

Chapter & Verse

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February 2016

Poetry Reading In A Nursing Home

I was asked to give a poetry reading in a nursing home to mark Burns Day on the 25th of January. Although I've read in a range of venues: from a castle to a stable and from a monastery to a bank, I had never before read in a nursing home and I approached this task with a certain amount of trepidation, not knowing what to expect. I was grateful for the moral and musical support of Anna, Carol and Jenny.

Jenny and I arrived rather late at Brandon Country Park as the SatNav had insisted in taking us on a detour around RAF Lakenheath. The Bupa nursing home is a former country mansion and surrounded by trees which on this afternoon were gently touched by winter sunlight. We had trouble getting into the building as either the bell didn't work or no one could hear it due to the frequent thunder of low flying jets. The door is kept locked, presumably so the residents can't escape, and can only be opened by someone who can key in the correct code. Fortunately, two members of staff happened to come out while we were waiting so we were at last able to enter. I was relieved to see that Anna and Carol had already arrived.

As soon as I entered, I saw some eighteen elderly residents sitting around the downstairs lounge with its wide window revealing an impressive vista of the park. Some were in wheelchairs; others appeared semi-comatose; some were simply asleep after their lunch of haggis; one man kept on muttering as if involved in an end

-lessly searching conversation with himself, waiting on answers which never came. Another man, who sat apart from the rest, broke into a chorus of the *La Marseillaise*. I was informed that he had French and Scottish ancestry.

Under the circumstances, I abandoned my plan to begin by outlining the life and work of Robert Burns and immediately began by reading *My Love Is Like A Red, Red, Rose* in the desperate hope that the words and rhythm would have a certain appeal, whatever difficulties my listeners or non-listeners might have with the Scots words. When I had finished, an imperious sounding lady, who was at least awake, informed me that I should take account of those who are hard of hearing and speak louder. The Scots/French man had heard, or not heard, quite enough and had moved off to his room with the aid of his Zimmer frame. I expect that he had long looked forward to this break from bingo and television and had felt badly let down. I had a sinking feeling that this was going to be a long afternoon. My only hope was that my singing friends would come to my rescue: it's at times like this that you most need your friends. I had read that people with memory problems can respond to certain songs even when they can respond to little else and I hoped to God that this was the case.

After a round of Burns songs which appeared to evince at least some pleasurable response, I found the nerve to read a few more poems. I abandoned Burns - poetry reading in a nursing home

requires flexibility - and read some of my favourite poems from primary school. I began by reading *I must go down to the sea again* and I could sense that this evoked memories in at least some of the residents. Indeed, one of the listeners said in an aristocratic voice that he recalled this poem from childhood. The lady sitting next to me whispered that this man is called Sir John. I then read my favourite childhood poem of all, *Nod* by Walter de la Mare about a shepherd gathering his flock which ends on a note of deepest peace:

Softly along the road of evening,
In a twilight dim with rose,
Wrinkled with age, and drenched
with dew
Old Nod, the shepherd, goes.

His drowsy flock streams on
before him,
Their fleeces charged with gold,
To where the sun's last beam leans
low
On Nod the shepherd's fold.

The hedge is quick and green with
briar,
From their sand the conies creep;
And all the birds that fly in heaven
Flock singing home to sleep.

His lambs outnumber a noon's
roses,
Yet, when night's shadows fall,
His blind old sheep-dog, Slumber-
soon,
Misses not one of all.

His are the quiet steeps of
dreamland,
The waters of no-more-pain,
His ram's bell rings 'neath an
arch of stars,
"Rest, rest, and rest again."

Those beautiful and moving words, so appropriate in this place of age and pain, had the power to momentarily silence even the talkative gentleman. It was as if he had found an answering echo to his words.

In order to enliven the mood, Anna sang Gaelic mouth music in which nonsensical words are used to create a tune to dance to when no musical instrument is available. As she sang, she jiggled around the room and I could see some of the legs of the residents sway along to the beat of the tune. Then Anna was joined by Carol and Jenny in singing the *Roses of Picardy*, *Danny Boy* and *Cockles and Mussels* and most of the residents joined in the choruses as if they had shaken off the shackles of age and illness. As she sang, Anna joined hands with the lady next to her, who could barely raise her head or speak, and gently swung her arm to the music. Although she could not join in the chorus along with the others, her arm was able to join in with the rhythm. A lady in her nineties once told me that the worst aspect of being very old that no one wants to touch you anymore. I'd read somewhere that the reason why some elderly women who live on their own spend so much of their often meagre income going to a hairdresser each month was to feel a human touch on their scalp. One of the care workers, asked Sir John's permission for a dance and they slowly waltzed around the room.

In some respects, it's very appropriate that the songs and poems of Robert Burns should be heard in a nursing home since his work is, above all else, a celebration of the miraculous nature of memory. It's precisely because moments of delight are so fleeting:

*But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snowfalls in the river,
A moment white then melts for ever:*

that we have to relive them through memory as those Brandon residents were able to briefly relive their past through the power of poetry and song. Watching their eyes lighten as they listened and sang and joined, whatever way they could, in the dancing, I was reminded of the healing nature of sudden shafts of memory which can be stimulated not just by certain phrases or melodies but by sensations of scent and taste when they are experienced at certain receptive moments. Such sensations bring the past to life: even by something as simple as the taste of tea and cake which perhaps the greatest of all writers, Marcel Proust has described:

No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. . . And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which

love has of filling me with a precious essence . . .

It was those experiences of the mysterious power of *involuntary memory* - without conscious effort - which led Proust to believe in the distinct possibility of life beyond death.

When the dancing had ended, those who were able to, stood and joined hands for a rendition of *Auld Lang Syne* and then Sir John was persuaded to play a couple of tunes on the grand piano which he had been allowed to bring into the home with him. If only for a moment, the brevity of life appearing illusory, we were asked by a number of both staff and residents to return next Burns Day. I was conscious that upstairs in corridors of separate rooms lay the bedridden and the dying beyond the reach of poetry and dance but perhaps listening to some strange inner music of their own.

Still, as we stood in the hall waiting on one of the carers to come and open the door and allow us to step back into the wonderfully fresh winter air, I experienced a momentary sense of panic at the thought of being trapped in this place because no one could remember the code.



Brandon Park