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Freak party

by [Ben Downing](#)

A review of *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* by D. J. Taylor.

Who were they, the Bright Young People? Nobody, it turns out. To be sure, there were large talents and personalities among them, and each had flair of one kind or another. As a group, however, they present an image of unredeemed triviality. Less than the sum of their parts, they brought out the worst in each other, or at least the most superficial. They left behind few significant monuments and exerted little lasting influence. So why do they continue to fascinate? Why does their name still have about it a certain legendary ring? D. J. Taylor's impressive yet numbing study simultaneously accounts for the lingering magic and kills it once and for all; while Taylor comes neither to praise nor to bury the Bright Young People, his book has the distinct effect of making them seem, in the end, dull, old, and scarcely human.

The term "Bright Young People," as defined by those within the clique and the journalists who covered their every frivolous move, refers to perhaps a few score partygoers and -throwers who amused themselves at a series of festivities during the second half of the 1920s, most often in London, especially Mayfair, but sometimes in country houses. (Though often used synonymously, "Bright Young Things" is a much broader term, Taylor explains, "as imprecise in its way as 'flapper.' A Bright Young Person may have been a Bright Young Thing, but not all Bright Young Things were Bright Young People.") The White Party, the Impersonation Party, the Hermaphrodite Party: these and others were fabled, for both their bacchanalian excess—mild by later standards—and their extravagant themes; at the Circus Party,

guests discovered that the premises had been decorated in the style of a fairground. The booths displayed live animals, including a dancing bear, a seal, and a Siberian wolf.

To these parties were added such diversions as "treasure hunts" (for random objects hidden all over town) and practical jokes like the Bruno Hat hoax, which involved a gallery opening for a bogus German artist, played by Tom Mitford.

Except for several Mitfords—Tom, Nancy, and Diana—the only Bright Young People still widely known today are Evelyn Waugh, Cecil Beaton, and, to a lesser degree, Robert Byron. (Anthony Powell and Henry Green, though they knew much of the group and wrote novels partially inspired by it, were really on the circumference.) Several others retain a scrap or two of fame or notoriety, whether for their books (Beverly Nichols), their sterile flamboyance (Stephen Tennant and Brian Howard), or their wealth and high-level cuckoldry (Bryan Guinness, dumped by Diana Mitford for Oswald Mosley). The remainder are now mere names, setting off only the faintest of bells even for those steeped in the period.

Yet it is precisely one of these forgotten sybarites that Taylor has cast as his emblematic figure of the set. Elizabeth Ponsonby, “a bright, capering spirit with a weekly berth in every gossip column in Fleet Street,” did absolutely nothing of note, which makes her an ideal Bright Young Everywoman. Her family did, however, leave behind an extensive archive, including diaries by both her parents, who agonized over their daughter’s waywardness. Taylor skillfully mines this material, extracting a story—Elizabeth’s, that is—of youthful frolic and glamour swiftly followed by divorce, impecuniousness, and premature death (in 1940) from chronic alcoholism. It’s a sad, sordid, Lily Bart-like tale, somehow made even more depressing by the delicate way Taylor weaves it episodically into the main narrative.

That narrative is very much of the rise-and-fall variety. In his early chapters, Taylor traces the origin of Bright Young allegiances—largely forged at Eton and Oxford—and the crystallization of the party scene in 1924. Then, for the majority of the book, he considers the scene and its participants from a series of thematic angles. The Bright Young “compact with the press” is thoroughly examined. (“More so than any youth cult that preceded them,” Taylor asserts, “the Bright Young People were a creation of the media.”) So is the pronounced homosexual flavor of the group, and its fraught relationship with the older generation, which Taylor sees as reflecting “the antagonism between youth and seniority that characterized the 1920s.” Bright Young style and argot also come in for sustained exploration. We learn, for instance, that Waugh’s repeated use of the adjective “sheepish” in *Vile Bodies*, which briefly made it a buzzword, “arose from a conversation between Waugh and the twelve-year-old Jessica Mitford, whose pet lamb he had promised to include somewhere in the novel.”

The decline, in Taylor’s view, began around 1930 and was inevitable for internal reasons:

What fatally injured the Bright Young People in the end was the thing that had helped create them: publicity. Bohemianism . . . can only stay true to its authenticating spirit by not trying too hard. Here, spontaneity had become a series of stunts.

Yet the People were, of course, doomed by history as well, for when the carefree effervescence of the 1920s gave way to the troubled 1930s, their antics had no place. Some desperately clung to childish things, such as Elizabeth Ponsonby:

[Her] career in the 1930s is an object lesson in the futility of thinking that you can go on living the life of your gilded youth in a world of marching armies and three million unemployed.

Others, however, willingly traded “freak parties”—as their gimmicky fêtes were known—for political ones at both extremities. “Nothing could be more narrowly symbolic of the fracturing of the Bright Young People’s world,” Taylor writes, “than the breakup of the Guinness marriage,” and several of Diana’s friends followed her lead in lining up behind Mosley and his blackshirts. Unsurprisingly, a larger portion went left. There were some unexpected transformations. Robert Byron, for example, put aside his aestheticism to become a brave and tireless anti-Nazi. Taylor doesn’t mention the fact, but Beverley Nichols, whose *Crazy Pavements* was the very first Bright Young novel (it influenced *Vile Bodies*), and who is now best remembered for his gardening books, in 1944 published a polemic called *Verdict on India* that passionately advocated an independent Pakistan and made a strong impression on Churchill; it’s odd to think of a gardener and Mayfair trifler having had a hand in anything so deadly serious as the partition of India.

Certain members of the group also went on to artistic and commercial success, most notably Waugh and Beaton, for whom Bright Young shenanigans were not just fun and games but vivid subject matter, and as such a springboard into fiction and photography; as Taylor wryly observes, “it was the middle-class meritocrats . . . who would have the last laugh” (both men were from atypically modest

backgrounds). Yet it is the failures who stand out and set the tone, none more so than Brian Howard, whose name has become a byword for preening nonachievement. “Expected, not least by himself, to write novels that would out-Firbank Firbank in their orchidaceous subtleties,” Taylor remarks, “he ended up a tragicomic turn in novels by other people” (especially ones by Waugh, who first used Howard in *Vile Bodies* and then reupholstered him for *Brideshead Revisited* and *Helena*). A suicide at fifty-two, Howard squandered all his chances, but he at least makes for good reading, and Taylor has dug up some wonderful anecdotes about him, such as this:

Brian Howard, invited to inspect Diana Guinness’s son Jonathan as he lay in his cradle, is supposed to have remarked, “My dear, it is so *modern* looking.”

Bright Young People is, in fact, studded—if not quite stuffed—with memorable nuggets and pleasing formulations. Of one Lady Burghclere, Taylor writes:

Her daughter specialized in lightning engagements to wildly unsuitable young men: Her nine previous fiancés included the purser of a cruise ship on which she had been exiled to get over a previous attachment.

Or consider this sentence on the novels of Nancy Mitford:

To spend very much time in the company of Nancy Mitford is to encounter a sensibility preserved in the amber of 1928, which has observed the world passing, the horrors of war and their personal consequences—a sister and brother dead, another sister interned—but whose response is largely a matter of shrieks and teases.

How perfectly put, and how damning. Though he doesn’t permit himself quite as many swipes of this nature as one might wish, Taylor is a cool, shrewd judge of character. He is also a taut, often elegant stylist, a penetrating critic, and a demon researcher with the discipline to shine his flashlight in obscure corners without getting lost in the labyrinth. (If nothing else, I’m grateful to him for pointing me toward *Ruling Passions*, a delectably salty memoir by Tom Driberg, once tagged “the most disreputable M.P. in the House,” who began as a journalist on the Bright Young beat.) Finally, Taylor has a kind of genius for structure. Shifting smoothly between narrative and exposition, punctuated with freestanding vignettes and thumbnail sketches, *Bright Young People* is as ingeniously engineered as any of the “freak parties” it documents.

All of which goes toward making the book a gleaming and formidable piece of social-cum-literary history. And yet I must admit finding it a hard book to love, or even to enjoy. This has nothing to do with Taylor, only with his subjects. The problem isn’t so much that many of them were, as Taylor puts it, “the silliest people in London.” It has rather to do with the closed, self-congratulatory, brittle quality of their silliness; and, again, with the way they had of cheapening each other. Waugh, for instance, was an infinitely more layered and compelling person than the wafer-thin Stephen Tennant, but in the context of the Bright Young People he gets pulled down to Tennant’s level. For all their interconnections, the People seem rarely to have been true friends to one another, and I miss, in their collective biography, the unfoldings, deepenings, painful twists, and moving turns that such webs of friendship usually disclose.

Then again, maybe you just had to be there. Being regaled about the gilded youth of any place or period tends to breed more annoyance than nostalgia—*la jeunesse* quickly comes to seem less *dorée* than boring. The same holds true for high meridians of decadence and hedonism: sure, it might have been a blast to be around for Haight-Ashbury, or Warhol’s Factory, or Studio 54, or the Swinging Sixties in London itself—in most respects far wilder than the 1920s, which were merely (to quote Taylor’s favored epithet) rackety—but this sort of experience does not lend itself to vicarious pleasure-taking. Taylor mentions, as an example of Bright Young “horseplay,” an unnamed aristocrat

who revenged herself on a hostess who had been slandering her by rubbing a lobster mayonnaise into her hair as she lay comatose on a divan and trussing her up beneath the supper table.

One smiles or even cackles to learn of the incident, but eventually, after long immersion in Bright Young harlequinades, one also starts to feel a bit like that hostess: paralyzed, sticky, and in urgent need of a shower.

Ben Downing's biography of Janet Ross is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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