

QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

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Green Man

by *Ella Windsor*

One November morning in 1974 Trafalgar Square's fountains turned bright green. The perpetrator, Nicolás García Urriburu was out of sight. He had swiftly fled the scene after his latest act against water pollution.

'Every time I colour water, it's a baptism for me, a rite of water purification,' he would say, 'to make everyone think about defending rivers and oceans.'

Other 'colourations' or 'nature interventions' (over thirty in all) hit the Seine, the Rhine, the Port of Antwerp, New York's East River and of course Venice's Grand Canal, where it all started on 19 June 1968 at the Venice Biennale.

This summer marks a year since Urriburu, hurrying to a meeting in Buenos Aires, collapsed and died aged seventy-eight, holding onto a large tree. It is an apt time to look back on his work as a pioneer of land art and to take in other Latin American 'land artists' whose major material is land or nature and who may well have followed his lead.

Urriburu's Venice act caused quite a stir. 'Initially they didn't understand,' he recalled. 'They said, "What have you done? Is it the end of the world? Is Fellini doing a film?" But then the radio said an artist had done it for the Biennale to protest the pollution of the canals and suddenly they said "How beautiful! It's like the mantle of the Virgin."'

Given that Urriburu's Venice intervention pre-dated Greenpeace (which later teamed up with him in Argentina to dye the Riachuelo river) or any other particular ecological movement, it was ahead of the times. Conceptual art had already started by this point in the nineteen-sixties, but ecological art or land art was a slightly later branch. It harked back to ancient monuments such as Southern Peru's pre-Columbian Nazca Lines, some three hundred geoglyphs of animals and plants etched into the desert sands, and England's Stonehenge and nearby crop circles. It was often phenomena like these which inspired the likes of Urriburu, yet until the Argentine's first aquatic trick which seemed both ancient and avant-garde, like the land art to follow, the modern art world had not seen anything like it.

It would be another year before the completion of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's first land artwork, wrapping the coast of Sydney's Little Bay in Australia and two years before Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty 'earthwork', a horizontal coil of mud, rock and salt crys-

tals curling out from a faraway shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake. And these works were realised only after permission was granted, unlike Uriburu's unauthorized guerilla act.

'I was very scared, but my wife, who was going to help, said, "Do it." So, in a lightning strike— about ten minutes— I dyed the entire length of the Grand Canal a life-affirming green!'

As fellow artist Daniel Santoro explained at Uriburu's memorial, 'At the time, dyeing the waters of Venice's Grand Canal was a huge transgression. When he did that, the ecological theme was not yet well understood and nowadays his work thus reformulates itself: the earth has acted in the way he warned us about. Garcia Uriburu is one of the first militant ecologists through art.'

Despite the illegal nature of his interventions, always executed without authorization (often in the dead of night) and the shock caused by the jarring and very much artificial-looking neon hue of the dye (in Venice he was at first arrested; in London he was fined twenty-five pounds for 'offending the British Empire'), the pigment, fluorescein, which turns a bright green when synthesised by microorganisms in the water, is a harmless and even biodegradable sodium used by NASA's astronauts to mark their landing position at sea. It disappears in just a few days, making something

of a magician of Uriburu in addition to his artistry and activism.

Indeed, the Argentine wore many hats. A contemporary artist, architect, sculptor, landscape architect, ecological artist, ecologist and one of Argentina's leading conservationists (in 1982 the founding member of forestation group Grupo Bosque planted 50,000 trees around Buenos Aires), he was equally a pop artist contemporary with Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali. Uriburu's pop art especially was famous in his native Argentina and worldwide. His cartoon-like giant dolphins cast in bright green as neon as his water interventions and his Amazonian river narratives on vast canvasses or winding through the green continent of South America placed on its head, inverting its conventional positioning on the map so it stands instead above North America, surrounded by bright blood red seas are particularly well known. As Uriburu explained, the red is 'the blood in the veins of Latin America' while the green always refers to nature.

Uriburu has even been described as a 'green man', a symbol of rebirth and nature. And while initially he was in fact an unwitting pioneer of ecological art (claiming he conceived and executed his first act spontaneously) he certainly developed his theme and grew to be a solid ambassador for the environment, perhaps his one constant and refuge in an otherwise heady world of art

in which the very shy and quiet man moved at the time.

His 1973 Manifesto declares, 'Art has no more place outside nature: its place is within nature.'

Since Venice, the colour green became a common denominator in his work and his ecological art even included himself. 'One has to do as much as possible for nature,' he would say. 'I have dedicated my life to this. I am an artist committed to this cause.' On different occasions he dyed his hair and his skin green, acts that naturally joined his roster of green artworks, even acquiring their own titles; *Colouration of the Face* (1971), *Colouration of the Hair* (1973).

Buenos Aires's vast MALBA Museum of Latin-American art holds many of his creations, including dramatic photographs of his famous colourations, their waters embellished by green pastels. And the Tate houses two of his major works: *Actions in Nature* (1968) and *Portfolio (Manifesto)* (1973).

Uriburu was also an impressive collector of and expert in pre-Columbian art. His foundation, the Nicolás García Uriburu Foundation in Buenos Aires, holds his highly revered ethnographic collection dedicated to the art of the continent's indigenous peoples. This includes a wealth of items from ritual ornaments to Amazonian feather headdresses.

He donated hundreds of archaeological pieces to establish museums in Buenos Aires and Uruguay, where

he also had a home. The Uruguayan State received his Collection of National (Uruguayan) Painting and Sculpture, which he curated himself at the Nicolás García Uriburu Museum in Maldonado.

Uriburu's daring work, while distinct in its aquatic medium and signature green, possibly sparked many other land artworks using nature as a means of activism. According to the Malba Museum, 'By his water interventions, Uriburu took up the natural space as the backbone and raw material of his art, anticipating what would become known as land art, 'earth art'.'

In Latin America, as worldwide, land artists, who link their works of art inextricably with the landscape, and environmental artists, who address social and political issues relating to the natural and urban environment, are increasingly establishing themselves. From Argentine Eduardo Sanguinetti's land-art 'sculptures' in La Pampa's desert to highlight the supernatural radiation of nature that culture lacks, Mexican sculptor David Guzman's three interlinked rings of volcanic rock and steel to seek the balance between industry and nature; Venezuelan Milton Becerra's site-specific *Meteorite* with its raging flames inside five circles on the grass; Bolivian Sonia Falcone's *Field of Colour* with its eighty-eight different spices in three-hundred different colours from around the world to unite cultural difference and Cuban artist Ana Mendieta's placement of her body in her land art through to Brazilian and

Mexican artists Gabriel Orozco and Vik Muniz's use of waste to alert us to the damaging effects of commercial and industrial refuse, a number of well-known artists from the region have made their names in these genres.

Meanwhile, images like two enormous fish made from discarded plastic bottles, lit up iridescent at night, on Rio de Janeiro's Botafogo beach to mark 2012's UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) are hard to forget for all who saw them.

In the vast glistening expanse of the world's largest salt flat, the Salar de Uyuni, in Western Bolivia, the hulking, wild-bearded Bolivian artist Gaston Ugalde disappears for days, sometimes returning only once the search parties have been sent out. He might go alone for a week or for a month with a film crew. He has done this for the past forty years and yet 'every single time is a different feeling and experience and there is always a new surprise.'

When Ugalde does come back to his studio in La Paz, it is either equipped with giant bricks of salt to sculpt or scores of photographs, film footage and props from his famous installations. The studio itself, its floor laden with salt crystals, is like a secret scene stolen from Narnia. In fact, it is a trove symbolic of what is arguably Bolivia's number one treasure: lithium.

The Salar de Uyuni, this artist's canvas and his medium, is one of the world's natural wonders. It is so

vast and bright that it is visible from space. Neil Armstrong is said to have seen it from the moon and mistaken it for a gigantic glacier.

It is also home to over fifty per cent of the world's lithium carbonate reserves, which lie beneath its surface of brine. This makes the salt pan extremely valuable – an asset increasingly capitalised upon in recent years by the country's government in response to global demand.

As well as longer-standing demands for lithium for pharmaceuticals, fertilisers and smartphone batteries, the electric vehicle boom has fueled substantial recent interest in Bolivia's salt flats. Demand is projected to outstrip supply by 2023. On one hand supplying a raw material to support the electric car industry could provide Bolivia with a welcome economic boost. Yet equally, partly due to the high levels of magnesium in this terrain, extraction could threaten its fragile ecosystem, not to mention bring a rise in traffic, pollution, the pressure on water supply and damage to the site's staggering natural beauty, in turn threatening tourism. Ultimately it could be of more harm than help to Bolivia.

In his 2009 re-election campaign, President Morales pledged to develop Bolivia's lithium industry with a strict policy toward foreign investment to end the 'looting' of his country's resources. However, increasingly Bolivia has been said to court international investment

opportunities, even considering establishing foreign lithium battery plants on site.

While Ugalde says 'at the moment the development with other nations is just beginning and you don't yet feel or see it as the solar is a big planet', his art on the salt pan in installations and photographs expresses his concern for the controversial activities of excavation. In particular he decries 'the tradition of exporting raw materials to be used for the industrialisation of the West, leaving out Bolivia from the chain of profit.' Indeed, his artwork drawing on Christian iconography, including an installation with a naked model tied upside down to a cross in the middle of the otherworldly white is meant to emphasise the potential 'suffering of Bolivian people.'

Ugalde's work through land art, video-art, sculptures, performances, paintings, concerts, installations and photographs has been snapped up by art shows and collectors worldwide and he has won many prizes. In 2001 he starred at the Latin-American Pavilion of the Biennale in Venice where, like Uriburu twenty-three years earlier, he staked his claim as a major artist from Latin America, and the most globally known from Bolivia. His debut installation included Bolivian multi-coloured striped woven works and a large pile of potatoes. In 2009 he would return with a stunningly colourful Inca and Aymara textile installation showing the country's rich weaving traditions and dyes and the

syncretism inherent in Bolivia's mix of cultures and religions. At Art Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2009, his photography included a naked woman curled up in a sheer sheet suspended above the never-ending salt flats, the whole image clothed in sleepy blues and violets. He recently showed more salt-scape photography at Photo London 2017 where he was a guest speaker.

A major point of focus is the Andes. In one study he is trying to 'capture the temperature of colour and freeze time with small interventions in the landscape'. Meanwhile he is working in the Andean glaciers ('are they melting?'), to explore the theme of climate change.

If Uriburu was by turns a green man prankster and nature interventionist, critics have called Ugalde, also successful in the 1970s, the Andean Warhol (for his treatment of Andean politics and culture) and the 'enfant terrible of the Bolivian art scene.'

When I met him in La Paz in 2008 his studio was lined with collages made from coca leaves – now world famous portraits of South America's politicians from Che Guevara and Simon Bolivar to Eva Peron and Evo Morales (whose start as a coca leaf farmer drove his presidential campaign), as well as Maradona, Mick Jagger and John Lennon. Ugalde says his coca portraits (some twenty-five in all) 'always cause surprise and laughter'. The best reactions came from Evo Morales, Maradona and the Pope and Ugalde has been asked to make more.

He has also used Bolivian coca leaves to fashion a number of American flags, a map of Latin America, giant dollar notes and Coca-Cola advertising, with slogans such as 'Enjoy Coke'.

The coca plant may be better known today as the source of cocaine, and as such a major target of the 'war on drugs' but for Andean cultures it is a vital part of their religious cosmology, even known as the 'sacred leaf.' As such it wields a power far greater in this symbolic context dating back to pre-Columbian times, while cocaine production only dates from the start of the twentieth century. Bolivia often defends coca production, saying, 'coca is not cocaine.'

As a sacred leaf, coca has been used countless times in indigenous Andean rites for protection from curses and bad energy, to change bad luck, to predict the future and to make offerings to Pachamama (Mother Earth).

It is this dual significance of his natural creative materials, that Ugalde often seizes upon. He has made a mastery of walking the fine tightrope between cultural advocacy and provocation, alluding to the natural, coveted and controversial riches of his country and continent. Whether his material consists of Bolivia's landscape or its tradition his art is known for its socio-political themes.

While the furthest reaches of Bolivia's salt flats are Ugalde's natural artistic back-drop, Colombian artist

Rafael Gómezbarros favours the proximity of buildings. In 2015, hundreds of giant ants (with bodies and heads the size of footballs) stormed the walls of the Saatchi Gallery in his shocking work on immigration.

For him, these unmissable creatures, each made from the plaster casts of two human skulls, depict the hundreds of thousands of his countrymen displaced by the raging civil war of the past half-century, only now drawn officially to a close by President Santos's recent peace accords. For others, they show the scale and chaos for so many around the world, fleeing worse fates, driven by an instinct to survive.

This work itself had migrated to London after other sites; the walls not only of galleries but vast outside spaces themselves, like bridges, monuments and fortresses, as urban as Uriburu's waterways.

Certainly on first sight, an ominous quality pervades these artists' interventions. And yet this is so often offset by the prank-like theatrics of each. If Uriburu often had to steal into the night for his colourations, Gómezbarros stashed his papier mâché skulls in the basement of Saatchi for hours until the time came to bring out the ants. Such antics in both cases made the artworks appealing to viewers of all ages whom they engaged and in many cases, intrigued. The wonder on the faces of children tracking the giant ants at Saatchi says it all.

If the startling sight of bright green water could teach children of all ages to guard nature, or a wall of gigantic roaming ants could ward them off war, perhaps land art ought to be encouraged more and more.



Robert Louis Stevenson's Journey

by *Peter Browne*

Robert Louis Stevenson was in his late twenties and not yet widely known as a writer. He had been staying in France and had fallen seriously in love with an American woman, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, who would later become his wife. She was ten years his senior and had two children from her first marriage, which had broken down. When she sailed for home to finalise her divorce, the future author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* was in need of an adventure to distract him.

A fair proportion of Stevenson's short life could be classified as adventure – for example, he would make a nearly fatal journey across America to reach his beloved. He perhaps did not quite qualify as a romantic hero, being inclined to fall on his face and then make the most of the joke at his own expense. He had a pitifully weak chest and was as thin as a rake: he once described himself as 'a mere complication of cough and bones'. But he seems to have had a valiant nature. Compelled to struggle almost constantly against ill

health, he had enough fighting spirit left over to take on all comers with his pen. His cousin Thomas Balfour, who lived with the Stevensons for several years, wrote ‘... he was brilliant, he was romantic, he was fiery, he was tender, he was brave ...’ His stepson Lloyd Osbourne, to whom he used to read from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, thought of him as Great-heart.

Left waiting for news from Fanny, Stevenson’s idea of diversion was a 120-mile trek through one of the wildest regions of southern France, the Cévennes – more famous in the nineteenth century than it is today (for reasons that will emerge). He recorded his thoughts and experiences in the extended essay *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, a pioneering work of first-person travel writing – quirky, feisty and funny. It was a critical success and is still well loved. It delights particularly in the foibles of human beings, not least those of the author himself – his joys and frustrations, his embarrassing encounters, his ill use of the unfortunate donkey Modestine.

This journey, in the autumn of 1878, is now celebrated in a hikers’ trail which follows approximately in the author’s footsteps, taking a southward course from Le Puy en Velay in the Massif Central. The path is known as *Le Chemin de Stevenson*, or simply *Le Stevenson*. In search of my own adventure I walked it in late April and early May – without a donkey.

Le Stevenson attracts a wide range of people, but most are French. My language skills were strained until I was rescued by a Belgian couple fluent in English and a Canadian. I met only one group of walkers from England – four middle-aged ‘lads’ who often walk and more often drink together. I fought shy of them at first, thinking them too English, too laddish and much too ready to down a bottle of wine under a pine tree at lunchtime with six or seven miles still to cover before nightfall.

The walking was surprisingly arduous, with a lot of steep climbs and descents. Most of us were in our fifties or sixties but we clocked up the best part of fifteen miles a day – just as Stevenson did. Leaving aside the likely state of his health, it should be understood that RLS never rode his donkey. Modestine was small, ‘not much bigger than a dog’; her job was to carry his voluminous kit and she did nothing to speed his progress. He slept more or less uncomfortably at small inns or under the stars. I stayed in marginally less discomfort in hostels.

It was an inspired scheme to market this footpath on Robert Louis Stevenson and his book. People seem to enjoy his wry observations. Battered copies of *Travels with a Donkey* in French are passed round and commented on. In a country mad on hiking, this trail is one of the most popular and has succeeded in giving a perceptible boost to the economy of a remote and

neglected area. Places to stay are the main beneficiaries, but artists designing postcards and donkey-owners hiring out Modestine lookalikes do their best to cash in. At one tiny hamlet, a couple offer home-made vegan food of the highest possible quality to ungrateful hikers and take trouble to acquaint them with the mysteries of their ecological toilet. The four English lads stopped there, but only ordered a mid-morning beer.

In the winter, the husband of the vegan food couple takes people into the wild, mountainous country of the Gévaudan, to track wolves. Yes, wolves. This is where we get one up on Stevenson. There were no wolves when he was here – every known strategy including deforestation had been employed to eliminate them from an area which 100 years earlier was home to ‘The Beast of Gévaudan.’

Wolves, alas, like bandits, seem to flee the traveller’s advance; and you may trudge through all our comfortable Europe, and not meet with an adventure worth the name. But here, if anywhere, a man was on the frontiers of hope. For this was the land of the ever-memorable BEAST, the Napoleon Bonaparte of wolves. What a career was his! ... He ate women and children and ‘shepherdesses celebrated for their beauty’... He was placarded like a political offender, and ten thousand francs was offered for his head. And yet, when he was shot and sent to Versailles, behold! a

common wolf, and even small for that.

In the last few years some wolves have moved back into the Gévaudan. In other areas where numbers are higher and sheep kills more frequent, such as the Alps and the Pyrenees, this is a very hot issue. But here, for now, their footprints and their droppings are no more than a source of interest and a little income.

It was perhaps as well that there were no wolves in Stevenson’s time, as he got badly lost in the Gévaudan. Unable to persuade anyone to give him satisfactory directions, he stumbled in circles until well after dark. Fortunately he was equipped with an early prototype of the sleeping bag, made for him in Le Puy of ‘green waterproof cart-cloth without and blue sheep’s fur within’. It doubled as the container for his luggage, strapped precariously on to Modestine’s back. He called it his sleeping sack. Now he slept in it, under a tree, he knew not where, after a late supper of tinned sausage, chocolate and neat brandy. He revelled in this night as an ‘inland castaway’ – except when he woke himself up by kicking odd items in the bottom of his sleeping sack, such as his lantern or the second volume of Peyrat’s *Pastors of the Desert*.

A day or two later, in a prelude to the main business of this story, he stayed in the Trappist monastery of *Notre Dame des Neiges* (Our Lady of the Snows). As a Scottish Presbyterian by upbringing and an atheist by conviction, he approached this Catholic sanctuary with

‘unaffected terror’. At first he was impressed by the simplicity and openness of the few monks permitted to speak with him. Later a novice and a visiting priest made it their mission to convert him to Catholicism, and this became tiresome. You can still spend a night at this monastery – in your own room, which was a welcome change for me. You get a fairly basic evening meal and must clear the table and wash up afterwards. There is no charge, but you are invited to make a donation. The novice or lay brother who deals with visitors is young (thirty-five?) and seems to radiate hope for the future; the few remaining monks, however, are elderly.

Having passed through the fertile lands of the Velay and the rocky wilderness of the northern Gévaudan, the path now heads further south into the Cévennes proper, which begins at Mont Lozère, the highest point of the walk at 1699m (5,575ft). Here, after another night in his sleeping sack, *à la belle étoile* as the French say, Stevenson crossed the summit in a state of euphoria, quoting a line of Keats.

Although it had been long desired, it was quite unexpectedly at last that my eyes rose above the summit ... and, ‘like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes he stared on the Pacific’, I took possession, in my own name, of a new quarter of the world. For behold, instead of the gross turf rampart I had been mounting for so long, a view into the hazy air of heaven, and a

land of intricate blue hills beneath my feet.

The cloud was down on the great ridge of Mont Lozère when I walked over it, so this view of the blue hills of heaven came later. It was an apt description, though. From the mountain top (with patches of snow still lying on May 3rd) the path descends rapidly into a different world – a warmer, more southern world, splashed with brilliant yellow broom and littered like Dartmoor with the granite boulders of which the farms and village houses are built, under roofs of round-edged schist tiles.

It is also the world of the Huguenots. At the bottom of this hill, on the River Tarn, is the village of Le Pont de Montvert, famous for a series of bloody events which sparked the ‘Camisard’ rebellion against the religious repression of Louis XIV. After several years of terrible violence and burning of property on both sides, the Protestants remained outlaws for another eight decades, forced to conduct their religious meetings in forests and on mountain tops, ‘the church in the desert’ as it was known. Most of their leaders had been killed during the rebellion, but scarcely a single mind or soul had been changed. Protestantism was still the dominant faith in the Cévennes when Stevenson was there, and it still is today.

The ban on Protestant worship became law in 1685 and at first the people of this rugged country had little choice but to endure it, being too poor to consider

emigrating. As persecution by the king's dragoons intensified, however, some did try to leave. They took the drove roads to the north-east – towards Geneva, birthplace of Calvinism, the doctrine to which they were committed for eternity.

As Stevenson tells it, a group of fugitives, many of them women dressed as men, set out on this trail but were arrested and brought to Le Pont de Montvert, to the house of the king's Catholic enforcer, Abbé François Du Cheyla, and tortured. This was the final straw for the Protestant outlaws in the hills. Led by a charismatic figure known as 'Spirit' Séguier, they marched on Du Cheyla's house on the night of July 24th 1702, singing psalm 68 as they went – 'Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered ...' They broke into the ground floor and freed the prisoners, then set light to the building. Du Cheyla fell as he tried to escape from an upstairs window and was dragged into the street and stabbed by fifty-two men in succession in revenge for relatives killed, imprisoned or broken on the wheel.

A few days later, Pierre 'Spirit' Séguier was arrested. Asked why he was called Spirit, he said: 'Because the Spirit of the Lord is with me.' Asked if he felt remorse for his crimes, he said he had committed none: 'My soul is like a garden, full of shade and of fountains.' At Le Pont de Montvert, his right hand was cut off and he was burned alive.

The stage on which all this took place, close to the old bridge over the Tarn, is little changed, though Du Cheyla's house has been rebuilt and now incorporates the village's modest clock tower.

There was strong support in England for the Camisards, due to feelings of Protestant solidarity and hostility to Louis XIV. Even 175 years later, when Stevenson travelled with his donkey, this episode of history was still talked and written about in Britain. By then the focus was often on the early Cévennes Protestants as a phenomenon, on the nature of their inspiration and their state of mind. Nominally Calvinists, they had a propensity for speaking prophecy, for trembling, paroxysms and sobbing. The priest and scholar Sabine Baring-Gould (author of the hymns *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Now the Day is Over*) wrote of them: 'The prophetic inspiration was really nothing more than an epidemic malady such as is found among the North American Indians ... and such as broke out among the early Quakers and Wesleyans. It is a nervous disorder, as natural as chicken-pox ...'

Stevenson was less controversial and merely said the outlawed Protestants were 'one and all beside their right minds with zeal and sorrow.'

The story of the Camisards carried familiar echoes for a Scot brought up on tales of the Covenanters' uprising, and particularly for a young man raised as a

Calvinist. Both Stevenson's parents were Calvinists, not outwardly rigid but absolute in conviction; his mother was a daughter of the manse. It was an almost unbearable blow to them when, as a young adult, he admitted he was an atheist. He does not air his own views here: he seems quite open-minded. He is surprised to find himself pleased when people he meets turn out to be Protestants and acknowledges a warmth and fellow feeling towards them. He is more trusting in their company than he was with the Catholic monks of Our Lady of the Snows.

When I walked into Le Pont de Montvert, burnished by the breeze and brilliant sunshine, I was greeted by a man of about seventy. He spoke with the flat Provençal accent where 'r's are pronounced in the Scottish manner and final 'n's have a twang, and he kept defeating me with the word vang. At the fourth or fifth time of asking I realised it was vent, wind. It was windy. He walked with me a short way, gave me some directions and left me with the words *Le Seigneur vous garde, Monsieur* (The Lord protect you, Monsieur).

I thanked him.

In truth I was thrilled. I had come to this place of history and found immediately that Protestantism still flourished. There could be no doubt that this was a Protestant salutation. Not from Spirit Séguier but from a courteous man who spoke about the weather. The following day I visited the Protestant Temple. It is

austere and massive – a plain granite-built space, a church for strong men, for miners or foundry workers, or for men descended from the Camisards. A place of certainty. It is not now used as often as it was.

Le Pont de Montvert was for me the highlight of *Le Stevenson*, and not just because of its back-story. It is a beautiful place in a glorious setting. If you don't mind quite a high degree of eccentricity, you can stay at the *Auberge des Cévennes*. It was here that Stevenson ate his midday meal and sat writing up his journal, in the same small dining room as is used today. He was, he tells us, rather taken with a waitress called Clarisse.

Before I left I assured Clarisse of my hearty admiration. She took it like milk, without embarrassment or wonder, merely looking at me steadily with her great eyes; and I own the result upon myself was some confusion.

Amazingly, Clarisse can be seen there now, in middle age, in a yellowing photograph hanging in a corner of the room – still a striking woman and just as Stevenson described her. I should acknowledge that the four English lads discovered her. They sat at table late into the night to discuss another bottle or two while reading aloud from *Travels with a Donkey*, as was apparently their habit, and the landlord brought the photograph to show them. One of them told me about it at breakfast the next morning. I was impressed.

After Le Pont de Montvert the path ranges over the

wild hills where outlawed Protestants used to meet for worship, crossing Mont Bougès where Séguier urged his friends to take up arms and passing Le Plan de Fontmort where he was finally captured. It visits Florac, an attractive place but alarmingly contemporary to a walker with the dust of the Gévaudan on his boots and Spirit Séguier in his heart; Cassagnas, a remote Protestant stronghold; St Germain de Calberte, a village deep in chestnut groves, much admired by Stevenson; and St Jean du Gard, where his adventure ended and Modestine was sold for less than half what he had paid for her.

Not so much has changed in these villages and this wild countryside since he was here. It was easy enough to conjure a picture along the way of a very slight man brandishing a switch to encourage his recalcitrant donkey. He made a fine companion.

From St Jean, Stevenson took the coach to the large town of Alès, to pick up his mail and get news from America. It would be eighteen months, including that grim journey across America, before he and Fanny were married. During their fourteen years together, his health broke down often. They moved many times in search of a kinder climate before settling at Vailima in the Samoan islands. After four happy years there, he died from a stroke, at the age of forty-four, and was buried at the top of a nearby hill. His grave is marked with the words of his *Requiem*, with their faint but

unmistakable echo of nights in France in his sleeping sack:

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
'Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.'* ♦

A Bronx Childhood

by *Leonard Quart*

I return every four or five years to my old neighbourhood and home borough, the Bronx, out of a sense of curiosity and a need to replenish my memories. On my last visit the infamous garbage-filled lots, shattered streetlights, abandoned and burned out buildings, drug-and crime-ridden wailing siren wasteland of earlier decades had over the years turned into cleaner streets, new prefab private homes, and Section 8 assisted low-income red brick buildings. The Bronx was no longer an ominous, desolate urban wilderness, having been transformed into something more intact and liveable.

The statistics bear this out as, overall, the Bronx has regained nearly three-quarters of the population lost in the 1970s because more people are choosing to stay in the Bronx and raise their families there. In addition, the borough has become a magnet for immigrants from West Africa, Mexico, Albania and Southeast Asia (over 30 per cent of its population is foreign born). In fact the Bronx today is being redefined by hundreds of units of affordable housing, and a plan to create a waterfront district along the Harlem River containing both

affordable and market housing. The High Bridge, the City's oldest bridge and a national and City landmark has been rehabilitated and reopened, and nearly 15,300 jobs were added between 2007 and 2012.

Still, though there are positive changes taking place, the unemployment rate remains high. The crime rate is much higher than the rest of the city's, educational attainment is low, and many residents still live in poverty. Riding with a friend through my old neighbourhood, what I observed from a car window and walking its streets felt inert and lifeless. The best one could say was that it seemed a more stable, viable place to live than in the past, but there was little for one's eyes to focus on – no vibrant street life or shopping districts whose variety and intensity could give one sensate pleasure or the good feelings that arise from observing an interactive communal life. What's more, the changes no longer allowed me to get easily in touch with images of my childhood and adolescence. No memories were resurrected when I tried to remember what these same streets looked like during my growing up. These sights just left me cold.

However, as I grow old I don't really need to jog my memory by returning to those timeworn streets to recall my growing up in the Bronx. For I have reached that age where childhood memories have become almost as vivid as my adult ones. It's not that my childhood was full of family drama or traumatic experiences, but that relatively ordinary life was filled with images and

incidents that remain indelible and that helped shape my adult self.

What I remember are the street games – tame ones like marbles, red light-green light, pitching and flipping baseball tickets, hit the penny, slug, boxball, off the stoop, and the more daring and adventurous ringolevio and the slightly more athletically challenging punch ball. The latter was a game I constantly played in whatever space could be utilized – from ample schoolyards to small playgrounds to oddly configured apartment house backyards. Though if most of the games offered little that was physically exhilarating, they did allow me my own realm – free of parental watchfulness – while I played on safe, sometimes chaotic streets with various children from my own and neighbouring apartment buildings. I can remember many of their faces, but few of the children were friends, merely interchangeable playmates who made me feel part of a world.

These games took up much of my life on the streets when I wasn't spending lengthy days (including Sunday) at my airless and oppressive orthodox yeshiva (where religion was force-fed and teachers didn't hesitate to use rulers when punishing students for minor misconduct), which my parents compelled me to attend. That was until I discovered at the age of twelve that if I received low grades my parents would take me out of the yeshiva and send me to the more emotionally and socially expansive neighbourhood public school. Though a great deal of the classroom teaching provided there was almost as

pedestrian and rote based as what I had just fled from. ♦



On Human Waste

by *Malise Ruthven*

In the summer of 1858, after an exceptional spell of hot weather, with temperatures averaging the mid-30s Celsius (mid-90s Fahrenheit) , the *Illustrated London News* ruminated with imperial chutzpah: ‘We can colonize the remotest ends of the earth; we can conquer India; we can pay the interest of the most enormous debt ever contracted; we can spread our name, and our fame, and our fructifying wealth to every part of the world; but we cannot clean the River Thames.’

The condition of the river had long been scandalous. Far from running softly, the ‘Sweet Thames’ Edmund Spenser had invoked in one of his celebrated marriage poems had become a putrid sewer. The stench of the river, polluted by everything from industrial waste and human excrement, to dead animals and the occasional human corpse, became increasingly notorious after flush toilets replaced the old commodes whose contents were disposed of by specialists known as ‘night soil collectors’. Up to that time human ordure had a

positive association with food production. Along with other manures including horse and cow dung, it had been used by London’s market gardeners since medieval times. In 1617 the Worshipful Company of Gardeners proudly claimed that its members ‘cleansed the City of all dung and noisesomeness’. Each of the London’s wards elected– or doubtless ‘volunteered’ – a scavenger and his raker-assistants, who took street sweepings, night soil and other rubbish to be spread on common land outside the city walls to be mixed with the horse and cattle dung in dumps known as laystalls. At Dung Wharf near Blackfriars animal and human manure were mixed and loaded onto barges and taken to the market gardens which supplied the city with fruit and vegetables, with the most productive gardens located in the riverside parishes of Fulham, Chiswick, Battersea and Mortlake. The same barges that carried the nightsoil returned piled high with fruit and vegetables.

The technology that put an end to this ecological, if odiferous, nirvana was a device we now take for granted as a humble, if necessary adjunct to civilization: the flush toilet. Though invented in the early nineteenth century it had been the preserve of privileged posteriors until the Great Exhibition of 1851, when growing numbers of the aspirational bourgeoisie were able to view samples for themselves. Thereafter an impressive variety of beautifully decorated porcelain

bowls made by firms such as Twyford, Wedgwood and Shanks – as well as the eponymous Thomas Crapper – helped to normalize the ‘flush and forget’ approach that rules to this day, as well as putting thousands of night soil collectors out of business.

Far from improving sanitation, however, the flush toilet was initially an instrument of death. Every time one was flushed it put around two gallons of contaminated water into the Thames and its tributaries, increasing the risk of disease. 1831 saw the first occurrence of cholera, causing the deaths of around 5,000 people. Thereafter there were outbreaks every few years, with thousands of fatalities culminating in the great epidemic of 1848-9, which killed more than 14,000 Londoners. The Great Stink, as the press famously dubbed it, finally caused the government to act. In the Palace of Westminster draperies were soaked in chlorine to avert the smell and there was talk of moving the business of government to Oxford or St Albans.

When Lord John Manners, First Commissioner of Works (equivalent of today’s Environment Secretary) was asked in parliament ‘if the noble Lord has taken any measures for mitigating the effluvium and discontinuing the nuisance’ he replied, according to Hansard, that ‘Her Majesty’s Government have nothing whatever to do with the state of the Thames’. Under pressure Benjamin Disraeli, at that time leader

of the Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer, who had been spotted leaving a committee room with a mass of papers in one hand and holding a handkerchief to his nose with the other, tabled an amendment to the Metropolis Management Act (1855) placing responsibility for clearing what he called ‘a Stygian pool, reeking with ineffable and intolerable horrors’ onto the newly formed Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). As the Times commented ‘Parliament was all but compelled to legislate upon the great London nuisance by the force of sheer stench’.

When the bill became law in August 1858 Joseph Bazalgette had already been working for several years as chief engineer for the MBW and its predecessor, the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers. Building on the work of his predecessor Frank Foster, who was said to have died from the ‘harassing fatigues and anxieties’ of dealing with London’s mounting volume of sewage, Bazalgette devised a plan, costing some £5.4 million (more than half a billion in today’s money) to construct some thousand miles of street sewers to collect the effluent and rainwater that would feed into more than 80 miles of sewers discharging into the tidal estuary at Crossness in the Erith marshes on the south side of the Thames estuary and at Abbey Mills by Stratford on the north.

The buildings he devised with his colleague the architect Charles Henry Driver – one of the foremost

Victorian exponents of cast iron – reflect an aesthetic that hovers somewhere between Romanesque, French baroque and Italianate, in a style Nikolaus Pevsner chose to call Venetian Rundbogenstil (round arch style). The original structure was both elegant and functional, with an impressive mansard roof punctuated with triangular lucarnes surmounted by a small cupola resembling a crown that served as a light-well for the octagonal gallery above the boiler house. Smoke from the coal-fired boilers that drove the pumps issued from a 208-foot (64m) high chimney masquerading as a soaring renaissance campanile topped by a delicate finial hat. Sadly the mansard roof was removed in 1928 and, like the campanile, only survives in photographs. The tower was demolished in the 1950s for reasons of safety. Greg, the volunteer guide who showed us around explained that maintenance costs would have been prohibitive.

Any disappointments felt on viewing the outside melt as soon as one enters the interior. The Engine House with its octagonal loggia and double arcade of columns, its decorative frieze and delicate scrolling guard-rails is a wondrous hymn to cast iron, Driver's favorite material, in an idiom that pays tribute to Byzantine, Romanesque and baroque antecedents, while celebrating the almighty power of steam. The religious feeling is obvious, in the exuberance of the acanthus finials, the capitols surmounting the pillars,

the decorated arches, the intersecting vaults and the splendid central octagon that evokes a tabernacle with its cast iron screens and elegant floral patterns. One's immediate response is that this must be a holy place or temple 'of hammered gold and gold enamelling' where the local moniker – Crossness Cathedral – is no exaggeration. It takes a moment to recall that this monument to Victorian magnificence was devoted to a banal but necessary function: the disposal of human excreta.

The four double-acting, single cylinder, rotative beam engines housed in the building produced some 125 horse-power, with each engine driving a pair of pumps with cylinders, rods and plungers. The system was adjustable, allowing the engines to cope with different heights of sewage lift. These great machines, with main beams weighing 47 tons, were made in James Watt's factory in Birmingham and brought to Crossness by canal and river. As the weight limit for the barges was 20 tons, the beams and 52-ton flywheels had to be made in sections and assembled on site – an impressive feat of engineering design when one considers that all the pre-cast drawings were done by hand.

Remarkably given the Victorian reputation for prudishness, each of these great sewage-pumping engines bore the name of a royal personage: Victoria, Prince Consort, Albert Edward (Prince of Wales) and his wife Alexandra. Royal protocol was evidently

unfazed by the function to which these massive engines were dedicated. Given the way they were cleaning up the river and improving public health, approval was both guaranteed and universal. Indeed the station was opened in 1865 by none other than the Albert Edward, the future Edward VII, who was accompanied by a number of MPs, the Lord Mayor of London, and both Archbishops.

The huge endeavor to clean up the river was successful, and popular, and in due course Bazalgette received a knighthood as well as posthumous recognition as one of the great Victorian engineers alongside Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Ironically, the idea that cleaning up the river would defeat cholera by making the Thames less smelly was based on a false premise. The so-called 'miasma theory' which still prevailed among doctors – and parliamentarians – held that cholera was transmitted by contaminated air ingested through the lungs: hence the belief that preventing the infernal stink would improve public health. Famously it was the outbreak in the vicinity of Golden Square, Soho, that led to a change in medical opinion. In June 1854 four years before the Great Stink, Dr John Snow, an epidemiologist who had already published papers challenging the miasma theory, was working on his alternative hypothesis that cholera was transmitted by an 'oral-fecal-route' by means of contaminated water. He was making house-

to-house inquiries in south London where two private water companies – Southwark & Vauxhall and Lambeth – were laying down drinking water pipes for public consumption. Having established that the former was drawing its water from the Thames downstream from the latter, which had moved its intake upstream to a cleaner reach of the river, Snow expected to demonstrate that people who drank water from the Southwark & Vauxhall pumps were suffering higher mortality rates. When the Soho outbreak occurred he rushed north of the river where, by applying the same methodology of relating fatalities to the local drinking water supply, he persuaded the Board of Guardians of St James's parish to remove the handle of the Broad Street water pump. Snow's action is now an iconic event in medical history.

Despite his intervention, Snow's theory that cholera is transmitted by water did not gain traction at the time when Bazalgette engineered his sewage system, and it was not till 1866, the year after Crossness opened, that the oral-fecal hypothesis was finally vindicated. That year an outbreak of cholera in London's East End, between Aldgate and Bow, claimed some 5,600 lives. 93 per cent of the fatalities took place in a district not yet connected to the new sewage system. Culpability lay with the East London Water Company which had been discharging sewage too close to their reservoir, allowing drinking water to become

contaminated by the incoming tide. Medical opinion finally caught up with Snow. Dr William Farr (1807-83) an epidemiologist who had vigorously opposed Snow's belief that cholera was water-borne, was finally converted. Commenting on Farr's investigation into the East London outbreak, *The Lancet* pronounced that his report 'will render irresistible the conclusions at which he has arrived in regard to the influence of the water-supply in causation of the epidemic'. The 1866 epidemic proved to be the last major outbreak of cholera in the capital.

The Crossness pumping station continued to function, with upgrades and modifications, into the 1950s. In the 1880s after a boating accident in which more than 650 people were drowned, with contamination seen as a contributory cause of death, the MBW stopped dumping untreated waste into the river, sending sludge by barge to be dumped offshore. The first of these vessels – the SS Bazalgette – remained in service till 1998. After the European Union banned sewage dumping in the North Sea under the 1991 *Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive*, and environment secretary Chris Patton vowed that Britain would no longer be the 'dirty man of Europe', residual sludge has been incinerated. The engines were also subject to modification. In the 1890s, with a growing population creating ever greater volumes of sewage, new engines were added so that modifications could be

made to the original beam engines without disrupting the flow. The old engines, upgraded and recalibrated, continued to operate until 1956. Thereafter they were left to rust and decay and would doubtless have been sold for scrap had it not been for the Crossness Engine and Boiler House acquiring Grade 1 listed status. Since 1985 Crossness has come under the protection of the Crossness Engines Trust, whose President is Joseph Bazalgette's great-great-grandson, Peter, television executive and former chair of the Arts Council of England.

The Trust, with some 500 paid-up members, began work in 1986. For the first six months, according to Greg, they were shoveling guano from the generations of jackdaws and pigeons who had been living and nesting in the buildings. The great engines and ironwork are now being restored by teams of volunteers, with grants from the National Lottery and English Heritage. Most of the volunteers we met on our visit were enthusiastic retirees. 'We use the skills that they've acquired in previous lives' Greg tells us 'although we're getting quite good at letting volunteers discover skills they never had'. Around 50 of them turn up regularly. The oldest, Harry, now 97, has been working there since his eighties. A true devotee he finds the twice-weekly parties of visitors something of a distraction. 'We usually find we have to bend our program to suit them' he says 'When you've got the bit

between your teeth you don't want that sort of thing'. Several volunteers have expert qualifications as plumbers or electricians that allow them to check the work of others; but a lot of the work, Greg tells us, is fairly low tech, just a matter of elbow-grease 'Anyone can buff up a piece of cast iron or clean a spiral staircase using a needle-gun.'

The ambience is friendly but also professional, with people signing in as in any office or factory. Fund raising is based on the hours volunteers put in, with donations related to levels of skill: While an unskilled volunteer can be logged to raise £50 for each hour worked, a professional's service can yield as much as £350. The state of a spiral stair next to one of the older boilers – the result of half a century's neglect – gives an idea of the work that remains to be done. But the atmosphere of devotion is palpable, with people quietly going about their appointed tasks with a minimum of fuss.

There can be little doubt that the dedication of the Crossness volunteers, with the hours of de-rusting, oiling, buffing and scrubbing, devoted to the Victorian gods of hygiene, will succeed in restoring the interior of this splendid temple to its former grandeur. With hindsight, however, one is bound to question if the original vision was flawed. Bazalgette's project was conditioned by the predicament he inherited – a river rendered lethal by quantities of human excrement and

other pollutants. But in 1834, more than two decades before the Great Stink, John Martin, the visionary painter whose huge canvases of apocalyptic events depicted in the Bible were viewed by millions in halls specially hired for the purpose, offered his own solution to the problem of London's sewage. He proposed that a pair of intercepting sewers be built below the banks of the river, to terminate at the Tower on the north, and at the Surrey Canal on the south. Two vast receptacles would convert the sewage into manure for agricultural use, with the gas burnt off by firing.

In March 2017 Thames Water, a company owned largely by Kuwaiti investors and Canadian pension funds, was fined £ 20 million – one of the largest fines in UK corporate history – for discharging 1.9 billion litres of untreated sewage into the river. While the judge stated that he wanted to send a message to shareholders that pollution on this scale, killing fish and endangering livestock, was unacceptable, the fine was only a pinprick for a company that makes an operating profit of around £ 2 million each day. While Bazalgette may have rightly entered the pantheon of London heroes for taming and cleaning the Thames, it seems ironic that it would take more than a century after the completion of his work for Martin's more hygienic and healthy solution – incineration – to be realized, while the organic recycling of human waste as practiced in the centuries before the Great Stink, by

the adoption modern smell-free composting toilets, is limited to garden allotments and the pioneering green enthusiasts on society's ecological fringe. ♦

Reykjavik

by *Konrad Muller*

On the streets of Reykjavik, trying to find a bus to Borganes, I met a charming fellow. He stank of drink and was on his way home from something called the Solstice Music Festival. He told me Radiohead had been playing. I expressed my polite approval.

He then said, 'What are you talking about? Those guys have been whining for years. Now they're multimillionaires and they're still whining.'

The guy was a real streetcorner philosopher; I missed my bus listening to him.

At one point he said, 'Where you from anyway?'

'Tasmania,' I hazarded.

'Tasmania?' he said. 'Well, I'm from Reykjavik, but really could be from anywhere. I've got Scottish, Irish, Scandinavian, Basque blood. I'm a real mongrel, a sailor. Look at this,' he said, turning side-on and pointing at his nose. 'That's a piece of France. That's a real French nose.'

I lacked the wit to reply that actually he had a very nice nose.

It emerged he was a muso. ‘Sigur Ros. I grew up with those guys. I used to play music with them.’ Then he introduced himself: ‘The name’s Olvus,’ he said. ‘Olvus not Elvis.’

‘Do you have any CDs?’ I asked him in my innocence. ‘CDs?’ he responded with incredulity.

‘No-one has CDs anymore, Konrad. They’re just like books. They don’t exist. Just like people. Everything’s in the clouds. I’m in the clouds. Look me up. The name’s Olvus. Olvus not Elvis.’

He paused, then asked, ‘What you doing here?’

I told him I was researching a book on Jörundur Hundadaga Konungur (or Jorgen the Dog-Days King, as the Icelanders call him), the revolutionary who ended his days as a British convict in Tasmania.

‘You know across the road there,’ he told me, ‘is the Prime Minister’s Office.’ And he signalled a large white building that resembled an overblown barn. ‘That used to be the gaol from which Jörundur released the brigands during his revolution.’

‘Is that right?’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ said Olvus.

It was certainly one of the crazier episodes in Britain’s long imperial moment. In June 1809, a Lambeth soap boiler and a Danish prisoner of war loafing around London, assisted by a very eminent botanist, sailed off to Reykjavik and proclaimed a revolution.

The soap merchant was a Mr Samuel Phelps.

The prisoner of war was the soon-to-be notorious Jorgen Jorgensen.

The botanist was none other than Sir Joseph Banks, who sailed with Cook on the *Endeavour* and then enjoyed an illustrious career as President of the Royal Society for forty-one years, Privy Councillor, ‘Father of Australia’ (for patronising that infant the Colony of New South Wales), and personal friend of George III with whom he shared a great love of flowers.

At the outset, Banks was pivotal. He secured the trading licence under which Phelps and Jorgensen sailed off to Reykjavik in the name of free trade. He, too, had harboured a romantic attachment to Iceland as a sort of northern exotic ever since he travelled there in his youth to conduct an inquiry into volcanoes. Now, years later, during the Napoleonic Wars, Banks had emerged as the island’s protector, facilitating trade, when Iceland faced starvation due to a British naval blockade in force against its colonial master, Denmark.

That, in brief, is the backdrop.

For, soon after they beached their rowboat on the black sands of Reykjavik beach, the English party discovered the Danish Governor, Count Von Trampe, had posters nailed up forbidding, on pain of death, trade with the English (this despite a British sloop-of-war recently negotiating at gunpoint a trade agreement with the Governor). The response of the soap merchant

was swift. Joined by Jorgensen and half a dozen sailors armed with a few cutlasses and a couple of old muskets, he called on the Governor and arrested him. Count Von Trampe was led away across the boggy field outside his residence to be locked up on the English vessel in the harbour. Icelanders, armed with pikes for ease of movement on the frozen ground, looked on with perfect indifference. The following day, 26 June 1809, *Proclamation Number One* appeared, announcing that Danish authority had ceased. It was signed by Jorgen Jorgensen in no particular capacity.

The Icelandic Revolution had begun.

Jorgen Jorgensen was duly appointed 'Protector'. He was a Danish clockmaker's son and now with great gusto he set about upending the wheels and dismantling the springs of Denmark's rusty colony. He announced Iceland was free and independent under British protection. He released the inmates from the gaol and confiscated weaponry. He declared all debts to the Danish crown and Danish commercial houses null and void. He abolished internal passports. He instituted trial by jury. He sequestered Danish monies and property. He established a personal guard of eight, some of whom were former inmates (the gaol became the barracks). Occasionally he swore. On his tough little pony, wearing out his stockings and shoes, he embarked on a tour of the north. He announced his intention to resign within a year and restore the

Althing, the ancient parliament dissolved by the Danes. He declared all Icelanders would have the vote. He invented his own seal: J.J., and a new flag: three white codfish on a blue background.

Where the 'revolution' would have ended is unclear. In forty manic days, Jorgensen and Phelps (busy acquiring tallow for his soap) met very little resistance, until the *deus-ex-machina* appeared. The *HMS Talbot* was out on routine patrol in the North Atlantic. Arriving in Reykjavik, Captain Alexander Jones very quickly said: 'This is not how we do things.' The fact that Jorgensen was technically a Danish prisoner of war on parole was not the least astonishing detail. Phelps, Jorgensen, and Von Trampe were all ordered back to London (Phelps carping that 'Government should interfere as little as possible in trade and commerce.')

We have a record of these events not least because Banks sent along his protégé, William Jackson Hooker, to botanize. Hooker became Jorgensen's closest friend, even moving with him into the Governor's residence when he occupied it. His *Journal of a Tour in Iceland in The Summer of 1809* gives an eyewitness account; and it is interlarded with the odd footnote bearing Jorgensen's fingerprints.

Traditionally, in Iceland, Jörundur the Dog-Day King has been seen as a carnivalesque figure, the sailor as rebel, a sublime idiot, or merry fool. Yet more recent

excavations have unearthed the image of a more complex, plural, extraordinary man.

At the University of Iceland, Anna Agnarsdóttir has been his chief excavator. She highlighted for me the very advanced nature of his politics – ‘the idea of no property qualifications for the vote was quite amazing’ – and the depth of his social concerns. In his defence of himself, Jorgensen would dwell on the poverty and disease of the Icelanders; Hooker joined him on an inspection of Iceland’s squalid Latin school. Both described at length the rickety staircase, the intolerable stench coming from the kitchen of sheep guts and off milk, the sordid dormitory where on seaweed mattresses the students slept three to a box. And with Halldór Laxness, they might have said, ‘All of their faces were ugly, each in its own particular way.’ Before Jorgensen came unstuck, he was about to launch a social programme. In addition to cleaning up the Latin school, he was acutely conscious of a need for more midwives (infant mortality ran at a horrific fifty per cent).

Fresh scrutiny, too, has been given to Jorgensen’s relationship with Sir Joseph Banks. The Dane had long had an emotional attachment to the English (despite witnessing the firebombing of Copenhagen in 1807) and had known Banks since 1806 when he returned to London from the South Seas with two Tahitians in need of assistance.

It emerges that as early as 1801, from his perch at 32 Soho Square (which these days houses the London headquarters of Twentieth Century Fox), Banks was advising William Pitt the Younger’s administration that it would be perfectly simple to annex Iceland ‘without striking a single blow.’ In 1807, he returned to his theme, writing to his friend, the Home Secretary, suggesting Iceland could be joined to Britain ‘and never hereafter separated,’ if a gunship with a negotiator were dispatched and leading Icelanders encouraged to shift their loyalties, depositing the Danish Governor on a ship in the harbour. Again, in April 1809, just weeks before Phelps and Jorgensen sailed, he was writing to the Secretary to the Admiralty, William Wellesley-Pole, urging annexation. From this correspondence it is clear Banks personally discussed annexation with Phelps and Jorgensen.

The considered view on these mystifying documents is that the prisoner of war and the soap boiler were *not* acting on the botanist’s instructions, not least because His Majesty’s Ministers had said ‘No’ to annexation, and Jorgensen, moreover, had declared the island independent, which was never the idea. But perhaps there were misunderstandings? Certainly, Banks – no revolutionary – had misjudged his man.

The upshot, nevertheless, was clear. Soon after Jorgensen’s arrival back in London, Banks was supporting Danish officials in their case to have the

revolutionist returned to Copenhagen – then at war with Britain – where definitely he would have hung. Quite correctly, the Foreign Office demurred. (Later, Jorgensen would return the favour and work for London as an intelligence asset on the continent.) A ‘Case of Very Special Circumstances’, as the King’s Advocate dubbed the entire Icelandic fiasco, was then tossed back and forth between government lawyers. Jorgensen was left to rot on a hulk in the Medway. He rotted there for ten months. When, eventually, he was released, the ‘Protector’ was a changed man. He now had a gambling addiction and was about to enter the spiral that would see him ejected to the other side of the world as a convict in Tasmania.

Through all this, only William Jackson Hooker, against the advice of his mentor, stood by his friend – visiting him in prison, giving him money, lobbying government. Hooker’s career did not suffer. He would end his days as Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. There, quite radically, he opened the gardens to the public.

Lately, of course Reykjavik has experienced new turbulence. In the winter of 2008-2009, following the Icelandic financial meltdown, the Pots-and-Pans Revolution led to the downfall of a government. Almost thirty criminal convictions of Icelandic businessmen, officials and bankers ensued, for insider trading, breach of trust and market manipulation. This spring,

revelations in the Panama Papers fuelled fresh demonstrations and the fall of another Prime Minister. Perhaps not surprisingly, the spirit of Jörundur has been glimpsed at the feast.

At his home in Reykjavik, over thick black coffee, which he calls ‘the beans of life,’ I listened to Einar Már Guðmundsson, who last year published a novel on Jorgensen, *Dog Days*, which won the Icelandic Literary Prize. Einar told me a tale from the Pots-and-Pans Revolution, so named after the banging of kitchen utensils outside the Althing. Eggs had recently been thrown and the then Prime Minister had called the protesters ‘a rabble’. To underline their demands for a new Iceland, one group Einar described as ‘those associated with the fun stuff’ wanted to hoist Jorgensen’s old flag – three white codfish on a blue background – over the Althing. In the event, they went with a second image. One enterprising young anarchist climbed onto the roof and raised a flag with a pink piggy bank on it, the corporate logo of a supermarket chain linked to one tycoon associated with the economic wreckage.

The Icelandic Pirate Party has been the main beneficiary of the traditional parties being in such bad odour. With policies like greater transparency in government, more direct democracy (in the form of referenda), drug decriminalisation and an overhaul of copyright laws, they have led in polls, remarkably for a

party founded in 2012 by Internet activists, poets and idealists. Elections are now expected this autumn. Out of curiosity, I went to see them at their headquarters by the seal-grey waters of old Reykjavik harbour. I asked if they had any sentimental attachment to Jorgensen? The Pirate General Manager, a young woman called Bylgja, immediately referred me to the party symbol. 'If you look there,' she said, 'you will see that on that pirate sail there is a fish. The fish is from Jörundur's flag.'

Later, I met the fellow behind the symbol. His name was Svafar. We sat in a bar off Austurvöllur Square, the site of the recent protests and of the old boggy field over which, two hundred years before, the Danish Governor had been led away by cutlasses to the English ship waiting in the harbour.

'We liked the idea of Jorgensen and the rabble taking control,' Svafar the Pirate told me with a smile. ♦



Side by...

Four Poems

*Al Purdy*¹

TRANSIENT

*Riding the boxcars out of Winnipeg in a
morning after rain so close to
the violent sway of fields it's
like running and running
naked with summer in your mouth and
the guy behind you grunts and says
"Got a smoke?"*

*Being a boy scarcely a moment and you
hear the rumbling iron roadbed singing*

...by side

Versek

translated by *Tárnok, Attila*

MULANDÓ

*Tehervagonban Winnipegből egy
reggel eső után olyan közel
a vadul hullámzó mezők mintha
az ember futna csak futna meztelen
szájában a nyár és egy tag
mögötte dörögve megszólal
"Van egy cigid?"*

*Alig egy pillanatnyi gyerek még
és hallja a morajló vas útágyat*

¹Alfred Wellington Purdy (1918-2000), kanadai költő, Ontario tartományban született, Trentonban nőtt fel. A nagy gazdasági világválság idején, 17 éves korában félbehagyta a középiskolát, és Kanada szerte alkalmi munkásként csavargott. A második világháborúban a kanadai légierőknél szolgált. Az 1960-as évekig kétkezi munkákból élt, csak ezután sikerült szépírással, szerkesztéssel és rádiós munkával biztosítania megélhetését. Az 1950-es években Purdy és felesége egy faházat épített a Roblin Lake partján, a ház gyorsan fiatal kanadai költők és írók találkozóhelyévé vált, Purdy halála után nemzeti emlékhelyként kulturális programoknak ad otthont. Élete során harminckilenc verseskötetet jelentetett meg, továbbá egy regényt és két kötetnyi emlékiratot. 2008-ban a torontói Queen's Parkban szobrot állítottak emlékére.

*under the wheels at night and a door jerking open
mile after dusty mile riding into Regina with
the dust storm crowding behind you and
a guy you hardly even spoke to
nudges your shoulder chummily and says
"Got a smoke?"*

*Riding into the Crow's Nest mountains with
your first beard itching and a
hundred hungry guys fanning out thru
the shabby whistlestops for handouts and
not even a sandwich for two hundred miles
only the high mountains and knowing
what it's like to be not quite a child any
more and listening to the tough men
talk of women and talk of the way things are
in 1937*

*Riding down in the spit-grey sea-level morning
thru dockyard streets and dingy dowager houses
with ocean a jump away and the sky beneath you
in puddles on Water Street and an old Indian woman
pushing her yawning scratching daughter
onto a balcony to yell at the boy-man passing
"Want some fun? - come on up" - and the girl just
come from riding the shrieking bedspring bronco
all the up and down night to a hitchpost morning*

*énekelni a kerekek alatt éjjel és
egy ajtó csapódva nyílik mérföld
poros mérföld után Regina állomása
a por vihar tornyosul mögötte és
egy tag kivel szót se váltott eddig
gyengéden hátba vágja és szól
"Van egy cigid?"*

*A Crow's Nest hegyei közt megy
a vonat első szakállad viszket és
vagy százan lepitek el a rozoga
apró állomásokat alamizsnáért
és vagy kétszáz mérföld óta egy
szendvics se jutott csak a magas hegyek
és megismerni milyen az nem lenni többé
gyerek és hallgatni kemény férfiak szavát
asszonyokról és a dolgok állása ez évben
1937-ben*

*Úton egy köpésszürke tengerszint reggelen
a dokk menti utcákon koszos nemes
özvegyi házak az óceán egy ugrásnyira
mögötted az ég tócsákban a Water streeten és
egy öreg indián asszony ásító vakarózó lányát
az erkélyre tolva kiált az elhaladó fiú-ember
után "Tetszik? Gyere fel!" és a lány épphogy
leszállt a sivitó ágyrugó bivalyról az egész*

*full of mother and dirt and lice and
hardly the place for a princess
of the Coast Salish
(My dove my little one
tonight there will be wine and drunken suitors
from the logging camps to pin you down
in the outlying lands of sleep
where all roads lead back to the home-village
and water may be walked on)*

*Stand in the swaying boxcar doorway
moving east away from the sunset and
after a while the eyes digest a country and
the belly perceives a mapmaker's vision
in dust and dirt on the face and hands here
its smell drawn deep thru the nostrils down
to the lungs and spurts thru blood stream
campaigns in the lower intestine
and chants love songs to the kidneys*

*After a while there is no arrival and
no departure possible any more
you are where you were always going
and the shape of home is under your fingernails
the borders of yourself grown into certainty
the identity of forests that were always nameless
the selfhood of rivers that are changing always*

*éjen át tartó fent és lent egy drosztos
reggelig anyával kosszal és tetűvel teli
nem éppen egy nyugati parti
szélis hercegnőnek való
(Hattyúm egyetlenem
ma éjjel lesz borunk és részeg kérők
tűre szúrnak favágók a hegyek közül
az álom kívülfekvő vidékén
ahol minden út a szülőfaluba visszavisz
ahol lehet a vízen is járni)*

*Állsz a hullámozó tehervagon ajtajában
mész kelet felé elhagyva napnyugatot
és egy idő után a szem egy országot megemészt
és a has térképészek vízióját kémleli a
csupa por csupa kosz arcon és kézen itt
szagát mélyen beszívod az orron keresztül
a tüdőbe és a véráramon áthatol
a belek mélyén agitál
és szerelmi dalt dúdol a veséknek*

*Egy idő után nincs megérkezés és
többé nem lehetséges indulás
az ember ott van ahova mindig tartott és
az otthon alakja a körmei alatt
ön-határa bizonyossá nőtt
névtelen erdők azonosságává*

*the nationality of riding freight trains thru the
depression
over long green plains and high mountain country
with the best and worst of a love that's not to be spoken
and a guy right behind you says then
"Got a smoke?"*

*You give him one and stand in the boxcar doorway
or looking out the window of a Montreal apartment
or running the machines in a Vancouver factory
you stand there growing older*

DETAIL

*The ruined stone house
has an old apple tree
left there by the farmer
whatever else he took with him
It bears fruit every year
gone wild and wormy
with small bitter apples
nobody eats
even children know better
I passed that way on the road
to Trenton twice a month
all winter long*

*örökké változó folyók önlényegévé
nemzetiséggé tehervonaton a gazdasági
csődön át
hosszú zöld mezők fölött és magas hegyvidékeken
és akkor egy tag épp mögötted szól
"Van egy cigid?"*

*Adsz neki egyet és állsz a tehervagon ajtajában
vagy egy montreáli lakás ablakán kinézel
vagy gépet kezelsz egy vancouveri gyárban
állsz ott és öregszel ♦*

METSZET

*A romos kóház mellett
egy öreg almafa áll
a gazda hátrahagyta
magával vitte mindenét
Minden évben férges
vad gyümölcsöt terem
apró keserű almát
senki sem szedi
egy gyereknek is több esze van
Havonta kétszer útban
Trenton felé arra jártam
egész télen át*

*noticing how the apples clung
in spite of hurricane winds
sometimes with caps of snow
little golden bells
And perhaps none of the other
travellers looked that way
but I make no parable of them
they were there and that's all
For some reason I must remember
and think of the leafless tree
and its fermented fruit
one week in late January
when wind blew down the sun
and earth shook like a cold room
no one could live in
with zero weather
soundless golden bells
alone in the storm*

*láttam mint kapaszkodnak
az almák a viharos szélben
néha hósipkával
apró arany csengettyűk
Más utazó talán soha
rájuk sem nézett
de nem akarok példabeszédet
gyártani ott csüngtek és kész
Valamiképpen megjegyeztem
és azóta is előttem van
a levelét vesztett fa
és erjedő gyümölcse
egy késő januári pillanat
a szél a napot is lefújta az égről
a föld rázkódott mint egy hideg
szoba ahol senki sem élhet
a mínuszokban a hangtalan
arany csengettyűk
a viharban egyedül ♦*

THE COUNTRY NORTH OF BELLEVILLE

*Bush land scrub land –
Cashel Township and Wollaston
Elzevir McClure and Dungannon
green lands of Weslemkoon Lake*

BELLEVILLE FÖLÖTT A TÁJ

*Cserjés bozótos vidék –
Cashel külterület és Wollaston
Elzevir McClure és Dungannon
a Weslemkoon-tó zöld vidéke*

*where a man might have some
opinion of what beauty
is and none deny him
for miles –
Yet this is the country of defeat
where Sisyphus rolls a big stone
year after year up the ancient hills
picknicking glaciers have left strewn
with centuries' rubble
backbreaking days
in the sun and rain
when realization seeps slow in the mind
without grandeur or self-deception in
noble struggle
of being a fool –
A country of quiescence and still distance
a lean land
not like the fat south
with inches of black soil on
earth's round belly –
And where the farms are
it's as if a man stuck
both thumbs in the stony earth and pulled
it apart
to make room
enough between the trees
for a wife*

*ahol az embernek támadhat némi
gondolata afelől
mi a szépség és nem fog csalódni
mérföldeken át –
Ám ez kudarcunk tájéka is
ahol Sziszüphosz éveken át
szikláját görgeti az ősi hegyen
szunnyadó gleccserektől szétszórt
évszázados törmelékeket
derékszaggató idő
esőben napsütésben
a megvalósulás lassan szivárog az agyba
pompa és önbecsapás nélkül nemes
küzdelemben
a megőrülésig –
Mozdulatlan távlatok és nyugalom vidéke
sovány föld
nem mint a kövér déli
sok centi fekete termőtalaj
a föld hasán
És ahol a tanyák olyanok
mintha valaki mindkét
hüvelykjét a köves földbe mártaná
és szétnyitná
hogyan elegendő
helyet teremtsen a fák egy asszony
és talán az ökrök számára*

*and maybe some cows and
room for some
of the more easily kept illusions –
And where the farms have gone back
are only soft outlines
shadowy differences –
Old fences drift vaguely among the trees
a pile of moss-covered stones
gathered for some ghost purpose
has lost meaning under the meaningless sky
– they are like cities under water
and the undulating green waves of time
are laid on them –
This is the country of our defeat
and yet
during the fall plowing a man
might stop and stand in a brown valley of the furrows
and shade his eyes to watch for the same
red patch mixed with gold
that appears on the same
spot in the hills
year after year
and grow old
plowing and plowing a ten-acre field until
the convolutions run parallel with his own brain –
And this is a country where the young
leave quickly*

*helyet a könnyen
tartható illúzióknak –
És ahol a tanyák átadták helyüket
az erdőnek
puha körvonalaik
árnyalt különbségek –
Régi kerítések elszórtan a fák közt
egy halom moha fődte kő
valami megfejthetetlen célból egybegyűjtve
célját vesztette az értelmetlen ég alatt
– olyanok mint a víz alatti városok
és betakarja őket az idő zöld
hullámain ringatózva
Kudarcaink tájéka ez
és mégis
az őszi szántáskor az ember
megáll a barázda barna völgyében
és kezével szemét árnyékolva
ugyanazt a foltot fürkészi évek
óta a hegynek ugyanazon
pontján vöröslök
és öregszik
egyre szántja tíz hold földjét míg a
hantok agytekervényeivel egybefutnak –
Ezt a vidéket a fiatalok hamar
hátrahagyják
nem érdekli őket az ősök tudománya*

*unwilling to know what their fathers knew
or think the words their mothers do not say –
Herschel Monteagle and Faraday
lakeland rockland and hill country
a little adjacent to where the world is
a little north of where the cities are and
sometime
we may go back there
Wollaston Elzevir and Dungannon
and Weslemkoon lake land
where the high townships of Cashel
 McClure and Marmora once were –
But it's been a long time since
and we must enquire the way
 of strangers –*

REMAINS OF AN INDIAN VILLAGE

*Underfoot rotten boards, forest rubble, bones....
Animals were here after the plague,
after smallpox to make another ending:
for the tutelary gods of decay
acknowledge aid from any quarter...*

*Here the charging cotyledons of spring
press green forefingers*

*nem gondolnak a ki nem mondott szóra –
Herschel Monteagle és Faraday
tóvidék és sziklás hegyvidék
nem messze a világtól
a városoktól kissé északra
és néha
visszatérhetünk
Wollaston Elzevir és Dungannon
és a Weslemkoon tóvidék
ahol egykor Cashel McClure
 és Marmora külkerületei feküdtek –
De mindez rég volt
és már mi is útbaigazítást kérünk
 idegenektől – ♦*

EGY INDIÁN FALU ROMJAI

*Deszkán, törmeléken, csontokon lépünk...
A pestis után állatok jártak erre,
a himlő után, hogy más vége legyen:
a romlás gondviselő istenei
bárkitől elfogadnak segítséget...*

*A tavaszi sziklevel itt zöld
ujjait nyújtogatja combcsontok,*

*on femurs, vertebrae, and delicate
bellied skulls of children;
the moon's waylaid light does not shrink
from bone relics and other beauties of nature...*

*Death is certainly absent now,
at least in the overwhelming sense
that it once walked at night in the village
and howled thru the mouths of dogs –
But everything fades
and wavers into something else,
the seasonal cycle and the planet's rhythm
vary imperceptibly into the other;
spirits of the dead have vanished,
only great trees remain,
and the birth certificate of cedars
specifies no memory of a village...*

*(And I have seen myself fade
from a woman's eyes
while I was standing there,
and the earth was aware of me no longer –)
But I come here as part of the process
In the pale morning light,
thinking what has been thought by no one
for years of their absence,
in some way continuing them –*

*hátgerincek és érzékeny gyomrú
gyermek koponyái közt;
a hold orv fényét nem halványítják el
csont ereklyék és a természet szépségei...*

*A halál biztosan hiányzik innen,
abban a nyomasztó értelemben,
ahogy egykor éjjel bejárta a falut
és bömbölt a kutyaugatásban –
De minden a múltba vész
és átlényegül valamivé,
az évszakok változása, a föld forgása
okán észrevétlenül mássá alakul;
a halottak lelke is eltűnt,
csak az óriási fák állnak még,
és a cédrusok bizonyítványa nem
írja jól körül a falu emlékezetét...*

*(És láttam magamat is, ahogy egy
asszony szeméből eltűnök hirtelen,
ugyan még ott állok, a föld
már nem vesz rólam tudomást –)
Egy nagyobb folyamat része vagyok
halvány reggeli fényben
arra gondolok, amire senki sem
évek óta: hiányukra,
valamiképpen folytatom őket –*

*And I observe the children's shadows
running in this green light from a
distant star
into the near forest –
wood violets and trilliums of
a hundred years ago
blooming and vanishing –
the villages of the brown people
toppling and returning –*

*What moves and lives
occupying the same space,
what touches what touched them
owes them...*

*Standing knee-deep in the joined earth
of their weightless bones,
in the archaeological sunlight,
the trembling voltage of summer,
in the sunken reservoirs of rain,
standing waist-deep in the criss-cross
rivers of shadows,
in the village of nightfall,
the hunters silent and women
bending over dark fires,
I hear their broken consonants... ♦*

*És látom a gyermekek árnyékát,
mint iszkolnak ebben a zöld fényben
egy távoli csillag elől
a közeli erdőbe –
erdei ibolyák és évmilliárdok
száz évvel ezelőtt
virágzik és eltűnik minden –
a rézbőrűek tábora is
romba dőlve visszatér –*

*Ami él és mozog
elfoglalja helyét
ami érint ami megérintetett
tartozik...*

*Térdig az összeboruló földben állva
súlytalan csontjaik halmazán,
a régészeti lelet fényében,
a nyár remegő áramában,
az eső elsüllyedt vízgyűjtőiben,
derékig az árnyak keresztül-kasul
kanyargó folyóiban állva,
a napnyugta falujában,
hallgatag vadászok, sötét
tábortüzek fölé hajló asszonyok,
hallom tört mássalhangzóikat... ♦*