

A Conversation of Place and Page

Owen Sheers is interviewed by Alexandra Trowbridge-Matthews as part of our conversations with poets.

Owen has won praise and prizes for his two poetry collections The Blue Book and Skirrid Hill, for The Dust Diaries and for his novel, Resistance. He has just edited an anthology of poems of place, A Poet's Guide to Britain following his series of programmes, of the same name, on BBC 4 this year.

Alexandra: It is well documented that you were born in Fiji. Were your parents working there at the time?

Owen: They were. It is funny how it is so well documented. It is interesting that we want to know where writers are born, but somehow we do. I was born in Fiji and left when I was about eighteen months old. My parents were working for the Overseas Development Agency; my dad was town planning and my mother was teaching English and Shakespeare in schools in Suva. Although I did leave when I was very young and though it is not where I am from culturally, it has left a very significant impression and a fascination with having been born on the other side of the world. That is why that as soon as I could, at the age of eighteen, I went back for six months to work as a volunteer there. Some of those experiences found their way into poems in *The Blue Book* (Seren, 2000).

Alexandra: Notably your poem, *The Umbilical Tree*.

Owen: Absolutely. That was one of those stories that you are told as a kid that you do find fascinating, that someone has buried your umbilical cord underneath a tree in Fiji. Very early on, that (story) gave me a strong sense of narrative and a slightly quixotic reason to go back there. Think I found the woman who buried it by placing an advert in *The Fiji Times* with a photograph of her holding me as a baby. The advert said 'this baby now eighteen years old looking for this woman.' Fiji, and that part of the world, has continued to exert an influence on my writing. I recently wrote a long piece for *Granta* magazine about the veterans of the Christmas Island thermonuclear tests and I'd entered that story via the experiences of Fijian veterans who I had met. Similarly, the novel after next will hopefully be based on a story that I turned up in Fiji when I was out there travelling in 2003. (Being born in Fiji) is an accident of birth that continues to cast a shadow but a very positive one.

Alexandra: You then spent some of your childhood in London and in Abergavenny.

Owen: My parents moved back to Abergavenny first for about a year and then I was in London (with them) between the ages of three and nine. My parents had bought that old Welsh longhouse in the sixties before they went to Fiji so it was always this place that was home although it wasn't, if that makes sense. I went from walking down the street to school to walking across three fields to a school with fourteen kids. That Llanddewi school is now a house because during the Thatcher years schools like that were closed down.

Alexandra: You have some literary ancestry that we will come on to later but were you surrounded by poetry and literature as a child?

Owen: My mother was an English and Drama teacher so obviously



there was literature in the house and there was a love of reading. I certainly remember her coming home and doing her drama exercises with us and there being a love of language. Her father, my grandfather, had been a maths teacher and a headmaster and when I knew him had a smallholding with lots of chickens and sheep. He was a Welsh speaker and would write an englyn for a wedding or a funeral. That is something that I have become aware of after the fact. I do remember books of poems like *Now We Are Six* (A. A. Milne, Methuen, 1927) and Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (Jonathan Cape, 1982). I must have had some idea of what a poem was because from an early age in school we were writing them. We had a very good teacher and one of my clearest memories is that we'd go on a school trip to Big Pit and we'd come back and she would get us to write a poem about it. Looking back this was fantastic because it seemed to be a perfectly natural way to interpret your lived experience and as relevant to the lived world as taking a photograph, writing a story or doing a drawing. I entered the Abergavenny Agricultural Show poetry competition when I was ten or eleven and I won and I think, when you're a kid, when you win something, even if it's only £1.50 or something, you think 'that's great, my poem's there.' They printed it, in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* I think. I managed to rhyme orange with Blorunge (a mountain near Abergavenny,) which is the only rhyme you can do with orange. From then on I was entering children's and under eighteen poetry competitions.

Alexandra: Was there any teacher in Abergavenny that encouraged you particularly?

Owen: Certainly later on. For my AS level I had a wonderful teacher called Helen Thresher who fought quite hard, I think, for me to be able to do 50% of my AS levels as creative writing course work. With Helen Thresher and Mrs Williams I studied R. S. Thomas for A level. That was the first time I really spent much time with a poet and reading widely across their successful and less successful work. At the time I was 16, 17 years old, I was playing for three different rugby teams, but R. S. Thomas very definitely made a very strong connection to me on the page. I am sure that was partly through that raw talent of his for sparse metaphor; spare but remarkable visual economy on the page. It's still something I aspire to, I'm not sure I'll get anywhere near. I feel at a greater distance from the poetry than I would ideally be at the moment, other things have taken over and it's been a very busy period and I suppose, quite naturally, when I started writing again recently it's a bit rusty. There are too many words on the page and actually now I am aspiring towards that economy, the economy of my earlier work.

Alexandra: I've read that you've often written a poem as you've been walking; so that rhythm of the walking lets you do the lateral thinking. I was wondering if that was

harder now that you have been spending so much time in cities; you haven't been getting out and doing the hill walking.

Owen: Absolutely. New York, where I have been for the last two years is a remarkable walking city. I wrote a piece for Radio 3 about walking the top hundred blocks of Manhattan. But it is different. The city directs you there is the 'walking' sign or the 'don't walk' sign that direct when you walk and where you go. It is an interrupted rhythm. That broader lateral thinking you mentioned has happened not just through the action of walking, but also through the environment you are in.

Alexandra: And you get the cadence of the steps that you are making?

Owen: Exactly. And when you've got a bald hill or on the side of the Sugar Loaf there's a spur that acts as a spur to thought; it's enlarged and, in some ways, detailed and not detailed, if that makes sense. There's the breathing space for the line to develop and you can think about the other line, the next line and so on. This isn't always the case, certainly hardly ever entire poems, but I will form stanzas or re-write poems a bit. It happens as well when you drive, I think, or do anything mechanical. I read a very interesting report about when we first get into the shower first thing in the morning, we all actually do exactly the same thing, make those same movements. I always solve my poetry problems in the shower. One of my first memories of that, funnily enough, of both writing and solving a problem with a poem, was waiting for a train up in the Lake District. I'd just been to the funeral of Robert Woof who was the director of the Wordsworth Trust, a wonderful man. Something rather strange had happened at the funeral and I realised I wanted to write about it and I formed, certainly, the shape and how the poem would work and how the last stanza would work, whilst this train was late. There are fewer and fewer times when we stand and stare — we stop. These moments when you stand on a train station or like this afternoon when I am going to spend six hours on a train; now I actually look forward to those moments.

Alexandra: It gives you that bit of head space, because you are on your own, even if there is stuff going on around you. And this is a question that I once asked Peter Finch, I see you as a hiker, but there is a bit of the flâneur there as well?

Owen: I think I have become more of the flâneur. What I am really looking forward to the next few days, when I am at this festival in Scotland (the Scottish Book Town Festival in Wigtown) and, between that and a festival in Ilkley (the Ilkley Literature Festival), I am going to spend a day and a night with my friends Sarah Hall and Jake Polley, Jacob Polley the poet and the wonderful novelist Sarah Hall, and they live in Cumbria. I've sent her a text saying, 'Please, Sarah, can I bring my walking boots?' and she said, 'Oh, yes — and your waterproofs!'

way through. So we were e-mailing him and he knew we were making the programme. The best we could do in the programme was to say interest was reviving because her work was being re-published. The reason he was not in it was that we had a pretty firm line through who we went to talk to in the series.

Alexandra: If I may go back to your own poetry, I am interested how you deal with characters and place. In your first collection you've written very powerfully about such Welsh characters as Blind Harris, the chip-shop owner's daughter (*News of the World* p19 *The Blue Book* 2000), and Dai with 'flaming Drambuics.' You seem to be getting over, in this book particularly, I think, that thing we have in Wales, the countryside and the farming side contrasting with the tough guys and the sub-culture that we have as well. Were these people you knew as you were growing up?

Owen: Well, they were. Actually the girl from the chip shop has been very successful in what she does and has just bought a large house. Obviously the poems are not holding mirrors up to people; they are based upon an essence of a town. Abergavenny is a small market town, so twice a week the country comes into the town and the fields are right there on the edge. Before I could drive we would go out into town on a Friday night and, as you know, market towns have a certain raw physicality to them. I still love going back there because there's very little front in terms of pretension. There might be something of a physical swagger, but no pretension. In the morning or sometimes in the same night I would walk, or run, four miles home and, very quickly, you are out of the town, literally walking across dark fields amongst the dozing cows. That proximity of town and countryside was very, very strongly placed in my mind. I do remember, in the poetry I was reading, (and it was out there but I wasn't reading enough of Mike Jenkins and people,) thinking that I wasn't seeing the lives of the people I knew around me represented anywhere in poetry. Then I wasn't seeing the boy who was getting expelled from school at fifteen who wanted to tattoo 'Satan' across his head (*Unfinished Business*, p15, *The Blue Book*, 2000).

Alexandra: I used to do drama with people on probation and would go along on the outward bound side, abseiling off cliffs, and remember once climbing up the waterfalls near Dinas Rock with the group. One of the guys on probation leant down over the edge to where I was swimming in deep water and picked me up by one arm and lifted me up to the high rock where he was, where we all had to climb; he was at the moment completely deserving of trust. He did his first Post Office job when he was fourteen and was strong from climbing over walls and shinning up drainpipes. He was twenty-four then and has since died from a heroin overdose. I have seen so much of that around the Neath and Swansea area.

Owen: It's interesting that you should say that he is already dead, because there is a proximity to life and death in Abergavenny although it is a beautiful area as well. It wasn't until I came to live in the cities and met people who hadn't lived in this area that I realised the amount of people I knew from my school days that aren't around anymore. A lot of them were suicides, two or three drug deaths, a lot of car crashes; literally between fifteen and twenty people who I was in school with, who did not have to die, who have died. There was an element of that which I was aware of in writing the book. It is something I want to go back to, but let's face it, physically I haven't been living there and in terms of poetry I have moved away from that area. I am not sure if I was that conscious of it at the time, but these were stories that were powerful and I could sense the metaphoric quality in them and I could definitely sense a frustrated anger and rage. Sometimes when I look back at *The Blue Book*, it surprises me that it is such a rage-full book, actually, there is anger there, saying 'look at this!' I hope.

Alexandra: I think that comes across. But just as you were with your different poets in *A Poet's Guide*, you were very fair to everybody you write about. It's holding a mirror up to them rather than being pejorative in any way. You are saying 'this is what their lives are like.' Mike Jenkins does it, and so does Dave Hughes.

Owen: Seeing Robert Minhinnick read and hearing some of his work, made me feel I was allowed to do that, even though I think it was his work about Brazil, *Hey, Fatman* (Seren 1995). I realised that you could write about the people in the bars.

Alexandra: Could you tell me about the First Lines Poetry Tour?

Owen: It's nice of you to ask about that. I won the Eric Gregory Award in the same year as Matthew Hollis did and *The Blue Book* had just come out and I was very, very lucky to go on a Contemporary Poetry tour with Carol Ann Duffy and Mimi Khalvati and that really was a huge stroke of luck, because Carol Ann Duffy was filling out theatres and I was able to read after her. *First Lines* came about between Matthew Hollis and Antony Dunn, who had always been friends and they had books out and they said let's have some fun, let's get five poets and put us in a car and drive around the country for two weeks and let's do ten readings. I told Siân Williams, who had organised the Contemporary Poetry Tour, what we were doing and she took it on. (I still work with Siân now, she's working on the tour for White Ravens (*Owen Sheers*, Seren, 2009) with Seren.) Suddenly it became this proper tour; we were actually given hotels and paid. It was brilliant and I really hope we can reform, it's a bit like reforming the band. It was wonderful, because I got to know poets like Clare Pollard, Polly Clark, Antony Dunn, Matthew Hollis, all of my generation. We drank a lot and we spoke and

OWEN SHEERS • • • •

The Rest

You lay your head in the hollow
between my chest and open shoulder,
the right and yet the wrong one too;
the one that came apart
years before you knew of me, or I of you.

The one that aches in the rain,
that stops my hand from reaching my spine.
the one that's healed but can't forget
the echoes of that pain.

But here, you say, is where you can rest,
and I have to agree, that this
is where you fit the best;
within those places I've come apart,
within the woundings of my past.

The Carriage Horses *Manhattan*

I was cycling west when I saw them,
a chestnut brown and a dapple grey,
slab-shouldered, resting one hind hoof each
somewhere on a street between 9th and 10th,
where the warehouses begin to lower and spread
before this city gives altogether,
to the river's stumps and slow-drifting freight.

They weren't harnessed yet, their carriages
still on the sidewalk, unbalanced without them,
and their drivers hosing them, the thumb-pressured
fans of water splitting at their withers
to soak their coats to seal skins before mixing,
as it ran, into a guttered froth of soap and piss.

They weren't blinkered either — but so used to this.
Docile against the highway's roar,
settled under their muscle like a pair
of punch drunk heavyweights, their heads dropped
and nodding as if they still drew shadows
of those carriages tipped beside them.

I cycled on, but wish now I'd stopped.
If for nothing else then for their smell
and the memory it would have conjured
of lying in a field against a horse's sleeping flank,
articulated within the speech marks of its legs
into a world made briefly as ancient as the chestnuts on its hocks;
devoid of time or cities, or any other engine of our hunger.

A version of *The Carriage Horses* was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and online in Magma in November 2009