

A working-class hero is something to be

Ross Bradshaw

Nottingham's good fortune was to attract a wandering bookseller, who recounts his take on the literary hinterland of the old Coalfield. In 2018, Five Leaves Bookshop became Independent Bookshop of the Year.

Class is that big thing we don't talk about in relation to fiction. Mostly we don't talk about it at all.

At the start of D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, he describes the pastoral scene of men working the fields, in the shadow of the church tower, working good land in the way they had for generations. The men were stolid – 'inert' writes Lawrence – the women of the farms being more the go-getters. Creeping in were the railways, the mines, ugly industries for ugly people. People whose children the girl schoolteacher Ursula would beat to show them their place on her way out of her class – and, ironically, towards feminism, socialism, lesbianism, and education.

Once, at the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum in Eastwood, I heard a former miner berating Lawrence because of his class. Not because Lawrence's mother was a bit above the position of a miner, but because Lawrence's father was an 'overman', the man who directed the work in the pit, the one who drove the pace. Such were the gradations within the class that a barely literate miner working in filth was seen as different by the men whose work he controlled.

It was Stanley Middleton – mentioned later – who taught me something else about class, and that was to do with religious observance. The working class went to chapel, the middle class to church. You can notice it if you look. In Lowdham there is one remaining Methodist chapel of the three that once operated in a village where textiles and railways were once important. They are in the village, the church is on the outskirts, the nearest house being what is

still called Manor House, just across the road. D.H. Lawrence's early companion, Jessie Chambers, also remarks on this about her time with Lawrence when local aspirational families moved from chapel to church.

It is often assumed that when Arthur Seaton opens Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* by falling drunk downstairs this was the start of the regional working class novel. Seaton was different. Someone recently reminded me of the opening scene of the Karel Reisz film where Seaton swaggers, runs for a bus. Nottingham was his city. Nobody could hold him back, not the bosses, not the unions, and not the women. He was in control. Though another reading of the book would put Seaton's Doreen winning the gender wars.

There is a progenitor to Arthur Seaton. *Penny Lace* by Hilda Lewis, published in 1946, has the Mr Penny of the title swaggering. Nothing could hold him back, not the bosses, not the unions, and not the women. And he took control by learning his trade – the trade of lace – and opening a mill in Long Eaton, out of reach of the lace trade unions so he could undercut the Nottingham firms and put his own former master out of business. I've often wondered if Sillitoe had read this book. Read the two books side by side so you can compare and contrast.

But it is coal that runs through the Nottingham working-class novel. Leslie Williamson, from Lawrence's Eastwood, in *Jobey* gave the rougher side of miners' lives – describing two miners solving their disagreement by kicking each other's shins with their pit boots on until one fell. On the other hand Stanley Middleton, in his best book, *Harris's Requiem*, described the packed-out concert of the Blidworth Band:

'The band all wore their military caps; we've paid for 'em, you shall see 'em. ... There was none of that demanding concert-hall cough, no last minute titter. The music was starting and there was a money's worth to be got.'

The Band played a concert of Beethoven, *Finlandia*, and 'finally a mighty tone poem, specially composed with solos galore'. This was the cultured side of the mining community. Middleton mostly wrote about lower middle-class life, but he understood the class from which he came.

Mining. It is hard not to be moved by Lawrence's 'The Collier's Wife', a poem about a pit accident. Or the opening scene of the children's book *The Secret World of Polly Flint* by Helen Cresswell, which starts with Polly's father being brought up injured from the pit. Or the modern writer Deborah Tyler-Bennett describing the four lines devoted to her great-

grandfather in the local paper, killed in a mining accident on Valentine's Day, 1914, while 'Fifty lines on how King George may visit/the Duke of Portland and attend the hunt/and thirty on a bride-to-be named Blisset/whose name on marriage will be Lady Blunt'. There were once 40,000 miners in Nottinghamshire, so it is hardly surprising there are so many literary references. But the Nottingham history of textiles – once employing 25,000 workers — is less represented, perhaps because most of those workers were women.

Tony Hill brings us almost to the end of the mining era with his autobiographical novel, *If the Kids are United*, writing about Jacksdale. The title comes from the Sham 69 song (but you knew that). His book is a roughly affectionate story of that former mining town, then in terminal decline thanks to Thatcherism. In his *The Palace and the Punks* Tony also described the life and times of The Grey Topper, an unlikely successful punk venue in his home town.

I'll move on from mining, and see what the women were saying, but in Nottinghamshire and other former mining areas it's hard to leave behind. I remember going to an NUM rally at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, in the early seventies. Hearing the mining leaders Lawrence Daly quoting Shelley long before Jeremy Corbyn did ('Ye are many, they are few...') and Mick McGahey replying with Shakespeare ('The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings') did more to tell me of the importance of literature in working-class life than did my six years of secondary school.

Daly and McGahey were autodidacts. Older Nottingham readers will remember The Cosmo – the Cosmopolitan Debating Society. Its last years were painful, but it was once the arena for the sort of autodidacts, mostly men, who appeared in Sillitoe's novel *The Open Door* and Philip Callow's *The Hosanna Man*. One striking thing about Sillitoe's Nottingham novels is that, save for the occasional bohemian, the world outside the working class barely existed.

All I knew of Nottinghamshire writing before I came here was reading the dirty bits in D.H. Lawrence, which had no impact on me, when I was an immature teenager. Thankfully I was a bit more mature when I arrived in Nottingham, in 1978, to live in the building where the magazine *Peace News* was then produced. Over the road was a large semi-permanent graffito saying 'Socialism will come, riding on a bicycle'. My kind of town.

Another graffito, elsewhere, was also attractive in its own way – big letters on the Forest 'mmm ... marijuana'. Surprisingly, that was either a

hangover or a reprise of the same graffiti mentioned in Ray Gosling's *Personal Copy: a memoir of the Sixties*: the first book that gave me a sense of place in Nottingham. *Peace News* sat on the fringe of St Ann's, where Gosling had lived and campaigned against the destruction of the suburb made famous by Ken Coates and Bill Silburn's *Poverty: the Forgotten Englishmen* (still available from Spokesman Books). But rereading Gosling now it is his cameos of the City that strike me. Saturday afternoons at the Kardomah looking out over the City "'Just waiting for a friend," you'd say to the nippie.' Sundays down the Market Square, the Sally Bash at one end and the Communist John Peck on his stand at the other. Gosling describes how Arnold Wesker's *Centre 42*, a national touring project to bring culture to the trade unions, bit the dust in Nottingham with local promoters putting on competing events at the same time. There are lots of literary nuggets, Colin MacInnes, Philip Callow... and a visiting Adrian Henri, delighted to see a bus going to – or possibly called – Arnold.

The '60s was a decade of change for working-class people. Alan Fletcher, in his three self-published novels of Mod life, described himself and his colleagues as the first generation of working-class youth which had money in its pockets. Wanting to spend it on looking good. To get away from the dreariness of the demob suit and the flat cap.

Michael Standen, in *Start Somewhere* (republished by Shoestring Press) catches a moment when the previously sharp divisions in class are starting to fall apart. His novel describes a teenage romance. Mr Griffin – a grocer – warns his son:

'You be careful. Their station isn't ours. They have a different road of going on. Her father's someone in the Town Hall; I've seen his name in the *Post* ... If you think I'm complaining because you're mixing with a good class of person, I'm not. Miss Cooper's got real breeding ... So don't start treating her like the girls round here.'

Next thing, people will not be standing up when the Queen comes on at the cinema.

I mentioned women's voices. From the working class of that period, in Nottinghamshire, there aren't many who have come my way. That is not to say there are no books. The publisher Persephone has been busy rescuing Dorothy Whipple. Worth reading, but her books are those of the well-off, the people who had servants. What the servants had to say is not recorded.

A more dated writer yet is Rose Fyleman. I'll summarise one of her stories. A group of children (think Famous Five) come across a caravan, nearby was a baby in its cot, nobody else in sight. The obvious solution

was that the baby had been stolen by Gypsies, ‘because they do, you know’, such an assumption being confirmed by the baby being blue-eyed and blond. So, some of the children rescue the baby while others head off to the road to stop any car with ‘decent looking people’ to get the police. Of course, the baby turns out not to be a stolen baby at all, but the nurse of a nice respectable couple, holidaying in their caravan, had left it out in the open (then to be stolen by those hideous, racist middle-class white children) while she went spooning with the boy in the farm next door.

A restorative read after that is Carol Lake – not Nottingham, but Derby. Lake has been overlooked of late, which is a shame, for she won *The Guardian* fiction award with *Rosehill*, set in our rival city. Her other book, *Switchboard Operators*, describes with gentle humour that now-vanished but once-important job from a woman’s point of view.

Nicola Monaghan’s first novel, *The Killing Jar*, was set among criminals on Nottingham’s Bestwood estate she was brought up on, as was Derrick Buttress in an earlier generation, while Kim Slater’s novel for older children, *Smart*, paints an ugly picture of the life for an autistic boy in The Meadows area of the city. Nicola remarked that her novel did not reflect the positive community spirit of her estate, but that it was easier to write a novel with crime at the heart rather than a feel-good novel about people being nice to one another.

But the face of our city, our county has changed over the last few years. On the Market Square you are likely to hear Polish, Romy, one of the Kurdish languages. Working-class Nottingham has changed again. So far Kevin Fegan has been the main writer to pick up on this. In *Let the Left Hand Sing* he walks down an imaginary street, knocking on doors, asking people to tell him their stories. There you will find, beside the Jamaican woman who remembers the Anansi stories of her childhood and the Ukrainian man who has lived in exile for fifty years, a woman from the Sudan ‘who was eight when the soldiers came’. Kevin himself is a migrant, from an Irish family who came to the Midlands for want of work.

We do forget some of our past. If you’ve read it, can you remember the title of the first chapter of the book at the head of this article, *The Rainbow?* It’s ‘How Tom Brangwen Married a Polish Lady’, the lady in question coming from a refugee family. We go in circles. But Nottingham does remember its working-class past – Christy Fearn writes about the Luddites, as does A.R. Dance with *Narrow Marsh*, which opens with a hanging.

Thus far there is no great Nottinghamshire call-centre novel, but the working class has not yet said its last word even if, in novels such as Phil

Whitaker's *The Face* and in so much of John Harvey's work, it is the streets of the city that give the books their Nottingham feel as much, perhaps more than, the people who walk them.

Ross Bradshaw contributed this essay to

Exploring Nottinghamshire Writers

by Rowena Edlin-white, *Five Leaves Publications*, £12.99

www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk

For man, the vast marvel is to be alive. For man, as for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive. Whatever the unborn and the dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive in the flesh. The dead may look after the afterwards. But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos. I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. My soul knows that I am part of the human race, my soul is an organic part of the great human soul, as my spirit is part of my nation. In my own very self, I am part of my family. There is nothing of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters.

Apocalypse, D H Lawrence