

## INTRODUCTION

*Lucky Jim* was first published by Victor Gollancz in January 1954. It went through ten impressions in that year, and reached its twentieth by 1957. I myself read it for the first time in the summer of 1955, a long-postponed treat after finishing my BA course in English literature at University College London, where the syllabus stopped well short of contemporary British fiction. I consumed it with exquisite pleasure, and read each succeeding novel by Kingsley Amis as soon as I could borrow it from the public library. (New fiction was beyond my means in those days, and paperback publication lagged years behind the hardback. The first paperback edition of *Lucky Jim* did not appear until 1959, tied to the Boulting Brothers' disappointing film of the novel.)

In 1963 I published one of the first academic articles on Amis's work, subsequently incorporated in my *Language of Fiction* (1966). Since then I have taken down *Lucky Jim* from my bookshelves on many occasions, and skimmed through it or dipped into it for the purposes of teaching or quotation, but it is some time since I reread it carefully from cover to cover. Doing so for the purposes of writing this introduction, I found it to be a rather different book from the one I remembered, and from the one that is described in most surveys of post-war British fiction. It is not so much that I - we - misread the book in earlier years, as that we seem to have screened out some of the elements of which it is composed.

'The novel that changed a generation,' declares the blurb on the back of my present Penguin edition. 'In his hilarious send-up of academic life, Kingsley Amis poked devastating fun at a very British way of life and gave post-war fiction a new and enduring figure to laugh and laugh at.' As far as it goes, this is a perfectly accurate description: *Lucky Jim* is indeed a classic comic novel, a seminal campus novel, and a novel which seized and expressed the mood of those who came of age in the 1950s. But there is more to it than that. *Lucky Jim* is not, for instance, as *continuously* funny as one remembers it being, or as its legend might lead new readers to expect. There are many passages in it where we are not invited to chuckle, or even smile; passages, usually to do with the hero's sentimental education, that are surprisingly serious in tone and import. More about this in a moment. First let us pay due tribute to its comedy.

This derives from two sources, situation and style, and while the comedy of situation is inseparable from the style, the reverse is not always true: the style can provoke laughter on its own. Both, however, depend on Amis's flawless sense of timing: the way he controls the development of an action, or a sentence, to create that combination of surprise and logic that is the heart of comedy. Comedy of situation is exemplified by such memorable scenes as Jim's accident with the bed-clothing at the Welches' and his efforts to conceal the damage, his attempts to deceive Mrs Welch and her son Bertrand on the telephone by disguising his voice, his hijacking of the Barclays' taxi after the College Ball, and his drunken lecture on 'Merrie-England'. All these episodes involve the violation of a polite code of manners and contain an element of farce; they belong to a tradition of British comic writing which goes back through Waugh, Wodehouse, Dickens and Fielding to Restoration and Elizabethan comedy.

The comedy generated by Amis's style was more original, and introduced a distinctively new tone into English fiction. The style is scrupulously precise, but eschews traditional 'elegance'. It is educated but classless. While deploying a wide vocabulary it avoids all the traditional devices of humorous literary prose - jocular periphrasis, mock-heroic literary allusion, urbane detachment. It owes something to the 'ordinary language' philosophy that dominated Oxford when Amis was a student there. It is a style continually challenged and qualified by its own honesty, full of unexpected reversals and underminings of stock phrases and stock responses, bringing a bracing freshness to the satirical observation of everyday life. The italics in the following quotations from the opening pages are mine:

He'd found his professor standing, *surprisingly enough*, in front of the Recent Additions shelf in the College Library ...

To look at, *but not only to look at*, they resembled some kind of variety act ...

He and Welch might well be talking about history. At moments like this Dixon *came near to* wishing they really were.

'... and the resulting confusion ... my word ...' *Quickly deciding on his own word*, Dixon said it to himself...

'Don't laugh at me if I say I think the Board did a better job than they knew when they appointed you,' *He hadn't wanted to laugh then, nor did he want to now*. What would she be wearing this evening? *He could just about bring himself to praise anything but the green Paisley frock in combination with the low-heeled, quasi-velvet shoes.*

'In considering this strangely neglected topic,' it began. *This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what?*

The last quotation is Jim's private interrogation of his own scholarly article, on the publication of which his professional future depends.

*Lucky Jim* was the first British campus novel (as distinct from the Varsity novel, about the goings-on of young people at Oxbridge) - the first to take as its central character a lecturer at a provincial university, and to find a rich seam of comic and narrative material in that small world. According to Amis himself, the

original inspiration for the novel was a glimpse of the Senior Common Room at what was then University College, Leicester, in 1948, when he was visiting Philip Larkin, who was a librarian there:

I looked around a couple of times and said to myself, 'Christ, somebody ought to do something with this.' Not that it was awful - well, only a bit; it was strange and sort of *developed*, a whole mode of existence no one had got on to from outside.

Thus is the genesis of *Lucky Jim* recalled in Amis's *Memoirs* (1991); but he put the story about Leicester into circulation a long time before, perhaps to deflect attention from University College, Swansea, where he taught from 1949 to 1961, as a possible source for the novel. In any event, *Lucky Jim* certainly started something, a distinctively British version of a kind of novel that had hitherto been a peculiarly American phenomenon. My own novels of university life, and those of Malcolm Bradbury, Howard Jacobson, Andrew Davies et al., are deeply indebted to its example. Jim Dixon's anxiety about his professional future, his dependence on the patronage of a senior colleague whom he despises, is a recurrent feature of the genre, and in Professor Welch ('No other professor in Great Britain, he thought, set such store by being called Professor') Amis drew an immortal portrait of the absent-mindedness, vanity, eccentricity and practical incompetence that academic institutions seem to tolerate and even to encourage in their senior staff (or at least did before the buzz-word 'Management' began to echo through the groves of academe in the 1980s).

But academic politics in the broader sense, intellectual competition and intrigue, taboo sexual relations between staff and students, and the social and educational dynamics of the seminar and tutorial, which are the stuff of most campus novels, British and American, have little or no place in *Lucky Jim*. Its university setting functions primarily as the epitome of a stuffy, provincial bourgeois world into which the hero is promoted by education, and against whose values and codes he rebels, at first inwardly and at last outwardly. The longest and most important piece of continuous action in the novel, extending over six chapters and some fifty pages, centres on a ball, a device for bringing characters together that goes back as far as the eighteenth-century novel, and one which might equally well have been associated with some other hierarchical institution, such as a bank or a business.

This brings us to the question of *Lucky Jim*'s historical and sociological significance. In 1954 it was acclaimed as marking the arrival of a new literary generation, the writers of the 1950s, sometimes referred to as 'The Movement' or 'The Angry Young Men'. These were two distinct but overlapping categories. 'The Movement' was a school of poetry, of which Philip Larkin was the acknowledged leader, and to which Amis himself belonged, along with other academics like John Wain, Donald Davie and D. J. Enright. The anthology that launched them was Robert Conquest's *New Lines* (1956), and they consciously set themselves to displace the declamatory, surrealistic, densely metaphorical poetry of Dylan Thomas and his associates with verse that was well-formed, comprehensible, dry, witty, colloquial and down-to-earth. Several of them besides Amis also wrote novels that cultivated the same qualities. Philip Larkin, for instance, whom Amis met and befriended as a student at Oxford, had published *Jill* in 1946 and *Girl in Winter* in 1947, though without making much impression on the reading public. The first of these novels anticipated *Lucky Jim* in having a hero of humble origins ill-at-ease in a university milieu. Amis showed Larkin an early draft of *Lucky Jim* around 1950, took his advice about cutting out superfluous characters (see *Memoirs*) and dedicated the finished novel to him.

The Angry Young Men was a journalistic term, originally put into circulation by a leading article in the *Spectator*, to group together a number of authors and / or their fictional heroes, who appeared on the literary and theatrical scenes in the mid-to-late 1950s, "vigorously" expressing their discontent with life in contemporary Britain. They included John Osborne/Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*), Alan Sillitoe/Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*), John Braine /Joe Lampton (*Room at the Top*) and Kingsley Amis/Jim Dixon. The category was soon stretched to include any interesting new young writer who came along - for example, Colin Wilson, whose existentialist tract *The Outsider* had nothing whatsoever in common with the above named works. Amis himself explicitly repudiated the label of Angry Young Man, but it stuck to him as such things tend to do.

Although these writers 'arrived' in the 1950s, their education and careers had in many cases been delayed or interrupted by the Second World War, and their formative years were really the 1940s. If one looks carefully at the text of *Lucky Jim* it becomes clear that it is a novel *about* the 1940s, and distinctly under the shadow of the War. Jim's oppressively keen student Mitchie is an ex-serviceman 'who'd commanded a tank troop at Anzio when Dixon was an RAF corporal in Western Scotland'. Jim keeps his lecture notes in an old RAF file, and visualizes the streets and squares of London by 'remembering a weekend leave during the war'. Even Welch, in an unwonted display of compassion, remarks that 'It's only to be expected, after a war' that young men should find it difficult to settle into a job.

No dates are specifically mentioned in the text. It cannot be set later than 1951 since a Labour government is in power. Bertrand's remark about their inability to 'pour water on troubled oil' may be a reference to the Persian Oil Crisis of that year. (In his *Memoirs*, Amis attributes this witticism to Dylan Thomas, and accuses him of having rehearsed it in order to impress a bar-room audience of university staff and students at Swansea.) In that case the action would be taking place in the summer term of 1951, but we know that Amis was working on the novel earlier than that. The point is that although it was published when the Tory government elected in 1951 was well into its stride, encouraging consumerism and free enterprise, the atmosphere of the novel itself is clearly that of socialist, 'austerity' Britain in the 1940s, when a young university lecturer might plausibly possess only three pairs of trousers, live in a lodging house, surrendering his ration book to his landlady, not even dream of owning a car, and keep anxious

count of his cigarette consumption, not on health grounds, but financial ones.

By the same token, the lifestyle of the Welches has a quality of the pre-war bourgeoisie. They live in a house that boasts a *music-room*, and have *maidservants*. (This degree of affluence, untypical of a professor of history at a provincial university, is explained by attributing a private income to Mrs Welch.) The two Welch sons, the 'bearded pacifist painting' Bertrand and the 'effeminate writing' Michel, seem in many ways hangovers from pre-war Bohemia. Indeed Bertrand's pacificism is hardly consistent with the Toryism he expounds in his political arguments with Jim. For his part, Jim's socialism is not ideologically sophisticated: 'If one man's got ten buns and another's got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns.' It is not entirely surprising that once progressive politics became trendy, as they did in the 1960s, Kingsley Amis and his heroes turned against them (see his 1967 essay, 'Why Lucky Jim Turned Right'); indeed, in Jim's tacit agreement with Beesley on the decline of educational standards" one can already see a premonition of the slogan, 'More will mean worse', that Amis later applied to the expansion of universities. The left-wing stance of *Lucky Jim*, in short, is an emotional, intuitive matter, more concerned with class and manners than with politics as such.

The received wisdom of the 1940s was that the Second World War, the 'People's War', the landslide victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 1945, and the establishment of the Welfare State, with free secondary and tertiary education, had genuinely democratized British society, and got rid of its class divisions and inequalities for good. But to many young people who grew up in the post-war period, and benefited from the 1944 Education Act, it seemed that the old pre-war upper classes still maintained their privileged position because they commanded the social and cultural high ground. For myself and many others, it was doing National Service in the peacetime army that opened one's eyes to this fact. For Jim Dixon, it was taking up a university post at a time when provincial universities were all mini-Oxbridges, aping and largely staffed by graduates of the ancient universities.

Jim is ill-at-ease and out of place in the university because he does not at heart subscribe to its social and cultural values, preferring pop music to Mozart, pubs to drawing rooms, non-academic company to academic. Looking into the face of a not particularly attractive barmaid while fetching a drink for Margaret, 'he thought how much he liked her and had in common with her, and how much she'd like and have in common with him if she only knew him.' He feels a fraud as a teacher. His students 'waste my time and I waste theirs'. Why did he take up this uncongenial profession in the first place? He gives a revealing answer when Beesley asks him this very question: 'feeling I'd be no use in a school and so on'. When he loses his university job, however, Jim resignedly prepares' to take up schoolteaching (at his own school) as if there were no alternative. A huge proportion of first-generation humanities graduates in the 1940s and 50s went into educational careers not because they had a vocational call, but because entry to the other liberal professions - administrative civil service, the foreign service, law, publishing, etc., was still controlled by the public-school-Oxbridge-old-boy network. They were the ideal readers of *Lucky Jim*.

Nowhere is Jim's scorn for the protocol and pieties of the academic life expressed more pungently than in his private commentary (already quoted in part) on the scholarly article he is hoping to publish.

Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. 'In considering this strangely neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defiled and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. 'Let's see,' he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: 'oh yes; *The Economic Effect of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485.*'

The note of self-accusation in this passage is crucially important. For most of the novel's action, Jim's rebellion against bourgeois values and institutions is purely mental, or physically expressed only through the pulling of grotesque faces when he thinks he is unobserved. His desire to take violent action against those who oppress him is discharged in harmless private fantasies of a childish nature (though no Jess funny for that) - plunging Welch feet first into a toilet bowl, beating him about the head and shoulders with a bottle, pushing a bead up Margaret's nose,' etc. After one such fantasy, Jim sadly reflects that, 'He'd never be able to tell Welch what he wanted to tell him, any more than he'd ever be able to do the same with Margaret.' The first occasion on which Jim's inner and outer speech exactly coincide comes after he fights Bertrand and succeeds in knocking him down.

The bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation, Dixon thought. 'You bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation,' he said.

After this, Jim's fortunes begin to improve, in spite of deceptive appearances to the contrary. In his drunken lecture on Merrie England he again, expresses, albeit involuntarily, his true self; and though he gets the sack in consequence, this turns out to be a liberation. Shortly afterwards he is liberated "from his emotional bondage to Margaret. He is rewarded with the job, and the girl, of his dreams.

Several critics have perceived a fairy-tale buried in the deep structure of *Lucky Jim*, in which Jim is the Frog Prince, Christine the Princess, Gore-Urquhart the Fairy Godmother, and Margaret the Witch. But Jim's relationship with the two women is more subtle and complex than that analogy suggests. It is the most serious strand in the novel, and is pursued with particular attention in the chapters leading up to Jim's fight with Bertrand. The character of Christine, admittedly, rarely rises about her archetype, the blonde, beautiful, virginal

yet voluptuous object of male desire, and the conversations between her and Jim are often embarrassingly banal. The dark, skinny, neurotic Margaret is much more interesting. Her claim on Jim's emotional loyalty is analogous to the university's claim on his professional allegiance. Just as he goes through the motions of being a university teacher, knowing he is in bad faith, but unable to do anything about it, so he feels bound to go through the motions of being Margaret's partner, even though he has no desire, and hardly any affection, for her. When he finally brings himself to tell her this, candidly, in Chapter 16, she throws a fit of hysterics, then apologises: 'you were absolutely right, saying what you did. Much better to clear the air like that. I just behaved like a perfect idiot.' This would seem to release Jim honourably from any further responsibility for Margaret, freeing him to pursue the promising intimacy he established with Christine on the night of the Ball. Yet he remains perversely in Margaret's thrall. Shortly afterwards Bertrand angrily accuses him of trying to entice Christine away from himself. Jim stands up to this bullying; but when Christine and Margaret come into the room this passage of highly significant introspection occurs:

He looked at Margaret and an intolerable weight fell upon him.

He knew now what he'd been trying to conceal from himself ever since the previous morning [Margaret's hysterics], what the row with Bertrand had made him temporarily disbelieve: he and Christine would not, after all, be able to eat tea together the following afternoon. If he was going to eat that meal with any female apart from Miss Culler [his landlady], it would be not Christine, but Margaret. He remembered a character in a modern novel Beesley had lent him who was always feeling pity moving in him like sickness, or some such jargon. The parallel was apt; he felt very ill.

It is part of Jim's loathing for all high-cultural affectation that he will never admit, even to himself, to remembering the names of the books and authors he has read. But there is little doubt that he is recalling here Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). The closest parallel to the simile cited by Jim actually occurs in Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), where 'a prick of desire disturbed him [Pinkie Brown] like a sickness.' But it is in *The Heart of the Matter* that the hero is dominated and finally destroyed by the emotion of pity. The word 'pity' occurs scores of times in the text, often in similes like the one half-remembered by Jim Dixon (e.g., 'pity smouldered like decay at his heart'). When he was a B. Litt. student at Oxford, between 1947 and 1949, Amis was commissioned, rather improbably, by an Argentinian university to write a book on Graham Greene. The project came to nothing, and one may infer Amis's opinion of his potential publisher by the fact that the academic charlatan, X. S. Caton, who plagiarizes Jim's article, disappears to a chair in Argentina. But it is certain that Amis would have been reading extensively in Greene, and would have read *The Heart of the Matter* on its publication with particular attention, when his own first novel was in gestation. It is hard to think of two modern novelists who have Jess in common than Kingsley Amis and 'Grim Grin' (as Greene's name is travestied in Amis's *I Like It Here*). But that of course is the point. In the late 1940s Greene was probably the most highly esteemed living British novelist, and the success of *The Heart of the Matter* put a seal on his reputation. He was precisely the kind of figure that a young aspiring writer might measure himself against and try to displace, or at least differ from. *Lucky Jim* is a comic inversion of the tragic *The Heart of the Matter*. Amis's hero acquires happiness and good fortune by throwing off the pity and guilt that destroys Greene's Scobie. (It is worth noting perhaps that though, like most critics, I refer to Amis's hero affectionately and familiarly as Jim, he is actually referred to throughout the text by his surname, as is Greene's.) Many phrases describing Scobie's feelings towards his shrewish wife would apply equally well to Jim's; feelings towards Margaret: 'pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion'; 'the terrible impotent feeling of responsibility and pity'; 'he was bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness'. Even that quintessentially Greeneian sentence, 'He felt the loyalty we all feel to unhappiness, the feeling that this is where we really belong', seems applicable to as he resumes his joyless association with Margaret. Margaret herself is surprisingly honest, even generous, in this scene, heightening the perversity of Jim's renunciation of Christine:

'You'd have much more fun with her than you ever had with me.' 'That's as may be. The point is that I've got to stick to you . . . ' 'I don't hold with these renunciations. You're throwing her away for a scruple. That's the action of a fool.'

This time, a minute or two went by before either spoke. Dixon felt that his role in this conversation, as indeed in the whole of his relations with Margaret, had been directed by something outside himself and yet not directly present in her. He felt more than ever before that what he said and did arose not out of any willing on his part, nor even out of boredom, but out of a kind of sense of situation. And where did that sense come from if, as it seemed, he took no share in willing it?

It comes, of course, from Jim's conscience, from a kind of pale, secularized version of the self-sacrificing Christian ethic that is overdeveloped in Greene's Scobie, and a fear of transgressing its imperatives. As Jim says later to Christine, 'I'm sticking to Margaret because I haven't got the guts to turn her loose and let her look after herself, so I do that instead of doing what I really want to do, because I'm afraid to.' What happens subsequently is that Jim is freed from his self-imposed loyalty to unhappiness by two developments in the plot. First, he is liberated from an unsatisfying career in education by Gore-Urquhart's offer of a job as his private secretary - a post doubly desirable because it entails living in London, where Jim longs to be, and because it is coveted by Bertrand. It is, however, worth no more in salary than Jim's university lectureship, and will be less secure than school-teaching, so Jim's ready acceptance is a sign of a new willingness to accept risk in his life. Secondly, he is redeemed from his emotional thralldom to Margaret by discovering, via Catchpole, that she faked the suicide attempt that originally bound him to her in a relationship of guilt and pity. Whereas Scobie's inability to reconcile the responsibilities he feels towards his wife, his mistress and God, lead to his suicide, the discovery

that Margaret had no intention of committing suicide releases Jim from his paralysis. What he has always believed - that nice things are nicer than nasty ones - he now at last acts upon. 'For the first time in his life he felt that it was no use trying to save those who fundamentally would rather not be saved.' He determines to back his luck - and Christine's:

Christine's more normal, i.e. less unworkable, character no doubt resulted, in part at any rate, from having been lucky with her face and figure. But that was simply that. To write things down as luck wasn't the same as writing them off as non-existent or in some way beneath consideration. Christine was still nicer and prettier than Margaret, and all the deductions that could be drawn from the fact should be drawn: there was no end to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones.

Is this contrast drawn between the two women sexist? Of course it is! So was most fiction written by men in the 1950s, or indeed at any other time, judged by 1990s standards of what is Politically Correct. The real objection to the characterization of Margaret is not that she is portrayed as hysterical, deceitful and sexually frigid, for it would be absurd to pretend that such women have never existed, but that the behaviour in which she manifests these traits is in one important respect rather implausible. I refer to her double deception of Jim and Catchpole over her faked suicide attempt, entailing the forging of a doctor's prescription. Like the sudden intervention of Gore-Urquhart with his job-offer, this discovery works in narrative terms only because it occurs in a comic novel, because we want to believe in it, because we want the hero to be released from his enchantment and find happiness. Margaret's story is potentially tragic, but it is not told here (it was to be told many times, and powerfully, by women novelists). Perhaps the ethical pragmatism finally embraced by Jim Dixon can only be sustained if the subject enjoys good luck. 'Nice things are nicer than nasty ones', is not much of a consolation for or defence against disease, madness, addiction, depression and death. As Kingsley Amis allowed these nasty things to impinge more and more on the world of his later novels they became progressively darker, to the disappointment of many readers of *Lucky Jim*, but also deeper.

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