

Burgess's Manchester, Manchester's Burgess

This symposium has as its focus the lives of Anthony Burgess as portrayed in the biographical and autobiographical writing. We are inevitably, then, involved in an enterprise which considers how lives are represented in fiction and non-fiction both written by and about our author. In doing so, we will discover, no doubt, the difficulty of separating the life from the work, the man from the representation. It is perhaps therefore permissible for me to introduce an autobiographical element at this point. My interest in Burgess stems from a shared Mancunian background. My childhood, like Burgess's, was spent in North Manchester, albeit forty years later. My earliest memories are of the shop on Rochdale Road where my mother worked, opposite Carisbrook Street, where Burgess had been born in 1917, and where his mother and sister died in the post war flu epidemic. My family had some faint recollections of the Wilson household, especially of Bertha, the maid who is memorably described in *Little Wilson and Big God* descending naked down the "noble staircase" of the Golden Eagle public house. My route to school took me past Moston Cemetery where Burgess supposed he would be buried alongside his forbears – he is not, and Andrew Biswell's recent research has shown that none of his family rest in that most Catholic of Manchester resting places. Since my schooldays, I have lived at various locations in Manchester, including Victoria Park, hard by Xaverian College, and like Burgess, I am proud to hold a degree from Manchester University. My interest, then, is a personal as well as a professional one. I was delighted, as a teenager, to discover that the author of *A Clockwork Orange* was a fellow Mancunian. Even then, the bleak high-rise cityscape of Burgess's dystopia seemed more reminiscent of the post war flats of Collyhurst than the Stalinist architecture it is generally taken to evoke. Burgess's reading of *A Clockwork Orange*, recorded in the late sixties, is instructive

too: he voices Alex in a strongly northern intonation, actually more redolent of the Lancashire accent than of the more obviously nasal Manchester voice. In this paper I want to explore how our mutual home city features in Burgess's works. In particular, in keeping with the focus of this symposium, I want to examine the way Manchester is represented by this exile in some fictional works with strong autobiographical elements, and to consider also how Manchester has responded to the work of arguably its greatest literary son.

Burgess's stance on Manchester is, at best, ambiguous. After his emigration from England, he seldom returned to his home city. Probably his final visit was to promote *A Mouthful of Air* in 1992. On that occasion, he gave a talk, characteristically delivered without notes, in which he was, *inter alia*, quite scathing about the city and the changes that had occurred since his youth. This speech was distinctly at odds with a piece he wrote at the time for the *Manchester Evening News*, later anthologised in *One Man's Chorus*, where Manchester is described as "prouder, cleaner and more elegant"¹ than the city of his youth.

Even on that single visit, Manchester seems to have occupied conflicting positions in Burgess's mind. The fiction suggests a similar state of confusion. Naturally, the city features heavily in Burgess's first autobiographical volume, and, as he demonstrated throughout his career, no experience was ever wasted, so it is no surprise that the Manchester of his childhood and young adulthood features in the fiction. The real and the fictional frequently intertwine in Burgess's work, to a degree greater than is the

¹ *One Man's Chorus*, p.91

case with most novelists. To some extent, Burgess's fiction might almost be treated as an adjunct of his autobiography.

Against this background, it is perhaps surprising that Manchester features so infrequently in the fiction, but two novels use the author's childhood and early adulthood in Manchester very directly: *The Pianoplayers* and *Any Old Iron*.

The first half of *The Pianoplayers* is an imaginative reconfiguration of Burgess's early life, with Ellen Henshaw replacing the author as the survivor of the 1918 flu epidemic. The episode concerning the death of Ellen's mother and brother precisely parallels Burgess's version of the event in *Little Wilson and Big God*, even though this version was, according to Lewis, somewhat embellished. The parallels go further: just as Burgess's father was a cinema pianist, so Ellen's is an inventive supplier of live soundtracks in the Manchester fleapits of the early twenties; and just as Burgess's mother was the Beautiful Belle Burgess, music hall artiste, so Ellen's mother is Flossie Oldham, Queen of the Soubrettes; both Ellen and Burgess attend the English Martyrs School, and both are terrorised by a painting of gypsy women on the bedroom wall; Burgess's moves to Delauneys Road, Crumpsall, and subsequently to a big pub in what Ellen calls a "slummy district" (Miles Platting), and thence to Moss Side, are all exactly mirrored in the novel. The histories then diverge, as Ellen and her father scrape a perilous living until he dies of exhaustion following an ill-advised piano marathon competition at Blackpool's central pier. It is, perhaps, not too fanciful to see in the substitution of Ellen Henshaw for John Wilson, the same point being made as that by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. Ellen can make her way in

the world only by trading on her physical attributes: Wilson can use his education to develop his talents as a writer.

The image of Manchester that emerges from *The Pianoplayers* is, at first glance, of a dull, grim and relentlessly unpleasant milieu, almost exactly as depicted in *Little Wilson and Big God*. Ellen's impulse in the novel is to escape, which she does – we first encounter her as an elderly lady in the south of France, again echoing Burgess's life. What, explicitly, Ellen escapes from is the impoverished drudgery of life in Manchester. After Billy's row with Bertha – stepmothers are never sympathetic in the Burgess canon – the family move to Moss Side:

Before I knew what was properly going on, dad and I were in lodgings in Moss Side, a bedsitter it would be called now, dirty, dark and cheap I supposed, with a single bed for him and me sleeping on the ragged old couch, and a gasring and a lavatory and bathroom for everybody on the same floor to use.²

Ellen's lodgings are in the very street where the Wilson family corner off-licence shop was situated, though Burgess's description of it in *Little Wilson and Big God* suggests a fairly pleasant environment. The equivalent of Ellen's Moss Side experience is in Burgess's Miles Platting:

Lodge Street was a tough street in a tough area. (...) I was in an ugly world with ramshackle houses and foul back alleys, not a tree or a flower to be seen, though Queen's Park and a general cemetery were available to the north-west if a breath of green was required.³

² *The Pianoplayers*, p.18-19

³ *Little Wilson and Big God*, p.23

Burgess, like Ellen, emphasises the dirt and the misery, but often juxtaposes those references with rather nostalgic accounts of the working class life of the time. That nostalgia is often founded on reminiscences of shop-bought food, usually the Manchester staple of fish and chips, as here in *The Pianoplayers* where the elderly Ellen reminisces about the food of her childhood:

The chips we got in those days were gold and fat and crisp, I remember, and I liked nothing better when I was clemmed coming home from school on a winter's day for my dinner than a chip butty which was hot chips with salt and pepper and HP Sauce laid between two slices of bread and butter or marge.⁴

This account chimes with Burgess's own reminiscence of his time in the Lancashire mill town of Bamber Bridge after the war:

Chips, or French-fried potatoes, probably derive from Belgium, but Lancashire likes to believe that they are a Lancashire invention. Certainly the combination of fish and chips is pure Lancashire, but a dish of chips and nothing else but bread and butter is a product of the Lancashire depression, when nobody could afford either fish or meat. A chip butty – a hot chip sandwich- is a genuine coarse feast.⁵

A 1988 newspaper article summarises this Manchester approach to food, confirming the no-nonsense relish for the plain food evoked in both novel and autobiography:

...Manchester still eats well. The Mancunian contempt for London was expressed as much as anything in disdain for what were considered Southern eating habits. High tea down there meant half a hard-boiled egg and a limp leaf of lettuce. They could not make tea in the South; true, they didn't, and don't have our soft water. Southern girls had inferior complexions (hard water again). But it is solid nourishment that Southerners lack.⁶

⁴ *One Man's Chorus*, p.69

⁵ *One Man's Chorus*, p.46

⁶ *One Man's Chorus*, p.77

Both this article and a later one strike a note of regret for the passing of the Manchester of Burgess's youth. Burgess describes revisiting Manchester in the sixties for a Belgian television programme, and laments the changes he finds, particularly the influx of Asian and Afro-Caribbean people in Moss Side. He is asked to leave a pub which is now a West Indian haunt, notices that his old house had become a shebeen before being demolished, and reflects on the change in the city's culture:

Very good - accept change: the Friday call of the muezzin instead of the Sunday summons of the bells, an Asiatic Manchester instead of the European one of my youth.⁷

Manchester, he concludes, is now "like any other city" with even the fish and chips now the business of the Chinese. Burgess also accepts, though, that he cannot resist change: though Manchester has become "Asiatic" it still

speaks with a Manchester accent. If I regret the disappearance of the shabby tiger I used to know, I am proving myself stupidly resistant to the current of history. But memory preserves reality, and my own memory will not allow that greater Manchester to die.⁸

Paradoxically, then, Burgess seems to have taken a contrary view in his later autobiographical writing, which generally seems nostalgic for the Manchester of the past, even though that Manchester is portrayed in such negative terms in the fiction. What emerges in the counterpoint between *The Pianoplayers* and the Manchester of *Little Wilson and Big God* is a double image of the city – brutal, grimy, poor but also surprisingly cultured, and with an inbuilt sense of its own identity, now lost, according to Burgess, in the homogenisation of the second half of the twentieth century.

⁷ *One Man's Chorus* p.75

⁸ *One Man's Chorus*, p.79

In *Any Old Iron*, Burgess draws upon his experience as an undergraduate at Manchester University. The first episode in the novel is another nostalgic food-related experience, where “a very Manchester meal of fried egg and chips” is enjoyed at the Kardomah café. Soon, though, as first the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War intervene, Manchester is figured as a dark place of danger and deceit, and features mainly as a backdrop to the rapid development of the plot, which centres on the sword of King Arthur, Excalibur.

Burgess’s wartime Manchester is a doughty city fighting to preserve its culture, but perversely unable to accommodate progress in the shape of a female musician in the Hallé orchestra, an institution frequently cited by Burgess as evidence of Manchester’s cultural solidity. Zipporah’s musical talent finds little scope for expression:

Zip was deputy timpanist. It was considered in order for her to clang bells and triangles, but Manchester’s audiences found it hard to accept the white arms of a personable young woman thundering away in Wagnerian climaxes.⁹

Again, the chauvinism of the time, as in *The Pianoplayers*, is neatly illustrated by the example of an enterprising and talented woman frustrated by the limits on her free expression. Manchester is, of course, merely reflecting the dominant mores of the times in these episodes, but they perhaps show Burgess’s impatience with the insularity of the city.

Manchester was happy to welcome Burgess in that valedictory 1993 visit. His *Manchester Evening News* article on that occasion is a model of diplomacy, but even so contained some barbs. Manchester was, he supposed, “an ugly city” and the neo-

⁹ *Any Old Iron*, p. 86

Gothic architecture of the Town Hall proclaimed the blindness of Victorian taste. In an echo of the episode in *Any Old Iron*, there is a hint of misogyny in his reference to female musicians:

I remember the Hallé Orchestra and cannot believe that its present bisexual virtuosity has made it more outstanding than when it was beery, all-male and desperately conservative.¹⁰

Manchester, though, remains largely aloof to Burgess. The recent establishment in a Manchester suburb of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation is a step forward, but still the university bears no memorial of Burgess's presence – and indeed, the seeker after Burgess's work in the University library must consult the catalogue under Wilson, not Burgess – a curious reversal of its normal policy, and one which is emblematic of the city's somewhat ambivalent stance towards its best known author.

When the much-criticised Roger Lewis biography of Burgess was published, the *Manchester Evening News* was happy to go along with Lewis's thesis. An article entitled "Creating a Fiction" took the book at face value, and quotes the author as saying that, had Burgess been alive, he would have loved the book, "because it's controversial."¹¹ Lewis's highly contentious speculations about Burgess's private life are summarised and presented as fact. In contrast, the opening of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation in 2004 is marked by an article entitled "City's homage to a genius novelist."¹² Burgess is described as "the wildly talented author" and the facts of his life are briefly summarised with no reference to the Lewis biography. The advent of the Foundation in Burgess's home city perhaps heralds a more balanced

¹⁰ *Any Old Iron*, p. 86

¹¹ *Manchester Evening News*, December 6, 2002, p.9

¹² *Manchester Evening News*, June 29 2004, p.17

approach to the legacy, whatever Burgess's feelings regarding his boyhood home really were.

Even in the relatively short period since Burgess's death, the city of his birth has undergone much change, initially precipitated by the IRA bomb of 1996 that ripped the city centre apart. Since then, the Bridgewater Hall has become the new splendid home of the Hallé, and adventurous developments such as the Lowry Centre, the National War Museum North and the Urbis Museum of City Life have contributed to the modern image of Manchester as a dynamic metropolitan area. Perhaps even Burgess might have been persuaded that they represented an improvement on the Manchester of his youth.