

REFLECTIONS AT 80

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In both London (England) and Toronto, 2020 is very different from wartime 1940 – in population, weather, energy use, life expectancy, and attitudes to out-of-wedlock childbirth – but the most important difference could be today’s understanding that we need many more women leaders.

I reached 80 this year – a time for thoughts about my early years and how things have changed since 1940. I was born in London, England, near the beginning of the Second World War. For most of my first four years I lived with my grandmother in south-east London, close to Woolwich Arsenal, then one of Britain’s largest munitions factories and the nearest to Germany. Her rented house suffered bomb damage twice. I dimly remember the second bombing, and the subterranean backyard air-raid shelter where many dark, dank nights were spent.

Several months after my birth, I was moved away from the danger to a place south of London – and left there alone, even though babies were usually evacuated with their mothers. I didn’t stay long. The children’s home soon told my grandmother to take me back because I was unmanageable or because one of the war’s great air battles began raging overhead, or both.

I was born out of wedlock, a shameful condition for a mother and child in 1940. The name of my absent Irish father was on my birth certificate, but in the wrong place. Recently, a London court confirmed that he was my father and said the birth certificate could be corrected. I’d been given my mother’s surname, but on re-registration was given his surname. The surname I’ve had for most of my life is that of my stepfather, who adopted me in 1943 after marrying my mother.

Unwed mothers were shamed in Britain in 1940 more than supported, but perhaps not as much as in Canada. A recent Senate of Canada report suggested that most unwed mothers in the 1940s were coerced into surrendering their babies for adoption because they were perceived as unfit to care for their own children.¹ In Canada today, out-of-wedlock childbirth is almost the norm, particularly in Quebec.²

Women were mostly kept down in Britain and Canada in 1940. Now, they often make better leaders than men. Countries with women at the helm seemed to have thrived better during the current pandemic.³

I was born during what is still London’s second-coldest January since reliable record-keeping began. In January 1940, London’s average temperature was -1.4°C. In January 2020, it was +6.4°C.⁴ Toronto, where I’ve lived for the last 52 years, has had a similar increase in average January temperatures: from -9.5°C in 1940 to -1.5°C in 2020.⁵ After all this time, I still can’t quite get my head around Toronto suffering much colder winters than London while being almost 900 kilometres further south in latitude.⁶

Even though very warm months of January had occurred in both London and Toronto during earlier decades, the large temperature increases between 1940 and 2020 could well be linked to increases in fossil fuel use across the 80 years. Worldwide, little oil had been consumed before 1940 – well under five per cent of the total human consumption up to 2020 – and hardly any natural gas.⁷ However, as much as a quarter of the coal ever used had been burned by 1940. Coal was king in both Toronto and London: for industrial uses, generating electricity and heating indoor spaces. Buildings reeked of coal dust and smoke. Inhaled poisons played a part in reducing life expectancy.⁸

In 1940, automobile use was little known outside North America, where more than three-quarters of the world's motor vehicles were on the road.⁹ Electricity from coal and coal itself powered most motorized movement of people and goods. Horses were still important. In Toronto¹⁰ and especially London, even in the late-1940s, deliveries to homes and businesses – milk, bread, coal, furniture, mail packages – were made using battery-powered or horse-drawn vehicles. When I was about nine years old, I used to love controlling the horse's reins and using the enormous brake pedal while the breadman went door to door. Coal dust and smoke may have the earliest indoor things I smelled; horse droppings topped the outdoor odour list.

A male baby born in London or Toronto in 1940 near the lower end of the class ladder had a life expectancy of some 60 years.¹¹ I stay in touch with several of my British contemporaries and conclude that we seem for the most part to have lived for a decade or two longer than that. The war could have had a beneficial effect in that food rationing limited intake to essentials, while ensuring that hungry children ate the essentials.¹² Babies born in 2020 are expected to live beyond 80 years,¹³ but the pandemic may make that questionable.

Increased life expectancy has played a small role in a profound change in the human condition since 1940: the more-than-tripling of the world's population from 2.3 billion in 1940 to 7.8 billion in 2020.¹⁴ Another profound change has been the massive trend towards urban living. Some 440 million people lived in towns and cities in 1940.¹⁵ Today, the world's urban population could be ten times higher: about 4.4 billion.¹⁶

In 1940, London's nine million residents made it the world's third most populous urban region – after New York and Tokyo-Yokohama.¹⁷ Now, with 14 million residents, the London region ranks 27th in population.¹⁸ The Toronto region had fewer than a million residents in 1940 and today has six million.¹⁹ Continuation of these rates of growth would take Toronto past London in 2062, when each region would have about 18 million residents.

The birth rate in England in 1940 was below the replacement level for the first time in history. After a post-war boom, it returned to the 1940 level in 1980, where it has remained.²⁰ Being ahead of the boomers has to a small degree shaped my life. My first non-vacation job was made possible by a boomer-induced teacher shortage. I was given an emergency teaching certificate and taught physics and math at a London high school at the age of 19. For much of 2020 I've been teaching math again – remotely to three young grandchildren. It's been a good way to stay in touch, but likely has only a part of the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction.

London in 1940 was the capital of the world's most populous political entity: the British Empire (Commonwealth) comprising some 550 million people, most in India. Next was Japan and its colonies, which embraced some 300 million, and then China with 270 million.²¹ By the end of 1940s, the British Empire was pretty much a ramshackle relic, mostly kept alive by high-school history and geography teachers, including my own.²²

2020 may be as much a pivotal year for the world as 1940 was for Europe. Experience there points to two ways out of the current pandemic-caused social and economic disasters. One would be to repeat the mistakes coming out of the First World War, when resentments and toxic ideologies led to an even worse war. The other would be to model the aftermath of the Second World War, when mutual consideration and international cooperation led to an immeasurably more caring, congenial and prosperous western Europe.

With enough women leaders, the world may well have a benign recovery from our present predicament, enabling my seven much-loved grandchildren – now aged 4 to 28 years – to have the long lives predicted for them.

Toronto, November 2020

END NOTES

¹ <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/august-2018/canadas-shameful-post-war-treatment-of-unwed-mothers/>

² https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/fl-lf/famil/anlsc-elnej/p2_01.html and <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/more-rights-wanted-for-unmarried-parents-in-quebec-1.3105168>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/05/perspectives/women-leaders-coronavirus/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/hadcet/cetml1659on.dat>

⁵ <https://toronto.weatherstats.ca/charts/temperature-monthly.html> and https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_data/monthly_data_e.html?Prov=ON&StationID=5097&timeframe=3&Year=1940&cmdB1=Go&Month=6&Day=1&StartYear=1840&EndYear=2020 (Durham average for 1940, adding 1°C for urban effect.)

⁶ London's latitude is 51.51° N; Toronto's is 43.65° N – a difference of 7.86°. Along a line of longitude, each degree of difference is about 111 kilometres. Thus, Toronto is 872 km further south.

⁷ See the file w-energy.csv at <https://user.iiasa.ac.at/~gruebler/Data/TechnologyAndGlobalChange/> (This is a file in the Web-based data appendix of Arnulf Grüber's 1998 book *Technology and Global Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.)

⁸ <https://www.pnas.org/content/96/7/3427>.

⁹ <https://www.darrinqualman.com/global-automobile-production/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/when-the-milkman-still-rode-down-toronto-streets/article16073542/>

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09> and <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016002-eng.htm>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/jan/04/observerspecialbritainsschools.medicineandhealth>

¹³ <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CAN/canada/life-expectancy#:~:text=The%20current%20life%20expectancy%20for,a%200.18%25%20increase%20from%202018>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estimates_of_historical_world_population and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population.

¹⁵ Table 8 in [https://population.un.org/wup/Archive/Files/studies/United%20Nations%20\(1969\)%20-%20Growth%20of%20the%20World's%20Urban%20and%20Rural%20Population,%201920-2000.pdf](https://population.un.org/wup/Archive/Files/studies/United%20Nations%20(1969)%20-%20Growth%20of%20the%20World's%20Urban%20and%20Rural%20Population,%201920-2000.pdf)

¹⁶ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-31082941#:~:text=London's%20population%20has%20topped%208.6,black%20or%20ethnic%20minority%20origins>

¹⁸ <http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/largest-cities-mayors-1.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/20402/toronto/population>

²⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1033074/fertility-rate-uk-1800-2020/>

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_in_1939

²² I couldn't find a place in the text to include a neat reference to what was one of the strongest formative influences on my life: the Duke of York's Royal Military School, which I attended from age nine to 18 – on the cliffs east of Dover in sight of France. This was a residential school chiefly for the sons of dead or injured non-officers in the British Army. I was able to attend because my stepfather was there in the 1920s and because he had a stellar war record. The school has admitted girls since 1994 as it did from 1803 to 1892, when it was in London and known at the Royal Military Asylum. My website (www.richardgilbert.ca) houses many of the files of Art Cockerill, unofficial school historian, who lived in Cobourg, Ontario for much of his life and died in 2016. His files can be accessed at www.achart.ca. When I went to the school in 1949, most students left when they were 15 or 16 years old to go to an Army Apprentice School or join the workforce. A few stayed longer to qualify for Sandhurst, the Army's main officer training centre; almost none went to university. (Then, less than four percent of the UK population went to university; now it's above 50 per cent. In Canada, to the extent systems can be compared, proportionately twice as many went in the early 1950s, but now it seems to be a lower share of each year than in the UK.) The school has evolved since I went there in 1949 from being an overtly military school to becoming what is known as a state boarding academy with military traditions, said to be academically among the highest performing schools in the country. Some of this evolution happened while I was there. Since 2010, it has been overseen by the UK government's Department of Education rather than its Ministry of Defence (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duke_of_York%27s_Royal_Military_School).