

“What If They Chuck It in the River, Miss?”

Poems from the Firth of Forth

CHRISTIAN McEWEN

In December 2004, I received an e-mail from Clare Hoare, in the city of Stirling, in central Scotland. Would I be interested in working with a couple of schools, she asked, as part of something called the Raploch Regeneration Project? Once an independent village, Raploch is now essentially a suburb on the western edge of Stirling, though far poorer and more run-down than its illustrious neighbor. Eight hundred new houses were to be built, Clare told me. There was to be a new health center, a new community and education campus, and—the reason she was contacting me—a series of writing workshops based on the Firth of Forth.

“Firth” is an old Norse word meaning “arm of the sea,” and refers both to the sheltered stretch of sea at the mouth of a river, and to the salty tidal estuary itself. The Forth is only 29 miles long—just a scribble of a river in American terms. In recent years, the Forth has been sadly neglected. But in medieval times, the ships of the Scottish navy were built along its banks, and as late as 1845, a hundred boats plied regularly up and down the river, carrying silver from the Ochils (hence “Sterling silver”), as well as locally-made shoes and soap and rope and tartan shawls. Stirling, too, was of vital importance, first as a fortress, then as a port and mercantile center. In the 19th century, Alexander Smith described it as “a large brooch, clasping Highlands and Lowlands together.”

Clare was keen that the children should learn something of this heritage. She had invited an historian, an archeologist, and an environmental ranger to visit the schools early in 2005, hoping they’d come up with fascinating local lore that could then make its way into the poems. Unfortunately, almost all this scheduling fell through. By the time I arrived in early March, the children had had just one session with a ranger, and she, poor woman, had moved up from England only two weeks before and knew almost nothing about the area. It was abundantly clear that unless I took up the slack, the emphasis on “local interest” would simply disappear.

Luckily, I had a few weeks in which to educate myself. I made my way to the big public library in Edinburgh, and I gave myself a crash course on the Firth of Forth. I identified several organizations having to do with natural history and the river, acquired leaflets

and posters, and spoke to the contact people there. I also paid a visit to the Smith Museum & Art Gallery (based in Stirling), where I learned a little about Raploch itself.

Museum director Elspeth King quoted Sir David Lyndsay, who wrote in 1602 of “the poor man in his coat of Raploch grey” (a kind of thick tweed), and gave me a thumbnail sketch of the area: its poverty, its pretty gardens, its long connection with the military (supplying cooks and cleaners to the Castle). Primed by her enthusiasm, I went on to Stirling library, where I accumulated yet more books and maps and memorabilia. It made for a surprisingly steep learning curve. But without such an intense, invisible apprenticeship, it would have been impossible to conduct the residency.



Clare had asked me to work with three classes of ten and eleven-year-olds, one from the local Catholic school, St. Mary’s, and two from the elementary school, Raploch Primary. Most of the children had grown up in the immediate neighborhood. They had visited Stirling Castle, which was visible from their classroom windows, high up on its volcanic knoll, and knew at least a smidgen of its history. But their own lives were centered in Raploch itself, with its littered streets and boarded-up windows, its absent dads and tatty Chinese takeaways. It was a 50-minute walk from Stirling’s famous Old Town, with its medieval buildings and pricy tourist cafes, but it might have been another world entirely.

I saw this forcefully, the morning I arrived. I had just introduced myself to the children, and was standing at the front of the classroom, outlining the work that lay ahead. As part of the Regeneration Project, a winding pathway had been built along the river, and much more had been planned, including special lighting to create a “ghost bridge” (visible only at night) and five designated areas on which poetry and art could be displayed.

“Your poems are going to be put into a book,” I told the children. “And they’ll be set up along the Riverwalk, so that everyone can read them.”

I paused a moment, and a boy—a tousled ten-year-old—put up his hand. His accent was so strong, I had to ask him to repeat his question, and then, shame-faced, to ask the teacher to translate it for me.

“What if they chuck it in the river, Miss?”

“What if they chuck what in the river? Chuck the poems in the river?” For a second or two, I was utterly nonplussed. “Oh, they can’t do that. The poems will be displayed on special boards, or carved, or painted. They’ll be protected.”

The teacher nodded in earnest confirmation.

“The poems will be fine, I promise you.”

But the boy looked down, frowning, unconvinced. He and his mates were used to things being vandalized: bus shelters set alight, public toilets garish with graffiti. I was just passing through, a middle-aged stranger with an unfamiliar English accent. What did I know? And why should he believe a word I said?

Later, I strolled with Clare along the brand new Riverwalk. I stared at the pale flanks of the hills, the oily dark brown water.

"There's no' much to see along the river," said an old man hobbling by, like some withered spirit of doom.

Privately, I began to make a list, "Only a blackbird whistling, only a rusted drum. Only a pink plastic bag snagged in the brambles. Only the lime-green of the hawthorn trees. Only a solitary magpie: one for sorrow."

A student from the University had been drowned here, near the Old Bridge, Clare told me. Parents warned their children to keep back from the water. We could not even get permission to organize a field trip. No wonder the kids were wary of the river, and had doubts about the future of their poems.



In the course of our six weeks together (March and part of April), the children tried a number of different forms. They wrote a poem of invitation to some imaginary American cousins, drawing on their own knowledge of the area, combined with various tidbits I'd extracted from my reading. I told them, for example, about a French monk called John Damien, who had tried to fly from Stirling to Paris in 1507. He constructed wings out of henfeathers and leapt from the Castle walls, landing ignominiously in a heap of dung. The children loved this, and John Damien found his way into a number of poems, along with the Wallace Monument, the Tollbooth, and the Old Town Jail.

Using the same warm-up (a long brain-storming session on local history, past and present), another class wrote an alphabet list poem, whose items veered wonderfully from Saturday hangouts like "the Ice Rink" and "Sea & Sands" to well-known tourist landmarks like the Mercat Cross and the King's Knot (part of Stirling Castle gardens), and back to their favorite Chinese takeaways (Jimmy Chung's, Fung Yell, the Jade Garden).

This intermingling of history and geography, famous and mundane, continued over the following weeks, when the children wrote a long poem in the voice of the river, short "haiku-like" poems of memory and observation, and poems based on oral history interviews. They also wrote riddle poems in the voices of birds and fish and animals, all of which lived in or around the Firth of Forth. Because of the exigencies of scheduling, each class did a different selection of these assignments, and in a different order.



The day of the river poem, I handed out photocopied maps to the children, and asked them to color in the whole stretch of the estuary, all the way from Stirling to the North Sea. With the maps in front of them, they could locate the source of the river, far up on the slopes of Ben Lomond; its two main tributaries, the Allan and the Teith; and the "Links" or "Windings" (fourteen miles of meanders), visible from the ramparts of the Castle. This is where the fresh and salty waters meet; it is a hard place to navigate, characterized by wild and turbid currents.

Questions and comments leapfrogged back and forth as I sketched in the early history of the river, from the bone and antler tools which had been found in the marsh, dating from 3000 B.C., to the arrival of the Romans in the first century A.D. I spoke too

about William Wallace, who had defeated the English at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. (The film *Braveheart* is a matter of local pride, though one purist informed me that Mel Gibson is a “wee runt of a man,” whereas Wallace himself stood 6’ 7” tall.) From there we moved to Mary, Queen of Scots (a name everybody knew), who had sailed upriver to Alloa in 1567. The next few centuries went by in an eye-blink. The Industrial Revolution spread its tentacles across the Border, crowding the riverbanks with tanneries, distilleries, breweries, and paper mills.

But with the advent of the railroad in 1848, Stirling’s authority began to decline. River traffic fell away. By the mid-20th century, the Forth was polluted by domestic sewage, as well as by pesticides and industrial chemicals. The shoals of herring vanished. Fish and shellfish were tainted by oil spills. These days, tall wire fences guard the banks, which are littered with plastic bags and broken glass. “We turn our backs on the river now,” said Elspeth King of the Smith Museum & Art Gallery. The glorious Forth has become one of the least-used stretches of navigable river in the developed world.

The children take these things for granted. It is what they know. Both the glories of the past and the extravagant promises of Regeneration are a long way from where they stand, in the ordinary (and to them, often boring) present. Nonetheless, they were ready to indulge me, to take on board a little history and geography and social studies. It was a break, after all, from their regular lessons. And if I wanted them to write not from their usual (human) point of view, but in the voice of the river, then they would try that, too.

“Imagine you’re the river Forth,” I told them. What sorts of things do you remember? Can you tell me about the place where you were born?”

I asked for a volunteer with especially clear handwriting, who could copy what I wrote up on the board. Then the children began to speak, and I took their dictation:

The River Forth

I remember when I was just a little burn
trickling down the banks of Ben Lomond.
The deer came down to sip at my clear skin.
They gorged themselves on the young grass.
The minnows wrapped themselves in my wetness.
Eagles, buzzards, and falcons glided over me.
Hawks hovered for petrified field mice.

It was a child who came up with the phrase “clear skin,” and a child, too, who supplied the word *gorged* in the next line. I don’t want to give the impression that I did not contribute; as teacher and editor, there is no question that I helped direct the poem, approving some lines, rejecting others, asking always for greater precision and variety: “Do you have another word for *frightened*? OK—*petrified*.” But as the poem gathered momentum, it was increasingly the children’s voices that came forward:

As I was flowing, I was getting larger.
People came to sketch me in all my beauty.
They ate sandwiches and apples

and the children came to paddle in my water
and skip on my stones.
The hawk's beady eye watched from above.
Poachers waded through me to catch my precious salmon.
Finally I came to Stirling Town.
There I was joined by my cousin, the river Teith.

We stopped for a discussion here, when someone mentioned the Teith, one of the Forth's tributaries. "How would a river refer to another river?" I wondered aloud. "My friend, my brother?" "Cousin," someone said firmly. So "cousin" it was. At this point, too, the children quite consciously steered the poem back into the past, into history, drawing on our earlier discussions.

I flowed under a wooden bridge,
men in armor tumbled into me.
My green river ran red with blood.
I saw the castle in all its might.
Traders were selling tartan shawls and leather shoes
and blacksmiths were melting iron to make their blades.
Then as I left Stirling, something changed
as if I were two people, salt and fresh.
At Alloa I saw a royal boat with a fine woman in it—
Mary, Queen of Scots.

The first part of the poem, from Ben Lomond to Stirling, was written by the older class at Raploch Primary, the second part, from Stirling to the sea, was contributed by the children at St. Mary's. Even now, I am amazed at how tidily they can be spliced together:

As I left Stirling, I spotted the Wallace Monument on my left
high up on Abbey Craig.
I felt raindrops falling on my surface.
I was swerving from side to side, I was entering "the Links."
I remembered the old days, watching the men working
at the foundries, the tanneries, the weaving mills, and the distilleries.
I remembered the fishing boats passing over me
and the big silver grey salmon leaping out of the water.
I remembered the rainbow trout admiring the oyster beds
and the kingfisher diving for sticklebacks.
I drifted on by Grangemouth, on between Culross and Bo'ness,
all the way to the two towering bridges,
the Forth Rail Bridge and the Forth Road Bridge.
I had arrived at Queensferry.
I could feel the salt move through me.
I could smell the sea.
Seagulls were flying overhead, squeaking and squawking.

Mermaid's purse and other seaweeds were swaying back and forth.
 The sun was beating down on me
 as I moved out through Aberlady Bay.
 I passed Inchkeith towards the Bass Road, and the Isle of May.
 I saw beautiful colors in a rainbow.



The Scottish population is five million, of which about a quarter live in and around the Firth of Forth. Because the immediate landscape is so varied, the non-human population is at least as numerous. Bottle-nosed dolphins play at the mouth of the estuary, which also shelters seals and harbor-porpoises and minke whales. Salmon and sea-trout are still found in the rivers. The moors support red deer (Britain's largest land mammal), as well as roe deer, Scottish wild cat, mountain hare, and the occasional adder. Gardens attract blue-tits and robins, chaffinches and wrens. The coast is visited by thousands of migratory waders from the Arctic. There is no shortage of bees and moths and dragonflies, far less the ubiquitous midge*.

I could have lectured the children on the natural history of the Firth, but I wanted them to do the research for themselves. Just before Easter, I passed around a hatful of folded paper strips, each one inscribed with the name of some bird or fish or mammal, making sure to include familiar examples such as foxes and sparrows, as well as more glamorous ones like the otter and the golden eagle. The children dipped and picked at random. If someone had an especially strong aversion to their creature, I let them choose another. But for the most part, they kept what they'd been given. I also provided them with a list of the following questions:

- What does your creature look like? (feathers, fur, scales etc.)
- What does it like to eat?
- Where exactly does it live?
- What do its children look like? Are they the same as their parents or very different? If so, how?
- What sounds does your creature make, if any?
- Who or what are your creature's enemies?

By the time we met again, the Easter holidays were over.

"What did you learn?" I asked, that first day back. "Was there anything that really surprised you about your creature? Something you'd never known before?"

I myself had just discovered that badgers are carnivorous; their grasp is so powerful they can uncurl a hedgehog in order to get at its soft underbelly. Naturally the children liked this gory detail.

They had stories of their own, ranging from the habits of the midge to the "helpful high-pitched clicks" of the bottle-nosed dolphin. I was impressed by the depth of their investigations. Some had consulted field-guides and encyclopedias, while others had

*The midge is a tiny stinging fly, equivalent to a no-see-um, but far more virulent.

printed out dense fact-sheets from the Web. Almost all had filled out the questionnaires that I'd provided.

"These creatures are all *local*," I reminded them. "They all live in or around the Firth of Forth." It mattered to me that the children realized this. We had spent so long discussing the neglect and contamination of the river that I wanted them to get a sense of its remaining riches.

Then I wrote the following lines on the blackboard, pausing before I reached the final word: When you turn your head, can you feel your heels, undulating? That is what it is to be a serpent.

"Who knows that word, *undulate*?" I asked.

The children stared back, blankly. This was beyond their ken. I made a wavy motion with my hand. "If something moves like this, it is *undulating*. Waves *undulate* on the surface of the sea." I repeated the motion, this time from side to side. "Can you think of anything that moves like this? Something live."

"A snake?" someone suggested, doubtfully.

"Yes! A snake. When a snake slips through the grass, you could say it *undulates*. Only the poet, Frank O'Hara, used another word. Can you think what it might be? Some of you might remember from church or Sunday school."

Without too much trouble, they arrived at *serpent*.

From there on, it was easy sailing. I asked everyone to put their pens and papers to one side, to settle themselves comfortably, and to shut their eyes. For the next six or seven minutes I led them in a short guided exercise:

"Take a deep breath, and then another, and another. Imagine that you're not a human being any more. You've been transformed. You've become a bird or a fish or whatever it was you just researched. When you look down at your front, you don't see a T-shirt and jeans and the tips of your shoes, you see feathers or fur or scales or—what do you see? Take some time to visualize it clearly. What color is it? What texture? Do you still have two feet? Perhaps you're a snake or an eel or a worm and you don't have any feet at all. But if you do have feet, what do they look like? Do you have paws, or hooves, or scaly talons?

And if you turn your head, and look back over your shoulder, what's there now? Do you have wings? A long reddish-brown back like a fox or a red deer? A slim gray back like an eel? Take the time to picture your new back."

Little by little, I talked them through the questions they'd researched, focusing on the sounds the creatures made (a bleat, a croak, a tiny chittering?); on the appearance of their children (miniature versions of themselves, or very different?); and on their favorite foods (fresh juicy grass, little bits of mashed-up worm?). I asked where they lived, what it looked like, what scared them most, and finally, what was their absolutely favorite thing to do.

I took my time with these questions, allowing lots of space between each one. I wanted the children to dream up answers of their own (for the last question, especially), and not just to repeat their conscientious research.

When we had finished, I wrote up some prompts on the board, and asked everyone to write a poem about his or her creature, using a riddle format.

“Don’t just say, ‘I’m a badger,’ and go on to tell us everything about yourself. Spin out the information, give us clues, little by little, so that we have to guess.”

The children understood at once. This was something they were completely confident that they could do. They wrote and wrote.

They liked the last part too, when each child read aloud what he or she had written, and the others had to guess what was being described.

“Dolphin!”

“Otter!”

“Golden eagle!”

The room was loud with their laughter.



I like to think that it made a difference to the children, this work with poetry, this journey into history and geography and nature studies, all centered on their own immediate environment. But really, I don’t know. The last couple of sessions were given over to simpler, “less imaginative” assignments, drawing primarily on memory and oral history. Since no field trip had been possible, I had asked them to pay a visit to the river over the Easter holidays, and to “notice what they noticed.” Back in the classroom, they described what they saw in little three-line poems. I didn’t ask them to count syllables, simply to name what they saw on the ground, in the middle distance, and in the sky. Their poems were delicate and precise:

When I look down, I see soggy grass.

When I look up I see grey clouds and birds.

When I look out, I see trees and a bridge with the Forth running under it
very slowly.

Karen Syme

This was the river they were familiar with, not the river clogged with pesticides and chemicals, or haunted by its vanished shoals of herring. It was a quiet river with “concrete” underfoot, and “mucky” or “marshy” grass along its banks. But, “When I look up,” wrote Derek Raybold, “I can see lots of birds and nice blue sky, and the nice sun, the bright sun.” His classmate, Franquie Curran described a sunset, a “nice purple and pink sky floating around” with clouds “like big marshmallows.” This, too, was the children’s version of the Firth of Forth.

For the last session of all, they wrote a group poem about the Raploch, based on the family interviews they themselves had conducted. I talked about history, and how we tend to think history belongs in the past, with William Wallace and Mary, Queen of Scots. “But history is yours too,” I told them. “Your family stories are part of it, and you, as poets and writers, can help to make sure that it survives.”

I wrote “SAVE” up on the board, and line by line, the children added the stories and memories that they wanted to preserve. They began (not surprisingly!) with food:

SAVE

Granny Kennedy's recipe for fairy-cakes,
Linda Bolton's wee sweet toffees,
Gran Allan's chocolate crispy cakes

and worked their way on through a list of venerable elders, from "My Granda James White who's still alive at 88" to "My Great Granny Gregor, who died at 115, on her birthday." Then there was a section on hard work, beginning with "My dad Dougie McLean who got up early each morning to make breakfast for all his brothers," and moving through "Granny Moira who got up at 6 to do her shift at the hospital," and "Great Uncle James who got up at 6 to work in the mines." This was followed by war stories, "The story of my Great Grand-pop Rigg who got his left hand blown off in the First World War," "The story of my Great Grandma who was a nurse in World War Two," and finally by more private, family stories, "The story of my Aunt Betsy who swam across the river Forth," "The story of my uncle James, who set the house on fire—twice!"

"How shall we end this?" I asked. "What are we really praising? What qualities matter to us here?"

SAVE their kindness, the children dictated.

SAVE their joy.

SAVE their dedication.

SAVE their bravery.

SAVE their memories.

SAVE their love.

Now I just have to keep my promise and make certain that the poems do survive: that they're put on display all along the Riverwalk, painted on glassed-in placards, carved in stone, and no one dares to chuck them in the river.

Resources

In Scotland:

Grounds for Learning (www.gflscotland.org.uk);

Scottish Natural Heritage, Redgorton, Perth, PH1
3EW Scotland. Tel. 01738 444 177. www.snh.org.uk.

Stirling Tourist Information
(www.scotland2000.com/topofthetown/todo.htm)

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum
(www.smithartgallery.demon.co.uk);

In the U.S.: A wonderful organization focusing on watersheds and children's art and writing is River of Words, 2547 Eighth St., Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel. (510) 548-7636.
www.riverofwords.org.