

***Literature, Place and the Industrial Sublime,
with special reference to Arnold Bennett.***

Annual Haggar Lecture by **Dame Margaret Drabble** given at **The Symposium**, organised by the **Reginald Haggar Memorial Lecture Committee** in partnership with the Raymond Williams Foundation (RWF)
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I begin this address by returning in time to a summer evening earlier this year in a North London garden, where we were celebrating the eightieth birthday party of an old friend, an art historian and fellow novelist. The garden was full of writers, artists, and critics, all on festive and reminiscent form. I found myself talking to two painters whom I'd never met before, and by some happy turn of the conversation I happened to mention that I was, later in the year, to deliver the Reginald Haggar Memorial Lecture in Stoke. Ah, cried one of them, I knew Haggar, I was taught by him. Haggar reminded me of a portrait by Goya! My mother is buried next to him in Stone churchyard! (This was Peter Archer, a landscape painter, now painting seascapes and viaducts and silage pits and reservoirs from his home in an industrial Welsh valley- the Goya portrait that he thought looked like Haggar was of Don Andres Pedal, and it is in the National Gallery.) He later sent me a photograph of the adjacent gravestones, and a vivid account of an artist friend of his, Jeremy Yates, also now a landscape painter, who had also been taught by Haggar in Stafford College of Art. Yates remembered the afternoon art history sessions, and Haggar's long-haired professorial image, and 'the amount and breadth of images he showed us' - 'we were image hungry as students'. 'What a time it was, when such eccentrics could find a place to be in contact with young students!...I doubt if they filled in any forms, ever!' He paid tribute to Haggar's sense of a need to record the old factories and bottle ovens in water colour, and he regrets that, being young and thoughtless, he didn't buy one of his watercolours that he came across much later in Fulham.

I was very pleased with this small coincidental link with the past, and these memories from two teenage boys from the early 1960s, both impressionable and

at the start of their artistic careers, and I think Arnold Bennett would have liked it too.

Bennett, like Reginald Haggard and his disciples, was acutely responsive both to landscape and to the visual arts. He had a good eye, and he took pains to educate it. And both of them celebrated both the rural and the industrial landscape. Haggard was a professional designer and a scholar of ceramics, as well as a painter and a teacher of painting, whereas Bennett was a gifted and enthusiastic amateur, well aware of the artistic heritage of his own birthplace. Bennett used to say that he owed his lifelong love of sketching and painting not to a teacher or to art school but to a boyhood gift of a fine set of watercolours, which made him vow to be an artist. And it may even have been so.

You will know the key passage from Bennett's *Clayhanger*, in which Mr Orgreave reveals to young Edwin the architectural beauties of the neighbourhood which he had 'blindly inhabited for so long', and the sense of permission that this gave Edwin- permission to pursue a world in which the arts and visual beauty had a rightful and serious existence. Hitherto the boy Edwin had thought of beauty was merely as a sentimental property attributed by sentimental or conventional women to describe the pretty 'girl-in-garden' or the 'true love clingingly draped' works of Victorian artists such as Marcus Stone, or religious scenes like those of James Sant (1820-1916), who was responsible both for a famous *Little Red Riding Hood*, and for the popular religious painting, much reproduced, known as *Saul's Soul's Awakening*. (Bennett refers sardonically to both these popular artists in *The Death of Simon Fuge*, and in his wartime novel *The Pretty Lady*).

Here are a few sentences describing Edwin Clayhanger's soul's awakening, which had a profound influence on me when I first read them:

Mr Orgreave crossed the road and then stood still to gaze at the façade of the Sytch Pottery. It was a long two-storey building, purest Georgian, of red brick, with very elaborate stone facings which contrasted admirably with the austere simplicity of the walls. The porch was lofty, with a majestic flight of steps narrowing to the door. The ironwork of the basement railings was unusually rich and impressive.

'Ever seen another pot-works like that?' demanded Mr Orgreave..

'No' said Edwin. Now that the question was put to him, he had never seen another pot-works like that.

'There are one or two pretty fine works in the Five Towns' said Mr Orgreave. 'But there's nothing anywhere to touch this. I nearly always stop and look at it if I'm passing. Just look at the pointing! The pointing alone...'

Edwin had to readjust his ideas...[up till now] he had never troubled himself a moment about the Sytch Pottery. Nevertheless, he now, by an act of sheer faith, suddenly, miraculously and genuinely regarded it as an exquisitely beautiful edifice, on a plane with the edifices of the capitals of Europe, and a feast for discerning eyes.

(Section Four, Chapter Fourteen, 'The Architect')

(The Sytch Pottery was based, I am told, on the Hill Works of 1814)

In this passage, we see combined hints of Bennett's love of Europe, which featured so much in his prose and in his water colours- he made himself a true European- but also his sense of the unique value of his own native landscape. As a writer, he needed both. He prided himself on being able to see more acutely than others, to see the beauty in unpromising places, to read the gripping stories in outwardly ordinary lives.

Bennett later credited his own awakening to the Five Towns landscape as a subject not to an artist or an architect, but to his fellow novelist, Irish-born George Moore, who in his early controversially realist novel *A Mummer's Wife* (1885) had evoked the Potteries- with their 'implacable perspectives', 'remorseless angles', and 'bald rotundities'- Bennett wrote to him years later, in 1920, telling him 'You are indeed the father of all my Five Town books.' One could comment that Moore had appropriated the scenery of the Potteries for dramatic effect, without truly inhabiting it: but Bennett knew that they were his own, and that he could make them his own.

Many of us will have experienced, when young, such epiphanies as that attributed to young Edwin- the moments when perception suddenly became clear, when we saw the grandeur of a building, the turn of a street, the view of a river, the force of a painting, with new eyes. I was brought up in South Yorkshire- in Pontefract, where we were evacuated during the war, and then in Sheffield- and early developed what some have considered a perverse taste for the industrial landscape, and for what I came to call the Industrial Sublime. This is concept and

a phrase which I thought I had coined in 1979 in my book on landscape, *A Writer's Britain*, though it has since been widely used by art historians. An admiration for the work of Bennett, who was very present in our household, was a natural companion to this interest, though Bennett's own views on the industrial sublime were complex. Factory chimneys, cooling towers, furnaces and pylons were all part of the imagery of the Midlands and the North, and we English have long had a stubborn affection for our dark Satanic mills. As a schoolgirl, I was drawn to The Pylon School of Poetry of the 1930s, which featured pylons, power stations, canals, trains and trams, and which included as practitioners Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice. It has been much mocked, but not by me. I particularly admired Spender's description of pylons as 'those pillars bare like nude giant girls that have no secret', which is often described as ridiculous. Some may consider Spender's poem as self-conscious attitudinising, but I don't. Not for me the stance of the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, who is said to have declared 'The more telegraph poles I see, the more angels I shall paint'. Bennett and I were on the side of the pylons and the telegraph poles.

Some views and regions have become identified with individual painters and writers, and we will always see them through their lens- a theme which I explored in *A Writer's Britain* first published in 1979. May I give a brief history of this volume, which originally sprang from an idea of the Polish-born photographer Jorge Lewinski (1921-2008), celebrated for having made photographic portraits of all the eminent British artists of the age- Francis Bacon, Lowry, David Hockney, Brigid Riley, and many others. He came to me with a series of photographs of writers' houses on which he'd been working some time, and asked me if I would write some text to go with them. I think he was thinking of something along the line of extended captions, but I found the subject of writers' houses somewhat limited, and became much more interested in the way in which writers and their work had been formed by the landscapes they inhabited, and in turn had formed the way subsequent generations saw and experienced them. So the text and my research ran away with me, and between us we assembled a series of essays in print and image of various aspects of the British landscape- and pertinent to us here today is the chapter on the Industrial Scene, which of course features Arnold Bennett, and some fine photographs of Burslem's canal and churchyards. I enjoyed delving into the history of Burke's theories of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and our changing attitudes towards

industrial scenes such as Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, and Neath and Merthyr Tydfil in Wales.

These scenes were famously celebrated by writers and travellers such as Arthur Young and George Borrow, who attributed a Miltonic grandeur to the palaces of Satan, and the Potteries were also easy to illustrate and to link to literature. Other striking scenes were less amenable. One of Lewinski's photographic studies was of the slate quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog, to which I could not then find a literary parallel, though we were both anxious to include it- I had to make do with not-wholly-appropriate and in every sense anachronistic quotes from J.R.R.Tolkien about Iron Mountains and quarry-digging dwarfs, about Mount Doom and the smoking chasms of Gorgoroth. That's because I hadn't then read that greater genius, John Cowper Powys, who actually chose to spend his old age in Blaenau- in fact he didn't write much about the slate quarries either, though he wrote a great deal about sublime Snowdonia. But something about Blaenau Ffestiniog appealed to his ancient Welsh werewolf soul, and it became a place of pilgrimage for his devoted admirers.

Industrial scenery is no longer considered a bizarre taste. It has come full circle from its earlier vogue as the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century romantic-sublime. L. S. Lowry – a little late in the day, from his point of view- now attracts a wealthy and growing clientele for his somewhat stylized industrial streets, factory scenes, and bomb sites, and we think and talk of places as 'looking like a Lowry'. He has become a classic point of reference and his works fetch high prices. We warm to industrial views, and at the extreme end of the landscape spectrum we even like watching a good blow down- the blowing down of some of Didcot's famous towers recently was witnessed with respect and wonder, and had to be carried out almost secretly for fear it would attract too many spectators. In September of this year, the press and TV and some of the public enjoyed the demolition of Kent's Landmark 801 foot power station chimney, and Jez Butterworth's 2009 play *Parlour Song* features as hero or anti-hero a demolition expert, Ned. Butterworth's work lives in the interspace between city and country, in a strange borderland. He has admitted that he developed his fascination for demolition while watching 'those films of tower blocks coming down on telly', and as a boy he says he wanted to ask *Jim'll Fix it* to arrange for him to blow up a room.

This borderland, regarded both with affection and with a degree of horror, was also familiar to and much described by D. H. Lawrence and Alan Sillitoe, both born in the industrial Midlands, where town and country so intimately interpenetrate. (There is a new word for it- 'edgelands'- coined by geographer and environmentalist Marion Shoard in 2011-2012, and adopted by poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts : the edgelands have their own poetry.) Charles Tomlinson, a poet and artist of this neighbourhood, celebrated – or perhaps we should say mourned- the life of allotments, another feature of the mixed industrial-rural landscape: Tomlinson's poem 'John Maydew, or the Allotment' speaks of the green paradise of flowering beans where you may smell 'the cinders of quotidian hell beneath you'- and the returned soldier who must choose between

an England, profitlessly green

and this—

a seamed and lunar grey

where slag in lavafolds

unrolls beneath him.

Martin Parr, photographer, ever awake to the beauty of the urban, the post-industrial and the odd, has taken many documentary photographs of the Black Country, including a striking sequence evoking Black Country allotments, in collaboration with his wife, Susan Parr. In 2015 I went to a conference in Plymouth where he and photographer Mark Power showed an impressive range of Black Country work, commissioned by a Community Arts project called Multistory, based in West Bromwich- an astonishing range of urban images, both of dereliction and of survival.

And I must mention here in this 'edgelands' context Prunella Clough, very much a painter of the industrial and the post-industrial landscape, and a painter who, like Lowry, can be identified with certain very English though largely uncelebrated views and aspects- she's one of those artists whose name springs to my mind whenever I see certain configurations or views. Just as we can say to ourselves 'That's a Lowry' – or , more rurally, 'that's a Paul Nash' so I often say to myself 'That's a Prunella Clough'. In her earlier work, in flight from the polite floral still-life considered suitable for a female artist, she favoured well worked subjects such as cranes, gasometers, and cooling towers, with echoes of the work of Fernand Leger, but as she matured she edged towards abstraction, paying attention to what she called 'unconsidered wastelands', favouring broken fences, disconnected bits of machinery, electrical circuits and

wiring, building sites, piles of rubble and telegraph poles. She seems to have had a particular fondness for rustic telegraph poles with their dangling wires and white ceramic bobbins- eyesores that she saw as strangely beautiful. She liked all the bits that Burne-Jones left out.

Let me return now from the post-industrial edgelands to the industrial sublime in all its dark glory, and to what many consider Bennett's finest short story, *The Death of Simon Fuge*. Here he addresses the differences between provincial and metropolitan culture- with provincial culture coming off distinctly better- and evokes the aesthetic of the sublime, which he contrasts with the aesthetic of the avant-garde and the decadent. As we know, he was personally an admirer of the adventurous in art, a bold and passionate defender of the Post-Impressionists and the Ballets Russes, a purchaser of modernist works by Modigliani and Hermann-Paul and Matisse (he bought a Matisse for 25 guineas in 1928 from the Leicester galleries), and of slightly decadent fin-de-siècle erotic works by the Belgian artist Felicien Rops: he was not a conservative or a traditionalist, and he did not admire the taste of Auntie Hamps. He considered himself a connoisseur of the new.

Simon Fuge has as narrator one Mr Loring, a Devon-born curator of antiquities at the British Museum, a porcelain expert paying his first visit to the Five Towns, 'to inspect and appraise, with a view to purchase by the nation, some huge slip-decorated dishes, excessively curious according to photographs, which had been discovered in the cellars of the Conservative Club at Bursley.' On the train he reads in his London evening paper of the death at San Remo of the avant-garde (we assume) painter Simon Fuge, originally from the Potteries, but now celebrated in death throughout Europe- though not, as the Gazette laments, like most prophets, in his own land. The story follows Loring's introduction to the industrial landscape, and his induction into the hectic (and hard-drinking) social and cultural life of Bursley, in a long night of revelry and revelation. The southerner Loring, as he travels by train from Knype with his host, the architect Mr. Brindley, is struck by 'the singular scenery of coal dust, potsherds, flame and steam...It was squalid ugliness on a scale so vast and overpowering that it became sublime. Great furnaces gleamed red in the twilight, and their fires were reflected in horrible black canals; processions of heavy vapour drifted in all directions across the sky, over what acres of

mean and miserable brown architecture! The air was alive with the most extraordinary, weird gigantic sounds. I do not think the Five Towns will ever be described: Dante lived too soon. And as for the erratic and exquisite genius, Simon Fuge, and his odalisques reclining on silken cushions on the enchanted bosom of a lake- I could no loner conjure them even faintly in my mind.'

Loring and Brindley arrive 'at an incredible station, situated in the centre of a rolling desert whose surface consisted of broken pots and cinders', and move on through domestic dramas and musical epiphanies to a sighting in the Wedgwood Institution of a 'masterful and imperishable' little picture by Simon Fuge, 'of a very young girl, very thin, with long legs in black stockings and a short untidy frock; thin bare arms; the head thrown on one side, and the hands raised...the thing was not much more than a sketch...but it was genius. Once you had yielded to it, there was no other picture in the room. It killed everything else...- and it was Simon Fuge's unconscious, proud challenge to the Five Towns...it was his scorn, his aristocratic disdain, his positive assurance that in the battle between them he had annihilated the Five Towns...'

They move on from this unappreciated masterpiece to a marathon evening of drinks in the Tiger, and to variant versions of the true story of the sister odalisques on the enchanted lake, and to barmaid Annie Brett, and to homes with yet more music, and yet more talk about books, and yet more drinks- during the course of his brief visit, Loring gets through beer, burgundy, green Chartreuse, Irish whisky, and champagne. The balancing act between metropolitan values and the values of the Five Towns, between art and life and art and football, between the domestic and the public, between the everyday and the eternal, between sublimity and subtlety, is superbly maintained, to an extent that it is impossible to say who won the challenge- the artist, or the Five Towns. And the interactions are so complex that I always forget details of the plot, and find something new each time I read the story. As Loring leaves in the morning, he knows he has seen a world that he has never entered before- 'a strange place, a place that is passing strange!'

I'd like to finish with a few words about the denizens of the industrial sublime- the miners, the quarrying dwarfs of Tolkien's tales, the potters. The sublime dwarfs the human. (Neither Lowry nor Prunella Clough were very good at the human figure.) Miners and ship welders have frequently

appeared in art on a heroic scale – there is no shortage of their epic and often patriotic images- think of Henry Moore’s miners- but other industrial workers appear perhaps less often in art or literature.

Julian Trevelyan’s interesting oil painting of *The Potteries* (c.1938) which hangs in Tate Britain is accompanied by a caption in which he writes of ‘a landscape full of drama and pathos’ where ‘human beings seem to creep about almost apologetically among the manmade disasters’. Trevelyan, of course, like George Moore, was not of the Potteries: he was a researcher and observer looking for material. In 1937-8 he worked with Mass-Observation, visiting Bolton and Blackpool, and making collages landscapes out of newspaper scraps and ephemera: but in late 1938 (and I quote now from Mel Goodings’ entry on him in the ODNB) ‘inspired by the expressive authenticity of ‘unprofessional painting’, and excited by the infernal landscapes of the Potteries, he adopted a deliberately gauche painterly manner and a vehement colourism. This expressionist style matched his response to the vitality and violence of industrialism, and later to the fevered atmosphere of London during the blitz of 1940...’

Trevelyan’s remarks about the human beings creeping about apologetically amongst manmade disasters might strike a chord with some of us. But let Bennett have the last words. He didn’t see the human beings of *The Potteries* in that light. Again, I quote from *Simon Fuge*, and Loring’s first impressions on the railway station:

So much crude force and naked will-to-live I had not before set eyes on. In truth, I felt myself to be a very brittle, delicate bit of intellectual machinery in the midst of all these physical manifestations. Yet I am a tallish man, and these potters appeared to me to be undersized, and somewhat thin too! But what elbows! What glaring egoistic eyes! What terrible decisiveness in action!

Nothing apologetic about these potters.

As we know, Bennett never returned to make his home in this region. He created the Five Towns while living in France, and eventually settled in London. He was a European, who knew and loved the Continent. But he knew the Five Towns, as James Joyce knew Dublin. He knew the crude force and naked will-to-live. He paid his homage to the Industrial Sublime, and to those who worked in it. He represents the paradox of memory, which dwells on places it has left behind, and

records them even as they change and disappear. We will forever see these landscapes through his eyes.

(Trevelyan, incidentally, also painted Pylons in 1938)

Margaret Drabble 2016 November