

SIMON ROBERTS

i-SPY

by Frank Cottrell-Boyce

It was the i-SPY books that first got me looking closely at the landscape. Do you remember the i-SPY books? Probably not. They were little paperbacks full of drawings of things to look out for. *i-SPY History* was full of Saxon chapels and stone circles, for instance. You got points according to how rare and interesting things were. So in *i-SPY People and Places*, it was 5 points for a bus conductor, 25 points for a member of the Household Cavalry plus horse. What I liked about them was that they left you in absolutely no doubt that your World—the World you lived in—the world of bus conductors and bin men—was a low-points World. They let you know that there was another World somewhere else that was crowded with Admirals of the Fleet (50 points) and orthodox rabbis (40 points), organ-grinders (40 points plus 5 bonus points if you spot a monkey with fez collecting the money) and pearly kings (100 points—a red-letter day). There were streets in London where you never saw anyone who was worth less than 20 points. Market towns in the Cotswolds where you couldn't move for stone circles and maypoles. I took my copy of the i-SPY book of birds everywhere. But everywhere then meant everywhere in St Sylvester's—the small Liverpool dockland parish in which I spent my early childhood, which we shared with pigeons and a species of seagull which I now recognize as The Urban Chip-Guzzler. Neither species got you any points at all. The entry-level birds were sparrows and starlings—garden birds, if you had a garden. Then it was up through the tits and warblers, birds of prey, osprey at the top there, then rare summer visitors—snowy owl, hoopoe—and then maybe the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove (150 points). I still have the feeling that the birds of Britain are existentially arranged in a kind of pyramid, whose peak is kissing heaven. Rare summer visitors seem semi-celestial to me. I assume hoopoes are effulgent.

We did move out of Liverpool when I was a bit older, to a new housing estate. The house had a postage-stamp garden, which I thought was the Serengeti. I was sure that once we moved in I wouldn't be able to move for hoopoes and ospreys. In fact there were no birds at all. I know this because I've still got my

copy of that book and there is NOTHING down for that year. Because, of course, in building the houses, they had felled all the trees and drained the brooks. There was nothing for a sparrow to sit on or build a nest with.

I still felt that the real Britain was elsewhere. The feeling was only enhanced at school when we started to study poetry and I discovered that it was almost always about the passing of rural England. Poets were telling me I'd already missed the best of England. Merrie England. The Greenwood. If anything I felt implicated in its destruction. If you walked to the fields at the back of the estate you could see the great carcasses of the trees that had been felled to make way for our new life, the muddy scars where the ponds and streams had once been, teeming with water boatmen (5 points) and flashed by kingfishers (20 points). Beyond that was the slag-heap of Sutton Manor colliery, where we used to illegally ride tea-tray toboggans down bright blue mud slides, through puddles rainbowed with oil. The slag-heap was built of spoil and I think I thought we had spoiled something by coming here.

Then, the second summer, something amazing happened. Squadrons of house martins came scything down every avenue. Under the eaves of every house they built their strange, hive-like nests of mud. Mud. Of course. The estate was still under construction. There was mud everywhere. And no competition for the insects from any other species. The estate was designed as much for house martins as it was for humans. It was thrilling to watch them, curvetting in and out of the lampposts, to wake to the sound of their chicks squawking for food outside the bedroom window, to watch them gather on the phone wires that autumn, getting ready to head south. For the first time I thought the place was beautiful and part of something. Even though it only gained me five points. I could see that the slag-heaps had a beauty of their own. That the weirdly lurid sunsets that bloomed over the chemical factories of Widnes had their own poetry. My personal motto is G. K. Chesterton's line, 'The world is not perishing for lack of wonders; the world is perishing for lack of wonder.' To help people to wonder, that's the whole point of art.

Simon Roberts' photograph, *London 2012 Opening Ceremony, Olympic Stadium, Stratford, London, 27 July 2012*, shows a moment from a section of the ceremony called Pandemonium. It's named after Humphrey Jennings's book about the Industrial Revolution. The book is a collage of diary entries, poems, newspaper reports— 'eye-witnesses to the coming of the machine'. Jennings was ambivalent about industry. Any sane person would be. But his book is one of the few places in our culture that captures the thrill, the excitement, of the Industrial Revolution.

This moment from the Opening Ceremony does it too—the heroism of labour, the alchemy of industry that dug stuff out of the ground and turned it into power and magic. What I remember from that moment is the choreographer addressing the volunteer dancers over their earpieces, saying, ‘If you’re getting burned by the sparks, please feel free to move away’—none of them did. They just stopped there, with shards of hot light showering them, staring up in wonder at what they had done. I’d worked on the ceremony myself but I hadn’t seen those chimneys or those molten rings until that night. Now, of course, the slag-heaps have been re-landscaped. The pit wheels, sirens, and factory gates are as much a scene of nostalgia as Hardy’s Wessex or Housman’s Shropshire. But for a moment in the Opening Ceremony I felt again the thrill of their power.