

Estuary Poems by Wayland Wordsmith *A newly-published collection by a Lympstone author*

One of the poems we put up on the poetry boards recently was *Cormorant* by Ralph Rochester, for very many years a Lympstone villager. I received an email from Pat Boaden, who had stopped to read it. "After collecting my paper today, the road was filled with traffic and the usual chaos. *Cormorant* caught my eye, and I so enjoyed it. Ralph's irony, humour, innuendo and respect for the bird... such a treat first thing in the morning."

She is not the only person to be captivated by Ralph's writing. The author Tom Fort, known for his best-selling book about the A303, tells his readers of a blog he has discovered:

"There is a fine chronicler of Exmouth and its estuary who calls himself Wayland Wordsmith. I have no idea who he is – except that he is a poet, a historian, an antiquary of the old kind, a sailor, a fisherman, an explorer, a lingerer over sunsets and dawns, a fierce enemy of the enemies of his town, a philosopher and a gifted writer of a terrific blog."

Well, I can reveal who he is. Wayland Wordsmith is no other than Ralph himself, and he has brought together some 60 of his Estuary Poems under his blogger's *nom de plume* in a new book published by Hanbury Press.

It's a celebration of living in Lympstone, and of sailing on the estuary. The section 'Of Fishermen and Other Watchers of the Tide' has a poem called 'A Haul of Mullet' that reminds us of Tony Day's recent book about Jim Squire. Ralph goes out fishing, not with Jim but his elder brother Dick:

*One morning early I was in his smallest boat with Dick Squire,
just the two of us,
and we were chugging home against the tide from upriver.*

It's a fishing story that would have fitted well into *A Lympstone Lad*, and it's told in the plain language of the sea.

Lympstone features a lot. 'Five Winter Scenes; Lympstone; 1977'. 'Lympstone Church Tower'. And a four line poem picked up in passing: 'Lines from a Snatch of Conversation Overheard on the Green at Lympstone'

*"I'nt that sunset nice?" she said
"Lovely!" said her man
No one can pat that fiery head
But don't we just think we can.*

There are poems about birds, of course – a Pomp of Swans, Herons from Powderham, even a stray Flamingo from Paignton Zoo - and about fish – skate and eels and crabs and hack – there's a wonderfully funny poem called 'I'm Glad I'm Not the Barnacle' ("*His sex life is amazing*"), and even 'The Sandhoppers Ball': *Bless you little amphipod/How prettily you're prancing/ To use your abdomen is odd!/Could this be belly dancing?*

Ralph uses a variety of poetic forms: haikus and ballads, lyric poems and love poems, different rhyming schemes and free verse, and even a boat-shaped poem. And there's a satirical number which seems like a version of John Lennon's 'Imagine', called 'What If'.

But amongst these amused and optimistic observations of estuary life, which are sure to cheer us up in uncertain times, there is one poem in more sombre mood, reminding us that Ralph has a military background. It compares the squaddies drilling at the Marine Camp with the boats turning on their moorings: *These boys are for Afghanistan/The boats aren't going anywhere.*

And boats are bobbing throughout these poems. On the cover (by Ralph's son, Richard) is a gold embossed image of Ralph's boat Poppy, with the author at the tiller. Who couldn't resist the Invitation to Sail by Night in such a boat, with such a companion?

Night is a favourite time – drifting down the night – drifting down the years. With last night's tide came three ghost boats... By last night's ebb the swans sailed past in line... There are summer nights when the Estuary waters glisten... Goodnight Orion!

This small book might sound pricey at £34 – even perhaps at the £24 for which it is discounted to anybody in Lympstone or associated with the village. But it is such a beautiful object, a hand-sewn hand-bound pleasure to hold in your hand, a little work of art in itself, satisfyingly tactile in a world

of digital screens, with its gold-embossed cover and perfect typography – that is what you are paying for: the poems themselves are priceless.

Harland Walshaw

To buy Estuary Poems at the specially discounted price of £24 (+p&p) our readers should go to www.hanburypress.co.uk and quote the code ESTLYM