



The Kingdom by the Sea by Paul Theroux

A review by Jim Alexander

Renowned travel author and novelist Paul Theroux had been based for over 10 years in London, the economic and cultural center of the United Kingdom, when he realized that he did not know much about the rest of the country. Strangely, while writing about remote parts of the world, he had neglected Britain, and was tiring of the urban pressures of London anyway.

The year was 1982, at a time when the government-run short line railroads that provided easy access to remote areas were facing another round of retrenchment. So, with camera and notebook in hand, and a good pair of shoes, he set about to travel the periphery of the Kingdom. Recognizing that no part of the UK was more than 65 miles from the sea, he left London in a clockwise trip that lasted three months, taking the train where possible, shanks' mare or a bus where needed.

Along the way he encountered people and a different life style than he was familiar with in London. Much of Britain was suffering from economic decline, and he was curious whether the stiff upper lip that had served so well during World War II remained. During part of his 3-month trip, the Falklands War was being fought. He avoided places with castles or major attractions, so that he could focus on regular people.

While not a traditional travel book, his observations are fascinating and telling. We'll mainly use some of his own words to describe what he found, starting with an early train ride.

... the railway line had the magnificence that all lines do when they run beside the sea. It was not just the sight of cliffs and the sea breezes; it was also the engineering, all of the iron embedded in rock, and the inevitable tunnel, the roar of engines and the crashing of waves, the surf just below the tracks, the flecks of salt water on the train windows that faced the sea.... It was man's best machine traversing Earth's best feature – the train tracking in the narrow angle between vertical rock and horizontal water.

Much of what he saw was faded old seaside resort towns, with pensioners eking out a living, often by running modest boarding houses. His observations, which included the following, reflected a sadness of what he saw:

...they talked very loud. I sometimes had the impression that the whole of southern England was full of deaf people talking much too loud.

Of Wales: there was one note, one color, one class, and in some places every house was identical, and equally ugly.

I knew at once that Belfast (reeling from "The Troubles") was an awful city. It had a bad face – moldering buildings, soft looking people, a visible smell, too many fences.... It was a city of drunks, of lurkers, of late risers. It smelled of wet bricks and burning coal. It stank.

Yet his mood changed as he worked his way up to Scotland's Cape Wrath, a sparsely populated area where tenants of large landowners had eked out a living by raising sheep on the rocky countryside, and few were now left:

We stopped by a small white cottage near the edge of the Loch and were greeted by an old man. He wore a tweed hat and threadbare jacket and loose trousers. His shoes were cracked and broken. "You'll have a cup of tea," suggested the elderly woman inside, who had recently had an operation and was far from well. "Sit down in front of the fire" she said. It was the end of June – a few days from July – and yet a fire burned in the cottage hearth, and the wind made the rosebushes scratch at the window.... You know you're in the Highlands when people make you welcome like this. No one is sent away. If you come to the door of a Highlander, he lets you in. As Thoreau moved on, he thought back: it was like a world apart, an unknown place in this best-known country in the world. No sooner had I left it than I wanted to go back.

Speaking with another local: he confirmed my feeling that great parts of Britain were turning into what they were before the railway age. Villages were becoming crabbed and shrunken, and businesses were closing, and the people who stayed in rural areas became more and more tied to their houses. The urban areas were growing in population and becoming poorer.

Perhaps the most telling indication of Thoreau's love of trains came when he wrote: *I sat alone.... This lovely train was passing through the green valleys ... in North Yorkshire. It was a bright evening – sunshine as soon as we were out of the city.... There is an English dream of a warm summer evening on a branch-line train. Just that sentence can make an English person over forty fall silent with the memory of what has now become a golden fantasy of an idealized*

England: the comfortable dusty coaches rolling through the low woods; the sun gilding the green leaves and striking through the carriage window; the breeze tickling the hot flowers in the fields; birdsong and the thump of the powerful locomotive; the pleasant creak of the wood paneling on the coach; the mingled smells of fresh grass and coal smoke, and the expectation of being met by someone very dear on a platform of a country station.

He described the train arriving at one station. *The train halted in the depths of the countryside, the platform surrounded by daisies and buttercups and the birds singing, and the leaves fluttering in the sunlight. There was great pride in stations. Well-tended rosebushes rambled around the platform ... the locomotive moving majestically through the dale like the highest stage of civilization.*

He summarized his circular tour by noting that *parts of Britain that had been frequented by travelers for hundreds of years had now become inaccessible.... without a car it was often very difficult, but it revealed ... long coastal stretches of unexpected decrepitude.*

And a few happy notes as well, we might add. Glad I read it again, maybe sometime again....

Theroux is the author of *The Great Railway Bazaar*, *The Old Patagonian Express*, *The Mosquito Coast*, and several dozen other works.