

Made in England – Beryl Bainbridge

I was made in England. The place of one's beginnings, the surrounding landscape, the names and words current in childhood are important to us all, but more especially to writers. Nothing makes sense until time has gone by; the past is always more real than the present. Think of Dickens and his poverty stricken Camden Town boyhood, of Jane Austen and her seemingly uneventful existence in Southampton and Winchester, of D.H. Lawrence and his Nottingham background, William Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, of Charlotte and Emily Brontë on the Yorkshire Moors.

My place was Liverpool, that once great shipping port with its Pier Head and Landing Stage, its seven miles of Docks – the Albert, the Gladstone, Salthouse, Canning – fronted by the Cunard offices, the Custom House, the Goree Piazzas and the magnificent Royal Liver Building, its winged birds tethered beneath the flying clouds. All were built in a previous century and gave a framework to my life.

I was fortunate that my father wanted to show me what had determined his own maturity; he trailed me round the business sector of the town, stabbing a finger at the warehouses that had stored his tobacco and his cotton, detailing doorways he had stood in while working out deals, windows he had gazed from when adding up percentages. He ranted about the sailing ships of his youth waiting for the tides to change, of the construction of the docks, of how the monopolies of the great trading companies, the Hudson Bay, the East India, the Royal Africa had been broken. There were tears in his eyes; he was grieving for a Liverpool long gone.

Before I was born an elevated railway had been built from the Dingle to Gladstone Dock. It was the first of its kind and Chicago copied and still retains one similar. In my pixie hood and rabbit fur gloves I sat opposite my father on the juddering carriage seat as we peered down at the warehouses stuffed with grain, sugar cotton and tea, at the giant ocean liners stuck in the black jelly of the Mersey river.

On summer days he walked me round the cemetery of St James's Place, jabbing with his umbrella at the tombstones overgrown with grass, hooking back the prickly holly to expose the long flat tablets engraved with the names of boys and girls all dead before their time – the orphans of the Bluecoat

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School. Beside the grave of Felicia Hemans he recited the verses of a poem she wrote, the one about the boy who stood on a burning deck whence all around had fled. Nearby reared the grand mausoleum of Mr Huskisson, the unfortunate statesman who, in 1830, attending the inauguration of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway was foolish enough to descend onto the track the better to admire its first train. It ran him over.

There were other places we visited in pursuit of the past. We scurried along the Dock Road, the air pungent with the smell of damp grain, the world thunderous with sound as the might dray horses pulled their clattering carts over the cobblestones, barefooted boys dangling from the back, legs spotty with the bites of bed bugs. Then we went back into town, past the imposing entrance to Exchange Station and the mighty office buildings of Stanley Street, monuments to the importance of the city's commerce. Often we loitered in Williamson Square where the wrought iron public urinals had neither tops nor bottoms and you could see the heads of the caught-short men, trilby hats bent forward, feet splayed out to avoid the splashings. In front of the Playhouse Theatre sat the women known as Mary Ellens who wore black shawls and sold flowers and cotton reels. And there was the man that lay on the ground with a boulder on his skinny chest; for a penny you could pick up his sledgehammer and take a swing at it. And there was Prince Honolulu, who wore a Red Indian headdress and took horse bets.

To his bones my father was a man of commerce, a trader, a wheeler-dealer who did sums of the backs of envelopes and whose offices were the Kardomah café in bold Street and the oyster bar in Casey Street. He loved his city and held the opinion that memories escaped if there were no walls to keep them trapped; you knew where you were with a lump of stone that had been standing long before you were a twinkle in your grandfather's eye. For him, the past was always present; men died, but the stones piled up by the sweat of their labour survived.

In my childhood I learnt of personal tragedies, and have some photographic images to remind me. My mother had two siblings who died as children. She's posed beside them, mouth sullen, eyes lost. One is a boy, the other a girl; she couldn't remember either of their names. My Auntie Margo's husband was gassed in the First World War and I have their wedding picture. Auntie Sally lost her man in the battle of the Somme; she died a month later from something diagnosed as a broken heart. My grandmother's brother committed suicide, reasons untold. My parents' marriage descended into a pit of despair

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when my father's business was destroyed by a decline in the gold standards, a slide that made him a bankrupt and everlastingly rendered him bitter. I have a snap of him on the shelf above my work-top, dressed in a too tight jacket and clasping the uplifted paw of a kindly dog.

There were other events of a more sensational nature that fuelled my need to write; murders, mysteries, names that involved the larger world. Lord Broughton, involved in the murder of his wife in Kenya, shot himself in a room in the Adelphi Hotel. The demise of Mrs Wallace apparently killed by her husband, an insurance agent, took place after my grandfather, Mr Baines, had played chess with him down town. At his trial Wallace said he had received a message at the chess club telling him to come to Menlove Avenue East to meet a client. I took my first intake of breath in Menlove Avenue, once known as the Holyland on account of the predominance of Jewish inhabitants. Once born I was placed in the hearth because my mother was in danger of dying. Hearth is an old word; when I told my children this story they didn't know what the word meant. Wallace escaped the noose for lack of evidence. Mrs Maybrick who lived in Aigburth wasn't so lucky. In 1889 she stood trial for the poisoning of her husband, a cotton broker who, it was rumoured, might have been Jack the Ripper; she was sent to prison for fifteen years.

Gladstone was born in Rodney Street. Francis Bacon was the city's Member of Parliament. The writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, United States consul for Liverpool, lived in Rock Ferry. Thomas Carlyle, the historian, often visited his Uncle in Edge Hill. Herman Melville, author of Moby Dick, stayed twice in Dale Street. Matthew Arnold, composer of the unforgettable poem Dover Beach, died of a sudden heart attack as he was running to catch a tram to take him to the Landing Stage; he was hoping to meet his daughter. William Joyce, that chap known as Lord Haw-Haw who made propaganda broadcasts from Germany throughout the war, was rumoured to have been educated at Merchants Taylors School in Crosby. Alois Hitler, half brother to Adolf, really did live for a time in Upper Stanhope Street, Liverpool 8. His Irish wife, Bridget, kept a diary, now in the New York Public Library, in which she tells how she and Alois had started up a business to do with razor blades and he'd sent her the money for a ticket to England in the hope that she'd keep his accounts. Bridget describes how they stood at the barrier and saw, emerging through the swirling engine smoke, the figure of young Adolf, a trilby hat on his head. All these events, legends, real or not, entered my mind.

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I know nothing of the creative stimulus behind scientific thought, and was brought up to believe that the composition of music owes much to mathematics. The art of painting, it was explained, as exemplified by painters of a bygone age, achieved perfection through a prolonged apprenticeship in the study of anatomy and nature. Fiction was different, a comparative latecomer, though it did depend on a knowledge of history and a more than nudging acquaintance with commas and grammar. One could read the works of Cervantes, appreciate the construction of narrative in the novels of Hardy, Stendhal or Dostoevsky, but the process behind the structure of fiction, particularly as regards to plot and character, was generally thought to lie in an author's power to form an image of something not present to the senses and never perceived in reality. In other words, it's all down to the imagination. I disagree, for it seems to imply that the 'imagination' is an inherited factor, similar to red hair or blue eyes, and one present in a fortunate few at birth. I hold it simply to be an ability to recall memories of the place in which one grew up and was made; the echo of voices heard in infancy; words bouncing from the wireless; landscapes viewed from train windows; recurrent dreams; lines from a poem; emotional experiences little understood at the time but later rising up like the bubbles in a glass. We all have such buried recollections, yet only some of us appear to have a need, a compulsion, to commit them to paper.

Novelists, without exception, are egotistical individuals whose understanding of life has been so shaped, so distorted by events in childhood, good or bad, that it drives them to the exaggeration and drama of storytelling. Think of Dickens, a stupendous spinner of so-called fiction and a man who loved play-acting. Had his father escaped incarceration in a debtor's prison and his mother not taken him out of school to work in a blacking factory, would he have wanted to write? Would he have had anything to write about? And would the stories have been different if he had not lived in Camden Town? The Beatles, though not strictly fiction writers, nonetheless composed songs whose words to my mind could only stem from a childhood spent in Liverpool.

All the books I've written, even the historical ones, came from the place of my birth, the characters based on my parents and relations. When I wrote about Captain Scott on his journey to the pole I was depicting my father, a man who couldn't stand the cold and never went out in winter without wearing his ARP beret. Only once in writing a novel did my unconscious, in the true sense, take hold, for I fell off a ladder and was knocked out by cracking my head against

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the edge of a table. After twenty seconds or so I came to and dialled what I believed to be the telephone number of my mother; she had been dead for twelve years. The male voice of the Speaking Clock answered – it was 2:36 and 50 seconds into the dawn. The next day I rang the archivist of British Telecom and was told that in the 1930's and lasting for forty years, three pennies in the slot had released the voice of a woman, enunciating the time in hours and seconds, who had been known as the Girl with the Golden Voice. It was believed she had been born in Liverpool and after attempting a career on the stage – she'd once had a small part in a Saturday Night Theatre radio play, and twice presented Henry Hall's Guest Night – had emigrated to the United States, returned when old and died in an old People's Home in Croydon. From this information I spun a story about a girl abandoned as a baby who believes Golden Voice is her mother. She rings her frequently, confides secrets, listens attentively to nothing more than a recording of the passage of time.

I moved to London towards the end of the 1950's. Already my city was beginning to change, but not too drastically. It's true that the Georgian terraces in Liverpool 8, now known as Toxteth, were becoming ever shabbier and that modern houses of poor quality were being constructed on the bombsites, but there were still cobblestones on the Dock Road, trams climbing the hills to Everton, Mary Ellens in Williamson Square, ferry boats chugging across the river, gas lamps flickering above the vegetable, fish, meat and second hand book stalls of St John's Market. I returned regularly, from a need to encounter my roots. In the 1980's I presented a television programme entitled English Journey, a documentary about various towns, including Liverpool. I interviewed David Bishop, its then Bishop, known for coining the phrase Flickers of Hope. He talked about the problems facing the poor. Never in history had the family unity become so reduced in size, devoid of blood relations, neighbours, community. As for the single parents, the pressures were unbearable. A third of the population lived on High Rise Estates. He took me to see the Netherly estate, which when completed won the architect a prize for design. To me, it looked like a prison complex. Twenty thousand people originally lived here, shunted out in 1970. Those flats not burnt out were boarded up with rotting plywood. Worse, every now and then on the ground floors I could see a little patio, a sort of open landing behind ornamental gates hung with nappies. Business as usual in the concentration camp. There weren't any children playing out; they stood behind the bars staring at the waste land.

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It wasn't all bad. Just down the road there was a school that had everything for the kids, including music and dancing, and it stayed open at night. It was breaktime and the playground was full of children, black and white, warmly dressed and sturdy of build. I just wondered how many of them would go on to University, what percentage of them had both a mother and a father.

To be fair, some things have improved. If the little houses and the communities have gone, so have the children with ragged clothes and legs bitten by bed bugs. The offspring of the working class don't go whipped into the grave anymore. They can join the products of the middleclasses at the comprehensive schools and take comfort in the fact that they'll all come out uneducated.

Save for once, two years ago, I stopped visiting my city in 1995. It hurt too much. I could still flourish the label, Made in England, once attached to rugs, furniture, food, television sets, jumpers, but who would take any notice? I found a lot of attention had been paid to the roads, in and out, to the erecting of glass towers along the waterfront, to the predominance of signs indicating speed limits, halts etc. The giant warehouses were being converted into apartments. Some streets were now car free. Liverpool 8 had a large yellow balloon stuck in the grass where once houses had stood. Lime Street, that once electric stretch of Picture Palaces was nothing more than a row of shoddy shops. Exchange Station had gone.

Liverpool is no longer the city in England in which I was made. I stood for a long time at the window of the once magnificent Adelphi Hotel, looking along the traffic choked length of Church Street and beyond. All the landscapes I remembered vanished without trace. No Boosey and Hawkes with the ukuleles in the window and a life sized photograph of George Formby, smiling just to show you how easy it was. No gunsmiths with its velvet drapes and pheasants stuffed with sawdust, and Johnny Walker in his breeches, who once had leapt across the hoardings of the public house in Lime Street, toppled forever from the sky. No ice-warehouse, no Bear's Paw restaurant, no pet market, no Mary Ellens, no Overhead Railway. Gone the parrot humped in its gilded cage in Blackler's store, obliterated the gloomy depths of the Kardomah Café, burnt as old fashioned the red plush sofas of the Lyceum tea-rooms, slung onto the refuse tips the potted palms and the nickel plated water jugs. No longer do the trams trundle to the Pier head; the bobbing landing stage has been removed and a road built where once old men sat on

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benches gazing out to sea. Huskinsson's monument is still in the cemetery but all the graves have been ripped away – to create a garden atmosphere.

If I were an historian I could chart the reason for all this elimination; decline in trade, aeroplanes instead of railways and ships, influence of America, synthetics instead of cotton and wool, the rise of China. No doubt there's a lot of money to be made from building huge blocks of glass, though I don't understand how, particularly when they're overlooking a river empty of ships. If I understood the politics I would blame the Conservatives for greed, the Liberals for lack of confidence, the Socialists for naivety and an urge to jump on the bandwagon. Why, oh why did so many of these great cities of Europe reconstruct their buildings from the shattered bricks and debris of war? Why did we, in England, choose to rush into a pre-fab future?

I suppose for the young with no memories of what it used to be like, none of this matters, not yet. But one day, grown old, perhaps they too will recall their past and look in vain for its trademarks. For me, it's too late. Someone unmade Liverpool and got away with it

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