

Fictional Manchesters

in the Work of Anthony Burgess

ROB SPENCE

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Manchester, the birthplace of Anthony Burgess, has a prominent position in his fiction. This paper shows how Burgess repeatedly returned to his memories of the city as material for his narratives. In particular, his childhood and early adulthood in the city are shown to be important factors in the construction of several important novels from different stages of his career.

Probably the way in which Manchester has impinged on a wider consciousness most recently is as a result of the bomb that killed concert-goers on 22 May 2017. A suicide bomber killed 22 people and wounded 250 when the device he was carrying exploded as people emerged from a concert at Manchester Arena. This was not the first time Manchester has been the target of terrorist violence—an IRA bomb caused huge damage in 1996—but this was the worst incident. The response in the city was an outpouring of love and solidarity, and the hashtag, #westandtogether, became a very common sight in the city. It is indicative of the spirit of Manchester that its collective response to the atrocity was, to use that famous phrase, to “keep calm and carry on.” The defiance and community spirit of the people of Manchester has a long history, and Anthony Burgess, as a Mancunian, was able to incorporate many references to it in his work. Before examining representations of Manchester in Burgess, it might be instructive to rehearse some of the city’s history, in order to highlight the traditions that Burgess draws upon in his writing.

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The bee is a ubiquitous symbol in Manchester, appearing everywhere from the city coat-of-arms to street furniture (Figure 1). Many buildings in the city are decorated with bee motifs, which stems from their incorporation into the coat of arms of the city in the nineteenth century. As Manchester was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, the city quickly became a hive of activity, populated by citizens working away in mills and factories to produce the goods which created the city's wealth. In particular, Manchester was known as "Cottonopolis," since cotton was the raw material of the mills. A third of all cotton production in the world was processed in Manchester and the surrounding Lancashire mill towns in the late nineteenth century. This busy industrial scene was likened to a beehive, with a quickly growing population as the worker bees. Some mill owners took the bee metaphor to its logical conclusion, adding appropriately-named "beehive mills" to the skyline. Whilst the machinery which powered them has long since fallen silent, there is still a Beehive Mill in the Ancoats district of the city. The bee seems an appropriate metaphor for Burgess too, whose workaholic writing habits are well-documented. He saw himself as a jobbing writer for hire, so as well as thirty-three novels, there are books on linguistics, critical biographies, two hugely entertaining volumes of autobiography, film scripts, adaptations of Rostand and Sophocles, musical plays, hundreds of reviews, some collected into three books, a book about New York, a book about the Grand Tour, a book about Going to Bed, a book about Tea. In addition, of course, there is a large corpus of music composed in time snatched from his writing schedule. Thus, Burgess the Mancunian epitomises the busy spirit of the place, and frequently referred to his birthplace in his work.

In addition to its industry, Manchester is also known for its radicalism and non-conformity, traits that again one might associate with Burgess. Perhaps the most famous manifestation of this is the Peterloo massacre of August 1819 (Figure 2). This took place at St. Peter's Fields, roughly where St. Peter's Square is today in the heart of the city, and where Central Library, an important building for Burgess, stands (Figure 3). The massacre is the subject of Shelley's poem *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819/32). A peaceful demonstration for universal suffrage was broken up by cavalrymen wielding sabres as they rode through a crowd of about 60,000 people. At least 15 people perished, and many more were wounded. This is a presence

in the background of Burgess's Manchester: he writes in the first volume of his autobiography that Peterloo was "well-remembered by my great-grandfather" (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* 15) and that the family wanted to live away from the city centre, which is how they ended up in the suburb of Harpurhey, a few miles to the north.

Shelley's rousing ballad poem catches the spirit of defiance that animated the crowd, and which persists to this day, epitomising a Manchester that is grittily resilient in the face of disaster:

Rise like Lions after slumber
 In unvanquishable number,
 Shake your chains to earth like dew
 Which in sleep had fallen on you—
 Ye are many—they are few. (Shelley 400)

Burgess's early life in north and east Manchester was spent in a very tough, working-class setting. Harpurhey, where he was born, was, as recently as 2007, named the most deprived area in England. Certainly, life for the boy Burgess in the years following the First World War were hard, but it provided rich material for his fiction. For example, The Golden Eagle pub in Miles Platting where his father was the landlord (Figure 4), forms the raw material for the early passages of *The Pianoplayers*, which will be considered presently. Burgess described the streets in which he grew up as "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 northwest if a breath of green was required" (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* 23).

The influence of place on Burgess is almost Proust-like in the way that childhood memories permeate his work, but where Proust recalls the hawthorn trees of the Guermantes way, Burgess has a strictly urban, cartographic recall: he remembers the street names of the north Manchester of his childhood:

A walk down Carisbrook Street on to Lathbury Road brought one to Rochdale Road and its intersection with Queen's Road, great arteries along which rattled the Manchester trams. Rochdale Road led south to Shude Hill, where my father worked.

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Shude Hill led through Withy Grove to Corporation Street and the Royal Exchange. Then Cross Street carried on to Albert Square and the assertive hideous Town Hall, all neogothic spires and sprockets. (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* 16)

Burgess's antipathy to the architecture of the Town Hall, despite its status as one of the finest examples of Neo-Gothic architecture in the United Kingdom, is a motif in his writing about Manchester, both fiction and non-fiction.

The Pianoplayers is the work where Burgess draws most directly on his Manchester upbringing, which is transplanted almost wholly intact to that of the character, Ellen Henshaw, whose rags-to-riches story forms the basis of the narrative. 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 of leisure in the south of France, again echoing the latter part of Burgess's life. The first half of *The Pianoplayers* is an imaginative reconfiguration of Burgess's early years, with Ellen Henshaw replacing the author as the survivor of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. 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 fleapit cinemas 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 Catholic elementary school, and both are traumatised by a painting of gypsy women on the bedroom wall; Burgess's moves to Delaunays Road, Crumpsall, a north Manchester suburb adjacent to Harpurhey, thence subsequently to a big pub in Miles Platting, which Ellen calls a "slummy district" (Burgess, *The Pianoplayers* 32), and on to Moss Side, are all exactly mirrored in the novel. The alignment with Burgess's autobiography is almost total, and there is a certain element of *nostalgie de la boue* about the passages in the novel which so exactly mirror the author's early life. It is perhaps significant that Burgess was working on the novel in 1977, from his home in Monaco and reconstructing the events of his youth fifty years earlier. Here is Ellen's description of the pub she moves to with her father:

“The pub ... was big and full of brass rails, and it had two singing rooms, as they were called, as well as a lot of odd snugs and ladies’ parlours and the like. ... My father served behind the bar and played the piano in the big singing room” (Burgess, *The Pianoplayers* 32). The similarity to the passage in Burgess’s autobiography covering his sudden move to The Golden Eagle pub is striking: “The Golden Eagle of Miles Plating was well known, a boozier of Victorian amplitude, gleaming with brass ... There were three singing rooms, a vast spit-and-sawdust, and a number of snugs” (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* 22–23). Both Elle Henshaw’s and Burgess’s toughness and resilience (at least outwardly) are attributed tacitly to their working class upbringing in the slums of Manchester.

Despite his years of exile in Gibraltar, Oxfordshire, Malaya, and Sussex, Burgess retained a strong sense of his northern city origins, even when, as in *One Hand Clapping* and *Honey for the Bears*, it appears under the pseudonym of “Bradcaster,” a portmanteau coinage perhaps inspired by J. B. Priestley’s invention of an archetypal Yorkshire town, “Bruddersford” in his 1932 novel *The Good Companions*. The “-caster” suffix in English place-names is cognate with the similarly common “-chester” and derives from the Latin “castrum” signifying a Roman military encampment. Thus, Burgess can evoke Manchester in the second element of Bradcaster. The “Brad” element is also present in Priestley’s invention, which combines the Yorkshire town names of Bradford and Huddersfield.

In *Honey for the Bears*, Paul Hussey, the protagonist, feels strangely at home in the otherwise alien surroundings of Soviet Leningrad:

Waiting, Paul tried to smell Soviet Russia, knowing that only to the rawest newcomer does a country reveal its smell; after a day, it becomes deodorised. He smelt his schooldays in Bradcaster—a whiff of brewery, tannery, burning potatoes, dust, a bourdon of tobacco which suggested Christmas, the pantomime, for, with the British, only festive smokes were aromatic. (Burgess, *Honey for the Bears* 47)

That description of the archetypal smell of the city includes a typical Burgessian trope, the use of an obscure item of lexis. “Bourdon” is here

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a musical term being pressed into use to suggest a background smell. Pleasingly, and perhaps serendipitously, the word derives from the French for bumblebee. The identification of Leningrad with Bradcaster is, then, based on their olfactory similarity, and Burgess evidently based this aspect on his own experience. In an interview with John Cullinan, he reflected on his first impression of Leningrad as being reminiscent of Manchester:

I think it was the sense of the architecture, the rather broken-down architecture of Leningrad, the sense of large numbers of the working class, rather shabbily dressed. And I suppose in some ways the *smell* of Manchester—I always associated Manchester with the smell of tanneries, very pungent smells, as you know. I got the same smell out of Leningrad. It's a small thing, but these small things have a curious habit of becoming important. (Ingersoll and Ingersoll 66)

Paul goes on to immerse himself in his new surroundings, which continue to remind him of his upbringing in the northern city, overlaid with a sense of history: “Childhood Bradcaster, yes, but an even older Bradcaster, heard of in childhood, uncovered. Despite the canals that suggested a factory-workers’ Venice, the bald Cyrillic signs saying MEAT, FISH, MILK, VEGETABLES, as though the town were a vast house and these shops the larder, Leningrad was not a foreign city” (Burgess, *Honey for the Bears* 48).

Leningrad, visited by Burgess in the summer of 1961, his experiences providing much of the material for this novel, was Manchester’s twin town in the days of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the twinning arrangement was made in 1962, the year before the publication of the novel. It promoted the concept of fraternal relations between the cities and included provisions for civic, cultural, educational, and scientific co-operation. This was a bold move by both cities at the height of the Cold War, and Burgess must have been aware of the development as he wrote the novel.

In *One Hand Clapping*, the connection with Manchester is not so immediately noticeable. The Shirleys, Howard and Janet, live in a new council house in an anonymous estate of the type that proliferated after the Second World War. The district is named by Burgess as “Shortshawe,” which

is probably a nod at the big post-war housing development of Wythenshawe in south Manchester; and when the Shirleys travel to the TV centre, they do so in a long train journey from London Road station to Euston, as they would have done in real life from the major railway station in Manchester, whose name changed from London Road to Piccadilly in the year before the novel's publication. Otherwise, the urban environment plays little part in the narrative, reflecting Janet's limited perspective. Even so, the bland modernity of the new estate is a counterweight to the more characterful Victorian housing of Burgess's other evocation of Bradcaster. The common practice of naming clusters of streets after a common theme is playfully mocked in Burgess's choice of the Oxford martyrs Ridley Latimer and Fisher, together with Archbishop Laud, another executed clergyman, as street names.

A later Burgess novel which draws extensively on his Manchester background is *Any Old Iron*, several of whose central characters attend university in Manchester in the 1930s. The novel relishes the sights and sounds, and indeed smells, of the Manchester of the time, starting with the evocative "very Manchester meal with fried egg and chips as the main course" (Burgess, *Any Old Iron* 62) consumed at the Kardomah café. Clearly Burgess draws on his own university experience for the sequences of student life in the novel. Burgess's characters congregate in what is now the Samuel Alexander Building (Figure 5), which housed the English department where Burgess studied, newly built when he was there, and with the Epstein bust of Alexander (Sammy's Bust) already installed. Samuel Alexander, a philosopher best known for his book, *Space, Time and Deity* (1920), is perhaps the model for the character Professor Pears, who, like Alexander, convened seminars at his home for advanced philosophy students. There is probably some Burgessian onomastic play in the fictional professor's name, since a variety of the common European pear is *Beurre Alexandre*, or Alexander.

Any Old Iron is a wide-ranging saga which takes in some of the major events of the twentieth century, and uses the Manchester of the twenties and thirties—the Manchester thus of Burgess's childhood, adolescence, and early maturity—as the setting for part of the narrative. Manchester's cosmopolitan, multi-cultural nature is key to this, as characters from widely varying backgrounds collide. The Wolfsons are Manchester Jews, and the Jones family initially come to Manchester from Wales via America and the Soviet Union

after the First World War to run a restaurant owned by Jewish businessmen. There are plenty of specific references to Manchester, especially drawing on Burgess's experience of being a university student in the city. For example, the cultural life of the city is explored in the figure of Zipporah, a percussionist in Manchester's Hallé Orchestra, which was just about possible historically, as Sir Hamilton Harty, who had dismissed the orchestra's few women players after the First World War, ended his tenure as conductor in 1933. There are other touches of local colour, familiar to readers of Burgess's autobiography: fish and chip suppers, the Midland hotel, student flats on Wilmslow Road, the student union refectory. Burgess's wartime Manchester fights against the forces of darkness, but is also figured as a place somewhat culturally hampered by a hidebound traditionalism. Nevertheless, Manchester is presented as a site of resistance in the novel, both to the threat of fascism, and to conformity. Or at least, the characters associated with Manchester show that typically Mancunian quality. Significantly, Manchester is also presented as a place from which to escape, as Burgess himself did. The coda to the novel finds Reg and Wolfson, the Manchester Jewish narrator, relocated to the new land of Israel, where they will once again be involved in a struggle for existence.

It is perhaps food that most characterises Burgess's construction of the Manchester of his memory. Not for him the delicacy of the "*petit madeleine*" of Proust. Burgess revels in the robust cuisine of his childhood: fish and chips, tripe and cowheels, black puddings. The "very Manchester meal" that Harry Wolfson and Reg Jones eat in the Kardomah café in *Any Old Iron* is just one example of how Burgess evokes place through the senses. While the evocation of Manchester as a place of grime and poverty pervades Burgess's fictional descriptions of it, his attitude softens when it comes to the cuisine. Burgess reminisced in a late newspaper article about the distinctive food of his Manchester youth, such as the chip butty—a hot chip sandwich, which is "a genuine coarse feast" (Burgess, *One Man's Chorus* 46). Ellen Henshaw in *The Pianoplayers* also reminisces about the chips of her youth, which 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" (Burgess, *The Pianoplayers* 76).

These memories animate Burgess's descriptions of Manchester, and provide a touchstone for his characters.

It seems that Manchester, though occasionally disparaged in its modern form by Burgess, remained a vital part of his artistic vision. The Manchester that Burgess returned to in his fiction is that of his childhood and young adulthood: he never lived in Manchester after his army service. The older Burgess seemed to resent what he saw as a homogenising blandness in the cityscape, and also, paradoxically perhaps, its embrace of different ethnic cultures. When revisiting Manchester in the sixties for a Belgian television programme, Burgess laments the changes he finds, particularly the influx of Asian and Afro-Caribbean people in Moss Side. He is asked to leave a pub that is now a West Indian haunt, notices that his old house had become a shebeen before being demolished, and reflects on the changes 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. (Burgess, *One Man's Chorus* 75)

Unexpectedly, Burgess does try to reconcile his contradictory impulses about his home city. It is, clearly, not the same city he knew as a boy, although The Midland Hotel and Central Library still stand as beacons of remembrance for him. He resents the change but is also self-aware enough to realise the futility of resistance: "If I regret the disappearance of the shabby tiger I used to know,³⁶ 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" (Burgess, *One Man's Chorus* 79). In what is probably his last printed comment on Manchester, written in the year of his death, Burgess noted that the city had changed, but would live on: "The Luftwaffe tried, but Manchester has proved unkillable" (Burgess, *One Man's Chorus* 91). And as long as Burgess's novels and other writings are read, we can be sure that his version of Manchester will not die.

36 A reference to Howard Spring's novel of Manchester, *Shabby Tiger* (1935).

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FIGURES



Figure 1. Bee mosaic in Manchester Town Hall

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Figure 2. The Massacre of Peterloo

The Massacre of Peterloo image: George Cruikshank's cartoon, 1819.



Figure 3. Manchester Central Library

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Figure 4. Golden Eagley
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Figure 5. University of Manchester Samuel Alexander Building
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ROB SPENCE

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Rob Spence was, until retirement, Associate Head of English at Edge Hill University, UK. He has written extensively on Burgess and other twentieth-century authors, including Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis, and Penelope Fitzgerald. He is currently completing a monograph on Burgess for publication next year.