THE WILD COAST OF SEFTON

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Viewing history as an entanglement of lived experience, we might see it as an arc, without discernible beginning or end, intersecting our horizon at both corners of our eyes. A great galaxy of lines of flight shooting across the night sky. Looking at our place within this arc we would see a coalescing of lines turning round on themselves, biting their own tail off to disappear in a firework of circles, large and small, marking the death of a friend, the ending of a language, a life form, a way of being. Jeppe Grauggard

In his The Writing of History, Michel de Certeau says that 'The past is the fiction of the present'.1 In summer 2014, when I walked the Sefton Coastal Path, from Crosby to Southport, I came to realise that he was right: our understanding of the present is preceded by layers of past meaning, where people and their histories meld and overlap; where social histories blend with environmental changes; and where marine and coastal life and vegetation thrives both despite, and because of, human activity.

On the beach at Formby, you can literally step back several thousand years into the lives of nomadic hunter-gatherers, whose footprints, when the tide cares to reveal them, can be seen hollowed into the sediment. As Alison Burns notes, in the introduction to The Prehistoric Footprints at Formby, 'It is possible that during this century these glimpses of the past will be lost forever to the sea as it gradually eats into Formby Point'. For Adam Pugh, describing an even older set of human footprints, found at Happisburgh beach in Norfolk, they 'illustrate the problem of history, or more properly, the writing of history […] Not only does our knowledge of their existence alter them but, as objects, it destroys them. Impossibly ancient, having endured invisibly for millennia, once disinterred they are yet ephemeral beyond measure'.

Nowhere is ephemeralness more apparent than in littoral zones, on the beach. I came to this project as a 'Sand-dancer', from South Shields, whose shores are quite different to those of the Sefton Coast. One of my intentions during Ghosts of the Restless Shore was to calibrate my understanding of my native coastline; to place it within the dual contexts of something similar yet different. When I blogged, initially, after having walked the Sefton Coastal path last summer, I noted that Liverpool, which is to Sefton as Newcastle is to South Tyneside, is a city whose similarities bear a startling resemblance to that of its north-eastern counterpart. In socio-historic, economic, geographic and sporting terms, the cities are nearly one and the same. But much like taking the twenty-minute Metro ride out to the coast in Newcastle, to reach the Sefton Coast you must also leave behind the city for something quite different.

Ragwort; Sorrel; Seaforth Docks; Horsetail; Sea Holly; Gatekeeper butterfly; Seaforth and Litherland; Sea Plantain; Dune Helleborine; Kirkdale; Bootle New Strand; Ainsdale; Alt; Rest Harrow; Dove's-foot Cranesbill; Dark Green Fritillary; Ravenmeols Dunes; Myxomatosis; Sea Kale; Yellow Rattle; Ionic Star.

'For us to live and die properly',4 says John Berger, 'things have to be named properly. Let us reclaim our words'. It is July 2015. A year since the walk, which I now think of as a gathering—of names, of words, of artefacts. New names and words, rolled on the tongue, tested out in whispers, cross-referred to maps and articles. New words which find shape and form, become real, on the beach.

Two months ago I travelled back to Ainsdale for the symposium which would kick-start the artists' thinking on this project, stimulating discussions which would lead to collaborative work. This was the run-up to the General Election which would see the first majority Conservative government in

nearly twenty years. While walking last summer, the news was filled with the Israel-Gaza conflict and with the tragic crash of flight MH17, which came down in the strife-ridden area of Eastern Ukraine. In my poem 'Star of Hope', which alludes to both of these events, I announce that 'These are things/I am not qualified/ to talk about//(but silence/is the natural ally/of war.)' As I proof this essay ready for inclusion in the exhibition catalogue, I do so with thoughts of Grexit on my mind; with a vague hope that Jeremy Corbyn will be voted in as Labour leader later in the summer; and, somewhere deep at the back of my mind, with a fear that climate change could irrevocably alter the dynamics of life along this and many other coasts.

So the writer faces the past as a fiction of the present, but the present—equally—can look fictional, or absurd. How do I/we, who feel these pulls between the beauty of natural landscapes such as those at Sefton and the knowledge that the growth-fixated economic system of which we are a part is damaging them—how do we reconcile, find meaning and transfer those meanings, positively, to others? For me, it is in the process of the poetics which I have attempted for Ghosts of the Restless Shore and for the accompanying pamphlet of poetry, The Coast Will Wait Behind You, which will collate all of my new, Sefton poems alongside their north-east-based cousins. I call this 'palimpsest poetics', in recognition that we sit, precariously and temporally, at the top layer of history, but to understand our place in it, and to move forward with both purpose and wonderment (because what is poise without a sense of its mirror image; without a sense of not knowing quite how or why we fit into the bigger picture?), we must look to the visible traces of what has gone before.

That is why former Manchester City goalkeeper, Bert Trautmann, who was interned as a prisoner of war at Fort Crosby, sits alongside the 'Bootle Organs' of the dunes. It is why the Natterjack Toads that I describe in that poem are as much a part of the story of this coast as 'Operation Starfish' was: the lighting of dummy fires north of Liverpool to divert German bombs away from the important docks and factories on the Mersey. It is why the 'Star of Hope' is both a literal shipwreck reminding us of the dangers of this coastline and a metaphor for looking to something bigger than ourselves to offer guidance, as sailors would have once done, before GPS. It is why I describe the Georgian poet, Siegfried Sassoon, scrambling the waves at Formby; because the sight of the Irish Sea beyond those waves must have been some solace for a broken soldier returning from the front line. It is why I have displaced William Wouldhave: the North Shields-born designer, thought to have dreamt up the original concept for the lifeboat, has been put in the world's oldest lifeboat station, even though we cannot be certain he ever visited the north-west. And returning to those footprints, it is why, when we see those ancient marks, we simultaneously realise our insignificance in it all yet recognise the importance we play in the interconnectedness that is this gift called life.

For many readers, certainly those of a certain ilk, much of that last paragraph will have come across as 'mushy' or, worse, sentimental—that much decried quality which the whole project of modernism sought to banish. Okay, I half-agree: sentimentality—easily-reached for or strangulated, stock phrases which offer the reader little to no new insights—yes, that kind of automatic writing is to be avoided, but is sentiment? In his long essay, *Folk Opposition*, Alex Niven is similarly minded when it comes to the baggage of sentiment: 'The reclamation of folk sentiment and folk opposition from the right-wing margins and from the ironic, belittling forces of bourgeois consumerism is every bit as serious as this. Re-emphasising the legitimacy of a common culture founded in ordinary, elemental solidarity will not be an easy task. But we have to at least try'. So, sentiment can elucidate our poetry, make it reach out to new audiences, and educate them, but not in a holier-thanthou, condescending way.

I recognise that I am not from this part of the world. In researching elements of my poetry, particularly the strong social histories found in the 'Bootle Organ' and 'Elegy for Bert Trautmann' poems, I encountered moments of severe anxiety founded in geographical guilt: here I was, a man in his late twenties, from the northeast, asking people twice, sometimes thrice, his age whether

they’d heard the aphoristic term ‘Bootle Organ’ (or, alternatively, ‘Birkdale Nightingale’) to describe the cacophonous mating call of the male Natterjacks. Here I was telling people that Bert Trautmann, a footballer I’d never heard of a year ago, had been interned along the Sefton Coast, and did they know, and it then turned out that he might not have been kept prisoner here after all—that might have been hearsay—but did they want to hear my poem about it anyway because there’s nothing stranger than fiction, nowt so queer as folk.

But the sentiment allows the universality: whether or not Bert Trautmann ever played a game of football with the home guard is as irrelevant as my vastly unlikely imaginings of William Wouldhave corralling the first lifeboat crews to take to those jagged waves off Formby Point. It is the sentiment behind the poems—that ordinary people can do extraordinary things—which is important. And that’s what this administration seems intent on destroying: the notion that normal people can shape the future. At risk of this essay falling into full-blown political diatribe (that was not my point at the outset), I wish to conclude with a paragraph which I first wrote this time last year, after walking away from Another Place, those iron men, their backs to the coast, the city behind them, the waves, static yet indeterminate, spread before their weather-worn faces.

You stand and watch the tide roll out, which it does quickly, the markers growing by the inch every minute, erect like giant fly swatters or cocktail sticks; and on the wind you hear the crack and whizz of bullets from the rifle range at Hightown; and at Altmouth the lazy boats slumber into marshes as the breeze strums their riggings in cowbell clatter; and a few dog walkers litter the coast, along with the rubble of blitz-bombed Liverpool and cooking oil drums chucked overboard from some distant tanker in the Atlantic; and the skyline of Liverpool, its cathedrals and Radio City Tower, are silhouetted to the South as the wind makes a marathon dash for the Mersey and you think of the opening scenes of Atwood’s dystopia, Oryx and Crake, all howling winds, jetsam and distant, empty skyscrapers; and the clouds lift, the sun opening them like blinds, to show you Hoylake, Flintshire, Snowdonia. And you stand, with your face to the sea, arms at your side like the Gormleys, asking yourself what it is you’re shoring up against, or for, out here, on the wild coast of Sefton.

Endnotes

1 de Certeau, M. (1988) The Writing of History. New York: Columbia University Press, p.10.

2. Burns, A. (2014) The Prehistoric Footprints at Formby. Ainsdale: Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership Scheme, p.7.

3. Pugh, A. (2014) Invisible Fabrick. Norwich: Promontories, p.9.

4. Berger, J. quoted in Le Monde diplomatique (http://mondediplo.com/2003/02/15pain), February 2003.

5. Niven, A. (2012) Folk Opposition. Alresford: Zero Books, p.76.