

ALASDAIR EOIN ASTON (G41-48)

He was born on 21 June 1930 and after attending Pembroke College, Cambridge has become a prize-winning poet. He is one of an illustrious line of poets to go to Pembroke College, including Spenser, Grey, Smart and Ted Hughes.



While at Cambridge he composed a poem called "Gloriana Rediviva", which he read in The Senate House at Cambridge University on the sunny afternoon of 6 June 1953. The title was set by the Examiners and was reference to the rebirth of a Queen Elizabeth with an added hint it was the 350th anniversary of the First's demise. The poem won the Chancellor's Medal for English Verse that year and recitation was attended by Kirkman and Winstanley who, immediately the poem was finished, gave Aston a wave and set off for the bumps on the River. The following is sections IV and V out of a 6 part poem.

Gloriana Rediviva

IV

The tide turns back to London where I hear
The breath of dying Gaunt, a swelling sea
Has risen round the Globe. The cornered sphere
Just circled by a sailor on his boards
Rings to the sound Elizabeth, for she
Can hold the stars about her, draw the cords
Of treasure bales to Tilbury, and knows
The course to take between the schools of night.
Walking the lawns of England, Bacon shows
Her gardening for courts, which plots to lay
With favourites to execute, the white,
Vermilion and damask gillyflowers,
Mezereon and crocus gold and grey.
Leaping the low restraint of Pembroke walls
Spenser precedes the morning, plants the hours
With fairy woodlands answering till all
The shepherds of Arcadia proclaim
The rising sun Elizabeth, who turns
Americas beneath her, who repels
The smoky-poled Armada with a flame
Outspoken as her mind. A peace returns
Leaving us space in England for the bells
Calling the tide to London, time to sail
Across the mind's discovery, and dream

V

England bequeathes her majesty today,
Men from all ages grateful, young and old
Walk in the starlit fashion, will not stay,
Inheriting the meteor desire
Flying on spacious England. If you hold
Yourself a little quiet, if you wait
In Westminster the busy, or the choir
Of Coventry the blessed, if you stand
Still on a Malvern hilltop, by the gate
Saint Edmund left at Bury, if you will
Wake in a Warwick morning to the land
Growing to sound around you, you can break
The barriers of age if you stand still.
If you tune in to England here and now
Along her silver waves, if you once take
Her bearings down Tintagel, up the Tyne,
You know she leaves you all, that her rich vow
Voiced by succeeding monarchs – crown on time,
Wills you this gathering harvest, grants a dream
Easy as spacious England, leaves you free
As five miles' sky in April, high to dream
Among the weaving atoms in the blue
The latest English larksong for the Queen.

We freely spread our lives before the Queen.

He is a contributor to *Pembroke Poets* which is a book published by Pembroke College, Cambridge. There are poems of 50 poets from 1510 to the present day. In the book he is described as drawing on the experience as college rep for the English Society, as well as sitting on the General Council of the National Poetry Society. The book, which was published in 1997, celebrates the 650th anniversary of Pembroke College by Marie de St Pol (Valence in 1347).

He is an 8 times winner of the Seatonian Prize and has strong links with Suffolk natural history. You can read a lot more of Alasdair's poetry on the Suffolk Naturalist Society website at <http://www.boxvalley.co.uk/nature/sns/poems/index.html> The following drawing is one of many on this website, but this one has a particular relevance for OFs



The following article is taken from a 2004 OF Magazine :-

"We make no apologies for putting **Alasdair Aston (G41-48)** last in Features as he appeared with prominence last time but he sends us another prolific poetry contribution and we thought it best to keep the two Seatonian winners apart! The Linnean Society of Burlington House has published another Seatonian Prize, this time Alasdair's prize of 1994, one of eight years he has won the prize which is on the subject of "Anima naturaliter Christiana," the naturally Christian soul, and he wrote about Gilbert White, naturalist and clergyman who lived in Alasdair's village of Selborne. He points out that White's Selborne book has not been out of print since 1788.

The poem portrays White's interest in antiquities, in creatures behaving and in the life of the spirit. Out of the seven sections of the poem we have chosen section VI to reproduce which reads thus –

Your feet could tell the way the landscape altered
After your eye had taken in the sky
And massing clouds had broken up and faltered
Your feet could tell the way the counties lie.

One was a steady slope where sheep unnumbered
Moved at a steady pace away from rain
And light broke loose, its suddenness encumbered
By solid flocks that kept it back again.
Another was a ring of chimes and churches
Hidden by woods and folded under hills,
Telling the times through wind-assisted lurches -
Bells into clamour, clamour into stills.
The last was heavy clay that clung together
Leaf on the boot and moisture to the dry
So that you had the edge on any weather -
And knew the truth of how the land would lie. "

He died on 17th July 2010 aged 80. His funeral was held on Thursday 5th August 2010 at 2pm in St Mary's Church, Selborne. James Ruddock-Broyd provided the following :-

"I had just written to him asking him to compose a poem or carol for the Royal Signals Carol Service which always comprises very unusual pieces and specific compositions and was terribly shocked to get a note back from his widow to say that Alasdair's funeral was only 6 days before I had written and had intended to all the time since Christmas. And I now discover that Alasdair actually served in Royal Signals but did not know that and approached him as a Cambridge Poet.

In fact Alasdair died on holiday having been taken to Ipswich Hospital suffering from a ruptured aortic aneurisms. If only I had known I would loved to have attended the funeral and I would imagine there was not another OF present which is unfortunate as the second item in the service sheet is "Framlingham February" written by the deceased with another poem of his read out later on. He was a Cambridge Poet and got the Chancellors Medal in 1953. "

The following obituary, written by his wife, was published in the Guardian in September 2010 :-

My husband, Alasdair Aston, who has died aged 80, was a poet, teacher and naturalist. He was an active member of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society for most of his life. He started identifying moths at the age of six and, at 11, was invited by the distinguished entomologist Claude Morley to join the society. Alasdair became known affectionately as "the Mothman" and, later, was a fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and of the Linnean Society.

He was born in Inverness to Scottish parents. By the age of eight he was living in Stowmarket, Suffolk, an area he described as "a naturalist's paradise". His love of poetry began early, when his mother taught him Scottish ballads. He won a scholarship to Framlingham college in 1942 and, as he remembered, "My paradise was extended to the meres, woods and fields around this town."

*He was a keen sportsman, excelling in cross-country running. After sixth form came two years of national service (1948-50) in the Royal Signals, and he proudly reached the rank of lieutenant. He received his BA in English literature from Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he won the Chancellor's medal for the best poem in heroic verse, with his *Gloriana Rediviva*. He taught English in London, at Emanuel school, in Battersea, from 1954 to 1956, and then at Allyn's school, in Dulwich, from 1956 to 1967.*

Alasdair joined the Inner London Education Authority in 1968 and rose to become chief inspector for English. Meanwhile, he was chair of the Dulwich Poetry Group (1969-75) and was chair of the education committee of the Poetry Society (1970-79). Between 1973 and 1994 he won the Cambridge Seatonian prizes for poetry eight times. He retired in 1990.

His publications included seven collections of poetry by school students, papers on lepidoptera, various poems in books and journals, and Suffolk Boy (2009), the first collection of his poetry. This was shortlisted for the New Angle prize for literature. Five more poetry collections await publication.

Alasdair was an eloquent, witty, kind and gentle man, always spirited, positive and great fun. We enjoyed 31 years of very happy marriage. I survive him, along with his sister, Romaine, and his children, Roger and Rosamund, by his first wife, Dorothy.