

## Forgotten Histories and Finding New Narratives

By Jessica Andrews

From the skeletal shipyards and steelworks along the rivers Tyne, Wear and Tees to the glassworks and clusters of colliery towns, the north-east has long been defined by its industry. I grew up in Houghton-le-Spring, an old pit village on the outskirts of Sunderland. It was the late 90s and the spectres of the mine and shipyard closures loomed large in our recent history. There was a sense of aimlessness as I traipsed past the concrete pool hall and the fluorescent chip shop with my mother, pinching pick 'n' mix from Woolworths and choosing videos in sticky plastic sleeves from Blockbuster. Despite the optimism of Blair and Britpop, there was an undercurrent of disillusion. In the wake of Thatcher, trade union memberships were in decline and people felt unanchored. Post-industrialism shaped the place I came from, which in turn shaped me, but I felt disconnected from masculine narratives of disenfranchisement that were defined by the heavy industry which had formed the region. I couldn't find a map to show me what it meant to be a young woman within that landscape, trying to make her way in the world.

I didn't identify with the traditional markers of regional and class identity, such as factories, football and arguing about politicians in the pub. Those spaces belonged to my grandad, my dad and my male friends, but my own formative years were characterised by fake tan, hairspray and treble-vodka mixers. My personal vision of the north-east was watching the Futureheads cover *Hounds of Love* as the sun set over Newcastle quayside, flitting from bar to bar with bare legs in winter and waiting at bus stops in the rain. I couldn't find a story that reflected what the north-east meant to me, so I decided to write my own.

I wrote a semi-autobiographical novel, partly set in Sunderland. I wrote about Oasis, Barbie rollerblades, potato smiley faces and riding through fields on the back of my dad's motorbike. I wrote about longing to leave and then longing to return, only to find that I had become a different person and things would never be the same. Young women from the north-east sent me messages to say they felt connected to my depiction of the region, however my vision of north-east identity is merely one story. In recent years, Brexit and electoral politics have divided the area and historic Labour

strongholds such as Sedgefield, Bishop Auckland and Blyth Valley voted Conservative for the first time in the 2019 general election. Our identity is in flux and we need new narratives which reflect nuanced perspectives and diverse experiences. How do we define the story of a place? Who is given the authority to do so?

Over the past few years, I have been working on the *Rebel Women of Sunderland* project in collaboration with Sunderland Culture and local illustrator Kathryn Robertson, researching the lives of past and present women whose work has impacted the area. I learned about Katherine Backhouse and the Quaker women, who were involved in the anti-slavery movement during the 1800s. Their campaign to brand West Indies sugar from slave plantations as 'blood sugar' caused a mass boycott which resulted in the eradication of the sale of sugar produced by enslaved people. The Quakers invited radical black activist Ida B Wells to the north-east, who refused to give up her seat in the 1<sup>st</sup> class ladies' carriage of a packed train in Memphis, 71 years before Rosa Parks' historic refusal to leave her bus seat for a white man in Montgomery. In Sunderland, she worked with anti-racist campaigner Celestine Edwards and spoke frequently at lectures in Newcastle about racial injustice. I researched Ida and Louise Cook, civil service typists who made money writing romance novels for Mills and Boon and used their earnings to smuggle Jews out of Nazi Germany during World War Two. I discovered that women took over the Sunderland shipyards when the men left to fight in the war, learning to build ships which were vital in carrying food and supplies to Britain. It was often difficult to find information about these women; I gleaned articles about their husbands and searched for offhand mentions of them in official documents, struggling to piece together the details of their stories. Their lives were not deemed worthy of record and their histories were almost forgotten.

I was particularly compelled by the figure of Eileen O'Shaughnessy, George Orwell's first wife, who was born in South Shields and went to Sunderland High School. It was here that she wrote a poem to commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee, predicting a dystopian future titled *Century's End: 1984*, years before she met Orwell and he wrote his seminal dystopian novel, *1984*. She travelled to Barcelona with Orwell during the Spanish Civil War, where they both joined the anti-fascist movement. She typed up his notes for *Homage to Catalonia* and he later acknowledged that he could never

have completed the book without her work. Scholars are divided on the true scope of O'Shaughnessy's influence on Orwell's writing, but her story begets a historical trend of the erasure of women's intellectual work by male writers and the silencing and disavowing of women across history. It reinforces the necessity of northern women and female writers finding the freedom to define their own identities.

I also went to school in Sunderland and dreamed of becoming a writer. I spent two years working on a novel in sticky, humid Barcelona, where Franco's defeat of the Spanish republican anarchists and his subsequent far-right dictatorship felt very present, particularly with the resurgence of the far-right across Europe today. O'Shaughnessy's story reminded me that there are many different ways to be from one place, even if the dominant narrative suggests otherwise. However, like many women throughout history, she did not have the chance to tell her own story. Orwell himself was from an upper-middle-class family; he was educated at Eton and moved into a working-class district of Paris in the 5<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement during the 1920s, where he wrote *Down and Out in Paris in London*, a memoir detailing the poverty and destitution he found there. His project begs ethical questions: must the Parisian working-classes be spoken for by a privately educated upper-middle-class writer from Suffolk? What would Orwell's subjects, and indeed, his wife, have said if they had the opportunity to define themselves on their own terms?

I was the first person in my family to go to university, just before the Coalition Government increased tuition fees in 2012. Coupled with circumstance and a growing awareness of the need for diversity within the historically elite publishing world, I won the right to tell my story. Northern, working-class, female protagonists are still rare within literary fiction and I wrote my first novel because I had a seasick feeling that the lives of my mother and grandmother would be forgotten if I didn't write them down. Northern literature is traditionally associated with gritty, masculine social realism and I wanted to write a lyrical novel that was realistic about the place I came from but also reflected the way that I saw the world. To record something gives it importance and to publish a story means that it has a legacy, no matter how small. It is powerful to be able to name what you are, on your own terms, in ways that women before me did not have the freedom to do. It has allowed me to claim presence and define my own existence.

Areas of the north-east suffer from social deprivation and issues such as unemployment, low incomes, access to education, food banks and child poverty loom large. I asked local women and non-binary people to define their north-east identities and almost every person spoke of resistance or living in opposition to a system that does not work for us. *We've been let down by those with red rosettes and those with blue rosettes and you can't help thinking it's because of our poverty and our accents and our lack of proximity to the action*, said one person. *[There is] a twist of bitterness that this region and its people are so often overlooked*, said another. *We know nobody thinks we're important [and] that's why the North East is so important to us*. The north-south divide is political and sorely felt through cuts to local authority funding and 12 years of austerity, despite the current government's vacuous promises of 'Levelling Up.' Stories alone cannot change systemic problems, but taking control of our own narrative can be a vital step in addressing the myths that are told about us by those in power. What if the region was defined by what we are, instead of what we lack? What would it mean to take control of the narrative and define ourselves in the ways that we want to be known?

To me, the north-east has always been about dancing and dressing up. It's that Friday night feeling, wearing high heels and too much perfume, catching a glint of the River Tyne from the bus window, the night boundless and elastic, as if anything could happen. Someone else I spoke to called the north-east *a softness and hardness simultaneously*. Another said, *there's beauty - beauty in the landscapes and the music and the history and the real soul of the people*. One person said, *there is a sense of fun and easy-going enjoyment of life, despite the struggles of being working class*. Some people have lived in the north-east for generations and are *proud of the grit of the people of our region*. Others have moved away and define their identity as *the pain I feel when I'm not there or for years wishing I was anywhere but there, before leaving to live elsewhere and realising what I had*. I spoke to someone whose grandad travelled from Nigeria by boat in the 1940s, arriving in Hull and then making a home in the north-east. I spoke to someone else who said, *the north-east is my borrowed homeland, a home-away-from-home. Despite only living here for a few years, it is a space that feels like mine*.

Due to the history of British colonialism and subsequent legacy of racism, migrant voices have often been erased from the narrative. Accounts of white, working-class oppression can be traced through archives, yet the stories of people who have adopted the north-east as their home are lesser-known. The area is increasingly racially and culturally diverse and we need to see this represented in our understanding of regional identity: Bensham in Gateshead has been the home of the Haredi Jewish community for many years, Kosher butchers and bakeries lining Coatsworth Road. The ornate Chinese Arch on St Andrew's Street in Newcastle was built to celebrate Chinese migrants who made the city their own and Elswick is well-known for its Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black and Polish residents. Hendon Mosque in Sunderland is the centre of the surrounding Muslim community and Middlesbrough and Darlington are increasingly diverse, with a migrant population from South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Durham shares a long history with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, with permanent sites across the county since the 1970s. We must endeavour to shatter the regional stereotype of the white, male, working-class majority as a narrative which has never fully represented everyone who lives and works here and instead celebrate our rich cultural diversity.

Our industrial heritage is an important part of our history and de-industrialisation fuelled the fierce culture of resistance that is still keenly felt today. However, to be solely defined by what we no longer have neglects the jagged coastline, cloud-wracked skies, rugged fields and raucous pubs. The masculine disenfranchisement narrative disregards the tough, gleaming women smoking cigarettes in doorways by the Bigg Market and the mothers in bright salwars gossiping on Elswick Road. It neglects the drag queens of Darlington in sequins and platform heels and the teenage girls skittering across cobbles at midnight, the dark rivers licked with neon. My own version of the north-east is my grandmother's bleach-bitten hands gutting fish at her stall in Jacky White's Market and my mother drinking lager and lime in the Queen Alexandra pub. It is the sting of the sky and the rain-slicked pavements, *the pull of the crisp sea air.*

During a time of division and disillusion, there is space for us to redefine our identity. There is no singular way to belong to the north-east and we must shape our own stories of the region which acknowledge the limitations of our past. Colonial,

patriarchal structures defined our history by deeming which lives were important enough to be remembered, but now we have a chance to leave our own legacies. What would those forgotten women tell us, if they knew we were listening? How does your story begin?