WRITERS MOSAIC

Corinne Fowler

In Conversation with John Siddique

John Siddique (JS): I'm sitting here in my car, actually, in the town of Darwin with Professor Corrine Fowler, who's just written this beautiful book called *Our Island Stories*, examining countryside colonisation and industrialisation all around the country as this beautiful series of walks. And we're sitting looking at the tower of India Mill, which you can see from everywhere in the town of Darwin. No matter where you go, you see this tower. And we've just experienced something really quite odd that when you try to photograph it, no matter what you do, it will not take a decent picture. It's like all the light is pulled towards it. It just is dark no matter what you try to do, which is really quite weird. It reminds me of William Blake and *Jerusalem* and the dark satanic mill. So here we are in dark satanic India Mill. And what gave you this idea for this book? Where did it come from?

Corinne Fowler (CF): Well, I think, in a way, it was a response to people's question about labour history, British labour history, here, and why I was obsessed with

colonial history. I mean, obviously, the facetious answer to that would be because I'm a professor of colonialism, so I write about it. But a lot of people said, 'Well, why don't you write about this other repressed history of agricultural labour, cotton workers in factories, and so on?' And I thought, *all right then. I will. I don't know much about it. It's true. I didn't learn much about it at school. And let me see if I can put together my love of walking with my ignorance about labour history and everything I know about colonial history and how it's all connected*. So that was what gave me the idea. And I think it was a great way to write a book as well, because I got to experience some of the most beautiful parts of Britain. And including this. It's got that grim industrial architecture, but out on the moor, you really get a sense of being above the whole place and looking across these vast views towards Manchester. It's still very green around here.

JS: It is. It is indeed. It's this really funny juxtaposition of absolutely stunning countryside and the toughest of industrialisation, isn't it, and its aftermaths as well?

CF: Yeah, yeah. So you can still feel the legacy of that cotton history and how people must have suffered and worked so hard and really felt like their lives really didn't belong to them in lots of ways.

JS: We've just been sat in a coffee shop, and everybody's chatted away. The people are so open hearted here, aren't they, and kind of interested in things? And we were talking to them about what we're doing today, and they were just like, 'Wow, that's so interesting, isn't it?' And you could almost expect the other reaction. Sometimes I thought, *don't say what we're doing*, because you've got a very bad reaction, didn't you, for some of your countryside stuff for National Trust?

CF: I did. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, there was a lot of hostility directed at us for doing our work examining the relationship between country houses and the British Empire. I think it came as a shock to quite a few people. And I think, unintentionally, it struck at the heart of the establishment because it was trying to uncover histories which have been avoided and people haven't talked about them. And the contrast between that and the people we randomly just met in that café saying, 'Oh, yeah, we're really interested in that history, and we must get your book, and it ought to be in our heritage centre.' And they seem to know about lots of aspects of that history. They even seem to know that Gandhi had visited here at one point. So it was really nice.

JS: And we're going to visit the walk that Gandhi did, aren't we? That would be really lovely to do that, and that's really interesting. But let me ask you this question: why are we then true history avoidant? Because that is—reading your book, right, and

obviously thinking about this as an author and as an interested human being, why are we not taught history properly? And why when we try to actually just literally look at what history is, are we so protective and avoidant of false histories?

CF: Well, I think that's such an important question. And it's something that I very rarely admit, actually, is that I managed to get all the way through the education system and to university before I realised that we were an empire. I'd heard the term British Empire, but I didn't know what it was, and I didn't understand what it meant or how absolutely massive a phenomenon it was and how the rest of the world was really affected by British colonialism. The parts that were ruled over by Britain, a substantial part of the world. And I suppose we don't avoid all history, do we? We're happy to talk about the things we can celebrate. So feeling when we're on the right side, all nations are happy to celebrate when they resisted this evil or this oppression. But when we were right in the thick of activities which we'd rather not think about, that we might be ashamed of or might bring up feelings of guilt or shame, we avoid it. I mean, it's not difficult for all of us, but I think it is difficult for some people. And in a way, I think it's also because as human beings, we tend to like to feel some sense of pride or aligned to some values which we feel are common to all the people around us. I think we just avoid it because, like all nations, we'd rather not think about parts of our history that make us feel uncomfortable.

JS: What we're talking about here is the literal foundational wealth that the entire country is built on. So it's not just part of the history, is it? It's literally the weft and the weave, the warp and the weft, or whatever the word is, of the fabric of so much of the infrastructure. And you get people saying, 'Well, that's nothing to do with us now. That's the past and things.' But all that foundational wealth is there, so there was opportunity for certain lineages and so on and non-opportunity for others. So I think about, say, my own family and the lack of opportunity, the lack of equity that I still have to work with to this day and try and figure my way through. Not in a kind of like, 'You people all did this to me, therefore—', but just literally, how do I navigate this? And what I find myself feeling is—it's really funny. I find myself thinking about the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. And one of the major clearances within any kind of process of truth and reconciliation—of initially this truth and reconciliation, but the path that leads to that is the making of amends.

CF: It's about lack of acknowledgement.

JS: Yeah.

CF: When you've done something or your ancestors have done something and there's still a legacy of that thing or many legacies of that thing, you need to first acknowledge it in order to begin to address it. And I think one of the issues is that

because so many of us have been kept in ignorance about it, we can't even acknowledge it because we don't fully understand what it is in any detail.

JS: Can you tell us something about India Mill then and Darwin?

CF: Well, Darwin is just one of many mill towns in this area of East Lancashire. And in the 18th and 19th centuries, they say, 'Cotton was King,' in these places. It was the main source of employment. It was the main source of major activity, economic activity. And of course, that cotton came from, for a long time, from the plantations in the southern states of America, in the Confederate States. And the cotton was imported through ports like Manchester, which was known as Cottonopolis, and then Liverpool, which made its major profits not from just sugar but from cotton. And then it was distributed as raw material produced by enslaved people on the plantations to cotton towns like this. This is really quite a small town, as you say. It's surrounded by hills and trees. But nearly everyone would have gravitated to this mill. And at first, the cotton came from the southern states of America, but then after the American Civil War, as I'm sure we'll talk about, the cotton had to come from somewhere else, so it came from India. And so this was one of the later mill chimneys that was built in the 19th century. And because it was built later on, it kind of really marks that history and this switch from one continent to another, from America to South Asia, and called India Mill. And the cotton, the Indian cotton, was

less popular with the weavers, who were paid by the hour, because it kept snapping on the machines. But India Mill it is.

JS: Well, let's move on from India Mill. Where should we go next?

CF: We should probably go to the tower at the top of the moor if we can, because it goes along the old routes, Witton Weavers Way, past the old weaving houses, where you can see the houses were designed to let the light through so that the weaver could see the loom. And yeah, it gives you a sense of that wider cotton landscape up on the moor there, Darwin moor.

JS: Let's go. So we're sitting on the hillside just underneath what's called the Jubilee Tower. As you drive towards Darwin on the motorway or from any direction, there's this folly that sits on the hill. And in all my years of travelling in the North, I've never been here. It's absolutely stunning moorland with clovers, and the grasses are kind of going into seed heads now, and we're looking down at a dam, and there's a small either fishing pond or something beneath us and sheep. And you've been a walker your whole life, haven't you?

CF: Yeah, completely. At first I was a bit of an unwilling walker because my parents forced me and my twin sister to go out in all weathers, often without snacks and

without any treats apart from just finishing the walk. But actually, that was one big adventure when I look back at it. And I've carried on walking ever since. And I think it's a brilliant way of reconnecting because I think you get disconnected really easily, and there's nowhere that gets you back to sort of feeling more like yourself than a landscape like this.

JS: In your book, you're talking about how there was an attempt to close off the nature to the ordinary people, and part of the colonial and industrial movement tried to shut down access to the countryside, and there was a massive outcry, wasn't there?

CF: Yeah, completely. And that's the case with history here, but it's the case with history all over the country, really, that people like us used to have access to nature. And pretty much everyone had a place, a common, where they could go, whether it was to graze your livestock or to take a walk or to catch rabbits and stuff, as people used to do, gather firewood, and just be outdoors, somewhere where you were allowed to go that everyone had access to. And the story around here is the same as the story across the country, really, of people having their footpaths blocked, their access blocked to the land. And if you look around this landscape in front of you, you can see all these hedges which are separating off the land, piecing it off into parts where animals can graze and so on, where people can grow things. But

part of that, it's really a symbol of the privatisation of a lot of our land and the fact that landless people, to whom nature belonged as it belonged freely and equally to everyone, was suddenly cut off. And a lot of that, as I explore in the book, is to do with colonial wealth and the influx of colonial wealth.

JS: What's striking to me sitting here, and I live in a tiny country town that's very famous, Hebden Bridge, is that this land is public and the land where I live is not, and it's all parcelled off and has been for hundreds of years. And it's actually got to the point now where we live that there is not even sheep grazing anymore or any veg being grown. It is literally held for wealth, as it were, for the value of the land itself, like gold in a way.

CF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It is a rare thing, and it should be less rare. It should be more common. We've got a couple of walkers here. Hello.

JS: Hello there. Hi.

CF: I'll tell you what, that's a very happy looking dog.

Dog walker: If you'd have food, he'd have been over there.

CF: [Laughs] Like you say, if the land belongs to everyone, then I think it's different from seeing the land as a commodity. And one of the biggest legacies of empire is land ownership, large-scale land ownership, and the closing off of land, of common land, for people to use it and to enjoy it. And I think that one of the legacies of that, you see the way it works out very unevenly, who has access to green spaces now. It's still a massive, massive issue. And footpaths are a massive issue. There are still large landowners who are trying to stop people from using footpaths that have been used for generations.

JS: Yeah, it feels like we're in a time of evolution that these systems are beginning to—well, maybe not beginning to fall. I think they're hanging on as tightly as they can, but it's all creaking at the seams, isn't it?

CF: Yeah, and there's still a lot of struggle over land access and land ownership. And even the historical stories beginning to creep into some of the disputes around land access across the country, where people are saying, 'Well, actually, your ancestors profited from slavery, and you're stopping us—you use that money to buy this land. You're now stopping us walking across it.' So I think the connections are beginning to be made.

JS: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It's just nice that here in Darwin, there's a rebellious enough spirit to say, 'No.' And they fought that back, and said, 'This is ours.'

CF: Yeah. That monument behind us, it's rising up from the moor, but that is a symbol of people's freedom to still access that land. This is common land.

JS: That's incredible. Like you, I have headed to the hills as much as possible in my life. And you talk in your book about people of colour accessing nature a lot more now, and yet you still see weird tweets and posts about that sometimes. I saw one not long ago going, 'Keep the British countryside white.' And then somebody replied, 'Well, it would have to snow, wouldn't it, darling?', which I thought was a beautiful comeback to that kind of thing. And if you actually looked at your history, you'd see that the countryside has never been what you think it is.

CF: Did you know that Rochdale story, you coming from Rochdale, the story about cotton? Did you learn that when you were growing up there?

JS: Well, my mum didn't work in the cotton mills in Ireland—I mean, in Rochdale, but she did in Ireland. And when she came to Rochdale in the early 50s, and my dad came from India at the same time, so two colonised countries coming together, my family. Your book is really beautiful for me because it helps us see that context.

What's interesting about your book is reading it as a person of the global majority will be very, very different as to reading it as a white person, I'm sure. What was really interesting, we're talking about a car on the way here, is you interviewed Sathnam Sanghera. And he was saying how, with all this flack when his books come out, how he's got used to it. And I was saying how I've never got used to it. And the fact that to even talk about what we're talking about here as a kind of act of humanity is such a threatening thing.

CF: Yeah, completely. And I liked what you said about not getting used to it because I think you don't want to accept it. You need to find a way of dealing with being in a hostile environment, but you don't want for it to become normal and not seen.

JS: But you've always been in nature, haven't you? So you were telling me, when you were young, did you go—was it Land's End to John O' Groats or John O' Groats to Land's End?

CF: I did the John O' Groats to Land's End. We call that psychologically downhill because if you start from Cornwall, you feel like you're going uphill the whole way. But actually the hardest bit is the Cornish part of that path because you gain a load of height and then you lose it again and you have to climb up it. You really have to

be quite fit to do that. So by the time I got there, I was fit enough to do the Cornish Coastal Path.

JS: How old were you when you did that?

CF: I think I was about 25, 26. I did it with a friend, a tent, and two pairs of walking boots. And gradually, I think you'll be interested in this, I realise how little you need, and I started sending things home, and my rucksack got lighter and lighter and lighter. It's a great metaphor for life.

JS: You were 25 when you walked that. Now you've had this beautiful career, and you've genuinely tried to contribute to the wealth of this piece of land that has the name Britain or Ireland. If you were to walk John O' Groats, if you were to walk downhill again now that you've written *Our Island Stories* and been Professor Corinne for as long as you have, it's going to be a different walk entirely, isn't it? You can't see the same anymore.

CF: No. All those things that I saw without seeing, now I would start noticing things I hadn't noticed before. But I think that's just a general thing of life. That is one of the nice things about getting older generally, isn't it, because you notice more, not less? I think it was Alan Paton once, he wrote that novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and he

has a whole section of it or some of his poetry around it in on similar themes about how, when he was a boy, he used to hear the high notes of the ocean, and then as as a man, he can hear the lower notes. He can hear the stones and the rocks tumbling underneath the waves. You just get a wider soundscape. And it's partly about opening your ears or opening your eyes a bit more. But I would be looking out for—*oh, that would be another walk. That'd be another walk.* I've done 10 walks for this book. I could easily put a pin anywhere on the map and there's bound to be something else to find.

JS: Yeah, as I was reading it, I was like, *oh, mention this one to Corinne. Do this one next. Should we go and do that?* I was thinking, *I want to do one of these walks with you, and I'll show you Rochdale.*

CF: Yeah. And some of those stories around Rochdale are quite hopeful, aren't they, because of the solidarity shown by the Rochdale mill workers over the American Civil War in the 1860s? The fact that when that war became about slavery shortly after it started and Abraham Lincoln kind of put out messages to ask people who were working in the cotton mills to show solidarity even though they were suffering because their cotton had been cut off and the mills had fallen silent, that those people working in the mill didn't just think of themselves. They thought, *actually, our*

situation is bad, and we are really hungry, and we're going short of pay here, but at the same time, the plight of the enslaved person is so much worse.

JS: Yeah, you were saying that there was an actual realisation at the level of, and I don't like this term, ordinary people, but the working class, the working people of that time, that a mill opening here actually created enslaved people there.

CF: Yeah. And I think that that war really created more awareness of the source of the raw cotton, the fact that the cotton didn't just spring out of the air, it came from the plantations, it came from enslaved labour, forced labour, by people whose children would be born into slavery. Really, really cruel stuff. And I think it was good. Although it wasn't universally the case that everyone in this area, in all of Darwin, all of the mill towns, had the same attitude as the Rochdale mill workers because some people just wanted what they call the cotton famine when the cotton supply stopped here and people were unemployed because the mills had to come to a halt. Not everybody showed that solidarity. They just wanted it all to be over, and they wanted their suffering to end. But some people were able to see that bigger picture, which always gives you grounds for hope.

JS: It does, actually. And it actually—that I found one of the most hopeful parts of what I read, in the kind of true class consciousness, which seems to be something

we need to return to. Which is the question I was going to ask you, actually. What do you think has happened to class consciousness in the last hundred years?

CF: I think, just writing this book—I'm from a middle class family in the middle of Birmingham, South Birmingham, nice suburbs with a nice park nearby, access to green spaces, all of that. But I grew up without knowing a lot of this labour history. And I am so shocked when I read about some of the conditions that people laboured under, the way they were treated by propertied families, landowners, and the aristocracy, the way that they were denied access to democracy, and all of those things. And also how they tried to unionise, and how people like the Tolpuddle Martyrs, who I look at in one of my walks in Dorset, were punished and exiled to the penal colonies for forming an agricultural labourers union because they literally could not afford to pay for the weekly things. They couldn't afford to pay for the coal they needed, the bread they needed, the rent, and all of the other costs. The wages were actually lower than the total bill for most people, and that was deliberate wage suppression by very wealthy people.

JS: Well, here we are again though, isn't it?

CF: Yeah. And you just think all of that comes from a lack of connection, a lack of empathy, and a lack of awareness of what life is like for people who seem remote

from you. Anyway, it's been a real education for me, and it has made me much more aware of how these systems have continued to work their damage over time.

JS: Should we go and walk in Gandhi's footsteps?

CF: Yeah, let's do that.

JS: So we're just sitting in front of the house that Gandhi stayed at in 1931 when he visited Darwin. It's a little Quaker model village. There was a factory just up the road, which I think was Quaker-owned or something. And they wanted to create a really beautiful environment for their workers to be in. And Gandhi insisted that he would only stay where the workers would be. Can you tell us something about Gandhi's visit, Corinne?

CF: Well, yeah. It's amazing to be by this house where he actually stayed. He was in Britain because he was doing some negotiations with the British Government about Indian Independence. And while he was in London, he was invited by the mill owners, some of whom were Quakers as we've said, to talk to the mill workers who were out of work or they were struggling because of the cotton boycott. And that was the Indian Independence Movement which was boycotting British cotton, or Manchester cloth, as it was then known, as part of the struggle for Independence

and the Swadeshi movement, and people were weaving their own cotton fabric in India. And so he agreed, to their surprise, to come here. And he arrived by train to massive public interest. There were people thronging at the station to try and get a glimpse of him. And he came here to this little model village, where he stayed, apparently, in the attic room. And the only 'luxury', in inverted commas, that he wanted was a goat in the garden so he could have goat's milk. And he took a walk down this road in the morning with the police, who were looking after him, trailing after him. Apparently he was quite old then, but he was so fit that they were puffing along the road and they couldn't keep up with him. So yeah, he came here, and he convinced the workers that the plight of Indians under British colonial rule was so much worse, so much more severe than people here who were at least getting unemployment benefits because of the situation with the boycott, and that though they were suffering and it was completely unintentional on his part, they should really think of the wider good and the cause of Indian Independence. And he won them over. I had a look at some newspaper reports, and they were pretty convinced by what he said, including the mill owners. And he also joined them in a silent Quaker meeting, which he said he enjoyed a lot.

JS: Oh, there was a very strange benefit system, wasn't there, in place at this time?

CF: Yeah, there was. Before then, and that's part of the older cotton story as well, because poor relief was given to people during the cotton famine when the Confederate slave-produced cotton was not coming into this area in Lancashire. People ended up having to rely on that poor relief from committees of, well, the landed gentry, really, who administered, or the local people who were moneyed people who then administered this poor relief to people in exchange for their labour, so they had to make footpaths and so on. Which is why I think it was pretty interesting we had a moment there on the footpaths up on the hill, didn't we? And it reminded me of that part of the story because when we were up on the hill, we took the path back, but we actually got lost because there were so many footpaths on that hill. And many of those footpaths were cut by people during the cotton famine. But these committees made them do that because they didn't want to give them the money for nothing.

JS: That's right. You were saying in the book that the ‘powers that be’, inverted commas, refused to actually let them have money so that they could have control of their own lives. So food came from the workhouses, and then there were insane donations of parasols and ballet shoes and things like that by people completely removed from the ordinary society.

CF: This tiny place has got connections to two continents: to the Confederate states in the US and to India, to the Indian Independence Movement, the visit of Gandhi, but also the Indian cotton that came after the cotton famine following the American Civil War. So it's really got the whole sweep of history here, and it could be made much more of it. It could be more centred, the global history of this place.

JS: Yeah, absolutely fabulous and so valuable. Thank you, Corinne.

CF: Well, thank you for walking and exploring the cotton story.

Corinne Fowler was in conversation with John Siddique

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk