Cover essay: my Jerusalem, my EcoHell

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About the Cover

Cover Essay: My Jerusalem, My EcoHell

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I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land

William Blake, ''And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time,'' short poem and preface to *Milton: A Poem*, 1808

These stirring words, set to music in the hymn ''Jerusalem,'' give crystal clarity to the deep feelings we English people have for our beloved country: our rolling green fields, our hedgerows, our nightingales, our moors, our oak trees. They stir up our *Invictus* spirit as we look into the middle distance, teary-eyed, and ask what we have done for ''England, my England.'' They help us put our petty differences to one side, and join hands—Northerner and Southerner, Chelsea supporter and Arsenal fan—to fight the good fight. Indeed, the hymn ''Jerusalem'' originated in 1916, when the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, asked Hubert Parry to put Blake's words to music during a pro-World War I ''Fight for Right'' campaign in London. Nowadays, ''Jerusalem'' brings us together in ironic ''old school'' nostalgia for a land that many of us have never really known—a green and pleasant one, that is. I say this as someone born and raised in the industrial North of England, who therefore knows firsthand the full context of Blake's pithy masterpiece. Specifically, Blake's earlier reference to a more sinister part of England's recent history:

And did those feet in ancient time.
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

The dark Satanic Mills of the Industrial Revolution were a particular reality for Blake. This phrase was first coined early in the Industrial Revolution for the Albion Flour Mills, located close to Blake's home. The Albion mills were built in London in 1769 by Matthew Boulton and James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, to revolutionize flour production. The factory was so successful it began to undermine the traditional flour-milling industry and was destroyed mysteriously by fire in 1791. Protestors referred to the mill as ''Satanic,'' and a published illustration of the fire depicted a devil appearing above the building. This reference helped make Blake's poem a favorite of socialist millworkers in their early protests for civil rights. Blake himself supported this viewpoint, with a reference in his later epic ''Jerusalem'' to ''the Arts of Death in Albion.''

The same mills represent a large part of my own memory of England as I look back on a childhood on the edge of Manchester where the industrial decay of the 1970s was slowly allowing nature to reclaim the closed factories. Just as ''Jerusalem'' has become England's unofficial second national anthem, so Manchester was, in the Industrial Revolution, England's second capital in the North—buoyed up on the booming cotton industry, cashing in on colonial success and the cheap labor that northern working class folk represented. On the cover of this issue of *EcoHealth*, I have chosen these dark Satanic Mills as the

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symbol of England to greet our members who are meeting in London for the EcoHealth III conference. Our cover image, ''The Lake,'' was painted in 1937 by the famed English artist, L.S. Lowry, who specialized in studies of industrial landscapes, replete with their huddled masses walking home from the mill, smoking cigarettes, pushing prams, and walking their skinny dogs. It is a view of Manchester from its outskirts, but it is actually a composite, one of Lowry's famed ''dreamscapes'' of the industrial north, which he painted throughout the 1930s and probably emanating from his earlier ''River Irwell at the Adelphi.''

Like many great artists, Lowry is largely misunderstood. In his paintings, many saw a man who celebrated industry, hard work and man's conquest over nature in the cotton mills of the north. A late 1970s popular song spoke of an artist who yearned to paint ''matchstick men and matchstick cats and dogs,''—true images of poverty painted by an artist who cared. In the mythology of the north, it's easy for working class people to see Lowry as a rebel who forced an industrial aesthetic onto the Art Establishment. But let's look a bit deeper. Edwin Mullins, who interviewed Lowry in the 1960s quoted him as saying, ''I must have been what they called a 'cold fish.' Even now I usually prefer to be by myself.'' (Mullins, 1987). The Manchester novelist, Howard Jacobsen, titled his 2007 annual L.S. Lowry lecture ''The Loneliness of L.S. Lowry.'' Indeed, as we look closer at Lowry's paintings, it's hard to see an artist who loved people or who viewed the industrial landscape in admiration. Instead, we see a man somewhat isolated and removed from the grit and misery of his surroundings; we see a man yearning to belong to, jealous even, of the crowds gathering at bandstands, parades, and carnivals. We see a person who paints out of misery, driven deeper by the death of his mother in 1939—a person who paints loneliness, Eco-chaos, Eco-hell.

Despite the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, this period of English history truly did put the ''great'' in Great Britain. Our colonial expansion supplied the raw goods for our cotton mills. Our practical genius provided the steam engines, Spinning Jennies, and Spinning Mules that fueled our growth. But in the end, once the party was over, what was England left with? My memories of 1970s England are one of a post-industrial apocalypse with little room for nature. Apart from kestrels, birds of prey were virtually nonexistent in the North, driven to near-extinction by urban expansion, hunting pressure, and DDT. Acid rain was laying waste to our forests. The river Irwell, which Lowry painted repeatedly during his career, and which I crossed over twice daily on my way to school, changed color weekly as different dyes were poured into its waters by clothing manufacturers just east of Manchester. In the 1980s our European partners coined the phrase ''Dirty man of Europe'' for England as we gradually took our place as a former colonial power and struggled for identity as a nation.

During the past 30 years, England has been able to move on. A series of ambitious conservation moves have brought back all the rarities of my youth: white-tailed sea eagles are back in Scotland, red kites are now common in the south, and the lady's slipper orchid is being re-planted in the East Riding. Even my own tramping ground in the disused factories along the canals of Manchester has become a green ribbon of nature: chimneys pulled down, bricks plowed in, and factory sites planted with native trees. It is inspirational for me, and I hope it also will be for EcoHealth III attendees. England's green and pleasant land might not quite be Jerusalem yet, but it's getting there.

Reference

Mullins E (1987) The lonely life of L.S. Lowry. In: L.S. Lowry, Leber M, Sandling J (editors), London: Phaidon Press, pp 65–83