

Rory Putman, *Boy on a Bicycle: An Oxfordshire Childhood*, Amazon, 2022, 94 pp., Paperback £7.99, Kindle edition £2.26.

This slim volume at first appears to provide little information about its author or scope. There is no biographical note, foreword, preface or introduction. The only hints are provided by a colour photograph on the front cover of a young man training an owl, and this note on the back cover:

On a Raleigh pedal cycle presented to him on his 9th birthday, Putman Putman rides down memory lane in a series of reminiscences of town and country life in Oxfordshire in the 1950s and 1960s. Although this is a personal journey, the keen observations of life around the boy and his bicycle as he passes, evocatively capture the flavour of landscape and lifestyles now consigned to history.

This was enough to entice me to read the book from cover to cover, which was an easy and enjoyable experience. Rory Putman, born in 1950, is only slightly younger than this reviewer. Many of his recollections of childhood are very similar to mine but others are very different. Although his father had an excellent camera and took home movies, most of Putman's early recollections are not recreated from photographs or film but are what he calls 'vivid retinal images', burnt into his memory as a 'magic lantern show of stills'.

He begins by telling us that his early years were spent in Abingdon, living on a housing estate built by the Atomic Energy Research Establishment (AERE) for its employees. His father was a scientist working at a laboratory in Wantage. Putman describes his early school days at Dunmore County Primary school and playing in the grounds of the former Fitzharris Manor. He and the other local children 'free-ranged' around the Stert Stream and in the patches of woodland abutting the estate, roaming unsupervised for most of the day. He reminisces about Morrell's Brewery and a grocer's shop in Abingdon, recalling how ham would be thinly sliced with a hand-operated machine and packaged in greaseproof paper and a paper bag.

From the age of seven Putman attended the Dragon School in Oxford as a day boy, transport being provided by the AERE. After a while the family moved to Oxford. Successive members of the Lynam family, who were the Dragon School's headmasters, aided by their dedicated but eccentric staff, provided 'an excellent and caring experience'. Games played by the Dragons included a variant of hide-and-seek known as Lurkey, and a form of playground hockey similar to shinty.

A chapter entitled 'Wider Explorations' reveals that when Putman's family lived in Abingdon his father could not afford to run a car. Instead he would occasionally borrow one from a friend. (My father did the same.) When Putman was seven or eight his father finally acquired an ancient jalopy nicknamed Ozymandias. Despite the foreboding inherent in that name, the car enabled the family to travel further at weekends, to locations such as Boar's Hill and Wittenham Clumps. In Appleton the family made the acquaintance of a Mr White, who stocked a local wood with pheasants: Putman developed a great interest in the rearing of the chicks. White's willingness to share his knowledge, and Putman's father's love of the natural world, gave Putman 'a firm and fundamental grounding in natural history, practical land management and a range of country skills which has stood [him] in good stead throughout a professional life as an environmental biologist and wildlife manager.'

The bicycle referred to in the book's title was given to him by his parents for his ninth birthday and was his first full-size bike: a second-hand Raleigh tourer, with dynamo lighting and a three-speed gear. (My first bike was also a second-hand Raleigh.) During term time Putman relied on the bike to get to school from the family home in Summertown. In the holidays he explored the lanes of rural Oxfordshire, visiting villages such as Yarnton and Fyfield. In Woodeaton he befriended the Roma who had a regular campsite there. He still has the British-Romany word lists he compiled during his friendship with these rather proud travellers. They followed a regular annual migration in southern England, searching for work such as picking fruit, hops or sprouts. He points out that many of Oxfordshire's travelling showmen were from Romany families.

Putman briefly traces the evolution of St Giles' Fair and describes the various rides and stalls. After the fair dispersed, the showmen would set up smaller fairs in the surrounding towns and villages. Other reminiscences include Oxford's May Day customs, the Lord Mayor's Carol Service in the Town Hall, and the annual beating of the parish bounds. When only six or seven years old, Putman pestered his mother to take him to see the ballet *Coppelia*. Fearing he would be bored and embarrass her, she said she would do this only if he could listen without interruption to a recording of the whole score. Accepting the challenge, he maintained total silence throughout, so his mother did indeed take him to the live performance at the New Theatre. He was enthralled and has enjoyed ballet ever since.

His interest in ornithology grew, partly stimulated by Maxwell Knight's magazine sponsored by the makers of Swoop, a wild bird food. Although Knight is not as well remembered as some other high profile naturalists of the 1950s and 1960s, he was a big name back then. I still have a signed copy of his book on amphibians which I won for asking the 'best question' at the end of a talk he gave for youngsters at Reading Central Library. As Putman points out, Knight's activities as a naturalist were curiously peaceable for the man who was the real-life model for 'M' in the James Bond novels. Putman fondly recalls being allowed access to the swift nesting colony in the tower of the University Museum of Natural History. He was recruited as a messenger boy for an International Ornithological Congress at Rhodes House, for which purpose the trusty old Raleigh was put to good use. His interest in nature, land management and ecology continued to develop: he spent much of his school holidays helping gamekeepers in Mr White's woods at Appleton.

Somewhat unusually, Putman's parents gave him a choice of which boarding school to attend: no attempt was made to influence his decision. His father took him to several schools and Putman eventually chose Bryanston in Dorset. Only then did he discover that his father had been a sixth form pupil there. Moreover, his paternal grandfather had been the school's resident clerk of works and his parents were married in Bryanston parish church. The chapter entitled 'A Detour to Dorset' is the longest by far and it is clear that the school had a deeply formative influence that Putman enjoyed greatly. Another chapter, 'Secret Lives and Secret Spaces', recounts tales of the escapades he and his fellow pupils got up to whilst at Bryanston. One in particular, involving water tanks in an attic, rivals in ingenuity the exploits of the inmates of Colditz or Stalag Luft III.

After his time at Bryanston, Putman returned to Oxford where he studied zoology at Balliol, taking rooms in the college rather than living at his nearby family home. He provides an interesting picture of what Oxford and its environs were like sixty years ago. He mentions some of the city centre pubs and, further away, the now defunct Lamb & Flag near Kingston Bagpuize, better known to us students as Dirty Dudley's. That was a round trip of about 30

miles by bike, which could have been interesting in the dark after a few pints. As a budding naturalist, Port Meadow was of particular interest. He became familiar with the University's field site, Wytham Woods, frequently cycling there from the Botanic Gardens, and occasionally overnighing at the Chalet on the edge of Rough Common. Some years later, having recently married, he and his wife lived at the Chalet full-time for a while.

The final chapter describes cruising with friends in a hired narrow boat along the canals from Heyford to Kingswood Junction. Again, Putman's enthusiasm for the natural world shines through as he explains that Halcyon Cruisers, the company from whom they hired the boat, was named after the kingfishers that accompanied them on their journey. (Halcyon being the name of the kingfisher genus.) A brief note at the end of the book tells us that, shortly after finishing his doctorate, Putman left for East Africa before taking up a post at the University of Southampton. He now lives on the west coast of Scotland and he still has the bicycle.

I found this little volume of reminiscences to be a well-written and enjoyable read. It does indeed 'evocatively capture the flavour of landscape and lifestyles now consigned to history'. If after reading it you would like to learn more of Putman's life, he has written several other autobiographical books, quite apart from his academic works on aspects of animal management and ecology.

Tony Hadland, Oxfordshire historian, March 2024