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### A serious bit

I was going to spend most of this *CB* wittering on about Novacon and various related and unrelated issues. But something happened at the weekend that I'd rather write about.

Last weekend I visited my brother up in Amer-sham, with two objectives, dropping off Christmas presents, and seeing my newly-born niece (his second child). While I was there, he showed me a video tape made out of some home cine footage that my maternal grandparents had shot between 1964 and 1974 (with a little bit from 1983). I'd seen it all before (in fact I suspect I even shot some of the 1983 footage), but not for a while, and I'm not sure I'd ever thought much about it.

Much of the footage is quite repetitive, especially in the earlier '60s materials. My grandparents spent quite a few holidays at a place called Woolacombe, which I guess is somewhere in Devon. Frankly, once you've seen one Devon beach in the 1960s, you've seen them all. However, I was very interested in the people.

Unfortunately, I was interested in different people to those taking the footage were mainly concerned with. My grandparents were very interested in taking footage of their grandchildren, so there's quite a bit of footage of myself, my brother, and our cousins. There's also quite a bit of footage of their children, especially their youngest daughters, who were still living with them at the time they first got the camera. But there's not that much footage of themselves.

In particular, my grandfather remains a rather enigmatic figure. I saw much more of my mother's father, Granddad Fellows, than my father's, Granddad Keen, because (aside from a brief spell in the late '60s) I grew up living in the north of England. Granddad Fellows lived in a suburb of Manchester, so we saw a lot more of him than of Granddad Keen, who lived on the south coast. For a couple of years, when I was first going to school in Manchester, I lived during the week with my grandparents, only returning to my mother's house in Derbyshire at the weekends. Yet, looking back now, I feel I hardly

knew him, and that I knew Granddad Keen, an open jolly friendly man, far better. I think this may partly be because Granddad Fellows died in 1981, when I was sixteen, whilst Granddad Keen died in 1985, by which time I was rather more interested in getting to know my older relatives better. But that isn't the whole story.

All I recall of Granddad Fellows is a rather reserved man, who liked his pipe, didn't much care for the unions, and that's about it; my grandmother looms much larger in my memories. Except that a strong sense of humour lay behind my granddad's mask. Eric Morecambe always reminds me of my grandfather, and not just because I remember watching the Morecambe and Wise show at their house. That was the sort of northern sense of humour that he had.

(The other television reference point I have for my family is '60s and '70s *Coronation Street*. My family were more middle-class than the people on the streets of Weatherfield — they lived in semis rather than terraces — but had more in common with the sort of people Tony Warren was reflecting than not.)

The cine footage adds little to illuminate this man. He doesn't appear often (I suspect he shot most of it), but when he does, he is often sat at a distance from the rest of his family. Unlike my grandmother, he never seems to play with his grandchildren. Remarkably, between 1964 and 1974, he hardly seems to age a day; sadly, this is his age catching up with his appearance, in contrast to my grandmother, who has always managed to look ten years younger than she actually is.

The other particularly enigmatic figure in this footage is my dad.

My father died in 1975, when I was ten, of colonic cancer (in a couple of years I shall have lived longer than he did). As a result I never really knew him. I haven't really made as much effort as I should have done to find out more about him since then, probably because, even now, it's a very painful subject for me. So I was hoping that I might get some sort of a sense of him from this footage.

He's hardly there. Now, by 1964 my mother had moved out of the parental home and into the first marital one, and lived further away than her younger brother and his wife, so our section of the family naturally appear less in the footage. But even when there is footage taken at my parents' house, my father is a shadowy, barely seen figure. I'm not sure whether he was simply camera-shy, or whether my grandfather was more interested in taking footage of his daughter and grandchildren than of his son-in-law.

The other thing that struck me was how young some of my relatives were in the 1970s. There is footage of my aunt, Pam, taken in the early '70s. I have fairly clear memories of this period, and viewing my aunt as another grown-up, in the same generation as my parents. In 1973, my aunt was 22, and

in this footage looks it. In the 1983 footage, there is film of my mum, Pam and her twin sister Gill on a holiday in Scotland (my brother and I had been packed off to my dad's parents). Again, from my perspective as an eighteen-year old, these were all middle-aged women. Looking back, this is clearly a ridiculous viewpoint. In 1983, the twins were in their early thirties, hardly what I'd feel now as being on the cusp of senility. Even my mother was only 46 at the time, and looks younger (having inherited that feature from her mother).

I really don't know exactly how I feel about seeing this footage again. It has stirred up a mass of emotions, about people I never knew properly, and now never shall, and people I have perhaps misjudged in the past. In the past, I think I've distanced myself from my family, preferring to rely on a support network of friends. That might change.

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#### Another serious bit

The Saturday of Novacon was Remembrance Day, so I set off for Birmingham's war memorial. I try to observe the silence both on Remembrance Sunday and on Remembrance Day itself, but I make more effort for the 11th November, which I feel is the more important date. Why I feel this I'm not sure. It's probably got a lot to do with my training as a historian, which has laid in me a strong respect for tradition. Partly, it may be that since it's more awkward to observe the silence on the 11th, one feels more virtuous for having done so. Why the whole thing is important at all to me is something I'm also a bit unclear on. Most of my relatives got through the war unscathed (Granddad Fellows was a town planner, and so in a reserved occupation, Granddad Keen a mechanic who escaped France and rose to be a Warrant Officer in a REME base in India), though I did lose a great uncle at Dunkirk. I think it goes back to my childhood interest in military history and the weapons and machines of the Second World War (and the movies), interests which have persisted into adulthood. I think it's good to remind myself at least once a year that real people fought and died in the planes, tanks and ships I find so fascinating.

This opinion is not shared by everyone, though. It's not just that I was one of few people under the age of fifty to have bothered to turn out for the ceremony. Not far behind me were two people who talked right through the two minutes silence. I couldn't believe this. Okay, if you don't want to observe the silence, then go about your way — but to turn up at the ceremony and then show no respect for it seems intolerable to me. I think this is another reason why I persist in going to such ceremonies. Somebody has to.

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A silly bit that I mentioned to Bug I'd put in, so I suppose I better had ...

I had first thought of doing one of these one-sheet jobs after the 1999 Novacon. One of the things I was going to talk about in the first one I planned (but never actually wrote) was the street in Birmingham called Needless Alley. I found it highly amusing that someone should build an alley that served no purpose, and then advertise the fact, and this lead to a conversation with the Bradshaws that roved over such possible thoroughfares as Gratuitous Street, and Superfluous Boulevard (that last may have been one of Bug's). Apparently, there is a Needless Road in Perth.

(Another feature would have been the wheelie-bin I saw on the way to Novacon marked 'Funeral', which seemed taking the cut-price approach too far.)

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#### Thoughts resulting from November's BSFA meeting

There is much talk about the impact of the Internet on bookselling, and the threat that poses to the institution of the bookshop. I feel that the demise of the shop will cause all to suffer. When I log on to Amazon, I do so with a specific volume in mind that I intend to buy. I don't log on just for the hell of it, and would feel frustrated if I was unable to successfully order my target volume. It's completely different with bookshops. I can happily go into a bookshop with no particular purchase in mind, and can have an entirely satisfactory experience inside a bookshop without making any purchase at all. This might not seem to be in the bookshop's interest, and I'm sure the idiot accountants who seem to have got themselves in charge at Waterstone's these days would view people like me as a waste of space. But sometimes (quite often, actually) when I go into a bookshop merely to browse, I emerge with a purchase or two. Since I don't go onto Internet book sites simply to browse (and don't trust Amazon's recommendations), in a world without bookshops those sales would be lost. And I don't think I'm alone.

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**The Convertible Bus No. 3** comes from the word-processor of Tony Keen, [old address deleted]. E-mail: keentony@hotmail.com. Thanks to Sandra Bond for calling this the *Convertible Omnibus* and to Alan Sullivan for sending me a LoC. RIP Kirsty MacColl.

ƒ Merry Christmas! ƒ