Peter Redgrove at Wood Lane

MAGIC AND SONG

Peter Redgrove in Falmouth

David told me that Penny

had been telling him about Peter's

office in the room above reception.

Imagine him standing in the bow window,

conducting a choir of weather and wind,

directing the students around him

in the ways of magic and song,

breathing in the storm before

breathing out poems of water and fire.

I first met the poet Peter Redgrove in the 1970s, when I attended a reading he gave in the Orangery in London's Holland Park. My friend the poet Brian Louis Pearce knew Penelope Shuttle, Peter's second wife, from a poetry group, and suggested I might enjoy Peter's poetry, perhaps especially in relation to the magic and mystical, elements I was then enjoying in Ted Hughes' *Crow*.

Brian was right. Peter was a striking reader, whose poetry focussed on alchemy, human beings as part of nature, and bodily sensation, particularly the olfactory. I came away with two books, *Sons of My Skin*, a selected poems, which remains a favourite book; and *In the Country of the Skin,* a strange prose work that I could not make head nor tail of at the time.

Many years later, Stride Books, the publishing company I ran for many years, was gifted Taxus Press, another publisher with a very different list, whose authors included Peter Pedgrove. Peter was a prolific author and Cape, who published his mainstream work, could not keep up, so Peter would use one or two small presses to issue work. Eventually Stride dropped the Taxus name completely (I had kept it as an imprint for many years) and simply published books under one name.

Most publishing work was done by mail and telephone, and then gradually by email and internet, but I finally met Peter and Penelope again when I helped organise a Post-Feminist conference as part of one the Exeter Poetry Festivals I was involved with. He gave a wonderful reading, involving both poems and excerpts from *The Wise Wound*, the book about menstruation and social taboos, which he and Penelope co-authored and which remains one of the major works on the subject.

In 2003, Peter sadly died, and Stride produced a memorial anthology, as well as a posthumous volume of his final work. At the Courtauld Institute, where a reading in his honour was held, I was able to joke about being the only one present who had 'inherited' Peter from someone else. It was a sad but celebratory occasion with many editors, friends, critics and authors present.

In due course I suggested to Penelope that Stride put his fiction books, two of which were collaborative works with Penelope, back into print; I also mooted the idea of a gathering of some interviews and articles to accompany them. Thus was born The Peter Redgrove Library (still available, despite Stride's closure, through Shearsman Books), with each volume containing a new introduction by another author, and a new book of interviews and articles edited by Neil Roberts, the biographer of Peter Redgrove. The books sat nicely along the *Collected Poems* that Cape produced (although it's more like a generous Selected Poems because Peter wrote so much).

Peter and Penelope lived in Falmouth since the mid-Sixties; Penelope continues to live here. It's only with the School of Writing and Journalism's move to the Wood Lane campus that I've really taken in that Peter used to work here, as a lecturer in Complementary Studies, back when the university was the Falmouth School of Art. In fact he was present from 1966 until 1983, offering talks, workshops and tutorials to the then much smaller student body. As the university aspires once again to interdisciplinary and cross-curricular studies, perhaps it is time to take note of what previously took place at Wood Lane. I hope the new poem above tells its own story, the two below are poems written after Peter's death.

HIS OWN WORDS

for Peter Redgrove

‘I can hear the wind in your voice’

– Townes van Zandt to Jimmie Dale Gilmore

Whatever was before

the texts are texts are broken up

broken up into before

Someone made words made all these words

keep it you keep it remember the words

remind us what is there

A figure alone figure in a landscape

figure become landscape a landscape a country

hot rock from down below

Dark night island sparkle of darkness

moonlight glint flash flesh glint and sparkle

a fish beneath the waves

Light on water light on water

whisper of wind whisper of wind whisper in the trees

asleep and listening

The suggestion of birds some flying birds

flying through night throughout the night

the air is never still

Gradually drift gradual meaning

drift toward meaning drift toward stories

wanting to be told

Each time words each time the words

not quite the words not quite the same

each word full of voices

Dry cold paint cracked cold paint

people in pictures in pictures and paintings

other lives long gone

Most of the canvas the canvas is empty

bright amongst whiteness the emptiness white

all brightness fizz and fuss

Whatever was pictured those pictures

texture and stillness still something missing

a way of being alive

We have to find out we must find out

for ourselves in ourselves we have to find out

so many places to see

You struggle with struggle to define

filter what’s seen filter vision memory

watch the storm outside

Attempt to pick up pick up what is

is out of reach stretch up reach out

learn to catch the breeze

Sudden attempt suddenly caught

broken up before being into before being

suddenly sunlight spills out

Consider the light admire the light

the way the light falls the shadows fall the way

shadows fill the room

His own work all his own work

out of words out of whatever whatever was before

the texts the texts are broken up

Rub clear the memorial stone

OTHER ROOMS

i.m. Peter Redgrove

Full moon, high tide,

smell of salt in the air;

oceans can seem kind

but a man got washed away.

Windows emit more light

than pale sun gives out:

this was the house

of the laborator.

He owned

a collection of hills,

the secrets of pools,

rich smells and clay ooze.

What he knew

could only be said

in the language of thunder,

seen in sand and stone.

Departing from us

he left books of wisdom

and magic in the world;

many words of blessing.

The future’s full of stories

and other rooms, unexplored.

They are in a different country

where we have no choice but to go.

Absence marks the opening of days,

loss grows fainter as the wind

tears his voice away. It is only

truly dark within the cave of self.

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