism, and thus rescuing a genuine and native individuality.' (Common, J., 1980, 'Marx and the Vultures', pp.50-3)

There is a feeling in Common's thoughts that a dangerous loss of instinctiveness has occurred, wrenching mankind from its primitive pagan roots and creating a society unable to break from the trap of 'civilised' convention, a great stifling of joy and wonder. He sees, for example, a gypsy lighting a fire and cooking kippers outdoors and he doubts 'whether the so-called civilised life is worth the sacrifices we have to make in order to maintain it. The temptation is to see in the curious grace of the gypsy's fire-drawing evidence of a way of living physically more whole than ours.' (Common, J., 1980, 'For Reactionaries Only', p.81)

'From a 'savage' point of view we own terrific collective powers but are ourselves deficient in all the natural graces. In singing, dancing, drawing, poetry-making, speaking, and love-making we are pretty deplorable judged by uncivilised standards. We seem to have got caught up in a kind of madly extreme democracy, so that we bank all on a tremendous queen bee of a Beethoven and have millions who can't sing at all; or, having raised a Shakespeare, from thence on content ourselves with smoking-room limericks and advertising slogans. What happens is that you have first a simple human pleasure which all join in, then it becomes worked on and specialised into a high art with a large audience delegating their interest to a few skilled

performers ... We have these free rhythms in us all right, but inhibited. So far, civilisations have been clumsy contrivances for the endowment of a few individuals ... The arts now become too difficult for the ordinary man, and few men believe they are capable of them, though as users of tools they often fall easily enough into the rhythm of gesture which is the germ of all arts ... The great virtue of a dark age is that it discovers the value of exceedingly simple things: of the love between man and wife, for instance; of the good in working a piece of land; of the rare sympathy that springs up in small and poor communities. In a dark age the people begin to make songs of their own, and dances; their speech becomes de-intellectualised, so that word-formations accumulate without anyone planning them by rule, and they therefore have a touch of magic in them ... You know very well that you are much better than you've ever had the chance of being. So am I. So is my mate ... I believe that mere ordinary humanity is an Eldorado of infinite potentiality, and that the work of endowed individuals is no more than outcrop gold indicating the quality of the greater mine ... In the end we shall come into our birthright again, and damn those professors of progress who call only the ages of mass-slavery and isolated genius golden.' (Common, J., 1980, 'For Reactionaries Only', pp.82-4)

Whilst much of Common's essay writing might be considered polemical in essence, he is capable, in the face of grim reality and, indeed, the onslaught of war, of displaying a sensuous lyricism and great love of life in his more descriptive pieces. They demonstrate Common's appreciation of poetry and his own attempts to grapple with this form since childhood and through his readings of poets such as Shelley (Common, J., date unknown, 'War Permitting'):

‘For the moment the bomberstorms have circled away east and taken with them a host of topics that used to sting like black flies in the close electric dusk of our dangers. So, war permitting, we can begin to talk about the weather again. It’s the pride of the year, anyway, and worth talking about. Summer has blown such a sky-bubble this time that clearly contains a world made crystal under a sun-span arching equally from all horizons. No mistaking the season, not for a day, and its quality can always be seen. It is not as soft as we think in the years when a moist air and the tumbling of huge clouds mute the glitter of things. No, there is something hard on display, the defence of the creatures against an over-masterly sun-pull. ‘Do you like butter?’ Sure you do, because the buttercup will always throw the ghost of its colour upon the shade of your cheek. Its petals have a lacquer to reflect; their yellow is surfaced, and thus very different from the vulnerable pastel softness of the daffodil throat or the circlet of soft fire on a primrose. That surfacing is characteristic of summer flowers, of marigolds, asters, dahlias. Look how the big marguerite daisy will spread porcelain petals of a hard glazed white and remember that the narcissi when they were out lay one to another like flung snow, gatherings from the air rather than the sun. The loveliness of spring flowers is all a gathering, their glow a phosphorescence not a flame ...

What the summer dawn first glimpses is the discovered livingness of trees. They are in touch somehow. The leaf tufts on saplings are a blown green like very soft fire-jets or submarine torches. Even the smoke-dark limbs of the bigger ones have gestured – just before you looked. The whole crowd of them are like people caught by the camera. Their poise is the stifling of recent motion, the sudden petrification of a tide. As the rising sun strips them

of their aqueous twilight and begins to print them isolate against sky and field, they stiffen. The limbs that felt for the night harden and scale to the day like tortoise's knees; the leaves which rose like many dark moths to the night-stars now come together in a cloak all sun-spangles and shaggy green. Soon we are back where I started in the great bubble of moon, and looking at what is chiefly the reflection of things. There's the barley-wave there, a million pricked ears and polished stalks sparkling as it runs to a horizon where the long falling sheen of blue has rippled into white streaks and the air electrifies easily to the smallest dagger of thrown light. The whole scene is oddly curved and contained, a soap-bubble reflection but seen from inside. And that is summer in its essence.'

He is also capable of wry humour, as illustrated in the following (Common, J., 1980, pp.26-7):

'A DICTIONARY FOR UNDERDOGS:

- Profits: That part of a worker's earnings he doesn't get.
- Working-man: Someone paid only for the time he spends on the job.
- Employer: A part-time worker who is paid for all the time he isn't there.
- Private enterprise: A method of running industries so as to secure a Maximum loss to one community or another.
- Loss: A gain to the community in most cases.
- Punching the clock: The least exciting forms of pugilism.
- Hard work: Lazy thinking. A consequence of cheap labour.

Tied house:	A device for preventing workers from looking for better jobs.
Council house:	A device for keeping working-men out of pubs (see Rent).
Rent:	Buying property without getting it – the neverest of the never-nevers.
Overtime:	A method of keeping wage-rates low without contravening the Truck Act.
Indirect taxation:	A device for concealing the nation's blushes over the fact that we charge the poorest more than we do the richest for what each gets of the national services.
Womanhood:	A biological excuse to get out of paying the rate for the job.
Television set:	A crystal-gazer's outfit for foretelling the present.
Tory voter:	A poor man who thinks that the rich will be kind to the poor some day; a rich man who is damn sure they won't.'

The humour is one way in which he makes the grind of reality tolerable. Common was not a man to shirk difficult and sometimes brutal issues. He is conscious, more than most, of the debilitating impact of raw capitalism but that does not mean that he fails, in some ways, to admire aspects of it and he does not shirk its analysis:

‘The man who has never admired capitalism does not understand it, and has not the right to disown it ... Capitalism is the economic dynamic of this civilisation; it is not the machination of a few financiers, or the concerted

oppression of the boss-class. It is worthy of a better effort to understand it than is involved in these fairy tales ... In a few centuries its energies have swept the globe; it has built and mined and blasted its way to dominion unleashing with miraculous divination powers known to no previous culture. Its advances in the discovery of power are so rapid that it is only with difficulty we can survey them.' (Common, J., 1980, 'Introspective Capitalism', pp.114-123)

Having argued the case for facing the capitalist reality head-on, he goes on to question and to guess at what might replace it:

'We need a new ethic, and a new ideology. If the shapeless, outward-striking capitalism is to be replaced by a finely balanced, structurally sound communism it is necessary to give to communal impulses an ethical, then a legal, sanction ... The history of socialism is too often the record of intellectual understanding and personal evasion; of misdirected fury on the part of the leaders, and of carelessly encouraged apathy among the men. Communism is not merely a social remedy; it is a question troubling our conduct. We must have done with leaders who understand the historic necessity of communism but who never let it become a personal question: of those whose fantastic preaching of class warfare is only silenced by a villa at Twickenham and a smart car. Whatever you hate in others you will find sometime in yourself. One should hate privately. The struggle with the possession-lust which is in all of us is a thing to be fought out silently, not publicly dramatised and made to colour our view of a whole civilisation ... We must believe in the new order of society as though we were already

citizens of it. It will not come from without.’ (Common, J., 1980, ‘Introspective Capitalism’, pp.114-123)

Common takes on capitalism but he is far from naive about ‘socialism’ and its adherents in all their bizarre shapes and forms. He can see that it attracts the virtuous but also rogues and pirates, though he understands the difficulties inherent in attempting to replace the status quo with something which is still an idea and a guess. (Common, J., 1980, ‘Fake Left’, pp.123-135):

‘One of the distressing things about the Socialist movement is the remarkable number of twisters and crooks it turns out. Not even Borstal apparently produces so many ornaments of a piratical society as the movement which discovered the piracy. The biography of almost any Socialist leader is apt to be the story of a falling rocket.

Why is it? The obvious answer is that Socialism does at least possess an ethical purpose by which its leaders are judged so that always, in the end, you can find out whether a man is straight, a thing one would be puzzled to do in the Conservative or Liberal camps. That is an answer, and a true one so far as it goes. It explains why the phenomenon of Socialist ‘betrayal’ is so noticeable, it does not explain why it occurs.

We must blame leaders and their followers both. The real answer must be looked for in the nature of Socialist parties. They differ from other parties in this: other parties serve class interests which are already satisfactorily established, and their programmes, therefore, are mainly defensive though embellished by small advances of a technical character. They are programmes, that is, of immediate practical utility. But though Socialist

parties, too, serve a class interest, defensive measures are a small part of the programme. Their hope lies in attack, and their programmes have always a certain Utopian unreality about them because they cannot be immediately implemented. The Socialist has the special problem of holding on to his vision of a world which is not yet, while maintaining himself in an environment which makes vision a handicap and tempts him to abandon it. What is behind the Socialist parties and what assures their final victory is this vision of a new world; what ruins them all is that they must prove of practical utility in the present Capitalist day if they are to live at all.'

Gilbert Bonifas (1984, pp.192-219) highlights the scepticism of Common and some of his associates at 'The Adelphi' towards aspects of Marx's thinking:

'For 'The Adelphi' people the definition Marx gives of the proletariat is at the very least awkward for it doesn't enable you to understand and admit that the proletariat on the whole can one day become the effective agent of the revolution. Murry, Common and friends also point out that a proletariat which is only an abstract entity could hardly play a role in history ...

In another article, Jack Common echoed Murry yet more severely, reproaching Marx for giving a quasi-disembodied image of the working class and refusing to identify himself with it, or even understand its principles and its behaviour. Certainly, Marx wrote that the emancipation of the working class could only be the work of the working class itself but in spite of that he never managed to express the essential proletarian quality and it is this deficiency which is the origin, according to 'The Adelphi' people, of the

perversion of the socialist movement in the twentieth century and the weak reception of workers to revolutionary ideals ...

The people of 'The Adelphi' if they are sincere admirers of the proletariat are nevertheless not blind. They know very well that the whole of the working class is far from being revolutionary, or even formed of potential revolutionaries. Their opinion appears very clearly in a short article by Jack Common entitled 'Objection to Mr Brown'. Common writes notably:

'Although the proletariat contains many who would become capitalists if they could, it also contains those who never had the will nor the constitution to be capitalists'.

That signifies that for Common and his friends it was indisputable that 'the British working class contained, from a socialist point of view, a considerable number of dead weights, but it was nevertheless certain that an equally considerable number rejected willingly the possibility of raising themselves up to the middle classes. For this second type of proletarian, the worker's life wasn't the hell that numerous propagandists on the left took pleasure in describing. The exploitation of workers is quite real, certainly, but despite everything, numerous are the workers who find their existence a lot more satisfying than the debilitating life of many petit bourgeois office workers. That's why, if it's no longer possible in England to speak of two nations, not even of two totally distinct classes, there nevertheless exist two types of men: he who lives according to the bourgeois credo and he who rejects it. It is this latter which is the hope of future England.'

Bonifas points out this ability of Common to face harsh realities in the face of the socio-economic truth that many workers 'think bourgeois and wish to be bourgeois' yet he

still sees weakness in Common allowing himself 'to get a little bit carried away by his love of the way of life of the working class he comes from, (considering) the majority of the proletariat as being made up of the ferment of the new humanity. Such an exaggeration would have, in the long term, transformed 'The Adelphi' into a simple workers' family lost in its ideals and chimeras, without a real contact with politics, if, fortunately, Middleton Murry hadn't tempered through his own writings the fervour of his collaborator, while, at the same, of course, following the same political line.'

Bonifas concludes with a hint of praise for 'The Adelphi' doctrine:

'Let us note, however, that with the acceptance of the economic theories of Marx, its desire to implant a classless society and its belief in the possibility of truly proletarian revolution, 'The Adelphi' was sufficiently Marxist to attract to it and influence certain young intellectuals who, like Orwell, found themselves in difficulty with their social class but had conserved enough suspicion with regard to the Soviet regime to not embrace communist orthodoxy and thus be lacking a progressive doctrine.'

Yet Common does have the vision and foresight to see beyond political parties, drawing again on the deep underswell of community which he imbibed in the streets of his Heaton heartland (Common, J., 1980, *Fake Left*, pp.123-135):

'In the future the ideal for Socialist or Communist organisations must be community, not party. We have to counter the tremendous developments in social mechanism with the cultural advances which alone can handle them. What keeps us from the full use of power is the ideological habits of a bygone age. Hence, we are still hemmed in by divisions and barriers which

have no sanction for existing except that we believe in them. And the way to get rid of these things is not in the organisation of vote-snatching corporations, nor in the waging of day-to-day struggles, but in the gathering together of a body of people who are accustomed in their relations with one another to live by Socialist concepts. Socialism must be built in the working-class, by the creation of nerve-centres throughout that class which provide cultural contacts and prepare the new world-feeling which is the basis of the new order. We will have inevitably parties of the class-war. What we need is communities in which classlessness is a virtue and is understood in all its forms.'

THE 'FREEDOM OF THE STREETS'

Common's essays also saw the light of day in his generally well-received and most major book *The 'Freedom of the Streets'*, published by Secker and Warburg in 1938. The book argued that in a dynamic society there should be a creative harmony between the intellectual and the common man and, in an era of the machine and mass-production, we must fight for the individual's creativity and basic humanity. In his Preface, Common puts his finger on these themes:

'If the general feeling of the day is anything to go by one ought not to write books. Writing books isn't normal, nor healthy. It means sitting still for many hours compelling your nervous energy to spray off through the narrow channel of a pen. It means smoking too much. It means encouraging a refined egotism which permits you to suppose that your thoughts deserve the

quasi-permanence of print instead of being let off in the tap-room or the street the way your neighbour's are. Now that's wrong: for nowadays we are all bent on normalcy. Go to the news-theatres and you will learn every week that people, even though they are Japs, swim and put the weight, or what it is. Czechs play football. Chinese girls' lip-stick and wear high-heels. Our East End kiddies box and play cricket. There are motor-bikes among the Jugo-Slavs. Who are we reassuring? The poet of intricate sensibility is capable and even eager at doing his share in a public-house rough-and-tumble; he honours Keats for the scrapping abilities the lad showed before he got consumption – it used to be the consumption that every young poet thought his especial sign. Novelists and nature-fans go farming and get so gaitered and pig-smelling that when the ordinary townsman meets them he'd never suspect that they earn their living in very unmasculine ways. Despite being intellectual they are normal, see.

While this taste is dominant queerish habits like that of writing books ought to be apologised for. Hold on, though. The itch among the eccentrics to ape the ordinary healthy man is after all only a symptom, a reflection of a deeper movement. It is an early and inadequate recognition of the new importance of the common man. He who for centuries has been buried under the anonymity of hard work and no kudos is now coming up into the daylight. That makes a difference to all of us. For intellectuals have always imitated the manners of the aristocracy they served. Their name for eccentricity is often earned because they have the morals of the wealthy without the all-justifying incomes. Now they think of imitating the ordinary man. Good. That will be a change ...

Machine-production becomes increasingly efficient according to how many people there are willing to agree that they do not differ in essentials from their neighbours. It can do anything for sixpence providing a lot of you don't mind using the same product. It can do this so well, too, that the force of its demand slowly pushes all of us into a negative equality of a kind. Not, of course, the equality which the socialist used to ask for. The inequalities of wealth are as huge as they ever were. It is an equality of taste, or learning to like what you are going to get. Whether you shop at Harrods or Woolworths, Fortnum and Mason or the Co-op, you are buying mass-production, and in relation to it you are one of the masses.

Some part of the day we all are. And we don't like it. We didn't will it.

Therefore it is a negative, an imposed degradation, the individual denied and made into mass. So it is until we learn to take pleasure in the new contiguity, to realise the enormous imaginative possibilities which our situation has once we accept it and begin to use its opportunities. You and I and all of us have come under a minus sign. Until we take it off we are anybody's mark, easily robbed and kidded, blown-up or gassed.

That is to put the matter fairly amiably for a start-off. We begin with a handshake – now be ready to duck.' (Common, 1938, Preface)

His friend George Orwell was certainly impressed with the book, judging by his review ('New English Weekly', 16/6/1938):

'Jack Common, a writer who is at present not so well known as he might be but who is potentially a sort of Chesterton of the Left, approaches the subject of Socialism from an interesting and unfamiliar angle.

He is of proletarian origin, and much more than most writers of this kind he deserves his proletarian viewpoint. In doing so he puts his finger on one of the chief difficulties of the Socialist movement – the fact that the word ‘Socialism’ means something quite different to a working man from what it means to a middle-class Marxist. To those who actually have the destiny of the Socialist movement in their hands, virtually everything that a manual worker means when he says ‘Socialism’ is either irrelevant or heretical. As Mr Common shows in a series of separate but connected essays, the manual workers in a machine civilization have certain characteristics forced upon them by the circumstances in which they live: loyalty, improvidence, generosity, hatred of privilege. It is out of these that they evolve their vision of a future society, so that the mystique of proletarian Socialism is the idea of equality. This is a very different vision from that of the middle-class Socialist who accepts Marx as his prophet – literally a prophet, a tipster who not only tells you which horse to back, but also provides the reason why the horse didn’t win.

The spirit in which Mr Common writes is the mixture of messianic hope and cheerful pessimism that is sometimes to be found in the quieter corners of the four-ale bar on a Saturday night. He thinks that we are all going to be blown to hell by bombs, but that the dictatorship of the proletariat is really going to happen.

... Yes: but if there were any certainty that this will happen, would it not be the duty of every Socialist to hope and work for war? And dare any thinking person do that nowadays?

There must be very many minds in which that hackneyed phrase, 'dictatorship of the proletariat', has been successively a nightmare, a hope and a chimera. One starts off – for after all, that is how most middle-class people *do* start – by thinking 'God help us all when it happens!' and one ends up by thinking 'What a pity it can't happen!' Mr Common writes all the while as though the dictatorship of the proletariat were just round the corner – a pious hope, but the facts do not seem to give much warrant for it. It would seem that what you get over and over again is a movement of the proletariat which is promptly canalized and betrayed by astute people at the top, and then the growth of a now governing class. The one thing that never arrives is equality. The mass of the people never get the chance to bring their innate decency into the control of affairs, so that one is almost driven to the cynical thought that men are only decent when they are powerless.

Meanwhile this is an interesting book, which tells you much less about Socialism as an economic theory and much more about it as a body of belief; one might almost say a way of life, than the average textbook. I particularly recommend the two essays called 'The Judgement of the Vulgar' and 'Fascism in Men of Good Will'. Allowing for the fact that it has found literary expression – which in itself is slightly abnormal – this is the authentic voice of the ordinary man, the man who might infuse a new decency into the control of affairs if only he could get there, but who in practice never seems to get much further than the trenches, the sweatshop and the jail.'

'The Freedom of the Streets' offers a unique and valuable account of Britain in the 1930s and in it Common expounds on the crucial issues of the times, including his view

of fascism:

‘Having proletarianised the worker we now proletarianise the small man. True he gets a pension in the form of dividends but his actual ownership of ‘tools’ thins down into unreality. So does his political power, and half the row between democracy and fascism is due to his growing recognition of this fact. Hitler promised the reinstatement of the little man but Hitler fell into the hands of big men instead. Meantime the British bourgeoisie look on with fluttering minds. At one moment they think fascism is just the thing for them: it will recapture their power for them and beat off the hands of the workers who they see reaching for their pensions. At the next they think no, democracy is the only safeguard: it ‘has’ served us well.’ (Common, J., 1938, p.49)

Developing his thoughts on ‘the common man’, he has this to say:

‘Let us seize upon this positive in defiance of all economic law. Many and many people actually choose to work as proletarians, not because that’s the only work they’d ever be able to do but because it actually seems more attractive to them. It comes naturally after the corner lad stage. In the factories, mines and shipyards there is the same opportunity for physical hardihood, the same rough equality and respect for one’s essential manhood, the same sense of outlawry and alien oppression formerly represented by the teacher and the constable, now symbolised by the bosses and the managerial staff. If you were happy in the street you’ll be at home in the works.’
(Common, J., 1938, p.75)

Common's critique of the extremes of capitalism is as ever rooted in the realities of everyday life as confronted by ordinary folk in all their infinite variety. He speaks up for their need to find ways to express themselves and the difficulties they face in doing so, as opposed to the ease in which the predominant bourgeois individuals found their way into print:

'There's no properly affirmed proletarian culture, we can't expect it yet, and we have to make do with makeshifts. That's a fair warning ... Glance into any library and you'll come across acres of accurate and lively descriptions of life, among the bourgeoisie. The Proletarian though, has few books to his name, and those fumbling ones. He's no hero that's why. He's a something, something poor fellow, busy trying to spell it out and make it come different this time.' (Common, J., 1938, p.53)

His commitment to these hidden voices is not only demonstrated in his attack on capitalist consumerism but is also revealed in his scepticism towards existing socialist and communist parties and the many manipulators of theories such bodies attract:

'Socialism is only a guess wherever it is a theory: the real stuff of it exists in the actual living of deserted men who, because they are treated by all the institutions of the day as if they were not men, have to elaborate a way of life which can endure when the world goes flop. Such a way of life is the germ of new civilisations.' (Common, J., 1938, p.172)

‘Time and again at socialist meetings you’ll hear some proletarian comrade get up after listening to a skilled bourgeois exposition and attempt to supplement it with bits of his own. Generally he daunts all present. He is hopelessly muddled and mixes up the abstract terms in a way it is a pain to hear – yet if you can command the attention there is often somewhere concealed among his inconsecutive remarks a rough diamond of an idea which is precisely what the finely constructed lecture lacked. Therefore one is led to suspect that the popular economic statement of the socialist philosophy is most likely to under-emphasise the elements that should be necessary to the proletariat. To that extent socialist literature is negative in its effect. It makes anti-capitalists; it disheartens the bourgeoisie; it disgruntles the proletariat. If you struck a balance of these effects immediately in the practical world, the resultant social structure could only be an uneasy and divided compromise held together by the strong arm of force.’ (Common, J., 1938, pp.157-8)

For Ron Paul (1999-2000, pp.128-9),

‘Common’s aim was to try and create a deeper understanding of both the individual resilience and collective resistance of the proletariat, which characterised it as a class. It was also this commitment to the radical potential of ordinary people’s lives which lay at the heart of both the book and its author’s own brand of revolutionary Marxism ... Not only did he seek to reassert the revolutionary class nature of the proletariat itself, his arguments were also supported by an inside view of how this socially transformative quality actually evolves.’

'SEVEN SHIFTS'

For his book 'Seven Shifts', also published by Secker & Warburg in 1938, Common brought together seven of his working mates to tell in their own words the lives they led in the workplace. These were plasterer Jack Hilton, steelworker James Stirling, unemployed Will Oxley, gas worker Herbert Mannion, market trader Simon Blumenfeld, blastfurnaceman J.H. Watson and railwayman Tommy McCulloch. Four of these contributors had already appeared in 'The Adelphi' and two of them, Simon Blumenfeld and Jack Hilton, were already published novelists. In his piece, McCulloch, Common's lifelong friend, reflects (McCulloch, T., 1978, pp.270-1):

'From the point of view of the world in general, we're just hired help, and the dumber we are the better. They want our labour, not our brains or imagination. If we try to use either there's an outcry that we are red desperadoes intent on smashing civilisation. Yet civilisation is smashing all right; the guys who have appointed themselves to run it don't seem to have the capacity. Perhaps it has become too big a job for the members of one small class. But don't imagine that my mates are anxious to rush in and seize the means of production, etc. Most of the time we'd be content to let the self-styled clever folk carry on, provided they left us a loop-hole to be free in. For it's a big job to be responsible for, and we know too much about jobs in general to rush at one before we have some idea of how it should be done. A fellow wouldn't want to take over a big block of signals until he'd had some experience in the smaller cabins. Yet every now and then something shows up the whole sorry business, and we can't help seeing that we'll be wanted

some day soon, and not as brute labour. When we really are wanted, you can bet on this, we'll be there.'

In his Preface to 'Seven Shifts', Common has this to say (Common, J., 1978, pp.vii-xi):

'My friends include members of the literary bourgeoisie and lads from the unprinted proletariat. Both parties talk well, and you'd probably enjoy a crack with them as much as I do. But here's the pity. The bourgeois ones get published right and left – especially left; the others are mute as far as print goes, though exceedingly vocal in public-houses. Now I've often felt it would be good to swap them round for a change ...

Well, here is the result: seven narratives in which working-men describe their jobs, their conditions, and some of their reactions to the life they lead. They are not highly literary compositions, yet the lads can write, as you'll see. If I was not sure of that, I'd have had no part in bringing them forward. Two of them have had books published already; a third soon will have, I think. The rest may follow in good time now that they are started on the downward path. The book is not constructed so as to fit any propagandist line, nor to receive the special blessing of any political party, but naturally an intelligent member of the working class must have pronounced opinions upon many matters, so we cannot claim impartiality. In the main, however, the contents here are plain fact, the little details of the daily job told without special emphasis just as they occur. When you finish it you'll have a good idea of what it would be like if you got a job in a blast-furnace, in the cab of a locomotive, or round an East-end market, and this is the stuff from which theories are fabricated and by which they are finally judged.'

You can see something of Common in McCulloch's own writing – the atmosphere of Newcastle and its dark streets together with the conflicts between social classes being played out there. This is particularly true and vivid when he describes his experiences of the 1926 General Strike (McCulloch, T., 1978, pp.266-7):

‘There was something awe-inspiring about the stilled city. No trams, no lights, no newspapers. Many of the men had never realized just how necessary the working-man is to the life of our civilization. Some began to think they were actually about to gain some honour in the land. But so far the enemy were quiet. Some of the University youths turned up at the junction, mightily protected by a force of policemen. Our instructions were to let them through. We were curious to see what they could do, for many of them were engineering students. We lined the junction wall and watched. It was a bit of fun that. They seemed not to know the first thing about locomotives, and had no notion that railways need at the minimum a skeleton organization before they can be run at all. We yelled advice to them, not all of it sound. And one driver was most indignant because they'd picked on his engine to experiment with, and he could foresee a month in the shops for it during which time he'd have to put up with some inefficient substitute. Later on the students did manage to get one or two trains through by the simple process of leaving a line clear all the way, and one of these they succeeded in putting off the rail in a nasty smash – this, of course, was explained away afterwards as the work of a miners' wrecking gang.’

Chapter 9. COMMON CONCLUSIONS

‘And I always thought: the very simplest words
Must be enough. When I say what things are like
Everyone’s heart must be torn to shreds.
That you’ll go down if you don’t stand up for yourself
Surely you see that.’

(Bertolt Brecht)

By developing this critical biography of Jack Common, I have drawn together and supplemented the fragmented work which myself and others have hitherto carried out on him. I have also analysed his published and unpublished writing and personal documents and have included previously unpublished articles and correspondence. I have taken a close look at the breadth of Common’s own writings and located rare correspondence from friends and associates. Lengthy interviews have been carried out with the Common family, friends and associates. All of this has enabled me to raise the profile of the man’s writing and, in particular, to emphasise his somewhat neglected talent as an essayist.

This has given a fresh perspective to previous studies of the man, bearing in mind that there has been no other major work published on his life and work. Carrying out this work has helped me look back on the various publications, events and activities focused on Common in which I have been involved over many years. I have not only produced a significant account of this work but have looked closely at its relevance to the politics and culture of his times, particularly the thirties, in order to discover how his attitudes and beliefs were influenced by his roots. I have especially given an account of the conditions which made Common something of a rebel.

I have studied the process of 'self-education' in his life and his experiences of this on the streets of Heaton, as well as the inspiration given to him by his Uncle Robin, his own close family, teachers, friends and mentors in adult education. This is particularly highlighted in my close study of his autobiographical novels.

I have especially analysed him from a class perspective, looking closely at those aspects of working class life which both inspired and confined him and evaluating it in the light of today. His friendship with George Orwell is important in this context and I have surveyed this in some depth.

This, again, makes my work original and of immense value in contributing to further understanding of the man and what he stood for.

This thesis has led me to explore issues of grass roots democracy, regionalism and decentralisation implicit in Common's life and work and his passionate belief in the cultural emancipation of the 'common' people. This is the main area where I believe Common's work remains relevant to the present day. I have particularly explored this in the chapters on his essays, novels, and other publications and in the account I have given of my own work, in the spirit of Common, with projects like 'Strong Words' and 'Northern Voices'. In a climate of economic competitiveness and profiteering, with the rampaging development of a new rich elite and cult of celebrity, encouraged by 'New Labour' rising unfettered over the heads of ordinary people, and a large section of society trapped in poverty-stricken enclaves amidst a political structure still rooted in virtual 'feudalism' and the archaic trappings of a faded empire and aristocracy, Common speaks for decency and a socialism built from the roots of shared communal values. Bearing in mind the concept of 'global warming', we need to see that any future

must look to areas of cooperation and shared humanitarian values and an internationalism conscious of the need to harness new technology for the betterment of common understanding and the development of positive links between peoples around the globe. Perhaps there is hope in recent developments in Latin America in this respect.

Common teaches us that such a hope must come from ordinary lives and not rely upon the cult of leadership and the stifling confines of established political parties and institutions. This is evidenced in books like 'Seven Shifts', finding a platform for the voices of ordinary people. He is for bringing back politics to people and for creating opportunities and meeting places to enable them to come together, be it in community halls or on the internet; for the decentralisation of power and culture, neighbourhood empowerment. He shows this in the compassion flowing through much of his writing. Such 'people power' might mean, for example, the break-up of the United Kingdom into smaller entities, with an attendant wresting away of power from the stifling self-obsession and grasping indulgence of the media, with its metropolitan focus acting as a drain on the potential creativity of the regions. He is for an end to the 'democratic deficit', the parasitic quangoes, the worship of greed as an end in itself, and the remaining dregs of unaccountable patronage and aristocratic landlordism. His essays, in particular, show this. In principle, he believes that everyone has a story to tell. In the days of 'Strong Words', this might have been through a series of pamphlets, now it can be on 'MySpace', on the web.

In a materialist world fractured into the shreds of an all-embracing individualism, he speaks of the enduring need for dignity in the individual but believes that this can only be truly found in a communal setting. This lesson needs to be learnt on the left as much as on the right. For, in my own experience, I have seen certain self-professed 'socialists' only too ready to stifle the individual voice in favour of the mass, whereas the situation

is actually complex and any real 'socialism' can only spring from the interface between the individual and the collective and the balance between the two. Common, and associates like Max Powman and Middleton Murry, did not necessarily solve this complexity but at least indulged in passionate debate on the theme and sought to put their feelings into action.

In a way, Common would have been of the 'New Left', speaking out for a personal kind of community, an anathema to the 'Old Left'. This is a redefinition of socialism with a stress on democratic, direct, face-to-face participation and a negation of party bureaucratic control. The year that he died, 1968, saw students on the streets of Paris and East European dissidents calling for a 'civil society'.

'The anti-institutional side of the New Left drove to distraction Old Leftists, for whom 'cooperation' had long ceased to be an operative word; the little communes, the mutual heart-searching under the banner of 'the personal is political', seemed to these hardened veterans just infantile self-indulgence.'
(Sennett, R. 2004, p.257)

'To achieve a more sustainable world the current aggressive globalisation will need to be replaced by a trend toward localisation and regionalisation.'
(Harvie, P., 2006, p.17)

In his enduring passion for his city of Newcastle and the rippling Tyne, Common stood for the strength of the regions. In all his moving from house to house, he took a deep interest in the local history and community activity around him. Standing in the working men's club in Newport Pagnell, he struck up conversation with assembly line workers and shopkeepers: he was indeed a true man of the people. Not for him the elbow society

of today, his was a world where people came first. In this sense, empowerment is important and, to achieve this, decentralisation of power to the regions is a key step.

Paul L. Younger talks of his return to the North East of England after a period in America (1992, pp.168-178). Delving into the heritage of Northumbria, he identifies with it 'as a distinctive land and people who have grown together through struggle', and 'even though the poverty of Tyneside stood out in relief from [his] new perspective, [he] began to feel genuinely fortunate at having been born there, just in time to experience a Tyneside of shipyards and pits, the industries we built our identity around'. But, on returning to his beloved region, he was 'brought down to earth with a bump'; a severe dose of reality tarnished 'the romance of history, where hardship and struggle can seem noble'. He was shocked by the devastation around him, saw 'the final annihilation of the shipyards'; the demolition of the colliery in his home town; his father, relatives, friends either on the dole or living in constant fear of it. There has been a drastic shift in investment and employment away from production towards consumption,

'paralleled by the rise of consumption itself as an arena in which people's desires and hopes are centred ... The rise of the right and of neo-liberalism have brought with them ideologies in which the solidarities of class, with its communitarian sentiments, have retreated before the rhetoric of privacy, choice, freedom, and the individual.' (Joyce, P., 1995, p.1)

Throughout Britain, and especially in the North East, quangos and local authorities have fallen over backwards to compensate for these changes in the regional economies, spending millions each year to promote their own areas,

‘desperate to beggar their neighbours in the jobs stakes and to capture for themselves that scarce bit of mobile inward investment to boost their ailing economies. Nice work for the public relations companies and lobbyists if they can get it – and they frequently can. Some £14m of Merseyside’s ‘Objective One’ European grant monies have been set aside for improving the region’s image. Nowhere has a longer pedigree in this kind of public relations than the North East, where the image business is big business, and accentuating the positive and downplaying the negative a fine art.’ (Davis, R., 1996)

The image-makers are concerned to point out the past which they perceive as ugly and out-dated and not only that, according to Bob Davis, they,

‘have conspired in the obliteration of its concrete reality. Try to find a pit-heap or a shipyard nowadays – no sooner closed (with no great part played in their defence by the image-makers) than razed to the ground. The ‘modernizers’ have helped to undermine the industrial culture which marked the North East out as different. And in its place they’ve tried to graft on a deferential, service-based culture and mentality that springs from the part-time economy that has supplanted the old order and which is a segment of the ‘global economy’ that they now embrace.’ (Davis, R., 1996)

This desire to cleanse the region of conflict and uncomfortable imagery is, of course, not new. In the magazine ‘Ostrich’, which I edited in the 1970s, I wrote:

‘These attitudes imply either a rejection of the traditional cultural pursuits (‘the cloth-cap image’) and its replacement by an emphasis on middle-class art-forms such as classical concerts and opera (with a budget weighted heavily in their favour) or, if not a total rejection, an attempt to make the traditional pursuits more attractive (note the activities of the Northumbrian Tourist Board in this direction). Thus the Newcastle Festival and bodies such as Northern Arts are much concerned with the region’s ‘prestige’ and its ‘image’. They form an indivisible link with local councils and board rooms upon whom they are in any case greatly dependent for both financial and moral support – small wonder that they tend to reflect the same attitudes – the very attitudes that have led to the destruction and/or starvation of a great deal of our local heritage and to the development of a gutless culture remote from the community’s needs.’ (Armstrong, K., 1974, p.9)

In this same article, I went on to quote the following:

Edward Heath (House of Commons, 19791): ‘We are putting special emphasis on building up the regional organisations for the Arts because we believe that it is in this way that we shall best transform these areas’.

David Dougan (then Director of Northern Arts, Annual Report, 1971-2): ‘This has been a remarkably buoyant year which produced ample evidence of real growth in many directions’.

Jenny Lee (former Labour Minister for the Arts): ‘The Arts Associations are definitely one of our most successful growth industries’.

At the time I posed the question: ‘Growth and development for whose benefit?’ It remains just as valid today.

Ken Worpole talks of the taboos that still attach themselves to the question of class, referring to it as ‘the wound in the national psyche that refuses to heal.’ (1996, p.2) He goes on:

‘Amazingly, issues of class still won’t go away. No amount of political modernisation, whether of the New Labour or ‘New Times’ variety, can hide the fact that aspects of class continue to fundamentally determine the quality of life-chances, as well as the structures of feeling of millions of people in Britain today. It is true that class is no longer the principal driving force of socialist or social democratic politics. But its wider determinations remain pervasive and unjust ... If there is one simple thing that you can say about class it is that it is very complicated.’

‘But the natives aren’t easily tamed, and there are times when the plumber’s cleavage of the North East moons on to the nation at large, despite all the best efforts of the much embarrassed image makers.’ (Davis, B., 1996)

THE JINGLING GEORDIE

Watch me go leaping in my youth

down Dog Leap stairs,

down fire-scapes.

The Jingling Geordie

born in a Brewery,

drinking the money

I dug out of the ground.

Cloth-cap in hand I go
marching in the jangling morning
to London gates.

Jingling Geordie
living in a hop-haze,
cadging from the Cappers
I went to school with.
Older I get in my cage,
singling out a girl half my years
to hitch with.

Oh yes! I am the Jingling Geordie,
the one who pisses on himself,
wrenching out the telephone
his Father placed off the hook.

Listen to my canny old folk-songs;
they lilt and tilt into the dark alley,
into the howls of strays.

Oops! The Jingling Geordie
goes out on his town,
rocking and rolling a night away,
stacking it with the weary rest.

See my ghost in the discotheque,

in the dusty lights,
in the baccy rows.
Jingling Geordie,
dancing gambler,
betting he'll slip
back to the year when the lads won the cup.

Well I walk my kids to the Better Life,
reckoning up the rude words dripping
like gravy off me Granda's chin.
Whee! goes the Jingling Geordie:
figment of the gutter brain,
fool of the stumbling system,
emptying my veins into a rich men's – palace.

(Keith Armstrong)

For academics like David Byrne (1992, pp.35-52):

'It seems abundantly clear that only proper, democratically based, regional control over economic development and industrial policy will allow the North East to have any chance of achieving the decent future its people so clearly want.'

Not that this will be easily achieved. Changes in the world economy are essential, as well as a move towards a truly federal Europe and a shift in the inequality between

‘North’ and ‘South’ worldwide. It is through such changes that the region’s people can find a voice and be able to articulate the sort of society they want which is, in Byrne’s view,

‘more egalitarian, open [with] a high level of public services, and ... based on full employment in a successful and modern industrial structure. It looks very like Scandinavian social democracy, and the North East with its three million people would make a very reasonably sized Scandinavian nation-state.’

Byrne’s view is backed up by that of Robert Colls (1992, pp.1-34):

‘If the North East wants to save itself and secure a future, it will have to claim the right to its representation ... If the North East is to survive into another century, it must be free to make its own stories, stories that can be given back to temper shape and substance.’

Though the basis of self organisation which was established through the grass-roots labour movement in the region’s industries has gone, for David Byrne (1998, pp.85-94):

‘Increasing insecurity and the immiseration of much of the employed workforce through the payment of low wages to ‘flexible’ labour on the U.S. model, means that proletarianisation is extending, not diminishing ... at the cultural level the values of class survive rather well, as they deserve to ... [in] a region whose people believe in inclusive collectivism, and understand perfectly well that capitalism is essentially a system of exploitation.’

To this extent, he sees 'New Labour' politicians, like the 'half-educated' Tony Blair, as 'scavengers living off the corpse ... acting as the lackies of globalisation ... an external thing ... imposed without reference to the values and needs of the people of the North'. He has confidence in 'the strength of the traditional value system' but is worried by 'the pessimism that people feel about having any capacity for doing anything about the forces which seek to destroy the achievements of those values in the past, and to recast the future against them'.

The issue of class remains because, as Ken Worpole points out (1996, p.2):

'no amount of political modernisation, whether of the 'New Labour' or 'New Times' variety, can hide the fact that aspects of class continue to fundamentally determine the quality of life-chances, as well as the structures of feeling of millions of people in Britain today ... Most strong regional accents and dialects remain grounds for exclusion. The accents of the public schools and of the Home Counties continue to dominate the upper reaches of power, influence and money ... It is not [therefore] surprising that so many people involved in the adult literacy movement, in English teaching in primary and secondary schools, in oral history and in the writers' workshop movement, talk about the importance of encouraging people to find their own voice. Finding your own voice is still the most transparent metaphor for being taken seriously culturally.'

'Something has gone out of those great heavy-industrial conurbations – pride, moral independence, a sense of confidence in the future, call it what you will ... It appears to be simply the case that pride and aspiration disappeared when the pits closed ... The imagination is where feelings of insecurity have their

being. And there is no doubt at all that all the rhetoric about the workforce needing to be flexible and the warnings that no one should expect to stay in the same job all their life have left their mark ... Thus while suffering the daily practical misery of not quite making ends meet, the poor also have the humiliation of seeing how little the society they live in values their efforts. Their ever-increasing relative poverty entrenches feelings of worthlessness and inferiority ... It is accordingly a matter for lamentation that over the first five years of Labour government, economic inequality actually increased and the fat cats continued to award themselves obscene pay increases without the government lifting a finger ... Since these people are not fit to be trusted with the most elementary powers and decisions, such as those involving their children's education, they are therefore incapable of understanding anything demanding, difficult or noble. We must therefore feed them pap.' (Mount, F., 2004, pp.240, 259, 280-1)

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE RAT

he's the chief executive rat

the chief executive of this and that

the chief executive of want and waste

the chief executive of bad taste

the chief executive brat

she's the chief executive of style

the chief executive bitch of bile

the chief executive of cluster bombs

the chief executive CD Rom

the chief executive of Sieg Heil

we're the chief executives of empty culture

the chief executives of soulless sculpture

the chief executives of soundbites

the chief executives of red kites

the chief executive vultures

chief executive emptiness

chief executive battledress

chief executive cocktails

chief executive entrails

chief executive stress

he's the chief executive slave employer

the chief executive missile deployer

the chief executive of civilian targets

the chief executive of hypermarkets

the chief executive life destroyer

she's the chief executive smirker

the chief executive charity worker

the chief executive of state terror

the chief executive of trial and error

the chief executive empty talker

chief executive workfare

chief executive homecare

chief executive meals on wheels

chief executive easy deals

chief executive warfare

chief executive warfare

chief executive war

chief executive war

(Keith Armstrong)

As Mount concludes:

‘The historical circumstances of modern Britain ... have left us, along with many blessings, an unexpiated curse, which is the curse of class division. In almost all societies, it is possible to grade people into classes of one sort or another, but Britain stands nearly alone in maintaining to this day so sharp a division between the Uppers and Downers. The numbers of the Uppers have grown hugely over the past century, the numbers of the Downers are much depleted by upward mobility, but the divide is still there. We can remove that divide if we really want to. But it will not disappear until we make it disappear.’ (Mount, F., 2004, p.316)

‘The French rebellion was a spontaneous class uprising. And like most spontaneous uprisings, it could not be sustained for too long. But also, like most rebellions, the possibility of recurrence will not disappear unless the gross inequalities are overcome ... We are in an epoch of accentuating, not

alleviating, inequalities. And therefore we are an epoch of increasing, not decreasing, rebellions.’ (Wallerstein, I., 2005, p.32)

Not that it is ever easy to fight against accepted orthodoxies, particularly in this country today:

‘Life as a heretic is so difficult that, in the end, most of us become believers ... There are people who care, who think, who are tolerant and open-minded and who want to live in a better, fairer world. There is a latent consensus for change and it is looking for an outlet – the people of Latin America will not be the last to challenge this distorted order that passes for progress. It will not be a walk in the park; to be confident in a strong challenge to the consensus of the ‘Sun’ and the ‘Daily Mail’ it would be good to have a much more diverse media, a much less functionalist education system and a much more representative politics.’ (McAlpine, R., 2006, pp.10-11)

Jack Common to me was a rebel, an intellectual, a deep thinker, yet a man of the people. Nothing changes without a subversion of the existing establishment – and, I would argue, under the cultural wet blanket of New Labour all is conformity, nothing is questioned, the media is compliant, even sycophantic; we are all under surveillance:

‘Blair and many of his cabinet have cruised on Billy Elliot rhetoric, but it doesn’t seem to have dawned on them that Billy Elliot was the only one who got out – what about the friends, relatives and neighbours left behind? What message has Labour had for them – once their staunchest allies? ... A small Labour elite whose lives bear no relation to those whom they are trying to

represent have moved centre-stage. Holidays with the Berlusconis, a taste for property and investments; thousands of pounds on hairdressing budgets ... and alongside it an implicit contempt for modest, unambitious, ordinary lives.' (Bunting, M., 2006, p.31)

This powerlessness is a curse and it can only be lifted when people gain confidence in their own sense of worth, with a belief in their possessing fundamental human and political rights. This requires both political will and action:

'Looking back on the landscape of power ... whether in the regions of government or of business, I find it hard to recognise it as belonging to the British democratic tradition, with its small clusters of self-enclosed, self-serving groups on the peaks and the populace on the plains below. The retreat of both the old Establishment and the rebels on the left has left a vacuum which has been filled by the masters of the market-place who can evade personal responsibility and pass the buck to each other ... while the values of public interest and public service have been eroded by the emphasis on individual competition.' (Sampson, A., 2005, p.372)

We need people like Jack Common today. We need romantic realists, artists worth their salt. On a local level, someone to upset the Duke in his castle, someone to upset the hegemony of Arts Council sponsored institutionalised conceptual art, someone to destroy the romance of Northumbrian folk music and its funded proponents in their tidy offices. What is required is self-belief on a local level, a desire for autonomy of thought and action, within a respect for others, a sense of fairness and an end to gross inequality:

‘Rather than an equality of understanding, autonomy means accepting in others what one does not understand about them. In so doing, the fact of their autonomy is treated as equal to your own. The grant of autonomy dignifies the weak or the outsider; to make this grant to others in turn strengthens one’s own character ... Self-respect founded on craft cannot alone generate mutual respect. In society, attacking the evils of inequality cannot alone generate mutual respect. In society, and particularly in the welfare state, the nub of the problem we face is how the strong can practice respect toward those destined to remain weak.’ (Sennett, R., 2004, p.262)

Common recognised this, particularly in his essays, and projects like ‘Strong Words’ and ‘Northern Voices’ have carried it on, standing for self-help self-controlled projects, standing proudly apart from corporate outfits and state-controlled institutions with an insistence on such local autonomy. As Simon Jenkins (2006, p.333) has said:

‘Most people round the world, rich and poor, enjoy a local empowerment that has become unknown in Britain. From the shanty-towns of Latin America to an Indian village or a Swiss canton citizens expect to be involved in decisions affecting their immediate surroundings. They know by name those who purport to be in charge of them, be they honest or corrupt ... They also expect to choose local priorities and pay for them. The concept of individual and family choice so beloved of Thatcherites should extend to their neighbourhoods and their communities. Self-government cannot define itself as government by others.’

Such empowerment insists on people owning their own lives and their own culture and not being patronised by a culture handed down from above:

‘The concern for addressing social cohesion and inclusion through a ‘soft’ approach such as the use of cultural projects, might be seen as a convenient means to divert attention from the real causes of today’s social problems and the tough solutions that might be needed to solve them. According to this line of reasoning, the whole discourse of social inclusion is a lot more appealing to the political elite than the old-fashioned rhetoric of poverty and the call for economic redistribution.’ (Belfiore, E., 2006, p.33)

Judging by what the topsy turvy life of Common reflected in his work, I think that he would have echoed the statement that ‘what we should be arguing for is not value for money, but money for values.’ (Hewison, R., 1997, p.314) He was both an intellectual and a democrat. Frank Furedi (2004, p.23) has questioned the anti-democratic and patronizing underpinning of contemporary education and cultural politics. ‘Such politics’, he asserts, ‘not only restrain intellectual and cultural creativity – they also infantilize the public and lower its expectations’. The role of the intellectual is crucial in initiating debate and involving people’s passions and interests. If we can keep alive the spirit of Jack Common, we can ensure that the spark of his intellect continues to resonate and shine a small light on us today, giving us all a measure of mutual respect:

‘The English working class is, I think, uniquely disinherited, and the most important ways in which it is disinherited are the more crippling because they are largely hidden from us. We are fairly well aware of how little the worst off have had in the way of independent material resources ... But there are

other sorts of capital to which they have also had little or no access – social, cultural and spiritual. And it is because the rest of us are so uneasily conscious of this other poverty without being able or willing fully to articulate it that our attitude towards ‘them’ oscillates between pity and disdain. Above all, it is difficult to show or feel respect towards people who are so embarrassingly impoverished. We are often told that deference has disappeared from modern Britain. Yet the adulation of the rich and famous is surely as fulsome as ever ... What has almost disappeared is deference towards the lower classes. Throughout the two world wars and the decades following both of them, the lower classes were widely revered for their courage in battle and their stoicism in peace. Values such as solidarity, thrift, cleanliness and self-discipline were regularly identified as characteristic of them. That is no longer the case. By a remarkable shift in public discourse, the middle classes have come to regard most of these virtues as characteristic of their own behaviour, indeed as largely confined to themselves. For the ultimate deprivation that the English working class has suffered – in fact the consequence of all the other deprivations – is the deprivation of respect.’

(Mount, F., 2004, pp.106-8)

For all of the defeats, it is possible still to find strength from the best aspects of, for example, the 1984 miners' strike when:

‘Defending those jobs, those families, those communities, that culture and that heritage was extended to defending those jobs, those families, those communities, that culture and that heritage against monetarism, deregulation, privatisation, market forces and the trickle down ... Socialist heritage. British

heritage, not nostalgia. Not romanticism. A heritage of sacrifice, of selflessness. A sacrifice and a selflessness born out of compassion and empathy – qualities that cannot be bought or stolen from you ... In Great Britain. In this country. In 1984 ... people might have done things differently, but the past is not a foreign country. The people who lived and died there are not strangers. They are our people, us, and it is our country. Then and now, right or wrong. We are shoulder to shoulder.’ (Peace, D., 2004, p.25)

But we need to make this much more than empty rhetoric and seek to identify weaknesses in amongst any professed strengths. Common was far from perfect, not that he ever professed to be a saint. He suffered from traditional prejudices and a weakness for working class pastimes like drinking and smoking which eventually did for him. Ron Paul has criticised Common for his ‘use of a pronounced masculinist form of language. Thus, despite his sensitivity to other stereotyped images of class, he nevertheless address himself in his own political writings exclusively and sexistically to his fellow working men: the lads on the street corner or men in the pub or factory. The only working women in Common’s world seem to be housewives, about whom he has little to say’. (Paul, R., 1999-2000, p.133). Looking at things globally, Jeremy Seabrook argues that the working class is not in fact dead, rather, in many ways; it has been exported to the third world:

‘The new working class is made up of factory employees in Jakarta, Mexico City and Chonging, making shoes, trainers and toys in enclosures surrounded by razor-wire, and watched as they work by CCTV. It is not, as we choose to believe, our own efforts and hard work that have socially wafted upwards to the majority of people in western Europe, but the successful export of the

labour they once performed to remote sites of desolation elsewhere in the world.’ (Seabrook, J., 2006, p.32)

It is true to say that the richest two per cent of adults in the world own more than half the world’s wealth. The richest one per cent of adults own forty per cent of global assets and the richest ten per cent account for eighty five per cent of the world’s total.

Addressing the whole issue of culture, Terry Eagleton insists (2000, p.131):

‘Culture is not only what we live by. It is also, in great measure, what we live for. Affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meaning: these are closer to most of us than charters of human rights or trade treaties. Yet culture can also be too close for comfort. This very intimacy is likely to grow morbid and obsessional unless it is set in an enlightened political context, one which can temper these immediacies with more abstract, but also in a way more generous affiliations. We have seen how culture has assumed a new political importance. But it has grown at the same time immodest and overweening. It is time, while acknowledging its significance, to put it back in its place.’

And this might require more than just casting a vote elsewhere, it might need more radical action:

‘What is at issue is value; the criteria by which we determine merit. And in the world of the ‘European Cities of Culture’ a work of art is judged by the financial expediency of big business ... local officials of labour-controlled District Councils up and down the country are suppressing and censoring

voices of dissent, content to do so publicly if forced into it. When that fails they try to punish those who dare speak out. Contemporary government, municipal, regional and national, is rooted firmly in the structure of U.S. corporate business management, the process has gone on at least since the mid-1970s. Our elected representatives and custodians have been transformed into chief executives ... Radical action is always possible. Society can be transformed. This is not the lesson of the 1990s nor is it the lesson of the late 1960s, it's standard information that's been available to humankind for the past couple of millennium'. (Kelman, J., 1992, pp.35, 45)

Having studied and analysed his life and work, I think that Jack Common would have agreed and so do I. It is easy to lie back and wallow in cynicism. But there remain grounds for hope and if Common could see that through the gloom of two world wars, the defeats of the twenties and the squalor of the thirties we can find it ourselves today:

'Suppose that we want to help the Downers break out of their ghettos and enjoy some sort of stake in the country. This may sound an implausible, idealistic ambition. Yet we have to recognise that in some countries it is not implausible at all. In Ireland or France or the United States or Italy, quite poor people own a patch of land ... In Dunkeld, Perthshire, for example, a Community Land Trust is planning to buy a twelve acre site and hand over plots to locals to build their own homes.' (Mount, 2004, p.291)

Recently, Amicus, IG- Metall and two US Labour groups joined forces to create an international link with more than six million workers, presenting a united front against

multinational companies in an effort to prevent them from playing off workforces in different companies against one another. This shows that we need to see a world outside, not just pretty 'World Music' but the miner in China, the cleaner at Heathrow, the slave girl in Prague. We need to change our luck and reading Jack Common can help us achieve this.

APPENDIX 1.

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY'S PROSPECTUS FOR 'THE ADELPHI' MAGAZINE.

'The ADELPHI', aims at filling a place apart among contemporary magazines:...Of magazines of fiction, of political reviews, there are already enough and to spar. What is needed, and what 'THE ADELPHI' is designed to supply, is a magazine in which subjects of vital interest to modern readers are treated with honesty and conviction. The standard by which the contents of 'THE ADELPHI' will be decided is 'significance for life'.'

OF LITERATURE, it goes on:

'We are bored to death by modern dilettantism. We are sick of 'Art'. Inspired by no living purpose, it has brought us nowhere. If modern literature is to be anything better than a pastime for railway journeys or a parlour game for effete intellectuals, it must be built upon some active foundations. Those who have something to say will know how to say it. Therefore, we hope that although the contents of 'THE ADELPHI' may not be 'literary', they will be literature'.

OF PHILOSOPHY:

'We believe that there is no such thing. What has lasted under the name of philosophy is either one or the other. But true literature and true science are always in a sense philosophical: they are occupied with reality. In this sense 'THE ADELPHI' also will be philosophical'.

Finally:

'THE ADELPHI' will not be a high-brow magazine. It aims at being comprehensible and interesting to as many people as possible. But it will not be written down to suit the needs of an imaginary audience of the semi-educated and half witted. We believe that a magazine to be really interesting to its readers must first be interesting to those who wrote write it'... (Lea, F.A., 1959, pp. 106-7)

APPENDIX 2.

INTERVIEW WITH PETER COMMON BY KEITH ARMSTRONG,
WARRINGTON, 28th FEBRUARY 2000.

We're an interesting family! I being the eldest son. I have a brother, Bob, who you know and have met, and I've three half-sisters – Sally and the twins Mary (now deceased) and Charmion. I also have a step-brother Jan who's about two months older than me and he was from Connie's first marriage. On one occasion we met when I was serving in Cyprus. We became totally separated after Connie's death and I haven't seen or spoken to him since then. Last time I heard he was living somewhere in the Southampton area.

I was born in Datchworth, Hertfordshire, in 1934. I only have vague memories of the first house. We moved to another house when I was ten months old which I can remember. At the age of about four we then moved to Wallington, Herts., where we lived in Orwell's house and by the time I was about five we moved up to Sandon where we stayed until my mother died when I'd be about seven-and-a-half. After Mary's death, Jack was involved with the Ministry of Information making films for the Army and I was shipped across to Essex, Frating Hall, where Irene Palmer, my guardian, lived. Frating hall Farmers' Society it was called, on the road from Colchester towards Clacton. It was an organisation run by a number of people who were conscientious objectors who were all exempt from being in the Army but were directed into that kind of work. Joe and Doris Watson were also my guardians at that particular point in time. Joe was a good Durham lad. I think that they were the link to my father because they had a lot of Fabian leanings and also were from the same background and era. And there we stayed until I was eleven and we then moved to West Sussex and various houses, it was a low time for Jack. West Chilington was the first one, Firtree Lane. We then moved to a council house, where Jack was doing book reviews and films, script reviews and things like that and working in local farming and things like that; at one particular point working on a mushroom farm.

We stayed in that general area until I left school and then served a five year apprenticeship for a garage, believe it or not, before I went into the Army. While I was in the Army, of course, Jack went on his way and worked in various places.

He could see straight through people who were false and he had no time for them, not at all. He was very open, very honest, very straightforward. One of the reasons why he initially had some problems with Orwell was because he thought he was a poser, he wanted to be. It's said that when he went to Wigan he looked through the train window and he saw an 'other world'. Jack was his guide in that 'other world', wasn't he? He (Orwell) wouldn't have understood Wigan, he wouldn't have understood the working-class, without Jack's guidance and interpretation, I feel strongly about that. If he had any regard for Orwell it was that, when it really came down to it, Orwell acknowledged to Jack that he needed his help.

I have been influenced by my father more than I'd like to originally recognise or perhaps accept.

You can't live with a man like that and not be influenced.

As I look back on things I've done and said, some things I've only recently realised I was influenced by him. Within the last five years, my good lady wife Shirley once said that the one thing you are able to do is see both persons point of view; and I hadn't thought about that but I do know it's true and I know it's from Jack.

He liked the thought of 'karma', that some things are fated to be. In his first chapter in 'Kiddars Luck', he talks about his genes flying around in the stars, and it's true that he had a spiritual sense of what's marked out for you. I didn't know until I was about nine or ten that he didn't believe in religion. He gave me every opportunity and encouragement to go to church and choirs and things like that and I independently came to my own conclusion that there was no room for modern religion and God in my life, and it was with a sense of relief that I found that my parents were agnostic or atheist. I came to the conclusion by the time I was eight that I couldn't believe in this and I tried hard because I thought that my parents did.

This was a random thought found in his notes before his death;

'We live in a world half-way between Communism and Conmanism.'

I don't know if he ever used this thought anywhere.

I think his writing is beautiful, I really do. I particularly appreciate it because I know much work went into making it look easy and free-flowing. When 'Kiddar's Luck' first came out, I read it to my children, they didn't read it initially. He, like Dickens, thought that his work should be read to (people) rather than just read yourself. I don't know if you've ever tried reading it out aloud, but all his work is very easy to read out, it flows, in other words you feel it conversational and because he loved to talk and we all feel that his work was meant to be read out like that. His work is a form of poetry, again, when you read it out, you can tell, it flows, it begs to be read out aloud rather than just read to yourself.

I think the clue to his writing is in 'The Ampersand', the word 'ampersand' was his quest for success. You've achieved success if you're known as 'Common & Son' or 'Common & Company'. He felt that a way of achieving success and recognition was at what he could do best and I think that he was aware of this when he was about twelve, very much so. So in his search for success and recognition he went for his 'Ampersand' by becoming a writer.

Like anybody who does anything thoroughly he researched his subject very well, not just what he was writing about but the tools of the trade. I don't know if you are aware of it, but he tried to be a musician. For two years he tried to play the violin – I don't think he was very good but whether he was very good or not is immaterial. He wasn't good enough for himself and he knew that wasn't where his skill lay, his skill lay in the music of words.

Mary, my mother, was a good amateur operatic singer, as so many people were at that time when there was no such thing as TV and very little radio and people amused themselves by playing the piano and singing. Every family could put together half a dozen people but in Mary's family, and to some extent in Jack's, there was a great appreciation for music and I think that there's a musical quality to his writing as well. I know how hard he worked just to get one paragraph to sound right. The more I think about it the more I'm aware of how music affected his writing. He was a great lover of classical music and operatic singing. He had a great love of Gilbert and Sullivan. He wanted success and recognition but he was also frightened in case he got it too big. If you look around this room there's a lot of wines and spirits in there but you wouldn't find that in Jack's house because he'd be frightened of the effect it had on him. Dylan Thomas was an object lesson to him because he ruined his life through booze and Jack said that he was frightened that if he was in the same position the same thing would happen to him. If he was in a position where there was no financial limitations or opening hours, I fear that the game he played about rushing to get there before the pub closed would be lost because it wouldn't be that game any more.

He felt that he ought to have made a lot more money and Turnstile Press or whoever it was at the time should have made a better job of things than they did – they went out of business and somebody else I think published the second book.

If only he had achieved some financial success earlier on so that he didn't have to do the hack work that bogged him down for years, the stuff that he hated doing and really only got peanuts out of anyway, then he would have been free to write what he wanted to write. I used to dream when I was young that if I won the Pools I'd be able to finance him so that he wouldn't have to do all that stuff. It was very frustrating for everyone who knew him at that time to see the length of time that he'd lost, wasted literally, and couldn't get on with the third book, the final part of the trilogy.

For something like ten years he was wasting the greater part of his time, in Newport Pagnell and prior to that as well. Hence we had this argument, 'Why don't you write something you can make money out of? Because you've got the ability, write what people want, to make money and then get out of the way, you can write it in about three months the way you write, honestly!' It would have been against his principles, though, and he thought that if he once did that he'd never be able to get back onto writing what he wanted to.

There's something else I owe a great deal to my father for. Schooling during the war years was very, very poor. I was taught to read by my mother when I was four, when I was ill in bed with mumps or something. The result was that when I went to school my reading age was along way ahead of most of my contemporaries. But it wasn't just that I could read well, it was what I was being encouraged to read. So I read all the classics, you name them, Rider Haggard, Dickens, I read all of them before I was ten and I had a voracious appetite – I'd go to the school library, for example, get four books out the school library and read one and complete it before I went out at seven-thirty to the Boys Club, that sort of thing. In this day and age, it's hardly ever done like that amongst the young.

There are a lot of books I've never touched at all. I never saw an Enid Blyton – type book or any of those sort, they just didn't exist.

Jack had a tremendous admiration and regard for Jack London, not only because of the type of work that he did but the fact that he was a waterfront gang-leader when he was sixteen or seventeen and had tremendous physical ability.

Jack would fight. I don't know how often he did fight but I know he did fight and he was quite a strong, powerful man. He was proud that his father was one of the biggest men around the place. When I first went to Newcastle after the War, there were still people around who remembered his father.

That would be hard for Jack to follow, I've no doubt. Like I don't try to follow my father, he couldn't follow his. There's nothing worse than being called, as I was at one particular stage, 'Young Jack', even though my name isn't Jack. For about three years my nickname as a schoolboy was 'Young Jack'! Of course, his father was about six foot four-and-a-half, which is tall even by today's standards. There were four brothers and three of them were well over six foot.

Jack would be about five foot eleven, still quite tall, but his father was enormous, he was a powerful man in a man's world, a train-driver on the Flying Scotsman and well revered, one of those strong men in the pub who everyone gave respect to.

Going back to when we first went to Lanham when I was billeted on the conscientious objectors – Irene and Joe Watson, Vera Britten and all that crowd – he reiterated to me, 'We're staying with them, we're not them', I have to put you somewhere while I go away to do what I've got to do, but you are not a conscientious objector (or 'conshie' as local village lads called them). The first week at the village school I got into a fight

with somebody and got hurt but then was respected and that's something that Jack would have encouraged me to do.

He worked for the Army and he certainly wasn't averse to it. There was nothing conscientious-objection wise about his attitude to life. He went for life head-on. I don't think he held a negative view on anything. That's a good way to remember him.

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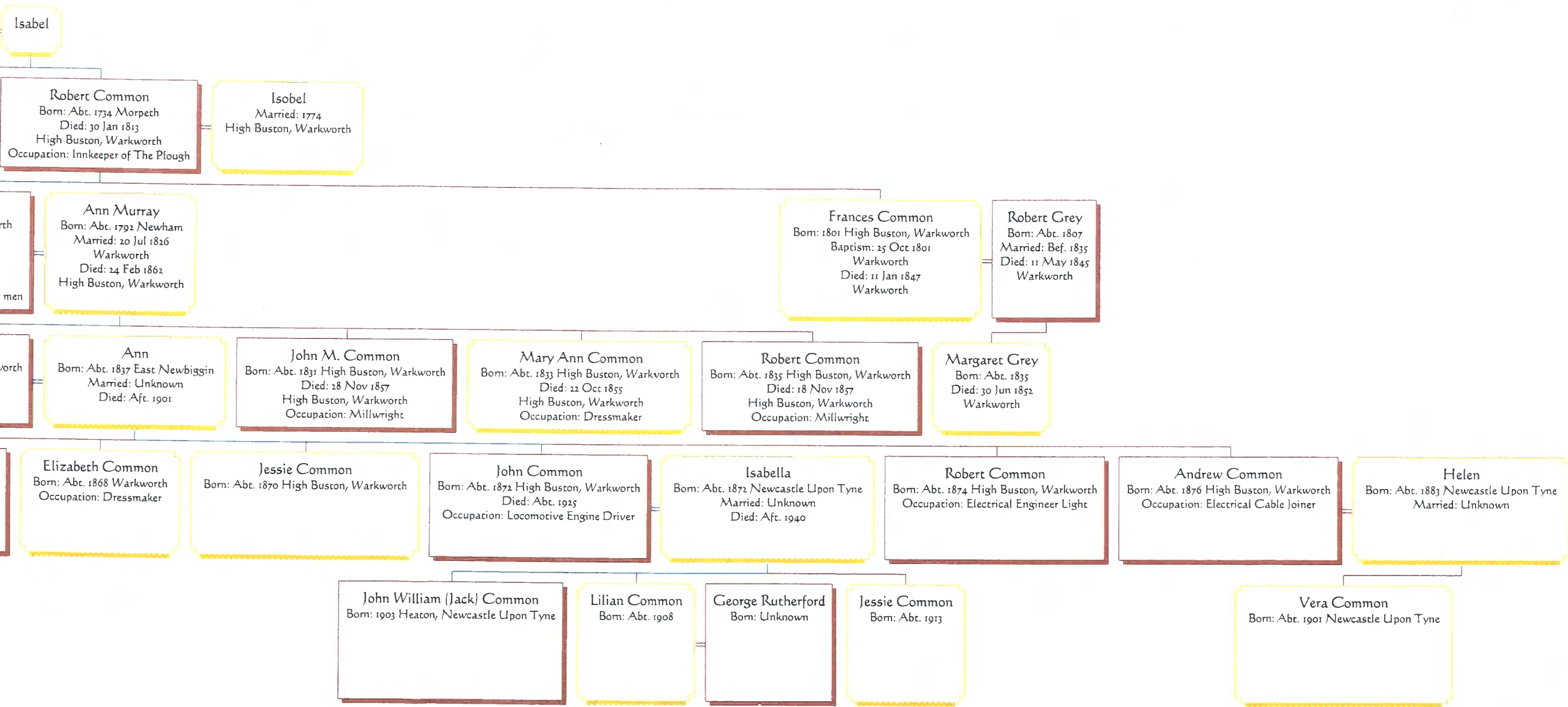
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