

WILD ! 9th MARYPORT LITERATURE FESTIVAL

Senhouse Roman Museum 18 – 20 November 2016

In modern parlance, the word AWE-SOME perfectly summarises this year's festival! The theme Wild! was interpreted both through landscape and our inner being.. In the modern world, it becomes increasingly difficult to discover new wilderness regions and increasingly important to cherish them. So where more appropriate to hold this festival than on the site of a fort at the most north-westerly extremity of the Roman Empire where Hadrian's Wall defended against Barbarian tribes from the north?

The festival was opened by **Doug Scott CBE**, who is best known for his summit ascent with Dougal Haston of Mt Everest SW Face in 1975. After this historic achievement, the first ever fulfilled without the use of oxygen, he felt justified in treating himself ~~~ to a new car radio. The garage owner recognised him and offered his congratulations on this breathtaking feat. Not wishing to let Doug feel self-aggrandized however, he offered him a mere 20% discount! But there is no sense of pomp about this man. He recognised his failings as well as his triumphs, while relating stories as scintillating as the spectacular backdrop of photography of snowy mountain peaks, of climbs on Changabang, Denali, Kangchenjunga and the Ogre, accomplished with such other legendary climbers as Sir Chris Bonnington, Pete Boardman, Joe Tasker and Don Whillans.

So why, he posed, are humans moved by the natural landscape? Doug suggested that it lies in our roots, our DNA, to feel part of something bigger than ourselves. The Norwegian Nils Faarlund, in *Wisdom in the Open Air*, expounds on the deep ecological philosophy that man should live "friluftslif", open air life, in harmony with nature. In climbing, one has to work it out for oneself; being in positions of danger or risk brings out the best in people. The British Mountaineering Council encourages these attitudes. In the best traditions of British climbing, our routes are not drilled or knitted with fixed ropes from bottom to top. In Doug's opinion, everything nowadays is becoming dumbed down. Sherpas and guides carry kit, prepare sleeping ledges, cook meals and brew tea for the teams. Allcomers, including business people and other non-climbers, can pay for the Everest experience. Not so in the golden era.

Having spent much time in Nepal and increasingly aware of the huge challenges that indigenous peoples face, Doug Scott founded his charity, *Community Action Nepal*, for which he fundraises through his public lectures and books. After last year's devastating earthquakes, there was much work to be done, especially rebuilding schools and clinics. Angela Locke, the festival's founder, created her charity, *The Juniper Trust*, in response to her experiences among the Nepali people during her treks there when researching for her books.

What satisfaction, then, did Doug Scott experience immediately after a climb? A clear headedness and a huge sense of calm; but it is no different, he said, after a good day out on the Cumbrian fells or on a coastal walk from the sensation he felt in the

Himalaya. Here, his favourite area is found at the back of Blencathra, where wilderness still awaits.

On Saturday morning, **Catherine Anderson FRGS**, who described herself as a “3rd culture kid” ~~~ one whose background was formed in various countries ~~~ introduced the audience to Australian photo-journalist Angus McDonald [1962-2013] whom she met in 2005 in the Indian Himalaya where she had set up a not-for-profit initiative working with Tibetan refugees. Angus had fallen in love with India’s narrow-gauge railways.

She delighted us with a short video film, *An Indian Railway Station: a Waiting Game*. The fledgling railway network which was integral with the postal service, canal system, and telegram connections, initially developed for trade, in such goods as cotton and tea. It was never about taming the landscape; the landscape dictates. Video of the *Himalayan “Toy Train”* lurching along its precipitous sections had us holding our breath! But in Catherine Anderson’s mind, the railways were more important for the human connections formed rather than their economics.

Angus McDonald had begun a book before his untimely death, *India’s Disappearing Railways*, to which Catherine contributed and posthumously edited. The book is not a technical handbook, she insisted, it is about people, the richness of humanity and culture. The railways are human ecosystems ~~~ people meet, celebrate and live there. In 2014 she established *The Angus McDonald Trust* in his memory, a healthcare charity working in some of Burma’s poorest areas.

After lunch, Yorkshireman **John Manning** described his story in journalism, from his first job on the *Todmorden News*, shortly after completing the Pennine Way, an experience which awakened his passion for walking in wild places. In 1994 he began 13 years of working on *The Great Outdoors* magazine, edited by Cameron McNeish, in Glasgow. After suffering a frightening stress attack, his remedy was a trip of 2,700 miles from San Diego on the Mexican border to Canada, during which he celebrated his 40th birthday. John Manning walked through diverse impressive landscapes: desert, burnt forest, vistas of wild flowers after rain, snow in forests and hot springs. On Mt Baden Powell, at 9,300’, he slept out under a sky teeming with stars. In these wild places, he encountered more lizards, snakes and bears than people.

It has been experiences like these, so vividly told, which have driven his journalistic trajectory. He became Editor of the magazines *Lakeland Walker* and *Cumbria*, the latter founded in 1947 and Cumbria’s oldest magazine, devoted to helping promote a greater knowledge and care of the countryside in all its variety.

Then a really wild bunch took over, in the form of members of the Lakeland Dialect Society, which preserves and celebrates the local dialect, influenced largely by the Old Norse of early settlers in the area. The audience anticipated much merriment and was not disappointed. **Colin Armstrong**, whose work for the National Trust takes him into the Buttermere Valley, read a well-considered poem, *Shepherd*, the tale of a

day's gathering of sheep on the open fell, bringing the flock down to the valley intake land. Colin's second poem was about the trials and tribulations of being a ewe, as voiced by her. There were accompanying actions: say no more.

Dick Gargett's first poem, *Food*, used the subject to examine the role of women. His second, *How does me garden grow?* saw him toil through the seasons of the year, with evident satisfaction. **Tommy Coulthard**, the former chairman, first paid respects to a valued member, Len Hayton, author and retired solicitor, who has died just as his new book, *Rhymes and Recollections of a Lakeland Lad*, his life and interests in verse, story and song, is about to be released. Tommy read one of Len's poems, *I got up gay early*, then *Friendship*.

It was **Jim Parker** who had us in stitches again, with his tale of *Midge's Bait*. It concerned Midge, who was mending a gable end off some scaffolding but it closely followed the predicament narrated by the lugubrious Gerard Hoffnung concerning a barrel and pulley system. **John Sewell's** piece was read by the Secretary. **Colin Armstrong's** *Robin and Friar Tuck* episode eventually led the hero to reset his SatNav for Zurich, the laughter only briefly over before **Dick Gargett** rounded off their performance with a hilarious rendition of Stanley Holloway's *1066* but in Cumbrian dialect. What a tremendously enjoyable interlude between the more serious speakers. More, please, Angela!

Eric Robson scarcely needed an introduction, his rich voice familiar to listeners of *Gardeners' Question Time* on BBC R4 and his face, from his TV series *AW* on Alfred Wainwright. He rambled amiably through his broadcasting history from ITV Border to freelancing with the BBC, throwing in anecdotes well-polished by their telling. He covered the visit of President Jimmy Carter and such outside broadcasts as Trooping the Colour and Princess Diana's funeral. Hardly a surprise, Eric Robson got on very well with the late Queen Mother. On one occasion when he was commentating on a Beating the Retreat ceremony, the Queen Mother was late, an extraordinary occurrence where the Royal Family is concerned. Eric continued filling in with as much background detail as he could muster until, 40 minutes later, the royal lady appeared. She apologised afterwards, telling him that she had been waiting to make her entrance in an apartment in Admiralty Arch and couldn't tear herself away from his interesting broadcast!

During his five years' working on the Wainwright series, he built a close rapport with AW, as he is affectionately known. But the success of his books meant that AW could no longer enjoy what had taken him to the fells in the first place ~~~ solitude. For 22 years, Eric Robson has chaired GQT, first broadcast in 1947 and one of the longest running programmes in the world. Recording a programme in a pub in Ashton-under-Lyne, a man stood up and began to play his cornet. He had mistaken the occasion for an audition for Wilfred Pickles' *Have a Go*. Eric Robson found it easy to work on GQT but the only decent gardening joke he had ever come across was a sharp one-liner: "Hedgehogs. Why can't they share the hedge?"

On the subject of *Wild*, the audience learned that AW had been an advocate of rewilding Ennerdale years ago but that generally, there must be a balance between nature and industry. Eric disagrees profoundly with George Monbiot's interpretation, particularly over re-introducing wolves into the landscape. Why, asked Eric, did US President Woodrow Wilson come to the Lake District on holidays? Answer: because he found here spectacular landscape on a human scale.

The short period before the evening's main event was a documentary film, *Operation Moffat*, made by Claire Carter and Jen Randall, who explored various landscapes familiar to **Gwen Moffat** and using excerpts from a documentary, *Space Below My Feet*, about her colourful life as Britain's first female mountain guide. A deserter from the army, she headed for North Wales, then hitch-hiked to Scotland and the Isle of Skye, "our Yosemite". She became a guide to support herself and her daughter.

Interviewed for the film, now an extremely feisty 91 years of age and living in Cumbria, Gwen Moffat asserted that she did not need material things; she was independent and confident. She said that mountains mean more to her than people. "They don't change, people do. There's no malice in mountains".

Adventurers were offered such a bounty of experiences in rare wilderness places, first by Doug Scott and, on Saturday evening, by **Simon Yates** who guided the audience through the world's magnificent mountain ranges and had just returned from Nepal, leading a trek for his company, *Mountain Dream*.

We were in for a second evening of absolutely stunning snow scenes. But how had a lad from Leicestershire, not noted for any great altitudes, arrived at this point in his life? From Sheffield University he discovered the Peak District's gritstone crags which gave him the climbing bug that took him via the Lakes, Wales and Scotland, together the cradle of British climbing, to the French Alps where, like many a young climber spreading his wings, he spent summers camping in Chamonix, climbing some of the classic routes on the hard granite and gneiss rock.

From there, it was something of a leap, after Uni, to head for Peru with Joe Simpson to climb Siula Grande, a successful attempt but with a disastrous outcome, as readers of *Touching the Void* by Joe Simpson find out. Back in the Alps, Simon successfully tackled the N Face of the Eiger but the urge to take on the bigger challenges found in the Himalaya led him to Pakistan where the landscape and the weather are harsh. In the Karakoram Range, he learned about the planning and logistics required for longer expeditions and when Gorbachev opened up Central Asia, Simon was able to access the Tien Shan and Pamir ranges. There he climbed with Soviet mountaineers who went in groups, coached by radio for instructions from base camp. Thence to Patagonia. So by now, he was making a living by talking about mountains, writing and photography.

Mountain areas are wild but people live there. Nowadays, Simon is increasingly drawn to high mountain zones without human habitation. In Tierra del Fuego, the

most southerly point in S America, he found no human impact. He had to make his own maps. Aged 41, Simon became a father. At this point, Simon's superlative photography included pictures of his wife and two very young children who were able to accompany him in S America on the yacht he shared with a friend. To sail through the Beagle Channel, they needed permission from the Chilean Navy, as described by Eric Shipton in 1962. In the Everest region of the Gokyo Valley, there were endearing photographs of his children being carried in baskets on the backs of porters, the most precious of burdens! Once they became school age, however, they could no longer join in all his journeys. Simon admitted that becoming a dad had given him a different perspective on life. It has also informed the children's world view.

In the 1980s, Simon Yates climbed with Doug Scott from whose immense knowledge he learned a great deal. He found Greenland to be a land of icy silence. Locals stay out of the mountains because there is no food there. Simon Yates summed up the fundamental desire to "get away from it all" by using the words of John Muir [1838 – 1914] a Scots-American environmentalist and philosopher:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home, that wilderness is a necessity.

Beauty in the Lap of Horror, the title of **Steve Matthews'** talk on Sunday morning, was not a reference to Theresa May sitting on Donald Trump's knee, he assured us, rather it summed up the attitude of the earliest travellers to Borrowdale, who found it a forbidding place. Steve's book on the subject contains his painstaking research into the earliest written accounts. In the early 18th century, its aesthetics were discussed in Carlisle Deanery by John Bernard Gilpin, painter of natural landscapes, William G Gilpin, his son, John Brown, William's tutor, Charles Avison, composer, and William Brownrigg, scientist, debating how to view the landscape. Its treatment would be described variously as Classical, Picturesque, Poetic and Romantic. By using a Claude Glass, the landscape can be framed, as modern postcards are presented now.

However, Borrowdale has been inhabited since the Stone Age and used both for industry and agriculture and is not removed from civilization at all, although little was written about it. Keswick was described as being on the threshold of beauty, horror and immensity. William Hutchinson visited Borrowdale in the later part of the 18th century for the tourist experience, more interested in landscape than people. Benjamin Franklin came with a Fellow of the Royal Society to carry out an experiment to observe the effects on surface chemistry of pouring oil on water and wrote with great excitement to his wife. From 1750 to 1850, over 100 descriptions were found. In our increasingly secure world, people are still seeking out "horror".

How the wild northern landscape influenced the writing of one of our most famous literary families was the subject of **Juliet Barker FRSL's** conversation with **Angela Locke**. In the 1850s, the first tourists arrived in Haworth, interested in finding out where the Brontës lived and set their novels, described as "in wilderness". What shaped their writing were the novels of Sir Walter Scott where they saw Scottish

landscapes and from Wordsworth they drew on the Lake District's scenery. Each of the Brontë siblings wrote to various celebrated writers of the time, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, Thackery, Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau, seeking advice, and in Charlotte's case, consolation in her grief at the deaths of the others. Juliet Barker had uncovered a wealth of letters and written the definitive biography of this important family. The audience had had a rare treat, listening to her scholarly discourse.

The remainder of Sunday was a delight for poetry lovers, although unfortunately **Kim Moore** had had to drop out due to illness. Her place was taken by **Grevel Lindop**, a favourite of the festival, who read from his latest collection, *Luna Park*. The title poem paints a mysterious picture of a derelict funfair by Sydney Harbour, Australia. Moonlight etched the outlines of some of the rides. He ends this haunting poem:

*Here I am
ten years later, like a child with no money
hopeful, face pressed to the steel mesh.*

The poems range across continents and through the sensuous to the philosophical. It is always a great pleasure to hear Grevel read.

Having worked with some of the most important poets of the 60s and 70s, including Basil Bunting and Allen Ginsberg, but for the last two years, living and writing in Maryport, the audience was thrilled to have **Tom Pickard** at the festival this year. He read poems on many subjects, including *Spring Tide*, written for Basil Bunting. Poems about wildlife in the landscape, from his latest collection, *Winter Migrants*, captured my imagination with their lyrical language and sense of place, especially on the Solway Estuary. Such concise little images as:

*sanderlings dig bait,
tailgate the first ripple
of a returning tide*

Having had this introduction, I am really looking forward to discovering more of Tom Pickard's poetry. The way he uses language is beguiling.

At last, **Angela Locke** came into her own, reading from two of her collections, *Into the Lotus*, *Poems of the Himalaya*, published in Kathmandu, and *Whale Language: Songs of Iona*, from which she chose *Iona: North Wind in Spring*. It begins:

*Blonde bleached reeds comb the ditch,
Brittle, flagged with ancient seed...
.....The North Wind, light-bringer, colour painter...*

I had been wondering which of the women in the audience would turn out to be **Ann Mathieson**, daughter of **Sheona Lodge**. Having researched the history of the

Cumbrian Literary Group for my blog on their behalf, I stumbled upon a collection of the writings of Sheona Lodge, *Swan Feather*, published when she was 93 years of age, her name familiar as a member of CLG. Nature and, in particular, rivers and fishing, played an important role in her life. Her poem, *Salmon*, is a conversation:

*Do you hear
The crunch of icebergs,
Conversation of whales,
The siren song of your
Own river summoning you?*

A miscellany of the writings of a remarkable woman!

Then finally it was time for the last poet, **Josephine Dickinson**, to take the floor. Alston, the highest market town in England, is regarded as being in our last great wilderness, she said, but it is, in fact, a place of great creativity, inhabited by artists, film-makers and writers. She had been collaborating with an artist / photographer, writing a poem, *Oxygen*, to enliven the work, having gone up Cross Fell to the source of the S Tyne River, a remote landscape of moss flats and peat hags. She used the visionary phrase *snow bones* to describe those long drifts left in ghylls and bare gashes on the fellsides.

The audience was eager to hear Josephine's thoughts on her strategy for judging the Wild! poetry competition. Nourishment of the senses, emotions, an intellectual story, use of imagination and metaphor, musicality and structure, and a title hiding a mystery were all pointers. She had been pleased with the standard of entries and congratulated the winners: 1st *Wild Garden* by Kerry Darbyshire; 2nd *Just Past the Village Sign* by Heidi Bailey and 3rd *Going to the Funeral* by Kirsty Hollings.

Heartfelt thanks to Angela, Grevel, and Jane for another fantastic festival!

Joanne Weeks