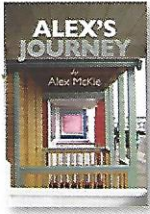


Snapshots of Britain



FROM: CHRIS WEST

ALEX MCKIE was a highly respected and talented planner who died suddenly at the age of 57. In her memory, this book, *Alex's Journey*, is a selection from her much longer diary of her observations from travelling around the UK.

I first met Alex when she was descending four floors from persuading Maurice Saatchi that there was such a thing as Gen X. In any age, Alex would have made a good king's adviser: intellectually broad, precisely but gently reasoning. She made her living as a highly respected advertising planner and was also a strategist, anthropologist, econometrician, quant and qual researcher, tech expert, writer, and even seamstress, painter and photographer.

At the centre of Alex's abilities was the power of quiet observation and reading *Alex's Journey* gives you the privilege of being able to spend eight years with her, travelling Britain and seeing it through her eyes.

She visited the big cities, but also the small towns and isolated rural communities. In her own words, she wanted "a new map... everyone contributing to a discussion about what matters most and how we go forward as country".

Her analytical mind shaped those observations into topics that some of us might have half detected, but never recognised. Topics such as 'the development of the universal menu', the new etiquette of mobile phones, how a third of B&B owners hate having people in their home, the slanting of the City into a game of snakes and ladders (where the bankers have access to the ladders, and the institutional investor is left with the snakes), the fact that "money is time stored", and the realisation that in small towns, music shops have somehow survived the modern, efficient, revenue-generating models and remain "scruffy and chaotic".

One day, driving along a deserted road, Alex notices "A man's head on the road". It turns out to be still connected to the body of a BT engineer, happily at work in a hole in the road. Perhaps because of the combination of her upbringing in a tight Cotswolds farming family, followed by a metropolitan career, Alex was able to effect a timely change of gears, and so she stops for a chat with the head. Chatting was another of her skills.

I remember Alex telling me that she had understood most about the workings of Great Ormond Street Hospital by sitting in the canteen and striking up a conversation with a cleaner. In her book, she chats to gangland juniors in Clapham, people she meets as she wanders into a Highland Gathering, lorry drivers and two goddesses.

During these travels and conversations, something becomes very clear. There isn't one modern Britain, or two Britains of metropolitan and countryside. There

are three Britains, "all facing similar challenges but each needing different things to thrive". There is London, of course ("economically strong but socially vulnerable") and there are the far-flung edges ("socially strong but economically vulnerable"). And then there's modern middle Britain, "which evolved for the 20th century and may struggle with the 21st". The middle is both economically and socially vulnerable.

Alex notices, however, that new ways of being start at the edges: people have to be creative about making a basic living and so hold more than one job, and for shops and pubs to survive, they too have to have more than one purpose.

There are many people reading this review who can rightfully claim to know Alex better than I do and I offer my apologies for not including all her facets – though I make no apologies for making this a very personal review, as Alex was one of the least corporate, most personable people I ever met.

The last time Alex and I met was typical. I was in a funk because we'd been asked to pitch to create the verbal identity for a provincial, poly-turned-university. What did I know about the provinces? The needs of a modern university? Alex, as always, rode to the rescue, gently advising the university's chancellor of what was important, what he might see if he stepped outside his car and into the lives of his colleagues and students. But it was unsuccessful – the chancellor valued most highly things that had never been mentioned on the pitch document. So we retreated to the branded coffee shop in the local concrete shopping mall, surrounded by its half-alive shops and long-deceased lighting, with the occasional shuffling past us of the slippers of the slightly medicated. But in Alex's company, this place became alive and understandable, an interesting place to be. Alex pointed out the effective apartheid of shops and wealth, even in one mall, how around us the one-size-fits-all brand guidelines were being ignored for the sake of genuine hospitality, how it was possible wherever you were, to interact with people and understand parts of their life.

Alex's travels were inspired by this desire to understand people. Along the way, she offered everyone a postcard on which they could write their three wishes. If I could have three wishes, one of them now would be for you to do as I did, and buy a copy of *Alex's Journey* for each person in your office who was never lucky enough to meet her. More than an enjoyable read, Alex's way of looking at what's around us is a good education for everyone, especially the members of Gen Z joining us now in the office.

Alex's Journey is published by Alliance Publishing Press, 2015. The complete manuscript is freely available for download at www.alexmckie.com