

**REINTERPRETING BRITAIN. AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARGARET DRABBLE***

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Drabble came to Granada in November 1994 to take part in the International Symposium on Gerald Brenan's work (Simposio Internacional I Centenario Gerald Brenan. Universidad de Granada). I took the opportunity to ask her some questions not about the famous hispanist but about her vision of contemporary Britain as presented in her most recent novels.

Q. In your novels you usually give a broad picture of British society, exposing the evils of nowadays Britain. Do you find any parallelism between your work and the so-called "Condition of England" novels of the 19th century (authors like Disraeli, Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell...) in the sense that they also showed the state of the country?

A. Yes, this was one of my intentions. It's a very difficult thing to do because however broad your canvas people are going to say you have missed out whole areas like Scotland or wherever. But yes, I was certainly very conscious of the tradition, particularly perhaps of Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot. Disraeli's work I don't know so well. I've read a few of Disraeli's books, but they are not in the full centre of my mind when I'm working.

Q. In that sense, do you consider your work as a continuation, a follower of that tradition?

A. As a follower in a sort of response, in that you can't write like they did, you can't do that now. Certainly they are in my mind when I'm writing, I feel I am arguing back or continuing their story. Yes, it is a continuation.

Q. Speaking about this kind of novel David Lodge says that "Cancer is the perfect metaphorical diagnosis of the condition of England...". Do you agree with this as applied to modern Britain?

A. Cancer, he says... It's a rather extreme statement. No, I don't think it's terminal necessarily. I see it more as some kind of wasting disease, that could go on and on for

years. And I see it as something not so malignant, more a kind of weakness rather than a malignancy.

Q. If we speak about the British novel during the eighties, we cannot avoid speaking about Margaret Thatcher. Most intellectuals during the eighties took a clear stand against Mrs. Thatcher's politics. Do you think it was a well-defined movement or it was something that each writer considered separately?

A. Well, it's very interesting that you say "most intellectuals". I think I want to qualify that and say "most literary intellectuals". A lot of historians sided very strongly with her, and academic historians swung to the right quite strongly during the 1980s. They swung behind her and supported her, historians, economists... and the writers felt rather excluded from the zeitgeist of the eighties, because they were in opposition, and I think this happened for various reasons, I mean, the universities, some of them protested very strongly against Mrs. Thatcher for financial reasons because she was cutting funds, and Malcolm Bradbury is quite funny about all that. But I also think it was quite a philistine administration, it didn't like the arts, it cut the government's Arts Council funding, and so writers and artists generally, and painters as well as writers, felt themselves undervalued. Her administration didn't value the arts, and I think that writers spontaneously felt things were moving the wrong way for them.

Q. There were some writers who sided with her, like Kingsley Amis.

A. There were. I would say on the whole an older generation. I'm younger than Kingsley Amis.

Q. Yes, I know.

A. (laughs) Not all that much. I think there were people like Paul Johnson, the historian, or Kingsley Amis, who came up very strongly pro-Thatcher. I could think of others or I could if I had time. But it was quite a divisive time, I mean, there were quite passionate arguments about politics during this period, not all the writers were automatically left wing. I was strongly committed to the left, I personally was, not necessarily to the Labour party.

Q. So, not necessarily all the writers who sided against Margaret Thatcher were left wing.

A. Not necessarily. There was something in her that very deeply disturbed a lot of people, I think for reasons that are not necessarily political, some of them were sexual. They didn't like a woman in power, and that again divided some of those who felt that you shouldn't hate her because she was a woman, and I know quite a lot of men whose physical response to her was one of deep dislike because of something about this matriarchal figure. So it was quite a complicated situation that the dislike of her came from many directions.

Q. In one of your novels you say that she was a woman as a Prime Minister who was not motherly.

A. That's right. She seemed to embody all these martial virtues, a sort of Britannia figure, with a trident, rather than a motherly figure. And I think that a lot of women had hoped that when women got into power we would become less destructive, less military, and in fact her great victory was the Falklands war. She seemed to take great glory that she had been unwomanly and had sent all these men to death, which she seemed to enjoy in a way of sort of feeling proud of her power, proud of her victory, and that was very disturbing to a lot of people.

Q. One of the characters in *The Radiant Way*, Alix Bowen, is in a conflict. On one hand she sides against her, and she is against what Thatcher represents, but on the

other hand she realises that some of her measures were necessary. Do you think that this conflict was a common position for many people?

A. Yes, I do. I think that many people would now argue that she went too far. She had an ideological fixation on things like privatization which didn't listen to reason or stop at the right moment. But I think nobody would wish now to de-privatize the telephone system because it works much better than it did. And I think she was right that competition in some areas improves the quality of service. The question is which areas. Competition in hospitals improves nothing at all, or in schools. The education has been a disaster because of this measure of competition as though they couldn't decide which spheres it was appropriate in. And it was appropriate in some and not in others, and that was very confusing to the old left who thought she was wrong on everything. And when the miners' strike came up of course Scargill was right, they did intend to close all the pits and now they have closed practically all of them, and they may be right or they may be wrong in long term ecological terms. If you look five hundred years ahead we may be going back to coal, but we couldn't see that at the time. And the people were fighting their old battle lines. The miners were fighting a losing battle because her troops were much sharper, and it was very confusing because one knew that many virtues resided on the side of the old left, but there was a kind of common sense of tactics missing.

Q. With the distance of the nineties, how do you evaluate, in general, all those years of Mrs. Thatcher's government?

A. In general I think it divided the nation against itself. I think it destroyed any vision of a real social hope, long term social hope for Britain. People no longer thought "Well, we're going to get better, everything is going to be better, poor people are going to be better educated". People lost that vision of moving forward together and it became a society with a kind of underclass where, true, sixty per cent of people are richer and better off but the other forty per cent, and it's actually an increasing number, I think, not decreasing, are getting bad education, bad health care, no pensions, no job security, no holidays, because they are having to work part time jobs without any security, and I think it has been very destructive for the social fabric, if that makes any sense. I feel very strongly that we've lost this phrase "social hope" that comes back to me because I know we used to have it, we used to think things would get better. And now I think the best we can hope for is that they won't get much worse, and that's very depressing.

Q. So in general you think she contributed to divide the country.

A. I think she certainly divided the country, she certainly caused division and she intended to, I think there is no doubt that she intended through weapons like unemployment to set one part of the community against the rest of it, to make people feel that they didn't want to go on paying for the unemployed, they didn't want to go on paying for the sick, they didn't want to go on paying for people who weren't competent. Well, we see it now manifested in all the political rows we have where, you know, one MP can spend more than the entire pension of a family in a year in one weekend in the Ritz, I mean and yet they say this is what we should all strive for, these riches, these glories of life, we all can be rich if we try, it's just nonsense.

Q. Going back to Margaret Thatcher, it was she who coined the expression "Is he/she one of us?" Did intellectuals feel that you were being questioned? Did you feel the necessity of siding against or for her?

A. One of the most curious things that happened to me... I was in Canada, touring with *The Radiant Way* for my publishers. And the British consul in one Canadian town came up to me and said he thought it was a disgrace that I was speaking so badly of my country abroad, in other words, I wasn't one of them, and I said, I am not being paid for by anybody but myself, my publishers are publishing this book and I'm here to talk about my book and not about how wonderful Mrs. Thatcher is, and he said, you shouldn't run her down abroad, and I said, look, we have an opposition, we have a loyal opposition. This whole concept was questioned by Mrs. Thatcher. We had this phrase, "Her majesty's loyal opposition". She absolutely rejected that you could be in opposition and loyal to the country. And that was the most extraordinary step that anybody was disloyal who wasn't on her side.

Q. Your novels are set in a very concrete time, you even mention exact dates. Some of the modern novels which deal with history try to transform it or to show the uncertainty and ambiguity of our measuring of history, in other words, they play with history. In your novels the recent past is treated in a linear, objective kind of way, some say in the line of the realist tradition. Haven't you been tempted to play with history, to show different readings, different visions of history?

A. I suppose I have. I mean, in *The Radiant Way* I'm very interested in showing my vision, not other people's but mine, or rather my three characters, it was not wholly mine, I wanted three visions of what was happening. But in fact in my last novel *The Gates of Ivory* it is a much more confusing book in that is quite obvious that we don't know what's happening in the Far East and it deals with Cambodia, western views of the east and eastern views of the west, and it is much more tentative about what history is because I think it is impossible for us to know what happened in Cambodia during the Cambodian atrocities, we don't know. We pretend we know but we don't, and so I have become very much more interested in questioning history but that doesn't mean that I don't know perfectly well the date on which certain things happened in Britain, and I'm quite interested in recording because we forget so quickly certain dates. I think what the novelist can do is to pick up dates that the historian might not pick out, and say this was an important moment when we began to drink Perrier water or when people began to sleep on the streets. These were important moments, they don't have historical kind of value, but they are just the way our society changes and I think that the novelist can do that better than the historian.

Q. And what is your opinion about this kind of fiction that plays with history, fiction in which history is seen as ambiguous, in which things probably happened, but maybe they didn't...

A. Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I suppose I've always believed that some things did happen. It's a question of trying to work out what they were, and of course one can endlessly revise one's interpretation of what happened, rather as in the Freudian search for one's own childhood. I mean, in *The Radiant Way*, I think it's in *The Radiant Way*, one of the characters, Liz, is looking for what happened to her as a child and what happened to her mother. Now, I think that looking for history is the same search. You know that certain events took place, and you know that your mother became a neurotic wreck and never went out of the house but you don't know why. And you can go back and back in a Freudian way, looking for interpretations knowing that the true interpretation may not occur to you because it is true, because that is the Freudian bind. And I find that very interesting about history as well. But if people are going to tell me there was no Second World War, or, you know, there are certain given points...

Q. Have you intended to be a chronicler?

A. I think there is such thing as a chronicler. But I also think that history is endlessly reinterpreted by each generation and, I mean, feminism has been one very interesting strain of this in that women have reinterpreted and recovered and rediscovered bits of history. And I'm also terribly interested in theories like, you know, the fact that it wasn't war that ruined ancient Greece, it was measles. I mean the idea that there are certain factors: medical, geographical, anthropological... that we simply don't know about. So it's not that I'm convinced that I know everything, it's just that I want to record the bits that I've seen and put them into the jigsaw. They might be useful to someone in a hundred years who will see more than I. We cannot see our own age.

Q. Since your first novels you were concerned with social matters, and you have even written two pamphlets about social policy, *Safe as Houses* and *A Case for Equality*. What made you write these pamphlets? Has it got anything to do with the British tradition of pamphleteering, like Daniel Defoe...?

A. (Laughs) Yes, it has a bit. Both those booklets, pamphlets, I was invited to do but it is true that I wouldn't have accepted unless I felt I'd got something to say. I wrote *A Case for Equality* because it seemed to me that the whole concept of equality had become so unfashionable and derided by everybody. I just felt I still believe in it, I still believe in the possibility of a greater equality. We cannot be equal but we can strive towards equality. So I just wanted to say that and I was slightly affected by the fact that my husband, Michael Holroyd, had been writing about Bernard Shaw who was a great egalitarian. Shaw is so unpopular now, and yet his plays are performed all over the world. I find that a fascinating paradox, that people who have no respect for his opinions are fascinated by his work. And with the housing thing, in fact I think we've won that because I was arguing against a certain kind of taxation in the booklet: everybody in England was obsessed by owning property, and that has actually been avoided now because of one or two changes in taxation policy. So a pamphlet doesn't have any effect but it contributes to an effect. With the "equality" it was hopeless but the "housing", because of various other social factors, I actually feel that people are less keen to invest in property and hang on to it through everything.

Q. Was it something that you deeply felt?

A. It was something that I deeply felt, something that was in the time, something that a lot of other people were beginning to feel so, you know, you just become interested in writing about something that is in the air. I don't think you can write a whole novel about housing policy, but it seemed a perfect case for a pamphlet.

Q. Can I ask your comments on what someone has said about you? Alan Massie has said "Drabble's early novels established her as the representative voice of educated women of her generation"². Do you agree? Do you speak as a representative voice?

A. No, I speak as myself, and a lot of educated women would repudiate and reject what I say quite strongly, I think, but I suppose what he is possibly pointing to is that I, certainly with my earlier books, had a very large readership which I think I may be losing for political reasons now, but I did have a very large readership because I represented a particular moment in women's lives, the educated woman with a family and a job, and a husband or a divorce, and I wasn't the only person, there were other women writers who were speaking for a generation and that's how the books were disseminated.

I would reject the idea that I was a spokesperson but I think that there are an awful lot of people who have found themselves in my position.

Q. Massie also says “Her true subject now is the moral condition of England”³. Do you consider yourself a “moral writer” in the sense that you seem very much preoccupied about the rise of individualism, materialism, the retreat of traditional values?

A. I think I am a moral writer, but only in that I am preoccupied with moral issues. But when one claims to be a “moral writer” that sounds as though one has an answer, which I haven’t got at all. I have no religious faith, I have no certainty about the future, but I’m interested in ethical issues, and I am very interested in issues not of good and evil but of right and wrong, I don’t quite believe in evil, but I’m very interested in social ethics, social values, I am always fascinated by moments in which you have to choose the greater good for the greater number. I suppose I am really interested in old-fashioned utilitarianism, and where we go from there, theories of justice, I’m fascinated by theories of social justice and egalitarianism. So, in that sense, I’m a moralist but that doesn’t mean that I think I know better, which is a mistake sometimes people make when they use the word “moralist”.

Q. The literary debate for many years has been about post-modernism. What is your position in this debate and what is the importance you give to this concept?

A. I think we are all postmodernist. There is no way you can avoid being a postmodernist now, unless you are a very exceptional simple primitive writer who hasn’t read anything at all, but even then you are a postmodernist because of the era, the time. We live in a very self-conscious age, it is a question of how you use that, and I think some people can use it very creatively, but some people are obsessed by devices and I’ve read books with just one device after another and it gets you nowhere. I’ve just read Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*. It is a very long traditional novel which is almost like reading Trollope, and even he has postmodernist devices within there, and this is though even when you are writing in the most traditional form you can find, it becomes postmodernist because of the moment of history that you are writing in. So I think that we cannot escape. It is almost like saying, can you pretend never to have heard of Freud if you live in the West? You can’t.

Notes

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1. David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984 [1966] 228).
2. Alan Massie, *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-89* (London: Longman, 1990) 19.
3. *Ibid.* 20.