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**David Cooper**

**The Most Mancunian of Trees**

*If we are to restore any connection with nature at all, it is in the cities that we need to begin. (Bob Gilbert)*

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There are trees in the centre of Manchester, but they are fakes. Rush through the deadened space of Piccadilly Gardens on your way to the station and you'll pass 'The Tree of Remembrance': a memorial, made out of bronze and stainless steel, that Wolfgang Buttress and Fiona Heron designed to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of VE Day. Dine out in Spinningfields – if your bank balance can take the strain – and you can eat Shanghai black cod beneath a four metre high dried cherry blossom that, miraculously, illuminates a restaurant interior for 365 days each year. It seems that Manchester, in the 2020s, is an unreal city, an arboreal simulacrum.

To say that the middle of Manchester is completely treeless, though, isn't strictly true. There are, of course, *some* real trees in the centre of the city. Just outside the Friends Meeting House, on Mount Street around the back of the Central Library, there's a giant London Plane. Redwoods and ash can be found between the beautifully brutalist buildings of the old UMIST campus. Further north, there's a thick line of trees, of various species, alongside the bijou Cathedral. There's a hornbeam on Market Street and a foxglove in St Peter's Square; there are willows overhanging the Bridgewater Canal and horse chestnuts in Castlefield. The centre of Manchester is a treescape, if you remember to look. It's just that, right now, you have to look pretty hard.

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'St John's Gardens? Yeah, I know it really well,' Chris replied. 'It's just off Deansgate, not far from the Opera House. See you by the memorial at ten.'

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In his 2017 collection of poems, *Mancunia*, Michael Symmons Roberts offers the reader a vision of the city that is rooted in the particularities of place: 'street-cleaners are out in force' in the

‘post-drizzle glory’ of the Northern Quarter (‘On Your Birthday’); a first-person speaker seeks mercy from God whilst walking ‘west on Cross Street’ (‘Mancunian Miserere’). *Mancunia* is also a book in which Manchester emerges as a city of geographical imaginaries and urban myths: a built environment of ‘back-to-backs’ where a modern-day Actaeon stalks ‘the alleys’ in the hope of glimpsing a sunbathing Diana (‘Actaeon’); a post-industrial landscape in which a mermaid has evolved ‘to live and hunt and thrive in this gotham of the north’ (‘Miss Molasses’). Manchester, then, emerges as a ‘partly real, partly dream-country’, to borrow the phrase that Thomas Hardy famously used to describe his own evocation of rural Wessex.

According to Rory Waterman, ‘Great Northern Diver’, the second poem in *Mancunia*, serves as ‘a scene-setter’ for the entire collection. Here, Symmons Roberts envisions – in a single, breathless sentence – Manchester viewed from above at night. To begin, the details in the cityscape are difficult to establish as, from this aerial perspective, the glow of street lights look ‘like embers’. As the speaker describes moving towards the ground, though, it becomes possible to pick out specific features in the human-made environment: flyovers and stadiums; cul-de-sacs and factories; cars and shop windows. ‘Great Northern Diver’ then ends with the speaker addressing an unidentified interlocutor: ‘the clay arrests you, holds you as a pulse for good/ so what keeps this city alive is you’. At the last, then, Symmons Roberts’s poem seems to celebrate the grounded physicality of the city; Manchester is framed as a body which is kept beating by ‘you’.

In the poem’s penultimate stanza, as the speaker describes zooming towards the earth, there’s a reference to the ‘ragged tops’ of ‘black poplars’. I’m pretty sure that, when I first read *Mancunia*, I failed to pick up on this. In defence of my earlier self, it’s only a fleeting mention as, in this poem of dizzying movement, the reader’s gaze is immediately shifted from the trees to ‘roof tiles’ and ‘kerbstones’. Looking back, though, I probably didn’t pause at this point as I simply didn’t get the place-specific significance of these particular treetops. I failed to realise that, in alluding to the black poplar, Symmons Robert was deliberately namechecking what Andy Long – Woodlands Officer at the environmental charity, City of Trees – has labelled ‘this most Mancunian of trees’.

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It’s a psychogeographic cliché, I know, but I sometimes wonder if I’m the only person in Manchester who still carries an *A to Z* in their bag. Bought at the Smiths in Piccadilly back in 2002 – price: £3.95 – my *Mini Manchester* is unsurprisingly battered these days: its back cover is

coffee-stained; some of the pages have gone missing; and pages 3 to 72 reliably fall out each time it's opened. The tiny weatherworn book feels something of an anachronism on the increasingly rare occasions I take it out on Oxford Road or Cross Street or St Peter's Square. The cartographic contents of the book feel conspicuously out-of-date too given how, over the past twenty years, the city centre has been knocked down and rebuilt, erased and remade. That morning, though, the *A to Z* did its job as, walking down Quay Street, I looked for a left-hand turn which would take me towards an all-too-rare green square sandwiched between Lower Byrom Street, Byrom Street, and Quay Street. I was trying to find St John's Gardens.

Chris was already there, trying to keep warm by sipping from a flask of coffee on this fag-end-of-winter morning. From 1769, this patch of land was the site of a church built by Edward Byrom, one of the founders of the first bank of Manchester. Designed in the Gothic Revival style, and once deemed worthy of a sketch by Turner on one of his tours of the North, the congregation at St John's dwindled at the start of the twentieth century and, in the 1920s, the diocese merged the parish with St Matthew's on the nearby Liverpool Road. The church was eventually knocked down and, in 1932, the site was redeveloped as a formal garden.

As I headed towards Chris, I was aware that all around me, just beneath my feet, were the submerged tombstones of people once of this parish. The memorial at the centre of the Gardens indicated that one of those bodies below belonged to 'John Owens, the founder of the Victoria University'; it also revealed that William Marsden – 'who originated the Saturday half holiday' – was buried here. Yet another inscription gave a sense of the sheer scale of this once consecrated ground: 'around lie the remains of more than 22000 people'. Looking up towards the aircraft warning light at the top of Beetham Tower, I couldn't help but think of the recent framing of the city as *Manhattan*: a vertiginous urban landscape – 'cheered by the Financial Times and George Osborne', as the journalist Aditya Chakraborty has put it - that's going higher and higher, pricier and pricier, with each passing year. Visiting St John's Gardens for the first time, though, was to remember that the vertical city also incorporates what continues to lie beneath.

'Right: where shall we begin?'

Chris's question was a reminder that we'd met up for a reason. We'd recently started to work together on a project exploring urban treespaces. We were here, in this patch of publicly owned green space, in search of Manchester poplars.

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Over the course of the nineteenth century, Manchester became black. The buildings were blackened by smoke. Black snow fell from the sky in the winter months. As a result of industrial melanism, the local moth population became black too: an evolutionary adaptation that, astonishingly, enabled them to hide in plain sight.

Unsurprisingly, many of the city's trees were unable to withstand these punishing environmental conditions. However, black poplars proved to be an exception and were able to tolerate, in the words of the natural historian, David McClintock, 'the soot and filth of Manchester'.

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'Let's go round together,' Chris suggested. 'Let's be systematic about this.'

I'm notoriously bad at identifying trees. I don't wear this inability as some sort of badge of honour: a self-righteous critique of the petty business of arboreal taxonomisation. For me, it's a significant *lack* as, on family walks, not knowing is the cause of frequent embarrassment. I *want* to be able to look and to name. For some reason, though, it takes a lot for the learning to sink in.

As we set off, I took out my phone to look at the checklist I'd cobbled together, on the way in that morning, from various websites and articles in obscure academic journals:

- *Populus nigra*
- Family: Salicaceae
- 'Manchester' is a cultivar of *P. nigra* subsp. *betulifolia* widely planted in northwest England.
- Thick, fissured trunk
- Knobbly 'bosses' and twigs
- Buds spiral round the twig and are closely pressed to it
- Spreading branches that often touch the ground, before sweeping upwards again in a mass of twigs
- Location: sun to half-shade

We began by walking around the perimeter of the Gardens, sidestepping the pizza boxes and face masks. We also pretended not to notice the middle-aged man – linen suit, leather satchel over-the-shoulder – unselfconsciously pissing against the railings on his way, presumably, to a mid-morning meeting. For the most part, we were reasonably confident in our rejection of the trees that we passed. It was only as we headed back towards Byrom Street that we became a little

unsure. There, on either side of the gateway to the church that once was, we found a line of trees that *sort of* ticked most of the boxes. Could these be them? Had I, in fact, walked past the black poplars on my way in? The trunks *looked* fissured and the branches *seemed* knobbly. And wouldn't it have made sense, given their remarkable resilience to industrial pollution, for these trees to have been planted on the edge of the Gardens? I started to send a photo to my sister-in-law – an ecologist turned horticulturalist – for confirmation when Chris interrupted...

'I've found them.'

I followed the line of Chris's finger to a pair of trees, leaning to the light, in the centre of the Gardens. He wasn't wrong. It was clear that there, just beyond the memorial where we'd started, was what we'd come to see.

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There's nothing new about green jobs. Ninety years ago, unemployment levels were unprecedentedly high in Manchester as a result of the Great Depression. In an effort to get people back into work, the Manchester Parks and Cemeteries Committee – with the support of the national government – hired men to head out on bikes. Carrying small iron bars, and bunches of saplings cut from a single tree, these men were tasked with planting black poplars around Manchester. These trees began to grow in parks and on roadsides, alongside canals and in public squares.

To my mind, thinking about bikes and labour in the 1930s can carry unfortunate associations. Back in 1981, Norman Tebbit – Thatcher's rottweiler – responded to the Handsworth and Brixton riots with characteristic sensitivity by arguing that, fifty years earlier, his unemployed father had 'got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it'. The poplar planters offer an alternative cycling myth from that decade. I don't know where those Manchester men had to go to pick up the saplings. Nor I am sure where they were asked to take those cuttings. I like to think, though, that they gathered at the new public gardens off Byrom Street before pedalling off to Prestwich and Burnage, Eccles and Flowery Field. I like to think that there were hundreds of cyclists, dispersing from the centre of the city to its edges, with hope for the future hanging out of their pockets.

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When I was little, there were two large silver birch at the bottom of our garden. Most of the time, I saw those trees as goalposts. I do remember, though, the deep satisfaction of going around and around the tree as I peeled off long, thin strips of bark. I also remember my Mum shouting from the back door, warning that I was ‘taking off too much tree’. I always wondered what would happen if I just kept on peeling. Just how much trunk was needed to support the branches above? What would be the tipping point?

I thought of those silver birch as I rubbed my hands along the burred bark of one of the black poplars; in spite of the material differences, I was momentarily transported back to a time – the *only* time - when I had a diurnal relationship with a particular pair of trees. I’d returned to St John’s Gardens on my own with the intention of closing my eyes and allowing my hands to get to know the texturality of the trees. But, in this edge-of-the-city-centre public space, I felt far too self-conscious to touch for too long. Instead, I took dozens of photos. I endeavoured to adopt an air of authoritative detachment which would convey, to any suspicious passers-by, that my interest in the poplar was purely professional.

There’s an image still saved on my phone that provides a close-up of the bark. On the small screen, the photo of the black poplar resembles the plane surface of a geological map: a flattening of what is, in reality, a thickly contoured landscape of peaks and valleys, fissures and grykes. As I swipe, then, I can only imagine this gnarledness. What I *can* do, however, is to use my index and middle fingers to zoom down into one of the dark fissures in the trunk. The hole gets larger and larger until, eventually, the whole screen becomes black. I go deeper and deeper into this negative space on my morning commute. I sit deep inside the tree, thousands and thousands of caterpillars crawling across my skin as we wait, yet again, for a platform to become available at Oxford Road.

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The twentieth century city belonged to the car. In the 1950s, there was congestion on Market Street and a line of cars parked outside the Royal Exchange in St Ann’s Square. In the middle of the following decade, Harold Wilson officially opened the Mancunian Way: the ‘highway in the sky’ that was built on top of the West Manchester Fault. The city was reimagined, redesigned, and reconfigured to facilitate movement at speed. Given the cult of the private car, many roadside black poplars were removed to avoid their shedding branches proving to be troublesome for drivers wishing to get back home to Prestwich and Marple.

Then, in 2000, the young shoots and leaves of many of the remaining trees blackened and died as a result of a virulent airborne disease: *venturia populina* or poplar scab. At the turn of the new millennium, dozens of black poplars – trees that had been able to withstand the onslaught of industrialisation – suddenly disappeared from the local landscape.

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To my surprise, the trees looked like they'd been draped with red decorations the next time I walked to St John's Gardens.

The black poplar is dioecious. In female trees, the catkins are yellow-green and, when they are fertilised, they develop into cotton-like seeds which fall towards the end of summer and are dispersed on the wind. In male trees, however, the flowers are pendulous red catkins. I turned to my phone, in an attempt to discover more, and learnt a new lexicon.

As I thought about heading back into town, I lifted a catkin that had fallen to the ground and tried to identify its bract and perianth. It was only when I got back home, and became buried deep within a rabbit-hole of folkloric websites, that I realised that, unwittingly, I'd picked up one of the Devil's fingers.

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Over the past few years, the National Trust has been working on an ambitious project to create an urban skypark in Manchester. At the end of the nineteenth century, the 330-metre long Castlefield Viaduct was constructed to connect the railway line with the Great Northern Warehouse which now houses a major leisure complex at the junction of Deansgate and Peter Street. For almost eighty years, this viaduct carried improbably heavy traffic high over the Bridgewater Canal; but, since the closure of the line to the warehouse in 1969, the Grade II-listed structure has been redundant.

Working with a wide range of local organisations and communities, the staff at the National Trust have reimagined the viaduct as 'a garden in the sky': an experiment, influenced by the famous High Line on the west side of Manhattan, to create an accessible green space in a city that, according to Chakraborty, has become defined by an Abu Dhabi-fuelled 'post-industrial regeneration' that is 'redbrick in tooth and claw'. Many of the species to be planted by the gardener and their team of volunteers will have local connections including cotton grass and native ferns to be found in the herbarium collections at Manchester Museum. It seems as if



visitors to the skypark will also be able find shade beneath black poplars as they look out, through steel lattices, across the city.

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Over the summer, the practice of everyday life invariably involved the black poplars. Some mornings, I'd catch an early train so that I could pop into St John's Gardens before work. Other days, I'd undertake a lengthy detour to Castlefield on the way back home. The Gardens, on one or two occasions, even served as a venue for *en plein air* meetings.

I like to think that, over those warmer months, I became a little less self-conscious around the black poplars. I pressed my left ear to the bark and tried to tune into the innumerable goings-on inside. I inhaled the balsamic scent of the trees in leaf. More than anything, I sat beneath and against them and read about black poplars.

In his brilliant book, *Ghost Trees: Nature and People in a London Parish* (2018), Bob Gilbert points out that black poplars can be found on the darkened left-hand side of Constable's 'The Hay Wain': a large-scale oil – painted in 1821 and originally entitled 'Landscape: Noon' - that was once voted 'England's favourite painting'. 'The Hay Wain', in the popular imagination, is beloved for its detailed depiction of a sleepily pastoral scene on the River Stour between Suffolk and Essex. As a result, when Peter Kennard, in 1980, produced a photomontage in which three nuclear cruise missiles were startlingly transplanted into this bucolic landscape, he was deliberately subverting an iconic symbol of national conservatism. There is, however, another – perhaps more nuanced - reading of 'The Hay Wain'. As Gilbert explains, the background of Constable's painting is split in two: the 'black poplars stand on the left, their billowing leaf branches seeming not just to catch a shade but to gather a darkness towards them'; but 'the eye is drawn' to the right of the canvas and towards 'a pleasant, level, sunlit plain where barely visible farm labourers are cutting the hay'. According to Gilbert, 'there is a tension in the picture that represents something of the tension of the times': a tumultuous period for many rural communities as the introduction of threshing machines led to mass unemployment and significant social unrest. In this interpretation, the black poplars 'radiate storminess, not just in their colour but also in their shape'.

I thought about Constable's painting hanging in the rarefied, temperature-controlled space of the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square as, at the start of what was going to be another alarmingly hot day, I sat in St John's Gardens beneath the black poplars. I thought about how, through the

vital labour of organisations such as City of Trees and the National Trust, a sense of hope is being offered *through* Manchester's arboreal history. I put Gilbert's book in my bag and, as I headed back into town, I dreamt of Deansgate and St Peter's Square, Portland Street and Piccadilly, as forests of the future. As I walked, I imagined a city centre in which you won't have to look quite so hard to find the trees.

**Note:**

Our research on the black poplar is being led by my friend and colleague, Christopher Hanley. I'd like to thank Chris for taking us to the trees.