



*Unreasonable Behavior: An Autobiography* by Don McCullin.

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Don McCullin published the first version of this autobiography in 1990, at age fifty-five. Not coincidentally, three years later he became the first photojournalist to receive a CBE and was knighted in 2017 two years after his expanded and revised second edition appeared. Both editions of *Unreasonable Behavior* have reminded the reading public and people in high places that his inspired war photography captured images of suffering human beings in the most violent places in the world. Between 1958 and 1982, McCullin took his idiosyncratic, dyslexic, slum-nurtured visual sensibilities to cities and countries riven by political and geopolitical conflicts, socioeconomic problems, and religious and ethnic strife, not to mention the damage caused by self-serving sociopathic leaders, disease, famine, and floods. In periods of decompression from the enormous stresses of photographing wars, he also visited hopelessly poor districts in big cities of the United Kingdom and the United States.

“Unreasonable behavior” well sums up how McCullin himself and people who cared about him thought of the selfless bravery he showed in Berlin, Cyprus, the Congo, South Vietnam, Biafra, Guatemala, Eritrea, Chad, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, New Guinea, Northern Ireland, Uganda, Paraguay, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, El Salvador, and Zambia. He was certainly not in it for the money: in 1974, for instance, he earned £5,392.80 (US \$70,447.37, adjusted for inflation) for forty-seven weeks of work. That is, he risked his life in zones of insanely savage and often indiscriminate mechanized violence for weeks on end for “no more than was paid to senior sub-editors who never emerged from behind the security of their desks” at home in London. Then again, “The amount of money that would compensate you adequately for getting your head blown off does not exist” (203).

Reading only his new edition of *Unreasonable Behavior* does not do justice to the corpus of McCullin’s photographs of human beings suffering from abject poverty, violence, hunger, disease, neglect, and hatred. One must also see the 120 captioned photographs (taken in 1958–1978) in his *Hearts of Darkness*<sup>2</sup> and the 98 extraordinary photos of ordinary human lives lived by people in Great Britain in his *Homecoming*,<sup>3</sup> with its accompanying essay stating two defining truths about his artistry: “Good people live in a sad world” (178) and “I want my work to be seen by ordinary people” (168).

Many of the forty-seven chapters in *Unreasonable Behavior* contain no images at all. Roughly half of the volume’s forty-six images may be classified as family photographs he took in childhood and as an adult of parents, siblings, wives, children, and close friends. Several others are examples

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1. Rpt. NY: Grove Pr, 2017.

2. London: Secker and Warburg / NY: Knopf, 1981, with introductory essay by John Le Carré and Mark Haworth-Booth’s 187-item bibliography of books, anthologies, picture stories, magazine portfolios, films, and essays on McCullin’s work.

3. London: Macmillan / NY: St. Martin’s Pr, 1979.

of his late-period landscape photography. Like the family photos, the dark-hued landscapes are suggestive of McCullin's larger world view.

Six noteworthy classic McCullin photos in *Unreasonable Behavior* are:<sup>4</sup>

1. "Street gang in derelict house, Finsbury Park, 1958" / "The Guv'nors" (38).
2. "Grief-stricken woman and son after discovery of murdered husband, Cyprus, 1964" / "Turkish woman mourning the death of her husband, Cyprus, 1964" (70).
3. "Shell-shocked soldier awaiting transportation away from the front line, Hué, 1968" / "Shell-shocked U.S. Marine, Hué, 1968" (115).
4. "Albino boy, not only starving and at death's door, but ridiculed by fellow sufferers for skin pigmentation, Biafra, 1970 [sic] / "A nine-year-old albino boy clutching an empty corned beef tin, Biafra, 1968" (135).
5. "Twenty-four-year-old mother, her child suckling at her empty breast, 1969" [sic] / "A twenty-four-year-old mother and child awaiting death, Biafra, 1968" (138).
6. "Christian militia mock the body of a young Palestinian girl killed in the battle of Karantina, Beirut, 1976" / "Young Christians beside the body of a teenage Palestinian girl, Beirut, 1976" (224-25).

Except for photo 5, of the Biafran mother and child, the 1981 captions are more disturbing and less matter-of-fact.

The young men in no. 1 are stripped of their later glamorous identities as "The Guv'nors," which reads almost like an aristocratic title. Instead they are given their true anonymous identities as a *street gang* in a *derelict house* in the *slum zone* of Finsbury Park. Each of the three pairs of words is a nail in the crucifixion of socioeconomic equality. In no. 2, the woman *and* the son are *stricken with grief* upon *discovery* of a *murdered* husband (and father). Later the boy is forgotten and the woman mourns the unspecified death of her husband. In no. 3, the shell-shocked soldier who survived the carnage of the battle of Hué is waiting to be *transported from the front line*. Later he is simply shell-shocked. In no. 4, the albino boy is *starving, at death's door*, and nonetheless *subject to social ridicule because of his skin color* by age-peers who are themselves starving to death! These details cannot be deduced from the photos alone, so McCullin, closer to the events, attached words to intensify their effect.

In no. 5, the 2015 caption elides the mother's obviously empty breasts and declares with simple existential finality that she and her child *are awaiting death*. No hope of aid or rescue exists outside the frame of the photo. Number 6 must be seen to be believed. It evokes characters in *Lord of the Flies*, *A Clockwork Orange*, or *Badlands*. Their heads are filled with Christian Falangist zealotry and hatred as, armed and dangerous, they are unleashed on war-torn Beirut. The 1981 caption has them mocking the lifeless body of the young Palestinian girl, lying face-up crucifixion-style in the mud and street debris. In fact, their purest form of mockery is that they are ignoring her as they strike poses for McCullin's camera.

*Unreasonable Behavior* is McCullin's honest effort to come to terms with himself and his actions and what made him see the world as he has and what motivated him to preserve in black-and-white photos the nameless people whose lives and deaths would otherwise, for better or worse, go unnoticed. I have all my life studied accounts of human beings traumatized by wars and other grievous social injustices. By a twist of fate, noted photo-historian Michael Lesy recom-

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4. Captions from *Hearts of Darkness* (1981) / *Unreasonable Behavior* (2015).

mended McCullin's book to me during a visit to the University of Texas in late February. Covid-19 has given me the time to read it with the care it deserves.

In chapters 1–5, McCullin (9 Oct. 1935) describes his life from childhood into early manhood in the Finsbury Park district of North London near Campbell Road (or “Campbell Bunk”), notorious from the 1880s through the 1950s as “the worst street in North London.” In McCullin's case, the child was definitely father to the man. He and his mother, invalid father, younger sister (until adopted as a war evacuee into a family of good standing), and his younger brother lived in “two damp basement rooms” of a tenement building. It was “no place for a man with chronic asthma” (his father) “or for kids for that matter, but it was home” (18).

The Blitz brought about three separations from the family during evacuations to the country, each experience worse than the previous. By war's end, the ten-year-old McCullin was deeply class-conscious. His sister had acquired polite manners, respectable dress, and public schooling, while Don had

built up a tidy store of resentment and mistrust. It gave me a lifelong affinity with persecuted peoples. I know what it is like to be branded uncivilized and unclean, and to be treated as something pernicious. Except that I was ostracized and ill-treated by my own people, and not an alien race (23).

The choice of “*something*” here rather than “*someone*” shot straight to my heart.

McCullin later discovered he was dyslexic. Undiagnosed as a schoolboy, he moved around to various substandard schools, subject to “beatings, whackings and punchings” by teachers. He nonetheless generously concedes that “these terrifying Finsbury Park teachers *were* ranged against a most evil bunch of boys” (24). He endured, too, such childhood embarrassments as secondhand clothes, regular dealings with the pawnbroker, and compulsory lying to bill collectors. Counterbalancing these was the strength of his father's love for him and unreserved encouragement of his talent for drawing. A teacher, recognizing his talent, arranged for a scholarship at the Hammersmith School of Building and Arts and Crafts.

These few precious positives were canceled by his father's sudden physical decline and death at age forty. “The scene of my father laid out, the burning candles and the smell, is one I shall never forget” (34). By age fourteen, instead of attending the Hammersmith School, he was working as a pantry-boy on the London to Manchester trains to support his family, taking in the indelible sights, smells, and sounds of “those grimy satanic northern cities, with their tall factory chimneys belching dark smoke” (35).

Each chapter of this autobiography further reveals a man who values other human beings, whatever their backgrounds or present circumstances, who overcome the worst of conditions when God, authority figures of all kinds, and close friends and families are not there to provide guidance, set limits, hand out rewards, or mete out punishments; or, still worse, when they *are* there but only to distribute licenses to hate, brutalize, torture, and kill.

McCullin has extracted lessons from life that changed his ideas about his own experiences and values. And he put into each picture he took a depth of feeling that “could imprint them on the world's memory” (73). For example, he writes the following about the transformative image of the grieving Turkish woman and her son:

I think I grew up that day. I took a step away from my personal resentments, my feeling that life had been uniquely tough on me, giving me evacuation and Finsbury Park, and taking away my father when I was young. That day in Cyprus, when I saw somebody else losing their father, somebody else losing their son, I felt I could somehow assimilate this

experience so that my own pity could cease to be personal and instead become general. And I could just say, “okay, I’m not the only one.” ... I found I was able to share other people’s emotional experiences, live with them, transmit them. I felt I had a particular vision that isolated and homed in on the essence of what was happening, and could see that essence in light, in tones, in details. That I had a powerful ability to communicate. (72)

He composed his camera shots “in the way that Goya painted or did his war sketches” (72).

In the last of a group of prohibited photos taken at great risk, McCullin captured the five young Falangists out on the ruined streets of the Karantina district of Beirut in 1976 (224–25). As a consequence, death warrants were issued against both McCullin and journalist and biographer Martin Meredith. McCullin did not care. His instinct to bear witness overrode any thoughts of self-preservation:

Again we got the message: “You two, leave this place now. And do not take any photographs, or you will be killed.” As we moved on I saw a pile of dead bodies which had not yet been burned. I was shaking as I took a picture quickly. Further down the same road we heard strumming. A young boy was playing a lute ransacked from half-burnt houses. The boy was strumming it among his mates, as if they were at a picnic among almond groves in the sun. In front of them lay the body of a dead girl in puddles of winter rain. My mind was seized by this picture of carnival rejoicing in the midst of carnage. It seemed to say so much about what Beirut had become. Yet to raise the camera could be one risk too many. Then the boy called to me. “Hey Mistah! Mistah! Come take photo.” I was still frightened but I shot off two frames quickly. This, when it’s published, will crucify this lot, I thought. (222–23)

He now knows better. Still there is some comfort in looking back upon your life’s work and realizing that “when I began as a photographer, I believed that my work would suffer if I allowed it to become political. In the event it turned out to be nothing but political for I consistently took the side of the underdog and the under-privileged” (275). And in McCullin’s case, seeing truly is believing.