

Andrew O'Hagan: The Cally [C1]

Caledonian Road, conosciuta come "The Cally", è una delle strade più importanti del quartiere di Islington, Londra. Da sempre, ospita famiglie di diversa estrazione sociale e provenienti da tutto il mondo. Ne parla lo scrittore Andrew O'Hagan, che l'ha presa come ispirazione per il suo ultimo libro.

London is **infamous** for being the poorest and the richest city in the UK. Many of its districts are socially, economically and culturally diverse, with the area around Caledonian Road in Islington an archetypal example. Houses worth millions stand metres from **run-down** social housing; families who have lived there for generations live side-by-side with a significant proportion of **newcomers**, many born outside the UK. The area has a personal resonance for Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan, whose recent book Caledonian Road is set in the borough. Caledonia was the Roman name for Scotland, and Caledonian Road dates back to 1826 and was named after an orphanage called the Royal Caledonia Asylum, established in 1815 to house Scottish orphans. In 1952, King's Cross train station was built at the south end of the road. It was here that O'Hagan arrived when he first moved to London from Scotland in the early 1990s. In a conversation with Speak Up, O'Hagan describes his initial impressions of Islington and how the borough has changed since then. **Andrew O'Hagan (Scottish accent):** I came to London thirty-five years ago from Scotland. I graduated I think on a Friday and I was in London, King's Cross, at 7am on a Saturday morning. I got the overnight bus, which was a bit of a phenomenon in those days, the overnight bus from Glasgow, you can imagine, on a Friday night. And I think everyone was drunk, including the driver. We arrived in King's Cross to this place that seemed like Victorian London to me, I felt like a character from Dickens, like Oliver Twist, looking up at these buildings, which were all Victorian buildings. [There were] **cobbled streets** behind King's Cross in those days. There was the Regents Canal, an old Victorian construction, two railway stations, St. Pancras and King's Cross and the Imperial Gas Works, which looked like something from a kind of nightmare of Victorian urban life. That's all gone. The stations are there but everything else has gone and it's become the

communications hub of Europe. Google are based there, Expedia, Facebook, the Guardian newspaper... it's all changed. Even then, before I'd written any novels, I wanted to write a novel set in King's Cross because the big street that goes up the side of the station, that's called Caledonian Road, that road is the most multicultural and multifaceted... it has Ethiopian restaurants, it has Turkish barbers, it has Scottish pubs, it has Iranian nail salons. It's an amazing melting pot of cultures.

WEALTH GAP

The wealth and income gap between different people living close together on and around Caledonian Road fascinated O'Hagan. While researching his novel, he traced this tendency back through history. **Andrew O'Hagan:** It's amazing the way rich and poor live on the street in the way that they've always lived. I looked back at poverty maps from the 1890s, colour-coded poverty maps showing the respective social condition of people and where they lived and how they lived. Here's the news: it's exactly the same. Two hundred years later, we're living the same way. With the same differences between opportunity for some and not for others. So that's all rich material for a novelist. It took me ten years to write it but I got there.

THE TOWER

O'Hagan claims his "superpower" is the lost art of listening. In 2018, he wrote a sixty thousand-word article for the London Review of Books on the deadly fire at Grenfell Tower, a high-rise block of flats in west London. The fire, on 14 June 2017, was caused by the building's highly-inflammable cladding, a danger known to manufacturers and sold at low cost. It killed seventy-two people, including eighteen children. O'Hagan combined the facts with the life stories of those who lived in Grenfell, many of whom came from low-income or marginalised groups, and whose voices of complaint about conditions in the building were not heard by public authorities prior to the incident. If you want to know more about this topic, read the article Andrew O'Hagan: "Caledonian Road".

Glossary

- **infamous** = tristemente famosa
- **run-down** = fatiscenti
- **income gap** = divario salariale
- **high-rise** = grattacielo, edificio a molti piani
- **cladding** = rivestimento
- **low-income** = a basso reddito
- **newcomers** = nuovi arrivati
- **cobbled streets** = strade con ciottoli
- **melting pot** = miscuglio culturale
- **traced this tendency back** = risalire all'origine
- **colour-coded** = contrassegnato con colori
- **claims** = affermare