

## The Irish Theme in the Writings of Bill Naughton

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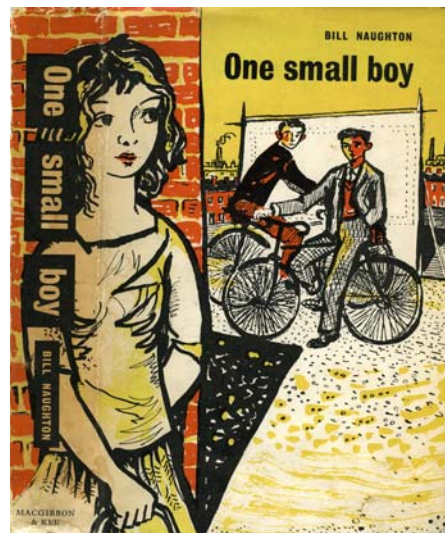
**Abstract:** The student interested in cultural assimilation, hybridity, and naturalization, in masculinity, authorship, and identity, in what happened to the Irish in Britain in the twentieth century, will turn at some point to the Mayo-born, Lancashire writer Bill Naughton (1910-1992), author of a classic children's story collection *The Goalkeeper's Revenge and Other Stories* (1961), of *Alfie* (1965), the film which helped define 1960s London, and of a series of autobiographies largely centering on his Irish childhood and upbringing in Bolton. It has been the historic role of Irish writers from Richard Brinsley Sheridan to Oscar Wilde, from Elizabeth Bowen to William Trevor, to give the English back to themselves in a gallery of portraits. Naughton is part of this tradition, but, unlike these other writers, his subject is the English working class, which he writes about from within, with both sympathy and knowledge. It can be readily conceded that his work is not at the forefront of modern English or Irish writing, but it does deserve to be better known and appreciated. Here in this discursive essay, with an eye on his Irish background, I move back and forth across his writing to reflect on his contribution not so much to the cultural greening of Britain as to the mass observation of the English and of the Irish in Britain.

**Key Words:** Irish identity in Britain, cultural assimilation, hybridity, masculinity, authorship.

### Holy Mountain



Bill Naughton as he appeared on the back cover of *One Small Boy* (1957)



Naughton's interest in his Irish origins is evident throughout his autobiographical volumes as well as in his semi-autobiographical novel *One Small Boy* (1957). Jacket design by Gerard Dillon.

Naughton's interest in his Irish origins is evident throughout his autobiographical volumes as well as in his semi-autobiographical novel *One Small Boy* (1957). That novel begins in Ireland with a chapter entitled 'The Father's Farewell', with Morcheen McCloud's departure from Ireland, where the family owned a small shop in County Mayo, for England and work in the Lancashire coalfield. In the opening paragraph Morcheen's son Michael, the *one small boy* of the title, is in bed the night before his father's departure, his head to the wall, looking at the shadow made by the candle in the room. "Is that shadow my head?" (Naughton 1957: 7) Michael asks himself, a question that in a sense underlies the whole of Naughton's work. Like a shadow, Holy Mountain, or, to give it a particular name in Mayo, Croagh Patrick (or Reek Patrick as it is referred to at one point in this novel), also stands behind everything he wrote, always there and yet, not unlike the shadow on the wall, never available for the turned head to gaze on directly.

The language in the opening chapter of *One Small Boy* is as intensely Irish as John Millington Synge's. "[T]hat man an' myself had great times in Ireland," says one of Morcheen's friends, "the likes was never known elsewhere in God's world." "I saw nine go from me," says another neighbour, "nine I saw go in the dark morning" —an' but the one ever I saw return." (13) It is the language of recourse, close to the bedrock of personal and cultural identity, the language that Naughton's mother has recourse to years later when in her Bolton home she discovers William, her brother-in-law, slumped on the floor after hanging himself: "Oh, why would you do this to me, agraw...and me in the strange land with my children —amongst strangers." (Naughton 1988: 77) There is potential here for a tragic reading of his background but, characteristically, it is declined by Naughton, who entitles this chapter not 'The Tragedy of the Irish' or 'The Problems of Assimilation' but 'Tragedy in the Home'. England is a strange land but only felt as such at times of acute suffering, potential disgrace, or when the wheel of opportunity falters.

In 1914, when the five-year-old Naughton arrived at Bolton Station for the first time, he

didn't recognise the father who had left their Irish home six months previously and who had been working six nights a week: "[I]n place of my loud and lusty father, I saw a lean man with a nervous look, without any colour in his face, and strangest of all, when he lifted his cap to greet us hadn't his hair gone grey and was lying lifeless on his head!" (Naughton 1995: 36) The light-hearted exclamation mark fails to offset the more serious note being struck here, for what Naughton underlines is the gulf between two worlds, two cultures, two lifestyles, two kinds of time and work, one defined by the seasons, the other by the clock. The double movement is constantly in play. At the same time as he was uncovering his Irish roots, he was also finding a home among the English and sharing in his father's pride in changed fortunes expressed in terms of newfound comforts: the new chairs, the dresser with the big mirror, the oilcloth on the floor, the coal-fire, the gas mantle which provided light in the evenings, and, more especially for a poor family from the west of Ireland used to drawing water from a nearby well, tap water. (Naughton 1988: 75) The two-storied terraced house on Unsworth Street was, as his mother exclaims on seeing it for the first time, "a palace altogether" (Naughton 1957: 36), where 'altogether' functions as both an intensifier and a qualifier. But material advances came at a cost, as in the case of his father (and his favourite uncle William), where the difference between Mayo and Bolton is registered not only in physical appearance but also in change of character. The equable disposition of Naughton's narratives runs counter to the disruption that forms and underlies his subject matter, as if he wanted to protect what we might see as a primary scene from too much exposure, to create a space for himself as an author which would not be overwhelmed by experience or memory, to cherish his interiority. But as readers we cannot but register and be impressed by the gulf the young boy was forced to negotiate at such a formative age, to see his 'lusty' father 'lifeless'. And we cannot ever forget the gender issue, for, as he tells us in one of his stories 'A Man's Life', "In Ireland the peasant child seems wholly of the mother" (Naughton 1950: 66).



This illustration accompanied Naughton's patriarchal story "A Man's Life" when it appeared in *Lilliput* in September 1950. The story begins: "Nine Irish acres of Mayo soil, stony and scattered, could not support our family of hungry youngsters, so that at every year at harvest time my father went to England to hire himself out to farmers."

Naughton's sense of Irishness is allied with his Catholicism, the faith the Irish, as opposed to the English, never forsook. Irish Catholicism traveled well in Britain and it was helped by Catholic schools, an array of associations and self-help groups, and a constant supply of Irish clergy. Naughton was educated by Irish nuns at SS Peter and Paul Catholic elementary school, went to Mass at the local parish church, and saw himself as Saintry Billy, the title he used for a volume of his autobiographies. The devotional revolution that had occurred in Ireland in the nineteenth-century ensured that when the Irish emigrated they did so with their souls intact and, armed with the rosary and devotion to the Sacred Heart, ready to face the land of the stranger with an inner strength which was emotional rather than intellectual, given to the efficaciousness of ritual rather than to argument, to the example of deeds than words. If the trauma associated with the first phase of industrialization in the eighteenth century in Britain was absorbed in part by Methodism, then part of the continuing trauma from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards was absorbed by the structure of feeling that accompanied those who made the journey across the Irish Sea.

The Lancashire Irish understood instinctively the difference between tribe and community, between what was Irish and Catholic and what belonged to their hosts, but they were rarely exercised or troubled by it.

The one secret they did tend to keep to themselves or to harbour was their nationalism, which throughout the nineteenth century had become increasingly entwined with their religion. For his First Communion in *One Small Boy* (1957), the young boy is given a copy of Tom Moore's *Irish Melodies* and his attention is caught by the opening lines from "Breathe Not His Name", Moore's tribute to Robert Emmet, who was the hero of the failed 1803 Rising against the English. "I'd like to memorise that... O breathe not his name". (94) If their religion was different so too was their politics, and just as prayer was silent so too was their nascent and ancient idealism. The Irish were accepted into Bolton during the Great War years in part because of a shortage of labour. In return they knew their place, and quietly got on with contributing to the well-being of their neighbours. Naughton's father admired de Valera's defiance against the British at the time of the Easter Rising in 1916 and Terence MacSwiney's hunger strike in 1920, but he kept such feelings to himself, and he always maintained a distinction between his English workmates and the real English, whom he identified as "powerful right-wing politicians, judges, mine-owners, and the like" (Naughton 1988: 175). For the insurgents across the water, England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity, but none of this surfaces in Naughton. Any sedition, modeled on his father, is quietly held.

So pervasive is the Irish theme in Naughton's autobiographies that it is quite surprising to learn he had only one Irish neighbour, a Galway woman who lived in nearby Thomas Rostron Street. Ireland, as we have seen, surrounded him from birth. But it was an Ireland of the past, as much of the mind as of the family, or, as Liam Harte rightly suggests, "an absent but keenly intuited Ireland of the mind" (Harte 1996: 175). His mother's speech was peppered with Irish words and "fluty" Irish sounds and rhythms —yerra, arra, musha— and as she worked round the house she hummed Irish songs. In a memorable phrase from *One Small Boy*, a phrase that James Joyce might have used about the accent of his Galway-born partner Nora, Michael's mother "brings Ireland into everything" (Naughton 1957: 81) The process from adjustment to accommodation to assimilation is well-charted by Naughton in his autobiographical writings. Nothing is neglected, and at the same time nothing is

brooded on: the sense of shame, of being called an “Irish Mick”, of praying for strength against the English, of never getting used to “the cold uncommunicative English stare” (Naughton 1945: 146). There is a classroom incident in *One Small Boy* which unsettles him but which also awakens his Irishness, which is here linked with his sense of defiance. Asked to recite lines from ‘The North Wind’ the boy gets as far as ‘poor thing’ in the third line when the teacher stops him. “‘*Ting?*’ she repeated. ‘Poor *ting?* Say ‘thing’.” (Naughton 1957: 149)

As it happened, in 1920 the Irish in Bolton comprised 10% of the electorate, and in December of that year the Bolton branch of the Irish Labour Party affiliated to the local Labour Party. By 1922 Labour was the second largest party in the town, and in 1924 three Irish councillors took the Labour whip. The Irish had their own pubs, their own Catholic Collecting [self-help] Societies, and even a United Irish League. The Shaw Street dicing club, to which Naughton’s mother belonged, was composed largely of Irish women and was especially helpful when extra money to tide them over was urgently needed. But compared with elsewhere, the Irish in Bolton tended to be less demonstrative. There is a memorable scene in Malcolm Lynch’s *The Streets of Ancoats* (1985), an autobiographical novel set in a predominantly Irish district of Manchester in the late 1920s, when the protagonist Kevin asks his teacher about the achievements of the Irish. “Please, sir,...what about us micks?” And the teacher replies:

the Irish have been coming to Manchester for three hundred years. Their muscles and tenacity built the first railway station in the world, in this town. Against impossible odds of marshes and swamps they put the first ever railway line from here to Liverpool for Stephenson’s Rocket to pull passengers on. Right now, they’re building a magnificent library in Peter’s Square, where Peterloo took place. In the Great War, which isn’t all that long ago, the Manchester Regiment was recruited almost exclusively from the Ancoats Irish —yes, the Ancoats Irish. So the Irish may claim this as an Irish town. Things are changing. Ancoats won’t always be the murky ghetto it is today; and those changes, when they come, will have been brought about by the sons and daughters of the immigrants. Yes, Manchester’s improving daily. (Lynch 1985: 162)

There are no such moments in Naughton’s work. Pride in his Irishness is not that of the effusive or fighting Irish; it is rather the quiet confidence that comes from being able to add a Lancashire mill town to that underlying identity. When his teacher with her long cane drew attention to the map coloured red with all the countries under British influence, the little boy Naughton would watch his classmates as if they were asking ‘am I an’ mi mum an’ dad an’ mi Aunt Flo’ an’ our Sarah Jane included?’ (Naughton 1988: 57)

Naughton’s experience of Irishness can also be contrasted with Pat O’Mara’s in the neighbouring noisy “Irish” city of Liverpool. In *The Autobiography of a Liverpool Irish Slummy* (1935), whose title signals a more cavalier attitude to social class and background, O’Mara devotes a lively chapter to the anti-German riots that took place in Liverpool following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. Given that coal-trimmers and firemen and sailormen —many of them were Irish— crewed the ship before leaving Liverpool, the tragedy had a more dramatic impact. In one street, practically every blind was drawn in token of a death. In a telling moment as attacks were launched against German pork-butchers in the area around Scotland Road, the author notes how for a moment allegiances switched, with the foe changing from England to Germany. (O’Mara 1935: ch. 29) Here is an Ireland much closer to the edge of things, at the mercy of strong emotions whipped up by the crowd. In a chapter significantly entitled “The Irish and the English” in *Saintly Billy* (1988), written towards the end of his life, Naughton dwells on the sense of melancholy which not only haunted him but which also prevented him from waving a banner or rushing to the head of a march: “Although we had a good family sense, which was comforting, we had only a remote feeling of belonging, since we were aliens. That was a feeling I never lost.” (57) Not far away in Manchester, Anthony Burgess, who was born in 1917, a Catholic in a Protestant country, was discovering something similar, that as he grew older “the sense not so much of conflict as of estrangement, of exile, grew deeper, more metaphysical” (Burgess 1965: 75), but in his case the use of the word “exile” has a Joycean ring to it, a reflection of an anti-colonial stance largely missing from Naughton.

## Worktown



“Morning Shift” by James Holland, with its echoes of L. S. Lowry, appeared in *Lilliput* in October 1947 to accompany an article by Margot Heinemann about the miner’s day. The same issue contained Naughton’s story “Bit o’ Skin”, a story about masculine achievement and failure.

The year Naughton arrived from Ireland marked the beginning not only of the Great War but also, although this wasn’t known at the time, of Lancashire’s industrial decline. “If, in 1920, it had been legitimate to ask ‘Is Lancashire a modern El Dorado?’ by 1929, the pertinent question was ‘Is Lancashire finished?’” So asked George Burke, President of Blackburn Chamber of Commerce, in February 1929. (Griffiths 1994: 12) The retreat from industrial pre-eminence is not dealt with by Naughton, who is more concerned with attitudes and lifestyles than with the larger sweep of history. In *Saintly Billy* Naughton does devote a chapter to the 1921 miners’ strike, but this centres on the effects of the strike on the family and community. Only rarely does he mention in the same breath the leading historical signposts, as when he comments in *Neither Use Nor Ornament* on the ‘flu epidemic at the end of the Great War which was followed in quick succession by the Slump in 1920 and in 1921 by a ten-week Coal Strike (72). As a recent historian has suggested, not for nothing did families after 1918 look to diversity and alternatives to

traditional staples of employment. (Griffiths 1994: 202) But Naughton’s focus or connective tissue is his family and the street where they lived and only then the widening arc. It is social history rather than politics. His family were respectable working-class, conscious of the poor beneath them as well as the better-off. “We’re not what could be called posh in Unsworth Street, but there aren’t many backstreets to compare with ours for liveliness.” (Naughton 1988: 3) As a child Naughton quickly absorbed his place in English class terms: he was well-dressed, went to school in boots, strove to do well, accepted authority, and (to prove his manliness) was Cock of the School. When he looks back on that period he does so with fondness and without the sense of brassy triumph that could have disfigured the characteristic calm of his writing, without any suggestion that ‘he had come through’.

In 1911 the population of Bolton reached 181,000, an increase of 13,000 on the 1901 figure. Thereafter the population remained constant until 1951 when the figure returned to 167,000. If Manchester was King Cotton, Bolton, 500 feet above sea level with an annual rainfall above 60 inches, was a close neighbour. Its outlook was dominated by Winter Hill and an array of tall chimneys seeking the air, its cobbled streets in Naughton’s time echoing to the early morning sound of clogs and trams and the constant greeting of ‘Howgo’. His Bolton, which was christened Worktown by Mass-Observation<sup>1</sup> in the 1930s, is nothing if not noisy and lively, self-conscious of its position and status, not Manchester (and certainly not its acolyte), not Liverpool, not Blackburn, and in possession of an independent but not deferential outlook. Naughton, aware of the town’s small size but equally conscious that it needed no defence, tells us in *Neither Use Nor Ornament* (1995), that it was “not to be compared with cities like Liverpool or Manchester, let alone London.” (42) There was steady employment and, as is clear from Naughton’s closely-observed play *Spring and Port Wine* (first staged as such in 1965), it boasted a variety of employment opportunities —Wilfrid is a factory mechanic, Florence a teacher, Harold works in a spinning mill, Hilda is a weaver, Rafe a cotton-mill worker, and Arthur a sheet-metal worker. Spinners, piecers, grinders, mule-gates, carding rooms —the vocabulary of the mills finds its way naturally into Naughton’s work, not so

much for the purposes of recreating atmosphere, nostalgia, or setting, but simply because this was the working environment of his childhood and youth. At sixteen he worked a six-to-two shift operating a yarn machine while his sister May worked as a weaver.

Interestingly, neighbourhood and family networks did not overlap in the factory; sons did not automatically follow father into similar employment. As a result, as a discerning modern historian has remarked, “A consistently functional attitude to work characterised the cotton workforce throughout the period” (1880-1930). (Griffiths 1994: 183) When employment prospects surface in Naughton’s plays, these invariably arise as options for the individual rather than as markers of influence, conformity or compulsion. In *Spring and Port Wine*, Arthur’s employer Aspinall oversteps the mark—at least in Rafe’s opinion, and maybe the audience’s—in offering Arthur a management post if he settles down and marries.

Coal too features strongly in Naughton’s work, more so in his autobiographical volumes. His uncle William worked down the mine as a dataller (that is, paid by the day), but in 1910, during the Pretoria Pit disaster, he was trapped in a cage for some hours before being rescued and never recovered psychologically from the ordeal. Ten years later in June 1920 he committed suicide, “so violent an end for one so gentle” (Naughton 1988: 78), and the family were never the same again. (Naughton 1995: 72) His father and his cousin Willie also worked underground, his father at Brackley Pit, then owned by the despised Lord Ellesmere. The pit accompanied his increasingly moody father and, if it weren’t for his mother’s diplomacy, threatened at times the quiet of family life: “She had her usual quiet manner to suit my father’s mood, sympathetic and ready, but not fussy, avoiding any word that might set him off cursing the coal-mine and all to do with it.” (Naughton 1995: 14) The family connection with coal continued above ground. Even into his late twenties Naughton himself, who was at that time a coal driver for the Co-Op, looked like a miner, as Tom Harrison, one of the organisers of Mass-Observation, recalled on first meeting him in 1938:

He was always well bathed and spruced up but he had the dark-rimmed, coal-flecked eyelashes you see on miners. He told me it took longer to get those eyelashes clean than all the rest of him. You had to do it with olive oil, a cloth and

a matchstick. To clean his hands he used a mixture of olive oil and sugar, and that took ten minutes. (Harrison 1961: 132)

In keeping with its worktown ethic, Bolton devoted considerable energy to leisure pursuits, as true in the 1950s as in the 1920s. In *Spring and Port Wine*, Florence rehearses what was on offer for the young male in the 1950s: “Greyhounds tonight —Wanderers tomorrow afternoon— boozing tomorrow night and Sunday the strip club.” (Naughton 1979: 42) A generation earlier in 1918, Naughton enjoyed his first cinema experience at the Derby Picture Palace: a Pathe Gazette short news film about the war, a Charlie Chaplin comedy, an interval during which an excited audience sang “Keep the Home Fires Burning”, the French national anthem, and “Rule Britannia”, which was followed by the main film in which William Farnum throttled the villain. (Naughton 1995: 7-2) In the 1920s, as Naughton recalled in *Britain Revisited* (1961), the Olympia and the Runworth cinemas were the focus for parades on Saturday nights for youngsters between the ages of 14 and 17. (Harrison 1961: 116) In 1948 Bolton could boast three commercial theatres, the Hippodrome in Deansgate, the Grand Theatre in Churchgate, and the Theatre Royal. Bolton Little Theatre [amateur dramatics], mentioned in the Mass-Observation report for 14 March 1937, continued to thrive until the late 1950s. (Jennings and Madge 1987: 352)



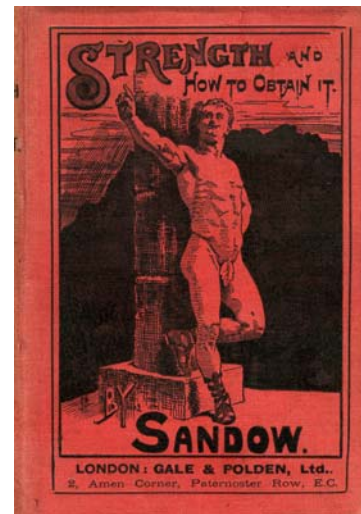
Whitsun Walk, Westthoughton, Bolton, in 1926. Once a year, as this contemporary postcard reveals, Lancashire Catholics, complete with frocks and banners, took to the streets in a show of devotion.

Perhaps a little unfairly, the Manager of the Theatre Royal complained in 1962 that “Bolton is not theatre-minded, and never has been over the years.” (Ichihashi 1994: 378) Certainly Bolton wasn’t Manchester, where in the early 1920s there were eight theatres in three streets around the Free Trade Hall, one of

which, the Gaiety Theatre, was founded by Annie Horniman, the woman behind the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and another of which, the Library Theatre, was at the forefront of provincial theatre in 1960s Britain. As it happened, Bolton's Octagon Theatre, which opened in 1967, arrived after Naughton had already made a name for himself.

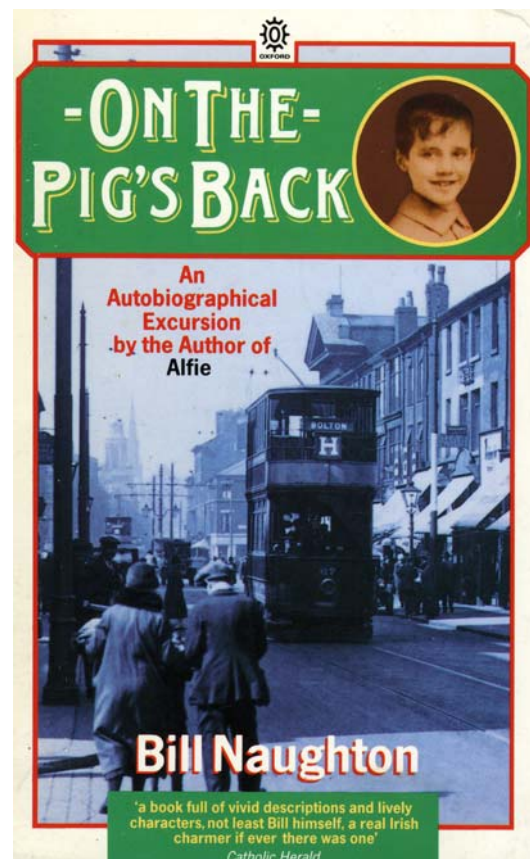
Elsewhere, The Winter Gardens in Bolton regularly attracted over 900 people to its programme of dances and entertainments. In 1937, the Mass-Observation observer (I assume this is Naughton) noted: "Dancing is a very popular pastime in Bolton. Almost every Sunday school has a dance per week. I enclose some adverts from the *Bolton Evening News*." (Jennings and Madge 1987: 359) Parks and open spaces were plentiful, and by 1948 there were 60 local football teams and 31 pitches, with some 495 acres allocated to 30 parks, golf courses, gardens. The figure of the physical fitness guru and champion Eugen Sandow, author of *Strength and How to Obtain It* (1897), whose influence extended across the water to Leopold Bloom in Dublin and to Yeats in London, recurs in Naughton's work, as does Bolton Wanderers' triumph over West Ham in the F.A. Cup Final in 1923. "No one who has not lived in a town with some twenty-five thousand regular football supporters can imagine the enthusiasm pervading the entire populace from their football fervour when the town team is in the Cup Final." (Naughton 1995: 41) Quieter pastimes were also catered for, not least gardening; by 1951 the number of allotments reached 1,276. Blackpool was the most popular holiday destination, and in 1952 the local cotton workers won the right to two weeks holidays a year —Wakes Weeks, as they were called, effectively closed down the town. In the years spanning the Second World War, Bolton possessed eight public libraries, which between them dispensed 1,639,800 books in 1944-5. As for television, the Holme Moss transmitting station sparked into life in October 1951; by May 1954 the local newspaper surmised that within a short period half the town's households would have a television set. Thus, Naughton's career as a writer spans the emergence of the two major twentieth-century art-forms, namely the cinema and television. By the time he was writing *Spring and Port Wine* in the 1960s, bingo halls were replacing cinemas and church halls, and television, as the example of Betsy Jane in that play illustrates, was putting people

into debt and, according to Rafe, threatening to destroy the silence and break up family life.



Sandow's striking pose on cover of his 1897 book, a classical column behind him, his roman sandals neatly tied, a finger pointing upward to strength, a fig leaf preventing over-exposure.

#### Naughton's Career as a Writer



Front cover of Naughton's autobiography carries a period photograph of Bolton in the 1920s as well as an inset of the six-year-old future author. By permission of Oxford University Press (URL: <http://www.oup.co.uk>)

In chapter 7 of his autobiography *On the Pig's Back* (1987), Naughton describes how in wartime London he broke into the market place for writing. It is a characteristic piece of prose on Naughton's part where the boundaries between context, origins, event and explanation shade the one into the other as if they not only belong together in his memory but have equal status or claim in his mind. Mr Hunch, who kept him at his desk in the evenings in London, was the name Naughton gave to his writing conscience. The BBC were looking for stories and they selected one submitted by Naughton under the tutelage of Mr Hunch. On his way to Broadcasting House to read his story, Naughton called into Mooney's Irish House on Oxford Street and was accosted by someone who had last seen him delivering sacks of potatoes: "Howgo Bill!" When he arrived at the BBC he made a visit to the toilet, took a wrong turning, and was found only minutes before the live broadcast. The director of a new publishing company The Pilot Press, whom Naughton had met in Bolton when at work on *Mass-Observation*, heard the broadcast and offered him a contract to write a fiction or a non-fiction book on the subject of marriage. (Naughton 1987: 44) Naughton then continues with some comments on the use of dialect and the authentic rendering of Cockney or Lancashire speech patterns, on writing an autobiographical novel and his decision to write about "various periods of my own life", and on the practical difficulties associated with acquiring the "quiet discipline writing responds to".

In these few pages we have a portrait in miniature of Naughton the man and writer: an Irish House, turned to for support and comfort; the distance that joins and separates him from comradeship with other workers and from his life as a manual labourer; his attention to dialect and common forms of expression; his roots in the 1930s and the culture of *Mass-Observation*; an awareness of being an authentic field worker and a regional correspondent as it were for a literary world; his dependence on others for contracts and indeed for subject matter; and the continuing theme of the difficulties he had with writing. Also on display in these pages is Naughton's ambition to reach a wide audience, which was partly satisfied in this case by a reading which was broadcast and broadcast live. Naughton's "room with a view" is also distinguished by objects which are at once material, physical,

social, and common. The story he read that evening he doesn't disclose, for his interest lies elsewhere—in the oddness of his situation, in making sense of being lifted out of a common environment into a middle-class literary culture.

Naughton's career straddles two worlds, the passage from Holy Mountain to Bolton and then the passage from manual worker to writer, or to give this passage a more personal interpretation, the journey from Willyeen, the name he was called in the family, to Bill, the shortened form he was known to his mates and the form he deliberately chose when he became a writer, the passage that is from the sacred to the secular, or to give this passage a gendered inflection from female to male. The author's notes to the February 1948 issue of *Lilliput*, an issue that included his story "Seeing a Beauty Queen Home", neatly inform us that Naughton was "Irish peasant by birth and industrial North of England by adoption" (Naughton 1948: 166). The Irish theme emerged with particular force at the end of his career, but, as I indicate below, it was always there at some point in the plays for which he became famous in the 1960s. The text which accompanied him throughout his life from childhood to adulthood was the familiar one of a journey from the west of Ireland to industrial Lancashire, but underlying this was not so much a tension as a separation between past and present, between recuperation and observation. What is intriguing about Naughton's career as a writer is seeing how the two belong together, the person who couldn't stop recuperating his Irish background and the person given to observing the habits of the English working class. Of course, it could be that the two are entirely separate like the art of the ventriloquist, but to my mind, especially if we want to understand more fully the workings of the concept of hybridity, it is worth pursuing the relationship between a memory and an identity steeped in Irishness and an essentially episodic drama dedicated to regionalism and the lifestyle of the English working class. In his autobiographies Naughton provides a running commentary on nearly every aspect of the social, cultural and religious differences between rural Ireland and industrial Lancashire. In his plays, however, the concept of difference is shaped largely by a sense of regional or class identity vis-a-vis London and the middle class.

One answer to this double aspect—and it is

not one I pursue in earnest here—is to pick out examples of overlap between the Irish and the Lancashire material. Thus at the beginning of *All in Good Time*, a play set in Bolton on the night of a wedding, the record player is “blaring out a brisk Irish jig”; it is after midnight and the wedding party is still dancing. A little later in the play the ever-solicitous Lucy bids her husband Ezra “God speed”, a phrase that constitutes part of an Irish farewell ritual which is repeated at the end of the play when Violet and Arthur exit for the last time to begin again their married lives. Occasionally, it remains unclear if the phrase is Irish or not. When Violet’s parents are trying to explain to Arthur’s parents that Violet and Arthur have not consummated their marriage, Liz turns to her husband and asks if he would like to take over. “No, carry on —same as I say, you have it all off” (37). In an Irish context such a phrase is often addressed to someone who “knows it all” with the implication that s/he knows too much about a secret event or history. It can also be used in a more light-hearted fashion: “Oh you have it all off.” Here in the play the mood is more sombre and the use of the phrase is not accusatory but simply a reflection that Liz has the full story and Leslie will not be obliged to tackle the taboo subject of his son-in-law’s impotence. It is rare to find in his plays Naughton mixing Irish and English dialect as happens in *Neither Use Nor Ornament* when the exchange between mother and son has a natural-sounding continuity: “Oh, an’ wouldn’t you take off that ould shirt that’s so soiled on you...” “All right, Mam, nowt I’d like better.” (Naughton 1995: 12)

To return to his career, Naughton is first and foremost a street writer. His streets are for the most part childhood streets where honour and ballgames are won, territories protected, and the unknown or unexpected encountered. It is a masculine highway, a world of the goalkeeper’s revenge and late nights on Watling Street, the titles of collections of stories. Not for nothing does he begin *Saintly Billy* with a description of playing marbles in the street. In *Spring and Port Wine*, almost the first piece of action is when Daisy waves out of the window at her daughter Florence arriving home. And because the street is so close to the Crompton home, it has to be kept at bay, protected, as it were, by a series of outer rooms or portals —back door, scullery, kitchen, and living room; and conversely, front

door, hall, living room. Betsy Jane, with her enamel teapot on the hob beside the fire all the time, is looked down upon by the Comptons, and appropriately enters by the back door. But Betsy Jane is also the person who is there when the family begins to break up, for she is closer to street values and knows that clannishness is both a strength and a failing: “You might have your troubles amongst yourselves, but you don’t like it to go outside your four walls. You stick together as a family —I will say that for you.” (Naughton 1979: 66) On returning home, work clothes are immediately hung up, thermos and lunch-box handed over to the woman of the house, hands and face are washed at the sink, cigarettes are frowned upon, and Daisy has to ensure the house is “spick and span of a Friday” when Rafe comes in from work. According to Rafe, wives shouldn’t have to work, a pointed remark he aims at Florence’s boyfriend, Arthur. The outside world is spoken of as if it belonged outside. Hence television and radio are switched off, reports in the newspaper are questioned, and memories of “a world in common” (53), as Rafe recalls, preserved intact. Hilda, ever conscious as an eighteen-year-old of what the world is thinking, can’t get enough of that world inside the home. “Folk would think you were daft if you walked about with a book of poetry under your arm,” (17) she taunts her father. The piano is the one piece of furniture that shares, and is allowed to share, a common world with the concert hall. But then that is “culture”, the word Rafe uses in his discussion of “home” versus “furnished place” (23). Significantly, when Hilda returns home she drapes her things over the piano stool.

There is something strained about Rafe’s attempt to keep separate the home from the street, and in the end he recognises it himself. How much Irishness there is in the play is an open question. Like a good Catholic (which he isn’t), Rafe prefers fish on Fridays. “You were all one in the kingdom of fish-and-chips”, as Naughton wryly observes in *Saintly Billy*. (Naughton 1988: 116) When he blasts Aspinall for pressuring Arthur over marriage to Florence, Rafe has recourse to an Irish word of abuse: “But what does he imagine I am — that I’d let one of my daughters marry at the bidding of a tinker?” (35). On the other hand, the use of the Bible for purposes of swearing an oath, or indeed keeping a Bible in the living room (or in the house at all), is a reminder that

this is not an Irish or Catholic home. But what does emerge from setting the play in this context is how *Spring and Port Wine* assumes the look of a sympathetic study of English non-conformity by an outsider in their midst. Naughton's observations are rooted in a sense of community. He is the good neighbour who refrains from interfering and who allows time and space for things to heal themselves. Naughton understood the pressure of the generations getting in each other's way. In 1918, according to Government figures, Bolton had a housing shortage of some 2-3,000 houses; in 1924, 10% of households had parents living with married children, a situation that Naughton in part addresses in his play *All In Good Time* (1963). Naughton can also see the goodness in Rafe, in the culture he has tried to create in the house, in his sense of history and of struggle, and he is instinctively attracted to a family which sings, even when it spills over into religion. Florence's recalling of the lovely concerts they used to have at St Saviour's Hall prompts Rafe's visionary declaration: (rising) "A great spiritual experience. People are starved in their souls. You'd waken up to a new civilization tomorrow" (56). By contrast, Naughton's own sense of religion stressed interiority. It was, as he puts it in a revealing passage in *Neither Use Nor Ornament*, "a mystical dimension that enriched daily life", more forgiving than the English Catholicism with its emphasis on sin which he learnt at school. But it also had an extra ingredient: "And blended in was the hard-headed ethos of Lancashire Methodism, appealing to common sense as well as to Christian principles." (Naughton 1995: 92)

*All In Good Time*, a play about male impotence in the early days of marriage, and *Alfie*, a play about male sexual prowess, are reminders of another kind of gulf, this time between male sexuality and female domesticity, how sexuality occupied a site dramatically at odds with institutional or community values. *Neither Use Nor Ornament* traverses the same territory in autobiographical terms, where three early chapters — "Jackie Seddon", "Street Scene: 1917", and "The Facts of Life" — come to constitute a sequence on the theme of mating. The first is a classroom scene during a lesson on hygiene when the young boy learns about greyhounds and breeding racehorses: "Certain words made a marked impression on me, and evoked a memory of when I first heard them —and

*mating was one*" (Naughton 1995: 17). The next chapter is a street scene when the young boy sees two dogs mating in the street and hears a posh widow calling out: "It's a disgrace it is —to look through the front window an' see that sort of thing going on in the street" (18). In the ensuing chapter, the scene shifts to home where May, his older sister, tells Bill about the facts of life: "I shut my ears to her voice as May went on about Alice saying it was the same as animals *mating* —and for once I was glad to see the door open and Eddie walk in with the usual, 'Where's Mother?' to put an end to the disturbing subject" (27). It is also in this chapter that we witness the children kissing their father before his departure for work, behaviour that Naughton takes care not to overlook: "He and mother never kiss or make any endearing gesture in front of us" (23). Mating is what Alfie in the play of that name does best and does best to preserve from family entanglements. He is put off a woman if he meets her husband: "As I'm having it off with her I keep thinking of him 'anging up his drip-dry shirt." (Naughton 1963: 5) Mating stood in marked contrast to family life, a tension always there since family life was based on both feelings and on the non-expression of sexual feelings, and behind it was the primal scene, which was not to be discussed or thought about at all.

In nothing is Naughton's Irishness more pronounced than in the space he devotes to the isolating effects of sexuality. The heresy of Jansenism —the belief, to put it somewhat simply, that the body is a site of evil— has been often accorded substantial space in Ireland by both perpetrators and critics, but while Joyce and Edna O'Brien sought to accommodate the body, Naughton saw the body as a common inheritance, uniting, albeit in isolation, people from different walks of life and religious persuasion. So, if mating is a key theme in his plays, we would also need to add that it is tackled with a mixture of seriousness and humour by a writer concerned as much with community as with the individual. Naughton refuses to heroicise the individual or to uphold a community's frozen values, and in striking a no-position he reminds us of the gentleness of his family's roots in Bolton in the period during and after the Great War, quietly supporting de Valera but equally impressed with their tolerant and peaceful neighbours. Alfie is a typical outlaw figure but he invites no followers. Rafe Crompton is a tyrant whose

power needs to be curbed by his family. Arthur Fitton needs time and space to consummate his marriage. This low-key resistance to tragic themes seems to belong to something ascetic in Naughton's character as well as to his Irish predicament, wanting to assert difference but all the time aware of the need for a looser kind of accommodation with and within the host country.

According to Frank O'Connor, the short story as a form belongs to a submerged population group, and Irish writers in particular—along with Americans and writers under Czarist Russia—were attracted to outlaw figures. (O'Connor 1963: 18-21) The strong narrative line in Naughton's plays, invariably expressed through a series of focused episodes, is the hallmark of a short-story writer. Naughton's plays share this cross-over territory between the short story and drama. *Alfie*, which began life as a radio play, a form directly related to the short story, is at once short story, novel, play, and film. Yet it is the voice and attitude that command attention, not the form to which it adheres or expresses. Interestingly, Alfie's voice emerged many years before Alfie came on the scene in the 1960s. It can be heard for example in a short story entitled "Seeing a Beauty Queen Home", which was published in the February 1948 issue of *Lilliput*. As its title suggests, the protagonist accompanies a woman home after a dance in "Cotton-town". He weighs up his chances in somewhat crude fashion: a three-mile tram ride for a seven-minute kiss and then the walk home. "The first kiss and I knew I couldn't do it. She was not a seven-minuter. Her smoodging was like her dancing—heavy and nervous. She was the type that want time, want warming up." (Naughton 1948: 145)

Once he had the "submerged" type fixed, the switch from a Lancashire to a Cockney accent was not something Naughton had any difficulty in making. At the time when he was working as a driver during the war years, he composed another of his London-based stories, "Night Out with Lannigan", which was published in the first issue of *Irish Writing* in 1946. Again, the accent can be heard from the beginning. After working for seven years with the House Cavalry, Irishman Lannigan's brogue "was shafted with army Cockney" (Naughton 1946: 61). While on stand-by duty as an ambulance driver, Lannigan would tell the narrator all kinds of gory stories of things that had happened to him as a prison officer.

"Did I ever tell you about the beating up I got?" which is a cue for a story about getting drunk with a prostitute in Soho and refusing to pay the pimp: "I wouldn't poppy and he hit me... Blood, talk about blood, my red coat was soaked sopping in it. And my face—" (70). Like the narrator in this story, Naughton refrains from recounting gruesome stories which lack significance or meaning: "I can see the incidents of the whole evening going, going from him" (70). In such stories, Naughton was learning about the voice, about getting close to his subject, the relationship between observation and narration, and the ability to position the first-person narrator at the centre of things. In *Alfie*, the transition from a first-person narrative into a soliloquy on stage is brilliantly handled by Naughton. Without the constant recourse to his thoughts and to the audience, Alfie would remain a detached and not particularly interesting figure, but in speaking to us he sparks a response: "Know what I mean?"

London enabled Naughton to widen his understanding of Britain's submerged population groups. Here was a new subject for his Mass-Observation eyes. The North could now be seen not only through Irish but also through London eyes. "It ain't come up bad, has it? All it needed was a good wash an' a bit of care and attention." Through Alfie's comments about Annie, "a lonely girl from the North", and through Michael Caine as the cockney Lothario in the film, we can hear the Southerner's prejudice against the coals-in-the-bath Northerner. "It can cook, too—a bit limited on the menu, goes in mostly for Lancashire 'otpot, an' steak and kidney pie—they blow you out a bit—but it do make a marvelous egg custard—I ain't tasted nothing like it" (42). Naughton takes care not to overdo the North v South divide in *Alfie*. In some respects, not belonging to a school enabled him to tackle the North and London with equal distinction. "Independence", he wrote in the Diary chapter at the end of *A Roof Over Your Head*, "is the note of balance in living." (Naughton 1945: 145) As a member of an Irish family within the English working class, he was ever alert to speech habits, the demands of the body, and (non-Catholic) attitudes to life. All his characters seem conscious of belonging to a submerged population group, whether as southerners or northerners. The world they share—the Northerner's matey form of address "howgo" crops up everywhere in

Naughton's work— is overshadowed by necessity. The wider world makes itself felt somewhat obliquely. History is noises off, a newspaper or weekly magazine, a personal memory of the Hunger Marchers. The group identity is a given, and then within that comes the struggle of the individual for self-expression. Freedom for Naughton is not the recognition of necessity but the escape from necessity, which in *Spring and Port Wine* is the law of patriarchy, in *All In Good Time* community pressures on a young married couple, and in *Alfie* the ties of marriage.

This ability to deal with his subject without looking over his shoulder at the reader makes Naughton's work especially appealing, and it suited the times. He began in the 1930s with Charles Madge's Mass-Observation, which developed his interest in documentary realism. At the BBC the issue of regionalism and regional identity was a constant source of internal concern, as is apparent in the antiquated terms in which it was expressed by John Coatman, North Regional Director at the BBC, in an article on the topic for *BBC Quarterly* in 1947-8: "North Country men and women, too, are far-wanderers... North Country humour is fully exploited by such microphone geniuses as Wilfred Pickles and Gracie Fields." (Coatman: 1947-8: 163) Naughton's work, especially in its ear for language, held out a certain attraction to those in the capital who controlled the publishing and broadcasting outlets. Here was a writer who, like B. L. Coombes in the 1930s, was able to portray his world as a neighbourhood and without condescension, attuned as he was to the gulf between subject matter and audience. Unlike Wilfred Pickles, whose radio programme *Have a Go* was incapable of not patronising the working class, Naughton always took the view that his roots were for observation but not for ridicule. Within a decade or so it would be impossible for anyone at the BBC to refer to 'North Country' men and women or to 'North Country' humour.

### Concluding Remarks

In the 1940s, as has been mentioned, Naughton wrote for *Lilliput*, a popular magazine with an appropriately Irish name, which included the work of other English-based Irishmen such as the neglected writer of prisons and vagrancy Jim Phelan (1895-1966)

and the London-based humourist and journalist Patrick Campbell (1913-1980). With its antennae tuned to the regions, its populist appeal and tongue-in-cheek tone, *Lilliput* was an ideal showcase for Naughton's post-war career as a writer. Here was displayed in handy pocket-book format the old world of industrial landscapes as captured in the black-and-white photographs of Bill Brandt and the colourful stick figures of L.S. Lowry's Salford and the new world emerging from the war with its traditional humour if not its heart intact. As we learn from *Voices From a Journal* (2000), it was also in this period that Naughton in London met other Irish writers such as Frank O'Connor (1903-1966), the Northern Irish poet W. R. Rodgers (1909-1969), who was at that time working for the BBC in London, and Louis MacNeice (1907-1963). Other Irishmen at the BBC at that time included Maurice Gorham (1902-1975), and the playwright Denis Johnston (1901-1984).

London and the North, London and the Midlands, became in the post-war period a central trope in British culture. Writers as diverse as Stan Barstow (1928-), Shelagh Delaney (1939-), Anthony Burgess (1917-1993), David Storey (1933-), and Keith Waterhouse (1929-), all had something to say on the topic. While working on the *Yorkshire Evening Post* as a young man, Waterhouse walked down to London from the North on a fundraising exercise, and appeared on *In Town Tonight*, the radio show given over to the eccentric English, Hollywood celebrities, Cockneys and barrow-boys. (Duncan 1951: 147) There is something symbolic about Waterhouse's gesture: the blisters, paying dues to the metropolis, individual fame for three minutes, and the brief exposure of Northern grit for a London-dominated media. Naughton, too, is a regional writer, but a regional writer with a difference. For not only did he give currency to the word "spiv" —the subject of an article on a London character he had worked alongside (Naughton 1987: 46-9) and, until recently, a very common expression— but the Lancashire Irishman also produced one of the most enduring cultural representations of London in the 1960s.

In the Biographical Note to *Spring and Port Wine* (1973) we read that "Naughton belongs to no group, has never been fashionable, avoids all publicity, and prefers not to talk

about his work.” This sounds like Naughton’s voice, the voice of the conscientious objector, albeit a voice at its most detached. Whatever he might think from beyond the grave of such a move, there is a natural compulsion to want to explain his body of work by reference to others. His work as a dramatist recalls Harold Brighouse’s *Hobson’s Choice* (1916) and the so-called Manchester School. Equally, it has elements in common with the one-act Abbey Theatre plays of Lady Gregory (1852-1932) celebrating the rural poor. If he had settled in Belfast he might have produced a play like St John Ervine’s (1883-1971) *Mixed Marriage* (1911) on the tragedy of sectarianism. His work also invites comparison with Walter Greenwood, who was born in Salford and went on to write the classic 1930s novel *Love on the Dole* (1933), and other Thirties writers on mining communities such as B. L. Coombes and Lewis Jones, author of *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939). In the 1960s, Naughton’s career as a writer overlaps with racy Irish writers such as Patrick Boyle (1905-1982), author of short story collections such as *At Night All Cats Are Grey* (1966) and *All Looks Yellow to the Jaundiced Eye* (1969), and Lee Dunne (1934-), whose career is not dissimilar to Naughton. Dunne was born in Dublin 1934, moved to London where he worked as a taxi-driver. While waiting at taxi ranks he embarked on a career as a writer. His first novel *Goodbye to the Hill* (1965) was followed in 1968 by *A Bed for the Sticks* and in 1975 by *Maggie’s Story*, the female equivalent of *Alfie*. Dunne’s ear for popular speech is matched by a 1960s story line which characteristically mixes the hard-nosed and the sentimental, an observation that could equally apply to the author of *Alfie*.

If we took as our guide the list of plays performed at the Library Theatre in Manchester in the 1960s and early 1970s, we could also notice a degree of common ground Naughton shares with other Irish writers or writers associated with Ireland: Brendan Behan, *The Hostage* (1961), J. P. Donleavy, *Fairy Tales of New York* (1962), George Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion* (1964), Sean O’Casey, *The End of the Beginning* (1964), Shaw, *Arms and the Man* (1965), Hugh Leonard, *The Poker Session* (1967), O’Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the*

*Stars* (1968). Naughton also belongs with English plays of the time. In 1967 *All in Good Time* had a four-week run, the same year as John McGrath’s anti-war play *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun*. *Spring and Port Wine* was staged in 1969 the same year as Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. In 1972, the two sets —English and Irish— came together when a three-week run of *Alfie* was followed by Stanley Houghton’s *Hindle Wakes*, and O’Casey’s *Shadow of the Gunman*.

The transition from driving lorries to writing was, as he tells us in “A Week-End to Worktown”, “painful”, and it is not surprising that the determination and struggle to become a writer is a constant theme of his autobiographical writings. (Naughton 1945: 133-7) “You had been used to handling things, hard stubborn things, and now you had to learn to take hold of ideas and images, and yet do it in such a way that you did not change them.” (Harrison 1961: 113) From things to ideas. As Madge and Harrison suggested: “The trained Observer is ideally a camera with no distortion.” (Madge and Harrison 1938: 66) Naughton began as an Observer but the baggage that accompanied him into writing never left him. In the transition from labouring to writing, as if overcome by the enormous personal changes involved, he devoted little time to an aesthetic theory, sensing that Mass-Observation chimed with his own account of things. But he had a certain advantage over his contemporaries such as George Orwell, for he had no need to “go and see for himself...what poverty smells like”, as Storm Jameson (1891-1986) had recommended to budding (middle-class) writers in 1937. (Jameson 1937: 12) It took him a long time to offload the baggage he carried with him, and whereas other working-class writers such as D. H. Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) began their careers recuperating their past, Naughton began with observation and only later when he was in his seventies and eighties did recuperation come to occupy centre stage. There is something unreconstructed and therefore familiar about this pattern, but, as I have tried to show in my remarks here, whether he was observing or recuperating, the English-Irish writer holds a certain fascination for the student curious about masculinity, hybridity and the unity of the subject.

## NOTE

1. Mass-Observation was founded in 1937 by Charles Madge, Tom Harrison and Humphrey Jennings to document British life. It took seriously the idea of democratic anthropology that just as primitive societies outside Europe could be studied in terms of work and social habits, so could British society. The aim was not only to present but to classify and analyse the immediate human world. Harrison took Bolton and the northern working class as his subject, Madge and Jennings Blackheath in London. With cameras at the ready, trained Observers recorded people in the mass responding to such things as Lancashire Wakes Weeks, the coronation of George VI, the Munich Crisis, congregating in pubs, doing the Lambeth Walk (in London). See Madge and Harrison (1938) The Mass Observation archive is housed at the University of Sussex.



Front cover of the magazine *Lilliput* with example of whimsical humour.

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