



MERSEY

MANCHESTER



BY
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I have always felt nostalgia for the north of England. Which is odd, as I grew up almost exclusively on the south coast. I was, to all intents and purposes, a northern novice when I found myself living in Manchester in my early thirties. I'd gone there for a change of scenery and a vague desire to put down roots somewhere far from my previous homes. I was also a novice to rivers, having been raised by the sea, and, during the long summer holidays, largely in it. The only rivers I was acquainted with were fictional, beginning on the overpopulated banks of Kenneth Grahame's Edwardian river society (based on the Pang in Berkshire), following a tributary to Mark Twain's quaint Mississippi and progressing on towards the darker adult territory of Conrad's treacherous Congo.

My relationship with the north was similarly imaginary, although I didn't know it yet. That peculiar second-hand longing of mine for all things northern had begun in childhood and been consolidated as a teenager by the now iconic records of 1980s Mancunia, paintings by Lowry, the novels and plays that captured the iron grip of industrialisation among the mills and the slums of Salford. I was sick of the robust, wealthy south; the insistent jolly glare of golden sands and sparkling water, the smugness of London, the propagandistic sale of pleasure as the south's inherent natural resource. I wanted a physical landscape that matched my interior one (soulful, grumpy and damp). In my head this involved soot, Guinness, melancholy, canals, electric guitars and the spectral blare of the factory horn. But the Manchester of the early 21st century had changed beyond recognition. I found a city held firmly in the suede-gloved hand of the regenerationists (developers,

retailers, and so-called culture industries), and apparently having the time of its life.

This force of progress was also reputed to have reached Manchester's great waterway, the River Mersey, which had become a triumph of conservation over the last twenty years. Local friends of mine enthused about the nature reserve at Chorlton Ees, the freshwater wildlife – a rural riverbank paradise. I was dubious. Two hundred years of industrialisation would take its toll on any stretch of water – it took until 2002 for levels of oxygen in the river to reach life-sustaining levels for fish again. But this was all fine with me. I would have been happy if the current had bobbed with the corpses of mill workers and empty ale bottles. It was what I had come for, wasn't it?

It wasn't until my second year in Manchester that I became properly acquainted with the river, when I moved into a friend's tiny ex-council house in the southern outskirts of the city. This part of the Merseybank Estate had so far escaped gentrification; our neighbours included junkies and falling-downstairs drunks and restless, school-dodging children whose hobbies included throwing water bombs through our front windows when they were feeling friendly. Across the cul-de-sac was a path leading down a grassy slope littered with rubbish to

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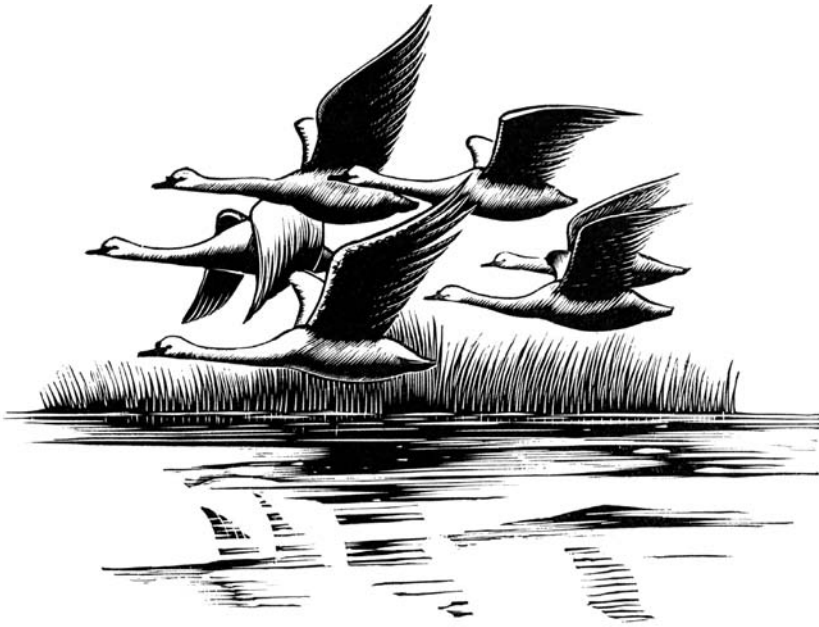
a riverbank. There it was – the River Mersey, rushing past on its way to the Irish Sea.

It wasn't much to look at. The Mersey is a river of noble pedigree, created from the tributaries of the Rivers Etherow, Goyt and Tame, which traverse Lancashire, Derbyshire, Cheshire and West Yorkshire before they conjoin at Stockport. I've seen photographs of these three rivers closer to their source; landscapes featuring peat moorland, mossy Roman bridges, a bleak Pennine beauty. In Stockport everything changes. The Mersey officially begins beneath a concrete shopping centre.



So far so good, concerning my mythic northern blueprint. Half a mile down the river path was the entrance to the Chorlton Water Park; once a gravel pit, now a small lake fringed with local fisherman in army surplus who sat stolidly on camping stools holding their lines like a silent militia. There were trees, swans, pre-teen kids pestering you for cigarettes. Urban nature. The Mersey itself felt similarly manmade, fortified with steep flood banks, concrete bridges and the roar of traffic from the nearby M60. No water rats eating Gentleman's Relish sandwiches and quoting Keats. Just solitary dog walkers, cyclists and the occasional scrambler bike ploughing up the path. I joined the traffic and began walking.

Every other day for the best part of six months I took the same route along the river to the Northenden Bridge and back again. Past the football pitch, under the spray-painted footbridge then on for a half-mile around the bend that hugged



the golf course until I reached my turning point. The brown water slopped and swirled and occasionally raced with a raging current, on top of which ducks whirled around like waltzers at a fairground. Slowly I discovered the river's secrets and eccentricities. The adjoining field of silent, anorak-backed men who flew radio-controlled aeroplanes in all weathers. The giant lime tree that hummed with invisible bees in the summer. The angry geese who colonised the river path and whose hissing sometimes made me run for safety. The infamous Jackson's Boat pub, a short stagger across the Jackson's Boat Footbridge just before the sluice gates, which was reputedly a hangout for Jacobean sympathisers back in the days of Bonnie Prince Charlie. It retained something of its suspicious nature; I had to steel myself to enter it alone. This was not destined to become



a gastro pub. The Mersey had outwitted the regenerationists and kept to its own natural laws of dawn and dusk, flood levels and seasonal change, laws upheld by its own riverbank society of anglers, cyclists, teenage lovers, family Sundayers, graffiti-sprayers and dogs. Somewhere between my front garden and the Northenden Bridge it dawned on me that I had wanted to try on the north like a new hat and see how it fitted. The truth was, of course, it didn't fit at all; moreover the hat I had chosen was entirely outdated. But by then I didn't care – I had the river, and the river had me, and I found more of myself (and of 'real' Manchester, perhaps), in that mile and a half of wet grass and rushing water than I had in years of dreaming about who I might be a few hundred miles north of my upbringing.

To me, Manchester, like Liverpool, feels like a tribal city, with its warring football teams and its out-of-bounds neighbour-

hoods and its fierce civic pride. Its major river reflects this. The Mersey doesn't have a tranquil beauty (at times it feels more Congo than Pang) but it remains stubbornly resistant to the new industrialists, the ones who install the cranes in the city centre and divide up the luxury apartments into 'units'. Somebody told me the name 'Mersey' means 'division.' They were close – apparently it stems from the Anglo-Saxon world for boundary. The River Mersey represents many boundaries both literal and symbolic; between Cheshire and Lancashire, between the two great British northwest cities, between Manchester's historical past and present, and in my case, between my romantic imagination and the reality of life in the north. Walking along the Mersey regularly for two years burst my bubble and wet my hems, but I fell in love with it anyway.

I moved back to the south eventually, of course. Recently I heard that the Jackson's Boat pub has been refurbished under new management. I don't miss my northern fantasy. I still miss the river.