

## Owen Sheers introduces Skirrid Hill

emag asked Owen Sheers to write about Skirrid Hill. He reveals his underlying preoccupations and stylistic qualities, as well as discussing the shape of the collection as a whole.

I have always found it difficult to mine back through the years to the foundation stones of why I wanted to write a particular poem or to how I wrote it once I'd decided to try. The moment of writing is the only time I feel like a poet, when the words on the page are taking the shape of the idea or the sense of the idea that made me want to sit down and write in the first place. At all other times, especially when talking about my own work, I consider myself more a reader than a writer, even if what I am reading is my own writing. So much of the creation of a poem – the arrival of the appropriate image, the negotiations made between craft, lyricism, narrative and an authentic voice – is forgotten, and of course this is how it should be. In the end nothing of the original block of marble from which the poem has been carved should remain, none of the scaffolding or tools that went into its existence should be seen, even in the corner of the room; there should be just the poem. This is why on the whole I say trust the poem not the poet. The poem, ideally, should be the only source of information about itself. The questions it may provoke are necessary questions, just as any gaps or ellipsis are necessary too, to make the poem live as an active entity rather than as a passive or didactic one.

### The collection

What I feel I can talk about, however, is the collection Skirrid Hill as a whole. This is because before it was published I had to ask myself about the shape it would take, about the climates through which it should travel and how the poems within it should speak to one another. Skirrid Hill is my second book of poetry. When I was writing my first book *The Blue Book* I actually had no idea I was doing so. I was writing poems, one at a time, to exist in and as themselves. I'd like to think this was still the case with the poems in Skirrid Hill, even though there was more of a likelihood they would be published together as a collection. I still believe poets write poems not books.

When I am writing a poem I am never thinking about the 'themes' or subject matter of others I have written before. At some point, however, when the book has to be constructed, it is almost impossible not to travel back through your own work detecting the shared territories, themes and preoccupations that may exist, even if you didn't intentionally place them there when writing the individual poems. This, then, is what I will introduce here: the shared ideas and vernacular of Skirrid Hill that I discovered myself when I took a journey back through the poems I'd written over the previous years, and what I chose to do with those discoveries.

### The title

Perhaps the most obvious choice to be made when bringing a group of poems together as a collection is what to call them. So let's begin with the title, Skirrid Hill. The title of a collection should be a door into the work, into the world of the poems within, and with Skirrid Hill I very much wanted

this to be the case. In a way the title is the end point of the journey back through my own work I mentioned above, the words which I thought best touched upon the different elements I'd found.

As the note on the title at the start of the collection explains, 'Skirrid' is from the Welsh name for the hill, ysgyrid, a derivation of ysgariad meaning divorce or separation. This etymological root was important for me. Although none of the poems in the book are in the Welsh language I feel that all my poetry, as I am in a way, is 'derived from the Welsh', by which I mean it is written out of a specifically Welsh sentiment in terms of language, sound and tradition. This isn't to say I'm not interested in engaging with the rest of the world, of course I am, and I'd hope many of the poems in the collection would prove this to be the case. But in terms of where I write 'from' it is certainly from the culture and landscape of my childhood, often represented in my poems in the form of landscape or in my grandfather, or in experiences shared with him.

It seems my early interest in writing about my grandfather in The Blue Book has extended through Skirrid Hill to a series of poems engaging with the idea of sons, fathers and grandfathers. Some of these are 'dialogues' between the generations; 'Trees', 'The Wake', 'Farther'. Others are observation pieces, such as 'The Equation' and 'Late Spring.' This is one element of the work the title specifically touches upon as the Skirrid is associated with perhaps the most famous father and son story, that of God and Christ. As the poem 'Farther' mentions, according to legend the hill was split (hence its name) 'by a father's grief/at the loss of his son to man' when Christ was crucified.

This spiritual association of the hill was another reason I wanted its name as the title of the collection. For me it is an embodiment of how poetry works – locating the spiritual, intellectual or emotional meaning in the physical image; making the abstract world of thought and feeling concrete by translating it to the physical world in which we live. The hill has a 'meaning' beyond itself, a metaphoric quality, and this is often what I first sense when moving towards writing a poem: that a story, a character, an image, has the potential to carry other ideas and emotions beyond themselves. That the legend is a local one was also important to me as, where possible, I like to layer a poem with local reference that still travels beyond the orbit of that reference within the poem.

Another example might be the line 'a finger-thick sapling drawn by the breeze into a long bow' in 'Trees'. In the area I was brought up, South-East Wales, the long bow was traditionally the weapon of choice, the Bowman's skill being passed on down the line from father to son.

## 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort'

Perhaps the most important poems in the book in relation to a father/son/landscape axis are the two that straddle the middle of the collection, 'Y Gaer' ('The Hill Fort') and 'The Hill Fort' ('Y Gaer'). Positioned at the centre of a collection concerned with, as the back cover says, an awareness of 'ideas of separation and divorce', these poems are intended to signal a crucial divide in the book. That this is also a transference between two states that are intimately related is hopefully referred to in the switching of the translated languages of their titles. The first poem is concerned with the hill fort as a place where a bereaved father can vent his anger. Like the ancient fort his 'defences' are down.

The hill is a place of healing for him, but of a violent, angered form. In the second poem the fort is positioned as a place of protection as well as defence; a place where memory of his son can be cherished, valued and held and where: these walls sunk however low, still hold him in as well as out: still protect as much as they defend.

Within the collection as a whole I hoped these poems would mark a subtle transition between more personal poems where the 'I' often appeared, poems set in my childhood or in Wales, and poems which were more outward looking in both their geographical settings and in their attitude towards the world. Both of these poems are also elegiac in tone and I'd like to acknowledge here that many of the poems in Skirrid Hill are just that, elegies. I can't answer why this is the case except that I seem to be moved to write as an attempt to 'hold' someone, or an experience with someone, who has passed away. In this respect I think I often associate landscape and poetry with close cousins, in that they are both able to 'hold' and archive intimate memories and associations. Sometimes this ability will manifest itself within a the central image of a poem – the skeletons uncovered in 'Mametz Wood', the buried cars in 'Border Country', the abandoned steelworks in the poem of the same name; in all these cases the landscape is operating both as a shared cultural 'memory' and as a metaphoric vehicle.

## Sounding familiar and strange

There are many other shared territories in the poems of Skirrid Hill – the ongoing dialogue between man and nature, the fraying of love, questions of failed articulacy (the last lines of the first and last poem both, intentionally, refer to 'absent' and 'unlearned' tongues) – but I'd like to finish now where I started, with the title, by way of introducing a couple of other ideas which I think apply to the poems as a whole. I don't want to talk any more about the title's meaning, but rather about its sound. Sound is crucial in poetry, how the poem lives on the ear and in the air, and it is also, I believe crucial in a title. That is partly why the collection is called Skirrid Hill rather than just Skirrid: for the echo of that 'i', and for the two-step syllables of the first word next to the 'full-stop' syllable of the second. I also wanted Hill there, however, because of the familiarity of that word after Skirrid which will sound strange and foreign to most people. This is, in the form of a title, what I suppose I want my poems themselves to do: to place the unfamiliar in juxtaposition with the familiar so that the best of them will both 'situate' a person, reminding them of emotions or thoughts they already knew, while also taking them somewhere unexpected, somewhere new, somewhere at the end of the page that they couldn't have seen from the top of it.

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