

Patchin Place: the universe in an alley

A FIRST VISIT to New York ranks as one of life's unforgettable events. I was impressed by the skyscrapers, the enormous scale of the place, the hurrying crowds, but most of all, by the sense of being in a great open-air theatre. The city and its neighbourhoods—Manhattan, Brooklyn, Greenwich Village, the Bronx, have acquired a mythic status more enduring than the transitory characters in countless novels, plays and films.

Greenwich Village is an island of low-rise buildings, corner cafés and shops, a place with a strong sense of neighbourhood and a potent atmosphere of times past. It was the week before Halloween and the houses and shops were emblazoned with witches, vampires and ghosts. I had time for a short expedition to Patchin Place where John and Llewelyn Powys lodged in the 1920s and where John lived with Phyllis Playter between 1924 and 1930¹.



Twilight in Patchin Place, Oct. 2009
courtesy Pat Quigley

There was nobody around as I slipped into the alley through a side gate. It was the border time between day and night that John considered best for communication between the physical and psychic worlds. As the electric lanterns began to glow I remembered the many writers who had lived in Patchin Place—Ezra Pound, O. Henry, Theodore Dreiser, John Reed, e. e. cummings and Djuna Barnes. There can be few places on earth shared by so many creative people. Boyne Grainger² painted a picture of a bohemian ambience in the 1920s with its actors and writers, especially Llewelyn writing under the trees. John said he met some of the most interesting and singular beings he had ever known on the street. Among many visitors classified as Personages or 'characters'³ who came to tea were Clarence Darrow, Padraic Colum, Ford Madox Ford and even Bertrand Russell, but the favourite was an Indian

chief whose massive cranium overawed the Powys brothers⁴.

I expected an apartment house in a bleak alley, but Patchin Place is a pleasant alcove of ten three-story houses, separated from West 10th Street by metal gates. As in the 1920s the redbrick walls are darkened by fire escapes and the slender branches of the ailanthus trees stretch over the eaves. John wrote a poem in praise of the tree that waved outside the window with "buds of greenish

¹ John came alone in the early summer of 1923. Phyllis joined him in the autumn of 1924.

² Boyne Grainger, *We Lived in Patchin Place*, 'Powys Heritage', (ed. A. Head), Cecil Woolf, 2002.

³ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁴ *Elusive America*, 'An Englishman Up-State', (ed. P. Roberts), Cecil Woolf, 1994, p.198

fire.” The houses were built around 1848 for workers in a Fifth Avenue hotel; heating and plumbing were only supplied after 1917 and gates erected in the 1920s. Matching windows and railings contribute to the sense of being in an enclave as does the decorative street lamp beside a white door.

Pumpkins lined the window sills of Number 4 where John and Phyllis lived in three little rooms on the top floor front. These rooms make up the universe in his story *The Owl, The Duck and Miss Rowe! Miss Rowe!* where:

a group of Persons lived, two of whom were human, two Divine, one an apparition, several inanimate, and two again only half-created.⁵

The story tackles such topics as aging and euthanasia, but displays how we can mould reality with will and imagination despite bleak conditions and mundane surroundings.

John wrote of Sunday mornings “when New York lay in deep gulfs of ethereal silence.” But one of the most remarkable events in the Place took place before he moved in. It was the open-air performance of the Yeats play, *The King’s Threshold*. The elaborately stylized play was presented for the audience spread out on the footpath and the fire escapes. I could imagine the echo of the poetic dialogue in the summer twilight as the transport authority stopped the overhead trains⁶ for the performance. The alley has a lingering sense of a place where the eternal can brush shoulders with the mundane.

Soft lights shone through the open curtains of Number Four; I noted a shelf of books, people around a table. Bricks on the outside wall were marked with ivy like the skeleton of some prehistoric creature that once swam in Patchin Place.

“I shut my eyes now and at once I see John, tweed-coated and corduroy-trousered, emerge stick-in-hand onto the low front step of No.4.” wrote Boyne Grainger⁷. When he went out, the street-children used to call “Shakespeare” and “Napoleon” after him⁸. He said he knew New York better than any other, a city that “harmonized with my obstinately rustic and obstinately Gothic nature. I used to go to Washington Square ... by way of Tenth Street where I made a fetish—or even a totem—of a poplar tree that grew by the pavement’s edge...”⁹ But he could also regard New York as “a terrifying chaos in which by the use of a certain crafty sagacity and a few magic tricks you can build a transient nest, the nest of a ‘Crane of Ibycus,’ under the iron girders of a steel bridge ...”¹⁰

Two plaques from the Cummings Society and the New York Landmarks Preservation Society remind us that e.e. cummings and his wife, Marion Morehouse, lived in No. 4, but there is no mention of Powys. He knew the reclusive poet and used to tiptoe past his door and once wrote that the flushing of the toilet being blocked, “Mr Cummings must have been getting rid of his rejected MSS at a dangerous rate!”¹¹

John lived intermittently here in the 1920s when he was lecturing across America and writing *Wolf Solent*. He was unable to refuse frequent visitors and needed space where he could practise the rituals he needed to unleash his

⁵ *The Owl The Duck and—Miss Rowe! Miss Rowe!*, Village Press, 1975.

⁶ The elevated railway or “El”.

⁷ *We Lived in Patchin Place*, p.19.

⁸ *Autobiography*, Colgate Univ. Press, 1968, p.573.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.569

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.573.

¹¹ *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, vol.1, Village Press, 1975, p.349

creative energies. You can't very well discourse with lamp-posts or knock your head against traffic lights without attracting unwelcome attention, but such practices would be harmlessly eccentric in rural New York. In early 1930 he escaped to "a turnpike cottage on a dirt road" in Columbia County where he found the energy to excavate such prodigious works as *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands* and the *Autobiography*.

He celebrated his departure from Patchin Place with an invocation to Kwang-tze in his faded yellow garment,

who in his lifetime taught men and animals and birds and trees and fishes to worship nothing but the mysterious Tao, had become, by reason of the mythological aura of the Known World, a god in its own right.¹²



Halloween near Patchin Place 2009
courtesy Pat Quigley

The shop beside the gates at 113 West 10th Street was stocked with statues, masks, jewellery and figurines, a suitable home for Kwang-tze. Further down at 154 West 10th Street was the bookshop Three Lives & Company, with shelves of books on New York, but nothing about the Powys brothers. Last August I was in Kiev and visited the One Street Museum dedicated to the street where Mikhail Bulgakov lived. Each display told the history of a house, how those who lived there contributed to the culture of the city and country. A small museum dedicated to Patchin Place would be fascinating, but we

have to make our own imaginary museum composed of photographs, memories and letters, prose and poetry.

Darkness came early on this autumn evening with shadowy figures hurrying from the subway. Did I find what I expected? I wish I could say I felt the ghosts of John or Phyllis or Llewelyn, but I gained a stronger sense of their lives. So much of our life is transitory, our surroundings vague and half-formed in our minds. To visit a scene connected with creative lives helps to strengthen the connections between past and present, the near and far, the invisible threads of the vast universe.

Pat Quigley

Pat Quigley is a writer and lives in Dublin. His first novel, *Borderland*, was published in Ireland in 1994 and translated into German. Currently working on a novel based on the romance of Constance Markievicz and her husband, Count Kazimierz Dunin Markievicz. Pat Quigley is fascinated with the sources of the imagination and the influence of the environment on consciousness, both of which are richly explored by John Cowper Powys.

¹² *The Owl The Duck and—Miss Rowe! Miss Rowe!*, p.11. See also JCP, 'The Philosopher Kwang', *The Powys Review* 7, Winter 1980, p.45.