

The People's Landscape East Durham 'Mini-Residency'
Commissioned by Durham Book Festival and the National Trust 2019
(This introduction is a draft of what I'll submit by October 3rd as my Blog Post)

My commission from Durham Book Festival and the National Trust for the People's Landscape project 2019 was to spend two days visiting the East Durham Coast, walking, meeting community groups and writing poetry about its extraordinary environmental reclamation. Although I have known some of the area all my life through family connections, and wrote about it 20 years ago for 'Turning the Tide', this was a very short time in which to re-familiarise myself with it. I therefore chose, first, to concentrate on just two communities, Easington Colliery and Horden; and secondly to regard any writing that resulted from it as work-in-progress.

My six resulting poems are just that. I wrote in my application that I love the Durham coast for its deep contradictions. This residency immediately confronted me with them. The National Trust is rightly extremely proud of the breathtaking Magnesian Limestone landscape over which it has stewardship for us all. The beaches have undergone the most remarkable transformation, even from when I wrote about them in 2000. They are cleaner than they have been since World War II, and many species of shore life and birds are re-establishing themselves. Nevertheless, the legacy of coal mining remains apparent, in shale ledges and strange orange stones. The National Trust's own signs acknowledge this, warning people to stay away from the lurid pools. In addition, the coastal communities, which suffered massively from pit closures, and the strike which preceded them, are still beset by high rates of unemployment, depression, poverty, areas of bad housing, addiction and crime, all of which affect people's relationship to place. I strongly feel that my writing has to tell the truth – about the difficult as well as the beautiful, and the complex interactions between the two. I could not write about 'the People's Landscape' without touching on some of the issues that people brought to me.

To a writer whose work is rooted in the local, the particular, the Durham Magnesian Limestone coast is a large area. Although it is united by its geology and by the biodiversity and industry which that has supported, within that landscape the human ecology is every bit as diverse as the plant life. Each village contains great variations, and the distinctions between the 'character' of each community, separated by the Denes, are strongly felt. To stay faithful to the particularity of place, I chose to concentrate on real encounters and true stories, changing only the names. All names used in the poems are fictitious, and no individual is identifiable. Beyond that, I focused particularly on young people's relationship to their landscape, asking them: what matters to you in your place, where do you play, how do you see its future, and your own?

The wonderful individuals and community groups who helped me in my two days, to whom I owe endless thanks, include: National Trust ranger Wayne Appleton, Ellie Hare (Amber Associates and Barn Arts, Easington), Nicola Balfour (Barn Arts, Easington), Sharon Bailey (photographer), Easington Brownies and Guides (Hawthorn Dene Heritage Project), former Easington miners Gordon MacPherson and Brian Jolly, Creative Youth Opportunities (Horden Youth and Community Centre), and Years 5 and 6, Cotsford Junior School, Horden. I also spent a delightful few hours with Phoebe Power, the poet with whom I am sharing this commission. Beyond my two day 'mini-residency', and one day supported writing, I spent five additional days of my own time creating this work-in-progress.

Recurring themes have emerged. Notable among the wildlife are the insects, including the mass migration of painted lady butterflies which has made the late summer of 2019 so memorable, and the astonishing report of a colony of glow-worms in Warren House Dene. I have also been struck in my conversations by the complicated relations between nature, language, age and sex. As I've observed before, older men who were miners often have great interest in, and knowledge of, plants and birds, and dialect names for them. The agricultural traditions of Durham have remained part of many older men's lives, mostly clearly in their allotments. Most children, too, are curious about the wildlife at their feet, as you can see from the touching stories the Horden children told me about their encounters with nature. Predictably, most teens I met, especially the girls, are more interested in their phones and appearance than in nature. Sadly, most of them, and most young mothers, say that they are frightened of the beach and landscape. The beach is perceived as dirty, 'not a proper beach', and many girls and young women told me that the sea shore is difficult to access and that there are dangerous people about. In contrast to this, there is a clear relation for many people, women as much as men, between the coast, the denes, and their deepest spirituality. I lost count of the number of small shrines I saw along the way, places where people come to remember lost loved ones amid the consolations of nature.

I have found the differences in language between the younger and older people I've met very striking. Old dialect names for birds and plants are dying out, and dialect in general seems on the decline. Why does this matter and what has it to do with the theme of the residency? Local variations in language are deeply bound up with people's relationship not only to community but to place. If you do not have the names to describe particular birds, flowers, landscape features, can you really see them? I have tried to bring this out in some of what I've written.

I have also tried also to keep in mind the larger picture. Durham's mining history exemplifies some of the worst environmental legacy of the 20th century's fossil fuel economy. It is a local case study of the most pressing global concern. It took 300 million years and three mass extinctions to reach the point in history where human beings spent a single century extracting Durham's deep-mine coal and burning it. Now a younger generation is rising up globally in revolt against the results of our fossil fuel dependence: our impact upon climate change, ubiquitous plastic pollution, population pressure, loss of biodiversity, and the threats to our own species. The enormous implications of these issues are beyond the scope of a two-day residency. But the passionate love of place and tenacious sense of community among young people in Easington and Horden is uplifting and inspiring, and gives me hope. My thanks to them, to Durham Book Festival and the National Trust, and to New Writing North, for giving me the opportunity to begin to explore this. To anyone in Easington Colliery or Horden who feels I have got their place wrong, my apologies. Please tell me, as I do think of this as work-in-progress. Perhaps these poems may be sketches for something which could, with more time, be more ambitious.

Katrina Porteous 21.9.19

Tiny Lights

At the edge of the industrial estate,
Fierce spikes fencing the weed-strewn pit site,
A fly-tipped sofa, black sacks spilling

Paint cans and polythene,
We found it – the track –
And followed it down the millennia, into the Dene,

Where we waited, like brigands, for the dark,
And after a long while, you saw it first,
Hanging from a grass-stalk –

Greenish-whitish, faintly aglow,
Mysterious in the twenty-first century – alien, ancient.
We drowned its ghostly signal with the beams of our phones

And a torrent of information, explaining
How oxygen binds to a chemical, luciferin,
And how its hideous, segmented, armoured offspring

Paralyse snails and suck them out of their shells.
Not a mile away, a police siren wailed.
This wingless female,

Barely a glimmer in the cool, damp, scented night,
Seemed to have hauled itself
Up a long, long path –

From the remotest deep, the prehistoric
Ocean teeming with miraculous, barbaric
Creatures of dark places that emit their own light –

And we with it.

Wildlife

i) Lee

Lee loves to play in the Dene. From a green flush
A wren is singing. 'The V' is a swamp,
Seething with prehistoric creatures. Dragonflies flash

Their glassy emeralds. Lee stirs the mud with a stick.
Tadpoles, beetles, scatter in alarm.
Lee likes to trot the wild-eyed ponies bareback

Over the pit site. A dumped fridge-freezer towers,
Its door wide open, clean lines, shelves intact.
Lee can't read what his friend's Dad posts on Facebook –

'Horden's answer to Easington's Pit Cage.' Aged nine,
Can't write his name, but knows the woodpeckers
By theirs, loves hedgehogs; wants to join the Army.

ii) Lloyd

Lloyd dreams of becoming an astronaut. At night,
He looks at the stars above the Numbered Streets,

Smashed glass, boarded-up windows: can't understand
How space is infinite, but everything ends.

He can't find words for all the contradictions.
The neat houses, 'respectable people', tidy gardens –

Lloyd thinks about these things. His caterpillar
Wrapped itself into a papery chrysalis; weeks later,

Shook out its flickering wings and flew. His Gran
Grew up on the same street, in a different country.

iii) Kayleigh

It's a short bike ride from the pit. Though the weeds conceal
Aerosols, glue cans, plastic bags, and in the Gill
Somebody's big sister is being sick beside a burned-out car,

On Limekiln beach, among the remains of coal,
You can run and run, dig and build – make fires, feel free –
Crack the sea-smoothed rocks wide open to reveal

Fossils, crystals, caves of gleaming fluorspar.
And though the beach is brassy with pyrites, sulphurous, stained,
Deranged from everything it's seen, for Kayleigh the future

Glitters. She loves this place; and with her friends
Seeks out the scuttling hermit crabs, crimson anemones.
The dazed beach offers them its treasures. What will they find?

Coastal Erosion

First to go is the footpath, smoking fireweed, the hawthorn
Reddening along the Grassy Banks; then the railway line,
The end terraces, blackened memorials –

Pit cage and pulley-wheel, small family shrines,
Allotments, Community Centres. Then the words for these things –

Bairns, Flower, Hinny, me Marra. Reminders
That what will survive of us is not love but chip forks,
Booty that Liam and Reece grab on their Pirate Litter-Pick –

Bottle tops, take-away cartons, lids, straws, nappy liners,
Carrier bags, falling apart into ever-smaller pieces,

Accreting down there on the beach, while a limp balloon
Snagged on the whin's thorn, indestructible plastic
Printed with soon-to-be incomprehensible runes,

Announces to no one, 'Baby! I love you!'

A Short Walk from the Sea's Edge

'The Sea is History' – Derek Walcott

'The coal is beginning again' – Sean O' Brien

Our Billy's Da walks the dog on the Grassy Banks each morning.
Seventy steps below, in the soft ochre shelf,
Each new tide kirves its judd. Its strata an archive,
The beach is forgetting itself.

The coast path tells one story, and the shore another.
A steep drop, headlong, precipitous. Inaccessible, inviting,
The sea rolls its old stones, stained fiery amber. 'Once
The worst pollution anywhere in Europe', boasts the sign.

Now hogweed and scrub willow are slowly erasing that hard-drive;
Shales, pyrites, oxides, remember hermit crabs, rock pools.
Inland, behind the railway line, our Billy's grand-daughter,
Chloe, checks in with Insta before school.

Our Billy's Chloe has no word for bluebell or cowslip,
Willow or yellowhammer. Granda's pigeons wheel and turn
Over the tracks, but she doesn't know *stobbie* from *skymmie*.
A soft breeze blows from the beach. A smell of burning.

Lads on their dirt-bikes down the slacks. Amid the limestone rubble,
Tall reeds, rushes, someone has tried to set that sign alight,
Photographs of butterflies, orchids, twisted, distorted.
Half a mile from the coast, impenetrably tight,

The roofs, rows, back lanes – safety. Chloe has a butterfly
Emoji glued to every nail. Her own words – *Gels, Acrylics, Apps* –
Incomprehensible to Billy's ears, are strange, untranslatable
As *yella-yowlie*, *gowdspink* are on Snapchat.

The old words clatter off men's lips: honeycombs of tree-bark
And giant ferns, frozen in limestone sinking into slag
In the relentless crunch and uproar of immense machinery –
Canch, post, rammel. NCB. The Low Main. Maggie. Scab.

Beyond them, wordless, stretch the fields, the sea. Glued to her phone,
Chloe waits at the bus-stop on the Coast Road, at the edge of the Dene
Where, among sparty ground, green seggs, gigantic ferns
And spidery horsetails, the coal is beginning again.

Glossary:

kirve a judd – in mining, to undercut a section before taking it down; *stobbie* – unfledged pigeon; *skymmie* – weak, sickly pigeon; *yella-yowlie* – yellowhammer; *gowdspink* – goldfinch; *canch* – large slabs of stone in a coal mine; *post* – hard sandstone; *rammel* – loose stones; *NCB* – the National Coal Board, the statutory authority which ran the nationalised coal industry from 1946 until its demise in 1987; *The Low Main* – one of the deep seams worked at Horden pit; *Maggie* – Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time of the 1983-4 miners' strike and subsequent pit closures; *Scab* – a strike-breaker; *sparty* – damp, marshy; *seggs* – sedge and rushes.

Painted Ladies

Although she would never normally set foot
Beyond the railway line, because the beach is dirty,
Her Mam said; spoilt before she was born, rust-stained and orange,

Black with slag and dolly-wash, its terrible lagoons
Haemorrhaging sulphates, oxides – some ancient outrage
No one alive can remember now – Leanne sets out

Down her grandda's red-black raa' – path of putter and hewer,
Backshift, foreshift; pigeon-cree; policeman and picket –
With his bairn in a Tupperware box. Up the White Lea lane,

Through fireweed and meadow grass, she wades, to the brink –
To the windy cliff at Shippersea, the clean horizon.
In a handful of ashes she brings her Mam to beauty.

Then far below, incarnadine, ochre, black, white
Pigments of caustic pools and residues, fly up, combine –
Embers, aflame inside, aglow in the grate,

Flickering from knapweed to thistle-top, they rise
Blazing before her – butterflies – the fields
From Hawthorn Hive to Eden Dene on fire with them.

Speckled Wood

Holly has found a butterfly
In Hawthorn Dene. The Brownies
Have been given cameras.

Framed in the viewfinder,
Its drab brown colours
Spring to life: snap

Into focus, coffee and toast,
Caramel, splotches of cream,
Smoke rings. Scalloped like bunting,

Its edges bristle with hairs.
What Holly, aged nine,
Can't know, is that it has come back

From wherever it has been,
In the new millennium, to say
It is warmer here now.

Don't move, thinks Holly,
Though whether to herself
Or the butterfly, she isn't sure.

The camera is showing her
What her eyes can't –
How to look. How, when you're still

And quiet, the world
Rises anew
To meet you, shining.