

Writing Durham 2 – Anne Stevenson

Introduction *You're listening to a podcast by New Writing North.*

Laura McKenzie When we think of County Durham, we envision miners' strikes and a Norman Cathedral, St. Cuthbert's Shrine with its headless statue, a post-industrial northern landscape, and a world-leading university. It's steeped in history, but we don't tend to talk about County Durham in terms of its literary significance. I'm on a mission to prove that there's more to Durham than meets the eye; that, alongside its medieval city and worked-out pits, the county is home to a rich and varied tradition of literature. Over the past few months, I've been seeking out the writers, books and poems that tell the story of County Durham's literary past and present. And in this podcast series, I'll be speaking to authors and poets who either hail from Durham, or have made it their home. What does it mean, if anything, to be a Durham writer? What role has this place, unique in so many contradictory ways, played in shaping their work?

For this episode, I'm joined by Anne Stevenson, a major voice in American-British poetry. A poet who Jay Parini has described as "a contemporary Emily Dickinson, working on a small canvas, quietly, with big themes". She was born in Cambridge, England in 1933, of American parents, and grew up in New England and Michigan. She studied literature at the University of Michigan under Donald Hall, and after several transatlantic switches, settled in Britain in 1964. She has since lived in Cambridge, Scotland, Oxford, and Hay-on-Wye, but settled in County Durham in the early 1980s, where she has remained ever since. As well as her numerous collections of poetry and Anne has published a biography of Sylvia Plath, a book of essays, and two critical studies of Elizabeth Bishop's work. In 2007, she was awarded the Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award for poetry and the Poetry Foundation's Neglected Masters Award. She also received the Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award. Anne welcomed me into her home on one of Durham's steepest hills, where we talked about Durham's shifting nature, and how the county and city have worked their way through her poetry.

I'm Laura McKenzie, and this is Writing Durham.

Anne Stevenson How I got to Durham, well, it's a story that begins I suppose, in Oxford, and I was in Oxford as a Fellow in Writing at Lady Margaret Hall for two years in the 70s. But when that ran out, I had no job there. I had a partner without any money, I had no money. So I had to do something. And so we decided, in a very foolish moment, to start a poetry bookshop and Hay-on-Wye in, you know, Wales, Hereford. So when we went out to Hay on Wye, I think it was 1978, and bought a house was my father's legacy. My father had left me a legacy. So we bought a house, in Hay on Wye, and put a bookshop in it. And I thought I would convert everybody to reading poetry. Well, the bookshop is still going. It was a success, but it didn't make any money. So I had to apply for jobs. And the jobs I applied for were Writer in Residence in various different residencies, and thanks to Robert Woof at the Wordsworth Centre, but he was then at the University of Newcastle. I came for an interview and I think I did all right. Anyway, I got on with Robert Woof. And we agreed about Wordsworth and poetry in general. And so I got the job, came up, and decided not to live in Newcastle, but to try to live in Durham because I thought it was a wonderful city. I thought it was a beautiful city and the cathedral had always attracted me. So we discovered we couldn't really afford to live in Durham City. But we did find a pit village outside called Langley Park and not a park, but a pit. And we could get a house there for £900. This was in 1979.

Laura McKenzie Wow.

Anne Stevenson And so I bought a mining house, a miner's house, on Logan Street, Langley Park, near Railway Street, for £900 or so. Eventually I got another one for about the same price next door. And here they were. And no loo inside. No inside loo, so we had to go outside, but we did put one in. And it was very – it was fun. It was really fun. We painted, and we started a bookshop, well sort of a bookshop, there. But really, Michael, at the time, Michael Farley, decided to start a press called the Taxus Press. And so I was supposedly teaching people about poetry in Newcastle and Durham, and he was running a press for poetry. But poetry still doesn't make money. [laughs] And eventually, I think the whole thing broke up. And I found a very old friend of mine, Peter Lucas, whom I've known for a very long time. And he said, "Why not marry me?" Well, he was a lawyer and had some money. So I married him! [laughs]

Laura McKenzie How romantic!

Anne Stevenson Oh, very romantic! I mean, Peter and I have been together for 30 years. And it's been very happy and satisfying. But that was a bumpy time there, in Langley Park. And yet, I think it was the best time for me, for poetry, I've ever had. Even better than Hay-on-Wye, which was actually commercial. Everybody was trying to make money out of books. But I decided, in Langley Park, what was money? Didn't matter at all. And so we none of us had any money. It was an ex-mining village, and most of us were ex-hippie, or, you know, ex-60s and 70s dropouts. And that finally came, you know, came to fruition for me, because I just discovered that really, I could never be – but I always thought I would be – some kind of academic, even a teacher. But, no, poetry and academia, just for me, didn't mix. So to hell with it, you know. And that was a wonderful throwing everything away, which almost no one could do now. That was a time when you could live without money, in the 70s, at the end of the 70s. I mean, without real money. Now it's much, much more difficult and so changed.

Laura McKenzie So were you living at Langley Park during the Miners' Strike?

Anne Stevenson During the Miners' Strike, yes. Oh, during Thatcher's reign. And Mrs. Thatcher's reign, you know – we were *all* violently Labour, and very rebellious. And I think one feels it in the poems I wrote them. But I think at the same time, I knew that coal wasn't an answer to the need for energy, and, already, people were turning to environmental issues and so forth. So it was mixed time. It was time of immense change. And finally, one emerged from the Thatcher years as very sure that that wasn't going to be the solution. And there are no Conservatives in Durham.

Laura McKenzie None.

Anne Stevenson No conservatives in Durham – so I was happy in Durham.

Laura McKenzie You picked out several poems from that period. Perhaps we could turn to those?

Anne Stevenson Would you like me to read it?

Laura McKenzie I'd love you to, if you're happy to.

Anne Stevenson Well, this is Langley Park...

Anne Stevenson [reading] Let me not live, ever, without fat people / the marshmallow flesh set thick on the muscular bone / the silk-white perms of sweet sixteen-stone ladies / luscious as pom-poms or full blown perfumed magnolias / breasts like cottage loaves dropped into a lace-knit sweaters / all cream-bun arms and bottoms in sticky leathers. / O Russian dolls, O range of hills / rosy behind the glo-green park of the pool table / thorns are not neater or sharper than your delicate shoes. // And let me not live, ever, without pub people / the tattooed forearm steering the cue like a pencil, / the twelve-pint belly who adds up the scores in his head, / the wiry owner of whippets, the keeper of ferrets / thin wives who suffer, who are silent, who talk with their eyes. / The girl who's discovered that sex is for she who tries. / O zebra blouse, O vampish back / blown like a lily from the swaying stalk of your skirt, / roses are not more ruthless than your silver-pink lipstick. // And let me live, always and forever, among neighbours like these, / who ordered their year by the dates of the leek competitions, / who care sacrificially for Jack Russell terriers and pigeons / who read very carefully captions in The Advertiser and Echo / which record their successes and successes of teams they support, / whose daughters grow up and marry friends' boys from Crook. / O wedding gifts, O porcelain flowers / twined on their vases under the lacelip curtains / save me from Habitat and snobbery and too damn much literary ambition!

Anne Stevenson I think that says it all!

Laura McKenzie I think so. As a frequenter of Durham pubs, that's a recognisable scene. Those are very real people to me.

Anne Stevenson Very real people, yes. Well, of course, I mean, people – everybody's real.

Laura McKenzie Oh, yes.

Anne Stevenson But, you know, but it is true that pretension is something that I've always felt allergic to. Any kind of pretention. That sometimes puts me off poetry, because poets are naturally pretentious and ambitious. And this is the world in which I can feel comfortable without being ambitious or competitive. People, of course, competed. But it was friendly, and the atmosphere was that we were really against something else. So we wrote together in this coal mining...

Laura McKenzie United by that.

Anne Stevenson United, yes. The other one I'd like to quote from, because it meant so much to me at the time, is called 'Forgotten of the Foot'. And again, it's a description of Langley Park. But because the times, at that time, were so uninterested in capitalistic success -and I'm not a natural socialist or anything like that, but I do feel that the emphasis on money has been destructive, recently so – so when I wrote this:

Anne Stevenson [reading] When the mine's shut down, habits prolong the story, /
Habits and voices, till grandmothers' old ways pass, / And the terraces fold into
themselves, so black, ugly // And unloved that all but the saved (success / Has spared
them, the angel of death-by-money) move away. / The town's inhabited by alien,
washed up innocents. // The memorial is a pick, a hammer, a shovel, given / By the men
of Harvey Seam and Victoria Seam. May / Their good bones wake in the living seams of
Heaven.

Anne Stevenson And then the poem ends with a quote from the Miners' Memorial in Durham Cathedral, which always moves me: "He breaketh open a shaft away from where men sojourn. They are forgotten of the foot that passeth by". It's a lovely passage. And that isn't in the original. I think that's in the revised version of the King James, which is unusual because usually I like the original – but they're forgotten of the foot. So I called the poem 'Forgotten of the Foot'.

Laura McKenzie You mentioned before that the cathedral had always been something that had drawn you or attracted you. What is the significance of the cathedral for you?

Anne Stevenson Well, yes, I think it's significant for me because it represents the history of, well, of the kind of religion that one returns to. I love the story of Bede and I love the story of Cuthbert, and this sort of story. I am very reluctant to accept creeds and theologies, because I think that they end up by quiet. And so the cathedral itself represents, again, the unity. And I think that's why I find it so moving. I go in, sit there, and just sit there for a while. It's a meditation rather than prayer. But I find it very moving. I belong to St. Chad's College, which is attached to the cathedral. And I think Durham wouldn't be the same without the cathedral.

Laura McKenzie No.

Anne Stevenson Because you need that element; the dignity and the beauty of that element, and the age, as opposed to the dark element of the coal mining and the unemployment, of course, which has been so acute in the past. Not so much now.

Laura McKenzie Yeah, I think that's something that the county itself is – it has a multivalency that is quite unique. You have the cathedral and the university and, you know, the quite affluent socio-economic centre in the city, and then you just go a few miles outside into the pit villages and it's a completely different story.

Anne Stevenson Yes.

Laura McKenzie Of course, you've lived in both. So you've seen both sides of the coin.

Anne Stevenson Yes. And to understand Durham you need to understand both. You have to see that. I always feel that people are unfortunate here. That, unless they have the university education, or unless the university or the cathedral – they have the university and cathedral which represent extreme rationality and intelligence – but you have another side that has, you know, really been deprived.

Laura McKenzie Were there any other poems you wanted to look at?

Anne Stevenson I have one I might read. This is 'Spring Song', which is living in this £900 house and everything is dirty with coal dust.

Laura McKenzie

Yeah.

Anne Stevenson [reading] The sun is warm, and the house in the sun is filthy: grime like permanent fog on the soot-framed windowpanes, dust, imprinted with cats' feet, on the lid of the hi-fi, dishes on the dresser in a deepening plush of disuse, books on the blackened shelves bearing in the cusps of their pages a stripe of mourning. The sun is warm, the dust motes and dust mice are dancing. The ivies are pushing green tongues from their charcoal tentacles, the fire is reduced to a smoky lamp in a cave. Soon it will be spring, sweet spring, and I will take pleasure in spending many hours and days out of doors, away from the chores and bores of these filthy things.

Laura McKenzie There's a lovely musicality to that poem.

Anne Stevenson Well, I wanted to talk about music, because I was brought up in a musical family. And I always assumed I'd be a musician, or a teacher of music. And I went deaf when I was about, I suppose in my early 20s. I began to go deaf and I couldn't hear – especially hear intonation. I played the cello, which wasn't very good when I played with other people and I

couldn't hear my intonation. So I finally decided that poetry was much the best thing for me to do. And I'd always written poems, but never seriously, but I went to the University of Michigan. I went back in the mid-60s to the University of Michigan to get a degree in English, and met Donald Hall there who said, "You must work on your poems," and taught me really, that one had to work on poems. They didn't come, you know, floating into your mind from inspiration. And so I decided to try to publish and I had some luck in America, and then came here pursuing my ideal English life.

Laura McKenzie Austen's England.

Anne Stevenson To marry Mr. Darcy. I married Mr. Darcy, but it didn't really work out.

Laura McKenzie Those Darcys never do. [laughter]

Anne Stevenson You know, it all seems comical now. But it didn't always seem comical.

Laura McKenzie It seems like – it sounds like an adventure. It sounds like a great adventure, to me. ,

Anne Stevenson Well, I think life is – my life has been, anyway, quite by accident – a matter of shifting from one idea to another of what I could do and what I wanted to, probably entirely selfishly. Because I'm aware now that concentrating so much on getting myself jobs, published, keeping my poems going so I could keep going myself, I really sacrificed my children in a sense, because I've always felt that I put my, well, art first. And now I think, in horror, was it art or was it just simply egotism? So I have double feelings about poetry. People are easy to know in Durham. You know, I've made friends with the street wives. 'Street wives' sounds terrible, like 'fish wives', but I go to a book group here, and most of them have their academic husband or academic wives, and they're all in different fields, and they're very interesting. I find people accessible. The whole... Durham is an open city. And it's got its flaws – of course it's got its flaws – but I found it easy to live here.

Laura McKenzie I wonder, do you find any core seam in the transatlantic places you've inhabited? Because I think you were at Yale and Harvard, or lived in Cambridge in New Haven. Obviously, there's a lot of correlations there with Oxbridge.

Anne Stevenson Well Cambridge and Harvard and Oxford all think they're the centre of the universe. Durham doesn't. It would like to be but it is – Durham and Newcastle together represent a much broader spectrum.

Laura McKenzie Do they speak more to Michigan than the Midwest, I wonder?

Anne Stevenson Ann Arbor I like very much. It was a nice place to grow up. Again, see, academia is very protective. And so I suppose there's a good half of me that still belongs to the academic, because I like to read, I like to think, I like to talk, I like to play music. And I can't bear... well, I can't bear Trumpism or, you know, I cannot bear this kind of popular non-thinking, calling names, instead of proving things.

Laura McKenzie Popular non-thinking; I like that.

Anne Stevenson I just cannot believe it does any good for democracy. So we need thinkers as leaders, I think. So. But everyone's caught in same trap. And something went wrong, something's gone wrong. Maybe it's just the number of people in the world – too many people. But certainly inequality: inequality of income, inequality of opportunity. And I think once... n not a day passes when I don't get, or we don't get a plea for money for refugees, for the homeless, or this, that and the other. And you have to decide where you're going to give your energy and your money and so forth. But it is disturbing. You feel guilty, a little bit, all the time, to live so well, when so many have nothing.

Laura McKenzie And how does that sit alongside poetry? Is there a sense of duty in poetry to respond to those kind of tensions or pressures? Or do you feel like they are of a separate world?

Anne Stevenson I personally can't do that. I've always responded to my need to feel what's real and yet keep some kind of idea in mind, you know. So I don't think I can write the kind of poetry that would be called political. It's just not in me to do that. I don't *feel* it as poetry. I feel poetry is an individual matter. And I think only a few people read it. I mean, I don't think everybody should read poetry. Nor do I think everybody should write it. I don't care about poetry as Poetry, the capital P, but I care about insight. And I care about, you know, can you make these people understand, now, what they could do to help themselves? Robert Frost said, and it's a funny thing to say, but I must quote this, he said that sociologists want to do good for people, and poets want to do something well. And it's always important, he said, for poets to do something well, and to not do things, good things, for people if they don't want to. In other words, sociologists think about other people in society, and try to think in terms of big societies, but a poet has to really think about what he can do with words, to make them say something that isn't said in prose. That *isn't* said. So it cannot be cut out prose. It has to be – the poem has to come in the way it is. And I think any poet eventually would agree with that. I mean, I think Robert Stevens said the same thing in a different way. Elizabeth Bishop said the same thing in a different way. But there are not that many poets. I mean, a poet is an affliction. You don't want to be a poet, you have to be, you can't stop being, and you won't stop. You'd rather do good for people. But I seem to not be able to put my heart and soul into being good to people.

Laura McKenzie So is a poetic existence necessarily quite insular?

Anne Stevenson Yes, I think so. It is now. Yes, I think it is. Of course, you know, it wasn't always. I don't think a *writer's* life is necessarily, but poetry is now on a little plot of its own; it's a little castle of its own. And I'm sorry, but I don't think anyone reads poetry very much who doesn't either want to be a poet themselves, or thinks they might find a key to life in it, which they won't. We don't have a Dante anymore. We don't have Shakespeare anymore. I think we can give up ideas of that. So I think it's a very strange thing, to be a poet. And I wouldn't advise it for most people. But sometimes – I mean, the number of poets that I *really* think are good, that I wish I'd had – there're quite a number, but mostly, you don't... I don't think it's easy to put poetry over to an audience unless they already know the poems pretty well. Unless I have a

script, or unless you read them several times. No one can understand a poem on one reading if you have a good poem.

Laura McKenzie But you must have some faith in readership, if you started a press, Taxus Press.

Anne Stevenson Oh, yes, I did. I had ambition. I've lost that. I had lots of belief in poetry – I started a poetry bookshop. But in the long run, I think things have changed too. I think poetry is now become a popular subject to study – creative writing. And I am afraid that I do not have any faith in teaching creative poetry. I think if you want, if you have, to be a poet, you'll find poems by other poets that inspire you, you'll become excited, and you'll learn yourself. And you go and you test, maybe on your friend or maybe another poet, and you try your poems out, and I think often these groups are good. But once you get a group that simply spurs itself along and is not critical enough, then that's no use at all. Because you need really strict and severe criticism if you're going to be any good. And it's very hard to give now. And you certainly can't grade creative energy, creative poetry. I think don't think you can grade, but you'll have to if you're giving classes. So I think, I think if you write poetry, that's wonderful. But do it, you know, do it with a sense of, you're not doing it to make yourself famous. You're not doing it to get a name; you don't want to be a celebrity. What you want to do is say something that can't be said in another way.

Laura McKenzie You're compelled to.

Anne Stevenson Yes, yeah. I mean, you cannot write a poem unless you're compelled. And I'm not writing poems now because I haven't felt compelled for quite a time.

Laura McKenzie You say Donald Hall advised you that you needed to work on your poems, they didn't just come out of thin air and imagination.

Anne Stevenson Oh you have to work on a poem. Well, you start with a line or two, and where it comes from one doesn't know, but you finally find that the poem is forming in your

mind, unconsciously. A lot of it happens asleep. And when you're asleep, your unconscious sort of unfastens itself, and you come up with some ideas. Any poems I write that I keep and like are usually written between four and six in morning, or maybe between six and eight or 10. But I am very much coming out of sleep and suddenly seeing something and understanding something that you didn't even know you were thinking about. And that sometimes creates a poem. Of course, there are poems you write because people ask you to write a poem, and that can make that difference between verse and poetry. And I can write verse, but poetry is rare. And I think everybody finds it rare.

Laura McKenzie Yeah. Robert Graves said that all true poetry, by necessity, had to come out of a poetic trance. Poets had to be in ultimate states, be it dream life or –

Anne Stevenson Yes, it comes out of a sort of trance. Well, you have to be aware that things are going on in your head that you don't really know all the time. That's why working for grades or working for a good mark or something like that doesn't work at all for poetry. I do think you can teach people to write decent prose. And I think everyone should be taught to write decent prose. But with the creative bit is very – it's too familiar a word now. Everybody uses it: "I want to be creative". Well, yes, well, but not everybody is naturally creative.

Laura McKenzie So which poets do you read?

Anne Stevenson Well, at the moment, I'm reading Tomas Tranströmer, and I – I discover people that you know, which I think is very fine. And he believes in this of course. I mean, he's very much a trance poet, and his translations – I don't usually like translations, but the translations by Robin Fulton, who's been working – or had worked – with Tranströmer for a long time, are really excellent. I don't think they've lost anything. They're very visual poems, very visual. So that's my latest, but before that, I think Thom Gunn is very good. I discovered him, *My Sad Captains*. And I think his form is absolutely excellent. I mean, he keeps to, say, so many syllables per line, and also to rhyme schemes, which Tranströmer doesn't. And that's a different kind of poetry. So I've discovered Tom Gunn, who I knew about, but I really hadn't responded to. And I like the American poet, A E Stallings. Alice Elspeth Stallings who lives in

Greece and began as a classical scholar. She uses – she understands Greek, Latin and classics better than any poet I know now. She really uses her knowledge, but she's an excellent and witty formalist. I don't like the word formalist, but she does writing, you know, in forms that I admire, and I can say, "Oh, that was a good thing to do". So I like Angela Leighton, who's at Cambridge now. She's been an old friend of mine for a long time. Richard Berengarten in Cambridge. There're a number of people who I think are good poets. But it's very hard to say why you suddenly like someone and suddenly are in tune with their poetry. It's, again, a matter of the unconscious sort of surfacing.

Laura McKenzie Perhaps you recognise the real in it, if that's what you're concerned with.

Anne Stevenson And that's why so much of poetry I read, I read four lines and I say 'I don't think I'm going to like this' and I stop. So I suspect – well, there's so much else competing with poetry. I mean, the internet, and, well, television, but everything to do with iPlayers and everything. People are so visually fixed now. They want entertainment. Press the button and off you go, you know. And doing it yourself is something people want to do, but they don't realise it's hard work. So they'd rather sit back and just let life entertain them. And somehow the rich are more spoiled than before. You know. Well, we're all spoiled, in the sense not spoiled ruined, but spoiled like children. And who's spoiled, but Donald Trump sitting there shouting abuses from the play yard instead of arguing any proofs? Really. He says "fake news" every time he doesn't like something? How does he... that's just Stalinism. That's terrible, a terrible thing to do. I don't think much of the Conservative Party's candidates either.

Laura McKenzie No, me neither.

Anne Stevenson So you know, what are we? – you know, because anybody who can fascinate and lead a crowd seems to get on, and that's very dangerous. What did Hitler and Mussolini do? Haven't we learned? Haven't we learned? So it's hard to write about today, for me. I don't feel I'm really part of it. I can't use a mobile phone properly and I can't do any of these things. I don't even have a microwave.

Laura McKenzie Well I don't have a microwave either, so I'm on your team for that one. I think in terms of bringing people together, and a sense of community, and uniting, that is something that's special about Durham City, in that you have this kind of hub or nucleus with the Palace Green and the cathedral. All roads in the city lead to that place and this kind of communal atmosphere there.

Anne Stevenson It's the shape of the city, it's all leading up, yes. As well, I think I must say, I'd like Durham to be recognised as a city of literary significance, if you like, because I think it is, and I don't think it's known enough.

Laura McKenzie Also you talk about your life as a series of shifts of shifts. You came to Durham; what made you stay?

Anne Stevenson Well, I'm old. I can't shift anymore. Most of my life, up till very recently, has been divided between North Wales, and the isolated hill cottage, and the city of Durham. And, I must say Newcastle, which is a lively city. And I miss Cambridge, where I was born and where I grew up and where I lived many times; I wrote poems about coming back to Cambridge. But you can't live in three places. And you have to live in one place really. And I have to say the National Health Service is very good up here. I've had beautiful... I've had a cochlear implant in my head and a metal clock pacemaker put in my chest. So I'm a bionic woman!

Laura McKenzie I was just about to say, they've made you bionic.

Anne Stevenson It's all been – I mean, for an American, that this should be on the health service, is just astonishing.

Laura McKenzie Long live the NHS.

Anne Stevenson It's Durham – Durham is... look at America with its troubles and again, now, and it's, it's a very good place to live if you're older. And they really care. I mean, there's this woman who comes around visits here, just to be sure we're all right. Now, that's terribly

generous. So I have to say that I know, the health service up here is really special, both in Newcastle and here and in Darlington.

Laura McKenzie Do you get through to Newcastle often?

Anne Stevenson Not very often now. I used to go a lot, because they used to be the Morden Tower there for poetry and that was a great time, but I don't think they do that anymore. No, those were the old days.

Laura McKenzie So did you use to read at Morden Tower?

Anne Stevenson Oh, yes. Yes. I knew everybody there, yes.

Laura McKenzie I bet you've got some stories.

Anne Stevenson What?

Laura McKenzie I bet you have some stories.

Anne Stevenson Well, might not [cross-talk].

Laura McKenzie Yes.

Anne Stevenson Yes. But yeah. That's a long story.

Laura McKenzie And on that note, I think I'll say thank you very much, Anne. It's been a joy speaking to you.

Anne Stevenson I hope I was positive enough about Durham. I think it's a worthy city.

Laura McKenzie For a worthy poet.

Anne Stevenson Worthy poets – well, worthy writers of all kinds.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Anne Stevenson for taking part in the Writing Durham conversation. This podcast was supported by Durham University as part of a wider project on Durham's literary heritage, which has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Next time, I'll be joined by award-winning poets Gillian Allnut and Kayo Chingonyi. We'll see you then.