

*John Robb: I'm John Robb and you're listening to hearmanchester.com, a series of 10 audio portraits exploring the rich and varied history of Manchester from the towpath of the Rochdale Canal that cuts through the heart of one of the greatest cities in the world.*

*The canal is fantastic place to come and sit or wander and there is a good chance you could come over all poetic as you take the sights in. We have a strong stable of literary high achievers from modern wordsmiths like Morrissey, Shaun Ryder John Cooper Clarke and Lemn Sissay, right the way back through to Anthony Burgess and Thomas De Quincey, author of one of my favourite books **The Confessions of An English Opium Eater** which he wrote in 1822*

**Confessions** shocked Victorian Britain and he is a really important figure in Manchester's literary history and I'm going to step off the canal by Oxford Road for a drink with man of letters Bob Dickinson.

**BD:** Thomas De Quincey was born in Manchester. He was obviously one of the most influential Romantic poets and essayists. He was born here in 1785, roughly a decade or so after the canals were completed, and so he would have known the canal system here, and he and his brother had to walk into Salford over the Oxford Road bridge where the canal goes under Oxford

Road to this day and he and his brother were every day ambushed by the cotton mill lads who shouted 'Boots! Boots!' at them because they wore hessian boots, which were posh, middle class.

**JR:** So would you say Manchester has a particular tradition, apart from De Quincey, has Manchester got a particular tradition of poets and writers?

Well, De Quincey had a real direct influence over one other poet, Frances Thompson. He was a medical student at Manchester Royal Infirmary, and he was given a copy of *The Confessions of an Opium Eater* book by his mother as a present, and he was so impressed by he decided he would try laudanum, and of course he became addicted to laudanum, and he started just wandering round the streets of Manchester stoned out of his head, and eventually he walked all the way to London and he became a beggar, writing and self-publishing poems, and he was discovered on the street by a couple called the Maynells who published poets and thought he was a genius, and his most well known poem is 'The Hound of Heaven', which opens, 'I fled him down the nights and down the days, I fled him down the arches of the years, I fled him down the labyrinthine ways, of my own mind and in the midst of tears I hid from him and under running laughter; you know it's the same thing, I've got this huge kind of town or city landscape, in my head that's my personality.

**JR:** *And that was Manchester?*

**BD:** Well it was Manchester, it was London, it was the human personality in the end.

**Danny Brocklehurst:** My name's Danny Brocklehurst, scriptwriter, responsible for shows like *Sorted*, *Talk To Me*, *Shameless*, *Clocking Off*... Working in television, there's this thing I think Tony Wilson said, about talent clustering – there's this strange thing about Manchester writers, there's quite a lot of us actually, who have stayed here and wouldn't live anywhere else and maybe you do find this in other places, Leeds and Edinburgh. Maybe you do but there's something very Mancunian about that, we're very proud of being here and from here and having this voice, the humour and having the ability to laugh at ourselves. And sometimes I'll meet people in the industry and they're from Manchester, and you just click, there's just something about, it's a weird indefinable thing, there's just something about the way we operate that you just kind of 'get'.

**JR:** *I'm with Ra Page, the boss and founder of Comma Press, the leading publisher of fiction in the North West of England, and what I'd like to know from Ra, is there a tradition, a Manchester school of writers?*

**Ra Page:** There is and there isn't, there is a really strong poetry scene at the moment in

the city, prose writers in the city are a little bit more diverse, but that said there is an incredibly healthy breed of writers that is produced by the city every year, every decade.

**JR:** *Is there anything about the city that's reflected in the writing?*

**RP:** Yeah, it's industriousness, its resourcefulness, its ability to improvise and adapt, I think it's very international, I think it's sometimes more international than the London writing scene, I think it's very outward looking.

**JR:** *So what kind of thing do people write about, would they write about stories in the city?*

**RP:** One of the paradoxical things about writing, instead of trying to write generically to generic audiences and set your stories nowhere in particular in the mid-Atlantic or hybrid cities, it's actually better if you're specific, write about the canal or the bridge over the Irwell, or the corner of Bridge Street and King Street or whatever, one of the best stories we've published recently was by David Constantine.

**David Constantine (reads):** 'All the years I was going to school, and for many before that, I am told, there was a madman on Victoria Bridge called Charlie. He wore a cap and jacket as a sort of uniform, and he believed himself to be in

charge of the comings and goings of the buses on Victoria Bridge. He had a pocket watch that he consulted frequently, and a pocket watch, and one of those pencils you have to keep licking to get it to write.

**JR:** *So Bob, you moved here in 1977, basically because of *Spiral Scratch*, which is a record with fantastic lyrics on it. Do you see a connection with say Howard DeVoto or Morrissey or people like that, with people like Thomas de Quincey?*

**BD:** Yeah I bought The Buzzcocks' first EP which was *Spiral Scratch*, and I was living in Norwich at the time which was about as far away from punk rock as you could imagine and I thought; I want to go and be a part of this thing that was happening in Britain and after I left university I went to Manchester and I wanted to write. There was a magazine then called the *New Manchester Review* which was a fortnightly What's On, it turned out that the address that that office was, was 182 Oxford Road, it was the post office address for The Buzzcocks.

As well as being a place you could sit and write all day on an old manual typewriter and get yourself published once a fortnight, it was where The Buzzcocks and loads of other musicians would wander in, and it was a great place to get to know people, so there was always this interaction between music, experimental writing and publishing – it was all sort of the same mentality.

**BD:** There's clearly something about Manchester that's a real hotbed of talent and people with something to say, creatively in both music and in writing for years and years and years now we've pumped out brilliant stuff out of this city, and I don't think that can be a coincidence, there must be something about living here or the mood here or the poetic nature of the city, or something in the air I don't know, that makes people feel they want to produce good work. I really do hope that Wilson's legacy is that we can continue to be a really creative city.

**JR:** *If you've enjoyed this programme, why not venture further along the Rochdale Canal and discover more portraits of our magnificent city at [hearmanchester.com](http://hearmanchester.com).*