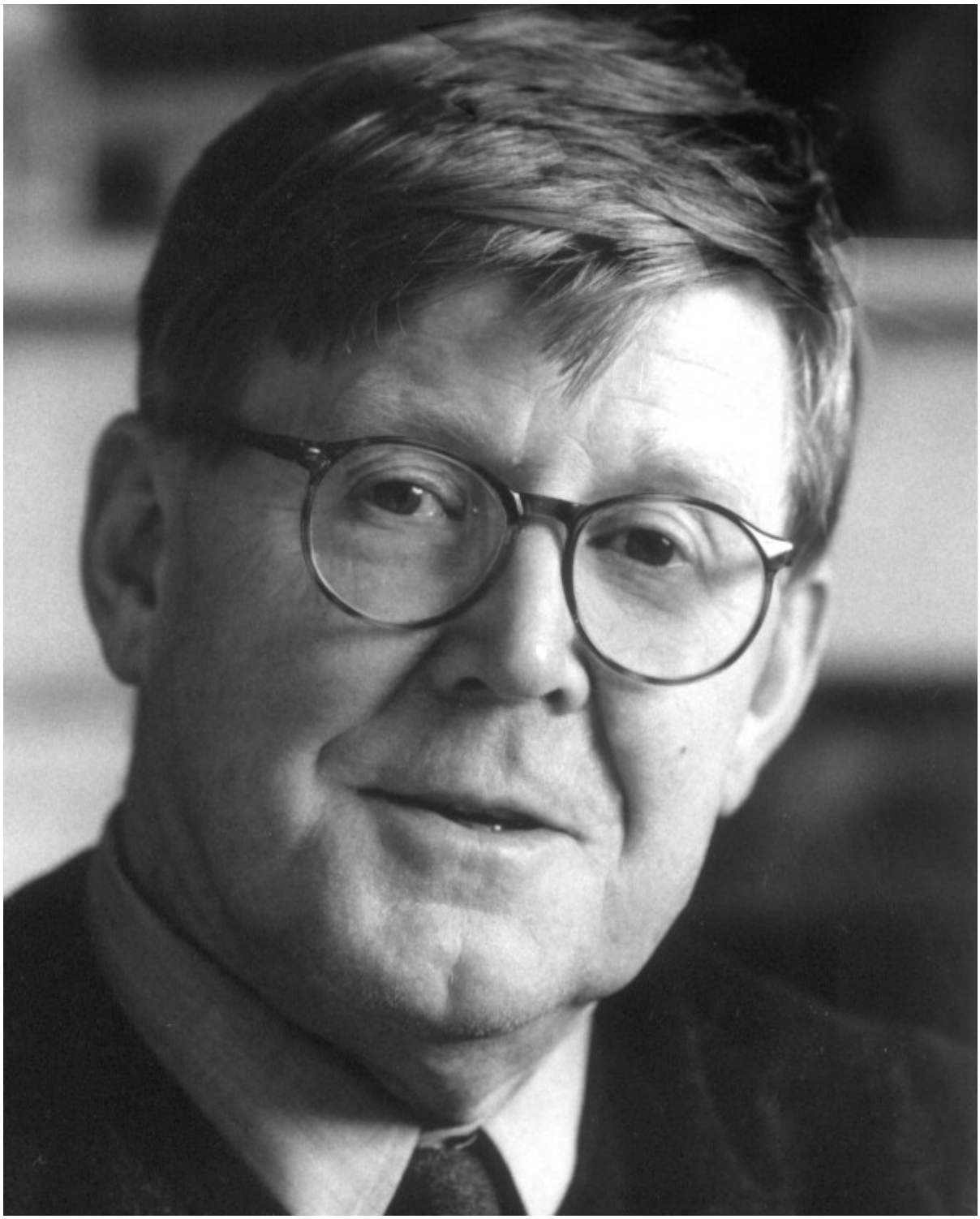
ALAN BENNETT’S SATIRE – THE NATIONAL TRUST AND HERITAGE



I am hearing a lot about Alan Bennett’s new play “People”, currently running at the

National Theatre in London [Link]

The setting is where he grew up – south Yorkshire UK, in a run down country house facing an uncertain future.

What are it's upper crust owners going to do to make ends meet? Sell off the house and family silver? Clean it up and put it on show – staging a slice of English heritage? Presented by the National Trust? – Britain's "charity that works to preserve and protect historic places and spaces – for ever, for everyone". Or even rent it out as the setting for a porn movie? – there's always a demand for characterful locations! Far fetched? Alan Bennett points out that the National Trust has actually produced a mobile app to accompany a tour of Soho, London's red light district – and the subject matter is rarely architectural.

The man from the National Trust – come to assess the possibilities of staging the past

In a frank commentary that introduces the play and which also appeared in the *London Review of Books* [Link], Bennett shares his concerns about the heritage industry.

“Some plays seem to start with an itch, an irritation, something one can’t solve or a feeling one can’t locate. With *People* it was a sense of unease when going round a National Trust house and being required to buy into the role of reverential visitor.”

“Reverential visitor” – my point that it is so much now a matter of *mode of engagement* … between past-and-present. Actuality.

“I imagine the Trust as entirely without inhibition, ready to exploit any aspect of the property’s recent history to draw in the public and wholly unembarrassed by the seedy or the disreputable …”

Simon Jenkins, among others [Link] [Link], complains of Bennett’s elitism in *the Guardian* [Link]:

Bennett is clearly a misanthrope. He writes of public access to great houses with the disdain of a Waugh or Wodehouse. He admits in his introduction to the play to “some authorial sympathy” with the elitism of Bevan, who asks: “What is the worst thing in the world? Other people. P-S-T: People Spoil Things.” Dorothy (owner of the country house) exults: “No people! I like the sound of that.” …

Nor is everyone blessed with a Courtauld degree and a

mental catalogue of English artists and craftsmen. For many people, visiting an old house is a puzzling introduction to an alien world; a voluntary, paid-for act of self-education. They appreciate being helped across the barrier dividing modern audiences from England's aesthetic and social history. Tourism is the most extensive adult education in the land. I cannot see the virtue in deploring it.

As Lumsden, the (man from the National) Trust explains, gone are the days of "aspic … red ropes … Do Not Touch signs … everything in its place". *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey* have resulted in "the scullery and the still room being as important as the drawing room". Lumsden exults over the discovery of a cupboard of chamber pots, in which is preserved the urine of Kipling, Shaw, Hardy and Asquith. "We cannot halt time," he says, "but we can put it on hold … I can almost smell it." Even Dorothy (the house's owner) is told that she should remain in situ, a human metaphor of English history in all her moth-eaten glory, "enthroned among your treasures". She is "part of the story" even if, as she admits, "South Yorkshire is not conducive to anecdote".

This is all a hilarious spoof on the Trust's efforts to make houses seem less like mausoleums. But the challenges are real, and Bennett's critical standpoint obscure. He derides the "stabilisation of decay" involved in not replacing tatty furnishings, "gnawed by mice and wet by generations of dogs". He derides the political correctness of chopping down trees to reveal the pit cottages across the park. But what is to be done? The march of decay can easily take over, degenerating old buildings and landscapes into Ozymandian "trunkless legs of stone" in a George Osborne business park. Conserving them involves endless choices.

Do you open the curtains at Hardwick and risk damage to the ancient tapestries? Do you reinstate an interior after a fire, as at Uppark, or leave it scorched and empty, as at Seaton Delaval? Do you replicate half an Axminster at Kingston Lacy so people can walk on it, or leave the old one intact and roped off? Should the Tudor garden at Lyveden be reinstated, as at English Heritage's Kenilworth, or left a ghostly mound in a field? Should cycling enthusiasts be allowed to ride penny farthings at Snowshill, even if a few get

battered in the process?

Alan Bennett offers no answers and clearly finds the topic of heritage and the past-made-for-the-present perplexing. But he does offer very sharp and amusing satire.

I like satire because it's serious humor: not just – let's have a laugh and not take it seriously, but rather –

satire – having a laugh means taking it more seriously!

This is not misanthropy.

Bennett shares his (fond) memories of visits to great houses around Leeds; I completely sympathize with his awkwardness about heritage and the National Trust, and have said as much in this blog [Link] Link].

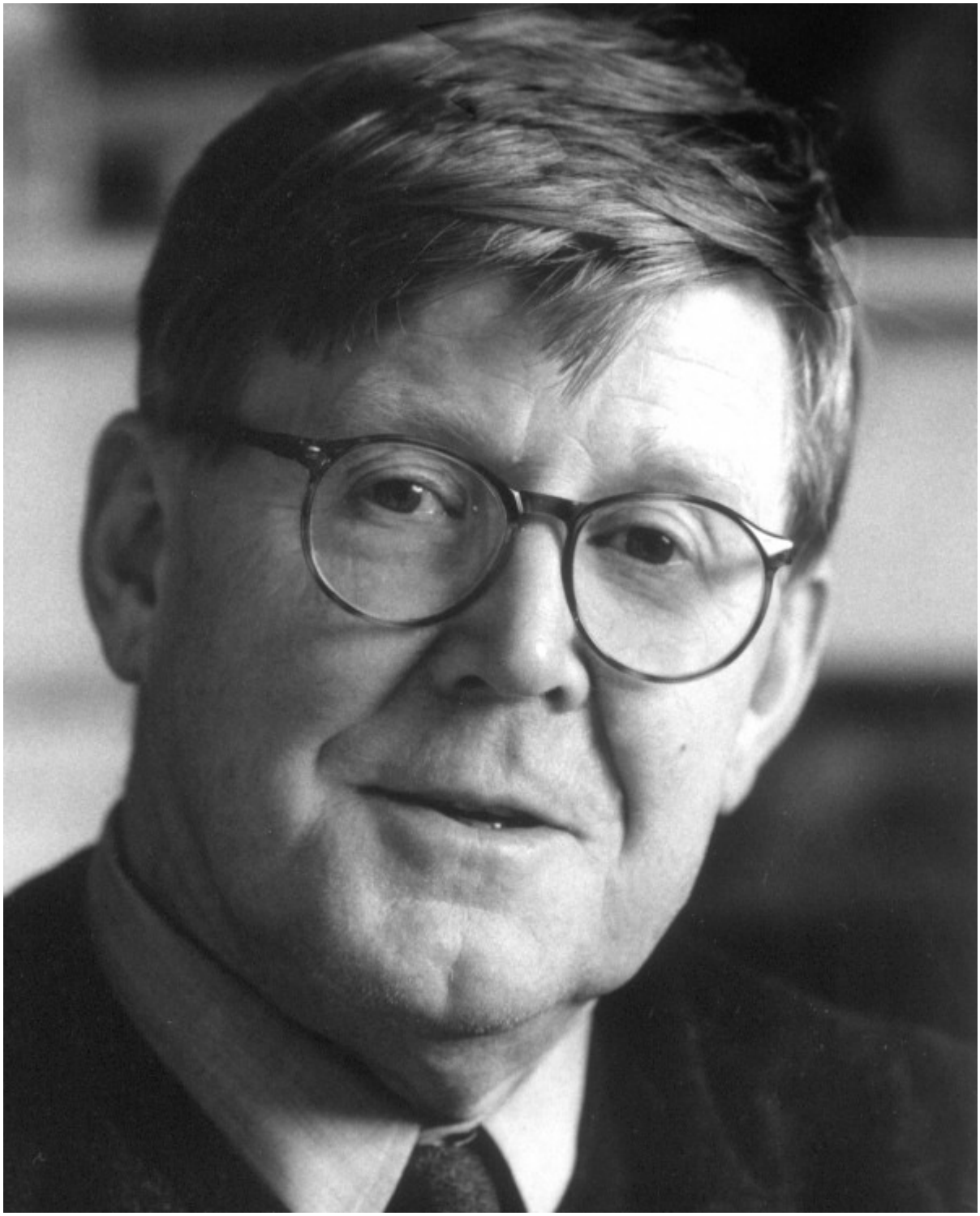
Bennett (I want to call him Alan) puts class politics at the heart of the heritage industry – Whose past? For whom and how? Yes – this should be about *people* (sic), not property (great houses and their contents), but they do always get mixed up in matters of heritage.

His point is broader than heritage, though taking in the resonances of pasts-in-the-present. The topic is a

decay of experience

its transformation into spectacle. Things seemed to have changed sometime in the 1980s, he reckons, when turning human experience ino a commodity took on new force. This is when the heritage industry started to grow exponentially. Thatcher and Reagan instituted virulent forms of liberalism subjecting everything to market forces. Bennett is reflecting upon the consequences, and it is not ever simply a case of authenticity versus fabrication – hence the nuance of satire.

Bennett's writing delves deep into matters (literally) of everyday identity (what are we now?). Much takes the form of (tragic) elegy (consider his many pieces about family in regional north of England). Much of his work draws upon the precise

observations of his diary entries – the recorded anecdotal and everyday. He constantly draws upon details of everyday encounters and reflections, ruminations – such human terms of gossipy incidental detail that I would call an *archaeological sensibility.*

Exactly – life is to be found in the micro details of human encounter – *people*. Bennett's is a critical romanticism.