

*Illustration by David Marsden*

# GILES

*Will Adams sketches an afternoon at home  
with a National Institution*

As any readers of the *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express* will be aware, one of Britain's best-known families is missing. Nothing has been seen of them for two years. To those who care, it is a matter of grave national concern. A husband and wife, the elderly mother of one of them, a frail lady in constant need of medication and a number of young children are simply nowhere to be found. It was therefore decided, in the public interest, that your two intrepid editors should institute a search for these missing persons, and on a crisp September morning we set out on a journey that was to lead us to the depths of the seemingly innocent Suffolk countryside; for it was there that the solution to the mystery was to be found.

'Giles?' said the helpful lady in the village shop. 'Yes, turn left by the pub.' A deep-banked lane led us down to a farmhouse standing amidst neat, trim gardens, and there, to our great relief, we found The Family alive and well and living in temporary seclusion in the still effervescent imagination of the best-known, best-loved and, well, best, British newspaper cartoonist of the century, Carl Giles.

Giles's enforced absence from the daily round of cartoon production is due to a recent operation that has left him rather less mobile than an otherwise extremely active

septuagenarian would like. On top of that, a fall has injured the all-important right hand – but shrugging off Grandma's sulkiness, shunning Vera's self-pity, and twinkling through like Dad personified, Giles is ready to return to the fray for his fiftieth year with the *Daily Express*, a quite remarkable record of achievement.

With him and his wife Joan, still clearly a source of great strength and support, especially in recent years, we basked in the autumn sunshine while butterflies, dragonflies and even a squirrel darted around the garden. And naturally our conversation soon turned to the subject of sausages.

We had now been joined by Lou. Lou Southgate has known Giles for many years, since long before the move to Suffolk. A big, jolly fellow, his friendship – not to mention his strength in manhandling wheelchairs and their occupants in and out of cars for daily excursions – is obviously highly valued by the Gileses. They also share another intimate passion – sausages. Before long, the relative merits of local butchers' products, and those further afield – Lincolnshire, Cumberland – were being avidly debated, and mouths were watering uncontrollably. Yes, even National Institutions eat sausages. This was breaking new ground in investigative journalism.

But we had come to talk about the cartoons

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and their creator, surely? But first, a cup of tea or coffee. And chocolate biscuits. Now here was a subject that surpassed even sausages. Bourbons versus chocolate-covered wholewheat. Meanwhile we tried valiantly to drag the errant conversation back to Giles and his work.

Carl Giles was born on 29 September 1916 at the Angel, Islington, where his father kept a shop. He attended Barnsbury Park School where he was taught by the original of Chalkie, the gaunt, skeletal schoolmaster who is the terroriser, yet eternal victim, of Giles's teeming hoards of minuscule, scruffy schoolchildren. (His portrayal of children in this way, incidentally, was to arouse much harsh criticism from the birth control pioneer, Dr Marie Stopes, who wrote to the *Express* in the late 'forties complaining that the cartoons 'degrade humanity and are very seldom funny,

and their injurious effect is corrosive'. She promptly cancelled her order for the paper. Whose loss this was is self-evident.) Ah, a second plate of chocolate biscuits has arrived. Better eat them quick because they're melting.

Giles left school at the age of 14 and trained as a cartoon animator in London's Wardour Street. By 1935 he was working as an animator for Alexander Korda, the Hungarian emigré who had settled in London in 1930 and was, more than anyone, responsible for the revitalisation of the British film industry in the 'thirties.

In 1937 Giles became the cartoonist for *Reynolds News*. Then, during the war, he produced and animated documentary films for the Ministry of Information; with the likes of E. C. Bentley and Stanley Holloway he somehow managed to give a humorous treatment to dire warnings about sepsis and the like.



*'Be funny if the siren went now, wouldn't it?' (19 August 1945)*

Later, as a war correspondent, he drew cartoons from first-hand experiences in France, Belgium; Holland and Germany. During this time he was invited to visit a Nazi camp for political prisoners. The camp was Belsen. He was also present in the tent on Luneberg Heath for the German surrender, and after almost half a century he still has strident opinions on the attitude of Montgomery and his conduct of the war.

Indeed, Giles's forthright left-wing political and moral views are still as strong as ever, so it may seem something of a paradox that he has worked for so long on one of Britain's most right-wing papers. But he reckons that Beaverbrook felt it was safer to have the enemy under observation in his own camp than preaching to the converted in the *Socialist Worker*.

It was while employed by *Reynolds News* as a relative unknown that Giles's work was first noticed by John Gordon, editor of the *Sunday Express*. According to Gordon, who introduced the first volume of cartoons in 1946, Giles required a considerable amount of persuasion before he would move to the *Express*. Eventually Giles did join Gordon's staff in 1943, but apparently took some while to settle in before the overwhelming public response to his cartoons convinced him, and the proprietors of the *Express*, that a historic partnership had been forged. Regardless of its political slant, Giles saw the *Express* as 'a kind of Palladium, a vast stage that had room for everyone'. And it was on that stage that he would give his finest performances.

Nathaniel Gubbins of the *Sunday Express* wrote the following in his Foreword to the third collection of Giles cartoons in 1949: 'So far as my knowledge of art goes, no cartoonist . . . can depict in black and white such vast forests and mountains, such magnificent churches and noble castles, such squalid backyards, such grim factories, such trees and rivers and – yes – such trams and buses . . . If these gifts were not enough to make his work of permanent value and therefore worthy of inclusion in any library, a Giles book of cartoons is also a day-by-day, week-by-week record of English history as it happens. Look at the cartoon and look at the date and you will find you are living recent history over again.'

Even after just six years with the *Express* and at the age of only 33, Giles had already become the national institution which he has

been for 50 years. His work has transcended merely the capacity to make us laugh – his pen has captured our essential national spirit in a way that has made him quite unique among our 20th-century cartoonists. From the Second World War to the Falklands, from petrol coupons to North Sea oil, from prefabs to tower blocks, he has portrayed life in post-war Britain through the eyes of the common man. It is social history at street level, free of the customary political and academic bias.

Giles sees his cartoons as social satire meant solely to entertain and is very distrustful of attempts to analyse his work. Yet, as a chronicler and interpreter of British history, character and manners he is, in a manner of speaking, the John Betjeman, the Ralph Vaughan Williams, the J. B. Priestley of newspaper cartoonists. He is also more than ready to recognise skill and craftsmanship in others, and to pour scorn and derision on the cartoon hacks, the untalented and, worst of all, the copiers. That famous 'Giles' signature betokens the original – beware of imitations.

But we're drifting from the subject again. Teacups and chocolate biscuits now cleared away, and it's time for a drink. 'What would you like?' 'What have you got?' 'Everything. This place is a pub . . .', smiles Giles, gesticulating towards an enormous bar in the form of half a boat at one end of the house. The Cartoonist's Arms, perhaps.

In 1943 John Gordon described Giles as 'slight, his fair hair is usually extremely untidy . . . he usually wears a pair of wide uncreased baggy trousers and often a leather golfing jacket. . . He loathes town and prefers the quieter sociability of Ipswich. All around that town I am told he is a familiar and well-liked figure.' The same is largely true today – he still boasts a trim figure (he comes from Newmarket jockeying stock) and his fair hair has matured to a rich silver. Not untidy, though – although wheelchair bound and with a blanket over his knees, he cut a dapper figure. To his embarrassment we mused who he reminded us of – David Lean? Oh that's alright – David Lean was a Giles hero, and acquaintance. Indeed, as we talked it became clear that beyond the Giles the cartoonist was Giles the celebrity who in his time had rubbed shoulders with an amazing roll-call of the famous – Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, fellow Suffolk locals, for example. An enormous autographed portrait of Margot Fonteyn hangs in the living room – 'To the

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Giles family – and their creator’.

It was in the 'forties that Carl and Joan Giles turned their back on London and the Fleet Street scene and bought their 280-acre 17th-century Suffolk farm – a great stroke of luck, they both agree – where they have lived ever since. At first it was a pig farm, but housewives' fluctuating tastes forced a change. Today Giles has a good team running the farm for him – in this as in so many other things, it seems that throughout his life he has been singularly fortunate. In Suffolk he has been able to ease the pressure of 50 years of continual production by dealing with Fleet Street at arm's length, and here also he has found a deeper 'Englishness' on which to draw for his work than he could have found in the capital.

Faultless hospitality is apparently another quality enjoyed in the country. The pre-prandials over, inevitably attention turns to the prandials themselves. It appears that we're staying for lunch, and Joan disappears inside to get us 'a sandwich'.

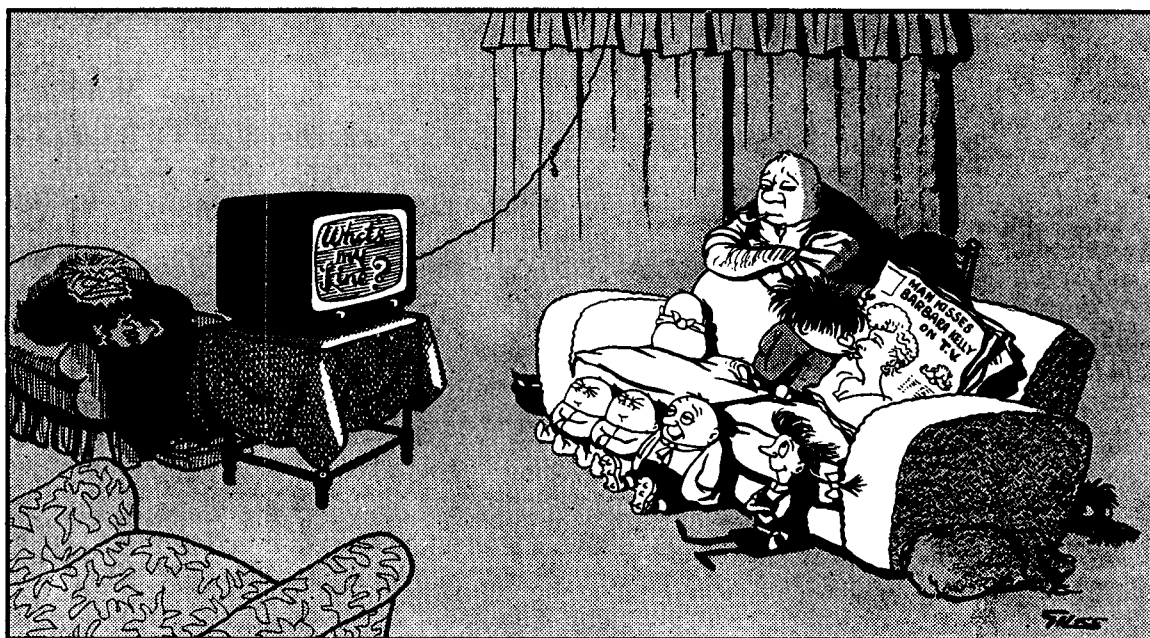
Before his recent operation Giles worked from a studio in Ipswich and originally dispatched his cartoons by a late afternoon train to Liverpool Street. Alas, the rail service became too unreliable, so it now goes by taxi.

The Gileses laugh about the trials and tribulations of finding a railway station in the heart of the Highlands when they were on holiday in the early days – next to impossible today.

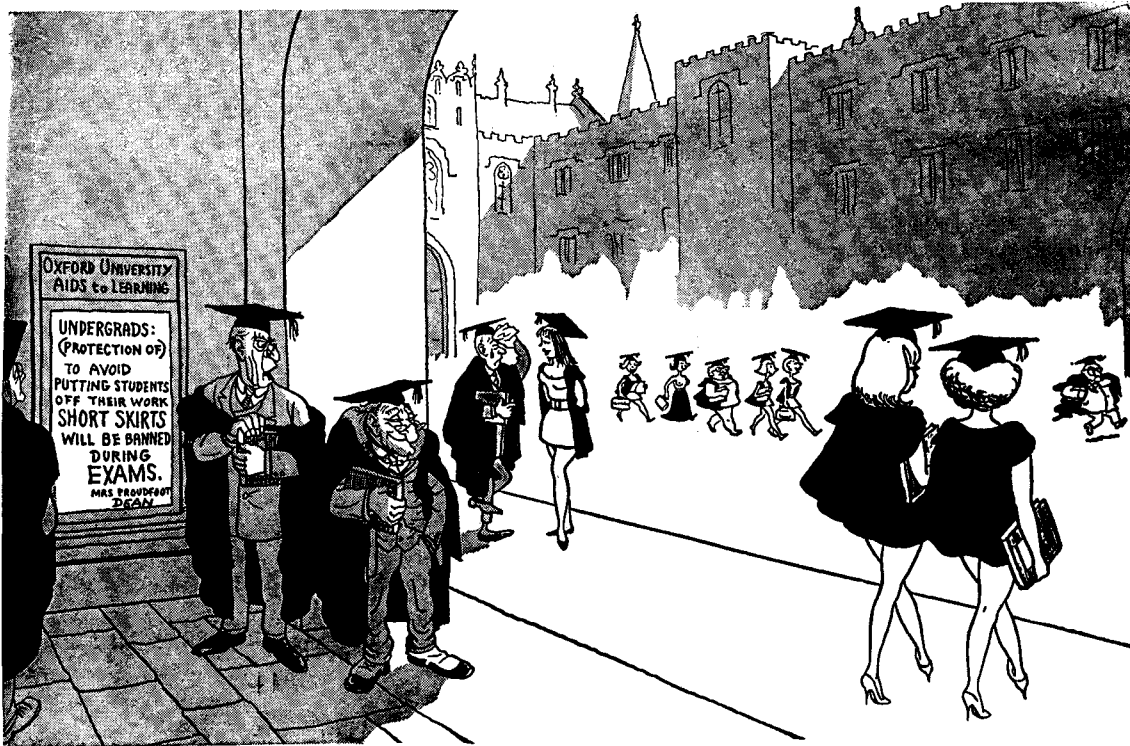
A cartooning day started early when the Gileses read through the day's papers and discussed potential ideas. Then, early in the afternoon, Giles would leave for the studio; three hours later, the cartoon would be finished and on its way to London. For all his dislike of publicity, Giles makes occasional visits to the capital and enthuses over the vista from his favourite window seat in the Savoy Restaurant, on the head of the Thames's great curve, the City to the left, Westminster to the right.

Oh, oh – food again. So let's break for the 'sandwich' – homemade asparagus soup, sandwiches, pork pie, cole slaw, crisps. More drink.

When he has not been drawing, and presumably, eating, Giles has enjoyed a wide range of recreations. In her Foreword to the 1954 edition, Joan said: 'I have five husbands. All equally unpredictable.' They were the cartoonist, the engineer, the designer and builder, the pig-breeder and the car enthusiast. In his large workshop he produced



*'I'd rather see someone try to kiss Gilbert Harding and Gilbert Harding get up and bop him one.'* (1 December 1953)



'Horace! You're purring' (26 May 1966)

wood and iron work and undertook building and alteration work around the farm. He even built himself a vast mobile studio – 36 feet of it by special dispensation from the authorities – and hauled this Leviathan by Land Rover around the country. Apparently he holds the St Ives, Cornwall, record for backing the monster caravan uphill all the way out of the resort in the height of the holiday season, leaving the entire town intact.

Motor racing was another early passion. At one time the *Daily Express* owned Silverstone racing circuit in Northants, and there Giles raced his Jaguar XK120. It still languishes in a garage on the farm. Would he have liked to be a famous racing driver rather than a cartoonist? 'Nooo . . .', he puffs dismissively. Too dangerous.

In the late 1940s the Gileses had a long holiday in the States, where they were universally feted, but strangely not widely published. Perhaps the Giles Englishness doesn't travel as well as the pen that creates it. Certainly for those back home the grafting of The Family on to the immediate post-war American landscape was hilarious. Mum with floral blouse and handbag, Dad in cricket

sweater and pipe, stop by a saloon in the Wilder quarters of the West – buffalo horn over the swing doors, 'best turps 5c', 'no expectorating': 'A pot of tea for three, please.'

We can't keep away from food. Before long we learn of Lou's secret longing for a Diner-crawl across the States, and once more the conversation veers foodwards. As, indeed, do the participants, for it's time for a cup of tea. And fruit cake. And Battenburg. So we move indoors for the next course in this remarkable moveable feast.

There is no doubt that Giles's most famous creation is The Family. 'The Family in Crisis' first appeared as a fill-in when, as a new cartoonist, he ran short of ideas. Their ancestors were the little rotund woman with the flowery hat and the black fur-collared coat and her equally spherical husband in the flat cap, soup-strainer moustache and watch-chain who appeared occasionally between the relatively large number of purely topical wartime cartoons of the early 'forties.

The heyday of The Family was the 'fifties, but they are still to be seen today; despite 40-odd years of disaster and crisis, they remain unscathed and unaged. They have appeared

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in countless different kitchens and sitting-rooms, gardens and backyards, in A-line skirts, flowery frocks, mini-skirts and hot-pants, on steam railways and trolley buses, on the Tube and jet airliners, yet they have always remained, timelessly, The Family, our family.

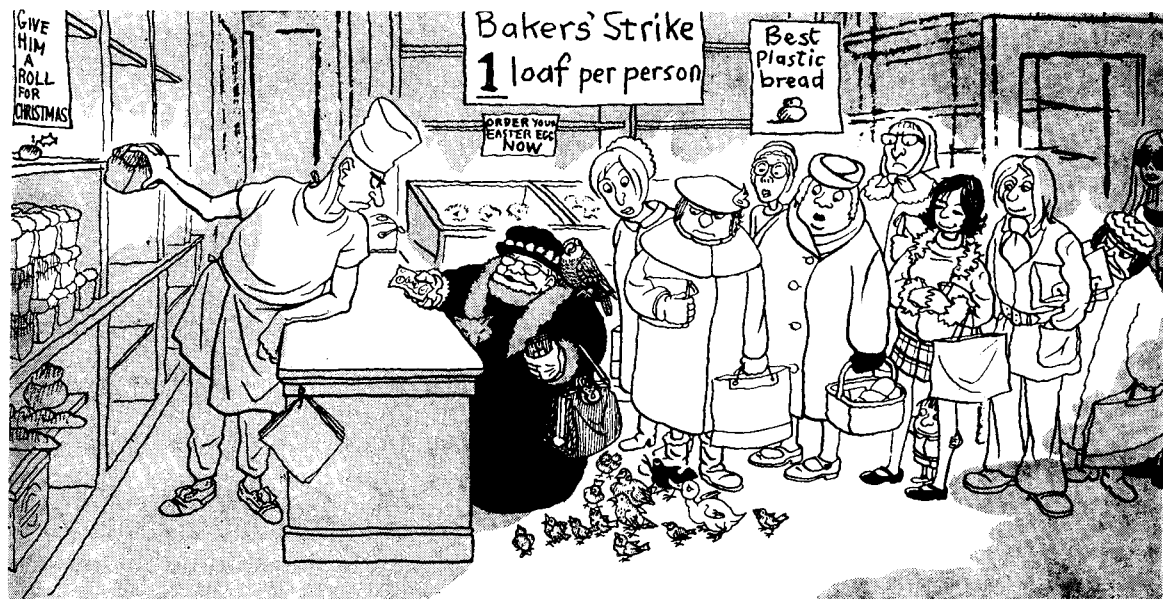
Mother is the cornerstone, strong, domineering, struggling to keep control of her anarchic brood of children who are, whatever the specific circumstances of the cartoon, always on the brink of perpetrating some fresh domestic mayhem. Father is struggling to get off to work or attempting to cope with yet another household task. Poor old Vera agonises over some appalling world crisis seemingly aimed directly at her, with only a carrier-bag of pills to bolster her broomstick frailty. Then there is Grandma, probably the best-known of them all, an amorphous cactus-like antique encased in a vast black overcoat, with squashed grumpy face scowling from beneath her famous bird-and-flowers hat.

The first Giles annual was published in 1946; it was a masterly stroke. Even if you never picked up a copy of the *Express* from one year's end to the next, you could be fairly sure of getting the annual at Christmas, always pitched just at that stocking-filler price. 'This is the first Giles book ever published,' concluded Gordon's Foreword in 1946. 'It is published because his admirers demanded it. It is the

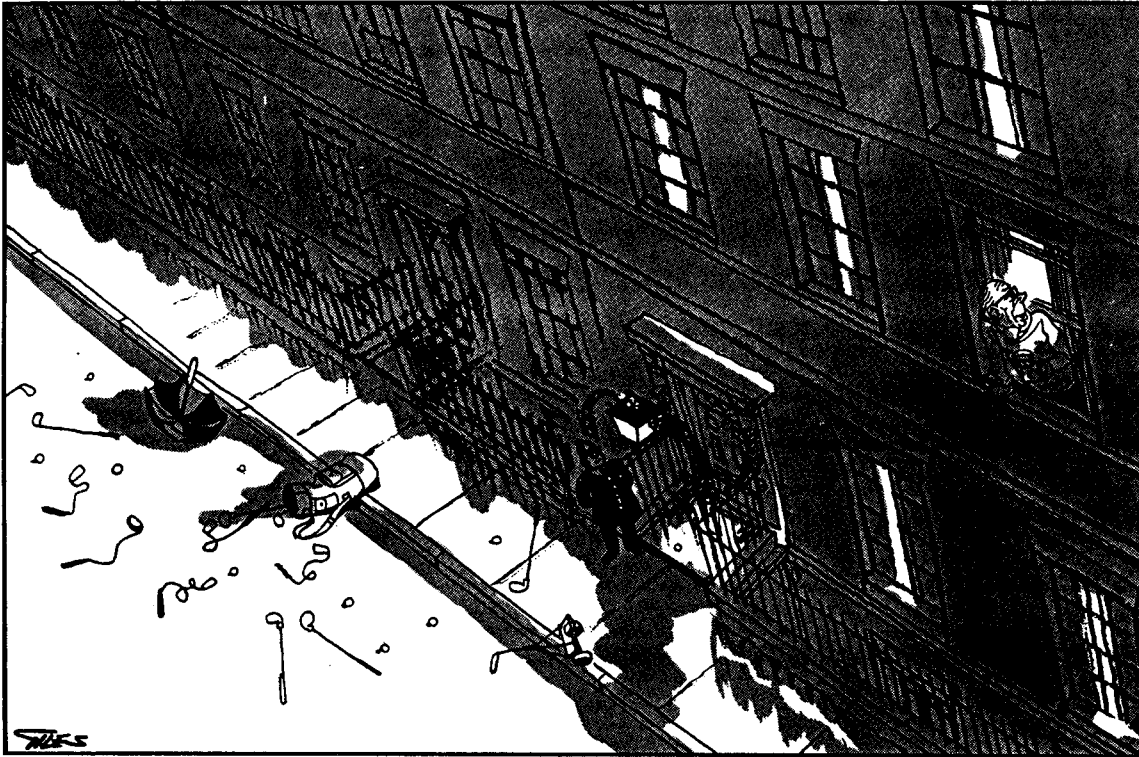
first annual record of the work of a young man who became a national figure in one short year. . . . But I am sure he is only at the beginning of his career.' Astute fellow, Gordon.

Nathaniel Gubbins, in his 1949 Foreword, says: 'My own special delight in Giles, apart from his horrible children, is his draughtsmanship.' It seems that the *Express* was at pains to promote this most important aspect of Giles's genius, and many of the early annuals featured forewords by prominent artists: in 1952 it was Osbert Lancaster, much admired by Giles himself, who introduced the book under the title 'Giles . . . among the Classics?' He was followed in 1956 by Annigoni, no less, who wrote: 'He is such a fine artist, such a fine draughtsman, as well as a funny cartoonist.'

The 1958 annual included words from Vicky and Ronald Searle – the latter right up there in the Giles Pantheon – in company with other 'distinguished Giles enthusiasts' including Stirling Moss, Pat Smythe, Stanley Holloway and Gilbert Harding. Indeed, the list of authors of these introductions is in itself a kind of Who's Who of celebrities of the last 40 years or so – Margot Fonteyn, Bud Flanagan, Adam Faith, Spike Milligan, Malcolm Sargent, Jim Clark, Sean Connery, David Frost, The Two Ronnies, Dave Allen, Mike Yarwood,



**'FIFTEEN, PLEASE!'** (5 December 1974)



*'I know you're a bit niggly this week, Margaret, but I only laid them on your desk for a few seconds.'* (20 November 1986)

Tommy Cooper, Eric Morecambe, Angela Rippon, Terry Wogan, Willie Rushton and many others. In 1983 the Foreword was written by no less a person than Sir John Betjeman, and it is interesting, and sad, to see how many of these people have been outlived by the seemingly immortal Giles. Who decided on the Foreword writer? Giles. 'Did anyone ever turn down the offer?' 'Never.'

In all these Introductions, Giles as artist and draughtsman is the recurrent theme. Draughtsmanship is a word seldom applied in the popular consciousness to a daily newspaper cartoonist's work. Representational reality was, of course, commonplace throughout the late 19th and early 20th century – Sir John Tenniel's work in *Punch*, for instance – but Giles has managed to combine this meticulous reality with an often remarkable economy of line and a most effective use of solid black, rough pencil and charcoal shading, and tint overlays. He also has a masterly and often entertaining way with perspective and proportion, twisting and stretching the dimensions of his composition

to suit his purpose, though never beyond the bounds of tangible realism.

Back in 1947 Arthur Christiansen said, 'Giles does not caricature. He does not fake. He does not invent. He draws real buildings, real pubs, real railway stations. . . .' There are apparently a bank of filing cabinets in the studio meticulously kept by Joan with artwork references filed alphabetically. Get the buttons wrong on a Guardsman's uniform and you're in trouble with the Great British Public. This is why Giles's cartoons are, whatever their absurdities, so *realistic*. He snorts disparagingly at other cartoonists' efforts to represent, for example, railway lines. 'The trains couldn't move an inch on them.'

Opposite Christiansen's Foreword is a perfect example from 2 July 1946. Grandma is hiding in the old air-raid shelter. The rest of the family are peering into the darkness – 'You can come out now, Grandma – they're not going to drop any more bombs for a long time.' It's not a joke, not a belly-laugh – it is the gentle sympathetic humour of a simple contemporary sentiment. (As Ronald Searle



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wrote in 1958, 'he has an instinctive ability to put down what people are thinking.') Its real impact lies in its devastatingly accurate impression of a bleak post-war back garden, empty but for the shelter with a tin bath upended on top and a clothes-line post. Beyond the tall featureless fence are three semis in cold grey silhouette and a single gnarled, pollarded London plane tree. The greyness and austerity of mid-'forties Britain is captured with a directness and economy of line that could never be equalled by a mere photograph.

Throughout the annuals, it is these backgrounds that plant each cartoon firmly in its season, its year and its historical context. Leaf through a few volumes from the 'fifties, for instance, and remember the fashions, the

elegant Wolseley police cars, the spivs, beatniks and teddy boys, *What's My Line*, Len Hutton and so on.

Very few humorists working in any medium can claim the unbroken consistency and maintenance of quality that Giles can. And if we find ourselves drawn to the early work of the 'forties and 'fifties, it is not because it is better, but because the passing of the years has given it an extra dimension, that of a record of English history as it happens.

Carl Giles is looking forward to returning to his drawing-board and his fiftieth year with the *Express*. His 'authorised biography' is about to be published, and independent television has made a documentary. Somehow I don't think Carl Giles OBE can see what all the fuss is about. His immortality was assured long ago.

