

Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok
Dávidházi Péter
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to
Péter Dávidházi
On His Sixtieth Birthday

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A borító Adam Friedrich Oeser *Sokrates meißelt die drei Grazien*
(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

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JOHN L. FLOOD

Petrarch's Legacy

— · —
The Proliferation of Laurels

As is well known, Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca) had himself crowned *poeta laureatus* on the Capitol at Rome in 1341. This “whim of vanity” precipitated some bizarre imitations down the ages. These include the proliferation of laureation in the Holy Roman Empire – with well over thirteen hundred men (and at least fifteen women), among them several (now forgotten) Hungarians, receiving the laurel at the hands of German emperors, counts palatine, and university professors between 1355 and 1804.¹ Then there is the tradition, unbroken for centuries, of the appointment of official poets laureate in England right down to the present day.²

¹ FLOOD, John L., *A Német-római Birodalom Koszorús Költői* = Zsuzsa Kalla (ed.), *Az irodalom ünnepei. Kultusz történeti tanulmányok*, Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum könyvei (9) 2000, 11–34.; FLOOD, John L., *Poets Laureate in the Holy Roman Empire. A Bio-bibliographical Handbook*, 4 vols. Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 2006.

² BROADUS, Edmund Kemper, *The Laureateship. A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with Some Account of the Poets*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921.; RUSSEL, Nick, *Poets by Appointment. Britain's Laureates*, Poole, Dorset: Blandford Press, 1981.; FLOOD 2006, ccxli–ccl.

In England, the laureation of poets falls into three distinct phases.³ At first the laurel was bestowed on poets on a more or less random basis by monarchs and universities – the best known among these are John Skelton (1460–1529) who was laureated three times, first at Oxford, then at Louvain, and finally at Cambridge, and Ben Jonson (1573–1637). The second phase saw the official appointment of a single poet who would hold the title Poet Laureate for life – there were eighteen of these, from John Dryden in 1670 to Ted Hughes in 1984. The third phase is represented only by the current Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy (appointed 2009) and her predecessor Andrew Motion. Since Motion’s appointment in 1999, the arrangement – introduced under Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997–2007) – has been that the office shall be held for ten years only. On relinquishing the post, Motion was granted a knighthood from the Queen “for services to poetry”.

All this is well known. Much less widely known, however, is that recent times have seen an astonishing proliferation of the use of the title Poet Laureate in Britain and more widely in the English-speaking world. This development is all the more surprising given that laureates have long been the target of mockery and criticism and the more especially because in Britain, unlike in the Holy Roman Empire, the bestowal of the laurel has historically been strictly regulated until recently. The trend towards the creation of ever more Poets Laureate seems to be confined to the English-speaking world. The only example I know of otherwise is from Germany where, in 1962, the University of Tübingen bestowed the laurel on Josef Eberle, then editor of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* and author of elegant neo-Latin poems.⁴ This act was evidently based on the premise that only the authors of Latin works could be considered worthy of the title, though even in Germany such exclusivity had been breached as early as the seventeenth century while in England Skelton had published both in English as well as in Latin already around 1500.

As we shall see, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen numerous examples of the creation of Poets Laureate in Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA. As far as can be ascertained, only occasionally do the schemes underlying the bestowal of the title show awareness

³ FLOOD 2006, 2380–2382.

⁴ FLOOD 2006, ccliv.

of Petrarch; more generally they seem to draw their inspiration from the centuries-old British tradition of creating an official state Poet Laureate. However, with few exceptions, they differ from it in at least one important respect: whereas the official British Poet Laureate has, prior to Motion, held the post for life, most of the other laureates that have been appointed in recent times hold their title for only a limited period, generally between one and five years.

As has been mentioned, laureated poets have long been the butt of criticism and mockery. Indeed, such disapprobation goes back even to Petrarch's own day.⁵ Often enough the charge has been that the laurel was placed on unworthy heads – neither Shakespeare nor Milton was laureated. Instead the honour was granted to men like Alfred Austin, Poet Laureate from 1896 to 1913, who is remembered today only for his truly awful lines concerning an illness of King Edward VII:

Across the wires the electric message came,
'He is no better, he is much the same'.

Such general low esteem of the office led some poets to eschew the honour – Thomas Gray (1716–71) and Samuel Rogers (1763–1855), for example, and more recently Tony Harrison who wrote a bitter attack on it.⁶ On the other hand, John Betjeman (1906–1984, laureated 1972) positively revelled in the fact that *The Guardian* newspaper declared the appointment to be “arbitrary and irrelevant”.

Yet, notwithstanding that such disparaging remarks are still rife today, Britain, and the English-speaking world more generally, curiously seems in recent years to have developed a remarkable enthusiasm for appointing laureates of one sort or another. Let us consider some examples.

Most striking perhaps is the appointment at national level of a series of 'Children's Laureates', each holding the title for two years and receiving a bursary of 10,000 pounds. The first was the distinguished children's book illustrator Quentin Blake (born 1932), appointed for 1999–2001; he recorded his experiences in *The Laureate's Party* (2000) and *Laureate's Progress* (2002). He was followed by Anne Fine (2001–2003), Michael

⁵ FLOOD 2006, ccxiv–ccxli.

⁶ HARRISON, Tony, *Laureate's Block*, London: Penguin, 2000.

Morpurgo (2003–2005), Jacqueline Wilson (2005–2007), and until 2009 the well-known writer and broadcaster Michael Rosen. The current holder is Anthony Browne whose picture books are famous for their brilliantly realised, surreal images of gorillas.

Another manifestation is the appointment of local Poets Laureate, particularly by municipalities. The cities of Birmingham, Peterborough and Glasgow appoint their own laureates. Whether the idea for this in Britain owes anything to the USA where Poets Laureate have existed in some States for nearly a century needs further exploration.

Although the website of Peterborough (<http://www.peterborough.gov.uk>) claims it to be “the only city in the country that has its own Poet Laureate”, this is by no means so. The first to do so was Birmingham where Brian Lewis was appointed in 1996/1997, two years ahead of Peterborough. At Birmingham, a city of which Jane Austen thought one could have “no great hopes” (*Emma*, chapter 36), the main task of the Poet Laureate, a purely honorary position, is to raise the profile of poetry across the city. To be eligible for consideration the poet must be resident in or connected with Birmingham, and he or she will be commissioned to write poems about Birmingham during the year. Among the fourteen Birmingham laureates so far – after Lewis these were David Hart (1997/8), Sybil Ruth (1998/9), Simon Pitt (1999/2000), Roshan Doug (2000/1), Roi Kwabena (2001/2), Julie Boden (2002/3), Roz Goddard (2003/4), Don Barnard (2004/5), Richard Grant, known as ‘Dreadlock-alien’ (2005/6), Giovanni Esposito, known as ‘Spoz’ (2006/7), Charlie Jordan (2007/8), Chris Morgan (2008/9), Adrian Johnson (2009/10) – there have been several women. The best known of the Birmingham laureates is perhaps Roshan Doug (born 1963), the first Asian to be appointed to the position and Arts Editor of *Spice Lifestyle*, the only Asian cultural magazine in Britain; his collections include *Delusions* (1995), *Thicker Than Water* (1998), *The English-knowing Men* (1999), *No, I am not Prince Hamlet* (2002), and *The Delicate Falling of God* (2003).

Birmingham also selects a ‘Young Poet Laureate’, a recent one being sixteen-year-old Jennifer Brough, a selection of whose poems, including a noteworthy one marking Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January, another Blair invention, instituted in 2001), may be read on the official Birmingham website (<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk>) which also has links to interviews with the city’s fourteen poets laureate.

As for Peterborough (130 km north of London), its first Poet Laureate, Toby Wood, was selected for 1998/9. His published collections include *Good Spuds*, *Bog Standard*, and *Cheese and Onion*. The current holder is one Michael Ricardo, known as 'Mixy'. Biographical notes and a selection of the poets' work can be found on the city council's website.

Even a few individual English counties appoint their own poets laureate. Thus in 2000 West Sussex appointed Hugh Dunkerley, a pupil of Andrew Motion and lecturer in English and Creative Writing at University College Chichester. The county of Cheshire, too, selects a Poet Laureate annually. In 2003 it was Harry Owen, author of *Searching for Machynlleth* and *The Music of Ourselves*, in 2004 John Lindley, author of *Cheshire Rising*, in 2005 Joy Winkler who published *On the Edge*, and in 2006 Andrew Rudd, author of *One Cloud Away From The Sky*. One of the commissions Rudd was set to celebrate in verse was the International Worm Charming Championships! (On this eccentric pastime, held annually at Willaston, near Nantwich, Cheshire, see <http://www.wormcharming.com>)

In 2005 Derbyshire also announced its intention to appoint a Poet Laureate for the county "to raise the profile of poetry to a variety of audiences." The panel of judges included Ian McMillan, "Poet Laureate of the Three Cities" (of Derby, Leicester and Nottingham), justly described as "one of the nation's most popular poets" and author of the collection *Perfect Catch* (2000) (see <http://www.uktouring.org.uk/ian-mcmillan>). The first Derbyshire appointee was Cathy Grindrod whose poetry collection is entitled *Fighting Talk* (2005). Another appointment local to the Derbyshire area is the 'Poet Laureate of the Peak', the Peak District being an area of outstanding natural beauty. The title, held for two years, is sponsored by Arts in the Peak with support from the Peak District National Park Authority. The first appointee, in 2005, was 64-year old Alec Rapkin whose published poetry collections include *Under Stone* and *Mr Darcy's Butterfly Collection*. See <http://www.artsinthepeak.co.uk>, where many of his nature poems may be read.

Turning to Scotland, at Glasgow the poet laureate, appointed for three years, is offered a fee in return for writing a substantial poem. The first appointee, in 1999, was Edwin Morgan. Born in 1920, he studied English literature at Glasgow University and subsequently became Professor of English there, retiring in 1980. His publications include

The Second Life (1968) and *From Glasgow to Saturn* (1973). In 2000 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (a prestigious award, originally instituted by King George V in 1933; previous recipients include Siegfried Sassoon, W. H. Auden, John Betjeman, Philip Larkin, and Ted Hughes).⁷ In 2005 Glasgow appointed as Morgan's successor Liz Lochhead (born 1947). Collections of poetry she has published include *Memo for Spring* (1972), *Dreaming Frankenstein* (1984), and *The Colour of Black & White* (2003). She is a prolific playwright, too, writing *Blood and Ice* (performed 1982), *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987), *Britannia Rules* (1998), *Perfect Days* (1998), and *Good Things* (2004). She has also adapted Sophocles, Euripides, Chekhov, and Molière (his *Le Misanthrope* appearing as *Miseryguts* in 2002).

One of the most significant constitutional changes in Britain in recent years was the devolution in 1999 of powers from central government in Westminster to the newly established Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff. This has served to sharpen nationalist appetites and, in Scotland particularly, there is at least a strong undercurrent of clamour for independence from England. In the cultural sphere, this has led to calls for Scotland and Wales to appoint official Poets Laureate of their own. Already while Edwin Morgan was Poet Laureate of Glasgow, he suggested that the new Scottish Parliament should create a Scottish Laureate. This idea – being in tune with Scottish nationalist aspirations – was duly taken up, and in 2004 Morgan was appointed the 'Scots Makar' (that is, 'maker [of verse]', a term going back to the fifteenth/sixteenth century) for three years, with a brief to represent and promote Scots poetry.

As in Scotland, so too in Wales after the devolution of powers and responsibilities from government in London to the Welsh Assembly there was a call for a national Poet Laureate. "Devolution has given Wales its own National Assembly, closely followed by a host of new government posts, but in a land known for its poetic tradition, where is the Poet Laureate?," asked Wales's leading English-language poetry journal, *Poetry Wales*, in 1999. There was a proposal for two Welsh poets

⁷ On Morgan's work see THOMSON, Geddes, *The Poetry of Edwin Morgan*, Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1986. and CRAWFORD, Robert – WHYTE, Hamish (eds) *About Edwin Morgan*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.

laureate, one for Welsh and one for the English language. After six years' agitation, the Arts Council of Wales in 2005 agreed to provide 5,000 pounds from lottery funds to establish the post. The appointee would serve as an ambassador for the nation, creating works to promote the image of Wales. The post would be held for one year, renewable for a second, and the poet's works would be read at ceremonial and official occasions. The language would alternate between Welsh and English. The chief executive of Academi, the Welsh National Literature Promotion Agency, declared, "England was first with its Poet Laureate, then Scotland with its Maker, and now Wales – ample evidence of our growing cultural nationhood."

The first Welsh Poet Laureate, or *Bardd Cenedlaethol Cymru* (National Poet of Wales), was Gwyneth Lewis, installed on 30 May 2005 at the Hay-on-Wye literary festival. She proudly calls herself "author of the world's biggest poem", referring to the six-foot high letters of the Welsh and English inscriptions ("Creu Gwir fel Gwydr o Ffwrnais Awen" ["Creating truth like glass from inspiration's furnace"] and "In these stones horizons sing") above the Millennium Centre at Cardiff. Her published collections include *Parables & Faxes* (1995), *Zero Gravity* (1998), *Y Llofrudd Iaith* (The Language Murderer) which won the Welsh Arts Council Book of the Year Prize in 2000, and her *Keeping Mum* (2003) was shortlisted for the same award in 2004. Her collection *Chaotic Angels: Poems in English* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005) includes a poem about Budapest:

Parable: Old Statues' Park in Budapest

Not all statues can change allegiances.
These are recusants that have been seized
and brought to this park by the new regime
to be hung by cranes for political crimes

and out-of-date gestures. An historical wind
blows iron trousers against communist limbs
from different directions, as men in suits
(there are three Lenins at the entrance gate)

regard naked heroes, all muscle and thrust,
who were happy to bare their collective chests
to lead the people. Now they direct
the starling traffic and orchard troops

into the thick of the afternoon
in which nothing happens, where they gesture alone.
Before they were orators – men were their words
and iron foundries their strongest verbs

but now they avoid each other's eyes
but hear as the workmen take their ease,
smoking behind them, and they're forced to see
a concrete-mixer decide their history.

Up-to-date details may be found on her website.⁸ She is still composing what are disparagingly known as 'laureate poems': on the very day on which I started to write this, 27 July 2007, she featured on BBC Radio 4 reading a poem she had written to commemorate the compulsory slaughter of Shambo, the 'sacred bullock' that, after a long legal battle, had the previous day been removed by the police from a Hindu temple at Skanda Vale in Wales because it had tested positive for bovine tuberculosis (see <http://www.skandavale.org>). Gwyneth Lewis's successor was Gwyn Thomas (born 1936) who is best known for his fine English translation of the Welsh *Mabinogion*. He has also published sixteen volumes of his own poetry, beginning with *Chwerwder yn y Ffynhonnau* (Bitterness in the Fountains) (1962) and most recently *Apocalups Yfory* (Apocalypse Tomorrow) (2005). Among his many academic publications is *Y Traddodiad Barddol* (1976), a study of Welsh bardic traditions. The current Welsh National Poet is Gillian Clarke whose 'poem for Haiti' commemorates the January 2010 earthquake. There is also a Children's Poet Laureate of Wales ('Bardd Plant Cymru' in Welsh), Ifor ap Glyn in 2008/9; he is already the ninth holder of the title. The first was Myrddin ap Dafydd in 2000. A Children's Laureate is to be appointed in Ireland in 2010.

Leaving the British Isles, it is particularly interesting to record that since 2002 Canada has had a 'Parliamentary Poet Laureate', selected

⁸ <http://www.gwynethlewis.com>

alternately from the English and French language communities and recompensed with 20,000 Canadian dollars a year and up to 13,000 dollars for travel expenses. The duties prescribe that the poet may “write poetry, especially for use in Parliament on important occasions, sponsor poetry readings, advise the Parliamentary Librarian regarding the Library’s collection and acquisitions to enrich its cultural materials, and perform other related duties at the request of the Speaker of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Commons or the Parliamentary Librarian.” The first appointee was George Bowering (2002/4) (born 1935), author of many books of verse including *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9* (1967, reissued 2003), described as “an ode to the beautiful game.” He was followed by Pauline Michel (2004/6), who writes in French. One of her books, *Funambule / Tightrope* (2006), is a collection of poems written to mark official parliamentary events. The 2006/8 holder was John Steffler (born 1947), whose works include the poetry books *An Explanation of Yellow* (1981), *The Grey Islands* (1985), *The Wreckage of Play* (1988), *That Night We Were Ravenous* (1998) and most recently *Helix* (2002), as well as the celebrated novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1992). Steffler has been succeeded by the prolific Pierre DesRuisseaux who already in 1989 earned Canada’s highest literary honour, the Governor General’s Award, for his collection *Monème*.

Also in Canada, Vancouver announced in May 2007 that its inaugural Poet Laureate would be George McWhirter, born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, but resident in Vancouver for many years. The Vancouver tourism website rather incongruously accompanies the announcement with a picture loosely based on the famous Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare, who, of course, was never appointed Poet Laureate.

In the United States there is a ‘Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry’, so called since 1986 – prior to that the title was ‘Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress’. The first ‘Consultant in Poetry’ was Joseph Auslander (1937/41), the thirtieth and last was Gwendolyn Brooks (1985/6). Their number included the celebrated Stephen Spender (1965/6). Since 1986 the title Poet Laureate has been borne by Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, Mona Van Duyn, Rita Dove, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Stanley Kunitz (who had already been Consultant in Poetry in 1974/6),

Billy Collins, Louise Glück, Ted Kooser, Donald Hall, Charles Simic, and since 2008 Kay Ryan.

Thirty-eight states of the USA currently have an official state poet laureate. Minnesota has only an unofficial one. Arizona, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania have no laureate (though at least the city of York, Pennsylvania, has had its own since 2003). The first state poet laureate ever appointed in the USA was Ina Coolbrith (1841–1928), appointed in California by governor's proclamation on 21 April 1915. The next was Alice Polk Hill, author of *Tales of the Colorado Pioneers* (1884), appointed in 1919 for Colorado. For comprehensive information about all American state laureates see the Library of Congress website (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/poets/current>). Approximately half the current holders are women. The website does not always indicate how long is their tenure is. In Tennessee today and originally also in Illinois the appointee held the position for life, but in some states tenure is limited: one year in Texas; two in Alaska, Delaware, Louisiana and Oregon, and renewable in Virginia; four in Illinois since 2003, and in Wisconsin; five years in Utah, and simply "during the pleasure of the governor" in South Dakota and West Virginia, while in Wyoming it is concurrent with the term of office of the Governor. Some positions are paid (Oregon, West Virginia, for example), others are honorary.

A radically different approach to laureateship is found in New Zealand where the 'Te Mata Poet Laureate' is chosen for a two-year term. The position has been sponsored and funded by the Te Mata Estate winery, and the appointed poet receives a grant of both money and wine (continuing the old English tradition), as well as a tokotoko, a ceremonial carved walking stick symbolising their achievement and status. Appointees have included Bill Manhire (1997/8), the Maori poet Hone Tuwhare (1999/2000), Elizabeth Smither (2001/2), Brian Turner (2003/4) and Jenny Bornholdt (2005/6). The website <http://www.temata.co.nz> gives full details of the poets' biographies and publications. As the Australian poet and novelist John Kinsella has noted in an essay entitled 'A Poet Laureate for Australia? God forbid!', it sends strange signals when private industry connects with 'official' historical culture (<http://www.johnkinsella.org/essay/laureate>). This may help

to explain why in August 2007 the National Library of New Zealand assumed responsibility for the award.

If one surveys the scene, it is evident that the selection process for these laureates is characterised by a significant degree of democratisation, which to some extent has defused the charge levelled against the appointment procedure for the official British Poet Laureate that it was done “behind closed doors” and rarely resulted in the best poet being chosen. In some cases the selection is made on the basis of open competition. It is noticeable also that a large number of this new breed of local laureates have been women – indeed even in Britain the official Poet Laureate is a woman, Carol Ann Duffy – it had long been a bone of contention in some quarters that no woman had ever been appointed to this position even though the names of Caroline Bowles Southey and Elizabeth Browning were mooted when Wordsworth died in 1850 and Christina Rossetti when Tennyson died in 1892. Curiously enough, an Englishwoman writing in Latin, Elizabeth Jane Weston (1582–1612), was the first woman to be laureated in the Holy Roman Empire, in 1602.⁹

The popularity of the laureate title certainly testifies to the widespread interest in poetry, but equally certain is that the renown of these local poets laureate will inevitably prove as short-lived and transitory as that of most of the laureates of the past. Few of them will have erected in their works a *monumentum aere perennius*, “a monument more lasting than bronze”, as Horace put it – indeed, in many cases their works have not even found their way into the British Library. If only Petrarch had known what he started by his own laureation! Certainly he would have disapproved of the unbridled proliferation and devaluation of the title – but then he lived in a different world.

⁹ FLOOD 2006, 2239–2244.