



Final Analysis

Peter Dench considers...

A mother with her new pram and baby in the steel town of Consett, County Durham, England, 1974 by Don McCullin

At a group meal in the south of France, I was fortunate enough to have been seated near to photographer Don McCullin. We discussed Finsbury Park, the then working-class neighbourhood in north London where he grew up. I live a short walk from Finsbury Park and described the bakeries and CBD shops that had replaced the tenements and bombed-out buildings where he took his iconic 1958 photograph of 'The Govnors in their Sunday Suits' on a Rolleicord medium-format twin lens reflex camera he bought for £30.

Don had flicked through my first book, *England Uncensored*. I suggested we should collaborate on a reportage across England – Dench and Don do Albion. He wasn't hostile to the idea, leant in and said: 'Of course it would have to be Don and Dench,' and of course he was right.

If you don't ask...

During the cheese course, the director of a major festival of photojournalism intervened and said to Don, 'I can't die without having exhibited you at my festival.' Wow, I thought, this is a historic moment. A few years later at the opening of that exhibition, I overheard the festival director say: 'Don said to me, I can't die without having exhibited at your festival.' Wow, I thought, that's not how I remember it.

It's not surprising the lengths to which people will go to collaborate with Don; he is the special one. In 2022, as part of *The Sunday Times* newspaper bicentennial celebrations, I was sent on a pilgrimage to Don's



© DON MCCULLIN

house in Somerset to film a segment for the documentary *200 Years in the Making*. He showed me through his archive and commented that some of his best work has been done here in England.

This image is included in a new book, *Life, Death and Everything in Between* (GOST, £80). It presents 140 key photographs by Don, some rarely published or previously unseen. Don knew the north of England as he'd worked on a steam train as a boy and realised there were rich pickings up there photographically. The new pram shines like a diamond in the rough terrain. The sparkling wheels contrast

'The woman is doing what the English often have to do, button up your coat, face the elements and push on into tomorrow'

with the dense circles of machinery behind. The woman's dark trousers echo the looming chimneys. Her hair flows in the same wind direction as the smoke.

What is she doing there and where is she going? What is Don doing there and how is the woman unaffected by his presence? Don is doing what he's done so successfully for over half a century. Trusting

his nose for a good image and story, relentlessly and meticulously documenting life, often in the north of England at a time it was experiencing de-industrialisation and poverty. The woman with the pram is doing what the English often have to do, put on your best polished boots, button up your coat, face the elements and push on into tomorrow.

AP

The publication of the book coincides with the exhibition Don McCullin in Rome – a Retrospective, on now until 28 January 2024 at Palazzo delle Esposizioni.

Peter Dench is a photographer, writer, curator and presenter based in London. He is one of the co-curators of Photo North and has been exhibited dozens of times. He has published a number of books including *The Dench Dozen: Great Britons of Photography Vol 1*; *Dench Does Dallas*; *The British Abroad*; *A&E: Alcohol & England* and *England Uncensored*. Visit peterdench.com