Revisiting Campbell Bunk

Jerry White

Campbell Bunk – more properly Campbell Road in the North London borough of Islington – was an unlikely slum.[1] It was, when laid out from the 1850s, a suburban street of 100-or so quite substantial houses on three floors, designed for respectable clerks and not the poor. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, the interwar years of which I made a detailed study, Campbell Bunk was an atypical slum in spacial terms. The worst run-down housing in London being cleared as slums in those years were mainly two- or even one-storey dwellings built in courts or alleys and tucked behind the main streets of old London, in the ancient districts of Holborn, Finsbury, Stepney and Southwark, all close to the original City of London. They were narrow, congested, largely hidden from view. But Campbell Bunk was a long wide street that opened off one of London's main cross-routes and close to the busy suburban transport interchange of Finsbury Park railway and tube station. On either side and all around were respectable working-class streets which in general were not poor. Yet here it was, the most notorious street in this densely-populated segment of north London and wide open to the public gaze. But slum it was by any definition. It was one of just eighteen or so streets in the whole metropolis coloured entirely black – its population cast as 'semi-criminal and degraded' – in the poverty maps drawn up by the London School of Economics around 1930. It had also been coloured entirely black in Charles Booth's poverty maps of forty years earlier.

It was, then, an unlikely slum. And it had become one by an accident of history, or rather a conjunction of accidents. Its development had been stunted from birth. Not all its building plots were sold in the initial speculation of 1857-8; the

1 Cf. White, 2003. This was first published as *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, Between the Wars*, London, 1986. All page references here are to the 2003 edition.

local market for new houses was glutted, so building did not begin until 1865; six years on and the road was still unmade and only half-built on; not all the empty spaces would be filled with houses until the early 1880s, some eighteen years or so after building began. Mud and filth on the ground caused rents to fall and the clerks to leave. Their place was taken by chimney sweeps, general dealers, street sellers, porters and building labourers. The neighbourhood' s rough boys and men gambled in the empty spaces. And in 1880 came the fatal tipping point. A large house on the street's middle junction, intended to become a public house, couldn't get a magistrates' licence and was instead converted to a common lodging house for ninety men. The shiftless homeless poor of London had been introduced to Campbell Bunk. Other houses soon followed suit. Within a decade there were more common lodging house beds in Campbell Road than any other street in Islington.

So Campbell Bunk's reputation was established by the 1890s. This is how Charles Booth, who uniquely accorded the street three pages in *Life and Labour of the People in London*, described it at that time:

> "A street fairly broad, with houses of three storeys, not ill-built, many being occupied as common lodging-houses; broken windows, dirty curtains, doors open, a litter of paper, old meat tins, heads of fish and stalks of vegetables. It is a street where thieves and prostitutes congregate. The thieves live in the common lodging-houses, paying fourpence a night, and the prostitutes, generally two together, in a single furnished room, which they rent at four or five shillings a week. They are the lowest class of back-street prostitute, and an hour or two after midnight they may be seen returning home."[2]

A few years later and a local sanitary inspector vented his feelings about the street in a report to Islington Council:

> "This road is the king of all roads. I have been in practically all the slums in London; Notting Hill, Chelsea, Battersea, Fulham, Nine Elms, and also the East End, but there is nothing so lively as this road. Thieves, Prostitutes, cripples, Blind People, Hawkers of all sorts of wares from boot laces to watches and chains are to be found in this road, Pugilists, Card Sharpers, Counter Jumpers, Purse Snatchers, street singers, and Gamblers of all kinds, and things they call men who live on the earnings of women, some of whom I saw outside the Town Hall with the unemployed last week. I could say a lot

2 Cited in WHITE, 2003, p. 23f.

> more about this road, but I think I have said enough to prove to you the class of people who inhabit it. Of course, there are a few who perhaps get an honest living, but they want a lot of picking-out."[3]

That was written in 1909, and I was myself a sanitary inspector for Islington Council some sixty years after my predecessor wrote these words. My job title had changed by 1970 to public health inspector, but the work was pretty much the same. And although Campbell Bunk had been demolished fifteen years before, its reputation was hardly less vivid than it had been. Indeed, I kept on hearing stories about it and by the end of the 1970s I had determined to investigate its story further by talking to people who had lived there. By this time I had got into the press my first book, an oral history of a Jewish East End tenement block[4] – a different sort of ghetto we might call that – so I was experienced enough with a tape recorder and reasonably adept at finding people to talk to. I wrote an article in "History Workshop Journal" on what I called this 'lumpen community' and thought I'd disposed of the Bunk.[5] In fact I hadn't. The place continued to haunt me. And despite not wanting to write another book about another tiny sliver of London, I spent in all some eight years trying to tease out the many contradictions of this extraordinary place. Central among them, to my mind, was this: Campbell Bunk was a close community where people would steal from one another, and was in numerous other ways at war with itself, as well as at war with the world beyond it.

The book was published twenty-six years ago, and was finished a year or more before that. Since then, of course, our terminology and explanatory frameworks have shifted. I don't recall that 'social exclusion' was much used, if at all, at the time. Had it been, then I believe "Campbell Bunk" would have provided insights into the contradictory mechanisms involved in the social exclusion process, and I'll come back to this point in a moment. The 'underclass' *was* written about at the time, but it's an unsatisfactory term, I think, and I didn't use it: it seems to describe a social formation too inert, too removed from possibilities of change, too far isolated from the shifting dynamics of economic opportunity and class relations, to be a useful descriptor of social reality. Marxism was a far more popular theoretical tool for social historians then than now, and I myself began from a 'base and superstructure' model of change in Campbell Bunk. In the event I found it incomplete and unsatisfying when trying to comprehend a

3 Cited in Ibid., p. 25.

4 Ibid., 1980.

5 Ibid., 1979.

'whole society' or 'total way of life', and I needed the introduction of gender fully to explain the street's history. The cultural or linguistic turn, I confess, passed me by at the time – and so have the re-turns and about-turns since then. I remain an unrepentantly old-fashioned social historian.

So looking back, revisiting Campbell Bunk as it were after twenty-six years away, what do I find?

First, it has to be said that in many ways, of course, this really *was* a socially excluded space and culture. But the picture of social exclusion we find there is complex and contingent, as perhaps all historical reality proves to be.

Certainly, though, Campbell Bunk actively set itself apart from – turned its back on - contemporary London in a number of ways.

It was, for instance, distinctively in-bred, with longterm traditions of settlement that were quite unusual. Many families in the street in the 1930s could trace their residence there back to the 1890s and before. Kinship patterns were frequently extensive – one man I spoke to could count more than forty relatives in a street of a hundred or so houses (about a thousand people). It was more frequent for young men and women to marry fellow-Bunkites than was the case in neighbouring streets. And longterm settlements and kinship were reinforced by the street's traditional connection with gypsies, which seems to have developed by the 1880s. This was an element in Bunk culture that strengthened a tendency to economic independence outside wage labour that I found to be a culturally distinctive, almost a defining, component of the Bunk's separateness. I wrote that

There is no documentary evidence for a gypsy connection with Campbell Road, but the oral tradition is overwhelming (although not shared by the street as a whole). A gypsy – or 'pikie' in cockney slang – pedigree was claimed by Harry James and for a number of other families. There were the Brothertons, who moved into the street some time in the 1920s; Dolly Mills and his family put up in Campbell Road whenever they were in the neighbourhood; Gypsy Jack Hobbs sold manure from a horse and cart and later married a girl from the street; Liza Harmer and Mrs Knowles, the street sellers, both had 'Romaner' or 'pikie' backgrounds.

The James family was headed by George, known as Dido. He was a tinker, repairing cane chairs and mats and sharpening scissors, knives, lawnmowers and so on from a richly-decorated barrow which he pushed over the streets of North London. He once fought Ernie Barnes, another knife grinder with a similar heritage, for the title of Campbell Road's 'King of the Pikies'. He went to Barnet Fair every September, a gathering place for gypsies, and he was said to have some sort of title to land there. He taught his son words which were not

even in the varied London underworld cant of the 1930s – words like 'jas' for go, 'yog' for fire, 'chokkors' for boots. And at least two of his boys never took to work, becoming professional thieves until after the Second World War.[6]

If this independent economic element was defining, there were numerous other cultural components that separated Campbell Bunk from its neighbours. Its pleasures, for instance, had a rough component about them that had gone out of fashion in working-class London even before the First World War. It retained a culture of heavy drinking and drunkenness among men and older women, in part no doubt an antidote to the foul, crowded and verminous living conditions there. Its collective male pleasures were dominated by illegal street gambling with dice and coins. There was a passion for fighting. Some men were terrors, to their neighbours and to others, but most men seem to have resorted to fists or worse on the slightest provocation. This rubbed off on many Bunk women and girls, some urged by their parents to settle their differences with violence. Violence, illegal pastimes and the way in which many people from the road made their living in the streets as costermongers, hawkers, scrap-metal dealers and so on, brought many Bunk dwellers into a sharp and brutal collective antagonism with the police. And that again was distinctively different from most working-class streets in Islington.

But apart from setting itself apart, it was also cast out, excluded by contemporary London. Take poverty. Not everyone in Campbell Bunk was poor, for its thieves, prostitutes, dealers and rent collectors could make a good return, if only for short and irregular periods; and there were always wage-earners in the local economy who kept well above the poverty line. But the depth of poverty in Campbell Bunk in the 1920s, at least, was sometimes at pre-war, almost Victorian levels. It became a reservoir, perhaps a sanctuary, for the very poorest in interwar North London. Here are some instances.

John Morley, 11 years old, was arrested for begging in November 1919. He had chronic conjunctivitis, 'fassy' eye or sticky eye, common enough in Campbell Road. "He was in a filthy condition. It was a cold, wet day and he has no shirt. When food was offered to him he ate it ravenously." Daisy Booth, 19 years old in 1925, and prosecuted for theft, had a baby to keep: "They were practically starving and without money […]. 'I had no milk and no fire at home, and not a penny coming in.'" When a Campbell Road painter was convicted of stealing milk from a doorstep in February 1932, the Court Missionary "said there was no doubt [his] child was hungry." A police report in May 1933 on a 31-year-old labourer found he "had no food in the house beyond a little bread." "See, we

6 Cf. Ibid., 2003, p. 55f.

was like animals, we was like animals at home, all of us hungry […]. I used to sit eating cabbage stalks cos I was that hungry," recalled Ronnie and Marjie Drover from number 25. And Mavis Knight's mother suffered from psoriasis, rheumatoid arthritis and chronic under-feeding: "She has to wear dark glasses cos her eyes was so affected by the malnutrition."[7]

"I've been to school many times with women's shoes on, and women's stockings tied up in a knot there [for socks]," and so did other boys from Campbell Road. "No kids went to school in long trousers in them days," recalled Walter Spencer. "But they did from the Bunk because they were men's trousers cut down with your arse hanging down."[8] Walter and his two brothers slept on a wooden platform with a flock overlay as a mattress, built into the tiny attic at 86 Campbell Road. The makeshift bed was covered with war-surplus blankets and their Uncle Charlie's army greatcoat. There was a paraffin lamp on the wall, and the room was just big enough for the bed and little else:

> "And I remember up there Christmas time. One particular Christmas […] we used to hang our stockings over for Christmas […]. I remember this particular year – my brother remembers it, never forgot it. We woke up – I felt mine. 'Oh', I said, 'we're alright […] we got some ink 'ere!' Cos it felt […] hard, like. We used to have orange a penny, and a few nuts and that. I thought 'Oh it's all right, we got something,' cos the old man had had a bad year, that Christmas. Oh, when we got up, you know, it was light in the morning, never looked at it until the morning, never forget: it was cinders out the grate and hard bread. And my brother ate that bloody bread! He really ate it – he was crunching it."[9]

The very reputation of the Bunk conspired to keep its residents poor and conspired to exclude them from contemporary London, to some degree at least. Labelling or stigmatization of the street and its residents in the local press, in the police courts and by word of mouth – the myths and exaggerations that persisted long enough after the street's demise to make me interested in it in the first place – directly affected the life-chances of the people living there. They could, indeed, be excluded from the labour market by employers for whom a Campbell-Road address was sufficient to mark out a boy as a thief and a girl as something worse. Perhaps the fear of discrimination was more pervasive than discrimination itself. For example it was said that the Ever Ready battery factory

7 Ibid., p. 71.

8 Ibid., p. 71f.

9 Ibid.

in Fonthill Road would not take girls from Campbell Road, but it sometimes did. Yet there was no doubt that discrimination was *felt* to be real, and that it was experienced as a direct and personal rejection by the labour market. "I have written for hundreds of jobs," complained 'A British Legionite (an ex-service-man) to the local newspaper in 1922, "and when I mention Campbell Road it is all up, simply because the street has been given a bad name." Another wrote "I lived there five years [and] I could never obtain a berth from there. People said to me, you will never get anything while you live there […]. It is like dynamite to mention the road. Why don't you alter the name? I wish, from the bottom of my heart, I had never known of its existence."[10]

The street's name was indeed changed from Campbell Road in 1938, to Whadcoat Street. There were, though, ways of avoiding the stigma: one youth from number 52 – on the Paddington Street corner – always gave his address as 52 Paddington Street. And in 1924, a charwoman convicted of theft from an employer was said by the police to have "lived in Campbell Road but gave another address."[11]

These then were the traditional 'ghetto' elements, as we might call them, which distinctively isolated – socially excluded - Campbell Bunk from all around it. Yet, and this cannot be stressed too highly, these ghetto walls were porous. The outside influences on the street were numerous, especially in the lives of its young people – school, of course, but also the various clubs for boys and girls run by the missions and working-men's clubs that had Campbell Bunk as their primary focus. Though the street's housing market attracted only the poor, there were many newcomers to the street, residents who came and went and sometimes settled for lengthy periods; they brought connections with other parts of London and no doubt spoke of different ways of doing things.

Even more important, these connections with London, even with a wider world, were strengthened by the expanding cultural life of the metropolis in the 1920s and '30s, and by a growing culture of working-class consumerism. We might mention, for instance, the influence of the cinema. Cinema penetrated everywhere, even to Campbell Bunk. From this new cultural element of talking pictures, with all its baneful influences according to contemporary puritans, and all its richness of new associations and thrills for the young people of Campbell Bunk, some could weave a fantasy world that the old London music-halls had never offered. It was noted in 1934 how, in Islington's 'most notorious café', the conversation was mostly in American accents. Nearly every girl there was

10 Ibid., p. 51.

11 Ibid.

acting a "hard-boiled Kate" role. Nearly every youth, with a very long overcoat and a round black hat on the rear of his head, was to himself a "Chicago nut".'[12]

The connections with contemporary London, and the road out of a socially excluded Campbell Bunk, was strengthened most of all by changes in the labour market. Despite the Great Depression and the Crash of 1929, and despite the economic distress common to many parts of industrial Britain, demand for consumer durables in London was fuelled by the suburban growth of the 1920s and the building boom of the decade to come. London prospered, and the demand for factory labour seemed inexhaustible. The demand was strongest for girl labour. Even the girls of Campbell Bunk were invited to find work at the factory bench. And never had there been so many things to spend their earnings on.

It was this dynamic world opening up for young women in Campbell Bunk that sowed the seeds of the street's dissolution during the interwar period, a generation before the bulldozers moved in. It was not an easy process. For the new world opening up for young women in Campbell Bunk was frequently viewed with anger and jealousy by their mothers. Something like an inter-generational struggle took place between mothers left behind in the slum and their daughters trying to make their way out. In true Campbell Bunk fashion it could be accompanied by threats, bullying, theft and violence. We have room for only a couple of instances to stand in for many.

The twenty-year old May Purslowe worked at a North London sweet factory in the early 1920s. Her mother was a hard-drinking charwoman or casual domestic servant, and the family lived in two rooms in Campbell Road, where three girls shared one bed and May's mother and young brother shared another. Rows soon began over how much May should pay her mother for her 'keep'. May and her mother had always been at loggerheads. May, accoding to Mrs Purslowe, "had got too much of what the cat licked its arse with."[13] May became particularly vocal over how she should be clothed. Mrs Purslowe had taken it on herself to clothe May out of the money the girl handed over. But her mother's choice of courier was restricted to totters' barrows in Campbell Road and the Fonthill Road rag shop. Clothes became, for mother and daughter, a fiercely contested symbol of independence:

> "And this one particular day I said to her, 'I'm not giving you all my money, I'm gonna buy my own clothes.' And I went to Chapel Street, Islington market, and I bought a velvet skirt and a blouse. And when I came home, washed

12 Cited in Ibid., p. 166.

13 Ibid., p. 202.

> meself, dressed to go out, she says to me, 'And where do you think *you're* going?' I said, 'Well, I'm going out.' So she says, 'Oh are you?' And she did no more, she tore all these clothes off me. And of course I cried and went into me aunt's which was next door but one, number 31 […] and I said to her, 'Mum's tore all my clothes.' So she said, 'Oh, you'd better stay in here then.' And I had to go indoors back again to get me old clothes to put on."[14]

May chose a route out of Campbell Road that many other girls took – they found a husband as quickly as they could: the mean age of marriage of girls in England and Wales in the 1930s was 25 years; in Campbell Road it was 21.2; in the street next door, fewer than one in eleven girls (under 9 %) were twenty years old or younger when they married; in Campbell Road it was nearly one in three. But May found that her mother did not react well to the prospect:

> "First night he took me home I said to him, 'You don't want to come down to my door,' I said, 'because if me mother comes home drunk you'll be sorry.' So he said, 'Well, that's all right,' he said. So of course, home they come from the Duke public house all merry and bright and singing. And when she went to come indoors, there was my boyfriend, Bob, standing there with me and she says to him, 'What the effin' hell are you doing here?' So he said, 'Well, I've brought your daughter home.' So she said, 'Well you can effin' well sling yer 'ook again.' So that was that. So I said to him, 'Come on, stand up on the corner.' She said, 'And you don't want to stop up there all night else I'll have a bucket of piss poured over yer!' So that was the wonderful reception he got."[15]

May had to creep indoors after she had been out with Bob once in case her mother caught her staying out late. And one, when dressed in her finest clothes to go with him to the Wood Green Empire, her mother threw a bucket of slops over her because May hadn't done the washing up. But eventually all ended happily. In 1922, May and Bob were married at Tottenham, and chose a house in respectable Wood Green.

Nancy Tiverton, my second example, had similar experiences a few years later, working at a local brush factory. The job itself she found because of her dissatisfactions with her appearance, especially how she was clothed. She sensibly decided to keep any new paid job secret from her mother and keep paying her the same amount from her previous worse-paid employment:

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 203.

> "I thought to meself, I don't know what to do, you know, as I am now I'll never get a rag on me back. I was a disgrace, I was, honest. And it wasn't my fault. So I thought to myself, I know what I'll do. I won't tell mum. I'll go after the Christmas holiday, go down the Star Brush, see if I can get on […]. So I didn't say a word to her. I come out as though I was coming to work, and down the Star Brush [factory] I went, and got on."[16]

Every penny she had went on clothes. Her mother kept a watchful eye on her purchases:

> "'How much you pay for that costume?' So I said, 'Four guineas.' So she said, 'Oh. How much them boots?' 'Twelve and six.' So she said, 'Oh.' They was down the pawn shop Monday. She asked that so she knew what to ask for, see? Down there Monday."[17]

This was not the only one of Mrs Tiverton's tricks. Nancy's sister Marjie, four years her elder, was courting a print worker from Walthamstow, well-off indeed in Campbell Road's terms. Each time he visited Marjie he'd give young Nancy half a crown. But Mrs Tiverton spotted this the first time it happened and claimed the money as her own thereafter. She cadged, too, from a Campbell Road boy who asked her permission to take Nancy to Finsbury Park Empire:

> "So you know what? Before he could take me out my mum say, 'Lend us half a crown, Freddie?' Nancy had to hide her money in a makeshift money belt tied with string round her waist under her clothes; 'I kept that secret. If I'd told her she would have had it she would.'"[18]

Marjie left home over her mother's depredations. Mrs Tiverton had pawned one of the rings given her by the Walthamstow fiancé. And Nancy, too, fell unwittingly into a similar trap. Mrs Tiverton provoked a row and told Nancy to go. She gave Nancy a parcel of her clothes – "'Take that with you, you haven't got to come back no more here for that.'"[19] But the treasured costume and boots were not in the parcel, and Nancy had to go back to her mother for the pawn ticket. It cost her some 15*s* to redeem her own clothes from the pawnbroker.

16 Ibid., p. 205.

17 Ibid., p. 206.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

Both these young women turned their backs on Campbell Bunk, and so did their sisters, by the end of the 1920s.

If we sum up the picture of social exclusion we find in Campbell Bunk in the two decades after the First World War we might characterise it thus. Social exclusion was a traditional element in the street's make-up and had been for forty or fifty years before. It worked both ways, the street's culture *rejecting* the local economy and the local economy rejecting the people of Campbell Bunk. But this was never watertight, and there have been many economic and cultural connections with a wider London that got stronger from the 1920s. The key element in weakening social exclusion in Campbell Bunk was, I think, first and foremost a combination of economic opportunity and expanding desires affecting young girls and drawing them bodily into a more inclusive working-class and metropolitan world. This helped undermine slum culture from the inside, dissolving as it were the cement that held the street together; traditional life two decades and more before the bulldozers eventually moved in. Finally, if I may, a word on the book's reception. I wrote it very much for myself, to try to understand this most extraordinary place as best I could. For a wider audience I had in mind the intelligent general reader, even though I'd included a lot of what we might call academic baggage. But although I gave a copy to each of the main people I'd interviewed I didn't really think they'd like what I'd done. So I was surprised and delighted when old Bunkites told me they'd read it from cover to cover. One told me that it had helped him come to terms with his parents' behaviour that had troubled him all his life. And I know that some others treasured the book and felt proud that they'd had a hand in it. Even the man – not from the Bunk but well known in it and a famous local bookmaker – who told me on publication that he would sue me for every penny I had if his reputation were tarnished in any way did not need to trouble his solicitors.

There were other surprises. A reunion of Bunkites was arranged at a working men's club in Finsbury Park, and some who hadn't seen each other for years were brought together again. Two plays were made out of material in the book and staged in Finsbury Park and Nottingham. And, astonishingly, another book with the Bunk as a major theme appeared in 1986. Tom McCarthy, who had been born in Campbell Road in 1925 and left in 1986, wrote an autobiography called *Boysie*, brought out by a small publishing firm in Devon.[20] Mr McCarthy had lived in Newcastle and he and I knew nothing of each other. Our approach was very different and it was fascinating to see how this microscope part of

20 McCarthy, 1986.

London could sustain two entirely contrasted narratives. If I remember right, episodes from Mr McCarthy's life found their way into the plays, too.

Nearly thirty years on, it would not be possible any longer to recover through oral history this sort of dense study of neighbourhood life in the 1920s and 1930s. Memories die out so quickly. It is one of the enduring satisfactions of a book like this that it creates its own archive of tapes and transcripts, for others to listen to and use. And that these recollections were captured *before* memories of life in Campbell Bunk, a representative rough London slum of the first half of the twentieth century, had died out forever.

Literature

McCarthy, Tom, Boysie, Braunton (Devon) 1986.

White, Jerry, Campbell Bunk, a Lumpen Community in London between the Wars, in: History Workshop Journal 8 (1979), p. 1-49.

Id., Rothschild Buildings. Life in an East End tenement block, 1887-1920, London, Boston 1980.

Id., Campbell Bunk. The worst street in North London between the wars, London 2003.