

Postcards from the Edge

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For a small minority of people the shipping forecast on BBC radio is precious information, a vital coded message that shapes the course of the working day (or night) for those whose lives and livelihoods are harnessed to the weather at sea. For many others its meaning rests somewhere beyond the real wind and rain, away from the low visibility and threatening swell, in a landscape of the imagination. Here it is intimately linked to a sense of Britain, or rather to the romantic British Isles, a mythical place that ignores national boundaries, existing more as a kind of mirage; a group of islands floating in the ocean of collective memory, a product of half-remembered geography lessons, seaside holidays and old maps and guide books. For most of us the forecast's sea areas are commonplace yet their actual locations remain unfamiliar. Instead the names: Dogger, Viking, German Bight, Faeroes, are imbued with a seafaring drama, with conflict; they suggest the unremitting challenge of a sea that encloses us, that symbolically protects and isolates the old island nations, battered but surviving.

There is no doubt that the shipping forecast's mesmeric voice and timeless rhythms are buried deep in the public consciousness. But why is it so special and why does it play such an important role in defining this imaginary map of the nation? Part of the attraction must be that in an age dominated by technology and miniaturisation, one increasingly controlled by the gentle tap of the keyboard and the flicker of the screen, the forecast stirs our residual contact with the sublime, our fading sense of epic scenarios, places where great, life-threatening forces are continually unleashed and where nature's vengeful power always hovers on the horizon. We automatically sketch in familiar images and details: massive ships; great sawing hulls crashing against waves; small trawlers tossed helplessly; dripping oilskins; shouts of alarm; patterns of resilience, strength. And then perhaps calm, awe inspiring vistas of tranquility and light. Pure Melville, through the filter of Hollywood and TV advertising.

The shipping forecast is now a gift for our image saturated imaginations but the key to unravelling its spell lies more in the nature of radio itself. Radio can achieve a kind of dramatic intimacy in the home that will always be beyond the reach of television. A radio voice can whisper through a darkened room, lull you to sleep; it can breathe images straight into your head. In contrast to the impersonal, intrusive glare of television, radio is often characterised as a 'companion' or 'friend', talking as you get on with the daily routine. The effect of the shipping forecast rests on this intimacy, balancing on this direct line to the imagination. And for those of us safely ashore its messages from 'out there', its warnings from a dangerous peripheral world of extremes and uncertainty, are reassuring. It has been said that "the best place to listen to the shipping forecast is in bed (...) with the bed-clothes pulled high and the radio turned low, the promise of a gale at sea is as comforting as the rattle of rain on the window or the howl of the wind in the trees (1)." If it is true that the forecast enhances the comfort most of us feel about 'being home' then this feeling can also be said to extend to a form of national 'belonging'.

The shipping forecast was first broadcast by the BBC in 1926 at a time when radio was beginning to have a profound effect on peoples' perception of a national culture. (2) During the 1920s and '30s radio programmes, and in particular live outside broadcasts ranging from concerts to major sporting events, gave radio listeners, for the first time, an immediate sense of shared national experience. Radio projected the new impression of a tangible national 'community', providing a bridge between the public and private spheres. Relieving feelings of regional isolation and the tedium of humdrum lives, it stimulated a much broader interest in national and international issues. By 1928 audiences for radio programmes often reached 15 million (3) and 'gathering around the wireless' had become woven into the fabric of domestic experience across the country. That the connection between radio's huge audience and its central, intimate role within the family home was a powerful political tool was also quickly understood. In America, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous 'fireside chats' exploited the potential of radio as conversation. Broadcast between 1933 and 1936, they skillfully linked an idea of homespun domestic good sense to the national policies and ambitions of the New Deal, uniting disparate regional interests into a sense of common national purpose.

As Nikos Papastergiadis has said recently: "(...) the focal point of identity and historical consciousness shifts as it stresses a relationship between the home and the nation. The symbols and narratives of the nation can only resonate if they are admitted into the chamber of the home." (4) The shipping forecast is both national narrative and symbol; for seventy years it has given reports on an unstable, volatile 'exterior' against which the ideas of 'home' and 'nation' as places of safety, order and even divine protection are reinforced. In those brief moments when its alien language of the sea interrupts the day the forecast offers to complete the enveloping circle and rekindle a picture of Britain glowing with a sense of wholeness and unity.

Mark Power's own image of the shipping forecast has evolved over the years; from a childhood fascination with these curious clues from the adult world that were delivered like a prayer, or the words of a bed-time story rearranged, to the recognition of its unique place in the constructed, mythic idea of Britain. But for Power the forecast has never lost its strange attraction, and when he first began to take the photographs in this book he wanted to preserve the feeling of mystery and ambiguity, of meaning and understanding always just out of reach. Drawn in particular to the forecast's mapping of both real and imagined space he became interested in photography - with its own unstable relationship to 'evidence' and 'truth' - might negotiate between the two, between fact and fiction. And then, of course, there was the persistent curiosity. The shipping forecast appeals to an idea of geographical space free from current political conflict, complexity and social tensions. But what is actually out there? What visions of the raging sea exist, what glorious, bracing scenes from the 'old country' are played out in these far-flung border areas that cast a metaphorical net around us? Armed with a reporter's instinct for a good story, Mark Power began an investigation that would lead him across the dislocated landscape of British identity and into the corners of his own memory and imagination. The remarkable series of photographs collected here is the culmination of four years work, a sustained windswept journey to the outskirts of Britain and beyond.

Power's plan was to visit every one of the 31 areas of sea covered by the shipping forecast, each defining a sea area of several hundred square miles and all but five containing stretches of coastline. It is here on the coast, along the ragged boundaries of land and sea, that Power's compelling work is focused. There were obvious practical reasons for this, but the artistic, photographic context was a dominant factor. Power's work refers to and extends the tradition of social documentary photography in Britain and for photographers the shoreline, the beach and the seaside town have all traditionally harbored the pageant of British post-war life. Particularly in the 1960s work of the late Tony Ray-Jones (an obvious reference point for Power) the seaside often becomes a bizarre social theatre, a spectacle full of incongruities pinpointing precisely the quaint, surreal character of imperial Britain in decline. (5) Although, in a kind of homage, Power opted for Ray-Jones' preferred means of transport for his project - an old VW camper van - darker and more disturbing elements creep into his account of this peripheral Britain of the 1990s, at odds with Ray Jones' images of 'gentle madness'.

Above Power's beaches storm clouds gather, shadows loom and people seem under threat. Often the pictures appear snatched from war zones rather than coastal resorts; in Portland a helicopter hovers over a 'fortified' beach (plate 8), in Thames smoke billows across a cheerless holiday facade (plate 41); scarred and pitted concrete surfaces and shattered windows bring the forlorn vocabulary of the inner city to remote landscapes and cut sharply into our ideal pictures of sea areas such as Hebrides. In one of Power's most haunting images, from Dover (plate 58) a child becomes part of the rubbish and squalor decorating a massive stone niche, the bare and brutal space forms a pathetic stage on which smeared graffiti is not only a signature of departed players but the sign of Tony Ray-Jones' harmless pageant gone sour.

The sea and sky alone are brooding presences in Power's work. Spare landless images from the pelagic areas open and close the sequence in this book where sea and sky come together in a dense and overbearing exchange. The sea and sky are the shipping forecast's essential elements and in Power's pictures they seem to cast a spell over what takes place ashore. For here, on the land, in picture after picture, life itself appears to have lost its co-

ordinates, movements are disjointed and frenetic, people wander aimlessly or gather in trance-like formation, lonely gazes stare out towards blank horizons. But here, too, with normal social relations abandoned or dissolved into incoherence, children come into their own. Power repeatedly photographs them leaping and cavorting through his sharp angled perspectives. Lost in a play, lost in reverie, the children's freed spirits become a measure of their often bleak, disenfranchised surroundings.

The sense of social dislocation is subtly shifted when Power travels beyond Britain and Ireland to the southerly limits of the shipping forecast's domain, to Trafalgar, Finisterre and Biscay for example, sea areas off the coasts of France, Portugal and Spain. Here it is cultural icons, symbols and rituals that tend to catch the photographer's eye; religious festivals; processions or the elaborate, shrine-like graves of a Spanish cemetery. In these images his view is more conspicuously that of a tourist, evoking, even stressing, a feeling of 'the English abroad'. But in making these signs of cultural difference explicit he also contrives a rude intervention in the catalogue of assumptions that make up the shipping forecast's imaginary map. Ironically the forecast's geographical span is also a symbol of the long-standing connections and relations between British and European cultures, relations that are once again being re-examined, extended and contested as the official barriers are removed and integration within the 'community' of Europe gathers pace. Power's project effectively reinforces the 'inclusion' of Europe within the realm of a particularly British island mythology (other European countries broadcast shipping forecasts for the same sea areas ignoring national boundaries); no longer 'on the horizon' it is grit in the dewy eye of those who still conjure a picture of the green and pleasant land as necessarily separate and independent.

Power's photographs are all titled according to the 0600hrs shipping forecast from that area on the day the picture was made. There is no obvious relation between the weather described in words and the scenes to which they refer, but in their disconnection the words and pictures share a common language, blending the familiar with the incomprehensible and defining the slippery space between fact and fiction, between evidence and understanding in which Power's work operates. The titles also emphasise transience, and the transience of the weather is another over-arching metaphor in the book. Northerly backing southwesterly 6 to

8, occasionally severe gale 9 at first. Showers then rain. Good becoming moderate. We are reminded continually of time passing, of changing moods and conditions, of threats and expectation. This state of impermanence and change is also the social condition witnessed in the images. Abandoned buildings and jerry-built structures, crumbling or recently shored-up defences against the sea, drifted symbols of loss and decay are frequently Power's points of focus. As one sign of a question mark suggests, existence here is uncertain, contingent. Like the patterns drawn in sand it is subject to ebb and flow, the relentless turning of the tide and to social forces beyond its control.

All this sits uneasily beside the soothing tones of the reliable British institution that the shipping forecast has become. In that imaginary place the conditions of continuous change and uncertainty which Power's pictures reinforce are necessarily at a distance. These photographs bring them ashore and uncomfortably closer to 'home'. And yet clearly Power's intention was not to level a social critique or simply expose romantic myth to the coarse texture of reality. His state of mind was tuned primarily to that elusive quality of the shipping forecast that still defies explanation and similarly his images pose questions rather than provide answers. His approach as a photographer is not rigid and analytical, rather his journey appears to us as one of restless observation, he is the discreet onlooker, sensitive to the grand gestures and minor inflections of life as it unfolds before his camera. It is a feature of the work in this book that we are rarely unaware of the photographer's presence, our view is tightly controlled and our sense of equilibrium is never allowed to settle for long before we are pulled in an unexpected direction as Power's square, flat picture plane glides through a rising, falling and twisting trajectory.

Power is a consummate picture maker, expertly bringing every part of the image to bear on his often complex narratives; each shape, shade, outline and figure has a role in the quizzical pattern. It is a measure of his skill in this respect that his photographs often seem like staged tableaux, especially in their arrangement of figures. Power's eye for the position and interaction of figures in his work is uncanny. From the statuesque women who play cricket on a beach in Humber (plates 2 and 17) to the subtle movements of people absorbed in play at the water's edge in Dover (plates 3 and 60), Power uses figures to draw the eye across his

pictures where we discover unnoticed details or new layers of expression. In one beautiful photograph from Lundy (plate 53) a group of boys crawl and step their way across a tangle of wave breaking concrete blocks. Power shows an almost 'scientific' interest in examining the types of movement, gesture and contortion on display, pitting figures against the hard, angular blocks and looming industrial forms on the horizon. His delicate observation, particularly of a boy inspecting a grazed knee, unites the scene in a physical, tactile sense of place. In another wonderful picture from a beach in Tyne (plate 16), a line of figures waver diagonally across the frame under the murky light of an English summer. With their array of predictable props: coats, bags, spades, footballs and umbrellas, Power contrasts the group's absurd, madcap charm with their gloomy setting in a way that suggests a uniquely British comic tradition; this could be a scene described by Tony Hancock or the template for a Monty Python sketch.

In spirit if not in structure this photograph, too, brings Power closest to Tony Ray-Jones' combination of 'sadness and humour'. Picturing the social scene as a whimsical comedy of manners has long been ingrained in British photographic culture. Steeped in a music hall tradition of comic encounters, the work of photographers such as James Jarcho in the 1930s and Bert Hardy in the 1940s and '50s helped to establish a kind of stock visual humour in the repertoire of British photojournalism (Jarcho was also known as a skilled conjurer, ventriloquist and story-teller). But it was Ray-Jones who first brought this tradition to the threshold of surreal fantasy. His example was vital for the next generation of independent photographers, like Power, who emerged in the 1970s and '80s. It would be impossible to understand fully the work of Martin Parr or Anna Fox, for example, or any number of others, without considering Ray-Jones important precedent.

Although he is not a humorist somewhere behind Power's work is an irrepressible giggle. In this book however it is subdued and we can assume that most of the visual jokes and one-liners picked up along the way have been added to the edited-out pile. Only echoes and remnants remain here; a kitsch Star Trek tie, a stuffed bear, or a beached oil can transformed into a grinning fish. Signs and phrases also appear like the remains of some other script, such as the bizarre 'Photographers' Peep-Holes' at a funfair in Wight (plate 38). Mostly

though humour is felt rather than seen at a glance and is clouded by the prevailing ambiguity. Elsewhere in Wight a wind-surfer struggles along a beach (plate 28), the awkwardness of his endeavour somehow given weight by the unlikely group of bulldozers stationed by his side. A laugh might spark from this comparison but it quickly fades, cut short by something troubling and unresolved about the picture. In another image from Wight (plate 4) two people in helmets are silhouetted against white cliffs and a low horizon of wooden breakers; one seems to bow in subjugation to the larger, more alien figure. We can only wonder at the nature of this strange rendezvous on a deserted beach and we don't know whether to laugh or cry, but the image leaves a sinister aftertaste as, like elsewhere in this book, the wit and humour fade to black.

Grotesque and tragic elements often lurk behind farce and at times, like Joe Orton, Power can generate nervous laughter, and occasionally he can't resist wiping the smile off our faces. The photograph of a man's back in Humber (plate 57) is an uneasy mixture of belly-laugh and latent violence; it is both ludicrous and menacing; inexplicable, yet touching a nerve that most of us would recognise. And then, again in Humber (plate 63), Power's camera closes in on two elderly figures, cutting their faces and expressions out of the frame and tilting them slightly out of kilter. We are too close for comfort, we feel party to an intrusion, but Power's body search holds us there to read the details: two clasped and wrinkled hands, a line of fastened buttons, a walking stick and a small label, twice pinned to the raincoat, which reveals the final indignity.

Westerly 7 to severe gale 9, occasionally storm 10, veering northwesterly. Showers. Moderate or good. Implicit in the shipping forecast's story is the possibility of a happy ending, the hope that sunlight will break through the clouds. Towards the end of this book references to light and space begin to appear in Power's catalogue of dislocation. The contrast is distinct and represents a coming to rest for the fragmented narrative of the work and a symbolic end to the photographer's restless searching. These elegiac photographs, for example from Hebrides and German Bight, uncharacteristically match the shipping forecast's promise of a 'fantastic space', and approach the tenor of our modern filmic or TV inspired fantasies. Many contemporary photographers have shut their eyes to such scenes, anxious about straying too

close to an overly sentimental and hollow pictorial tradition that has become the staple of camera clubs everywhere. But these images are much more than this and, in context, are an essential part of Power's parallel story, because as well as denoting a sense of closure they hint at other immaterial, unearthly states and return his shipping forecast to the level of a dream. As the setting sun floods across a beach at low tide (plates 5 and 59), a group of minute figures drift like ghosts into the light. Light dematerialises form and transmutes substance, the beach becomes a liquid mirror and in Lundy (plate 61) another of Power's spirit children performs one last magic dance before nightfall.

Imitations of sleep and death float through Power's final sequence of images, and time evaporates as we contemplate another unknowing uncertainty, that of infinite space. To preserve their tenuous relationship with reality, the locations of Power's photographs are deliberately unspecific. But the site of his concluding image is loaded with significance and has a bearing on everything that precedes it. The picture refers to the literal meaning of Finisterre and the original belief that this was in fact Finis-terre, 'the end of the earth'. Taken in Spain near the town of Santiago de Compostela the image re-conceives the view of pilgrims who, coming to the town for St. James' day, would pass on for several miles to a point on the coast and here they would stare out to sea, towards a horizon they believed to be the edge of the world.

If the overall effect of Power's work is to challenge and confound expectation, his success is also that he has beautifully resolved a personal preoccupation through his chosen medium. Despite their social resonance his photographs are intimately linked to his own memories and obsessions. By plotting a trail of subjective photographic evidence through a collective imaginary map, by setting his images against a fictional landscape borne of public as well as private fantasies about home and nation, he has shifted popular perception towards his own. Although Mark Power cannot deny our radio dreams, having seen this work we will never hear the same pictures again.

(1) Andro Linklater, 'From the warmth of a bed, you can't beat a gale at sea'. Telegraph Magazine, 26 March 1994, p. 30.

- (2) Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, A Social History of British Broadcasting, Vol. 1 1922-1939, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 280.
- (3) Andrew Crisell, Understanding Radio, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 19.
- (4) Nikos Papastergiadis, The Home in Modernity, unpublished essay, 1996.
- (5) Richard Ehrlich (introduction), Tony Ray-Jones, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 1990.