Airedale Writers' Circle

August 2017

Unfolding

Neil Wilson

I admit it now: I used to bypass poetry (unless it was simple and/or humourous) in favour of the much speedier reading of prose. In doing so I thought I was achieving more, an attitude surely encouraged by the demands of my education which favoured digesting, and later regurgitating, vast quantities of prose.

And yet, even as a sixteen year old Wilfred Owen's searing *Dulce et Decorum Est* was a revelation, as it conveyed so much more forcibly than any stark statistic the bitter, senseless loss of life and misplaced patriotism of fighting on The Western Front. Half a century on (crikey!) I have latterly – especially since retirement six years ago – come at last to appreciate more the power of verse, and savour the best poets' weighing of every word for its import and impact.

I was reminded that the best poems *unfold* over time (with repeated reading) in the days following our **July meeting**. Those not present missed the rare treat of an established poet, Lola Haskins, reciting a few of her many published verses, but it was only later that what she wrote "sunk in", after I had reread one of her fourteen collections of poems.

Remarkably she declaimed all the poems that evening entirely from memory. On a more prosaic note it was also remarkable that she waived her normal fee (of upwards of several hundred pounds) as she so likes meeting small writers' groups.

Lola spends most of the year in her native USA but since the 1970s she has spent some of the summer months in her house in Skipton, so we might see her again in 2018.

Here's a sample of her work:

To Play Pianissimo

Does not mean silence.
The absence of moon in the night sky
for example.

Does not mean barely to speak,
the way a child's whisper
makes only warm air
on his mother's right ear.

To play pianissimo
is to carry sweet words
to the old woman in the last dark row
who cannot hear anything else,
and to lay them across her lap like a shawl.

What I've been reading — Chris Manners

Earlier this year the broadcaster Andrew Marr made three television programmes about genre fiction: crime, spies, and fantasy. In the fantasy one he mentioned the Ursula le Guin series that starts with **A Wizard of Earthsea**. A bell jangled in my head: my godmother bought me a copy when I was — oh I dunno — ten or eleven, but I never got round to reading it. Oops. I remembered the pink cover well but couldn't find that copy, so bought an omnibus edition of the first four.

They're marvellous. It's the usual mix: a pre-industrial world where there's magic and evil to be fought, but the stories are grave and spare and have the weight of myth. Ged, the wizard for whom the book's titled, thinks much but says little and treats his magic seriously, as something liable to upset the balance of the universe. The language is stately, almost Old Testament.

I've emailed my godmother to tell her I'm a silly boy and she's a wise woman.

Marr also mentioned Joe Abercrombie's **First Law Trilogy.** It's a sort of Game-of-Thrones lite, but enjoyable in a holiday sun-bed way; not so ponderous and self-important as GoT. The characters are often ordinary people surviving on their merits, not the scions of great houses warring against each other, often grotesque and damaged. But the books don't take themselves too seriously either; they're not comedies, but there's a sense of wit and humour shot through them.

But I didn't finish . . .

It can't happen here by Sinclair Lewis, a dystopian novel from 1935 in which a sinister populist called Windrip is elected president and brings Fascist government to the USA. No surprise, it's enjoying rather a revival at the moment, with phrases like 'eerily prescient' being bandied about. (Call me immature, but isn't the way 'Trump' and 'Windrip' chime together a coincidence too perfect to be deliberate?) By the blunted pencils of Agatha Christie, though, boy is it dull. I gave up at about page 60 by which time I felt like I'd lived through eight years of The Donald already.

Origins and derivations — Neil Wilson

Orange: from *naranj*, the fruit first cultivated in South-East Asia, and later introduced to Sicily by Arabs. It arrived in England in the 1400s but it took another century for orange to oust the tongue-twisting *giolureade* as a description for a yellow-red colour.

The bitter end: may be related to "bite" in the sense of something cutting or sharp, or from *bitts*, the stout posts on ship decks to which cables were attached. When the cable was allowed to extend to its full length it was said to have come to "the bitter end".

Loggerhead: nowadays refers to a species of turtle, a moth, a duck, and even a place-name. Back in Shakespeare's time a logger was the heavy block of wood fastened to the leg of a horse to stop it straying. "Logger-head", and later "block-head", became insults but in the 17th century a long-handled iron implement with a ball at its head, which was used to stir hot liquids, was then called a "loggerhead". Using such devices as weapons gave rise to the expression "to be at loggerheads".

Weymouth Pat Farley

The name of Weymouth doesn't immediately bring visions of the strikingly beautiful countryside and coastline of the West Country, or the sedate elegance of Bournemouth which isn't many miles to the east. No, to me Weymouth was merely the embarkation port for the Channel Island ferries, where trains trundled slowly through the streets of the town to deliver passengers directly to the dock. Hardly a place to choose for a holiday, but this year circumstances decreed that I should stay for a week on the outskirts of Weymouth, and now I know a little more about this town.

Trains no longer trail through the streets, although some of the railway lines are still there. In the centre of Weymouth the shops and stores are similar to those found in most English towns nowadays and, looking at the seafront from the pier, the curve of Georgian buildings failed to impress me, but the harbour, where boats of all kinds are moored, is picturesque and certainly worth a visit, especially if you are a photographer or an artist. There are, of course, a variety of museums, theatres and exhibitions in the town, and the sandy beach is free for all kinds of activities when the weather is fine, but to my mind the real virtue of Weymouth is its position. It's an ideal base for exploring, and I found that a week wasn't nearly long enough to see all the things I'd like to have seen.

Dorset abounds with National Trust properties and gardens, and if Weymouth itself doesn't inspire you, the surrounding countryside will. If your interest lies in ancient castles and ruins, there are stone circles and barrows, the remains of a Benedictine Abbey and a small stone chapel used at one time as a lighthouse. For those with a literary bent, the house where Thomas Hardy was born is a place of pilgrimage giving an insight into how people lived in Dorset in the nineteenth century, and a visit to Portland Castle will take you back to the time of Henry VIII to experience first- hand the draughts of this stone fortress as you follow the audio tour, imagining the conditions endured by the soldiers posted here to defend the harbour.

The coastline of the Weymouth area is distinctive. The 'Isle' of Portland is a rocky promontory rising some five hundred feet above the sea. From the top there is a marvellous view of the unique Chesil Beach, a pebble bank which stretches for eighteen miles to the west, parallel with the coast and enclosing a lagoon known as The Fleet. This is a nature reserve, a paradise for twitchers, where native and migrating birds can safely rest and feed. At the far end of The Fleet is the Abbotsbury Swannery where over a thousand of those beautiful creatures take advantage of the protection offered to live and breed. Never before have I seen so many swans together in one place. My camera worked overtime in an effort to record the spectacle of white feathered bodies resting and preening on the ground beside The Fleet while others rocked gently on the water close by. I arrived just before their 'tea-time', and at the sound of the wheel barrow, hundreds of heads rose up, and hundreds of heavy birds struggled to their feet in readiness for their afternoon treat. Any other kind of bird or animal in similar circumstances would have made a colossal noise, but these are mute swans, so there was no cacophony, nor was there any pushing or shoving to get to the feed. Two young people distributed the pellets on the land and in the water, and those swans nearest to the wheel barrow arched their elegant necks over the edge and helped themselves.

During my stay in Weymouth the weather wasn't as bright and warm as I would have wished, but my luck was in on the day I visited Brownsea Island. The sun shone and the gentle breeze bore no resemblance to the chilly winds I'd experienced at Abbotsbury and Portland Castle. A ferry boat from Poole took me to the island, which is now owned by the National Trust. Just under half of Brownsea Island is leased to the Dorset Wildlife Trust, and that part is fenced off as a reserve with restricted access. The main part of the island is wooded, with wide paths and areas of grass where peacocks and peahens graze in an unconcerned fashion, where birds sing and red squirrels thrive unmolested by the greys. You may catch a glimpse of one if you are very lucky. This is where General Baden-Powell came with his first boys' camp before he started the Scouting movement, and there's a large stone with an inscription commemorating this.

The little church of St Mary's is just one reminder of the thriving community that was here in the 19th century, mining china clay and making pottery. After strolling the paths and enjoying the tranquillity of this special place, I returned to the quay to catch the ferry. When it arrived I was surprised to find that instead of going directly back to Poole, the boat took its passengers right round Brownsea Island, and as we passed the other islands in Poole harbour we were given a commentary on their history. What a lovely day that was.

I'm sorry that I didn't have time to go to the renowned beauty spots of Lulworth Cove and Durdle Door, or to walk along the coastal paths. I could have paid more attention to the Isle of Portland, visited the sculpture park, climbed to the top of Portland Bill Lighthouse and descended the steep steps to Church Ope Cove. Given more time I might even have come to appreciate the delights of Weymouth itself. I didn't really give it a chance. A week just wasn't long enough.

Future Meetings:

August: none.

September 12^{th}: Members' evening – of writing exercises.

October 10^{th}: To be decided.

October 24^{th}: Return visit to **Drystone Radio** in Cowling. This time we *will* be guests on David Driver's live "Bookshelf" programme that starts at 7pm. We will rotate in turn between that studio and the recording one. Those attending are encouraged to bring along short poems or brief prose but this is not compulsory!

Keighley News deadlines:

Those of you who have penned reports of our meetings in the past for inclusion in the *Keighley News* will remember that there was often only a day and a half to complete the required 500 words for these… though such a tight deadline did concentrate the mind wonderfully!

Well, now you can relax. David Knights from the *Keighley News* emailed us recently with a re-jigged schedule of deadlines for the rest of the year which will give us much longer – typically three weeks – to send him our reports.

Getting published:

“Our own” busy Lisa Firth (writing as Mary Jayne Baker) has burst into print again, this time with a romantic comedy novel: “Meet me at the Lighthouse”. Its plot has been summarised as “the day I turned 28, I bought a lighthouse and met the love of my life…” and one review enthused that this second book of hers is “side-splittingly hilarious”.

Order it now from Amazon, Kobo, iBooks, or Google Play.

Lisa also had a hand, in her job at the *Dalesman,* in my “Remembering Daisy” piece which appears in the August issue of that magazine. It recalls an incident from my work as a GP in Keighley, with a subsequent feature on diphtheria.

And Finally…

Eats, shoots and leaves is of course the title of Lynne Truss’ best-selling book on punctuation.

Much less well-known, as an example of the importance of the comma in altering the meaning of a phrase, is the sign I saw outside a church in Bradford a few years ago which read “What on earth are you doing for heaven’s sake?”

Well, not quite finally…

…because I wanted to thank Chris Manners and Pat Farley for making this newsletter possible, in that their contributions meant I could go ahead with composing one -- as I think it would be somewhat egotistical if I was the only writing these newsletters!

As ever, the appearance of future newsletters depends therefore on your putting pen to paper, or rather fingers on keyboard!