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CROSS CURRENT

# Pootering About

**Peter Morton** reminds us that, a century before Adrian Mole, there was Charles Pooter.

**I**N *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*, the latest of her hilarious fictive diaries, Sue Townsend sends her hero to a ceremony. Too late he discovers that the front of his trousers is stained with dried evaporated milk. He spends the occasion slightly crouched, 'with my hands flat against my thighs, like a man who was about to bend down and pat the head of a small child'. It is yet another of Mole's humiliating moments.

Or, one might say, another 'Pooterish' moment (the adjective is in the Oxford English Dictionary). For as Mole ages, and he is now in mid-life, the more he is coming to resemble his great late-Victorian original, Charles Pooter, the hapless suburban clerk of *The Diary of a Nobody*. Indeed, Pooter experiences an analogous moment at the theatre, when his patent bow-tie falls from the balcony into the stalls below. Fortunately Pooter is bearded; so 'to hide the absence of the tie I had to keep my chin down the rest of the evening, which caused a pain at the back of my neck.'

Originally a serial that appeared in the comic magazine *Punch* in 1888-89, *The Diary of a Nobody* was the creation of the brothers George and Weedon Grossmith. George was then a star of the D'Oyly Carte opera company and took the lead role in many of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas (he was playing in a revival of *The Pirates of Penzance* when the *Diary* appeared); Weedon was a comic actor and, later, a playwright and novelist. Today the *Diary* is their only memorial. Curiously, the first reviews were unenthusiastic – 'a photographic representation of middle-class boredom and horseplay' snarled the highbrow journal *Athenaeum* – which is probably why the Grossmiths avoided any public reference to it afterwards. But it has never been out of print since the book version appeared in 1892, and it has inspired many comic novelists, from Anita Loos and Evelyn Waugh in the 1920s to Keith Waterhouse and Helen Fielding in more recent times.

The months leading up to the Iraq War provide a menacing backdrop to Sue Townsend's account of Adrian Mole's tragi-comic life at Rat Wharf, Leicester. By contrast, in *The Diary of a Nobody* the months between April 1888 and July 1889 are filled exclusively with the private concerns of the people living at The Laurels, Brickfield Terrace, Holloway. Charles and Carrie Pooter are not given to musing on, say, the Feni-



'I seized her round the waist, and we were silly enough to be executing a wild kind of polka when Sarah entered.' April 30th, 1888.

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an bombings or the lessons of the Bloody Sunday riots; nor does the East End's 'autumn of terror' rate a mention, even though the Jack the Ripper murders occurred while the *Diary* was running in *Punch*. Pooter is a man whose breakfast philosophizing focuses on his plate rather than his newspaper: 'I cannot and will not eat cushion of bacon. If I cannot get streaky bacon I will do without anything.'

But that matters little. The *Diary* works on us in the same paradoxical way as Pepys' real diary: the more humdrum the detail, the more mesmeric the effect. The *Diary* is a grab-bag of all the minutiae of English life at the end of the 1880s. I have noted more than two hundred such allusions: a short list might include the heavy use of contemporary slang and songs, the social aspects of bicycling, manicuring, spiritualist séances, smocking, ballooning (an allusion to the terrifying leaps, that summer, from high above Alexandra Palace by 'Professor' Thomas Baldwin, using an umbrella-like parachute), hats like coal-scuttles, 'Aesthetic' affectations (writing in white ink), Christmas cards with surprisingly bold sexual jokes, five-foot long parasols ('I told her it was ridiculous. She said: "Mrs James, of Sutton, has one twice as long;" so the matter dropped'), Pooter's disastrous investment in Chlorates (a sly allusion to the activities of John North, the flamboyant Nitrate King), and the vile weather (the summer of 1888 was atrocious, possibly due to the effects of the Krakatoa eruption of 1883).

More substantially, if one reads between the lines, the *Diary* reveals much about the lower-middle-class English life of that day. It is striking, for instance, how well the Pooters can live on Charles's senior clerk's salary of about £250 a year. They can afford a three-storey terrace for just two people in an inner London suburb, but today the little house near Archway, which may have been the Grossmiths' model for The Laurels, is split into flats. Pooter's working hours do not seem arduous even by modern standards. He has to put in a half-day on Saturdays, but it's acceptable for him to arrive at 9.15am daily. He always lunches out in a restaurant and his half-hour commute between Holloway and the City by horse-bus means he is always home for 'tea' – or 'meat-tea' if there are visitors – by 6.30pm.

Nor do the domestic labours of his wife Carrie



seem too strenuous. She has a daily charwoman as well as Sarah, her live-in general servant, and there are plenty of small tradesmen close at hand eager to supply every service that their economy offered. The Pooters eat and drink more or less what they like: whisky is three shillings a bottle and champagne hardly more, even if it is 'Jackson Frères' from the grocer. Pooter treats himself to the latest consumer gadgets, and for Carrie there is always 'that little costume which you saw at Peter Robinson's so cheap'. And unlike Adrian Mole, squeezed in the rapacious grip of credit providers, their only debt is the piano, the one item being bought on the 'three years' system'.

Certainly, then, there is comfort at The Laurels; but it is not unalloyed comfort, for the Pooters are constantly anxious, and their anxiety arises from class-consciousness. Many novels tell us how the Victorians talked to servants and tradespeople, but the *Diary*, more unusually, records how they talked back, at least to people of Pooter's middling position. 'Not in front of the servants' is important to the Pooters, and Charles is annoyed to be caught 'executing a wild kind of polka' with Carrie during a moment of exultation. We are reminded that the social gap between master and servant was closing and the deference of underlings no longer automatic. 'Oh, you are always complaining,' Sarah tells him. 'And you're always grumbling about your breakfast.' Pooter reports that 'she began to cry and make a scene' but beating a retreat to his bus stop is his only recourse. Sarah is in a sellers' market and she knows it.

Dress is particularly anxiety-making. The Pooters worry constantly about wearing the right clothes, and are mortified when they, or their friends, are wrongly dressed for the occasion. Dress was a supreme signifier of class and status, and every Victorian learned to decode its language. For example, a modern reader is hardly likely to register the fact that the Pooters' friend Cummings turns up once in a self-invented 'half dress', but his combination of frock coat and white tie would have made the readers of the day guffaw. Clothes were expensive to buy and clean, and so were likely to register the first signs that one was slipping down the economic ladder. After a dinner invitation, when the dog licks the polish off Pooter's boots, we hear that 'the walk home was remarkable only for the fact that several fools giggled at the unpolished state of my boots.' This was a world of more social policing than we are used to; a world where street loungers might jeer at you if your status and your clothes were giving out contradictory signals.

The Pooters' social anxiety is exacerbated by their awareness that the mid-Victorian certainties of their youth are starting to dissolve. Was it lady-like for women to smoke, for example? 'Miss Posh ... startled Carrie by saying: "Don't you smoke, dear?" I answered for Carrie, and said: "Mrs. Charles Pooter has not arrived at it yet," whereupon Miss Posh gave one of her piercing laughs again.' We see that, while social norms for women are still nominally defined by men, untoward insis-

tence on this by males of such fading patriarchal authority as Pooter now invites female mockery. But the most frightening and subversive single line in the *Diary*, from Pooter's perspective, is delivered by the ironmonger, Farmerson, at the Mansion House ball. To his riposte, when Pooter expresses astonishment at seeing him there, 'I like that - if *you*, why not *me*?' Pooter can only respond 'Certainly' but confides to his diary, 'I wish I could have thought of something better to say.' But there is nothing he can say. A prosperous retail ironmonger could well afford, in every sense, to patronize a mid-level clerk. It is a painful realization for one who sets such store by his black-coated respectability, and foreshadows the further class upheavals that lay in wait in the Edwardian years.

It may be that the Grossmiths intended to be crueler about the Pooters than we can easily perceive now. For in the 1890s disparaging suburban life was, so the historians James Hammerton and John Tosh have demonstrated, by no means limited to impatient young Lupin Pooter, with his cry to his father: 'I am not going to rot away my life in the suburbs!' For example, the contemporary patrician sociologist C.F.C. Masterman disdainfully described the Pooter class as those who live 'in small, crowded offices, under artificial light, doing immense sums, adding up other men's accounts, writing other men's letters.' Their box-like dwellings are spreading out of London like an encroaching slime mould, a 'gigantic plasmodium', and Masterman shudders at the consequences.

But if the original purpose of the *Diary* was to add something uniquely witty to anti-suburban diatribes like Masterman's, then time has drawn its sting. We still chuckle at the Pooters, whose ineptitude we hope is so much greater than our own, but we also laugh with them, indulgently if a little nervously, since we are not sure how far we want to stand revealed, even to ourselves, as potentially Pooterish. But we are more likely to identify with, than sneer at, the targets: the ineffectual do-it-yourself efforts; the anxieties of entertaining and socializing; the pains and pleasures of friends and relatives; dealing with inept and cheating tradespeople. Reading *The Diary of a Nobody* against Adrian Mole reveals many new, fascinating shifts and fissures in the topography of the British class structure, but also assures us that, in the realm of the private lives of Middle Englanders at least, a mere century is nothing: the more things change, the more they stay the same. ■

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The Laurels, the Pooter residence in Holloway, north London.

