

## Using History in Your Poems<sup>i</sup>

Waters spends weeks researching things like locks, coins, shoes; what she calls ‘the poignant trivia’ of the period. What does a dogskin coat smell like? How do you melt down a pewter cup on a kitchen fire? What is it like to share a bed with your servant... Steep yourself in the writing of the time: fiction, journalism, diaries, letters. Try to absorb how people thought and spoke. Continue this reading throughout the writing process, to ensure your mind stays saturated with the right atmosphere.<sup>ii</sup>

-Debbie Taylor

How can a writer employ the unique opportunities afforded by the techniques of verse – including the dialogic benefits of poems being part of a collection – whilst still paying heed to the grain and structure of the past? How does someone develop a poetic shape for history? A writer’s imagination can bring the past to life for us in a more intimate way than academic or bluntly factual descriptions. It can imply emotions and draw on a broader range of sensory impressions than the cinema, conveying what it was like to be inside a human body in previous centuries. We can not only look out at Edinburgh or Paris as they once were but breathe in the smells of fish markets, pomanders, pipe tobacco. We can feel the weight and surfaces of necklaces, vellum, the hilt of a dagger and perceive how these might have chimed with or complicated people’s ideas and sentiments.

The compression, rhythm, imagery and plays on sound in poetry with their capacity to stir such deep, often physical responses allow us to experience long-vanished times in an especially intense fashion. My own first collection of poems, *The Frost Fairs*, conjures up gay, lesbian and transgender voices from previous centuries through a series of love poems which dovetail with pieces set in present day London and Brighton. The compositional process for me involved amalgamating a surprisingly large number of different sources, and the poem which gives the book its title actually began through me reading *Great Expectations*, a historical novel that starts not at the time of writing in 1860 but much earlier in 1812. The convict trade that employs the absent lover, the word ‘greatcoat’ and a much-fingered pipe were all inspired by descriptions by Dickens. A depiction of the 1814 frost fair itself breaking up was based on gatherings of eye-witness accounts I found in books and on the internet.

The rest was a case of filling in the gaps and imbuing the set up with emotion. I had to build up two imaginary people and their relationship, and I drew on my own experiences of being in love with someone who’d travelled to another country, using freewriting to imagine in precise detail the emotions the different circumstances, imagery and sensory impressions of the nineteenth century might evoke. It’s useful to focus in on the physicality of objects and their tactile and olfactory aspects. My Poem ‘The Other Side of Winter’, came together when I tied the relationship down to a particular pipe. This idea of constantly going back to range of historical sources is valuable for summoning the

individual character of periods long gone; the ideas, sensuous details and tiny linguistic markers that take a reader there.

## The Other Side of Winter

Overnight the Thames begins to move again.  
The ice beneath the frost fair cracks. Tents,  
merry-go-rounds and bookstalls glide about

on islands given up for lost. They race,  
switch places, touch – the printing press nuzzling  
the swings – then part, slip quietly under.

Still, there is no end of crystal weather.  
I hoard coal, stare mostly at the chimney's back,  
fingering the pipe he gave me on the quay.

Even now it carries his greatcoat's whiff:  
ale, oranges, resolve. I remember his prison-ship  
lurking out from shore, huge as Australia.

*I'll write, my dear sweet man*, he said  
then squeezed my thigh and turned, a sergeant  
again, bellowing at a flock of convicts.

I do not have the nerve to light it.  
The mouthpiece is covered with teeth marks, sweat.  
I look out at my museum-garden,

the shrubs locked in glass cases,  
the latticework a galaxy of frozen dew.  
There is no snow in New South Wales.

I cannot put the pipe down. It makes things happen.  
Last week I heard a crash and ran outside to find  
a jackdaw flat on the lawn. It must have fallen

from the sky, its wings fused together  
by hardened sleet, its neck twisted as though broken  
from straining to see the incredible.

*A modified version of this text appears in In Their Own Words, ed. Helen Ivory and George Szirtes (Salt, 2012) and The Frost Fairs, John McCullough (Salt, 2011)*

I drew on a first-hand account of the life of a drag queen during the Blitz from the Brighton Ourstory Archive – an organization that preserves both written and non-written material related to local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history - when writing a longer poem, 'Georgie, Belladonna, Sid'. This piece uses Polari, the English homosexual slang prevalent in the early to mid-twentieth century, and I was able to ask Tom Sargent, an academic at Ourstory who'd written several articles on the subject, to check my drafts. The experts you consult during research need not be archivists and curators, however; when writing about a time in living memory, conversations with friends and family can be just as, if not more, beneficial in terms of summoning small details, perceptions and feelings omitted by historians' grander narratives.

Biographies are packed with narrative threads, and research produces a cornucopia of material, no more than a well-chosen fraction should be used to further the task at hand. A novel can accommodate trivia in incidental ways a poem can't.<sup>iii</sup> Compression is vital to poetry's power to stir deep responses because we naturally assume that everything in a poem contains some kind of symbolic significance in ways we do not when reading fiction. If you put into a poem the fabulous butter mould you saw at a museum, the reader's going to attach connotations to it, and possibly in ways which might detract from your central thread, so you have to be absolutely certain you're only putting in what's necessary rather than what's interesting. The best historical poems wear their research lightly; I can't help thinking of the narrator in Carol Ann Duffy's 'Warming Her Pearls' elatedly dusting her mistress' shoulders with a rabbit's foot. Rather than being shoved arbitrarily into the poem, this image not only evokes with precision the historical setting but captures the springy, light qualities of rabbits' feet when alive and so underlines the vivacity of the ecstatic speaker's actions. A generic sketch of someone at the time packed with the most intriguing objects and phrases from your reading can only go so far; if you want to move a reader, a portrait of an individual viewing the world around them in one specific moment through a personal lens of whatever desires or losses dominate their thoughts is much more effective.

## Exercise 1: Living History

Spend five minutes writing down all the times you or someone in your family or circle of friends has been present at a defining moment in history. Which historical figures have collided with your life or the life of someone you know? Use the encounter as a starting point for a poem or story, or for a short autobiographical or biographical narrative.

## Exercise 2: Museums

Take a notebook along with you to a museum and narrow your attention to a section or two you're particularly interested in (e.g. Clocks, Ancient Greece). Make notes on the objects you're most drawn to in these areas, and how and why they came into being. You then have three options:

- 1) Write a piece exploring the life of someone who encountered one of these objects in the period it was made. Again, you can either write as this person or address your piece to them. Think about how you could draw on research and sensory impressions to make your words come alive.
- 2) Employ an exhibit as an allegory i.e. use the object as a vehicle for subtly investigating an idea like war, love, death or writing itself.
- 3) Write in the voice of an exhibit. What is its take on modern viewers and its original historical context? Rather than writing pure whimsy, adopt this strange angle as a means of probing human relationships, power structures or social attitudes.

John McCullough 2012

---

<sup>i</sup> This essay is adapted from a lecture originally given at The British Museum on 19 January 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Waters, interviewed by Debbie Taylor, *Mslexia*, 20, 2004, pp.16-7, reproduced at:  
[http://www.mslexia.co.uk/magazine/interviews/interview\\_20.php](http://www.mslexia.co.uk/magazine/interviews/interview_20.php)

---

<sup>iii</sup> In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr, Sylvia Plath envies the novelist's ability to include a toothbrush in their work without it attracting the interpretive scrutiny it would in a poem:  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/plath/orrinterview.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm)