

INTRODUCTION

John Wain spent most of the 1980s and early 1990s writing his sprawling trilogy about Oxford, the city and the university, *Where the Rivers Meet.* It was to be his last major work: the final volume of the three was published a few weeks after he died in May 1994. Originally he intended to bring the story of Peter Leonard, son of an Osney Town publican and subsequently history don at Oxford, up as far as the late 1960s. In the event the story (or rather the books) ends ten years before that, with the death of Leonard's son in a motor-racing crash and Leonard's own thoughts on the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956. Wain also wrote some material which post-dated these events, which never made it into the final published work. Some of these episodes were no more than rough sketches for the storyline to continue, but others were in a more finished form. The longest of these is entitled 'The End of Lamont.'

Gavin Lamont was, in the story, Leonard's contemporary at Oxford, a young undergraduate poet who went down without taking his degree and subsequently makes rare but important appearances in the 40 or so years that the full story was to span. Despite his small overall part in the books, Lamont is a significant figure. Among all the cynical, worldly and self-serving characters, he represents a pure poetic ideal, untouched by the sordid politics which are infecting Peter Leonard's world. Lamont makes his own bargain with life, finding places to dwell peacefully while completing his central poetic work, and never compromises - even during the war he serves in the Merchant Navy rather than the Armed forces so as to take part in the conflict without shedding blood.

One of his most meaningful appearances is just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Leonard, like many people in those years, assumes that European civilisation will be completely destroyed by bombing, and that Oxford will not be spared: all its medieval buildings, its libraries, its gardens, will be swept away in a hail of TNT. At the worst moment of Leonard's despair, he meets Lamont on a dark rainy night in the college garden of what is called in the novel Episcopus, (immediately recognisable as St John's), and they spend a few moments in talk. Leonard spills out his fears to his friend, and is comforted by his quiet reflections. Afterwards, Leonard wonders if he really has met the actual, physical Lamont:

After he had gone, I stood alone in the windy quadrangle for a moment. The order and beauty of the place seemed created in order to draw to themselves the presence of a man like Lamont. I even wondered whether I had met Lamont in person at all, or had merely communicated with the idea of Lamont. Had he really been there, or had I been confronted with a hallucination, a vision that embodied my idea of Lamonthood, the gentle and meditative poet whose presence was sorely needed and would be needed even more in the iron time that was coming upon us?

The whole episode has a symbolic, dream-like air. Lamont has made an appearance at a time of great crisis, quietening Peter Leonard's mind, and it is a pattern repeated throughout the books: at the worst moment of Leonard's doubt, the poet appears, as if to show him that the artistic spirit will survive.

In the unpublished fragment, 'The End of Lamont', Peter Leonard is in Spain years later, in conflict with another character who has made significant appearances across the years (almost as Lamont's antithesis.) This is the robotic political turncoat Carshalton, whose latest manifestation is as a Stalinist, trying to rewrite the brave history of the Spanish Civil War; Leonard clashes with him in Spain and after this clash hires a car and, in frank intellectual flight, drives almost at random across the Portuguese border and into a small hill village.

As it turns out, this village is the last resting place of the poet Lamont, who has died a few months before Leonard's arrival. He has lived the last 10 years of his life in simple, almost hermit-like poverty, completing the central sequence of poems that contain his life's work. Leonard is shown to his bare little room by the village priest, who passes on to him the final manuscript of Lamont's poetry. Leonard promises that he will take it back to Oxford and make it known to the wider world. The priest, as the two take their leave outside in the dusty street, says quietly that Peter Leonard's coming to his village was no accident - it was providence, since Lamont's work, conceived in isolation, will now go out into the world and become a force for good. And Leonard, in despair after his conflict with his political and intellectual demons, is given new heart by the values that Lamont stood for.

In the published books the poet Lamont is given the role of a pure poetic ideal, the poet-scholar, the wanderer without possessions, almost the holy man, and one senses in the above episode a certain

longing in the description of the poet's humble life, devoted to his art. Not for one moment am I suggesting that there is any conscious projection on the writer's part. John Wain was not the poet Lamont, nor would he have wanted to be. As a man he was clubbable, social, liking to be surrounded by friends and family, relishing pubs, country walks, live jazz and conversation, whether dining in one of the three Colleges where he was a Fellow or in his local bar. He was too engaged with the world, with people and life, to have withdrawn like a hermit into a single small room in a mountain village and written poetry that might never reach anyone else. But perhaps deep within him, and in his best writing, particularly in his poems, lived a similar ideal - a way of letting his most inner voice speak directly, of expressing the continuing power of the forces that shaped him.

John Wain was born in the Potteries in 1925, the son of a prosperous local dentist, Arnold Wain, who had worked himself up from a beginning in almost unbelievable poverty and ill-health to become a respected local citizen, magistrate, lay preacher, and one step away from Lord Mayor of Stoke-on-Trent. John went to school locally and took a First in English at St John's, Oxford in 1946. After a period as Fereday Fellow of that college he took a job as Lecturer in English at Reading University, a period he touches on in one of the autobiographical pieces in this book. A couple of years after the success of his first novel(1953) he resigned from his post at the University, settled in 1963 in Wolvercote, on the edge of Oxford, and made his living as a writer for the next forty years.

As a professional writer his output was varied and prolific: novels, short stories, journalism, autobiography and *belles lettres*, criticism, travel writing, plays for radio, TV and the stage, and of course poetry, which he never stopped writing no matter what else was going on in his life. Like many writers of his generation, his stock rose and fell across the decades; he and his fellow 'Angry Young Men' (like most of those so-called, he disliked and denied the journalistic pigeon-holing) were practically household names in the mid 1950s; Penguin published all his novels in paperback for twenty-five years, and he was before the public eye in the 1970s with his election to the Oxford Professor of Poetry chair and the success of his biography of Samuel Johnson. However the graph of his fame flattens somewhat in the 1980s, though he produced some of his best work in that decade as well as reinventing himself as a travel writer, with articles on the bastide towns of Southern France, the Scottish Highlands and the Canal du Midi - this after a lifetime's travelling to places like India, Russia and South Africa and visiting lectureships such as his semester at Vincennes.

In 1984 he won the Whitbread Best Novel Award for *Young Shoulders*, which was dramatised on BBC1, and in the same year he was made a C.B.E for services to literature. But by the mid-1980s, with novels coming at the rate of one every six to eight years, and a forced change of publisher, he seemed to have fallen out of sight; this was only partly revived by his Oxford trilogy. Yet as the high tide of his recognition drained away, it seemed to leave the true artist almost more exposed. John Wain, who had dreamed of earning his living in the 1940s as a poet and literary critic, in the 1990s continued to explore the concerns on which he had based his life's work. The mature poet, once his own relaxed and stubborn idiom had emerged, produced some of his best verse later in life, as well as his best prose: such as *Dear Shadows*, a collection of essays on people he had known who had passed on, from Richard Burton and Marshall McLuhan to a German exile in the Welsh hills and his own father. His final work was the monodrama *Johnson Is Leaving*, a moving study of the last days of Dr Johnson's life, which had its first public airing in Wain's old college a few days after he died.

If there is a unifying theme to his inner landscape, and to his art, it is perhaps the gradual reemergence in later life of the feelings instilled in him when he was a child - that the things he valued were under pressure, probably fatally so, and that their natural frailty would not survive the late twentieth century. This applies in art and literature as well as, crucially and foremost, the natural world. In his 'partial autobiography' *Sprightly Running* (1962) he describes the feelings that he had as a young child watching new housing develop across the unspoilt valley below his home in Stoke-on-Trent. There is a strong sense of common cause with the wildlife doomed to be buried under the new housing, a scenario at least as topical now as then - and he felt himself, however irrationally, threatened by the same fate. He was set apart from the local youth by his comfortable upbringing and mildly persecuted at elementary school, where the seeds of a feeling of isolation were sown. This earliest sense of being part of a threatened minority persisted, an emotional identification with the doomed wildlife which resurfaced late in his life and even in his last writings: at the age of 68 he wrote the autobiographical pieces to be found at the end of this book, in which he restated that love of the old rural surroundings he knew as a child. The evocation of that farming country on the English-Welsh border is, in these pieces, deeply infused with the realization that the countryside in general which he knew in the 1930s and 1940s was gone for ever. It reminds one that the most important single literary influence on him, one that he more than once acknowledged, was that of George Orwell, who also made an emotional

identification with nature and associated rural simplicity with a child's innocence.

Oxford, in the long run, reinforced Wain's world-view. As he himself said, the intellectual effect the place had on him, a naïve 17 year old from 'the most provincial of the provinces', was unhealthily strong. Oxford in wartime gave him a further sense of being part of a minority, with most of the undergraduates having disappeared into the forces, leaving the injured or unfit to make up most of the student body (Wain himself was turned down for service because of his poor eyesight). His tutor was C.S. Lewis, who was approaching the height of his fame as a Christian writer and lecturer, and Wain became one of the youngest, if an infrequent, member of Lewis and Tolkien's literary group, the Inklings, although he didn't share their championing of 'fantasy' and heroic quest literature. Lewis's (and the others') attitude to modernity was fairly antagonistic; on top of this one of John Wain's first friends at Oxford was the neurotic poet and scholar E.H.W. Meyerstein, who frankly rejected any manifestations of the modern world at all. He emerged from Oxford with a backward looking, almost Johnsonian determination to dig in and cherish the old values while the tide of modernism swept over him - an attitude in his youth that he described, at 35, as absurd:

Always ready to dramatize a situation, I grew up towards my twentieth year with the old sense of doom, of being inexorably crowded out, inch by inch, from sunlight and nourishment, growing stronger with every day that passed...At the very time when the world was opening out before me, I saw it closing in. With every reason for optimism, I became a stoical pessimist...Looking back, I am appalled at my own complicated folly.

In 1953, *Hurry on Down* was published, his first and still best-known novel. It has been described as the forerunner of a new kind of fiction: the 'angry' novels of the early Fifties, produced, of course, by 'Angry' Young Men. Appearing the year before Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, it is the picaresque story of a young man who can neither take his preordained place in the professional middle classes nor, finally, bring himself to throw in his lot with the workers whom he briefly attempts to join. Instead, after a series of comic misadventures, he finds his own place in the world, like the poet Lamont, and makes peace with his own sense of not-belonging. What is notable to someone trying to evaluate Wain's work is that *Hurry On Down*, while outwardly it did certainly express a fashionable impatience with post-war austerity, on close examination is really an exploration of the feelings that he made explicit in *Sprightly Running* - the sense of not belonging to any particular class, the struggle to find a way of life without having to squash the personality into a unhappily distorting shape. There is a wild humour in *Hurry On Down*, and a fierce longing to join in with life, not stand outside on the sidelines, but these do not fully obscure the sense of not-belonging which is only partially resolved by the boy-gets-girl ending.

Meanwhile, to the outside world, the stance which Wain took was the exact expression of the times. There were precedents for this story of an 'angry' young misfit, such as William Cooper's *Scenes From Provincial Life* or Philip Larkin's first novel *Jill*, but *Hurry On Down* was then seen as the first novelistic expression of this new movement - which later encompassed Wain, Amis, Larkin, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine; John Osborne in the theatre and A. Alvarez and Colin Wilson as its philosophical outriders. Looking back, nearly fifty years later, it seems permissible to remark the undoubted similarities between these writers. Thematically, they do have in common a re-engagement with 'society', a returning sense of personal morality, a (hardly new) tendency to show impatience with the ruling elite, political and literary, and in terms of literary form, a rejection of pre-war 'experimentalism'. However, the suggestion that some of these writers colluded to produce a self-consciously new literary movement is certainly false. (It was only a coincidence that Wain, Amis and Larkin shared a college in St John's, for example, although it is true that they remained friends for years afterwards.) The whole 'angry' tag was as much a reaction to Wain and others' broadcasting of new writing on the staid mid-1950s BBC as any considered literary judgement. Ultimately the 'angry' generation passed on from the shock they initially caused, some of them moving into a famously right-wing stance, and predictably revealed themselves, as writers, to be very different from each other.

In John Wain's case the concern in his novels and short stories was often the struggle of the individual to reach an understanding with society, a theme which his succeeding novels handle with widely varying degrees of warmth and optimism. His second novel, *Living in the Present*, less successful than the first, shows a young man struggling with the problems of suicide and murder, finally finding a way forward through love. *Strike the Father Dead* follows a young jazz pianist in revolt and ultimate reconciliation with his father, a Classics professor (which strangely seems to reconcile two sides of Wain's own life, his teaching career and his love of jazz). *The Smaller Sky* (1967) is the most open exploration of this conflict between the individual and society: a scientist who quietly escapes his suburban existence to live out his life on a London station is pursued to his death by a publicity-hungry TV reporter seeking to launch his own career. It is a rather untypical book, lucid and

spare, almost reminding the reader of the sort of Continental writing once called 'existentialist'. *A Winter in the Hills*, perhaps his best novel, is the story of a middle-aged Englishman's slow entry into a close-knit Welsh community, his own acceptance of his brother's death and his final 'long-delayed coming of age'. It draws on Wain's own involvement with North Wales, thanks to his second wife Eirian's Welsh connections; the hero moves from a loneliness approaching despair to a recognition of his place in the world and the finding, always important in Wain's work, of happiness through love. *The Pardoner's Tale* handles similar ideas but in a far bleaker mood; yet it, too, ends on a note, if not of optimism, then of hope. Finally there is the huge Oxford trilogy, *Where the Rivers Meet* (1984-1994), with its hero, Peter Leonard, bridging the vast social gulf that existed in Oxford in the nineteen thirties between the University and the local people of the city living just a few streets away. Although it is perhaps not John Wain's best work, overlong and unwieldy, it did well enough in the face of apathetic publishers, and is certainly a fascinating and very well-researched social document on the city and the university of pre and immediate post-war Oxford. Closely examined, the trilogy, too, has as its central character a man whose values are of the past, in this case the perceived golden age of Victorian scholarship.

The feeling that the things he valued were being overwhelmed by a materialist, consuming society, and its allied sense of living and working in the twilight of a culture, persisted, and resurfaced in this trilogy. They are in part a record of the physical environment of Oxford that Wain remembered as a young undergraduate, before the man he always referred to as 'Billy Morris' (Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors) introduced large-scale industry to the city. In Wain's view this upset the town/gown balance that had existed in Oxford for 700 years; upset it socially and economically, and in terms of the landscape. More centrally, and more importantly, the trilogy was a defence of the 'best' of Oxford (meaning Oxford University) - its humanist tradition, its intellectual tolerance: the Enlightenment virtues, which Wain had explicitly defended in his Johnson biography. Throughout, and sometimes to excess, the narrator and hero Peter Leonard defends Wain's own view of Oxford, from hostile journalists, academic careerists and other philistines. In fact Oxford and the values which it stands for in the books are menaced throughout the story, not just by internal hostility but by the actual forces of totalitarianism, Hitler's bombers, Stalinist fellow-travellers, representing forces that care nothing for tolerance, art and freedom. In this respect Oxford is made to stand for the positive side of English (Wain always drew a sharp distinction between English and British) culture, just as the physical city, with its class divisions, could be said to be a microcosm of the nation.

In public, Wain's record on speaking out against injustice was an honourable one. Always ready to identify with the 'democratic' West, he attacked the pre-perestroika Soviet Union and in particular the treatment of the Russian writer Leonid Pasternak; in 1961, after an Observer article following his trip to the USSR, he was officially made An Enemy of the Soviet People. As regards domestic politics and issues, he also spoke out against Tory cuts in higher education cuts during the 1980s, and spent much of his last few years putting the case against the fur trade on behalf of organisations like Compassion in World Farming and Respect for Animals. The fate of the natural world was something that came increasingly to top his list of concerns later in life - so much so that many a small pile of anti-vivisection and anti-fur farming leaflets was left surreptitiously in Oxford common rooms in the late 1980s.

He also cared deeply about what happened to poetry. One of my own best memories of him is of when I was helping him compile the Oxford Library of English Verse. This consisted of helping him update an earlier selection, made in about the 1920s, and adding verse written since. He suffered with failing eyesight, in part due to late onset diabetes, but also to a childhood detached retina, and he could never, since the age of about sixteen, read as much as he would have liked. In later years his eyes (or eye; he really only had the use of one, and that was then failing) would become extremely tired after an hour or so of reading close-printed text, and I was drafted in as his reader-to and researcher. Working through the old anthology, I would give him the name of an obscure Victorian poet and he would immediately suggest half a dozen of his or her poems, usually quoting some lines from memory. At other times I would begin to read a poem and he would complete it for me, not as someone taking any kind of a test, but almost instinctively, not for my benefit but for his. This was in part a tribute to his retentive memory, which he consciously developed from the time it became clear that he would never be able to read as widely as he would have liked to, but it said more, I think, about his attitude to and his love for poetry. It was a lifelong commitment to it, the practice, study, and craft of it, and the cultivation of it too. When he was Professor of Poetry, he took the post's implicit responsibility of nurturing young and developing poets very seriously, always making himself available to them, at home, in Oxford's pubs and common rooms, or simply by reading and discussing the stuff they sent to him. His book *Professing Poetry* (1977) is a collection of the lectures he gave in that post, bound

together with thoughts on the young Oxford poets of the day and containing examples of their verse. It gives a picture of just how committed he was to a continuing, changing, developing art form.

He did not welcome all developments, of course. In the late 1960s and early '70s he produced a few squawks against the then-novel concrete poetry, sound poems, protest poetry and all the rest of it that was then briefly causing a stir. His fears more or less subsided in later years in the realisation of all the serious poetic work still being done. As I write, Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* has won a major literary prize; Wain would have approved of the continuity of English literature's first great saga being brought before a fresh audience. In this spirit I have included one of his own translations from the Anglo-Saxon, *The Seafarer*, in this book, as well as a piece from the Latin, Samuel Johnson's '*Know Thyself*', partly for the stately suffering of its rhythms, and partly as a gesture to Wain's lifelong empathy with his fellow Staffordshire writer.

The poems in this selection were written across more than forty years, from 1949 to the early 1990s – the span of John Wain's entire published career. He recognised two basic kinds of poem, the short, compressed kind, containing a single developed idea, and the long, convoluted, variform sort, of which he produced several. Without, I hope, doing too much damage to the longer sort by taking extracts from them, I have tried to make a representative selection of both kinds. Short or long, they all deal with what makes us human, our regrets, memories and longings, and often show a concern with the dispossessed outsiders, the forgotten and marginalised people of history, and by extension with the animals, exploited and hunted to extinction.

Letters to Five Artists, addressed to friends in Paris, Oxford and North Wales, describes the atavistic hunger that he felt came to him from his father, growing up in poverty, 'thin feet on the hot bricks', and goes on to reflect on those other hungry outsiders, the wandering gypsies of Europe and the dispossessed American slaves. That particular sequence, included in this book, speaks to his friend, the jazz trumpeter Bill Coleman, who played with the gipsy guitarist Django Reinhardt in Parisian clubs; as in his novel, *Strike the Father Dead*, he evokes the music (and by implication, all art) produced from intolerable conditions, art which reconciles us to our often troubled place in the world:

*what bruising of continent against continent,
before the two homeless songs made this their home;
the plucked string and the quivering mettlesome cry,
the two long journeys meeting here at last.*

History is alive in the poems, more naked and crueller than in the novels: *Wildtrack*, for example, with its section about the casualties of the Russian civil war, the prostitute and the bourgeois shot down side by side on the street corner, or the psychosis and guilt of one of the aircrew that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki (*A Song About Major Eatherley*):

*His penitence will not take away our guilt,
nor sort with any consoling ritual:
this is penitence for its own sake, beautiful,
uncomprehending, inconsolable, unforeseen.*

In other poems his concerns are more personal. *To My Young Self* is a look into his own past, wryly comparing the restraints that he had to break through as a young man with the more subtle temptations he has to resist in his settled middle age:

*Your voice echoed among Easter Island heads:
mine shouts along a valley littered with broken waxworks.
You had to break iron bars to get out.
I have to unpick silken ropes to stay out.
Nothing could help you but the stubbornness to live.
Nothing can help me but the stubbornness to live.*

In many of the poems, too, he combines a love for the physical world with a keen appreciation of its frailty. In *Mid-Week Period Return*, a poem for John Betjeman, and one of his most accessible pieces of verse, he characteristically explores the countryside of Middle England, his spiritual and physical home, from Oxford to Stoke-on-Trent, and views it with a fond but unsentimental eye. It ends with this quiet tribute to his home town:

*And now I get out and stand beside the train
happy to see that steeple-crowned hill again,*

*the tall church in whose shadow I learnt to read
the miraculous black marks that answered my deepest need.
In the moving crowd I stand, a silent grateful man,
since this place, for me, is where it all began.*

The fragments of memoirs (published here for the first time) that he provisionally entitled first *For the Timbers of my Roof* and later on *Earthtrack*, are the beginnings of an ambitious journey through his memories of seventy years of life. The mood here is rather different to the conscious questions that inform *Sprightly Running* about who he is and what shaped him. These are more the reflections of someone sending his heart back over the years, and they move easily from descriptive scenes of the countryside around the Potteries where he grew up to meditations on the writers, especially poets, that he associates with a special place or time - much as, I suppose, a piece of music will always bring back a certain memory. His recreation of the countryside where he grew up is inextricably linked to Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, and his early married life in Reading to the poet that he was devouring at the time, Wilfred Owen. The fragments are tantalisingly short and incomplete, but they show the things he was meditating on in the last few years of his life - the countryside, the Potteries, his own younger self, and there is an endearing touch of healthy anger about what he feels has been done to the land since those days.

It is fitting that much of the autobiographical writing included here is about Stoke-on-Trent, or the smoky place of narrow terraces and bottle kilns he knew in his youth which was not, in essence, all that different to the Five Towns of Arnold Bennett. It seemed for some years that he had turned against the place in favour of Oxford, a stance that in different forms was common to many of his fellow Fifties writers and was (of course) as much about a young man rejecting his parents' values as any genuine hostility to the place itself. But in later years he was as grateful for the gifts that Stoke had given him as those of his adopted city. In the 1970s and '80s it gave him a lot of pleasure to be an on-hand 'textual adviser' for Peter Cheeseman's Shakespearean productions at the Victoria Theatres in Stoke, both Old and New, and even more pleasure for the Vic to stage, in 1975, his own play, *Harry In the Night*. In *Professing Poetry* he looked back on the ethos of this play:

I am giving them [the people of the Potteries] a slice of the truth as I have learnt about it by living it for fifty years, and it is the same as their truth. Harry, when his life crumbles about him, finds new strength not from some spectacular fresh beginning, some road-to-Damascus religious vision, but simply from usefulness and productive work, from the sense that he has skills and knowledge that are needed and so can respect himself. He makes his new freedom out of the sober, industrious habits of his old slavery...This is something I learnt by growing up among these people and realizing what keeps them alive in their often monotonous and drab surroundings - alive, and full of zest and humour and courage.

Ultimately these things are what the man and the writer stood for, and stood up for: resilience, tolerance, our common humanity, the producing of art in the most trying of circumstances, and happiness in the familiar and extraordinary things of life. In *A Winter in the Hills* he celebrates, almost in passing

... the courage and resourcefulness of human beings, their endless inventiveness, their willingness to fight back against the bitter siege of the years.

William Wain
Oxford and Rhosgadfan, 1999