



A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s

By Alwyn W. Turner

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"Superb" NICK COHEN, author of *What's Left?* "Tremendously entertaining" DOMINIC SANDBROOK, *Sunday Times* "Like his previous histories of the Seventies and Eighties, *A Classless Society* is an extraordinarily comprehensive work. Turner writes brilliantly, creating a compelling narrative of the decade, weaving contrasting elements together with a natural storyteller's aplomb...engaging and unique" IRVINE WELSH, *Daily Telegraph* "Ravenously inquisitive, darkly comical and coolly undeceived...Turner is a master of the telling detail" CRAIG BROWN, *Mail on Sunday* When Margaret Thatcher was ousted from Downing Street in November 1990, after eleven years of bitter social and economic conflict, many hoped that the decade to come would be more 'caring'; others dared to believe that the more radical policies of her revolution might even be overturned. Across politics and culture there was an apparent yearning for something the Iron Lady had famously dismissed: society. Yet the forces that had warred over the country during the 1980s were to prevent any simple turning back of the clock. The 'New Britain' to emerge under John Major and Tony Blair would be a contradiction: economically unequal but culturally classless. While Westminster agonised over sleaze and the ERM, the country outside became the playground of the New Lad and his sister the Ladette, of Swampy and the YBAs, of Posh and Becks and Jarvis Cocker. A new era was dawning which promised to connect us via the 'information superhighway' and entertain us with 'docusoaps'. It was also a period that would see old moral certainties swept aside, and once venerable institutions descend into farce - followed, in the case of the Royal Family, by tragedy. Opening with a war in the Gulf and ending with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, *A Classless Society* goes in search of the decade when modern Britain came of age. What it finds is a nation anxiously grappling with new technologies, tentatively embracing new lifestyles, and, above all, forging a new sense of what it means to be British. "Deserves to become a classic" EDWINA CURRIE "Rich and encyclopaedic" ROGER LEWIS, *Daily Mail* "Excellent" D.J. TAYLOR, *Independent*

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Editorial Review

Review

"Superb. I was a journalist throughout the 1990s, but did not notice a tenth of what Turner has seen or write about it half as well." -- Nick Cohen, author of *What's Left?* "John Major may have struggled to create a country at ease with itself, but Alwyn Turner's seductive blend of political analysis, social reportage and cultural immersion puts him wonderfully at ease with his readers." -- David Kynaston, author of *Austerity Britain* "It was refreshing to dip into *A Classless Society*, the third volume of Alwyn Turner's history of Britain since the 1970s... I enjoyed it a great deal." -- Toby Young *Spectator* "Alwyn Turner comprehensively explodes the notion that knowing so much about the 20th century makes a coherent historical account impossible. *A Classless Society* is an illuminating, admirably inclusive and perhaps essential guide to understanding what just happened. An invaluable English document." -- Alan Moore, author of *Watchmen* and *From Hell* "Tremendously entertaining... As a historian Turner is probably his own worst enemy - which I mean as a compliment. His book has plenty of acute insights, as well as a sensible thesis that the 1990s saw the establishment of a new post-Thatcher settlement, based on economic and social liberalism. But the stories are just so good, and often so funny, that you keep forgetting about the argument... How often, after all, do you read a book that has equally interesting things to say about Britain's exit from the ERM, the advent of *Loaded* magazine and the rise of Alan Partridge?" -- Dominic Sandbrook *Sunday Times* "Rich and encyclopaedic... A particular pleasure of this wonderful, hilarious book is Turner's contempt for politicians, who are 'perverts, liars and conmen', on the whole." -- Roger Lewis *Daily Mail* - 'Book of the Week' "He is amusing, perceptive and reminds the reader of the TV programmes and musical artists they have loved and then forgotten." -- David Aaronovitch *The Times* - 'Critics Choice' "Isn't it too soon for a history of the Nineties - their recentness carrying an inherent danger of not seeing the wood for the trees? Turner's solution is to anchor his narrative firmly in the era's politics, splitting the decade into the Major and Blair years - resulting in a very credible first draft... Turner has a good ear too for political gossip - Major's flirtatiousness (to Margaret Beckett: 'Would you like a nibble of my mace?') and Blair's impatience (on Roy Hattersley: a 'fat, pompous bugger')." -- Andrew Neather *London Evening Standard* "One of the great strengths of this ... very readable and enjoyable book is Turner's use of the telling vignette. An early one is the story of how Major, a few weeks after becoming PM, crossed the floor of the Commons to kneel beside the old leftie Eric Heffer, who was obviously dying but had left his sickbed to vote against Britain's involvement in the first war against Saddam Hussein. This sweet and most un-Thatcherite gesture provoked applause in the House, a bipartisan and possibly unprecedented breach of protocol... Reading *A Classless Society* is like a safari through vaguely familiar country, illuminated by a shrewd, fair-minded guide with an elephantine memory." -- Matthew Engel *Financial Times* "A tremendous book ... takes you there, and reminds you of the taste and feel of those times ... proves beyond doubt that the Nineties were a very important decade. One day, there will be lots of books about this period. I suspect that the first may well be the best." -- Dan Atkinson, co-author of *The Gods That Failed* *Mail Online* ***** "The field of instant history now attracts some of this country's liveliest and most intelligent writers ... Alwyn W. Turner ranks high among them: ravenously inquisitive, darkly comical and coolly undeceived... Turner is a master of the telling detail... His research is phenomenal. There seems to be no haystack through which he has not rummaged in search of every needle... Turner has a talent for zooming in and out from the general to the particular and back again. This means he is able at one and the same time to see both the wood and the trees... *A Year In Provence*, *Squidgygate*, the *Chippendales*, *Cool Britannia*, *Black Wednesday*, *Swampy*, Robert Maxwell, 'Something of the Night'; Alwyn W. Turner conjures them all up, as vivid and eerie as a dream." -- Craig Brown *Mail on Sunday* - 'Book of the Week' "Excellent" -- D. J. Taylor *Independent* "Ingenious... valuable and entertaining... Turner's compellingly readable account of a decade that we ought to remember as if it was yesterday reminded me of plenty I had forgotten. There are details here that will bring

a warm rush of nostalgia or make you groan with embarrassment. And beneath this teeming surface of telling details there is a profound analysis of the broader themes of the decade before the one before this. This 600-page history of the 1990s manages to be a page-turner. It also weighs less than a 1990s mobile phone." -- David Stenhouse Scotland on Sunday "His many-tentacled frame of reference is staggering... Scarcely a paragraph goes by without a killer detail or illuminating anecdote... the value of this book lies, above all, in the extraordinary amount of material it synthesises. It's easy to see it becoming still more essential as time goes on." Metro "Detailed and expansive... readable and accessible to a degree that may make the sniffier critics suspicious... this is a diverting book that induces a kind of nostalgia for those times without a jot of desire to relive them. On almost every page, you encounter a name from the past with the evocative twang of an old pop song or TV theme, be it Nigel de Gruchy, Swampy or the Maastricht Treaty." -- Stuart Maconie New Statesman "Like his previous histories of the Seventies and Eighties, *A Classless Society* is an extraordinarily comprehensive work. Turner writes brilliantly, creating a compelling narrative of the decade, weaving contrasting elements together with a natural storyteller's aplomb... engaging and unique." -- Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting* and *Skagboys* Daily Telegraph "This was the decade dominated by Sir John Major and his Tory government's slow walk to electoral annihilation: a time of rows over Europe and over traffic cones, of a political promise to restore Victorian values and then a rash of Westminster sex scandals. It was the decade of New Labour's gilded rise... Yet these developments, Alwyn Turner argues compellingly, were not the point of Britain's fin de siècle. What mattered was happening elsewhere... meticulously and magnificently described." The Economist "Tremendous! His judgements on Blair and Major are brilliant. The conclusion, on the gap between the meritocratic instinct of both compared with the anti-establishment tone of the decade, is masterly. The book deserves to become a classic" -- Edwina Currie "Excellent ... this trilogy is about the most authoritative account of the late 20th century as you are likely to get." Choice Magazine "I was captivated, almost smothered, by the incessant flow of facts, opinion and conclusion. Turner, as he proved in the other two books, can sew events together seamlessly... This is a wonderful panorama of the 1990s, as fluid as a mountain stream with encyclopedic ripples, a strict adherence to the facts, and all 600 pages as readable as a letter from your mother." -- Illyd Harrington Camden New Journal "Describes, with sanity and a light touch, more or less everything that took place between Thatcher leaving Downing Street and Nick Bateman's departure from the Big Brother house." -- Leo Robson Evening Standard - 'Books of the Year' "[Turner has] immense gifts as a chronicler and historian - as a first take on a decade whose wounds remain partially open, this is essential reading." Daily Telegraph - 'Books of the Year' "Lively and illuminating ... To read Turner's book is like looking back over the recent past through a new set of eyes." -- John Preston Daily Mail - 'History Books of the Year' "Turner is at his strongest when scrutinizing what he feels became the growing interdependence between politicians and the media." -- K. Biswas Times Literary Supplement "To Alwyn W. Turner this was a decade of adaptation and realignment, in which the British began to acclimatise themselves to a series of moral and behavioural shifts, technological revolutions and a brand of politics in which 'managerialism' had kicked ideology into touch... His eye for the salient quotation is horribly acute." -- D. J. Taylor Prospect

About the Author

ALWYN W. TURNER is the author of *Crisis? What Crisis?* Britain in the 1970s and *Rejoice! Rejoice!* Britain in the 1980s, both published by Aurum Press. An acclaimed writer on post-war British culture, his other books include *The Biba Experience*, *Halfway to Paradise: The Birth of British Rock* and *My Generation: The Glory Years of British Rock*.

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