

ENGAGE 27 : Professor Peter Fidler A sense of place ... through the looking glass

[Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment](#)

By Bryan Talbot

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I was born and grew up in Lancashire. The cotton mills were still working and dominated the landscape of my neighbourhood. Each day as I walked to my local school in Oldham, and later took the two-bus journey to Manchester and secondary school, the industrial might of the great conurbation – the immense manufacturing, technological, engineering and trading energy – was all around me. It dominated the physical landscape, and permeated the activities and aspirations of family and community. But the

1950s and 1960s of my youthful memory and making were also two post-war decades of ferment and change, of great social, economic and political movements, and inescapable recognition of the importance of national and international forces shaping our futures.

I was made in the north of England, my early years in one particular part of the north of England and my most recent years in another. It is now over a decade since I came to Sunderland and the north-east of England, and the journey has taken me via many other places. I have lived the other half of my life, literally, in the south of England, and through it all have had a keen eye towards the international and global shaping of our world, our experience, and our lives.

The invitation to reflect on books and readings which have personal resonance has drawn me to share some reflection and not a little identification with my 'sense of place' – of the north as viewed through a particular 'looking glass', perhaps.

Quite recently I enjoyed a meeting and discussion with Brian Cantor, vice-chancellor of the University of York and another Lancastrian of my generation, where we spoke of our two universities and we talked of the Lancashire that influenced our histories. We spoke about books and reading and I recalled the impact which George Orwell's [The Road to Wigan Pier](#) and [Down the Mine](#) and Walter Greenwood's [Love on the Dole](#) had on me. This had led me to Robert Roberts's work – [The Classic Slum](#) and [A Ragged Schooling](#) – and later had me delving back into Engels's writings from his time in Manchester and Salford. I remembered my graduate studies too, when I had come across John Foster's [Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution](#), built around case studies of Oldham, Northampton and South Shields. Fascinating to me for its characterisation of the Oldham of my great-grandparents, the work also evidenced the power of painstaking, detailed research to demonstrate the difference place biography can make to the understanding of social phenomena, in this case class consciousness.

We ranged across the creative connections then and now; The Wednesday Play, and now the new BBC North ; and the love of a man of Lancashire, LS Lowry, for Sunderland, which he visited regularly and called "a real city - with sea", painting ships and seascapes of Sunderland and South and North Shields. And, in case you think this discussion between vice-chancellors was too serious to be true, I should say that we also spoke about our respective football affinities and north-East/north-west connections, of Niall Quinn, Manchester City and Sunderland.

As we concluded our meeting, Brian asked if I had come across a book he had just read about the place and people of Lancashire. He thought I would like it, and I said I would look out for it. I did, but not quickly enough, for a week later it arrived through the post with Brian's compliments. He wanted me to read it. The cover reviews were encouraging – "a delectable book" (Independent), "amusing and uplifting" (Guardian), "entrancing" (Observer), "a gem of a book" (New Statesman), and from Joanna Lumley in The Times "an absolute joy".

I have now read – and, in the case of certain chapters, reread – [Lancashire, Where Women Die of Love](#) by Charles Nevin. It is all those things Brian and the reviewers said, and I can recommend it strongly to anyone who might care to explore Nevin's humorous and wideranging insights into the place, people, customs and character of this great county.

Nevin even takes a gentle swipe at the north-east and at north-easterners, describing them as “fetching folk, with an affectionate faith in the ability of their quaint accent to lend an intrinsic wit, wisdom and interest to anything they might care to say. And have you ever seen one in an overcoat? Exactly.” Which takes me to the north-east.

When I came to Sunderland, the then director of the Town and Country Planning Association, Graeme Bell, himself born in Sunderland, sent me a copy of [Where Ships are Born: Sunderland 1346-1946](#), by JW Smith and TS Holden, and alerted me to the need to understand the city's industrial heritage. I arrived in a city which was once the largest shipbuilding town in the world, producing a tonnage in the late 1930s which exceeded the whole of that produced in the US. In 1999 it was a city whose riversides no longer had a single working shipyard, but which was now home to technology parks and a ‘new’ university, with the early phases of a now magnificent campus built at the deepest launch point and largest former shipyard site on Wearside.

Making a home in a city still deeply resentful of the Conservative government it held responsible for the closing down of its shipbuilding and coal mining, where a new economy including a new kind of great civic university was, tentatively, in the making, demanded a sensitivity to place and context. I have benefited from holding dear this ‘sense of place’ consistently in the subsequent period.

The ingredients of an understanding of ‘place’ are all around us. The looking glass has many viewing points, and intelligence and empathy come from many sources. But, as I turn to literature, in my twelve years in Sunderland I have read most of the surprisingly extensive published work on the city. This ranges across serious historical accounts which remind us of Bede's birthplace, life and times, here in this ‘sundered-land’. Meikle and Newman's [Sunderland and its Origins: Monks to Mariners](#) is an excellent example of such an account. As Michael Wood writes in the book's preface, in the period from establishment in AD674 until the eighth century the monastery of St Peter's and its sister monastery at Jarrow were distinguished centres of learning and “powerhouses of European culture”. I have also particularly enjoyed an excellent example of historical fiction; Sheri Holman's [The Dress Lodger](#) is set in the early 1800s, as cholera arrives through Sunderland into England and as Burke and Hare trawl Wearside seeking cadavers for cross-border medical research in Scotland!

But to recommend one book which captures the essence of Sunderland for me is to switch genre to Bryan Talbot's magnificent graphic novel [Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment](#).

Bryan Talbot, himself a native of Lancashire, has captured and presented a fascinating characterisation of a place – Sunderland – as well as the story of [Lewis Carroll's Alice](#), and Carroll's own journey and story, in and of Sunderland. He suggests that Lewis Carroll's source of inspiration – and indeed his main character Alice (Liddell) – came from the north-east and not from a dreamy Oxford boat cruise. From one of the world's leading comic and graphic novelists this is a remarkable piece of work.

I have lost count of how many reviewers have described the book as a ‘tour de force’. Rachel Cooke in the Observer, under the heading “He were a right bonny lad, that Mad Hatter”, describes the book as “one of the most exhilarating books I've read in years. A minor masterpiece.” Bryan Talbot based his book on the research of Carrollian scholar Michael Bute, and describes it as “an entertainment”. A quite wonderful fusion of myth, autobiography, soaring imagination and glorious, rich illustration and artwork, it is my book – and gift – of choice. It sits in my office and in my sitting-room. I return to it as I do to Nevin's Lancashire for further discoveries. The scope and detail are wide and deep. The graphic novel genre has surprised me so much, providing a vehicle for the research and findings of literary, scientific and human interest which inform my sense of this place, Sunderland, so strongly. Of course,

Talbot is a master of his work. Leo Baxendale, a pivotal figure in British comics, has said of Alice, "The narrative and artwork are magic and the structure is magisterial." As Nick Hornby has said, graphic novels give a positive literary experience; Rachel Cooke goes on to remark that "the best induce a deep longing for ownership", and that Alice in Sunderland "pushes the genre to a new level. It is so deeply learned."

And is there anything in it for those not 'made in the North'? Michel Faber in the Guardian says, "Plenty. Although ostensibly a celebration of Sunderland's uniqueness, the book is in many ways a history of Britain as a whole".

Place and journeys deep into the spirit and culture of place have always captured my imagination. The richer the understanding of this sense of place, with its complex themes of society, economy, culture – historical and contemporary – the better equipped one is to live and work in a place. I believe this to be particularly true of university leaders, whose institutions have their own sense of place, and importantly have civic and regional place-context which is in many cases integral to their educational objects and purpose.

The leadership textbooks which identify and champion key traits of 'authentic' and 'transformational' leadership often allude to this understanding of place and context, but rarely put it at the centre of their analysis. In my view, we should admit the possibility that this sense of place, through the looking glass and with many layers and sources, might be more important than we think. Indeed, in my own case, in a university now at the heart of a great city, each with rich and complex biographies, I can't imagine the leadership without this acute and multilayered sense of place.

Professor Peter Fidler joined the University of Sunderland as vice-chancellor and chief executive in 1999 from Oxford Brookes University where he had been deputy vice-chancellor (academic) and deputy chief executive for five years. A chartered town planner and a past president of the Royal Town Planning Institute, Peter has been a non-executive director of regeneration company Sunderland arc, the North East Strategic Health Authority, and Codeworks, an organisation supporting the north-east's digital and media technology sector. He is a trustee of the Customs House Theatre, South Tyneside, and of two academies in Sunderland. He is a deputy lieutenant of Tyne and Wear, and is proud to be a city ambassador for Sunderland, sit on the city's Economic Leadership Board, and chair its international strategy board.

Further Reading

Alice in Sunderland:

www.amazon.co.uk/Alice-Sunderland-Entertainment-Bryan-Talbot/dp/0224080768/ref=sr_1_cc_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1318413367&sr=1-1-catcorr

Road to Wigan Pier:

www.amazon.co.uk/Road-Wigan-Penguin-Modern-Classics/dp/0141185295/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318413746&sr=1-1

Down the Mine:

http://orwell.ru/library/essays/mine/english/e_dtm (Not on Amazon)

Love on the Dole:

www.amazon.co.uk/Love-Dole-Walter-Greenwood/dp/009922481X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318414663&sr=1-1

The Classic Slum:

www.amazon.co.uk/Classic-Slum-Salford-Quarter-Century/dp/014013624X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318414720&sr=1-1

A Ragged Schooling:

www.amazon.co.uk/Ragged-Schooling-Growing-Classic-Slum/dp/1901341011/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318414720&sr=1-2

Class Struggles and the Industrial Revolution:

www.amazon.co.uk/Class-Struggle-Industrial-Revolution-Capitalism/dp/0416841007/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318414854&sr=1-1

Lancashire, Where women die of love:

www.amazon.co.uk/Lancashire-Where-Women-Die-Love/dp/1845960378/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318415069&sr=1-1

Where Ships are Born: Sunderland 1346-1946, by JW Smith and TS Holden:

www.amazon.co.uk/Where-Sunderland-1346-1946-History-Shipbuilding/dp/B0000CP89L/ref=sr_1_cc_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1318413232&sr=1-1-catcorr

Sunderland and its origins: Monks to Mariners:

www.amazon.co.uk/Sunderland-Its-Origins-Monks-Mariners/dp/1860774792/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318415267&sr=1-1

The Dress Lodger:

www.amazon.co.uk/Dress-Lodger-Sheri-Holman/dp/034071784X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318415368&sr=1-1

Alice in Wonderland:

www.amazon.co.uk/Alice-Wonderland-Wordsworth-Classics-Carroll/dp/1853260029/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318413480&sr=1-2