

BOOKS

City Of Dandies

Liverpool enchants writers today. But is this fascination backward-looking, an appreciation of 'northern realism'? **Frank Cottrell Boyce** looks at a new book on the city and **Chris Jones** suggests an itinerary for a weekend discovering Liverpool

Tony Lane's book, *Liverpool: Gateway Of Empire* (Lawrence and Wishart, £4.95 pbk.) celebrates a lot of things that need to be celebrated. The first of these is the astonishing beauty, the 'opulent romance' of Liverpool. One of the 19th century commentators from whom he quotes compares the stunning waterfront - with its seven-mile granite wall - to the pyramids, a comparison that gets more apt the more you think about it. After all, both were built by great slave empires.

Actually, slavery doesn't get much of a mention here and there's a danger that in celebrating Liverpool you end up celebrating the empire whose greedy gullet the city became. There's a lot about the exotic foods and materials you could find on the streets, not much about the people from whose backs and mouths these things were taken.

Still, what the book does it does brilliantly; namely, trace the influence of the maritime industries on the life of the city. Lane shows how the extraordinary amount of casual labour in and around the docks gave the waterfront an economy and a culture all its own. In a place where a good connection might be your only guarantee of work, boss-man politics, religious sectarianism, racism - anything that played up your own acceptability as opposed to the next man's - all were bound to thrive.

In a place where money could be here today and gone tomorrow, the spree and the pawn shop took the place of the Co-op and the Pru. Liverpool is still a city of dandies. Lane also accounts for the city's unusual racial mix - the other great legacy of our imperial days. The book buz-

zes with the startling details and insights of a passionate but disciplined enthusiasm.

But what do you *do* with an imperial legacy? For a while, the Egyptians made do with grave-robbing and the exhibition of corpses. Lane ends with a few suggestions for Liverpool that are basically in the same vein. He sees it as a potential garden city populated by writers, artists and the like who will move among its monuments creating. A kind of post-industrial theme park. Forest Lawns to Egypt's 'valley of the kings'. It is all very beguiling. But art does not come out of parks.

Mind you, it won't all be fun; there'll be 'sophisticated, environmentally-sympathetic industries'. I think I know the kind of thing. Thatcher's Britain is already acned with tasteful little workshops, tapping out those useful and uplifting things on which the economic upturn is based - scratch 'n' sniff scampi-and-lemonade-flavoured anaglypta, novelty pot noodle, inflatable filofaxes and witty chocolate genitalia.

Living an appalling present among the memorials of a thriving past, it is difficult to avoid nostalgia. And nostalgia is a scouse disease. Even the works of the best writers about Liverpool - Bleasdale, Terence Davis and so on - present the city's suffering in a way that is backward-looking. Where are the 'boys from the burger bar'? In fact, where are the out-of-town deck-access estates as opposed to the friendly little terraces? Where is the endless boredom as opposed to the glorious scam? Of course, all writers like to write about their own childhoods but if we're not careful Liverpool will become a backdrop.

Lane points out that one of

the things that distinguished Liverpool was its sense of its own role in the world as opposed to the nation. Liverpool still has that role. It was the place where capital grew up. Now it's the place where capital is going gaga. Liverpudlians have already risen to the challenge that this presents, this world responsibility, once before - when the Dunlop workers organised the first real international strike, bringing out their colleagues in Italy, France and Spain.

In the age of the multinational this kind of interna-

tionalism is the best legacy of empire that the Liverpool working class could leave to history. It's worth remembering that Jim Larkin lived here too.

All the time I was reading Lane's book, I kept thinking of another westward-looking port, also of monumental beauty and whose inhabitants shook the world. There's no reason Liverpudlians couldn't do what the people of Leningrad did. And when you think of the movies that came out of that... 'Hollywood of the north' indeed. •



A Weekend In Liverpool

Arriving at Lime Street station, the weekend is best spent in the Adelphi Hotel, which, for modest rates, gives you your own taste of *Brideshead* - with or without cocktails - in the liner-style bar. Go up to the Everyman Theatre in the evening, where Liverpool's dramatic tradition thrives on local talent.

After the play, fill your face, spot the celeb and watch young bohemia preen its ego in the bistro below. For late nighters, the Casablanca is a few doors down, though glam lovers might prefer The State in Dale Street, where Chanel meets ganja and on whose dance-floor the 'Brezhnev' lovebirds met.

Saturday: Try a Chinese breakfast in the Nelson Street Chinatown quarter while in the afternoon you might like the world-class football, or you may prefer a ferry across the Mersey from the classic Pier

Head waterfront.

Hardman Street is a good laugh on a Saturday night and left-wing boozers can find a place among the sympathetic in the Flying Picket below the trade union centre. Peacocks may prefer Kirklands, Plummers or the Philharmonic, where orange marble pissoirs add a touch of Roman splendour.

Sunday: Morning breakfast is a treat in Peter Kavanagh's on Egerton Street, where greasy spoons and Sunday morning papers border the Toxteth front line of '81. Walk off the calories up Princes Avenue and around Liverpool's parks, twin tributes to Victorian optimism, stopping only for lunch in Keith's wine bar, Lark Lane, where radical bookshops and multi-ethnic eateries make this Liverpool's best thoroughfare. Stick around for the evening revelries among the trendy riff-raff before one last night of Adelphi splendour. •