

How sister's love gave Alan Johnson a childhood at home

By Katie Macleod

'This Boy' is a book that brings us a childhood journey so remarkable, it seems more suited to fiction than fact. From the slums of North London to the famous front benches of Parliament, the life of Alan Johnson, Labour MP for Kingston-upon-Hull West and Hessle, certainly suits the theme of this year's Faclan festival, 'Pilgrimage and Journey.'

The politician who the papers hailed as 'the best Prime Minister Britain never had' started out as a postman. This part of his life, however, marks the end of the memoir; Alan provides no insight into his ascent through the trades unions, or Cabinet roles as Education and then Health Secretary.

Instead, he illustrates his childhood of poverty through the markers of his mother Lily's life: the short time his parents were together; the period after his father Steve left the family; and the years following Lily's early death.

It was a life of basic survival, scrounging shillings for the meter, following horse-drawn coal carts with an old pram, and asking for everything "on tick." The Telegraph review of 'This Boy' depicts Alan's journey perfectly, describing him as "a straightforward, likeable man whose path into public service came via the increasingly rare route of real life."

It is a 'real life' that for most readers will be completely alien. All the reviews point out that Alan's account of his upbringing could – rightly, justly – have been one of misery and self-pity. While the Dickensian days that made up his 1950s childhood easily deserve it, his writing remains upbeat, often quietly humorous. There is no hint of bitterness when he writes "I spent my childhood in an almost permanent state of hunger"; when he remembers the only meal of the day being the free one he received in school; or when he talks of stale bread floating in Oxo as the only offering at the dinner table.

The level of poverty experienced by Alan and his family was extraordinary, even for a society that was struggling to recover from the Second World War. Southam Street in North London was one whose buildings had been condemned in the 1930s, but were not demolished until the 1960s. For Alan this was home, a street that possessed "squalor and vibrancy of life" and saw "survivors inhabiting the uninhabitable."

Powerful depictions of poverty, however, take a back seat to the stories of strength told by the actions of Lily and his elder sister Linda, who are the central focus of the memoir. Alan openly admits he had no time for his father, whose greed and infidelity made life even harder for Lily, who suffered from a long-term heart condition. "My greatest fear was not losing a father; it was having one," he writes after Steve finally abandons the family.

Despite her ill health "Lily could not afford to stop working. When her increasingly frequent stays in hospital forced her to do so", they "would be plunged deeper into poverty and debt and she had no choice but to work even harder when she came out." It is clear from Alan's account of his upbringing that Lily truly wanted the best for her children – and for them to have a better life than she did.

Alan's family shrinks first to one with a single-parent, then to a family of two orphans when Lily dies. It is a desperately sad stage of a story already filled with struggles. "For the operation that was to have transformed Lily's life instead to end it so prematurely was the final cruelty inflicted on a woman who had borne so much misery so courageously for so long."

While Alan's elder sister Linda had already been holding up the family for some time – working "relentlessly" to pay off their debts, taking charge in confronting Steve over maintenance payments – it was in the aftermath of their mother's death that Linda, still a teenager, showed strength of character worthy of any adult.

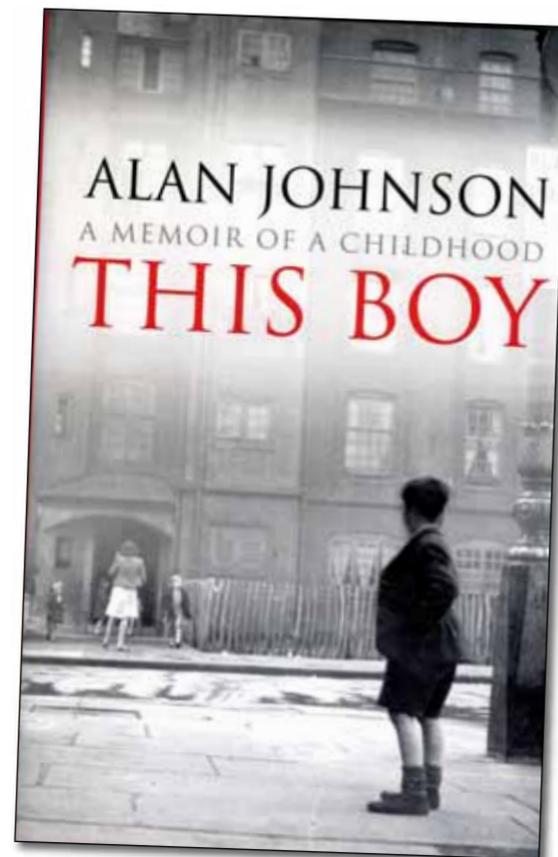
Through sheer determination, Linda succeeds in preventing herself and Alan from being taken into care and separated by "the authorities." Alan's descriptions of his sister's successful shouting matches with their social worker are almost entertaining, even as they take place in a desperate context. His admiration for her is obvious. "I was never in any doubt about who'd protected me: it was Linda."

It is easy to see how Alan's early experiences might have influenced his political beliefs later in life. While he never explicitly makes these connections, there are mentions of the Notting Hill race riots of 1958; the fact that Lily "detested" Fascist politician Oswald Mosley; and the terrible living conditions and experiences of West Indian immigrants in North London.

At a more personal level, Alan remembers the "arbitrary nature" of the 11-Plus exam, "already the subject of fierce political debate." Later, he recalls the frustration of an early job at Tesco, where he was made to do a managerial job without the pay, an experience that left with him "the conviction that not only should the voices of workers be heard but they needed some protection against exploitation."

They are certainly situations that could have encouraged the Left-leaning politics often associated with the Unions, which Alan reached the top of in 1992 as General Secretary of the Union of Communication Workers.

It was during this time that he crossed paths with former MP and current Harris Tweed Hebrides Chairman, Brian Wilson, who will be chairing the Faclan event on November 1st. "I first got to know Alan quite well in the mid Nineties," remembers Brian. "I was Labour Spokesman on the post office, and he was General Secretary of



the Communication Workers Union. He was an exceptionally good secretary for the Union. Then as now the big issue was privatisation of the Post Office, and the Union mounted a very good campaign which effectively killed it stone dead, and we collaborated on that.

"He was always a very good, very intelligent Trade Union leader. He had a very acute strategic sense, he knew what was attainable and what wasn't," Brian continues. "It was unusual to be so senior in the Unions and then to go into Parliament. In the same way as he modernised the Union, he saw the need to modernise the Labour Party and widen its appeal. He was very much in line with the Labour Party's need to change."

Parliament seems a world away from Alan's early ambitions; he wanted to be "a writer and a rock star," and very nearly achieved the latter. 'Cabinet Minister' doesn't exactly match up with these teenage dreams, but his success suggests he was maybe more suited to the political stage than the rock 'n' roll one.

"I've always had a very high regard for him," says Brian, describing Alan as "grounded" and "a very genuine, authentic figure." If Brian is correct, "it's not too late" for Alan Johnson, currently on the backbenches, to take a top political job in the coming years.

"I don't think we should talk about him politically in the past tense; he's still a very significant figure." With his extraordinary memoir now in the minds of the electorate, 'past' is not the tense you would apply to Alan Johnson – personally or politically.

Alan's talk for Faclan will start on November 1 at 8.30pm.

Joining Alastair in his expedition through spirituality

Alastair McIntosh, author and activist, will be taking part in the Faclan book festival on Friday 1st at 5pm, lecturing on Pilgrimage and Island Spirituality.

After Alastair's Scottish father became the medical doctor in what used to be the North Lochs practice, Alastair went to school in Leurbost, and later to the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway.

His involvement with Faclan came about when John Randall, Chairman of the Islands Book Trust, invited Alastair to deliver a lecture about his experiences during a walk from Harris to the Butt of Lewis. This year's book festival has a theme described by director, Roddy Murray as "the choices we make, the paths we take, the forks in the road, the footsteps we follow and the lessons we learn." This fits in well with Alastair's book – "Island Spirituality".

Alastair has given many lectures about non-violence and it was after returning from lecturing on NATO's Partnership for Peace training in Geneva that Alastair felt he needed to clear his head by going out for a walk. "It was a kind of pilgrimage, so I allowed 12 days for it," he says. The route took him through villages as well as lonely, deserted areas. "I went four days without meeting anyone!" he relates. "I camped out, prepared my own food, and gathered mussels from the shore!"

Throughout the walk, Alastair had lots of fascinating experiences,

visiting areas of historical interest. "I met some amazing people who told me stories from the past. Also, in the moors, I had interesting encounters with animals. I got entangled in a bog when I was very tired and was carrying my heavy backpack. It was the kind of bog you could easily fall through and I was wondering which way to go, then I saw the tracks of deer." Alastair assumed if the deer could successfully navigate around the bog, he could too, and followed them to safety.

Another aspect of the islanders that impressed him was their kindness. "Islanders have a very deep understanding of community," he says. "It was lovely to experience their kindness, including being given eggs from their hens and being invited to lunch!"

Alastair's book came about in the course of a bigger book he is still working on. As he was delving into the history of the islands and their religious beliefs he found the information was too copious and too specific to include in just one book. The Islands Book Trust then asked him if they could publish a lecture he gave, and the rest, as they say, is history.

"It caused me to do a lot of research on unpublished material," Alastair says. "It's a small book, but a big job! It took half a year. One of the hardest aspects was writing about island Calvinism without causing offence to those who hold that approach precious. I was

delving into a controversial area." The book contains specialised material of interest to a more local market. For example, one of the chapters deals with the role Lady Mary Stewart-Mackenzie had in bringing evangelical religion to the islands in 1820. "This is of great island interest, but is not so relevant to the wider world," admits Alastair.

The author hopes his book will impact readers by giving them a "renewed respect and understanding of island spirituality." He aims to encourage an atmosphere of respect of different denominations. "We have to be honest and respectful of people's differing viewpoints. I call it opening windows rather than closing doors."

Another part of Alastair's life is his academic work. He is the fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology and an Honorary Fellow of the Schumacher Society. He has also held the honorary position of Visiting Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Strathclyde, which is noteworthy as being the first post of its kind in a Scottish university. Alastair is also involved with urban regeneration in Govan and land reform.

Alastair's talk for Faclan will start on November 1 at 5pm.