1907
THE YEAR I WAS BORN

BY FRED BASON

I wonder if you remember what Jimmy Porter said in Look Back in Anger about the Edwardian age. It was rather surprising. 'All home-made cakes and croquet; bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture.'

I was born bang in the middle of that romantic picture—in 1907. And I've been trying lately to find out what it was really like in that mythical age of ease and leisure. Was Jimmy Porter right?

Well, in 1907 something of a sensation was caused by a famous American publisher declaring in a much-publicized letter that British novelists were unable to produce books suited to American tastes because the work of most of them was concerned with sex, and they wrote about it in a manner that revolted the American public. It seems they were all Angry Young Men, like Jimmy Porter.

Now that does surprise me, because the leading British novelists of 1907 were E. F. Benson, whose House of Defence was a best-seller that year, William de Morgan, whose Alice for Short was a success, John Galsworthy, who had just published The Country House, and Israel Zangwill. I met three of these four men in later years, and nicer, more kindly, inoffensive, and respectable men you couldn't find. I can't think how they managed to revolt the American public.

What was on the stage in 1907? The hit of the year was A Woman of No Importance by Oscar Wilde at His Majesty's Theatre. But what I would have liked to have seen was Magic and Mirth, Mystery and Sensation, Aquatic, Equestrian and Stupendous Stage Spectacle at the London Hippodrome, twice daily, at two and eight. The music-halls were at the height of their popularity in 1907, packed out night after night, when you could see a four-hour show for fourpence.

But there was a strike in 1907, a very unusual sort of strike. It was a strike of music-hall artistes. Contracts in those days seldom stated how many performances were expected in one week, and many stars were worked to death at additional matinées for no extra pay. So the stars struck. The strike was led by Gus Elen, Marie Lloyd, Charles Coborn, Joe O'Gorman, and Joe Elvin, and was supported by nearly all the profession. They won.

What stars there were then! Albert Chevalier singing 'My Old Dutch', Kate Carney, Chirgwin the White-eyed Kaffir, Cinquevalli the juggler, Harry Lauder, Harry Champion, and Little Tich.

Little Tich was an oddity, just four feet high, extremely temperamental, but something of a genius. In 1907 his salary was £150 a week, and when he went to South Africa in November of that year he was paid £500 a week—a prodigious wage considering the value of the pound then. But he was very touchy and unapproachable—perhaps because he had six fingers on each hand.

What else happened in the year when I was born? Coney Island was devastated by fire; the S.S. Lusitania made her maiden voyage, and crossed from Liverpool to New York in the record time of four days, eighteen hours, and forty minutes; there were assassinations in Russia; Lord William Neville was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment at the Old Bailey for obtaining jewellery by fraud; the Tube railway from Charing Cross to Hampstead was opened; the Kaiser made a state visit to England; motor taxi-cabs made their first appearance in London; the Prince of Wales entered the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth; and The Merry Widow was produced at Daly's Theatre.

George Graves, Count Popoff of The Merry Widow, had a peculiar hobby. He attended more than a hundred murder trials and witnessed several executions. I once asked him...
why. 'Because,' he replied, 'I say to myself: 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.'"

When I was one week old Fred Karno’s company of comedians were appearing at my local variety house, the Crown Theatre in Peckham. This was the company which introduced to the world three years later a young actor called Charlie Chaplin. Most people believe that Charlie Chaplin began his career with Karno in a sketch called ‘The Mumming Birds’, with his brother Syd. In fact he started in a sketch called ‘Jim the Fearless’, in which, as a boy who returns home late at night, he narrowly escapes a thrashing from his father, and then, as he is left to eat his supper alone, there is a stage black-out and the boy dreams a series of adventures in the Deadwood Dick style. The man who told me about this, and who saw this sketch with his own eyes, also told me that even in those days Charlie was reading books on philosophy and socialism.

Fred Karno’s company was the first I ever saw on any stage, when I was eight years old. I had a seat in the gallery for twopence. Twopence was a lot of money even then. In 1907 you could make a day excursion from London to Southend by sea for five shillings. You could make a cheap day excursion from King’s Cross to Cambridge for three-and-nine, and to Skegness for only three shillings. Coal was twenty-eight shillings a ton. A furnished flat at Westcliff cost twelve-and-six a week—with food. And you could buy an Improved Defiance Vibrating Locksmith Sewing Machine, complete with box and cabinet cover in wood, for forty-nine shillings, warranted for four years. I’m pretty sure that somewhere in London some of these machines are still sewing away defiantly.

What was happening in America in the year when I was born? President Roosevelt was doing a lot of tub-thumping and hand-shaking. There was a Stock Exchange panic caused by a vast depreciation in railroad stocks. Jack Dempsey was still at school, and in his spare time washed dishes in his mother’s eating house, the Rio Grande, at Montrose. Orville Wright was building an airplane which astonished the world the following year by staying in the air for an hour. The pin-ups of the year were the Gibson Girls, created by C. D. Gibson, a notable artist of his day. Mary Pickford was already a movie star, but Douglas Fairbanks was known only on the stage. They had not yet met.

What was happening in the world of music? Everyone was going to hear Caruso, of course. But Mary Garden and Tetrazzini were in their heyday too. Giants, weren’t they! Yet the musical event of 1907 that intrigues me most was the meeting of Sir Thomas Beecham and Delius. *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* by Delius was produced at the Komische Oper in Berlin in 1907; and it was Beecham who produced Delius’s *Paris, the Story of a Great City* in London the following year. Beecham really ‘made’ Delius, but he told me once that though Delius was one of the world’s greatest composers, he was also the world’s worst conductor!

Perhaps I should mention that the celebrated prima donna Madame Patti had made her farewell appearance at the Albert Hall in 1906. . . . She had another farewell concert in 1907. . . .

I hadn’t gone into the book business then, of course, but I’m interested to note that in 1907 a First Folio Shakespeare sold to Quaritch for the record sum of £3,600. In 1907 the original warrant for the massacre of Glencoe was sold for £1,400. Today I guess it would fetch ten times as much.

Here’s another example of appreciation. The popular comics of 1907 were *Lot of Fun* and *Comic Life*—and very good harmless entertainment they were. They were published at a halfpenny each. Only the other day I sold copies of the 1907 issues to a collector for two shillings each!

In 1907 Bob Fitzsimmons was beaten in two rounds by Jack Johnson. He died ten years later. If he had not met Johnson in this fight I think he’d have lived a good deal longer. But he was a great and brave fighter. Do you know of another boxer who at the age of forty and weighing 162 pounds would have taken on Jim Jeffries at 215 pounds, and young enough to be his son—and lasted eleven rounds before being beaten?

Len Harvey, who became middleweight, cruiser, and finally heavyweight champion of Great Britain, was born in
THE LOOKING GLASS OF TASTE

1907—a very clever boxer and a fine gentleman. The heavyweight champion in 1907 was Gunner Moir. Although he was one of the worst boxers who ever held the title, he once gave a clip over the ear that hurt for days and days. I met him when I was fourteen and he was a chuck-out at the Canterbury Music Hall in Westminster Bridge Road. Why did he clip me? Because I'd asked him for his autograph, and when he refused I said: 'Cor blimey, can't you bloomin' well write, either?' I didn't dodge quite quickly enough.

What were we eating in 1907? In that year fresh eggs were two for three-ha'pence; Maypole tea was one-and-six a pound. Best milk was fourpence a quart. Fry's chocolate was very popular at a halfpenny a slab, and R. White's ginger beer was twopence for a big bottle. Kops Ale Stout was a penny a glass. Ale in a cask cost a shilling a gallon.

Coffee shops were all the go in 1907, but the last thing they sold was coffee. Roast mutton fourpence a plate; roast beef or steak-and-kidney pudding threepence; Yorkshire pudding a penny; cabbage a halfpenny; apple pie or other pudding a penny; tea a halfpenny a cup. In any part of London eel-and-pie shops were very popular. Many a portion of 'pie and taters' I had for twopence in my young days. If you wanted somewhere more respectable than the eel-and-pie or coffee shops you went to Lockhart's, the Lyons of its day, and got a good meal for fivepence.

That also was a great time for cigarette cards. Among the 1907 series were 'Full Dress Uniforms', 'Famous Cricketers', 'English Garden Flowers', 'Celebrated Boxers', and 'Views of British Landscapes'. Oh, I wish cigarette cards would return. What pleasure they gave! So did the games we played with tops, marbles, and hoops. And—would you believe it?—one of the great hobbies in those days was going round churches and taking brass-rubblings.

One of the other great recreations of 1907 in my part of London was what they called 'making up a bundle'. A bundle consisted of any odds and ends that a poor family could temporarily dispense with. The success or otherwise of 'making up a bundle' was measured by the amount of money the pawnbroker was prepared to lend on it. Pawnshops were a blessing to the poor.

And the poor were plentiful. Before Christmas hawkers used to stand along the gutters in Fleet Street and round Ludgate Circus trying to sell cheap toys. In 1907 they were all shifted to Holborn, where they stood, shoulder to shoulder, a colourful parade of abject poverty.

Still, there were genuine German bands, and barrel-organs were coming into favour. Buskers could sing and play anywhere at any time, and a couple of people standing chatting at a corner were enough to make an audience. You didn't have to queue for buses, because the drivers of horse buses (my father was one) would stop anywhere at a signal from the pavement.

The year 1907 was not a golden age, but there were golden sovereigns then, and money values were stable. Goods were plentiful and cheap, though wages were low. My father's wages were twenty-five shillings a week, and he betted on the horses then as he did every day for the next thirty years. Even when he won a packet he very quickly lost most of it. No wonder my mother put her faith in cheap diamonds, as I knew to my cost when she slashed me across the face with the back of her hand and her rings cut into me.

Boys in those days were taught to be patriotic, God-fearing, and self-reliant. The rod was not spared. Although you could buy a multitude of toys for a penny or a halfpenny, I was given only three toys in the first fourteen years of my life.

Still, I am glad I was born in 1907, and was able to know something of that wonderful, stable, and seemingly unchanging world—which has since changed out of all recognition (though I still live at 152 Westmoreland Road, in Walworth, where I was born).