

“When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life”.

I’m sure you’ve heard this quote many times. Samuel Johnson praised in 1777 the life in the city and not much has changed since the 18th century. London is still one of the liveliest places in the world.

But I’d like to draw your attention on the second part of the quote, less known:

“For there is in London all that life can afford”.

Again, we’ve got to agree with Dr Johnson. London offers such variety and such freedom that it’s possible to lead any kind of life one desires. Whatever ones tastes or aspirations are, we can fulfil our dreams in London. At least, if one tries with enough determination. For centuries, the city has embraced people from all over the world, people who were looking for something better or just something else in their life. With their ideas, beliefs and feelings, they shaped the city and, in return, the city shaped their lives and those of who came after them.

Galician people are among those who have formed part of London’s scenery for years now. They aren’t as colourful as Africans or Asians, as loud as Italians or Egyptians, as mysterious as Russians or Indians. They’re

such discreet persons that it's not easy to spot them. But they're there and you'll meet them in the most unexpected places of the city. Immigrants or exiles, London can also count Galicians as part of its multicultural identity.

I am what I am because of London. I was born in Kensington because my mother emigrated to the city in the 70s and my grandmother before her in the 60s. London helped me develop my first literary tastes, identify my first heroes and made me meet people like Amalia, the woman from Cambre who did the cleaning in Sean Connery's flat; like Joseph, the Ethiopian refugee who helped his countrymen; like Ben, the graffiti writer from Worcester.

For years I didn't think of myself as a Londoner, but I do now: I confess myself utterly fascinated with its streets, its stories, its inhabitants. And this fascination is also a spiritual journey: I'm sure that by expanding my knowledge on London I'll be able to learn more things about myself. And that knowledge, of course, is also about Galicians in London: my own family story as immigrants, but also writers and other intellectuals who shared a passion for the city. People like Manuel Curros Enríquez, Álvaro Cunqueiro, Fernando Pérez-Barreiro or Ramiro Fonte, whose lives, believe it or not, in some ways have crossed paths with mine. This is our story.

When telling a story, you can choose different beginnings. I'll start this story by talking about my mother. When she was young, much younger than the age I am now, and it was time for her to leave school, she wanted to keep on studying. She would have gone to secondary school, but there was none in Betanzos at the time and going to Corunna was out of the question: too expensive. So she went on to learn English, in a most curious way: in 1966 La Voz de Galicia published an English language course. She cut the pages from the newspaper, studied hard and passed her exam. That was her first English certificate. Then she took one of the most important decisions in her life: she left for London. There she worked in various domestic jobs and attended more classes, where she met people from all over the world. Some had come to study languages, like Astrid, a German girl from Munich who wanted to specialize in teaching English back at home. Others were escaping from poverty or undemocratic regimes. Such was the case of Joseph, who helped refugees from his country, Ethiopia. Both became my mother's best friends in London, where they shared homework and dinners, picnics and talked about life and what it should be like. This were the sixties, remember, and anything seemed possible, especially in London, the capital of the modern world in those times.

Another decade had started when my mother went to London for a second time. Now my father had gone with her: they had just got married a couple

of months before. At the airport, a nurse who worked for the customs police examined my mother. If she was pregnant, the authorities would deny her a work visa and they would send her back. She stayed. What the nurse couldn't find and what my mother didn't know, was that I was already on my way. And so I was born on a cold winter Sunday evening, the 28th of February, the year 1971, in Saint Mary Abbot's hospital, South Kensington. For five years I was nothing else but a Londoner: first I went to the nursery, then to a Catholic school. I played in the parks and discovered marvels in the National History Museum. I had grapefruit with brown sugar at breakfast and jam biscuits with tea at Joseph's house, my favourite of all my parents' friends. I found friends in books, like Paddington bear, an immigrant as also I was: he had arrived from Darkest Peru at Paddington station, hence his name, where he was adopted by a typical London family, the Browns. My father worked as a cook in Saint Stephen's hospital, Chelsea, then as a builder. My mother was the housekeeper of the house in Cornwall Gardens where we lived in a basement flat: it was so small that my bed was placed in the corridor. But I was happy, or at least I remember being happy. Very happy.

In five years it was all over: we came back to Spain. I wasn't a pure Londoner anymore and I became a sort of an exile. But I'll talk about that later on. When we still lived in the city, my mother used to buy her books

at Bennedict's, a bookshop in Fulham, next to my old nursery. She needed grammar books, volumes on phrasal verbs and idioms; sometimes she also bought literature. There was a bargain basement at the end of a spiral staircase and there I found this book, *Las mocedades de Ulises*, by Álvaro Cunqueiro. I must have been ten or twelve at that time, so I wasn't at all conscious of the great impact his writing would have on me, and how this line would have such great significance: "Buscar el secreto profundo de la vida es el grande, nobilísimo ocio".

What I also ignored then is that Cunqueiro had written a book on one of the great British myths, Merlin the magician, and that, being as passionate as he was on the Middle Ages, he had a great knowledge on English history. In 1966, the same year my mother did her English course in *La Voz de Galicia*, he visited England with Francisco Fernández del Riego. They sailed from Vigo on a ferry, the *Montserrat*, and reached Southampton. Cunqueiro was adamant they went to Hastings, because he had planned the visit on the anniversary of the Norman invasion, exactly nine centuries before. They remembered the battle where the Saxon king Harold died when an arrow struck him in the eye and then went to London. There they met the journalist Felipe Fernández-Armesto, better known as Augusto Assía, (also father of the well known historian Fernández-Armesto) who had published in *La Voz de Galicia* his chronicles of the London blitz under the Nazi bombs. He also was one of the main

contributors of the Galician programmes on the BBC, which between 1947 and 1956 focused on issues of Galician culture, which had gone underground because of Franco's dictatorship.

Until much later I didn't realise that I also shared with Cunqueiro a passion for the epic of the Middle Ages. I was learning to read with the Ladybird book series and the ones on castles or kings were among my favourites, but they couldn't rival my admiration for Richard the Lion Heart, and, most of all, Robin Hood. They were my childhood heroes and I relived their adventures on the carpet of our basement flat, with the help of my imagination and my building set of castles, known as Exin Castillos. I really don't know, but I want to believe that those toys were a present from my grandmother.

Yes, to be honest, she's the very beginning of this story. In 1962 she found herself with three little daughters, a husband in Venezuela who didn't write and, more important, didn't send any money, and no serious prospect of a decent job. One of the most courageous people I've ever known, she emigrated to London, funnily enough, on the *Montserrat*; she didn't know anyone, not even the language. At first, she even had difficulties in doing her shopping, because she couldn't name the food or the objects she wanted. But she learnt fast and I've never seen anyone like her bargaining in the London markets. She worked doing the cleaning in Saint Stephen's, where ten years later she was joined by my father in the

hospital kitchen. There my father worked with other immigrants, from Poland, Spain or Portugal. With one of these Portuguese mates he once went to a Russian shop in Fulham to buy a short wave radio and he still laughs when he remembers how his workmate went in and said “One arradio, please!”. He wanted it to listen to the results of football matches on Radio Exterior de España, but soon we were using it to listen to the BBC World Service when we were in Spain.

In the BBC also worked Fernando Pérez-Barreiro, translator from English to Galician and one of the cofounders of the Grupo de Traballo Galego de Londres, active in the Seventies. Formed by Pérez-Barreiro, Teresa Barro, Carlos Durán, Manuel Fernández Gasalla and Xavier Toubes, the group celebrated meetings where its members talked about what kind of measures would be useful for a more democratic and prosperous Galicia. At first they focused on the educational establishment; their ideas were written down and printed on small bulletins that were signed “Grupo de Traballo Galego de Londres” and distributed in Galicia. Their proposals were very useful and advanced, so a lot of people were really surprised. Soon they started dealing with more political and cultural issues. Then Carlos Durán left the group.

Durán had written a novel based on the life of Galician immigrants, *Galegos de Londres*, in which he analysed how he thought an immense city

like London could destroy individual and weak identities such as those of Galicians. “Caíu unha grande emigrada. Emigrou a valer na nova estación. Levamos un ano de moita emigración. Non para de emigrar. Non se para coeste emigrante que bufa na cara. É un verbo impersoal que non ten suxeito. É que o tempo está de emigra. Aquí esmorecen os tipos máis esforzados, perden anceios, esquecen por que están”. We had this book at home in Betanzos and I read it when I was twelve or fourteen. I couldn't understand much of it, but that didn't matter. What I wanted was to feed my nostalgia of London: I was starting to think of it as my own Paradise Lost.

My mother hadn't wasted her time in London. Apart from working and raising a family, she had kept up with her English studies and back in Galicia she tried to find a job as a teacher. But she hadn't a University degree, and no school would employ her. So she started giving English classes at home. Our dining room table became a place where smart people wanted to learn the language of the future and I did my homework. Soon everyone was studying English at school and our home became overcrowded with failed pupils. At a very early age I started helping my mother with her classes and a lot of people started respecting me because of the knowledge I could offer them. Until then, being from a foreign country was something that made me different and complicated things. None of my friends shared the interests I had brought with me, my grandmother sent me

clothes from London markets that were subject of scorn (but she also sent me one of the first personal computers of Betanzos) and when doing my homework I found out that my Oxford atlas was practically of no use or that our typewriter lacked accents and the letter Ñ. We could still visit my grandmother, something we did from time to time, but my mother even lost touch with her old London friends, Astrid and Joseph, with whom she had exchanged letters. I read and reread my Paddington books wishing we were the Browns and I could drink my elevenes' cocoa with Mister Grubber on the Portobello Road. We were trying to live like Londoners in a place where it was strange and hard, even if English classes were good business at the time.

The Galician poet Ramiro Fonte did the opposite journey: he went to London to give classes in the Spanish School on the Portobello Road. He liked to roam the city in search of old and rare books, and he was also fascinated by the lives of Galician immigrants, which he recorded in some poems, like this one, *As dez menos dez*.

My grandmother could have been one of the ladies he describes in these lines. When I was a teenager I spent most summers with her. She had already retired from the hospital, but she was still busy cleaning flats in Kensington, where she lived in a small room in Kensington Square. I used to help her and I was fascinated to be able to peek at the houses and the lives of London's rich and famous, who are some of the richest and most

famous of the world, believe me. But I also had spare time for myself. I bought a seven day travelcard and used the Tube to roam from one part of the city to the other. I went to bookshops, recordshops, the parks, the banks of the Thames, the museums... I discovered the pleasure of being a Londoner, even if it was just only a month each year. As I was greatly interested in graffiti, I spent a lot of time tracking this art and taking photographs. One day I met Ben on the Edgware Road, a lad from Worcester who was living in London with his divorced mother and was a committed and excellent graffiti writer. Together we hunted for graffiti or drunk pints of bitter in the pubs: I felt as if I had found the English friend I'd never had because of leaving the country.

But then the nineties came and two things happened: I started a career in journalism at University and my grandmother left London for good, after nearly forty years and even if she still enjoyed living there. So for a time my relationship with London was cut off and reduced to the same nostalgic feeling I had felt in my boyhood, but now even sharper. I started having this dream in which I was in London and wanted to phone my friend Ben but I had forgotten his number. At the same time, I started to give more and more importance to my London background: the things that years before had been shameful to admit, now were the pillars of my identity. I thought more and more on the role London and immigration had played in my upbringing, and I wrote a book, *A-Z*, named after the famous

London street map, with a few stories based on my childhood memories. That book was a starting point, and I knew it was time to investigate more.

After some years away, I started going back to London more frequently. Sometimes it was because of work, sometimes a short pleasure trip. I interviewed authors like Hanif Kureishi or wrote an article on the full size replica of the Pórtico de la Gloria from Santiago in the Victoria and Albert museum. Both pieces were published in the newspaper where I work, *La Voz de Galicia*, strangely enough, the same one where now forty years ago my mother started to learn English. I also met people like Fernando Pérez-Barreiro and Teresa Barro, who for me represent the ideal way of being Galician and Londoner at the same time. Cunqueiro has now been dead for 25 years, but Fernández del Riego is still alive and his head still works as good as ever, and was more than delighted to meet me in Vigo to discuss his trip. But the biggest surprise was to be invited for tea and a chat with Paddington bear himself. Well, not exactly Paddington, but his creator, Michael Bond, who lives within walking distance of Paddington station, and was kind enough to answer my interest of meeting the author of one of my childhood heroes. He signed me my old Paddington books and I'm honoured to consider him my friend. Other quests weren't as fruitful: the hospital where I was born, Saint Mary Abbot's, now houses luxury flats, and where we bought books at Benedict's, you can now purchase caviar and vodka: it's a Russian delicatessen. But then, out of the

blue, my friend Ben got in touch again. Nowadays he's married and has a serious job, but guess what, he's still into graffiti and as good as ever. And I've written to Astrid and Joseph. Astrid still works as an English teacher in Munich and was delighted and amazed to receive a letter from the son of her old friend. Joseph was more difficult: after tracing the Internet, I placed a request of information on a website dedicated to people from Harar, his hometown in Ethiopia. I wanted to find out where he was and, most important, if he was still alive. Three weeks later came the reply: one of his nephews, who's living in the USA, wrote back to tell me Joseph is still living in Harar. He even sent me a photo and now he's trying to find a postal address so I can write to him. I'll do it of course, and I'll wait eagerly for his reply, because I still want to find out about the most important secrets in life, those who deal with our loved ones and the forever unanswered question of who we are. Thank you.