

Charles Tomlinson At Brook Cottage

INTERVIEW BY JULIAN STANNARD

Searching my verse, to read what I'd once said,
It was the names on names of friends I read
And yours in every book, that made me see
How love and friendship nurture poetry.
— 'A Backward Glance'

The weather forecast less than promising, we set off in the midst of the summer's floods for Gloucestershire. Charles and Brenda Tomlinson have lived in their isolated cottage in the west of the county for half a century. Tomlinson, who was eighty in January, is now Emeritus Professor at the University of Bristol. The most recent of his many collections is *Cracks In The Universe* (2006). He last gave an interview in 1999, to Willard Spiegelman from *The Paris Review*: Spiegelman was astonished by the remoteness of the setting, its Englishness, and the fact that there wasn't a telephone in the house. For some years Charles Tomlinson has been battling with failing sight, having suffered an ill-fated operation in the 1990s. Brenda has, to some extent, become his eyes. She cooked a wonderful lunch; later, we sat in the garden and drank tea. The sun shone. For almost an hour, it was summer.

I'd like to start by asking about Donald Davie, who was a great champion of your work. I'm thinking of his 'Some Shires Revisited' which ends "Your love of our country has not been returned, and won't be." In the last few years there have been several critical appraisals of your work. Late and timely recognition?

CT: As you've mentioned Donald Davie, I have to say that it was Donald who saved my bacon at Cambridge.

Can you say more about that? You went up to Cambridge in 1945 and he was your tutor in your final year.

CT: Well, the thing he always used to say was "Who is the tutor and who is the student?" Because I was able to tell him a lot of things he didn't know and

he was telling me a lot of things I didn't know.

You were talking to each other about poetry?

CT: By the time I'd got to Cambridge I'd already had some brilliant school-teachers at Longton High School in Stoke-on-Trent, where I was born and brought up. There was a fine French teacher and there was an exiled German Jew. He was a man one could talk to and who taught me so much. As teachers, the exiled Jews knew so much more than any ordinary teacher in England. I had so much French and German literature at my fingertips which Donald just didn't know. In fact I went up to Cambridge with Rilke in my pocket. For a long time German was my best language. Of course when I got into Italian I found something else!

What was Cambridge like at that particular moment?

CT: Well, the people left there were people who weren't particularly good. I wanted to get out of it all but Brenda persuaded me to stay on.

Cambridge was a disappointment?

CT: Utterly, there was so much dead wood because all the young people had gone away to the war. And then entered Donald Davie and so began this wonderful relationship.

It was a relationship that continued until Davie's death in 1995. What was Davie like? Wasn't he a rather cantankerous figure?

CT: He wasn't at that point. He'd just come out of the Navy and he was full of enthusiasm about teaching at Cambridge; and he was reading widely and we were introducing so many things to each other. And later I became a great admirer of *Articulate Energy*. The cantankerousness set in at a later stage because he rather felt his poetry had been neglected.

After his death in 1995 I thought his work might have been re-visited in a more sympathetic light. Do you think his work has failed to enjoy the recognition it deserves?

CT: Yes, I think you have a point.

In 'A Doggerel for my Seventieth Birthday' you talk of prizes which are "handled by a clique / Who haunt each other's parties week by week." Davie used to say that the neglect of your work in this country was a national disgrace.

CT: Well, I couldn't say that about myself!

Let's move beyond the Cambridge period.

CT: I ought to tell you about getting published. Here in England Peter Russell was publishing me in *Nine*; but really my first publications came about thanks to Princess Caetani, an American by birth married to an Italian Prince. She ran a magazine called *Botteghe Oscure*. And one day, now that she knew something of my work, she said "Tell me about yourself" so I let out this great wail of horror! It was a period when I just felt utterly isolated.

You'd left Cambridge by then and were working in a school in London?

CT: Yes I was imprisoned as an elementary school teacher and that was when I let out my scream to Princess Caetani. And she spoke of this possibility of going to Italy to work as a secretary to Percy Lubbock, the author of *The Craft of Fiction*. And I thought this was marvellous, going to Italy! Lubbock was living in a villa called Gli Scafari between Lerici and Fiascherino on the Ligurian coast.

Can you say something about that first visit to Italy in 1951?

CT: It was an incredible phase of Italian history. Italy was just coming out of the war.

And to be in the employ of this rather Jamesian figure, this grand seigneur?

CT: Well, he changed his mind, didn't he! I was supposed to read to him and he probably didn't like my northern accent.

You write about this in 'Class'. The ending's quite mischievous: "Still, I'd always thought him an ass / which he pronounced arse. There's no accounting for taste."

CT : Well there you are.

Suddenly you were unemployed and homeless on the Italian Riviera?

CT: Thanks to the Marchesa Origo, the stepdaughter, an arrangement was made. We moved into a *villino* in the grounds and lived on a small allowance. Actually it was a marvellous moment because we ended up living in one end of the gardener's house so they became our friends and we were now in the real Italian world. So despite my misfortune I was quite happy.

And in this less rarefied environment you discover the hill-top village of La Serra and the young dialect poet Paolo Bertolani, and you later came to write that extraordinary poem 'Up at La Serra', which is one of your many Ligurian poems.

CT: The first thing Paolo said to me was *Sono un poeta* (I'm a poet!) and I said *Anch'io!* (Me too!). It got us very close together. Paolo became our chief link with Italian society. And when I went back to Liguria, Paolo was now known as a poet and he knew other poets such as Vittorio Sereni and Attilio Bertolucci, whom he introduced me to. Paolo became very important. Not to mention the Lerici Festival which we went to year after year after year. I always ended up doing a talk in Italian which meant reading Giorgio Caproni and Eugenio Montale, so it put me in touch with Italian traditions. Many years later I re-discovered Paolo. He was still living in the village and I wrote an elegy for his wife, Graziella. It's called 'The Return'.

The Liguria you describe in the 1950s was a place of economic suffering. In 'The Return', in fact, you refer to it as "a place of poverty and splendour".

CT: It was a poverty you cannot imagine. It was poverty that went beyond anything in this country. Paolo Bertolani himself earned a few pence chopping wood. Nobody had a job. And those few pence he spent on books. Yet they were very hospitable.

In 2001 you wrote a piece for the Genoese newspaper Il Secolo entitled 'It Began Here' and you pay homage to this early Italian visit, saying that the Ligurian experience helped you write your first real poems.

CT: Well, I suppose above all it has something to do with the light – the mysteries of light, sea, rock – all of which became part of my poetic and moral vocabulary. So I suppose, notwithstanding our clash over English vowels, I do owe something to Percy Lubbock!

Now living with the gardener, did you have anything more to do with Lubbock?

CT: I was doing a lot of painting then. The comic thing was that Lubbock would bring his guests round. So though I'd been chucked out he'd insist on bringing his guests and on one occasion he brought E.M. Forster. He got me to show my paintings. "What a fancy he has!" Lubbock used to say, and there was Forster absolutely bored stiff. He didn't react whatsoever. But he did talk about literature and he suggested that I looked him up at King's when I got back to England. Which I did. I had lunch with him and that was quite a pleasant moment.

I've read that on this first Italian visit you had The Pisan Cantos tucked away in your bag. Reading Pound in the 1950s, up the coast from Rapallo, meant that you were reading him in situ.

CT: You could learn so much from reading Pound. How to handle the line. To begin with, Pound was a very great poet. From Pound I learnt a lot, and in a way Pound also opened up Italy to me. I later met him at the Spoleto Festival in 1967, the same year I met Octavio Paz. But of course Pound wasn't speaking by then.

Davie had also developed an interest in Pound, and he was now questioning the provincial nature of the Movement. Do you think this interest in Pound put you in a camp quite removed from Larkin and Co?

CT: I loathed Larkin's promotion of the suburban mental ratio and I didn't want to get into that. I had no temptation.

Did you ever meet Larkin?

CT: No I never did, I never tried.

In the 1940s and 50s you'd been reading Wallace Stevens but then you got hold of William Carlos Williams. Can you say something about this new literary involvement?

CT: No one was really interested in American poetry at that time. I'd had this correspondence with Williams and then in 1959 the Americans set up a scholarship which allowed six European writers to travel anywhere they liked in the United States for six months. I was chosen from England and I

went along with the likes of Günter Grass and Italo Calvino. Brenda came too, I insisted on that.

What was it like meeting William Carlos Williams? Were you awe-struck?

CT: I wasn't in awe, he wasn't a man who awed you. He was very natural. It was Denise Levertov who took me along to meet him the very first time.

You were conversing with another great American modernist. You were determined to tap into non-English traditions?

CT: I never thought about it that way. I did it because I realised what I had to do. It was more instinctive than anything else. I had no particular theory about it but I dare say I was learning from Williams.

What were you learning?

CT: I was learning that I could break up cadences without collapsing into chaos. There's a stringency about Williams' writing which helped me.

Was it on this visit that you met Georgia O'Keeffe?

CT: That was later in 1962/3 – when I had taken up a Visiting Professorship at the University of New Mexico. And on that trip I also got to meet George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, the Objectivists. I came to review George Oppen's *The Materials*, his first book for twenty-five years and then I got in touch with George. Oppen's been to Brook Cottage many times. This sofa I'm sitting on, he mended it!

From Williams to the Objectivists, not to mention Marianne Moore and Robert Creeley, you seem to be chasing the Americans?

CT: I just admired these people because I saw they knew things I didn't know and that I could learn from, mostly to do with their handling of the line. But Zukofsky would be a difficult man to follow. He was very stimulating to be with but I couldn't really do anything with his writing.

In Some Americans you talk about meeting Georgia O'Keeffe. A granddaughter of Mabel Dodge Luhan came for lunch. Mabel had given Kiowa ranch to D.H Lawrence as a gift.

CT: I was crazy about Lawrence. I did my thesis on Lawrence. Well actually it was a study of Lawrence, Wordsworth, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. In 1963, after we'd finished that year in Albuquerque, we went to live on the Lawrence ranch which was very unappreciated then. I wrote a poem about a coyote there. Someone had killed one and strung it up.

Even your post-graduate thesis shows you bridging traditions. We're sitting in Brook Cottage, this quintessentially English dwelling, and I'm wondering how you've held together these many influences.

CT: We never really thought of Brook Cottage as just some remote English idyll. We just thought it was a live place to live. In a sense all these places – Italy, Mexico, America – are all of a piece for us. The centre of our existence was the muse and poetry and so you reach out to wherever it is and there was hardly a year we didn't go somewhere for poetry readings – Israel, Japan, Germany. And the Americans were always holding out professorships.

You're a poet who travels in order to return. Davie ended up more or less emigrating to the States. But you never chose the road of the exile?

CT: When Davie left Stanford they got in touch and offered me the post. I drank it down like a bottle of whisky. Wonderful! We didn't have a telephone so we walked up the hill in the snow, having thought about it for three days and I thanked them very much and explained that we couldn't possibly leave this place. So we walked back in the snow thinking of all that Californian sunshine!

In 'Jubilación' you refer to your then neighbour Bruce Chatwin who wasn't so "smitten with this spot". You go on to write "I prefer to go / And to return".

CT: Oh yes. This isn't just a cottage, it's more than a cottage. This is the place!

Given that half of Gloucestershire's under water, it seems timely to remember your poem 'The Flood'. You've always been interested in the medium of water, now you were being overrun by it.

CT: It was 1966, I think. We're getting old! We were bailing water out of a window. We started with tea-cups and went onto buckets. It was terrifying. When went to bed we could hear the roar, we were surrounded by water. But the next morning it had stopped and the sun was shining and it was quite

gorgeous (“the vertigo of sunbeams everywhere”). Brenda had always wanted to go to Venice! But you’re right about the water invading us, all the streams of Gloucestershire congregating here.

Notwithstanding your frequent journeying, your ease with several languages, it seems to me that you’re actually a very English poet digging into a Romantic hinterland.

CT: Absolutely. I think Wordsworth was so important to me and Coleridge, especially the conversation poems.

But you’re always schooling the temptations of the sublime, keeping an eye on solipsistic flights and mythological extravagance.

CT: Yes and that all becomes part of my engagement with Octavio Paz. We wrote to each other for thirty years. It was a very close correspondence. I was interested in the continuum of nature rather than any exotic ecstasies. I say something about this in that poem ‘In The Fullness of Time’. Octavio was into Indian mythology but I was more interested in considering “the beauty of succession / That Breton denied”. I wasn’t into mythological closure and surreal fancy. Octavio was marvellous but I began to itch a bit at times.

Eco-criticism is the new thing in the Academy. Were you an eco-poet before they invented the term?

CT: Perhaps I was! But I do hate labels being stuck onto me!

But in your writing you’re always asking the reader to look un-waveringly at nature, to acknowledge what Merleau-Ponty called the primacy of perception.

CT: Nature, it’s a physical thing. Yes Merleau-Ponty helped me with this, as well as Cézanne’s selfless visual poetic. Nature’s physical in a way that goes beyond “soppy” versions of Romanticism. I only have to look out of that window in the morning to see that nature isn’t mine.

