

Art Blart

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August 16, 2024

Exhibition: 'Roger Mayne: Youth' at the Courtauld Gallery, London

Exhibition dates: 14th June – 1st September, 2024

Denise Coates Exhibition Galleries



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Southam Street Group, North Kensington, London, 1956
Vintage gelatin silver print; 55.5 x 80.4cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum

In vivid and completely natural un/reality

As readers of Art Blart over the years will know, I love a committed social documentary photographer, an artist with a heart and an informed social consciousness, one who is aware of the right or wrong actions (conscience).

Roger Mayne is one such photographer. Others in the pantheon include Helen Levitt, Chris Killip, Don McCullin, Edith Tudor-Hart, Bill Brandt, Tony Ray-Jones, Syd Shelton, Neil Kenlock, Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, Daniel Meadows, Gordon Parks, Milton Rogovin, Teenie Harris, and Dave Heath to name just a few.

Mayne's portrait of the working class areas of London life, his gritty black and white images of a "crumbling post-war Britain" and the "modernisation of working class neighbourhoods after the war" picture – as Colin MacInnes author of the "cult 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, a lively account of the emergence of teen culture and attitude in the late 1950s" (wall text) states – "a rotting slum of a sharp, horrible vivacity."¹

What a turn of phrase!

But what MacInnes forgets is that there was community in those very slums, that there was a culture of supporting each other through the tough times, especially after the deprivations of the Second World War and the ongoing rationing which lasted until mid-1954 in the United Kingdom. I vividly remember as a child visiting my grandmother in a small town in suburban Hertfordshire in the 1960s and recall the drabness of the identical houses cheek by jowl, the washing hung in the backyard and the outdoor loo, and the dampness, darkness of the house. And the cold and the rain. But then there were the children playing in the streets, the smiles and the joy of freedom despite the poverty.

Mayne's photographs push further than mere documentary reportage on these communities. As he himself says, photography becomes art through a "particular mixture of reality and unreality" and the photographers power to select what they are photographing. They become art through the photographers consciousness.

Here I believe that the mixture of reality and unreality and previsualisation (selection of what to photograph and how to frame the image) in Mayne's photographs can be seen as a form of "magic realism" which is "a style or genre of fiction and art that presents a realistic view of the world while incorporating magical elements, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality."² Matthew Strecher (1999) defines it as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe."³

Indeed, if we look at Mayne's photograph *Southam Street Group, North Kensington, London* (1956, above) there is something so magical and strange about the atmosphere of this image – the out of focus girl in the foreground, boy with his hand to his neck, self absorbed girl on the steps looking out, peeling paint of the building, young children watching the man holding the bicycle and a second, orphaned larger wheel (what is it doing there?), the small child being propped on the too large bicycle, bulky pram lurking, hunkering at the side of the image – it is as though the image was part of a fable, a story about mythical characters and streetscapes that can never happen again.

This magic realism is repeated again and again in Mayne's images: that sense of the extra/ordinary, of the super/natural – the spacing of the figures in *Southam Street Corner, North Kensington, London* (1957, below); the zoomorphic characteristics of the figures in *Girls doing a Handstand, Southam Street* (1956, below); the contrast between the stiff-legged boy and arms folded screaming girl in *Screaming Child, Southam St. (North Kensington)* (1956, below); and the lean of the whole photograph ... the women, reaching out to touch the man child in *Nottingham, St Ann's* (1969, below). And on we could go, each image taking us out of ourselves into strange new (old) worlds.

Roger Mayne was truly a magnificent, poetic artist. His subjects, though never appearing "posed," confront the spectator in vivid and completely natural un/reality.⁴ Spirits who still inhabit London's deliquescent urban spaces.

Dr Marcus Bunyan

1/ Colin MacInnes (British, 1914-1976) *Poverty and poetry in W.10* c. 1961

2/ "[Magic realism](#)," on the *Wikipedia* website

3/ Strecher, Matthew C. 1999. "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 25(2): 263–98. p. 267 quoted in "[Magic realism](#)," on the *Wikipedia* website

4/ Adapted from Colin MacInnes Op. cit.,

Many thankx to the Courtauld Gallery for allowing me to publish the photographs in the posting.

Poverty and poetry in W.10

THE FIRST TIME I saw Roger Mayne's photographs, I must admit I couldn't grasp their "point." All I could see were scenes of dingy, oddly poetic London streets, peopled by unprepossessing kids and teenagers, sometimes at play, at others just standing in a purposeless, slightly ominous way. As my wits came into focus, I realised what these photographs were showing was a portrait of London life like that of a novelist of real originality.

They portray a district of horrid fascination that I know well—the W.10 and 11 areas of London. This weird and fantastic region, in the triangle between Wood Lane and the Harrow Road, is—save for a few bourgeois enclaves—a rotting slum of a sharp, horrible vivacity. It is the Christie country around Rillington Place—now renamed Rustin Close—the race riot battlefield of Walmer, Silchester, Blechynden and other thoroughfares of odious memory, the whole mess bisected into squalid segments by a railway running high above the slum-scape, like the old New York L., and by the dank, stagnant, boatless Grand Union Canal.

This complex has a marked Anglo-Sicilian flavour. The citizens, among whom a criminal element is traditional, live on the streets, in a way rare even in prosperous working-class areas. Teds tailed by their mute birds, tough unforthcoming adults, gnarled, wry old people, and infant Arabs and Lolitas, all create a hard, animated Northern casbah. This is a place the Welfare State and the Property-owning Democracy equally passed by.

Into this area, on the edge of which he lives, Roger Mayne penetrates on perpetual safari, and has patiently stalked his quarry. He can shoot it with such startling effect—and without searing it away or exciting its hostility—because of a lightning camera speed, and his bland air of ingratiating vagueness.

His subjects, though never appearing "posed," confront the spectator in vivid and completely natural reality. The children at their fierce, fantastic games. The tribesmen Teds staring, in tensed, dead-pan groups, with blank, meaningless hostility. The girls showing their paces and bursting youth with a real glamour that transcends their fierce determination to be glamorous. The hunched, chunky, watchful, back-to-the-wall older men, and their chore-and-baby-ridden women. The melancholy, graceful West Indians, stepping it out on a cautiously carefree prowl. All these Roger Mayne records with a cool appraisal—with an eye and brain constantly alert and truthful, at times almost clinical, entirely un-judging.

He is one of the few English photographers I know of who have disclosed to me a world of modern fact: a portrait of urban sub-life of which, without him, I would have been unaware.

COLIN MacINNES

A collection of Roger Mayne's pictures, many of which have been reproduced in "The Observer," have been published in Uppercase (Whitefriars, 7s. 6d.).

Colin MacInnes (British, 1914-1976)

Poverty and poetry in W.10, c. 1961

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“Photography involves two main distortions – the simplification into black and white and the seizing of an instant in time. It is this mixture of reality and unreality, and the photographer’s power to select, that makes it possible for photography to be an art.”

Roger Mayne

“[Mayne] understood how to compose images in the camera to create what he described to Peace News in 1960 as a “particular mixture of reality and unreality.”
“The photographer’s power to select...makes it possible for photography to be an art,”
Mayne continued. “Whether it is good art depends on the power and truth of the artist’s statement.””

Miss Rosen. [“Joyful photos of London youth culture in the 50s and 60s.”](#) on the Huck Magazine website Monday 13 February, 2023 [Online] Cited 23/07/2024





Installation views of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London

Acclaimed British photographer Roger Mayne (1929-2014) was famous for his evocative documentary images of young people growing-up in Britain in the mid-1950s and '60s. This exhibition, of around 60 almost exclusively vintage photographs, includes many of his iconic street images of children and teenagers, alongside an almost entirely unknown selection of intimate and moving later images of his own family at home in Dorset, as well as those taken on his honeymoon in Spain in 1962.

Self-taught and influential in the acceptance of photography as an art form, Mayne was passionate about photographing human life as he found it. This is the first exhibition of his work since 2017.

Text from the *Courtauld* website

Playing in the Street



Installation view of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London showing at left, Mayne's *Goalie, Brindley Road, Paddington, London* (1956, below); at second left, *Southam Street Group, North Kensington, London* (1956, above); at centre, *Girl on the steps, St. Stephen's Gardens* (1957, below); and at second from right, *Southam Street Corner, North Kensington, London* (1957, below)



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Southam Street Corner, North Kensington, London, 1957
Vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board; 43 x 58cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Children in a Bombed Building, Bermondsey, London, 1954
Vintage gelatin silver print; 28 x 19.5cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Don McCullin (British, b. 1935)

The Guv'nors, Finsbury Park, London, 1958

Gelatin silver print

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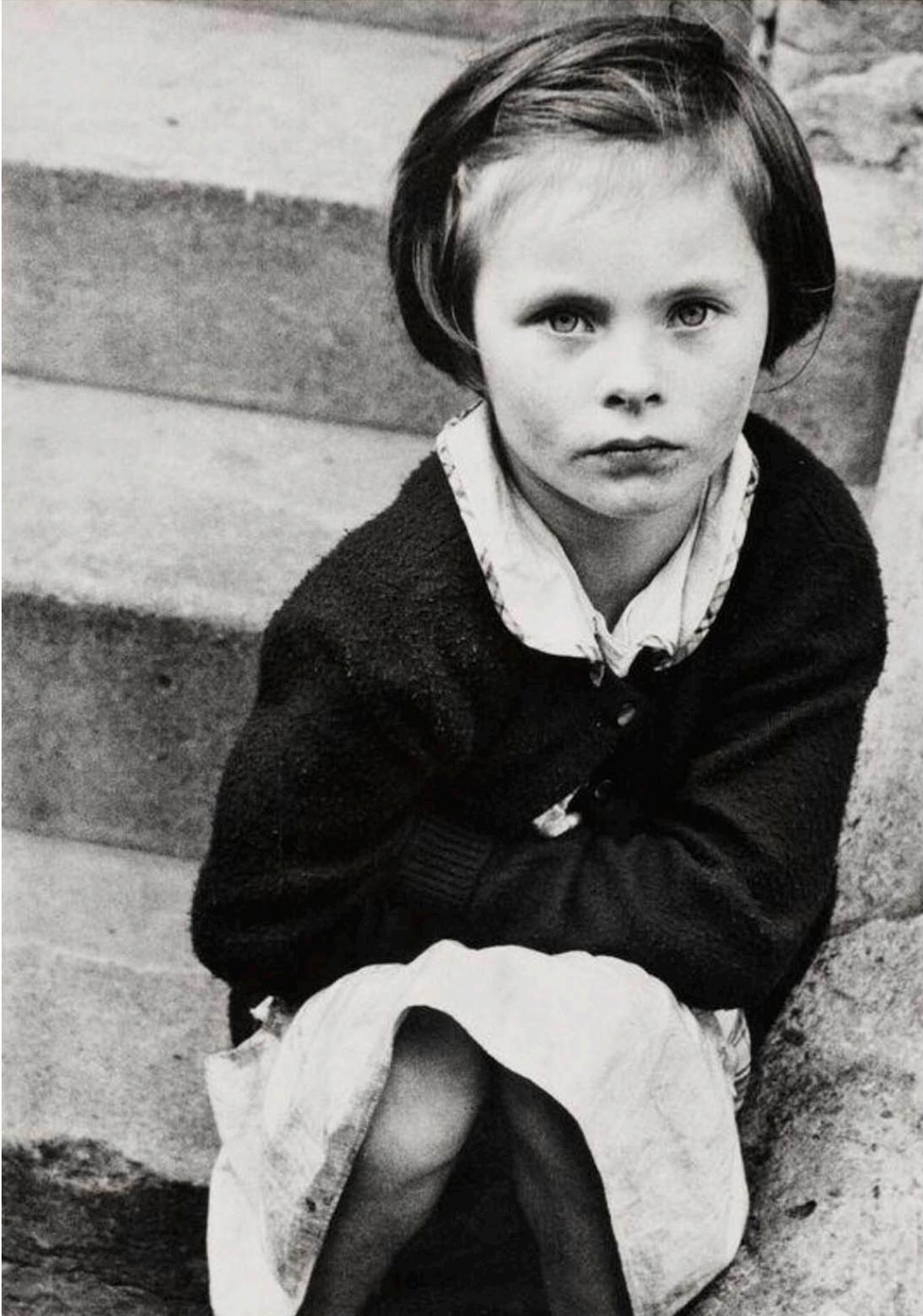
This photograph is not in the exhibition



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Girls doing a Handstand, Southam Street, 1956
Modern print (printed in 1987)
30 x 23cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Goalie, Brindley Road, Paddington, London, 1956
Modern print (printed in 2002)
38 x 30cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Girl on the steps, St. Stephen's Gardens, 1957
Vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board
49.3 x 34.5cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum

In the case:



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Screaming Child, Southam St. (North Kensington), 1956
From the 'Southam Street' Album 1956-1961, 5 May 1956
Vintage gelatin silver print mounted in an album
36.4 x 54.8cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum



Dave Heath (Canadian born United States, 1931-2016)
Vengeful Sister, Chicago, 1956
Gelatin silver print
7 3/16 x 8 7/8 inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Gift of the Hall Family Foundation
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This photograph is not in the exhibition

The summer season at The Courtauld Gallery in London has opened with a major exhibition of photographs by the acclaimed post-war photographer, Roger Mayne.

The first-ever photography exhibition at The Courtauld, Roger Mayne: Youth (14 June – 1 September 2024) reassesses the importance of Roger Mayne (1929-2014), through the lens of his evocative black and white images of young people. The exhibition brings together the works of the 1950s and early 1960s for which he is famous, alongside lesser-known images of his own children. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue positions Mayne as crucially important in the emergence of documentary photography as an art form in Britain in the years after the war.

A self-taught photographer, having discovered the medium while studying chemistry at Balliol College, Oxford, Mayne moved to London in 1953. Inspired by the work of the artist Nigel Henderson, among others, he became passionate about photographing human life as he found it. He quickly achieved widespread recognition for his powerful images of communities struggling with poverty against a backdrop of dereliction in London and across the UK. Renowned for his sustained portrayal of Southam Street, now long gone but then located on the northern fringes of Notting Hill, Mayne's dedication to photographing this one locale over a six-year period – from 1956 to 1961 – was, and still is, extraordinary in the history of photography.

Mayne's photography in the 1950s and early '60s captured an exuberance and an uneasiness that embodied both the scars and hopes of post-war Britain. In documenting the lives of young people growing up in Britain, his images highlight the significance of children's play and the identity formation of the teenager in the post-war years, revealing the tectonic shifts in society at that time. Highlights include *Children in a Bombed Building, Bermondsey, London* (1954) and one of his most famous images, *A Girl Living in Southam Street (Eileen Sheekey), London* (1957).

In 1962 a new chapter opened in Roger Mayne's personal life, when he married Ann Jellicoe, a pioneering and well-established playwright. Their honeymoon in Spain left Mayne feeling creatively nourished by the vitality of the people he encountered there. With children and young people still at the forefront of this fresh strand of image-making, he judged the photographs from this trip to be 'the best series of photographs I have yet done.' Following the birth of his own children and a move to the Dorset countryside in the mid-1960s, family life and the local bucolic landscape became a new backdrop for Mayne's lens. The imagery of the street was replaced by that of a growing and adored family.

This exhibition, curated by Jane Alison in close collaboration with Mayne's daughter, Katkin Tremayne, features over 60 vintage photographs, some never exhibited before. While the two bodies of work, street and family, have a different tenor, they are united by Mayne's radical empathy with his youthful subjects and his desire to create photographic images that enjoy a lasting impact, produced with great sensitivity and artistic integrity. With Mayne's post-war subjects now in their more senior years, and today's younger generation facing a myriad crises, Mayne's deliberations on growing up, childhood, adolescence and family feel especially poignant and timely.

Press release from the Courtauld

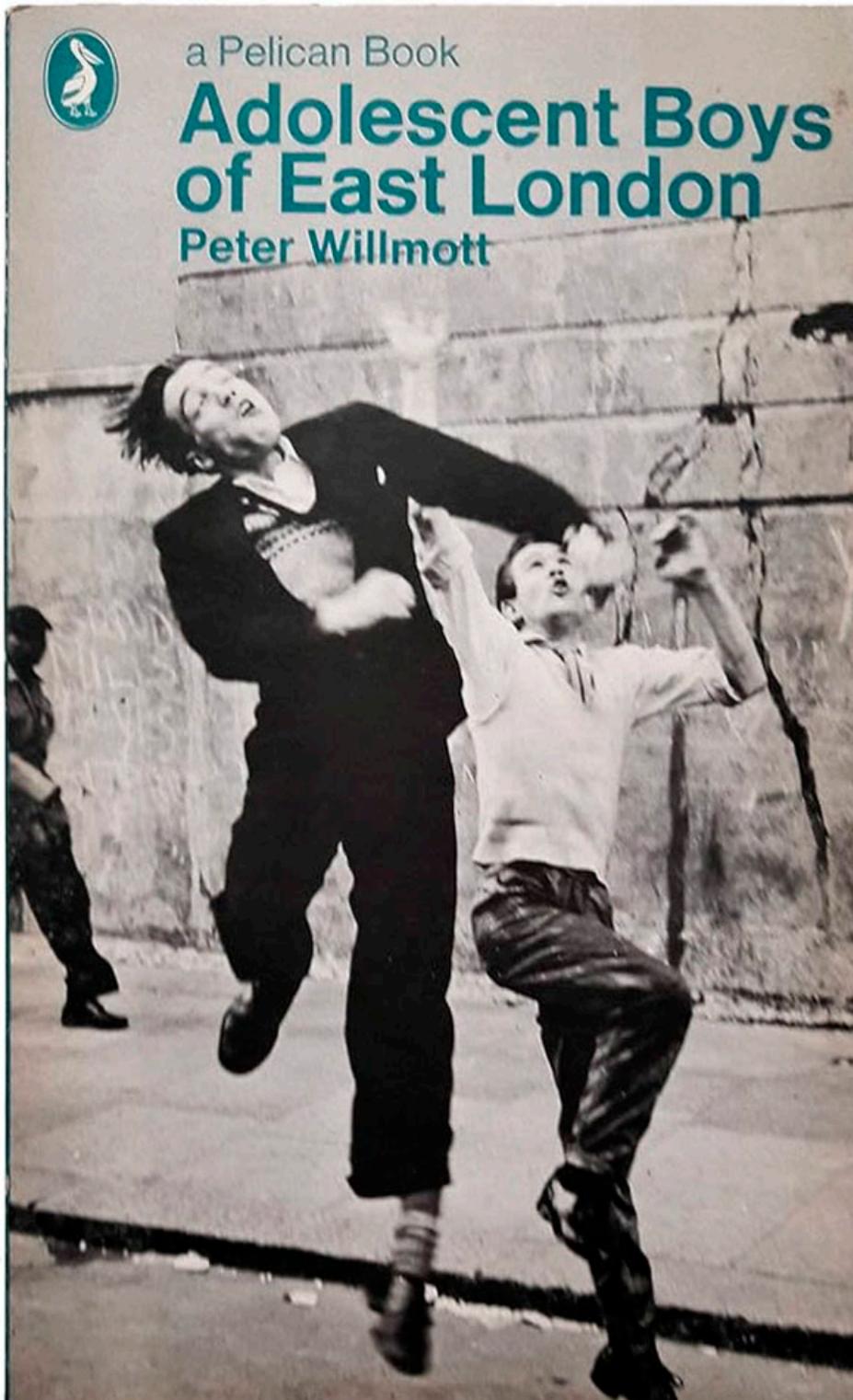
Society at Large



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Nottingham, St Ann's, 1969
Modern print; 16 x 23cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive

In the case

Nine Pelican and Penguin paperback books including:



Adolescent Boys of East London, by Peter Willmott, Pelican, 1969 with Roger Mayne's *Street football, Southam St., North Kensington, 1958* (detail) on the cover



a Pelican Book

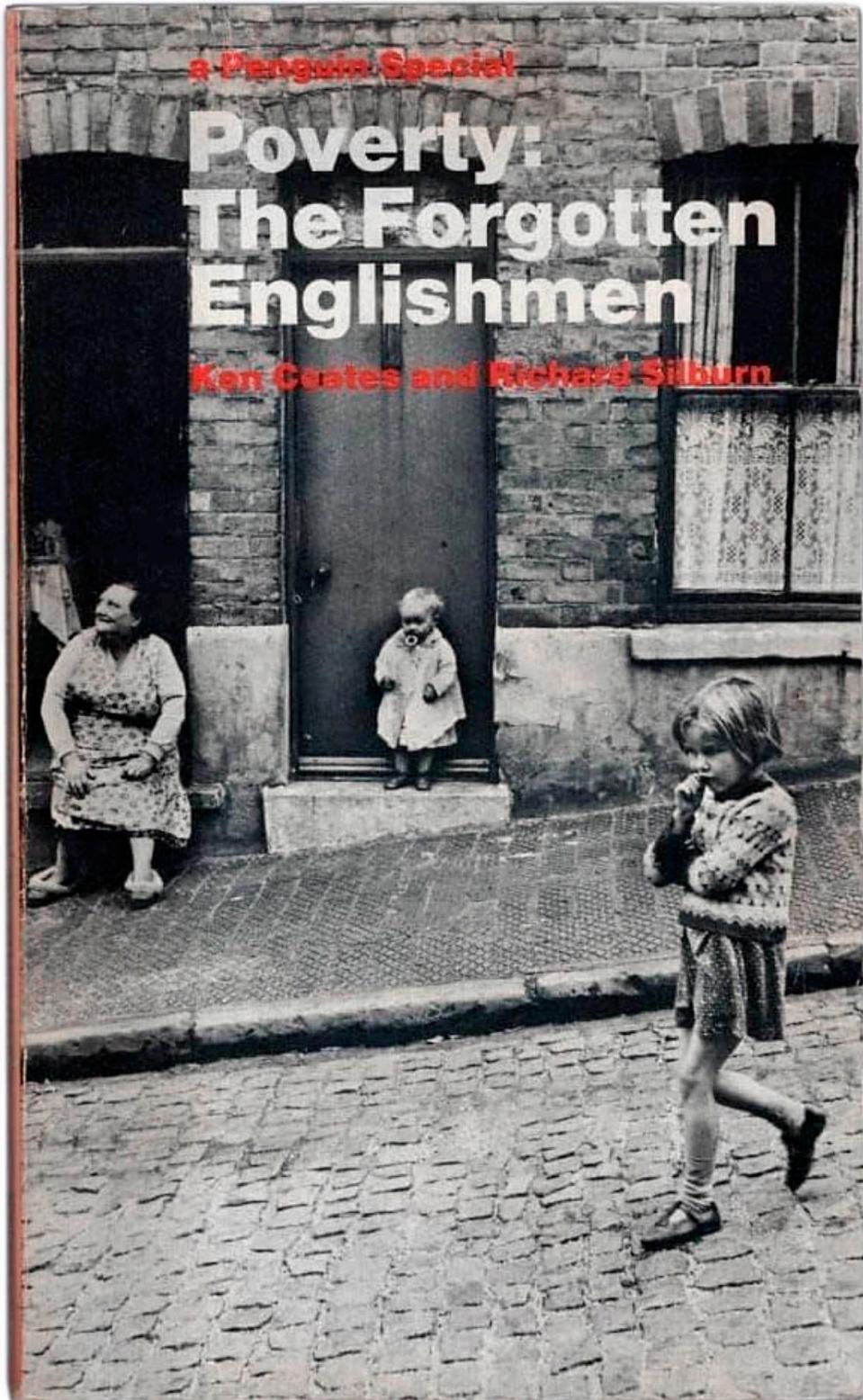
Relative Deprivation and Social Justice

A study of attitudes to social inequality
in twentieth-century England

W. G. Runciman



Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century England, W. G. Runciman, Pelican, 1972 book cover



Poverty: The Forgotten Englishman, Ken Coates and Richard Silburn, Pelican, 1970 book cover

The Spanish Honeymoon



Installation view of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London showing at left, Mayne's *Costa del Sol* (1962); at centre, *Girl in a Market, Almunecar, Costa del Sol* (1962, below); at top right, *Footballer Jumping, Almuneca, Costa del Sol* (1962); and at bottom right, *Girls by a Fountain, Almunecar, Costa del Sol* (1962)



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Girl in a Market, Almunecar, Costa del Sol, 1962
Vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board
59.5 x 91.5cm

Teenage Takeover



Installation view of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London showing at left, Mayne's *Teenagers, Soho Fair, London* (17 July 1958, below); at centre, *Teenage Couple, Absolute Beginners photo-shoot* (26 April 1959, below); and at right, *Men and boys, Southam Street, London* (1959, below)



Installation view of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London showing at left, Mayne's *Teenage Couple, Absolute Beginners photo-shoot* (26 April 1959, below); at centre, *Men and boys, Southam Street, London* (1959, below); and at right, *Teddy Girls, Battersea Funfair* (1956, below)



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)

Teenagers, Soho Fair, London, 17 July 1958, Vintage gelatin silver print; 24 x 36cm

Courtesy Wilson Centre for Photography



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)

Men and boys, Southam Street, London, 1959, Vintage gelatin silver print; 18.5 x 27cm

Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Beaulieu Jazz Festival, 1961
Vintage gelatin silver print
18 x 27cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
A Girl Living in Southam Street (Eileen Sheekey), London, 1957
Vintage gelatin silver print; 36.5 x 25.2cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum

The moving girl may have been living her best life, but this wasn't peak prosperity for her. The street she lived on was the most densely populated street in London (according to a 1961 survey), a place where children played in the streets because there were no green spaces available....

Roger Mayne didn't foreground this poverty. He photographed Southam Street in a way that was in some ways nostalgic. He wrote, "Empty, the streets have their own kind of beauty, a kind of decaying always great atmosphere... My reason for photographing the love on them, and the life on them. ... [I]t may be warm and friendly on a sunny spring weekend when the street is swarming with children playing."

At the same time, he doesn't avoid the signs of poverty, the indicators of decay, and not does he romanticism them. When brickwork crumbles, you know it is a sign of neglect and not some kind of shabby working-class chic. His pictures also show the changes these communities are going through. Stephen Brooke wrote that the immediacy of Mayne's images helped him "capture the dynamism of working-class life and chronicle new actors on the urban stage such as teenagers and African and West Indian immigrants." ...

It's a world that is nostalgic in some ways, but is also a reminder of what we have lost. The public sites Mayne photographed, the spaces of the street, have been taken over by cars or commodified and securitized. And when we wonder at the nostalgia of it all, it might be a nostalgia tinged with mourning, not at what we have lost in our striving for affluence but at what has been taken from us."

Colin Pantall. "[West London's Working-Class.](#)" on the *Blind Magazine* website February 27, 2023 [Online] Cited 23/07/2024



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Teddy Girls, Battersea Funfair, 1956
Vintage gelatin silver print
58.3 x 43.8cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Teenage Couple, Absolute Beginners photo-shoot, 26 April 1959
Vintage gelatin silver print; 25.6 x 18.2cm
Courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum

Absolute beginners

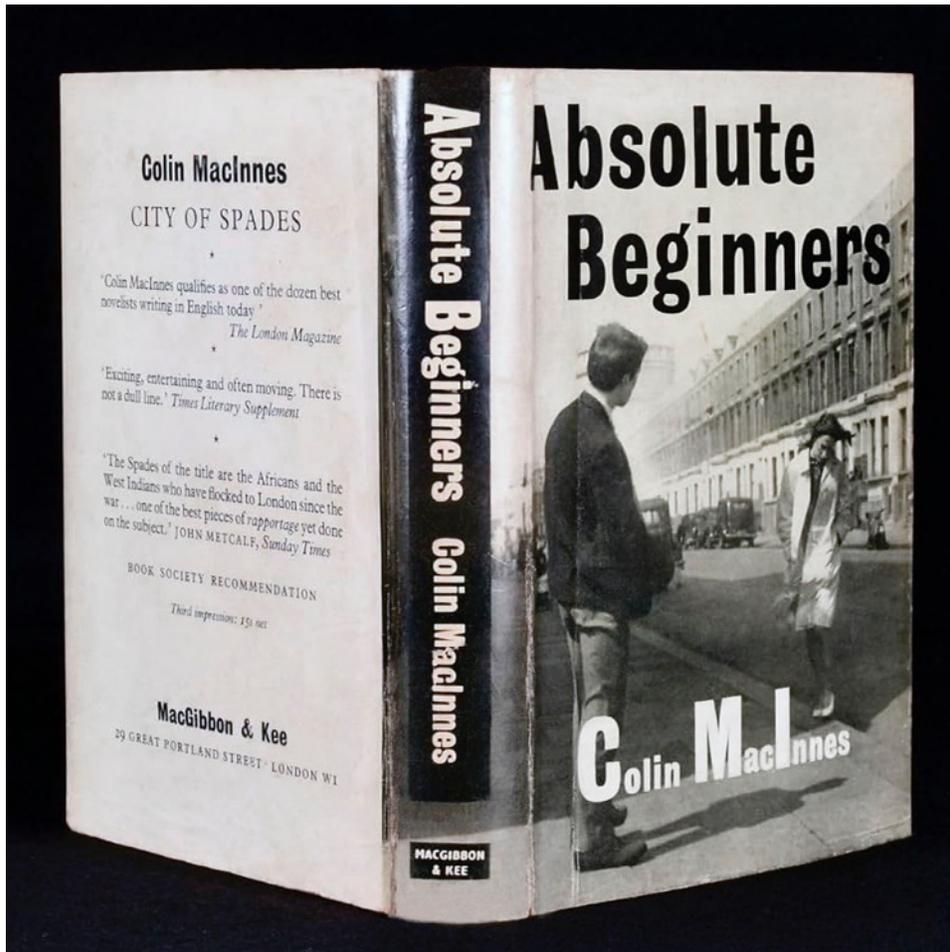
26 April 1959

Mayne was commissioned to photograph the cover image for Colin MacInnes cult 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*, a lively account of the emergence of teen culture and attitude in the late 1950s. The young Mod couple that Mayne photographed for the book cover effectively announced the birth of “cool” in the UK. One of over 80 images that Mayne took on the day of the shoot, we know that this image was preferred by Mayne to the one on the cover, most likely due to the fact that he thought it looked less staged, which was something that he vehemently disliked.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Wall text from the exhibition

In the case



Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* 1959 book cover

Soho, Notting Hill... a world of smoky jazz clubs, coffee bars and hip hang-outs in the center of London's emerging youth culture. The young and restless – the *Absolute Beginners* – were creating a world as different as they dared from the traditional image of England's green and pleasant land. Follow our young photographer as he records the moments of a young teenager's life in the capital – sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, the era of the first race riots and the lead-up to the swinging sixties.

A twentieth-century cult classic, *Absolute Beginners* remains the style bible for anyone interested in Mod culture and paints a vivid picture of a changing society with insight and sensitivity.

Text from the [Goodreads website](#)

Introduction

The novel is written from the first-person perspective of a teenage freelance photographer, who lives in a rundown yet vibrant part of West London he calls Napoli. The area is home to a large number of Caribbean immigrants, as well as English people on the margins of society, such as homosexuals and drug addicts.

The themes of the novel are the narrator's opinions on the newly formed youth culture and its fixation on clothes and jazz music, his love for his ex-girlfriend Crêpe Suzette, the illness of his father, and simmering racial tensions in the summer of the Notting Hill race riots.

Plot summary

The novel is divided into four sections. Each details a particular day in the four months that spanned the summer of 1958.

In June takes up half of the book and shows the narrator meeting up with various teenaged friends and some adults in various parts of London and discussing his outlook on life and the new concept of being a teenager. He also learns that his ex-girlfriend, Suzette, is to enter a marriage of convenience with her boss, a middle-aged gay fashion designer called Henley.

In July has the narrator taking photographs by the river Thames, seeing the musical operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore* with his father, has a violent encounter with Ed the Ted and watches Hoplite's appearance on Call-Me-Cobber's TV show.

In August has the narrator and his father take a cruise along the Thames towards Windsor Castle. His father is taken ill on the trip and has to be taken to a doctor. The narrator also finds Suzette at her husband's cottage in Cookham.

In September is set on the narrator's 19th birthday. He sees this, symbolically, as the beginning of his last year as a teenager. He witnesses several incidents of racial violence,

which disgust him. His father also dies, leaving him four envelopes stuffed with money. Suzette has separated from Henley, but still seems uncertain as to whether she should resume her relationship with the narrator. The narrator decides to leave the country and find a place where racism doesn't exist. At the airport, he sees Africans arriving and gives them a warm welcome.

Text from the [Wikipedia website](#)



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Girls Dancing at Richmond Jazz Festival, 1962
Vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board
61 x 91.5cm



Installation view of the exhibition *Roger Mayne: Youth* at the Courtauld Gallery, London showing in the background at left, *Girls Dancing at Richmond Jazz Festival (1962, above)*; and in the case the texts below

The Family Albums

The arrival of Roger Mayne's own children, Katkin and Tom, prompted an ambitious documentary project entitled 'Daughter and Son', 1966-1974, for which he planned a comprehensive book of images accompanied by detailed behavioural observations. An earlier devotion to the youth of Southam Street was here replaced by an adoration of his own family. The images that Mayne took, along with later ones of his grandchildren, are collected in more than a dozen albums, four of which are featured here. A further album, made as a keepsake for the children's great uncle, juxtaposed photographs with drawings by both children. These are prefigured by a much earlier album, which includes images of families.

Mayne sought to bring an unwavering gaze to the nature of human's experiences. The act of giving birth and the emergence of new life presented itself to Mayne as an opportunity to bring sensitivity and authenticity as well as compositional flair and originality to these unique moments. As such, the group of images that Mayne took of his wife Ann giving birth to Katkin are unlike other childbirth photographs, which are typically taken from behind the mother's head and without such a direct view of the emerging baby.

Cabinet display text from the exhibition

Early Work Album Vol II

This album of the photographer's most important early images was brought together by Mayne and presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum. The left-hand image of a family friend is marked by a wry humour that came to characterise much of Mayne's mature work, whereas the image on the right-hand side, with the riot of closely, cropped and tangled bodies, foreshadows some of his best photographs of children in unruly abandon in London's Southam Street. The right-hand image was taken on a trip to Victoria Park Lido with the artist Nigel Henderson's family and friends.

Cabinet display text from the exhibition



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)

Three children at Nigel Henderson's: Drusilla (Jo) and Justin Henderson, with a friend, Bethnal Green, 1953

Vintage gelatin silver print; 21 x 20cm

Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive



Roger Mayne (British, 1929-2014)
Tom, Trafalgar Square, 1970
Vintage gelatin silver print; 27 x 17cm
Courtesy the Roger Mayne Archive

The Courtauld Gallery
Somerset House, Strand,
London WC2R 0RN