

An artists impression of Ancoats, *Manchester Guardian*, 16 September 1905, drawn by Frank Emanuel.

THE DEVIL IN ANCOATS: IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Malcom Lynch

A small boy growing up in Ancoats in the 1920s had everything going for him although maybe it was not the same for the girls. If he could spell 'rat' he was educated; if he stepped backwards it was at least a move; in fact he'd nowhere to go but up.

I was the luckiest kid alive at that time because my father was a Catholic, and my mother was a Protestant, so I considered myself belonging to Saint Anne's and Saint Andrew's. I was still luckier in that my father had full-time work; he was a muckman or middenman. The heavy metal 'mid-dintins' were tipped with brute force by men stripped to the waist and wearing wide-brimmed women's hats into thick wooden open carts pulled by the thickest, strongest horses you ever did see. Because of their women's hats, the men were sneeringly referred to as 'Dolly Vardin men'. (Dolly Vardin was, I believe, a music hall singer of the Naughty Nineties noted for her wide-brimmed hats.) My father was taken off the carts, and put to burn the rubbish in

huge furnaces at Holt Town. His partner was 'Black Joe', obviously a black man, although not so obvious when they were both covered in sweat and muck. They started work at five in the morning, and finished at four in the afternoon, and were sustained throughout that time by brews. Brews for both of them were prepared the night before by my mother: the recipe for one cup is as follows — one tablespoonful of condensed milk, one desertspoonful of tea, and one desertspoonful of sugar, all mixed into a ball and rolled up in several pages of *Tit-Bits*: that was Ancoats tea, if you could afford it.

A number of these were put into my dad's wicker basket which fastened with a slide-through rod. Sometimes he forgot to take the basket, and I was delighted to be sent after him. He and Joe made their brews in cleaned-out tin cans with steaming water from one of the pipes at the side of the furnace; they they would sit down on a mountain of dustbin rubbish, with more rubbish continually tipped down the chute above

their shoulders as the carts came in with their loads.

It was there I met the third member of this hellish group. He was Fritz the German chemist, although he said his name was Hans. It was his job to separate metals and rags and bones to make potash, which I imagined was a kind of stew. I liked Fritz, but he was a spy, as were all Germans living in Ancoats; indeed everybody lived in mortal fear of the giant gasometer which the Germans had built in Beswick: it was widely known that sooner or later when there was another war, the Germans would send a Zeppelin guided by Germans with flashlamps below, then up would go gasworks, Ancoats and all.

My father's job had great rewards in it for me. The wicker basket often came back with treasures he had salvaged, mainly broken toys, but sometimes tea-splashed or paint-stained, stuck-together, pages missing or torn apart books like *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations*.



The Horsfall Museum.

Come Christmastime, the small house was strewn with broken toys. I was rich beyond the dreams of Ali Baba. None of the other kids got anything at all and I was able to swap my surplus broken toys for used tram tickets and cigarette cards, which currency we gathered from the gutters and litter-tins.

I once got a smashed-up fort which kept falling down, and dozens of toy soldiers, guardsmen, Red Indians and knights-at-arms, but they were all missing arms, legs and heads even before the battle began.

Being the only child, I also got broken dolls. My favourite, and one I took to bed for a couple of years, was a large pot doll with the top of her head missing, and she had a set of eyes which opened and closed with a loud click, and sometimes fell out through her head. My mother promised to sew a cap to fit over the missing top of her head, but she never got round to it, although heaven knows she did plenty of sewing. She had a Jones's foot-treadle machine, and spent her days from eight o'clock to three o'clock sewing patchwork quilts for Becky up Cheetham Hill. We carried the quilts she'd made up to Becky's cellar stock room every Friday after school: that was the day dad came home late because it was pay day and he stopped to get drunk.

I considered us, the Irish, as being fairly low on God's list of favourites, probably sure-fire bound for hell, whereas the Italians, who occupied the *Daily Express* side of Ancoats, had a pretty good chance of heaven, for wasn't the Pope at Rome an Italian in Italy? But the Jews, in my opinion, were the holiest of the holies, because wasn't Our Lord

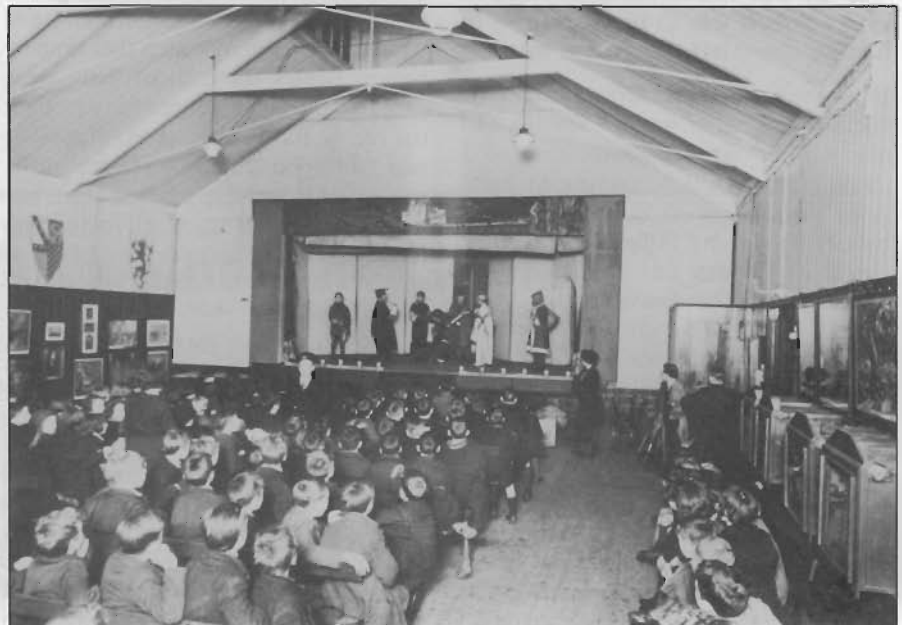
and Holy Moses and that lot Jewish. And wasn't Becky, who was no doubt a blood descendant of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a Jewish lady who gave me a penny every Friday. This business of religion was an all-pervasive obsession in Ancoats; there were many do's and don'ts and shalt's and shalt-nots. It was a shalt-not for Catholic children to go into the Horsfall Museum, but a shalt for Protestant kids, so I was able to push open the door with my Protestant hand and enter this people's palace. But my Catholic eye was shocked — 'Domine patrie' — by a room full of larger-than-life naked statues, so unlike the statues we lit penny candles in church.

In spite of the many temptations of culture which Mr Horsfall had set out on his stalls for me, my favourite room

was the aviary-room upstairs. It was taken up by a large cage of Australian birds, budgerigars in fact, and I wondered what kind of a crime these little bright birds must have committed to get themselves transported to this penal colony of Ancoats. In truth, we kids always felt we were in a penal colony, although a safe one, for some past sins of our fathers: when they were in beer they sang of the green fields, silver rivers and blue mountains of old Erin, and that little bit of heaven which fell from out the sky one day, yet we, their children, were doomed to scarp and scrounge between black chasms of brick.

Up in the bird-room I created my own little bit of heaven for it was the only room from which I could see the whole of Ancoats Goods yard through the window. I'd no wish to become a naked Greek god, but oh how I envied the dirty-capped engine drivers who shunted their little shunting engines and dozens of waggons on the network of lines in the yard. If there was a pal with me, we'd bet tram tickets on which line the trucks would be shunted; the most coveted ticket being the 'workman's' which was all the colours of the rainbow. We'd never seen a rainbow, although we knew it was Roy G Biv.

Death and the Devil were very much a part of our lives. There were frequent suicides at which we knew the Devil had been in personal attendance, for it was well-known that the Devil came up for suicides. It was frightening to know that he had been but a few doors away the night before. The suicide was usually a young unmarried woman, and the cheapest and most popular method was



The Children's Theatre: Father Christmas and all.



The Palmy: Saturday matinee, one penny.

by swallowing a bottle of bleach or ammonia. Nothing nice or kindly might be said about a suicide because that would be the same thing as sympathising with Satan against God Almighty.

Boney-fingered, head-shawled women might be heard muttering things like 'No better'n what she deserved', 'Showed her ankle and look where it got her', 'Went to too many dances and smoked cigarettes, she did'.

Joyfully there were more heavenly deaths than hellish ones. We kids would race around the streets after school calling on houses where somebody had died. My mother threatened me with a clout if I visited the dead houses, but it was irresistible and the crow-pickings were too tasty. We were always shown into the home without question. What with the coffin and the sideboard we had to squeeze close together, often treading on each other's boots, and then somebody went into the scullery and came back with Vimto's or American Cream Soda's and slabs of aniseed cake or an arrowroot biscuit. These we would devour while gazing on a pale face on a white pillow, whitish skin covering a skull. We often thought that the suicide girls must be very pretty in contrast, very pretty indeed, like the mothers we never had. The same boney-fingered women in shawls would be there staring down at the corpse and saying 'Twas a grand man he was right enough, and allus supped his Sunday pints up at the Men's Confraternity'.

We came to realise that these visits were called 'wakes' though we could never reconcile these wakes with the wakes which came to Hil Kirk Street

Croft every November in the magnificent spectacle of Collins's Fairground with its red-eyed green dragons and its high-jumping brass-railed dobbie horses, its coloured lights and mirrors, its loud, clashing 'Bye-Bye Blackbird' music, its outer row of hissing, puffing, panting, threatening, coal-smelling steam-sweet engines with great wheels that could crush a kid. Maybe, we thought, 'twas the Devil's very own wake for the suicide girls.

The one form of death we envied — yes, envied — was when thin but beautiful or handsome children were taken away with consumption. They went off in motor cars — motor cars indeed! — to places called Baguley and Sandiway. No more school for them! We heard that they lay in beds on



The Roundhouse in ruins.

balconies surrounded by fields and flowers while they were still alive, and were fed on fresh eggs, sizzling bacon, farm butter and buttermilk cream, and they would be driven to heaven in a white tinselled motor car, not the plumed horses down the cobbled streets under grey cemetery skies.

The only time we saw flowers was at deaths, yet there were pictures of them in the Museum; although here again the pictures were a sort of preview for bereavement. I've overheard a young woman say of one of the pictures — 'Hey, wouldn't these look nice on grannie's grave when she's dead'?

The Devil we were certain of; he was the joker in a pack of playing cards. History we were not too certain about: it was not the history of our parents, and we got the confused impression that everywhere outside Manchester was in the hands of Normans with their castles and cathedrals. Furthermore the names of the tiny streets we lived in were grandiosely named after English lords. Lord Palmerston was our favourite lord; he was a happy, noisy, exciting, laughing, disinfected lord because his street contained the Palmy Picturedrome, Saturday matinees one penny.

For some reason known only to my parents, I was taken from the Catholic school of Saint Anne's across the street to Every Street Municipal school, and my heroes switched overnight from Cuchulane to Hereward the Wake, from King Brian Boru to King Alfred. And through my new teacher, Harold Beaumont, I began acting in The Children's Theatre, and joined the Scouts and got free Christmas oranges



A tiny house in a narrow street. After 60 years, grass and trees have taken over. The ruins of the University Settlement alias the Roundhouse, are in the background.

at the 'we-three-kings-from-the-Oriental' University Settlement. In getting involved with the Roundhouse Settlement, I was playing right into the hands of the slimy old joker in the playing cards, for didn't Mary Stocks herself come on Wednesday to tell young women how not to have babies? And her with the name of Mary! This other Mary, whether cursed or canonised by the women, made us realise that we were surplus brats of unnecessary people bred solely for Heaven or Hell.

At the Children's Theatre we acted out the medieval miracle plays, which packed the theatre with howling, appreciative kids: appreciative because their senses and surroundings were attuned to things medieval. It was nothing to hear a kid say — 'Bet Jesus wouldn't get himself born in Ancoats, too much bloody sense. Nor was his Dad on't dole either'. Their favourite, and one which brought the house down, was the one in which the dragon was killed by Saint George, brought to life by the Doctor, only to be re-killed; and the Turkish Knight was killed, cured, and re-killed; and all egged on by Father Christmas with his 'pocketful of money, and a skinful of beer'. Another tried and trusted favourite was 'The Shepherd's Play' in which Mac the

sheepstealer steals a sheep, and his wife, Gill, snuggles it in her bed and pretends it's a new-born baby when the good shepherds come a-gunning, but one peep and they're convinced the sheep isn't a baby, so Mac is tossed up in a blanket.

Learning my lines meant spending more time on the outside lavatory.

It was a tiny house in a narrow street, as were all the houses in the district. The front room door opened on to the street, and there was only enough room for a table and two upright chairs; I had to sit on a stool. The back room was a scullery; one third of it taken by the bricked-in copper washing boiler under which a fire was lit on washing-day. There was a slopstone with only one cold water tap which dripped day and night. Food was kept in a fine mesh safe in the backyard, and was cooked on the perpetual front room fire. The backyard was also shared by a tin bath on a rusty nail, and of course the lavatory. There was only one gas jet in the front room; none in the scullery or the two small bedrooms; and my mother had to do the washing in the night by candlelight in order to start Becky's quilts in good time. Her peggying in the dollytub woke me up at daybreak.

I was lucky; I was the only one and therefore had the bedroom to myself; in

most houses brothers and sisters had to share the room, and they could hear all the parental activity in the next room. But I was only allowed a candle to go to bed with; it was taken from me as soon as I was in bed. This meant that the only place I could read was on the outside lavatory. Circumspectly, I always took my trousers down to read.

It was here I learned my God, Abraham, Noah, Mac, Herod and Saint George parts for the Theatre; and I read the many midden-tin salvaged, torn and tattered, besmirched and besmeared books ranging from *Pickwick Papers* to *Sexton Blake in Chinatown*.

It was my ambition when I grew up to have a lavatory with bookshelves nailed on the walls, likewise a candle and candlestick for midnight reading, and a nightwatchman's coke brazier.

Because of this literature on the lavatory I passed a scholarship to a posh school two tramrides from Ancoats. Two tramrides! I was Marco Polo! On the first morning when my mother saw me off on the first tram, she kissed me when no one was looking, and said 'Mind now and don't be letting on you're from Ancoats, and if they ask you what your father does for a living say he's employed by the Manchester Corporation'.