

The Review Books

IAIN BAMFORTH

Iain Bamforth is an internationally distinguished figure in the field of the medical humanities. He has worked as a GP in Europe, held positions as a hospital doctor at the American Hospital of Paris, and in the Australian outback, and worked with the World Health Organization, including spells on community health projects in south-east Asia. His publications include *The body in the library: a literary history of modern medicine*, a book of essays, *The good European: essays and arguments*, and many articles in journals ranging from the *BJGP* to *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Born in Glasgow in 1959, Iain Bamforth has published five collections of poetry: *The Modern Copernicus* (1984), *Sons and Pioneers* (1992), *Open Workings* (1996), *A Place in the World* (2005), and, most recently *The Crossing Fee* (2013), from which the poems published here are taken. His sometimes demanding poetry is characterised by a rigorous intellectualism wedded to an international vision. It shows a sharp ear and eye for local details, from the 'piped-in petrochemicals of the polar night' in Shetland to a 'mudflow saga' in Indonesia, and the poems often draw on an undertow of religious sensibility, insistent even when he writes of the potato: 'pabulum of the Christian faith'.

Bamforth is also a skilled translator, both of prose and poetry. His version of Hendrik Marsman's *Memories of Holland* with its Scottish-accented 'iridescent smirr' has an immediately attractive lyricism, though it concludes with a Bamforthian note of cherished menace.

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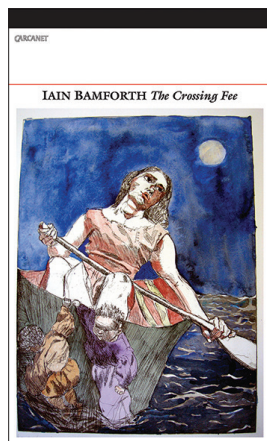
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THE CROSSING FEE

IAIN BAMFORTH

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Base matter

*In Wanam there was the one river the
colour of anthracite
and a smell straight out of the pickled-egg
jar,
a warren of shops, gangways and a pub (the
sign read 'Pap')
with its two waria owners offering sugary
refreshment
and a mind-blow. The whole yawning village
rested on planks above the sludge, with
ropes and ladders
descending to where the boats were
tethered,
one marked 'Bintang Laut' and the other
'Polisi'.
This was a town subdued to its elements,
and they were one, and it was without
radiance, being toxic.
Every fish in the sea seemed to be in the
Chinese processing plant
back of town, ready to be dismantled and
spirited away
for reassembly in another part of the planet;
the fish complacently waiting, in solid frozen
blocks.
Walking there as one of the visiting party
I suddenly felt uncomfortable, almost
ashamed
to be standing on the walls of Dis in this
vortex of immensity.
And there was the treatment centre, with its
benches*

*and two sickbeds, the only emergency care
in any direction.*

*But who would be left to treat, when the
land of mud*

*sucks everything into the sweet shared
slime*

*of shiftless penultimate floors and landing
stages,*

*and the world is an improvisation, where
our feet might be?*

*The ferryman was waiting there, among
such base matter,*

*ready to escort us back, if not to civilisation
at least to the district officers who spoke on
our behalf,*

*though the sea had drained away, weighted
by lunar indifference,*

*and left a vista of such stunningly
featureless flatness*

*only laughter could absorb the infinite
slippage.*

*Low tide, it seemed, in our world of excess
and depletion.*

Wanam is a small town on the channel separating the island of Kimaam from mainland Papua, which I visited in March 2007. Medical resources in the area were almost non-existent except for the rudimentary hospital and dispensary maintained by a Chinese fishing company, and its facilities were very limited. It was the only clinic for hundreds of miles in any direction. This rather melancholy poem reflects my sense of isolation in the native immensity of Papua, where the locals are left to their own devices. Rural Papua's infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and much higher than those of the rest of Indonesia.

Wanam, Papua, April 2007.



The Review

Shared humanity:

a Jane Austen bicentenary

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Memories of Holland

From the Dutch of Hendrik Marsman

*Thinking of Holland
I see broad rivers
slowly chuntering
through endless lowlands,
rows of implausibly
airy poplars
standing like tall plumes
against the horizon;
and sunk in the unbounded
vastness of space
homesteads and boweries
dotted across the land,
copses, villages,
couchant towers,
churches and elm-trees,
bound in one great unity.
There the sky hangs low,
and steadily the sun
is smothered in a greyly
iridescent smirr,
and in every province
the voice of water
with its lapping disasters
is feared and hearkened.*

This is my translation of the work which was voted by Dutch readers as their favourite poem of the century. Four years after publishing it, Hendrik Marsman drowned in the English Channel in 1940 on the way to Britain when his ship was torpedoed by a German submarine. The translation of *Herinnering aan Holland* was commissioned by the Written World Project and broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland in 2012.

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For more details of the book please visit www.carcenet.co.uk

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The most important thing about 'Classics' is that they are shared. They are experiences we all have in common. Or at least things that we can refer to in common. As such they are links between us which form the very substance of our culture. And they do this, it seems to me, whether or not they are particularly great art. But when they *are* great art, and we recognise in the shared experience they afford truths about our own humanity, exquisitely expressed, that is something special indeed.

Three-quarters of a mile to the south west and almost within sight of our bedroom window is the room where Jane Austen wrote or completed all of her six novels. It was in that room, exactly 200 years ago this 28 January, that she took delivery of her own copy of the newly published *Pride and Prejudice*. And on the celebration day itself a family of our friends who had been involved in the preparation arrived there at 5 am to find the BBC already installed. The father is a trustee of the museum; the daughter was to play the contemporary piano for the broadcasts throughout the day; the mother had arranged the cake, with its facsimile of the title page, to be cut on the evening news. Albeit by proxy, we too felt involved.

Like many who went straight into medicine from a narrow education in science I came late to the classics. I could easily have never come at all. I grew up thinking that Jane Austen was one of those stuffy writers you were supposed to read but never did. It was that word 'supposed' that turned you off. Nothing could be more calculated to make you read something else. The urge to read for pleasure must surely come from inside, and that 'supposed' is not a good way to start.

For some reason I gradually did get involved. My closest encounter with our own legend down the road was a few years ago when I was allowed access to her personal collection of musical scores, three volumes of which are written in her hand, (that was how you got your music in those days: you borrowed it and copied it.) I had just been trying my own hand at writing music, as part of a year of music with the Open University, and I knew how impossible it seemed to be to avoid mistakes. But one of the wonders of those precious, densely-written pages, as I turned them with my white-gloved hands, was the total absence of corrections. Subsequently, with two friends, I performed

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a few of the songs there in the museum. One of the friends, a soprano, had been a patient, with the special bond of having been one of my 'mums'. The other friend accompanied on the box piano straight from the figured bass in (photocopies of) Jane Austen's handwritten manuscripts.

And so it goes on. I studied *Northanger Abbey*, the first of Jane's completed books, in another part of my Open University course. And with another friend, a historian, I devised an entertainment based on it for our little drama group.

And so it goes on. A wonderful and ever-growing enrichment to our lives.

Jane Austen's House Museum has averaged 35 000 visitors in recent years, from 136 different countries in the last two. That is the measure of the human bond that the sharing of great art can bring. And that is the measure of how deeply human experience is shared.

The RCGP is one of many organisations to have chosen the wonderful motto *Cum Scientia Caritas*. In recent decades the College, and this Journal, have been big on the science part. But the humanity, which is at least as big a part of medicine, and the very heart of general practice, has retreated into second place. Alec Logan, over many years, has made a huge contribution to redressing that imbalance with his gloriously eclectic *Back Pages* section of this journal. His best legacy, as he leaves us, would be for the College to reassert the centrality of the humanities, and the great shared heritage of art itself, in our unique, all-inclusive generalism.

James Willis,

GP (retired), Author.

<http://www.friendsinlowplaces.co.uk/>

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