

50 Poems
&
The Fire of Belonging:
The Life and Work of Mick Imlah
and the influence of the work
on my poetic development

By
Robert Edward Selby

A Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing
Presented to Royal Holloway, University of London
February 2015

Declaration of Authorship

I, Robert Edward Selby, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, it is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Abstract

This is the most sustained study to date of the late poet Mick Imlah. The close reading it makes of a number of his poems is informed and placed in context by biographical information gathered from archival research and interviews with his friends and colleagues. The study argues that Imlah's first collection, *Birthmarks*, can be understood in the context of his predilection for the fictive potential of poetry being complemented by a contemporaneous, wider renaissance in interest in the Browningsque dramatic monologue and narrative. The study argues that his second collection, *The Lost Leader*, can be understood in the context of Imlah's increased identification with his Scottish heritage, triggered by creative and personal crises and encouraged by Scotland's growing sense of nationhood towards the end of the twentieth century. The implication is that Imlah's oeuvre, contrary to the perception that it is *sui generis*, can be regarded as in dialogue with changes that took place within and without British poetry towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first: the re-appreciation of Victorian verse, for instance, or the emergence, from the 1980s, of a more confident Scottish voice.

Informing – and informed by – this study of Imlah's poetry is a collection of fifty poems by the study's author that displays a movement, similar to that which characterised Imlah's career, towards a preoccupation with extolling a place. Both parts of the study contribute to our understanding of Imlah's body of work, which, half a decade on from his death, is still well-regarded but becoming obscure. It is hoped that this study acts as a springboard for more specific explorations of his poetry over the coming years.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my PhD supervisor, Professor Andrew Motion, and my adviser, Professor Robert Hampson.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Professor Mark Ford and Alan Hollinghurst, the co-executors of Mick Imlah's literary estate, as well as to Maren Meinhardt, Jane Wellesley, Professor John Fuller, Professor Bernard O'Donoghue, Professor Andrew McNeillie, Professor Robert Crawford, and Dr John Morton.

Finally, my special thanks to Declan Ryan; and to my mother and father, without whom this work could not have been undertaken.

List of Publications

An earlier version of the poem 'The Sycamore' appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5481, 18 April 2008, p. 8.

An earlier version of the poem 'Balfour' appeared on the *Guardian* website, 'Poetry workshop: heroes and heroines', 8 October 2009.

[<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/08/national-poetry-day-workshop>]

The poems 'Acting' and 'Outside Elizabeth Greenwood's' appeared in Royal Holloway's academic e-journal *Exegesis*, No. 1, Spring 2013, p. 66 and pp. 73-74.

The poem 'Acting' was discussed by Dr John Morton in his paper 'Poetry and the Neo-Victorian', delivered to the conference 'Neo-Victorian Cultures: The Victorians Today' at Liverpool John Moores University, 24 July 2013.

The poem 'The Firecrests' appeared in *Ambit*, No. 216, Spring 2014, p. 3.

Contents

Declaration of Authorship	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
List of Publications	5
50 Poems	9
<i>Part One: An Act of Terror</i>	10
Scotland 12 Ireland 8.....	11
Dunnottar	15
The Firecrests	17
Acting	19
Outside Elizabeth Greenwood's	21
Balfour.....	23
An Aurelian Watches His Wife.....	25
Matilda Tennyson Recalls Encountering Arthur Hallam's Ghost.....	28
The Party.....	30
The Sycamore.....	34
The Land Girl's Story.....	36
The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders	40
Trouble	44
<i>Part Two: Chevening</i>	45
I.....	46
II.....	47
III	49
IV	50
V	51
VI	52
VII.....	53
VIII	55

IX	56
X.....	57
XI	58
XII.....	60
XIII	61
XIV	62
XV.....	63
XVI	65
<i>Part Three: East of Ipswich</i>	67
1. In God’s Prevenient Grace.....	68
2. Orford.....	69
3. The End of the Horse Age.....	71
4. Elysium	73
5. When That Which is Perfect is Come	75
6. Visiting Day	76
7. The Divide	78
8. We May Allow Ourselves a Brief Period of Rejoicing	80
9. Team Photo	81
10. Hellfire Corner	82
11. The Big Guns	83
12. Personal Effects	84
13. Tournai	85
14. Dunton Green.....	87
15. Saturday Morning Football.....	89
16. Valediction	90
17. The Peace that Passes Human Understanding.....	92
18. An Idle Wind	93
19. The Daylight	95
20. <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	97
21. Wilf.....	99
The Fire of Belonging: The Life and Work of Mick Imlah	100
Introduction	101
Chapter One: Beginnings	105
Chapter Two: Shy to be an Act	128

Chapter Three: Editorship.....	154
Chapter Four: Afterlives.....	176
Chapter Five: A Scottish Journey.....	202
Chapter Six: The Fire of Belonging.....	226
Conclusion	254
Bibliography	259
Appendix	268
Photographs 1 and 2.....	269
Photographs 3 and 4.....	270
Photographs 5 and 6.....	271
Photographs 7 and 8.....	272
Photographs 9 and 10.....	273
Photographs 11 and 12.....	274

50 Poems

Part One
An Act of Terror

Scotland 12 Ireland 8

i.m. Mick Imlah

*I was consoled for Ireland's absurd defeat by Scotland
by thinking how pleased and amused Mick would have been by it.'*
(Bernard O'Donoghue)

English, I sit this one out...*And stood against him,*
Prood Edward's Airmy, An senet him hamewart,
Tae think again. Murrayfield up for it,
if nothing else to keep warm. Princess Anne
swaddled in her Scottish Rugby puffer.
The two sides sport fresh fly-halves: Jacksons –
Ruaridh of Aberdeen, Paddy of Belfast,
but comparisons fail to last: Ruaridh
leaves the kicking duties to the rakish scrum-half,
the metronomic James Graham, of Montrose,
whose tactical game and knack of gelling
Scotland suggests greatness awaits if he
stays clear of the selectorial gallows.
Paddy's baby-faced, and once of Walsall,
where he practiced the true faith over football,
before waking one black and baleful night
to a chloroform hanky, then coming round
aboard the Liverpool to Dublin ferry.
His first kick is a raw shank, but his second

sails through, its three points all Ireland accrue
from dominating the half, from flooding
into the breach behind the druid-haired
Áedán, who encamps on Scottish territory
only to be repulsed at defences braced
by Andrew de Moray, seven-foot scion
of a Justiciar of Scotia, gone in the eyes,
dreaming of his Laich's winter fields ripening
into a reserve of golden coins. Or is it
his fighting an urge, creeping like the Nith bore,
to rake the achilles of Wallace on the wing,
whose star overshadows the pack's doing everything?
De Moray slaps their flanks, drives them like cattle
down the drove roads of Skye and old Kintyre.
They will not tire.

After the break,

Cú Chulainn receives from the ruck, and roars
over. 8-0. Scots lie around, panting
like dying dogs. A gumshield pops from Chulainn's
pumped grin, a grin to ruin bonnie daughters.
Slaps rain down on his steaming shoulders.
Bullock-smoke curls off warriors widened
by paid drilling that permits fewer gaps
for flair.

Then the slow Irish nightmare.

Brian Boru offside. 8-3. Prodigal

Paddy misses again. The Irish scrum
crumbles. 8-6. Edward Bruce drives a maul
up to a foreign five-metres. A green sleeve
knocks it on. 8-9. Murrayfield bounces
to the Proclaimers. Then Silken Thomas,
he of English fizzog but possessor
of more Irish caps than a Dublin milliners,
kicks into a crowded midfield – ‘suicidal!’ –
and Hugh O’Neill is found to be mortal:
offside. 8-12.

Still time for one more green wave.

It licks the white concentrate of Scots line,
but de Moray and his pack are there, blood in their beards,
to see it kept like the Spey: clear and fine.
The seconds weep away, a tap-and-go penalty...
Áedán knocks on. The year’s first dotterel
whistles sweetly from a thawing high top.

*

This side of Hadrian’s Wall, Scotland’s triumph
is seen the only way it can be –
as a pasty-arsed moon at all logic.
As de Moray brandishes the pewter quaich,
lifting it (just in shot) out of Wallace’s reach,
I picture wet roads lined by misty tenements;

love, trussed by layers of defensive brashness,
disrobed by the gift of half a battered sausage
when she drops hers; chips on cobbled streets;
a tweed dealer with a pink feather duster
looking up from his display of antiques;
wobbly heeled lasses beckoned by laddies
from buses, lary on their way to play pool;
a tall, languid figure in tam o'shanter
with sown-in red hair, sauntering a pissy
underpass home, hailing in baritone
a new dawn as a pink, gull-rowdy one
seeps through Auld Reekie's sodium light,
wry with knowing the result disnae bode much
but loud with the hope it might.

Dunnottar

*'One of Scotland's most popular tourist attractions
has been forced to close "indefinitely" for safety reasons...'*

(The Scotsman)

1297 (after Blind Harry)

It's an act of terror: flame balls
are jumping from castle walls
into the sea. The balls are men.
Barred door now cinder, the hell-pen
of the kirk belches half-lit
miracles to make a hurl for it.

Their diving cries are the cries of gulls
across Aberdeenshire's deaf voes.
Their landing of surf and granite face
is wipe-clean: they leave no trace.
And when the last of the four thousand
is grit for grass, or steaming drowned,
only fire breathes on that promontory
where revenge has met its apogee –
as this is a bit much even for
those who lost kith and kin at Ayr.
Watching on, their hearts flurry,
they turn and fall to their knees

before the bishop, asking absolution.

But then he is among them –

Wallace, firelight glinting off his green teeth
and the eyes of his nonplussed nag beneath.

‘Are you warriors repentant
for so small an event?’

They rued not us in Ayr,
our true baronies they hanged there.
No man of Sotheroun blood shall
know comfort in my locale;
if they stay, their wives and bairns neither.
Now we take a breather.’

After rest: victory at Stirling,
defeat at Falkirk, treachery handing
him southward at Robroyston,
and the ill-famed fortress on that stone
closed to tourists, its gutted masonry
breaching health and safety.

The Firecrests

The hazel is ablaze with catkins.
The elms nod their heads in a blue realm.
Below, daffodils kiss down the knoll
to the kissing gate, the brown field beyond
exact, freshly tidied by tractor.
You are standing in it,
your face turned up to the new sun,
the tartan scarf – Clan Barclay? The
irrepressible Quakers of Aberdeenshire? –
so yellow around you
on its last outing for,
fingers-crossed, more than a wee while.

*

You think you saw firecrests in the elms
so why don't we go and see?
I follow, and my delight
at having you with me
I mask as a possible sighting.
When you lean in to borrow my sightline
up my outstretched arm and finger
the weight against my shoulder

is one of a possible future,
balanced precariously
as a sweet-wrapper snagged in a tree.

*

Even here has a coffee franchise.
You sip from a big mug
held in both hands
while I look anywhere but at your eyes.
Steam rises to mock-Tudor beams.
The light of afternoon and the smell of beans.
Your legs are pointed towards me,
which I read somewhere means you like me,
or don't, I can't remember.
I shake a sachet of sugar,
as if wisdom might talk from within.
How do I get beyond birds and coffee?
How do I tell you I know you were ill,
I've seen a photo of you
when you were stick-thin?

Acting

I am Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers –
without a horse, granted, but the budget
stretched to false whiskers, red cape, breastplate,
and I can deliver ‘Halt, scoundrels, and let
the girl go!’ as well as any, when on
I rush, leading the counterwatch from the front,
and clutch Esmeralda to me as they
pile in with quarterstaves. Over her shoulder
I can just make out faces in the rows
closest to the stage, including yours.

Did I, knight in shining – plastic – armour,
thrill you with my gallant entry? Did it
portray me in a whole new light, dashing,
in the nick of time, before the footlights?
Did my act of chivalry cleave your defences,
pierce your heart like a lance point?
As I pause, regaining breath, ready for
Esmeralda to turn to me, and thank me,
and want her leave, but become smitten,
hypnotised forever by my handsome face,

do you imagine yourself in her place,
and begin to reassess your choice,
a choice your presence here suggests is not
irreversible? In two days you fly
to Hong Kong to be with a dying uncle,
yet take time out to watch me badly act.
The fracas nears its end; please, meet my eye
and, with yours, tell me I did not mistake
the setting sun for our aurora,
that snow-lit afternoon in the long ground

when you befriended a chestnut horse
and, stroking his blaze, named him after me.
That when you are in Sham Shui Po,
taking respite from your vigil, downtown
among the fabric stalls and computer arcades,
it will be me you call. Can I discern that,
from your expression in the half-dark?
But here's my cue, my name is asked:
'Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, my dear,
at your service.'

Outside Elizabeth Greenwood's

It's the time of the copper sky at evening.
The shriek of young martins under the eaves
foretells fledging. The long days are receding:
I needn't be out late to watch you, Lizzy,
in your well-lit kitchen window, as the bats
and martins flit around my shady vantage,
dusk-life triggers the pines that prick my spine.
Beyond them, the village that thinks you witch
dances to public house viols, or stokes flames
before cold eyes that see your chin and deem it
pointed; that see your red cloak and deem it
scarlet; that never see you in their – our – church,
so they misjudge your womanly intuition.

But when those with troubled conscience come to you,
it's not by spell you ease them, but by sitting them
at your kitchen table as you pare potatoes
and letting them talk. I lack their confidence,
by which I mean they do not come to me,
nor I to you. A man of my position:
I must baulk at you! Mere excuse. I'm possessor
of a tongue that your back to me, the splash
of pared potatoes into the bucket, the flash

of wrist, your hair down over your mauve dress,
a sideways glance allowing a flash of nape...
I'm owner of a tongue that would be tied,
and by it you would know my distress.

So I watch you crocheting by candlelight
from here; watch a frown of concentration
beautiful enough for any man, any nation.
In a dream I step into the light, and halloo,
and you blush, welcome me in for hot tea;
in a nightmare moonlight reveals my collar,
and you step back whitened, your gaze grown cold.

No, Lizzy, I will not be so bold.

But tomorrow, tomorrow I will rail for you,
rail against petty tongues and superstitions
to their owners, that unbecoming lot,
and God can judge them if they should guess
whom I defend, and think us in scandal.

Forgive me, Lord, but would they were right!

It has grown cold. Bless you, Lizzy, bless you. Goodnight.

Balfour

(Arthur James, 1848-1930)

Footnoted for being Lord Salisbury's nephew,
but forgotten for much else – Arthur Balfour.
Balfour, who wrote tracts on theism; who,
when not in séances to contact his beloved mother,
or May, his sweetheart, taken at twenty-five
by typhoid, was manneristic Prime Minister –
indeed, accused of being more mannerism than man.

His plan was not to have a plan, the last grandee,
lounging on the frontbench with his feet up
on the table, dreaming of his Lothian library;
concealing, inside a silken glove, a mailed fist.
Hence, Bloody Balfour to the Irish Nationalist,
Brilliant Balfour to Israel, and in between,
scion of squirearchy in a time of zeppelins.

Never seared on history's cataracted eye,
he would've had it no other way, to lie
and be left, to hone, on an eternal links
where the eighteenth is also the first,
his play, never getting any better, nor worse;
May, a golfer's widow, waits in the clubhouse
for if ever he blows in, wind-harried off the flats.

Time, its powers confined to earthly courses,
can never bring an end to that,
so has instead brought low Whittingehame, the stately pile
he left behind, stripping it to barracks then apartments
resigned beyond bracken; symbolic of an isle
in decline, where a sham sun drags shadows
clockwork around a dial.

An Aurelian Watches His Wife

*'Behind the great naturalists of the period,
there was a wife.'*

(J.G. Gissing, *Butterflies & Seashells: the Victorian Naturalists*)

How can that snow-lit neck of yours be purpled
so it leads justice to his skewed door?
You hold your hem up as you scatter grain
about the coop. All is glaring on this white plane:
like the specimens we netted together
last summer, I caught with soft tread and held breath
your whispered promises from the dim depths
of his warped shed. I pin them to the page:

'For him I'm a nag,
but for you my love
I'm a trotting-horse
bristling for your thighs' –
'He'll be left to keep house –'
'– with those mild hands –'
'– while mine glide
with dexterity
between you –'
'– above a beech-screened
eloper's inn –'

‘– for a sovereign

no one’ll bother us therein –’

No, I won’t get by with a talent only

for what makes Society heads nod approvingly

over their fire-lit port, lacking housekeeper

and cook since you wished this place ‘just for ourselves’.

But out there, you said, demands the plotting

persuasion of an earthy literacy,

and the scholar we chose, or at least you did,

is like the caterpillar of the Large Blue,

leaping dead-eye from his thyme leaf into

my credulousness; we the callow ants,

taking him in and fattening him up

as one of our wintering own, but when

these short days thaw he’ll burst out – with you.

Now you look round, and see me, and smile

redly, as if desiring to re-ignite

new love’s weakness for begrimed beauty.

But I’m no just-born mayfly,

urgent on his first and final day:

you want him who chops firewood in the copse.

I can hear him at it, stripped to his shirt

despite the cold, his brace-clips shining

in the last sunlight, glittering to old gold.
So can you. Grain sticks to your palms as,
with every chop, you picture him bending

to balance another block, then straighten,
his colt breath silver in the under-trees.
Then a glinting arc, the fall true, the silence split.
You head inside, breathless in your burn
for his beastliness to befit your crime,
unsuspecting on your return
me slipped from credulity's chrysalis,
these hands possessed of a length of twine.

Matilda Tennyson Recalls Encountering Arthur Hallam's Ghost

'Before they received Henry Elton's letter, the Tennysons had what they later came to believe was a supernatural message about this catastrophe.'

(John Batchelor, *Tennyson: to strive, to seek, to find*)

A brook mist had suffused the lane oaks,
falling from them as more rain. Further up
a figure stood, mist-cloaked but plain enough
to judge the bearing a gentleman's. Nearing,
we fell hushed. His back was to us. We knew
it could not be, for he was travelling
on the Continent. But Mary tried his name.

He spun round, eyes wild. I screamed, and Arthur –
for it *was* he – recoiled into the vapour.

As stubborn back then as she was beautiful,
Mary propelled us after our dear friend
whose stride forced us to run, spattering our hems.

A little way off he came to a halt
and, out of a reverence, so did we.

He turned to us, appeared to doff his hat,
then marched away through a gap in the hedge.
'Arthur! Arthur!' we beseeched, hastening

to where he'd gone, but we found only hedge,
no gap. Just rain dripping from hawthorn,
like tears of heartbreak. We went straight home,
by which time we were inconsolable.

It was not until the following month,
when I brought the day's post from Spilsby
after my dancing lesson, and Ally opened
the letter at dinner, that we learned Arthur
was weeks dead, of apoplexy in Vienna.
And do you know, in my mind's eye I still see
a scene not genuine but could have been:

Ally at his desk in his ticking room,
committing the first lyrics of the poem
Her Majesty annotated in her palatial gloom;
nearby, Emily is fainted on the chaise longue,
and through the cloudy glass beyond
Gladstone is walking upon a sunlit hill –
all with a grief that cuts them to the heart.

The Party

*'To see a vampire in your dream symbolises seduction
and sensuality, as well as fear and death. It may depict
someone in your waking life whose charm
may ultimately prove harmful.'*

(A.F. Whitechurch, *The Hogarth Compendium of Dreams*)

Blariness from drink and pirate radio
explained why none of us noticed the blurred
Brixton living room harden around us
into books and baize, mahogany shining
in a dawn that fell on us when the music cut,
exposing our talk like a burglar in sudden light,
and a mantel clock ticked us into silence.

Questioning our drinks, we herded together,
but felt intrusion's ill draught between us;
pallid faces come among our own suggested
acquaintance with the Brixton weather,
though not with its stayed-knife bonhomie:
their stoniness surely a magnet for drink-
fuelled smile-enforcers up Brixton Hill,
their sharp suits pound-signs in a mugger's eyes.
But their skinny clip-on ties, I suspected,
became garrottes in their pianist's fingers.

They pushed vials of whisky-coloured liquid –
I saw, horrified, without difficulty –
that caught the light from a great sash window
I instinctively moved to, knocking back
my own vial before a vivid view:
a small town encircled by summer trees,
a church spire, a steam train passing through,
ravens lifting from roofs in lazy rifts,
a weak sun dawning down unpeopled streets,
across fast water a silent weir sifts.

‘Hades’, the dealer at my shoulder said:
his hometown, and bored of it,
as everyone always is of their hometown.
I turned to say it didn’t look *that* bad,
but found only Andy, my friend, who whispered
his was only a feigned inebriation;
he’d hidden his vial behind the mantel clock,
that ticking alter-piece of gilt bad taste:
‘How the fuck, Rob, do we get out of here?’

But then she was among us. Sky-blue eyes,
seashell hair; a stare to shiver the coolest man;
stalking, as only feminine danger can,
the hushed room and with a cryogenic sigh
freezing our collusion’s fragile flame.

Her gaze cupped every ending of my brain,
checking for lumps. I was all gooseflesh.
She moved on to Andy, deducing at once
from the clear vista of his Somerset pupils,
and clicked her fingers, a queen displeased.
Her boys arrowed through the crowd to seize
my friend, but I found I stood between,
airy but unmoved: love's topiary soldier.

I appealed to her better nature, which seemed
open to listening: she called her boys off.
Sash-light set her talc skin glistening.
My tongue was a laurel leaf, tapping out
on her gaze's glass a description of love –
to her a notion as alien as sunbathing
or a steak well-done with Béarnaise sauce,
belief in it some quaint votive of those
who see no more than one Halley flyby:
'You feel it, you give it, you make it;
it makes you float on a limitless plain of air
or maroons you in quicksand eating you
by degrees to discordant string music.'

Her face cracked like a windscreen in freak hail.
Her cackle broke bulbs on the electrolier.
'I bet it can't compare', she said, her voice

like the susurrations of graveside holly,
'to landing in kicking-out time's backstreet
and taking by surprise some pissing fool
until he's a pool of blood at your feet.
I bet it can't compare to sinking into
the crepuscular wood's jogger until
they're the signature of a serial killer.
I bet it can't compare to the smooth clavicle,
the freckled nape; the perfume where they meet.

But you're brave; I not an unkind host.
I will let you all go, and you will wake
to New Year's morning in your beds
with nothing the worse for wear but your heads.
Don't live to make me regret my leniency.
Make this *love* work. Go on. Convince me.'

The Sycamore

'Up the narrow road beside the tea-room

and you pass an iron-eating tree...'

(Gazetteer for Scotland)

The black-faced smithy's boy of Brig o'Turk

propped his bicycle against the sycamore

before his final shift at the clanging hearth,

soon to head for war to escape the bore

of pouring coal into the firepot's girth.

Proud of his young apprentice, the old mentor

drove the new recruit home on his dray,

so the bicycle remained in the keep of the tree.

As the smithy's boy made corporal and set sail,

the sycamore began a cruelly slow advance.

As bugles sounded from sad shires a lonely scale,

the bicycle was raised on a timber lance.

When the smithy's boy fell at Passchendaele

and the village shuttered in remembrance,

the sycamore drew about the bicycle,

clutching to its bark the spokes and saddle.

Long since the blacksmith sold off the yard,

since war ended, resprouted, withered again,

and the Trossachs became a National Park,
the bicycle protrudes still, a man-made limb
mimicking new growth. The ribbed handlebars
wait for the smithy's boy to re-clasp them,
pull free the frame and tour off, roadworthy,
the cast-iron memorial in the skyward lee.

The Land Girl's Story

I

'God speed the plough and the woman
who drives it,' the poster said, and I saw
the sun coming up on a furrow without boredom,
without spurnings in gossip-hot ballrooms.
I scandalised my allotted district
with my breeches and gaiters but won them round
by turning the hue of their thankless earth.
My face hollowed into a frozen dawn.
My legs' new muscles moved me to
the village's tolling metronome.
I wanted to be seduced by its old gods.

I remember, all down the lane were snowdrops;
it was nearly lambing time.
A hand beat mine to the lychgate latch.
'Allow me,' he stuttered, this boy in uniform.

II

I'd been led to believe the church was balm
for the quaint folk, but I got to going.
The rector did his best
but most were Chapel, and not really that:

they stifled laughter in the square
so as not to bait the curse of the hanged merman;
they made rafts of candlelight on the ninth moon
for mere sprites to mate by.

I looked over to the boy in uniform.
His face was down, in darkness.
At the hymns he stood but didn't sing,
face twitching all up one side.
His officer's coat had the pips missing.
It stayed buttoned-up tight. At the end,
he replaced his cap in the morning light.

III

'That's Blakewell's boy. Gallipoli.'
He was helping with the hedges when next
I saw him, doing Blakewell's boundary.
I was ploughing with Judd, the horseman. A bully.
The best of his team had gone to France;
he was left with the nags, beat them for it.
Giant was no longer. He was gaunt, lumpen.
At the furrow's end he saw the hedge moving,
and stopped, crowding the horses behind,
so they trampled the plough, our recent till.
I couldn't pull him on,

and Judd came roaring,
whipping the poor thing across his head.
Giant tried backing away,
but caught in the plough chains.

IV

Then Judd kicked the lump on Giant's leg.
The tumour tore. The scream!
Like ice water across you. Before I knew it,
I was on Judd, hitting him, shouting at him.
Best left unrepeated my curses, or his,
when he threw me off. He raised the whip to me.
I tripped on the plough chain and fell,
but the whip never fell.
Instead Judd was screaming, and I looked.

There was Blakewell's boy,
crouched over him, panting like a cornered fox,
throwing his fists into Judd's sides
until the screaming stopped.
He looked at me then. His face pulsed.
I saw in his cooked eyes a hot, Turkish sun.

V

They found him in the belfry.

They said he'd go up there when a lad
to see as far as Capel St Andrew,
beyond to Ipswich and, on a clear day, the world.

One year he'd etched his name,
with that of his Ella.

There was an envelope of bird feathers
and an old farming book furled by age.

He'd gone up there to remember her,
the times they collected feathers together,
the times he'd study his books up there

alone, after the consumption took her.

He'd gone and done it there, at the village's
draughty heart, in his lieutenant's coat,
a pile of hassocks kicked away.

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders

1854

Colin Campbell, son of a Glasgow carpenter,
veteran of Napoleon's wars, of 1812,
and risen to the rank of brigade commander,
stands besashed in his stirrups and impels:
'Men, my boys! You must remember
there is no retreat from here: you must die
where you stand,' and the bearded bear-skinned scum
of the Highlands, bible-braced, yell back 'aye,
Sir Colin. Needs be we'll do that'. They do not run
when the vibrations from Russian hooves
sway their kilts and pasty shanks, but pray hard
for the form-square order.

But no, Colin chooses
to line them up two files deep: this Cossack charade
unworthy of facing what trumped the fine French.
He orders a volley, and another; by the third
the foe is fled, or fit for a lime-slaked trench.
To the rear, the Balaklava bastion sends word
across the seas of salvation's 'thin red streak'
become a line by the time it reaches the Queen,
so that, later, when those Highlanders went khaki

she ensured each wore red and white dicing
on the cap band of their proud glengarry.

1902

Fire and candlelight flicker on thawing faces;
men budge forward as more come in behind,
stamping snow from their boots and adding traces
of old country to the clamour, dram-lined.

Then a cheer goes up, spreads to fill the room:
Captain Logie is excusing his way to the front,
dusting the snow from his hat and its plume,
taking his seat at the desk beneath the trophies of hunt,

the Saltire, and the shield of arms of the province:
three golden maple leaves on a green background
(the motto *Loyal she began, Loyal she remains* since
warranted, and a moose and deer to wrap it round).

Now silence but for the draught in the eaves,
the fire, and the quayside bell in the harbour.
Logie raises the quivering dram he receives,
toasts 'to St Andrew and Scotland forever!'

and the room repeats and heartily necks the heat.

‘Sirs of the St Andrews Society and the Sons
of Scotland, I trust it’s in good cheer we meet.

You petitioned me with patriotic tongues

this night a year ago to raise a regiment
of Highland character, so that if called
to a foreign field we would march in redolent
of our forefathers. Well, on cost Ottawa stalled –

wait, sirs – but assurances we’d fund our own dress
mean I sit before you not as your captain of militia
but your recruiting sergeant –’ the rap of fists
on the desktop, disturbing the clan regalia,

cheers from wainscot to beams ‘– any Scotchman
of good standing with a stake in the community –’
‘– *Ho-Ro, Ho-Ro! The Campbells they are a’ in arms* –’
‘Hush sirs! I must ask you to form an orderly –’

So the glengarries with the red and white dicing
were piped up the Canadian lines where they turned to tin
still being ploughed up now by the banks of the Somme,
on Vimy Ridge, in Passchendaele, and Mons.

2014

Watched over by angels of peace and liberty,
through a triumphal arch, Canada Responds:
a nurse, a sailor, a kilted Vickers gunner, infantry
helping a horse-drawn gun; all cast in bronze.

Beneath, on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier interred
from Vimy Ridge into Caledonia granite:
a medieval sword; a helmet partly obscured
by maple leaves that seem to want to wrap it.

Poppies placed by the public turn the tomb red
every November. One October, a sentry
was approached from behind, and shot dead.
At the funeral, his boy wore his father's glengarry.

Trouble

The signs are everywhere. The cherry's buds are red
in impatience to blossom. Cuckoo flowers
are the only white now, in the busier beds.
A kinder breeze laps the lintel of the lengthening hours.
Sound comes from farther off; the motorway
has a voice that rain and mist smothers
but now I hear it from two miles away,
beyond the wood twig-snapping with trysting lovers.
It all means trouble. You arrived with the season.
I met you and the next day saw the first bluebell.
I know by summer I'll have lost all reason.
I mutter to myself in the warming air: 'Oh, fucking hell...'

Part Two
Chevening

'History is now and England'

- T.S. Eliot

I

Will you enter

the maze with me?

Do you trust me to find the

way

to the centre of things?

Do you

trust me to get us safely through

without

needing directions

shouted

from spectators on the bank,

or having to be

lifted and passed

out like those toddler twins

to their mum

from daddy who's lost to the end of his tether?

These arms in these

rolled-up sleeves;

strong enough to hoist

a child? Strong

enough to shield

the world from it,

you,

us?

II

The train pulls you away from me,
our weekend in my country.

You speed through lavender and chalk
towards a London whose dusk
will echo to you treading Downs dust
and pollen into its pavements;

its tagged shutters and sick-flecked stops,
its scaffolding like lies around
your peeling hopes
will make the cake stalls and book stalls
and little church on the Pilgrims Way
feel more than thirty miles away.

What from all you saw these two days
will flash back to you neon-strong
after you've tossed your keys down,
opened your room up to yells and sirens
and no fresher air? Is it cruel of me
to hope you slump back in despair

because you see your place with eyes
rested from compromise?

It *is* cruel. You already miss somewhere

you're far from, farther than thirty miles:

home. But perhaps, one day maybe,

what you call that will be my own.

III

Your tread round the ornamental lake
was comically unsure:
your little pumps picking with balletic care
where to come down
amid the green goose shit.

We swayed, our arms around each other;
waited for the promised carp
but saw only dull minnows
in dark lanes through algae
made by a family of Greylag.

We saw the purple threshold
of the boathouse
that in the Georgian or Victorian
provided a sanctum
divined by moonlight for illicit lovers,
or a murdered governess
scanning the water for her reflection.
We didn't enter.

IV

In the arboretum, under palms gifted
by diplomats at dim-distant summits
grown gaunt now with uncongenial climes,

you looked each way twice

then pressed me against the hot redbrick.
Your hair was slow through my fingers,
tasting salty, smelling of Ambre Solaire.

V

You made straight for the queue
snaking into a gazebo
where the right amount of coins

lifted the lid on a cool-box.

Sat on the lawn, it wasn't my book-finds
that made your eyes gleam,

or the 'Keyhole' cut through
the beeches on the distant Downs
giving us a mile of the future,

but the vanilla-cool that painted
a white petal on your chin.

VI

Home Wood. Summerhouse Wood. Summeryards Wood.

Peacock Wood. Bird House Wood. Lord Chatham's Ride.

Park Wood. Golden Stable Wood. Lord's Spring Wood.

Home Coverts. Coach Road Woods. Crooked Cross Wood.

VII

Through the graveyard filled with change-ringing,
in through the south door, hinges singing.

Powdery light from lancet windows
in the estate family's chantry
baptised you and the cobwebs unnerved;

enough light for the colonel (ret'd)
to take you all in, so when you transgressed –
running fingers along the white marble
and alabaster tombs –
he turned his good eye blind.

What did you expect your touch to find:
papier-mâché?

The tombs lie as real as death's day,
rearing in all our futures, except England's.
They died in childbirth and of the plague,
they died in their beds and on the veldt, the Somme,
but here, in lit candles, live on.

You gaze up at the family's banner overhead –
azure crescent, on ermine and gules –
and beyond you, beyond the font
and through the west-doorway,

I see mounted knights ranked in fine array,
and streaming from helms and cockades
and lances raised
the same glade-green as your sundress;
the black of your hair at their breasts
as a black carnation.
At the door you leave a dollar donation.

VIII

Tile Kilns Wood. Kilnfield Wood. Carpenter's Wood.

Cooper's Wood. Doctor's Wood. Brimstonewell Wood.

Chalk Pit Wood. Sawpit Wood. Flanes Wood. The Strikes.

Six Acre Wood. Four Acre Wood. The Guzzle.

IX

Your money has the Queen's head but isn't sterling;
currency of a place where eyesight like a fishhawk's,
hearing like a timberwolf's, won't stop a man incurring
desolation's bite as he forays deeper, deeper north.

A place where he goes to wage his right to metal and hide,
where his scarlet tunic with gold-crown insignia
is a torch in the dusk of the uncontacted tribe,
a flare of remembrance on the thawing aiguille.

There came a retreat back down the couloirs and trails
like blood draining from the head of a continent
for the boats to France, to advance with muddy details
on Vimy Ridge, and win the greatest monument:

a country, recognised as such. But with another's kings
and queens, for there's more that unites than divides,
and as you kayak across the reflection of a mountain
I write to you with a closeness one language provides.

X

'Invicta' on their caps: undefeated – meaning England's
only people unconquered by the Norman invader,
reprimed at Neuve-Chapelle by the first battalion,
West Kents, which stood firm and lost half its number.

Those four hundred names in stone west of the Medway
do not change in towns they would half-recognise.
Enterprise centres stand where they mowed their hay,
turbines replace the trees they saw cuffing sweat from their eyes.

Still horses though: the white stallion breeze-rampant
in his red field, flying from obscure prefabs by the railway line,
council offices, and from other points less permanent:
the Cricket Week marquee, the pop-up library. Divine

comes the sun's countenance to the august wheat,
on the cut lavender, the flags, the fallen's roundabout.
They live. The back lanes are dusted by their returning feet
and murmur to the bawdy songs of their mustering out.

They move into the field-sweet air; the women turn,
drop their toil, rush disbelieving to their dearest ones
who kiss them, lead them under the shade, into the fern.
Their names our grandfathers bore, then our fathers; now our sons.

XI

Undefeated, it survived that a Kent man's intestacy
left all his sons equally a gentleman.

No primogeniture: an equality
on earth, as it is in heaven.

Womenfolk too, if they could speak
in straw-floored court their blood-cord to the dead,
received a share with which to sow and reap
their daily bread.

No confiscation by the Crown
of the inheritance of those who trespassed.
Any attempt brought across the down
men with halberds interlocked so none might pass.

It was thus until nineteen-twenty-five
when a time of great social upheaval
caught up with the age of the scythe
and deemed *gavelkind* illegal.

'You did not need deliverance,'
the faces in the rood screens and stained glass say,
'from what was your inheritance:
are things any better in your day?'

I, standing in their nave to their prayer,
sheltered from all temporal pressure,
feel on the back of my neck the hard stare
of their power and glory, forever.

XII

Badcock Wood. Broomcocks Wood. The Rookeries.

Cuckoo Wood. Heron Shaw Wood. Starvecrow Wood.

Jenkin's Neck Wood. Pratt's Bottom Wood. Griff's Wood.

Shootfield Wood. Robsack Wood. Magpie Bottom.

XIII

This is the real England, I say, so what do you think?

It's a place of trees; of apple, pear, cherry and plum.

In the gaps is man's history, his urge to link

with others, forge commerce, lick a thumb

to count the realm's tender or sample harvest.

The railway came, but the speed it gave the world

entangled in this bracken and broomy darkness.

Life here is at the pace a picnic blanket unfurls.

Do you want to reset your watch to the toll of here?

Our years would lengthen into a summer's evening

of wine on a lawn under bat-flight. Then we'll disappear.

All that'll be left: two glasses filled with morning,

your silk scarf over one of the two empty chairs;

two lit candles in the church for us, if anyone cares.

XIV

Bluebell Wood. Black Bush Wood. Great Stockholme Wood.

The Birches. Birches Wood. Anisbirches Wood.

Ashen Groves. Osier Bed Wood. Pilots Wood.

Little Molloms Wood. Hagbush Wood. Hartnips Wood.

XV

I sit on the bed and see you turning to me,
waving smilingly until the doors close between us,
and after, through their lancet windows.

I leaf through the all-you-can-carry-for-50p books
releasing the smell of privet-screened studies
where restraint only relaxes in florid hand

on an inside cover: 'To Anne, with all my love...'
'Hugh, with love. We think it's funny – and really hope
that you will too! From Meg, Xmas 1938.'

Looking close, strands of your ink-black hair
lie all round, not just on your side of the bed.
They're everywhere, sticking to my tread,

and when I step on a loose board
the kiwi bird toy you couldn't resist winding up –
even knowing an ex had bought it for me –

jolts into life, cloth beak butting the bookshelf
as, for some reason, as it has always done,
it hops along backwards,

bumping into your own offering you left there:
a key-ring cuddly toy moose in Mountie uniform.
He stares back beadily from under his brim

as I contemplate how big my pocket
would have to be to accommodate him.
With sunlight still on Sidehilly Wood

but draining from here like cows down the lane
I receive word you're home safe.
A freshness elates the darkening trees.

I lie in the strangeness of after you being here,
quilted in your perfume, lit by your message,
happy not feeling relieved that I'm alone again.

XVI

England did all it could. It hoisted the broolly
of its microclimate and put on its best southern face;
it drew back the nettles and oil-painted
its moths into butterflies. It muted the motorway
but turned up the wood pigeons' volume,
darted the walks with proud robin.

It lowered the ceiling of the shade, cosily,
and healed the woodworm in the beams.
Each house, from the road, was a castle
from a yeoman's dreams: a hearth,
a table at which to break the won bread,
an armchair, bookcase and a lamp; upstairs,
beyond net curtains, a white pillow for his head.

When he comes to rest his head on another,
a distance from here, conveyed to it shrilly
through traffic under a flag of truce,
he will think of his castle and realise what he
inherited will be inherited from him soon,
and find peace in that, as the boatman takes his fee
glinting in the light of a bomber's moon.

Yes, England did all it could.

All of it becomes propaganda with an airmail stamp.

All of it evocable at a whiff of buddleia.

It wreathed the dead, straightened the steeple,
set out the fielders, re-glazed the red phonebox.

Now I must wait for the needle
of your heart's compass to unspin,
and see where it stops.

Part Three

East of Ipswich

'I like this ol' cun'ry best.
Suffolk.'

'Your roots are deep deep,
Oliver?'

'Yeah, I like ol' Suffolk. I
don't think you can beat it,
do you?'

'Oh, I don't think so. I think
there's worse places to be,
don't you?'

'Yeah, 'course there is ...
deserts and all that, y'don't
want to go there, do you?'

- *Akenfield*

1. *In God's Prevenient Grace*

He came from a long line of men who worked
now extinct equine trades: wheelwright, ostler,
coachman, horseman. His father, a groom,
fathered nine. They were rural poor
in the 'coming down time', so Chapel.

The redbrick Methodists have no graveyard,
are permitted joining the heaped-up past
among the sheep, holly and windswept grass
of St Bartholomew's lofty acre
during a terse, scattered prayer.

He left two-dozen books, one a schoolboy
adventure story: *Every Inch a Briton*.

Its cover: a boy in bowtie, waistcoat,
plus-fours, raising his straw boater.

Inside, inscribed by his Sunday school teacher,
dated January 1934,

Ecclesiastes 12:1: 'Remember
now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.'

2. *Orford*

He grew up beside
Europe's largest vegetated shingle spit.
Across it, North Sea winds bring word of mermen
and invasion. MOD buildings stand disused on the peninsula,

softened by time
in the hearts of the locals, who call them
pagodas. In the war a friendly destroyer some miles
off-shore mistook the village for the nearby firing range

of Sudbourne Battle,
and shelled the road he was born and raised in.
The special constable rang up the navy and asked
please would they kindly cease fire. No one was lost.

Like much of old
England now, it stars in colour supplements:
the Crown & Castle has become a high-end hotel
and restaurant owned by a TV personality, the tamed ness

a Grade One Site
of Special Scientific Interest. But weak glows
in night windows still hint at a hearth-comfort, stolen
against the undying winds that buffet the grass-entombings

of the long gone Kings
of the East Angles; against the fen demons
that, retold by flame, might burst over the threshold,
into the real. That expressed before King George II's visit

still rings true as the church
bell's peel: 'If the King ask, "who are you then?"
We humbly answer "Orford Men". Who else dare ask,
we answer bluff: "We're Orford Men, and that's enough."

3. The End of the Horse Age

In the time of the workhouse
and before the dole,
before history gave him a greater role,

he would cycle many dawn miles
to work the stately piles
then lunchtime peddle back for rabbit,

suet pudding boiled in a sack.
Then out again, draining his water
in a doorway of cornfield sunlight.

And so on every day:
no risk of calories dawdling to fat.
The beasts he clicked his tongue at

cycling past
were Suffolk Punch, built to last:
chestnut heavies with names like 'Pegasus',

bred to lack feathered fetlocks
(fine on a brewer's or a milkman's dray
but magnet for clods in the field).

They were gods of the plough,
'good-doers' seventeen hands high
with a rump 'like a farm wife's arse'

and the eyes of a Christian.

But even as he passed then,
they had already begun

their final furrow
towards a redundancy
that trimmed them to three hundred,

their yearly shows greasier affairs,
their brass medals melting down
to makers' plates,

side-lamps,

fuel pipes,

gear cogs.

4. *Elysium*

Away? The next village, the next set of fields.

Only conscription could put him on a train.

As it pulled into the tunnel,

the world was big, torn.

When it emerged,

the sudden, blinding light of peace

waned to a smaller place stitched by jets.

He returned to his wife and his hearth

having seen nothing to counter his suspicions.

She would have liked to travel,

but it was he who learnt to drive.

When their grandchildren

return from a holiday

with miniature bagpipes that play

a puny 'Scotland the Brave' when squeezed,

she asks:

'What's the time difference

between here and Scotland?'

To spare them, news of one grandson's

planned move to Tasmania

is kept from them

as long as possible.

Before the secret
can become untenable
they, who knew the end of the horse age,
make their own longest journey,
into the next life, the next set of fields.

5. *When That Which is Perfect is Come*

He married 'Doll', my grandmother, in Orford.
Lea, her real name, was shed like the mixed tears
and confetti on the waving platform,
and they sat back hand-in-hand to weave away
from the ness, crossing the Orwell to Kent,
to the terrace house she was born and raised in,
to live for seven decades until death took them
within a tell-tale short time of each other.

Her maiden name, the name
of the most famous Kentish beer hop,
was gone then, so too eventually the hops,
the green rows blackening with *Verticulum*
Wilt, one-by-one, until the kells cooled.

6. *Visiting Day*

The 'front room' was so-called as a door
admitted the post and a window poured
with traffic passing just feet away.

It was a room never used in the day.

The real front room was at the back, where
my mother parked next to his grey Morris Minor,
its large hubcaps like the shallow-crowned
kettle and Brodie helmets still found

in the till of Flanders and northern France.

She'd throw her arm over the gate to chance
the bolt, and if it gave we'd walk down
the concrete path past the bit of lawn,

past his fit-to-bursting, decrepit shed
and the burgeoning flowerbeds
to the blue backdoor, on which she'd lightly
rap with her knuckle or car-key

calling out 'cooe', a 'come here' bush-call

Tommies heard Diggers use in the Dardanelles
and brought home to mean 'It's only me, so don't start;
I've let myself in to meet you at your hearth.'

Inside, the sound of water, simmering gently.

The clock correct on its long-life battery.

From his low armchair by the partition

he shakes my hand in greeting,

as if I'm a man. His hands dwarf mine.

I already know this won't change with time.

Suffolk reserve in his 'Hello

Robert': words are weeds that don't fall to the hoe.

Grandma is up, beaming, as if our arrival

is impromptu and not at all

routine: 'Oh look, it's Robert, my favourite!'

Freed from her wet kiss I find a place to sit

as my mother kisses her parents: 'Wotcha.'

I warily take the window's upright chair:

Moggie, a neighbour's, will materialise

in the shed's shadow as two green eyes,

alley-tense to reclaim her throne.

Grandma will head her off with a saucer

of full cream milk, placed on the step for her,

all the while muttering about her proper home.

7. *The Divide*

They're in the kitchen, the one place well-infused
with natural light, a room of bathroom blues
built to extend their home into a century
already eight decades old. Boiling water
to make trifle jelly, she disappears in the kettle's steam.
He's in his brown trousers, his brace-clips gleam,
his checked shirt unbuttoned revealing grey vines
thriving in his vest's trelliswork, sleeves rolled up:
after a lifetime outside in hell or high water,
it's less of a leap to come home and peel potatoes
than for the suited man who steps off the evening train.

They've served tea in untouchable glass cups.
He spooned two sugars into mine; a finger
came to his lips and he winked at me
when putting three in his own – making up
for all the sugar boats that went down.
She hasn't skimmed on the full-cream milk,
delivered in pint bottles with silver foil crowns
by the white-coated Unigate milkman
dawn brings whistling from his three-wheeled float.
He whistles under our windows too,
but leaves pints crowned red and white: semi-skimmed.
This says we're a household that cannot thin

the calories from full-cream milk into
olive-skinned gauntness, into a formidable handshake
beneath piercing eyes in deep sockets.
My father, after all, is one of the suited men
who'll step off the evening train.

I wait for her to cross to the oak dresser
and liberate the McVities chocolate biscuits.
But she's back there, busy with the whisk.
And he's back further, in my mother's memory,
straining elderflower through muslin
into the tin bath, turning light into wine.

8. *We May Allow Ourselves a Brief Period of Rejoicing*

If my brothers were also there
the table couldn't accommodate us all,
so he ate from a tray in his armchair
close by, next to the fire and the record player
that, later, became a CD player.

After the doctor told him
'things aren't exactly one hundred per cent
the way we'd like them to be',
when canned water became heavy,
an outside tap went in
so he could hose his beds
with still-judicious rain.

To drown out the drilling,
he sat in his armchair with headphones on
listening to remastered big band and swing,
grey characters with pencil moustaches
who sung him back

to that walk up the garden path
when he was blind to the barren beds,
kitbag over his shoulder,
about to press play on a paused life,
a polished husband returning to his wife.

9. Team Photo

Used in the evenings, the front room contained
a TV with fake wood trim, aerial aimed
at the fireplace, over which five shelves
housed framed photographs of five grandchildren;
a crimson coffee table, built in the sixties
by a son-in law, with a fruit bowl on it;
a battleship grey rotary dialling telephone,
emergencies-only use; a blackout curtain drawn
across the front door to reduce draught
and noise from increasingly heavy traffic;
a brown, hairy sofa.

Above it all,
keeping unfaded a long rectangle of wall,
a black and white regimental photograph:
hundreds and hundreds of men in tiered rows,
with the same field service caps, squints and shadows
under the nose from a midday sun,
but him not one. There was a story, lost, as to why.
Doubtful that it was down to superstition,
a fear the camera would steal his soul.
More prosaic: he was on garrison duty –
organising mail home, or setting up the goal.

10. Hellfire Corner

The sun had burned the mist from the hills,
revealing German POWs at their ploughs.
Spring's breeze silvered the birches
burgeoning greenly behind The Duke's Head.
He was down at the bus stop with Doll
when the V-bomb came growling over,
forged deep from within hell's foundry.

Then it stopped. Silence.
The hedge birds, the linnets and larks, stopped.
Spring's breeze darkened to a draught.
He pulled her down, throwing himself on top of her.

'Any excuse!' we quipped
to lighten her funeral reception –
she a munitions girl
who became a doting wife and mother, and grandmother,
whom he couldn't shield with his body
the final time.

11. The Big Guns

Memories, like poppies, are stirred by trauma.

At grandma's funeral reception, fragile
red flowers bloomed in a once sunless bed.

The room fell hushed to what he said.

We knew he'd seen action across Europe
after D-Day with the Royal Artillery,
but now we were told an enemy
gun emplacement in a church was neutralised,

leaving no church. Offered bombardier,
he turned it down to remain one of the lads.
Demobbed, he stowed his Enfield in the attic:
you can take the boy out of the country...

Then came a sixty-year, losing battle
with leg ulcers that may have been caused
by working on his big gun. Eligible
for recompense, he filed for nothing,

only from God the narrow peace in which
to see his children and grandchildren grow up,
like miracle marrows to flaunt
at the County Show, however flawed.

12. Personal Effects

A child's clogs with the Dutch tricolour
painted across the uppers;
a black and white photo dated
'Summer 41' showing him
in helmet and puttees,
full kit, with his Enfield at the ready.

A large leather wallet.
Inside, an almost petrified pressed flower,
and a scrap of paper
that might have been dipped in tea
to age it, as if the war was really
only a history project.
On it, a note pencilled
when he heard it was all over:

May 7th, 1945.

Left camp at 10.30am at Bad Oeynhausen.

Crossed Rhine into Holland at Roermond.

There is a Naafi on the train

(10 cigarettes, 1 chocolate and tea cakes).

4.45am - Arrived at Tournai.

13. Tournai

He files out under a ceiling of starlight.
The hijinks of the train – they'd smoked,
eaten Yank chocolate, shaved off
one of bombardier's eyebrows as he kipped –
spills into the platform parade.
Sarge receives a bit of back-chat.

Something has changed.
It's there too in the dawn:
the belfry's white pigeons pouting lazily,
the light dressing the cathedral's wounds
and dappling the path along the Scheldt
suggest a more permanent R&R.

He and the lads head for the Musée
des Beaux Arts, but the kiss-blowing
of the passing Belgian girls
keeps them on the street, feigning nonchalance:
cap through shoulder-board, hands in pockets,
cig in corner of mouth like Bogart.

They walk Rue Saint-Martin and Chaussée
de Willemeau until they reach the town
cemetery, where they lean or lie on the tombs

next to six hundred British dead
from the last show. He takes a light, lies back,
draws, and breathes out a trail of smoke
into the clear blue sky between the yews.

14. Dunton Green

The smoke rises into the clear blue sky
between the yews. His gaze drops again,
and he sees not the lads among the graves
but a bride, invincibly white
in a dappled crowd – his daughter,
whom he's just given away with dry eyes
and the ruin of his heart.

He taps out his pipe against the Morris's wing,
pockets it, and walks back over.

The men ease from the congregation.
'Sunderland are winning' he declares,
and one or two head for the transistor
on his passenger seat, only believing it
if they hear it with their own ears.

In the front room, eating finger food
off paper plates, they watch Bobby Stokoe,
Sunderland manager, run across Wembley turf
to embrace keeper Jim Montgomery,
whose double save at the death
has secured the biggest shock
in cup final history.

Stokoe's hat comes off, forgotten.
His run – arms aloft, trilby precarious –
is already passing into bronze,
his tears into rain,
when the newlyweds' Allegro rumbles off
in a cloud of exhaust and rattling tins
up the cheering, blossom-moted lane.

15. Saturday Morning Football

The old battle formation: baggage to the rear.
I was hidden in defence. Blood up with boredom,
eager to change minds, I'd foray out, slide in,
and miss. He's still there, on the touchline,
waiting for me to do something to make him proud.
Leaning on the seat-stick pride stops him unfolding –
even now, when the diagnosis is no pulse –
he's a silent figure my nocturnal dog walk
runs aground on. 'It's been twenty years,' I plead,
backing away, lead and all my adulthood loosed.
Dawn finds me muddy-mouthed and prone,
watching through grass-blades their striker slotting it home.

16. *Valediction*

His mind untwined from the present
and his tongue came free,
rolling off in the dim glow
of our comprehension
the rules he once lived by:
'you will be sacked immediately
if caught smoking.

You must never be seen from the house.

If there are people in the garden,
you must keep out of view.

Never speak until they speak to you.

Never look at her Ladyship:
she will never look at you.

Listen for voices.

If you hear people in a certain walk,
make a detour.

'The garage is for the chauffeur only.'

At this last, a smile passed over his face
like an owl's shadow
across a moonlit lawn.

A fox barked, fields away.

His eyes, scanning us one by one,
were black

as black magic hollyhocks.

Then he repeated, as if taking pity

on those who only know offices:

‘If it’s to give of its best,

a garden must be cherished

all the year round

as carefully as if it’s an aged

and affluent aunt

with no other relatives.’

17. The Peace that Passes Human Understanding

I don't visit him in hospital,
wanting my last memory of him to be
him sat in his armchair nursing a bottle
of Adnams, offering me

his massive, worn hand to shake goodbye,
I able to hope a little while longer
because of the strength his thinness belies
that the coil can unwind forever,

not end in the soul's release through
the discreet door in the great walled garden.

The bolt slotted home, beyond he is made new,
rejoining his wife, lads he last saw at Arnhem.

18. An Idle Wind

As his coffin slid behind the curtain
to Glenn Miller and 'Moonlight Becomes You',
my mother, a girl again,
waved and said: 'Goodbye dad.'

Now we kneel in turn as at a flowerbed
to unpot his and Doll's intimate grit
together into the sexton's care.
Some blows over us, in our faces and hair.

The worst of the weathers to work in, he said,
rubbing his arms and shaking his head,
indoors, twenty years after retirement:
undoes your labours, upsets your stride;

sometimes there was nowhere to hide.
And an 'idle wind', well, that's the worst
of all winds, goes right through you
rather than take the trouble to go round.

My mother likes it; says the dark hollies
whitening in the wind like surf
create a sense of life, as though the dead
are reincarnate as leaves and the very turf.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse him
leaning against the ruined Norman chancel,
his young face weakly-lit
by the struck match he's holding to his pipe:

collar up, flat-cap down, all skulky-like,
for he's in the out-of-bounds garage among
tennis racquets and limousines, sheltering
from an idle wind and the Lordship's gaze.

19. The Daylight

Leaving the mason with his cement gun
to glue down the desk-style headstone,
we enter the church. The door thuds shut.

A musty silence but for our footsteps,
the immortal draught in the tie-beamed roof
harrying the candles we light,

the harried light setting the font's lions
and wildmen dancing. Along the south wall,
the Great War memorial bears more names

than Orford has roofs, a congregation
that would cram the pews long since ripped out,
replaced by Victorian schoolroom chairs

with little bible-holders at their backs.

We go among them, admiring the knitted
hassocks depicting local landmarks, crests:

the WI; the Methodist church; the Scout group;
the houses in the road he grew up in,
the road shelled by friendly fire.

We're given the all-clear. Against the wind
we arrange favourites in the inkwell
to soften the newness of the sandstone:

pink tulips, white narcissi, purple speedwell.

We take photos, then all cram in for one:
a family snap with two members unthere.

We divine the smokehouse by its smoke,
one of us buys eels;
we watch the fish boats and tugs clank

against their moorings on the glittering ness.
Time, and a long pilgrimage, narrows
the daylight between mourner and tourist.

20. *Platalea leucorodia*

I drive home nervously from the ness
the blue Vauxhall Corsa
he exchanged his rusted Morris for.
My brother in the passenger seat navigates,
hand near the handbrake ready for scrapes.

Past pine forest concealing
an old air force base gone to weed,
past farm hardware piled in disused quarry pits,
past salt marsh invading heath, slinking back out,
and a tractor's arm trimming a hedgerow,

the lane grows congested:
a spoonbill has been spotted on Havergate Island.
Some observers believe it the same bird
seen last week at the mouth of the River Humber.
Others detect minute plumage differences.

Camouflaged men unpack tripods from car boots.
On the radio, a Suffolk Police spokesman says:
'We have managed to send a message out
to the twitcher community
asking them to park more considerately.'

Home, my brother has to go and lie down.

He's woken by our mother's scream.

Looking out the kitchen window, she'd seen
a flat-capped old man re-parking the Corsa.

It was my father: she thought she'd seen hers.

21. *Wilf*

He left us Wilf, a barefoot stone rustic.
A battered old boater, waistcoat, neckerchief
keep him decent in the flowerbed he hogs,
sat on a stone bench with his stone lunch
wrapped in newspaper beside him.

Unflapped by the union jack once struck
above his head to mark Remembrance Sundays,
St George's Days and royal anniversaries,
he has luncheoned in a century's lees.

He's weathered white, but locked in old age
like Tithonus: denied the eternal sleep.
In fact, rounded off by rain, his feet balling
into boots, he could be growing younger.

Now Lordship of my parents' flowerbed,
he watches with hard eyes a Worcester
permanence apple tree come into fruit,
the day's shadow move about the dial,
bats loot the mountain ash of red berries.

The Fire of Belonging:
The Life and Work of Mick Imlah
and the influence of the work
on my poetic development

Introduction

This essay sets out the chronology of Mick Imlah's life and provides a context for – and a close reading of – some of his poems. Where relevant during the close reading, I refer to poems of my own that have been influenced or inspired by Imlah's. In the new field of the Creative Writing PhD, the extent to which the essay writer must refer to his own creative work remains uncertain: interjections regarding my own poems are reluctantly made and designed to be illuminating yet unobtrusive.

Oxford Poetry's special 'in memoriam Mick Imlah' issue of December 2009 has proved invaluable in helping to shape the biographical element of this essay.¹ I am also grateful to Dr John Morton of the University of Greenwich for allowing me to read, before publication, two academic papers that discuss Imlah's poetry.² Biography and poetry are brought together in this, the most sustained study yet of Imlah.

Imlah's poetry career can be divided into three stages. The first culminated in the publication of his debut collection, *Birthmarks*, as a 32-year-old in 1988.³ The last culminated in the publication of his second collection, *The Lost Leader*, as a 51-year-old in 2008.⁴ Between, Imlah experienced a period of 'three or four years' in which he 'couldn't write poems'⁵ that ended with the composition of what has been called his

¹ Hamid Khanbhai and Tom Richards, eds, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Dec 2009. All subsequent references are to this edition.

² John Morton, 'Robert Browning and Mick Imlah: Forming and collecting the dramatic monologue', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3. pp. 84-98.

³ "No one remembers you at all": Mick Imlah and Alan Hollinghurst ventriloquising Tennyson', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 66, No.1. pp. 22-40.

⁴ Mick Imlah, *Birthmarks* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988). All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁵ Mick Imlah, *The Lost Leader* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008). All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁶ Mick Imlah, 'Mick Imlah writes', *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 1994, ed. Peter Forbes, p. 98.

tour-de-force, the ‘Afterlives of the Poets’ sequence. The ‘Afterlives’ of this middle stage of his career acted as a bridge between the first and final stages: while Tennyson – who together with Browning had been a significant influence on Imlah as a young poet – is the subject of the first of the ‘Afterlives’, the subject of the second is Scottish poet James Thomson (B.V.). Imlah’s fascination with Thomson coincided with the beginning of his growing affinity with Scotland, an affinity that ultimately led to *The Lost Leader*, ‘a compendium of Scottish experience – historical, mythic, cultural and personal – of monumental proportions’.⁶

Although this study is a general survey of Imlah’s life and work, it will also attempt to answer two specific questions. First, *Birthmarks* has been revered as so sui generis as to have emerged from a vacuum. I will investigate if the collection can in fact be placed in the context of a wider renaissance in interest in the fictive opportunities provided by the Browningsque dramatic monologue and narrative. Secondly, *The Lost Leader* astounded many, even those close to Imlah, when it was finally published: how, and why, had the transformation in preoccupations between his first and second collections come about? Contextualising the latter work will help us better understand why Imlah came to unsheathe the Scottish identity that he had hitherto kept ‘like a dirk for tight corners’.⁷

Chapter one charts Imlah’s progress to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he came under the guidance of the figure pivotal to his literary career (as he was to so many others): John Fuller. This will provide a context for the three poems close-read in chapter two – ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’, ‘Doing It’ and ‘Solomon’ – with a particular interest in how Imlah used the Browningsque dramatic monologue as a form

⁶ Peter McDonald, ‘Brave hearts’, *Guardian*, 7 Jun 2008

[<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/07/poetry>, accessed 1 Oct 2011].

⁷ Mick Imlah to Nicholas Jenkins, ‘An Interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1983 [http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/interviews.php?int=i2_mickimlah, accessed 30 Sep 2011]. All subsequent references are to this version.

and what preoccupations unite his early work.

Bookending chapter three – which close reads the poem ‘Birthmark’ and surveys the collection *Birthmarks* as a whole – are accounts of Imlah’s editorships at *Poetry Review* (1983-86) and Chatto and Windus (1989-93) which help elucidate not only his editorial gifts but also his personality, poetic tastes, and working methods. Chapter four examines what the ‘Afterlives of the Poets’ – ‘In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson’, ‘B.V.’ and ‘III’ – reveal about Imlah’s take on identity and literary posterity, and also close-reads his technically virtuoso poem ‘Past Caring’.

Chapter five endeavours to understand what Andrew Motion has dubbed Imlah’s ‘Scottishification’, a process he underwent in the 1990s, by contextualising it within a changing political and literary climate, his employment at the *Times Literary Supplement*, his victory over his private demon – alcohol – and his co-editorship of *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, published in 2000.⁸ The chapter close-reads three poems that directly or indirectly resulted from the latter project: ‘Fergus of Galloway’, ‘The Ayrshire Orpheus’, and ‘Braveheart’.

Through reading poems such as ‘The Lost Leader’, ‘Diehard’ and ‘The Queen’s Maries’, chapter six helps to place Imlah’s poems within the Scottish tradition – perpetuated by Edwin Muir and Douglas Dunn – of portraying the Scottish people as abandoned ‘sheep that have not a shepherd’.⁹ It also explains how my own poetry has bought into the pride in place so profoundly extolled by Imlah in his later life and work.

I have visited the Chatto and Windus archives in Rushden, the John Florio Society archives at Oxford, the *Times Literary Supplement* archives in Wapping, and the *Poetry Review* back issue archives in Senate House. I have interviewed a number of Imlah’s friends and colleagues – some agreeing to go on the record, some not – in

⁸ Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah, eds, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Penguin, 2000).

All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁹ ‘The Lost Leader’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 41.

person, on Skype, and by email. A picture has built up of a complex, deeply intelligent man: the poems reflect that – defying, as they do, easy analysis. Actual pictures, pertinent to the essay and flagged within it, are included as an appendix.

While studying for a Masters degree in 2007, my tutor Andrew Motion recommended I submit poems to the *Times Literary Supplement* in the hope it might publish some. The poetry editor there was Mick Imlah, whom I had not heard of before and whose surname had to be spelled out to me. A short while after submitting, I received a phone call from Imlah himself: he was memorably encouraging. Several of my poems – many concerned with form (rhyme royal, ottava rima) and what Imlah had twenty years before coined as ‘imaginary travel’¹⁰ – subsequently appeared in the *TLS*. One was shortlisted for the paper’s 2008 Poetry Prize, which Imlah – by now almost completely incapacitated by Motor Neurone Disease – judged by having entries passed before him and nodding at those he wanted shortlisted. British poetry has lost not just one of its most significant poets, but one of its most generous enablers.

Through *The Lost Leader* a younger generation was only just coming to know Imlah when he passed away. Reading it after it was published, I was struck by how similar his poetic devices were to my own: form, the fictional or historical narrative, imaginary travel. The difference was Imlah’s preoccupation with one place – Scotland – and the people, actual or otherwise, who have populated it. In attempting through this study to tell his story to my generation, something has kindled in me which in Imlah’s later life sustained him as a person and enriched his poetry: the fire of belonging.

¹⁰ ‘An Interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*.

Chapter One

Beginnings

Michael Ogilvie Imlah was born, with his twin sister Fiona, in Lewisham Hospital on Wednesday 26 September 1956. The day before, the first transatlantic telephone cable system had been inaugurated. Over 700 calls were made from London to North America in the first 24 hours of public use. The Suez Crisis had been ongoing since July, and would eventually lead to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, nine days into 1957.

The Imlah twins were born to Aberdonian parents: James Ogilvie Imlah, a 34-year-old insurance company inspector, and his 33-year-old wife Bathia Cruickshank Imlah, *née* Wilson.¹¹ Soon after the birth, the family, which also included an elder sister, Susan, moved from 24 Courtlands Avenue in Hayes, Kent (*see appendix photograph 1*) to Milngavie (pronounced ‘Mull-guy’), an East Dunbartonshire commuter town on the north-western fringe of Greater Glasgow. Imlah was thus, in his own words, from the ‘softer suburbs’ of the metropolis, receiving an education at Milngavie Primary School that insulated him from knowingly meeting ‘a Catholic boy’ –

Till I was sent to have my tonsils out
In the Ear, Nose and Throat on the Paisley Road
Aged seven, where the alien ward was full
Of green favours, Celtic scarfs and scruffs¹²

¹¹ Mark Ford, ‘Imlah, Michael Ogilvie [Mick] (1956–2009)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=100789&back=>, accessed 14 Jan 2014].

¹² ‘Stephen Boyd’ (lines 23-28), *The Lost Leader*, pp. 97-98.

Imlah would in his poem ‘Namely’ playfully explain his surname – ‘I’ve got this mongrel and seeming-Islamical M. IMLAH’ – and defend its Scottish credentials, asserting that it descends from ‘Imlach’, Gaelic for ‘those of the loch’, the ‘c’ having become lost during the Imlachs’ migration – as part of the Highland Clearances – across Scotland from the Isle of Jura to Aberdeen in the eighteenth century.¹³ ‘Imlah is a Scottish name,’ Douglas Dunn has confirmed, ‘though not a common one, usually spelled Imlach’.¹⁴ In fact, a Scottish poet had already borne it: John Imlah, an inn keeper’s son born in Aberdeen in 1799, became a piano-tuner by trade but contributed to the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* and published in London two duodecimos of lyric poetry and patriotic songs.¹⁵

John Imlah is the titular subject of a four-line poem by his modern namesake, the epigraph to it referring to him as ‘The Baird o’ Bon Accord’. He did indeed appear in William Walker’s 1887 anthology of Scottish poets of 1375-1860, the Aberdeen-published *The Bards of Bon-Accord*, but he is reimagined as having never left Scotland, when in fact historical record has him dying of yellow fever, aged 47, while visiting a brother in Jamaica:

He never left his native Aberdeen,
Where the triple rivers rin, sae clear and fresh;
But since he bore the alcoholic gene,
Better if he’d been born in Marrakesh.¹⁶

Walker does not record John Imlah as suffering from the ‘alcoholic gene’ – something with which Mick Imlah and his family became familiar – and the first line can instead be

¹³ ‘Namely’, *The Lost Leader*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁴ Douglas Dunn to author, email, 2 Feb 2014.

¹⁵ William Walker, ed., *The Bards of Bon-Accord: 1375-1860* (Aberdeen: Edmund and Spark, 1887), pp. 414-428. All subsequent references are to this edition. Internet Archive: The University of British Columbia Library [<http://archive.org/details/bardsofbonaccord00walk>, accessed 11 Nov 2012].

¹⁶ ‘John Imlah’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 60.

read to mean that, as a good patriot, John Imlah's *heart* never left his homeland. The poem is a reimagining of John by Mick to create a lineage between them, helping to root the latter in his Scottish ancestry.

In his poem 'Electric Blanket', Imlah recalls the 1966 football World Cup when his Milngavie street was 'rooting for Germany' when they played Scotland's auld enemy England in the final – 'even' his father, who had fought in the Second World War.¹⁷ Later that year his father's work returned the family south of the border once more, this time to West Wickham, formerly in the county of Kent until its absorption, the year previously, into the London Borough of Bromley. There began for Imlah what he described as the 'years of Southern education' that trimmed his Scottishness to a 'tartan phrase / Brought out on match days and Remembrance Days'.¹⁸ From West Wickham's Hawes Down Primary School he won a scholarship to attend, from 1968, the prestigious south London public school of Dulwich College.

There, Imlah was a curious mix: the 'private and silent' boy in class liked by peers for his laconic wit became, on the cricket field, a malicious fast bowler, suspected of targeting the batsmen rather than the stumps.¹⁹ His cricketing prowess would continue at Oxford, where he was a 'begetter / Of deep fours on opponents' grounds'.²⁰ Imlah was synonymous enough with the sport that his obituary would appear in the *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, in which he is described as having been a 'combative, charismatic all-rounder who played to a good standard', a 'star turn' in the annual match between the *Times Literary Supplement* and the publishers: his pace and 'flowing locks' had made people believe there was 'something Trueman-esque about him'.²¹ Of all his

¹⁷ 'Electric Blanket', *The Lost Leader*, p. 88.

¹⁸ 'Stephen Boyd' (lines 30-31), *The Lost Leader*, p. 98.

¹⁹ Jan Piggott, 'Mick Imlah at Dulwich', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 40.

²⁰ John Fuller, 'Two Words', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 38.

²¹ Unattributed obituary, 'Imlah, Michael Ogilvie', *The Wisden Cricketers' Almanack 2010* (London: John Wisden and Co, 2010), ed. Scyld Berry, p. 1668. 'Trueman-esque': Fred Trueman (1931-2006), Yorkshire and England fast bowler.

obituaries, this is the one Imlah might have cherished most.

But it was what he called ‘the perversion I was public schooled in’,²² the sport of Dulwich’s Michaelmas term, that became Imlah’s main sporting passion: rugby union. At it, he represented Dulwich and, later, Magdalen, whose First XV he captained, showing a ‘startling power of acceleration’ on the wing.²³ Rugby provided him with an environment and a circle of friends removed from the literary scene, for – as he would reflect in an article for the *Times Literary Supplement* – few writers are interested in the sport: ‘Welsh pub bards aside, there aren’t that many others to meet’.²⁴ Rugby also provided a forum in which he could, in his words, ‘Jock it up’:²⁵ wear his otherwise reticent national identity on his sleeve by singing Scottish songs after pints in the clubhouse; deliberating in notebooks – which show numerous crossings out and substitutions – on the make-up of the Scottish XV;²⁶ and rooting for England’s opponents. ‘Sport would have been a great help for his shyness,’ said Alan Hollinghurst:

Anything that presented a formal structure, you excelled within its terms. Like acting, you’re sort of hiding yourself in something. Mick always drank a lot. As well as all this ease and elegance he was very socially shy actually and I think he often wouldn’t say anything very much, and drink was a great disinhibitor and enabler. And I suppose students tend to drink a lot and he stayed in that world a long time. He developed other obsessions, like with pub general knowledge quizzes. It became rather a sort of nightmare going out for a drink with him because you go into a pub and think you’ll settle down and have a chat and he’d go straight off to the general knowledge machine because he was brilliant: he was fantastically knowledgeable of course about sport and pop music in particular. He made a lot of money out of those machines!²⁷

²² ‘Stephen Boyd’ (line 33), *The Lost Leader*, p. 98.

²³ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 5.

²⁴ Mick Imlah, ‘Goodbye to all that low tackling’, *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5262, Feb 6 2004, p. 9.

²⁵ ‘Stephen Boyd’ (line 35), *The Lost Leader*, p. 98.

²⁶ Mick Imlah’s papers in the possession of Jane Wellesley, Kensington. Seen by author 28 Mar 2014.

²⁷ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012.

Although more than thirty Old Alleynians have gone on to play international rugby union, Jan Piggott, Imlah's schoolmaster, suspected he might become a playwright, bearing in mind his love of reading and story-writing – often illicitly, below the level of the desk in class – and his 'great intensity and control' in school productions.²⁸ But it was the school's magazine, *The Alleynian*, which offered the best clues as to Imlah's future.

Aged fifteen he contributed, to the Summer 1972 issue, a short story inspired by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which he had been reading in the fourth form. In it, Herman, a fat Dulwich schoolboy, in recompense for cutting his sister's forehead with a pocket-knife, suffers a gruesome metamorphosis on the morning school bus ('Hairs sprouted from nose, from arms, clouding white cuffs...school blazer sagged to long cloak.').²⁹ Herman eventually returns to his normal 'public school plump' and goes on to become a chartered surveyor. The Summer 1973 issue included the poem 'Sweating Surgeon', here in full:

Through swan-like gliding to our lawn,
I think the stork was scared;
He flapped and furied, and was gone.
I quickly tugged the curtain closed,
And wondered how I'd dared.
So sad; it makes my mother cry,
She, yearning for the bird's arrival,
Plump with expectation; I'll not lie!
Now, with twitching, awkward tongue I grasp
How, furtively, I did espy,
Sliding whitely from his furry, furious grasp
The baby boy; I watched him float, and died.³⁰

²⁸ Jan Piggott, citing Jeffrey Greenslade, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43-44. Piggott: 'Thus *The Alleynian* in the last line, bequeathing a possible misprint and textual crux – not "watched him float, and *die*"?'

Supported by such evident talent, Imlah applied to read English at Piggott's alma mater: Magdalen College, Oxford. Piggott could inform his old college that his pupil had come top of the internally-assessed element of the A-Level examination, that he was 'intellectually very able and subtle, an ironist with an equable temperament' and that 'while laconic in discussion he could animate the whole discussion by a flash of inspiration or by exposing something bogus or pretentious'.³¹

Imlah went up to Oxford for interview on Tuesday 9 December 1975, midway through the IRA's Balcombe Street siege.³² One of his interviewers was 38-year-old Magdalen fellow and tutor John Fuller, who, in his diary entry for that day, noted: 'Candidates: a crowded week. Aggressive Imlah.'³³ Fuller was initially impressed by Imlah's hostility, which he later knew to be an understandable 'carapace' deployed against a new and intimidating environment.³⁴ The don ensured he gave candidates every chance to provide a defence of any inaccuracies perpetrated in the three-hour entrance and scholarship papers: Imlah had deftly analysed the symbolism of Yeats and recalled some lines of Tennyson's *The Princess*, only to misidentify Ophelia as a character from *King Lear*. Confronted about this, Imlah, despite his nerves, 'was unfazed, and fenced the implied rebuke with his characteristically leisurely decisiveness'.³⁵

The entrance paper had shown Fuller that this candidate was already an 'attractively resourceful reader across the centuries' with a strong and unique imagination. A number of authors, each with their own torch (i.e., their style), are congregated in 'the dark room of the blank page' trying to create the impression of a rose. Where others have failed, one of the group's torches manages to 'intensify, as

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.41.

³² Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-79* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 151. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³³ John Fuller, 'Imlah at Magdalen', p. 1, paper delivered to the conference 'Mick Imlah: His Life and Work' at Senate House, University of London, 10 Dec 2010.

³⁴ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

³⁵ John Fuller, 'The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 13.

much as it clarifies' the rose: 'Emily Dickinson, of our party, has gone very cold, and swoons, muttering that this poetry has removed the top of her head.'³⁶

Piggott was informed by Magdalen that Imlah had been 'a little inaccessible' at interview and that the dons were 'momentarily put aback when he said that he didn't do very much reading for pleasure'.³⁷ Piggott was also informed that 'when he was eventually invited to question the panel at the end, he asked what the bathrooms were like'. Nevertheless, his pupil had been awarded a Demyship (College Scholarship) to study English at Magdalen, starting in the autumn of 1976.

*

Just as he turned twenty, Imlah moved into his rooms in the Longwall Quad of Magdalen College after the hottest summer since records began.³⁸ The sunshine receded, October was wet, and in December the country's exchequer had to negotiate a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.³⁹ Imlah, meanwhile, strolled through Magdalen's quads and cloisters (*see appendix photograph 2*) on his way to weekly tutorials on Victorians and Moderns with John Fuller, and Old English with a young College lecturer, Bernard O'Donoghue.

The 'off-hand, very throwaway' attitude that had been evident in his entrance interview characterised Imlah's early tutorials.⁴⁰ He would shamle in, film-star good looks obscured by the big hair that was the fashion then, and some way into the tutorial take out his essay – hand-written on A4 paper folded twice or four times – from the back pocket of his jeans. The essay would betray a deep engagement with the texts, so

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ Jan Piggott citing Emrys Jones, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 41.

³⁸ Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-79*, p. 596.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁴⁰ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

that, as Fuller put it in his elegy for Imlah, ‘Every green June you were bound / To get your seventy or better,’ an excellent individual score both on the cricket field and in the end-of-year exam.⁴¹ O’Donoghue recalls quoting from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles in a seminar a few days into the start of term and, from out of a sea of glazed faces, Imlah responding in Old English:

I thought, ‘here we go, this is the proper way to do things!’ He was constantly surprising you with lightly-carried special knowledge. The most frustrating thing about him was he’d come in wearing these denim suits, looking very kind of glamorous, good-humoured, and you weren’t quite sure how serious he was to the whole thing. In those days, the mid-1970s, people still hadn’t got round to writing essays yet, it was still the sixties you know, effectively! And you didn’t want to be too presumptuous. I’d say ‘Err, hmm, err, you haven’t written it then?’ [and Imlah would respond] ‘Yeah, yeah’, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his essay, folded four ways, smoothing it out and reading it. And they were short and brilliant and exactly the right thing every time.⁴²

Imlah was soon confident enough to enter the College’s Richard Selig Prize for Poetry with ‘To Stuart, On Losing Elaine, probably to Another’, which Fuller has since called a ‘modernist mishmash of overdeveloped metaphor’.⁴³ He wished to steer his student in another direction. Fuller had not studied the poetry of Robert Browning when himself an Oxford undergraduate, up the road at New College, and was now reading it in order to teach it on Oxford’s first-year Victorians course. He became absorbed:

I particularly, personally, responded very much to Browning, who I think was one of those writers that I had not known well enough in my youth, I always remember my fellow student at New College when I was up, D.J. Palmer, a known

⁴¹ John Fuller, ‘Two Words’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 38.

⁴² Bernard O’Donoghue to author, 26 Apr 2013.

⁴³ John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p.15.

critic and English scholar, who had come up the year before me, talking a lot about *The Ring and the Book*. I remember thinking: ‘my God, you know, I’ve never read *The Ring and the Book*, should I be reading it?’ It wasn’t part of the syllabus you see. So I thought of it as a daunting thing. So I came to Browning half fresh in order to teach him and became very enthusiastic. I suddenly myself saw all of his poetry as a kind of model for the sort of thing we should be doing now: no longer the rapt lyric, but something more fictive, more teasing.⁴⁴

The Honour Moderations course included a Special Authors paper, on which candidates had to answer either on Browning and Tennyson, or on Eliot and Yeats. The latter, Fuller said, was always more popular with undergraduates:

Eliot’s disaffection from life is very attractive to young people, it conforms to their sensibilities of adolescence. Year on year, even now, Eliot rings that bell. Whereas Browning doesn’t. You can’t really understand what he’s about: what does he believe? What sort of person was he? Those are hidden things.⁴⁵

Fuller encouraged Imlah to explore Browning and Tennyson, a task made easier by his student already being ‘very keen’ on the latter.⁴⁶ Such steer soon bore fruit not just in essays but in verse. Imlah’s pre-existing interest in the fictive potential of poems was supplied with a framework common to such Browning poems as ‘My Last Duchess’, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ and ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’: the dramatic monologue. Not that Magdalen’s only organised forum in which students could discuss their own poetry would see the results immediately.

It was felt by some undergraduates that ‘extraordinary nerve’ was required to submit a poem to the John Florio Society, where it would have to ‘survive’ a circle of peers – plus Fuller and O’Donoghue – who were ‘all of them kind but resolutely

⁴⁴ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

honest'.⁴⁷ Such a perception might explain why Society secretary Pico Iyer's increasingly elaborate minutes – which set a precedent for Imlah's to follow – record a young poet reluctant to show his work.⁴⁸ The minutes for Michaelmas Term 1977, the first Florio meeting Imlah attended – and in fact held in his rooms, in which crammed Fuller, O'Donoghue, Alan Hollinghurst and eleven others – state:

James Joyce is said to have spent three days chiselling one sentence of 8 words; Mr Imlah did better, labouring for many hours over a blank white sheet which, he assured us, was the preface to his massively unfinished poem.

The following term, Hilary 1978:

Perhaps, like the finest wine, Mr Imlah's verse ripens slowly, and, while the poetic grapes may have been trampled, the distilled perfection still awaits us.

Rather than having produced no poems, Imlah, a perfectionist, was keeping them back until he felt they lived up to the easeful talent he was known for in his essays, in the common room and college bar, and on the sports field. While he appeared to Fuller to take to 'literary Magdalen like no other undergraduate I had known',⁴⁹ poems from his early career – most explicitly, 'Cockney'⁵⁰ – betray a keen awareness of the differences between milieus and anxiety about being somehow outed as an imposter: that, in Imlah's words, 'natural limitations' could 'reassert themselves' at any time.⁵¹ Robert Crawford would write how, in 'Cockney', the narrator's 'cosmetic voice-surgery of

⁴⁷ Mark Wormald, *John Fuller & The Sycamore Press: A Bibliographical History*, ed. Ryan Roberts (Delaware and Oxford: Oak Knoll Press, 2010), p. 42. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴⁸ John Florio Society minutes, McFarlane Library, Magdalen College. Seen by author 26 Apr 2013.

⁴⁹ John Fuller, 'The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ 'Cockney', *Birthmarks*, pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ Mick Imlah, biographical note, *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman & Society Contemporary Writing No.1* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), p. 16. All subsequent references are to this edition.

social climbing⁵² unravels when the ‘ghost of me mum’⁵³ roves into view. ‘I developed an inconspicuous accent quite quickly,’ Imlah would say of his own youth, ‘though I still have the other one up my sleeve like a dirk for tight corners.’⁵⁴ Imlah spoke in the family home – where he was known by the more common Scottish contraction of ‘Mike’ – with an accent that was not in evidence at Oxford. ‘He was a tremendous compartmentaliser of his life’, Alan Hollinghurst recalls –

It was very marked in him. Nobody I know ever went to his home. I remember occasionally ringing him during the vac when he was down in West Wickham and he would always speak in a Scottish accent on the phone. He did at home, you see.⁵⁵

Tracey Warr remembers that when she arrived at Oxford to take a postgraduate degree and felt like a ‘fish out of water’ – as someone from a working class background and the first in her family to attend university – it was Imlah who ‘made me feel at home. He was the person who could see my dilemma’.⁵⁶ Such consideration for a struggling new student suggests an acquaintance with those struggles first-hand, which would not have been widely confided. Imlah wrote of his friendship at Oxford with Stephen Boyd:

two prigs, we liked to disapprove
Of those who showed their fears or bared their hearts;
As when, in one of your fancier flights,
You said of the social posture of a scholar
Whose girlfriend had gone off with someone other,
That he ‘expects the whole community
To circulate his sorrow, open-mouthed,
Like the wee Marys in Giotto’s *Crucifixion!*⁵⁷

⁵² Robert Crawford, ‘Callaloo’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11, No. 8, 20 Apr 1989, p. 22-23 [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n08/robert-crawford/callaloo, 14 Nov 2013].

⁵³ Mick Imlah, ‘Cockney’, *Birthmarks*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ ‘An interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*.

⁵⁵ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012.

⁵⁶ Tracey Warr to author, 31 Jan 2012.

⁵⁷ ‘Stephen Boyd’ (lines 64-71), *The Lost Leader*, p. 99.

Imlah learned that the Florio Society was far from the sort of vulgar gathering of superiority the narrator of his poem ‘Cockney’ must endure. Its atmosphere was unassuming and convivial, often lubricated with alcohol. Nicholas Jenkins, who first met Imlah at a drinks party Fuller gave for prospective Magdalen students in 1981, and who went up in 1982, did not find the Society a ‘star-chamber’:

It was more like a friendly thing that had a core of people quite committed. I always attended even though I never really hit the [poetry] bullseye myself, so it wasn’t a law court or anything like that where people were subject to Cambridge levels of scrutiny.⁵⁸

By Trinity Term 1978, towards the end of his second year at Magdalen, Imlah had become Society secretary. The minutes he took grew into, in Hollinghurst’s words, ‘ever more extended and involved fantasias on the relatively ordinary things that had actually been said or done,’ showing a talent for a ‘baroque and slightly menacing transformation of reality that was also seen in many of his poems’.⁵⁹ One minute covers Iris Murdoch’s guest attendance at the 1978 annual Florio Dinner. The author is quoted as being presumptuous as to the quality of the Society’s output (‘I suppose the standard isn’t – very high’) and Imlah invents his response:

I gripped the edge of my chair, but remembering that the society was feeding Miss Murdoch out of its own shallow pocket, acted instinctively; without rising, I drained my port, folded my napkin, selected a banana from the bowl and brought it down as hard as I could on her head...And everything (I imagine) went black.⁶⁰

Another minute claims that Fuller’s room was filled with ‘thirty American servicemen

⁵⁸ Nicholas Jenkins to author, 1 Mar 2013.

⁵⁹ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ John Florio Society minutes, seen by author 26 Apr 2013.

and a dozen Arab peddlers’;⁶¹ another deems fellow student Henry Woudhuysen the lead member of an army of replicant Henrys ‘moving in rows across New Buildings Lawn’.⁶² The minutes for Hilary Term 1980 are more prosaic: ‘The first twenty minutes of the meeting were unexceptional. I know *I* was bored.’⁶³ Imlah relinquished the secretaryship in March 1981.

Typing up the poems Imlah put before the Society was Magdalen’s Junior College Lecturer, Alan Hollinghurst.⁶⁴ They had met in 1978 for a tutorial that Hollinghurst was to give him on Matthew Arnold, at Bernard O’Donoghue’s home, where Hollinghurst was lodging. A recent Magdalen graduate who had stayed on to write an M.Litt., Hollinghurst was only two years Imlah’s senior and felt ill-equipped to teach him, so he instead invited him onto the patio to take vermouth.⁶⁵ Hollinghurst was jubilant when, giving him a tutorial on Laurence Sterne at a later date, Imlah – with visible reluctance – noted down something he had said: ‘That was the only time I felt I was contributing to the tutorial at all!’⁶⁶ In the autumn of 1978, Hollinghurst moved into the home of his friend and fellow Oxford graduate Andrew Motion. Thus, in turn, Imlah became friends with the future poet laureate.

It was, in Jenkins’s words, a ‘charmed moment’ in the life of literary Oxford, when ‘everyone who arrived added something more to it and made the mix richer’.⁶⁷ He recalls Imlah sitting in Magdalen’s Middle Common Room drafting poems on a clipboard. Magdalen was ‘like a dormitory’ in which everyone knew what everyone else

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² John Fuller, ‘Imlah at Magdalen’, p. 4.

⁶³ John Florio Society minutes.

⁶⁴ Imlah did not learn to type until allocated a word processor at the *TLS* when he began working there full-time in 1995. The poems he brought before the John Florio Society were ‘To Stuart, On Losing Elaine, Probably to Another’ (Trinity Term 1978), ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’ (Michael Term 1980), and ‘Abortion’ (Hilary Term 1981).

⁶⁵ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Nicholas Jenkins to author, 1 Mar 2013.

was doing: 'The poems were just part of the furniture of life, of his life that I saw in those days.' Hollinghurst has written:

In the days before creative writing had entered university syllabuses Magdalen College provided perhaps the best academic environment for a young poet.⁶⁸

The 'presiding genius'⁶⁹ of this environment was Fuller, who enabled it to thrive through kind encouragement, selfless generosity with his time and, most importantly, by establishing the Sycamore Press.

Imlah gained his First in Schools in 1979 and followed Hollinghurst into starting a postgraduate thesis, a D.Phil. on Arthurian myth in Victorian poetry. This he would work on during the week, still living in College, while he spent weekends helping to typeset a pamphlet of his poems at Fuller's home.

*

In the 1960s, when the builders of Benson Place, a modernist cul-de-sac near Lady Margaret Hall, were prevented from constructing a fourteenth and final house due to the situation of a sycamore tree, they could not have foreseen the significance it would have on British literature. For, as they had already built fourteen garages, it meant one house, No. 4, would have the ownership of two. John Fuller and his wife Prue moved into No. 4 in 1967.

Fuller had resolved to publish the work of those students he felt deserved a wider audience, and there was no better location for a printing press than the spare garage (*see appendix photograph 4*). For £20 he acquired an old Arab clamshell hand-set

⁶⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Andrew Motion, contribution, *John Fuller & The Sycamore Press: A Bibliographical History*, p. 32.

printing press that had formerly produced cricket scores for distribution in the University Parks, and named it after the large tree hogging the garden. The Sycamore Press was born.

Its first output was, in November 1968, *Our Western Furniture*, a sequence of 21 sonnets and two haikus by James Fenton that had won that year's Newdigate Prize. Some 230 copies were produced, retailing at five shillings each. There followed pamphlets from names – Peter Redgrove (1970), Roy Fuller (1972), David Harsent (1973), Andrew Motion (1977), Fenton again with *Dead Soldiers* (1981), Alan Hollinghurst (1982) – now familiar to readers of contemporary British literature.⁷⁰ It was inevitable, then, that Fuller propose to Imlah – whom he adjudged a ‘rapidly maturing writer who deserved an audience’⁷¹ – that the Sycamore Press publish a pamphlet of his poems.

The tortuous process of producing it on a treadle-powered machine and typesetting by hand for as long as the daylight lasted⁷² was compounded by Imlah's sometimes ‘over-laboured perfectionism’:

Although his attitude to his poems was sometimes dry and dismissive, he worked on them endlessly and was loath to deliver finalised copy to the printer ⁷³ [...] As the weeks (and months) went by with revision after revision, I could see the rewriting never ending at all.⁷⁴

The production of *The Zoologist's Bath and Other Adventures* was finally completed on 7 June 1982, a week before the end of the Falklands War. It appeared in an edition of 400

⁷⁰ John Fuller, foreword, *John Fuller & The Sycamore Press: A Bibliographical History*, p. ix. Forty years on, a copy of *Our Western Furniture* was retailing in a bookseller's catalogue for £300. A copy of Hollinghurst's pamphlet, *Confidential Chats with Boys*, was priced at £1,300.

⁷¹ John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 16.

⁷² John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012. Fuller intended to introduce a petrol engine and install a fan-belt over the treadle to automatize the printing. This never materialised.

⁷³ John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

copies – double the usual number because of the longer daylight hours of the early summer months – and consisted of six poems: ‘The Zoologist’s Bath’, ‘Brawl in Co. Kerry’, ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’, ‘Insomnia’, ‘Abortion’, and ‘Jealousy’.⁷⁵ All would appear six years later in Imlah’s first full collection, *Birthmarks*. Imlah had a ‘quiet knowledge that this was good and he was happy with it’,⁷⁶ even after having to alter two words in the lengthy, font-hungry poem ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’ because the press ran out of ‘K’s (see appendix photograph 3). ‘It is evidence of Mick’s fine judgement,’ Fuller has written, ‘that when the poem was reprinted in his first collection he decided to keep the second of these changes, but not the first.’⁷⁷

The Zoologist’s Bath and Other Adventures transformed Imlah, at the age of 25, from a promising undergraduate writer into a published poet with an audience. The pamphlet was reviewed in the *Observer*, where Peter Porter summarised it as ‘Browning in the world of Hammer films’.⁷⁸

*

John Fuller has written that Imlah used his ‘postmodernist Oxford background as a springboard’ to his literary career.⁷⁹ Robert Crawford, reviewing Imlah’s first full collection, *Birthmarks*, for the *London Review of Books* in 1988, stated that some of it ‘comes perilously close to a sort of Post-Modern common room wit’.⁸⁰ The Browningsque blank verse dramatic monologue, for example, can dovetail with postmodernism because of the similarity in what the two things look to achieve. This is

⁷⁵ Mick Imlah, *The Zoologist’s Bath & Other Adventures* (Oxford: The Sycamore Press, 1982).

⁷⁶ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

⁷⁷ John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 17.

⁷⁸ Cited by John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 18.

⁷⁹ John Fuller, ‘Mick Imlah: poet, critic and founding editor of Oxford Poetry’, *The Times*, 13 Jan 2009 [<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/obituaries/article2084143.ece>, accessed 5 Oct 2011].

⁸⁰ Robert Crawford, ‘Callaloo’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11, No. 8.

illustrated by the fact that the following characteristic of postmodernist poetry outlined by Tim Woods can also be read as the main characteristic of the dramatic monologue:

Where the 'I' fits into the articulation of [the] narrative, the poem is concerned with the gap that opens up between what is said and what happened; in other words, the piece relishes and takes pleasure in the condition that words are the world that we inhabit.⁸¹

Peter Forbes, surveying the Poetry Society's twenty 'New Generation Poets' in 1994, mistook the 'richly Browningsque' nature of Imlah's poetry as 'the essence of dusty Oxonianism'.⁸² What escaped him was that Browning's dramatic monologues and narrative dramas were ahead of their time, suspicious as they were, like postmodernism, of the 'notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self which acts as a standard of rationality',⁸³ favouring the fragmented and at times incoherent delivery, the narrator as unreliable.

Browning invested time in the dramatic potential of poetry not only as a frustrated playwright but in response to what he and others believed was the 'shrinking' of poetry 'thematically to the dimensions of the home and heart, and formally to those of the lyric'.⁸⁴ He wished to turn away from what he described as the 'white light' within himself, his personal feelings which he was 'afraid to communicate, or even to confront',⁸⁵ particularly after John Stuart Mill decried his first published poem, the book-length *Pauline*, as the work of a writer 'with a more intense and morbid self-

⁸¹ Tim Woods, 'Postmodernism and the Literary Arts', *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 79. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁸² Peter Forbes, 'Talking About the New Generation', *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 1994, ed. Peter Forbes, p. 6. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁸³ Tim Woods, introduction, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Daniel Karlin, introduction, 'Robert Browning's Pleasure House', *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. xxi. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁸⁵ Esther Loehndorf, *The Master's Voices: Robert Browning, the Dramatic Monologue, and Modern Poetry* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1997), p. 25. All subsequent references are to this edition.

consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being'.⁸⁶ Imlah, encouraged by the study of Browning and, in John Fuller, the tutelage of someone enthusiastic about the 'fictive, more teasing' potential of poetry, began to elaborate, refine and revel in the fictive narratives that, Alan Hollinghurst has said, naturally 'appealed to his instinctive tact and modesty'.⁸⁷ In Tennyson, too, Imlah saw how the 'dress of artifice' concealed the man.⁸⁸ He would later write in the introduction to his selection of Tennyson's poetry that –

the whole of Tennyson's long career is a shelter for the sensational revelation of his melancholy.⁸⁹ [...] Tennyson's problem in presenting poems to the public was that his deepest experience was unsocial, painful, and shaming to a degree ⁹⁰ [...] He was daunted by society and sex, by life as well as death; and his poems had to put on forms or metaphors which would allow him to say his 'woe' without dishonour.⁹¹

One valuable recourse, Imlah continued, was the dramatic monologue, which he defined as a 'speech of fictional disclosure, normally in Shakespearean blank verse'.⁹²

One of the main effects of a dramatic monologue such as Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi' is that the speaker, in speaking, inadvertently reveals aspects of his actions and his nature that he would not have conveyed by design. There is 'disequilibrium' between the speaker's utterance and the meaning of the poem,⁹³ the speaker so preoccupied with his own standard of judgement that he is oblivious to the world's. Robert Langbaum writes of the dramatic monologue:

⁸⁶ Cited by Adam Roberts, *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 731.

⁸⁷ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Mick Imlah: Selected Poems*, ed. Mark Ford (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. xxii. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁸⁸ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: poems selected by Mick Imlah* (London: Faber and Faber 2004), p. ix. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 72.

We understand the speaker's point of view not through his description of it but indirectly, through seeing what he sees while judging the limitations and distortions of what he sees. The result is that we understand, if not more, at least something other than the speaker understands, and the meaning is conveyed as much by what the speaker conceals and distorts as by what he reveals.⁹⁴

The blank verse dramatic monologue meets postmodernism's demand for a technique that reflects the subjective nature of experience in what it sees as today's fragmented world; it also meets postmodernism's acceptance – in contrast to modernism, which 'tries to destroy the past' – that 'the past must be revisited', even if only ironically.⁹⁵ Like the Gothic façades of Victorian architecture, dramatic monologues are ornate, gaudy, digressive; functionality is of lesser importance.

Postmodernism, in looking back to go forward, appeals to societies 'in which the demise of their former economic cultural and political superiority has led to a responsiveness to nostalgia and frustration'.⁹⁶ In the economically frail and politically fraught Britain of the 1970s, these conditions led to what Dominic Sandbrook has called a 'thirst for a quieter, gentler world of hierarchy and consensus', principally that associated with the Victorian and Edwardian ages.⁹⁷ Visitor numbers to museums doubled between 1971 and 1987, while membership of the National Trust boomed from 158 000 people in 1965 to 539 000 in 1975 and more than a million in 1981.⁹⁸ Thanks to the 'public appetite for Victorian romanticism', clothes retailer Laura Ashley's turnover increased from less than £500 000 in 1970 to some £25 million a decade later, while Stoke potters Portmeirion could not keep up with demand for its Victorian country house-style 'Botanic Garden' floral ceramics range, launched in

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁹⁵ Peter Barry, 'Postmodernism', *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 91.

⁹⁶ Tim Woods, introduction, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-79*, p. 90.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

1972.⁹⁹ The success of television dramas *Upstairs, Downstairs*, *The Onedin Line* and *The Duchess of Duke Street* and books such as Edith Holden's *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (1977) and Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978) was testament to a demand for 'nostalgic reassurance'.¹⁰⁰ In Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*, first published in 1977, Alison waits for a train at St Pancras and observes the disparity in confidence between the Gothic façade and iron arches – 'Victorian England had produced them' – and the 'garbage and newspaper and plastic bags, this sea of rubbish' on the 1970s concourse, waded through by a subdued and uneasy population full of 'fear and sadness'.¹⁰¹ Another character, the academic Linton Hiscox, retreats to a dilapidated house-cum-hermitage in the country to escape a society whose poetry he deplures:

Linton's own poetry was, naturally, academic, intelligent, structured, delicate, evasive, perceptive, full of verbal ambiguities and traditional qualifications: his reaction to the wave of beat poets, Liverpool poets, pub poets, popular poets, was one of amusement, then of hostility, then of contempt tinged with fear.¹⁰²

The shifts in fortune of the Victorian age's reputation is encapsulated in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011), a novel dedicated to the memory of Imlah. In it, Daphne, the 1920s lady of the house, admits that the gloomy Victorian panelling, Gothic windows and turreted fireplace are 'hard to defend' to the visiting modernist interior designer, 'except by saying foolishly that one loved it'.¹⁰³ Just as the interior designer boxes in the grand coffered ceiling, so Browning and Tennyson were

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Margaret Drabble, *The Ice Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), p. 172.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁰³ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 113. All subsequent references are to this edition.

derogated and their general reputations ‘almost totally collapsed’.¹⁰⁴ In the final chapter of *The Stranger’s Child*, however, set in the present day, their revival is comically depicted by ‘Poets Alive! Houndvoice.com’, whose users, thanks to digital wizardry, can view ‘authentic sound recordings emerging from the mouths of digitally animated photographs’ of the long dead poets.¹⁰⁵ Tennyson’s beard quivers ‘like a beast in a hedge’ to a recording of him reading ‘Come into the Garden, Maud,’¹⁰⁶ a ghoulish, slightly absurd resurrection redolent of Imlah’s ‘In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson’.¹⁰⁷

John Fuller recalls that when he was an Oxford undergraduate – at New College in the late 1950s – the English Literature syllabus ‘stopped at the Romantic poets. You didn’t do Victorians’.¹⁰⁸ The subsequent extension of the syllabus, together with work by Oxford University Press (OUP), remedied this. In 1964, OUP published *Confessions and Histories*, a poetry collection by Merton College-educated Edward Lucie-Smith that included Browningsque monologues. In ‘Rubens to Helen Fourmont’, the artist, as he immortalises his young wife in paint, wonders aloud who she will marry when he predeceases her. Although the thought of her with another pains him, Rubens knows that in posterity she will be forever his, by virtue of the painting:

And yet I win:
I paint this picture. No one will remember
Another man has owned you. Everyone
Will see you thus, in the act of being possessed
More coarsely, more completely than in all
The many separate times I came to take you.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Clyde de L. Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 251. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁰⁵ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child*, p. 549.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 550.

¹⁰⁷ ‘In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson’, *The Lost Leader*, pp. 111-116.

¹⁰⁸ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Lucie-Smith, ‘Rubens to Helen Fourmont’ (lines 27-32), *Confessions & Histories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 14-15.

Five years after Lucie-Smith, in 1969, the American poet Richard Howard published a collection of monologues, *Untitled Subjects*, written directly in imitation of the Browning manner.¹¹⁰ In 1974, Magdalen's own John Fuller published a sequence of Browningsque monologues, *The Most Difficult Position*. In it, the chess master Howard Staunton (1810-1874) speaks to his wife, who has interrupted his working on an edition of Shakespeare to tell him dinner is ready:

I saw you in the garden through the window
Reaching for roses. You sustain my labours
As the bright stream an oak that arches over.
Thought in your presence is a growing silence
That feeds invisibly upon my love.
(Pass me my cigars: you will not mind?
Thank you. It helps me to unwind my thoughts.)¹¹¹

In 1980, two years before Imlah's *The Zoologist's Bath & Other Adventures*, OUP published Anthony Thwaite's *Victorian Voices*, a collection of fourteen dramatic monologues whose speakers are obscure Victorian figures such as Philip Henry Gosse and Margaret Gatty.¹¹² And that same year, OUP published Robert Bernard Martin's acclaimed biography of Tennyson, *The Unquiet Heart*, in the preface to which the author captured the change that had come about in the preceding years:

Perhaps because he [Tennyson], more than anyone else except the Queen herself, seemed an emblem of the Victorian age, there was a lingering critical animosity against him long after the fashion of denigrating Browning and Arnold had died a much-to-be-desired death. If our own age has not learned much else, it has at least come to a belated recognition of the greatness of the age of Victoria. Today the

¹¹⁰ Richard Howard, *Untitled Subjects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Atheneum, 1969).

¹¹¹ John Fuller, 'The Most Difficult Position' (lines 35-41), *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 150. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹² Anthony Thwaite, *Victorian Voices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

condescension of W.H. Auden and Harold Nicholson to Tennyson seems at least as outmoded as Tennyson seemed to them.¹¹³

Three years later, Imlah was telling Nicholas Jenkins that ‘today’s poet is a bit like a Victorian architect’:

Middle Pointed Gothic, neo-Egyptian, blank verse, this or that kind of stanza, silly one-word lines, whatever. Everyone knows it isn’t the real thing, that there’s an element of exercise about it, but it’s better than rubble. I don’t like poems which look like rubble.¹¹⁴

Imlah put this rejection of modernism’s free verse – T.S. Eliot’s ‘heap of broken images’¹¹⁵ – into practice with ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’, ‘Doing It’, and ‘Solomon’, three ‘mordantly modern’¹¹⁶ blank verse dramatic narratives that showcase his singular imagination.

¹¹³ Robert Bernard Martin, preface, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. vii. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹⁴ ‘An interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*.

¹¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’ (I. The Burial of the Dead, line 22), *The Waste Land and other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 23. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹⁶ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 8.

Chapter Two

Shy to be an Act

As a rugby full-back pouches a high ball inside his 22-metre line and shouts ‘mark!’, so the hunchback Quasimodo whisks the gypsy girl Esmeralda from the gallows to the door of Notre Dame crying ‘Sanctuary!’¹¹⁷ In so doing, he invokes an archaic ordinance in which human justice cannot cross God’s threshold. The Quasimodo of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is no Disney character: he is so deformed that pregnant women fear aborting two-headed foetuses if they lay eyes upon him. As Esmeralda cannot bear to let herself see the face of her rescuer, the besotted hunchback draws near only while she sleeps. Mick Imlah’s 84-line blank verse dramatic monologue, ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’ (‘QSG’ hereafter),¹¹⁸ portrays one of those times when the ‘owl’ enters the ‘lark’s nest’.¹¹⁹

Despite being his novel’s hero, Hugo barely invests Quasimodo with an inner voice, portraying him instead as deranged nearly as much mentally as he is physically. The hunchback is thus a literary character conducive to being lent a voice; for, as Douglas Dunn describes Browning’s reasons for deploying the form, the dramatic monologue can ‘encompass ostensibly out-of-the-way historical or imaginary episodes and their participants with a reanimating vigour and a sentient, intellectual

¹¹⁷ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 323. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹⁸ Mick Imlah, ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’, *Birthmarks*, pp. 33-35. All subsequent references are to this version of the poem.

¹¹⁹ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, p. 341.

“opulence”.¹²⁰ ‘QSG’s close intertextuality with Hugo’s novel in terms of protagonist and setting, and Browning’s dramatic monologues in terms of register and form, is a bold move by a poet which, conversely, serves to conceal him. Echoing the opening to Browning’s poem *Pauline*, in which the speaker wants to be shut in with Pauline so that ‘I might unlock the sleepless brood / Of fancies from my soul, their lurking-place’,¹²¹ Imlah enters beneath the cloak of Hugo and Browning’s constructs, competently but shyly –

Look how my fancy shuffles from the shadow,
Free of its shame, but shy to be an act.

‘QSG’ was typed-up from Imlah’s clear italic hand by Alan Hollinghurst and brought before the Florio Society in the Michaelmas term of 1980. It was published in *The Zoologist’s Bath & Other Adventures* two years later, and re-appeared in a selection of poems by Eric Gregory award winners, published by Salamander Press in 1985.¹²² Between then and its inclusion in Imlah’s first full collection, *Birthmarks* in 1988, an erroneous epigraph – ‘to the beautiful gipsy girl he has rescued from the stake’¹²³ (Esmeralda was for the gallows) – was dropped, and individual lines revised. Imlah continued asking John Fuller for his opinions on possible alternative lines, once sending him a postcard asking:

‘What do you think of the line’ – I won’t get it quite right – ‘inch by inches, inch
by inch by inch?’ It’s a very good line, a bit like ‘never never never never never’
[*King Lear*] but, you know, is it a bit much? I can’t remember what I said, it didn’t

¹²⁰ Douglas Dunn, introduction, *Robert Browning: poems selected by Douglas Dunn* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. xiii. In using ‘opulence’ Dunn is citing Thomas Carlyle.

¹²¹ Robert Browning, ‘Pauline’ (lines 6-7), *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 1.

¹²² John Fuller and Howard Sergeant, eds., *The Gregory Poems: 1983-84* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1985), pp. 40-42.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p 40.

survive as such, but that's a version of one of the lines in 'Quasimodo Says Goodnight'.¹²⁴ That's an example of how he would work [...] He very often would be undecided between two different versions or effects and he would ask me.¹²⁵

Imlah begins his poem as a dramatic monologue the type of which Browning would have recognised. In order to better elucidate how he then self-reflexively subverts the form, the dramatic monologue must first be defined.

Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is the poem often posited as the 'perfect'¹²⁶ dramatic monologue. This is because, Esther Loehndorf helpfully summarises, it features a 'speaker' (the Renaissance Duke), an 'audience' (the envoy of his prospective second wife), an 'occasion' (the visit of that envoy), as well as –

interplay between the speaker and the audience (the envoy's questions are implied in the Duke's answers), revelation of character (the Duke inadvertently talks about himself by talking about the Duchess [his wife, who he may have had poisoned]), dramatic action (the Duchess' death and the Duke's new plans), and action taking place in the present (e.g. the Duke and the envoy going downstairs).

'QSG' features the speaker (the hunchback), an occasion (he has entered Esmeralda's cell), revelation of character (as we shall see), dramatic action (he has saved the gypsy girl, hauled her to the cell, fed her) and action taking place in the present (he draws near, and pulls the bedcovers over her to keep out the chill). But missing are the 'audience', i.e. the auditor, and the 'interplay' with that auditor. For Esmeralda, we discover, is asleep and thus an ignorant presence within the poem. If the presence of an auditor is afforded a crucial role, then only the poem's first stanza is a 'perfect' dramatic

¹²⁴ lines 74-75: '...to ease you from the crusty bedding inch / By dazzling inch, by unimagined inch.' 'Quasimodo Says Goodnight', *Birthmarks*, p. 35.

¹²⁵ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

¹²⁶ Esther Loehndorf, *The Master's Voices*, p. 175. Loehndorf interprets the 'formal checklist' of what constitutes the perfect dramatic monologue as provided by Ina Beth Sessions ('The Dramatic Monologue', *PMLA* No. 62, 1947, p. 508).

monologue. In his opening address Quasimodo believes Esmeralda is only *feigning* sleep – ‘while you pretend this deafness I can call you / Esmeralda’ – and trapped by this pretence, for to ‘express / Our difference in painful gesture’ as she has done before would reveal her wakeful state. Only at the beginning of the second stanza, when he has shuffled close enough, that Quasimodo discovers that she is in fact genuinely asleep, her mouth’s ‘little purse of air’ borrowed from the ‘sweet purse-mouth’ of Tennyson’s ‘Maud’:¹²⁷

And yet come closer; look, your mouth is open
 Where a little purse of air blows in and out
 And in and out; and in the mild adventure
 Of a dream you cannot scale the height
 To which these hands have hauled your daily fear

Without his initial misunderstanding, Quasimodo would have no auditor and whether he *speaks* these words would be called into question. It could be, instead, an *inner* monologue. At the start of the second stanza the hunchback discovers Esmeralda is asleep and the dramatic monologue effectively becomes – as there is no auditor – an inner one. By including a conscious auditor in the first stanza and then removing it (or rather, by revealing it not to have been conscious all along), Imlah – taking ‘youthful pleasure in pure skill’¹²⁸ – acknowledges that the presence of an auditor is argued as important for a poem to be a Browningsque dramatic monologue, but it is unnecessary for his own poem to work. He sheds the auditor: Esmeralda, ignorant, is effectively reduced to a figure Quasimodo could be dreaming up or watching through a window.

It should also be noted that, if the definition outlined above is applied, then ‘QSG’ is the only dramatic monologue in *Birthmarks*: ‘I Have a Dream’, ‘Goldilocks’,

¹²⁷ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘Maud’ (line 71), *Alfred Tennyson: The Major Works*, p. 307.

¹²⁸ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Mick Imlah: Selected Poems*, p. xiii.

‘Visiting St Anthony’, and ‘Cockney’, for instance, are all past-tense ‘dramatic narratives’ (Imlah’s term),¹²⁹ as is the first section of ‘The Zoologist’s Bath’. The brother’s reference to his sister Catherine in the third-person at the start of the poem’s second section confirms that his monologue is not being delivered to her, but to himself.

Because it is not delivered to a discerning auditor, the inner monologue is freed from the pressures of propriety: in my poem ‘Outside Elizabeth Greenwood’s’, the vicar can pine for his forbidden love; in my ‘An Aurelian Watches His Wife’, the naturalist can fantasise about ‘purpling’ the neck of his straying young wife. However, this freedom also has the potential to limit the poem: as the speaker can be completely honest, no disequilibrium is able to emerge between what the speaker aims to communicate and what they in fact communicate. For instance, in ‘My Last Duchess’, while the duke conveys a sense of loss over his late wife, we discern that he was jealous, perhaps had her murdered, and is indecently eager to attain a dowry from a new marriage. We find him morally repugnant yet simultaneously understand his situation on his terms. Robert Langbaum writes:

It is safe to say that most successful dramatic monologues deal with speakers who are in some way reprehensible or odd, so as to heighten the tension¹³⁰ [...] We understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathising with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgement we have suspended for the sake of understanding.¹³¹

Doing so produces in the reader a ‘psychological revelation’:¹³² our sympathising with the speaker, however reprehensible their misdeeds, reveals to us how wide our sympathy can stretch, encompassing even the most reprehensible of characters. This in

¹²⁹ Mick Imlah, biographical note, *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman & Society Contemporary Writing No.1*, p. 16.

¹³⁰ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 85.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

turn humanises those characters to us and challenges the assumptions of our own morality. Browning was accused by his contemporaries of ‘perversity’ precisely because, in Langbaum’s words, they ‘found it necessary to sympathise with his reprehensible characters’ and discovered themselves enjoying doing so.¹³³

On first reading ‘QSG’, Quasimodo, as the hero of Hugo’s novel and one who receives only ingratitude from the girl whose life he saved, has our sympathy from the very first stanza, when he describes how Esmeralda cannot look at him but only –

Wince, or feel for the wall, or quickly thank me
For my beans or let that pity fly
Sidelong

The clever line break makes the reader’s eyes act out the very movement described, while the embittered questioning makes the reader judge Esmeralda, for seemingly having at some point reproached Quasimodo for delighting, innocently, in her rare beauty:

I should be sorry,
Esmeralda, should I? I am wicked
Sneaking back to watch you sleeping – am I?
...
 encircled by my tread
You suffer each unseen approach in silence
Or a sigh, and fumbling trespass fails because
While you pretend this deafness I can call you
Esmeralda, and you cannot think me
Beast, because I want you, and I should not.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

The impression of Quasimodo's sneakiness is enhanced sonically by the insistent use of sibilance in the opening stanza: /s/, /z/, and /ʃ/ are all present. His entrance contradicts what he said he would do when he first installed Esmeralda in the cell: that he would come near only when she slept, and then only as far as the door or window, for 'the owl never enters the nest of the lark'. But the switch from a 'perfect' dramatic monologue to one without an auditor, outlined earlier, renders Quasimodo's actions legitimate after all: Esmeralda is genuinely asleep, comfortable enough to be performing what Hugo describes as the 'pout peculiar to her'.¹³⁴

However, the often dark recesses of the male psyche when it comes to love and lust bubble just below the surface. Esmeralda's sleeping pout – recalling the shepherd in Keats's *Endymion*, whose face 'repos'd / On one white arm, and tenderly unclos'd, / By tenderest pressure, a faint damask mouth / To slumbry pout' –¹³⁵ conjures innocence that renders discomfiting Quasimodo's lurking. Esmeralda's 'half-uncovered' back – recalling Porphyria's 'smooth white shoulder bare' in Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover'¹³⁶ – can be taken metaphorically to mean that Quasimodo, as he is 'quasi man', potentially possesses mixed motives: he is protector but also potential predator. He, like the draught, might 'muscle' inside her bedclothes. This lends sinister new meaning to his earlier thought, while stooping over her, that he could –

love you as I pleased while you
Could only hate more closely than you do.

Instead, he is content to 'love' her only with his eyes. The notion of possessing someone by gazing upon them as they sleep again recalls 'Porphyria's Lover'. Just as the

¹³⁴ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, p. 237.

¹³⁵ John Keats, 'Endymion' (lines 402-405), *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1988), ed. Christopher Ricks, p. 144.

¹³⁶ Robert Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover', *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, pp. 122-124.

lover in Browning's poem strangles Porphyria to death with her own hair so that he can stop time at a single perfect moment, Quasimodo desires Esmeralda's continued sleep so he can watch her at leisure.

A likely germ of Imlah's poem was the sad 'verses without rhyme' Hugo has Esmeralda overhear Quasimodo singing as he busies about the belfry. 'Do not look at the face / Young girl, look at the heart' is a neat summary of 'QSG', 'beauty' an important word:

Beauty loves only beauty
[...]
Beauty is perfect,
Beauty is capable of anything.
Beauty is the only thing that does not exist in half measures.¹³⁷

This preoccupation with beauty is present in 'QSG':

whosoever
(line 26) You consider beautiful seems not
To come
(line 42) How accidental beauty seems!
(line 58) Beauty waits, and knows its hour,
And falls in questions
(line 69) If we were of one element, say beauty
(line 83) But my beauty is all in dreams.

The obsessive soul-searching over 'beauty' continues in the penultimate stanza, in which female beauty is described as 'a careless miracle' designed 'to tease us' – the 'us' intended to refer not only to those men who look like Quasimodo. He yearns for female beauty in his life, but must watch it from a distance, from high atop his 'lofty beams'. He also yearns for beauty guiltily, having been brought up to think himself

¹³⁷ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, p. 351.

unworthy of its company. As we will see again in the poem 'Doing It', beauty is an act – almost a weapon – turned upon the male protagonist, because it stirs within him desires that he has been brought up to feel ashamed of and/or unable to act upon:

When I saw your naked back just now,
Because in the end I had to, just at the simple
Form of it, why did I shudder and see flame?
Could you, who did it, tell me?

Esmeralda is thus *doing* beauty to Quasimodo, as though consciously, like a siren from the rock: a common patriarchal conceit of female powers which Browning articulated in *Pauline* as 'whoso sucks a poisoned wound / Envenoms his own veins!'¹³⁸ Hugo portrayed beauty as one of the fruits of God's genius, but a poisoned fruit. Just as the sailors in Tennyson's 'The Lotos-Eaters' are lost to a narcotic bliss in which they desire 'long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease,'¹³⁹ so Quasimodo becomes so obsessed with the gypsy girl that on her body's interment into the Montfaucon vaults he, inconsolable, goes to it and clutches it until he himself perishes into the 'dreamful ease' in which his fantasies – communicated in Imlah's poem – will come true.¹⁴⁰

Rather than be resolved, Quasimodo's 'fancies' merely intensify into a 13-line sub-clause that is almost a love sonnet in its own right, a protracted divagation the deployment of which achieves the effect of spontaneous speech. In this fantasy, Quasimodo is as beautiful as Esmeralda, able –

To rouse you with a face, and not a plate,
And greet you with a smile, and get a smile;
To ease you from the crusty bedding inch

¹³⁸ Robert Browning, 'Pauline' (lines 11-12), *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 2.

¹³⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters' (line 98), *Alfred Tennyson: The Major Works*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁰ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, p. 465.

By dazzling **inch**, by unimagined **inch**;
To throw the trapdoor on new feats of air

The repetition of ‘to’, ‘smile’ and ‘inch’, and the caesura-like mid-line commas – with the second half of the line repeating or chiming with the first – reinforces the feeling of obsessiveness. The hunchback and the gypsy would, in his ‘clasp’, perish and ‘go like stone together’. This conjures Larkin’s ‘An Arundel Tomb’, in which, in such ‘faithfulness in effigy’, the earl is depicted with his hand withdrawn from a gauntlet ‘clasped empty’, and holding instead the hand of his countess – they are ‘linked, through lengths and breadths / Of time’.¹⁴¹

And when we perished in my clasp we’d stay
And go like stone together, and be thought stone
By the Deacon, and he’d overpay the Mason,
And a new boy would toll the morning bell, –
But my beauty is all in dreams; and now you stir,
Poor angel; you have slept with me; thank you.

Esmeralda’s stirring is a response to ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, in which the narrator declares that ‘all night long we have not stirred’.¹⁴² Quasimodo enthuses ‘you have slept with me’, a statement neither literally nor figuratively true. His innocence of the potential double entendre heightens the reader’s sense of his naivety, an innocence reaffirmed by the simple ending: ‘thank you’.

‘QSG’ depicts how Quasimodo’s heroic act of saving Esmeralda fails to offset his deformity in her eyes. Love’s self-deception flickers within Quasimodo as a fantasy – that he could ever possess a different appearance, or that she could grow blind to his disfigurements – but it must remain a fantasy. The hunchbacked bell-ringer’s

¹⁴¹ Philip Larkin, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 45. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁴² Robert Browning, ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (line 59), *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 124.

predicament mirrors the common predicament of being hamstrung by a lack of confidence, a self-perception of unattractiveness without and – perhaps – within. The only difference is that Quasimodo’s outward unattractiveness is not merely self-perception, but fact. ‘His body,’ Imlah stated shortly after *The Zoologist’s Bath* was published, ‘is a physical representation of the kind of self-doubt or disqualification everyone feels in certain relationships’.¹⁴³

Quasimodo acts out a common male fantasy: attempting against the odds to win, with some fateful heroic act, a reciprocation of love. His motives and feelings are thus not exclusive to hunchbacked bell-ringers, and this fact humanises him. As well as being universal they are also timeless: he cannot be discounted as a protagonist specific to a now distant age. If the best dramatic monologues widen the gap between our sense of morality and our sympathy, ‘QSG’ demonstrates that the best dramatic monologues also narrow the gap between our perceptions of the past and of the present.

Browning’s dramatic monologues enabled him to reinvigorate and make sentient characters in historical or imaginary episodes, and Imlah has likewise reanimated the hunchback with a sentience Hugo’s novel omits. By doing so through a dramatic monologue – a form which, in mimicking the psyche’s ebb and flow, conveys a story in rich multilayers – Imlah brings Quasimodo closer to us than ever before and we see that, within at least, he is not dissimilar to ourselves.

*

In my poem ‘Acting’ I co-opt the character of Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the point in the novel at which he is introduced to the reader – when he saves Esmeralda from being kidnapped by Quasimodo – but only as

¹⁴³ ‘An interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*.

conceits by which to tell an altogether different story. In an example of postmodernism's 'frames within frames',¹⁴⁴ the thinker of this inner monologue is merely a contemporary amateur actor *performing* the role of Phoebus in a stage adaptation of Hugo's novel. The actor's part parallels and illuminates the circumstances of the actor himself:

Did I, knight in shining – plastic – armour,
thrill you with my gallant entry? Did it
portray me in a whole new light, dashing,
in the nick of time, before the footlights?

Hugo's lament that the Latin arcades and Corinthian colonnades of Paris were in decay even as they were at their most beautiful ('it is the setting sun that we mistook for the aurora'¹⁴⁵) is recycled to refer to the actor and the audience member's past relationship having been cut short:

please, meet my eye
and, with yours, tell me I did not mistake
the setting sun for our aurora,
that snow-lit afternoon in the long ground

when you befriended a chestnut horse
and, stroking his blaze, named him after me.

The horse reminds us that, it being a stage adaptation and an amateur one at that, the actor lacks the mount by which Captain Phoebus rode to Esmeralda's rescue: the actor is a pathetic figure, who hopes his approximation of Esmeralda's handsome rescuer will

¹⁴⁴ Tim Woods, 'Postmodernism and the literary arts', *Beginning Postmodernism*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁵ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, p. 169.

make his ex-lover see him in a new light. At the end, he and Phoebus, and she and Esmeralda, are one and the same:

But here's my cue, my name is asked:
'Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, my dear,
at your service.'

This and another inner monologue, 'Outside Elizabeth Greenwood's' – which transforms into an object of desire the old crone ostracised as a witch by her village ('that see your chin and deem it / pointed; that see your red cloak and deem it / scarlet') in Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*¹⁴⁶ – illustrates how literary characters can prove ripe for reanimating in poems. Imlah's 'QSG', however, demonstrates a more puritan commitment to such intertextuality: it remains faithful to Hugo's character and setting. The fact it manages to do so while imbuing Quasimodo with convincing, universal feelings is a testament to Imlah's skill.

*

In 1983, aided by John Fuller, Imlah – together with Bernard O'Donoghue, Nicholas Jenkins, Nicola Richards and Peter McDonald – revived the venerable publication *Oxford Poetry*, which had been defunct for twenty years. McDonald, in his elegy for Imlah, would write of his friend submitting his typescript 'an hour before the copy went to press' –

a sheet where every other line was stiff
with Tippex, and over the patches your own hand,
elegant even there, even in biro.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2004).

¹⁴⁷ Peter McDonald, 'Oxford Poetry', *Torchlight* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011), p. 18.

Re-launched in thirty-two pages as a tri-annual publication, *Oxford Poetry* redux began the tradition of the *Oxford Poetry* interview, in which a poet is questioned about poetry in general and their own in particular. Imlah was himself the interviewee in the second issue. His interviewer, Jenkins, sensed that, as the process of putting the piece together went on, Imlah grew increasingly ‘ambivalent’ about it:

Mick was a real perfectionist and I think it was often hard for him to finish things and release things to the world. That might have been what got difficult in the final stages, because we were trying to put this thing together and finish our interview. I think that was hard for him, writing out prose answers about himself. I feel his adoption of all these different personae was a way of him not having to say something directly, and he was better at getting to the truth obliquely, or sort of winding into it rather than heading straight to it. And the interview process is antithetical to that.¹⁴⁸

As he did in his Oxford entrance interview seven years earlier, Imlah comes across as defensive. There is a young man’s show of individuality (‘I’ve always liked Tennyson more than most people seem to’), humour (‘I’ve eaten lumps of cheese before sleeping because that’s meant to stir up vivid dreams’), and forthrightness (‘Critics will often try to find your poems like someone else’s because it makes their job easier – that’s lazy and frequently false’).¹⁴⁹ Only in two places is Imlah less guarded: when asked if his background is an influence, he discusses how he finds it easier to write about places he has not been to in ‘imaginary travel poems’; and when asked why he writes relatively slowly, he is disarmingly open:

¹⁴⁸ Nicholas Jenkins to author, 1 Mar 2013.

¹⁴⁹ ‘An interview with Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry*.

It's a worry when they're [poems] nearly finished, because they're what you do, and you want to be thought good at it. I don't like sending things out for public display with holes or patches. So I revise, much too much. In the quest for polish or evenness you can rewrite the life out of a thing. Revision – mine, anyway – tends to substitute the elaborate for the simple; trying to turn everything into a flashy 'good bit'. In 'Quasimodo', for example, I replaced the hunchback's desire for a simple exchange of affection with the girl ('To greet you with a smile, and get a smile') with a reference to his role as a scorned provider of food ('To greet you with a face, and not a plate') – because I thought the latter was smarter, funnier. I can see now that the first version was truer to the character's situation and idiom, and that the second interrupts the momentum of the fantasy.

His defences become raised again when Jenkins asks him if the slowness of his production has 'anything to do with a problem in accommodating private experience into a fictional context'. Imlah reacts: 'Why's that a problem? Do you think my poetry is especially defensive of its origins?' Jenkins responds with 'perhaps' and Imlah continues:

But what are the origins? [Citing his poem 'Insomnia'] No-one's interested in a student not being able to get to sleep. You're protecting the reader as much as yourself by working your insomnia into a myth. And poems soon detach themselves from whatever provoked them; they're not a secret therapy, and they're not a coded version of the poet's life.

However, by the end of his answer Imlah is conceding that how he wants to appear personally does affect a poem: he substitutes the sentimental for the 'smarter, funnier' so as not to appear 'soft or naïve'. His doing so is acknowledgement of the truth of Clyde de L. Ryals's statement that the reader ultimately recognises even in a Browningsque poem that the narrator is 'pure artifice, over or behind whom hovers the figure of the poet'.¹⁵⁰ Esther Loehndorf reminds us that –

¹⁵⁰ Clyde de L. Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography*, p. 4.

although the poet is not the speaker, his presence in the poem is nevertheless one of its central features. The interplay between the poet and persona may perform a crucial task for the former, offering a freedom of self-exclamation he may lack in his everyday identity.¹⁵¹

‘My narrators are becoming more thinly drawn,’ Imlah admits, before describing the ‘overreacting priggishness’ of the narrator in his poem included alongside the interview: ‘Doing It’. The fact that this poem remained uncollected, appearing in print only once more, in the Salamander Press anthology of the 1983-84 Eric Gregory prize winners,¹⁵² suggests it is one of the poems he had in mind in his response to Jenkins’s question: ‘What sort of poems do you want to write now?’

I don’t know that many poets have that much control. You might as well ask me to design my children – not that I think of my poems as children. I don’t much like the ‘sort of poem’ I’ve been writing lately; they’re nasty, lurid, not colourful. They take place in alleys and toilets in places like Norwood [a district of South London, neighbouring West Wickham]. I yearn for the open air.

‘Doing It’, a 96-line narrative loosely in blank verse, takes place on a ‘Common’ that bears the hallmarks of Hayes Common, lying a mile southeast of West Wickham (*see appendix photograph 5*). In its final stanza, the narrator turns ‘light-footed into Commonsides’, the name of a road at Hayes Common’s south-eastern corner. This is supported in the opening stanza’s description of the girlfriend’s parents who ‘stored their lives and hers / Beyond the Clump, in a house with woodland views’. The houses along Commonsides do indeed enjoy woodland views, and, approaching from the direction of West Wickham, stand on the far side of two hectares of shrub heath – perhaps the ‘Clump’ – that now form part of the Keston and Hayes Commons Site of

¹⁵¹ Esther Loehndorf, *The Master’s Voices*, p. 155.

¹⁵² Mick Imlah, ‘Doing It’, *The Gregory Poems: The Best of the Young British Poets 1983-84*, pp. 46-48. All subsequent references are to this version of the poem.

Special Scientific Interest. The ‘estate’ from where the smoking boys hail could be any of a number that fringe the Common. The ‘disease’ or ‘blight’ that had been ‘done to the Common’ is Dutch Elm Disease, a particular virulent strain of which tore through England’s elm woodland during the 1970s and 1980s, and was widely in the public consciousness when the poem was written. Five Elms Road at the north-eastern corner of the Common attests to the historical presence of elms on Hayes Common.

Whereas many young people at university embrace independence and return home infrequently, for Imlah home was a ‘happy bolt-hole’¹⁵³ where he had a full other life, socialising, dating, and playing for the local cricket team. The setting of ‘Doing It’ is this bolt-hole, and follows Shakespeare, Hardy and myriad literary works between (including Tennyson’s ‘Rizpah’¹⁵⁴) in experiencing a ‘blustery’ night that both provokes and reflects the inner drama of the characters. In this case, the character is an 18-year-old ‘prone to self-consciousness’ whose propriety, ‘fractured’ by ‘the snap of birds / And rustles of the wind’, ruptures to reveal otherwise repressed desires: he mistakes a stricken elm tree lying in his way for ‘a pair / Of copulators knotted on the path’. These desires lend a double meaning to the ‘disease’ from which the Common suffers: the fungus afflicting the elms, but also the ‘disease’ – as it might be deemed from a priggish viewpoint – of boys’ sexual desires. If pestilence is said to be retribution for sins committed, it is no surprise that the tree containing the estate boys’ cache of porn is struck by the blight.

While he is priggish, we know the narrator to be no better than the estate boys – after all, he too has visited the porn cache for his ‘chosen story’, and the ‘non-event’ of going weeks without receiving what he thinks he has the right to expect from his girlfriend has ‘vexed’ him. His comment that ‘some kids don’t know fear / Not of

¹⁵³ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘Rizpah’, *Alfred Tennyson: The Major Works*, pp. 437-441.

themselves, of lovers' betrays that he is one of the kids who does know that fear. He possesses both a fear of himself because of his repressed desires, and a fear of his girlfriend: he looks up at her bedroom window with a 'ferocious sneer' because she, simply by virtue of being of the opposite sex, provokes those desires. As someone to lust after, but also to be repelled by, she is a confusing figure to him. The same patriarchal conceit present in Quasimodo's view of Esmeralda is present here: the narrator feels the girl is *doing* something *to* him, her beauty causes him to feel frustrated desires that he believes are unbecoming.

When he arrives at his girlfriend's home, the double entendre of 'something was up' is confirmed by the 'wooden loins' when he takes her to see the public coitus, only to realise it is a tree:

she took some time to say 'Stupid –

It's a *tree*.' And of course that's what it was
When you saw things from her side; a length of trunk
Upended by disease, or shock, or a vandal,
Whose roots were twisted into pairs of feet,
But further up, was hollow at the core;
And patting whose wooden loins I was free to mock

An embarrassment, that was suddenly only my eyes'.

The mistake, to her, is an innocent one of mis-seeing, while we and the narrator know it to be one arising from sexual excitement easily triggered in him because of the 'weeks of non-event'. He wanted her to see a pair of fornicating 14-year-olds to make her realise even couples some years junior to them are 'doing it', and thus her own sexuality should not be kept 'stored' away. The potentially millions of copulating couples are 'careless', while he, who is not 'Doing It', is full of care. This realisation dawns on him as

morbidly as that which struck Tennyson, used by Imlah as an epigraph to his 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson': 'I remember once in London the realisation coming over me, of the *whole* of its inhabitants lying horizontal a hundred years hence.'¹⁵⁵ The 'lying horizontal' is of a different kind in 'Doing It', where 'the thought' –

Dogged me as far as her door, that everywhere –
In Zululand, on paths in Bushey, Herts. –
There were hundreds and thousands and millions of careless twos
At that very moment doing it;
Just quietly doing it.

The stanza – its shorter final line tempering the pace, conveying the slow dawning of realisation – recalls Larkin's poem 'High Windows', in which he sees 'a couple of kids / And guess he's fucking her and she's / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm'. 'I know this is paradise', Larkin laments, a paradise that has passed him by.¹⁵⁶

In 'Doing It', the narrator 'dragging her / Ways she wasn't equipped for' to get to the copulating couple has a double meaning too: its redolence of male sexual pushiness is reinforced by his concession that she would be justified in fearing his story is a pretext to get her into the woods – a 'tactic, or some prank / Less decent than we both knew she deserved'. As sex is on his mind, he sees a couple having sex; as sex is not on hers, she sees a stricken tree. At the end, he stands exposed to himself and us: his notion of being superior to the estate boys is, like the tree, 'hollow to the core'; his 'loins', pricked by what he thought he had seen, are left 'crippled' by the realisation of his mistake and what, self-mortifyingly, it reveals about him.

The conceit allows Imlah to explore how young men struggle to balance propriety with feelings of desire. Guilt can follow the belief that romantic feelings are

¹⁵⁵ Tennyson cited by Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁶ Philip Larkin, 'High Windows', *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 17.

compromised by sexual ones. The fact the narrator's girlfriend fails to comprehend what the situation reveals about him suggests such hang-ups are inconsequential, a waste of time. As we shall see next, in his poem 'Solomon', there was present in Imlah's poetry at this time a young man's exploration of what are the 'correct' or 'appropriate' things to think and feel towards the opposite sex.

*

Though not ostensibly a dream narrative, with its nightmarish backdrop, neurotic senses and eerie mirage 'Doing It' is of a piece with the 'dreamy world'¹⁵⁷ that characterises Imlah's poetry of the early 1980s.

Within *Birthmarks*, 'I Have a Dream' is a surreal investigation of attitudes ('Couldn't I tell them apart, the whores and the victims, / The black and the white?') inspired by a mirage-like view of 'Atlanta (or was it Atlantis?)' that, like an apparition, 'vanished in smoke and dust'; 'Visiting St Anthony' – which appeared alongside 'Doing It' in *Oxford Poetry* – describes a mirage-like counterfeit holy site; 'Abortion' is a surreal conflation of a hangover and a foetus' abortion; waking after a night's heavy drinking is also the backdrop to 'Birthmark'; 'Goldilocks' is an account of finding an intruder asleep in one's bed, then dreaming of it later; a father dreams in 'Crime and Punishment' of murdering a pensioner; the narrator of 'Insomnia' is kept awake by a neighbour's radio and fantasises about bursting in on her 'To nudge like BOO the button OFF'; 'QSG' features a sleeping, dreaming girl being watched over; the narrator of 'Jealousy' experiences 'bad dreams' because he fears his girlfriend is being unfaithful; and 'The Drinking Race' sequence stemmed from Imlah 'waking up once, after a drink

¹⁵⁷ Nicholas Jenkins, 'An interview with Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry*.

or two, having dreamt vividly the taste of human blood¹⁵⁸ – the sincerity of this account open to question, particularly when it follows his remark about eating cheese before bed-time to stoke such deranged dreams:

I don't think I approve of using dreams in poems, but I do it. About half the poems refer to them, or at least to that grey area between waking and sleeping. The narrators are often in and out of bed because that's where I get the ideas for their poems.

John Fuller has written of Imlah's 'metaphysical diffidence'.¹⁵⁹ The 'dreamy world' of 'Doing It' and other poems is essentially a metaphysical one in which, cloaked by ornate metaphors and insulated from cliché or – in Imlah's view – from appearing 'soft or naïve', a diffident poet is free to explore potentially embarrassing scenarios.

Influenced in tone and form by 'Doing It' and inspired by a dream (or nightmare), my poem 'The Party' portrays a party gate-crashed by a gang of vampire-like drug dealers, the leader of which is a mysterious woman with 'sky-blue eyes, / seashell hair; a stare to shiver the coolest man' who laughs at the concept of love, preferring instead 'landing in kicking-out time's backstreet / and taking by surprise some pissing fool / until he's a pool of blood at your feet'. This surreal poem's contents can be explained by the implied admission at the end that it has all been a dream:

I will let you all go, and you will wake
to New Year's morning in your beds
with nothing the worse for wear but your heads.

¹⁵⁸ 'An interview with Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry*.

¹⁵⁹ John Fuller, 'The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 18.

A surreal, dreamlike setting excuses the surreal and dreamlike story that ensues, the hinterland where the rational and recognisable meets the irrational and unrecognisable redolent of that ‘grey area between waking a sleeping’. Just as the subconscious is liberated in a dream and can be safely dismissed as a dream, embarrassing feelings or scenarios can be liberated in a dreamlike dramatic narrative, and safely dismissed as only a poem.

*

The predicament of the titular king in Imlah’s 101-line poem ‘Solomon’ is, on the surface, as far removed from the narrator of ‘Doing It’ as can be. This is a king with 700 wives and 300 concubines, mining ‘the virgin seam’ for ‘a world of wives’ whose names he rarely troubles to learn. The poem grew tangentially from a draft entitled ‘The Morning’, another tale by Imlah in which the narrator wakes up the morning after a night’s mistakes.¹⁶⁰ ‘The Morning’ conveys a Larkinian fear of feeling trapped in a relationship with ‘shellfish’ women, blown-up to a Solomonian scale:

in truth, women are shellfish, poured ashore
and borne in pailfuls to the marketplace;
each seems unique, and patterned with a self
no artist could imagine; so you buy;
but what’s within? At the rare best, one pearl,
and I’ve already spent a million pearls
and only one out of a million shells
yields even as much as that. As for the worst –
to claim them is to be yourself possessed,
and not by anything you thought you chose –

You’ve spent your life beachcombing for bad dreams!

¹⁶⁰ Mick Imlah’s papers in the possession of Jane Wellesley, Kensington. Seen by author 28 Mar 2014.

This fear of being ‘possessed’ recalls Larkin’s dread of something ‘pushing’ him to ‘the side’ of his own life,¹⁶¹ dread of the life that in his view would result from allowing another person to bear him ‘irrevocably off’ and have a claim ‘on everything I own / Down to my name’.¹⁶² But it was too openly rueful, the disillusionment it communicates too self-pitying and the metaphor too pat to have escaped Imlah’s censure. An early epigraph to ‘Solomon’ – a quotation from Coleridge’s *Anima Poetae* – was also cut:

Who ever felt a single sensation? Is not every one at the same moment conscious that there co-exist a thousand others?¹⁶³

This quotation, in the context of ‘Solomon’, can be read not only as a potential justification for the king’s bedding a new bride daily, but as a defence of infidelity in general. The quotation is taken from a paragraph by Coleridge, ‘The Continuity of Sensations’, that might have been the germ for artistic expression being the conceit, in Imlah’s poem, to extract from Solomon his confession that inner discontent results from his endless sexual encounters. The full paragraph from Coleridge reads:

Is not every one at the same moment conscious that there co-exist a thousand others, a darker shade, or less light, even as when I fix my attention on a white house or a grey bare hill or rather long ridge that runs out of sight each way [...] is it anything more than the light-point in every picture either of nature or of a good painter?¹⁶⁴

In Imlah’s poem, these nuanced shades of colour are personified as Solomon’s women.

The king’s ‘palette’ as an amateur artist ‘flourished’ because –

¹⁶¹ Philip Larkin, ‘Afternoons’, *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 44.

¹⁶² Philip Larkin, ‘Places, Loved Ones’, *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1991), p. 16.

¹⁶³ Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., *Anima poetae: from the unpublished note-books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Heinemann, 1895), pp. 102-103. [<https://archive.org/details/animapoetaefromu01cole>, accessed 2 Apr 2014].

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

every day I'd venture in fresh fields
To add unknown sensations to the spectrum;
For each submissive blonde was her own shade,
And no black would repeat her neighbour's hue,
So every Sabbath I could call to view
A startling rainbow arched over the week
Whose seven elements combined anew

Coleridge's argument that life is not a succession of individual sensations but an 'undivided duration' of 'indivisible' sensations¹⁶⁵ is made manifest in Solomon's attempt at making 'monumental sense / Of all I'd known': a 'mural tribute' to his 'world of wives'. The urge to create such a thing is understandable when we remember what Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi says about depicting his – admittedly far fewer – conquests:

we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see¹⁶⁶

But in Solomon's mural, 'so many dates and skins and faces' end up drying into 'one stain'; the king realises that his 'single mind' had 'come to fuse the bright particulars / That women brought, in a brown, saming fog'. The professional artist he summons to advise him on this mess effectively champions fidelity when we remember that the word 'colours' is interchangeable with 'women' in this context:

*Colours (he lectured me!) blossom apart,
But they corrupt each other – mix 'em up,
You're bound to get the same, dull, mineral brown.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Robert Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (lines 300-302), *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 181.

Sex with a new partner daily, like alcohol or any drug, loses its potency, and becomes routine: 'my habit overruled my sense'. It becomes a dependency shorn of enjoyment, and shorn too of all glamour. As Fra Lippo Lippi says: 'You don't like what you only like too much'.¹⁶⁷ There follows Solomon's confession:

Sometimes it seemed a mixed lot – never to know
The simple conjugation of the mass
Of choiceless men and women – *he* and *she*
Boarding each other like a bus in sunshine –
Snug in the mouldings of their married berth
They sleep together now, like slotted bolts.

The 'mouldings' and 'married berth' recall Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', where side by side the earl and countess lie, 'his hand withdrawn, holding her hand'.¹⁶⁸ Larkin's poem communicates that, intended or not, the tomb is an emblem of the idea of marital fidelity, a fidelity that somewhere within himself Solomon craves. Here, then, Solomon is not dissimilar to Quasimodo, whose fantasy of becoming 'like stone together, and be thought stone' with Esmeralda also recalls the stone effigy in Larkin's poem.

Imlah's deftly-deployed anachronism of the 'bus in sunshine' – no tenth century BC reference, that – betrays Solomon's inner suspicions that sex between 'choiceless' couples is a wholesome, and thus innocent, act. Here, 'choiceless' is not meant in a pejorative sense, for to Solomon sexual commitment is a wholesome symptom of love, and it is love that he lacks. Couples are locked together like 'slotted bolts', yes, but they are 'snug'. Of course, fidelity is only ever, in Larkin's words, 'almost instinct', and any portrayal of sexual commitment can only ever be 'almost true', but to Solomon choice –

¹⁶⁷ Robert Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (line 262), *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, p. 180.

¹⁶⁸ Philip Larkin, 'An Arundel Tomb', *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 45.

sexual freedom – has become wearying like an addiction, ‘a mixed lot’ that satisfies compulsions but not the heart.

However, the king quickly lets his habit overrule his sense once more, and the window onto his soul slams shut. He concludes that the couples have entered into ‘choiceless’ predicaments because they had no other options to forego in the first place, unlike he, who, ‘given greatness’, has all ‘the colours of the map’ to choose from: ‘who on earth governed a sum of parts / Equal to mine?’ The Queen of Sheba’s devotion to him, in his view, ‘wore her charm away’, and she left for the coast where she weaves again and again hangings for his bed, the latest being ‘no clear improvement on the ones before’: to fall for, or settle for, one person, Solomon tells himself, is to stagnate. But the reader has seen, through a brief window into his soul, that he suspects the opposite is true: anonymous sex stagnates into the ‘saming fog’ of habit, while the inner self goes malnourished.

The hunchback of ‘QSG’, the priggish boyfriend of ‘Doing It’, and King Solomon are united in their possession of veneers that are the very reverse of their inner selves: Quasimodo’s malformed visage obscures wholesome, desirable virtues; conversely, the priggish boyfriend’s propriety conceals unvirtuous desires; and Solomon’s sexual bombast conceals great insecurity. Their predicaments convey how man’s power of self-determination is hampered by innate fancies, desires and feelings: his masculinity is undermined by his need to be loved; his respectability is undermined by his need to conquer. The poems – which are, Alan Hollinghurst has written, likely to evoke in their ‘tones and gestures’ and ‘shades of irony, a shadow portrait of Imlah in his 20s’¹⁶⁹ – communicate a youthful questioning of whether these traits can be compatible. The answer lies in the nature of each poem’s ending: there is no resolution, and things merely continue on the way they were before.

¹⁶⁹ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Mick Imlah: Selected Poems*, p. xiii.

Chapter Three

Editorship

In 1983 Andrew Motion relinquished the editorship of *Poetry Review* and encouraged his friends Mick Imlah and Tracey Warr to apply for the role. Warr received a telephone call from Imlah, who said:

‘I’m thinking of applying and you’re thinking of applying; why don’t we apply together?’ So we did. We joined forces before the interview. We just thought that would be a way of wiping out the competition. We thought our strategy through quite carefully about getting the job.¹⁷⁰

The strategy worked: Imlah and Warr were appointed jointly. For a ‘really paltry salary divided between two people’, they worked every Monday at the top of the Poetry Society’s building at 21 Earls Court Square, hemmed into a room hardly big enough for both them and the postbags of poems (as well as the sandwiches Imlah’s mother made for them). Warr found her co-editor ‘sociable but not very confiding’:

He wasn’t secretive, just private. He was one of my best friends for at least five years but then when I think about it I think, well, actually, what did I know about him? He didn’t volunteer a lot of information about himself. I just got the impression that in a way that elusive aspect of his personality was necessary for his poetry somehow. It was like something he was guarding because that’s where the writing was coming from. Also he had a very dry sense of humour; you couldn’t

¹⁷⁰ Tracey Warr to author, 31 Jan 2012.

always tell when he was being serious. And that was a kind of defence, another part of being elusive.

Conscientious in working through the sacks (*Poetry Review* receives 50-60,000 submissions a year), they passed back-and-forth between them those poems they thought potential inclusions. At interview they had sold themselves on the basis that they were young and were going to 'shake things up', so the Poetry Society knew what to expect:

We were never quite sure at what point they were going to get fed up with us and decide we had gone too far or were alienating the core membership. We were determined, for instance, to get the word 'fuck' into *Poetry Review*. But they did give us a lot of rope. I don't remember anyone saying 'what do you think you're doing?'

Their first issue, September 1983, signalled the shift towards what would later be described as a journal 'gossipy, editorial and vigorous in its assumption of high standards'.¹⁷¹ An idiosyncratic front cover depicted Craig Raine's face inside the silhouette of a tomato (*see appendix photograph 6*):¹⁷²

Mick did have a really wicked sense of humour; on the edge of malicious I would say! Things like having Craig Raine on the cover with a tomato on his face – I'm sure that was Mick's idea and I went along with it! [He had] a sense that really poetry needed a bit of a critical edge applied to it. I don't think he was wrong about that – it was a bit smug and self-congratulatory and inward-looking. We did see ourselves very much as iconoclastic, which wasn't hard within the Poetry Society at that time because *Poetry Review* was quite staid.

¹⁷¹ Fiona Sampson, ed., *A Century of Poetry Review* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), p. xx.

¹⁷² *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No.3, Sep 1983.

In a break from the trusted format of poems at the front and reviews at the back, they installed at the magazine's heart a 'Shorts' section ('News-Reviews-Previews-Competitions-Letters') which gave Imlah a space in which to bring his wit to bear on his peers. The Shorts section might have been Warr's idea in principle, but its writing was collaborative, often brainstormed in the pub:

We introduced crosswords and quizzes, a league table of book sales – which we probably made up – and slightly frivolous things [such as] a letters page we often wrote ourselves.

The first Shorts section included a review of Benjamin Zephaniah reading at the National Poetry Centre ('ranting doggerel');¹⁷³ under the headline 'Cream Eggs' a report on the first Cadbury's National Competition of Children's Poetry, including, in full, an entry by a ten-year-old from Edinburgh;¹⁷⁴ a competition set by Wendy Cope ('You are invited to rewrite up to 14 lines of any well-known poems in words of one syllable') with £10 for the best entry; and an amusing letters page that readers had to digest with scepticism as to its authenticity.¹⁷⁵

The most notable issue of Imlah and Warr's co-editorship was its second, themed 'Alcohol and Poetry'.¹⁷⁶ They hoped the subject would prove attractive to eminent names: the issue has its place in posterity for including 'Party Politics', the last lines of poetry Larkin wrote before his death.¹⁷⁷ The issue began with a tone-setting quotation from an account in John Haffenden's *The Life of John Berryman* ('We went to John's room and he was vomiting his guts and blood out'), followed by a description of

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 40

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁷⁶ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Jan 1984.

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 505.

Tennyson's port habits¹⁷⁸ and dipsomaniac James 'B.V.' Thomson 'in the fullness of change wrought by his excesses'.¹⁷⁹ Under a photograph of Spender, Auden, Ted Hughes, Eliot and MacNeice standing together each holding a glass of wine, the caption read: 'On your marks...'¹⁸⁰ Also included, under the pseudonym 'Ralph Crozier',¹⁸¹ were two Imlah poems ('Starter's Orders' and 'Hall of Fame') that would eventually form part of his sequence 'The Drinking Race'. Another part of this sequence later titled 'The Irish Team' appeared in the April 1985 issue as 'The Drinking Race', under the pseudonym 'Philip Kiernan'.¹⁸²

The Shorts section of the 'Alcohol and Poetry' issue included a piece, headlined simply 'Woman Wins', criticising the National Poetry Society Competition's failure to 'unearth convincing winners from a total of 12,000 submissions'.¹⁸³ There was also a withering review ('Or Am I Being Paranoid?') by Blake Morrison of Michael Schmidt's recently published anthology, *Some Contemporary Poets of Britain & Ireland*.¹⁸⁴ Morrison accuses the introduction to Schmidt's anthology of being a thinly-veiled attack on an earlier anthology he, Morrison, had co-edited. In the following issue, under the heading 'Anthologies Battle', Michael Horovitz voiced support for Schmidt and labelled Morrison's anthology 'a patently shoddy piece of bookmaking'.¹⁸⁵

Imlah himself would weigh in when he felt it required. He came to the defence of a poet he admired, Peter Reading, when one of Reading's poems was accused of anti-

¹⁷⁸ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Jan 1984, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* 'Ralph Crozier' is described in the contributors' notes as 'teaching history at a comprehensive school in Suffolk'.

¹⁸² *Poetry Review*, Vol. 75, No. 1, Apr 1985, p. 8. 'Philip Kiernan' is described as 'engaged in a study of Austin Clarke's poems'.

¹⁸³ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Jan 1984, p. 37. The 'woman' was Carol Ann Duffy. Her winning poem, 'Whoever She Was', is described thus: 'Much of the detail is predictable, and the language is not very interesting[...] It is notable for having more full-stops than lines'.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁸⁵ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, Apr 1984, p. 50.

Semitism by the *Times* newspaper. Imlah quoted Tennyson's response to a review of 'Maud' to draw a parallel:

'If an author pipe of adultery, fornication, murder and suicide, set him down as the practiser of these crimes?' To which Tennyson replied: 'Adulterer I may be, fornicator I may be, murderer I may be, suicide I am not yet.'¹⁸⁶

After five issues of co-editorship, Warr left *Poetry Review* to become press officer at Chatto and Windus, leaving Imlah in sole charge. The poems included in the January 1985 issue show a taste for the surreal narrative: there is 'Ryan's Rebirth' by Sean O'Brien ('I step from the wardrobe unblinking / [...] And my mouth has been pissed in by goats');¹⁸⁷ an odd 14-liner from Richard Murphy ('You can't give every spall's lost face / a niche in the anchoretic oratory');¹⁸⁸ a sestina by Dana Gioia mocking sestinas and poetry workshops that encourage them;¹⁸⁹ and a two-page poem, 'National Trust' by Lawrence Lerner, redolent of Imlah in its fantastical divagations.¹⁹⁰ The reviewing team began to take on the look of a new generation, with Michael Donaghy, Michael Hofmann, Lachlan Mackinnon and Oxford contacts Mark Ford, Nicholas Jenkins and Bernard O'Donoghue all contributing pieces.

The final issue under Imlah's auspices was published in June 1986: a 124-page 'England special' featuring 'The Counties of England', a collaboration of 39 six-line poems between Imlah and John Fuller, written under the pseudonym 'John Bull'.¹⁹¹ In concept and execution, it recalls Donald Davie's 1974 book-length sequence *The Shires*, which explored England's history ('Drake, / This is the freedom that you sailed from

¹⁸⁶ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2, Jun 1984, p. 34.

¹⁸⁷ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4, Jan 1985, p. 22.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.

¹⁹¹ *Poetry Review*, Vol. 76, No. 1/2, Jun 1986, pp. 27-33.

shore / To save us for?),¹⁹² neighbourhoods ('St Catherine's Hill, upon / Wolvesey Castle, the Cathedral Close')¹⁹³ and literature ('Housman came, savage recluse, / Lover of boys'),¹⁹⁴ while modernity ('Spaghetti Junction on the M / 6 is, shall we say, / a comparable alternative solution / to a problem of traffic-flow')¹⁹⁵ both endangers and complements these things. Davie's sequence referenced his wartime postings around England, but Imlah and Fuller's is shorn of the personal. Imlah, for example, felt the end to Fuller's 'Lincolnshire' was 'too private':¹⁹⁶ the line after 'there, at Alkborough, you may draw breath' was changed from 'and if Nicky's at home she will give you a cup of something'¹⁹⁷ to 'in a village reputed still to believe in God'. In 'Essex', Imlah responds – with the lyricism the subject of England could draw out from him – to Davie's poem of the same name which had claimed that 'Names and things named don't match / Ever':¹⁹⁸

Out of the Thames' discolouring clutch are broad fields
 And towns named after flowers. Centuries ago
 They picked the crocus in the morning for the tiny
 Yellow stigma, dried in a day, pressed into blocks.
 Three thousand of them crushed into a pound; and the streets
 Of Saffron Walden clogged, with drifts of purple petals.

Nicholas Jenkins recalled that, at this time, Imlah was 'more interested in things like rural English cathedrals than he was in Robert Burns':

¹⁹² Donald Davie, 'Devonshire', *The Shires* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 13. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁹³ 'Hampshire', *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁹⁴ 'Cambridgeshire', *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁵ 'Warwickshire', *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁶ Mark Ford citing John Fuller, 'Mick Imlah & John Fuller: The Counties of England', a paper delivered to the conference 'Mick Imlah: His Life & Work' at Senate House, University of London, 10 Dec 2010.

¹⁹⁷ John Fuller, 'Lincolnshire', *Collected Poems*, pp. 416-417.

¹⁹⁸ Donald Davie, 'Essex', *The Shires*, p. 18.

At that time he was really into English iconography and culture. The people he was writing about – and he did write parts of his thesis – were English poets. He was really, really interested in English cathedrals, English folklore, anything that wasn't mainstream English culture. Things that had been forgotten, or things that he could have an ironic endorsement and parody of at the same time. So the time that I knew him, I never really thought of him as being really, distinctively Scottish at all: it didn't really seem like the centre of his life or his imagination.¹⁹⁹

Imlah revealed as much in his *Oxford Poetry* interview with Jenkins, when he declared that Scotland was 'not something I'd write about':

I have a gimmicky nostalgia for England as I imagine it was between the wars, or before concrete buildings, or whenever. One of my favourite books is a 1949 Batsford Book called *The Counties of England*, full of the charm of Rutland etc [...]. Quite often I lament the felling of the elms in the Suffolk village of Long Melford, which I learn from the Batsford Book were very fine, though I don't know whether the elms have been felled or not, and I haven't been to Long Melford.²⁰⁰

In 'Solomon', when the '*English* come to mind', the king rather lyrically pictures –

Cathedral greens; the brass of trumpets blown
Through blazed cheeks; stipple winking from a pond;
Blood on the dairy floor, and the rum buff
Of a spring sky; the quick flare of blue
Skimmed by the kingfisher through evenings dim
With dying bonfires

Eight of Imlah's contributions to the collaborative 'The Counties of England' appeared – some with alterations – in *Birthmarks* two years later.²⁰¹ 'Northamptonshire', historically known for its shoe-making industry, is 'shodding Britannia's March Through

¹⁹⁹ Nicholas Jenkins to author, 1 Mar 2013.

²⁰⁰ 'An interview with Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry*.

²⁰¹ Mick Imlah, 'from The Counties of England', *Birthmarks*, pp. 28-30.

the Centuries'; a cleaner, sifting a 'mound of rejections' after a brainstorming session by 'ambitious young toe-rags' trying to invent a slogan that captures 'Bedfordshire', is 'nodding at every half-hearted depiction of Eden'; in 'Somerset', birds have come 'to sit with the stillness of leaves in the afternoon shadow / Of Taunton's twin towers: big Botham and Richards'. A revision Imlah made to Fuller's 'Kent' was telling: 'Where even now the fields still smell of beer' became 'Where even now the outfielders smell of beer'. Imlah, Fuller wrote, 'could only think of fields in terms of cricket'.²⁰²

The 'England' issue of June 1986 was Imlah's last as *Poetry Review* editor. He took up the role of Junior Lecturer in English at Magdalen, and submitted a manuscript of his poems to Andrew Motion at Chatto and Windus. *Birthmarks* was published in 1988.

*

Birthmarks included the six poems from *The Zoologist's Bath*, with 'Brawl in Co. Kerry' slotting into a six-part 'The Drinking Race' sequence. 'I Have a Dream' and 'Visiting St Anthony' had already appeared in *Oxford Poetry*, the latter also having been included in the Salamander Press's 1985 anthology of Eric Gregory award winners. Counting each part of the book's three sequences ('from The Counties of England', 'Mountains', 'The Drinking Race') as individual poems, there are 36 poems in *Birthmarks*, making for a slim, 61-page volume.

The collection's titular poem is a distillation of the uneasiness over the possibilities of self-determination communicated in 'QSG', 'Doing It' and 'Solomon': what of our thoughts and actions are innate, and what are determined by ourselves? Guilt and shame is made manifest as the drinker's flush that the narrator wakes up with.

²⁰² Mark Ford citing John Fuller, 'Mick Imlah & John Fuller: The Counties of England'.

Just as the ‘classic sure-foot’ mountain goat lying ‘broken-backed / Among heathery boulders’ in the poem ‘Snowdonian’ shows that even the surest can slip,²⁰³ the narrator of ‘Birthmark’ finds himself slipping down the mountain of respectability due to his drinking:

On my decline, a millipede
Helped me to keep count;
For every time I slipped a foot
Farther down the mountain

She’d leave a tiny, cast-off limb
Of crimson on my cheek²⁰⁴

A sense of fugue, of hangover, is accentuated by only a loose adherence to the tetrameter-trimeter ballad-like form and – in the first three stanzas – of the abcb rhyme. The near-rhymes in these stanzas suggest a narrator struggling to exude the clear-headedness he requires to avoid the fate that might befall him if he continues his excesses. For increased dramatic effect at the moment of realisation, the second stanza, with its startling self-reference and ellipsis, leaves the thought hanging:

She’d leave a tiny, cast-off limb
Of crimson on my cheek
As if to say –
You’re hurting us both, Mick...

This unguarded self-reference is striking amid a collection layered in the fictive, the public nature of it only enhancing the sense of masochism in the poem, the almost revelling in unravelling which addicts can experience: ‘I saw in this gradual sacrifice /

²⁰³ Mick Imlah, ‘Snowdonian’, *Birthmarks*, p. 43.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, ‘Birthmark’, p.48.

No end of merriment'. The narrator hasn't taken the drinking seriously: a 'broken vein or two' is 'hardly / Memento mori'. But the 'thousandth' night of drinking – '(Or thousandth-and-first)' – has on this morning brought his face out in a full drinker's flush. The full-rhyming inevitability of his downward trajectory comes to the fore as he sobers up to the realisation that he is doing himself damage:

This thousandth morning after, though
(Or thousand-and-**first**)
I miss her, and a bedside mirror
Bellows the **worst** –

A big, new, bilberry birthmark, stamped
From **ear** to livid **ear**,
Her whole body of blood's
Untimely **smear**.

She must have found, shaking her sock
For warnings, that the hoard was **spent**,
And had to stain me with her death
To show what she **meant**

'Untimely' injects a powerful sense of sadness. The untimeliness is prematurity: the drinker has consumed a life's worth of alcohol while still young. The millipede's hoard of warnings, after all, is spent, and now he must bear the indelible 'purple face' of his shame, the envelope rhyme in the final stanza communicating his being enveloped by his fate:

it's as bad to fall **astray**
As to start from the wrong place.
Now I have earned the purple face.
It won't go **away**.

This denouement complements the poem ‘Cockney’, in which an attendee at a dinner party (‘it seemed an acceptable social *milieu* / If only because it was something like six million light years away from the planet of Millwall’)²⁰⁵ becomes neurotic that he will betray his working-class origins which, he believes, the other guests would adjudge as the ‘wrong place’ to have come from. He fights to avoid being ‘reclaimed’ by the origins his mother’s ghost, lurking in his peripheral vision, reminds him of: ‘You are the same little boy that I sent out in winter with *Cockney* inscribed on your satchel!’ It is all in vain: he is soon holding forth in full clichéd cockney (‘ALL ROYT MOY SAHN! HA’S YOUR FARVAH?’) and showing his ‘purple salami’. The poem pokes fun at social climbing; it is futile to deny one’s origins, just as it is futile for the priggish boyfriend to deny his sexual desires or for Solomon to deny love’s importance. We are all fallen, whether the ‘purple’ face is on the outside or the in. Thus we are all equal, which makes the judgemental dinner party ‘toffs’ grotesque, and the social climber risible for aspiring to be one of them.

Both ‘Birthmark’ and ‘Cockney’ exhibit a sensitivity to class and social mores, written by someone who – in attending public school and Oxford – moved in a ‘social milieu’ perhaps removed from that known by his parents. His preoccupation with origins is confirmed by Imlah himself in a booklet of Chatto poets published a year after *Birthmarks*, in 1989. Inside *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman Contemporary Writing No.1*, Imlah’s biographical statement read:

Most of my poems are dramatic narratives, which have to work as stories first. Sometimes the narrator suffers an unpleasant shock when his origins or natural limitations re-assert themselves. Hence the title of my book: *Birthmarks*.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, ‘Cockney’, pp. 36-37.

²⁰⁶ Mick Imlah, biographical note, *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman & Society Contemporary Writing No.1*, p. 16.

Such a description applies to ‘Birthmark’ (natural limitations) and ‘Cockney’ (origins), but Imlah was confident enough that it applied to *Birthmarks* as a collection that he wrote the statement before knowing which poems would appear alongside it. In a letter to Chatto, he favoured the inclusion of ‘Goldilocks’ most of all, but also listed ‘Tusking’, ‘Birthmark’, ‘Clio’s’ and ‘Cockney’.²⁰⁷ As it was, space dictated that ‘Birthmark’ and ‘Clio’s’ were included. Fellow Chatto poet John Fuller featured in the same booklet, his biographical statement reading similarly to Imlah’s (as well as to the poetic preferences Imlah described in his *Oxford Poetry* interview with Nicholas Jenkins):

I’ve always believed that poetry is better when it is entertainment rather than rapt self-communion, and my metaphor for that entertainment is Palace of Varieties rather than Grand Opera. I would prefer poems to be fantastic, riddling, horrific, erotic, or plain fun, rather than ‘true’. The truth of poetry is a function of the reader’s pleasure. I teach at Oxford, but do most of my writing on a Welsh mountainside.²⁰⁸

That Welsh mountainside is a range of slopes on the Llŷn Peninsula between Pwllheli and Caernarfon where, in 1969, Fuller bought a remote former shepherd’s cottage. The two-up one-down – with views of the coast of Anglesey, the lighthouse at Holyhead, and Caernarfon Bay – regularly hosted writing parties on weekends and university vacations. Imlah stayed often, as did Nicholas Jenkins and Alan Hollinghurst. Word games, chess and ‘ferocious’ pontoon²⁰⁹ – ferocious enough that on one occasion £100 changed hands²¹⁰ – were played. Imlah’s natural competitiveness came through in these pursuits and in his invention of ‘Welsh Golf’ (sic):

²⁰⁷ Mick Imlah to Zoë Heller, 17 Apr 1989. This letter is in the Chatto and Windus archives, Rushden. Seen by author 25 Mar 2013.

²⁰⁸ John Fuller, ‘John Fuller’, *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman Contemporary Poetry Writing No.1*, p. 10.

²⁰⁹ John Fuller, ‘The Early Poetry of Mick Imlah’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 21.

²¹⁰ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

Mick was ferociously keen. We had to have little booklets to keep our score in, like golfers. He invented these very specific rules for it [totalling four pages], and I remember them to this day. You had to set off from a particular stone outside the cottage and you had to kick [a tennis ball] down into a couple of fields below, on a slope. And hit a particular post, like croquet or something, and you had to kick it up, over the cottage roof, up to the gate, up the drive, and then down again and finish up in a sort of gutter area. You did it like golf, there was par for the course, a certain number of shots, an absolutely amazing game. If you went for a walk and Mick was there you had to take a ball or something.²¹¹

Typical of their time together in Wales was the occasion of their writing their respective biographical statements for Chatto's *New Statesman* booklet. Fuller met Imlah off the London to Bangor train – arriving 15.42 – on Thursday 13 April, and Imlah stayed until the end of the following week.²¹² The drive from Bangor railway station to the cottage would be –

occupied by the London gossip. The sexual and poetical life, curiosity about whatever others do and what is going on, outrage at injustices, one's sense of inadequacy, the defusion of humour.²¹³

Imlah would return from his walks up the mountains behind the cottage with tales of how he had got lost and nearly fallen off. He and Fuller would pick mushrooms and puffballs, search for more pieces of a crashed Halifax B11, and plunder the disused quarry nearby. Photographs show Imlah wielding a pick-axe (*see appendix photograph 7*). Back in the cottage, more games were played, work done, and whiskey consumed by the fire in the evenings. Fuller describes how, when Imlah came to visit –

he would often bring work with him. And he was a very, very diligent reviewer. He'd annotate in pencil the books that he was reviewing. He would engage with

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² John Fuller to author, email, 5 Apr 2013.

²¹³ John Fuller, 'Imlah at Magdalen', p. 5.

them very fully. I mean, rather more than I think I ever did as a reviewer. I would kind of read books and have my ideas and flaunt my opinions and do it as quickly as I could probably, but it was always a considered task for him. My wastepaper basket in Wales was always full of these crumpled-up sheets of this, that and the other. He was a conscientious worker.²¹⁴

In 'Games', a poem Fuller wrote in the early 2000s with a sense that Imlah's visits to the Llŷn Peninsula were growing less frequent, an exhumed Tennyson and Browning are drinking whiskey over a game of cards. Smoke in the rafters emanates from a cigarette being enjoyed by a characteristically maudlin Tennyson:

'I have in mind,' says Alfred, 'an account
Of life as a perpetuity
Of warring graves, a diminishment

Lit only fitfully by eyes
Looking up in uncertain hope
From the pressed latch of the trysting-gate.²¹⁵

Browning's response to this bleak musing – 'Surely it is precisely there / That the betrayals proceed unhindered?' – is as an allusion to the preoccupation with fraught sexual and romantic anxieties in Imlah's work. 'Will you not join us?' Fuller asks Imlah, who has left his hiking boots by the door. When Fuller tries them on, they instil in him a desire to –

run on the spot with little steps
Like a substitute preparing himself,
Or to kick out at foxgloves, wildly.

²¹⁴ John Fuller to author, 30 Oct 2012.

²¹⁵ John Fuller, 'Games', *Ghosts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), p. 64-65.

The trying on of Imlah's hiking boots is a metaphor for Fuller trying out his friend's talent for returning the Victorian poets to life. Imlah did this by deploying their forms and diction, and, later, by writing a poem marking the centenary of Tennyson's death in which Victoria's laureate takes leave of his afterlife and returns to earth for the night.

*

In 1989, Scottish poet and academic Robert Crawford's review of *Birthmarks* appeared in the *London Review of Books* as part of an article exploring the increased importance of 'home' in contemporary poetry.²¹⁶ Crawford assessed Douglas Dunn's seventh collection, *Northlight*, as emblematic of a 'poet inscribing himself in his cultural home, and championing it with skill'; Dunn's 'stance' of preoccupying his poetry with his home country of Scotland by this time – and rejecting 'patronising' London – 'commands admiration'. Assessing the anthology *The New British Poetry*, Crawford quotes from a poem by Grenadian poet Merle Collins that is concerned with the 'need to throw off a feeling of shame "when de man ask/whey you from?"'

In this context Crawford reviews Imlah's collection which, he states, asks the question "'whey you from?" in a lively variety of ways'. He naturally focuses on 'Cockney' and 'Goldilocks' which, to him, showcase how 'under the cosmetic voice-surgery of social climbing lies the Ur-accent of home':

After the geneticist of 'Goldilocks' has elbowed out the wheedling tramp, he confides to the reader: 'Och, if he'd known *I* was Scottish! Then I'd have got it.' That 'Och', the verbal birthmark, is again the revenge of home, the insistent inner 'Whey you from?'

²¹⁶ Robert Crawford, 'Callaloo', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11 No. 8.

In contrast to that of Dunn's collection, Crawford's assessment of *Birthmarks* is wary about how serious, and indeed how concerned with 'home', this new poet is. His origins are not so easily locatable. Writing from a 'donnish milieu', Oxford's common rooms, has this poet – the reviewer infers – the right to parody accent and dialect that is not 'Proper English'? More than twenty years later, Crawford admitted to his wariness in a review of Imlah's *Selected Poems* for the *Scottish Review of Books*:

Though [...] brought up as a child in Milngavie, Mick did not sound at all Scottish. This roused suspicion in me. [...] A rugby-mad and privileged English public schoolboy he had glided from editing *Poetry Review* to looking after poetry for Chatto. It all looked like effortless superiority: from Dulwich College to Magdalen College, Oxford, where in 1983 Mick helped re-found the magazine *Oxford Poetry* [...] I found it hard to forgive Mick for appearing such an Olympian Oxbridge toff.²¹⁷

Notwithstanding these reservations, Crawford's review of *Birthmarks* was favourable. He remembers shortly after the piece appeared 'breathing a sigh of relief' that it was so, because 'unexpectedly, Mick became my editor at Chatto'.²¹⁸

Andrew Motion had personally recommended his friend for the poetry editor position that he was vacating at Chatto and Windus. Imlah accepted the job offer, moving full-time into his London address of 133c Ledbury Road – 'my time is served', he would write in his poem 'Namely', 'in a place off Portobello' (see appendix photo 8). Crawford quickly realised any misgivings he had about this change at Chatto were misplaced: Imlah oversaw the publication of Crawford's second collection, *Talkies*, and

²¹⁷ Robert Crawford, 'Birthmarks', *Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 11 Nov 2010 [http://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/index.php/back-issues/volume-six-2010/volume-six-issue-four/377-birthmarks-robert-crawford, accessed 5 Jan 2012].

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

helped it gain a Scottish Arts Council subsidy.²¹⁹ ‘I came to respect him as a superb editor. He was disconcertingly shrewd,’²²⁰ Crawford recalled –

I remember Mick being very good at picking up any repeated words within poems, and querying whether the repeats were deliberate, or added anything. He did do a careful line-by-line read-through.²²¹

Imlah inherited a poetry list that included himself and Crawford, as well as John Fuller, Selima Hill, Alan Jenkins, Lachlan Mackinnon, and Carol Rumens. To these he soon added Gerard Woodward, receiver in 1989 of an Eric Gregory Award from a panel chaired by Fuller, who had subsequently published a pamphlet of the 29-year-old’s poems with the Sycamore Press. Attractive to both Fuller and Imlah were the fantastical qualities of Woodward’s poetry, in particular his ability to twist suburban tranquillity into the nightmarish. In *Householder*, the collection Imlah signed for Chatto, the local greengrocer fantasises about eating ‘young girls’ breasts, / ‘To have the blood running down his jaws’;²²² the local ‘malcontents, the friendless’ are secret cannibals who may rise up together to plunge society ‘into a soup of self-consumption’;²²³ the barber ‘giggles with his back-to-front face’ as he evangelises the need for ‘a time of bald supermen’.²²⁴ As the narrator of Imlah’s poem ‘The Zoologist’s Bath’ would agree, humanity as we know it is evolving in a strange direction: ‘Something has just surfaced in the gene pool / And is climbing out and drying itself.’²²⁵

Woodward met Imlah several times at The Coal Hole pub in London’s Strand to discuss the collection, the poems spread out across a table. Imlah chose its name and

²¹⁹ Robert Crawford, *Talkies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).

²²⁰ Robert Crawford, ‘Birthmarks’, *Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 6, Issue 4.

²²¹ Robert Crawford to author, email, 25 Nov 2013.

²²² Gerard Woodward, ‘Meeting the Greengrocer’, *Householder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), pp. 69-70.

²²³ *Ibid.*, ‘Forbidden Food’ (canto 3), p. 24.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, ‘A History of Hair’, p. 55..

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, ‘Forbidden Food’ (canto 5), p. 26.

organised the poems into four sections, each with its own title. He ‘did a sort of Ezra Pound’ on the long sequence ‘Forbidden Food’, shortening it and reordering the cantos.²²⁶ Woodward noted that ‘the collection really took shape around his idea of what was important and how certain poems group around certain themes’. When *Householder* was published, in 1991, it won the Somerset Maugham Award. Woodward noted Imlah’s reluctance to be on stage when they subsequently went on a reading tour together:

He was quite uncomfortable as the host having to introduce me. He was always hoping someone else would do it instead, like the manager of the bookshop or something. There was a shyness about him. There was very much two sides to his character: this boisterous horse-playing rugby type and a very shy poet.²²⁷

That year also saw Imlah publish *The Weakness* by Bernard O’Donoghue, whose work was already published in Ireland by Gallery Press (*Poaching Rights*, 1987) but yet to make its debut in the UK.²²⁸ Imlah had been aware of his friend’s poems since their Florio Society days. ‘He’d seen me doing a couple of poems a term, a poem a month,’ O’Donoghue said –

for the previous ten years really, so he knew them, and he was involved in the printing of my Sycamore pamphlet [*Razorblades and Pencils*, 1984] as well. And he had the Gallery book. He came from London [to Oxford]. I remember meeting him at a pub near the station on a Friday night and he said ‘come on, we’ll do your book, let’s sort it out’.²²⁹

O’Donoghue remembers receiving further editorial help from Imlah some years later,

²²⁶ Gerard Woodward to author, 9 Feb 2012.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Bernard O’Donoghue, *The Weakness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).

²²⁹ Bernard O’Donoghue to author, 26 Apr 2013.

when putting together his third collection. Imlah included one of its poems, 'Ter Conatus', in the *TLS* in 1997 and again in the anthology he co-edited with Alan Jenkins, *A Century of Poems: from the pages of the TLS 1902-2002*.²³⁰

['Ter Conatus'] was radically changed by Mick in the middle of it, one phrase in the middle of it, vastly improving it because it got rid of sentimentality and put something rather harsh. I think the phrase was 'even for chemotherapy', which was Mick's phrase. He had put this ring of truth into it.

The poem describes a sister and brother who have lived and farmed together for sixty years. Despite being very ill, the sister delays seeing the doctor until it is too late 'even for chemotherapy', a startlingly clinical and memorable puncture of the poem's pastoral lyricism.

O'Donoghue's poetic preoccupation with his County Cork upbringing, his sense of Ireland being his true home, and the playful scope of a poem like 'The Atlanteans' in particular,²³¹ is reminiscent of later Imlah with Scotland. 'The Atlanteans' places Ireland in an Atlantic seaboard context, informing us that in prehistory the island of Ireland was once attached to Africa and what is now Morocco, so when politicians speak of 'giving the country back' to who it belongs, how far does one go?

I am at
Speaker's Corner, half-hearing an Arab's
Cryptic challenge to the old-time socialist
Who'd asked for questions from the Hyde Park idlers.

'When you gain power, will you give Ireland back
To Morocco?'

²³⁰ Mick Imlah and Alan Jenkin, eds., *A Century of Poems: from the pages of the TLS 1902-2002* (London: Times Literary Supplement, 2002) p. 149.

²³¹ Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Atlanteans', *The Weakness*, p. 46.

Then, in proto-Imlavian fashion, the poet playfully invents fictional evidence to support spurious or prehistoric, long defunct connections:

I've heard it said, if you close your eyes
And listen hard in Marrakech or Fez
You will hear wafted out of the bazaars
The Lament for Staker Wallace

It and other poems also deal with how, in Imlah's words, 'sport matters / Because it doesn't matter',²³² how on match days it can provide a totem of national identity that is of increased importance to someone in exile:

I'm just scanning *The Tribune*
For team news, prior to watching
The All-Ireland final in the Odeon,
Praying to God they don't let us down again.

If Woodward and O'Donoghue's work was of a piece with Imlah's own tastes, his next signing showed he did not let personal preferences confine his editorial decisions. He and Mark Ford had been introduced to each other by Nicholas Jenkins in Oxford's King's Arms pub one night in the mid-1980s when Ford was writing a PhD on John Ashbery at the university. Imlah, then *Poetry Review* editor, took one of Ford's first poems for publication:

I had a notion of poets, as you do, of being rather bespectacled and Larkinian and sort of unglamorous in a way. And what was striking about Mick was that he made poetry seem quite cool, which clashed with my no doubt completely erroneous

²³² Mick Imlah, 'Stephen Boyd' (lines 61-62), *The Lost Leader*, p. 99.

sense of what poetry scenes were like. *Poetry Review* under his editorship was quite sort of sassy and fun.²³³

Ford was surprised when Imlah took his collection, *Landlocked*:²³⁴ ‘I didn’t think my verse would be his kind of thing, he wasn’t a John Ashbery fan; he was formalist and so on.’²³⁵ This might explain why Imlah demurred from being as editorially proactive with Ford’s book as he had been with Woodward’s and O’Donoghue’s: ‘He didn’t edit a word,’ Ford recalls.²³⁶ But his poem ‘A Swimming–Pool Full of Peanuts’ is reminiscent of Imlah’s ‘I have a Dream’ in its American setting and dreamlike surrealism, and ‘Visiting St Anthony’ in its distrust of vision: the swimming pool behind the outhouse, filled with salted peanuts, is surely a hoax or a mirage. Perception is subjective, to be distrusted, while reality is something tantalisingly just out of reach. Its conclusion, in the way that it is a gloss on the events described and a verdict reached, recalls the end of Imlah’s ‘Goldilocks’:

I make this resolution never ever if you can ever avoid it
fool around with a swimming-pool like this one
well a swimming-pool full of peanuts is not worth the trouble.²³⁷

Working full-time at Chatto and Windus, Imlah entered a period lasting ‘three or four years’ in which he ‘couldn’t write poems’.²³⁸ In *The Coal Hole* with Gerard Woodward, he confided that –

he was frustrated because they [Chatto and Windus] were trying to make him do lots of other things. They were limiting how much poetry he could publish. They

²³³ Mark Ford to author, 9 May 2013.

²³⁴ Mark Ford, *Landlocked* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).

²³⁵ Mark Ford to author, email, 27 Sep 2013.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Mark Ford, ‘A Swimming–Pool Full of Peanuts’, *Landlocked*, p. 38.

²³⁸ *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, p. 98.

were restricting it to two collections a year, I think, and so there was very little scope for taking on new writers. He had to edit [England rugby captain] Will Carling's autobiography and other sports-related things. He was fed up not being able to do what he wanted.²³⁹

Imlah was supplementing his income with book reviews for the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday*. He was commissioned by the *TLS* to write a poem marking the centenary of Tennyson's death, which fell in 1992. Likely glad of the prompt, he wrote 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson', a poem of seven sections (including one consisting entirely of epigraphs and one of prose) that eventually filled the entire back page of the *TLS*'s special Tennyson issue, imposed over a photograph of the Victorian poet. Alan Hollinghurst, *TLS* poetry editor at the time, has since hailed the poem a 'tour-de-force'.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Gerard Woodward to author, 9 Feb 2012. In fact, it was *Captain's Diary: 1989-91*, by Will Carling (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).

²⁴⁰ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction, *Oxford Poetry: in memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 11.

Chapter Four

Afterlives

In 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson', Imlah, a poet always sensitive to the interplay between the poet and the poem, makes us aware that Tennyson's literary reputation is 'disembodied' from the man.²⁴¹ As Imlah wrote in the introduction to his selection of Tennyson's verse a decade later, by the end of his life Tennyson had so successfully managed his reputation and organised his posterity that 'at the last, succeeding to the properties of his own legendary gentleman, Tennyson had outworn the trouble of being alive'.²⁴² Imlah's poem makes a play of hoisting that legend by its own petard: in his afterlife, Tennyson must, forever, endure the sterility of the reputable milieu he wanted posterity to remember him as part of: after all, 'the trick of the afterlife is,' Imlah playfully suggests, 'that what you sign up for, you get'.²⁴³

Postmodern 'frames within frames' are present here: the tour guide-cum-impersonator delivers a monologue that we know not to be his nor Tennyson's: it is, of course, Imlah's. The fact the reader navigates two layers of artifice and still reads the dramatic monologue as if it was Tennyson's highlights the power of the form to suspend disbelief in the reader. In addition, by undergoing this manipulation the reader is made aware of how great the capability of a poet to manipulate them is and, in turn, how divergent Tennyson's public and private personas might potentially have been. The epigraph quoting from Henry James's statement that he saw 'the full, the monstrous

²⁴¹ Mick Imlah, 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 111-116.

²⁴² Mick Imlah, introduction, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: poems selected by Mick Imlah*, p. viii.

²⁴³ 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson', *The Lost Leader*, p. 114.

demonstration that 'Tennyson was not 'Tennysonian' after dining with him one night'²⁴⁴ reminds us that the Tennyson who spoke of little else than port and tobacco throughout the evening was not the same as the straight-laced public figure held in such high esteem.

Tennyson worked to consolidate, both on and off the page, the public reputation that he received following the success of what Imlah deemed 'the meeting of a morbid strain with a dearly needed occasion' – 'In Memoriam A.H.H.' – and his attainment of the laureateship.²⁴⁵ On the page, there followed 'more of what the Victorians called "Parnassian" – poetry produced by the ream under low pressure and generalised outlook':

Tennyson stands as he intended, as a great poet of proven range and formidable stamina: but one who is none the less ideally read in selection.²⁴⁶

Imlah's selection of Tennyson thus runs to 75 pages, less than half the number in Faber's companion volume of Robert Browning, edited by Douglas Dunn.

Off the page, Tennyson arranged his posterity: his insistence that his 'Crossing the Bar' end all posthumous editions of his poems Imlah likened to 'arranging his funeral, or stage-managing his carriage to Avalon'.²⁴⁷ His widow Emily and son Hallam acted on what they felt were his wishes by destroying thousands of letters; Hallam's two-volume *Memoir* of his father's life ('Hallam's obedient book', Imlah calls it in his poem) would, as John Batchelor writes, 'include nothing personal, nothing that the poet himself would have regarded as private, and nothing at all that glanced at a private life before or outside marriage'. The version of Tennyson they created was "'Victorian" in

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁴⁵ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: poems selected by Mick Imlah*, p. xi.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

both the strong and the limiting sense of the word'.²⁴⁸ So when in the first line of 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson' ('IMALT' hereafter) Imlah declares 'No one remembers you at all', the 'you' refers to the man behind the manufactured brand, obscured as he would have wished. For 'sanctified', read 'sanitised':

Now sanctified are your remains:
The poems; Hallam's obedient book;
The photographs your neighbour took
Of an old Jesus with food stains;

The rest is dressed up decently
And drowned

Because most of what we have to go on is still obedient accounts and the poems, any 'fake memorial', any poking fun at Tennyson, cannot hurt him, lending a double meaning to 'You are not here; you cannot fall'.

This opening section, in the abba iambic tetrameter of Tennyson's 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', is followed by a section of prose reportage in which the narrator describes breaking into the garden of what was once Tennyson's Sussex home, outside which he is confronted by a Tennyson impersonator or a tour guide, 'a student, or out-of-work actor', dressed as the Victorian poet. It is this figure who ultimately proves to be the 'flesh' by which Imlah proceeds to 'flesh out' his 'phantom Tennyson Centenary project'. The impersonator embarks on a monologue the form of which – lines of roughly nine metrical feet in rhyming couplets – recalls Tennyson's 'Vastness', a poem that questions whether life has any meaning, and whether it continues on in an afterlife:

²⁴⁸ John Batchelor, *Tennyson: to strive, to seek, to find*, p. 367.

What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own corpse-coffins at last,
Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence, down'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past?²⁴⁹

Tennyson ends 'Vastness' by insisting that there is an afterlife, as a comfort to himself after the death of his beloved Hallam: 'for I loved him, and love him for ever: the dead are not dead but alive.' Imlah, in 'IMALT', gives Tennyson a heaven to reside in, but it is a heaven he perhaps would not have relished. By portraying him as escaping it, and appearing before the narrator, Imlah renders comically literal the conclusion to Tennyson's poem: 'The Dead Are Not Dead But Alive!'

I knew him at **once** – for a student, / or out-of-**work** actor, or **worse**,
With **Tennyson's frock** and **fedora**, / and a **volume** of **Tennyson's verse**,
But even the **mouldiest music-hall** turn / would be **sunk** from the **start**
By a **stature** at **least seven** inches too **short** / for the **laureate's** part.
This was a **bloke** whose **Kraken** had **awoken** / for years twice a night
In **some shallow** provincial canal /

One of the aspects of Tennyson's work Imlah particularly enjoyed – 'an instinct for the weights and measures of words and lines'²⁵⁰ – is evident here. The long lines possess unrealised caesuras midway, after which there is either a continuance of the existing alliteration or a fresh set. Every noun in the second line above is alliterative. The abruptness of the fourth line's second half conveys the impersonator's insufficient height; 'part' references not only that the impersonator is acting a role, but that Tennyson himself – as Henry James discovered – was acting a part. The first half of the fifth line contains three plosive 'k's that conjure the writhing arms of the kraken, whose 'shallow provincial canal' recalls Eliot's 'dull canal [...] / round behind the gashouse'.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Vastness', *Alfred Tennyson: The Major Works*, pp. 459-461.

²⁵⁰ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: poems selected by Mick Imlah*, p. xii.

²⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' (III. The Fire Sermon, lines 189-190), *The Waste Land and other poems*, p. 30.

This kraken is regularly woken by, and diminished by, his postmodern suburban surrounds: not Tennysonian at all.

Tennyson is bored of a heaven bereft of all the furtive 'old pastimes' he enjoyed in life:

Ours is a sepia **parlour**, / a club without **pipes** or the **port**,
Half full of identical **males**, / where **Her Majesty** still **holds** court.
As we **strut** in our **standardised** jacket, / beards on our **standardised** face,
Dickens and **Grace** and myself are **dubbed** the Three **Graces** – / by **Grace**.
There isn't a future in Heaven; / no nightclub, or pool with Jacuzzi –
You walk in the **garden** with **Gladstone**, / or stand at the **piano** with **Pusey**

He struggles to get 'four for bridge' because contemporaries such as Edward Bulwer Lytton, Henry Edward Manning, Thomas Babington Macaulay and William Archer have been (down on earth) forgotten:

They're all cast over the margin and into the beggarly throng
Who bray for biography, down in the darkness, all the night long.

Arthur Hallam's fate is to be confined to the 'terrible cellar' of literary purgatory: neither completely cast over the margin nor distinctly remembered. His existence after death is only a 'half-life'; all that lives on of him is what was captured by Tennyson in 'In Memoriam A.H.H.':

His features appear where he gnaws at the grille of his terrible cellar,
Fading and growing and fading again with never a sound,
And but for my friendship his luminous half-life would choke underground.

Fearful of experiencing a similar fate, and bored of his own port-less, 'sepia' one, Tennyson has journeyed back to earth: 'There's times when you've got to get among folk to promote your existence.' Before he can embark on a recitation of his poem 'Maud' the narrator cuts him short –

Casting a jibe at him over my shoulder – You're not Lord Tennyson! –
Catching the small, disembodied retort, 'Well, neither's Lord Tennyson.'

Imlah thus ends by delivering his point explicitly: the Tennyson we have come to memorialise is merely a sanitised 'legendary gentlemen'. The dinner guest in 'Cockney', the priggish boyfriend in 'Doing It', and the king in 'Solomon' have shown us that people's true selves are divided, incoherent and often hidden, so any posthumous biographical portrayal of an undivided, fixed self can over ever be inaccurate. Even our names slip from us: Imlah deploys as an epigraph a quotation from *The Times* of 1948, in which Tennyson's grandson, the 3rd Baron Tennyson, states his denial that he was a drunken New Year's reveller who purported to be 'Lord Tennyson'. For the name Tennyson, so too Browning:

(Oscar Browning introduces himself):

O. BROWNING: I am Browning.

TENNYSON: No you're not.

- E.F. BENSON, *As We Were* ²⁵²

And at the poem's end, when Tennyson calls out at a séance 'Are you my boy Lionel?' and receives 'Not / The reply that he wanted' the answer has been a 'no': others are never quite who we think they are. If, as Imlah wrote, Tennyson's poetry was a 'shelter'

²⁵² 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson', *The Lost Leader*, p. 113.

for experiences that were ‘unsocial, shameful, and shaming to a degree’,²⁵³ then his constructed self served the same use. By condemning Tennyson to a stultifying afterlife suitable only for his sepia legend, Imlah good-naturedly teases him for his control-freakery towards how he would be remembered, and highlights the inherent inaccuracies of literary posterity more generally.

*

In 1993, Imlah left Chatto and Windus and went to work on *Departures*, the luxury travel magazine, while continuing to contribute book reviews to the *TLS* and the national newspapers. He confided to Gerard Woodward that travelling the world for the first time had put poetry into better perspective:

He was doing reports on exotic foreign destinations, and he said he was lying on the beach in the Virgin Islands saying ‘why on earth would I want to write poetry when I could do this?! Getting paid lying down on the beach in the Virgin Islands!’²⁵⁴

One thing he inadvertently forgot to take with him when he cleared out his desk at Chatto was his copy of another collaboration with John Fuller, an unpublishable 158-entry ‘Poetical Lexicon’ teasing writers past and present by inventing meanings for their surnames. John Fuller recalls that ‘Armitage’, for example, was as follows:

‘a familiar term for a precious but relatively inaccessible collection (from an eighteenth-century Huddersfield pronunciation of ‘Hermitage’, as in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg).’ Mick insisted that we substitute the following: ‘armitage, *sb.* Period of probation during which young offenders are held to be

²⁵³ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: poems selected by Mick Imlah*, p. ix.

²⁵⁴ Gerard Woodward to author, 9 Feb 2012.

exempt from criticism (cf. *dotage*, the similar dispensation extended to very old criminals).’ This shift of attention from mere obscurity to undeserved celebrity, with its allusion to [Simon] Armitage’s work as a probation officer, was typical of Mick’s twists of the knife.²⁵⁵

Unfortunately, the lexicon was discovered in a drawer by Imlah’s successor as Chatto poetry editor: Simon Armitage.

In 1994, the Poetry Society selected Imlah as one of their twenty ‘New Generation Poets’, a marketing exercise devised to boost sales of contemporary poetry. The chair of the Society’s voting panel, Melvyn Bragg, produced an hour-long edition of *The South Bank Show* for ITV featuring the poets, which aired nationally on 2 October ahead of National Poetry Day.²⁵⁶ Thirty minutes into the programme, Ian Duhig stated his belief that poets have a ‘different function in the temple of learning to scholars’ –

who have a peculiar, reverent attitude to what they’re supposed to be transmitting. I think poets have always been disruptive, anarchistic and suspicious in their use of traditional materials [...] I enjoy being a bull in a china shop with regard to academe.

Showing a sense of humour, the programme’s editors then cut to the sound of bells ringing over the cloisters of Magdalen College, Oxford, where a softly-spoken Imlah, dressed in a suit, extolled:

I think what people mean these days when they refer to the ‘Oxford tradition’ is John Fuller, the English don here at Magdalen College, who taught James Fenton, and a little later on taught me, and a number of his students went on to become novelists. I think what poets who have this sort of academic training do have in

²⁵⁵ John Fuller, ‘Imlah at Magdalen’, p. 6.

²⁵⁶ *The South Bank Show: New Generation Poets*, Season 18, Episode 3, written by Melvyn Bragg, directed by Susan Shaw, aired ITV, 2 Oct 1994.

common is concern for form. I don't think form is an optional extra you can take an interest in or not, I think it is a large part of the meaning of every poem.

From *Birthmarks* Imlah read 'Tusking', a 'deliberately simple-sounding poem, a nursery rhyme really' about colonial relations in Africa. The rhyme, seductive to the inner ear ('Out in the bush / Is silence now; / Savannah seas / Have islands now'), communicates an enigmatically postmodern, fragmented portrayal of old colonial masters as both overgrown public schoolboys and slaughtered elephants.²⁵⁷ Imlah signed-off with:

I would go as far as to say that a poem can be enjoyable *because* of its craft, almost regardless of what it has to say, though that's perhaps an old-fashioned view. Anyway [momentarily turns away from the camera, then back with a wry smile] Oxford's finished as a centre of poetry they say now, so we'll see.

In a special New Generation Poets issue of *Poetry Review*, the magazine's editor Peter Forbes heralded those selected as 'the true fruits of postmodernism',²⁵⁸ breaking away from the 'Oxford hegemony' and 'system of patronage' that had become 'debilitating'.²⁵⁹ However, Forbes added, a leftover remained:

Of all the poets here, the only 'traditional' poet in the sense of fully belonging to the Oxonian tradition, is Mick Imlah. He read English at Magdalen and John Fuller and James Fenton were his mentors [...] But whereas Fenton and his Oxford friends dominated the early 'eighties, Imlah, at present, is a marginal figure who has only produced one book and that six years ago. (Compare the hectic productivity of [Simon] Armitage and [Glyn] Maxwell).²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ 'Tusking', *Birthmarks*, pp. 9-11.

²⁵⁸ Peter Forbes, 'Talking About the New Generation', *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, p. 5.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

In his eagerness to see the ‘old Establishment’ thwarted, Forbes mistook quantity for quality and, later in the same piece, fashion for longevity:

Compare [Carol Ann] Duffy’s monologues with Mick Imlah’s ‘The Zoologist’s Bath’ – Imlah is richly Browningsque and the essence of dusty Oxonianism; Duffy’s have the stink of some new beast entering the language for the first time.²⁶¹

The poem ‘The Zoologist’s Bath’ is deemed a ‘quintessentially Oxonian work’ that is ‘no more than an excuse to indulge in the Browningsque’. Forbes discerned a connection between ‘the clenched formality’ of Imlah’s poems and his slow production rate, or ‘difficulty of writing’. Alongside this withering essay was ‘Tusking’ and a new poem, showing ‘an even greater obsession with shape’: ‘Past Caring’.²⁶²

In the shape of the pyramidal iceberg referred to in its opening stanza, this poem, about the fallout from Imlah’s twin sister’s alcoholism, unfolds into an elegiac study of illness and decline. A trail of sibilance, beginning in the opening anapaest with /f/, creates the sense of something furtive, secret, kept from the rest of the family. This secret can only be kept for so long, however, before something has to give:

As a **ship**
Sees only the tip
Of the **ice’s** pyramid
That has already **scraped** her **bows**,
We’d glimpsed that drink was **something** you overdid;
Now after the wreck I **sift** the damage you’d **stowed** in the **house**.²⁶³

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁶³ Mick Imlah, ‘Past Caring’, *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, p. 99.

The ‘damage’ stowed in the house is a noun, embodied as empty gin bottles. But it is also suggestive of intrusion (echoed later with ‘burgled’): a stowaway lying in wait below deck. The sibilance of stanza one is replaced by soft plosive ‘b’ sounds in the next, as the bottles knock against each other in the bin bags:

Eyes glazed
I fumble, amazed,
Through mounds of knickers and slips,
Extracting the **bottles** you’d **buried** there; these
I hump in their **binbags**, clashing against my knees
To the **‘bottle bank’**, by the **public baths**; it takes four trips.

The bcbc rhyme of stanza one having become a bccb rhyme, the longer wait for the rhyming word to ‘slips’ lends force to it when it does arrive, enhanced by the breath after ‘public baths’, which creates a stark, declarative statement: ‘it takes four trips’. After the long final line of this stanza, the opening line of the next – with its exclamation mark of incredulity – is startlingly staccato:

The gin!
No wonder you’re thin;
Hundreds of bottles of gin;
And feeding them singly into the ring
My arms grow weary from shifting the bottles of gin;
A numbing collection of lots of exactly the same thing.

The addiction-like repetition of the rhyme is like that of a nursery rhyme, suggestive of regression to a childlike state due to drink-induced infirmity. The length of the final line almost requires three small breaths – ‘A numbing collection / of lots / of exactly / the same thing’ – which tempers the pace and accentuates the sense of numbing repetition. In the next stanza, an incongruous image of a contemporary art installation featuring

gin bottles entering a bottle bank arises from ‘illicit viewing’, ungainly deployed to meet ‘doing’. But the following stanza corrects the poem’s course, as any anger dissolves to tenderness:

A smear
Of lipstick, here –
Like the kiss on a valentine;
And sniffing the neck I feel suddenly near to you,
For what it gives off is your smell, if we kissed any time,
And it wasn’t a cheap perfume – but the only thing properly dear to you.

The ‘s’ sounds return, like a caress. Indeed, the first five lines of this stanza – with the mention of lipstick, perfume, kisses, and sniffing the bottle’s neck – is more befitting the description of a lover than a sister. ‘Lipstick’, ‘like’, and ‘kiss’ conjure the sound of the tackiness of painted lips on a glass bottle. The ‘e’ vowel sounds of ‘smear’, ‘here’, and ‘near’ – culminating in ‘dear’ – create the sense of an offer of help: here, have my hand. The final stanza breaks with the couplet rhyme that opens the previous four, as if the poem is ‘past caring’ about holding fast to its own scheme:

Next week
If you’re not past caring
They may let you out for an airing,
To slump in your armchair, too burgled to speak,
The fish out of water that stubbornly stays all the more fish:
Then how shall we drag the treasure you were back to the surface?

The ‘they’ of the stanza’s third line is as opposed to the ‘we’ in stanza one: this private family problem is given up to professional medical care. ‘To slump in your armchair too burgled to speak’ recalls those who ‘tamely sit / On rows of steel chairs turning the

ripped mags' in Larkin's 'The Building',²⁶⁴ a poem Imlah refers to in his *TLS* review, written at a similar time, of a selection of Larkin's letters.²⁶⁵ In Larkin's poem, as in Imlah's, hospitalisation is to 'confess that something has gone wrong'. Imlah's memorable use of 'burgled' conveys the sense that the alcohol has been an active protagonist rather than merely a means: a burglar come to steal health away. In a final line that hopes for re-emergence, rebirth, 'treasure' delivers the purring sound of comforting: her hand, on the arm of her chair, is gripped by a consoling hand.

The question at the end, delivered at the very start of the long road to recovery, is echoed by the end to my poem 'The Firecrests', where the narrator wonders –

How do I get beyond birds and coffee?
How do I tell you I know you were ill,
I've seen a photo of you
when you were stick-thin?

This woman's predicament, of recovering after an illness, comes as a revelation that gives new meaning to what went before:

your face turned up to the new sun,
the tartan scarf – Clan Barclay? The
irrepressible Quakers of Aberdeenshire? –
so yellow around you
on its last outing for,
fingers-crossed, more than a wee while.

Together with the inclusion of 'Past Caring', a technically proficient and surprisingly intimate poem, the Imlah profile in *Poetry Review* is significant for a further reason: for the first time, Imlah lists Aberdeen as his birthplace.

²⁶⁴ Philip Larkin, 'The Building', *High Windows*, p. 24.

²⁶⁵ Mick Imlah, 'Selfishly yours, Philip', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 4673, 23 Oct 1992, p. 13.

*

In 1993, Imlah reviewed *Places of the Mind*,²⁶⁶ the Scottish poet Tom Leonard's biography of James 'B.V.' Thomson, for the *Independent on Sunday*.²⁶⁷ Born in Port Glasgow in 1834, but removed aged six to an orphanage in London, the city in which he lived for the rest of his life, Thomson was 'crypto-Scottish'²⁶⁸ insofar as he had what Imlah termed a 'marble' English accent.²⁶⁹ Aged 27, alcoholism induced by the morbidity and insomnia that plagued him saw Thomson 'discharged with disgrace'²⁷⁰ from his position as an army schoolmaster. He subsequently lived in a succession of rented rooms that he paid for by writing for journals under the pseudonym 'B.V.' ('Bysshe Vanolis', in honour of Shelley and Novalis) for reasons of anonymity. He published his masterpiece, the 1,123-line poem 'The City of Dreadful Night', in 1880, less than two years before his death, aged 47, from a broken blood vessel of the bowel.

Imlah wrote in his *Places of the Mind* review that 'short, dingy, crapulous, solitary lives in bedsits' generate fewer resources for the biographer than others. This is compounded for Thomson biographers by the fact their subject, mid-life, destroyed his private papers. However, Imlah was of the opinion that this did not excuse what he deemed the 'total chaos' of Leonard's book:

Tom Leonard has found a conventional 'life' beyond or beneath his ambitions, and has created instead what he describes as 'a shape, containing a biography,

²⁶⁶ Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind: The Life and Work of James Thomson ('B.V.')* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993). All subsequent references are to this edition.

²⁶⁷ Mick Imlah, 'Sad days in the City of Dreadful Night', *Independent on Sunday*, 14 Feb 1993 [<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--sad-days-in-the-city-of-dreadful-night-places-of-the-mind-the-life-and-work-of-james-thomson-b-v--tom-leonard-cape-25-pounds-1473030.html>], accessed 29 Oct 2013].

²⁶⁸ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

²⁶⁹ Leonard citing William Michael Rossetti, *Places of the Mind*, p. 176.

²⁷⁰ Cited by Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind*, p. 100.

made slowly in response to the shape of the art of another'. Extracts from Thomson's surviving notebooks are suspended without commentary in the midst of a narrative that is queerly reticent on matters of real importance to the subject, such as whether or not he had sex, or cancer.²⁷¹

Places of the Mind is indeed idiosyncratic. The book's first third is less concerned with Thomson than with chronicling nineteenth-century Scottish church reform, London-Scottish school education, and the rise of Victorian atheism. Later there is extensive inclusion of Thomson's exhaustive diary entries on the weather: one chapter consists solely of unannotated diary excerpts 'based on a computer-generated random number sequence and providing 100 written entries from the period'.²⁷² Thomson's poems, on the rare occasions they are quoted from, are only sparsely accompanied by criticism.

What the book as a whole manages to convey successfully, however, is Thomson's morbid strain. Shocking to a Victorian reader would have been his declaration in 'The City of Dreadful Night': 'There is no God.'²⁷³ All one can do, Thomson's atheistic oeuvre communicates, is accept that one's existence is not watched over by a 'Father' and has no meaning: in the time we have before 'divine Oblivion'²⁷⁴ comes to relieve us of 'life's sore burthen',²⁷⁵ we should take pleasure in the simple things such as a Sunday trip to loll on Hampstead Heath.²⁷⁶

One poem that especially betrays Thomson's deep unhappiness, and which was included in *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* Imlah later co-edited with Robert Crawford, is 'In the Room'.²⁷⁷ In this poem, an unvisited 'glum and sour' lodger of a single city room lies dead in bed having taken a phial of poison. The room's furniture is given voice, and, ignorant of the fact the lodger is dead, they complain of his

²⁷¹ Mick Imlah, 'Sad days in the City of Dreadful Night', *Independent on Sunday*.

²⁷² Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind*, p. 253.

²⁷³ James Thomson, 'The City of Dreadful Night', *The City of Dreadful Night and other Poems*, p. 30.

²⁷⁴ Tom Leonard citing James Thomson, *Places of the Mind*, p. 112.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁷⁶ James Thomson, 'Sunday at Hampstead', *The City of Dreadful Night and other Poems*, pp. 65-78.

²⁷⁷ James Thomson, 'In the Room', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 355-360.

neglectfulness: the cupboard bemoans being empty, the fire-grate complains of being cold, the mirror of being 'blurred with dust and damp', the writing table of having taken the lodger's weight all the previous night for the paltry result of one folded sheet, sealed in a blank envelope. The reader begins to suspect that this could be a suicide note, and when it is the turn of the bed to talk, it confirms that the lodger will not 'any more arise, / And do the things he did of old'. The little phial adds:

The man there drank me with slow breath
And murmured, Thus ends barren strife:
O sweeter, thou cold wine of death,
Than ever sweet warm wine of life.

The poem ends with the familiar Thomson sentiment:

Though life be torture through and through,
Man is but weak to plain of fate:
The drear path crawls on drearier still
To wounded feet and hopeless breast?
Well, he can lie down when he will,
And straight all ends in endless rest.

Crawford feared Imlah's enjoyment of the poem derived from some inner sense of fellow-feeling with Thomson. On one occasion, walking together near Thomson's former Vauxhall Bridge Road address while discussing the *New Penguin* anthology, Crawford warned Imlah that he was 'too obsessed with Thomson' and that he should not think he was 'going to turn into him'.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

I could tell he was obsessed by Thomson. People talk about Mick's interest in Browning and Tennyson. But, to me anyway, and this is possibly because I connected most with Mick on this Scottish level, James Thomson was deeply important to him, as the poet of 'The City of Dreadful Night', which, although a poem that never mentions London, is a poem that is usually read as a poem about London. But also other aspects of Thomson as well. In an amateurish psychologising way I slightly worried that Mick was worried that he could turn into a sort of Thomson if he was unlucky. And Thomson got lost, in an awful way.

Imlah, Crawford believed, 'felt fiercely and fearfully from the inside' about the poet who once wrote 'there is no other truth than nothingness'.²⁷⁹ This passion Imlah channelled into the composition of a long poem, 'B.V.', which he intended to be the second of his 'Afterlives of the Poets' after 'IMALT'.

'B.V.' was included in *Penguin Modern Poets 3* of 1995, in which Imlah appeared alongside Glyn Maxwell and Peter Reading.²⁸⁰ The anthology contains 21 of his poems: eighteen from *Birthmarks*, as well as 'Past Caring', 'IMALT' and 'B.V.'. In the biographical notes, Imlah is again stated as being 'born in Aberdeen'.

'B.V.' differs to 'IMALT' in that it focuses on retelling what Imlah called, in his *Places of the Mind* review, the 'tragi-comedy' of Thomson's last days: only one of the poem's nine parts – as it appeared in 1995 – returns Thomson from the grave. Imlah had summarised with relish the account of Thomson's fate, which is –

vividly documented – not by the poet – in 10 pages of letters and reminiscence more interesting than anything that has come before. In February 1882, Thomson, staying with friends in the Leicestershire countryside and writing good, cheerless poetry again, squanders his chance of rehabilitation by disappearing to drink himself sick in a local pub. Returning to the city, he embarks, broken-nosed and black-eyed, on a last long dreadful debauch

²⁷⁹ Tom Leonard citing James Thomson, *Places of the Mind*, p. 142.

²⁸⁰ Mick Imlah, 'B.V.', *Penguin Modern Poets 3* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 100-109.

'B.V.' is thus highly indebted to Leonard's *Places of the Mind* for biographical facts that cue elaborated and/or fictionalised verse versions. Indeed, in the poem's 1995 guise, which this close reading will hereafter refer to, Imlah begins by informing us that 'the story of James Thomson (1834-82), the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, is told in Tom Leonard's book *Places of the Mind*'. When 'B.V.' next appeared, in *The Lost Leader* thirteen years later, this had been relegated to the end of the poem. Other changes included the omission, in the latter version, of section three: the reproduction of a spoof 'advertisement' from Leicestershire County Council for a writer-in-residence, supposedly taken from the *Guardian* in September 1994. Thomson's fragile situation in life is humorously lamented in the advertisement's call for applicants who can 'demonstrate an enthusiasm and aptitude for helping the homeless to express themselves'.²⁸¹

Helping Thomson to express himself is what Imlah seeks to do in section eight, in which he makes manifest as two separate apparitions Thomson's twin personalities: the sober and the drunk. They are referred to in a passage on Thomson that Imlah included in the 'Poetry & Alcohol' issue of *Poetry Review* ten years earlier. He attributed it to 'E.V. Pratt *Memoir*'; it is in fact a comment made by Thomson's friend, J.W. Barrs, to the poet's first biographer, Henry Salt:

Thomson was naturally very loving with children, and children invariably returned his affection. Once, when he came back to his rooms in Huntley Street in the fullness of change wrought by his excesses, the children went to the door to admit him, but closed it again and went to their father, telling them that 'Mr Thomson's wicked brother was at the door'; and for some time they could not recognise 'our Mr Thomson' in the figure of the dipsomaniac claiming his name.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Mick Imlah, 'B.V.', *Penguin Modern Poets 3*, p. 101.

²⁸² Henry Salt citing J.W. Barrs, *The Life of James Thomson (B.V.)* (London: Watts and Co, 1914), p. 107
 Internet Archive: The California Digital Library, University of California
[\[https://archive.org/details/lifeofjamesthoms00saltiala\]](https://archive.org/details/lifeofjamesthoms00saltiala), accessed 16 Jan 2014].

In 'B.V', a contemporary narrator, an 'Arts-Clerk-in-Residence' at the British Library, goes to remove an advertisement he had pinned up for a time-warping poetry reading to be given by Thomson (which the poet failed to turn up to), only to discover him slumped nearby, dead from one final bout of drinking –

as if to butt in five hours late
on his own abandoned reading,
but not so much as breathing
through the mask of custard, brandy, blood
his spatchcock nose had blurted.

The intrigued clerk stoops to 'filch' what 'work-in-progress' is secreted in the dead man's pockets, only to be confronted by a 'less dead / statue hard by':

a stray from the museum,
but on its brow a crown
of fresh leaves shivered, and pulses
rippled the grooves of gown

This recalls the 'familiar compound ghost' in a poem by someone who admired Thomson's work, 'Little Gidding' by T.S. Eliot.²⁸³ In that poem, the apparition nears the narrator 'as if blown towards me like the metal leaves / Before the urban dawn wind unresisting'.²⁸⁴ The narrator and apparition 'trod the pavement in a dead patrol',²⁸⁵ and the latter's statement that 'I find words I never thought to speak / In streets I never

²⁸³ T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' (line 95), *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 44. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Mark Ford, in 'The City of Pain: The Poetry of James Thomson', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 504, mentions the appeal of Thomson to the adolescent Eliot, citing Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) and Maurice Lindsay, ed., *John Davidson: A Selection of His Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, (lines 87-88), p. 43.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, (line 107), p. 44.

thought to revisit²⁸⁶ is surreally executed in ‘B.V.’, in which Thomson’s ghost demands, ‘in English, with a marble accent’ –

‘Relieve yourself at once on this head’s flesh
The quicker to melt it into mulch and aether’
(So anxious to obey, I looked to find
I was already doing as he instructed)

This statue, then, is the embodiment of that side of the poet’s ‘head’ able to produce poetry worthy of being ‘twinned with Tennyson’s’ but inhibited by the alcoholic side with its –

northern appetite – this *bon viveur* –
This bear-faced bevvying barbarian barnacle –
‘B.V.’, as he would have me style my poems.

The ‘northern appetite’ refers to the Scottish reputation for heavy drinking, confirmed by the deployment of the once widely-used contemptuous term for all things Scottish – ‘barbarian’ – later dropped from the poem, likely for supplying two alliterative ‘b’s too many. Imlah thus explains alcoholism as part of Thomson’s Scottish inheritance, an inheritance that no amount of time beyond the country’s borders, nor a ‘marble’ English accent, can deny. Thomson the drunk, the sober Thomson explains –

knocked and wheedled and begged and beavered
And roared to have our head, my self was spent,
And he dissolved us in his element.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, (lines 123-124), p. 44.

The sober Thomson, tired out by insomnia resulting from his ‘wicked brother’ continually banging on his mind’s door demanding to be let in, relents, and a potentially brilliant poetry career dissolves into the unsavoury endgame – drunken disorder, theft, arson, squatting, imprisonment – that Imlah revels in charting. The self-destruction he addresses obliquely, almost lyrically in ‘Birthmark’ and ‘Past Caring’ rushes to the fore in blunter, unambiguous fashion here: Thomson is resolved to remain beyond the help of his friends, and is lost.

The narrator’s shadowing of Thomson on his night walk recalls ‘The City of Dreadful Night’, in which –

Because he seemed to walk with an intent
I followed him; who, shadowlike and frail,
Unswervingly though slowly onward went,
Regardless, wrapt in thought as in a veil:
Thus step for step with lonely sounding feet
We travelled many a long dim silent street.²⁸⁷

The arts clerk in residence is turned to as the ‘dark began to fade’ by a panicky, sweating Thomson, who offers –

his empty hand in a hurry:
‘I leave the card of *The Rambler* magazine,
as I cannot be sure of my present address
for some time to come –’ and was nothing

This end, which recalls ‘Little Gidding’ (‘He left me, with a kind of valediction, / And faded on the blowing of the horn’²⁸⁸) has no full-stop, conveying the apparition’s sudden disappearance, as it were, in a puff of smoke. It also suggests that the story

²⁸⁷ ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ (canto II), *The City of Dreadful Night & Other Poems*, p. 6.

²⁸⁸ T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’ (lines 148-149), *Four Quartets*, p. 45.

remains unfinished: Thomson may yet be exhumed again if efforts to raise his profile, like Leonard's biography, continue. In this way, Imlah is crediting Leonard with having provided a 'new estate' – if only a niche – in the literary spectrum for Thomson to tread; with having freed for posterity, if only temporarily, Thomson's poetic gifts from alcohol-induced obscurity. Imlah did in fact regret his review of *Places of the Mind*, telling Robert Crawford that he had –

changed his mind about the book afterwards and felt very bad about some things he said in the review but somehow he couldn't put this right with Tom Leonard. I remember thinking, on Mick's part, that this was extremely decent of him to say to me, and he was possibly saying it because he hoped it would get back to Tom.²⁸⁹

The debt 'B.V.' owes to Leonard's book makes the poem something of an ode to it. The naivety of J.W. Barrs in believing his friend Thomson could be persuaded of the 'lyric qualities of water' by being provided with the sort of stultifying setting Tennyson in 'TMALT' must endure ('thence to the [non-] smoking room, where we may pass / Hours with the couplet rather than the glass') is portrayed in a couplet-rhyming missive; Percy Holyoake's excited reports of Thomson's final days are moulded into another, complete with the exuberant dashes, italics and the quoting with relish that characterises the young gentleman's letters; Imlah portrays Thomson's complete breakdown by having him believe his landlord – Mr Gibson – is Spanish, recycling to comic effect ('*Olé! Olé!*') the obscure fact that Thomson had, some years before, visited Spain to report on the Third Carlist War for the *New York World*. Finally, Thomson's actions after being thrown out of his rooms for attempting arson are a gift to the writer of 'Goldilocks' – he crept back in to sleep illicitly in an upstairs room. Holyoake's letter, included in *Places of the Mind*, tells it thus:

²⁸⁹ Robert Crawford to author, 13 Oct 2013.

Now listen, the whole time G[ibson] was thus yarning, B.V. was upstairs in one of his unlet rooms!! Miss S. had neglected to obtain the key from Thomson, & he had slipped in upstairs while they were at breakfast. About 10 he was bundled out again – he had left *his mark* in the room – saying he should go & see some friends in the Park.²⁹⁰

This becomes in ‘B.V.’:

For listen – the whole of the time he’d been cursing the fellow to hell
B.V. had been upstairs asleep, in one of the unlet rooms!
Since G in the heat of his temper had failed to recover the key –
Our Homer had simply slipped in while he fumed at his coffee and kippers!

This time, he went meekly, it seems – though leaving his mark on the bed –
Remembering, he claimed, that he’d business to see to, with ‘friends in the park’

These ‘friends’ are the animals in Regents Park zoo, towards which Thomson feels affinity because their incarceration mirrors his predicament both within his rented room and within his mind. One can imagine that, like the tramp in ‘Goldilocks’, Thomson was by this stage ‘ragged and poisonous,’ the ‘released smell’ of his existence swirling ‘like bracing coffee’ in the bed sheets.²⁹¹

Imlah, through recounting vividly in poetry what was reported in prose in *Places of the Mind*, made something of an amends for his critical review of the book. Thomson, meanwhile, beyond the black comedy, is left mourned for not having been able to reach his full potential, hampered as he was by the twin birthmarks of melancholy and addiction. It is for him that Imlah wrote what would appear in *The Lost Leader* as part ‘III’ of the ‘Afterlives of the Poets’, in which he doubtfully indicates that obscure poets

²⁹⁰ Tom Leonard, quoting Percy Holyoake, *Places of the Mind*, p. 299.

²⁹¹ Mick Imlah, ‘Goldilocks’, *Birthmarks*, p. 17-19.

have their place among the ‘stars’, and it is not their fault if we on earth fail to comprehend their ‘wattage’.

The section which became ‘III’ opens with an epigraph quoting from the *King James Bible* version of Ecclesiasticus: ‘And some there be, which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never bene.’²⁹² Imlah intends us to insinuate that Thomson would recognise such a fate, as a poet whose ‘star’, rather than being ‘twinned with Tennyson’s’, has faded into obscurity. But in Ecclesiasticus there follows a consolation Imlah attempts to communicate by quoting from another source: Galileo’s notebooks. Ecclesiasticus states that those forgotten in death will continue to be remembered by God: ‘Their glory shall not be blotted out.’ Imlah cites Galileo as proving this scientifically, as it were, when, in 1611, the year the *King James Bible* was first distributed, he writes of seeing through his glasses the ‘rebellious armies of starlife’ in the Milky Way that shine ‘not for Earth’s amusement’, making him aware that the earth is not the centre of the universe but a ‘false vault in the bowels of Babel, whose brightest lights, in the vast upstairs, will disappear...’

Ecclesiasticus undermines the construct of a literary hierarchy – at the top of which is the ‘canon’ – in arguing that in God’s eyes all are equal. And if one makes literal – as Imlah does in his poem – the metaphor for literary enduringness, ‘stardom’, then Galileo’s finding that even the brightest of stars in our sky are insignificant in the great expanse of the universe also undermines that hierarchy. In Imlah’s poem, Galileo’s findings have the same effect on civilisation which the seventeenth-century Catholic Church feared his upholding of the theory of heliocentrism would have: shockwaves are sent through the established order and society slumps into looting and chaos: it’s a ‘free-for-all’.

²⁹² Ecclesiasticus 44:9, *King James Bible* [http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Ecclesiasticus-Chapter-44_Original-1611-KJV/, accessed 3 Sep 2014]

Those ‘rejects’ who have failed to enter the canon or have fallen out of it dwell in the same sky as those of the canon, and their obscurity – so that we know not the ‘wealth of their rays’ – is our fault, not theirs. But Imlah is not unreservedly standing up for these obscured stars; he is at best ambivalent about them. He portrays, after all, the hierarchy’s downfall as leading to the ransacking of that exquisite holy of holies of human artistic expression, the Sistine Chapel, and laments that ‘the notes of the scale are heard no more, nor lanterns seen / than the holes between’. The ‘notes of the scale’ are what Imlah praises Tennyson for in his selection of the Victorian’s verse – ‘the weights and measures of words and lines (a faculty in which the general reader has since lost interest)’ – while the ‘lanterns’ recall the passage in Imlah’s Oxford entrance paper in which the inspiration of great writers are ‘torches’ lighting the ‘dark room of the blank page’.

No, rather than standing up for the faded stars, Imlah is suggesting that removing the filter that ensured their fading – the literary ascendancy – would create an egalitarianism in which standards would suffer. As Imlah said on *The South Bank Show*, ‘Oxford’s finished as a centre of poetry they say now, so we’ll see’. He is being ironic when he declares ‘fair play to rejects’, and betrays his real feelings about their enduringness in a playful slip of the tongue indicated by the dash in the penultimate line:

still through the void they hurtle their wattage,
powered with the purpose of having been – being, after all, stars
whose measure we may not take, *nor know the wealth of their rays.*

The ‘Afterlives of the Poets’ represent the mid-point in Imlah’s poetry-writing career. *Birthmarks* had been published, and the long realisation of *The Lost Leader* was only just being embarked upon. His interest in literary posterity at this time, the fickle

nature of who it is given to, not only betrays a certain level of anxiety about his own abilities but also would have been contiguous with his exploration of the idea of identity. Is one remembered as one truly was? Does an individual possess a ‘true’ identity in the first place? What is it all for if, eventually, we all disappear ‘in the vast upstairs’? If writers aspire to live forever in literary posterity, then all literary careers end in failure because that posterity, if it lasts at all, will not do so indefinitely.

In his poem ‘Gray’s Elegy’, originally intended to form part of an additional section of ‘Afterlives of the Poets’,²⁹³ Imlah depicts Thomas Gray as unknown to modern school children, who are familiar with lines of his verse only as titles to famous novels. To rectify this, their teacher – deemed strange for knowing about such figures as Gray (‘we guessed he was gay’) – goes to find copies of Gray in the stockroom, only to discover there aren’t any. The poem ends with the school bell tolling the knell of Gray’s posterity. What, then, is all the hard work for in the great scheme of things? A question usually asked at a difficult time, when the words aren’t flowing. If looking forward we see ‘nothingness’, we look back to where we have come from for comfort and inspiration. Looking back, Imlah would have seen what ultimately provided his poetic gifts with its ‘dearly needed occasion’: Scotland.

²⁹³ Mark Ford to author, 9 May 2013.

Chapter Five

A Scottish Journey

Following his review in 1993 of Leonard's *Places of the Mind* for the *Independent on Sunday*, Imlah reviewed for the same newspaper Douglas Dunn's eighth poetry collection, *Dante's Drum-kit*. For the poet of 'In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson' and 'B.V.', Dunn's 'exploration of what the forms and conventions of ghost poetry can and can't offer' was of interest, in particular 'Disenchantments', a long poem in terza rima – 'the longest and most ambitious poem here, described on the jacket as "a meditation on the afterlife", though it's more fun than that.'²⁹⁴

In the poem, Dunn claims that, when moving in a country little changed through history, the ghosts of the dead can appear in one's 'interior extra sense'.²⁹⁵ One such place is 'antique Scotland', where Dunn surveys the sky and the firth and feels –

It might as well be the twelfth century –
There's nothing on the eye other than bygones,

Nothing 'modern' (whatever that might be)

...

Twentieth-century dress

All over me, but mediaeval thinking

For several minutes as I retrogress

²⁹⁴ Mick Imlah, 'Grave and Muffled Beats', *Independent on Sunday*, 16 Jan 1994 [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--grave-and-muffled-beats-dantes-drumkit-by-douglas-dunn-faber-pounds-1299pounds-699-1400479.html, accessed 5 Jul 2014].

²⁹⁵ Douglas Dunn, 'Declarations' (canto II), *Dante's Drum-kit* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 32. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Into preposterous ancestry's winking
Annals and declarations.²⁹⁶

Imlah wrote that the ghosts act to 'serve the poet impersonally with intuitions about history and continuity'; in short, they allow what W.N. Herbert has called Dunn's signature 'temporal dislocations'²⁹⁷ to be deployed – the congestion into one poem of quite disparate periods from Scotland's past. By so doing, Dunn illustrates what he believes is the 'monstrous permanence' of the country's suffering.²⁹⁸

In the poem Imlah deemed the collection's most important, 'Body Echoes', this suffering is embodied as 'national halves':²⁹⁹ a man and woman (Imlah – 'the archetypal Janet and Jock') who repeatedly reappear, ghost-like, in the narrator's life. He sees the woman waiting at 'electronic tills that become counters / in former Co-ops in the former burghs'³⁰⁰ or 'outside a factory's gates / As if the gates and factory were there, / Expecting him among a booted shift'.³⁰¹ At stations, bus depots, in public parks, in Brechin, Renfrew, Dalmellington and Keith, they appear:

They had no country, have not; until then
A nationality of night and day
Identifies them – intimate seasons, years,
Their duplicated journey, searching for
Each other in the mottled parishes³⁰²

Their timeless suffering, which they have inherited and will in turn have inherited from them, is lived out in a Scotland dormant and despondent.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, canto IV, p. 35.

²⁹⁷ W.N. Herbert, 'Dunn and Dundee: Dunn's re-entry into Scottish Culture', *Reading Douglas Dunn* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), eds. Robert Crawford and David Kinloch, p. 126. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²⁹⁸ Douglas Dunn, 'Body Echoes', *Dante's Drum-kit*, p. 61.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Dunn's 'Swigs', which deals with that ghost on society's conscience, the homeless drunk, who holds out his hand 'In its dolorous cadge, / His cup of flesh, / His half-cut sublime',³⁰³ anticipates Imlah's more spirited poem on the subject, 'The Bright Side':

Picture a ghost
With a hand like paper

Pegging you back with
'Hi, I'm Mac –
A reformed alcoholic!
(Ghastly, earnest) –

Picture his eyes
(Pin-clear, pleading)³⁰⁴

Dunn's 'Poor People's Cafés' – in which 'Women who sit / Without a bean / Articulate / The unforeseen' over portions of pie and chips straitened by the tightening of the public purse³⁰⁵ – becomes, in Imlah's poem 'The Queen's Maries', Dumfries bus depot, where the elderly narrator's unreliable memory mingles together episodes from 500 years of Scottish misfortune: the exile of Mary Queen of Scots; defeat to the English at football; a boyfriend's death after D-Day; the scorn for bus-users misattributed to Margaret Thatcher, which extends more playfully Dunn's critique of her government.³⁰⁶ Indeed, 'Poor People's Cafés' first appeared in *Poll Tax: The Fiscal Fake*, a 1990 Chatto and Windus pamphlet written by Dunn in which he posits that Scotland's salvation from Thatcher's unpopular Community Charge, which rolled out in 1989, might be the

³⁰³ Douglas Dunn, 'Swigs', *Dante's Drum-kit* (canto IV), p. 68.

³⁰⁴ Mick Imlah, 'The Bright Side', *The Lost Leader*, p. 92.

³⁰⁵ Douglas Dunn, 'Poor People's Cafés', *Dante's Drum-kit*, p. 81.

³⁰⁶ Mick Imlah, 'The Queen's Maries', *Diehard* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2006), pp. 11-15.

‘resurgent national identity’ that had ‘begun to make itself felt in politics and culture’. In Scotland the government at Westminster –

is seen as being of the Government, by the Government, and for the Government. It certainly isn’t of, by and for the people of Scotland. From the north of the border England once again looks the way George Orwell described it, ‘a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly’.³⁰⁷

The Poll Tax’s introduction in Scotland in 1989 and the anti-Poll Tax riots in London in 1990 fell either side of the Scottish rugby side’s Grand Slam victory in the annual Five Nations tournament. This was achieved by overcoming favourites England at Murrayfield in an encounter lent extra resonance by the political climate. ‘A warm deceptive spring followed the March / Of David Sole’s Grand Slam in 1990,’ lamented Imlah in his elegy ‘Stephen Boyd’,³⁰⁸ as if the bright new dawn of national realisation (note the potential double meaning of ‘March’) the result promised came, as ever, to nothing. The surprise Conservative victory at the 1992 general election, in which the Conservatives won 11 Scottish seats to Labour’s 49, reinforced a feeling in much of Scotland of being governed by an Anglocentric party with no mandate north of the border. ‘I’m not / A patriotic *British* Scot,’ Dunn declared in 1993,³⁰⁹ and time has since proved his sentiment not uncommon.³¹⁰ ‘It’s interesting,’ Imlah’s friend Andrew McNeillie has said –

³⁰⁷ Douglas Dunn, *Poll Tax: The Fiscal Fake*, Chatto Counterblasts No. 12 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 30.

³⁰⁸ Mick Imlah, ‘Stephen Boyd’ (lines 111-112), *The Lost Leader*, p. 100. David Sole (b. 1961): Edinburgh and Scotland loosehead prop and captain.

³⁰⁹ Douglas Dunn, ‘Dressed to Kill’, *Dante’s Drum-Kit*, p. 144.

³¹⁰ The 2011 Scotland Census found that while 18% of people in Scotland identify themselves as ‘Scottish and British’, some 62% identify themselves as ‘Scottish only’.

National Records of Scotland, *Statistical Bulletin: 2011 Census – Key Results on Population, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Religion, Health, Housing and Accommodation in Scotland - Release 2A*, 26 Sep 2013, p. 23.

[<http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/StatsBulletin2A.pdf>, accessed 24 Jan 2014]

how the postcolonial moment came around to the point where – well, probably Mrs Thatcher introduced it – the home populace became the colonised and were punished as members of some other thing than what she wanted, and Scotland was punished. And I think Mick somehow came in behind all that.³¹¹

As did others. If Scotland really was a place where ‘a sort of intellectual Unilateral Declaration of Independence occurred during the 1980s’,³¹² from the second half of that decade it was blessed with a generation of poets that enabled it to be disproportionately represented on the British poetry scene. This generation included John Burnside, Carol Ann Duffy, and Robin Robertson (all born 1955), Robert Crawford (b. 1959) – a poet hailed by Dunn as beating the drum of Scottish achievement ‘with a newer confidence’³¹³ and who Imlah edited at Chatto – W.N. Herbert (b. 1961), Kathleen Jamie (b. 1962), and Don Paterson (b. 1963). All but Robertson shared with Imlah the rostrum of the Poetry Society’s New Generation Poets in 1994. Hailing from Scotland was a distinct and confident, yet lightly carried, component part of their poetic identities.

Imlah did not work on Dunn’s Poll Tax pamphlet in his capacity as Chatto and Windus poetry editor, but it was clear to its author when they first met in the late 1980s that Imlah was conscious of his Scottish birth.³¹⁴ Dunn subsequently included ‘Goldilocks’ in *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, published in 1992.³¹⁵ If Imlah was moved by Scotland and Scottish poetry’s growing confidence to explore his own Scottish inheritance, during a period after the publication of *Birthmarks* in which he ‘couldn’t write poems’ and was deliberating where next creatively, he would not have

³¹¹ Andrew McNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

³¹² Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 302 [all subsequent references are to this edition], citing Christopher Harvie, “For Gods are Kittle Cattle”: Frazer and John Buchan’, in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Robert Fraser (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

³¹³ Douglas Dunn, introduction, *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. xlv. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³¹⁴ Douglas Dunn to author, email, 2 Feb 2014.

³¹⁵ Douglas Dunn, *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, pp. 397-400.

needed to look beyond Dunn for an example of a poetic career that had managed to remain widely admired while accommodating a significant evolution in preoccupation.

Dunn's debut collection, *Terry Street* (1969),³¹⁶ a Larkin-influenced sequence about life on a working class street in Hull, the city he had made his home, and his next, *The Happier Life* (1972),³¹⁷ contained few allusions to the Renfrewshire of his upbringing. But in his third collection, *Love or Nothing* (1974) – published the year the Scottish National Party won nearly a third of the Scottish vote at the October general election, ultimately leading to the first Scottish Devolution Referendum – a line in the poem 'Renfrewshire Traveller' read like his own declaration of independence: 'I am Scots'.³¹⁸ Although the back cover of his fourth, *Barbarians* (1979), still described him as one of 'England's major living poets', the collection itself was conspicuously Scottish-centric and nationalistic.³¹⁹ Two years later, *St Kilda's Parliament* ensured *Barbarians* could not be dismissed as a one-off:³²⁰ 'it is emblematic', wrote Robert Crawford, 'that the title of the collection of poems should focus on a parliament as far from Westminster as it is possible to get in the British Isles'.³²¹ 'Put the Larkin early bit away,' McNeillie said –

and Douglas is a very restlessly angry Scot doing things very close to later Mick. Things I think that must have been somehow very important to Mick that he was doing. I think Mick learnt a lot out of Douglas.³²²

Crawford has argued that rather than having put Larkin's influence 'away', Dunn's movement towards Scottish subjects was a natural next step. Put simply, Larkin's provincialism – 'notorious for his dislike of London, and eloquent on behalf of Hull's

³¹⁶ Douglas Dunn, *Terry Street* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

³¹⁷ Douglas Dunn, *The Happier Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

³¹⁸ Douglas Dunn, 'Renfrewshire Traveller', *Love or Nothing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 22.

³¹⁹ Douglas Dunn, *Barbarians* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

³²⁰ Douglas Dunn, *St Kilda's Parliament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

³²¹ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 294.

³²² Andrew McNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

“sudden elegancies”³²³ – becomes nationalism when it is a nation one is eloquent on behalf of. Northern Irishman Seamus Heaney, who like Dunn had suffered and disliked having his un-English identity submerged in an English-dominated ‘British’ context,³²⁴ could identify with Larkin as a writer ‘possessed of that defensive love of their country which was once shared only by those poets we might call colonial’.³²⁵

Dunn’s movement towards this ‘more explicitly nationalist, post-British literary consciousness’³²⁶ was indicative of how his generation’s attitudes towards Scotland’s place in the world differed from that of its predecessor. Of that earlier generation, Edwin Muir, writing in *Scottish Journey* (1935), was uneasy with the British settlement but resigned to it. This inertia is mirrored by what Imlah called the ‘narrow creative place’ of Muir’s ‘colourless’ or ‘repetitive’ oeuvre, where the diction of every poem is ‘consistent with the diction of the poem preceding it’.³²⁷ Imlah, as he did regarding Tennyson, argued that Muir ‘benefits, more than most, from being read in selection’.³²⁸ If Scotland was Hell, Muir, ‘The Good Man in Hell’, was stuck in it, writing the same poem again and again:

Would he at last, grown faithful in his station,
Kindle a little hope in hopeless Hell,
And sow among the damned doubts of damnation,
Since here someone could live well?³²⁹

³²³ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 276, citing Philip Larkin, foreword to *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1982).

³²⁴ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 290.

³²⁵ Seamus Heaney, ‘Englands of the Mind’, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 150-151.

³²⁶ *Devolving English Literature*, p. 9.

³²⁷ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Edwin Muir: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. xv. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

³²⁹ Edwin Muir, ‘The Good Man in Hell’, *Collected Poems*, p. 104.

This is the torpid person's hope: that if they wait long enough, something may eventually change. Such quiescence would not do for Dunn and the generation of Scottish poets that fell in behind him, who had not experienced war and thus possessed fewer suspicions of nationalism, and who were living through the breakdown of the post-war political consensus and thus did not necessarily see Britain as an immutable construct.

The Industrial Revolution which Muir so disliked had, in his view, 'cut clean across' the Scottish faculty for the 'myth-making'³³⁰ poetry that had transfigured the likes of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, Mary Stuart and Bonnie Prince Charlie into a 'purely poetical reality', into 'semi inventions' inhabiting the ballads.³³¹ It is in this context that he yielded the assertion that Imlah used as the epigraph to *The Lost Leader*:

One may say that no poet in Scotland now can take as his inspiration the folk impulse that created the ballads, the people's songs, and the legends of Mary Stuart and Prince Charlie. He has no choice but to be at once more individual and less local.³³²

By moulding a body of poems that defies Muir's declaration, Imlah was – as much as any explicitly political poet – contributing to the late twentieth century's revival in Scottish identity.

*

Imlah replaced his friend Alan Hollinghurst full-time as the poetry editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* in the autumn of 1995. There in Wapping, among the 'squalor' of the

³³⁰ Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2008), p. 94.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

disorganised *TLS* office, he would sort through what was called with some weariness the ‘poetry box’ of submissions;³³³ write, commission and proofread articles; and in lulls, such as on Sundays, type up and edit his own poems on his office word processor. With colleagues there were beery lunches (*see appendix photograph 10*) and five-a-side football at the nearby sports arena, which Imlah – forever competitive – took all too seriously for some.³³⁴ His *TLS* work allowed him to broaden his reading considerably. ‘I loved it,’ Hollinghurst said of the poetry editor role –

and I think Mick did too because you’re in constant contact with what’s being written and with very interesting people you’re dealing with as reviewers, so you’re living – even if only as a facilitator – in a world of intellectual exchange. I think it really suited him. At the *TLS* he could pick subjects that would seep into him, where they would have bigger imaginative potential.³³⁵

Although his corner of the office, which he shared with the newspaper’s American literature editor, the Glaswegian James Campbell, and the fiction editor Lindsay Duguid, also of Scottish ancestry, would eventually become known as the ‘Scottish island’, Imlah’s own Scottish identity was ‘scarcely in evidence’³³⁶ to start with. ‘Mick’s Scottishness was a late developing trait’, Campbell believed, ‘though no less dear to him for that’:

It represented something in his soul that Oxford life did not. There was something artificial about his Scottish persona, though it was justified by the literary excellence that emanated from it. Scotland represented something he couldn’t attain – a lost domain, which he constructed in his imagination with the help of cultural emblems, ranging from Scottish rugby to Walter Scott.³³⁷

³³³ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012.

³³⁴ Alan Jenkins to author, 4 Dec 2013.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ James Campbell, ‘Mick Imlah at the *TLS*’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 26.

³³⁷ James Campbell to author, email, 30 Oct 2013.

Early on, Imlah's growing interest in Scottish subjects was nourished by reviewing books by contemporary Scottish writers such as Irvine Welsh, James Kelman and John Burnside. Later, his pieces grew more ambitious, taking in a wider sweep, with digressive articles on John Buchan, J.M. Barrie, an anthology of Glasgow, an anthology of Dumfries and Galloway, Walter Scott, and those chroniclers of Wallace and the Bruce, Blind Harry and Robert Baston. 'From the time he started editing *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* with Robert Crawford,' Campbell said, 'his cultural patriotism increased year by year.'³³⁸

The commission Imlah had received from Penguin to edit an anthology of Scottish poetry was proving problematic because he felt his knowledge was insufficient to make a fully informed selection. He was also uncomfortable with the fact the anthology's sole editor was London-based, one likely reason why he had begun claiming Aberdeen as his birthplace. In a February 1996 edition of the *London Review of Books* he read a review of Roderick Watson's anthology *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English 1380-1980* by Robert Crawford, by now Professor of English at St Andrews. Crawford wrote of his regret at Watson's decision to begin at the fourteenth century and to 'brutally chop' the new generation of Scottish poets such as Kathleen Jamie, W.N. Herbert and Don Paterson.³³⁹ But he also praised the book for containing Gaelic: in a blatant touting for business he stated its doing so 'sets a new agenda that future anthologists cannot ignore; I would like to be one of those anthologists who try to surpass it'. Penguin, he added, have commissioned Mick Imlah to edit a new anthology: 'Will he allow Sorley MacLean's [Gaelic] voice to accompany [Hugh] MacDiarmid's?'

Imlah telephoned Crawford and informed him that he had not got further back

³³⁸ James Campbell, 'Mick Imlah at the TLS', *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 26.

³³⁹ Robert Crawford, 'Speaking in Tongues', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 8 Feb 1996, p. 10. [<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v18/n03/robert-crawford/speaking-in-tongues>, accessed 26 Nov 2013]

than William Dunbar (c.1460-c.1520): would he like to help?³⁴⁰ Crawford was more than happy to accept, and they met in London shortly after to renegotiate and split Imlah's original contract at Penguin. Crawford was adamant the anthology should start well before Dunbar and be poly-lingual, containing Latin, Gaelic, Scots and English. Later, Crawford discovered that of the project –

Mick hadn't really done anything. From my point of view this was great because in many ways I got to do most of the choosing. The choosing that Mick did was – as you would expect of someone who was the poetry editor at the *TLS* – very astute and shrewd. But basically he just read through some earlier Scottish anthologies and picked out things.³⁴¹

While Crawford approached the anthology as an academic, Imlah did so as a practising writer: the poems he read inspired and informed his own. Crawford's inclusion of the long Latin poem 'Altus Prosator' by St Columba, and a translation by Edwin Morgan, led Imlah to read Adomnan's 'Life of Columba'.³⁴² It informed his poem 'The Prophecies', the second poem in *The Lost Leader*.³⁴³ Crawford's choice of extract from Guillaume le Clerc's 'Fergus'³⁴⁴ was intended to be translated into English by Douglas Dunn, but when that failed to materialise Imlah did it: his 'Fergus of Galloway' appeared as the fourth poem in *The Lost Leader*.³⁴⁵ An extract from Robert Henryson's 'Orpheus and Eurydice' included in the anthology³⁴⁶ was reinterpreted by Imlah into 'The Ayrshire Orpheus', the twenty-fifth poem in *The Lost Leader*.³⁴⁷ 'Braveheart', the

³⁴⁰ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² St Columba, 'Altus Prosator', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 2-11.

³⁴³ Mick Imlah, 'Muck', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 3-5.

³⁴⁴ Guillaume le Clerc, 'Fergus', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 32-34.

³⁴⁵ Mick Imlah, 'Fergus of Galloway', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 33-35.

³⁴⁶ Robert Henryson, 'Orpheus and Eurydice', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 73-75.

³⁴⁷ Mick Imlah, 'The Ayrshire Orpheus', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 50-51.

eleventh poem,³⁴⁸ was informed by John Barbour's 'The Bruce'³⁴⁹ and Blind Harry's 'Schir William Wallace, Knicht of Ellerslie',³⁵⁰ extracts from which appeared in the anthology, as well as by another inclusion, Edwin Muir's 'Scotland's Winter'.³⁵¹ 'Mick had clearly been immersed in this stuff,' Crawford said:

When *The Lost Leader* came out I was jealous because I thought 'God, he's got a whole book of poetry out of this stuff' and what have I got? I've got all this prose, this academic tome called *Scotland's Books!*³⁵² As soon as I read *The Lost Leader* I sent him an email. I don't think I said 'I'm shocked that you've produced this' but I was very impressed by the book, not least because I could see where a lot of it had come from. And all the more impressed because I had no inkling that he was writing the poems.³⁵³

Crawford supplied Imlah with the original French text of 'Fergus', and an English prose translation by D.D.R. Owen.³⁵⁴ The resulting poem, which borrowed the couplet rhyming and loose tetrameter of the original, underwent a number of changes in the eight years between its appearance in the *New Penguin* anthology and *The Lost Leader*. Liberated from appearing alongside the original French, the poem's diction moved towards a colloquialism more befitting the collection it would ultimately become part of. The over-poetic 'broiling maw' of the she-dragon became a 'filthy width', the shield of Dunnottar was not 'seized' but 'grabbed' by Fergus, who did not 'look' but 'peep', and cursed his 'buggered' – not the more school-friendly 'fractured' – armour. The playfulness is distilled when Fergus is sent flying:

³⁴⁸ Mick Imlah, 'Braveheart', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 22-26.

³⁴⁹ John Barbour, 'The Bruce', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 43-44.

³⁵⁰ Blind Harry, 'The Actis and Deidis of the Illustere and Vailyeand Campioun Schir William Wallace, Knight of Ellerslie', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 76-77.

³⁵¹ Edwin Muir, 'Scotland's Winter', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, pp. 404-405.

³⁵² Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin, 2007).

³⁵³ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

³⁵⁴ Guillaume le Clerc, *Fergus of Galloway: Knight of King Arthur*, tr., D.D.R Owen (London: Dent, 1991).

He struck a wall with such a crack
His ribs were crushed against his back,
And all his senses so displaced
He thought he heard a burning taste.

The strong rhymes of 'blade' with 'splayed' and 'fire' with 'ire' were softened to 'weapon' with 'open' and 'froth' with 'wrath':

When Fergus drew his favourite blade,
The dragon froze – her jaws splayed,
Pretending to be petrified,
So the doomed knight might look inside
That broiling maw of filth and fire –
Then shut it, with a hiss of ire. (*The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, 2000)

When Fergus drew his pathetic weapon,
The dragon froze, with her mouth open –
As if to say, I'm petrified;
That the doomed knight might peep inside
Her filthy width of flame and froth –
Then shut it, with a snap of wrath. (*The Lost Leader*, 2008)

'Filth' from the original version's 'filth and fire' was recycled in 'filthy width'. The 'width', pleasingly less poetical than 'maw', was necessary because 'mouth open' in line two of the second version did not express the nature of the dragon's mouth as 'her jaws splayed' did. The later omission of 'fire' avoided the cliché of a dragon breathing it: instead she uses her tail to 'slap' Fergus along the pass. Fergus 'sprang up like a cornered stag' –

At the tough scales of the serpent's hide: –
Slicing up at the shocked head,
Severed the neck and dropped her dead.

This became:

At the tough scales of the lizard's hide –
Slicing up at her peevish head,
Punctured the neck and dropped her dead.

'Lizard' replaced 'serpent' because it is more suggestive of 'tough scales' ('serpent' conjures smoothness); the dragon's 'shocked' head, meanwhile, became 'peevish', a Scottish-sounding word suggestive of – and related to – 'perverse'. To alliterate with 'peevish', 'severed' in the next line became 'punctured'. The triumphalist exclamation at the end of the poem – 'So pleased was he to sniff the air / As Fergus of Galloway – Dragon-Slayer!' – lends it a sense of rambunctious regional or national pride. After all, Fergus, a proud chevalier of Galloway, would not 'disown / His day's work' even for 'the English throne'. Fergus's achievement is not just that of an Arthurian knight fulfilling his quest in order to win back his beloved, but a rare emblem of victory in a collection that chronicles Scottish defeat.

More representative is the poem 'The Ayrshire Orpheus', in which Orpheus, of course, fails in his quest – looking back on his beloved, so that 'chains belted from the deeps / And yanked Eurydice to Hell for keeps' – and is left not just a heartbroken widower but –

like some old town
Of Carrick in decline: Maybole, or Girvan,
The pubs shut down, the kids, taunting 'the clown
Who couldna face the front', on drugs from Irvine ³⁵⁵

³⁵⁵ Mick Imlah, 'The Ayrshire Orpheus', *The Lost Leader*, p. 51.

Where Henryson rendered the Greek legend into Scots, Imlah injects the Scottishness into the narrative itself. This provincialising of the legend serves to aggrandise Scotland: the likes of Ballantrae in Ayrshire are capable of playing host to the same epic dramas as ancient Thrace. Later, Imlah's poem 'Dad's Army' would use the nickname given to the dialect of north-eastern Scotland – 'Doric', the name given by the ancient Athenians to the wilder Spartan region of Greece – as the conceit by which to portray himself as a Spartan veteran retiring home from the long 'war' against the 'march of union' to start family life.³⁵⁶ Likewise, Muir's poetic preoccupations with Greek, Biblical, Arthurian and other mythology – poems such as 'Ballad of Hector in Hades', 'Ballad of the Flood', 'Tristram's Journey' – only become interesting when diffused into a contemporary Scottish context, such as in 'Milton',³⁵⁷ where Glasgow and Hell are – in Imlah's words – 'freshly synonymous':

the utmost trial devised for the blameless Milton is to submit his ears to the riot of
Argyle Street at closing time, 'the steely clamour known too well / on Saturday
nights in every street in Hell'.³⁵⁸

Such diffusion, Imlah lamented, was uncommon: 'Muir will rarely surprise us with [...] a colloquial turn of phrase'.³⁵⁹ Muir's poem 'The Return of Odysseus', for example, is a staid, faithful retelling of that much-told moment which cries out for the sort of imaginative reanimation Imlah revivifies Orpheus's story with. Imlah – like Dunn mourning Scotland's condition in pages of rolling Dantean terza rima – cosmopolitanises the country's parochial idiosyncrasies by imbuing them with a universal quality. This is a worldly Scotland in which, rather than them being mutually

³⁵⁶ Mick Imlah, 'Dad's Army', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 104-105.

³⁵⁷ Edwin Muir, 'Milton', *Collected Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 207. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³⁵⁸ Mick Imlah, introduction, *Edwin Muir: Selected Poems*, p. x. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

exclusive, there is a direct – rather than implied – dialogue between the civilised and the barbarian, ennobling the latter. Scotland, after all, underwent an Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and historically possessed closer ties to learned Europe than England did. ‘I’m a Francophile’, Dunn has said: ‘Scotsmen, like Frenchmen, don’t believe in common sense, we believe in intelligence.’³⁶⁰

The ten stanzas from Robert Henryson’s ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ included in the *New Penguin* anthology are those from which Imlah drew his poem. He borrowed the rhyme royal form and continued almost a line-by-line translation until ‘Poor Orpheus!’ at the start of his final stanza served to abbreviate Henryson’s three-stanza description of the hero lying prostrate with grief – which explains why Imlah’s version is eight stanzas long to Henryson’s ten. Orpheus, journeying into the underworld, is not playing a harp but ‘piping’; Eurydice is his ‘bonny lass’; she quietens him down with ‘shoosh, pet’:

Than Orpheus before Pluto sat doun,	<i>(Henryson)</i>
<i>So Orpheus sat before that mocking twosome</i>	<i>(Imlah)</i>
And in his handis quhite his harp can ta,	
<i>And let them have it, with his matchless voice,</i>	
And playit mony suete proporcion,	
<i>Pitching ‘Ye Banks and Braes’ at the royal bosom;</i>	
With base tonys in ypodorica,	
<i>A charming ‘Ae Fond Kiss, and ‘Ca’ the Yowes’,</i>	
With gemilling in yperlydica;	
<i>And then ‘My love is like a red, red rose’;</i>	
Till at the last, for reuth and grete pitee	
<i>Till Pluto swooned, and prickly Proserpine,</i>	
Thay wepit sore that coud hym here and see	
<i>Lay her softening form upon the green.</i>	

³⁶⁰ Ian Gregson, ‘The “Dialogic” in Terry Street and After’, *Reading Douglas Dunn*, p. 27, citing Douglas Dunn in *Vienpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), ed. John Haffenden, p. 30.

After Orpheus asks for his beloved (Pluto: ‘You’re a bold one, Mac!’) and receives her – in Henryson’s memorable words: ‘And on thair went, talkand of play and sport’ – his famous mistake is rendered in an understated way:

If you have loved, imagine the sweet chat
The two then had, rejoining their own kind –
So can you blame him, in the midst of that,
If he should suffer a local lapse of mind?

In the Henryson, Eurydice, gone ‘unto hell agayn’, leaves Orpheus –

chydand on with lufe, our burn and bent,
A woefull widow hamewart is he went.

Imlah has Orpheus taunted by gangs of youths as he walks home from the supermarket in the ‘dismal twilight of surviving’:

Alone with his shopping, sore to be rid of her,
He walks the roads of home a widower.

Imlah found Crawford’s original draft of the *New Penguin* anthology’s introduction too political and polemical, and re-wrote it almost entirely,³⁶¹ sweeping effortlessly from Columba’s ‘Altus Prosator’ to Hugh MacDiarmid. Between, the seventeenth-century folk songs and ballads are described as having become ‘among the great treasures of Scottish literature’ and influenced the first phase of English Romanticism;³⁶² after his death in 1796, Burns’s technique of mixing Scots and English ‘involuntarily used up the last energies of Scots as a literary language’ when it became a

³⁶¹ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

³⁶² Mick Imlah and Robert Crawford, introduction, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. xix.

vice in the hands of his imitators;³⁶³ while James Thomson (B.V.) and Edwin Muir in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meditated on the industrial city as Hell.³⁶⁴ Concluding, he repeated the sentiment he made in a review of *A Dictionary of Scottish Quotations* for the *Guardian* in 1997:

[Robert Louis] Stevenson's 'quiet claim that 'the happiest lot on earth is to be born a Scotsman' is unassailable. She is, you have to admit, the greatest country in the world.³⁶⁵

Stevenson's statement, he adds for good measure, is 'outstandingly sentimental but also, as far as literature can test it, true.'³⁶⁶ This from someone who, seventeen years earlier, had said: 'I suppose I only feel Scots on major sporting occasions now. It's not something I'd write about.'³⁶⁷ There is a sense in which, in this introduction, Imlah is consciously extending what he sees as Scottish poetry's tradition of extolling 'prejudice in Scotland's favour'³⁶⁸ and rebuking, like Byron in *Don Juan*, his younger self if he was ever coy about his Scottish identity:

I 'scotched, not killed', the Scotchman in my blood
And love the land of 'mountain and of flood'.³⁶⁹

Imlah sought to list the common characteristics of Scottish poetry beyond its radiating 'to a degree unmatched by any other substantial national literature, a

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxii-xxiii.

³⁶⁵ Mick Imlah, 'Auld Acquaintances', *Guardian*, 23 Jan 1997, p. 13.

³⁶⁶ Mick Imlah and Robert Crawford, introduction, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. xxviii.

³⁶⁷ 'An interview with Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry*.

³⁶⁸ Mick Imlah and Robert Crawford, introduction, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. xxvii.

³⁶⁹ Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (Canto X, stanza 19, lines 7-8), ed. T.G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W.W. Pratt (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 379. Byron quotes from *Macbeth* (Act 3, Scene 2, line 13) and Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (Canto 6, stanza 2, line 4).

passionate love of country’,³⁷⁰ and claimed the subject of weather to be foremost. He had in mind the work of Muir, where winter is ‘symbolic of political gloom or freezing-over’,³⁷¹ and in particular ‘Scotland’s Winter’, the poem Muir included in his prose survey *Scottish Journey* because it resulted from his attendance at an Edinburgh ceilidh in 1934 and being struck by the ‘feeling of the contrast’ between Scotland’s ‘legendary past and its tawdry present’.³⁷² The tap of dancers’ heels on the sounding floor becomes those of a simple miller’s daughter whose footsteps on the frozen ground taunt – because she is ignorant that they ever existed – Scotland’s dead kings and balladeers buried beneath:

Now the ice lays its smooth claws on the sill,
The sun looks from the hill
Helméd in his winter casket,
And sweeps his arctic sword across the sky³⁷³

In ‘Braveheart’, Imlah reacts to this portrayal of a ‘songless’ Scotland frozen out of its former greatness by having it melt free of Muir’s frigid yoke in virtuoso heroic rhymes:

THE SPRING: – and as her ice draws off the glen
Scotland gets up, and is herself again;
Hawthorn has run in white to the riverside
Where bluebells crowd the bank, and the young Clyde
Skips down the hill with a fresh appetite
On stones as clear as the stars on a frosty night.

³⁷⁰ Mick Imlah and Robert Crawford, introduction, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. xxviii.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

³⁷² Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p. 38.

³⁷³ Edwin Muir, ‘Scotland’s Winter’, *Collected Poems*, p. 229.

Like the one following David Sole's Grand Slam, this warm spring proves deceptive. 'Braveheart' moves the story on from Muir's poem 'Robert the Bruce', in which the Scottish king on his deathbed laments to Sir James Douglas how bringing order to his kingdom involved committing sins he will, in his afterlife, face the consequences of.³⁷⁴ Playfully, as if to challenge our assumptions, Imlah hands to the Bruce the title associated in modern culture with William Wallace, and makes it literal: on his death, the Bruce has his heart removed and placed in a 'hand-grenade of Ailsa granite' to be tied around the neck of Douglas and transported to Jerusalem. 'Braveheart' strongly recalls not John Barbour's biographical poem of the Bruce, but the fifteenth-century Blind Harry's 'Wallace', with its tales of daring-do in heroic couplets:

In till Breichyn thai lugyt all that nycht;
 Syne on the morn Wallace get graith thaim rycht,
 Displayed on breid the baner off Scotland
 In gud aray, with noble men at hand;
 Gert plainly cry, that sawfte suld be nayne
 Off Sotheroun blud, quhar thai mycht be ourtayn.³⁷⁵

Like Harry's 'Wallace', for all its portrayal of righteous chivalry Imlah's story ends in failure. Douglas and his men are distracted like lotos-eaters from their mission by the pleasures of Seville, and do battle with 'Moorish troublemaker' Osmyn the Orange on its behalf. What follows is a charge by the Scottish barony reminiscent of the chaotic charge – captured in Imlah's 'Elegy for the Greys' – by the Scots Greys at Waterloo:

Heroes, who when they'd run their targets through
 Galloped on over the hill for the joy or the hell of it.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Edwin Muir, 'Robert the Bruce', *Collected Poems*, pp.115-116.

³⁷⁵ Blind Harry, 'Schir William Wallace', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. 76.

³⁷⁶ Mick Imlah, 'Elegy for the Greys', *The Lost Leader*, p. 52.

In 'Elegy for the Greys' Imlah – so as to convey his awareness that he has it – teases his own partial, romanticising tendency by having his companion point out that the charge was in fact a near-costly act of 'crass indiscipline' in which non-Scottish cavalry regiments such as the Blues were 'no less forward'. Imlah's sulk betrays his likeable bias:

– She means it; so I don't object, *Your Blues*
Did not ride navy horses; and they weren't Scots.

In 'Braveheart', too, 'better judgement yielded to blood-thirst': the Scots are duped by the same tactic that stopped the French advance at Waterloo, 'feigned retreat' –

which, from the Arabic,
El Cid, at war a hundred years ago
With Moorish allies and a Moorish foe,
Had learned to keep watch for; but the Scot,
Brought up on civil warfaring, had not.

Douglas's ill-judgement leads to an ignominious defeat (neatly symbolised by his banner's transformation from depicting a 'burning bonnet / With an unburnt salamander sitting on it' to a sorry 'toad encircled by a flammand hat') from which bursts a surreal postscript. Released from its granite shell and possessing the sentience of its former owner, the Bruce's heart undermines its 'brave' sobriquet by deciding that discretion is the better part of valour: it feigns death until it can safely retreat to 'the north, trailing his pipes'. This acts as a precursor to 'The Lost Leader', in which the Jacobite cause is not lost gloriously but abandoned to a rueful retreat.³⁷⁷ The lack of a decisive end allows the bearers of the cause to believe it endures, and resent the fact that victory would have been possible had it not been for ill-luck or the fallibility of an

³⁷⁷ Mick Imlah, 'The Lost Leader', *The Lost Leader*, pp. 41-43.

individual, whether that be Bonnie Prince Charlie or, in the case of footballing defeat to England, ‘for the goalie, / a lanky, unfortunate critter from Heart of Midlothian’.³⁷⁸ In Muir’s poem ‘The Castle’, the invulnerable bastion of the title nevertheless succumbs when a ‘wizened warder’, bribed, simply opens the back gate to let in the besiegers:

How can this shameful tale be told?
I will maintain until my death
We could do nothing, being sold;
Our only enemy was gold,
And we had no arms to fight it with.³⁷⁹

Imlah’s ‘Elegy for the Greys’ ends, satisfyingly, on a more whimsical note. Showing that his romanticising tendency will continue unabashed, Imlah humanises the events and sharpens the poignancy by positing what was going through the mind of the Greys’ sergeant John McEwan during them:

Surely his mind, vaulting its circumstance,
Repairs in half-light up the Brussels road
Two nights ago, and stables off the *Place*,
And climbs a staircase to the Richmonds’ ball
Before the word from Quatre Bras: that waltz;
Lifts of desire; Amelia’s pregnant look

The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse was published in 2000, a matter of months after the sitting of the first parliament in Scotland for 300 years. The *Observer* rated it a ‘serviceable route map’ for such a wide swathe of Scottish history, highlighting

³⁷⁸ Mick Imlah, ‘The Queen’s Maries’ (canto 4), *Diehard*, p. 14.

³⁷⁹ Edwin Muir, ‘The Castle’, *Collected Poems*, p. 129.

omissions but enjoying unexpected ‘digressions’.³⁸⁰ One of the latter is ‘On an Amorous Old Man’, a six-line poem by another Scotsman who settled in London, David Malloch (1705-1765), about an ageing, lonely lothario:

Still hovering round the fair at sixty-four,
Unfit to love, unable to give o’er;
A flesh-fly, that just flutters on the wing,
Awake to buzz, but not alive to sting;
Brisk where he cannot, backward where he can;
The teasing ghost of the departed man.³⁸¹

Crawford’s belief that this little-known poem captured one of Imlah’s ‘nightmare scenarios’, together with his concern that his friend’s life was threatening to resemble James Thomson’s, was encouraged by Imlah’s ‘pathological’ elusiveness during their *New Penguin* co-editorship. Crawford often phoned Imlah at the *TLS* to learn that he was not there, and people were having to cover for him.³⁸²

Maren Meinhardt – who had joined the *TLS* in 1996, specialising in science and German literature – noticed her friend and colleague’s absences and discovered that a pint after rugby, or a pre-party loosening glass of wine, or one more in a *TLS* lunch break, had become as much as a bottle of whisky a day.³⁸³ She understood how important Imlah’s *TLS* position was to him, so that, when the newspaper’s deputy editor, Alan Jenkins, warned him that the situation had grown untenable and his job was at risk, she and his long-standing friend Jane Wellesley stepped in. ‘It was those two that really sort of saved him,’ said Alan Hollinghurst, who had been shocked by Imlah’s

³⁸⁰ Arnold Kemp, ‘In the beginning was the word. Then they started arguing’, *Observer*, 8 Oct 2000 [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/oct/08/poetry.arnoldkemp, accessed 12 Dec 2013].

³⁸¹ David Malloch, ‘On an Amorous Old Man’, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. 243.

³⁸² Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

³⁸³ Maren Meinhardt to author, 1 Feb 2013.

physical condition when he saw him at a launch party.³⁸⁴ But it was Imlah's competitive instinct, rather than the rehabilitation clinics he was booked into, that ultimately secured his recovery. The same competitiveness that had helped fuel his drinking (he boasted that one clinic had informed him that his blood alcohol level was the highest they had seen in anyone in years³⁸⁵) was harnessed to take on and beat the statistic that only a fraction of recovering alcoholics avoid relapse: he didn't drink again for the rest of his life.

Imlah now 'ached towards the north':³⁸⁶ regular holidays in the Scottish Borders and stays – as often as once a month – at Jane Wellesley's Ayrshire home provided a therapeutic retreat from London and met his appetite for physical, not just imaginative, immersion in Scotland. His successful re-emergence from an addiction that had afflicted his twin sister, killed James Thomson and which disproportionately affects the nation he had come to proudly identify with,³⁸⁷ locked in Scotland as part of his regenerated self: he was now the Aberdeen-born co-editor of *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* whose poetic gifts had found their occasion.

³⁸⁴ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012.

³⁸⁵ Maren Meinhardt to author, 1 Feb 2013.

³⁸⁶ Mick Imlah, 'Braveheart', *The Lost Leader*, p. 26.

³⁸⁷ Scottish Government, *Scotland's drinking habit*, press release, 22 Feb 2009 [<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/news/releases/2009/02/20161722>, accessed 3 Oct 2014].

Chapter Six

The Fire of Belonging

Scotland's history is a 'varying record of heroism, treachery, persistent bloodshed, perpetual feuds,' wrote Edwin Muir in *Scottish Journey*.³⁸⁸ 'Its imagination turned to the spectacle of beauty in misfortune and the tragedy of the lost cause.'³⁸⁹ Muir's own poem 'Robert the Bruce' conveys this sense of a civilised Scotland as a forlorn hope. The Bruce maintains order, but at a cost: on his deathbed he is haunted by John Comyn whom he murdered at the high altar of Greyfriars Church in Dumfries when Comyn refused to pledge his allegiance:

O Douglas do not leave me now,
For past your head I see

My dagger sheathed in Comyn's heart
And nothing there to praise or blame,
Nothing but order which must be
Itself and still the same.³⁹⁰

Imlah ironizes the Bruce's present day sobriquet 'the flower of Scotland' by using it as the title to a sonnet in which he reimagines the Bruce's brutal and sacrilegious stabbing to death of Comyn:

³⁸⁸ Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p. 30.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁹⁰ Edwin Muir, 'Robert the Bruce', *Collected Poems*, p. 115.

Bruce appears from the priory, panting,
his sword in bloom, 'Comyn...the Red... is *kill!*'
(Comyn of Badenoch, a Balliol man),
And Bruce's boys pile in 'to mak siccar'.

So by their murderous pride they raised the flag
at Bannockburn ³⁹¹

– this being Scotland, victory is inevitably eclipsed by defeat –

that fell in the mud at Flodden,
Where Scotland braved a general massacre
Of soldier, sovrán, noble and downtrodden.
Woe was Dunbar, mourning his sick makars.
The Highland version lasted till Culloden.

The proximity of bloodshed ('mak siccar') to poetry ('sick makars') symbolises poetry's traditional importance in Scotland as a chronicler of the times and – as with the ballads – an immortaliser of them. At Bannockburn, the official poet of the expected English victory, Robert Baston, was captured and turned 'like captured artillery'³⁹² to write in praise of the English defeat. In one hand the sword, in the other the quill.

Another poet, Scotland's King James VI, became king of England on the death of his mother's cousin, Elizabeth I, in 1603. Not content with a Union of the Crowns between Scotland and England, James campaigned for 'unus Rex, unus Grex, & una Lex' (one king, one flock, one law) and sought to make this more palatable to an uncooperative English parliament by telling it that it could see Scotland 'as if got by Conquest', with England and Scotland considered 'the one a great, the other a less, a

³⁹¹ Mick Imlah, 'Flower of Scotland', *The Lost Leader*, p. 18.

³⁹² Mick Imlah, 'A Burel Broth', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5290, August 20 2004, p. 6.

richer and a poorer'.³⁹³ The bitterness over this belittling of Scotland is held forth in Imlah's 'The Honours':

When James the Sixth went South, to be the First,
He abandoned the honours of Scotland, her national regalia,
The crown, the sword of state, and the Spectre of Judah,
Those durable symbols of Scottish success or failure,
And died in his absence of the bloody flux.³⁹⁴

This echoes Muir's 'Scotland 1941'³⁹⁵ in which the status of Scotland's 'sword, the sceptre and the shield' as museum pieces is symbolic of a nation's honour sold out to the union with England, to Calvinism, and – as he expressed in 'The Castle' – for the 'dull lucre' of the Industrial Revolution that set Scotland's cities 'burning in their pit'. Scotland's nationhood now exists only in 'mean heirlooms of each fainter generation'; Burns and Scott, inventors through doggerel of cod Scotlands, are mere 'sham bards of a sham nation'. Imlah communicates that in wanting 'one flock' James VI abandoned his own: Scotland. Its state honours being hidden away for safe-keeping as 'evening herdsmen fold away their flocks' is a wry metaphor for James's tidying away of Scottish needs for political gain in England. It is left to the simple patriot, the everyday 'Janet and Jock', to keep the fire burning: a Mrs Granger smuggles the honours out of Dunnottar Castle and the reach of the English 'in a wagon of dirty clothes'.

This sense of Scotland's people being more ardent than its susceptible leaders, their rueful feeling of abandonment, continues in the poem 'The Lost Leader', where the Jacobite Scots, as the epigraph quoting from Kings 22.17 makes plain, are 'sheep that have not a shepherd':

³⁹³ Irene Carrier, 'King James I adjourning Parliament, 31 March 1607', *James VI and I: King of Great Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), citing King James VI and I, p. 43.

³⁹⁴ Mick Imlah, 'The Honours', *The Lost Leader*, p. 37.

³⁹⁵ Edwin Muir, 'Scotland 1941', *Collected Poems*, pp. 97-98.

And Micaiah said...I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd: and the Lord said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace. ³⁹⁶

This is lent pertinence by what Imlah, in his review of *A Dictionary of Scottish Quotations*, called the ‘most potent sentence in Scottish history’,³⁹⁷ a dispersal order passed down to his troops from Bonnie Prince Charlie: ‘Let everyone seek his own safety the best way he can.’ In ‘The Lost Leader’ this order is delivered to the prince’s bedraggled, rain-soaked supporters by his aide-de-camp. One – the poem’s narrator – finds ‘sauve qui peut’ (‘every man for himself’) a ‘foreign sentiment’, brought up as he and his countrymen are, as we know from ‘Braveheart’, on ‘civil warfaring’. Eventually the narrator, like the other ‘sixteen-hundred far gone’ remnants of the prince’s army, accepts ‘the fire of belonging was out’, and journeys home to his ‘poor shift made / between rain and wood’. Disillusioned, he resents his now former leader’s lack of fight and pictures his flight abroad as something grown grotesque with the excesses the average Scot, left behind, can only dream of:

west down channels
Of last-ditch loyalty;
To France at last, your safety,
Prince, Your Highness,
Your brandy, gout and syphilis.

The Scottish people are abandoned by their leaders to their poor shifts, in which folk ballads and songs help insulate against a long, cold disenfranchisement; the light of any cause that might thaw their – in Muir’s words – ‘frozen life and shallow banishment’

³⁹⁶ Mick Imlah, ‘The Lost Leader’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 41, quoting from Kings 22.17, *King James Bible* [<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/originalscans.php?book=1+Kings&chapter=22&verse=17>, accessed 3 Sep 2014].

³⁹⁷ Mick Imlah, ‘Auld Acquaintances’, *Guardian*, 23 Jan 1997.

barely perceptible.³⁹⁸ Muir's description of this in *Scottish Journey* is what *The Lost Leader* as a collection ultimately tries to communicate:

What makes the existence of the mass of the people in Scotland so unsatisfactory, apart from their economic plight [...] is not the feeling that they are being subjected to English influence, but rather the knowledge that there is no Scottish influence left to direct them.³⁹⁹

Scotland's huge and unreturned investment in the construction of a trading colony on the Isthmus of Panama, Imlah wrote in the *Observer* in 2000, 'bankrupted the nation and so brought on the indignity of takeover by England in the Act of Union'.⁴⁰⁰ Just as Scots fought on both sides at Culloden, and lairds were complicit in the Highland Clearances, what followed the establishment of Great Britain in 1707 was, as Crawford describes it, an 'attack on the distinctive Scottish cultural tradition [...] mounted by Scots themselves'.⁴⁰¹

Scots who, like Alexander Wedderburn in the 1755 *Edinburgh Review*, wrote about 'North Britain' rather than 'Scotland' in the context of 'improvement' were emphasising the new opportunities open to a post-Union and post-Culloden Scotland loyal to the British constitution. Such figures were pro-British because they were pro-Scottish: it was in the promise of 'Britain' that they saw the richest future for a Scotland which would soon 'improve'.⁴⁰²

It is in this context that Dunn, in his poem 'The Come-on', calls for what Crawford terms 'a barbarian literary attack' from within.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁸ Edwin Muir, 'Scotland's Winter', *Collected Poems*, p. 230.

³⁹⁹ Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey*, p. 28.

⁴⁰⁰ Mick Imlah, 'Taking Tincture with "Claret Colquhoun"', *Observer*, 10 Sep 2000 [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/10/fiction.reviews3, accessed 17 Aug 2014].

⁴⁰¹ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 38.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

We will beat them with decorum, with manners,
As sly as language is,
Take tea with the king's son at the seminars –
He won't know what's happening⁴⁰⁴

One day, the barbarians will 'leap down, into the garden / And open the gate – *wide, wide...*'. 'Brothers,' the poem continues, 'they say we have no culture', a reference to T.S. Eliot's questioning, in 1919, 'Was there a Scottish Literature?'⁴⁰⁵ The poem tells Scotsmen to 'deafen' the 'portentous remark' with the 'dull staccato of our typewriters'. Scottish allegiances must be subversive, an insurgency from within the British settlement. Imlah refers to this galvanising cause in the postscript to 'The Lost Leader' which deliberately mirrors Hugh MacDiarmid's 'The Little White Rose', here in full:

The rose of all the world is not for me.
I want for my part
Only the little white rose of Scotland
That smells sharp and sweet – and breaks the heart.⁴⁰⁶

For all its bittersweet history, the patriotic MacDiarmid defiantly loves his country, which he symbolises as the small but hardy Jacobite rose. Imlah takes on the mantle by picking the rose and wearing it 'in the heart'; it is light to carry, and a light in the dark like a fire of belonging, because it enriches his existence: his patriotism provides for Imlah what Bernard O'Donoghue has said his own, Irish identity has given him in England: 'that rather luxurious feeling' that one's 'centre of gravity' is elsewhere, that

⁴⁰⁴ Douglas Dunn, 'The Come-on', *Barbarians*, p. 13-14.

⁴⁰⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?', *Athenaeum*, 1 Aug 1919, pp. 680-1, cited by Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, p. 254.

⁴⁰⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Little White Rose', *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. 422.

one has ‘something in reserve’.⁴⁰⁷ The ‘we’ in the final line refers not only to the Jacobites gone to ground 250 years ago, but to their descendants, Imlah and Scottish diaspora everywhere:

*The cause was light,
A flower worn in the heart,
The secret white of the rose:
And all we did was sweetened by it.*

Imlah’s paralleling of the eighteenth-century Jacobite cause with his own exile chimes with Dunn’s argument that Scotland’s situation is a ‘monstrous permanence’, the irresolution of its so-called leaders chronic, so that, as he portrays in ‘An Address on the Destitution of Scotland’, Scotland is perpetually in a ‘nocturne of modernity’ where the only feeble light is a wasteland brazier around which ‘shabby encampments’ of Clydeside homeless shelter ‘out of the way of dragoons’.⁴⁰⁸

Redolent of Imlah’s later ‘London Scottish’, Dunn’s poem ‘War Blinded’ imagines how a Great War veteran came to lose his sight:

enlisting at
Recruiting tables on the football pitch,
To end up slumped across a parapet,
His eye-blood running in a molten ditch⁴⁰⁹

In ‘London Scottish’, the 1914 members of the titular rugby club all enlist together:

⁴⁰⁷ Andrew McCulloch quoting Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘Freyfaxi by Bernard O’Donoghue’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Sep 2013 [<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1311693.ece>, accessed 17 Jan 2014].

⁴⁰⁸ Douglas Dunn, ‘An Address on the Destitution of Scotland’, *St Kilda’s Parliament*, p. 19-20.

⁴⁰⁹ Douglas Dunn, ‘War Blinded’, *St Kilda’s Parliament*, p. 31.

The stars, but also those from the back pitches,
All sixty volunteered for the touring squad,
And swapped their Richmond turf for Belgian ditches.⁴¹⁰

Even in this apparently linear almost-sonnet – reproduced on postcards by the Scottish Poetry Library for National Poetry Day 2009 and distributed throughout Scotland’s schools and libraries – an oblique reference is being made to rebellious events from another time. The fifteen members of the squad the ‘ass selectors favoured to survive’ toast to the ‘The Forty-Five’. This cleverly subversive allusion – to the number who perished but also to another name for the Jacobite rising of 1745 – transforms what is ostensibly an elegiac war poem: the reader is left to consider if the terrible death toll has led these veterans to reject the prevailing ascendancy. A more explicit rejection of it Imlah portrays in his poem ‘Selkirk’ about what could be called ‘The One’ – the sole survivor of Selkirk’s contingent in the Scottish army at Flodden, who returned to the town waving a captured English flag above his head to show the other men cut down:

He rises every June at the Common Riding,
and when the trades lay down their flags, waves it
in semaphore, in silent figures of eight.

No wonder then, after Gallipoli,
the Selkirk Ladies dig in against all-comers⁴¹¹

The Selkirk women’s jealous protection of their menfolk, and the London Scottish survivors’ subtle toast, reconnects Scotland with its tradition of doubtfulness of English-centric authority in a time – the interwar years – in which unionism is regarded as having been in its heyday. The veterans, Londoners who, we assume, self-identify as

⁴¹⁰ Mick Imlah, ‘London Scottish’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 76.

⁴¹¹ Mick Imlah, ‘Selkirk’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 28.

Scottish, are potentially the barbarians who might one day ‘leap down, into the garden / And open the gate – *wide, wide...*’ These furtive allegiances continue in the poem ‘Herries’. The mysterious visitor to a family’s dinner table (perhaps the leader by that name of Walter Scott’s fictional third Jacobite rising, portrayed in *Redgauntlet*, or the historical figure of the Jacobite William Maxwell, Lord Herries of Terregles, a decade dead by the time of the poem’s setting – 1753 – but perhaps playfully revived) reveals his allegiance to the exiled Stuart line, the ‘King Across the Water’, by passing his cup ‘*over the water-jug*’ during a toast ostensibly made to King George II.⁴¹²

The subject of Walter Scott is perhaps where a difference in Dunn’s and Imlah’s impulses is most apparent. Dunn’s nationalism is inextricably linked to his socialism. In ‘Renfrewshire Traveller’, the guilt Dunn feels on visiting Scotland – so that ‘home rain’ is his ‘only appropriate welcome’ – is twofold: he has left working class Clydeside behind to make England his home, and he has made his career the writing of poetry (‘the sort of thing a Jessie would do’).⁴¹³ Ever since failing the Scottish Eleven-Plus examination as a schoolboy, Dunn possessed a deep consciousness of class which, in Jane Stabler’s words, he views as a ‘destructive English export’ (‘A rotten, rancid and disgusting thing in British society,’ he told her, ‘not native to Scotland until someone put it there’).⁴¹⁴

In the poem ‘Green Breeks’, Dunn directly addresses Walter Scott and upbraids him for the assault of the titular street urchin carried out by Scott’s childhood gang of rich boys. Dunn’s allegiance is naturally with Breeks, as a representative of the Scottish poor, a demographic Dunn believes Scott patronisingly romanticised. The left-behind haunt Scotland’s conscience, their fate a stain on Britain:

⁴¹² Mick Imlah, ‘Herries’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 46.

⁴¹³ Douglas Dunn, ‘The Scottish Review of Books Interview’, *The Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2008 [<http://www.booksfromscotland.com/Authors/Douglas-Dunn/SRB-Interview>, accessed 12 July 2013]

⁴¹⁴ Jane Stabler, ‘Biography’, *Reading Douglas Dunn*, p. 4.

He is perpetual. He is my country.
He is my people's minds, when they perceive
A native truth persisting in the weave
Of shabby happenings. When they turn their cheeks
The other way, he turns them back, my Green Breeks.⁴¹⁵

For his poem, Dunn uses as material, and quotes from throughout, J.G. Lockhart's *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*, in a similar way that Imlah mined Leonard's *Places of the Mind* for his 'B.V.' In Dunn's poem, Scott is a figure to be derided as an embodiment of upper-class superiority, as a writer who, for the benefit of the reading classes largely in England, romanticised the Scottish poor whose lives he knew little of and whose welfare he was ambivalent about.

But in 'Diehard', Imlah, as a Scotsman in exile and as someone less politically engaged than Dunn,⁴¹⁶ is more warmly disposed to Scott. He teases the man for his vanity, but ultimately approves of his project to assert the validity – granted, through the creation of a sanitised Highland culture – of Scottish cultural difference within Britain, for that is what he, Imlah, is attempting too:

Look how he peopled the fields, they light up
When you say their names, *Dalgetty, Jarvie!*,
Not living, so much, as thoroughly acting the part,

With portable speeches and full stage-colouring:
Martyr and Highlander; lost children, heirs
To great estates; gypsies: Prince *and* Pretender. ⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁵ Douglas Dunn, 'Green Breeks', *St Kilda's Parliament*, pp. 47-51.

⁴¹⁶ Alan Hollinghurst to author, 10 May 2012: 'James [Fenton] was obviously politically extremely engaged, which you could never say in a million years Mick was. I don't think I ever heard Mick express a political opinion at all, actually.'

⁴¹⁷ Mick Imlah, 'Diehard' (canto 2), *The Lost Leader*, p. 56. All subsequent reference are to this version of the poem.

Imlah defends Scott's 'formula novels' against criticism from F.R. Leavis ('who now reads *Revaluation?*') by arguing that they were written to 'blunt the bills of ransom'. In his 2005 *TLS* review of new Edinburgh University Press editions of Scott's novels, Imlah wrote that while none of them are 'the highest things in literature' they are '(no small thing) perfect for the sofa'.⁴¹⁸ He admits to finding Scott's inventions and anachronisms page-turners:

The Scott novel's a 'Big Bow-Wow', shaggy,
Heavy, particular; slow to rouse; but once fixed,
Will not give up its grip on your reading leg.

What Dunn might have focused on – that Scott's boyhood gang became in adulthood an anti-invasion militia whose only 'action' was suppressing restive miners and millworkers – is portrayed by Imlah as an illustration of Scott's vanity: Scott 'wore year round' the militia's 'scarlet uniform with sky-blue britches'. For this he is mocked by his comrades behind his back, while neighbouring farmers – kind to his face by day – break into his bantam coop by night and steal his finest specimens. Scott's fate, then, is to be treated as a figure of fun by the very people he sought in his writing to immortalise. What will have resonated with Imlah as he struggled to bolster his Scottish credentials from London was that Scott was a considerable contributor to Scottish culture, but isolated to a degree from the truth of it.

'We won't look away at the end', the final section to 'Diehard' begins, as though doing so might be the politer thing to do: the following seven stanzas are a window onto the real Scott beyond the literary man. In his 'gas-lit Gothic anomaly' he constructed by the Tweed, the ailing Scott retreats to a 'shaded room' that is a metaphor for the posthumous fading of his literary reputation, a lonely widower with only the

⁴¹⁸ Mick Imlah, 'This Right Hand', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5341, 12 Aug 2005, p. 6.

pathetic consolation of companionable dogs. However, while his star as a writer may have waned, he has ‘come to lend’ his name ‘to a whole breed’. This refers to the tenacious Aberdeen terriers called ‘Scotties’ that have come to be a national symbol of Scotland, the description of which in Imlah’s poem ‘Domestic’ – ‘if battle has to be given, he will get hold / and not give in, or let go, for the life of him’⁴¹⁹ – deliberately echoes the line in ‘Diehard’ about Scott novels not giving up their ‘grip on your reading leg’. But it also refers to the Scots themselves, as a people who have, for better or worse, assimilated much of Scott’s creations into their national identity. ‘History obeyed his whip’, his ‘mendacious annals’, Dunn concedes angrily in ‘Green Breeks’, believing Scott’s work helped justify class division.

The class guilt Dunn betrays in ‘Renfrewshire Traveller’ is distilled in Tom Leonard’s ‘Fathers and Sons’, which Imlah and Crawford included in the *New Penguin* anthology. In it, Leonard confides to having felt ashamed of his father for his whispering words aloud when reading the newspaper. Then the poem cuts to:

‘Don’t you find
the use of phonetic urban dialect
rather constrictive?’
asks a member of the audience.

The poetry reading is over.
I will go home to my children.⁴²⁰

Marked changes in education – such as the 1944 Education Act – and in society more widely created greater opportunity for an alienation from origins to occur: the son of a barely literate blue collar worker performs at poetry readings where the most arduous it gets is answering vacuous questions from the audience. ‘In a country where the majority

⁴¹⁹ Mick Imlah, ‘Domestic’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 85.

⁴²⁰ Tom Leonard, ‘Fathers and Sons’, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, p. 504.

of writers are born to non-literary families,' Dunn wrote in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, 'the subsequent distance which education can put between them and their origins is often painfully vivid.'⁴²¹ Dunn was writing from experience: he recalls giving a copy of his celebrated debut collection, *Terry Street*, to an uncle who said: 'I don't know why you bother, you will never be as great as the immortal Robert Burns.'⁴²² There is a sense in which the poet's success in his field cannot be appreciated by those closest to him – by blood at least – because that field is one they barely comprehend: to quote R.S. Thomas, the poet has nothing to offer them 'but a few songs, cold as stones / In the thin hands that asked for bread'.⁴²³

*

Douglas Dunn writes in the introduction to *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry* that the MacDiarmid-led fight-back against Scottish literature's marginalisation as provincial brought with it a 'petty discrimination' against those poets identifying themselves as Scottish but living 'furth' – out – of Scotland: those 'not quite obviously Scottish enough'.⁴²⁴ Among others, he lists Edwin Muir as a victim of such discrimination, presumably because he lived much of his life in England. Imlah and Crawford themselves regretted omitting from the *New Penguin* anthology Ewart Alan Mackintosh, whose links to Scotland resembled Imlah's.⁴²⁵ Mackintosh, born in Brighton, alumnus of London's St Paul's School and Christ Church, Oxford, never lived in Scotland but identified enough with his father's nationality that when war broke

⁴²¹ Douglas Dunn, *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, p. xliii.

⁴²² Nicholas Wroe quoting Douglas Dunn, 'Speaking from Experience: Douglas Dunn profile', *Guardian*, 18 Jan 2003 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview24>, accessed 6 Nov 2013].

⁴²³ R.S. Thomas, 'Death of a Poet', *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 84.

⁴²⁴ Douglas Dunn, introduction, *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, p. xix.

⁴²⁵ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

out in 1914 he enlisted in the Seaforth Highlanders. He, like Imlah, lacked that most important Scottish shibboleth: an accent.

Andrew McNeillie, informed by his own experience as the Welsh-born son of a Scotsman, understood how the potentially ostracising importance placed on the accent affected his friend. Imlah confided to McNeillie that, crossing the border, he would attempt to adopt a Scottish accent that always proved unconvincing. McNeillie recalls:

We both had this problem of to be Scottish is to more or less have an accent, if you don't have an accent you can't be Scottish. When you think about it, the Scottish identity is largely that: that's the marker. It's absurd. And he felt that, and I remember him saying 'immediately that I cross the border I sound like this, this peculiar thing that's not convincing, but I have to do it'. I hate going to Scotland in some respects because I lose all confidence – and I think he felt that – because I want people to understand my derivation and allegiance but they won't if you don't sound Scottish enough.⁴²⁶

Imlah's inability to assimilate fully whilst in Scotland would have been ample fuel for his forging a more successful connection between himself and that country where he was in full control: on the page. If he himself did not possess a Scottish accent, his poetry would. 'Mick gave out that he was born in Aberdeen,' said Robert Crawford –

and he wasn't. And I like that, and all the more so I was moved by that, because I thought that says all the more about what this deeply hidden Scottish side did mean to him. He really, really wanted it to matter.⁴²⁷

An identity forged through the imagination might have made it seem 'artificial' – surprising, even perverse – in the eyes of James Campbell and others, but it was proving a success: this Imlah, 'born in Aberdeen', had been included in *The Faber Book of*

⁴²⁶ Andrew McNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

⁴²⁷ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry, had co-edited *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, was synonymous with insightful articles on Scottish subjects for the *TLS*, and in Andrew McNeillie had gained a likeminded friend who would facilitate the meeting between his new poetry and the world.

From 2001 onwards Imlah came close to submitting his poems to a publisher. A manuscript would be printed off, given a title, and not posted, or posted and then retracted. ‘Everyone at the *TLS* who cared to know knew that Mick was writing a new book,’ Campbell said:

He delayed its submission over and over again, but evening would find him tapping away quite, as it were, publicly at this or that poem. Since we knew he didn’t care to discuss it, no one pressed him. He would have given a one-syllable reply – but then so he did to many things. The pamphlet published by Clutag Press did come as a surprise.⁴²⁸

The small, independent Clutag Press had been established in Thame, Oxfordshire, by McNeillie in 2000. It used the Arab clamshell machine formerly used by John Fuller’s Sycamore Press. McNeillie had met Imlah at a Seamus Heaney Oxford lecture in the mid-1990s, and would irregularly send him poems at the *TLS* for consideration:

Mick started to cotton-on to me one way or another, and he liked me for two reasons probably – that I was clearly very like him in being a distressed member of the Scots diaspora, and that I wrote very short poems that were very useful to fit in the bottom-end of columns! And then we started to meet, and we shared a lot of stuff about Scotland which in many ways we were both going through in very complicated ways – emotionally – together. We gave a joint reading at an event in Dumfries, and I think we were well bonded together before that. We’d become close.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ James Campbell to author, email, 31 Oct 2013.

⁴²⁹ Andrew MacNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

McNeillie learnt that Imlah was ‘obsessively’ working on a manuscript of poems and offered to publish some as a Clutag pamphlet. Imlah showed his trust in McNeillie in not only accepting his offer but deferring to him on which poems to include, in what order, and on what to call the pamphlet. *Diehard*, of which 200 copies were published in 2006, contained nine poems all on Scottish subjects.⁴³⁰ Joining ‘Herries’, ‘Selkirk’, ‘London Scottish’, ‘Diehard’, ‘Braveheart’ and ‘The Honours’ were ‘The Four Marys of Melrose’ (a ‘rugby song’) and ‘The Queen’s Maries’.

This last was a five-part monologue delivered by Mary, an elderly lady waiting for her bus in a café at Dumfries bus depot.⁴³¹ This ‘soft in the head’ 83-year-old, her memory ‘playing tricks’, serves as the perfect conceit by which to digress on, and converge, disparate episodes from Scotland’s past, for ‘surely it’s nature, to sweep things together / when we look back’. In an apt mirroring of Scotland’s semi-invented history, the reader is left unclear what is accurate and what not. This is epitomised by the first epigraph to the poem, a quotation from a sixteenth-century Scottish ballad about Mary Hamilton and three other children – all the daughters of Scottish nobles and all named Mary – accompanying the six-year-old Mary Queen of Scots on her escape to France: ‘There was Mary Seaton and Mary Beaton / [And] Mary Carmichael and me.’⁴³² The ballad’s lyrics are erroneous: the four Marys were in fact Seton, Beaton, Fleming and Livingston. The epigraph’s deployment is intended to imply that, as the name Mary is common throughout Scotland’s story, bearers of it can blur into one national representative. This concept is lent embodiment when Robert Burns, pining for his beloved Mary Morison, is fobbed-off with another Mary. His reaction – ‘Ye are na Mary Morison’⁴³³ – serves as the second epigraph to Imlah’s poem, and recalls that line about

⁴³⁰ Mick Imlah, *Diehard* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2006).

⁴³¹ Mick Imlah, ‘The Queen’s Maries’, *Diehard*, pp. 11-15.

⁴³² Imlah’s deployment of the lines as an epigraph omits the ‘and’ before ‘Mary Carmichael’.

⁴³³ Robert Burns, ‘Mary Morison’, *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919) [<http://www.bartleby.com/101/493.html>, accessed 10 Dec 2013].

the subjective nature of identity in ‘In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson’: ‘You’re not Lord Tennyson!’

Mary’s unreliable monologue veers from the memory of seeing the ‘Highland Brownie’ train pulling out of Glasgow Queen Street Station to the smuggling of the six-year-old Mary Queen of Scots out of Dumbarton Castle into her fifteen-year exile in France, an event apparently captured in a Victorian-era painting our Mary once viewed in Glasgow. The monologue then shifts to its finest section, which – with its warring and sporting misfortune – is a microcosm of *Diebard* and, later, *The Lost Leader* as a whole. Mary recalls being at Hampden in 1948 for Scotland’s defeat to England at football. She could not attend the match with her war-time lover, who in her mind is the Prince of France to her Mary Queen of Scots because he –

used to do
those French songs of the day, ‘Mimi’, ‘Louise’,
putting on his daft international accent;
it tickled me, all right: he was *my* Dauphin,

my own Chevalier. Him and his pals were part
of the Phibian Landings; not D-Day, but
a fortnight later – their pontoon was meant
to rebuild bridges behind the Canadians:

but the boat got shelled in the bay, he drowned,
they all drowned.

Mary then reveals her heart in an unguarded moment cut short by her confusion and the mundane: ‘I loved him. I still love him, really. But then / I forget if he’s Jackie or Hughie. – Here’s the bus.’ We watch her board it, an everyday act ridiculed by authority (‘Mrs Thatcher decided / that any man over the age of twenty-six / who took the *bus*,

could *count himself a failure*) and complicated by a gang of girls ‘in a spiral / of swear words, text-tones, midriff and brutal candy’ sat at the back:

Some France they had: a dingy day out in a tunnel, –
but they tag on to the roll of great explorers:
‘There was me, Shaneel, Shell and Michelle –’

The name Mary in a Scottish context represents continuity: Imlah and Meinhardt gave it to their second daughter, born in the same year *Diehard* was published. Is the displacement of this ‘best and prettiest of Scottish names’ from the country’s affections symptomatic of a nation’s disconnection from its history, or of national renewal? ‘Thank heavens’, the narrator seems to communicate, for the young girls’ lack of deference, for their innocence of war: perhaps they will not be content to spend their lives, like the Mary of the monologue, ‘making other peoples’ beds’ in ‘back-seat country’.

The nine poems of *Diehard* formed the core of Imlah’s second full collection, *The Lost Leader*. That collection would also contain, mostly towards its end, more forthcoming poems that marry his own personal history to that of Scotland’s. There is ‘Stephen Boyd’, an elegy for a close friend from his Oxford days who became a fellow in English at St Andrews and who took his own life in 1995. With its epigraph from Henryson’s ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ (‘And on that went, talkand of play and sport...’), Imlah’s character portrayal of Boyd, a Scotsman, reveals substantial biographical information about his own upbringing near Glasgow (‘the softer suburbs of the Kirk’); the love of rugby which gained him Boyd’s friendship (‘a friendship based / On little more than aping Bill McLaren’⁴³⁴); his representing Magdalen’s XV at it; his dislike of revealing weakness (‘two prigs, we liked to disapprove / Of those who showed their

⁴³⁴ Bill McLaren (1923-2010): Scottish rugby commentator for BBC television.

fears or bared their heart’); his being invited to perform at a poetry reading in St Andrews with Kathleen Jamie. Boyd’s St Andrews colleague, Robert Crawford, remembers this reading:

Mick came to St Andrews, gave a reading, and I must have already had a copy of *Birthmarks*, I brought it along and he wrote in it something like ‘To Robert, with thanks for inviting me up here’. I think that was probably because he almost never got invitations to read in Scotland, because people, certainly after *Birthmarks*, did not think of him as a Scottish poet. What struck me afterwards was that probably he liked this invitation for several reasons, one of which was that he visited and stayed with Stephen. I don’t know whether he’d stayed with Stephen on other occasions, I think possibly not. So I think that will probably be the occasion he writes about in the poem about Stephen Boyd.⁴³⁵

For a man and poet assiduous in not ‘baring the heart’, his portrayal of Boyd’s personal strife, which when published in the *TLS* in 2000 caused his widow distress,⁴³⁶ is striking:

You’d put a record on, of Monteverdi,
Or something even earlier, singing yourself
In a passionate, reedy voice – and weeping, lots,
Then weeping more; and Sue had arms around you,
Stroking and shooshing, but without surprise –
So this was not the first time, nor the last.
She made you steady, and I went to bed,
And slept; but it resumed – whispers, breaking –
You exclaiming – she hushing you down

Personal disclosures follow in ‘Tales of a Grandfather’, in which Imlah describes his grandfather’s service in the Great War: ‘Like all the braves of Aberdeen, he joined / The 4th Battalion, Gordons’. He quotes at length from his father – ‘eighty now, who

⁴³⁵ Robert Crawford to author, 14 Oct 2013.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

flew / ‘Ops’ in the next’ – describing a letter Imlah’s grandfather wrote to the custodians of Edinburgh Castle’s war memorial appealing for them to include on it not only the names of the fallen but those who ‘must die civilian’.⁴³⁷ And in ‘Dad’s Army’, Imlah admits his past reluctance to settle down.⁴³⁸ A name for the dialect of north-eastern Scotland – taking in Aberdeen – is ‘Doric’, a jocular reference to the dialect of the Dorians in Ancient Greece that was adjudged harsh and rustic by the Athenians. The Spartan bachelor of Imlah’s poem is ordered home to the ‘Doric’ after being injured in battle, not against the Goths but – in setting mines ‘under the march / of union’ – against commitment. Arriving home, he discovers his warring was futile for his hearth – his heart – has been breached: ‘while you were off on your wargames / [...] a German has stolen/ under your lintel, and knocked you up / some eggs and a pair of *flachsenkinder*’ (sic). The ‘German’ is Meinhardt, who, in the following poem, ‘Maren’, is a ‘Boeotian’ out-running Imlah’s ‘great Caledonian bore’ around ‘Wapping’s amenable sports arena’:⁴³⁹

Together, then, after our fashion:
 exchanging oaths like old antagonists,
 your Focke-Wulf tailing my Spit
 into fresh air and another orbit.

With its captain struggling to divine the way, the last poem of the main body of the collection, ‘Iona’, mirrors the first, ‘Muck’.⁴⁴⁰ Their deployment at each end of *The Lost Leader* illustrates Imlah’s twenty-year journey across the subject of Scotland: from making landfall on what was then an obscure shore, to exploration, assimilation, and naming his first daughter, born in 2003, after one of its islands. Iona’s misunderstanding

⁴³⁷ Mick Imlah, ‘Tales of a Grandfather’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 77.

⁴³⁸ ‘Dad’s Army’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 104.

⁴³⁹ ‘Maren’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 106.

⁴⁴⁰ ‘Iona’, *The Lost Leader*, p. 107.

of her father's request while playing in the bath to 'Take me to your leader!' – 'I haven't got any leader' – neatly infers her Scottish inheritance. Imlah is given his 'pilot' star with the birth of his daughter and so is Scotland too, for she is its future:

Succession is easy: first it was them,
then me for a bit; and now it's you.

Imlah, reluctant to surrender his independence, had promised himself that he would not engage in baby talk, but finds himself doing so now that 'all the words / we care about are yours'. The resting Mars of Velázquez's painting referred to in the poem⁴⁴¹ represents the bachelor Imlah, seemingly still in sufficient condition to give 'perpetual service' to the war games of courting and 'released too soon' to settle down. But, as in Velázquez's depiction, one suspects his 'demob nakedness and gloom' is not gloom at having been demobbed but a tired relief that his warring is over. 'Poor tin soldier man! He's thinking about things!' says Iona, and we suspect he's thinking it is time, in his 'afterprime', for a change. The bachelor life was an adventure, but also a time of self-destruction and inner disquiet. Imlah states, looking into the same mirror he did in 'Birthmark' twenty years earlier, that his youth was misspent dwelling 'so much / sometimes, on self and such', inwardly searching for happiness 'without / a clear view out':

when, if I asked the mirror once
in the way of an old queen,
to frame how things might look
twenty or thirty visits thence,
all it reflected back was white
and unrefracted light, the mean
prophetics of a closed book.

⁴⁴¹ Also referred to in the poem 'Empty Tumbler' as 'Mars without his war-toys', *The Lost Leader*, p. 87.

But things have worked themselves out in a circuitous but definite way. Having children ushers Imlah towards the family man's comfortable downslope:

Of course, it was not allowed to show
or we to know
that you were coming all the time,
my perfect rhyme;
how you would seize the reins, Iona,
riding my shoulders over the hill

In October 2007, Imlah was invited to read at the Bodleian alongside Bernard O'Donoghue and Seamus Heaney as part of an event for Clutag Press's *Archipelago* magazine (see appendix photographs 11 and 12). A recording made for the Bodleian's online archive has him reading 'Muck' reticently, perhaps nervously.⁴⁴² The academic Brian Vickers, seated in the audience, told McNeillie he thought Imlah had read poorly; McNeillie himself thought there was something not right about his friend – 'he looked grey and odd really' – that he couldn't quite place.⁴⁴³ He learned a short time later that Imlah had been diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease.

Imlah had been suffering from muscle spasms in his arm for some time. Eventually he found it difficult to open bottles and jars, even to get out of bed, and finally resolved to see a doctor. His hope that the symptoms were those of the minor Benign Fasciculation Syndrome was misplaced; he spent a number of days sitting in the garden smoking, coming to terms with the prognosis.⁴⁴⁴ Motor Neurone Disease, which

⁴⁴² Mick Imlah, reading 'Muck' at Archipelago Poetry Evening, 9 Oct 2007, Audio (BODcasts), *Bodleian Library & Radcliffe Camera* [http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/__data/assets/file/0017/20690/archipelago_imlah.mp3, accessed 10 Dec 2013].

⁴⁴³ Andrew McNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

⁴⁴⁴ Maren Meinhardt to author, 1 Feb 2013.

causes weakening and muscle wastage, and which most often presents itself in people aged 50-70 – Imlah was 51 – is typically fatal within two to five years of the start of symptoms.⁴⁴⁵

Imlah resolved to continue working at the *TLS* for as long as possible. His last piece for the paper, published in November 2007, a review of a Posy Simmonds graphic novel based on Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, begins as a meditation on missed chances.⁴⁴⁶ It recounts how Hardy, engaged to be married, met the similarly engaged Helen Paterson, whose illustrations accompanied the serialisation of *Far From the Madding Crowd* in the *Cornhill* magazine. Paterson must have made quite an impact on Hardy during their one meeting, for he declared to a friend over thirty years after it: 'these two simultaneous weddings would have been one but for a stupid blunder of God Almighty.'

A year after the piece appeared, unable to talk, Imlah was judging the *TLS* poetry prize by nodding at entries passed before him that he wanted shortlisted. In the meantime, Andrew Motion had successfully encouraged Paul Keegan, Faber and Faber's poetry editor, to publish a new collection of Imlah's poems. *The Lost Leader* duly appeared in May 2008, together with a selection of Edwin Muir's poems that Imlah had edited. A launch party was held at Jane Wellesley's home in Kensington, where Imlah was being cared for. In October, *The Lost Leader* won the Forward Prize for best collection. The *Guardian* headline read: 'Mick Imlah takes Forward prize after 20-year silence.'⁴⁴⁷

'I did not know he was Scottish,' wrote the *Observer's* reviewer, speaking for many: 'Reading *The Lost Leader* is like finding oneself surrounded by a crowd in which

⁴⁴⁵ Motor Neurone Disease Association, *About MND: Brief guide to MND*

[<http://www.mndassociation.org/what-is-mnd/Brief+guide+to+MND.htm>, accessed 22 Jan 2014].

⁴⁴⁶ Mick Imlah, 'Away from it all: Posy Simmonds' modern Hardyesque', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5459, 16 Nov 2007, p. 19.

⁴⁴⁷ Alison Flood, 'Mick Imlah takes Forward prize after 20-year silence', *Guardian*, 8 Oct 2008 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/08/forward.prize.mick.imlah>, accessed 1 Oct 2011].

almost everyone turns out to be Scottish.⁴⁴⁸ A week later for the *Guardian*, Peter McDonald hailed the collection as ‘a compendium of Scottish experience – historical, mythic, cultural and personal – of monumental proportions’.⁴⁴⁹

With the publication of his first full volume of poems since 1988’s *Birthmarks*, Mick Imlah has produced a book that fulfils, and even exceeds, the promise of that already mature and substantial debut [...] [It] has an overall coherence, strength and emotional depth seldom encountered in modern poetry collections. Formal and imaginative daring, Imlah proves, can be moving as well as merely ambitious.

*

I would like, in my dreams, to have an independent Kent. Think of the tariffs on the roads, the near monopoly on hops, our recourse to oast houses, castles, beaches, Dickens, William Harvey, Canterbury, Knole for tourism...⁴⁵⁰

So began a letter in *The Spectator* of 13 September 2014, a week before the Scottish independence referendum. The sentiment, albeit tongue in cheek, reflected the extent to which the debate north of the border had stirred many south of it into considering for the first time what Scots had been contemplating for decades: a post-British identity.

The referendum in Scotland would, in Andrew McNeillie’s words, ‘help re-design the mental geography of England’.⁴⁵¹ The fallout from the result suggests he could be right: although Scotland split 55% to 45% in favour of remaining in the United Kingdom, there have been English calls for the ‘West Lothian Question’, a democratic anomaly tolerated since the establishment of the Holyrood parliament in 1999, to be

⁴⁴⁸ Kate Kellaway, ‘In praise of a proper Charlie’, *Observer*, 1 Jun 2008 [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/01/poetry, accessed 1 Oct 2011].

⁴⁴⁹ Peter McDonald, ‘Brave hearts’, *Guardian*, 7 Jun 2008.

⁴⁵⁰ Charles Robinson, letter to the editor, *The Spectator*, 13 Sep 2014, p. 14.

⁴⁵¹ Andrew McNeillie to author, 4 Dec 2013.

resolved either through ‘English votes for English laws’ at Westminster, or an England-only parliament, or – even – ‘several parliaments – London, Anglia-Essex, Wessex, Mercia and Northumberland, for instance.’⁴⁵² Thus the notion of an independent Kent, an English county which, for five hundred years, was a kingdom in its own right, and which, like Scotland, neighbours a far larger entity – in its case, London.

Seamus Heaney was able to state in a Beckman Lecture given at Berkeley in 1976 that the ‘devolutionary impulse’ to attain, reclaim or exaggerate an identity separate from the traditionally dominant London-Oxbridge English cultural centre had become prevalent:

The loss of imperial power, the failure of economic nerve, the diminished influence of Britain inside Europe, all this has led to a new sense of the shires, a new valuing of the native English experience. Donald Davie, for example, has published a book of poems, with that very title, *The Shires*, which attempts to annex to his imagination by personal memory or historical meditation or literary connections, each shire of England. It is a book at once intimate and exclusive, a topography of love and impatience, and it is yet another symptom that English poets are being forced to explore not just the matter of England, but what is the matter with England.⁴⁵³

Trying to understand Imlah’s movement towards harnessing his Scottish inheritance for his poetry, while the heated Scottish independence debate raged in the background, led me to reflect – ever more locally – on my own roots: not only as someone from England, but Kent, a place next to – but other from – London:

This is the real England, I say, so what do you think?
It’s a place of trees; of apple, pear, cherry and plum.
In the gaps is man’s history, his urge to link

⁴⁵² James Meek, contribution to ‘After the Referendum’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 18, 9 Oct 2014, p. 21.

⁴⁵³ Seamus Heaney, ‘Englands of the Mind’, *Preoccupations*, p. 169.

with others, forge commerce, lick a thumb
to count the realm's tender or sample harvest.

This is non-metropolitan England with its own distinct and place-specific customs, right on London's doorstep: 'the cake stalls and book stalls / and little church on the Pilgrims Way / feel more than thirty miles away.' My 'Chevening' sequence attempts to communicate that the actual and literary consolidation of south-eastern England into London is misplaced and that a strong sense of local identity need not be the exclusive preserve of regions more remote from the capital. The 'temporal dislocations' used by Imlah and Dunn to project one unifying Scottish history can be deployed in Kent too. Beyond the war memorial's roundabout, the cricket marquee, and the pop-up library, knights come to worship at the west door of a church on the Pilgrim's Way, Tommies return to their farms a century after armistice, the Lord's Prayer summons the voice of a people who for thousands of years lived by gavelkind, the system of land tenure not abolished until 1925:

'You did not need deliverance,'
the faces in the rood screens and stained glass say,
'from what was your inheritance:
are things any better in your day?'

I, standing in their nave to their prayer,
sheltered from all temporal pressure,
feel in the back of my neck the hard stare
of their power and glory, forever.

Such valuing of a small part of England is not something that is exclusive. 'Local patriotism,' wrote Richard Church in the 1970 *Shell Guide to England* –

is benevolent and hospitable, based on the assurance of a place of one's own. It gives civic pride a touch of religious mystery. To hold that state of mind about a vast and ill-defined mass of the earth's surface is impossible. That is why empires fall apart, after much ill-feeling and injustice. It is not so within small communities, conditioned by their local geography, weather, natural advantages and difficulties.⁴⁵⁴

'Home', the narrator of 'Chevening' contemplates hopefully, 'perhaps, one day maybe, / what you call that will be my own':

Do you want to reset your watch to the toll of here?
Our years would lengthen into a summer's evening
of wine on a lawn under bat-flight. Then we'll disappear.
All that'll be left: two glasses filled with morning,
your silk scarf over one of the two empty chairs;
two lit candles in the church for us, if anyone cares.

*

Mick Imlah died of respiratory failure on the morning of 12 January 2009, at Jane Wellesley's home. He was 52. It was the day of the awarding of the T.S. Eliot Prize, for which *The Lost Leader* had been shortlisted. A funeral service took place in the chapel of Magdalen College on 21 January, and the following day Imlah's body was laid to rest in Colmonell cemetery, by the banks of the River Stinchar, near Wellesley's Ayrshire home. If Scotland represented in Imlah's life a lost domain that he could not fully reclaim, in death he was reclaimed by it.

Five months after his death, *The Lost Leader* was shortlisted for Canada's International Griffin Prize. The prize's judges concluded their citation with:

⁴⁵⁴ Richard Church, 'The South-East', *The Shell Guide to England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), ed. John Hadfield, p. 148.

Imlah ends his book with the brilliant ‘Afterlives of the Poets’, which draws on the company of Tennyson and James Thomson, musing on what’s left to us of their lives and pages. He recovers the lost, leaving their books open for us. And, as his closes, he joins their company.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁵ Griffin Poetry Prize, 2009 international shortlist, ‘Mick Imlah’, judge’s citation [http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/awards-and-poets/shortlists/2009-shortlist/mick-implah/, accessed 10 Jan 2014].

Conclusion

Amid its general surveying of Mick Imlah's life and work, this study aimed to find answers to two specific questions. The first: how and why had Imlah come to adopt the Browningsque dramatic monologue and narrative, and did he do so in isolation? The second: how and why did the transformation in preoccupations between *Birthmarks* and *The Lost Leader* occur?

In answer to the first question, the study has found that, in 1976, Imlah began the Magdalen Victorians and Moderns course and, guided by a tutor in John Fuller who believed in the 'fantastic, riddling, horrific, erotic, or plain fun' potentials of poetry, opted to study Browning and Tennyson over Eliot and Yeats. Such study complemented his pre-existing predilection for the playful, fictive potential of poetry, forged from a singular imagination on the one hand and a shyness – belied by his feats on the rugby and cricket fields – on the other. The Browningsque monologue or narrative, with its bard rendered anonymous behind layers of artifice, liberated him to explore what could otherwise have been embarrassing, and in such a way that avoided cliché or the risk of seeming 'soft or naïve'.

While wider 1970s society, battling economic and political headwinds, re-appreciated the Victorian era as an emblem of stability, poets such as Anthony Thwaite, Edward Lucie-Smith and Fuller himself turned away from the 'rapt' confessional lyric or expressions of a prevailing collective mood towards modes that better reflected the fractious and discordant world that the second half of the twentieth century had seemed to become. This included the Browningsque dramatic monologue, which, with its unreliable speaker and its gap between what is said and what happened, enacts the

postmodern notion that humans lack an ‘undivided and coherent self which acts as a standard of rationality’. The fruits of this connection include Imlah’s dramatic monologue ‘Quasimodo Says Goodnight’, and his dramatic narratives such as ‘Doing It’.

In answer to the second question, the study has found that Imlah always identified with his Scottish ancestry and exhibited it in a number of ways, whether that be reverting to his Scottish accent in the family home or singing Scottish rugby songs in the pub after a few drinks. Rooting his identity deeper in this Scottishness fortified him against a personal crisis in the 1990s, when a few drinks became something more problematic. From the middle of that decade he co-edited *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, which directly led him – by, for example, obliging him to write ‘Fergus of Galloway’ – to realise Scotland could be a valid poetical preoccupation. Simultaneously, Scotland as a nation was discovering a new sense of itself. Politically, this was manifested in its heated rejection of the Poll Tax in 1989-90, and the coming into being of the Holyrood parliament, opened in 1999. Artistically, Douglas Dunn had already shown the way in becoming increasingly preoccupied with Scottish subjects through the 1970s and into the 1980s, a decade in which, it is held, an intellectual ‘Unilateral Declaration of Independence’ occurred, reinforced by the emergence of an assertive new generation of Scottish poets on the British poetry scene. Any survey of that successful generation would be incomplete without Imlah’s inclusion, even if his Scottish identity was not widely perceived until he was in the last few months of his life, with the publication of *The Lost Leader*.

Studying his journey has influenced my own: from taking direction in terms of form (poems in blank verse monologue and narrative) and subject (potted stories, biographies and histories) to taking direction in terms of impulse, so that, in the sequences ‘Chevening’ and then ‘East of Ipswich’, I come closer to my own ancestry:

‘Time, and a long pilgrimage, narrows / the daylight between mourner and tourist.’ My own collection illustrates to scholars the extent to which being immersed in another’s poetry – I in Imlah’s just as Imlah was, for example, in *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* – can influence a poet’s own output, and how infectious is the impulse to identify it with a particular place. This in turn reinforces my argument that the ‘Scottishification’ of Imlah’s output was not a damascene shift but, in part, a quite logical result of his reading.

The Lost Leader was contiguous with *Birthmarks*. The latter communicated that attempts to deny one’s origins, who one truly is, are doomed to failure; the former extends this sense of a lost cause – what afflicts us being congenital, or at least inextricable – to a nation’s story, extolling elegiac pride but also Scottish dry humour in the face of defeat. ‘Tomorrow, then?’ James Campbell would ask when Imlah rose from his *TLS* desk at the end of the day. ‘If we’re spared,’ Imlah would reply.⁴⁵⁶

To determine if Imlah’s star will remain unobscured, we must first determine how brightly it shines in the first place. Ian Hamilton could have been referring to Imlah when he wrote:

There are poets who, by keeping to one side of the ins and outs of literary fashion, do find themselves rather more to one side than they’d wish. By holding back, they run the risk of getting lost.⁴⁵⁷

Publishing two quite ostensibly different collections twenty years apart is not conducive to the gaining of a following. Unlike with Michael Donaghy, for example, there is little sign of an ongoing effort to retain a place for Imlah in the minds of the poetry-reading

⁴⁵⁶ James Campbell, ‘Mick Imlah at the *TLS*’, *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, p. 26.

⁴⁵⁷ Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (London: Viking, 2002), p. xiv.

public.⁴⁵⁸ As Hamilton once wrote: ‘It isn’t true that “if it’s good, it will survive”;
someone, somewhere, has to keep saying that it’s good.’⁴⁵⁹

Birthmarks is perhaps too slight and – now 25 years out of print – already too
obscure to endure, though certain poems from it might because of their inclusion in the
Selected Poems of 2010. The poems of *The Lost Leader*, however, with their more
ostensibly unifying and unignorable theme, lend themselves more to categorisation (and
thus marketing: ‘London Scottish’ was reproduced on postcards for National Poetry
Day in 2009) and anthologisation. An increasingly independent-minded Scotland might
treasure more closely those poets whose work beats the drum of Scottish identity.
Scotland’s preference, made in the 2014 referendum, to remain a part of the United
Kingdom does not deny the long-term direction of travel, and so it is that, as time
passes, Imlah, at rest in Ayrshire, might increasingly be claimed by Scotland. When
asked if Imlah would be ‘accepted as a genuine “Scottish poet” north of the border’,
Douglas Dunn replied:

Among readers who care for poetry first, and nationality second, Mick is an
‘accepted’ poet. Those with a prissier, more political, or ‘purer’ sense of nationality
will probably ignore his work, if they even know it exists.⁴⁶⁰

Robert Crawford declared in the *Scottish Review of Books* that Imlah leaves behind
poems that are ‘likely to become a lasting part of the inheritance of Scottish literature’.⁴⁶¹
‘I’ve been reading it [*The Lost Leader*] with a mixture of fascination, jealousy and
astonishment,’ he told Imlah in their final email exchange: ‘It is destined to be known as

⁴⁵⁸ Since Donaghy’s death in 2004 there has been *Essays, Interviews & Digressions* (Picador, 2009), *Collected Poems* (Picador, 2011), and *A Reader’s Guide to the Poetry of Michael Donaghy* (Picador, 2014).

⁴⁵⁹ Ian Hamilton, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (London: Clarendon, 1994), p. v.

⁴⁶⁰ Douglas Dunn to author, email, 2 Feb 2014.

⁴⁶¹ Robert Crawford, ‘Birthmarks’, *Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, 11 Nov 2010.

“The Loss Leader”, “The Lost Reader” and such, but I think it will last.”⁴⁶² It is hoped this study marks the start of a concerted effort to ensure that that is indeed the case. But if Imlah’s oeuvre does not continue to be appreciated on merit alone, the study has shown that – if nothing else – rather than being *sui generis*, that oeuvre is relevant to literary scholars investigating a range of subjects, from British poetry’s re-appreciation of Victorian verse in the latter half of the twentieth century, to the emergence, from the 1980s, of a more confident Scottish presence on the British poetry scene.

Robert Selby, Sevenoaks, December 2014

⁴⁶² Robert Crawford to Mick Imlah, email, 27 May 2008; forwarded to author 26 Oct 2013.

Bibliography

including interviews, recordings and correspondences

- Barry, Peter, 'Postmodernism', *Beginning Theory* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 81-95.
- Batchelor, John, *Tennyson: to strive, to seek, to find* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012).
- Bernard Martin, Robert, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- Browning, Robert, *Selected Poems*, ed. Douglas Dunn (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
- Browning Robert, *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- Buchan, John, *Huntingtower* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 2012).
- Buchan, John, *Sick Heart River* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 2007).
- Burns, Robert, 'Mary Morison', *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919)
[<http://www.bartleby.com/101/493.html>, accessed 10 Dec 2013].
- Byron, Lord, *Don Juan*, ed. T.G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W.W. Pratt (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 379.
- Campbell, James, email to author, 30 Oct 2013.
- Campbell, James, email to author, 31 Oct 2013.
- Carrier, Irene, 'King James I adjourning Parliament, 31 March 1607', *James VI and I: King of Great Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 43-44.
- Church, Richard, 'The South-East', *The Shell Guide to England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), ed. John Hadfield, pp. 148-153.
- Coleridge, Ernest Hartley, ed., *Anima poetae: from the unpublished note-books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Heinemann, 1895), pp. 102-103
[<https://archive.org/details/animapoetaefromu01cole>, accessed 2 Apr 2014].
- Crawford, Robert, 'Callaloo', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11, No. 8, 20 Apr 1989, pp. 22-23

- [<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n08/robert-crawford/callaloo>, accessed 14 Nov 2013].
- Crawford, Robert, *A Scottish Assembly* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).
- Crawford, Robert, *Talkies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).
- Crawford, Robert, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- Crawford, Robert and David Kinloch, eds., *Modern Scottish Writers: Reading Douglas Dunn* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).
- Crawford, Robert, 'Speaking in Tongues', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 8 Feb 1996, p. 10
[<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v18/n03/robert-crawford/speaking-in-tongues>, accessed 26 Nov 2013].
- Crawford, Robert and Mick Imlah, eds., *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Crawford, Robert, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin, 2007).
- Crawford, Robert, 'Birthmarks', *Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 11 Nov 2010
[<http://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/index.php/back-issues/volume-six-2010/volume-six-issue-four/377-birthmarks-robert-crawford>, accessed 5 Jan 2012].
- Crawford, Robert, interviewed by author, London, 14 Oct 2013.
- Crawford, Robert, email to author, 26 Oct 2013.
- Crawford, Robert, email to author, 25 Nov 2013.
- Davie, Donald, *The Shires* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).
- Drabble, Margaret, *The Ice Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978).
- Duguid, Lindsay, interviewed by author, telephone, 8 Apr 2014.
- Dunn, Douglas, *Terry Street* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).
- Dunn, Douglas, *The Happier Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
- Dunn, Douglas, *Love or Nothing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).
- Dunn, Douglas, *Barbarians* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).
- Dunn, Douglas, *St Kilda's Parliament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).
- Dunn, Douglas, *Elegies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).
- Dunn, Douglas, *Northlight* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

- Dunn, Douglas, *Poll Tax: The Fiscal Fake*, Chatto Counterblasts No. 12 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).
- Dunn, Douglas, ed., *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).
- Dunn, Douglas, *New Selected Poems 1964-2000* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).
- Dunn, Douglas, 'The Scottish Review of Books Interview', *The Scottish Review of Books*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2008
 [<http://www.booksfromscotland.com/Authors/Douglas-Dunn/SRB-Interview>, accessed 12 Jul 2013].
- Dunn, Douglas, email to author, 2 Feb 2014.
- Eliot, T.S., *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).
- Eliot, T.S., *The Waste Land and other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
- Fenton, James, *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983* (London: Penguin, 1983).
- Fenton, James, *Out of Danger* (London: Penguin, 1993).
- Fenton, *Yellow Tulips: Poems 1968-2011* (London, Faber and Faber, 2012).
- Flood, Alison, 'Mick Imlah takes Forward prize after 20-year silence', *Guardian*, 8 Oct 2008
 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/08/forward.prize.mick.imlah>, accessed 1 Oct 2011].
- Forbes, Peter, ed., *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 1994.
- Ford, Mark, *Landlocked* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).
- Ford, Mark, 'Mick Imlah: leading poet, editor and critic', *Guardian*, 13 Jan 2009
 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jan/13/mick-imlah-poet-obituary>, accessed 5 Oct 2011].
- Ford, Mark, 'Mick Imlah & John Fuller: The Counties of England', paper delivered to the conference 'Mick Imlah: His Life and Work' at Senate House, University of London, 10 Dec 2010.
- Ford, Mark, *Six Children* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).
- Ford, Mark, 'The City of Pain: The Poetry of James Thomson', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 492-506.
- Ford, Mark, 'Imlah, Michael Ogilvie [Mick] (1956–2009)', *Oxford Dictionary of National*

Biography

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=100789&back=>, accessed 14 Jan 2014].

Ford, Mark, interviewed by author, London, 9 May 2013.

Ford, Mark, email to author, 27 Sep 2013.

Fuller, John and Howard Sergeant, eds., *The Gregory Poems: 1983-84* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1985).

Fuller, John, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996).

Fuller, John, *Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004).

Fuller, John, 'Mick Imlah: poet, critic and founding editor of Oxford Poetry', *The Times*, 13 Jan 2009

[<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/obituaries/article2084143.ece>, accessed 5 Oct 2011].

Fuller, John, 'Imlah at Magdalen', paper delivered to the conference 'Mick Imlah: His Life and Work' at Senate House, University of London, 10 Dec 2010.

Fuller, John, interviewed by author, Oxford, 30 Oct 2012.

Fuller, John, email to author, 5 Apr 2013.

Griffin Poetry Prize, 2009 international shortlist, 'Mick Imlah', judge's citation [<http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/awards-and-poets/shortlists/2009-shortlist/mick-implah/>, accessed 10 Jan 2014].

Hamilton, Ian, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1993).

Hamilton, Ian, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (London: Clarendon, 1994).

Hamilton, Ian, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (London: Viking, 2002).

Hardy, Thomas, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2004).

Heaney, Seamus, 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 150-169.

Heaney, Seamus, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

Heaney, Seamus, *New Selected Poems 1966-87* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

Heaney, Seamus, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

Heaney, Seamus, *Electric Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

Hollinghurst, Alan, *The Stranger's Child* (London: Picador, 2011).

- Hollinghurst, Alan, interviewed by author, London, 10 May 2012.
- Howard, Richard, *Untitled Subjects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Athenaeum, 1969).
- Hughes, Linda K., *The Manyfaced Glass: Tennyson's Dramatic Monologues* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987).
- Hugo, Victor, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (New York: Random House, 2002).
- Imlah, Mick, *The Zoologist's Bath & Other Adventures* (Oxford: Sycamore Press, 1982).
- Imlah, Mick and Tracey Warr, eds., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No. 3, Sep 1983.
- Imlah, Mick and Tracey Warr, eds., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Jan 1984.
- Imlah, Mick and Tracey Warr, eds., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, Apr 1984.
- Imlah, Mick and Tracey Warr, eds., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2, Jun 1984.
- Imlah, Mick, ed., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4, Jan 1985.
- Imlah, Mick, ed., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 75, No. 1, Apr 1985.
- Imlah, Mick, ed., *Poetry Review*, Vol. 76, No.1/2, Jun 1986.
- Imlah, Mick, *Birthmarks* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988).
- Imlah, Mick, 'Selfishly yours, Philip', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 4673, 23 Oct 1992, p. 13.
- Imlah, Mick, 'Sad days in the City of Dreadful Night', *Independent on Sunday*, 14 Feb 1993 [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--sad-days-in-the-city-of-dreadful-night-places-of-the-mind-the-life-and-work-of-james-thomson-b-v--tom-leonard-cape-25-pounds-1473030.html, accessed 29 Oct 2013].
- Imlah, Mick, 'Grave and Muffled Beats', *Independent on Sunday*, 16 Jan 1994 [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--grave-and-muffled-beats-dantes-drumkit-by-douglas-dunn-faber-pounds-1299pounds-699-1400479.html, accessed 5 Jul 2014].
- Imlah, Mick, Glyn Maxwell, and Peter Reading, *Penguin Modern Poets 3* (London: Penguin, 1995).
- Imlah, Mick, 'Auld Acquaintances', *Guardian*, 23 Jan 1997, p. 13.
- Imlah, Mick, introduction, *Dr Wortle's School* by Anthony Trollope (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), pp. vii-xx.
- Imlah, Mick, 'Taking Tincture with "Claret Colquhoun"', *Observer*, 10 Sep 2000 [http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/10/fiction.reviews3, accessed 17 Aug 2014].

- Imlah, Mick, and Alan Jenkins, eds., *A Century of Poems: from the pages of the TLS 1902-2002* (London: Times Literary Supplement, 2002).
- Imlah, Mick, 'Goodbye to all that low tackling', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5262, Feb 6 2004, p. 9.
- Imlah, Mick, 'This Right Hand', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5341, 12 Aug 2005, p. 6.
- Imlah, Mick, *Diehard* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2006).
- Imlah, Mick, reading 'Muck' at Archipelago Poetry Evening, 9 Oct 2007, Audio (BODcasts), *Bodleian Library & Radcliffe Camera*
 [http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/__data/assets/file/0017/20690/archipelago_i_mlah.mp3, accessed 10 Dec 2013].
- Imlah, Mick, 'Away from it all: Posy Simmonds' modern Hardy-esque', *Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5459, 16 Nov 2007, p. 19.
- Imlah, Mick, *The Lost Leader* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).
- Imlah, Mick, *Selected Poems*, ed. Mark Ford (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).
- Jenkins, Alan, interviewed by author, London, 4 Dec 2013.
- Jenkins, Nicholas, 'An Interview with Mick Imlah', *Oxford Poetry*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1983
 [http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/interviews.php?int=i2_mickimlah, accessed 30 Sep 2011].
- Jenkins, Nicholas, interviewed by author, Skype, 1 Mar 2013.
- Kellaway, Kate, 'In praise of a proper Charlie', *Observer*, 1 Jun 2008
 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/01/poetry>, accessed 1 Oct 2011].
- Keats, John, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin Classics, 1988), p. 144.
- Kemp, Arnold, 'In the beginning was the word. Then they started arguing', *Observer*, 8 Oct 2000
 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/oct/08/poetry.arnoldkemp>, accessed 12 Dec 2013].
- Khanbhai, Hamid and Tom Richards, eds., *Oxford Poetry: In Memoriam Mick Imlah*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Dec 2009.
- King James Bible*, Ecclesiasticus 44:9
 [http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Ecclesiasticus-Chapter-44_Original-1611-KJV/, accessed 3 Sep 2014].

King James Bible, Kings 22:17

[<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/originalscans.php?book=1+Kings&chapter=22&verse=17>, accessed 3 Sep 2014].

Langbaum, Robert, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Larkin, Philip, *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1991).

Larkin, Philip, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

Larkin, Philip, *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

Leonard, Tom, *Places of the Mind: The Life and Work of James Thomson ('B.V.')* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).

Loehndorf, Esther, *The Master's Voices: Robert Browning, the Dramatic Monologue, and Modern Poetry* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1997).

Lucie-Smith, Edward, *Confessions and Histories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

McCulloch, Andrew, 'Freyfaxi by Bernard O'Donoghue', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Sep 2013

[<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1311693.ece>, accessed 17 Jan 2014].

McDonald, Peter, 'Brave hearts', *Guardian*, 7 Jun 2008

[<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/07/poetry>, accessed 1 Oct 2011].

McDonald, Peter, *Torchlight* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011).

McNeillie, Andrew, *In Mortal Memory* (Manchester: Carcanet: 2010).

McNeillie, Andrew, interviewed by author, London, 4 Dec 2013.

Meek, James, contribution to 'After the Referendum', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 18, 9 Oct 2014, p. 21.

Meinhardt, Maren, interviewed by author, London, 1 Feb 2013.

Morton, John, 'Robert Browning and Mick Imlah: Forming and collecting the dramatic monologue', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3. pp. 84-98.

Morton, John, "'No one remembers you at all": Mick Imlah and Alan Hollinghurst ventriloquising Tennyson', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Vol. 66, No.1. pp. 22-40.

Motion, Andrew, ed., *Chatto Poetry Festival: New Statesman & Society Contemporary Writing No.1* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989).

Motion, Andrew, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 505.

- Motor Neurone Disease Association, *About MND: Brief guide to MND*
 [<http://www.mndassociation.org/what-is-mnd/Brief+guide+to+MND.htm>,
 accessed 22 Jan 2014].
- Muir, Edwin, *Collected Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).
- Muir, Edwin, *Selected Poems*, ed. Mick Imlah (London, Faber and Faber, 2008).
- Muir, Edwin, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2008).
- National Records of Scotland, *Statistical Bulletin: 2011 Census – Key Results on Population, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Religion, Health, Housing and Accommodation in Scotland - Release 2A*, 26 Sep 2013, p. 23.
 [[http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/Stats Bulletin2A.pdf](http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/StatsBulletin2A.pdf), accessed 24 Jan 2014].
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, *The Weakness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, *Gunpowder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995).
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, *Here Nor There* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999).
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, *Outliving* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003).
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, *Farmers Cross* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).
- O'Donoghue, Bernard, interviewed by author, Oxford, 26 Apr 2013.
- Paulin, Tom, *The Secret Life of Poems: A Poetry Primer* (London: Faber and Faber 2008).
- Roberts, Ryan, ed., *John Fuller & The Sycamore Press: A Bibliographical History* (Delaware and Oxford: Oak Knoll Press, 2010).
- Robinson, Charles, letter to the editor, *The Spectator*, 13 Sep 2014, p. 14.
- Ryals, Clyde de L., *The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
- Salt, Henry, *The Life of James Thomson (B.V.)* (London: Watts and Co, 1914), p. 107.
 Internet Archive: The California Digital Library, University of California
 [<https://archive.org/details/lifeofjamesthoms00saltiala>, accessed 16 Jan 2014].
- Sampson, Fiona, ed., *A Century of Poetry Review* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009).
- Sampson, Fiona, 'Mick Imlah's death is a multiple loss to poetry', *Guardian*, 13 Jan 2009
 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/jan/13/mick-implah-poet-legacy>, accessed 5 Oct 2011].
- Sandbrook, Dominic, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-79* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

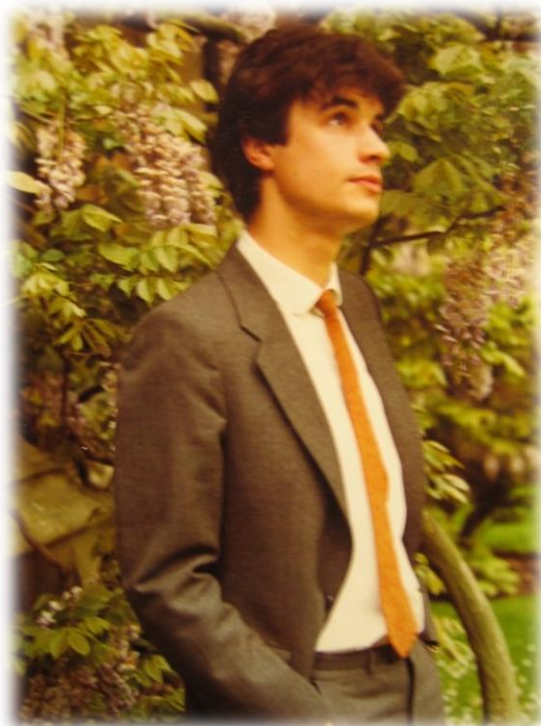
- Scottish Government, *Scotland's drinking habit*, press release, 22 Feb 2009
 [<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/news/releases/2009/02/20161722>, accessed 3 Oct 2014].
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord, *The Complete Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1902).
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord, *Selected Poems*, ed. Mick Imlah (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
- Tennyson, Alfred, *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- The South Bank Show: New Generation Poets*, Season 18, Episode 3, written by Melvyn Bragg, directed by Susan Shaw, aired ITV, 2 Oct 1994.
- Thomas, R.S., 'Death of a Poet', *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 84.
- Thomson, James, *The City of Dreadful Night and other Poems* (London: Watts and Co, 1938).
- Thwaite, Anthony, *Victorian Voices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- Unattributed obituary, 'Imlah, Michael Ogilvie', *The Wisden Cricketers' Almanack 2010* (London: John Wisden and Co, 2010), ed. Scyld Berry, p. 1668.
- Unattributed obituary, 'Mick Imlah', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Jan 2009
 [<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/4376077/Mick-Imlah.html>, accessed 5 Oct 2011].
- Walker, William, ed., *The Bards of Bon-Accord: 1375-1860* (Aberdeen: Edmund & Spark, 1887), p.414-428. Internet Archive: The University of British Columbia Library
 [<http://archive.org/details/bardsofbonaccord00walk>, accessed 11 Nov 2012].
- Warr, Tracey, interviewed by author, Oxford, 31 Jan 2012.
- Woods, Tim, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).
- Woodward, Gerard, *Householder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).
- Woodward, Gerard, *After The Deafening* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994).
- Woodward, Gerard, interviewed by author, London, 9 Feb 2012.
- Wright, David, ed., *English Romantic Verse* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- Wroe, Nicholas, 'Speaking from Experience', *Guardian*, 18 Jan 2003
 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview24>, accessed 6 Nov 2013].

Appendix

12 photographs



1. 24 Courtlands Avenue, Hayes, Bromley: the address where James and Bathia Imlah were living when, in 1956, Mick and his twin sister Fiona were born (© Robert Selby)



2. Mick Imlah in the Magdalen Cloister as an undergraduate (c.1976-79; photograph supplied by Alan Hollinghurst)



3. Mick Imlah distributing type for *The Zoologist's Bath* at John Fuller's home, c.1981-82 (© John Fuller)



4. John Fuller's garage in Benson Place, Oxford: home of the Sycamore Press from its inception in 1968 to its closure in 1992 (© Robert Selby)



5. 'Stupid – / It's a tree': November on Hayes Common, Bromley
(© Robert Selby)



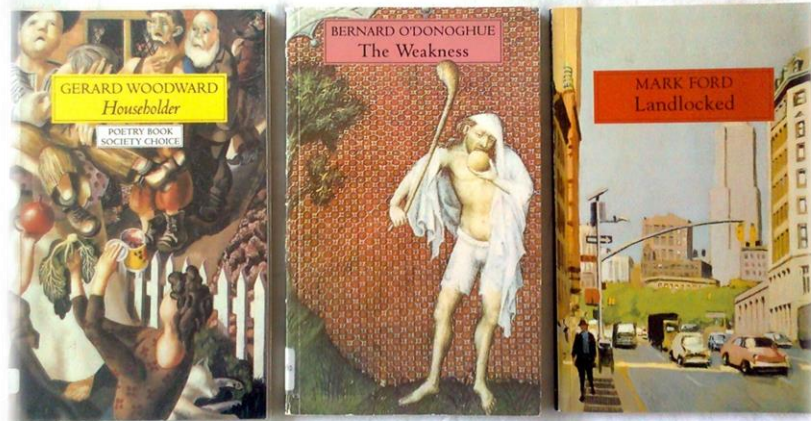
6. 'A really wicked sense of humour': the September 1983 issue of *Poetry Review*,
the first under the co-editorship of Mick Imlah and Tracey Warr
(© Robert Selby)



7. 'Out of the mines and the quarries': Mick Imlah in a disused quarry near John Fuller's cottage on the Llŷn Peninsula, early 1980s (© John Fuller)



8. 'My time is served, in a place off Portobello': 133c Ledbury Road, Mick Imlah's address for twenty years (© Robert Selby)



9. Three additions Mick Imlah made to the Chatto and Windus poetry stable: Gerard Woodward, Bernard O'Donoghue, and Mark Ford (© Robert Selby)



10. Mick Imlah in a lunch hour at the *Times Literary Supplement*, Wapping, 1995 (© Alan Hollinghurst)



11. Drinks in Quod Bar before the *Archipelago* poetry evening at the Bodleian, 9 October 2007. Mick Imlah, bottom right, is talking to Bernard O'Donoghue.

On O'Donoghue's left is Seamus Heaney, and on Heaney's left is the artist Norman Ackroyd. On Imlah's right is Irish poet Greg Delanty (© Andrew McNeillie)



12. Mick Imlah in Quod Bar before the *Archipelago* poetry evening.

Andrew McNeillie learned shortly after that Imlah had been diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (© Andrew McNeillie)