## A Refusal to Mourn

#### By Michael Scannell

#### A new England

Five years ago a world-famous young woman died, and her death revealed a new England. Established commentators soon rushed in to rubbish the national response: it was ‘mass hysteria’, ‘media-inflated hype’, you name it. A few months after the event it became the distinguishing mark of an intellectual journal that it should contain an acerbic article on the popular reaction: putting it down to a collective self-hypnosis or fantasy identification or something more reconditely discreditable.

Undeterred, the new England showed itself again this August. A whole country became day by day more focused on a small and—it must be said—quite ordinary village in Cambridgeshire. The two smiling girls in their Man United red took up residence in the national consciousness—from where they are unlikely to be dislodged for some time to come.

This time the commentators are a bit quieter. Maybe it’s OK to mourn two village girls; maybe it was mourning royalty, as though we were dreaming ourselves back to the middle ages, that was a bit off.

Personally, I don’t think there are any important differences. In both cases I think our responses honour us as a nation. At the same time, I believe that in the case of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman we should hold off mourning.

#### Hold off mourning?

This is obviously difficult to do. The memorial service has been held. The funerals are upon us. How we can do anything but feel bitterly deprived of two ordinarily—and extraordinarily—beautiful English lives?

To begin with, we can be our own commentators. It’s always something in ourselves that we mourn. We can remember what Gerard Manley Hopkins said to the young girl (of much the same age as Holly and Jessica) who was crying over the falling of leaves in a local wood: “It is Margaret you mourn for.” In mourning these two bright girls, we are all crying over the loss of something bright and unrecoverable in ourselves.

But these ten-year-olds were real girls. That kind of mourning has to be put aside. We don’t want “any further/Elegy of innocence and youth”.

The words are those of Dylan Thomas, writing about the death of a young girl in the German fire-bombing of London in the second world war: from his beautiful, and much anthologised, A Refusal To Mourn The Death, By Fire, Of A Child In London.

Thomas wanted to wait a fair time before mourning—until the end of human life on earth, in fact. I’m not suggesting we wait so long. Only until things are a lot clearer—until we have some idea of how such appalling murders came about. How we might begin to prevent them taking place. In the meantime I suggest our response should be not grief but anger.

#### The right response

Anger first, and most simply, at what has happened to England. The replacement of individual initiative, and authentic active communities, by bureaucracy.

The new Criminal Records Bureau is rushing to check the standing of teachers, classroom assistants, school support staff, school bus drivers… Since both the suspects in this particular case successfully passed these vetting procedures, what substantial good is this going to do? Isn’t it a typical administrators’ response to a problem which actually has to be solved on the ground? Paper validation will only catch a handful of glaringly obvious cases. Individuals have to be assessed by other individuals. There is no substitute for what used to be called ‘judgment of character’.

We lost confidence in that in the last years of the twentieth century. The New Right weakened our belief in society (“There is no such thing as Society”) and left us with nothing to keep us together but Carlyle’s cash-nexus. The Old Left brought in legislation which left everyone impotent except sharp administrators (who could always find ways to exploit it).

Of course in the final decades of the last century we needed equality legislation, and many other large-scale administrative solutions to individual problems. But only as a stop gap. Even at the time when these measures were first proposed, everyone knew that the key was a shift in attitudes. Which is happening. We still need to be on our guard against prejudice. We also need to revive our respect for sound individual judgment, and rage against its dying out.

#### Psychiatry

Rage, too, against the state of official psychiatry. The Moors murders took place decades ago. In 2002, are we any better off at understanding—and therefore preventing—such horrors? Why are we still lumbering about with long-exploded concepts like ‘mental health’ and ‘mental illness’?

There is such a thing as Society. There is no such thing as ‘mental illness’. It is a misleading and incoherent way of conceptualising bizarre and outrageous behaviour. It plays down the critical role of fantasy.

#### Fantasy

Fantasies—the ways we imagine things to be, out of fear or longing—are things everyone entertains. Any of us can be taken over by our fantasies. Sexual and murderous fantasies are particularly strong. Most of us have salutary awakenings. But some people indulge their fantasies to the point that they lose touch with reality—for a moment, for a short period, for a very long period. This is dreadful: but it isn’t ‘falling ill’.

None of us can yet be sure of the facts in the case of the murders of Holly and Jessica. And there are entirely appropriate legal restrictions on comment. We can still make the general point that someone capable of answering journalists’ questions lucidly and thoughtfully (on TV too) doesn’t become an alien being when he stops speaking altogether. We all know what shock is like, and the sudden destruction of omnipotent fantasies is a great shock. Treatment for the shock is called for—not baptism as ‘mentally ill’.

And fantasy is the point all round. It is a fantasy to suppose that such horrors call for a legislative or administrative solution. So which is this country in more danger from: the fantasies of sexually deviant individuals? or the fantasies of administrators?

#### Not only England

In Spain recently, in another quite ordinary village, just south of Alicante, the death of a young girl in a terrorist bomb attack moved another nation to grief. A political party with links to ETA was banned within a couple of weeks. Another big administrative solution. Another refusal to look real problems, real difficulties, in the face.

Until we can do this with murders like Holly’s and Jessica’s we cannot indulge ourselves with mourning them.