

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

New Year Party
27th January 2007

AGM
19th May 2007

Poetry Workshop Weekend
27th -29th July 2007

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

May I begin by wishing you all an enjoyable Christmas and very successful new year in all things, but particularly in your writing. Of course, if we are to trust the view of Samuel Johnson, “What is written without effort is generally read without pleasure”. Thus I am wishing you a year of hard work and look forward to reporting with pleasure your consequent successes. Booker Man awaits!

My house move is behind me, I have ceased crying about the broken furniture and insurance that is willing to pay only a small fraction of its replacement cost, my wife has unblocked the drain that had been causing the rain to overflow into the boiler vent and down the inside of the bathroom and kitchen walls, the electrician has found the cause of blowing fuses and life is wonderful. Of course I have yet to find many of the things I most need, but hope to do so within the year, 2007 that is!

Unfortunately the year end means the request for membership renewal fee and, pending receipt of the late Gordon Gompers’ bequest, we continue to have less money than we need to publish our magazine and meet other unavoidable expenses. Thus I am again asking those who can afford to contribute more than the £15 requested, to add a little more when sending their payment to Beryl. To save cost we have opted for the St. Vincent Centre for our New Year Party, which is just a few minutes walk from Victoria Station. It is hoped that the change of venue will not reduce the numbers attending this popular event.

It is appropriate to point out that your committee give more than just their time and effort. Between them could claim total expenses of not less than £300, but make no demands upon our meagre resources. Roy Froud continues to provide the prize money for his parent’s memorial competition and this too contributes to our survival to a significant degree, for which we must all be grateful.

Terry James, who was good enough to take on the role of poetry editor after the many years that this role was so ably filled by Joyce Thornton. On his behalf, may I appeal to all members of poetry workshop to support him. Terry could not provide a selection of your poetry, for the benefit of the whole of SCPSW, because he has

received only one item. Although Poetry Workshop has a large degree of autonomy and its independent publication Waves, and not all members of P/W are members of SCPSW, our society places great value on the work of P/W and I am quite sure that all members enjoy reading such in Author.

Once the Christmas pudding has settled, I hope you will all find something to send to Terry, so that he can provide the future contents of "Poetry Pages".

Getting Published

Recalling the experience and advice voiced by Margaret Pilling and Paul Williams at our Annual Luncheon, both of whom have had books published recently, added to that acquired from articles by our late friend Gordon Gompers and others, I offer the following advice:

Whilst it is important to retain a degree of modesty, belief in one's own values must prevail. To accept the refusal of a publisher to take on your work should not cause you to lack faith in it. Perhaps it does need a rewrite, to be updated, or remedy a weakness you have already identified, but the amount of time a publisher can spare to read an unknown author's work is unlikely to identify such detail.

Your synopsis must be clear, succinct and attract curiosity; your sample chapter(s) must excite their interest, ideally within the first paragraph, certainly within the first page.

None of this comes without effort, less for the fortunately gifted, considerably more for those of us with less talent.

Writers and Artists' Year Book and similar publications, advise writing to one agent/publisher at a time, or you risk their wrath. Margaret sent out as much as six copies at a time and ultimately found one publisher. The chances of finding two or more as an unpublished writer must be rather slim, so she was probably right to do so. In my own experience, much time, expense and effort will be wasted in approaching agents, unless you have established some degree of notoriety, or hit upon a blockbusting, if questionable, idea such as the Da Vinci code. I therefore conclude that a direct approach to an appropriate (relevant to the subject) publisher is the better option.

“Support Your Local Sheriff”

Let me rephrase that. Support those SCPSW members who have published work. This is not an option available to all, but for those with computers and connection to the internet, write any words of praise that you feel justified on the Epinions site. (Yes that is how it is spelt) This will help to promote our member's books, possibly leading to a reprint and, who knows – Hollywood?

Letters

Dear Friends, I was very sorry to learn of the death of member Albert Thornton. Sincere sympathy to his devoted wife Joyce and family. He was a very talented poet and artist illustrating the covers of “Waves” for many years. I had the pleasure of meeting Albert at the poetry- workshop weekends and enjoyed listening to his poetry. I have been going through my back copies of Waves and reading his poems again. He will be very much missed by all in the Society who knew him and by those who enjoyed his talent in art and poetry. A collection is being made for the Society for the Blind in his memory. Please send any donations to Terry Rickson.

Ethel Corduff

Anthony Roberts

We were saddened to hear of the sudden death of member Anthony Roberts (Lord Clewyd) on October 10th. He attended the poetry weekends in Birmingham and was about to host a mini poetry workshop in his home in November. Anthony was active up to a few days before his death. He was a kind, humble, intellectual with a great love of music and poetry. One of his poems “ A moment of Reconciliation’ was read by his son at the funeral service. His son said his father loved the Autumn and picked a conker each Autumn to carry in his pocket all year. He departed in Autumn and will be sadly missed by all of us that knew him. The funeral was held at Putney Vale Crematorium on October 13th. The Society was represented by Ethel Corduff and Terry Rickson. The family would welcome donations to The Royal College of Music, Junior Department in Anthony's memory. Please send them to Terry Rickson.

Ethel Corduff

Annual Luncheon

Saturday 21st October saw Society faithfuls at the Civil Service Club for our yearly good food (and literary of course) occasion and the Club did not let us down. We enjoyed sirloin of beef, steak and kidney pie or halibut with all of our 5-a-day, and starters and desserts were very tasty. Our organiser, hardworking Ethel Corduff, had suffered stress midweek when she discovered that Jean Bowden, who was to speak on Crime Writing, would be too ill to attend. Sensibly Ethel decided, after frantic searching of the internet, that we'd manage without an outside speaker and we did. Instead we were entertained by Margaret Pelling, our Writer of the Year, who received her award and some goodies. Margaret's message was 'don't give up hope' as she had had her novel published after lots of rejections. She is now writing her next one, which we avidly await. Ethel had given us lots of detail about Margaret's varied career - she did seem to have done most things in the Civil Service.

Our Chairman, Terry Rickson, then gave us an amusing roundup of Quirky Poetry. Of course, we did know about doggerel and limericks but not about clerihews and 'Little Willies' (!), especially if we were not members of the Poetry Workshop. Terry was thanked for helping to fill the gap opened by Jean's absence.

Roy Froud, generous sponsor of the Memorial competition, gave a vote of thanks, kindly mentioning those of us on the Committee who endeavour to keep the Society going. Well fed and watered, we caught up with friends before departing for various stations and buses. We could only leave the Club in one direction, as filming of Harry Potter Five was happening the other way - sadly we didn't see or feel any magic, but we had enjoyed a very good event.

Joan Lewis

SCPSW ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2007

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

Maximum length 3,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £4.00 per story. Prizes as follows: 1st: £50.00; 2nd £30.00.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the George Farley Prize). Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.00 for first and £1.50 for each subsequent poem. Prizes: 1st: £30.00; 2nd: £20.00.

Vincent Brennan Travel Article

Maximum length 2,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.50 per entry.

Prize: one only £30.00

George Farley Prize

For light humorous verse only. Judges and sponsors, Pamela Farley, Aline Shee and Jean Squires (daughters of George Farley). Judges look for the qualities their father valued in humorous verse – “wit, clever construction and interesting language”. Entries returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Prize £25.

Notes for Entrants to all Competitions

1. Unless entrants state on entering competitions that they do not wish their entry to be published, all winning entries will be published in Author if space permits. The entrants name will also be quoted, unless entrants advise on entry that they prefer to use a pen name.
2. Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of the submission. Entries exceeding specified number of lines or words will be disqualified.
3. All entries should bear only the pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting: pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. (Optional for serving members, Department and staff association for potential publicity use.)
4. All entries should be sent to Competition Secretary, Ron Jeffreys, 186 Lewis Flats, Lisgar Terrace, London W14 8SQ not later than 28th February 2007.

R C Jeffreys
Competition Secretary

President's Competition

There were eighteen entries to my competition, and as I have already said, they were very interesting and the standard of them all was good. I think that if I were planning another competition, I would allow for some flexibility. It might have been better if the prize money had been divided amongst three or four winners, but as the competition had been announced to provide for only one winner who would take the entire £ 100, it seemed to me that it would be unfair to the competitor who had been judged to be the outright winner if the rules had been changed. But certainly the number of entrants to this competition (18) warrants the supposition that the amount of prize money was a factor in attracting so many. It was not easy to decide what precisely was being asked of entrants, and it might have been better if I had offered some guidance, for instance, I might have pointed out that the subject of the competition was 'myself looking back at a time when I was young, what fears did I then have? Was I terrified by the dog next door jumping up and barking at me? What delights were there in being invited into my Grandma's warm feather bed on an icy cold morning? These are the sort of things I hoped would be described by entrants to the competition. So you may see that I was not on the look-out for accounts of exceptional circumstances however interesting they might be. I felt that everyone would have something to say, trivial may be, but looming large in the memory of 'myself when young'. The variety of entrants made the judging extremely difficult, and it was only after considerable thought and re-reading that I came to the conclusion that the best entry was "**Right Away**" by **Isambard**. May I offer my congratulations to the winner and my condolences to those who have not been successful on this occasion. I hope they will be encouraged to enter subsequent competitions, as the overall standard was so extremely high.

Alan S Watts

Our President did not know that Isambard was the pen name used by our Chairman, Terry Rickson, whose winning entry now follows:

Right Away!

Isambard

I confess to a long standing love of the sight, sound and operation of the steam locomotive. In today's world one stands the chance of being labelled a 'saddo' or an 'anorak' - the latter word hadn't been invented in my train-spotting days! - but judging by the thousands who enjoy visiting the many steam-operated preserved railways, this does not quite ring true. But it was the dream of many boys then, to become an engine-driver.

For the purposes of the 'Myself when young' competition, I shall concentrate on the theme of railways and the part they occupied in my early life.

One of the earliest memories I have, is watching trains through the windows of the front-room of the house where we were living at the time. The view was towards the mainline of the former London & North Eastern Railway, between Oakleigh Park and New Barnet. Most evenings I was allowed to stay up to see the L.N.E.R.'s crack express, the 'Silver Jubilee,' come storming up the line from Kings Cross, the lights shining in the silver-grey carriages. After that our 'local' would come wheezing past and soon afterwards, I'd see my father walking up the road from the station,

I was told that my Dad took me down to our station to see King George V's Funeral Train pass but I have no recollection, it would have been just another train to watch as far as I was concerned.

We moved house before the war started, to New Southgate, near grandparents. This meant no more trips by train to visit, with an obligation to arrive much earlier at the station than necessary so that I could watch the trains. I'm sure my parents were relieved! I found a friend, Brian, living across the road from us, who was as keen on trains as myself. We also shared an enthusiasm for Hornby trains, his was electric and mine clockwork, so my loco could run easily on his layout plus the trucks and carriages.

My friend's Dad was not too enthusiastic when we made a cutting through one of his flower-beds, on one occasion, having laid out our model railway in the garden.

Brian and I got down to the serious business of collecting engine numbers, saving up for many of the famous A.B.C.' publications produced by Ian Allan, listing all the numbers and names of locomotives belonging to the various railway companies and later, of course, when they became British Railways. Rarely a school holiday or a weekend went by, when we were not visiting one of the London Termini or balanced on the fence overlooking our local railway tunnel, with books and pencils at the ready. We were often chased out of yards and engine-sheds, along with other 'Spotters', by over-zealous railway staff. We saved up pocket-money and cadged a bit more from not well-off parents, to afford trips to places such as St. Alban's, Reading or Swindon.

Despite living near the LNER, I was first and foremost a 'Great Western man' mainly, because holidays or visits to relatives entailed travel on the Great Western. There were those exciting places to be noted from the destination boards affixed to the carriages, Bristol, Swansea, Weymouth, Worcester, Exeter, Penzance and many others. I loved the dark green livery of the locomotives with their polished brass fittings and the chocolate and cream livery of the coaches. The sound of a Great Western engine was quite distinctive too.

Recalling 'sound', that too was quite comforting to a small boy lying awake in bed in the middle of the night. The sounds of shunting; a sharp whistle and clank, clank, clank of wagons of a goods train starting up after she'd been held at a signal or a night express passing rapidly. On cold frosty nights the sounds would be clearer still. The LNER had one of their locomotives named 'Dominion of Canada,' she had been presented with a Canadian style whistle by one of the Canadian railway companies. Many times I heard her melodious 'whooo-a-whoo' from several miles away, coming clear on the frosty air, as she came speeding down the line through the night with an express.

A year or two after the war ended, the non-stop running of the 'Flying Scotsman' was re-introduced between Kings's Cross and

Edinburgh and vice-versa. This caused great excitement amongst us enthusiasts because the Edinburgh, Haymarket shed loco, came down to London on the 'Scotsman' in the morning, to go out again on the evening 'Aberdonian' express. Crowds of us would be waiting at the trackside to see which engine it might be, bursting out of the tunnel and pounding up the line towards us; if it were a 'rare cop,' we'd be in heaven!

Following the Nationalisation of the railways in 1947, British Railways ran a series of locomotive exchanges, in which engines of the former big companies were tested for speed, economic running, etc, so this afforded some interesting sights. I was, of course, thrilled to see a Great Western engine, 'King Henry V' hauling an express out of King's Cross. There was no mistaking the Swindon sound as she came rumbling through the tunnel!

A memorable journey was one Christmas Eve, I was travelling home on leave from Exeter during RAF National Service. I boarded the 'Torbay Express' at St. David's station, the train headed by 'Castle' class loco in beautiful condition. Given the 'Right Away,' and getting into her stride, she took off like a rocket, racing across the Somerset Levels and into Wiltshire and Berkshire. Even with a gentle pace through Reading, she picked up speed again and we reached Paddington three hours after leaving Exeter.

My son, from a small boy, always loved trains and the grandchildren are the same, so it must be something in the genes



The following continues Beryl Jones' fascinating series on the history of our society:

The Merseyside Civil Service Writers' Club

The Merseyside Civil Service Writers' Club, the idea of Alan Brack, was an offshoot of the Civil Service Authors' Society and began life when, in March 1959 the following announcement appeared in the Liverpool Newspapers:

'It is proposed to start a Writers' Circle in the Merseyside Civil Service, of all grades. The main objects would be - Compare notes - getting and giving advice. Arrange talks by established writers. Organise competitions. Organise visits to places of literary interest and other appropriate social activities. The Circle would be open to anyone interested in writing in any form, beginners and old hands alike (whether published or not) and would eventually affiliate with the National Society of Civil Service Authors. If sufficient interest is shown, an inaugural meeting will be arranged in the near future, and Mr Frank Shaw (Customs & Excise) the well known Liverpool writer, has agreed to preside.

Anyone interested should get in touch with A. Brack, Customs & Excise, Custom House, Liverpool 3.'

The Club got off to a flying start and the programme for the winter season included the formation of a criticism group, visits to the Liverpool Echo and the Post Office, a typing service for members, magazine evenings and talks by prominent literary figures.

The Club was affiliated to the Society and paid an official fee of one guinea per annum, and on occasions both the Club and the Society provided judges for each others competitions. Many, if not all, club members also belonged to the Society with at least two (Alan Watts and Alan Coustan) playing a prominent part in the activities of the Society when they were transferred to London.

'Reporting on the Club in the November 1959 issue of the C. S. Author, the Editor stated:-

'If our Society might claim with due modesty, to have been the father of this enterprising and enthusiastic Club, it is expected that the vigorous offspring will be able to teach Dad some new tricks. And what Lancashire does to-day, London does tomorrow, n'est-ce-pas?'

By October 1960 the Club could boast a membership of around thirty and, in the capable hands of Frank Shaw and Alan Brack, forged merrily ahead.

Activities included a talk on One-Act Plays given by Frank Shaw in which Jerry Dawson local producer and writer, Edgar Criddle formerly of the Liverpool Playhouse, and Jimmy Wiggins National Drama League Actor for 1960, took part, all elucidating the mysteries of this art.

The Club also arranged a 'Natternight' - a Coffee Evening with a difference, whereby members got together to discuss their ideas and problems. Members' published work was displayed as an encouragement for others 'to go and do likewise'. A quotation from the C.S.Author of that time reads - 'Obviously, Merseyside is the appropriate for launching new projects, be they ships or Writers' Crafts.'

In February 1961 it was announced that James Laver, Vice-President of the Society of Civil Service Authors, had agreed to become President of the Merseyside Civil Service Writers' Club, an apposite choice, James Laver having been born in Liverpool.

In May of 1962 a contingent of members and wives from the Merseyside Club travelled to London for the annual dinner of the Society which was held that year at the Phoenix Restaurant in Cavendish Square, London W.1., and cost one guinea per head. The guests of honour for the evening were Denise Robins and Mr Henry Sherek; and a toast to the Society was proposed by Frank Shaw.

Another Dinner of note was the one held at the Athenaeum in Liverpool on the 4th March, 1965. Laurie Pearce writing in the C.S.Author of May 1965 commented as follows:-

"A good dinner and company that pleased me mightily, being all eminent men in their way." So wrote Samuel Pepys on July 19th 1668. Had his shade been at the Athenaeum on March 4th 1965, he might have written much the same. Not that many of us in the Merseyside Club claim much in the way of literary fame, though we have our moments. But the Athenaeum having an acquaintance with eminence second only to the Cavern, makes the lowliest of us feel eight feet tall. However, we like to feel that if there is any trend-setting to be done we are able to take the lead from time to time. To this end formal toasts were dropped and each speaker was given a quotation on which we might improvise for our enjoyment. Those in good voice included John Farrell (after dinner speaker extra-ordinary), Tony Colegate (current producer at the Playhouse) and lesser lights conscripted from our own ranks. They sang well for their supper.'

The Club also published a magazine 'The Mersey Packet', the first of which was dated May 1961, the last in February 1955. Each issue was ten pages long, initially edited by Alan Watts and later assisted by the late Mrs Joan French, a very enthusiastic member of the Club, who eventually

became the chief editor ably assisted by Tony Dunford. A conventional picture of a paddle steamer adorned the front cover of the early issues of the Packet, later changed to a 'modernistic' picture (also of a paddle steamer) but showing various ancient news items such as 'Boy Bites Dog'. The back cover of the early publications was blank, but later ones were decorated with a design formed of overlapping rejection slips.

Whilst most members of the Club contributed to the Packet at one time or another some did so on a regular basis. i.e. Frank Shaw was responsible for the monthly 'Bosun's Nips' and Alan Watts for the essay by Bach Pugh. Cuthbert Bridgewater, Laurie Pearce and Tom Capes also appeared on a fairly regular basis. Alan Watts writing in 1997 states:-

'One cannot turn over these thirty year old pages without having one's attention held again and again by interesting titbits. e.g. An article on Writers' -And Their Trade tells us that "Alexander Dumas wrote and published according to his own testimony twelve hundred volumes. He said 'It should be as easy for a novelist to make novels as for an apple tree to make apples.' To prove his point he turned out sixty full-length novels in one year." Pieces like this were intended to encourage members to write.

Sadly after such a promising start the Merseyside Club was not able to maintain its momentum and in November 1969 after only ten years of life 'had to discontinue its activities.' Alan Watts (now Chairman of the S.C.S.A.) founder member of the Merseyside Club and former editor of the Mersey Packet ('And a fine old magazine that was'), stated that the balance of the Merseyside Club funds had been placed at his disposal with the suggestion that he might institute a competition to commemorate the Club. With this in mind he announced the first of a series of annual competitions to be known as the 'Alan Brack Competitions in honour of the "Onlie Begetter" and continual sustainer of the "Old Club"

In January 1972 a tribute from Alan Watts to the late Frank Shaw was published in the C.S. Author.

With the passing of Frank Shaw, the Society has lost a gifted and warm-hearted member who was the leading exponent and defender of the "Scouse" dialect. Frank began his career as a candidate for the Catholic priesthood but found he was not fitted for the rule of St. Ignatius. Later he joined H.M.Customs but at heart he was always, whether successful or not, an inveterate writer. He seldom wrote a letter without mentioning one or two of the projected books he had in mind. Some of these "Lern Yerself Scouse", "The Gospel in Scouse" and "Yer Know Me Aunty Nelly" achieved all the glory of print. Others such as "The Memoirs of a Left-Handed Customs Officer" were either still-born or are yet to appear;

some, have gone into the making of the posthumous work “My Liverpool” just published.

‘Frank Shaw was a great humorist. His comic compilations had all Merseyside (and far beyond) rolling in the aisles. This wayward genius was never lacking for ideas. Until his final illness he never stooped putting out the most appallingly typed manuscripts nor collecting newspaper cuttings, old magazines and comics. And always he was talking, telling stories and laughing his tremendous guffaws.

.....He was a popular and hilarious platform speaker. His reading was wide; his knowledge of English Literature deep. His very many friends will miss him greatly.’

On a lighter note the C.S.Author of June 1980 comments on the further successes of Alan Brack, most notably his latest book. ‘Liverpool - the Official Book of the City’ and quoted from several publications i.e. PORTCULLUS: ‘Alan’s previous book for Merseyside County Council “The New Merseyside” has become something of a best-seller having sold 15,000 copies in two years. ‘CHESHIRE LIFE: ‘Liverpool has taken an imaginative step in the right direction by commissioning one of our regular contributors Alan Brack to write “the official book of the City” with virtually a free hand. It contains 120 pages written in a way unusual for the normal publicity guide and is probably the first of its kind produced entirely by one person. Fritz Spiegel writing in the DAILY POST also congratulated the author and ended with the comment: ‘It’s time the detracting pop image of Liverpool is put in its proper place.’

The article also noted that Alan’s first full length hard-back book ‘The Wirrall was due for publication, and concluded by wishing him good luck and the desire that he enjoy every minute of his success.

One of the early supporters of the Merseyside Club was a dentist, the late Merton Fink, the author of a successful comic novel ‘Dentist in the Chair’. Under his pen-name (Matthew Finch) he donated a cup to be presented to the Merseyside Club’s ‘Writer of the Year’. When the Club was wound up this cup known as the Matthew Finch Trophy was conveyed to the Society which now awards it annually to its own ‘Writer of the Year.’

A final tribute in the C. S. Author commented that the passing of the Merseyside Civil Service Writers’ Club was much regretted and that perhaps one day. ‘Other gifted writers of the calibre of Frank Shaw, Alan Brack or Alan Watts may be moved to breathe fresh life into the body - not dead, only sleeping.’

Copyright - Beryl Jones (SCPSW) October, 2006

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

Wavelengths

The winter issue of **Wavelengths** will appear during December. Don't worry if it is a week or two late, as publication may be delayed by the run up to Christmas. Let me know though if you haven't received your copy by January. The issue will include several poems, the text of one of the talks given at the Birmingham Weekend, the booking form for next year's Poetry Workshop Weekend, and the usual Newsletter section. Hopefully, it will also include the results of the Bill Barnes Competition, if I receive them in time. **Wavelengths** is the quarterly magazine of the Poetry Workshop, issued free to all its members. Contributions are welcome from all members of the PW. Submission guidelines are given at the end of the magazine.

Bill Barnes Competition 2006

At the time of preparing this page for Adrian, the deadline for entries for the Bill Barnes Competition had just closed, so the results are as yet unknown. I hope to be able to announce the winners in the winter issue of **Wavelengths**, but if not they will be published in the New Year either in the spring issue or on this page. The spring issue of **Wavelengths** will include the judge's report plus the prize-winning poems and those considered as Highly Commended.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop will fall due on 1 January. A renewal form will be enclosed with **Wavelengths**. The fee remains unchanged at £3 for Society members.

Waves 2007

The deadline for next year's anthology is 31 March 2007. Full details of how to submit to this showcase of members' work will appear in **Wavelengths**.

Poetry Workshop Weekend 2007

A booking form for the Weekend will be enclosed with **Wavelengths**. The venue for 2007 is the Woodbrooke Quaker Centre in Birmingham, and the dates are 27-29 July.

Submitting poems

I'm somewhat concerned that for the second year running we have had to disqualify some poems entered for the Bill Barnes Competition because they did not comply with the Rules. Similarly, I have had to turn down some poems sent to me for inclusion in **Wavelengths** because they did not meet the submission guidelines set down at the back of the magazine. I can't stress too firmly that if you send poems to any competition or magazine, you should always make sure that you acquaint yourself with and fully comply with the Rules/guidelines given. You waste your own time and postage if you fail to do so, I'm afraid.

The Poetry Workshop

If you are a member of the Society, have an interest in poetry but have not yet joined the Poetry Workshop - what are you waiting for!

The cost of membership is only £3, and for this small sum the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **Wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, Terry Rickson, at the address above. Cheques should be made out to: SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account.

Dates to Remember

1 December 2006	Wavelengths #9 publishing date
1 January 2007	PW Subscriptions due
1 February 2007	deadline for Wavelengths #10
1 March 2007	Wavelengths #10 published
31 March 2007	deadline for Waves 2007
27 -29 July 2007	PW Weekend

The Turkish Enigma

Jenny Chamier Grove

(Winner of the Lewis Wright Short Story Competition)

June. Wave after wave lashed against the hull. The Turkish coast seemed to recede until it appeared unreachable, and only the two of us, braced against wind and water, seemed real. Robert, gripping the tiller, now loomed above me, then dipped, framed by a drenching sea.

The wind was stronger than we'd expected. Foam raced over the gunnels. The sails strained with effort.

Then we started to fight.

"I think we're gaining on her," Robert said, squinting at a yacht cutting through the waves ahead of us.

"I thought sailing was supposed to take your mind off the competitive culture at work," I protested.

"That's different," he said.

"And when do I get my go?"

"What go?"

"On the helm."

"I'm not sure you're strong enough to hold her."

"A specious excuse," I muttered. Secretly I was afraid he might be right.

We were both exhausted by the time we dropped anchor in Aplotheka. I clambered ashore and was just fastening a line around a tree when I heard something - a faint sound of knocking, coming from a clump of sage. "Robert, come and look. It's a tortoise!" I cried out.

"Secure the stem line immediately and stop faffing about!" He yelled in a bellicose roar.

Don't then, I thought. I'll come back and look at the tortoise again later. On my own.

But later that afternoon when I scrambled ashore it wasn't the tortoise that caught my attention. I'd climbed to the summit of a rugged cliff when I heard voices. We'd sailed to Aplotheka in a loosely-knit flotilla

of boats that now lay anchored in the Bay beneath me. The largest of these was the *Sea Eagle*, sailed by Brook, the Flotilla Skipper, with Hedley, the engineer, and Nickie, a young New Zealand woman.

It was Nickie whose voice I'd heard - though unusually for her it was almost a whisper - and I had an abominable temptation to spy. Looking back, that was my first mistake.

It was some minutes before I could make out a tall man with springy hair and recognised David from the yacht *Intrepid*. For once David's wife, Beryl, was not with him. I ducked behind a scrubby bush and strained to catch their voices.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Nickie was insistent.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my whole life."

Then I shifted, a twig cracked and I decided to dodge back to the boat.

"Who do you think I saw on the cliff?" I whispered to Robert, once I was back on board. And he put on that face of his, preparing not to be told anything.

"David from *Intrepid* and Nickie the Flotilla Hostess," I rattled on. "I can't imagine what they can have been discussing so intently."

"Do we have to have your homemade washing line just where I'm most likely to garrotte myself on it? On a small boat everything should be in its place," Robert grumbled.

"And I'm the one who knows where that place is. When it comes to finding things, you're about as much good as a bull in a broom cupboard," I hit back.

That evening we were all invited to a barbecue onshore. I changed into my red trousers and climbed into the cockpit to be greeted by Roger saying: "Good heavens! You're almost ready on time!" In a tone tinged - inexplicably, I thought - with surprise. We rowed in the dinghy to a sandy cove and found several people there ahead of us. Nickie, the Hostess, was building a fire and the Colonel and his wife, from the yacht *Taboo*, were handing out glasses of punch. At the start of the cruise, the Colonel had told us he was a military man and had asked us not to mention it. Inevitably he'd become known as "Colonel Taboo."

Robert and I started talking to David, who was wearing rather garish Union Jack shorts. Then something odd happened. It began when

David's wife, Beryl, decided she wanted to photograph the sunset and asked David to row back to their boat to collect her camera. David dutifully paddled off and then I noticed that Nickie the Hostess seemed to have disappeared too.

I had to make small talk with Beryl while becoming steadily overwhelmed with embarrassment. I knew Beryl was wondering why David was taking so long, but she didn't mention it. Instead, I learnt that, like me, Beryl was a teacher and David was a journalist specialising in the Balkans. But as David failed to return, Beryl's expression of saintly patience began to fade.

The sun sank and so did my heart. "I don't know what's keeping David," Beryl muttered. We drifted towards the group around the fire.

Conversation ricocheted around the usual subjects - who'd had the most trouble getting their anchor up - or down. Everybody joined in hearty condemnation of people who tossed their litter into the sea - string, plastic bags or fishing lines. Then David reappeared and somebody mentioned the troubles between the Turks and the Kurds, telling the story of an escaped political prisoner who'd stowed away in a yacht and escaped to Greece. I noticed that Colonel Taboo was not saying much, just listening intently. Everyone seemed to be talking at once when Brook, the Flotilla Skipper, announced that he didn't want any of his boats sailing into Greek waters, the last yacht that had done that had been stoned for flying the Turkish flag.

'I shouldn't be writing all this down,' I scribbled later that night. I was adding to the ship's log which had now become my diary.

By the following night my sense of mystification had deepened so I perched in the cockpit and took up the log book again.

"Robert, are you awake?" I suddenly blurted out.

"No. I'm asleep."

I really think there's something strange going on. Today I spotted David on the Flotilla Skipper's boat, the *Sea Eagle*. I know it was David because he was wearing those ridiculous Union Jack shorts. He ducked out of sight as soon as I saw him."

"I hope you're not planning to interfere." Robert's voice was muffled.

"Robert. I do something helpful, and, according to you, I'm *interfering*. You do it, and you're *using your initiative*."

Robert's head ducked down behind the blanket.

Next evening I tried to confide in Robert again, embarking on a riveting account of my suspicions which tailed off when I noticed that he was secretly reading the pilot book. "It's strange," I repeated. "Today, Nickie dropped a flag overboard from the *Sea Eagle*. David, who was on *Intrepid*, saw what had happened and plunged into the sea fully clothed to retrieve it. But all the time there was a man in a wet suit sitting next to Nickie on the *Sea Eagle* and he didn't budge. So we had a figure in a wetsuit who did not dive and a fully-dressed man who did. Robert, are you listening?"

"And a fully-dressed man who did," Robert repeated, mechanically. "A fully dressed man who did what?"

Don't You Ever Listen, I had intended to say, but for some reason the words came out as "Cup of tea?"

Next morning, oddly enough, I didn't feel as defeated as I might have expected by Robert's response. Or lack of it. I was beginning to conceive a stratagem. We were due to sail independently to explore the Dorian Gulf and, by that afternoon, we were at anchor in Ulubuk, in company with David and Beryl on *Intrepid*, Colonel Taboo and his wife on *Taboo*, Brook, Nickie and Hedley on the *Sea Eagle*, and various colourful craft.

Boats bobbed. Oleander blossomed. And it was then that I had the inspiration that was to be my triumph and my undoing.

Half an hour later I had borrowed a windsurfer from the *Sea Eagle* and was sitting astride it. I felt elated. It was a reckless sensation and left me quite unprepared for what was to follow. I repeated Brook's instructions in my head. *Feet either side of the mast. Keep your back straight. Haul up the rig, grab hold of the mast, then the wishbone. And off you go!*

I planted my feet either side of the mast, hauled up the rig, grabbed the mast, then the wishbone - and off I went. Into the water. After a time my efforts to stay upright were no longer greeted by cries of "Ooops!" from neighbouring boats and people lost interest in my on-off relationship with the board.

It was while I was fending myself off from the *Sea Eagle* that I saw something distinctly odd. It was a face that peered back at me through a porthole. What struck me as strange was not that there was a man on the *Sea Eagle* whom I had not seen before. It was his expression. He looked terrified.

Minutes later Brook was fastening off the windsurfer and ushering me into the cabin of the *Sea Eagle*. “*This is Orhan*,” he said, indicating the man with the frightened face, who was, I saw, dressed in Union Jack shorts. ‘We’d rather you hadn’t seen him but you have. Orhan’s a journalist and last year he was arrested, ostensibly for non-payment of tax. The Anti-Terror police tried to persuade him to confess to other crimes and now he’s heard he’s about to be arrested again.’”

Brook eased himself onto a bunk. “Basically we’re trying to help him. Exactly how we do it is another matter. The important thing is that you mustn’t tell *anyone* about this. Not even Colonel Taboo.”

I mustn’t tell anyone, I thought, as I swam back to our boat. Surely that doesn’t include Robert?

“Robert, listen!” I hissed, as I struggled back into dry clothes.

“Any chance of a cup of tea?”

“Suppose there was a political prisoner... “Robert’s head disappeared into the engine compartment.” Oh, do listen... “

I am listening. You haven’t put the kettle on yet.”

Brook could be right about Colonel Taboo, I thought later. In Marmaris I’d seen Colonel Taboo with a Turkish policeman standing in the shadows, talking fairly hard.

The log book was becoming dog-eared by the time I’d recorded the day’s discoveries. I was lolling in the cockpit with my eyes closed when something made me look up.

Just discernible on the glistening water was an ominous sight - a figure in a dinghy. It was Colonel Taboo, heading towards our boat.

“Permission to come aboard?” His manner was courteous but it was hardly a question. “I saw you writing. Is that your ship’s log? Perhaps I could borrow it?”

“It wouldn’t be worth your reading.” As usual I was not ready with a quick answer.

“You don’t trust me, do you?” Colonel Taboo asked.

‘No, honestly it’s not that... “My palms were sweaty and I could feel my ears burning but I tried to sound casual.

“In that case perhaps I could just glance at it?”

I was greatly relieved when Robert, who'd been dozing, roused himself, offered Colonel Taboo a drink and the subject of my ship's log was dropped.

It was not until the following morning that things started to go badly wrong. I went for a swim, returned to the boat and was searching for my homemade washing line when I felt a tug of worry. The log book was not where I'd left it, under the mattress on my bunk

“Robert? Where's the log book?”

“Colonel Taboo's borrowed it. He came over. While you were swimming.”

My stomach clenched. I'd recorded Orhan's hiding place and now he faced discovery, arrest, perhaps worse.

“Oh Robert, how could you?” Vividly I imagined Colonel Taboo sailing off to inform the Turkish police. “I'll swim over and ask him to return it,” I added, miserably. I was fumbling with my washing line and a pair of Robert's swimming trunks. It was too late, now, I knew. I was 44 but I felt old. Old and worthless. But shouldn't I still try to do something? Two minutes later I plunged over the side.

The cruise lasted for another two and a half days. Two and a half days of stifling my real fears. One question kept recurring in my mind. When the cruise was over, what else would be over? Robert studied the pilot book, tried to overtake other boats and complained that he'd lost his navy blue swimming trunks. I knew I had to brace myself for a last night party at Datca. How could I avoid Brook and Nickie? Always assuming that they weren't about to be arrested.

As we picked our way over mooring lines and past displays of brightly coloured carpets towards the taverna for the last night party, I felt ashamed. If Robert learnt how I'd betrayed Orhan he might decide to leave me. I'd understand, I told myself. After all, it would be a logical thing for Robert to do.

When we arrived Brook was chatting by a tin table underneath an olive tree. I tried to make myself inconspicuous but he strode up, sipping an Efes beer.

Robert drifted off as Brook looked round quickly and whispered, “Have you heard about Orhan?”

I felt a tightening in my throat. “No.”

“The trick is to know who you can trust. I thought we could trust you, Frances.”

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks.

“Very few people knew about Orhan,” Brook went on. “One who did was David on *Intrepid*. David lent us clothes for Orhan. That was important. We couldn’t keep disguising Orhan in a wet suit. It was too hot - and risky, as he can’t swim. But a strange thing happened after we left Ulubuk. Colonel Taboo tried to sail out after us but he couldn’t get his engine started. He tried to call us up but his radio telephone must have been baffled in that small Bay. When we finally realised he was in trouble and got back to him we had to send Hedley down in diving gear. There was a long piece of string wrapped around *Taboo*’s propeller shaft. I’ve got it here, in fact. It looks like a washing-line. There’s even an old pair of navy blue swimming trunks attached. You don’t know anything about that, do you?”

My lips and tongue seemed to have tightened but I tried to sound nonchalant. “No, nothing at all,” I stuttered.

“You might like to know something else,” Brook went on, staring at me intently. “Before we sorted out *Taboo*’s propeller, we sailed to the Greek island of Symi and left Orhan there.”

A bolt of joy shot through me. I looked up and glimpsed Robert, clutching a drink, edging towards us. His shoulders sagged, and suddenly he reminded me of my father. When I was little my mother ordered my father about interminably. He was a gifted teacher who couldn’t keep order. They separated, and later when my father died, I blamed myself for never having told him how much he meant to me.

I left Brook and hurried towards Robert. “Listen,” I said, “I want to tell you something.”

“Are you going to tell me why Brook’s brandishing your washing line and my swimming trunks in that embarrassing way?”

“Sssh! No.” If there were words for what I wanted to say, how could I bring myself to utter them? I struggled to force them out. And then I said it. “Robert, I want to tell you something. I want to tell you that it is possible to love a bull in a broom cupboard. You might think it isn’t, but it is.”

Around us cicadas stirred and stridulated in expectation of his reply.

Small World Isn't It?

Davina McLean

(Vincent Brennan Travel Article – 2nd Prize)

I used to travel to get away from 'it' and 'them'.

Now I am resigned to the fact that to accomplish either I shall probably have to travel into space and even that is getting busier by the day. I hear that holidays on the moon are already booked.

We live in a crowded world and every year millions more people have the opportunity to travel. There are few places left on the globe to explore and, let's face it, they are in pretty remote or inhospitable regions where only the mad or extremely intrepid are likely to go. Well, that lets me out then for I now require a measure of comfort and safety, based on experience and wisdom gathered over many years. However, there may still be some purpose to my travels if I bear in mind that "distance lends enchantment to the view".

My very first real travel experience was 'long haul' before I quite appreciated just what the term meant. It was 1960 and the flight to Hong Kong took over 30 hours, which included short stopovers of course. Touchdown was courtesy of any passing downdraught roaring off the Kowloon Mountains onto an impossibly small runway. Scary! Three years in Hong Kong before the skyscrapers grew, gave me a taste for the new and exotic and I've been indulging myself ever since.

But this is where the problems started. Getting away from it all was the prime reason for packing my bags. Away from work, commuting, inflexible hours, despotic management and all the other daily trivia.

So I walked across three Indonesian Islands. That's pretty well away from it all isn't it? Except that a fellow traveller just happened to be in the same line of work and my trek became a training and counselling programme. He asked for advice on how he could overcome his current problems and constantly gave unasked for advice on how I could reach the top of the promotion ladder if only I ... well, you don't really want to know do you?

Sunrise over Sumbawa should not include a whining voice detailing the insults hurled at him years ago. Trust me! Distance from my fellow traveller would certainly have added enchantment to that view.

The time came when I felt I had at least a tenuous control over my working life and simply ‘getting away from it all’ was replaced by the pleasure of discovering more out of the way places. Getting away from the old familiar faces, meeting interesting strangers. So there I was, sitting in a very decrepit bus chugging its way uncertainly up the side of the High Atlas Mountains. I am a nervous traveller when the driver is smoking, talking to his rear seat passengers, reading and patently ignoring the hairpin bends in his rush to get to the top of the mountain. It doesn’t bring out the best in me.

But isn’t this what foreign travel is all about? Excitement. Adrenalin rush. Taking some risks. Great. I think! The man seated next to me remarked that I seemed a little nervous. Who, me? I denied it. But the ice was broken so we started to chat. We followed the usual conversational route that travellers take. Where are you going to? Where have you been? Where are you from? I named the small market town I lived in. “Oh. Really! I know the place quite well” he said. Turns out he was the Bank Manager there for about 12 years. The rest of that day’s reckless journey was spent trying to bring him up to speed on who was doing what, to whom, why and well! What a surprise!

I did get away from it all in Southern Spain. One of those magical travel moments which can’t be planned. After a long day walking in the AlpuJarra mountains we had finished our excellent dinner and were spread around the outside terrace. A few glasses of Fundador meant the conversation was as mellow as we were. One man asked if we thought we could find our way through unknown territory, at night, without a compass. It was a good question to ask a group of walkers and the mixed response was “probably not”. He then gave a truly expert lesson in how to navigate by the stars. With eyes gazing upwards, we followed his every gesture, hung on his every word. Sadly I would still be no more able to find my way but it was a wonderful evening, learning of such distant friendly objects. A truly enchanting view.

It then became my mission to get away from them all. Find a place where everything and everybody was new. So naturally I headed for Australia.

Sydney airport. 6 a.m. I’m no longer sure what day it is and my body clock is seriously run down. Not the best welcome in the world from

the Customs and Immigration personnel but we have to grin and bear it now don't we. No problem, as they say Down Under. Soon be at the hotel, shower, breakfast, quick kip and then stand by Sydney for I am about to discover you.

It can be very chilly hanging around waiting for a non-existent taxi and the lady next in line to me comments on this fact. We start to chat. As you do. Same old routine. Where are you going? Where are you from? "Yes I do know that area quite well. Which town? Oh! right! That's just about six miles from where I live".

On the next phase of my journey, round New Zealand, I came to realise that just about everybody I met either came from, or had relatives in, every place I had any connection with in Britain throughout my entire life. Really, really small world!

However, it was with a smug sense of certainty that I set off for a trip up the River Amazon, with a diversion planned deep into the rainforest a thousand miles up river. Now that is away from them all isn't it? The Amazon is truly mind boggling, the statistics are staggering and it all just keeps on flowing past the boat.

The trip into the rainforest meant I must accept that things were likely to be very primitive and in that I was not wrong. Of course it was wonderful beyond belief and holding a two foot long cayman in my hands was pretty great too, though I did keep a sharp eye out, hoping its mother was not going to take offence.

The jungle did not disappoint and our accommodation was set in the middle of it all. Everything was built on stilts above the water and spider monkeys lounged just outside the wire netting covering the small bedroom balcony. Brilliantly coloured macaws flashed through the jungle canopy. Exotic and gorgeous. The dawn chorus was like waking at the beginning of time in a brand new world.

Our communal dining area provided food which was, fortunately, labelled for us, though the element of surprise was still there. But you could have a boiled egg and toast for breakfast if you really wanted to play safe! The bar area was a few chairs, mostly occupied by demented squirrel monkeys, with a three foot long wooden trestle table fronting several shelves of bottles. Coffee was available (well it is Brazil) and the beer was cold. Just the thing after a very hot and humid day out there, grappling with nature in the raw.

So, 6 p.m. Sun definitely well down. I sit at the bar with a beer. Three people are standing next to me and we start to chat. The traveller's litany begins.

Where are you from? America, say the two older women. England says the younger one. She asks me the same question.

England, I reply. Where in England? I name the County. Where about? I name the town. She starts to laugh and says I know it well". Come on! This can't be happening! I'm a thousand miles up the River Amazon, I'm in the depths of the jungle, this cannot be happening! But it is.

It turns out the lady lives about 150 yards from my own front door. Small world?

I am inclined to go for the space option next. Now that would really be some distant view and surely ... surely!!!

Interlude in Oman

Norman Bissett

(Vincent Brennan Travel Article – 3rd Prize)

First impressions were favourable.

The arrivals terminal, after our short onward hop from Abu Dhabi, was full of men in immaculate white robes-the cool-looking, full-length nightshirt, the *dish dash*, that constitutes the national dress with, perched on their heads, the traditional, embroidered pillbox hat, the *kamah*. The women, rather sinister figures from Greek tragedy, were swathed in not-so-cool-looking black *abbayas*, some veiled, others with only their hair covered. The cameo might have been entitled *Wee Willie Winkie Meets The Furies*.

Queuing at Immigration, parallel to us, were forty female pilgrims from Indonesia, mute, veiled and in single file, an assembly belt of nuns, waiting for their passports to be processed. Other than in the air-conditioned coolness of Carrefour, a few days later, this was the largest concentration of women that we encountered during nine days in Oman, which, despite liberalization and equal educational

opportunity, is still mainly a male preserve. Later, in Ruwi, we noted that many shops, including those specializing in foundation garments, bras and corsets, were predominantly staffed and patronised by men.

Why Oman?

Well, mainly because it's half-way between Edinburgh and Jakarta. We arranged to meet our son there for Easter, rather than flying all the way to Indonesia, where he's currently working.

Our visit coincided with the Prophet's Birthday, a sober, low-key affair as unlike Christmas as you could imagine. No jingles. No obvious manifestations of joy. No baubles dangling from the palm trees. No red-nosed reindeer. No Bing, groaning in the shopping malls. Banks and ministries closed for two days. A few solemn, po-faced, all-male speeches reported on TV and in the press. I doubt that things were any more festive inside the mosques.

We went somewhat diffidently, cowardice clashing with curiosity, nostalgia for the Middle East some thirty years earlier; we had lived in Beirut, Ankara and Cairo—contending with slight apprehension about the weird, new Islamic world of fatwa, fundamentalism, jihad and suicide bomb. We needn't have worried. We found the Omanis peace-loving, Anglophile, dignified and welcoming, proud of how far their country, under Sultan Qaboos Ibn Said, has come in thirty five years, and disenchanted by the wilder-eyed perversions of Islam. They were generally dismissive of Wahabism, Saudi Arabia and the unbridled materialism of neighbouring Gulf States. They were curious about Camilla and spoke fondly of Prince Charles who, from time to time, goes camping with the Sultan in the wilderness. How many pantechicons and Range Rovers must that involve, we wondered?

Outside Switzerland, Muscat is the cleanest city we have ever visited. It should be an obligatory research destination for everyone in the UK responsible for the dissemination of fag ends, old newsprint, recycled curries, pizza cartons, bald tyres, obsolete white goods, plastic bags, lager cans and dog poo. There's no word in the Omani lexicon for detritus. Drop a cigarette butt from your car window and you will a) be reported by half the population and b) fined on the spot. Just like Switzerland, without the snow. We warmed to it immediately.

The architecture of the capital is attractive—white, Islamic and low-rise, the tallest building in the country being the Sheraton. This

provides a useful landmark as, initially, the geography of the city is disconcerting. Whereas London has absorbed its multiplicity of districts into one bloated megalopolis, Muscat's various neighbourhoods remain discrete, separated by rocky, snaggle-toothed mountains. Returning by taxi from a distant restaurant on our second night, we became anxious as our driver headed along a byway that seemed to be taking us ever further into the desert. Not a light, not a dwelling place, not a fellow human being could we see. Night on the bare mountain loomed.

Eventually, to our huge, unspoken relief, we turned a bend and silently rejoiced at the welcome sight of illuminated houses, development banks, filling stations, a Pizza Hut, LuLu's Hypermarket and towering over all, the Pharos-light of the Sheraton tower. Our driver, who, after all, had not been plotting to murder us in some desiccated spur of el Wadi el Kebir, touched his heart and bowed graciously as we added a generous, un-Scottish tip to his fare.

At Seeb International Airport we had been similarly impressed by the graciousness of the immigration official who stamped our passports. Ever-willing, I tried out a few words of dimly remembered Arabic on him. These elicited the merest flicker. 'First time?' he inquired, straight-faced. 'Aywa.' 'Welcome to Oman,' he said politely, serene as a Buddhist.

Afterwards, my wife pointed out that I had addressed him, not in Arabic, but in equally rusty Turkish.

The lobby of our hotel was milling with Masai warriors in track suits or T-shirts and trainers. Omanis appeared to be seven foot tall and slim as pencils. Very quickly we learned that the hotel was hosting a regional basketball tournament, involving teams from all over the Gulf. Some of these languid giants were guest players from the American South.

It's worth taking a taxi ride around Muscat to get one's bearings and a feel for the city's various districts: Ruwi, the commercial centre; Qurum, the main shopping area; Medinat Qaboos, an attractive residential area; Al Khuwair, the embassy and diplomatic belt with its extravagant, nouveau Gulf architecture. A recce could usefully include some of Muscat's finest hotels the low-slung, Bedouin-flavoured Chedi, the Shangri-La, with its private beach, and perhaps the finest of

all in the Middle East, Al Bustan Palace, overlooking its own rugged bay, 4 miles south of Old Muscat. Built on the site of a former leper colony, this is now a regular venue for Gulf summits and the haunt of crown princes, heads of state and ministers.

Our ports of call were altogether humbler. We took the hotel courtesy bus to the beach resort at Qurun, not to swim but to watch the fishermen landing their catch. Not for them the wooden boxes, swinging derricks and rapid-fire auctioneering of Grimsby and Peterhead. At Qurun, high-sided pickup trucks took it in turn to reverse into the shallow waters of the Gulf of Oman to meet the incoming boats. A dozen Arabs, at a signal, heaved aloft the bulging net and tipped hundredweights of fish straight into the pick-up truck: sardines, whitebait, sprats - cascade after cascade until each truck was heaped to overflowing. The trucks then drove out of the water and along the beach to market, an honour guard of at least three sprawled on each fishy pyramid. The shallows were alive with silver, wriggling sardines and the gulls were having a field day.

We also made an early bee-line for Muttrah Souq, heady with frankincense, sandalwood, coffee and halwa. While not on a par with the great bazaars of Cairo, Istanbul and Damascus, it is still one of the most authentic souqs in Arabia, its narrow lanes filled with the bustle of traders, shoppers, money-changers, hawkers and gawkers, each sector thronged with shops specializing in a particular product-gold, silver, spices, textiles, household items, whatever.

After some hesitation and much deliberation - and only eight months after the relevant anniversary-I chose a ring for my wife, a rich Burmese ruby. It would be set and mounted overnight, and delivered to our hotel the following day, payment on receipt. *Maleesh. Kwayis ktir. Sukran awm.* We shook hands on the deal.

Glowing with the romance of it, we meandered through the rest of the Souq to the Corniche, and strolled around the old harbour, the impressive ruins of Muttrah Fort towering above us. The evening air was silky and an Arab dhow - its lines like those of a Chinese junk-rode at anchor in the bay whose waters were teeming with fish-easy pickings for the little boys casting makeshift lines from the sea-wall.

Much as we liked Muscat, we needed to leave it to experience an older, more authentic Oman of dried-up wahdis, monochrome, adobe villages camouflaged against a rocky landscape, scalloped desert dunes, biblical oases of date palms, serrated peaks sweeping down to rugged, golden-sand bays, and, everywhere, the forts of mud-brick, stucco and stone typical of the country.

Saif, the most knowledgeable of our tour guides, drove us to the Grand Canyon in his roomy Nissan 4 x 4-essential for off-road deviations. Despite a country-wide network of modern highways, locals still use dry river beds as roads and Saif occasionally did likewise.

He was proud of his country's progress. Thirty five years ago, Oman had only three schools and one small, twenty-bed hospital. Today, there are over 1000 schools and a university whose medical degrees are recognised in Britain. While Oman welcomes guest-workers - Indian, Filipino, Indonesian the Omanification of the labour market is well-advanced. Women drive, are encouraged into academic and vocational training and have reached ministerial positions - although the Sultan retains control of such key ministries as Finance and Foreign Affairs.

In that day's *Word on the Street* section of the English language *News*, the issue debated was: *What do you think of women in sports?* Four professional men were robustly supportive. There was only one dissenting voice, that of a hospitality worker: 'In our culture, it's not considered decent for women to go out, work and participate in sports. The woman's role is to look after the house and her children, to cook and clean, and look pretty for her husband.'

Oman has one of the highest birth rates in the world, with an average 7.5 children per family. Saif's friend had fathered twenty two. Another acquaintance was responsible, every Thursday, for entertaining his entire extended family - a kind of DIY welfare state - of fifty five. With education open to women, change seems inevitable.

Grand Canyon, a smaller version of its American cousin, was impressive enough but uniformly mud-coloured and hard to photograph. We settled for buying some brightly-woven key chains (1 Real, without the ring), from a leathery Old Testament patriarch,

beaked like a falcon, whose four wives had set out their vendors' carpet on the rim of a 1000 foot drop.

Next day, with another driver, Nasr (born Colchester, son of an Edinburgh graduate), we visited some of the watch towers and forts, built initially to pacify inter-tribal conflicts, and largely rebuilt in the 17th Century against Portuguese invasion. By the 19th Century Oman had one of the biggest navies in the world and controlled the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. The forts at Nizwah and Rustaq were impressive in their architecture, diabolical in their defences - stooped entry, trapdoors above voids, bottle dungeons, overhead slits through which boiling water, oil or honey were poured. The peace-loving Omanis could obviously look after themselves.

Nasr, pro-Arab and staunchly nationalistic, was less talkative than Saif, his silences punctuated by oracular statements. 'The great leader, Salah-ed-din, was very handsome. All Arab leaders are very handsome. Really?' I mused. 'I wouldn't have mistaken Yaser Arafat or Hosni Mubarak for the Mona Lisa. All very handsome,' he insisted.

A third trip took us into the Sharquiyah Sands, a desert region in eastern Oman, stretching 180 kilometres from north to south, 80 kilometres east to west. The dunes, rising to 150 feet, undulated in crests and waves whose colours-gold, brown, pink, copper-varied according to the time of day. From some hovels at the start of the track, four large-footed Bedouin women came out to greet us. Once we stopped for a pee in a holiday village whose 70 un-air-conditioned cabanas stood empty in the baking heat, guarded by two lacklustre, tethered ibexes. There were no takers for these hellish hothouses, which were more concentration camp than money-making proposition.

There's a knack to driving over dunes, with the car tending to slide all the time. The sand is firm enough, as long as one keeps moving. Stop, the crust breaks and the vehicle begins to sink. Happily, Azar, our third driver was supremely in control.

Nevertheless, we were content to spend our final day dolphin-watching and gently snorkelling among Technicolor shoals, just off the beach.

“Winner Takes All”

A Review by Ethel Corduff

If I say I do not like something or somebody, this frequently prompts my family at Christmas and birthdays to give me a gift in connection with my current pet hate. They think this is so funny! So this Christmas I received three cat calendars (I am nervous of cats) and a Michael Winner autobiography “Winner takes all”. I grimaced when I saw it, as I find his Sunday times food articles so pompous, he thinks so much of himself. Mind you, that does not stop me from reading them.

Anyhow, my son and daughter kept asking me during January how the book was progressing, as I kept putting off reading it. I finally finished it on the 20th February. There was one major appeal this book held for me and that is that I was a total movie fan in my youth in Ireland. This was fuelled by the fact that we got two free cinema tickets weekly for displaying the three local cinema posters in our family shop window.

Michael Winner, as a film director knew all the stars intimately and he told stories about their lives that I had never heard of I enjoyed reliving my youth and lapped up his movie stories which were one of the main themes of the book. Yet there is more to “Winner takes all”. There are many photographs, even though Winner is in every one, so are the stars! Though he still comes over as full of self importance, I did not find this as irritating as in the food articles. There was a lot of humour and anecdotes on every page, though I read it slowly, it held my interest and was fun as he did some outrageous things. I would not call it a literary book it was plainly written. Michael gave his honest opinion of people so much, I kept wondering if those he spoke negatively of had ever tried to sue him for defamation of character, as many are still alive. I felt sorry for him when he said his many ex girlfriends were his only family.

I enjoyed reading about the back ground of how the films he directed were made, for instance how Victorian New York was filmed in the grounds of Lambeth hospital. Photography played a huge part in the authenticity of Michael’s films. I feel the book would be a good read for those from fifty years upwards, not so much for the younger reader who would not know many of the film stars. It is a funny book, even when Michael loses thirty six million pounds of his inheritance, all squandered by his mother to feed her gambling. The book is published by Robson books at £8.99, which is a bit steep for a paperback. Over all I did enjoy it and could understand why it got such good reviews.

The Right Prescription

James Lancaster

(Lewis Wright Short Story Competition - Joint 3rd Prize)

When the knocking was heard from the bedroom above, Gary looked across at Liz and muttered an impatient, “Now what?”

Liz got up from the sofa putting aside the magazine through which she had been browsing and with an understanding smile replied; “I expect mum’s ready for her drink; she’ll be wanting to get a good night’s sleep tonight.”

“Sure,” went on Gary, “if she’d had a good night last night, we could have gone to Mark’s party - but no such luck -one of her funny turns and that was that.”

“Oh Gary it was such bad luck I know,” said Liz putting her slim hands on his shoulder and giving him a peck on the lips as she passed by barefooted to the door.

“Coming mother!” she called up the stairs.

Gary crossed the floor, his hands thrust into the pockets of his designer trousers and stood in front of the mirror which hung above the fireplace. He was confronted by the picture of a disgruntled young man, although one admitting to thinking himself blessed with good looks and being a fairly smart dresser. At the moment his blue striped shirt was unfastened at the neck and his patterned tie loosened to ease the rather oppressive warmth of the small lounge.

The sound of soft footfall on the stairs brought Liz back into the room.

“You’re annoyed Gary.”

“Yes you could say that - and running out of patience too.”

Liz had switched on the kettle and got out three cups and saucers. She spoke from the kitchen door, showing frustration as she ran her fingers through her dark brown hair.

“But you’ve always been so understanding; mother needs my help here - you must still see that - and she’s not improving much yet.”

“Oh I do understand that,” replied Gary resuming his seat on the sofa, “but how long can a wedding be put off; how long do you expect me to wait? Let’s fix a date now, that’s what I say.”

“Gary darling,” explained Liz persuasively, “the way things are here I just couldn’t do that yet. Mother needs my attention - I owe it to her.”

Gary snatched his packet of cheroots from off the table, plucked one out, flicked a lighter into flame and lit up.

“So this is the situation. You’re the only one at home now and your mother was forty when you were born. Now thirty-odd years later she needs you more than you think I might need you.”

He drew heavily on the small cigar as the sound of the boiling kettle arrested the conversation and caused Liz to return to her tea-making task. She came back carrying two cups of tea, placing one on the table as she passed through on her way upstairs.

“You have a cup too Gary; I won’t be a minute.”

Gary sat holding the cup and saucer but looked somewhat vaguely beyond it into the orange flames of the gas fire. He heard muffled voices coming from upstairs, until Liz rejoined him.

Mum really does look pale tonight,” she said forlornly as she brought herself a cup of tea and sat down on the rug near to Gary. She rested her head against his legs, and as no response was made to her statement, spoke again with a tone of despair in her voice.

“Somehow I just couldn’t make up my mind to fix anything definitely yet; I only wish I could. I sometimes think that if you weren’t a few years younger than me you’d see it my way.”

Gary shot up from the sofa. “Well we’ll just go on the way we are; it’s an ideal situation. The trouble with you Liz is that you’re too damn good hearted, but not in my direction.”

He grabbed his jacket saying;” I’d better go now anyway; I’ve to be off early in the morning,” and the couple parted with only the briefest of embraces. Gary did not then drive straight back to his flat, but called in at a local club to be fortified by a whisky on the rocks, principally because he felt events were heading that way.

It was after eleven-o'clock when the phone rang to interrupt his reverie.

“Gary!” it was the urgent voice of Liz. “I’ve had to ring for the doctor. Mother’s not at all well - can you come over?”

Gary gave a look of despair to the ceiling but chose his reply carefully.

“O.K. if you think you need me I’ll be with you in quarter of an hour.”

He got the car out and as he sat behind the wheel turned over the problems of the situation in his mind. Liz was in a panic when he arrived.

“She looks so pale now and her breathing’s not good -I’ve never seen her like this before. I wish that doctor would turn up.”

“So do I” said Gary. “I’m no guy to have around in these circumstances.”

A noise outside caused Liz to rush to the window, pull back the curtain and look out. The doctor parked his car beneath the light of the street lamp and hurried up the short drive. Gary stayed downstairs as the doctor and Liz went up to her mother. He could hear the muffled voices but was more concerned by his own wretched luck which seemed to have placed him in a state of limbo. He moved briskly over to the wall mirror to which he mentally put his case.

“What sort of guy am I to keep hanging around like this?”

His other self, showing him to be a little more dishevelled than earlier in the evening had the answer.

“Usually a shrewd operator, but as yet not shrewd enough to convince the girl upstairs that there is cause to marry you yet.”

He turned away to pace restlessly about the room, only pausing when he heard footsteps on the stairs, and Liz and the doctor rejoined him.

“She isn’t good at the moment,” said the doctor in quiet tones, “but there is something that can ease her; but she needs it quickly,” and he began to scribble out a prescription. “This could help her through the crisis, otherwise things might get even more complicated.”

“I’ll dash off for it,” said Gary suddenly.

“Oh good man,” smiled the doctor. “The chemists are all closed now so try the hospital pharmacy - I’ll ring them to tell them you’re coming.”

“Thanks, Gary,” said Liz, and even in her anxiety was able to give her fiancée a parting kiss of gratitude.

Only the more observant might have seen Gary give a knowing look to himself in the mirror as he went out into the hall. He drove through the night with the piece of paper bearing the vital prescription on the ledge above the dashboard, and for the sake of decency had to struggle to prevent himself laughing out loud.

“I have the solution here in my hands” he told himself as he held the paper in his gloved fingers. “This life saving information - and it all depends on me. For the first time I can have a say in the matter?”

A few spots of rain spattered on the windscreen as the idea formed that a delay in getting the medicine back to Liz might do his own cause some good. After winding his way through dark country lanes he emerged into the brighter lights of town and made his way to the hospital where he presented the prescription.

As he waited in the warmth of the building, he was searching for a plausible scheme which would enable him to come out of any delusion unscathed, but even as he received the prescribed medicine and thrust the white paper bag into the pocket of his trench coat, he had not come up with a worthwhile idea.

“Some way or other I have to be delayed, “ he mused as he drove through the hospital gateway. “Somehow I have to be stopped.”

At this point a sinister thought came to mind. “But of course; run out of petrol - how simple.”

From the gauge he saw that there was too much in the tank to hope for that happening, so it would mean calling back home to siphon some out. With the windscreen wipers ticking out a steady rhythm, he took the route which eventually brought him to the back court of his flat, where he reversed into the garage.

Not wanting to be seen, he worked in the dark, feeling his way to find a suitable length of rubber pipe and the can into which the petrol would be put. Showing characteristic haste he made a clumsy job of it.

Petrol spilled out on to the floor and in getting the pipe end back into the can, his hands took some of the flow.

With the siphoning completed, all was ready to fill the tank with enough petrol which would enable him to drive out on the roads again - until he stopped. He put the rubber pipe away and fumbled around for a funnel. It could be on the bench, or under it - or in the drawer. He cursed at his inability to find it, instinctively produced a cigarette lighter - and pressed.

In a flash his hands and arms were enveloped in flames which leapt upwards to his face. He tried desperately to beat them out, but they kept biting back like hot teeth upon his flesh. He hurled himself outside into the pouring rain and fell into the water gurgling down the gutter.

A neighbour alerted by the sudden flash of light in the garage came to his aid.

“ Good Lord Gary what happened?”

“Got to get...” Gary stammered, “medicine in the car ... back ... back to Liz ... Liz’s mother ... urgent ... urgent”

“O.K. I’ll fix that, but you’re for hospital just as quick.”

Soon two cars were leaving in opposite directions as the neighbours rallied round. One carrying the vital medicine, while the other conveyed Gary back to the hospital he had left some little time earlier.

He lay in bed, a despondent figure suffering pain and confusion. A ministering nurse whispered that his fiancée would be coming to see him the following day, then gave him two tablets which sent him into a deep sleep.

On waking his first thoughts were for Liz and how her mother had fared. How could he face Liz again; could she ever want to speak to him again; could she ever want to look at him again? He thought of how he looked in the mirror in that cosy room the previous night. Had his good looks which had been attractive to Liz now gone forever?

The sound of footsteps came nearer and opening his eyes which were no more than narrow slits he saw Liz standing at his bedside. In guilt and embarrassment he turned his head away, but Liz, kneeling, drew close to him.

“Oh Gary, if you hadn’t have gone for mother’s tablets this would never have happened. To think that you had to stop to fill up with petrol - then this happened - I feel so guilty.”

Gary tried to say something but no words were forthcoming and the medical dressings hid any sign of bewilderment that his face might have shown.

“Don’t try to talk now,” said Liz. “You did all this for mother, so you did it for me, and when you’re feeling better we’ll fix the wedding date.” Gary didn’t try to talk. He was content to lie there, conscious of Liz being close to him and feeling her warm breath upon his face.



Merry
Christmas