

# Death of British filmmaker Michael Apted at 79, director of *Up* documentary series, *Coal Miner's Daughter*

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British film director Michael Apted, who died January 7 aged 79, was responsible for a remarkable variety of work over his long career, from action thrillers to the documentaries that will probably stand as his most enduring legacy. Fascinated by the cinema from his teens, Apted worked with facility across a surprising range of material.

There was a James Bond film, *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), a solid biography of country singer Loretta Lynn (in fact, the best of the popular music biographies), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), and *Amazing Grace* (2006), about the abolitionist William Wilberforce.

The strength of his best work lay in his honest, if not always successful, attempts to engage with the realities of society and social conflict. While this found distorted reflection in a thriller like *Thunderheart* (1992), about a murder investigation on a Sioux reservation, he also pursued more direct investigations, like the contemporaneous documentary *Incident at Oglala* for Robert Redford, treating the Leonard Peltier case.

He was in this respect a product of developments in British television and society of the early 1960s, marked by a growth of interest in social criticism in art. In 1963, Canadian Paul Almond directed a proposed one-off documentary about disparate children across Britain, *Seven Up!* for Granada television. Apted, one of the researchers, was particularly interested in the effects of class on the children. In 1970 he followed them up, as he subsequently (and uniquely) did every seven years until his death.

As we noted in a review of *63 Up* (2019), “The implied premise of *Seven Up!* was that the British class system was so entrenched and rigid that the various participants were likely to remain trapped in the class into which they had been born.” Apted’s return to his participants over the ensuing years explored this sensitively. The series remains his testament and reveals not only “something about the particular lives documented, but also speaks more broadly to the character of the age and society, namely post-war Britain until the present.” We are reposting here the review of *63 Up* as a tribute.

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In 1964, a group of 14 British seven-year-olds were chosen to be the subject of a “one-off” documentary for Granada Television. The film, entitled *Seven Up!* and directed by Canadian Paul Almond, was inspired in part by—or intended to test—the motto, attributed to the co-founder of the Jesuit Order, Francis Xavier, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man.”

Michael Apted (*Coal Miner's Daughter*, *Class Action*, *Thunderheart*, *Amazing Grace*), who worked on *Seven Up!* as a researcher, subsequently took on the project of filming those same individuals (or those who agreed to participate) at seven-year intervals. The latest episode, the ninth in the series, follows the group now in their 60s. Apted is 78.

In 2012, at the time of *56 Up*, the eighth edition, Apted told the *Radio*

*Times* that the first documentary “was Paul’s film ... but he was more interested in making a beautiful film about being seven, whereas I wanted to make a nasty piece of work about these kids who have it all, and these other kids who have nothing.” The *Radio Times* continued, “Apted was able to indulge his social conscience by trawling the nation’s schools for 14 suitable subjects.”

One of the most groundbreaking series ever produced for television, the “Up” series gives voice to a range of human beings from distinct socio-economic backgrounds and walks of life. According to one commentator, Joe Moran, in “Childhood, class and memory in the *Seven Up* films” (*Screen*, 2002), the principal aim “of bringing children from startlingly different backgrounds in *Seven Up!* was to show the impact of class distinctions on life chances. The programme has no explicitly articulated thesis but points to the significance of class implicitly through its narrative techniques, the most obvious of which is the suggestive intercutting of shots of the different children in their everyday lives.”

The implied premise of *Seven Up!* was that the British class system was so entrenched and rigid that the various participants were likely to remain trapped in the class into which they had been born. Indeed, this proved largely to be true.

The “Up” series not only reveals something about the particular lives documented, but also speaks more broadly to the character of the age and society, namely post-war Britain until the present.

While the uninitiated viewer may need to watch each episode from the beginning, the experience will not be time wasted. Every one of the lives recorded, from the working-class participants to those from the elite, is interesting, though it can’t be an accident that the lives of the poorer individuals are more intriguing and dramatic than those of their richer counterparts. Nevertheless, it is to the filmmakers’ credit that one can sympathize with each person whose life is documented.

Although the latest installment is not the most eventful of the series, the participants at age 63 are able to provide some insight into the changes that Britain has undergone over the course of the series. Something of the optimism of their youth still remains, but their worries for the future, especially for the generations to come, are more pronounced than before.

Leon Trotsky, in his autobiography, noted that the idea of childhood “as the happiest time of life” holds true for very few, only for those living “in a home of inherited wealth and culture.” The majority, on the contrary, experience “a childhood of darkness, hunger and dependence. Life strikes the weak—and who is weaker than a child?”

In the first segments of the “Up” series, childhood’s seemingly idyllic times are contrasted with the harsh reality of Great Britain in the 1960s. All of the children go to schools determined by their class background. Some of them go to elite boarding schools, others to orphanages or public institutions. Nearly every place looks depressing and yet the children go

about their lives apparently oblivious to what lies in store for them.

Along with its bleak and archaic surroundings, Britain in the 1960s had a restless, combative working class that looked to the future with some confidence. Now in the third decade of the 21st century, despite all the surface improvements in life, nearly every person filmed expresses a degree of skepticism and anxiety about the state of the world. One participant tells the camera something to the effect, “I don’t know how the next generation can keep living like this.”

The series opens with Tony, a working-class boy from the East End of London. In the first episode, Tony wants to be a jockey when he grows up. By *21 Up*, Tony has given this dream up to become a taxi driver. Of all the characters, Tony was the only one to move out of his class, becoming financially comfortable and even dabbling professionally in acting.

The latest episode, however, shows how Tony has abandoned his holiday home in Spain because of the global recession. He remains in good spirits but expresses doubt about Brexit and the entire political establishment, telling Apted he might consider voting for the Green Party. His generally upbeat character leaves an impression.

The women of the “Up” series, particularly those from a working-class background, are especially memorable and all have a unique story to tell. Jackie, Lynn, and Sue are asked rather patronizing questions in the earlier films about when they will get married, have kids and so forth.

Jackie marries at 19 and eventually moves to a council estate in Scotland, raising three boys mostly by herself. Despite being on disability for years and having a precarious existence, she displays good humor. At one point, Jackie berates Apted for only asking her questions about family and marriage, while the men of the group are presented with a wider range of questions.

Lynn also marries at 19 and become a children’s librarian until she is laid off due to budget cuts. Lynn is also extremely active in the fight against austerity and Thatcherism more generally. In 2013, she succumbs to an illness and becomes the first participant of the show to die. The school library she worked in was renamed in her honor.

Sue marries at 24 and has two kids before getting divorced. She is engaged to her current boyfriend and works as an administrator for Queen Mary University of London by *63 Up*. Footage of her singing “Smile,” the popular standard by Charlie Chaplin, and “Superstar” by the Carpenters from an earlier episode, is especially moving.

Paul and Symon were both raised in a charity boarding school as orphans. Paul left for Australia while Symon remained in the UK. The latest episode shows them catching up and recounts their lives and new families. They, along with the working-class women of the series, are perhaps the most sympathetic figures, having had to withstand a good deal of adversity and still make a life for themselves.

However, at times these segments tend to drag somewhat, and the audience is treated to the same rather banal questions about family and circumstance. Such sequences have more the feeling of watching one’s friends’ home movies rather than a deep-going sociological study.

Nick, a boy from a small farm, moves to the United States to eventually become a nuclear physicist. His first marriage is shown over the course of the series, and he is quite candid about the circumstances leading to its end. By *63 Up*, he is remarried and fighting cancer. He also expresses some regret at not achieving more success in his professional life.

Peter and Neil are two boys from a middle-class school in Liverpool. By *28 Up*, Peter is a frustrated teacher and expresses his contempt for Margaret Thatcher’s administration leading to a vicious media campaign against him. After bowing out of the show for several episodes because of the attacks, he returns for *56 Up* to promote his new Americana band.

Peter notices the immense cultural changes in Britain over his lifetime, noting something along these lines, “In 1964 it was illegal to be openly homosexual in Britain, women could not get an abortion, and you could have a sign that said, ‘No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs’ over your

establishment.” He notes correctly that Britain is unquestionably a more tolerant society now, and yet...

Neil, Peter’s classmate, has perhaps the most tragic journey of all the show’s participants. In *Seven Up!* he is a happy child and full of hope. By *21 Up*, he is squatting in a flat in London working on construction sites. By *28 Up* he is still homeless and by 35 he is living in a council house in the Shetland Islands, the northernmost inhabited part of the UK. He tells Apted’s camera at various points about his struggles with mental illness.

By *42 Up*, it seems Neil’s “freefall” has stopped. He is involved in local politics, becoming a Liberal Democrat in the London Borough of Hackney. Still a timid man by *63 Up*, Neil reveals he was married at one point, but separated from his wife for reasons never made clear. He tells the camera, “When you have the possibility of a relationship, but you can’t fulfill that relationship, heartbreak ensues.”

The other participants of the show are not quite as interesting as to merit further comment, though as an aside, one feels sympathy for them too despite their more privileged backgrounds.

After more than half a century on the screen, does the “Up” series say something about life? In this reviewer’s view, yes. Perhaps the reason why the characters’ lives feel as unfulfilled as they do is because of the nature of the period they went through.

On that note, what has happened over the course of their lives, politically and historically? The British working class was cruelly betrayed by the Labour Party in the 1960s and ‘70s, opening the door to the social counter-revolution led by Margaret Thatcher in subsequent decades. Then New Labour and Tony Blair came to power, carrying out unrelenting attacks on social services and producing mass unemployment, a precipitous fall in living standards and a resulting decline in culture and class consciousness. All of this had an impact, and it shows.

*63 Up* tells us something about not only the lives but also the times. Through the documentary medium Apted and his subjects have illustrated not just the immense difficulties of being a human during a time of social reaction and decay but also that these lives were not lived in vain, that something can be learned from them.

The class system remains in Britain, as entrenched and more reactionary than ever. Sections of the population succumbed, temporarily at least, to the foul Thatcherite mantra that the purpose of life was the accumulation of material wealth before everything else. In fact, that many of the characters have found some happiness in this world, without money or power, disproves that right-wing filth. Britain is far more of a social powder keg today than it was in the 1960s.

That the series has become so popular over the years and inspired different versions around the world is testament to the fact that many people can identify with the characters and their hopes and failures.

It remains one of the most intriguing examples of the possibilities of television and film to illuminate and entertain. It is a humane answer to “Reality television.”



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