



# Mast Year: a Poem for the Bicentenary of The University of Manchester

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*In my dreams past and present were co-existent,  
and I lived in the past with a knowledge of the future...*  
(Alison Uttley, *A Traveller in Time*, 1939.)

*Making a difference*



**SINCE 1824**

# Introduction

It is a *mast* year, the second in a row. Abundance of berries, nuts, and seeds. As I walk from Piccadilly Station to Oxford Road I notice a ladybird has landed on my sleeve.

My plan is to visit Sackville Gardens and sit a moment to reflect beside Alan Turing, who waits on his bench, apple in hand, when (forgive the cliché but also: fact) a cloudburst

quite sudden. Rainwater driven up from flagstones floods my shoes. Water-blind and soaked I splash to an open coffeeshop, order a cheese and kimchi toastie, and wait for the rain to pass.

Opposite, the old UMIST building shoulders through clouds. Red-brick, terracotta scrolls and mascarons; a padlocked door, and the Godlee Observatory's seamed papier mâché dome.

There, if you could walk across the tiled entrance hall and up a flight of spiral, wrought-iron stairs, you'd find the door to a room where the roof's two halves turn the city to a glimpse of stars.

# Hypothesis

Returning to Manchester, mid-September, 7:26pm.  
My flight comes in from the west, over the Irish Sea:  
Mersey and Ribble estuaries, shorelines, dunes and beach  
visible from my window seat, even the faint squiggle  
of waves encroaching on the grey sand. And at the end  
of this long-haul flight I ask myself if the time has come  
to address what we are good *for*, not just good *at*?

As now above the Cheshire Plain I look down and see  
Lovell's telescope gleaming amidst late summer green  
like a giant pearl casting its long evening shadow and the shadow  
of trees stretched across the fields at Jodrell Bank. And as we pass  
overhead a flock of starlings lift from an oak and swirl around  
the telescope's pearl-white ear, which tilts skyward  
listening for the hubbub and oscillation of distant stars.

## Literature Review

Minutes of the Manchester Mechanic's Institution (founded April 1824)

*...to instruct the working classes in the principles of the Arts they practise and in other branches of useful knowledge...*

The old reports are handwritten, and I search their variations in quality of ink from glossed lamp-black to faded brown-leaf.

On page 38, a smudged thumbprint.

*Lists of new appointments and dismissals; lists of the lectures—two centuries of them to come—Zoology, Mechanics, Geography and Geology, Chemistry, Music, Arithmetic, Landscape and Figure Drawing, Botany, and History...*

On page 79:

*Numbers and Classification of Subscribers:*

*2 Brushmakers, 1 Civil Engineer, 58 Clerks, 4 Hatters, 1 Labourer, 6 Ladies, 5 Letterpress Printers, 4 Machinemakers, 26 Mechanics, 1 Piecer, 1 Pipemaker, 4 Surgeons, 2 Silkmen, 4 Tailors...*

Not listed are the slaves on American plantations whose forced labour ensured a plentiful supply of cotton to Manchester's mills, providing raw materials for wealth unpayable debt<sup>1</sup> which begs

Robert Hayden's question...

*why should we sanction / old hypocrisies<sup>2</sup> ...*

On page 21 written:

*in this part of our subject  
the attention was strongly called to the evidence  
which this science afforded of design and contrivance  
having been employed in adapting the structure and strata  
of the Earth to the benefit of man...*

On page 101 a nib that leaves a flurry of blots and splashes.

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<sup>1</sup> Olusoga, David. 'The ties that bind us.' *The Guardian* (28 March 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Hayden, Robert. 'American Journal.' *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden*. W.W. Norton & Co (1978, 2013).

## Results

And by the stroke of a pen an endowment can fund,  
build and incorporate a university's sprawl from  
Quay Street to Oxford Road: Owens College,  
a Medical School, Rylands and Jodrell, the Gallery,  
and Waterhouse's Whitworth Hall—  
in such crucibles our future is forged.

## Methods

Waking after a night of 3D printed  
dreams in which I manifested  
a building vast as an aircraft hangar  
and filled it with lasers, microscopes,  
lathes, and lightning conductors;  
25 Nobel Laureates and six thousand  
people from across the globe come  
to learn and discover, and a room  
with a loom, and a flight simulator,  
and racks of steel-cap boots,  
and on a bench a small threaded screw  
which I turn and it spins sweet as you like  
and the printers chatter to each other  
all the night through.

And yes, we walk here knowing  
that to look back is not easy.

Serendipity—

the island of my father's birth,  
the trade winds and wars that swept  
him up and led me to this place  
shaking out my umbrella to disperse  
a constellation of silver raindrops  
on the tiled floor. And now, at the end  
of another long day and leaving  
the lecture theatre in Sam Alex I pause  
to rub the lion's lustrous polished nose  
before I unlock my bike and  
wheel it out onto Oxford Road.

# Acknowledgements

Minutes of the Manchester Mechanic's Institution:

*Cleaning—the walls of the classroom have been swept and the floor washed. The committee have made an arrangement with a charwoman to sweep out once a week at the rate of 4/6 and recommend to the attention of the Board the propriety of making a permanent arrangement respecting the cleaning of this and other parts of the Institution.*

## Discussion

*Everything is alive with feeling for me.*<sup>3</sup>

Coupland Street. Hurrying from lecture to library, I stop a moment. Catch my breath. In the cracks between kerb and road a patch of green. I crouch to look. Growing: hairy bittercress or cardamine hirsuta, a weed native to Europe, Asia, parts of Africa. Most commonly found in recently disturbed areas it uses a form of rapid movement for seed dispersal, where ripe seeds burst from the pod and land far from the parent plant. Growing out of a basal rosette and with delicate, white flowers, it is edible as a bitter herb. The plant is small; its reach vast. We contemplate each other. I, with my hand lens and books. Thou, easing fibrous roots into this sandy, unpromising soil. We both bank on a future we can't yet imagine. I reach down to touch the dust on green palmate leaves; rub the sand and grit between my fingertips.

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<sup>3</sup> Uttley, Alison. 'Creatures of Fiction, Hannah Carter interviews Alison Uttley'. *Manchester Guardian* (5 April 1969).



## Conclusion

*Manchester is no longer a city of rain, but of enchantment.*<sup>4</sup>

It is a mast year, the second in a row. Abundance of nuts, seeds and berries. The purple here is buddleia, or butterfly bush, sprouting from drainpipes and reaching swift roots into the crevices between wall and paving stone.

A gust of wind brings down a flurry of gold and crimson wings, swirling maple leaves and sycamore keys—voices past, present and still to come—that shiver and whisper as I walk on.

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<sup>4</sup> Uttley, Alison. Letter to Dr Frederick Ratcliffe. 14 May 1970.

## References cited<sup>5</sup>

Walking  
when I first arrived  
in the city I saw  
all the bees—  
on the bollards,  
rubbish bins,  
benches, the town  
hall's mosaic floor,  
even a bee hive  
on the roof of the  
Manchester Museum.  
And I thought, yes,  
I'm meant to be here.  
The bees felt  
like a sign.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks are due to The University of Manchester Library and the John Rylands Research Institute, for providing access to the minutes of the Manchester Mechanic's Institution and to author and alumna Alison Uttley's letters and papers. Thanks also to all those who spoke to me about their work, or their relationship with the University, including but not limited to: Alice Larkin, Paul Mativenga, Carly McLachlan, Hannah Mortimer, Liam O'Hanlon, Jeevan Kaur Sanghera, and Jessica Smith.

<sup>6</sup> From a conversation with University alumna Fatema Abdoolcarim.