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– Paris Seen by a Stranger –

I first started reading *Nairn's Paris* whilst drinking a beer in a café called 'Chez Charly' on the rue Raymond-Losserand in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, where I have lived for the past ten years. This isn't the real name of the café but this is what locals call it in homage to 'Charly', a once-legendary previous owner of the place. It isn't quite a dive but it isn't quite as respectable as it seems from the outside, where passing tourists sit on tidy *terrasses* sipping coffee or drinking beer. Inside, on any given evening you are likely to come across a sprinkling of local small-time gangsters, mainly North-African or Portuguese, some elderly prostitutes and a former, now repentant drug dealer from somewhere in Eastern Europe whose cockney accent was acquired during several years doing time in English prisons. It's the kind of place where you could easily imagine Ian Nairn enjoying the atmosphere, necking down a Leffe and giving his shy, diffident but always definitive views on his surroundings.

In fact, as a quick glance at the back end of this book reveals, Ian Nairn had already been around here almost fifty years ago – if not to this particular *zinc*, but to this *quartier*, usually called le Village

Pernety after the nearby Métro station. He called it 'the grey backside of Montparnasse' and came here specifically to look at an obscure but intriguing church, a few minutes' walk away from 'Chez Charly,' called Notre Dame du Travail.

The church is situated on the rue Vercingetorix. Even now, this place is not particularly easy to find – it's certainly a fair way from the classic sights of central Paris. In the mid-1960s, when Ian Nairn was here, the area was low rent and dilapidated, just about to be redeveloped into a new *autoroute* for the coming decade, and so messy and unloved. Nonetheless Nairn found his way here and discovered what he called 'the gayest of all the iron churches in Paris'. He described it in this way because of a very specific architectural fact – the church is extremely unusual for its period (it was finished in 1902) because, as Nairn explains, 'it makes not the slightest concession to Gothic detail . . . Instead, the piers are I-beams, expressed down to the bolts, the struts in between are as thin as technology could make them. It feels like a train shed, but here the space is given direction.'

The point that Nairn is making, in a slightly oblique way, is that with this singular technical detail the architectural style of this church is suddenly at a remove from the late nineteenth century when even the likes of such forward-thinking architects as Louis-Auguste Boileau felt the need to nod to the Gothic past. As such Notre Dame de Travail ('Our

Lady of Work') announces a new pseudo-industrial aesthetic, in line with the needs of the predominantly proletarian worshippers of the parish, and so ready for the twentieth century. It is the architecture which reveals the wider sweep of history. This is typical Nairn – clever, poetic but never showy. He is an excellent teacher.

By the time he wrote this book, Nairn was in his late thirties. By now he was already known to the British public for his opinions and for being opinionated. Although he had started his career writing for the specialist journal *Architectural Review*, he was equally at home in the pages of the *Observer* or on the BBC. He had made his name in 1955 with a special issue of *Architectural Review* called 'Outrage' which attacked the creeping banality of the British landscape – which he called with disgust 'subtopia'. His arguments struck a chord with a non-specialist readership and were soon published as a book.

His big idea was that 'architecture', although all too often conceived by theorists, is actually about daily life, where people really live and how they live. Nairn himself kept his distance from architects, although his work was increasingly influential on them. Instead he travelled, drank and wrote books like this, which were meant to be 'not an invitation to argument but to discovery'.

He is famous for nosing out neglected or forgotten parts of a city – indeed this is what makes

Nairn's London and *Nairn's Towns*, the companion volumes to this book, such marvels. And this is indeed why so many contemporary writers on the city – Iain Sinclair, Jonathan Meades, Owen Hatherley, Will Self: take your pick – admire him. It would be obvious to invoke the term 'psychogeography' at this point – a term often used by Nairn's present-day admirers to justify his relevance. This is not entirely wrong but as you walk around Paris reading this book – which you should – then it is also worth remembering that the term 'psychogeography' was actually coined here in the 1950s by a group of avant-garde fanatics called the *Internationale situationniste*. This group was led by the writer and drinker Guy Debord – who invented the word after eating too much hashish (he ate it rather than smoked it to copy his hero Charles Baudelaire) and who spent a stoned night in the Jardin Des Plantes. Nairn had almost certainly never read Guy Debord, nor heard of the *Situationnistes*. But he shared with them a desire to be intoxicated by the city; they also liked a drink and knew how important it is to be sometimes literally intoxicated *by* and *in* the city.

Like *Nairn's London*, the present book has a double-edged quality: yes, it takes you to places that you would never have guessed existed but it also teaches you to look at familiar sites again, in a way that often reveals new, hidden realities. Here he is, for example, on the Eiffel Tower: 'It must represent

Paris for millions; and it is a well-deserved piece of luck that the Eiffel Tower is very good as well as very tall. Eiffel conceived it with true nineteenth-century gusto – "France will be the only country to have a flagstaff three hundred metres high" – but also with nineteenth-century civility, comprehending and compassionate. Never for a minute does the tower bear down on the city or its visitors; never does it endorse the puniness of man. Instead it enlarges the viewer, gathers him up in its colossal size (. . .) and declares that the sky is not terrifying at all but was meant for our enjoyment along with Pernod and Coquilles Saint-Jacques.'

This is one of the best, and most accurate descriptions I have ever read in any language of how and why the Eiffel Tower was built, and what it actually does in the city. Like most people who live in Paris, I love the Eiffel Tower and, although I almost never go to the park where it lives, I never tire of its presence which is visible almost everywhere in the city from the heights of working-class Belleville to the bourgeois Grand Boulevards. This includes even proletarian Pernety: from the top of a small hill which is Place de Catalogne you can see what a graceful structure it really is, and how it elevates the Paris basin. A good number of the construction workers who actually built the Eiffel Tower – many of them Catalans or Portuguese – lived here and worshipped in Notre Dame de Travail; this is of course the kind

of narrative logic that Ian Nairn so cherished in the cities he admired.

And mostly he does indeed admire Paris. His admiration does not however simply stop at the grand gesture or the boulevards (although he does love it when these two come together: 'This really is the way to announce a city,' he says of the Western approach to Paris from Neuilly, 'inexorably, steady, tree-lined, straight at the Arc de Triomphe, down the Champs-Elysées at the same gradient, back to the river at Place de la Concorde. No variation or deviation whatsoever.')

He is however equally in love with the small, intimate spaces and the interiors of the city. Most importantly he knows how key these places are to the 'atmosphere' of a city. This is a word that is often thrown away by theorists as vague or impossible to define; but for Ian Nairn it is the very essence of a city, and very tangible and real. This is why he used words like 'noble', 'intelligent', 'jolly', 'malevolent', 'melancholy', 'gentle', 'friendly': the buildings and the streets they occupy must have personalities if they are to be admired. He loves architecture that speaks.

In the same spirit he prizes the passage du Caire for the emotions it evokes – 'a very eerie place indeed'. He is keen on the Restaurant Vagenende, still there on the boulevard Saint-Germain, and still more or less 'a complete Art Nouveau room . . .

aided by original posters and a juke box phonograph that happily provides the opposite of romantic illusion with a deafening blare and clanking.' More to the point, Nairn understands instinctively how much the essential paraphernalia of the city contains its soul: so he tells the reader/traveller to watch out for and variously pay attention to butchers' shops, *métro* station names, greengrocers, gendarmes, un-smart cafés, booksellers, the back of a bus, the old-fashioned *pissoir* ('A centralized scallop of convenience . . . what could be more economical, yet more satisfactory?').

As he was writing this book Nairn guessed that not all of these everyday details would be there forever. The original Penguin paperback cover of *Nairn's Paris* is illustrated with a photograph of the author, wearing his trademark rumpled dark grey suit and smiling jauntily, standing on the back platform of what must have surely been one of the last of the buses which trundled around the city giving passengers such a free and open view. The *pissoirs* lasted a decade or so longer, until they were replaced by the grey and useful but also unlovely street conveniences called *sanisettes*.

If you're interested – and I'm pretty sure Ian Nairn would be – the last *pissoir* standing in Paris is on the Boulevard Arago, just outside the walls of the prison of La Santé. Public executions took place here well into the twentieth century. The last public

beheading was actually in 1939, the victim Max Bloch, a burglar and double murderer. The execution took place at dawn and attracted a crowd of several hundred who came to make a party out of it – 'to see a murderer's head pop like a champagne cork', as one eyewitness and gore-hound put it. The guillotine has now gone, the spot where it stood unmarked, but I can testify that the *pissoir* is still in use and a good if gloomy spot to catch the full tangy whiff of an older, earthier Paris.

Nairn was undoubtedly a Romantic, but although he lamented the loss of such picturesque details he was not necessarily a nostalgic. He understood that Paris, far from being a museum-piece, has always been a tough, hard-headed place. 'Kick, and it will kick you back,' he says. He goes on to say that it is also potentially a 'crucifying city', and it is true that the public transport system, the long, monotonous boulevards, the ever-present low growl of traffic can quickly sap your energy and spirit.

The fact is that Paris is still a predominantly nineteenth-century city, and one which still works for the millions who flow through it every day. The fact that this happens mainly in streets that were built and designed over a hundred years ago does not make it a museum, but is simply proof that the original design of the city still works – that 'the great gusto' of the French nineteenth century is alive and visibly present and still shaping the city.

Nairn likes all of this; it is part of what makes a city 'a city' after all. He especially enjoys his underground journey Place de la Concorde to the Madeleine, travelling through the sewers of Paris in a 'big, open boat in a dark tunnel smelling faintly of gas and piss'. The sewers, he concludes, are the supreme achievement of Baron Haussmann, the Prefect of Paris who in the 1850s rebuilt and re-designed Paris. The Baron was criticized in his day by poets, artists and politicians, who nicknamed him 'the demolition artist' but even travelling across from Paris North to South, East to West, you can see what he admired; the straight, unwavering lines, a city brought to collective order, designed for an aerial view, which also happens to be beautiful.

If Nairn is unafraid of and indeed enthusiastic about *les bas fonds* ('the lower depths') of the city, he has however no time for errors in taste. Despite its ubiquitous presence on the Parisian skyline, he dislikes the basilica of Sacré-Coeur, describing it as 'a waste of talent' (the architect was the other-wise distinguished Paul Abadie, a member of the Académie des Beaux Arts no less). His dislike of the building was shared by the Parisian working classes of the 1870s, who resented the fact that it was com-missioned in 1873 as an act of atonement for the Commune, the violent anti-government insurrec-tion of 1871. The builders who came to work on the construction every morning were greeted by the cry

of 'Vive le Diable!' from locals, who sometimes spat on the floor to add an exclamation mark to their disgust. It is still a controversial monument, despised by architectural purists for its sickly pastiche of the Romano-Byzantine style. Nairn is even-handed – there are bits which are not too bad on the interior – but ultimately he is as severe as any Anarchist or Communard in his final judgement on this 'crazily perverse' symbol of an artificial social order.

Nairn himself was always on the side of the working class, whether in France, Britain or anywhere else. He was not one of them however and so, like George Orwell, sometimes cut a gawky and awkward figure when actually in a working-class environment. But also like Orwell, he understood how important working-class culture is in defining a national culture. It is simultaneously the most authentic and, to outsiders, most impenetrable expression of a national identity. As Nairn saw it, it was this culture that was most fragile and under threat from the developers of post-war Britain whose arrogant 'subtopian' designs smashed communities and the delicate ecology that supported them.

The same process was at work in Paris when Nairn wrote this book, even if it was taking a very different shape. The great aim of the planners of post-war Paris was to evacuate the working classes from the city to the *banlieues*, a word which is often translated as suburbs but which in reality carries

none of the arcadian wishful thinking which the word 'suburb' has for English-speakers. The word *banlieue* actually dates back to the eleventh century when the Medieval Latin term *bannileuga* was used to denote an area beyond the legal jurisdiction of the city, where the poor lived on the wrong side of the city wall. These days the Parisian *banlieues*, like those which encircle other great French cities, are mainly broken parodies of city living – tower blocks, dead businesses – which are entirely disconnected from the real life of the cities that they are attached to.

Amongst those who guessed correctly what would happen when its people – *le peuple* so beloved of Parisian mythology – were kicked out of Paris, was the historian Louis Chevalier, a grumpy outsider figure who loved Paris for all the reasons that Ian Nairn did: because of the close relation between its architecture, its history and its people. Chevalier is best known in France as the historian of the 'dangerous classes' of nineteenth-century Paris – the vagabonds, immigrants and alcoholics as well as the 'labouring classes' – and he argued that it was the dynamic relation between these marginal figures that had shaped the real history of the city. Chevalier also wrote a book called *L'Assassinat de Paris* ('The Killing of Paris') in which he lamented the changes which were about to take place in Paris in the late 1960s, driving these vital energies out of the city. Amongst Chevalier's admirers was Guy Debord,

the *situationniste* who was just about to emerge as one of the chief theoreticians of the near-Revolution of 1968, which happened just after Ian Nairn published this book.

These facts are all connected. Nairn was no Marxist revolutionary but as he walked around the city and wrote this book he could sense that the city was on the cusp of great changes. In the Marais, he finds an area which was already marked for the dead hand of gentrification. As far back as 1962, Charles de Gaulle's Minister of Culture, André Malraux, had drawn up a law that identified the area to be preserved as a secteur sauvegardé ('conservation sector'). In the rue Volta, Nairn is still able to find in the Marais its unvarnished, more ancient self. Unexpectedly this is the site of the oldest house in Paris, which you might have expected to have been tarted up for tourists – 'an invitation to see some over-pickled non-entity'. Instead Nairn is charmed by a house which is indeed 'venerable and half-timbered' but also 'shabby, thumbed over, barely recognizable but still supported by teeming life.' He goes on: 'I hope the rue Volta never goes up in the world; demolition would be better than politeness.' These days, happily, the area partly houses a thriving working-class Chinese district.

The fate of Les Halles – the covered food market in the heart of the city – was less fortunate. When Nairn was there, it was already dying and its micro-

world of whores, thieves, peddlers and hustlers, preparing to move on (the sex trade moved next to the rue Saint-Denis along with its fellow travellers). Nairn is sorry to see it go but he is unsentimental: the myth of Les Halles, long established in the folklore of Paris, was by the time he was there already just that – a myth. The traffic problems, clogged streets and sanitary problems made change inevitable. For Nairn the real issue was what would come next.

The answer is not much. These days Les Halles is a vast underground shopping mall and the neighbouring *quartier* Saint-Merri dominated by the bullying presence of the Centre Pompidou, which has long since sucked all the energy out of the surrounding streets. La Fontaine des Innocents is still there. This is the oldest fountain in Paris, dating back to 1590, and admired by Nairn for its nymphs which are 'far from allegorical, and full of experience'. Not so innocent at all in fact. In the twenty-first century this is a good place to buy drugs of varying price and quality; the hustler spirit of Les Halles lingers on.

Nairn's real theme was beauty, which made him the implacable enemy of ugliness. This much too applies to his prose; he writes beautifully with light grace and speed. It is as if each architectural vignette here is an attempt to capture that sense of moving quickly around the place. These pieces, like the city itself, when assembled make a whole. It is, as he says, 'a collective masterpiece, perhaps the greatest

in the world'. By this he means that it is not a place for 'individual wonders' despite the Eiffel Tower, the Opéra and all the rest, but detail, accumulated layers of history, and the sense that the practice of daily life here is still an event. 'It is a noble way to live,' he says, 'and it makes a noble city.'

This sounds like a big statement but really it is about simple things done simply but also done well; this much is summed up in an opening aside in this book: 'As a person who drinks quite a lot but can't bear either pretensions or possessiveness, I look for a shabby but clean hotel and a restaurant where the menu is written up daily in near-illegible purple ink.'

Ian Nairn was not simply an iconoclast for the sake of it. He was famously self-taught and claimed not to be an expert on much; but he knew how to read and understand architecture with a forensic eye. It is this combination of learning loosely worn, and visual acuity which make him such an important writer. His opinions, delivered with a nonchalant passion, are still worth listening to precisely because he is not simply being provocative for the sake of it, but is also nearly always right.

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