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Front cover illustration: Michael Caine and Ted Lewis on the set of *Get Carter*. Photographer unknown.

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It began with the laughter of children, and there it will end.
'Drunken Morning' – Arthur Rimbaud

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Prologue

I'd exchanged emails with Mike Hodges about *Jack's Return Home* – Ted Lewis's punchy, defiant, distinctly non-metropolitan noir novel written in the twilight of the 1960s, which he'd adapted, then directed, as *Get Carter* in eight white-hot weeks in 1970. After the acclaimed dramas, *Suspect* and *Rumour*, made for television, it had been Hodges' first feature film, his first adaptation, and the film that established his reputation as a great British filmmaker. For the cinema-obsessed Lewis, quite simply it had been a dream come true.

I met Mike in Hull in November 2013. I'd been invited to host the Q&A following a screening of *Get Carter* as part of that year's Humber Mouth Literature Festival. Mike didn't want to watch the film so we went to a nearby restaurant along with festival director, Shane Rhodes, the writer, Kevin Sampson, and music consultant, Charlie Galloway – Kevin and Charlie were friends of Mike's from Liverpool, in town for the event, and Charlie had played a key role in the reissue of the *Get Carter* soundtrack in 1998. Over dinner, we talked about Lewis, his relationship to Hull and the Lincolnshire towns across the river where he'd lived and where *Jack's Return Home* was set. We were back in time for the film's final scenes: Jack Carter kidnapping and murdering Margaret in the grounds of Kinnear's country house, exacting revenge on those responsible for his brother's death, then the Fletcher brothers' call to an anonymous hitman famously in place from the opening title scene. Mike wrote in the screenplay: *The deserted beach is like the end of the world… Eric is halfway along the beach, struggling in the mud. Carter closes in on him.*

From the rear of the gallery we watched Michael Caine and Ian Hendry's chase along the slag-blackened beach of Blackhall against a grey North Sea backdrop. It looked incredible, as it always does. Mike said, 'It's like watching someone else's film.'

Afterwards, a group of us walked to the pub. The wind whipped off the Humber near Victoria Quay where the ferry once moored and a 16-year-old Ted Lewis commuted between art school and his mum and dad's home in Barton-upon-Humber. The pub, the Minerva, was his regular pre-crossing haunt. It features in his first book, *All the Way Home and All the Night Through,* and the 1971 novel, *Plender.* As the barman poured the pints, I thought about the times Lewis would have stood at the bar as we did and I wondered what he'd have made of Mike being there. I had a sense of this being the final stretch of some great circumnavigation, as if somehow I was bringing the story home. A few days later Mike emailed and asked, what was the name of that pub?

The Minerva.

Ted Lewis's story is as much about these unfashionable, unheralded places and how they fed into his work as it is about the zeitgeist-riding moments: 50s trad jazz, the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, the dark corners of 1960s Soho, the creation of Brit noir, *Z Cars* and *Doctor Who*. It's also about what happens when a good-looking, jazz-loving, cinema-obsessed kid from a small town on the banks of the Humber writes his way into history then drinks his way out again.

That Lewis remains in the public consciousness at all is mainly down to a small band of dedicated admirers in Britain and America, and, of course, that *Jack's Return Home* was the basis for the greatest British crime film of the 1970s, arguably of all time. Truth is, ask a room full of people to raise a hand

if they've heard of *Get Carter* and you'll witness a sea of hands. Ask, do they know the name Ted Lewis and you'll be lucky if there are one or two. But without Lewis there is no Jack Carter, Sir Michael Caine is short of one career-defining iconic role, and the course of British crime fiction is changed forever.

When I moved to Barton-upon-Humber from London in 2001, my knowledge of Lewis extended no further than a dog-eared *Get Carter* paperback and a DVD of the film. For me, it was a one-way ticket to a place I'd never known. I had no idea it had been Lewis's home town. I learned more when his name came up in interviews for a social history book I was researching in 2007. Broadly speaking there were two responses: the first, usually delivered with bluff Northern Lincolnshire dismissiveness, was that he'd left, moved to London, made and lost a fortune and returned home with his tail between his legs and died of drink. The marginally more sympathetic view was that he was a local lad who'd done well – *'he wrote that film with Michael Caine'* – but whose boozing and philandering in later years had made him difficult to like. As one notable local told me, 'Barton is a small town and small towns have long knives'. More than once I was reminded of the lack of any formal recognition of him in the town. The Civic Society, guardians of Barton's heritage, pin plaques on the homes of notable local citizens. At that time Lewis had not been so honoured. I asked around. The suggestion was that he'd been too controversial a figure to warrant the tribute.

What really stirred my interest was an interview I recorded with the novelist Karen Maitland for a regional arts magazine in January, 2008. Karen's first mediaeval crime novel, *A Company of Liars,* had just been published and we spoke at length about the story, its inspirations and its journey to publication. Our conversation turned to crime writers we admired, specifically Ted

Lewis. Some years previously, Karen had worked as a librarian in Barton. At the time, the library kept a virtually complete collection of Lewis's books locked away in a metal cabinet. When the county of Humberside broke up in 1996 and local libraries were placed under the authority of North Lincolnshire Council, a team from the Central Library arrived in Barton to review the stock. They told the staff to throw Lewis's books on the tip. 'They were old and battered,' said Karen, 'and they couldn't think why we were wasting valuable cupboard space keeping out of date novels by a local author no one had ever heard of.'

To begin with, it seemed Ted Lewis had left little other than his published work and the memories of those who knew him. People entered and left his life with regularity and only a very few can claim to have been close for any length of time. Others suffer from the vagueness of memory that advances with age and the after-effects of 1960s and 70s lifestyles. Some are fiercely protective of his reputation and reject any enquiry. Others were hurt by him with the same outcome – he could, it was said, 'turn on a sixpence': charming, entertaining, boyishly attractive one minute; obnoxious, paranoid, self-destructive and abusive the next. For those closest to him, raking over the past is frequently a painful experience. I've sat down with friends, lovers, schoolmates, drinking pals, neighbours and colleagues; I've met with his ex-wife, his daughters, and his literary agent, Toby Eady. I've collected scraps of reviews and interviews from long defunct magazines. Primary sources are scarce. Verification is rarely straightforward. No formal archive or collection of correspondence exists, only a few pieces written about him for magazines and websites. Lewis didn't keep a diary for most of his life and the majority of his papers and personal documents were destroyed after his mother's death in 1990.

Yet the popularity of contemporary British crime fiction can be traced directly to the aesthetic he pioneered in *Jack's Return Home*, found again in *Plender* and *Jack Carter's Law,* and took to new levels of dark intensity in his final novel, *GBH*. That unflinching mix of tawdry underworld violence combined with an unerring eye for detail, an evocative connection with landscape and the reek of the authentically domestic, the brutal and banal, dark and psychological, and a gift for crafting language like no one who came before him, helped define the concept of present-day British noir. So why had he fallen into relative obscurity? Why, since his death in 1982, had there been no significant posthumous rediscovery? Why are his books, with the obvious exception of *Get Carter*, out of print in his home country?

For much of his life, Lewis exhibited the virtues and flaws of a classic noir antihero: nobility, infidelity, weakness, sickness, sex, cigarettes, love, booze and bad choices play a part. He was the star of his own film, damaged and dangerous. As a writer, he achieved an astonishing amount in a short period of time, though never enough to satisfy his expectations. His fall, when it came, was rapid. I've tried to fill the gaps and provide a narrative certainty, but there remain ambiguities, complexities, mysteries and half-remembered fragments which I've agonised over and learned to reconcile, avoiding the temptation to neaten loose ends on his behalf.

Interviewed shortly after the publication of *Jack's Return Home* in 1970, he said he'd tried to 'make it real'. The least I can do is to follow his lead and tell it straight as I've found it.

1

Heartache
1940–1951

Ted Lewis had a sense that something had been missing. Born on 15 January 1940 in Stretford, Manchester, among his imperfect and chaotic wartime recollections it was his father's absence that resonated. A space which, for the first five years of his life, was dominated by his mother, Bertha, and his maternal grandmother's matriarchal presence. In this his experiences were no different to those of countless other wartime babies and young children, their consciousness formed in an uncertain and austere time of absent fathers, air-raid warnings, rationing, bomb-damaged streets and the filtered realities of war reported each evening on the BBC news. A rare family snapshot from the period, taken while his father, Harry, was home on leave from the Royal Air Force, shows father and son together. Harry Lewis is on his haunches, tanned and healthy in the uniform of an RAF Corporal. His broad hands encircle his young son's waist. Perhaps a little more than a year old, Edward is pale, blond and chubby-cheeked, smiling and alert in the sunshine.

By the time Harry returned home from active service for the final time in 1945, his son, christened Alfred Edward, but

always known as Edward to his parents, was a fit and energetic five-year-old. Readjusting to home and family life after the war proved difficult. For a short time, Harry went back to work at the Manchester Ship Canal Company where he'd been employed as a shipbroker's clerk before the war, but his experience had equipped him for greater responsibility. When the opportunity of a management position arose at one of the company's subsidiary concerns across the country in Lincolnshire, he accepted.

In early September 1946, the Lewis family migrated 100 miles west to east from Manchester to North Lincolnshire. Harry Lewis took out a mortgage on 118 West Acridge, Barton-upon-Humber, a modest three-bedroom semi-detached in one of the town's most established streets. The family moved in and Harry took up the post of manager at Elsham Quarry some ten miles away, one of several similar works peppering the landscape south of Barton which provided raw materials for building, engineering and railway industries.

The Barton that welcomed the Lewises was a small, insular market town on the south bank of the River Humber, some 25 miles from the fishing port of Grimsby to the east and 20 miles from the steel town of Scunthorpe to the west. They knew no one and the town's few thousand inhabitants were, in the main, families which could trace their local heritage back generations. The town had built up around two distinct geographical locales: the Waterside area close to Barton Haven, a busy inlet from the River Humber, where once a ferry had connected to Hessle on the opposite bank of the river a mile and a quarter away; and Top Town, which centred on two mediaeval churches – Saint Peter's with its Saxon tower and nearby Saint Mary's. A few local shops and half a dozen pubs led up to the town square, home to the weekly market. Beyond its own boundaries, the town had made

its name through Hopper's bicycle factory whose machines were exported around the world; Hall's Barton Ropery which made ropes for the Royal Navy and the Empire for 150 years; and for the manufacture of bricks and tiles – there were a number of traditional works dotted along the river's south bank making use of Humber clay.

Across the river, accessible only by ferry from New Holland, a short train journey from Barton, or a lengthy detour inland by road, the lights of the city of Kingston upon Hull represented a distant world. The house in West Acridge gave Lewis a clear view of the river and the city beyond. After Trafford Park's industrial grime, Barton was an idyllic setting for the Lewises. Nestling in the hillside as the landscape scoops from the outer edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds to the wooded fringes and pebbled beaches of the Humber foreshore, it would have felt clean, its broad outlook offering an uncluttered panorama of the wide river, its air unpolluted. It was a free and safe playground for the young Lewis. In his first novel, the autobiographical *All the Way Home and All the Night Through*, Lewis wrote his observations of Barton, describing the easy pace of living and the ordinariness of the town, concluding that although the youth complains about the claustrophobia of life, 'hardly anyone leaves the place'.

In 1947, Lewis was enrolled at Barton County Primary School on Castledyke. Although he felt some affection for his headmaster, a quiet man called Jack Taylor, the bulk of the teaching staff were, according to childhood friend and classmate, Nick Turner, 'formidable old spinsters'. The most draconian was Miss Crawford, a strict disciplinarian who inflicted liberal doses of corporal punishment on her young charges. Children were terrified of her. Turner remembers the consequences if Miss Crawford suspected someone had broken wind. 'She would walk round smelling our backsides until she found the culprit

and then slipper them in front of the class.' Miss Crawford's comeuppance came while attempting to teach the children to bunny-jump during a PE lesson when she fell on her back and had to be carried out. After the comfort of home, the sensitive Lewis was unsettled by the severity of Miss Crawford and the other teachers. They upset the sense of fairness he had come to depend on with his mother and grandmother and he withdrew, quietly shielding himself from the school's worst excesses.

Lewis's days at Barton County were curtailed abruptly when, in 1948, he contracted rheumatic fever. In pre-antibiotic, late-1940s Britain, cases were still fairly common, particularly among children. The disease was a major cause of death until around 1960. It would attack the heart's mitral valve, causing it to leak, often leaving the sufferer with chronic heart problems. In addition to its effect on the heart, it was a highly debilitating illness – we know from friends that Lewis suffered severe pain in his joints. In extreme cases, rheumatic fever could lead to brain damage. Recovery was primarily dependent on the ability of the patient's immune system to fight back and it was generally accepted that, if the sufferer kept to a minimum any potential strain on the heart, the disease would be less likely to cause lasting harm. Whilst the exact severity of Lewis's bout of rheumatic fever isn't known, it was certainly a grave cause for concern, serious enough for Bertha to ensure her son received complete bed rest for many months. Throughout the latter part of 1948 and into the spring of 1949, he remained at home, convalescing.

When it was suggested to John Dickinson, whose parents had become good friends of the Lewises, that he visit this young chap who was ill in bed, he found a pale boy a couple of years younger than himself, quite shy, and with a mop of blond hair, his bed littered with comic books and a pencil and paper constantly

to hand. Dickinson recalls 'he would draw all the time, always these figures of people'.

With recurrences of rheumatic fever as common as the disease itself, particularly in the years immediately after the first incidence, Harry and Bertha would have been told that another episode could cause lasting and serious, possibly fatal, damage to their son's heart. But, as Lewis's ninth birthday approached, Bertha dared to hope the worst was over. Thinking a birthday party would raise his spirits, she made a cake, iced with the family's saved sugar rations. The boys who sat on the edge of the bed at his party have a clear recollection of Edward Lewis, sitting up in bed and 'holding court'. It was as if the illness had conferred a degree of celebrity.

The friends drawn to Lewis around this time called themselves the Riverbank Boys. Barton was no different to many towns where discrete areas became territories for loosely associated groups of friends. The Riverbank Boys were hardly a gang in any contemporary sense, more a bunch of lads who played together, shared interests and made a point of looking after each other. Lewis was welcomed on board. Along with Nick Turner and Alan Dickinson, he was one of the youngest of the group that included Martin Turner, John Dickinson, Mike Shucksmith and Neil Ashley. They were Barton born and bred and came from similarly respectable families. Here, for the first time, Edward Lewis of 118 West Acridge became Ted Lewis of the Riverbank Boys after Nick and Martin Turner's father, Arthur, decided Edward was too effeminate a name. Ted was 'more manly'. Lewis's friends called him Ed or Eddy. Bertha would make sandwiches for the boys and they'd sit around in her son's room, talking, drawing, reading comics, usually with Lewis as the centre of attention. Sometimes Harry set up a hand-cranked film projector, plugged into the light socket with a bulb behind

it for the boys to watch cartoon films screened against the blank wall at the foot of the bed.

In hindsight, Lewis's rheumatic fever and the enforced period of recuperation and reading which followed, gave him a degree of knowledge and insight beyond his years. Temporarily released from the constraints of formal education, in its place, encouraged and supported by Bertha, his natural artistic ability was given licence to flourish. In the dull rhythms of convalescent days, he discovered an inner world of imagination, invention and story. Escape from the everyday came first through the wireless, particularly radio thriller serials like *Dick Barton – Special Agent*. Lewis was an avid listener.

He was also a keen reader of comics. While British comics of the time were, for the most part, limited to the traditional – *Beano*, *Dandy* – and boy's own titles like *Hotspur* or *Eagle*, increasingly Lewis's older friends were attracted to glossier American titles from the Entertaining Comics (EC) stable of crime, horror and science fiction. *Crime Patrol*, *War Against Crime!*, *Vault of Horror*, *Tales From the Crypt*, *Weird Fantasy* and *The Haunt of Fear* were captivating reads, particularly for lads raised on a diet of Desperate Dan, Biffo the Bear and old-fashioned heroes and villains of Empire. EC comics were no ordinary adventures. These were stories of violent revenge, punishment, guilt and retribution. *Death's Double Cross*, *Under Cover* and *Snapshot of Death* and countless stories like them delivered a jolt to Lewis's pre-teenage imagination. He was enthusiastic about the vivid colours and graphic narratives, the more horrific the better. The byline of his and Nick Turner's favourite comic featured a gleefully sadistic character hunting roadkill in dark city streets spouting the mantra: 'Blood and guts all over the street, and me without a spoon to eat.'

Retrospectively viewed as a highpoint in pop culture in

the period before concerns about juvenile delinquency in the United States prompted senate hearings to neuter their alleged impact on American youth, early EC comics have a parallel in the pre-censorship film industry of the early 1930s. Eventually, they would be codified and sanitised. They were bold, entertaining and featured tough heroes, deviant victims, good stories, sharp dialogue and eye-catching artwork. Some stories, like those of artist Johnny Craig, were naturalistic and had moral undertones. Others were gratuitously violent or overtly sexual. Lewis was enthralled by torture scenes, double-crosses in shadowy alleyways, gangsters in fedoras and hard-bitten detectives. They also began to influence the way he wrote, finding expression in the pages of his drawings. His comic strips and fictional characters were more colourful and they now had speech balloons.

An American comic in Barton in the early 1950s would have seemed a wildly exotic item and a prized possession. Although Bertha enthusiastically provided her son with whatever he needed to keep him happy and occupied, it is unlikely she would have been able to find, or would necessarily have approved of, the comics had she been aware of their content. Buying comics was a challenge for Lewis and the other boys. Often they were handed on by the older members of the Riverbank Boys, those with pocket money, part-time jobs or paper rounds. It was said they could be bought from sailors who came through the docks at Hull and Immingham. Martin Turner remembers buying them from a novelty shop in Cleethorpes – a thriving holiday resort and popular destination for daytrippers an hour or so from Barton on the train.

Lewis was absent from school for several months. Illness had left him physically fragile. It had also deepened the already close bond between mother and son. In later years, he told one friend

of a game they played in which Bertha would ask, 'Who are you going to marry?' To which he would answer, 'You, mummy'. Bertha was determined he should be back to full health before returning to school. On warm afternoons, she set a chair in front of the house and allowed him to sit outside. Friends remember passing on their way home from school, stopping to talk to the boy swathed in blankets. He became something of a curiosity, the illness marking him out as different. When they asked why he wasn't at school he told them he had 'heartache'.

A school class photo, taken in the summer of 1949, shows a group of children, smart, but perhaps a little dowdy in hand-me-downs or the best that clothing coupons could buy. Lewis sits at the front, distinct, with his longish blond fringe swept across his forehead. He looks healthy, smiling. By the time he left Barton County in the summer of 1951, a promisingly bright boy, perhaps a little more fragile than most and extremely shy, the strict regimen of schooldays had sown the seeds of a quiet rebellion. As he regained strength, Lewis spent more time with friends, exploring the landscape and absorbing his surroundings: the River Humber, its windswept shores, rolling grey-brown tides, hidden nooks, disused tile and brickworks, jetties, broad bays and river-borne traffic were fertile grounds for the imagination. Here in the riverside wilderness, he found freedom from illness and a place to play.