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COMMENT

On Detail in Historical Writing

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Abstract

This Comment considers the role of detail in historical writing, inflected through my own experience of writing 'trade' books for a general rather than specialist readership. I argue for the value of the detail that is slightly recalcitrant, that is more than just flesh on the bones of an argument or evidence marshalled to make a point. Detail is itself a kind of argument and thus, since beauty and elegance in writing derive from economy, a way of making a point without belabouring it. The gratuitous fact can be seductive, suggesting that the world has a randomness and overabundance that can't easily be rounded up into a dataset. Details, in their singularity and idiosyncrasy, point to the capaciousness of human experience. They correct our tendency to fixate on one story, to focus on the eventful at the expense of the marginal, and to invent a false unity of experience that erases social differences. With their obdurate specificity, they can shatter our presumptions about the past. I explore these ideas with reference to modern literature (Flaubert, Chekhov), the Mass-Observation archive and examples from my own work in contemporary cultural history and family history.

Keywords: detail; writing; Mass-Observation; history

In her book *August 1914*, about the first month of the First World War, Barbara Tuchman writes that the Grand Duke Nicholas, Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Russian Army, was so tall that when he established his headquarters in a series of converted railway carriages, his aide pinned up fringes of white paper over the low doorways to remind him not to bump his head.[1] That kind of detail reveals much more than if Tuchman had just noted how tall the Grand Duke was (six foot six). Human life, it tells us, is corporeal. The people we encounter in history books were not disembodied machines for turning motives into actions. They were tall or short, thickset or wiry, ungainly or balletic, taking up space in the world in their own stubbornly singular way.

Tuchman calls her detail-driven method 'history by the ounce'. The value of this kind of detail, for her, is that 'it epitomizes, it crystallizes, it visualizes. The reader can

[1]Barbara W. Tuchman, *August 1914* (1996), 290.

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see it; moreover, it sticks in the mind; it is memorable.'[2] Like Tuchman, I mostly write 'trade' books, for a general rather than specialist readership. Like her, I use detail to fill my writing with the stuff of the world and the evidence of the senses – to make the past quicken on the page.

I think of myself as a writer who is, most of the time, also a historian. Among 'proper' historians I can sometimes feel, as W. H. Auden wrote of being in the company of scientists, 'like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes'.[3] These historians, I imagine, are using detail more systematically than me, as data deployed in the service of a clear methodology. Even Tuchman, that most literary-minded of historians, saw detail as 'corroborative', and believed in excising the most atmospheric detail if it did not fit the narrative she had constructed from the evidence. She cites a detail it pained her to leave out of *August 1914*: Kaiser Wilhelm II's birthday gift to his wife each year was twelve hats, selected by himself, that he then obliged her to wear.[4] My problem is that this is exactly the kind of detail I am drawn to – the one that is slightly recalcitrant, that is more than just flesh on the bones of an argument or evidence marshalled to make a point.

I teach in an English department, and the models for my own writing have often been works of fiction and creative non-fiction. I learned from them that a detail is itself a kind of argument and thus, since beauty and elegance in writing derive from economy, a way of making a point without belabouring it. Through the selection and arrangement of detail, you can redirect the reader's attention, which is naturally drawn to the eye-catching or the obviously consequential. You can make something that seemed peripheral seem suddenly important.

I have also learned how seductive the gratuitous fact can be. The word detail derives from the Latin *talea*, for a twig or cutting. It came into English from the French *détailler*, to cut into pieces (making it a relative of *tailor*, who cuts cloth to size to make clothes). So a detail is a cutting, a little piece lopped off from the whole. I like at least some of the details I use to have this uncorralled quality. I want to suggest that the world has a randomness and overabundance that can't easily be rounded up into a dataset. Details don't always need to substantiate some larger point; they can have a life and a meaning all of their own.

The reality effect

In an essay on 'the reality effect' in modern literature, Roland Barthes argues that modern fiction, from Gustave Flaubert onwards, draws much of its realism from the proliferation of 'useless details'. Flooding fiction with redundant information might seem to be 'a kind of narrative *luxury*', Barthes writes, but it has come to be seen by readers as 'the very signifier of realism … the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity'.[5]

[2]Barbara W. Tuchman, 'History by the Ounce', in *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (1982), 37, 35.

[3]W. H. Auden, 'The Poet & The City', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York, 1962), 81.

[4]Tuchman, 'History by the Ounce', 34, 37.

[5]Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford, 1986), 142, 141.

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Note that the verisimilitude is 'unavowed'. Flaubert allows each detail to speak for itself, without editorialising. Important and unimportant details come at the reader all at once, just as in the chaotic miscellany of our own lives. Take the famous scene at the agricultural fair in *Madame Bovary*, when the roguish landowner Rodolphe leads Emma upstairs to an empty room in the town hall overlooking the public square. As he seduces her, the trite phrases of local dignitaries carry through the window: 'Dedicate yourselves above all else to the improvement of the soil, to good manure, to the development of the various breeds, equine, bovine, ovine, and porcine.' The couple's hands meet and their fingers entwine as the portentous announcements of agricultural awards begin: 'To Monsieur Caron from Argueil, a gold medal! ... For a merino ram ... Use of oilseed-cake ... Flemish manure – cultivation of flax – drainage – long leases – domestic service.'[6]

In one sense, these details symbolise the frittering away of Emma's life in provincial banalities (the added irony being that the affair she is about to embark on is equally as banal). In another sense, though, they are just the kind of thing you might overhear at an agricultural fair. In modern fiction, pointless detail has a point, because it mirrors life's pointlessness. James Wood calls it 'off-duty detail', in the sense that it is there simply to imitate the endless, motiveless superfluity of life itself.[7] Details in literature don't have to signify anything. They can be, in Wood's words, 'little bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form'.[8]

Anton Chekhov's short stories take this narrative redundancy to new levels, giving undue weight to the most contingent details. In 'The Lady and the Dog', when Anna Sergeevna bares her soul to Dmitri Gurov after they have made love for the first time, he reacts by cutting himself a slice of watermelon and eating it. (Why a watermelon? Why not?) At the end of 'Neighbours', Pyotr Mikhailovich, sitting despondently beside a pond at night, thinks he sees the ghost of a divinity student who was beaten to death nearby, but when he goes to investigate finds that it is just an old, rotting post. In 'Gusev', the eponymous soldier dies of consumption on a ship and his body is sewn into a piece of sailcloth, so that 'he looks like a carrot or a radish – broad at the head and narrow at the base'.[9] Thrown into the water, his body startles a shoal of harbour pilot fish, before a shark tears at the sailcloth, and one of the iron weights inside sinks to the bottom of the sea.

These details read like the kind of random things only a true eyewitness would notice. In the fierce light of Chekhov's attention, they come to seem rich and strange. Human life, they suggest, is absurd and unfathomable. Endings don't produce revelations or epiphanies; a story just peters out into yet more details. When people die there is no reward for their suffering; a body is simply disposed of and rejoins the food chain. We can imagine some wrongheaded Chekhov character spouting, with sonorous conviction, one of the great clichés of contemporary political discourse – that someone or other is 'on the wrong side of history', or 'on the right side of history', as if history were a stern teacher marking everyone's homework and passing final judgement. Chekhov's details suggest that, on the contrary, nothing makes sense and no one is in

[6]Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (1992), 137–8.
[7]James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (2009), 64.
[8]James Wood, 'Serious Noticing', in *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays* (2019), 53.
[9]Anton Chekhov, 'Gusev', in *The Oxford Chekhov*, v: *Stories 1889–1891* (1970), 113.

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charge. History is just one thing after another. The human and natural world – vast, anonymous and indifferent to the fate of the individual – go eternally on.

In fiction, random details feel compelling because they marry up with the reader's sense of what the world is really like. Every sentence, George Saunders writes in his book on the art of the short story, 'is a little referendum on truth'.[10] If it seems true, we keep reading. And the way to make it seem true is to give it the accidental definitude of life. Details draw us in, as any skilled liar knows. The most convincing lies on *Would I Lie to You* – a BBC TV panel show in which participants read out a statement about themselves which may be true or false – have this arbitrary quality. That must be true, we think, because why would anyone invent such a bizarrely unnecessary detail?

Here the historian has the advantage over the fiction writer, or the liar. They have no need to invent these kinds of details. Life is full of them, which means that history is full of them. 'History', writes Barthes, 'is in fact the model of those narratives which consent to fill in the interstices of their functions by structurally superfluous notations'.[11] The Mass-Observation archive, which I have used a lot in my work, is saturated with such 'superfluous notations'. Mass-Observation was a social research organisation founded in 1937 to study the lives of ordinary Britons. Its co-founder Tom Harrisson believed, he said, in 'the bombardment of fact', in building up a picture from 'the trivial, the overheard, and the stray incident'.[12] Even the smallest detail, such as 'who did and did not drop their tram tickets into the litter bins' or 'the pattern of saliva round a spittoon', was worth recording. For Harrisson, unquantified data had its own poetry, and we should be careful not to skip over it in the pursuit of 'bee-lining for a conclusion'.[13]

Leading the Worktown project, the fieldwork phase of Mass-Observation conducted in Bolton, Lancashire, Harrisson trained his team to focus on everyday scenes as moments of unrepeatable life, caught and preserved by an observer who was alive and present at that time and place. Here is one example: an incident in the lounge of the Dog and Partridge pub in Manor Street, Bolton on Thursday 27 May 1937. It was almost certainly witnessed and written up by John Sommerfield, who was working for Harrisson in Bolton. A group of market traders are talking about being tired and about trade being bad. Then a 'large, tough guy with masses of hair held down by a hairnet' suddenly takes a live tortoise out of his overcoat pocket, threatens a woman with it and 'she screams a little'. A conversation ensues about what he feeds it on (a saucer full of milk once a week), its age ('only 36') and how the only way to kill a tortoise is to cut off its head ('but you can't get at their head').[14]

What, you might ask, was a tortoise doing in a Bolton pub in 1937? And then you might do some digging and discover that tortoises were an increasingly common sight in Britain at this time – including in pubs, where a growing sport was tortoise racing, taking place on billiard tables with the tortoises carrying toy jockeys on their domed

[10]George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* (2022), 219.

[11]Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', 146.

[12]Judith Heimann, *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and His Remarkable Life* (2002), 257.

[13]James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013), 31.

[14]'Full-time Observer: The Bolton Tortoise, c. 1937', in *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937–1949*, ed. Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (1984), 1–2. The story is retold, in slightly different form, in Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (1943), 189.

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shells.[15] The tortoise trade had begun in earnest in the 1890s, and by 1937, around 2 million tortoises were arriving in Britain per year.[16] They were almost all Moorish tortoises, harvested from the beaches of southern Europe and North Africa by poor local children working for a pittance, and sent over in consignments of thousands, often used as ballast, in ships bound from Tunis or Casablanca for England's southern ports. They were packed in crates, in layers and on their backs to economise space. Many were crushed to death, or died because they were deprived of food and water to prevent them defecating during transit.[17]

On arrival in Britain, they were given away, like goldfish, as prizes at fairgrounds, or sold in markets and outside schools for sixpence or a shilling. Pet shops promoted them as trouble-free pets that could live on food scraps and garden grubs (when in fact Mediterranean tortoises are herbivores). Only a few survived their first British winter. Schoolboys broke their shells by throwing them against walls, or hurling bricks and stones at them, and they were often attacked by dogs, especially Jack Russells.[18] So the behaviour of that man in the hairnet, keeping his tortoise in his coat pocket, brandishing it like a weapon and feeding it on just a saucer of milk a week, seems typical of the casual disregard with which people treated these supposedly low-maintenance, unphotogenic, almost-mute, hard-to-anthropomorphise animals. These attitudes were enabled by an unregulated international trade supported by the cheap child labour of poorer countries, allowing tortoises to be sold in Britain at prices that made them almost disposable.

The tortoise incident took place in the pub's lounge. Also called the parlour, the lounge was a pub's 'best' room. When Mass-Observation surveyed the pubs of Bolton, it found that lounges generally had padded seats and chairs, aspidistras and other plants, pictures on the wall, and linoleum or rubbercloth on the floor instead of bare stone. Women were often banned from or unwelcome in the male preserve of the vault or tap room, which had none of these luxuries but where the beer cost a penny a pint less. This meant that, while women made up only 16 per cent of all Bolton pubgoers, they made up 45 per cent of those in the lounge.[19] So pubs were places where men could avoid women, but where women could not avoid men. And women throughout history will have had encounters with men like this one in the hairnet with the tortoise in his pocket, lunging uninvited into their personal space, and requiring an instant assessment of tone and intention: harmless, boorish or sinister?

With a little excavation, then, that detail about the Bolton tortoise has opened up some interesting areas of social history – from the cruel global trade in throwaway pets to the gender codes of public houses in 1930s Britain. By providing an unexpected entry point into the past, it has led us to other details we might not have stumbled upon otherwise. But even with that wider context sketched in, the detail retains a slightly surreal singularity, of the kind you might find in a Chekhov short story. John Sommerfield was a novelist, along with several other Mass-Observation contributors, and had a writer's eye for the vivid scene. A tortoise, with its dinosaur-like carapace,

[15] 'Tortoise Racing', *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Apr. 1938.
[16] 'The Tortoise Population', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Aug. 1938, 6.
[17] Peter Young, *Tortoise* (2003), 104, 143.
[18] *Ibid.*, 103–4, 106, 144.
[19] Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People*, 106, 93, 38.

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elephantine legs, scaly feet and wizened head, would have been a peculiar thing to see coming out of an overcoat pocket, then as now. The detail brims with undiluted life; that hair-netted man pulls the tortoise out of his pocket and the reader is there in the pub looking on, almost as startled as the screaming woman herself.

In search of the jarring detail

From the start, Mass-Observation's scattershot approach to detail had its critics. One early reviewer complained that its facts 'simply multiply like maggots in a cheese and leave no shape behind them'.[20] Harrisson was certainly better at collecting data than collating and interpreting it: the Worktown project produced masses of material but only one full-length publication (*The Pub and the People*). The researcher in the Mass-Observation archive has to wade through a lot of roughage to find the nourishment. But Harrisson's basic hunch was sound: the most unpromising details can capture the raw reality of ordinary people's lives. I have tried to borrow something of Mass-Observation's distinctive tone of reportage – beady-eyed, deadpan, alert to oddities and incongruities – for my own writing.

Here, for instance, is a detail I used in my book *On Roads: A Hidden History*: on 30 September 1959, the film star Jayne Mansfield officially opened the Chiswick flyover, now part of the M4.[21] That detail drew me in initially because I could see it had an argument about the recent past contained inside it. It pointed to a different era, not that long ago, when motorways were glamorous spaces – and even urban flyovers, those unloved, lumbering overhead sculptures now covered in a decades-old coat of grime and petrol fumes, were once admired for their beautifully tapered stanchions and flowing cantilevers. But that detail, like the tortoise emerging out of an overcoat pocket in a Bolton pub, also felt jarring enough to be irrefutable. It was too weirdly specific to have been invented. The scene played out easily in the mind's eye: a celebrity whose star is slightly on the wane is driven up and down a new elevated road in a chauffeur-driven limousine, then gets out of the car, blows kisses at the assembled crowd and cuts a ribbon with gold-plated scissors.

I often fasten on humorous details – because something is funny when it takes us by surprise, and this can alert us to the oddness of the human-made world, an oddness normally hidden behind the dulling veneer of habit and routine. When the Preston Bypass, the first stretch of motorway in the UK, opened in 1958, the Lancashire Constabulary filed a series of monthly reports on the behaviour of motorists on the new road. I found these details in a Ministry of Transport file in the National Archives when researching *On Roads*. In the ten months after it opened, the police observed lots of people on the motorway who shouldn't have been there: 40 pedestrians, 13 pedal cyclists, 2 farmers driving tractors and 184 learner drivers. They also spotted 59 motorists driving, crossing or stopping on the central reservation; 74 driving in the wrong direction; 12 reversing on the motorway; 47 stopping on the hard shoulder when not in distress; and 41 parking on the carriageway itself. Two drivers were discovered parked perilously in the motorway's left-hand lane. They turned out to be travelling together and had stopped to repair one of their cars. While

[20] A. L. Kennedy, 'The Listener's Book Chronicle', *Listener*, 17 Nov. 1937, 1096.

[21] John Rolls, 'The Gang had a Crazy Day, But ...', *Daily Mirror*, 3 Oct. 1959, 2.

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waiting for the engine to cool, they were eating their sandwiches.[22] That last detail felt especially cinematic. I could picture the police coming across those two drivers, munching on sandwiches kept in foil or Tupperware. I liked the bizarre juxtaposition: the portable domesticity of the packed lunch, that staple of British daily life, and the murderously fast new highway.

That detail seemed not only funny but comic in the broader sense of the word. The characters in comedies do ridiculous, self-sabotaging things but nothing terrible happens to them, and life goes on in its quietly chaotic way. (If that impromptu lunch break on the Preston Bypass had caused a serious crash, it would no longer be comic.) This felt like another shortcut to an argument: the centralised apparatus of modern daily life may try to enforce predictable behaviours, but we remain what Shakespeare's Falstaff calls 'this foolish-compounded clay, man' – cussed, error-prone, uncomputable. Human beings are not the rational, deliberative animals wished for by the technocratic imperatives of post-war policy and planning. The synthetic world of the motorway, with its rules and codes of behaviour, had to be invented, and the process was far from straightforward.

Details often lead me to other details, carving out a whole new area I wasn't planning to investigate. When I was writing *Armchair Nation*, a history of watching television in Britain, I found some diaries that Mass-Observation had asked children to write before and after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953, a key event in the take-up of television. I came across this touching statement by an eleven-year-old boy: 'I hope that someone will at least be kind enough to let me have a short look at their Television Set. Our next-door neighbour has a Television Set but all I have seen of it is the aerial.'[23] It made me wonder how many other people at the time were doing the same thing as that boy – looking up at the H-shaped aerials newly peppering the skyline and imagining the delights being viewed in the living rooms below.

I began looking for contemporaneous stories about television aerials. I found one about a Midlands viewer who was watching the 1950 FA Cup final at home when he was interrupted by two callers who asked if they could join him, and who said they belonged to a larger group that had split up and gone in search of aerials. I found another about groups of men roaming the streets of Birmingham in September 1951 while a big boxing match was being televised, willing to pay admission money, about two shillings and sixpence being the going rate, to enter houses with aerials.[24] These details felt striking in themselves – I could imagine the slightly desperate door-knockers and the bemused householders answering the door – while also having an argument inside them: television was once a scarce resource, making people behave in eccentric ways to access it. As soon as television became plentiful, those H-aerials were mentally edited out of view and vanished into the invisible everyday along with roof tiles and chimney pots.

I realised that I could use details like this to tell a particular story – about a nation semi-united in front of the television set in a sort of discordant simultaneity. I was

[22] 'Lancashire Constabulary: Motorway Behaviour on Motorway Six During the Period 24th September 1959 to 23rd October 1959', The National Archives, MT 121/227.

[23] 'Coronation 1953 – Children's Essays', Mass-Observation Archive, SXMOA1/2/69/3/D/8.

[24] Steven Barnett, *Games and Sets: The Changing Face of Sport on Television* (1990), 12; 'The Fans Hunted TV Aerials', *Daily Mirror*, 26 Sept. 1951, 3.

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inspired in part by the Mass-Observation day surveys, which record scattered bits of life going on throughout Britain on the same day. So, from the first day survey on 12 March 1937, we learn that a Hertford bank clerk saw a man in a car he thought he knew and waved at him, but then realised that he didn't know him after all; a Birmingham housewife danced a jig with her husband to the jingle for Force breakfast cereal being played on Radio Normandie; a young Liverpool office worker knocked down an elderly woman on his bike; a schoolmaster at a boys' boarding school in Northern Ireland saw a pupil throw a snowball at the bedroom window of another master and run for it; and a Northumberland accountant watched the other passengers on his commuter train making little circles in the steamed-up windows with their coat sleeves.[25]

These mostly mundane details, united only by their co-occurrence, feel like brief glimpses into wholly separate lives, each experiencing the world in their own unique way. In this sense, Mass-Observation was misnamed. It might have gone looking for 'the masses', but what it found, and then recorded in proliferating detail, was lots of captivatingly different lives being lived out on their own little patch of earth. My aim was to achieve the same collage effect using television as the unifier. I knew that millions of people would have been watching the same programmes at the same time, but watching in their own part of the isles, from Unst to Alderney, and reacting differently. Others would be declining to watch, because even the most herdlike behaviours leave room for the apathetic, the preoccupied and the actively hostile.

I became fascinated by the details of people pointedly doing something else when a televisual event presumed to command universal attention. On 2 June 1953, for instance, one Mass-Observation diarist tried to avoid the coronation by cycling through the country lanes of Sussex, but kept being reminded of it by the deserted villages, with bursts of noise coming from houses with aerials on their roofs and the curtains drawn.[26] On 1 July 1969, the cultural critic Raymond Williams, as a republican and Welsh nationalist, refused to watch the investiture of Prince Charles and spent the day building a dry stone wall.[27] And when, three weeks later, ITV and BBC1 were both covering the moon landing, there must have been some viewers who preferred to watch, on BBC2, a Bing Crosby and Bob Hope special followed by Lulu and the Young Generation in concert at the Berns Restaurant, Stockholm. I wasted a day trying to find evidence of someone who did – I knew there were plenty of moon refuseniks, who found the whole thing boring or a waste of money – but drew a blank.

Details like this point to the capaciousness of human experience. The world is almost incomprehensibly full of people and incident. Momentous things happen 'while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along', as Auden writes in his poem about Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, which shows Icarus drowning in the painting's bottom right-hand corner while the ploughman, shepherd and fisherman get on with their day.[28] Bruegel's paintings, full of minute detail that

[25]Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge (ed.), *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day Surveys 1937* (1987), 359, 365, 379, 390, 397.

[26]Philip Ziegler, *Crown and People* (1978), 122.

[27]Raymond Williams, 'Watching from Elsewhere', in *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan O'Connor (1989), 67.

[28]W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1991), 179.

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can't be taken in all at once, teach us that someone's periphery is always someone else's centre, and vice versa. Details correct our tendency to fixate on one story, to focus on the eventful at the expense of the marginal, and to invent a false unity of experience that erases social differences. With their obdurate specificity, they can shatter our presumptions about the past.

Details and the dead

More recently, I have been researching my own family's history. I am trying to write about my late father's childhood in the 1950s in Cappa, a village on the Shannon estuary in west Clare. All I really have are details, culled from a brief memoir my father wrote and from stories I heard from him and other family members. Many of those details point to the poverty and squalor of that world, as Éamon de Valera's ruralist illusion of an Ireland 'bright with cosy homesteads' resulted only in economic stagnation and the shoring up of a repressive theocracy.[29] There is the detail about my grandmother chipping barnacles from the rocks on the strand each day, so that she could boil them in their shells for a cheap meal. There is the one about the priest who would lose his temper if a child knelt rather than stood at the altar rail during communion, forcing him to bend over to deliver the host into the mouth. There is the one about the thatched roof of the family's cottage being replaced with asbestos sheeting, when the rats hid in the shrinking bit of thatch, until they made a break for it and everyone chased them into the nearest hedge with pitchforks.

Grinding hunger, querulous priests, rats scrabbling around in the thatch – all these details are true, as far as I know, and convincingly graphic. But they also seem interchangeable with other accounts of that period and place, and if I use them wholesale they will feel too relentlessly deployed in the service of a well-trodden view of the west of Ireland in the 1950s. My father used to call them *Angela's Ashes* details, after the best-selling memoir by Frank McCourt about his early life in 1930s and 1940s Limerick. In this book there are the same high-handed priests, the same repressed, heavy-drinking men, the same poverty and hunger (at one point, the young Frank licks the newspaper in which someone else's fish and chips were wrapped for the taste of oil on his tongue). Almost all the detail, as beautifully rendered as it is, seems designed to prove the thesis laid out on the book's opening page: 'Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.'[30] As Seamus Deane wrote in his review of the book, 'it is implacable in its reiterated detail, ultimately stifling the very response it sets out to evoke'.[31]

When I get round to writing this part of my father's story, I know I will have to include some of those *Angela's Ashes* details; they are part of the lived reality of that time and place, after all. But I will need other details too, ones that feel like more than just an evidence base for an already familiar narrative. Here is one. Brother Langan, one of the Irish Christian Brothers who taught my father at school, would sometimes get the boys to read out stories from the Irish Sunday papers about the heroics of German Second World War commanders. Brother Langan routinely beat his pupils when they

[29] J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), 334.
[30] Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (New York, 1996), 296, 11.
[31] Seamus Deane, 'Merciless Ireland', *Guardian*, 12 Dec. 1996, A12.

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could not answer his questions, either with the leather that hung from the cummerbund wrapped around his black soutane or the blackthorn stick he seasoned in the chimney of the schoolroom's turf fire. The boys learned that one way to spin out time before he remembered to quiz and assault them was to get him on to the war. My father recalled one blissful Monday morning when all lessons were suspended as they read out the story of Günther Prien, the German U-boat commander who had slipped into Scapa Flow and torpedoed the HMS *Royal Oak*.

That detail tells you something about the Ireland of the 1950s. Ireland was officially neutral in the war but there were small pockets of sympathy for Hitler's Germany as the shared enemy of the British Empire. And yet that context is also rather misleading. Brother Langan's pro-Nazi stance had nothing to do with anti-British sentiment. If the Germans had won the war, he told his class repeatedly, they would have invaded Ireland – and then sorted out a native population he regarded as feckless and lazy (exactly like his pupils, in other words). That detail about reading aloud the story of Commander Prien transports us to a specific Monday morning in a specific west Clare classroom in the 1950s, with the boys enjoying a brief moment of calm before their teacher once again becomes furious at them for not knowing the date of the Battle of Clontarf or how much three dozen eggs cost if one egg costs a penny halfpenny.

Here is another detail: my father's uncle, John Brennan, who had a house in Cappa, was a lighthouse keeper. With the disposable income from this comparatively well-paid job, he had bought himself a Ford Prefect, only the fourth car in the village. However, he couldn't drive it properly. (Before the driving test was introduced in Ireland in 1964, a driving licence was granted on application for a small fee. My father once told me that the test was finally introduced after an enterprising reporter obtained a licence for one of the monkeys in Dublin Zoo, a detail I would love to be true but for which I can find no evidence after much searching.) When John was home from 'the lights', for a fortnight every six weeks, he would drive the car a few hundred yards down to the pier on Sunday afternoon, sit for an hour looking out at the sea, and then drive back home, bucking and stalling both ways as he struggled to find the biting point and change gears.

Why didn't my great-uncle John just walk down to the pier? Perhaps he was proud of his car and wanted to make use of it. Any car in west Clare was a luxury then, and the Prefect was a four-door saloon, more expensive than the two-door Ford Anglia and the even more basic Ford Popular. Perhaps, like the title character in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), who also owns a Ford Prefect, he 'savoured the smell of new leather' and 'the soft steady beat of the engine', before becoming irritated by the ill-fitting ashtray cover, the dirty floormats and the dust-attracting paint.[32] What was my great-uncle thinking as he sat in his Ford Prefect by Cappa pier on a Sunday afternoon? Almost since the invention of the motor car, people have done this: driven to the seafront and sat there staring ahead, not even getting out to stretch their legs or breathe the sea air. History is also made up of such events: the slightly contrarian things people do on slow days to stave off boredom and pass their time on Earth.

Details, because they are fragments of a bigger picture, often leave such unanswered questions. But they also bring people to life precisely because they *are* fragments:

[32]V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1992), 512–13, 516.

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another human being, they remind us, is always an unsolvable puzzle. That detail about my great-uncle and the Ford Prefect captures that inimitable quality that each person possesses. There he is in my head, grinding the gears and stalling: a fully incarnate being now, just like the Grand Duke Nicholas ducking to avoid bumping his head on the door of that railway carriage. The same alchemy happens in John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, when we read that James Harrington sat in a shed on hot days to prove that his sweat turned into flies and bees, or that William Harvey spent the Battle of Edgehill sheltering in a hedge reading a book, or that John Pell had a looseness of the bowel he attributed to overly strenuous thinking as a young man.[33] A life, Aubrey wrote, is 'a small history in which detail and minutiae are all'.[34]

I came to family history after my father died, and his death undoubtedly changed how I think about historical detail. Shortly after he died, I came across Brian Doyle's prose poem 'Kaddish', which consists of 217 one-line descriptions of people lost in the twin towers on 9/11, using details pulled from newspaper obituaries, such as 'the man who occasionally vacuumed his lawn', 'the man who meticulously rotated the socks in his drawer for even use', and 'the woman who sketched commuters on the train every morning'.[35] This simple list, in the form of a secular prayer, seemed to capture perfectly how the dead live on in their details – little bits of animation, evidence of their irreducible existence. Someone has left behind a human-shaped hole, moulded to their exact dimensions, that can't be filled by anyone else. An irreplaceable life has been extinguished.

Detail brings the dead to life, I think, because detail makes our own lives worth living. It is what the Greek gods and the angels envy about us: the infinite particularity of each individual life, the enveloping and thickening substance of it. For a brief and precarious few decades, each human being fashions their own reality out of the numberless stimuli available in their tiny corner of the world. The heaven of our imaginations – a static, abstracted state of perfection – seems endlessly dull by comparison. 'We live in details, not abstractions', the philosopher Kieran Setiya writes.[36] With that snaggy little detail about his short ride in the Ford Prefect, I feel I am giving back my great-uncle a little bit of life – the richly individuated life on Earth from which he has been banished.

One thing I have discovered from this approach to detail is that people are unpredictable. They are not nameless and substitutable data fodder; nor do they behave as the utility-maximising units of rational choice theory, coolly calibrating the costs and benefits of their actions. The idiosyncratic details of their lives are more than just (to quote the philosopher John Durham Peters) 'artifacts of insufficient sampling'.[37] The people who lived before us were as hard to pin down as the people we encounter in our own lives. You think you know someone. And then, all of a sudden, they take a tortoise out of their coat pocket, or stop their car on the motorway and start eating their sandwiches, or go hunting for television aerials and knocking on doors. Or they drive

[33]John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (2016), 126, 128, 232.

[34]Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey: My Own Life* (2015), 8.

[35]Brian Doyle, 'Kaddish', in *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies* (Chicago, 2003), 132, 134, 139.

[36]Kieran Setiya, *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 101.

[37]John Durham Peters, "The Only Proper Scale of Representation": The Politics of Statistics and Stories', *Political Communication*, 18 (2001), 440.

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two hundred yards in their Ford Prefect, stalling all the way, and then just stare out at the sea.

Conclusions

Ernst Bloch once praised Walter Benjamin for having 'a *Sinn für Nebenbei* – a nose for the lurking detail'.[38] I have tried to cultivate a similar 'nose'. History is a human subject – produced by flawed, non-algorithmic beings like me and populated by the flawed, non-algorithmic beings who lived before us. This means that it is always, fundamentally, writing – and writing has less to do with following a set method than with making a series of bespoke micro-decisions. Fine judgements about sifting and shaping evidence blur into even finer ones about texture and tone. Historians rely, perhaps more than they like to admit, on hunches and inklings.

'World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural', writes Louis MacNeice in his poem 'Snow'.[39] In choosing and curating the details that seem to matter, I am painfully aware that, in this incorrigibly plural world, every detail matters in its own way. For every detail I use, there are hundreds I collect and discard. I don't always know why I choose one detail over another – except that I have learned that if a detail feels striking it probably matters in some way I haven't worked out yet, rather as scientists say that a beautiful equation is likely to be true even if it can't yet be proved. By following my nose like this, I can usually begin to turn a mass of interesting details into a larger argument – to see the wood for the trees, as it were. But I also know that the details I discarded might have led to different and equally valid arguments.

This messily human process feels worth preserving in a world increasingly driven by data science and mathematical modelling. In such a world, details are inconvenient. Large language models often hallucinate details because accurate ones don't always fit inside their aggregate patterns and next-token prediction systems. I find details inconvenient too, for similar reasons. They don't always support the argument I want to make or the story I want to tell – but that is also what I value about them. I am trying to bring some order to the disorderly past while conceding that in many ways it is just like the disorderly present, with all its jagged edges and random particulars. The whole process is laborious, time-devouring and hopelessly inefficient. But then, I remind myself, so is history.

[38]Quoted in Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts* (New York, 2007), 49.

[39]Louis MacNeice, 'Snow', in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNiece*, ed. Eric Robertson Dodds (New York, 1967), 30.

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