

The Common Cause

In *Geoscientist* in July 2010 I proposed a search for the best geological poetry, offering the prospect of an evening of high culture in Burlington House. Thanks to the outstanding efforts of our very own Literary Trio of Sarah Day, Michael McKimm and Ted Nield, the inaugural Geological Society Poetry Day, on 10 October 2011, became something quite special. Just how special you can judge for yourself in this brand-new poetry section of the website.

Here you will find, on film prepared by the indefatigable Kevin Perry, the talks given during the day and the verse read in the evening, linked to copies of the poems themselves. Even a song: folk-singer Mike Excell's ominous ballad *Proof in the Puddingstone* had its London premiere.

Our resident poet Michael McKimm persuaded notable literary figures to join Fellows and guests for the day. Judge for yourself the standard of verse, from poets and Fellows alike. If you could not be with us on Poetry Day, enjoy the website now, maybe react, and consider getting involved in the next event. Submit your own poems to Michael, as a claim on literary as well as geological immortality. Listen, please, to 'Field Notebook' by Barbara Cumbers, which for me sets the standard to which we all might aspire.

Where will this lead? I'm delighted to say that I don't know, for never have I instigated a project that has moved so rapidly and wonderfully beyond the control of an individual. Yet I am a geologist, so I do nurse a practical hope: that our poetry will help to establish true environmental conviction where our scientific prose has failed us. We geologists will need every edge we can gain as the world glides into the Anthropocene, in a fashion brilliantly framed for us on Poetry Day by Jan Zalasiewicz.

Which contemporary poets will best express our 21st century view of our relationship with Earth? Who can capture the intellectual revolution involved in our transition to a looming Anthropocene? Who will emulate Milton and Tennyson?

First, *Paradise Lost*:

“The ark no more now floats, but seems on ground,
Fast on the top of some high mountain fixed.
And now the tops of hills as rocks appear;
With the clamour thence the rapid currents drive
Towards the retreating sea their furious tide.”

Then, through such early geological heroes, Lavoisier, Hutton, Smith and Lyell, to *In Memoriam*:

“The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
The melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.”

We have travelled from a feeling of mastery over all Earth’s creatures, to passivity in the face of geological forces apparently way beyond our control, to a growing apprehension that we may be marking our own stewardship of the blue planet in a fashion we would not wisely choose. Poets and geologists have a common cause: a search for words to help us to understand what we do.

Bryan Lovell

President of The Geological Society 2010 – 12