

Waterfall

(A poem by students of **ENG 2159: C2st English Poetry** - May 2020)

Preface

One component of this new course - **ENG 2159: C2st English Poetry** - was a poem written by the whole class. The idea came to me when I was re-reading Alice Oswald's fine poem *Dart* (2002). This book-length poem traces the river from its source on Dartmoor to Dartmouth. As she says: "*The poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years I've been recording conversations with people who know the river. I've used these records as life models which sketch out a series of characters – linking their voices into a sound map of the river, a song line from source to sea... all voices should be read as the river's mutterings.*" Oswald also interweaves topography, history, legends etc. associated with the river.

It occurred to me that we might compose a class poem about Hong Kong. What might be an equivalent of the river Dart? Perhaps the MTR stations? I settled on the Pokfulam waterfall. Sailors used to stop here for fresh water, then a dairy came about because of that water; fast forward to 2020 when there is now a huge corporation – still called Dairy Farm.

Well, as Robert Burns wrote, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley." (It is rather appropriate to quote from his poem *To a Mouse* in the Year of the Rat!) I had envisaged lots of face-to-face group work in class as well as 'field trips' to gather information/interview people for the class poem. When we were hit by the coronavirus the plan had to be revised. Students have had to rely more on printed materials, Internet sources and their own experiences and imaginations in composing the poem. Given the circumstances, I think they have done a very good job.

You will find here a wide variety of verse forms from odes to sestinas, ballads to comic verse. There are precise syllable-count lines as well as free verse. A panoply of poetic devices has been deployed: assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhymes (full, half, internal), vivid imagery, the strategic/dramatic use of white space, the use of italics, different size fonts etc.

The students worked in three groups. Group A produced Part 1, Group B Part 2 and Group C Part 3.

In Part One, we encounter the ghost of an old fisherman who is questioned by a child. We also hear the voices of the waterfall, of a dead sailor and of a contemporary student taking photos.

In Part Two, we go from fish to fish market, then to Pokfulam village where we hear from a housewife, witness the Fire Dragon ceremony and meet the craftsman who oversees it. A tourist gives her impressions, a grocery shop granny remembers, a village child conjures up life there.

Part Three takes us from a watercolour of the waterfall to the arrival of foreigners (Lapraik's castle, Bethanie) and the establishment of the Dairy Farm. We encounter the cows (and cowboys) then there is an outbreak of rinderpest. The beginnings of factory mechanization occurs before World War Two and internment by the Japanese. We move on to post-War reconstruction and expansion. We encounter local customers and those who buy in a modern supermarket. We hear from the Dairy Farm corporation and, at last, from the waterfall.

All three groups produced endings to the poem. The original plan was to conflate the three endings into one. However, they all bring fresh perspectives as well as recurrent motifs and so all three have been kept (as Parts 4A, 4B and 4C)

In Part Four (A) we meet William Havell, a British painter who came to HK in 1816, a ferryman recalling the 1874 typhoon, a British soldier who died in 1941 defending HK from the Japanese, a contemporary selfie-taker who takes a step too far, the thoughts of an old Wah Fu resident, the returning ghost of the old fisherman and his child questioner.

In Part Four (B) some of the characters from Part Two are reprised. We have a younger person's views on the Fire Dragon ceremony and that of an outsider. We meet a police constable who grew up near Pokfulam village, as well as a figure not unlike the grocery shop granny looking back on life. There is an incense stick in the water at Waterfall Bay; the Waterfall itself ends this part.

Part Four (C) begins with the waterfall and the origins of the Dairy Farm. We encounter a live cow and calf then visit the derelict cowsheds in Pokfulam. A Rememberer makes an appearance and finally, we see the waterfall as it is in 2020.

Dr. Peter Kennedy (May 2020)

Appendix

These students wrote the poems:

- CHEUNG, Cheuk Lok (Natalie)
- CHOW, Tsz Kin (Tommy)
- CHOW, Yue Ching (Felix)
- JOSHI, Gayatri
- KAUR, Ramanpreet
- KEUNG, Pui Sin (Ashley)
- KIM, Sun Ho
- KO, Nok Sum (Bernice)
- KWOK, Ming Yee (Jade)
- LEUNG, Fung Yee (Louise)
- LEUNG, Lik Yau (Sheena)
- LIU, Yao Xin (Mena)
- RAI, Sharon
- SIU, Shania Grace Yu
- TSANG, Ho Tak (Jonathan)
- TSE, Mei Ying (Gabrielle)
- WONG, Bo Huen (Aubrey)
- WONG, Kei Tao (Emily)
- WONG, Shuk Ngai (Suky)
- WONG, Yeuk Lam (Matilda)
- XU, Xinshu (Aurora)
- YICK, Pui Yin