THAT'S LIFE

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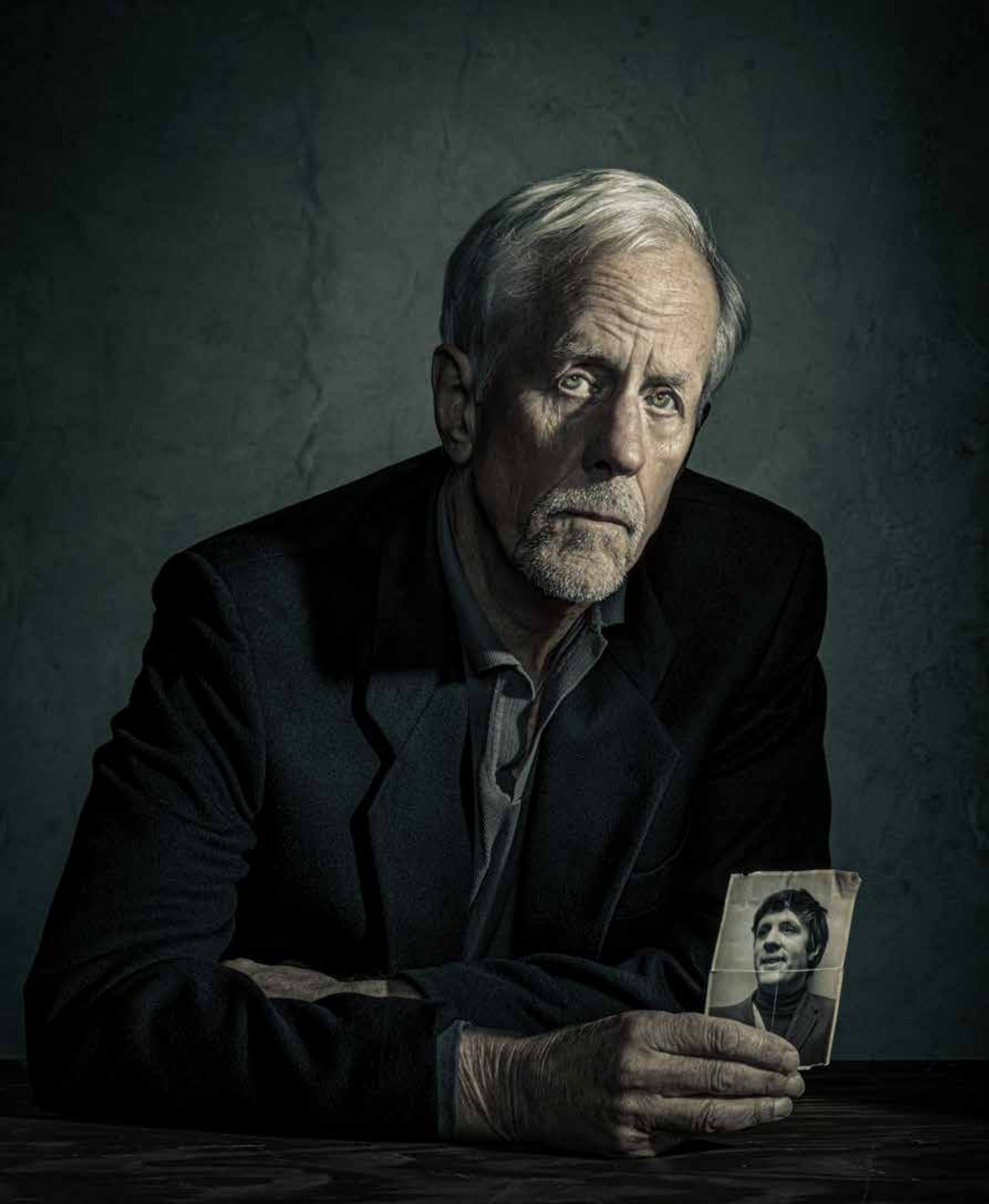
IN 1964, WITH "SEVEN UP!" MICHAEL APTED STUMBLED INTO MAKING WHAT HAS BECOME THE MOST PROFOUND DOCUMENTARY SERIES IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA. FIFTY-FIVE YEARS LATER, THE PROJECT IS REACHING ITS CONCLUSION.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN WINTERS

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ON A BRISK SATURDAY MORNING,

one uncommonly cloudless and bright for late autumn on England's moody North Sea coast, the filmmaker Michael Apted paced a sloping headland of mud and stubble with an air of fretful preoccupation. Though the day's shoot would amount, in the end, to an additional five-minute increment of the documentary project that had intermittently consumed the entirety of his working life, these occasions never ceased to surprise and unnerve him. He had known Jackie, whose arrival was imminent, for 56 years, but her interviews could be volatile, and this one was particularly important, he felt, to get right.

A series of posted warnings along the fraying seaside bluffs, where the stubble field gave abrupt way to the tides below, advertised the dangers of erosion and instability. Apted worried that even a short walk might unnecessarily tax Jackie: She suffered from an arthritic condition that kept her on disability benefits. Though she was now 63 years old, he first met and filmed her when she was 7, and from time to time couldn't help referring to her as one of the children. She was well into adulthood before he learned to stop treating her as a child, and he no longer really thought of her as one, but he had no concise way to refer to a person who existed for him as all ages at once. Nor was there an easy way to describe her view of him. For more than a half century, Apted, now 78, played the role of a recording angel. Every seven years he turned up and asked her to account for her life.

Jackie arrived in a bright red parka and purple-trimmed glasses, colors selected to stand out on camera against the wintry brown of the stubble field and the indifferent gray-green of the sea, and made her way slowly from the parking lot. A cheerful German shepherd bounded ahead, and Apted shook off his reverie to greet the dog with warmth. As Jackie caught up, Apted, still stroking the grateful animal, lifted his face to her and said, "I've met her before."

"No, you haven't," Jackie said, pleased to claim the advantage without delay. Apted looked puzzled. He was probably thinking, Jackie continued, of Lizzie, a family dog of a long-lapsed decade. "You filmed her in '35.' She joined the family photo." Apted shrugged, allowing two dogs separated by 28 years to bleed together in his mind. It was in the nature of his project that time tended to slip the bonds of its ordinary drill. Jackie gave him a big, untidy kiss.

Claire Lewis, Apted's longtime producer and collaborator, issued a brief safety lecture about the cliff. Jackie listened but continued to look at Apted, eager for the chance to score another point.

"You used to be like that, Michael," she said.

"I'm getting old," Apted replied in the restrained baritone that had long narrated her history, "and forgetting things."

Jackie was delighted. "I never thought I'd hear you say that!"

Apted ignored the provocation. The morning's B-roll, he explained, required Jackie, along with a small family entourage and this belated generation of an old familiar dog, to walk downhill from an old lighthouse. A quadcopter drone would begin out over the water, taking in the irregular sweep of the Norfolk coast, and gradually zoom in until her tiny figure assumed recognizable proportions. He asked if Jackie felt well enough to comply.

"I'm all right, Mike," she said. "I just don't want to overdo it."

Apted's crew — a cameraman, George Jesse Turner, and sound engineer, Nick Steer, who have been with him since Jackie was 21; Lewis, who joined when Jackie was 28; and a few young people new to the program — began to set up, and he ambled around the periphery like an extra on his own set, taking a keen interest in the local dogs out for a walk. Apted is tall and narrow and was moving with a slight limp; his face, gaunt with age but rosy from the California sun, has in recent years taken on the grave warmth of his voice. He wore a green cap pulled down like a falcon's hood, as if to conceal the challenge of his gaze. He is dryly funny, and occasionally he returned to the busy group to deliver a droll comment on the technological advances they'd witnessed since the early days of 16-mm handhelds and 12-inch television screens. Everyone else bellowed to be heard over the cold sea wind, but Apted's own contributions never rose above the volume of a confident voice-over. When it was time, he gave a rusty action whistle. After a few takes, the young drone operator, new to the production, proposed one more, but Turner said that Jackie had already walked too far.

An hour later, the group reassembled a short distance up the coast at a pub called the Poachers Pocket. Jackie, accustomed since adolescence to location shoots, explained to the young bartender that they were there for a film project called the "Up" series — not the cartoon movie "Up," she hastened to clarify, but a documentary. (The drone operator, much closer in age to the bartender than to Jackie, piped up to say that the cartoon movie was also worth seeing.) In 1963, as a schoolgirl in London's working-class East End, she was interviewed for a television special called "Seven Up!" In late 1970, she appeared in a follow-up, "Seven Plus Seven," and since then Apted and his crew have returned with biblical clockwork. The footage they were shooting at the pub — a conversation between Jackie and her older sister Ray — would appear in "63 Up," the ninth installment in the series.

The bartender was taken aback. "So you started this when you were 7 years old? How did you get onto it, then?"

"Because I didn't shut up," Jackie said. "They asked the school to recommend children that wouldn't be intimidated by the camera — there's 14 of us — and I wouldn't shut up." Jackie, who has developed a proprietary relationship to the program, was momentarily distracted by the presence of a production assistant's coat in the background. "Whose coat is this? You don't want it in the shot!"

Apted arrived and Jackie and her sister joined him in the autumn sun on a terrace overlooking the sea. Visible beneath the shallow waves were the skeletal remains of a seaside village that was submerged, in 1953, by a tidal surge. The play of the submarine light made the old walls ripple.

"The early ones are easy to remember," Jackie said. "There were certain milestones — the birth of the kids."

"Now," Apted replied, "it all gets muddled up." Jackie nodded. The three of them debated whether a different pub location had appeared in "35 Up" or "42 Up."

Jackie looked to her sister for a reference point. They agreed that they'd already lost their mum.

After a pause, Jackie moved closer to Michael and spoke more quietly. "Next week, that'll be a strange one." When Jackie was 7, Apted interviewed her along with two of her East End schoolmates, Sue and Lynn, and each successive episode included a segment in which he consulted the three of them together, always arranged in the same configuration. In the years since "56 Up," Lynn had died. She was the first child they lost. The following week, Apted planned to film Jackie and Sue in Lynn's absence. "There used to be three of us," she continued, trailing off. "But life goes on … or it doesn't."

Right: BritBox. Opening pages: Photo of young Apted from ITV/Shutterstock; Helen Robertson (grooming).

Apted meandered inside, and Lewis, his producer, came to fetch Jackie.

"Ready, girls?" she asked. Jackie nodded and sat down. "I'm ready, Mike. Are you?"

Apted assumed the sportive tone he reserves for expressions of total sincerity. "I live for this moment every seven years!"

To spend time with a child is to dwell under the terms of an uneasy truce between the possibility of the present and the inevitability of the future. Our deepest hope for the children we love is that they will enjoy the liberties of an open-ended destiny, that their desires will be given the free play they deserve, that the circumstances of their birth and upbringing will be felt as opportunities rather than encumbrances; our greatest fear is that they will feel thwarted by forces beyond their control. At the same time, we can't help poring over their faces and gestures for any signals of eventuality — the trace hints and betrayals of what will emerge in time as their character, their plot, their fate. And what we project forward for the children in our midst can rarely be disentangled from what we project backward for ourselves.

These are the tensions that have animated and shaped the "Up" programs on their way to becoming the longest-running documentary film series of all time. The narrator of 1964's "Seven Up!" reminds the viewer that "the shop steward and the executive of the year 2000 are now 7 years old," as the boys and girls arrayed before us in grainy black and white chase each other around during a special outing at the zoo. This, the episode concludes, has been a glimpse of Britain's future.

The first film was conceived as a special one-off episode of a program called "World in Action." The mid-1950s saw an end to the BBC's monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, and "World in Action" became the flagship current-affairs program of a Manchester-based commercial upstart called Granada Television. The show was run by a 30-something Australian émigré named Tim Hewat, a former editor of the northern Daily Express and an instrumental figure in the expansion of broadsheet vigor to television. As an expat, Hewat found absurd the idea that postwar Britain had at last begun to dismantle the rigid class determinations that striated the country for centuries, and he was looking for a novel way to expose the lie of the new egalitarianism.

1964: "SEVEN UP!" PARTICIPANTS, FROM LEFT, JACKIE, LYNN AND SUE.



Hewat was taken with the saying, "Give me a child until he is 7 and I will give you the man," and proposed the idea for "Seven Up!" As one researcher remembered it, Hewat imagined an aerial shot of 20 7-year-olds subjected by voice-over to merciless prophecy: " 'Five are going to be winners (zoom in), and 15 are going to be losers (zoom in). Now we're going to show you why.' " Years later, the researcher said, "we supposed artists nodded condescendingly at this barbarian tabloid conceit and then went out and made a film which, though not in those words, said exactly that."

Apted, 22 and a fresh graduate of Granada's trainee program, was enlisted as a researcher. His background made him an obvious choice. Apted's mother was a Blitz evacuee, and he was born in the countryside northwest of London in 1941. His family returned in peacetime to Ilford, a middle-class town east of the city proper. His father worked as a surveyor for a fire-insurance company, and his mother brought up the children — Apted, a brother and a sister who was adopted after a string of miscarriages. He has described his mother as "a kind of tragic figure," a very bright woman who, as the youngest of six siblings, was denied the educational foundation for a career. His father went to good schools but never attended university. Apted's parents, in the hope that their children would reach the solid ranks of the respectable middle class, put what little money they had into education, and from age 10 he commuted on the underground to the prestigious City of London School.

The school's location afforded Apted regular exposure to the theater and the cinema, and he describes his experience, at 15, of seeing Ingmar Bergman's "Wild Strawberries" as his "road to Damascus" moment. Though he loved the French New Wave and the Italian Neorealists — films that had the "gravitas and seriousness of a book" — he was equally drawn to popular entertainments, musicals and comedies on the radio as well as follies and vulgar "end of pier" seaside attractions.

His schooling proceeded along the lines his parents envisioned. His Cambridge interview, he told me, consisted chiefly of questions about rugby. As a fullback, he could kick with both feet and was given a place at Downing College to read history. His era at Cambridge was one of great cultural ferment, and he joined in the flourishing theatrical activity. John Cleese was part of his cohort, and he worked on productions with Trevor Nunn, Mike Newell and Stephen Frears. He knew he wanted to direct but couldn't imagine how to make a creditable career of it and switched from history to law, a subject that placated his parents and struck him as a way to put his socialist commitments to remunerative use.

Apted finished his time at university just as commercial television was beginning to take off in Britain. Despite Granada's populist grandstanding, Apted recalls, the company's trainee program drew exclusively from Oxford and Cambridge. His first real job at the company, as an assistant to the Canadian director Paul Almond, was on "Seven Up!" Almond had little knowledge of the British educational system, so it fell to Apted and another researcher to procure a mix of children. Over just six weeks, they visited schools all over the country, asking teachers to select from their charges a few candidates unlikely to be camera-shy, and then proceeded by instinct. It was more economical, both logistically and narratively, to gather children in groups. Among the 20 initially chosen, they took three patrician boys from a rarefied pre-preparatory school in Kensington; three girls and a boy from the working-class districts in London's East End; two middle-class boys from a Liverpool suburb; and two boys from a charity home. The roster was filled out with the son of a colonial adventurer at a military-inflected boarding school and two representatives of rural England — a well-bred daughter of a wealthy landowner and a dreamy little boy from an isolated farm in the Yorkshire Dales.

Over the following few weeks, the children were filmed as they went about their disparate activities — schoolyard fights for the working classes, ballet lessons and the performance of "Waltzing Matilda" in Latin for those to the



1978: "21 UP," FROM LEFT, BRUCE, JOHN, PETER, ANDREW, JACKIE, LYNN, NEIL (BACK), TONY (FRONT), CHARLES, SUE, SYMON, PAUL, SUZY AND NICK.

manner born — and then were brought together for a "very special day in London," an outing that included a party and a trip to the zoo, where one of the posh boys tries in vain to get his social inferiors to stop throwing things at a polar bear. The day ends at a grim, hazardous-looking pit of an "adventure" playground, where the children "could do just what they liked." ("Those from the children's home," the narrator observes, "set about building a house.")

Almond, eager to create a work of beauty and originality, instructed the cameraman to run after the children at eye level. Apted contributed to the seated interviews, with leading questions designed to elicit maximally contrastive answers. Where the posh pre-preparatory boys know exactly how their educational careers will unfold — "I'm going to Charterhouse," Andrew says, "and after that Trinity Hall, Cambridge" — Paul from the charity home plaintively asks, "What does university mean?" The most memorable sections, however, are those in which the children act like children. Jug-eared little Bruce, subject to the punitive discipline of a remote boarding school, says, "My heart's desire is to see my daddy, who is 6,000 miles away." Here's befuddled little Paul of the charity home, on marriage: "Say you had a wife, and say you had to eat what they cooked you, and say I don't like greens — well, I don't — and say she says, 'You have to eat what you get,' so I don't like greens, say, she gives me greens and — and that's it."

"Seven Up!" aired on May 5, 1964. "It was one of those ideas," Apted wrote later, "that sounded O.K. when you talked about it, but when you actually saw it, it was remarkable." It landed like a grenade. "That first one," Apted told me, "was extremely successful. It was the truth of the class system out of the mouths of babes, and the whole country was shocked — people were just gobsmacked by the rifts in English society on celluloid."

The program had only ever been viewed as a one-off, and Apted went on to other things. His break into drama came a few years later. His friend Mike Newell was going on holiday, and Apted asked Granada management if he could take over a few episodes of the wildly popular soap opera "Coronation Street," which Newell directed. In 1970, he was working on a comedy series called "The Lovers" when Denis Forman, a legend of British television and film, approached him in the company canteen. In a companion book to "35 Up," Apted remembers it as an offhand exchange: "'It's nearly seven years since 'Seven Up!' he said. 'Wouldn't it be a nice idea to go and see how the children are doing now?' I said that I thought it might, so as casually as that I re-embarked on a project that has engaged my entire working life."

By the time "42 Up" appeared, in 1998, Andrew Sarris could speak for most critics when he called it, in The Observer, "clearly the most remarkable nonfiction film project in the history of the medium and officially the most temporally ambitious." Roger Ebert called the series "the noblest project in cinema history." (The first eight installments can be seen on the BritBox streaming service, though a binge-watch, with its superabundance of life, might induce viewer vertigo; it is best consumed as intended, at seven-year intervals.) But the "Up" films, which Apted himself calls "the program,"

Left: BritBox. Right: ITV/Shutterstock.



1984: "28 UP," MICHAEL APTED (SEATED) WITH JACKIE, LYNN AND SUE.

are among other things about our halting steps to maturity, and from the moment Apted resumed work on it, when the children were 14, it took more than a decade for the project to find its way.

Apted has described "Seven Plus Seven" as the most painful one to film, and it is perhaps also the most difficult to watch. The blameless incandescence of the 7-year-olds has given way to cringing self-consciousness. Very few of them look directly at the camera, instead peering truculently at the ground or blandly off into the middle distance. The ephemera of social differentiation that marked the first installment — posh Andrew's announcement that he reads The Financial Times to check his shares (except on Mondays, because markets are closed on weekends); the eagerness of Tony, the East End's "cheeky chappie" and jockey manqué, to court schoolyard scraps — are no longer worn as lightly. John, in three-piece tweed, describes himself as "a bit more reactionary than most," and is seen strolling the courtyard of Westminster School with lordly assurance. The posh boys generally bemoan worker strikes; the East Enders generally support them. The installment is, if anything, even more programmatic than its predecessor, where the milk-tooth winsomeness of the children held class-grooved destiny in abeyance.

It couldn't have been obvious at the time the program first aired, on Dec. 15, 1970, but "Seven Plus Seven" contains a few premonitions of what the series will ultimately become. The first is the tendency of even a diffident, restive 14-year-old to criticize the premise of the program itself. For all their adolescent confusion, the film's subjects seem to understand that they've been pressed into service to settle an impersonal political score. Suzy, the child of rural privilege, wonders aloud if the whole thing wasn't "just ridiculous." The posh boys reject the way they were portrayed at 7, though at least one of them worried less about his snobbery and more about an error; he'd said "Trinity Hall, Cambridge," when he'd meant "Trinity College, Cambridge."

The other aspect of "Seven Plus Seven" that intrudes uneasily on the program's stated aim are the oblique confessions of the human face. At 7, Neil was a heartbreakingly endearing, bushy-tailed youngster from Liverpool who wanted to be an astronaut or a motor-coach driver; at 14, his bright lantern eyes have gone red-rimmed and panicky. Though he remains on what appears to be an upwardly mobile track — he's seen playing chess — it's clear that, issues of social class aside, he's showing signs of psychological strain. Bruce, on the other hand, who seemed so timid and defenseless at 7, has blossomed into a ruddy, flaxen-curled and entirely prepossessing teenager. Apted was learning to focus "more and more on the close-up at the expense of action and movement," he later wrote. "I felt that watching the aging of people's faces was going to be my most dramatic visual card and central to the essence of the series."

Whatever lessons lurked there, Apted's inclination for "21 Up," which aired on May 9, 1977, was to double-down on the show's early conviction. The children had reached what he called "gamecock maturity," and the age difference between them — Apted was then 35 — had narrowed to

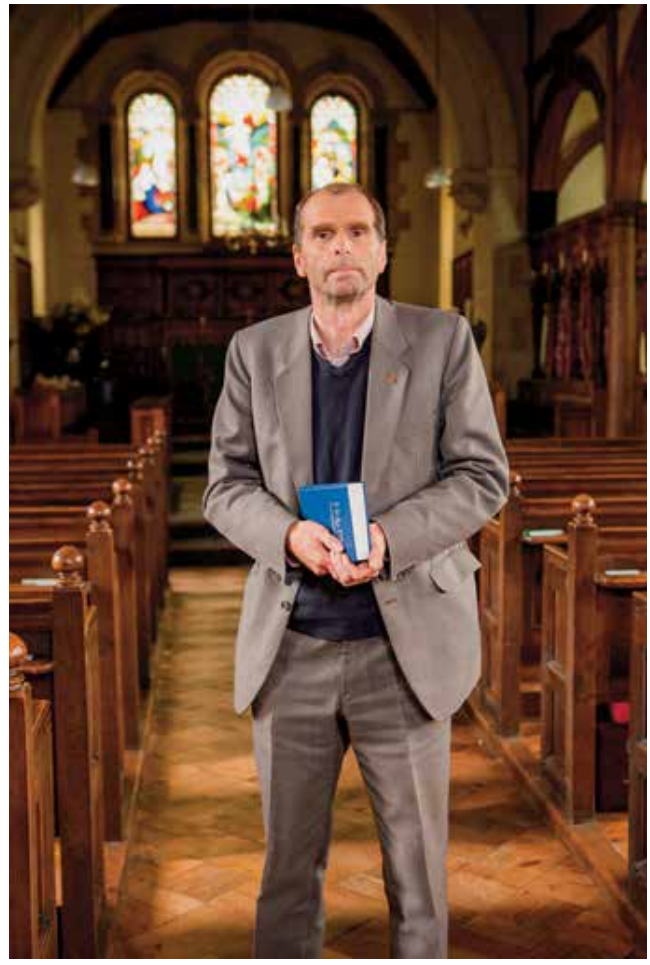
the extent that he could begin to talk to them as peers. His questions are more pointed, his assumptions more overweening, his tone one of knuckle-rapping authority. Apted has conceded that his sensibility might be that of an "English middle-class neurotic," a phrase he uses not to describe an individual pathology but a sociological bias. Apted has been frank about the problems with the aleatory, impulsive nature of the original 1964 casting: only four were women; only one represented an ethnic minority; and all but two were drawn from the relative extremes of the class divide. This last decision was made in part because it provided for more sensational television and in part because the filmmakers took their own upwardly mobile middle-class perspective, values and anxieties for granted. If the manifest motivation for the exercise from the beginning was a strong suspicion that England's class distinctions remained insuperable, there was an equally important if latent hope that the broadening out of the middle-class emphasis on education, abstemiousness, modesty and discipline might confound the base perpetuation of class difference.

The tone of "21 Up" is thus one of mild and slightly smug disapproval — of the haughtiness and complacency Apted finds at one end of the spectrum and the passivity and complacency he finds at the other. Andrew has, as envisioned, gone to Charterhouse and then Trinity College, Cambridge. John, the reactionary, is shown in a Prince of Wales suit, then beagling for hares with his Oxford chums; he is well aware of his role in the ensemble and resents Apted on camera for the implication that his successes are due not to hard work but to some "indestructible birthright." Bruce is at Oxford, studying mathematics with his tutor. Two of the three East End girls are married. After Apted asks Jackie whether it was a good idea to settle down so early, she hangs her head in what looks like shame — and which is, four installments later, revealed to have been fury. When things haven't worked out for a child, Apted can scarcely conceal his disappointment. Neil, having failed to secure a place at Oxford, has dropped out of university after one term at Aberdeen and is living in a London squat. Tony, the cheeky chappie seen training at Tommy Gosling's stable at Epsom, has abandoned his aspiration to become a jockey and is running numbers for bookies at the greyhound track. Apted encourages Tony to take him on a tour of East London's criminal landmarks, with the obvious expectation that by 28, Tony will be in one of Her Majesty's prisons.

The pivotal interim for the show — what turned a gripping if occasionally heavy-handed quasi-sociological experiment into one of the greatest works of art of our time — was the period between "21 Up" and "28 Up." Several factors contributed to the transformation. In 1979, Apted, having directed a few successful films, moved to Hollywood to make "Coal Miner's Daughter," a Loretta Lynn biopic that earned seven Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, and a Best Actress win for Sissy Spacek. He had finally proved that popular entertainment was a real and serious job, one that could combine his political and his humanistic interests, and he was able to relax his neurotic grip on social issues. His family moved from London to settle with him in California, but the minute they arrived he was off to Europe to shoot "Gorky Park," now in demand as a talented director on his way up.

As the interviews for "28 Up" approached, the project picked up a new researcher, Claire Lewis. Lewis discovered that nobody from the company, including Apted, had bothered to keep track of the participants over the preceding six years, and several participants seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth. "Finding Neil, who was completely missing, took three months," Lewis once commented. "I literally had to try and do what the police do when you're looking for a missing person." She found him in North Wales, in a caravan in the middle of a field.

Lewis understood that the program stood no long-term chance of survival without deliberate reinforcement of the personal bonds that held it together. Apted was happy to drop his Hollywood work every seven years to descend once more into his participants' lives, even if it meant forgoing more lucrative feature jobs, but he was too busy to devote much energy to interim upkeep. He also just didn't think it was fair. The kinds of questions he asked them amounted to an existential audit, one that few among us could ever face with equanimity, and even once in seven years was nearly unendurable. Lewis understood that not only a softer touch was needed but also a more regular one.



2019: "63 UP," NEIL.

Apted's awakening humility found formal expression in the editing room. The first three programs were crosscut along thematic lines with sections about class, education or politics. Now, in part because the participants' archival back stories had grown to unwieldy dimensions, the material could only be tamed if each individual were given his or her own chapter. The final cut felt much less abstract and much more personal.

Even Apted didn't quite realize how the program had transfigured itself until American audiences were introduced to the series for the first time, with a theatrical premiere in 1985. The reception was extremely enthusiastic; Sarris, in The Village Voice, wrote, "The results are both staggering and chastening on so many levels that the entire enterprise may require years of amplification and analysis before we can even begin to answer all the perplexing questions it raises." Apted reckoned that the series was too English to appeal to a wider audience. "But I was wrong," he wrote in 2000. "People did respond to it, and not only here but all over the world. And then I had an epiphany: I realized for the first time, after 20 years on the project, that I really hadn't made a political film at all. What I had seen as a significant statement about the English class system was in fact a humanistic document about the real issues of life."

Apted does not rehearse his interviews and prefers to restrict all prefatory conversation to his favorite low-stakes subjects: dogs and sports. His

Photograph from ITV/Shutterstock

handwritten shooting notes are a blunt instrument: "To Ask All: Happiest; saddest; crucial decisive moments; heroes; proud of; worries; show me a child until he is 7; future; has life between a success or failure." He does, however, reconnoiter with Lewis, who reminds him which topics tend to be profitable and which are touchy or, worse, boring. Before Jackie's formal interview, which was set to take place in her sister's living room, Apted and Lewis conferred in the white crew van. They began by going over some basic background — questions about her family and her health — and quickly got to the crux of their expectations for the hearing.

"I think you should say to her," Lewis said, " 'O.K., what I want to talk to you now about is that you've been quite angry at me over the years. Can you tell me why?' You know, 'You had a go at me in "49 Up," you wouldn't talk to me in "35 Up," why was it?' " Jackie's insurrection in "49" remains one of the most arresting and significant moments in the entirety of the program. After decades of chafing at his authorial control, she at last summons the courage to chasten him. When Apted asked how he had failed her, Jackie replied: "The last one was very much based on the sympathy and the illness that I've got and what I may or may not be able to do. It should have been about what I *can* do, what I *am* doing, what I *will* do." Jackie had since got over her sense of injury, in no small part because Apted included her rebellion in the final film, but Lewis thought that some things had been left unsaid. "You need to try and find out," Lewis continued, "what made her so cross — remembering that it was your comments at 21."

"Which were they?" Apted asked mildly.

"When you said to her, 'Have you had enough relationships with men before you got married?' and I think she thought you meant how many men have you slept with, and I know you didn't — "

"No."

"But I think that's what she thought, and she was insulted — "

"And what was I asking?"

"And for the rest of that interview she stared at the floor, wouldn't look at you and wouldn't speak to you."

"Yeah, right." Apted seemed to recall the contretemps through a light fog.

Lewis reminded Apted that Jackie had expressed a desire to complete her education. "And she hasn't gone back to school, she hasn't done anything that she really wanted to do. So in a way her story is one of underachievement and of dreams. She's a very intelligent woman, and she's very brave, and I think what we need to try and get out of her is why, when everything is going so wrong all around her, how does she manage to stay so strong? Because she does."

"Mm-hm."

Act 3 of the interview, as they planned it, would return to the program's original conceit. "Give me a child until he is 7" — is there any truth in that? Is there still social class in Britain and, if so, what continuing effects does it have? "And I think," Lewis concluded, "you need to add, 'Has she any fears for her grandchildren?' For the world and her grandchildren, because she's now got five grandchildren — it's looking forward."

There was a long pause.

"It never goes the way you expected," Apted said.

"Of course it doesn't. It's not a script, is it? It's merely a theme, merely an idea, and anyway I hope she'll just do something unexpected, which will be lovely."

Inside, he took a seat perhaps three feet away from Jackie, off to the side of the camera in a chair that Jackie had labeled "Director Apted." Apted began the interview with some warm-up questions about where they were, why her sister became so important to her and how things stood at her home in Scotland.

"What," Apted then asked, "have the big changes been since we sat down together?"

"Oh, God," Jackie said, "here comes the horrible part." Her eyes filled with tears. In "56 Up," she was grief-stricken at the death of her former partner, Ian. The intervening years brought more pain: first the loss of Ian's mother, Liz, with whom Jackie had been very close, and then the loss of her beloved father. "That was so hard — I was 30 years old when I lost my mum, and my dad was my rock." Apted tried to steer her away from the agony of her bereavement and into the fortification of her anger with the state bureaucracy, but Jackie returned to Ian's untimely death. Her children had been devastated; Ian's mother, in the short time left to her, never recovered.

"Well, you know that," Jackie said, in an exchange that Apted, keen to leave himself out of the program, would not share with his viewers. His eldest son, the Hollywood sound editor Paul Apted, was born three years after the first program was broadcast, and died of colon cancer, at 47, two years after the previous one. Many of the children sent him notes of condolence. "You know what it's like."

Apted's voice was quiet as a shaken leaf. "Horrible."

There is no way to describe the arc of the program without making it sound like an incidental soap opera of our short and ordinary days. Tony becomes a cabby, fails as a publican, confesses his marital infidelity on camera, buys a home in London's outskirts, adds a vacation property in Spain, raises his granddaughter when his own daughter proves unable, tries and fails to open a sports pub, sells his home in Spain after the financial crisis and through it all talks about the celebrities he has driven in his taxi. John, one of the posh boys, drops out of the show before "28" and only returns at "35" on the condition that he can draw attention to the charity work he does in Bulgaria; he never makes it to Parliament, to his chagrin, but he wears the wig and the silk as a Queen's Counsel. He never has children. (John, who declares in "35 Up" that the show feels like a "little pill of poison" injected into his veins, will not speak to Apted on camera; Lewis has conducted the interviews since 1991.) Bruce, who once dreamed of missionary work, teaches immigrant children in the East End — it's the same school Tony attended, as it turns out, after the neighborhood's great demographic shift — before marrying late, having two boys and abandoning the ideals of his youth to serve at an elite school that was founded in the year 948. They gain lined faces, put on weight, lose parents.

The original political aims of the series weren't abandoned so much as rendered implicit. Apted experimented with various timely inquiries over the years — he once asked the participants about the death of Princess Diana — but the material never worked and he threw it out. Class, of course, never goes away. Though there is indeed some social mobility, the elites are running the country and the nonelites, while mostly comfortable, are not. In 2005, with the release of "49 Up," the British journalist Jonathan Freedland wrote, "It seems Granada's original premise — that background determines fate — has held up depressingly well." The nature of the class system, however, had changed since the Thatcherite revolution of the early 1980s. As the British social historian Joe Moran noted, in 2002, the series "did not foresee the decline of the British economy's manufacturing base, the fragmentation of the working class, the rising number of white-collar jobs and Thatcherism's destruction of union power." It also didn't foresee the expansion of middle-class consumerism or the rise of the predatory gig economy.

Apted might not have anticipated these things, but they nevertheless find expression as the delimiting conditions of the participants' lives. If in the early installments he attempted to recruit individual biography to dramatize socioeconomic history, the program's attention is ultimately drawn to an even more profound dynamic: the interplay of self and environment. The narrative center of gravity of the "Up" films hovers somewhere between the stiff-necked documentarian and the unruly subjects to whom he is yoked. Apted, like a social scientist, emphasizes the role of big, obstinate forces; his participants almost invariably take the opposing side of agency and self-determination. What we get, as the show goes on, is an ever-fuller picture of how particular individuals at times shrink to inhabit the givens of an inheritance and at times spill over the sides of those constraints. What emerges are the countervailing qualities of structure and dignity.

The program is able to generate this surfeit of meaning in part through the frictional trajectory of its participants' relationship with Apted himself — as both an individual and as a sort of imago, a figure of fraught authority.

Apted has been candid about the odd, transactional nature of the exercise. The children retain an enormous amount of power over him. Many of them have made no secret of the fact that they wish they'd never been chosen; they endure it only out of loyalty. Which is not to say that they aren't happy to exploit Apted's vulnerability. Peter, who dropped out after the right-wing media tarred him for the vehement anti-Thatcherite politics he expressed in "28 Up," was only coaxed to return when Apted agreed to help him promote his band. Still, the negotiations could be extremely difficult and often drove Apted to the end of his tether. He spent several "ludicrous" months trying to get Suzy to participate in "63 Up" — in which, among other ruses, he used other people's phones to call so she wouldn't know it was him — and she nevertheless bowed out, to his enduring peevishness.

When they have agreed to continue, Apted nevertheless has needed to remain cautious; he gets right up to the line of the unacceptable without crossing it. His perennial gambits, as he once acknowledged to an interviewer, are "Why?" and "What do you mean?" He recognizes that "why" is an aggressive question, yet he is perfectly happy to ask it and then sit in silence, to the point of sadism. "I never want to take advantage of them or be too soft on them," he told me. "With people like Neil, who are very bright but very vulnerable, you don't want them to think you're being too judgmental." Still, he can be frontal to an astonishing degree. At the end of his interview with Neil in "63 Up," Apted risks asking what Neil makes of the maxim, which in Neil's case would have predicted something other than a life of free-fall.

"At 7 and 14," Apted says, "everybody was in love with you. . . . "

Neil cuts him off, saying, "And now nobody speaks to me."

Apted thought that was marvelous.

Over their three hours together, Jackie was alternately furious, despondent, cheerful, horrified, frustrated, disbelieving and amused. Every half an hour they would break, and Lewis would come to Apted's corner like a boxer's cut man. Eventually they got around to the material Apted and Lewis discussed in the van. Jackie conceded that something of the core of her character had been captured at 7, though what life would dole out to that child could not of course be anticipated with clarity. Apted pushed her.

"This is an odd question for you," Apted began. "I mean, we all think you're a very, very bright, very talented woman — I mean, could you have done more, do you think?"

"Yes, I should have done more. I should have done more. But the trouble is, when you're 18, 20, 22, you think you know it all and you've done it all — or I did, let's put it that way, but by the time you reach 35 you're like, 'Oh, dear, I didn't know anything.' But by then I had my children, so I had to concentrate on my children. I was going to say, 'By the time they grew up and left home,' but they haven't!"

"We've talked about relationships," Apted said, "but one we haven't talked about is you and me — "

Jackie giggled, a sound that has not changed since she was 7.

" — which was a big part of our lives in a way, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, of course it is," Jackie said.

"What was that about? What's your version of it?"

"Are you talking specifics?" Jackie asked. "You're talking about '49'?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Jackie collected herself for a moment. "Now I appreciate," she said, "that when we started at 7 most women were in the kitchen or were bringing up children, there weren't many career women and those there were were frowned upon, but when we hit 21 I really thought you'd have had a better idea of how the world worked, shall I say?"

It wasn't just about how many men Jackie had or hadn't slept with. "I just didn't feel that you had any idea of the changing role of women in the U.K. at that point," she said. "That sounds awfully dismissive, but it was how I felt," she went on. "I knew you knew you didn't have enough women in it, and that's why you introduced Debbie and some of the other wives, but you still asked us the most mundane, domestic questions, and I really wanted to go, 'Rrrrrr.' So by '49' I actually thought, You know what? No more. I'm not having this anymore." This part was included in the film, in slightly shorter form, but the following exchange was not.

"I went to a boys' school and all that sort of stuff," Apted replied, "so I never saw the lives of a lot of women, girls and whatever, so you're probably right, I was a bit. . . . " Apted seemed to lose his train of thought.

Jackie laughed and rescued him. "I understand that," she said, "and that's why I'm saying. . . . I wanted to say what I wanted to say but that would never affect our relationship. I know if I picked up the phone and said, 'Michael, I need help,' you would be there." Jackie's voice began to catch, and her eyes shone. "You would say to me, 'Where, when and how?' and if it was humanly possible you would help me, I know that. I know you care about me, and I care about you, but that didn't stop me having to have a go at you. Well, we're a family, families fall out, families have arguments, but we are a family."

Jackie stopped, unsure if she had it in her to say out loud the thing that was plainly on the mind of every person in that room. Apted was frail and prone to falls; he regularly misplaced his personal items; he could often enough recall the past with great detail but sought frequent clarification of where he was supposed to go and why. Apted, she feared, would not be well enough to make a movie in seven years' time. The likelihood there would ever be a "70 Up" was vanishing.

"And this is one of the reasons, and I'll tell you this now, it's one of the reasons there'll never be another program for me." Her voice broke. Apted himself was not in tears; everyone else in the room was either openly crying or seemed to be struggling for composure. "This is me, I'm done. Because I'm not having somebody else sitting in that chair and somebody else sitting behind the cameras. I wouldn't be able to trust them the way I trust all of you."

At a recent celebration of Apted's achievement, the filmmaker Alex Gibney noted that "63 Up" — the culmination of a program that has drawn its energy from the unfairness of class and its tenderness from the unfairness of flesh — is marked by a "profound sense of mortality." Lynn has died; her husband, who had always kept his distance from the program, nevertheless agreed to appear, along with their daughters, in Lynn's stead. Another of the participants, Nick, reveals that throat cancer has made him "seriously ill." In its broad strokes, Nick's life has had the greatest resemblance to Apted's own: an Oxbridge degree, expatriation to the States, divorce. Nick has also provided some of the more astute on-camera commentary. In "56 Up," he wonders aloud whether a few minutes of his life drawn almost at random every seven years can possibly say anything about who he is. "It isn't a picture, really, of the essence of Nick," he concludes. "It's a picture of Everyman. It's how a person — any person — how they change."

In "63 Up," this change has run its course, and Nick acknowledges that his thoughts extend no farther than the short term. The program's dreamlike, foreshortened and haphazardly disobedient rapport with chronology renders not only his present but his past almost unbearably poignant: not a midcareer professor but a dying professor; not a newlywed but a dying newlywed; not a student but a dying student; not a child but a dying child.

This past February, a few months after Jackie's shoot in Norfolk, I visited Apted in a rented editing suite in Santa Monica, Calif. The notes he got from the studio executives had been a cause for irritation — he felt as though they were trying to revise a formula that had worked for 56 years — but by his own admission he'd never been particularly agreeable about studio notes. Or rather, the notes weren't terrible, he allowed; he just wasn't going to use any of them. He felt as though the producers were too new to the series to appreciate its scope. Apted was irked by notes like "Lose Sue's dog."

Kim Horton, who has edited the series since "28 Up," matched Apted's indignation. "That dog's been in it for two or three programs!"

"Sue's dog is quite famous," Apted said solemnly; he was again confusing two different dogs, but it didn't matter. "He runs downstairs and watches an animal show on TV. The notes said, 'That's not their life, take it out' — well, it *is* their life."

As Apted finished the rough cut, he was also

moving out of the bungalow that served, for the previous seven years, as his office. Recently he has had some difficulties securing work, and his professional future in Hollywood was uncertain. The office was in complete disorder, littered with decades of files, awards and scripts, as well as his youngest son's childhood artwork, an embroidered West Ham pillow, business from his years as the president of the Director's Guild and cartons of financial, medical and divorce records. "When this is over," he said, "and I'm not doing anything for the rest of my life, I can go through these boxes."

On his last day in the office, he peered at the assorted leavings and turned to Cort Kristensen, his producing partner; originally hired 18 years ago as Apted's assistant, Kristensen now tends to Apted with filial devotion. "You're sure we got everything done in here?"

"Stop panicking, Michael," Kristensen said.

We sat at a picnic table outside the editing suite, and he evaluated his achievement. "On the whole," he said of "63 Up," "they've never been better, the people in it. They've had to pay attention to the whole life span, to confront themselves, and they seemed to be very serious. I was fairly thorough with them." It hadn't required a lot of prodding this time. "I suppose when you're asked to look back on your life, it can't be a flat experience; it has to be an emotional experience."

I asked if any of them had surprised him. There were a handful of plot twists, long-delayed revelations and belated experiences, but those were par for the course. What struck him now were tonal shifts. He mentioned Nick, the ailing expat professor, who had only agreed to an interview in a last-minute text of three words, Apted told me. Apted had rushed back from Australia, where he was shooting Paul and Symon, to sit in his sickroom. Apted had been warned that Nick might have to stop every 10 minutes or so for a break, but Nick had spoken without pause for an hour and a half. "He wanted to settle things," Apted said, "with himself and the people who knew him and the audience." In the past, it had been a struggle for Nick to summon emotion; now he struggled to summon his old dispassion. "I'm still the same little kid, really," he said over the footage of himself at 7. "I think all of us are."

Apted paced the terrain of recollection; he never felt bound by archival chronology in the show — he had always loved Buñuel above all, and thought that the "Up" series' desultory shuffle of the flashbacks mimicked the peregrinations of the unconscious — and now freely wandered the chambers of his memory. The excruciating time Tony admitted to adultery on camera. His anger with Charles, who dropped out after "21." John, he felt, had never really trusted him; he supposed he might have been making fun of him a bit with the business of running him out with the hounds, but he'd always really liked him. Apted felt a strong reaction this time to the accordioned archives that began each segment. "To condense all that time to a hysterical pace — it's terrifying, in sort of a bogus way, but it does dramatize how quickly things go by." It gave him, he continued, "strange feelings about time and passage of time — it's all so distorted."

I asked him what he thought now of the maxim "Give me a child until he is 7, and I will give you the man."

"It's just a platitude," he said, with little ceremony. "There's no great wisdom. My two older boys, when I think back to how they were at 7, pretty much turned out how you'd expect — one serious, the other a jolly fellow, and they still are." He stopped. "Well, the elder one died. But they stayed the same at heart. I don't think it's a particularly brilliant observation, frankly.

"This is my life, right in front of me," he added — a life overlaid by 14 other, random lives, forever entwined with them, a life forever contoured in haunting outline by other people's triumphs and other people's pain. "My life is concentrated, the way it's laid out now. 'Seven Up!' was the first serious piece of work I was involved with, and now it's my whole working life in front of me." He shielded his eyes from the sun. "I'm not going to be well enough to make another of these — it's an irony that here are the bookends of my life. I might have 10 more years of sadness of not doing what I want, but there's something beautiful about that — about having my life in that beautiful box." ◆