

Holroyd in London

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Humphrey Carpenter, in his recent book *The Angry Young Men*, wrote that he was unable to trace Stuart Holroyd. To some it may have seemed as if Holroyd had disappeared from the face of the earth. I was amused by Carpenter's remark because, at the time I read it, I had been in correspondence with Holroyd for about seven months. I managed to get in touch with him through a considerable amount of detective work based on what I knew about him and his writings. One of the reasons why I had initially written to him was to ask his help in resolving some difficulties I had in working out a coherent chronology of his life. It all started with my admiration for *Contraries*, which I regard to be his finest published book. It demonstrates all his best qualities as a writer: the concise presentation of people's characters, absorbing narrative, engaging dialogue, humour and penetrating self-analysis. Because I had read the book so often, I realised that the chronology just did not make sense. This does not detract from the literary value of the book, since it is not a straightforward autobiography. In an earlier, and longer, draft Holroyd described it as being, not so much an autobiographical novel, but rather a novel form of autobiography. To a literary historian of the period, however, it poses the challenge of presenting the events he recounts in their correct order. I have been tremendously helped in this task by Holroyd himself, who, as well as answering my numerous questions, has also let me see a journal he kept in the late 1950s, various letters from that period and other unpublished material, and I am very grateful to him for his help. The following is an account of a truly fascinating period in Holroyd's life where we can see his literary talent and philosophical thinking being informed and infused by the close associations he made with a number of thinkers and writers. It is also a period when other key events and interactions would shape, mould and then possibly curb the rising talent of this young and promising writer. My account of this crucial time in Holroyd's life is partly based on some of this unpublished material that Holroyd has kindly let me see, but in order not to break up the narrative I have not referenced every source.

Contraries ends dramatically with Holroyd presenting several matters as coming to a head in November 1959. In that month Holroyd got involved in a punch-up with a man he thought was getting too familiar with his then current girlfriend and future wife Sue Rowland. The strength of his jealousy convinced him that he really wanted to be with her. Holroyd also portrays the notorious performance of his play *The Tenth Chance* as taking place in that month as well as his former girlfriend Carol giving birth to his son and also his eviction from the house he shared with Bill Hopkins and Tom

Greenwell. Holroyd then depicts himself as deciding to give up the London literary scene. He moves to Sussex, where Sue lives, and sets up a language school.

It cannot be denied that Holroyd's departure from London is a logical resolution of the several narrative strands found in *Contraries*. The individual events recounted all took place and their cumulative psychological effect on Holroyd is accurately portrayed, but in reality they took place over a period of about two years. What actually took place is also a fascinating story. This was, after all, a pivotal and defining time in Holroyd's life. It is likely that what happened to him then radically altered the course of his life. In order to unravel the events that Holroyd depicts as happening in November 1959 and explain how they came about I need to go back to the arrival of the nineteen-year-old Holroyd in London in September 1952. He found somewhere to live and soon fell in with a crowd of fellow poetry-lovers who met on Sunday evenings in a Westminster pub. When the pub closed, the group would continue their discussions in the all-night Strand Corner House. On Sunday, the seventh of December 1952, the group of regulars, all of whom were about Holroyd's age, were joined in the coffee house by a foreign-looking gentleman in his mid-forties. This Hungarian émigré, whose name was Alfred Reynolds, was a civil servant, but during the Second World War he had served as an officer in the British army. His job was to break the hold of Nazi ideology on the minds of captured German soldiers. He was extremely successful at this, using a Socratic rather than a didactic method, and after the war he maintained contact with several of the Germans who had been liberated from fascism under his guidance. These people formed the nucleus of an informal movement called the Bridge. That Sunday, Reynolds was impressed with Holroyd's intelligence and his knowledge of continental poetry and asked him to attend Bridge meetings. Holroyd soon became a regular at these. He used them to extend his knowledge of literature, music and art as Reynolds was a very cultured individual. Carpenter has described Holroyd as being a disciple of Reynolds, but this is incorrect. Even at nineteen, Holroyd was too strong-willed and too strong-minded to be anyone's disciple. He had resisted the pressure his teachers had put on him to go to Oxford University and, around the time he met Reynolds, he wrote the first of a series of articles for *The Poetry Review* which show a critical ability far more mature than one would expect. Someone like Holroyd was not looking for a leader to follow.