

NORTHERN IDENTITIES: FIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF INTER-WAR CHILDHOODS

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The northern life story or autobiography has been a persistent and influential force in the shaping of an identity for the Manchester region. As spoofed by Les Dawson, the dominant tropes in this genre have been an assertion of extreme hardship ('you were lucky' etc.) wedded to a sentimentalisation of warm neighbourliness:

I was born in Manchester in the Thirties. It was a depressed decade and most of the people who lived in our area were decayed. Our terraced house was so narrow, the mice walked about on their back legs and the kitchen ceiling was so low the oven had a foot-level grill. The place I was born in was called Collyhurst; it lay two miles from the city centre and it was a district of narrow streets and tenements that gazed eyeless onto cobbled roads escorting the warehouses and shops past shadowed alleyways where teeming hordes of ill-dressed children ran amok. But it was a place that held warmth and comradeship in adversity, and there was compassion and love amongst the inhabitants.ⁱ

In this article I examine the identity politics of a highly-specific form of northern autobiography: those written in the 1980s or 1990s by men who grew up in the North during the inter-war years but who left for the South in their late teens or early twenties. The purpose of the piece is to examine how these accounts mediate a particular version of northernness through discussions of regional difference, community, poverty and eventual exile (principally through scholarship but also by enlisting in the military). I pay particular attention to five authors, referring to four from the Manchester region but also considering the work

of Richard Hoggart from Leeds on account of his importance to the area of British cultural studies on which these texts impact. Besides Hoggart's *A Local Habitation*, then, I examine *Little Wilson and Big God*, in which the novelist Anthony Burgess describes his upbringing in Collyhurst, Miles Platting and Moss Side. My third author, the novelist and playwright Bill Naughton, arrived in Bolton as a young boy of Irish Catholic parents; his father was a miner. Naughton eventually left for London where he reached the high point of his career with the publication and film adaptation of *Alfie*.ⁱⁱ Naughton is a fascinating character in terms of the construction of British identity, with associations with three of the most place-conscious areas of the (then) United Kingdom. In spite of his claims for great affinity with the North in *Saintly Billy* and *On the Pig's Back*, Naughton has been characterised by one academic as manifesting a troubled Irish emigrant's consciousness.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus Naughton was famous for 'humorous, affectionate dramatisations of the experiences of canny Lancashire weavers and opportunistic Cockney wide-boys [...] But although he was hailed as a percipient insider, Naughton was in fact an immigrant outsider'.^{iv} William Woodruff's family experienced acute poverty as mill workers in Blackburn during the depression. Woodruff went on to become a student at Oxford and a professor of economics in America; his autobiography *Billy Boy* has recently been reissued as *The Road to Nab End* and has become a best-seller.^v Don Haworth's family in Burnley was affected by the depression when Haworth's father lost his job as a Co-op branch manager. Haworth left Burnley as a young man and became a London-based radio playwright, which narrative he describes in *Bright Morning*, the last of the five works considered by this article.^{vi}

Of course these autobiographies are only a very specific sub-genre within the published range of northern life stories. One could also point to the Oxbridge scholarship *Bildungsroman* where dreaming spires supplant chimneys and northern drabness in works by Winterson, Ashworth, Jacobson, Shindler and Drabble.^{vii} As the genre has become more self-conscious there have even been intellectualised re-visionings of self-and-world within collections of fragments, inventories, essays and diary entries by Simon Armitage and Paul Driver.^{viii} And beyond these mainstream texts it is important to acknowledge the range of nostalgia, autobiography and reminiscence published since the 1980s by local presses such as Neil Richardson.

The importance of the sub-genre that I isolate here is that it constructs a version of the regional, masculine, working-class childhood so integral to our (perhaps increasingly anachronistic) national discourse of North and South. Philip Dodd has written of how in much northern literature 'the North is a place that one leaves behind', this carrying its own implications for



Passage in Collyhurst, 1934

the staging of a gender identity in that region as opposed to the exiled place in which the narratives are written.^{ix} The concept of the authenticity of northern working-class life is a seductive one, particularly when we consider that any retrospective evocation of a northern childhood addressed to a southern metropolitan audience is vulnerable to the fetishisation of roots described by Alan Bennett thus: '[Northern writers] set their achievements against the squalor of their origins and gain points for transcendence, while at the same time asserting that northern life is richer, and, in some undefined way, truer and more honest than a life of southern comfort'.^x This assertion of truth does of course remind us of George Orwell's diagnosis of the 'curious cult of northernness' whereby Orwell asserts that any northerner in the South will 'explain that it is only in the North that life is "real" life ... that the North is inhabited by "real" people, the South merely by rentiers and their parasites'.^{xi} Part of the project of this article, then, is to determine the extent to which contemporary northern autobiography has upheld the masculinist, 'Lowryscape'-styled retrenchment of regional stereotypes of ruggedness and self-fashioning associated with Victorian narratives of the region.^{xii}

Bearing in mind this perception that 'authenticity is the most politically correct, popularly endorsed and most irritating aspect of the modern myth of the North', the popular construction of the very form of autobiography might be seen to conspire with suppositions of pithiness and authenticity.^{xiii} K.R. Smith has argued that we look to autobiography 'for a construction of a past that disguises its status as a construction, offering us meaning that we can perceive as trustworthy, absolute and real'.^{xiv} Comparable perhaps to the Victorian rags-to-riches story, we have recently been inundated with what Kate Douglas - discussing the work of Jeanette Winterson and Andrea Ashworth - has termed 'success narratives'.^{xv} These are works that Douglas identifies as giving us 'quick ideological or value fixes'.^{xvi} Thus they are marketed as "must-read" texts - gifts from geniuses, self-actualised authors'.^{xvii} Yet Douglas's assertion that 'The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a marked increase in interest in the various forms of life writing' is of particular importance for the construction of northern identities.^{xviii}

This is for the simple reason that these texts were written about a time when the North was suffering economically from the perspective of another period of economic suffering when Thatcherite policies were eroding many of the traditional symbols and folkways of northernness. It is thus that we have to be sensitive to the idea that autobiographies function by means of a double chronology: 'the contents will be determined both by the times through which the author lived as a child and as an adult, and by the moment at which the compendium of memories is subject to an overall analysis'.^{xix} Is it then possible to speculate on the ideology of texts written and published in the middle of the Thatcher years when many of the values most celebrated in the inter-war years were being menaced, and the North as a whole was held to be 'in decline'? Simon Charlesworth, for example, has commented that 'since the early 1980s, the gradual decline of the culture of the working class has been one of the most powerful, telling developments in British society'.^{xx} And this might be taken in opposition to the pre-1940 years recalled by these writers, years about which one historian has commented that 'it is probable that working-class

culture from the 1880s to the 1930s was more homogeneous and distinct than in any period before or since'.^{xxi} So a key question to ask of these autobiographies has to be: are they keen to reaffirm the mythic values of Northern community and cheerful long-suffering when writing in decades that were seen to mark the divestiture of those values in British society? Or are they at pains to stake the complexities, tensions and problems of subjectivity and community in the era in which they were growing up?

In terms of the northern identity that is most visible to the southern audiences courted by the texts discussed here, many of the most powerful contemporary stereotypes relating to northernness are derived from the decades immediately preceding the Second World War. Philip Dodd has written about the 'Lowryscape' of the 1930s as the version of the North that we have inherited today whenever northern stereotypes are invoked. He writes that 'the ideological prominence [of] the working-class Northern "tradition" owes a lot to 'the 1930s, when artists such as Orwell, Humphrey Spender, Lowry, as well as Mass Observation, identified "the North" as the site of "the cap and muffler, the unemployed man, dirt, decay and pollution"'.^{xxii} If, in terms of cultural signification, the North is a male/past/working-class space, then the depression years represent the most iconographic northern era.

Raphael Samuel has indeed described the period as a time 'when so many of Britain's new industries seemed to dispense with the need for heavy physical labour, and when so many of the older ones, like cotton textiles, came under the hammer'.^{xxiii} It is thus that Orwell's sketch of the area in *The Road to Wigan Pier* carefully (and, some would argue, very selectively) establishes a world that is horribly depressing and run-down. One of the images that Orwell claims that he will always remember of Lancashire during his stay is that of 'shawled women, with their sacking aprons and their heavy black clogs, kneeling in the cindery mud and bitter wind, searching eagerly for tiny chips of coal'.^{xxiv} In terms of public history and consciousness, this is the ulcerously-deprived and monochrome North within which the autobiographers studied here have to position themselves. In determining that position, I think it is safe to say that two of



Waiting for the Dole, Manchester, 1930s

the defining traits of the northern working-class experience in those years were collectivism and economic suffering. It would be glib to assert that working-class solidarity and long-suffering are popular myths that need to be exploded. Even the most superficial reading of histories and oral testimonies reveals the North of this era to be one in which people necessarily shared fundamental social conditions and destinies. Such circumstances are inevitably fertile ground for nostalgia but we also need to be aware of the pressures which those years would have exerted on people's sense of identity and belonging:

These years brought malnutrition, shabbiness, dirt, industrial strife, the indignities of the Means Test and threat of the workhouses. They also brought out the strengths of traditional working-class life: solidarity, resourcefulness, good neighbourliness, political determination, and moments of intense and long-remembered delight. Lest I be accused of romanticisation, it has to be said, too, that the brutality of living conditions played its part in provoking meanness, deceit, violence and injustice within the stricken families and communities. The harshness in the times inspired both the best and worst of human behaviour.^{xxxv}

To take the first half of Grey's summary of human behaviour in those years, a number of commentators have agreed upon the significant contribution that community, solidarity, collectivism and neighbourliness has made to the myth of northernness. As part of their discussion of everyday life and local feeling in Sheffield and Manchester, Taylor, Evans and Fraser talked to a number of senior citizens about the changes they had witnessed in their communities over the past 70 to 80 years. They summarise their findings by noting that 'there is no question that one of the most powerful refrains running through our discussions with the elderly was a kind of 'class and regional nostalgia' for the lost world of industrial manufacturing and its associated set of social institutions and political and civic assumptions. Most particularly lamented was the sense of community that was universally asserted to have been characteristic of that particular historical experience.^{xxxvi} And yet the authors point to the rhetorical nature of assertions of community by noting the lack of specific references to locations or persons.

Indeed, the concept of 'community' to which nostalgists might point is a very hazy one. Does it exist on the level of family, street, district, town, or region, or is it simply a quality that suffuses social interactions and expectations at a very general level? Rob Shields has made the point that the sense of community that we stereotypically associate with the North is a very partial and constructed one. Shields takes *Coronation Street* as the most obvious and available celebration of group affinity and close-knit neighbourliness in the mythologised North. 'Corrie' is, in this view, a 'prescriptive utopian fantasy' in which the idealised working-class share a 'spurious, homogenised identity'.^{xxxvii}

Many of these reductive myths are indebted to a notional pre-war North that one critic has satirically termed 'Hoggartsborough' in reference to Richard Hoggart's advocacy of the 1930s as the golden era of the Northern working-class before it supposedly succumbed to the materialism, individualism and Americanisation of the post-war period.^{xxxviii} Hoggart

himself has come under considerable criticism recently – a lot of it unjust, as I will hope to show in my reading of his autobiography *A Local Habitation* – for excessive nostalgia.^{xxxix} Turner argues that Hoggart belongs to a school of thought that subscribes to the idea of a cultural Fall whereby the inter-war years, for all their harshness, nevertheless serve as a nostalgic counterpoint to a materialistic post-war working-class Northern culture with its 'lack of organicism, its failure to emerge from specific roots within the lived cultures of ordinary people'.^{xxx} Medhurst states that 'it is now taken as axiomatic that Hoggart was given to "romanticisation"'.^{xxxi} His work is viewed as 'defensive populist nostalgia', making his version of working-class culture 'backward-looking, apolitical, insular, sexist and slushy'.^{xxxii} Charlesworth rejects *The Uses of Literacy* on the grounds of its 'irrelevance and the banality of its observations'.^{xxxiii} Turner brands his work a 'nostalgic account'.^{xxxiv}

Resisting the nostalgic tendency that has been pinned on Hoggart, Joanna Bourke has worked ruthlessly in her book *Working-Class Cultures in Britain* to expose working-class community as a 'retrospective construction'.^{xxxv} Bourke establishes a version of the working-class that is multipartite, complex and quite without moral consensus or collective identification. Taking the definition of community as 'a sense of shared perspectives, and reciprocal dependency' to be a 'backward-looking romanticism', Bourke comments that 'the romantic use of the phrase has been fostered in working-class autobiographies and oral histories, where social relations are often recalled through a golden haze: conflict is forgotten in favour of doors that were always open; the neighbour who was neglected in favour of the neighbour who always shared; tiring workdays in favour of nearly forgotten games which diverted children during difficult times'.^{xxxvi}

Bourke's comments are persuasive but there is a sense in which she may have been rather too harsh in her efforts to explode what she sees as a mawkish myth. As Andy Medhurst has argued of derisive comments about scholarship-boy stories:

Anyone who speaks about a working-class upbringing in a British context is liable to accusations of sentimentality. This is hardly surprising, since class is an emotional business. Class privilege and class prejudice are not reducible to dispassionate debate or the algebras of abstraction. Class is felt, class wounds, class hurts, and those of us on a cusp between classes bruise particularly easily.^{xxxvii}

In view of these debates, it is not my task to set up a supposedly truthful account of what it was like to live in Bolton or Blackburn in the 1920s against which to measure the veracity of autobiographies pertaining to that period. What I am keen to study is the representation of life in this period as it has been filtered through literature with all its entanglements of memory, audience, purpose and context. Indeed, part of my agenda is to explore the extent to which myths – however fictional or fantastic – may nevertheless be thought of as part of the experiential 'reality' of 'belonging' to the region.

The texts that I examine reveal shifting and ambiguous positions with regard to the North and northernness. On the one hand there is a surprising level of agreement amongst the authors'

texts as to what constitutes northernness, most especially when taken in contrast to the idea of the South. However, it will be seen that the 'North' is used as something of a 'straw man': the life story within is often much more 'anti-Northern' in its sensibilities and predilections, full of hostilities towards the space in which the author spent his childhood. How do the authors manage the process of reconciliation needed to bestow value on a place that moulded the personality but was also, in some critical sense, lacking?

In what follows, therefore, I examine the attitudes towards northernness, masculinity, community, poverty and exile as expressed by these five texts.

North and South

All the writers introduced above express uncomplicated love for the North, or at least, how the North used to be. This is most often expressed at the level of the immediate locale rather than at the level of the region as a whole, however. Burgess states that 'I am proud to be a Mancunian'^{xxxviii}; Woodruff – who later emigrated to Florida as a professor of economics – states that 'I was proud to be a Lancastrian, especially a Blackburnian'^{xxxix}; and Hoggart – typically the most careful in the terms of his self-analysis – states that 'in an obscure way we felt part of the entity of Leeds and proud of belonging to it'.^{xl}

Bearing in mind that these texts were written at a time when the North was far from thriving, particular pride is taken in the achievements of the area on a national scale. Burgess, as a literary figure, rhapsodises about Manchester's linguistic verve and high cultural pedigree while the economist Woodruff writes that 'Blackburn had been the greatest weaving centre in the world'.^{xli} These assertions of status and value seem to be addressed to an educated, middle-class southern or supposedly neutral 'other' and are aimed at buttressing the importance of the North at a national level as more than just an inconsequential backwater. These authors are always aware of the value judgements of the 'South' and contrasts are drawn continually. As Gillian Rose has it: 'senses of place relate to identity in different ways: they may invite identification with a place; they may establish identity by offering a contrast with the place that is "away"'.^{xlii}

The place that is 'away' for the autobiographers is a certain, crudely-constructed 'South' to which many regional southerners would take exception. Moreover, I do not want to be too simplistic in my assertion of an inter-war years' North-South divide as the North was itself open to internal divisions. Hoggart, for instance, observes how 'Sheffield and Stockport looked different and felt different from Leeds': there is no sense of an homogeneous Pennine regional consciousness here.^{xliii} Likewise, Burgess – talking about clogs and knocker-up men – points out the differences between Manchester and Lancashire mill towns, while to Haworth, in Burnley, Manchester was a 'foreign place'.^{xliv} And yet this awareness of difference is as nothing when compared to the sense of radical alterity invoked in images of the mysterious, mythic South.

Paradoxically, it is by studying allusions to – and caricatures of – the South that we can best approach a sense of what it means to be Northern in these works.



Knocker-up, Manchester

In the majority of the texts the south emerges as a foreign space to be suspected or disdained. Preparing to leave his beloved but beleaguered Blackburn, Woodruff finds himself 'wonder[ing] what the people of the south were really like. Were they like us?'.^{xlv} 'No', would seem to be the answer provided by the four other texts studied here. Haworth's anticipatory sense of the South comes from the boasting of an insurance man who had visited his family's home one day:

He made it known that he had motored to the South of England. He described the expedition as though he had been up the Amazon. We were left with a notion of wide roads and glass factories, lush fields and woods, and of brisk people of sharp speech and punctilious driving habits living in green and spacious towns.^{xlvi}

'Lush', 'green' and 'spacious' are very typical of the lexicon applied by this type of text to the South, which provides an idealised topographical foil to the cramped, grey and harsh northern industrial town. Yet its human aspect is pejoratively judged to be 'sharp', 'brisk' and 'punctilious' in distinction to an implicitly superior northern warmth and expansiveness.

These distinctions are amplified in Bill Naughton's first impressions of London after having been called up to the capital for the war: 'I looked around at the cool-faced Londoners about me, heard the strange accents, and thought of the warm Lancashire faces I had left behind'.^{xlvii} There is a revelling in sentiment that characterises Naughton's work: the North-South dispositional divide is invoked to explain a mood that probably had far more pressing contexts and denotations (i.e. war) than simple southern aloofness.

Richard Hoggart works harder to define the sense of the South's difference by focusing on socio-economic contrasts. Hoggart's South is clearly not the hard-bitten East End or impoverished Cornish mining communities but a South that is tangibly more

affluent and privileged than the more uniformly working-class North. Hoggart pinpoints the end of the Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire coalfields as:

The entry to the softer South, the property-owning South, the executive South, the clean South, the suburban South, the mock-Tudor and half-timbered South, which, on rare occasions one passed through a swathe of it on the way into London, had all the tugging attraction of an Ealing film, and made a Northerner feel more than ever outside, cut off from an altogether softer, more wrap-around, less hard-edged England.^{xlviii}

Hoggart's language here is far from unambiguous. The 'tugging attraction' betrays itself in the fixated, incantatory repetition of 'South' and in essence these lines give back to us a lexically savvier version of the cushy, plush South constructed in the Burnley insurance man's eulogy. Yet this goggle-eyed awe at wealth and space is counterbalanced by the recurrent impression of spiritual southern inferiority: the three pejoratively-weighted references to the South's relative softness makes it clear that this comfortable mock-Tudor world lacks the galvanising or hardening force of the straitened, industrial North.

An interesting class dynamic is added to this reflex when we look at the work of Anthony Burgess when discussing the South. Burgess's father was well-educated and his family went up in the world when they moved into the off-license trade in middle-class Moss Side, leaving behind the roughness of the Golden Eagle pub in working-class Miles Platting. Burgess's



The Golden Eagle, Lodge Street, Miles Platting, 1958

childhood and adolescence were certainly less deprived than the other four authors studied here. Burgess therefore seems to add a less defensive and awed voice to the chorus of southern disapproval, basing his criticisms on a perception of the capital's high-cultural inferiority. His tone is arrogant and aggressive as we hear him trying to get up the nose of the complacent southern establishment:

In those days for a Mancunian to visit the capital was an exercise in condescension. London was a day behind Manchester in the arts, in commercial cunning, in eco-

nomie philosophy. True, it had the monarchy and the government and was gratuitously big. It had more history than Manchester, but history was no more than a tourist frippery. When foreigners came to Manchester they came to learn, not to feed ravens and snap beefeaters. Sometimes, they learned too well but that was not Manchester's fault. Manchester was generous and London was not [...] The distance was between the Mancunian and Londonian temperaments.^{xlix}

Burgess is different here as he feels himself part of a grander North than the towns and villages that the other four authors lived in. And in all the post-war northern writing I have come across, Burgess is one of the few to still give voice to the sense of Manchester as the great nineteenth-century 'shock' city able to look down on London. And yet Burgess is bruised by a sense of marginality and vulnerability in the face of the South-East as a 'centralising linguistic force': 'Cradle-speakers of that south-eastern dialect which has become the national language of the educated have never sufficiently realised the pain we provincials have suffered in forcing ourselves to conform'.ⁱ Burgess refers to 'cradle-speakers' as he mourns the fact that he had to work hard to lose his accent so as to be able to get on in 'the world' (this being in an era before what he describes as 'the provincial revolt of the 1950s'): 'it was not taken seriously outside Lancashire. London saw it or heard it as a wilful and comic deformation of Received Standard, suitable for George Fornby Senior or Junior but to be despised as a medium for social intercourse'.ⁱⁱ This, then, is the same resented, hegemonic southern stranglehold which meant that 'a Manchester degree, however good, could never hope to prevail against one, however bad, from Oxford or Cambridge'.ⁱⁱⁱ There is an interesting tension here, therefore, between pride in provincial origins and perceived exclusion from the Big Smoke.

This indeterminacy causes writers to adopt some fascinatingly irrational and contrived identity positions. At certain points in his narrative Burgess rejects the philistinism of the northern working-class yet when it comes to pretentious southerners he is quite happy to ally himself with the customers of his father's old pub. He takes vicariously plebeian – and bitter – satisfaction in the fact that on holiday in Blackpool 'there was more drinking and there were heartening fights with strangers, preferably slumming southerners'.^{liii}

Aside from registering some clear statements of regional pride, I have begun this analysis of northern identity by drawing on what it is not. Standing for what it is not, the South becomes a repository for the unwanted and contemptible in human character and social conduct. It is variously upbraided for being cold, sharp, brisk, punctilious, ungenerous, soft, elitist, privileged, opulent, spacious, clean, oblivious to others, suburban, executive, superficial, hollow, touristy, executive, wrap-around, self-regarding, half-timbered, property-owning and over-refined. And it knows nothing about a good hotpot.

So much for the South; what of the North?

I think that one of the most important qualities that these authors take as defining northernness is good humour. It seems particularly important to stress this quality as many of the com-

mentaries by outsiders such as Orwell focus on the squalor and hardship without doing justice to the importance of laughter in northern place meaning. This is not to say that humorousness was necessarily a universal trait but merely to observe that it is deemed by the autobiographers discussed to be the lynchpin of their sense of regional identity. Many of the authors make extravagant, generalised claims for the region's comic spirit: Woodruff remembers of a friend that he would 'go out of his way to start people laughing, which with Lancashire people was infectious'.^{lv} Haworth states that in Burnley '[c]heerfulness was a social requirement. Grumbling was scoffed at'.^{lv} Hoggart and Naughton manifest, respectively, a kind of academic and religious seriousness, yet Burgess concurs with Woodruff's view that '[f]or Lancashire folk, exuberance was an inborn trait' when he cites a hotel where 'the management catered for weddings and funerals alike and, this being Manchester, with equal gusto'.^{lvi} Either explicitly or implicitly, all of these authors make regional claims for the quality of the social ambience. To conclude, take Burgess's mention of a couple whose courtship had gone on for years: 'Of this couple the following was told, a typical Lancashire paring down to bare dialogue: "Isn't it time we got wed, Jim?", "Ay, but who'd have us now?"'.^{lvii}

Poverty and Community

In this section I want to examine the values attached to poverty in these texts and examine how, first, material deprivation is made to appear to be a salutary and powerful source of identity. The following line from the opening page of Naughton's autobiography is a prime example of this: 'We're not what would be called posh in Unsworth Street'.^{lviii} The first thing to notice is the collective pronoun which sounds the note of solidarity and common experience. Lexically 'posh' establishes the familiar, colloquial tone while the litotical construction of the sentence makes an affirmation of poverty by negating its opposite. This tone is continued in a less-is-more argument: 'Around here we're happy with the occasional singing canary in a cage, the aspidistra in the window, and the privet hedge here and there – and these we have all year round. To heck with poets and all the rest of them – you can't beat the cosy feeling of your own back street, and all the young miners and others playing marps for money'.^{lix} Elsewhere Naughton blames money for corrupting the characters of young men during the brief post-war boom and opines that 'anxiety, fear, hunger, and pain – may be almost as necessary as love for the development of the character'.^{lx}

Woodruff echoes this view when he says that 'I was lucky to have been born and reared in Lancashire, doubly lucky to have been poor [...] I had never had the time or need to ask, who am I? I was a weaver's son, somebody close to the bottom of the social pile; somebody who could not evade reality; somebody who had been brought into daily contact with the conditions of labour; somebody who had been blessed by constant challenge: the challenge of poverty, the challenge of making do; even the challenge of a harsh climate and a cold North wind'.^{lxi}

Such a view is firmly entrenched within the sense of the northerner as ennoblingly long-suffering. Haworth observes that '[people] were helped by their patience and poverty, old characteristics of the poor [...] They accepted their bad luck. They bent with the wind. They did not kick rocks and then complain

that the universe was hostile'.^{lxii} Naughton states that 'deprivation [was] so bred into use that we were unable to grasp it as something other than what might normally be expected from life'.^{lxiii}

With respect to issues of poverty, Hoggart, Woodruff and Burgess suggest that hardship was not so easily recruited to a sense of collective identity. Woodruff, for instance, is naturally given to deep sentiment on occasion yet he does not refrain from depicting the morally corrosive side to poverty. As a young child he remembers finding a malnourished-looking thief in his family's kitchen: 'the incredible thing about those years is that the poor began to steal from the poor'.^{lxiv} He also points to some of the everyday ugliness of living in a depressed northern town that is elided in more sentimental accounts: '[i]n summer, the smell of rotting garbage was everywhere. Flies descended in droves; hence the upset stomachs'.^{lxv}

Such details are not necessarily beyond incorporation in any northern romanticism but they do offer a greater level of specificity that is less susceptible to sublimation or elision. Hoggart fastidiously avoids blasé, ideologically imprecise statements but points us to the particular, affecting moment: 'when you have seen a woman standing in frozen, clutching misery whilst tears start slowly down her cheeks because a sixpence has been lost and difficult readjustments have to be made, you do not easily forget'.^{lxvi} Similarly, in spite of his comparable wealth, Burgess points to the crushing, listless misery of the Depression using concrete reference points: 'I had not been sheltered from the cries of the dispossessed in the greenery of Victoria Park. I regularly saw the undernourished beneficiaries of the dole and the means test, drab, thin, living on bread, and an egg every two days'.^{lxvii} Thus, to take an illustrative example of differing takes on a mutual commonplace, while Naughton claims to be happy with an aspidistra in the window, Burgess states that 'I was in an ugly world with ramshackle houses and foul back alleys, not a tree or a flower to be seen'.^{lxviii}

There are countervailing trends of romance and realism, therefore, where poverty is concerned. Yet, in relation to issues of community spirit and solidarity, there is much more unanimity between the texts.

The most immediate layer in the community presented by these writers is of course the family. As an orphan Hoggart points to 'the working-class sense of family solidarity' as the reason for his personal survival and future success.^{lxix} Living in a tiny weaver's cottage, Woodruff recalls that 'my brother and I slept so close to our parents that we could touch them. It gave us a sense of belonging'.^{lxx} Haworth points to what he saw as the benefits of clear roles within the 1930s family where 'old people especially enjoyed a bit of authority [...] my father [was] head of the household [...] my mother [was] manager of the home'.^{lxxi}

In terms of the larger neighbourhood, Haworth claims that people were essentially existing within 'the Christian tradition learned in childhood with an emphasis on social responsibility developed through a century of hard and close urban living'.^{lxxii} This 'hard and close urban living' accounts for the specifically northern claims for this collectivist mentality as other areas of

the country did not witness industrialisation on such a significant level. Thus Naughton gives phonetic emphasis to the memory of his friend helping a woman with a broken baby carriage full of coal picked from the slag heap: 'Blimmy said to her, "Don't you worry, missis – Lancasheer helps Lancasheer"'.^{lxxxiii}

Woodruff remembers that 'although I was first to be put to bed in our family, I was never lonely. I always fell asleep to the drone of voices in the kitchen below'.^{lxxxiv} Here we have a very clear-cut society where work helped to define and delimit the scope of thought and activity. Hoggart calls it a 'small, neat, ecologically complete cycle'.^{lxxxv} Naughton's epigram is that 'you were all one in the kingdom of fish and chips'.^{lxxxvi} Indeed, far from qualifying the 'myth' of the northern community, Woodruff goes so far as to say that its historical significance has not been sufficiently recognised or appreciated: 'Too little has been made of working class solidarity and community spirit. It wasn't the dole that saved Britain from revolution, it was the nature of the working classes. The British toffs will never know how lucky they were'.^{lxxxvii}

So far then, we have documented four key points about these five texts: they assert a sense of pride in their city and/or region; they understand themselves in relation to a crudely-differentiated South; they discourse on the effects of poverty in different ways; and, lastly, they all subscribe to a strong sense of community and class solidarity.

Exile

It is with the fifth and final category dealt with in this chapter that we get to the nitty-gritty, however. Why did Bert Hoggart become Richard Hoggart? Why did John Wilson become Anthony Burgess? These questions stem from the fact that each of the authors discussed here is in some way exceptional. They have 'made it'. And in 'making it' they have been drawn out of the northern working-class communities with which they claim such consanguinity. We have to ask the question: to what extent are these autobiographies partial and nostalgic rewritings of rather more jumbled and ambivalent realities? If you have made it into a London-based middle-class culture then what are the benefits of staging your identity within a northern childhood with all its temptations towards exaggeration or self-aggrandisement? Is northernness to some extent an act, a means of occupying a certain identity position in order to have the best of both worlds?

In fairness I would say that four of the texts meet these questions head on and are very honest about their authors' reasons for leaving the North. But this is not to say that their answers are well-managed or tidy, for identity is necessarily always slipping and sliding around in such texts. Hoggart, for instance, writes scrupulously about 'the baggage of class and of local, Anglo-Saxon place roots'.^{lxxxviii} So what prompted this problematic and book-spawning move away from the 'kingdom of fish and chips'? In what ways does the North of the 1920s and 1930s fail? What does it lack? With what is it unable to provide these men?

Haworth's text is by far the least informative about any disharmony between self and community or region: he would seem to claim total affinity with his culture's values and principles.

After being called up for the war, Haworth ends the story of his childhood years with the simple and sealed sentence: 'I never returned to live in Burnley again, but it is the place I still think of as home'.^{lxxxix} This leaves the reader with all kinds of niggling questions and confirms the suspicion that Haworth's relation to his 'home' is more complex than his story would suggest.

In contrast, William Woodruff's text is brutally clear about his reasons for leaving Lancashire: 'the best I could hope for was pick-and-shovel work'.^{lxxx} Having grown up in the worst years of the stricken Lancashire economy, Woodruff's move away was motivated by simple human imperatives. Yet he manages to cushion the psychological blow by making his Lancashireness the very means by which he was able to effect his leave-taking: 'Lancashire folk might be rough and ready, but they were never servile. Servile people didn't take it upon themselves to walk out as I was doing. At least Lancashire had left me free to reject my birthplace'.^{lxxxxi}

Yet even where there isn't a physical sundering, there can be a psychological rift between a person and his beloved city or region. The cause of this rift for Naughton, Hoggart and Burgess is books. The North that they present – and admire – is essentially a working, oral, male culture of the streets. The 'streets' become the main focus of disquiet for these men. It is indeed absorbing to follow the ongoing effort which these authors make to try and fuse their bookish, monkish tendencies with the alternating attraction and repulsion they feel for the very non-literary and anti-philosophical world of pubs, back streets and playgrounds.

A number of northern working-class communities of this time would have lacked confidence or interest in educational and literary matters. Haworth, for instance, points out that '[b]ooks in our house either came as Sunday School prizes or as gifts for taking a newspaper or not at all'.^{lxxxii} Understandably, 'dallying in education, still to be under instruction as one approached adult years seemed effete'.^{lxxxiii} The latter quotation neatly summarises the dilemma of the male northern writer: to write is not to be very male or very northern. The culture is more oral and community-based than the self-focused world of words – 'my people loved talking' – where writing would mark a flaunting of station or destiny: '[my father] never encouraged any of us to better ourselves or make the best of our talents by schooling'.^{lxxxiv}

To buck this trend requires something special in such a society. Hoggart was clearly exceptional in his intelligence and in the encouragement of his mother and aunt that he 'should not sound and be Leeds working-class'.^{lxxxv} Hoggart clearly did not feel at ease with many of the people around him. Similarly, Naughton felt 'lonely and alien' in Bolton because of his Irish Catholic heritage.^{lxxxvi} Naughton's work as a whole bears out one historian's view that 'Irish Catholics as a whole were never simply outcasts from Manchester's working-class; nor were they all warmly embraced by their English neighbours'.^{lxxxvii} Thus whilst Naughton often signals his admiration for northern bluntness, warmth and solidarity, elsewhere he expresses a sense of tension between his own 'oddly quiet disposition' and that of the northern working-class mass around him.^{lxxxviii} Whilst the young boy is indoors sedulously writing his 'scholarly' diaries

he, like, Burgess, feels a disjunction between himself and the life of the streets outside: out '[t]here in the dusty street, where it seemed all my days were destined to be spent, the mindless mob went clattering by on their way home for midday dinner, some of whom would hardly know the day of the week were it not for the signs and smells about them [...] they just went milling by like hordes of noisy and good-humoured barbarians'.^{lxxxix} It is only the word 'good-humoured' that prevents this description from having a tone of total revulsion. This mood of apartness also has Naughton claiming greater spiritual rarefaction than is achieved by the low-brow world of the industrial North: 'my wish was to slip into heaven unnoticed - to escape from the almost incessant din of Bolton into some quiet little corner of God's kingdom would suit me perfectly'.^{xc}

Whereas Burgess's family were themselves Irish Catholic, it was money and education that marked Burgess out as different, as he discovered in the day unit of a Manchester hospital as a child: 'I had never seen myself as one of the privileged, but now I was marked out as such by my aspirates, which were mocked. There were two classes in this world, then, and they were bitterly opposed'.^{xc1} To take this opposition further – and to understand the confusion of Burgess's position within it – we could look briefly at the issue of language. On the one hand, Burgess aligns himself with the North on a dialectical and ideological linguistic level when he mourns the death of Lancashire dialect and the contemptible imperialism of Received Standard. Yet when we see Burgess in a crowd at Manchester City he is rather appalled by his local linguistic culture. When his uncle suggests that McCabe might be the best centre-forward playing anywhere, '[t]here was a derisory and even bitter response of 'fuck off, is he fuck, is he fuckin' hell, what the fuck does this fucker think he fuckin' knows about it?' The answer being 'fuck all'. I was now familiar with the word in all its declensions'.^{xc2} I think there is something of a wince in the choice of words here – the phrase about declensions swiftly marks Burgess off as the learned and aloof outsider to this kind of discourse. So which local language is it that Burgess champions, strictly speaking?

Take John Wilson (later 'Anthony Burgess') sitting on the doorstep of the Golden Eagle in Miles Platting one afternoon in 1928: 'incoming and outgoing customers must have noticed something unhealthy in this thin-legged child drawing on ragged card or gaping over *Chick's Own*. I should have been throwing stones or kicking an old tennis ball about Lodge street with its rougher urchins, or slopping in bare feet through the mud and horse-merds'.^{xc3} Burgess is a 'child' rather than an 'urchin' and there is a clear distaste for the rough and ready world of the streets. In spite of his father having concluded that 'education was a mug's game', Burgess's chosen narrative is very much that of a bookish boy at odds with an anti-literary family and culture: I will always remember the image he presents of himself reading Ibsen on the beach at blaring, brassy Blackpool. We therefore have to reconcile the hotpot crusader with the man who asseverates of his Northern childhood that 'I seemed to be surrounded by philistines'.^{xc4}

There is a very similar sensibility at work in Hoggart's view of himself as a 'spotty ordinand' for whom '[the streets] became less interesting as grammar school took over'.^{xc5} Unlike Burgess and Naughton, Hoggart claims that 'you are unlikely to find an



**Manchester City Football Club's Ground, Maine Road
1925**

active philistinism' amongst the Northern working-classes, yet this seems to be something of an ambitious and wistful claim.^{xc6} For Hoggart is very much of the respectable working-class and he baulks at the crudeness of the miner that his Aunt Alice chooses to marry. Similarly, for all his good-natured qualifications and exculpations, he cannot help but register a sense of disdain for the world of the worker with:

The limited enthusiasms and dismissals, the endless repetitive arguments about the latest TV give-away show or scandalous revelation in their newspaper – about royalty or sport or showbiz – which assume that they matter to more than the shallower reaches of experience, the equally endless and conventional sexual chit-chat, the routine bad language, itself largely sexual in origin, the blinkered reactions to simplified political positions as presented by the popular press and peddled around the group.^{xc7}

These are damning words and are reminiscent in tone of Burgess at the football and Naughton hearing the noise of the street while at work on his diary. The identification that these authors make with the working-class – and almost by association, the North – is not wholesale or unmitigated. Statements such as the above give us the exact friction point between the individual mind and the collective cultural character. If the North confers all kinds of honourable attitudinal values, it is also lacking in cerebral culture and refinement. Hoggart's text stands as a meticulous and sensitive account of this identity-troubling predicament: 'I was beginning the movement out and away, step by step, slowly but irrevocably leaving that house, that home, that culture, those unhappy people to whom I would for ever after be emotionally linked. I carried their peculiar pride with me, in different, diffident or aggressive ways'.^{xc8} Hoggart's work, like that of a number of other male, northern working-class writers such as Tony Harrison, is ample testimony to the fact that 'after a break like that you never sit entirely or wholly at ease in your local culture'.^{xc9}

Conclusion

In June 2003 the Mancunian novelist Carol Birch lamented the tendency for representations of the North to be either indulgently twee or miserably naturalistic; she asserts that 'the North comes in two types, Hovis and Grim'.^c The autobiographies studied above have emerged as containing sufficient complexity to offset accusations of pietism. However, they must be understood within the context of the other literary genres that dominated writing about the region during the nineteen eight-

ies. Works such as Tony Harrison's *v.*, Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, Hines's *Looks and Smiles*, Cartwright's *Road* and Michael's *Under a Thin Moon* all recorded a North of sink estates, unemployment, deindustrialisation and cultural erosion.^{ci} Read alongside such works, the North described by Burgess, Naughton, Haworth, Woodruff and Hoggart cannot help but commemorate a relatively more homogeneous and vivid cultural identity for the region.

Notes

ⁱ L. Dawson, *Les Dawson's Lancashire* (London, 1984), pp. 11-12.

ⁱⁱ *Alfie*, Dir. L. Gilbert, Paramount/Shieldrake, 1966.

ⁱⁱⁱ B. Naughton, *On The Pig's Back* (Oxford, 1987) and *Saintly Billy* (Oxford, 1988).

^{iv} L. Harte, 'Migrant memory – the recovery of self in the autobiography of Bill Naughton', *Critical Survey*, 8, (1996), p. 168.

^v W. Woodruff, *Billy Boy* (Halifax, 1993) [the edition used here]; reissued as *The Road to Nab End: An Extraordinary Northern Childhood* (London, 2002).

^{vi} D. Haworth, *Bright Morning* (London, 1990).

^{vii} See J. Winterson, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (London, 1991 [1985]); A. Ashworth, *Once in a House on Fire* (London, 1998); H. Jacobson, *The Mighty Walzer* (London, 1999); C. Shindler, *Manchester United Ruined My Life* (London, 1998); M. Drabble, *Jerusalem The Golden* (Harmondsworth, 1967).

^{viii} See P. Driver, *Manchester Pieces* (London, 1996) and S. Armitage, *All Points North* (Harmondsworth, 1999).

^{ix} P. Dodd, 'Lowryscapes: recent writings about 'the North'', *Critical Quarterly*, 32:2 (1991), p. 18.

^x A. Bennett, *Writing Home* (London, 1994), p. 385.

^{xi} G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1989), p. 98.

^{xii} See C. Delheim, 'Imagining England: Victorian views of the North', *Northern History*, 26 (1986), pp. 216-30.

^{xiii} B. Appleyard, 'T'narrowness of t'North; They scorn muesli and avocados. They're poor, gritty and authentic. Or are they?', *The Independent*, 14 Sept. 1994, Comment, p. 15.

^{xiv} K.R. Smith, 'Allegory and autobiography: George Perec's narrative resistance to nostalgia', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 23:3 (1993), p. 202.

^{xv} K. Douglas, 'Blurb-ing biographical: authorship and autobiography', *Biography*, 24:4 (2001), pp. 806-26.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 807.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 808.

^{xix} J. Burnett, D. Vincent and D. Mayall, 'Introduction' in J. Burnett, D. Vincent and D. Mayall (eds.), *The Autobiography of the Working-Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (Brighton, 1984), p. xx.

^{xx} S. Charlesworth, *A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 2.

^{xxi} R. Johnson quoted in T. Griffiths, *The Lancashire Working Classes 1880-1930* (Oxford, 2001), p. 2.

^{xxii} Dodd, 'Lowryscapes', p. 18.

^{xxiii} R. Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London, 1998), p. 154.

^{xxiv} Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, p. 46.

^{xxv} N. Grey, *The Worst of Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression in Britain* (London, 1985), p. 6.

^{xxvi} P. Taylor, K. Evans and P. Fraser, *A Tale of Two Cities: Global Change, Local Feeling and Everyday Life in the North of England* (London, 1996), p. 247.

^{xxvii} R. Shields, *Places on the Margin* (London, 1996), p. 208.

^{xxviii} G. Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (London, 1990), p. 48.

^{xxix} R. Hoggart, *A Local Habitation* (Oxford, 1988).

^{xxx} Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, p. 49.

^{xxxi} A. Medhurst, 'If anywhere: class identifications and cultural studies academics' in S. Munt (ed.), *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* (London, 2000), p. 21.

^{xxxii} Medhurst, 'If anywhere', p. 21.

^{xxxiii} Charlesworth, *Phenomenology*, p. 88.

^{xxxiv} Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, p. 61.

^{xxxv} J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994), p.101.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 137.

^{xxxvii} Medhurst, 'If anywhere', p. 21.

^{xxxviii} A. Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* (London, 1987), p. 15.

^{xxxix} Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 274.

^{xl} Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 39.

^{xli} Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 274.

- xli G. Rose, 'Place and identity: a sense of place', in D. Massey and P. Jess (eds.), *A Place in the World?* (Oxford, 1995), p. 97.
- xlii Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 89.
- xliii Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 56; Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 15.
- xliv Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 268.
- xlv Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 50.
- xlvi Naughton, *Pig's Back*, p. 16.
- xlvii Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 113.
- xlviii Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 234.
- xlix *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- l *Ibid.*
- li *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- lii *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- liii Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 94.
- liv Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 221.
- lv Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 28; Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 52.
- lvi Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 50.
- lvii Naughton, *Pig's Back*, p. 3.
- lviii *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- lix *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- lx Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 275.
- lxi Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 21.
- lxii Naughton, *Saintly Billy*, p. 88.
- lxiii Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 44.
- lxiv *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- lxv Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 44.
- lxvi Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 125.
- lxvii *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- lxviii Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 52.
- lxix Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 52.
- lxx Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 220.
- lxxi *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- lxxii Naughton, *Saintly Billy*, p. 113.
- lxxiii Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 19.
- lxxiv Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 33.
- lxxv Naughton, *Saintly Billy*, p. 116.
- lxxvi Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 204.
- lxxvii Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 137.
- lxxviii Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 235.
- lxxix Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 273.
- lxxx *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- lxxxi Haworth, *Bright Morning*, p. 54.
- lxxxii *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- lxxxiii Woodruff, *Billy Boy*, p. 28.
- lxxxiv Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 36.
- lxxxv Naughton, *Saintly Billy*, p. 90.
- lxxxvi S. Fielding, 'A separate culture? Irish Catholics in working-class Manchester and Salford 1890-1939' in A. Davies and S. Fielding (eds.), *Worker's Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1992), p. 82.
- lxxxvii Naughton, *Saintly Billy*, p. 14.
- lxxxviii *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- lxxxix *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- xc Burgess, *Little Wilson*, p. 80.
- xc *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- xcii *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- xciii *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- xciv Hoggart, *Local Habitation*, p. 88.
- xcv *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- xcvi *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- xcvii *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- xcviii *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- xcix C. Birch, 'Northern Delights', *The Independent*, 11 Sept. 2003, Review, pp. 14-15.
- c J. Cartwright, *Road* (London, 1986); A. Dunbar, *Plays* (London, 1988); T. Harrison, *V. New Edition: With Press Articles* (Newcastle, 1985); B. Hines, *Looks and Smiles* (Harmondsworth, 1982); L. Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (London, 1992).