

WARTS AND ALL

Working-class life in the 1970s and 1980s is powerfully memorialised in the photographs of Tom Wood. The novelist Irvine Welsh is reminded of the bad skin and 'pub snogs' of his own youth

Below: Duke Street, Birkenhead (1992). Right: Chelsea Intro (1985). Below right: Brothers Fighting, the Park (1980s)

Liverpool is a city that revels in conducting a very public love affair with itself. In Britain, the only serious rival to the Merseyside port in the self-mythologising stakes is Glasgow. Tellingly, 15 years after the Scottish capital re-invented itself with the European City of Culture tag, Liverpool – until recently Britain's Cinderella in terms of urban development – is taking a similar route as the title's 2008 designate. As with Glasgow, this involves a great deal of soul-searching. Who benefits from all this new

development and what is ominously referred to as 'rebranding'? Who is disadvantaged by it? Will the city lose its distinctive character as a result?

Those who fear the disappearance of the old, resolutely proletarian Liverpool will at least have Tom Wood's excellent collection of photographs to remember it by. Photie Man (as Wood was known by the locals) displays the heart and soul required to do justice to a city that has both in spades. When I was working on the film *Dockers* with the writer Jimmy McGovern and several of

the sacked Liverpool dock workers, I got to know the town, especially the parts of it under threat from big money and redevelopment. Due to this, but also to being a young working-class male when many of the Photie Man pictures were taken, Wood's shots resonate deeply with me.

The girls, especially, are just as I remember them; the pastel colours, the laddered tights (sadly, always tights, never stockings, although you refused to give up hope) and the omnipresent acne. Teenagers today are lucky with all the skin



care products on offer; they may have an obesity epidemic, but it's a small price to pay for a decent complexion. The missed opportunities flash back; the wonderful desperation of it all, those pub snogs with nowhere but an alleyway to go afterwards, with frustrated peers jostling each other like rutting stags.

But Photie Man transcends testosterone and oestrogen cliché, depicting love and tenderness in abundance. One of the opening pictures shows a young couple enjoying chips, beans and each other, and it pulses with an understated poignancy rare in portrait photography.

The pictures are transparently honest, simply because most people hate having their photograph taken by strangers. Photie Man's warts-and-all images have far more integrity than the sneaky voyeurism of Martin Parr's more famous work, much of which is also shot on the New Brighton beaches that Wood inhabits. Parr similarly depicts a litany of fried food, cigarettes, beer guts, tattoos and scar tissue, but it's through

a long lens on unwitting subjects, and one can't help feeling that its ultimate function is to tweak the prejudices of the bourgeois consumer. Economics dictate that glossy picture books of the have-nots end up on the coffee-tables of the wealthy. Tom Wood's art is too honest and big-hearted to be a tool for this sort of smugness.

Another great thing about the photographs is that they avoid the stock Merseyside haunts. The road to Goodison Park, home of Everton FC, provides the only football shot. It brilliantly captures the time before the media yuppies stole the game, with their satellite telly and all-seater stadiums. But Wood is more than a mere vox popper; he is a supreme stylist with great vision. My favourite picture is of Duke Street in Birkenhead. In the foreground two dogs sniff each other, with an evocative car security poster behind them. But to the rear of this we have a mother and gran watching out for the bus, oblivious to the

fact that their young child is running down the street in a determined dash for freedom.

And there's another great picture boasting canine involvement, although you have to look carefully before you see the shitting dog of the title. He's mid-shot, surrounded by swarms of kids playing in the street. This picture was taken in 1979, in some ways a more innocent time for children: before the horrific murder of Jamie Bulger, and prior to paedophile hysteria. It's not just the kids that have lost their innocence; sadly it's difficult to imagine any city in Britain enjoying this sort of scene again.

Images of impoverished children and young people are unsettling, and we have to be moved by the wasted potential they represent. There is a great shot of a group of *Young Lads at Railings*; the coolest north-west of England rock 'n' roll band that never was.

Documentation is not as straightforward as it seems in a place like Liverpool: the problem with being so heavily into your own mythology is that it makes you selective about your history. Thus Liverpoolians can (and should) remember Hillsborough with a sense of burning injustice, but addressing the issue of Heysel in a similar way is

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taboo, as the perpetrators of that particular tragedy don't fit in with the city's concept of itself. Wood's pictures, however, both celebrate and undermine Scouser archetypes. Catching the pulse of the city at play, they breathe a powerful life and unerring humanity into stock urban clichés.

Many of the pictures were shot in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the city was devastated by the high unemployment of the Thatcher era. (It's important to remember that 'Thatcherism' began in 1976 when Denis Healey went to the IMF and introduced a monetarist economic policy.) We had rioting in England and heroin abuse in Scotland. Liverpool had its share of both, but was defined by neither. Alan Bleasdale's magnificent *Boys from the Black Stuff* dramas centred on working-class impotence in the face of this onslaught but, more than any other city, Liverpool fought back. The Militant Council, with Derek Hatton as its standard bearer, challenged central government in a way that is inconceivable now.

Putting our *Dockers* film in the context of Tom Wood's pictures, it now seems as much a paean to a past era as a lament to the political defeat of

trade unionism and the betrayal by the Labour Party of its traditional supporters. Yet out of the Liverpool dockers' struggle a myriad of thriving information technology and community arts projects flourished, as well as the 'Writing on the Wall' literature festival, one of the best of its kind in the country.

Other cities which don't have Liverpool's level of activism miss out, with local people too stunted through years of political and social passivity to take advantage of new opportunities. The unpalatable truth for the 'modernisers', and one which will depress all the major political parties, as well as those on the left, is that a culture of radical political activism is probably the best way of ensuring that high-profile urban renewal projects are ultimately successful. The irony is that Liverpool, with its indomitable sense of self, will do better out of the new era than most cities. Like Glasgow, it will shamelessly reinvent itself as the original bastion of urban cool, digging deep into its own myths in this process.

Pundits and politicians habitually take the city's inhabitants to task for wallowing in tragedy, but

to me that is to fundamentally misunderstand them. Like their Irish forebears and Glaswegian cousins, Scousers know that this is just the first phase of their own repackaging exercise: the second being the reconstruction of tragedy as triumph. After all, if you believe that you've suffered longer and more unjustly than anyone else, the celebration when you come through is bound to be the biggest and the best.

One important thing that the organisers of the 2008 European City of Culture can do is to ensure that Tom Wood's marvellous pictures are exhibited as part of the celebrations, so that Liverpool people can see them. If this is not in hand, then it's an unforgivable oversight, and one that will give justifiable succour to those who claim that the great and good have deemed that certain voices should remain silent (and their faces unseen) during the process of 'rebranding' this great city. ●

'Photie Man' (Steidl) by Tom Wood is available from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222) at £28 plus £2.25 p&p

Clockwise from below:
Dog Shitting (Abruzzi) off Borough Road (1979); *Goodison Park, Everton (1997)*; *Foundation Stone (1991)*; *Lads at Railings (1987)*

