

Call and Response: an Interview with Katrina Porteous

By Paul Batchelor

Katrina Porteous is a poet, historian and broadcaster. She was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and grew up in County Durham. She graduated from Trinity Hall, Cambridge, with a double first in History in 1982, studied at Berkeley and Harvard Universities in the USA on a Harkness Fellowship, and has lived on the Northumberland coast, working as a freelance writer, since 1987. Katrina's poetry has won many national awards, including a Gregory Award (1989), an Arts Council Writer's Bursary (1993) and an Arts Foundation Award (2003).

Katrina's first major collection, *The Lost Music* (Bloodaxe 1996), concentrated on the Northumbrian inshore fishing community. She has also explored this subject in prose in *Beadnell - a History in Photographs* (Northumberland County Library 1990), *Beadnell Harbour 200th Anniversary* (Harbour in Trouble 1998) and *The Bonny Fisher Lad* (People's History 2003). Katrina's other publications include a long dialect poem, *The Wund an' the Wetter* (with piper Chris Ormston, Iron Press 1999), *Turning the Tide*, a collaboration with two artists on the Durham coast (Easington 2001), *Dunstanburgh* (Smokestack 2004) and *Longshore Drift* (with artist James Dodds, Jardine Press 2005). Katrina's three-part poem about the River Tweed (accompanied by photographs by Susheila Jamieson) appears in *Tweed Rivers*, edited by Ken Cockburn and James Carter (Luath Press and platform projects, 2005). Her work for radio includes the poem 'Late Blackbird', broadcast on Radio Four.

Katrina's latest publication is *The Blue Lonnen* (Jardine Press, 2007), an elegy for the Northumberland coast, the area's traditional wooden fishing boat, the coble, and the way of life which it represents. The book includes photographs by Nigel Shuttleworth and paintings by James Dodds. The poems and photographs were selected from an exhibition commissioned by Alnwick Playhouse in 2006 through the financial support of the Northumberland Coast AONB.

***Dunstanburgh* made quite an impact when it was first broadcast. I first heard about it from non-poet friends, who got in touch because they were surprised at having been accidentally exposed to a poem – on the radio of all things – and actually having liked it... Is there any possibility of a CD edition being made available?**

I hope so, but I'm very bad at getting my work out there! I'm long, long overdue another collection with Bloodaxe, and the idea is that when this book comes out, there will be a CD that will have some of my radio work on it: *Dunstanburgh* being one of those pieces. However, I'll have to remake the whole thing because it's too expensive to buy the rights back from the BBC.

Your work is marked by a close attention to the historical resonance of locations. *Dunstanburgh's* legend of the Seeker (in which a knight finds a girl trapped in the rock) could be a metaphor for the careful listening you specialise in, so that the music and rhythms appear to arise unbidden, as found things rather than being imposed by the poet. However, I know you also read history at Cambridge: so do you begin by visiting the site or by researching it?

I think my primary response is emotional and I begin by going to the place, but I also tend to write about places I've known for a very long time. It's hard for me to write about a place

with which I don't have a personal history. I have to establish some emotional resonance. One way of doing that is through people: I work like a journalist, interviewing people and finding out what their emotional connection with a place is, and... I don't want to say I 'give them a voice' but it's about allowing them to speak in the piece and having respect for that.

Allowing them to speak literally: in *Turning the Tide* you use some wonderful overheard poetry-of-the-everyday: 'Never forget your roots, flower...'

In most of the long poems I've written about place there are more examples than you would expect of literal quotations from interviews... The long poem about Hadrian's Wall [link to excerpts on the site] was my first radio piece in 2001 and there is a huge amount of recorded speech in that, and *The Wund and the Wetter* is entirely based on quotations. When that book came out the reviewers said 'oh, she's made up those words,' but actually so much of the poem came from speech, including the phrase 'come wi' the wund an' gan wi' the wetter' – a local phrase meaning 'easy come, easy go...' Most of those long poems about place have been based on visiting the place, walking, and then talking to people.

That collage of voices is particularly evident in *Dunstanburgh*, where there is no linear narrative: the piece consists of voices from several centuries; some are human, but others belong to the castle or the earth itself. How did you go about constructing the poem? Did you have a framework in mind when you began, or did you go on your nerve?

I did have a framework in that I wanted it to be about the course of a year. I'd had that framework in mind since my early twenties, when I wanted to write a prose book about the castle. I took very meticulous notes about the changes in the wildlife, birds particularly, over the course that year, and used that natural sequence to dictate the shape of the poem.

In your introduction to *Dunstanburgh*, you say that 'This is an aspect of spoken poetry which particularly interests me, and one which I think radio serves especially well: it returns poetry to one of its most ancient functions – to explore, through the arguments of history, a common sense of who we are.' Why do you link this specifically to *spoken* poetry?

I think all poetry is spoken poetry: it's meant to be heard. In the early 90s I spent a lot of time talking to fishermen all along the Northumbrian coast, particularly in Beadnell, and they were telling stories that went back to their grandfathers' time, the 1850s. There was a real repository of history there, and it was all done through argument. Charlie would say that such-and-such a thing happened, and his brother would say 'Nay such bloody thing, it was this way...' and that brought home to me the way all our history comes from argument. For all I'd studied history for years in Cambridge and I'd thought about dialectic, actually seeing that as a process in a family and in a community made me realise that this is how we've established our histories. In the past, handing on the stories of a community has been one of a poet's functions. So it's good to have more than one voice in a poem, because if you're trying to get at what happened, and trying to tell the truth, the way to access that is through many voices and through argument.

Your radio poem *Longshore Drift* is also built around the interplay of voices: the two main voices are shown by different coloured fonts and given a separate page. This generous layout is a sign of the book's high production values: good quality paper, a hardback edition, and illustrated with beautiful linocuts by James Dodds. All of this helps compensate for the loss of the actual sound of the voices chanting together. Are you happy with that pay-off between an independent press that has limited distribution and smaller print runs, but has much higher production values?

I was delighted with that book. I felt very lucky to have met the artist James Dodds, who did the artwork for that book, and who also has a huge commitment to the fishing community (he was a boat builder to begin with). *Longshore Drift* was published through his press, Jardine press, and his wife Catherine designed the book and we worked together on the layout. Actually its print run was as big as any other book I've done: 2,000 copies. It sells slowly, as poetry books do, but it also sells because James Dodds probably has a higher profile than I do as an artist.

'Small presses' tend to be designated as such for reasons that aren't always clear... All poetry presses are small! A print run of 2,000 is very respectable.

It all depends on who your audience is. I don't see my audience as being primarily a 'poetry audience' – a lot of the people who bought the book were friends and family of the people I worked with. *The Lost Music*, which is the only collection I've done with a major publisher, Bloodaxe, was launched in the WI hut in Beadnell, which is not an obvious venue, but there was a great turnout... But there is a downside. I couldn't write without a commitment to place: that's a strength, but it also means that I end up being seen as a 'local poet' which can be rather double edged...

But it also means your work has an in-built audience. Maybe this relates to what you said about the importance of dialogue. The work is built on that communication with people...

And I want to hear their response as well. It's not enough just for the work to go out there. I want the argument to come back, for it to be a continuous dialogue...

***Longshore Drift*, like much of your work, seems aimed at extending the oral tradition. This seems more than simply a case of literary influence, and I would connect your interest in the oral tradition with your depiction of fishing communities: both want to bring poetry back to actual lived experience and living traditions. Is this important for you?**

I was dreading being asked which poets had influenced me, because while obviously there *are* poets who have influenced me, the primary influences have been musical – singers like Bob Dylan who was influenced by the folk tradition and then in the last 10 or 15 years being interested in the music of Northumberland... I think that has certainly been equal to any literary influence. But the most important influence has been the voices of people locally, listening to the dialect of the fishermen. I wasn't born in that place – I wasn't 'of' it – but listening to it, I was so strongly aware of its expressiveness and its musical qualities, and its ability to make you feel through sound what is being described... to me, that is exactly the same as listening to poetry.

It's tempting to say that not being 'of' that place perhaps made you more receptive to its qualities than someone who had grown up with it...

Yes, I was reading the Acknowledged Land interview with Bill Griffiths who talked about being an outsider, and there is a sense in which a poet is always an outsider in some way. You have to stand outside it but at the same time absorb it. It's a paradoxical relation.

Your most recent radio piece is 'Late Blackbird,' tell me about that.

It was commissioned for White Nights, a late-night series on BBC Radio 4. The series was about the borderline between waking and sleeping. The poem was based on a very early memory I have of lying in my pram in the garden and this bird singing, and I remember very clearly the frustration of wanting to speak. The poem runs alongside a tape of the blackbird's

song. I wrote nonsense phonemes to imitate each phrase of the blackbird's speech. From the phonemes come words, and from those words comes the poem. Later, the poem starts to break back down into phonemes. It was also about the way language expresses things through sound before its intellectual content. I think musicality lies at the heart of poetry.

Working for radio has opened up new ways of working for you...

It's a completely different medium and I find it very exciting. There are all sorts of things you can do with radio that you can't do on the page or at a poetry reading. You can have several layers of speech at once, with chants going on in the background, or cross-rhymes across the layers, or dissonance. You can incorporate natural sounds as well. Very interesting three-dimensional things you can do with sound on the radio.

I'd like to ask about your long poem about the River Tweed, some of which has been published in *Tweed Rivers*. Did the poem come directly from that commission?

Yes, but it was also something I'd wanted to do for a long time. A lot of the things I do have been a long time in gestation. I wanted to write about the River Tweed for several reasons, partly because it was a physical border between England and Scotland: I'm interested in that because I spent my very early years in Aberdeen, where I was born, although my parents are English. I suppose I was aware early on about the connection between language and where you come from, so I related that idea of the border country to my being distinct from either place. Then there was the fact that my father's family comes from a place very close to the source of the Tweed, a place called Hawkshaw, near Tweedsmuir. And then there's the whole business about salmon fishing on the river: the idea of the Tweed as a border in the arguments about man's relation to nature. Salmon return to the specific place where they were spawned, right to the same gravel bed, to breed. The river owners make a huge amount of money for the local economy through angling; however, there were until very recently net fishermen on the Northumberland coast who also traditionally caught salmon making their way back to the river. So there was a great controversy between the river owners and the netsmen in the sea over who the fish belong to. There was also netting on the last third of the Tweed, and again the anglers felt that this was an unfair way to catch fish. But the river netting was an ancient way of life, whereas angling is for sport. There are also arguments about conservation: the anglers thought the netsmen took too many fish. The only way I can deal with all the arguments is by looking at them from several different angles, like a Cubist painting. I do have political opinions, but you need to be aware of the different angles. In the case of the Tweed, the stronger economic power – the angling – bought out the netting rights at sea. It's very complicated...

But you can relate this to other situations where leisure pursuits have started to outweigh what were once vital industries. The North East used to give the world coal and ships, now the heavy industry has gone and we're in danger of becoming a pseudo-destination for tourists. And call centres, since everyone loves the accent...

So the battles the unions fought over the last hundred years have been undercut by the fact that the work is now done overseas, often at slave labour prices again. I think there are a lot of pseudo-places, and also pseudo-jobs, especially in management and bureaucracy. In the Hadrian's Wall poem, I wrote about the frustration farmers have with this – the way they are being paid *not* to farm the land. I think this is a really important debate in the country: what is our countryside for? What is a 'wild' place? Our so-called 'wild' landscapes like 'Hadrian's Wall Country' are historically created by human intervention – by farming. More and more, the tendency now is to try to restrict human intervention – to see it only as destructive – and to separate the human from the natural. We do that at our peril. We're part of nature; it's part of us.

Moving on to your more recent work, one of the highlights of *The Blue Lonnen* is ‘How the Coble Came to Be,’ a creation myth for the Northumbrian fishing boat, in which the sea itself crafts the boat for the fishermen. ‘Coble Counting Song’ and ‘Plenty Lang a Winter’ also engage with the oral tradition of rhymes, chants, commemorative songs. These poems have the strange, timeless authority of an Anonymous ballad.

The thing I love most about folk music is that it doesn’t have an individual author: it’s a collective thing, it’s been changed by a community singing it over and over again, I love that quality...

It struck me that, while many poets have been influenced by the Border ballads, very few have carried over their tonal quality. I don’t know exactly how to define that quality, but there’s a difference between a ballad by Yeats, or by Keats, and an anonymous ballad like ‘Thomas the Rhymer.’ Even something like ‘She Moved Through the Fair,’ which at first it seems very ‘traditional’, actually carries many signs of authorship. The more you look at it, the more you see how constructed it is, you see the signs of one personality organising it... Whereas, in *The Blue Lonnen*, the first time ‘I’ appears is in the final poem of the sequence:

**Cold tonight. No moon. The frost
Crackles on limestone. I’m staring east**

**From Beadnell Point beneath a sky
So starry, it steals my breath away...**

It’s rare for a poet these days to exclude themselves as subjects in this way. Is this something you are conscious of doing?

Yes, and this goes back to what we were talking about earlier about the importance of including different voices. I’ve felt this increasingly in the long poems I’ve written over the last few years: if there is an ‘I’ in the poem, it’s chairing the meeting, and just letting the other voices speak. In *The Blue Lonnen* it’s partly to do with my relation to the fishing community. When I wrote about the fishermen in *The Lost Music*, I was seeing them every day and they were part of my life and I was part of theirs. It was a conversation, and lots of the poems take the form of conversations. In *The Blue Lonnen*, while there is still a fishing community, and while I still know many of them, we have a much more distant relation. In the intervening time I’ve composted it down, so the ‘I’ has retreated and left these different voices. The experience has become more internalised and more distant at the same time.

Something else I try to do when I write is to get rid of the immediate clamour of the self. I often run writing workshops and I do exercises which are about getting rid of the intellectual self, so that the writer can experience what is out there as directly as possible through the senses. It’s about listening, letting the place speak to you, and as much as possible not imposing yourself and your own ego on it, but being receptive. And only then do you allow yourself back in. You have to allow yourself back in eventually, in order to be truthful – you have to admit to being an ego and a self – but the really important stage is listening.

That reminds me of Eliot’s famous statement that poetry was an escape from personality rather than an expression of personality. He added the rather catty remark that only those who have a personality will understand what it is to want to escape from it.

When you write you’re only using one part of your personality: it’s one snapshot of that moment, so in any given moment what you’re doing is dramatising yourself to some extent. You’re never the whole of what you are in anything you say, so I don’t it’s valid to

distinguish between the lyric poem and the dramatic poem. Every time you say ‘me’ it’s a dramatisation of one of the many things you are.

Louis MacNeice said exactly that: ‘the lyric is always dramatic...’

I love Louis MacNeice, so there you go! Alice Oswald uses many voices and personae in her river poem *Dart*. In the few reviews I’ve had, I’ve been compared with her more than anybody else; although I think we found our own way to that approach completely independently of each other. The first published work I had which worked in that way was the Gateshead Garden Festival commission in 1990. I interviewed people who had worked on the site and used those interviews in the poems I wrote; others were in the voices of plants!

I know you said you were dreading being asked about literary influences, but I wanted to ask whether Basil Bunting was an influence...

I first read Bunting when I lived in America where I was very lucky to study with a number of poets, among them Robert Pinsky who was an influence, and Thom Gunn who taught a course on Bunting. It’s almost heretical to say this but I didn’t like Bunting. I felt there was an artificiality, an artifice, in his relation to Northumberland. While there is an artifice in any writing, I could see the joins in *Briggflatts* in a way I didn’t want to... One thing I have appreciated is his musicality, and I can see why people admire him so much, but hearing him reading *Briggflatts* for example, that sort of mannered, staged way of reading, which is...

Glorious?

Sorry! I can’t say exactly *why* he didn’t appeal to me. That declamatory style is, after all, part of what we are talking about; the poet as a dramatic voice. It’s just that the Northumbrian the fishermen spoke is so much more beautiful to my ear than Bunting’s made-up dialect. But remember that, while I did take some post-graduate English Literature courses in America, I didn’t read English at University...

...where they probably would have told you that Bunting isn’t artificial at all, whereas really he is – that’s one of the things that interests me: the way Bunting constructs a Northumberland that nobody, prior to *Briggflatts*, would have recognised...

Isn’t *Briggflatts* in Yorkshire anyway?

Yes, the important places in the poem are Orkney, York, Dublin and Cumbria. But doesn’t that raise the question of how artificial our histories, territories and communities are? I mean, Bunting refers to Cuthbert a lot in *Briggflatts*, but nobody knows anything about Cuthbert that hasn’t been filtered through Bede, and Bunting disliked Bede. So Bunting constructs an alternative St Cuthbert. It’s artificial, but then so was Bede’s account of Cuthbert... So the artificiality intrigues me.

It does come back to the relation of the ‘I’ to the subject, which seems to have been the theme of this interview. The workings of the ‘I’ are too present in Bunting’s work for me.

Talking about the workings of a poem brings us to ‘Building the Boat,’ from *The Blue Lonn*, which describes the sensitivity needed to make the best boat: the ‘measured eye’ of the ‘composer of silence.’ The boat emerges as a found thing (‘Nothing forced’) by a craftsman who works with nature not against it:

**From their grown shape
Arches the strength of each timber,
Each supple plank.**

Do you see parallels between this and the practice of writing poetry?

Yes, I was certainly thinking of that: the coble was formed in response to the sea: the sea gives it its shape. That's what is amazing about a coble: it's the place and the sea that has formed it. The boat-builder is responding to that, like the poet: he's listening. Probably all artists do that: they respond rather than impose. Those boats were built without a plan, just by what looked right. They were built by the eye, and every one was unique. The fishermen would go to the boat builder and say 'well, I'd like a boat like such-and-such a boat, except I'd like it longer here, or deeper here, and the boat builder would respond to that.

'The Arc of the Possible' tells the story of how the traditions of the Northumberland inshore fisherman are vanishing, their dialect may well follow. Preserving or rejuvenating an endangered vocabulary is a theme that runs throughout your work, as you say in *Turning the Tide* 'Forgetting/ Is a slow rust.' Is this an area where you feel poetry can make something happen?

I sometimes think when dialects are written down it's a symptom of them dying out.

That's what they say about folksongs as well...

I suppose it's better to write them down than let them die out altogether. I feel that in dialogue a poet can give something back. If you can use dialect actively in a poem – use its constructions and rhythms as well as its vocabulary – then it's a more of a living thing than simply putting it in a glossary, or a museum. That's why it's so important in the dialect poems for it to be a conversation, partly because it's never been my own language, and partly because it's only in that interaction – again, that dialectic of history, that argument or conversation – that it's alive. A poem comes alive every time it is spoken. A poem is an active thing.

Visit Katrina's website here: <http://www.katrinaporteous.co.uk/>

Read more about *The Blue Lonnen* here: www.jardinepress.co.uk. The book is available for £15 (post free) from Jardine Press, 20 St Johns Rd, Wivenhoe, Essex, CO7 9DR.