

**‘WOMAN POETS FOR THE PLANET’:
JEMMA BORG, HELEN MOORE, MYRA SCHNEIDER,
KAY SYRAD & ADELE WARD**



I’ve taken this opportunity to write about the 2nd March 2016 reading in the Poetry Library’s Special Edition series at the Royal Festival Hall (RFH) partly because there was a large and enthusiastic audience of over 200 people of all ages, which is always heartening, and partly because the chosen topic for the event inspired and sustained a genuine bridge between poets and audience, though the poetry read in no way pandered to preconceived ideas.

The room on the fifth floor of the RFH, made available because the bookings well exceeded the capacity of the poetry library, was a joy to be in. Night-time Thames-side London was a ‘player’ on the scene, with the scarlet-lit Wheel much in evidence. To some this might have constituted light-pollution but I am always delighted when a reading is accorded a dignified and iconic setting.

This at least was one occasion when – solely owing to the audience voting with their feet and booking in heavy numbers – poetry was given space and support. The poets were not ‘celeb’ figures chosen because they would fill the coffers. This was a free reading and the poets were selected because Second Light, the proposer of the evening, knew that they had much to give.

The poets who read were Jemma Borg, Helen Moore, Myra Schneider, Kay Syrad, Adele Ward. This group included in their aggregate experience, standing as a parliamentary candidate for the Green Party, research work with Friends of the Earth, taking part in ‘demos’, involvement in projects and academic study, as well as (in all cases) being profoundly interested as writers in the fate of the planet. The poets each read for ten minutes then formed a panel to answer questions.

At the heart of the evening was the question of how poetry can (and should?) be used to draw attention to the abuse of Nature. What constitutes 'abuse' is of course a matter of debate, but there was most probably no-one present who did not think that there are 'grave questions to answer' about our collective behaviour, and this was generally felt to be the basis on which we had come together.

With this degree of communality of thinking the mood of the evening was positive in one sense, but profound fears about irreversible damage to life on the planet – a putative 'mass extinction' event – were expressed. The question was posed, 'Does writing poetry about a subject constitute effective action in this cause (or any other) and how should poets approach writing about nature, given that there are now new and urgent concerns bringing pressure to bear on such writing?'

As you'd expect, the five poets responded in different ways, their choice of poems to read being their first line of response. These poems ranged from those celebrating the existing variety of the natural world and special efforts to preserve species (such as Myra Schneider's *Aptera* about visiting botanic garden with conservation aims in Crete) to Helen Moore's poem *#Iceclimblive* describing a Green Peace demo, "6 women ascending Europe's tallest building ... not for the rush // of extreme sport, but as a direct communication with / Royal Dutch Shell...".

While some poems were direct protests against what the poet saw as an abuse, including some written by Adele Ward specifically for this reading, other poems presented the kind of varying, complex reactions which a serious modern writer may feel when confronted by nature near at hand or perhaps distant wilderness.

This was particularly clear in Kay Syrad's poem, *Burnt Island Lake*, with its male protagonist who, with difficulty, tries to 'place' the experience which comes to him in a wild setting, "when he heard the pure, long calling of the loon, / a strong swooping majestic call, early / when the loon had dominion over the black lake...". The man, it seems, responds to the bird and to wilderness by clinging to the whole range of his cultural, political and sexual preoccupations, continuing to read the books he has brought with him and to debate rather than to purely enjoy (though his wife tells him " 'Just try listening...' "). The poem implies that man comes to nature with much baggage.

In their readings and answering questions, the poets revealed a range of viewpoints about what 'activism' involves. Poets may proudly call themselves 'Ecopoets', setting up readings specifically to blow a loud trumpet against abuses. Writing and 'the movement' thus comprise a continuity of commitment, and may lead to a 'poetic' demo like that described by Helen Moore – a coffin carried through the streets to signify the loss of wild flower species. For other poets there are feelings of concern and responsibility, embedded rather than explicit, which may or may not lead to writing poems – and these poems may explore unresolved issues rather than constitute a battle-cry.

On the question posed by the audience (indeed, by the poets themselves) of whether poems create new awareness, all the poets were positive that poetry can be consciousness-raising. A poet's own raised awareness comes into this. Myra Schneider linked frequent references to the environment in her more recent collections to a steeply rising graph of daily awareness about abuses. Her concerns on this issue were now sharper than when first writing and publishing in the 1980s.

Helen Moore quoted Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth*, "The business of literature is to work upon consciousness". She thought that British poets often shied away from examining power relations, implying that she hoped for more direct exposure of selfish motivation and 'hidden agendas' (a plea, in effect, for more Swiftian satire as part of the modern repertoire).

Jemma Borg quoted Paul Sartre, "The world is my task" and "The writer's task is one of renewal" and, from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, "Poetry can enlarge the circumference of our imagination", "Imagination is the great instrument of moral good". She implied however that the relationship of modern man to nature is infinitely complex, quoting Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, "Exile is the quintessential modern condition".

The poets made many points. There were prior issues to resolve before a poet can simply become an advocate for one ecologically-related policy or another (if indeed advocacy is her desire). A poet may need to dig deep into her own role as a 'dweller on earth' before she can contribute with truth and understanding to various debates. Though there are new, pressing issues, earlier poetry also encompassed 'conscience' towards the planet. Poets are only effective as communicators and advocates when employing artistic integrity, self-criticism, craft skills, honing.

What did the audience make of the poems and discussion? Those present probably did not simply look for 'a call to action'. They were greatly enthused by such calls but also interested in the way the poets picked out wider issues and basic dilemmas. If a group, a poetry venue, or a Literature Festival has not already arranged an event round this topic, any such event is recommended! It will doubtless succeed because responding to deep-seated concerns, anxieties, unanswered questions.

I would also recommend bringing forward more than one writer to lead such a discussion and including those not of like mind or experience. From our experience at the RFH, it seems that audiences don't want foregone conclusions. I doubt if this large group would have listened so patiently to challenging poems, unless they recognised that, on this vital topic, good poets will not be trite or predictable. People do not always appreciate that poetry is essential because it gives effective expression to our deepest concerns. Yet, on this topic, many desire their concerns to be expressed in a way that resounds without simplifying. Poetry and the planet can help each other.

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