

National Post

Canadian author Alan Bradley describes his first visit to Britain, the ancestral land he'd always dreamed of Coming home to the country I'd never seen

Alan Bradley, National Post · Dec. 9, 2011 | Last Updated: Dec. 9, 2011 5:15 AM ET

My grandmother flew only once in her life, and that was the day she and her new husband ascended into the skies of Victorian London in the wicker basket of a hot-air balloon. They were soon to emigrate to Canada, and the aerial ride was meant to be a last view of their beloved England.

Eighty years later, at the age of 100, she still recalled the scene in startling detail, and still seemed somewhat surprised at herself for having undertaken such a risk.

Growing up in a Canadian household that was more British than Big Ben, I dreamed of flying to England myself and visiting the places my family never tired of talking about. I always woke up before the plane landed. Fate, it would appear, meant to keep me in Canada.

Books were my escape instead - British books at that. I was an early reader, and my grandmother, who as a child had been forbidden to read by a father who believed books to be frivolous time-wasters, delighted in putting her favourite volumes into her grandchildren's hands. Dorothy L. Sayers's fat, black-bound Lord Peter Wimsey mystery, *Busman's Honeymoon* was one of the first I remember being given. Another was Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, a sensational penny-dreadful, which pretended to lay bare the secrets of the lurid life behind the walls of a 19th-century convent.

After that, I read everything about England I could get my hands on: geography, geology, architecture, folklore, fiction, place-names, pottery, poetry and plants. I pored over detailed 18th-and 19th-century maps of London, retracing the steps of Sherlock Holmes, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, and Jack the Ripper.

And so the years passed, with, incredibly, no opportunity to travel abroad.

Following a long career in television, I took early retirement to devote myself (there's no other word for it) to writing. I set my first novel, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, in the English countryside, drawing upon a lifetime's reading about a country I had visited only in spirit.

But in 2007, when I was 69, the book won the Debut Dagger Award from the British Crime Writers' Association. Time seemed to fold in on itself, and in an instant I found myself aboard my first flight to London.

Within hours of landing, I had sat at the organ upon which George Frideric Handel played the London premiere of *Messiah*, stood in the poky little room where Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*, and accepted my award upon the very spot that the residence of Lord Peter Wimsey had once stood, at 110A Piccadilly.

Because I wanted to keep my feet on English soil, I had decided to use no buses or underground transportation during my visit. I wandered the city like a wraith. And much to my delight, I discovered that I was able to see the city's past as well as its present: The London of my imagination superimposed upon the reality, a transparent city in which the old was encased in the new like an ancient layer cake wrapped in glistening sandwich wrap.

I visited Covent Garden, now known for shops and theatres but once where 18th-century surgeon John Hunter dickered for graverobbed corpses for his brother's medical school. At St. Paul's Cathedral I browsed the memorial tablets to Alec Guinness, John Gielgud and *Punch and Judy*. I explored the alley behind the Lamb and Flag pub where the poet John Dryden was beaten to a pulp by ruffians.

In Gough Square, in front of Samuel Johnson's tall and staring house, I stopped for a while to watch a workman digging up a drain, taking the opportunity to gaze down into the rich strata that lay beneath the London pavement. Its history was all there, the layers seemingly laid bare. I thought I could see back through remains of the Blitz to Dr. Johnson's shattered crockery and beyond, to the scraps left behind by the Romans, who built a temple to the goddess Diana on nearby Ludgate Hill.

On one of my final days in England, I made my way on blistered foot to the south bank of the Thames, past the site of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, to the place where my grandparents had made

their balloon trip.

I stood looking up at the magnificent cast-iron crest of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway at the foot of Blackfriars Bridge - substantially the same bridge they had rocked across by train on their way home to Sussex, a place near where Sherlock Holmes was then setting up his beehives. I realized that it had been a hundred years, almost to the day, since their unforgettable balloon ascent.

It had taken me a century to come home.

The Wall Street Journal

©2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

? Alan Bradley's fourth Flavia de Luce mystery, *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows* was published on Nov. 1.

[Get the National Post newspaper delivered to your home](#)

© 2011 National Post, a division of Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved. Unauthorized distribution, transmission or republication strictly prohibited.