

I

I've had many a curry in a hurry,
Many a rabbit out of habit.
But the one thing that still makes me squeal
Is a pie, some mash and a jellied eel.

T. Rundall

A middle-aged man walks off a flight from Sydney, gets into a minicab and asks to be taken to Kelly's eel, pie and mash shop on the Roman Road in London's East End. He's lived in Australia for thirty years and thinks of himself as an Aussie now, but ever since the plane left Sydney he's been dreaming of his first taste of eel jelly, which, in spite of everything, remains the flavour of home.

On the other side of London, where the city borders Essex, a pregnant woman makes her way on to the Central Line, heading for Mile End station. From there she'll take the 339 bus to Ford Road then walk the couple of minutes down the Roman to Kelly's, where she will order a 'two and two', two pies and two helpings of mash, with liquor. Though she seldom eats pie and mash these days (there aren't many pie and mash shops in Essex), she's had cravings for a two and two throughout her pregnancy and thinks it might be something to do with wanting to connect the baby in her belly to a heritage she barely remembers but in some undefined way continues to live by.

A few miles to the south of the pregnant woman a man is released from Brixton prison in the clothes he was wearing when

he came in ten years before, carrying a travel warrant and a £46 discharge grant. He's not sure where he'll spend the night but before he even thinks about that there's something else he must do. At Brixton Tube he gets on the Victoria Line, changes at Oxford Circus and heads east on the Central Line to Mile End station. From there it's ten minutes' walk to Kelly's in Bow. In the decade he's been inside, the district has changed so much it is almost unrecognisable. It's market day on the Roman Road. Among the traders are a few familiar faces – Rashid with the unpronounceable surname, Tracy and her mum – but it's mostly strangers from outside the area. The man recalls the time you could buy anything you could name here; meat, fruit, haberdashery, even eels. Now, it's almost entirely clothes, mostly cabbage* or overstock. On the Roman, where the old grocers used to be, a café selling fancy coffee and overpriced toasties disguised as paninis is crowded with bearded young men and skinny girls. The old printers, Arber & Sons, has closed and the ironmongers has become a cycle shop. Opposite the library, which is now called an 'ideas store', there's a Tesco Metro. A new market has set up in the car park beside Ace cars, selling things the man can't imagine ever needing. Here the toasties are £6.50 a pop. For an additional fifty pence the man can get double pie, mash and liquor, though it's not really about the price. The moment he enters Kelly's eel, pie and mash shop the man is reminded of everything he has lost, of everything he has, and of the things that might one day make their way back to him. The cost of a plate of pie and mash matters less to him than its value, or rather, *values*. It's the values represented by pie and mash that have drawn him here.

For a hundred years the Kelly family has been serving beef pies and mashed potato and parsley liquor, and jellied and hot stewed eels to the people of Bow, Mile End and Bethnal Green (and

* *Cabbage* is the overstock or seconds from the tailoring trade. The word itself is derived from the French *carbage* or *garbage*, meaning the remnants left over when cutting cloth.

further afield). And for more than a century generations of East Enders (from all parts of the world) have grown up on what has come to be known as *the* Londoner's meal. As the fields east of the Old Gate (now Aldgate) were turned into market gardens and as huddled terraces divided by railway lines were built on those gardens and then sandwiched between factories; as the docks opened to the south and canals were dug and Victoria Park was carved from gravel pits and land too poor to grow on; as terraces crumbled or were bombed or slum-cleared and replaced by council estates and tower blocks; as the docks closed and tower blocks were pulled down and 'affordable' flats built in their place and the factories converted into artists' studios and some very unaffordable flats; as a velodrome and athletics track appeared alongside more unaffordable flats on the marshes, and houseboats collected on to the canals where once horses towed timber barges, and West Ham United Football Club moved its stadium to the old Olympic Park – during all this time Kelly's has continued to bake minced beef pies with rough puff pastry tops and a dough base and serve them with mashed potatoes and parsley liquor and with hot or jellied eels on the side.

But even Kelly's has changed. Today there are shops in Bethnal Green, Roman Road and Debden, all run independently by different branches of the Kelly family. At the Roman Road shop, managed by Sue Vening, née Kingdon, and her son Neil, chicken, ham and leek and vegetarian pies are now served alongside the more traditional beef. The provenance of the ingredients is listed on their website (beef from Aberdeen Angus Hereford crosses reared by Tim Johnson of Stokes Marsh Farm in Wiltshire and sold by Walter Rose & Son; free-range chicken breast in the chicken pies; potatoes from East Anglia; eels from Barneys of Billingsgate; vegan apple crumble using Kentish apples, served with dairy-free ice cream). There will be East Enders of all stripes eating at the Formica tables: octogenarian cockneys, market porters, builders and tradesmen, families from the Afro-Caribbean community, plus

hipsters, Japanese tourists, artists and outsiders whose roots are in the East End and whose hearts have never left it.

I cannot claim to be an East Ender, though my mother certainly was, and her mother, and many generations before her. My parents met in East Ham and both had family deeply rooted in Bishopsgate, Bow, Bethnal Green, Mile End, Poplar and the outer suburbs of West and East Ham and Waltham Forest. By the time I arrived Mum and Dad, like so many East Enders after the war, had moved out to Essex, so I was born in Romford. Now I live in Hackney in east London, I think of myself as part of the cockney diaspora. London has been my home for more than thirty years and ever since my father's untimely death a quarter of a century ago sent me on a search for my roots, I have been drawn to the East End by the conviction that, for me, its history is by a long mile the richest and most textured in the capital. Nothing I've ever learned about any other part of London, which, of course, is bursting with the past, has caused me to waver from that view. For unlike Westminster, say, or the City, the East End's history is not about buildings or the great institutions of state. Unlike south, west and much of north London, it's not about urban development or suburbanisation. At its heart, the East End's history is about trade, and the dynamic flows of people, capital and goods which trade both demands and sustains. At its broadest, it is about how the great upheavals of industrial revolution, Empire, war, mass migration and now globalisation, themselves intimately connected to trade, have shaped a corner of the city and its inhabitants. At a micro level it's about the relationships, whether between newcomers and the long established, between classes, neighbours or within families, which trade in goods or labour either promotes or discourages. Nowhere is this more vividly true than in the Roman Road.

The great eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith observed that we are a nation of shopkeepers. This phrase is frequently repeated by politicians or diplomats, often disparagingly, to make a point or further an agenda, but to me it lies at the raw, life-giving

heart of a great truth about us as Britons. In our water and in our bones we're traders, with all the good (dynamic, quick-thinking, relationship-orientated) and the sometimes not so good (transactional, opportunist, exploitative) this implies. I challenge anyone who has ever been to a Sunday morning car boot sale or a late opening night at a shopping centre, a livestock market in the West Country or the trading room in a City brokerage, a street market or Oxford Circus on Christmas Eve to doubt the truth of this.

This fact about us, the nugget of truth at the heart of our identity, is nowhere more on display than in the market stalls and shops of the East End, and in the ghostly remnants of its docks and warehouses. To get to the real meat of us as islanders, Britons, and Londoners, why not start there, with something as simple and as iconic as a shop selling the Londoner's meal of pie, mash and eels? It cannot tell the whole story, which is as complex and dynamic as trade itself, but just as an archaeologist in revealing a scrap of pottery or a fragment of mosaic in the rubble of a building site on which a skyscraper is about to be built can cast light on the history of the Roman Empire and its citizens, a light shone on a pie, mash and eel shop in what might at first seem to be an unremarkable road in east London can help illuminate more general truths about who we really are. Working on this book has been very much like undertaking an archaeological dig. By delving into pies and mash and eels, and the lives of people who made and ate them, who washed up the plates in the kitchen or served at the counter or passed by the shop on their way to work or to the market, the people who lived in the grid of streets around or worked in the nearby shops or played in the park up the road, or whose lives intersected in meaningful ways with others who did, I have tried to reveal parts of London's history through stories that are often obscured – and sometimes literally built over – by other, flashier narratives.

A set of established customs around the consumption of pie and mash marks out the eater as a Londoner. A Londoner will not eat

their pie face up, but will turn it over and make a tear in the pastry base with a fork and spoon (never a knife) to let out the steam before beginning. Seasonings are kept to a minimum – ground white pepper and salt and vinegar will usually do. A chilli pepper might spice up the vinegar. The mash will be just that, potato, and the liquor will be a simple concoction of flour, water and dried or fresh parsley. Eels will be boiled with a bit of white pepper, salt and perhaps a chilli pepper or two, and either served hot or left to cool and jellyfy. Jellied eels are served in a separate little bowl. Few pie and mash shops sell hot eels now, but some, like Kelly's, still do. There are those who prefer a portion of hot stewed eels and mash without the pie. The occasional oddball, often on a nostalgia trip, will ask only for mash and liquor to remind them of their penniless childhood, or because they don't like pastry, or just because they can. Your preferred temperature for your meal, whether the pie crust is better browned or slightly burned, whether the liquor is poured on the plate first or on the potato, or else on the pie or pies, or just on top of everything; how much vinegar, salt and white pepper to add; and what, if anything, is good to drink before, during or after the meal, are all matters of personal taste. Ketchup, brown sauce, mustard, mayonnaise or any other kind of condiment is neither traditional nor, indeed, provided. You could bring your own. No one would ask you to leave, but there might be pointed looks or even laughter. Any variation on this basic theme would mark the eater out as someone who is not a Londoner. And in an eel, pie and mash shop in London most of the customers are Londoners, eager to come across as Londoners, or curious as to what it feels like to be a Londoner.

Like most Londoners, at least those of working-class origin, I've eaten my fair share of pie, mash and liquor, not least while researching this book. I have sat in the kitchen at Kelly's on the Roman as the morning's batch of pies has emerged from the oven, stirred cooking eels and watched mash turning in great vats. I've listened to the flow of conversation between customers as they announce

births and deaths, dispute good naturedly over politics, laugh and grumble about the state of the world or the temperature of the liquor, because Kelly's is the sort of place where regulars come to share their lives with one another. I have taped interviews, but I have also sat at a corner table on my own nursing a mug of tea and felt both distant and impatient, keen to get back to my less intimate but more habitual world of Facebook and broadband. Then, as the morning has slipped towards lunchtime and the bustle has grown louder and the action has moved from the back of the shop to the front, I've found myself fully immersed in the liveliness, the rootedness, the toing and froing, the sheer pleasure that continuity and the sense of witnessing a ritual both ancient and everyday brings. And I've forgotten all about Facebook and the rest, because compared to this it's hard to see how they count.

This book isn't about me or my family – I've written on both these subjects elsewhere – except in so far as it deals with themes dear to my heart (namely home and a sense of belonging), along with a desire to discover in the layered history of east London something of my own, but it is perhaps a bid fully to comprehend how what we like to think of as new is often not new at all. With our smartphones and hot spots and general bustle, it can sometimes seem we have little in common with the people who inhabited London a hundred years ago or a thousand years before that. But I wonder whether that's something we tell ourselves in order to make living in a place as rich in history as London feel more spacious and less clamorous with the voices of the dead? Cities change all the time, their dynamism is part of their pull, but the reasons for those changes often don't change at all. The same is true of the people who inhabit them. Human desires, needs, aspirations, failures are the same wherever and whenever. Only the ways those needs, desires, aspirations and failures are pursued, expressed or else avoided really change.

On one level this book is about pie and mash. But it's also about those fundamental human impulses. If I've done my job well, you

should be able to imagine yourself sitting at a table in Kelly's eel, pie and mash shop on the Roman over the course of a hundred years, watching the world go by and picking up the flavour of the place and the warp and weft of the lives of some of the people who are or were closely or loosely linked to it, either because they are related to the founder, or because they or their families were or are regulars, or because they hauled the potatoes or managed the counters, or bought pies to take away or ran market stalls down the same stretch of street, or worked in the family-run businesses that grew up alongside Kelly's, because they spent their schooldays at the Roman Road school opposite and ate pies at dinner time or else didn't eat pies but came in for a penn'orth of mash and liquor. By the end of this book, if I've done my job well, you will know more about what it means to be a Londoner and have a greater sense, specifically, of how it feels to be an East Ender whose head is in the twenty-first century but whose feet still walk the Roman Road.

Many of the customers in this book are Kelly's regulars, though there are a few who come in only once, never to return. Sometimes a whole life is revealed, other times only snippets; it may be someone's everyday world or one or two incidents or events which, for the person involved, have overshadowed all the rest. Some of the stories here are family histories, encompassing generations of Kellys, Robertsons, Lucionis, Randolfis, Da Costas, Plentys, Arbers, Shratskys and Bakers, who worked variously as pie-makers and eel dealers, tram drivers, match-makers, looking-glass gilders, printers, ice-cream makers, café proprietors, costermongers, barrow builders, newspaper vendors, market traders and Billingsgate porters. Others are the tales of individuals whose lives intersect with the shop: people like Marian Old who manned (or womanned) the public toilets; Sylvia Pankhurst who based her East London Federation of Suffragettes just round the corner, and handed out suffragist pamphlets to the lunchtime queue; Ron Moss who as a kid filched sausages from the butcher's stall down the road; Ann Simmons who shopped with her mum down the Roman in what was then called

the ‘women’s market’; Ray Gipson who rose to become a Tower Hamlets councillor; Christine Yeend who with her wild sister Georgia scoured the Roman on market day for hot pants and platform boots; Tel Willets who once painted Lady Di’s loo, and ate eight Kelly’s pies in a pie-eating competition with his mate; and Meg Bradley, Kelly’s long-serving manageress whose working life could be measured out in pies and scoops of mash. All these people, and most others in the stories that follow, either knew one another directly or by one or two degrees of separation, because, wherever their lives took them, all roads on the Roman eventually led back to Kelly’s.

The stories are true, and like all life stories they are based on recollections. In a couple of cases, people’s names and identifying details have been altered at their request. Wherever it has been possible to check the facts that has been done, but sometimes the view through the window is obscured by time and memory and it isn’t always possible to know what is fact and what is family lore or something that feels so true to the teller that it is indistinguishable from actuality. In one way it doesn’t matter. We all create myths about our lives and those of our families to sustain us, to give us a sense of continuity in a world that transforms almost daily. A plate of eels, pie and mash with liquor is a kind of myth too, one understood by millions of ordinary men and women to represent a way of life which is always in the process of changing while, in some small but essential way, remaining forever the same.