A Heart Needs A Home

Northern writers are supposed to escape – to take the last train for the Smoke and a wider world. ***Mark Hodkinson*** *chose to stay in Rochdale, writing about local heroes, football stars and sad cases and building a book-publishing business from a garden shed*

Mark Hodkinson got his start car-doorstepping England forward Bob Latchford (below).

THE MOORS ALWAYS CALLED us, especially on Sundays. I'd go up there with my mates, Alan and Terry. They were a few years older than me and already in work, proper work where you grafted and came home knackered. After our hike we'd sit down in the coarse grass, both of them rolling little spitty fags. Below us, sunk in the valley, lay Rochdale, the streetlights flickering in the nightfall sky like a huge gas ring on a cooker. Looking down on the town (literally), Alan would start up: "Wants a bloody bomb on it, doesn't it? It's shit around here."

I understood his mood. Monday was almost upon us. He'd soon be cycling through still-dark streets to the warehouse where he worked, probably in the rain. And this journey, this life, seemed forever because that's what they told you in Rochdale: stay put; know your place, lad. While Alan longed to escape, I didn't let on that I didn't share his discontent. I didn't need to go anywhere because, from the age of about 12, I knew that *my* travelling would be in my head. I was going to write all this: the mills, the hills, the brick dust, the rain, the people, the mess of it all. I was also enthralled by our local run-down, ramshackle football club.

"What good's ever come out of it?" (Alan, again)

We knew not to say anything; it just made him worse. We were thinking, actually, that we could mention the Rochdale Pioneers (the founders of the co-operative movement), Gracie Fields, Cyril Smith, Bill Oddie, or that John Peel worked at Townhead Mill for a while and Joy Division recorded *Atmosphere* at the town's famous studio, Cargo.

Alan's main point, though clumsily made, was that the place had no "culture" and certainly no glamour. No one had time for anything so self-indulgent. Life was rigidly prescribed. You went to work, came home, watched the telly, went to the pub. The "northern" writers of 15 years or so earlier – Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, Barry Hines, David Storey, etc – had painted magnetism on to the working-class but this had largely focused on mining communities. Their books invoked a manly heroism that validated lives but this was absent from people and towns like Rochdale, based around the textile industry. Eighty per cent of the world's cotton was once exported from Britain and, at its height, half a million people worked in textiles, two-thirds of them women. But no one sang their song; that was going to be my job, my muse.

WHEN MY FAMILY MOVED THE 12 MILES FROM MANCHESTER to Rochdale in 1974, we sometimes caught the bus to and from the city to see relatives and friends back there. I recall waiting for the 461 and being apprehensive as it set off along Queensway. This road, almost two miles long, was completely hemmed in by mills and factories. Finally reaching houses and pubs and streets again felt like emerging from a brick tunnel. If you did the same journey by train you'd pass Dunlop Mill, which was believed to be the largest in the world, built over six years and made from 14 million Accrington bricks. The machines turned night and day and were said to consume one-third of Egypt's cotton crop in a year. In its heyday it employed 3,200 people.

Growing up in the 1970s, there felt to be a mill on every street corner. They were out of scale with the rest of the topography, standing like docked battleships. Each had a peculiar short name to fit snugly on the chimney: Elk, Era, Ena, Orb, Rex and Roy. I often visited them at weekends when my dad, an electrician, would repair the machines. They were incredibly noisy places with their own distinctive sweet, starchy smell.

I was in a CSE stream at school and it felt as if we were pre-ordered staff for local firms, earmarked to either labour in the mills or become engineers – often working on the machines *in* the mills. There was never a suggestion that we might want to work in an office or go to college. I told the careers teacher I wanted to be a journalist. He handed me a leaflet about trainee-management schemes at Marks & Spencer. "There'll be some writing involved," he said.

I would meet older friends who were already working in the mills. The change in their physique was striking. They bulked up from lugging bales in hot conditions but they seemed tired and distant when you spoke to them, blaming the long hours they worked.

Cheap imports led to the closedown of the textile industry through the 1970s and 1980s. Round-the-clock working became a four-day week, to three, two, one, gone. Its demise had more social and cultural impact than that of the similarly ravaged steel and coal industries. Miners and steelworkers had been well paid by comparison and received extensive post-redundancy support with good pay-offs. The effect was also focused largely on specific villages, while the collapse of the cotton industry devastated whole swathes of the north of England. The countdown to shutdown had been slow and lacked the narrative snap of the miners' plight. So there was little acknowledgement of the distress: no pop concerts in their name, very few poems or folk songs, no poignant pit-head imagery with which to frame television documentaries.

Many mills were flattened. In odd places walls were left standing without a roof. As kids, we walked through pretending to be a liberating army – the first in after the bombs had dropped. We shouted so our voices echoed. We'd find cotton spindles and pretend they were mortar bombs, throwing them at pigeons roosting in gaps where windows had once stood. The town fell listless. We suddenly noticed grown-ups hanging around in the daytime. They'd stop and talk to us by the canal or when we played football. Occasionally they'd join in the game or help us rip up cardboard to slide down a grassy slope. Although conditions in the mills had been poor, they still fostered communities. Many firms had their own social clubs and sports teams, which were disbanded on closure.

"The careers teacher handed me a leaflet about trainee management at Marks & Spencer. 'There'll be some writing involved,' he said"

Rochdale's mills (like Townhead, where the young John Peel briefly worked) closed in the '60s, their places taken by awe-inspiring new supermarkets.

My mum had worked as an overlocker for a sewing firm. After she was made redundant she began holding jewellery parties for Sarah Coventry, a brand that was only available via house parties, and then similar ones for Tupperware (plastic food containers) and Pippa Dee (clothes). In their brochures it said she could be a millionaire within ten years. She wasn't a saleswoman and neither were most of the other women taken on. They had nearly all been made redundant and were feeling guilty being in the house during the daytime. They worked their way through their circle of friends, holding parties at each other's houses, until they ran out of friends from whom to take money. Another attempt at "home working" saw my mum soldering bits of wire at the kitchen table. A man delivered a box of them every morning and paid her depending on how many she'd done the previous day.

At least we had a tinge of the exotic when supermarkets arrived in town. Asda took over the vacant Queens Mill, which became known locally as the "Asda Queens". Tesco was purpose-built with aisles as long as airport runways. Girls began working there who I'd last seen at school. They were now wearing check uniforms, their hair centre-parted and eyelids dusted powder blue. Krazy Kuts and Kwik Save were also vying for customers and the *Rochdale Observer* was full of splashy adverts with girls in hot pants holding up tins of beans next to banner headlines containing words like "blockbuster" and "price busters".

Mum went to Tesco every Friday with Dad, and he normally hated shopping. It was as if they were going somewhere special like a show or a restaurant. When they came back the first time they said how warm it had been and well lit. Girls dressed in funny costumes had offered them samples of cheese and foreign food. I asked if they'd had any. Dad pulled his face as if I'd asked him ▶

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something absurd, like was it true that Mum used to be a trapeze artist. "Not likely. It gives me indigestion, that stuff. Your mam tried a bit, though."

I'm sure there were other family outings in the evenings during my childhood but I can only remember two. The first was to see *Planet Of The Apes* at the Odeon. The other was to Spotland, the home of Rochdale Football Club. We all went – Dad, Mum, my sister and me, on a Monday night, October 1974. We sat in a shabby wooden stand full of middle-aged and old men, coughing and moaning. Dad bought us sweet, milky coffee from a hut behind the stand. When Rochdale scored, everyone rose from their seats and patted each other on the back, smiling as if all was well with the world. The rain came down and the pitch and players disappeared in mist. The match ended a draw. My mum and sister never went to Spotland again. Dad and me couldn't keep away.

I went to the next game and the one after. I went all season, and the 36 seasons after that. I'm still going. If Dad couldn't make it, I went with pals from school. I wore the scarves and badges. I bought the match programmes. I learned the rituals. At first I didn't know that we were one of the worst teams in the Football League but I soon bumped into its past. It was everywhere; drizzle soaking through your coat. They had spent all but five of their 63 years in the bottom division. Our ground was a seaside town out of season, falling down around us. The emphasis had been on survival, so peripherals such as the fabric of the place were neglected. The stands, huts, dugouts and out-houses were like broken teeth, barely upright and left to decay. White paint had stained grey and flaked away like old skin. Damp had turned wood to the colour of cinder toffee and it crumbled to nothing in your hands. Rain seeped through the roofs. And, of course, I loved it, every grimy, gritty aspect of this wonderfully spirited football club. The players, battlers all, were gods in Stylo Matchmakers and so were the fans around me, each of them eternal believers, hopers, dreamers. There was no richer place for a writer-to-be. At 15 I was editing the club's match programme; in my thirties I was providing a weekly column for the *Times* about them and I have written three books on the club.

I travelled on the supporters' club coaches to away games. I did this even throughout the time when the world felt to have turned black, in the winter of 1975. A girl called Lesley Molseed went missing that October. She was 11 and lived a few streets from us. When the news broke, people stopped washing their cars and left their Sunday dinner on a low light. They gathered on street corners, formed search parties and retraced Lesley's route to the shop where she had gone on an errand for her mum. Kids combed wasteland, believing they stood a better chance of finding her because she was one of them. They knew the shortcuts, the hidey-holes, the rickety wooden garages, the millponds and the mill yards, the abandoned cars, the tree-swings, the secreted piles of wood ready for bonfire night. They'd find her lost in the long grass, sunk to her knees cradling a doll, sobbing. It was an adventure: Christopher Robin had come to town and they were preparing trestle tables and cakes for the hero's party.

I'm suspicious of the can't-wait-to-get-away folk. Where are they heading? Isn't the journey within?

The birthplace of the co-op movement and Gracie Fields as it looks today.

We didn't find her. Police released her photo and it was splashed across newspapers and television screens. Lesley was everywhere but nowhere to be seen. Four days later, a man thought he had seen a pile of clothes on a grassy ledge next to a moorland road in nearby Ripponden. On drawing closer he realised it was a child's body. A blue linen bag with a crest of Tweety Pie was by her feet; Lesley's mum had given it to her to carry the shopping. She had been stabbed in the back, shoulders and head. Semen was found on her clothes.

Everything changed. We weren't allowed to play out any more. Mum walked with you to school, met you at the gates. Lesley's murderer was among us. The world became a cave, the light gone. He was beyond the fence at the bottom of the garden. He was in the back entry, flitting between the bins and boxes. He was by the railway sidings, bored, jabbing a knife into sleepers, marking time. He walked the park at night, a few steps behind the last boy or girl home, waiting.

The tension and fear that had fallen over the town ebbed away within a few hours on Christmas Eve, 1975. We could play out. The streets and parks were safe again. Stefan Ivan Kiszko appeared before magistrates charged with Lesley's murder. Kiszko was six feet two inches tall and weighed more than 18 stone. Six policemen flanked him in court. The mums and dads on our street referred to him as a "monster" or a "beast". People wanted to do to him what he had done to that little girl. They called on other prisoners to attack him, mutilate him, make him pay. My mum said he should hang. Frank, one of our neighbours, said hanging was too good for him.

At his trial the court heard that a few weeks before his arrest Kiszko had been admitted to hospital with anaemia. Doctors noticed he had a condition called hypogonadism; his penis and genitals were underdeveloped. He was given testosterone and the prosecution argued that a side-effect was sudden, uncontrollable sexual urges. For months afterwards, anyone at my school showing signs of excitability was teased: "What's up, are you on Kiszko pills or what?"

The jury found Kiszko guilty on a ten-two majority and he was given a life sentence. Afterwards his former head teacher was asked for a quote. He said, curiously, that he was "a very pleasant and often quite generous boy". His hobbies and interests, listed assiduously in the papers, were: stamp-collecting, botany, photography, playing the accordion, attending the cinema with his mother, tending his father's grave and visiting garden centres.

KISZKO SERVED 16 YEARS FOR A CRIME THAT FORENSIC TESTS showed later he hadn't committed. The police, under immense pressure to find the killer, had effectively falsified evidence against him. He was beaten in prison and, for his own safety, spent most of the time in solitary confinement. He suffered psychological problems, for a period refusing to wear clothes and smearing himself in excrement. After Kiszko was freed, my dad drove past him once when he was carrying his shopping along Oldham Road. Dad said he shuffled as he walked and looked like a "broken man". Kiszko died a year after being released, missing out on the £500,000 compensation he had been promised. Ronald Castree, a market trader from Oldham, was arrested in 2007 and later convicted of Lesley Molseed's murder.

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Over the years I have written extensively about the murder and the subsequent miscarriage of justice. In fact, I've written – as I always planned – a lot about Rochdale and, therefore, working-class life. I've not followed the given doctrine of rejecting my hometown, viewing it as something that has stymied creativity. I have been inspired by the supposed cultural hinterland and become a blood-brother to those who have stayed loyal to their art in the face of, at best, indifference or, at worst, derision – good on 'em. I'm suspicious of the can't-wait-to-get-away folk. Where are they heading? Isn't the journey within us? When Billy Liar doesn't board the train to London with Liz, I'm glad. I want to know what he'll do stuck fast for the next 30 years, how all that piled-up routine and inertia will lap up against him. I have friends like this in Rochdale, where there is no "narrative arc" but merely a today, tomorrow and the day after. These lives are compelling.

Television and publishing is run principally by the middle-class and southern-based. Obviously they make claims on a cosmopolitanism of taste but, in reality, largely commission what they know, what they can relate to. When they do move down the social scale, it is routinely quirky or conforms to stereotype. So the "lower" order is played for laughs on, say, *Shameless* or they dig into what is actually the underclass, where we find writers such as Irvine Welsh et al proffering guided tours of squalor for a predominantly bourgeois audience.

Stefan Kiszko and his mother before he was falsely accused of murder.

All this has become my specialist subject because for several years my agent has presented my work-in-progress to various publishing houses. I am routinely congratulated for my "fine, evocative writing", etc but, unfortunately, it is not what we are looking for at this present time, thank you. It's not just a class issue, of course, it's also that I write outside an easily identifiable genre.

I guessed that other writers covering similar themes in a similar way were receiving the same knock-backs. They were. I decided, then, to set up Pomona five years ago, a publishing house (more of a garden shed, really) committed to the kind of books I wanted to read. The support from writers has been heartening. The likes of Simon Armitage, Ian McMillan, Barry Hines, Hunter Davies, Fred Eyre, Trevor Hoyle, Ray Gosling et al have all been prepared to forego advances for a 50/50 profit split because they have seen that Pomona's heart is big and its aim true.

My relationship with the machinery of the publishing industry is not so cheering. What should be fun is turned into a maths test, with a hangover. It is a business choked in admin – ISBNs (10 and 13 digit), AISs, B-format, scale-out, bar codes, dues, returns, Nielsen's data. Reaching break-even on a book is almost impossible. Shops demand up to 50 per cent discount and the reps and distribution, a further 25 per cent. This means, on a book selling at £10, the income to the publisher is £2.50, of which £1.75 goes to the author, post-breakeven. And the cost of producing and promoting said book? Er, about £1.75.

All the same, I'm close to our 25th book now at Pomona. I plough on because I have a belief that if we all join up – those of us resistant to the carpet-bombing of celebrity on culture – we will eventually form a counterculture, except this time we'll eschew duffel coats and National Health glasses. Many writers are currently facing a choice between compromising and writing to order or accepting that they must work in a vacuum – and this stands for established figures, too. A few months before they died, I was speaking to both Alan Sillitoe and Alan Plater about doing books for Pomona. Both these titans had been jettisoned by mainstream publishing.

Those of us resistant to the carpet-bombing of celebrity will form a counterculture, but this time without duffel coats and National Health glasses

Writers should be able to write what they want, in any way they wish. It should be a free-for-all, an imagination set loose and not tied in or kowtowing to a marketing strategy. If Rochdale's your stimulus, so be it. John Steinbeck did OK plundering Salinas for material and Stanley Spencer brought the resurrection, no less, to Cookham in one of his most famous paintings. Hometowns rule!

Unfortunately hometowns don't do so well in rock music. The staple is to relate the alienation and desperation to escape (*Home Is Where The Hatred Is* – Gil Scott-Heron, *William, It Was Really Nothing* – The Smiths, and thousands more) or to sentimentalise from a good, safe distance of many years away (*My Little Town* by Paul Simon, *Hometown Farewell Kiss* by The Triffids, etc). Has anyone ever proffered a positive view of their growing-up town? It seems that the artist also has to be the maverick, and mavericks move about, bar to bar, place to place. They don't stay put with their mams, go shopping at Lidl and have potato ash for tea every Wednesday. At least Bruce (Springsteen) shared our grief in *My Hometown*: "They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks/ Foreman says these jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back".

Meanwhile back in Rochdale, the town shows little sign of recovering from the closure of the cotton industry; I doubt it ever will. The districts of Falinge and Freehold have 75 per cent unemployment. The town has no independent shop selling new records and books. There is no coffeehouse chain or town-centre cinema. Instead it is clogged with empty shops or charity outlets and tracts of fenced-off wasteland on which rosebay willowherb has grown shoulder-high. The mills, despite the poor conditions and low pay, gave the town a social and structural personality. It is now post-recession Anytown UK.

At least the football club has finally come good. Last year we achieved promotion from the basement division after 36 years of trying. And whatever bruises the town may bear now and ever more, those moors framing it will remain. Go up there on a still day, roll up a little spitty fag, and the rough beauty and quiet will make you believe that anything is possible. *Anything*.

Mark's books, BELIEVE IN THE SIGN, THE LAST MAD SURGE OF YOUTH and SPOTLAND: THE SUN ALSO RISES, are available at www.pomonauk.co.uk