

## Introduction to *The Road from Herat* by Clare Holtham

Writing on the poetry of Peter Redgrove, I once observed that ‘A metaphor brings us into relation with the universe. It is a pattern in embryo, and there would be no poetry today if we did not still retain our primitive sense that meaning must fall into a pattern, or a pattern hold meaning.’ That sense is particularly strong in the poetry of Clare Holtham, which can be seen as a sustained attempt to find a pattern and so recover a meaning from the fragmentation of her early life.

Clare’s parents were committed Communists. Clare was born in 1948 and she was only two when another member of the Party, a ‘charming Irishman’, swept her mother off to Mao’s China. Clare stayed in Dartmouth with her mother’s father, Jack Bragg, while her own father moved to London and remarried. Her father took her back when she was five but theirs was ‘a fierce . . . unacknowledged love’. Clare ran away from school at fourteen and ended up sleeping rough on the streets of London.

She was taken in by a kindly priest, the first in a series of father figures invoked in the poems. She had little education until she was given an IQ test and came out at the top of the MENSAs scale. She was sent to the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology, where she had the good fortune to be taught by Sidney Bolt, and to find another father figure in Frederick Parker Rhodes, one of the Epiphany Philosophers, for whom she was to write a fine elegy. Sidney Bolt recognized her potential and told her to apply to Cambridge since, with an educational record as unorthodox as hers, only Oxford or Cambridge would take her.

Clare faced a problem when her grant ran out and she had a long, hungry summer to get through. A notice in the Cambridge Arts Lab, *To India on \$25*, alerted her to the possibility that it might be cheaper to travel and she set out alone, spending three days on the jetty in Istanbul before she found the courage to take the ferry across the Bosphorus and set foot in Asia. She travelled on by bus and lorry, crossing Turkey,

Iraq and Iran to reach Pakistan and Afghanistan, a journey she was to repeat several times as a student and which brought her both the deep friendship recorded in 'The Simorgh' and a temporary marriage to an Uzbek chieftain, temporary marriage being a convenient institution that existed then in the Afghan countryside. That marriage was the occasion of the finest of her short poems, 'Anointing', and the title is significant because for the rest of Clare's life the wind touched her feet.

Clare came up to Newnham in 1970. The College allowed her to follow her own path, taking Russian courses alongside her English studies, but it took them a while to realize that, unlike most undergraduates, she did not have a home to go to in the vacation. 'Did you have a good Christmas?' her Director of Studies asked innocently and was surprised by the reply: 'Do you want to know how I spent Christmas Day? I spent it weeping in the corner of A&E at Addenbrooke's. No one even asked me why I was there.' Once it was discovered that Clare had been camping out in the Music Room, Jean Gooder went way beyond her remit as Director of Studies and took Clare into her own home. She and Clare's tutor also turned a blind eye when Clare took a part-time job at the Arts Cinema, a breach of the University regulations that in Clare's case was a simple necessity.

Clare found a kindred spirit in Eddie Block, the cinema manager, and in time became his partner. Over the next ten years they presided over a flowering of film culture in Cambridge, founding the Film Festival and the Animation Festival. When they finally fell out with the Arts Trust, they moved down to Sussex and helped to turn the Duke of York Cinema in Brighton from a fleapit to an art-house cinema.

When Eddie retired, Clare retrained as a computer systems analyst and travelled all over the world, installing, improving and consulting on systems for Centronics, for Securicor, as a consultant for SSA and finally as a partner in her own business, Small Blue. This is the background she drew on for 'Night Flight', for her gentle lament for colleagues in Turkey, and for her telling glimpses of Eastern Europe as it began to re-open to the West. And it is the setting for 'Paso Doble', which celebrates her long-running partnership with Eddie and conveys the shock of his sudden death in 1999. It was in mourning for Eddie that Clare turned back to poetry, which she had written as a student, drawing first on the

song forms she knew from the folksong revival of the 1960s. And it was entirely characteristic of her that she should turn back to education too, to that wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary search for understanding she had first learned from Frederick Parker Rhodes and his quest for *wholesight*.

Clare moved back to Cambridge from the home that she and Eddie had made in Northamptonshire. She trained as a Blue Badge City Guide while continuing to work for Small Blue and found in Madingley Hall, the University's Institute of Continuing Education, the Platonic ideal of an academy that would allow her to follow her search wherever it led. Her interest in genealogy, for example, did not stop with the shipwrights she discovered on her father's side of the family. It took her right back to the hard science of genetics, which she mastered to a degree that won her tutor's respect. Clare used her time well and she did not falter when she had to have a brain tumour removed, the experience she describes in what for me is the finest of her poems, 'Intercalary Days'.

That poem ends with the image of a wounded samurai recovering his strength and his skill,

*practising throwing the knife  
at a skittering autumn leaf on the threshold,  
over and over again.*

—an image that for me has a deeply personal association, bringing to mind something I once said to the poet Frances Horowitz. I told Frances that I thought she was a warrior and she replied, 'Well, if I am, I would have to be the kind of warrior who stands on the battlefield so deep in meditation that any blows are deflected around her.' That's the kind of warrior Clare was, a warrior with a deep peacemaking instinct. It was a chance conversation over lunch at Madingley Hall that led me to suggest to Clare that she join the Poetry Masterclass and it was in developing her poetry that she was finally able to draw together threads that had been severed more than once and to find peace in their patterning—in the act of patterning itself.

One of her Irish half-brothers had seen a letter from Clare in *The Times* and realized that they must be related. That lucky chance brought Clare back into contact with her mother, and with the paintings and drawings from China that her mother had exhibited in Dublin under

her name from her second marriage, Marian Jeffares. 'Peking Album' does not disguise the painful irony that lay behind the making of those drawings but Clare was proud of her mother's work and balances that first album poem with another in which she retraces a few of her mother's steps from an earlier journey through the French Alps. In the same way, 'Lamplight' does not hide the tensions which led Clare to run away from home but 'Sequence for my father' finds her driving to see him in his old age and grasping a hand that 'grips mine, / hot and dry, / strong as a newborn baby.' With a moving simplicity, she describes the moment of his death and the thoughtfulness of the nurse who left her to 'sit with death a while'. Finally she takes her place beside her half-sister and the family is reunited at the graveside.

Clare had only three or four years in which to develop her poetry before kidney cancer struck. The astute reader who knows something of contemporary poetry will probably guess that 'Bristol Blue' and 'Lamplight' came out of a Masterclass on Tony Harrison. She might even guess that 'Walter the Tramp' came from an assignment to use Yeats's ballad metre and 'Elegy for the Buddhas of Bamyan' from studying his use of a repeated refrain. But by then Clare was able to absorb influences into her own voice and the poems were winning an audience in their own right. 'Walter the Tramp' won the second prize in the Long Poem Competition held by *Scintilla* in 2009. And her use of the repeated refrain in 'Elegy' shows a formal skill that would have served her well wherever the imagination took her. We lost a real talent when Clare died in February 2010.

At the same time as she was developing as a poet, Clare was studying to become a homoeopath under the tutelage of Misha Norland and the community she invokes in 'Yondercott' became the last of her extended families, those informal groups of friends that are as strong a presence in the poetry as the father figures. The other strong presence—or is it an absence?—is the space that had opened in her from her early travels through Iran and Afghanistan, the paradoxical yearning for a landscape so arid that 'We smelled the sweet water / for hours before we reached it', an emptiness where 'the thread of being' can fray until it is 'unbearably light' but where a traveller might still descend to the sound of a rabat being played beside a well under the lemon trees. The poem that Clare

posted on her Home Page when she joined *Second Light* was 'White Morning' with its image of 'a distant smoke rising / in the bowl of the mountains'. The wind touched her feet to the last and it seems only fitting that this book should be called *The Road from Herat* and that we should include some of the photographs of Afghanistan that were featured in her exhibition in Cambridge in 2008. Clare was a fine photographer as well as a fine poet and there are many rolls of film stored in the archive at Newnham College, Cambridge, where a Travel Scholarship has been endowed in her memory.

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