

A Fortunate Man revisited, 50 years on

Exploring this acclaimed book in the place that gave birth to it fifty years ago.

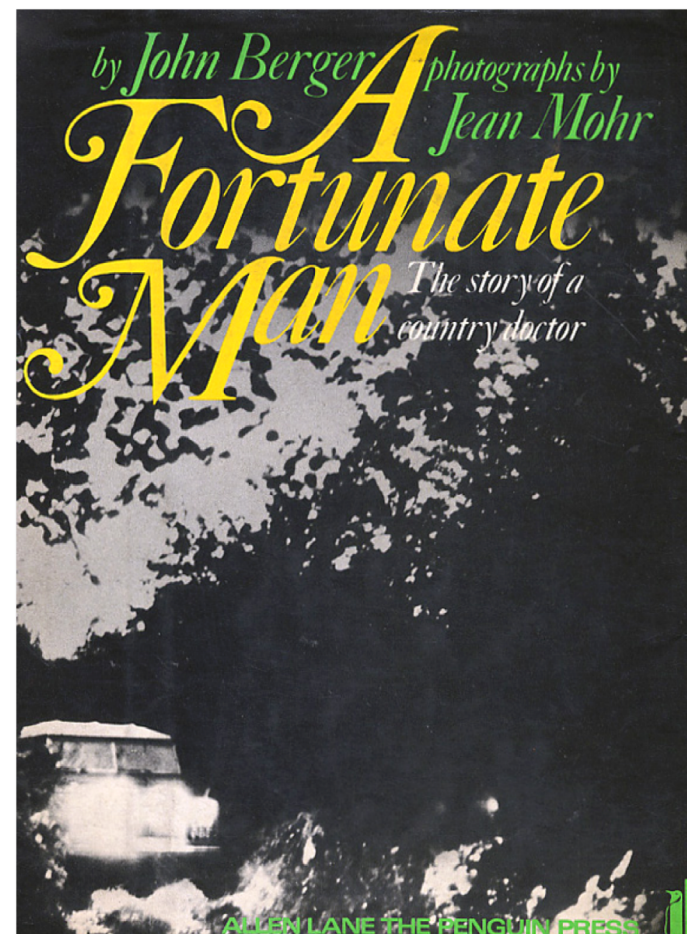
In 1967, the book *A Fortunate Man* was published to international acclaim.

It explored the relationship between a rural doctor and his patients and become recommended reading for trainee GPs.

The setting of the book, the doctor and his patients were all anonymized, although a newspaper soon disclosed the real location as St Briavels. The book was widely known in the medical profession, and amongst academics, but became less well-known in the Forest of Dean.

In 2015 the book featured at a Royal College of Art conference celebrating its author's career. As the panel of doctors discussed the book, one aspect was starkly absent: the people and landscape of the Forest of Dean.

This exhibition, the talks and films, aims to redress that, whilst exploring the stories behind this extraordinary book.



One of the many photographs by Jean Mohr in the book.
© Jean Mohr 1967, renewed 1995

Fact File

- Written by acclaimed art-critic and author John Berger
- Photographs by Swiss documentary photographer Jean Mohr
- 'Dr Sassall' in the book was real-life St Briavels' GP, Dr John Eskell
- The photographs include his patients, the people & places of St Briavels & the area

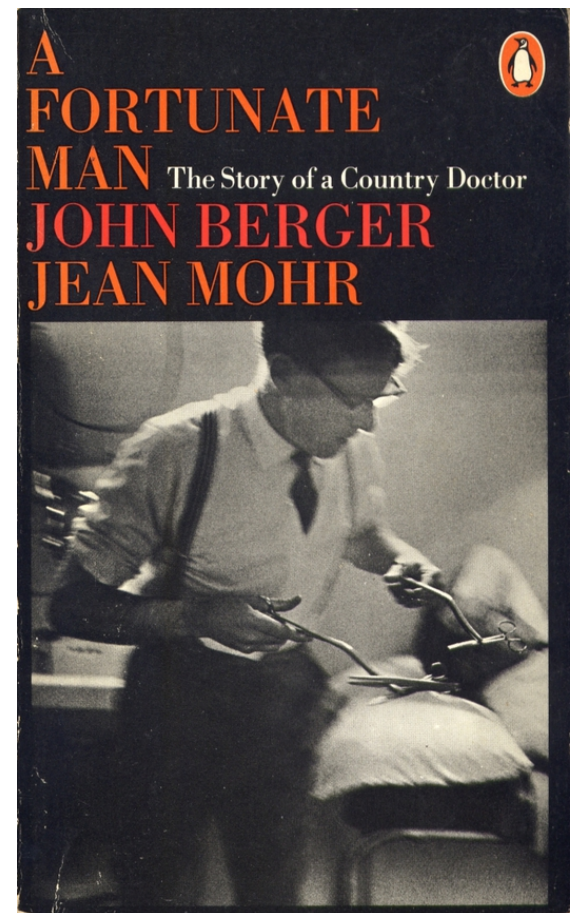
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the book: **Critical Acclaim**

A Ground-breaking Work

Widely regarded as a masterpiece, its popularity increased as the work and its author became more widely known.

John Berger and his work became known by a wider readership after he won the Booker prize for his novel *G* (notoriously, suggesting he would donate his winnings to the Black Panthers), and as his television series *Ways of Seeing* was shown on the BBC. It appeared on the shelves of many liberal intellectuals - an important statement of shared values and beliefs.



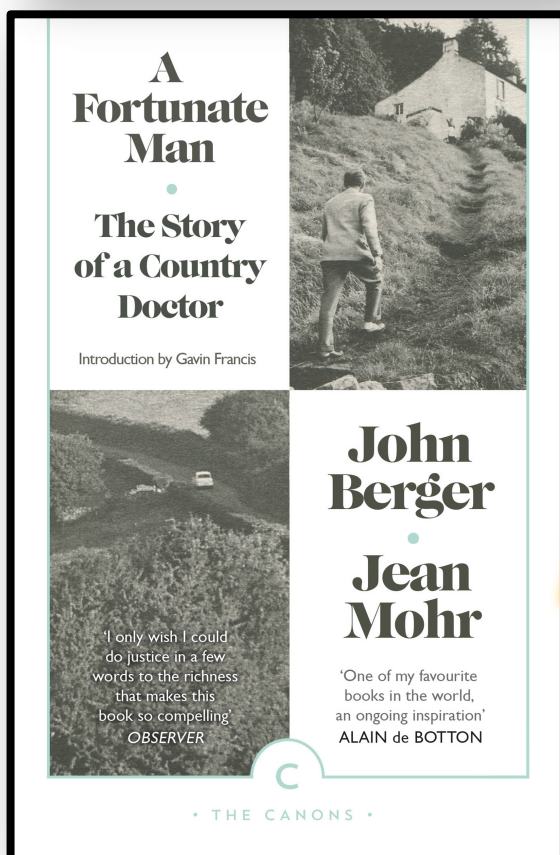
Influence on Medicine

Still probably the most important book about general practice ever written.

It arrived when post-war social medicine was struggling to come terms with inequalities in health and demands on medicine that were beyond purely the relief of symptoms.

'Berger [...] had illuminated the deep potential of medicine, and particularly general practice, to express solidarity with people as they move through their lives. The mixture of darkness and light in the text and pictures resonate even more in me now, a middle-aged GP academic, than it did 30 years ago'

Dr Gene Feder, GP. British Journal of General Practice, March 2005



In 2015 the book was re-published

Contemporary Criticism

More recent criticism of the book has questioned some of its content

'The omission of the negative aspects of Eskill's depressive illness, his wife's role in the medical practice and the absence of the middle-class patients all simplify the picture of the Forest community'
Dr Hannah Bradby in *Cost of Living*

'a masterpiece of witness: a moving meditation on humanity, society and the value of healing'
Dr Gavin Francis, GP & author

'I grew up in the Forest of Dean and, while recognising its comparative social isolation, bridled at Berger's patronising depiction of Forest folk as uncultured half-wits...'
Dr Roger Jones, Editor of *The British Medical Journal*

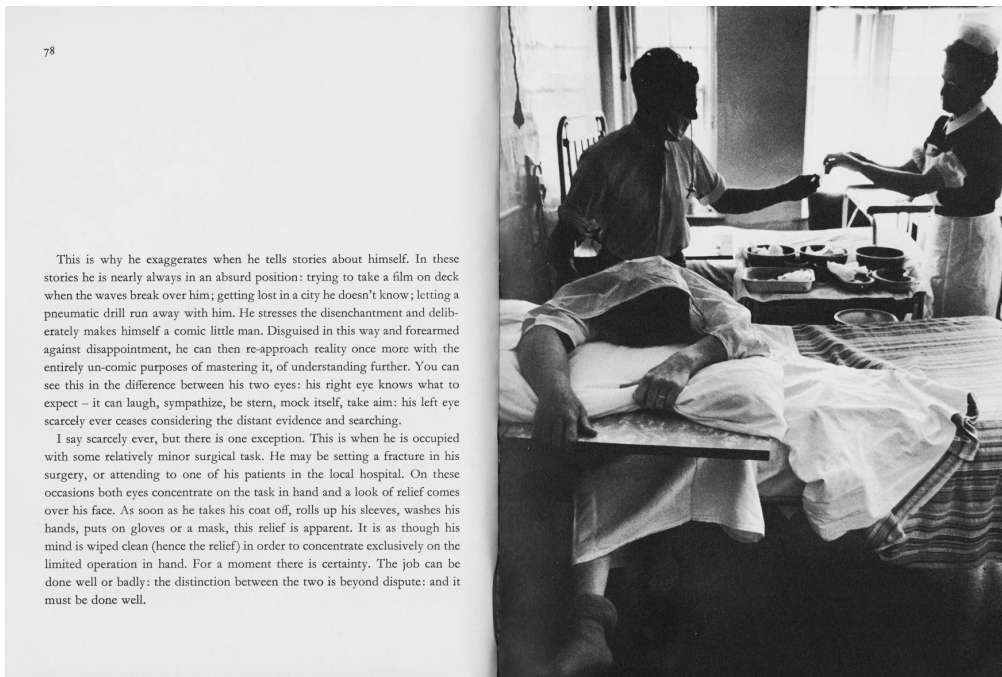
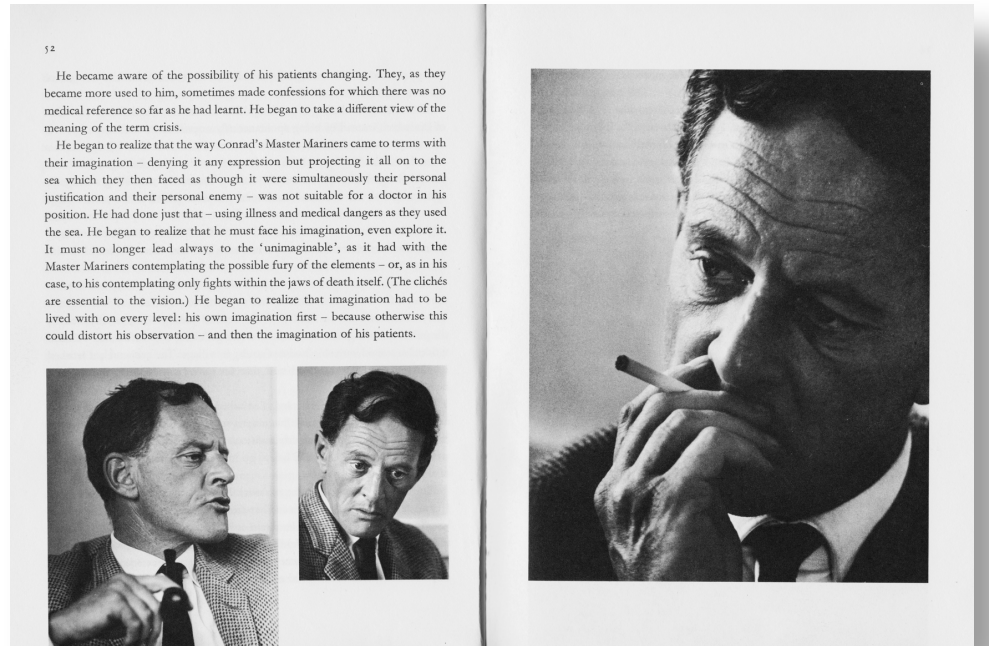
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the book: More than Words

Words & Pictures in Tandem

The book emerged as a pioneering fusion of text and images – a ground-breaking exercise in both photo-documentary, and design.

Berger & Mohr worked closely together in St Briavels, then separately on the book. On coming back together they completely, **‘reworked it so that the words and pictures were like a conversation; building on rather than mirroring one another.’**

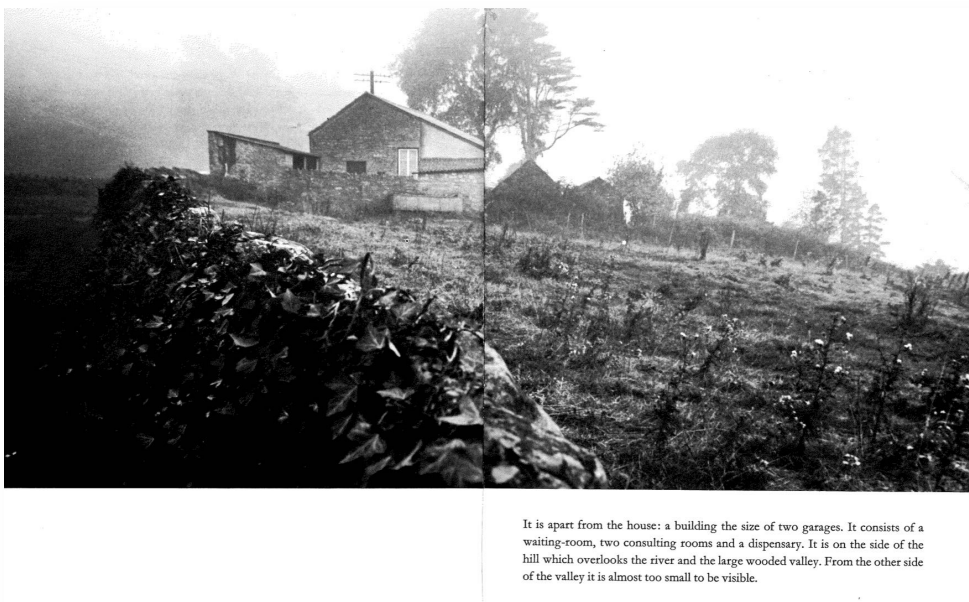


A Design Classic

The exact layout of the book was the work of Penguin's chief designer and typographer Gerald Cinamon. The original, and his redesign for the first paperback edition, are considered to be book-design classics.

‘It is a carefully worked out set of relationships – alternations of text and image; picture sequences and page turns – performed and realised by design’

Rick Poyner, eyemagazine.com, 10th March 2015



John Berger

1926-2017



John Berger in 1966 by Libby Hall ©

One of the most significant art critics and authors of his generation, in the late 1950's he found himself briefly living in the Forest of Dean.

In 1955, he married Rosemary Sibell Guest and they moved to The Dower House in Newland. It was during this time that he got to know his local doctor, Dr John Eskell, who he would later immortalise in *A Fortunate Man* (as 'Dr Sassall').

With the demands of his developing career as a writer and broadcaster it's not clear how much time Berger spent in Newland but he is remembered by his Forest of Dean neighbours of the time. He gave it as his address in the electoral register of 1959, but was already by then in another relationship with writer Anya Bostock with whom he would later leave the country to settle abroad.

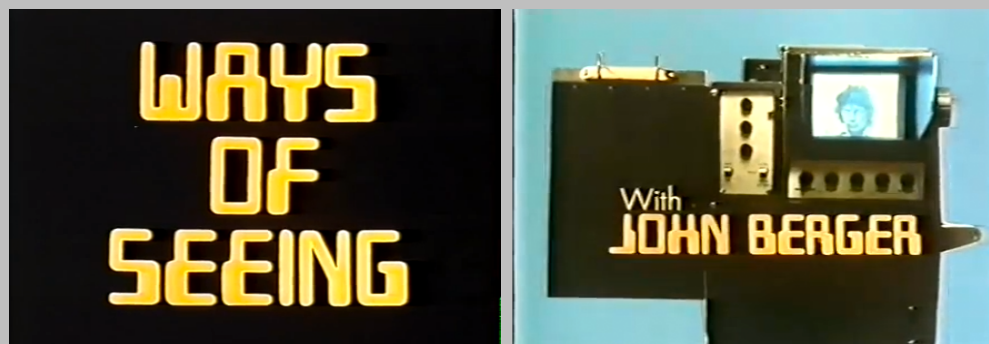
People in St Briavels recall Berger visiting Eskell several times during the 1960s, and his & Anya's son, Jacob, was born in Lydney in 1963. Berger remained in touch with his doctor friend until John Eskell's death in 1982.

Politics

Throughout his life he spoke out and campaigned on a wide range of issues. He said that his understanding of the world, and where we are in history, was shaped as a young man by reading Marx.

"He has not veered from his revolutionary views and passion for the dispossessed; yet the vast bulk of his writing has not been directly political; he seems to have little interest in the deep structures of power or in parties; and he is clearly the kind of Marxist who would be instantly dismissed from any Marxist organisation he joined."

Andrew Marr in *The New Statesman*, 28th Nov. 2016



He'd been involved in arts broadcasting since the 1950s on radio and television, but it was his ground-breaking & influential BBC TV series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that would bring him to wider public attention. In it he argues that seeing is always culturally situated. How we view a work of art (and what we consider art) depends on what we know, what we believe, who we are...

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Jean Mohr



A critically acclaimed documentary photographer in his own right, his life-long friendship and collaboration with John Berger began in the 1960s.

Born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1925, he studied economics & social sciences and worked briefly in advertising, before working with the International Red Cross in the Middle East. After studying painting in Paris he took up photography.

He first met John Berger in 1962 in Geneva.

Refugees, Migration & the Aftermath of War

Working with the Red Cross and UN relief organisations, much of his photography documents ordinary people's experience of conflict, and the global economic & political forces that impact on their lives. He spends time with his subjects getting to know them and their stories.



The photographed photographer, Jerusalem, 1979. © Jean Mohr



Mozambican refugee at Sunday mass, Tanzania, 1968. © Jean Mohr

'In 1966 John saw a story I worked on, following a doctor for a short time in Belgium. He enjoyed it, but said that the two of us could do it better. That became the idea for *A Fortunate Man* for which we spent a month observing the daily rounds and moral challenges of a doctor in the Forest of Dean.

At the end of that, John liked my prints but thought some were too aesthetic; he wanted a counterpoint to his story, but it became apparent I could say with one picture what he could articulate only in pages and pages of words.

This was how we worked: never disagreeing for long, instead discussing ideas as equals and always finishing the job even firmer friends than when we started.'

The Telegraph, 13th February 2015

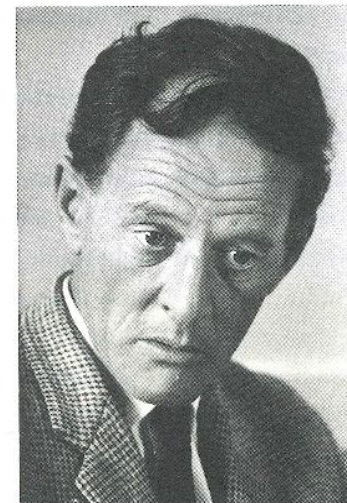
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Dr John Eskell 1919-1982

John Eskell ('Dr Sassall' in the book) was born in Hampshire, educated in Devon and came from a long line of medical and dental practitioners.

He graduated from Bristol University in 1944, and had been a stretcher-bearer in the city during the blitz of 1941. He was a keen rower and loved amateur dramatics a passion that stayed with him all his life. In 1944, he married Betty Lycett and joined the Royal Navy working on board ship in the Mediterranean. After this he moved to St Briavels where he would practice for the next 35 years.

His wife Betty was an important influence and companion and they had three children.



© Jean Mohr 1967, renewed 1995

'Dr Eskell exemplified the understanding that it is not just the symptoms that are important but how a person portrays them – and really to be able to understand that the GP needs to have a long-term relationship with the patient. It is about continuity of care'

Dr Tony Calland, 2018

Life and Death

Dr John Eskell was a profound thinker and humanist; characteristics he shared with Mohr and Berger and that made him an immensely attractive subject to observe at work.

Eskell also suffered from bi-polar disorder or manic depression, a problem acknowledged in the book. This prompted mood swings; periods of great creativity and days of dark depression. In later years this presented great challenges. His wife died in 1981 and he retired the same year.

On 16th August 1982 he committed suicide, aged 63.

OBITUARY

J ESKELL
MD, DPH, DOBSTRCOG

Dr J Eskell, who practised in St Briavels, Gloucestershire, for 35 years until his retirement last April, died on 16 August aged 63.

John Eskell was brought up in Totnes and went to the grammar school there; following



the tradition of his father's family for medicine or dentistry he then went to Bristol University, graduating MB, ChB in 1944. During his preclinical years he rowed in the university eight and shone in the dramatic society. He lived in at the Bristol Royal Infirmary through-

out the great Bristol blitzes and organised and led the stretcher-bearer and transfusion teams, thriving in this environment and gaining wide surgical experience that was later in-

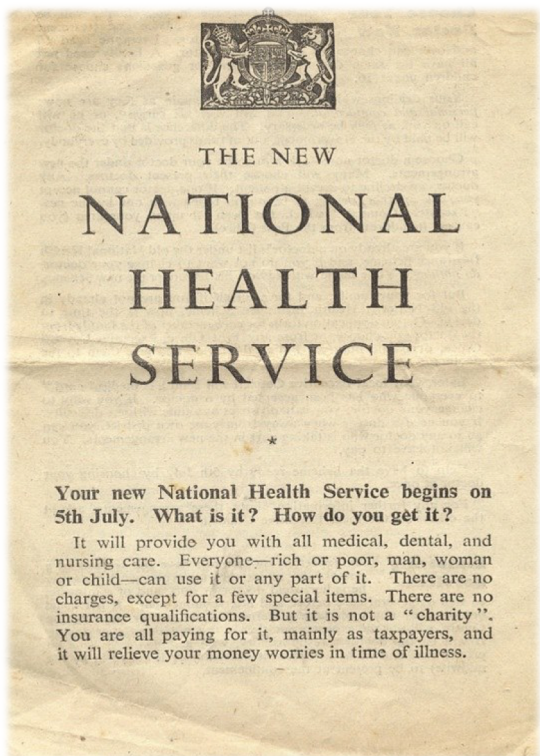
Dr Eskell

1919-1982

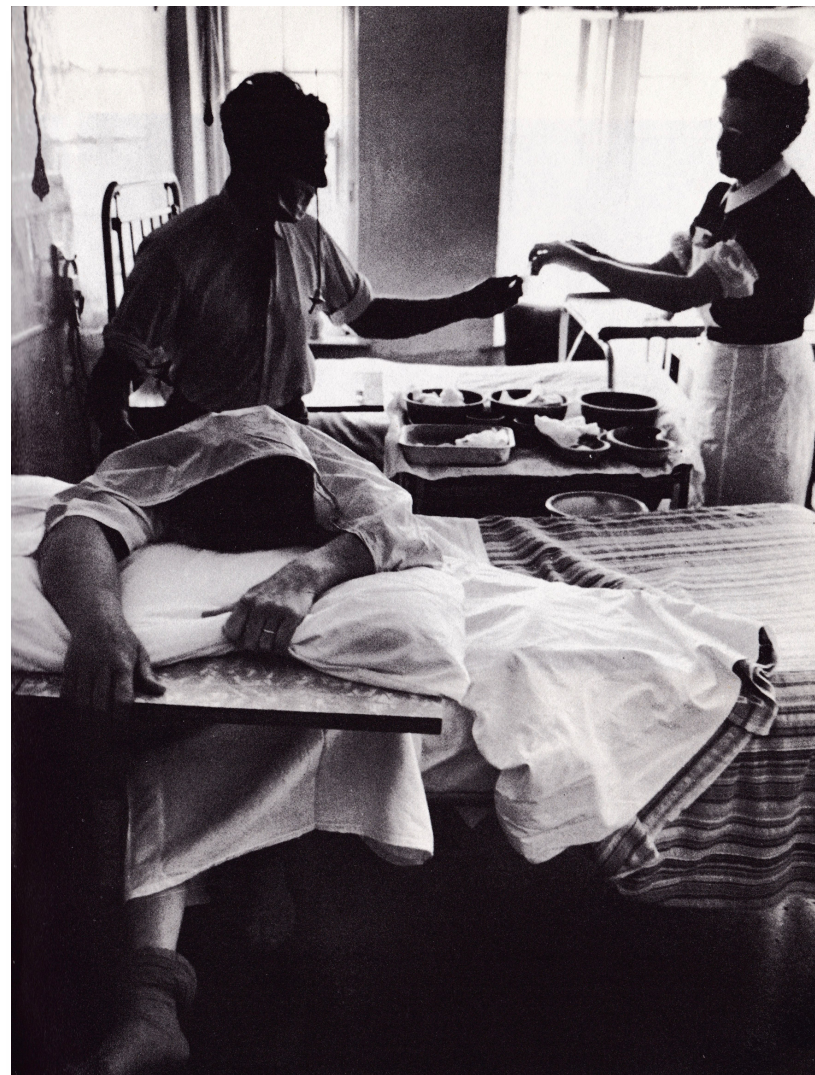
National Health Service

He came into General Practice just as the National Health Service began.

This made health care accessible to everyone regardless of their income or status. Dr Eskell provided 24-hour care, including home visits, surgery at home and in hospital, emergency care, managing fractures and wounds and maternity at homes or in Lydney hospital.



However, it’s been pointed out that by the 1960s Eskell’s wife (acting as practice manager), receptionists, and practice and community nurses were all part of the primary care team and that in the book Berger ignored their contribution.



© Jean Mohr 1967, renewed 1995



© Jean Mohr 1967, renewed 1995

Holistic Approach

Regarded as an ‘original thinker’ he had a concern for patients’ total well-being rather than just specific symptoms.

- Qualification in psychiatric medicine
- Practiced osteopathy
- Studied acupuncture in China
- Followed Freudian ideas that the mind influenced well-being.

He observed his patients closely from his chair through the window when they came for consultations and was said to understand their symptoms without them being explained.

He is attributed with having personally tested every drug he prescribed on the basis that he had a personal duty of care.

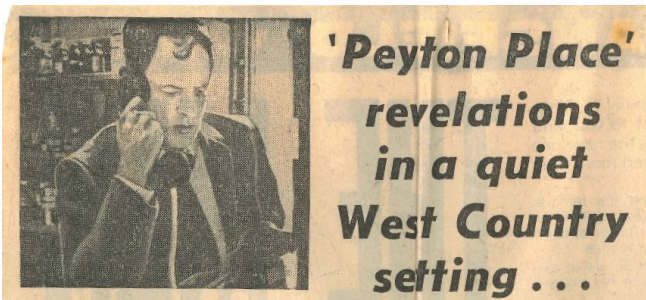
1967 Press Coverage

On publication of the book, a review in the local newspaper was in stark contrast with the coverage of a national tabloid.

The story in *The News of the World* became notorious in the village.

'What they wrote in the paper was nothing like what Dr Eskell was like. I wasn't very pleased. My mother was disgusted'

Ivy Biddle, who featured in *The New of the World* story



'Peyton Place' revelations in a quiet West Country setting ...

DOCTOR'S CASEBOOK INTRIGUES VILLAGE

From William Rankine

ST. BRIAVELS, Saturday

THE doctor who serves this lonely village and the surrounding Forest of Dean has brought about an atmosphere of speculation and doubt among the villagers.

The villagers are so sharply divided that the man at the centre of the storm, Dr. John Eskell, "I myself," says, "Some people here love me. Some hate me. For some people round here everything I do is wrong."

The cause of the tension is a revealing, intimate book about the doctor's life in a remote country community. It has composite case histories which make this sleepy community look like a *Peyton Place*. But though clinical the case histories are completely camouflaged.

The village is not named in the book. The doctor is named as Dr. Sassall, but it is Dr. John Eskell's photograph which appears.

And the people of St. Briavels realise that their own lives form the material of the book. *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*. Several are pictured in the book as well.

Scene in the surgery, another photograph used in the book. We have blacked out the woman's face

the doctor's unconventional relationship with patients. Several villagers told me they were unhappy about helping an author who would put down four letter words and go on to a passage like this: "You're the laziest bitch I've ever come across," said Sassall to the middle-aged woman draper whose day is now made. Yet only he can say this to her.

And then there is this extract: "What have you got on?" he asks about a menu at a factory canteen. "Do you want to start at the top?" answers the girl at the counter, pointing to her breasts, "or at the bottom?" lifting her skirts up high. Yet she knows she is safe with the doctor.

I told Dr. Eskell, who has been in St. Briavels for more than 20 years, that I had found opinion in the district evenly divided about the book and about his collaboration with Mr. Berger. Some were shocked, but many others saw no harm in it. "You know, the only person who is identified in the book is me," he said, "and there are things in it which show me in an unfavourable light."

"The book tells about my fits of depression, but I think people should know that their doctor suffers too. Approaching every patient is a different problem for the doctor. Perhaps if people read about my feelings, it will make them feel better about coming to consult me."

John Berger wanted to write this book for many years and I always refused. I finally agreed — and I still feel the same way — because I felt that it would do some good.

There is a long waiting list for the book at the local library. The nearest bookshop, eight miles away in Chepstow, reports a "healthy number" of orders.

"And I shall never forget it — I lie awake and think of it — because it has never been like that again when I was like heaven when I got Stephen."

On couch

One of the photographs shows a woman sitting on the edge of the examination couch in Dr. Eskell's consulting room. She appears to have no stockings on, her skirt has moved high up on her thighs, her other clothes are rumpled, and she looks thoroughly ill and miserable.

It is without doubt a picture with the impact of realism. The woman told me: "I felt very ill and groggy the day it was taken. I was asked if I'd agree to a picture being taken. I said 'yes' but I'm almost sure I said I didn't want my face to show."

"I wasn't shown the picture before it was published. If it seems, it might not have wanted it published."

Dr. Eskell said: "So many pictures were taken I don't remember the exact circumstances about this one. I'm very sorry anyone has been distressed. When the book was being prepared, patients were asked if John Berger, the author, or Jean Mohr, the photographer, could be present and the patients' wishes were always respected."

At his large, rambling stone-built house, Dr. Eskell, a clean-shaven man approaching 50, said he was aware of the speculation among his patients.

"But," he went on, "there is no danger of patients being identified from the case histories. It doesn't say so in the book, but all of them were emponded. No one individual or situation is accurately described."

"I told Mr. Berger about hundreds of my cases with no names or other identifiable circumstances."

Dr. Eskell added: "I had no regrets about the book until this moment. I think now that perhaps I may have

* Allen Lane, *The Penguin Press*, 30s.

Spinster

And then there is the spinster with a puzzling case of asthma. Who, the villagers ask themselves, is she? According to the book she is about 37, lives with her mother, and the doctor is convinced that her condition is the result of extreme emotional stress. The story goes on:

"Two years later he discovered the explanation by chance. He was out on a maternity case in the middle of the night. There were three women neighbours in attendance."

Whilst waiting, he had a cup of tea with them in the kitchen. One of them worked in a large mechanised dairy in the nearest railway town.

"The girl with asthma had once worked there, too, and it turned out that the manager—who was in the Salvation Army—had had an affair with her. Evidently he had promised to marry her. Then he was overcome by remorse and religious scruples, and had abandoned her."

"Was it even an affair—or did he only once one evening lead her by the hand out of the creamery up to his leather-chaired office?"

Explaining that the case histories were built from composite cases, Dr. Eskell said of the man in this one: "He was actually a member of another, quite different, religious organisation."

The book also describes

The News of the World, 21st May 1967

BOOK REVIEW

Doctor and people in a Forest village

One of the first fruits of the Penguin Press's invasion of the hard cover market (*A Fortunate Man*, 30s) has especial interest to Forest of Dean readers. The author, John Berger, lived for some time at Newland and therefore knows the Forest well. The book is neither novel nor biography, and perhaps the best description of it would be a documentary.

Its subject is a doctor named Sassall in an unnamed Forest village and both doctor and village will be easily identified by anyone with more than a superficial knowledge of the Forest, even without the excellent photographs by Jean Mohr which add considerably to the value of the book. Sassall served as a doctor in the Navy during the war and then settled down in the village, at first as junior partner of an older doctor. Mr. Berger makes an excellent contrast of the young doctor, with his enthusiasm for emergency operations and difficult cases, and

the same doctor in more recent times when "his satisfaction comes mostly from those cases where he faces forces which no previous explanation will exactly fit, because they depend upon the history of a patient's particular personality. He tries to keep that personality company in its loneliness."

The change in the doctor's personality was largely due to a growing interest in psychology, which has resulted in an identification between patient and doctor, a desire to know better the people round him, and a sympathy with the sick and the dying that almost makes the medical man take over the function of the priest. In one respect, however—his public life—Mr. Berger suggests that he fulfils the function, not of priest but of "a foreigner who has become, by request, the clerk of their (i.e. the villagers') own records". In that particular village we are afraid there would be other candidates for the job, and there might be considerable discrepancies between the records they kept.

Young hands across the sea

Preparations are being made for the annual youth exchange between boys and girls from the Harz, Germany, and the Forest of Dean area. The German party will arrive in England on July 17 and spend two days in London before coming to the Forest.

Whilst here they will stay with families, visiting Coventry Cathedral, Stratford-on-Avon, the Roman Baths, Bath, ice skate at Bristol, see Gloucester Cathedral and attend the theatre at Cheltenham. Social functions will be held locally with youth groups whilst German and English boys and girls will spend two days together at Braceland Farm, participating in a programme of outdoor activities and discussing the English way of life.

FULL PROGRAMME

On August 3 the English Group will return to Germany to the Harz. Here also a full programme has been arranged. The party will be entertained with a Harz round trip, visiting the border zone, a day in Bad Grund, enjoy a day's hospitality given by a folk group at Göttingen and see Hanover.

The highlight of the exchange will be a five day visit to West Berlin where a very full programme of entertainment and day trips has been arranged.

Time will be allowed to visit East Berlin and to tour The Wall. Opportunity will be given for social activity and swimming in a new heated indoor pool in the host town, Clausthal-Zellerfeld, Harz. The Group returns on August 19, 1967.

Mr. Berger's estimate of Sassall is, we believe, much more accurate than his estimate of Foresters and the Forest. "The area as a whole", he says, "is economically depressed" . . . It "is one of extreme cultural deprivation". The first statement was undoubtedly true in the early 1930's when over 50 per cent. of the insured population was out of work. Even now when the unemployment rate exceeds 2 per cent., the Forest has had nearly 30 years of near prosperity, a period previously unexampled in its history. Of course even in a prosperous community there are instances of poverty and a doctor, largely engaged in visiting the old and the sick, is likely to come in much closer contact with these than most people.

In actual fact it is highly improbable that the inhabitants of Sassall's village are any more deprived of culture than those of the average village in any other part of the British Isles which is not near a large city. My feeling that here Mr. Berger is using the word culture in a highly specialised sense is reinforced by the fact that he undoubtedly uses commonsense in a far from usual way, as a kind of superstition tinged acceptance of a passive conventionality rather than as practical sagacity. And when a Forester's commonsense is allied to a Forester's sense of humour you have something that might very well pass as a rudimentary culture.

Despite these defects Mr. Berger has written a very fine book that may for many years to come be accepted as the best example in literature of the life of a general practitioner operating in a rural area and his relations with his patients and the community among which he has chosen to cast his lot.—T.B.

The Dean Forest Mercury, May 5th 1967

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The Forest in the 1960's

The Changing Forest

The 1960s was a period of radical change in the area yet this is not really reflected in the book.

Another writer of the period, Dennis Potter describes in his book *The Changing Forest* (1962) a Forest of Dean going through profound cultural and social change: increased & different work opportunities, more leisure, television and new influences such as Elvis Presley!

The railway, with the nearby halt at Bigsweir had always made the St Briavels area accessible, but the advent of motorways and the new Severn Bridge in 1966 brought commuters from much further afield to live in the area.

Leisure has continued to change the make-up of the area with second and holiday homes becoming an increasing phenomenon.

‘The area as a whole is economically depressed. There are only a few large farms and no large scale industries’

A Fortunate Man (1967) p83

Changing Employment

By the time the book was published the last of the deep coal mines in the Forest had closed. Employment had shifted to new light industry and manufacturing.

Carters modern drinks plant at Coleford

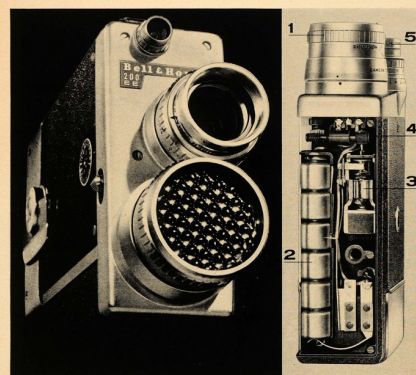
Deep in the beautiful Royal Forest of Dean is the home of the great natural health drink of our time

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Pages from *Royal Forest of Dean Industrial Handbook*, early 1960's

Shops & Services

Compared to today, the Forest as a whole was then well served with maternity wings at its two hospitals; there were secondary modern schools, three grammar schools, & a mining college; train and bus services; pubs, societies, sports teams, drama societies; numerous bands...
...and, there were an estimated 20 shops in St Briavels around this time!

A Fortunate Man revisited, 50 years on

The Forest in the Book

The Place

The book avoids naming St Briavels as the village at the heart of the book. The description of the people as 'Foresters' and the photographs are heavy clues to where it is set.

With the passing of time, the location has become more apparent, however many people remain oblivious to the setting. Anonymity satisfied concerns about confidentiality but also gave Berger a blank canvas on which to tell the story. It has been argued that the spirit of the book is universal rather than being about only one place or time.

The events in the book and the accompanying photographs are not exclusive to St Briavels: they actually reflect the wider area of Dr Eskell's practice and its two thousand patients who also lived in Brockweir, Bream and across the Wye.



'They are suspicious, independent, tough, poorly educated, low church. They have something of the character one associated with wandering traders like tinkers'

A Fortunate Man (1967) p83

'There is less loneliness in the Forest than in many cities'

A Fortunate Man (1967) p125

The Foresters

The book raises interesting questions about identity.

It views ordinary people in the area as poor, isolated and poorly educated. The social mix of the area was actually more diverse. As well as farming, many people in the area were employed in modern light industry, and there were also professional and middle class people living in the village.

Since the time of Wordsworth's visit to Tintern in the 1790s the wider area had attracted bohemian, artistic residents inspired by the landscape. In the 20th century the tradition continued with residents in the area ranging from Flora Klickmann to Philip Toynbee. There were also many retired gentlefolk who settled in St Briavels, such as Sir Alfred Carpenter VC.



© Jean Mohr 1967, renewed 1995

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On Screen

New Release, BBC TV (1967)

The arts programme interviewed Berger, and filmed Eskell in the Forest.

This fortnightly programme on BBC2 included extracts from the book read over footage of Dr Eskell and people in the Forest of Dean. As well as St Briavels, the film shows Carters (Beecham's) drinks factory at Coleford, Formwood at Lydney, and a family sitting down to tea at Trow Green Farm.



A Fortunate Man (1972)

The drama documentary based closely on the book and filmed on location in the Forest of Dean.

With backing from the British Film Institute, film student Jeff Perks cast local people, and filmed on location in Soudley and Blakeney. 'Dr Sassall' was played by Michael Bryant who had recently starred in *Roads to Freedom*, a BBC television serial based on the novels of Jean-Paul Sartre. As well as footage of local school children, there were interviews with a freeminer, and men working at the Cannop Rd Chemical Works.

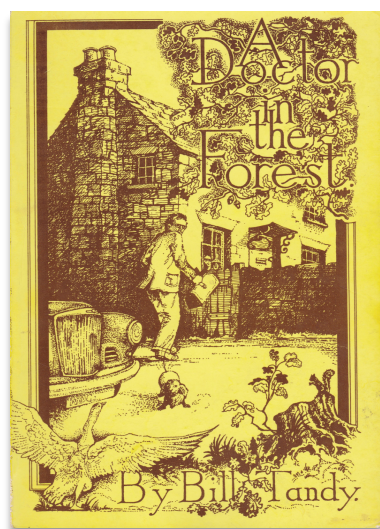


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Other Forest Doctors in Print

Dr Tandy

Bill Tandy was a much-loved Forest doctor who in his writing demonstrated a respect, understanding and fondness for his adopted community.



Growing up in Birmingham he moved to India soon after qualifying. Hearing about the Forest of Dean from a friend he moved here in 1940, working as a local GP until his retirement. His books draw on his experience as a doctor, here and in India, and reflects the history, resilience, and humour of his Forest patients.

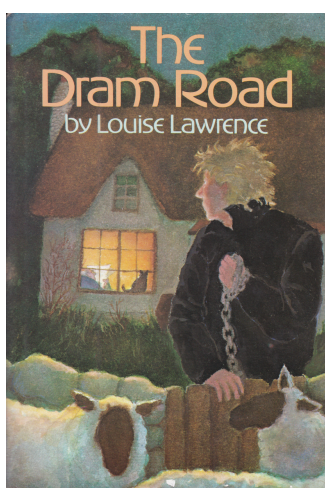
“They were strange, busy, years during the war. Driving about at night with masked headlights, especially in fog, was a hazard, made worse by the wandering over the roads of the forest sheep”

A Doctor in the Forest (1978), p75

Dr Jarret

After committing a violent crime, Stuart escapes the city for ‘Green Edge’, in a fictionalised yet familiar Forest in *The Dram Road* (1983), a novel by local author Liz Holden (pen name Louise Lawrence).

Amongst the close-knit local community that help Stuart turn his life around is the kind and calm presence of neighbour Dr Jarret.



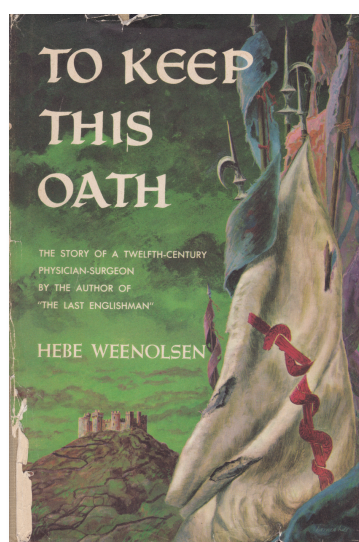
“I know how it is,’ Dr Jarret said quietly, He turned to Stuart. ‘It’s the first bit of loving kindness you’ve ever known, isn’t it?’”

The Dram Road (1983), p98

‘Ole Monk’ & Jesu Maria

To Keep This Oath (1958) by Hebe Weenolson is the fictional story of a twelfth-century physician-surgeon who learns his craft in the Forest of Dean.

After being kidnapped by Silures, Jesu Maria is taken under the wing of ‘Ole Monk’ from who he learns the art of medicine and surgery. The primitive conditions in which the Forest miners lived and worked allows him ample opportunities to practice his new skills.



“‘Aye,’ another miner added, ‘got in the way of a butty’s pick.’”

Jesu took up a pair of scissors and cut away the man’s tunic, exposing the wound. He poured wine in a bowl, and with a sponge dipped in the wine he cleansed the surrounding area, after which he set his instruments in the bowl and carefully rinsed his hands.”

To Keep This Oath (1958), p242

A Fortunate Man revisited, 50 years on

Thank you

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