

Down and Dirty in Sheffield

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[A B D E L K A D E R B E N A L I]

What Sheffield, the once so illustrious city of steel, is lacking in monumentality or authentic little canals or charming pubs or hills where lord or sir somebody or other kicked the bucket in the umpteenth battle over one or other shire, it more than makes up for with its local colour: the residents themselves, who, as soon as the first working day is over, are already getting dressed up again for the great debauchery of Sheffield nightlife; the boozing and verbal ejaculation that can last until the end of the week and knows no bounds. When the Englishman goes on a night out he liberates himself from his class, social conventions and inherited sobriety.

The main high street is designed to accommodate the greatest number of revellers to the greatest extent. On a typical evening, the body of merrymakers takes control of this urban zone – where, on a drizzly afternoon, next to nothing happens – for the satisfaction of every base instinct imaginable; swearing, screaming, ranting, spitting, provocation, baring their teeth, cramming themselves into pubs, undressing, fighting, drunkenly loitering or throwing up their stomach contents. In short, everything an Englishman should not do. I dare say that I learned more about the English by standing side by side with them for a few evenings in the pubs than by reading endless books about the nature of English culture. Moreover, every reference book I read after that only confirmed my impressions. Whatever irony and self-control the Englishman accumulates in his little finger during the week he loses entirely as the light of Friday afternoon fades into evening.

Before Osama Bin Laden became definitively radicalized in his revulsion for the West, I imagine that he visited this alcoholic inferno on a Saturday evening. Looking through the window of an overflowing pub must have provided the ultimate nudge towards Tora Bora. Here is the West at its most vile. Everything stinks of depravity. And even if in the past this flirtation with and surrender to excess was deeply mistrusted, frowned upon, to be kept out by all those trussed up in the corset of social responsibility, the English are finished with all that now. At the weekend, the confirmation of all anthropological research, which is that only the Japanese outdo the English as far as rigidity and formality is concerned, is smashed to smithereens. Sheffield on a Saturday night is one great big crazed Manga strip!



Decadence – once a privilege of the elite to drown in the plentiful final throes of a civilization in which all that has been gained is squandered with a mere wave of the hand – is now within grasp of us all. A pauper who is married to his horse can dream fancifully all night long, only to discover the following day that he is still a pauper and his wife is still a horse.

I know all this because my apartment looks out onto the car park where the local youth leave their Japanese hatchbacks - the girls wiggling their little chicken-bottoms atop high heels as high as a hairdressers' scissors, pulling irritatingly with their sausage fingers at their far-too-short mini skirts under which the sun bed-brown legs march onwards like frankfurters, and the boys all poor excuses for British second-division footballers – to then hasten in the direction of the establishments where the drinking-bout can begin. While the situational similarities to a group of ladies-in-waiting accompanying their knights to a jousting tournament may be observed, the fact that the passing of 1,500 years of emancipation means that it is actually the women who wear the trousers now and the men who just tag along behind like a kind of also-ran.

For me, the English are the politest people in the world because they have set the standard for indirect speech. The Dutch bluntness that lends their presumption of always being right about everything a crassness that sometimes leaves me reeling in disgust, would result in social suicide here. When I look at the English, I feel like I am looking at an episode of *Planet Earth* where the herd of animals being portrayed has raised the act of communication and interaction with each other to an art form; I can hardly contain my delight when I see a queue forming, I take pleasure in the silences that hang in the underground, silences that are the result of inner courteousness, convention and avoidance behaviour, and how in a conversation strangers always end up finding out as



little as possible about each other. At the end of the documentary I always want to watch it again as soon as possible.

At the weekend, a very different documentary is played back: the uncensored, raw version that would be better off not being shown, were it not for the fact that the participants in this joyful, hideous masquerade excel at the precise exhibition of all manner of absurdities and swearing and yelling. What struck me was the brazenness with which this behaviour is displayed - behaviour of which anyone sober would actually be ashamed. The English are not good at keeping secrets, holding things back is taboo. Privacy, yes; secrets, no. And what could be finer than, in the company of friends - those who are allowed to get close and frequent your private space - to have no secrets: 'Hey everyone, look at my tits!'

Sheffield on a Saturday night is like carnival in Maastricht: everyone is dressed for an erotic *danse macabre* and it doesn't matter what you say or who you are, the only thing that matters is where your place is in the polonaise of pleasure and jollity.

Drink is the driving force that gives this energy-devouring enterprise that pleasant mixture of recklessness and courage, and gives the English that necessary impulse whereby the consciousness is compelled to make a detour. In my eyes, this is where one ceases to be an Englishman, though I'm well aware that I run the risk of being laughed at for this. As far as I am concerned, the men and women I saw out at night have nothing to do with the men and women who climb the stairs to their office on a Monday morning; they are two beings, two different entities which are mutually exclusive. Islands apart, in fact.

Pub life in Sheffield is something special; when I walk into a cafe in the Netherlands I feel as if I am entering a space where I could possibly disturb the established order of things. Maybe it's my imagination, but this imagination is fuelled by years of walking into cafes. In a Dutch cafe you have to fight for your place, nothing is taken for granted, especially in the trendy cafes that recognize a hierarchy and a social code that usurp many a fraternity member. Fortunately the threshold in the brown cafes is a bit lower, but rules apply even there.

Coming into an English pub you feel like you were the final person that was needed to complete the party; there is an instant feeling of joviality: a convivial atmosphere that is perceptible in the faces of the customers and bartenders. When I die, let it be in an English pub. They will drink to me and if there happens to be an Irishman nearby, then there will even be singing.

Alas, at the weekend the pubs change into a frenzied blazing ghetto. The absurdly early closing times force young people to drink far too much in a short space of time, a routine that has been cultivated just as the English cultivate everything they are good at, with a pleasant form of irony. Here, standing at the bar is not so much an escape from the hard daily reality of life, as it is a social event in which class differences do not matter and,



provided he shows respect for the moral code at the bar, a stranger is welcomed just as warmly as the oldest client. What was immediately evident when I made my way past a number of these pubs – there is no other form of amusement in this city – was the intimate solidarity with which young and old hitch up together side by side and, as soon as you cross the threshold, there seems to be no such thing as a generation gap or a difference between the sexes. Here it is beer that fulfils the equalizing function fulfilled in our country by football and sex.

I would be lying if I didn't say that the scenes of Sheffield nightlife shocked me. It brings home to me again the prudish background I grew up in and in which every form of nudity, the presence of sensuality or licentiousness were severely disapproved of. Although I have certainly had my fair share of nudity, sensuality and licentiousness, I can hardly abide seeing it in others. It feels like I am being shown a magnified image from the Middle Ages of all my sordid antics from years gone by. But then there will be enough people who wouldn't call this sordid, just living life.

If my colleague, the author Herman Brusselmans, were in town, he would know how to handle all this youthful abandon, he would quickly pick out a character and then transform them into the Everyman of the modern day throw-away society, a world where the individual thinks they are born to utter as many idiotic statements as possible as if they were in a reality show, where drugs are seen as medicine and are consumed as a commodity and sex fulfils no other role than to get the two airbags through the boredom.

He would sprinkle all of this with the delicate intrigue of a visiting sidelined writer – drunk every day, with stinking breath, not even capable of getting his own belt through all the loops in his trousers properly – who begins a relationship with a very young waitress. In Sheffield he would discover that there are still a few places in the world where he has sex appeal. He would of course get her pregnant only to discover that the lady in question just wants to keep the foetus and from that day onwards sees him as no more than incidental. She retreats to one of the suburbs where at the weekend all the cars are parked nicely in the street, while behind closed doors the most unbelievably sleazy goings-on play out. The author would pay for his audacity in going there to gain satisfaction with a scuffle leaving him with at least a couple of broken teeth. As he is lying in a corner coming round from the battering by her brothers, the girl would bend over him and deliver the alarming words that he needn't go thinking he has the right to anything. Luckily for him, she then tries to speak a bit of English so that he will remember it. And Brusselmans would provide all this – which now appears to the reader a tad unlikely – with the necessary injection of reality and comedy that a story like this needs. I myself don't manage that. I try to see my observations as paving the way for a razor-sharp essay in which I give a lucid yet extremely insightful glimpse into the general deterioration of the welfare state.

The notion that the parents impotently turn their faces away from so much reckless abandon is based on a wrong set of expectations. They're all getting on with it too! Before one trollop of sixteen has passed by, she is already closely followed by another slightly older one, with a slightly thicker layer of slap and often just that bit more inebriated; but also more worldly, enough to mask that exuberance with a kind of "in your dreams" attitude: the mothers. They are just as shrewd as their daughters, but more experienced, and thus smarter, and even





more desperately in search of a bit of alright. This does not necessarily have to be a man. A nice cold beer will do.

The women dress, by Dutch standards, extremely provocatively. We would say sluttishly. The average amount of material on a Sheffield wench is just enough to make a face flannel. Their bodies are sun-tanned, here and there a little ring or star or a piercing. Heels, high heels. 'People don't think the attire here is offensive or common at all. It's generally accepted.' I doubt this: it would be 'generally accepted' if newsreaders were also to wear these clothes in their professional capacity. I don't see female newsreaders doing this. Even so, it is true that this parade of flesh comes across as relatively innocent; the few times I walked up and down the main street I did not see any aggression or harassment of women.

I know it is showtime again when I wake up suddenly in the middle of the night because someone has started yelling in the car park. It's always the same. Usually a woman screaming loudly and above everything and everyone else, but not a call for help. A call to follow. A fraction of a moment later the second call sounds, usually also female. The fugue of hysteria has begun. By now, a small group of women has formed, opposite which a comparable group of male yellers assemble; significantly more enthusiastic and with louder yells, but they keep it up for a shorter time. The choir has taken over the theme. The yell of a woman has a higher frequency in any case, whereby the squeal penetrates the ear much further. Once there has been some yelling then everyone has to run after each other. At the beginning I thought there was something serious going on. A mugging. Rape. Murder. In that order. The cause was something else. Drink. Hijinks. Horniness. All that energy and no where to go with it. Whether people actually do it with each other here, I don't know. 'For the Englishman, the evening is only really a success if, to his shame, he can't actually remember the next morning what he did the night before.' So he could have done everything or nothing. Life, a black hole into which everything disappears. Drinking beer as the equivalent of safe sex.

An evening that started out nice and friendly in a local pub where at about ten o'clock all the usual golden oldies started up, where a very ordinary, straightforward type of clientele came and, in the presence of unfamiliar, let's say fresh, menfolk,

the local virgins immediately started to crank up the cleavage competition, turned their gaze and let their eyes wander strategically in the direction of the table where some man had settled himself. That was the pleasant part of the evening.

At about two o'clock the decline of any common decency among young people – from which I hope they will one day come to their senses – which I don't doubt



because, as well as the capacity for complete drunkenness, people also possess a talent for self-correction – was already in full swing. Girls walked desperately through the streets with reddened eyes in search of a taxi, a bottle of vodka, a man. I saw a fat youth looking despairingly towards his girlfriend as, not that far out of view, her fat finger disappeared down her throat after which a churning, hot stream of vomit erupted like lava out of Mount Etna. She stood there vomiting with a professional nonchalance that shocked me. He was looking at her as if he were looking at a long-treasured illusion that suddenly seemed to be based on nothing other than self-delusion. What I saw in those eyes I recognized very clearly, the fear of being rejected by a girl who, once she had finished vomiting and had sobered up considerably, would come to her senses and then decide not to go with him after all so that all the time and emotional suffering that he had invested in her would have been for nothing. Nightlife conduct is governed by a very efficient and ruthless logic. I wanted to go and sit next to him and comfort him, soothe him even, but I see that he can really do without the platitudes of a stranger. What he really wants is for his girlfriend to feel better again; he doesn't even see the rip in her tights. What he was secretly hoping was that, having recovered a bit, she would decide to stay with him after all and carry on drinking for a while. Nothing is as lovely as waking up next to someone with the same dead parrot in their mouth as you.

I walked around astounded, confounded. I was astounded by everything I saw, there was so much happening and so quickly that at times I had to pinch myself to come to my senses. A group of girls walked past me who, judging by their body language, had reached that point in the evening when they were seriously getting on each other's nerves. There are three of them, two really attractive and voluptuous, the third sallow and unremarkable. The latter is showing signs of a childlike dependency which the other two shrewder girls absolutely cannot stand. And the inevitable, what the other girl was so afraid of, just has to happen and does. She is abandoned. The other two run away from her in the direction of a taxi like two cyclists in the big final stage of a tour, sprinting away from another who has been tailing them up to that point and whose role is now completely played out. Exhausted, her arms hanging helplessly by her sides, the poor young girl stands there and stares, like a lover gazing at some long-lost memory, at the friends that she so desperately wanted but are now making their getaway in a taxi. Sure enough, only to get out a few hundred metres further up where they can continue their evening as they see fit, liberated from their burden. This is where the world can be very cruel, especially on a Saturday night.

I see a group of black girls, most of them with heels as high as Cleopatra's Needle, others have bare feet, their very expensive shoes hanging loosely from their forefingers, taking turns to glug on a magnum bottle of vodka. It looks rather like a scene from a nature documentary where a group of birds are taking their fill from a flower's chalice of nectar. They are drinking with a discipline that would be more appropriate to the dragoons from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* than these savage beauties.

There are still a couple of streets before I get home. I turn the corner and, before I have chance to realize, a glass object explodes next to my ear. A bottle. I look around alarmed, at the same time extremely wary of a possible second missile that may find its way to me. Something was thrown at me with no other intention than to hit me. And so I was driven from the Sheffield nightlife and have never returned. ■

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ABOUT CITYBOOKS

The Flemish-Dutch House *deBuren* invites (with the support of the Culture Programme of the European Commission) international authors and photographers to take part in a two week residency with one of the local partner organisations in various interesting European cities (Sheffield, Bucharest, Charleroi, Chartres, Graz, Turnhout, Lublin, Ostend, Skopje, Venice, Utrecht etc.).

The resulting citybook (stories, essays or poems) can be read, listened to and downloaded for free on www.citybooks.eu. Every citybook is available as a webtext, e-book and podcast (audio book) of thirty minutes in Dutch, English and French. The podcasts are also available via iTunes. For each city a photographer makes a series of 24 photographs, and a City One Minute video project is made.

For *Germanic Studies/School of Languages and Cultures* (University of Sheffield) Henriëtte Louwse hosted the UK version of citybooks. She welcomed five authors (Joost Zwagerman, Abdelkader Benali, Rebecca Lenaerts, Helen Mort, Agnes Lehóczky), a photographer (David Bocking) and a video artist (Dominic Green) to create a unique portrait of the city of Sheffield, an alternative travel guide.

Abdelkader Benali visited Sheffield in autumn 2011.