



Authorgraph No.64 - Charles Causley

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Charles Causley was interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

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*Mary, Mary Magdalene
lying on the wall,
I throw a pebble on your back,
Will it lie or fall?*

When my pebble landed on Mary Magdalene's back I *knew* I was lucky, not just because local folklore says so, but because I was walking round Launceston with Charles Causley as my guide. Not only did I see the ravishing Mary Magdalene Church and hear the stories associated with it, but I was also shown eagle one and two, peering down from the top of an elegant house with Britannia beside them. Those familiar with Causley's poetry will immediately recognise the sites of two of Causley's best loved poems from **Figgie Hobbin**, his earliest collection for children.

Launceston, the town where Causley was born, grew up, and where he still lives today, is a fascinating place, the old capital of Cornwall. As the seat of the judiciary, Launceston had a grisly record of public executions and the like. A grim prison dominated the town centre with the remains of a castle and what was once a walled town. Causley grew up in a place where the past cast its spell on the present; the games he played, the rhymes he chanted, the stories he knew backwards were all steeped in the town's riveting and macabre history, relics of which were all around him. Causley's words in the introduction to **The Puffin Book of Magic Verse** seem extremely apt: .. folk memories of our long crawl out of the prehistoric cave into the sun of reason will awaken easily.' One brief trip to Launceston was enough to explain the inspiration and genesis of much of Causley's work.

He is a delightful man, even more fascinating and entertaining than his poetry promised. Any sense of a poet limited by living in a quiet backwater should be dismissed at once. (He has, of course, travelled widely.) The many books covering every possible surface of the Causley study reveal an intellectual with a breadth of interests. He is also modest, down to earth, laughs a lot and doesn't believe in taking himself too seriously, even though he is now Causley, CBE.

Causley attended the local primary school in Launceston of which he was later to be teacher himself for twenty-five years. He was a keen reader from a young age, but he didn't remember much exposure to poetry in his early years of schooling except 'a faint-hearted attempt to interest us in Christopher Robin ... he didn't go down terribly well with me or anybody else in the National school in the late 1920s - he might as well have come from outer space!' Later at Grammar school Causley showed obvious promise as a writer and was introduced to the Georgian poets whom he found boring, preferring the resonances of 'Young Lochinvar' and 'Ozymandias'. 'Great stuff!'

What Causley did remember with affection was his old headteacher (soon to figure prominently in his forthcoming **The Young Man of Cury**), a fine musician, pumping away furiously on the harmonium as he took the whole school for mass singing lessons through the entire repertoire of Cecil Sharp's extensive collection of English folk songs. Causley

has always been drawn to the musical side of poetry and he is much admired for his own body of wonderful ballads. He has also devoted a lot of time to writing for Music Theatre, often composing between books of poetry.

As a teenager in the thirties, Causley and his contemporaries involved themselves in the usual activities of that age group, drinking, dancing and, in his case, playing for the local dance band. But they were well aware of events in Europe and the inevitability of war. 'We all followed the terrible progress of the Spanish Civil War... I remember coming home, having my dinner and hearing accounts of the bombing of Madrid... you knew it was all going to happen again. ..'What made Causley angry then and still does today is that 'if you had any intelligence at all it was perfectly clear what was happening to the Jews in Europe...'

It was the fact that poets like Auden, Spender and MacNeice were prepared to speak the truth that attracted Causley as a young man to poetry and he has never moved away from that position. 'The interesting thing about the poem... for me ... is that there's always a sub-text... the skin of the poem is never what it's really about...'

Causley writes for both an adult and juvenile readership and doesn't discriminate seriously between the two. His **Collected Poems** contains much of the body of work on the children's list, as well as his adult books. Causley does *not* believe that writing for a younger audience is light relief. He offers them challenges and mystery like the poem 'Why?', based on a childhood memory:

*Why do you take my hand,
Susanna,
As the pointing flames jump high?
It's only a bundle of sacking and
straw.
Nobody's going to die.*

It's hard to feel the same about that macabre annual ritual after reading this uneasy poem. As the author says, 'it's a thin dividing line between ecstasy and terror.'

Readers of Causley are drawn to his work because of its musicality and because the poetry feels so rich and deep, although it is often an apparently simple tale on the surface. 'The great problem (in writing poetry) is to achieve these resonances and hints and suggestions and reverberations and it's an endlessly difficult and endlessly fascinating task to get the thing to work somehow or other. ..'And, of course, he succeeds wonderfully. Causley is now seventy-three, clearly at the height of his power, and there are several new collections in the pipeline.

Causley produced one of the earliest anthologies of contemporary poetry for children, **Dawn and Dusk**, in 1962. Since then he has compiled three of the finest anthologies of the twentieth century for the young. Clever Kaye Webb to snap him up for Puffin in the early seventies. **The Puffin Book of Magic Verse** begins thus: 'All poetry is magic. It is a spell against insensitivity, failure of imagination, ignorance, and barbarism.' Wow! Causley is a creative and scholarly editor: 'The rule of thumb I had about anthologising was never to make an anthology from other anthologies. It's got to be fresh. I don't think you can do an anthology in under a couple of years. The work should be of the first order. If you think Arnold should be represented, you read the whole of Arnold first.' Bravo!

Causley subsidised his passion for writing by teaching until the early seventies. He insists that he wasn't a particularly good teacher: 'too short a fuse... too strong a sense of humour...'The more Causley told me (always deprecatingly) about the way he approached the kids and the curriculum, the more convinced I was that he was a superb, natural teacher. His approach to teaching poetry was simple. Apart from the necessity of reading children a wide range of poetry first, he believed in giving children time, space and freedom. 'I've never set a subject... write about something you feel strongly about... first-hand experience ... get it out of life... let them make the decisions about it all... they know exactly how a poem should look, the shape, how long it should be... and they can space out their emotions in a remarkable kind of way, like little bursts of gunfire... I would only put the spelling right so that when the poem was typed out for our anthology, adults wouldn't snigger because of spelling mistakes... who worries about that?' Embedded within those

apparently casual comments is a whole philosophy about poetry and education.

One thing Causley did like about teaching was the children. 'I was determined to enjoy myself. I never went to school with a heavy heart. I used to set off feeling like a nineteenth-century explorer with a butterfly net... and all the wrong equipment? as if I was going into undiscovered territory... you never knew what was going to happen.' He deplored the large classes, the crowded curriculum and too little time, especially for those kids who found learning difficult. Causley didn't think he would have got on too well with the National Curriculum! And he marvelled that it was often the children without many literary skills who, wrote the best poetry, 'somehow jabbing down something from their own experience'. A great humanity for, and admiration of, children came over strongly. 'If you get kids on your side they'll die for you... they're heroic... I love the way they go flat out at things... they're economically unsound, physically small ... and they're often badly treated by adults who fail to understand them...'

The main influences on Causley as a poet have been the circumstances of his own life. Living in Cornwall, the feel for the natural world and the sea; the folklore associated with that part of the world; his partiality for music including all kinds of songs; his compassion for the underdog, partly stemming from his working-class roots, his humane beliefs and his hatred of Auden's twentieth-century ogres, particularly intolerance. Then there was Causley's family and his deep attachment to his parents. His father died quite a young man in 1924 from the effects of the First World War. The pain of this experience is suggested in some of Causley's poetry, like this extract from 'Tavistock Goose Fair':

*Today, I hardly remember
my father's face;
Only the shine of his boot-and-
legging leather
The day we walked the yellow
October weather;
Only the way he strode at a
soldier's pace,
The way he stood like a soldier of
the line;
Only the feel of his iron hand
in mine.*

Causley's mother was a great fund of stories and memories, one of the most celebrated of which is 'My Mother Saw a Dancing Bear'. It is typical Causley - a good story, simply told, with a strong, understated message.

*They paid a penny for the dance,
But what they saw was not the
show;
Only, in bruin's aching eyes,
Far-distant forests, and the snow.*

One of the most remarkable things about Causley is how closely in touch he remains with himself as a child. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why he is such a good writer for children. The final poem in **Figgie Hobbin**, 'Who?', is a good example.

*Who is that child I see wandering,
wandering
Down by the side of the quivering
stream?
Why does he seem not to hear,
though I call to him?
Where does he come from, and
what is his name?*

Echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson's 'To Any Reader': *and it is but a child of air/who lingers in the garden there.*

When asked why he doesn't write his autobiography, Causley replies:

'There's not much to say apart from the poems... as Rebecca West said, "You can't be sick off the same meal twice!"
This captures Causley so well - his lively sense of humour and his serious commitment to poetry.

*Why does he move like a wraith
by the water,
Soft as the thistledown on the
breeze blown?
When I draw near him so that I
may hear him,
Why does he say that his name is
my own?*

Photographs by David Hills.

A Charles Causley bibliography

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