Alan Johnson On Notting Hill Before It Was Notting Hill

By Alan Johnson

When I set out to be a biographer I realised quickly that I couldn't capture the person if I didn't adequately describe the place. If I wanted Lily, my pretty, petite, Liverpudlian mother, to live again on the page, I had to chronicle the London that she found herself in having married Lance Corporal Steve "Ginger" Johnson at the end of the war.

Evocation seemed to me to be at least as important as the detail of the story I was setting out to tell. I had to take readers to those mean streets, to have them sense the damp, feel the hunger. And make them do so without invoking memories of that old Monty Python sketch: "A hundred and 10 of you in a shoebox? Luxury! There were 200 of us in a rolled-up newspaper."

My task was made easier by whatever incredible stroke of fortune brought the photojournalist Roger Mayne to Southam Street, where we lived, in 1956. He'd graduated from university and was looking for a project that could make his name. He found it in the crumbling streets of North Kensington in general and Southam Street in particular.

The houses had been jerry-built in the 19th century for a predicted population drift that never occurred. By the Thirties they'd been declared unfit for human habitation. My sister and I were born into those slums 20 years later. Electricity didn't arrive until roughly the same time as Roger Mayne. The 1951 census recorded that the number of people living at a density of more than two to a room was four times higher in Southam Street than in London as a whole.

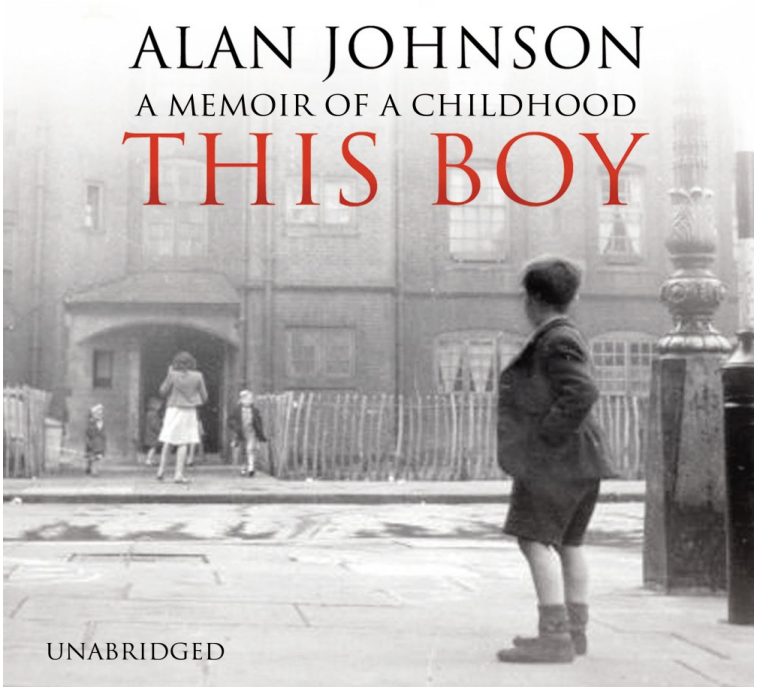
Mayne's photographs, which have featured in settings as varied as a V&A exhibition and a Morrissey concert, captured the squalor of Southam Street and the vibrancy of a community where it was better to be outdoors than in. This was a world that had changed little since Dickens but one that would virtually vanish within a decade.

It was the setting for the Notting Hill race riots, Rachmanism, the murder in 1959 of Kelso Cochrane, a young carpenter (for which nobody has ever been convicted); a place where Oswald Mosley stood for election claiming to have come to rescue the white working class and where the white working class learnt to live with the black working class without any assistance from Mosley or the various well-heeled populists who have claimed to be our rescuers since. Fittingly, it was a Roger Mayne photograph of Southam Street that graced the cover of the first edition of Colin MacInnes's novel Absolute Beginners, that prelude to the Sixties.

The area was inaccurately described as Notting Hill when in actual fact we didn't see anyone remotely like Hugh Grant or Julia Roberts at our end of Portobello Road. It's true to say that walking up "the Lane", as we called it, was a stroll through the English class system even then as one progressed towards Holland Park. Notting Hill didn't become gentrified – it always was. What happened was that North Kensington became Notting Hill.

My task, however, was to describe it as it was then, not as it is now. Some of my favourite books provided inspiration. In childhood I read and reread Shane by Jack Schaefer , choking on the Wyoming dust to the extent that I could have been sitting on the corral fence with Bob Starrett as the eponymous hero rides slowly towards him.

In adolescence I felt the wet earth around the unnamed fugitive in Geoffrey Household's Rogue Male and climbed Riceyman Steps with Arnold Bennett. In adulthood I walked through 17th-century London with Sam Pepys, smelt the stench of the Thames, observed the clamour and chaos of the streets and sat with Sam in Westminster Hall waiting for Charles II and the restoration of the monarchy. I rarely take the train journey from my constituency in Hull to King's Cross in London without thinking at least once of Larkin's "Whitsun Weddings", which immortalised that exact journey 50 years ago.



So like all avid readers I'd been thrilled by evocation. Now I needed to work the magic myself, to fill the blank page with the sights, sounds and smells of London W10. The detail provided the canvas on which to paint the picture.

My sister Linda is the second heroine of my book. Born two years and eight months before me, she remembered things that I'd forgotten or never knew. (As I say in the book, my mother's three most frequently used words were "Don't tell Alan".) A lovely lady by the name of Mrs Eve Stonelake wrote to me having heard I was from the area, setting out the vast array of shops in Golborne Road: a store that sold nothing but tea, Holmes the German baker's, the pease-pudding-and-saveloy shop on the corner of Wornington Road.

I needed no reminding of the two warring sweetshop proprietors on opposite sides of that road who sought to achieve retail advantage through the small tumblers of fizzy drink they used to lure in local infants. Or Renee's pie-and-mash shop, where Linda and I were sent for a sixpenny dinner when holidays kept us away from our free school meals.

There is a journey in the book that can't be taken any more, one that took place on a day of the week that has changed out of all recognition. The journey was the walk my father would take us on to visit his mother, and the day was Sunday. Recreating it allowed me to describe Southam Street as it was in the early Fifties: the railings removed for scrap metal during the war; the sunken enclosures in front of every house known to us as "airies"; potato sacks hung across windows as a substitute for curtains; the "debry" at the far end of the street where the Luftwaffe had struck. It took me years to realise that debris had a wider meaning and wasn't just the name of a bomb site in my street.

Sundays were special. After mornings spent on that family visit to Nanny Johnson in Peabody Buildings, the afternoons stretched out like a summer's evening in Tromsø. The men would come home from the pub suited-up – their Sunday uniform – and the afternoon would begin, punctuated by the cries of the cockles-and-whelks man who somehow managed to push his wooden barrow down every street. The walk is now impossible to make: all that's left of our long road is a little spur; and Sundays have long ceased to be the day when nothing happened.

I went back to North Kensington a few weeks ago to visit Bevington, my old primary school. I got off the Tube at Westbourne Park and walked down what was once the eastern end of Southam Street and is now a modern estate, the 31 storeys of Trellick Tower on the corner where the bagwash – precursor of the corner launderette – used to be. Golborne Road railway bridge has been repainted; the shops have different owners but the same outline. There are Portuguese cafés and a Lebanese restaurant where Renee's pie-and-mash shop used to be. It remains a vibrant area, and my old school is one of the best in west London. The Grand Union Canal, which forms the northern border of my old domain, is now so clean it's possible to fall in, swallow its water and survive.

What's left of Southam Street at the western end still has the Earl of Warwick pub on the corner – only now it's called the Earl of Portobello and is more of a wine bar. There are no longer children at the door yelling to their fathers inside to go home because "Mum says your dinner's ready now". A blue plaque high on the pub wall records the murder of Kelso Cochrane, whose life was ended on the corner of my street. I calculate where 107 Southam Street would have been. It's an artist's studio. There's a Bentley outside.

My mother rented our rooms from the Rowe Housing Trust. In the book I describe how we'd accompany her to pay the rent at the trust's office in the Portobello Road, which had an unusual hinged door and a strong smell of disinfectant. The trust lives on as Octavia, but no longer occupies that office, which apparently now belongs to Richard Curtis's film-production company.

I'm glad the slums have gone. I have not a smidgen of nostalgia for the brutal times my mother had to endure. None of the houses I lived in still exists. As well as Southam Street, Walmer Road, 318 Lancaster Road and Camelford Road, where I move with my wife at the end of the book, have all fallen victim to the elevated section of the A40 that cuts through Portobello Road and Ladbroke Grove.

I left Notting Hill for the last time when I was 19, on the day the Stones performed free in Hyde Park and Jagger read Shelley in memory of Brian Jones. I moved with my wife and our two daughters to the Britwell Estate in Slough. My mother spent the whole of her short adult life waiting for the offer of a council house that never came. She desperately wanted her own front door rather than rented rooms at a shared address.

I secured the council house my mother dreamt of at the age she was when she left Liverpool. I spent my next 19 years bringing up three kids on the Britwell. It's another story for a second book, to be published in September.

How I wish that Lily, my central character, could remain as part of the story. But the moving finger writes and having writ moves on. Having been my mother's biographer, I must now be my own.

Alan Johnson will be talking to Sarfraz Manzoor at the Hay Festival on Sunday (hayfestival.com).

This Boy: A Memoir of a Childhood by Alan Johnson (Corgi) may be ordered from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk) at £7.99 plus £1.10 p&p.

More details on the RSL Ondaatje Prize at rslit.org/rsl-ondaatje-prize

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/england/london/west/notting-hill/articles/Alan-Johnson-on-Notting-Hill-before-it-was-Notting-Hill/

How exchanging this for this was ever going resolve crime and poverty remains a mystery but mindless politicians like Alan Johnson will defend these decisions to the last.