

Armley Gaol, Leeds

A grim place, more medieval castle,
soot-covered, Victorian take
on punishment: I scowl back
spotting it from the train.

Once, asked to see a prisoner
who claimed difficulty walking,
I arrived at the gate alongside
a queue of visiting relatives.

The sergeant at the gate barked
at them as he ticked off names
on his list. But when I gave him mine
he went all soft.

“Not related to *my* Dr Currie
at Tinshill?” he asked.
“Yes,” I said, “my cousin.”
He rolled over, a big floppy dog.

The prisoner himself was walking
easily, in a circle with other men,
refused to come and be examined.
But I saw enough to get my fee.

Today, the nearest I go is to play
the organ in Armley Church,
an instrument renowned
throughout Yorkshire.

But do prisoners in the yard
hear music across the waste-ground?
Or, heads down, are lost
in a world of their own?

Simon Currie

Bradford Interchange, New Pudsey, Leeds

Not every gaol has bars. I didn't know that then,
but the writing was on the wall.

"Wake up! It's time to die again!"

Years before Blade Runner pinched the phrase,
in the monochrome rawness of 70s' anger,
whitewash daubed in the wasteland
between Stanningley and Armley.

It was liberation for me then, as I passed
through the shadow of the gaol, from a city
with no decent bookshops, to Austicks,
that seemed to me another country
– a Babylon library – to return with
Flowers of Evil, with Exile and the Kingdom,

never anything familiar, English: no Forster
Lawrence, Woolf or Orwell,
but in 1984, I found out
what it all meant: "Eat, work, sleep, commute."
"Wake up! It's time to die
again!"

Mike Farren

Books and Bookshops in Leeds

Working at Leeds Infirmary, I could do
a neat circle the shape of Pi to three haunts:
the main city library in Calverley Street,
then on to Miles's secondhand bookshop,
Great George Street, and finally Austicks
on Cookridge Street, opposite St Ann's.
Today, of the three, only the library remains.

That held the out-of-print book on "Style"
by F.E.Lucas: a lot of *recherché* stuff,
such as Casement hanged through a comma
in a statute of Edward the Third. While
Miles took all our books when the family
down-sized from thirty-five rooms to five.
Whether he gave a fair deal I wouldn't know.

But Austicks I liked best, a place of wonder,
not only for the books but papers, folders, pens.
I knew David, later our M.P. He would tell me
how much he admired the Health Service.
Yet he avoided using it and I learned later
how badly he treated his staff at all the shops:
LibDem in name but Tory in sheep's clothing.

Simon Currie

“Everything is brilliant in Leeds”¹

Bradford’s Fourth Idea ² went bust,
abbreviating bookshop
choice to SPCK
or WH Smiths.

Perhaps that’s why our politics
seemed hand to mouth, or perhaps
our problems were inconvenient
for ideology.

But Leeds had bookshops, and
an air of dogmatic
rarefication, sometimes
almost too pure to breathe:

the accusatory music,
the righteous agit-prop,
the scorched-earth purges,
the one, the unfalse consciousness.

So how did we get to here?
the Mammon city, the
consumerist cathedrals,
the designer life, the

arrogance, the swagger?
“Everything is brilliant
in Leeds”. And fuck your
neighbour. Fuck anyone else.

Mike Farren

¹ A common t-shirt slogan from the mid-2000’s.

² A left-wing bookshop in Bradford city centre, open from some time in the 70’s until 1982.

The City Black

Soot, everywhere soot: windowsills
black each day from Kirkstall Forge.
Climb trees, come home filthy.

Urban sprawl covers moors
of heather and silver sand:
houses and high-rise flats.

Our church Norman, we cling
to dogtooth, salamander, spurn
the lavatory-brick new one.

Our sausage dogs are stoned
as German: hatred between whites
well before immigration.

Sent away at seven, Leeds
for only a quarter of my year,
yet still I get TB.

* * * *

Who's to say it's better?
Clean bark, clean brick but still
these awful terraces, alongside
mansions for the rich.

Simon Currie

From the low ins to Bridgewater Place

Why are you Loiners? I can't find
a definitive answer, but I like
the "low ins", the back yards
round Briggate –
the sense of hunkering down
squat round a homely centre.

Was this where you became what
Nuttgens³ called upside down,
inside out, and back to front?
A rough, practical city
made of terracotta brick,
grimmed with soot of industry.

How far from the humble yard
to the concrete Babel tower,
to the jealous god who
controls the wind, who
metes arbitrary judgement,
demands human sacrifice.

But as Nuttgens told my
school Speech Day, Briggate
still leads down to the bridge
and Kirkgate to the church,
and Swinegate will forever
lead to Bradford.

Mike Farren

³ Patrick Nuttgens – architect and first director of Leeds Polytechnic. Author of 'Leeds: The Back to Front, Inside-out, Upside-down City'.

Names-dropping in Headingley

The field we owned beyond our house
had been in the family of Captain Oates,
that very gallant gentleman of thirty years before.

Our orchard at the top touched that
of Valerie's parents, the second Mrs Eliot:
the nearest I have got to the T.S.Eliot prize.

The Kitsons and the Kitson-Clarkes
lived nearby at Meanwoodside, their grand house.
There, we saw water-colours by John Sell Cotman.

Our butcher, Joe Demaine, sounded more posh than us.
Dad, at school with him, said this was because he was queer.
Swapping memories with Alan Bennett, I did not repeat that.

I myself was born much further into Leeds:
at Denison Hall, Lord Londesborough's place
with its curving staircase of green marble.

But in truth, we're some of the ordinary folk
who fill in between the few famous ones:
dead, forgotten or still making a mark.

Anonymity is best. Know your station.
Forget great expectations. We are what we are,
the cheapest cuts of meat: flank, chuck, blade.

Simon Currie

Stuff of legend

Memory endures of
the taste of toasted teacake
in a café off Leeds market,
taken shopping by my mum.

We knew we knew nobody
in our never, nowhere city,
where we only glimpsed the famous
living behind TV screens.

Even the Hockney painting
on the wall outside the library
just pointed up how greatness
departed years before.

So I learned while I was young
that I had to make my myths
from material close to hand,
and like Kane recalling Rosebud,

in my final lucid moments,
I'll forget all love, all triumph,
and just taste the sugared currants
and the salty, melting butter.

Mike Farren