

The following essay seems to have been published in the Australian magazine **Famous Reporter # 26** in December 2002. I have cut it a bit. The first publication appended a number of related poems and I have dropped those.

Lawrence Upton

Essay

Pol Dhu, heading north

*This article is based on my posting to **PoetryEspresso** on Fri, 1 Mar 2002. That posting was in response to others' responses to the publication of my poem **Pol Dhu, heading north** as PoetryEspresso's "March Poem of the Day - No. 1" (edited by Jill Jones) It is followed by **Pol Dhu, heading north**.*

In 1986, I performed my poetry, with the woman I lived with, in a series called RASP. Everything was fine. Everything was good. At the end, the Chair announced a reading at Kings College by a colleague. But we were off to a Yugoslavian island, an incredibly beautiful place, and I had to miss that reading.

So I started writing a poem to the poet, explaining that I couldn't make it. I meant it as a friendly gesture, an occasional poem; but I kept worrying at it... I said just how much I valued his writing; I built in a sort of quotation, echoing some of his characteristic rhythms; and then I started playing around with that... and, before I knew it, I found myself saying that what I got out of his poetry, the renewal, was akin to the renewal I got out of going to Yugoslavia... It was true at the time.

There was a problem, though... This process led, in the poem, all in the poem, to an examination of just how fine everything really was... In part, that challenge to the apparent contentment of my life had identified and may have reinforced the hidden instability of my home relationship. A problem was that any such chatter was bound to have a lot of wrong-headed stuff in it, as I spoke of places I hardly knew, misapprehensions of places visited and so on...

So, I reworked a lot of the poem(s) continuously, stopped addressing the letters to one personally, which I built into the narrative, and began building in errors, so that there was no question of (sociological) accuracy. Thus, I had a kind of ghost of myself, even more foolish than I, who was the I; and I could begin to examine the idea of "I".

I had that I expanding the field of inquiry to large parts of Europe while all

the time it obsessed about itself and its beliefs.

It's an interesting time to be a European and I threw in earlier travels to east Europe and Scandinavia...

My lover and I had started moving on to Greece for our travels together before the Yugoslavian civil war got going fully. In terms of the writing, it expanded my range back to 2000 BCE. (Not that there isn't a prehistory to all the Balkans, but one writes from what one knows best.) The verse, sets of letters, unsent internal monologues, is a kind of lineated prose recitative which syncopates at high points in various ways and then drops back...

There were easily 100 pages in several sets... and then I had a break... I was living alone by then and putting some things forcibly into my past.

Later (1994) I was asked for a poem for the 70th birthday festschrift of the poet / critic / teacher Eric Mottram. I decided to write a letter to him, not referencing an invented I, assuming it; because Eric didn't need to be told that you can't really say "I..." in a poem without it being fiction. I chose to write from Pol Dhu because that's where Marconi made his first trans-Atlantic broadcast; and one of Eric's big things was the spread and effect of technology.

It was a very different poem, certainly technically, to the earlier verse. It's one of my personal favourites. It bred numerous similar but lesser poems, many of which haven't been published... I also began, after that, writing one offs, hoping -- I think -- that they would eventually string together to make a further set of what I now called **Messages to silence**... ("Volume 3", **Letters to Eric Mottram and some postcards**, Form Books, 1997)

Messages to silence is an odd thing. It's much too long ever to be read at one meeting; but I do read bits of it, now and then, which turns it into a set of poems and that really isn't the effect I wanted.

The later poems, largely written in and of Cornwall are numerous now and have morphed into something else, though I still sometimes refer to them as part of the 86 + sequence. They grow out of and with a whole set of poems about solitary walking in Scandinavia and the Balkans, much of which is still in notebooks. It sprawls like a conurbation.

This one, **Pol Dhu, heading north**, is a few years old, a transitional one, transitional in the context made above.

In the first **Letter to Eric**, Pol Dhu is where Marconi worked. In this poem, "Pol Dhu, heading north", it's Pol Dhu now.

For much of the year, Pol Dhu is deserted, except for farmers exercising their right to lift sand for soil improvement... a large sandy beach in a cove with quite a substantial stream crossing it which seems to have no surviving name. A few scattered buildings, a through road not much used, a spur road built for the royal inspection of Marconi's equipment, about a century ago.

Pol Dhu means black pool or black water, which refers I think to a marshy pond further back, partly lost to a National Trust car park. I've tried following the stream inland, but I would need waders at least! It's beautiful but fairly hostile.

I used to spend weeks very near there, in a small cottage, and stride up and down that empty coast. At Pol Dhu, there's a bus stop. North and south the road swings away, so going north one is heading away from an easy ride -- available several times a day. It's maybe three hours walk to the first substantial town, to the first public transport unless you abandon the coast. Going north, one is heading towards some rugged and treacherous walking -- the next cove up is Church Cove with the very old church almost cut off from the main by sea-erosion; and, further north, Hell Cliff -- a straight translation from Cornish rather than a renaming, and quite accurate potentially.

Church Cove has a helicopter space, which may give a sense of its relative isolation. It's a place, a stretch, I find emotionally moving. The sense of the land moving, I stole from Charles Thomas, by far the best writer I know on the history of Cornwall and Scilly. He said it of Scilly. Anywhere where one is on a path which has developed organically the world seems to turn, of course; but that arises from a cited expectation of straightness. A few weeks before *PoetryEspresso* published the poem, I watched the church at St Just in Penwith dance across the skyline as I went towards it. But Charles Thomas picked up on something else, which I had felt but not been aware of conceptually till he named it. That stayed with me for years and was there when I needed it at Pol Dhu, part of the experience of the poem and so part of the poem. I wrote the first draft just up the coast.

Cassie Lewis wrote that she found the poem's "structure [...] seems wave-like, each concept overturned by the next." and I was happy with that; that was the effect I wanted, I realised. That ground is some of the oldest and most geologically stable in the British Isles, and yet it moves and is in a way alive. I don't find it at all intimidating; but it's a bit like being a flea on a big animal and knowing it. Everything is on the move -- a flat curved world / a plate-tectonic world experienced as a field of appeasable powers... and I should think the whole thing's resting on the back of a hopping rabbit. There are rabbits everywhere above ground and donkeys [loose for the benefit of rare flowers; and you come upon little possees of them. I like that; but, if you're daft enough to pet them, they mug you for sandwiches. There are many streams. Much of the (Lizard) peninsula is a 300 foot plateau under saturated peat. The sea's breaking into it apace near Pol Dhu. And I wanted to get a sense of some of that in a song.

Of course, not all poems written in Cornwall would fit into any one obvious category within my total output. For instance, I have a couple of poems which describe dogs between Mullion and Mullion Cove with whom I used to be on terms; but they could easily have been written on the east coast of Britain.

A lot of my writing takes place in the country of Cornwall; it is only English by conquest, but that's an almost total conquest.

Though I was born in London, most of my family comes eventually from beyond the Tamar, and I was taken to Cornwall yearly, even as a baby. When I was 4, in Hugh Town in Scilly, my mother uttered the doubtful proposition that it was my home; and it has taken me half a century to effect my doubt. Over the last ten years, I have spent increasing amounts of time in the west of Cornwall. So, ethnically, I am returning after about a century; & that sense of belonging in the west Cornish landscape remains with me strongly and underlies almost all that I write.

I try not to romanticise the country and find the whole "mystic Cornwall" thing tiresome.

Pol Dhu, heading North

the sea is blood, not water

tides pulse, land still; but not immobile --

streams run from it -- this one has moved more than a man's length south
since autumn

it coils and fans

and the bay falls over itself

to touch its beach and

hold it

sometimes it all swings round
and you're pushed back
against where you've come from
gravitational false
dizzy up here in solidity
stunned

I'm

fallen in retrospective anticipation
any limit now will break
and the pointer of my self'll go

one way or the other

time less change less necessity
in a sliced sphere

sea from the west, stream westward
elliptical swirl of

cascaded over
sand beside another
infinity
evaporates between
the contents of each frame
caricaturing
the concepts of its framer

that which I think inanimate
exerts itself against me

a shifted perspective

awareness of large power

jump forward a year
a grave length a wave's
length from the bulk of sea
no discontinuousness