

One Last Toll: Foreword

All verse is, in a sense, occasional, and readers who may know something of the occasion already will perhaps be not altogether indifferent to an account of the origins of a piece more occasional than many and of more limited interest than most: how I came to write the lines that remember the **Royal Shrewsbury School Hunt** as it once was and why I have radically reworked in 2012 what I originally wrote nearly 25 years ago¹. Early in 1988, the late Mark Mortimer, a versifier of rare talents, sent me a poem afterwards published in a selection (*Mort*, **The Greenbank Press**, 1997) taken from the verses that over many years he had contributed to the school's weekly broadsheet. One of these poems refers to 'a man' who had by then been living in Japan for a number of years:

It's happening at last

*Where many a bosky by-way
explored the countryside
appears a three-lane highway,
obscenely straight and wide,*

*and secret, rustic places
the Hunt meandered through
in rarely witnessed races
are opened up for view.*

*It had to be; so be it:
I'm thankful that a man**

¹ The **RSSH**, as I explain in my verses, is only in name a Hunt: the boys who in those days took part enjoyed running across country for its own sake. We naturally did our best to win our matches against other schools, but that was not the point: the point was our enjoyment of what Mark calls 'secret, rustic places'.

*who'd surely weep to see it
is safely in Japan.*

** W. J. Jones, master i/c Hunt 1960-77*

The man in Japan, myself, was moved to respond; but I want Mark's laconic voice, a native tone reflected and refined by his expertise in the classic tongues: his short poem probably says more about our common theme than my 'meandering' lines. Mark's verses adopt the form of Housman's 'Fancy's Knell' (*Last Poems*, XLI), three iambic feet to the line, the odd numbered lines of Housman's eight-line stanzas all ending with an extra unstressed syllable, a metrical feature known, unfairly, as a 'feminine ending'. Mark's stanzas are of four lines rather than Housman's eight, and he has only three stanzas to Housman's five, but the musical effect is the same. I turned to Housman's poem for my response and took its opening flourish as my cue:

*When lads were home from labour
At Abdon under Clee,
A man would call his neighbour
And both would send for me.*

While I soon gave up all pretence of pastiche, echoes of Housman's poem did sound from time to time, and still do, especially towards the end; but when *The Salopian Newsletter* published my second attempt (*Number 105*, 1989), Mark was not at all impressed; and now that I have looked at the piece again, I am not impressed, either. I returned to it because in the weeks before Christmas several men — who when they were boys had gone running with me through the Shropshire countryside — had sent me greetings after I had sent an email to Peter Birch, chairman of the Old Salopian Hunt, an email that Peter had then forwarded to everyone on his list who had once taken part in the activities of the **Royal Shrewsbury School Hunt**. A dozen of them have now written to me: first, Kit Childs, whom I met in the Lent Term, 1956, when I was a student teacher, and, later, from the start of my years as the master in charge, my first Huntsman, David Vernon. As I had never before been in touch with any of them since their leaving school, it has seemed worth trying, as a form of thanks, to better my earlier efforts as I may now have a better idea of what metrical

composition entails. After that first effort I went on to write a good deal of verse, which taught me that it is a craft that requires regular exercise, and I wrote and had privately printed four volumes of verse autobiography; but as the majority of the friends to whom I sent copies had nothing to say, I lost heart and turned to journal writing instead; and that seemed to please its readers better. Some years later, I spent the first of several sessions in hospital and returned to the writing of verse.

Since I hoped that I might have a chance to read what I had never had time for until then, I took to hospital with me, besides a number of other hefty works, *Le Ton Beau de Marot* by Douglas Hofstadter. Hofstadter's book weaves together a variety of themes, one of which is the translating of verse, and he deals in detail with a work that he taught himself Russian in order to read and translate: *Eugene Onegin*. I decided to try my hand at the Pushkin stanza, and so much enjoyed the task that I spent the next three years playing with the form in musings of a mostly autobiographical kind. I learned what I ought to have learned from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, that you begin at the end, and the actual pleasure in the writing is working out how to get there. I sent all my drafts to Mark and though he really only commented on my prosody, and on whether I had too many or too few feet in a line, this was invaluable because it forced me to look for ways to clarify what I might have accepted too easily as 'good enough'. Nothing is ever good enough, so one goes on rewriting. Here, from the first volume of what Mark called my Pushkiniana, is a stanza about the Hunt, which I do not mention by name, while having conceded that my being a runner may have led to my appointment to teach at The Schools:

*And so, for nearly eighteen years,
I ran through Shropshire countryside,
About its farms, beside its meres,
Up bracken hill, down woodland ride,
By meadow gate and hedgerow stile,
No better pastime to beguile
The afternoons of days that spun
From sweet September's mellow sun*

*To dull December's frosts and snow,
With views from ridge-tops of the hills
That mark the boundary with Wales
Where dark clouds masked the sunset's glow,
Until I tore a tendon sheath
And buildings shrouded Bicton Heath.*

Mark said that he liked this and his approval gave me the confidence to write hundreds of such stanzas: naturally, on many other topics as well.

On now returning to my earlier verses I have tried to follow Mark's guidance and lean on his example by attempting to practise some of the lessons that I hope I may have learned.² One of things that is wrong with the first two versions is that the stanzas rarely work their way to what linguists would call 'the focus of new information' and theorists might call 'closure', and I have therefore re-written most of them so as to ensure that the final rhyme locks the verse into place (clinches it) rather than allowing it to die in the sands. In many cases this has meant demolishing the whole stanza and rebuilding it afresh, and while such labour is time-consuming it is rewarding: you try out many patterns before you think that you have hit on the one that says most in the fewest number of words and leads to a proper climax. Since I now *have* the time, I have spent many hours at this, even, once or twice, going back to the phrasing that I thought of first.

While the second of each pair of rhyming words must always take priority during composition and while the rhymes ultimately control the syntax, I have also worked hard at the metre. Mark always counselled me to be metrically consistent, but while I have, with one or two exceptions, kept to a metre of three feet (or at least three *beats*) to the line, I have mixed a good many ***anapaests*** in with the ***iamb***s. This has, at least to my ear, given the lines greater fluidity and

² I have also spent 33 years editing papers written in English by Japanese scholars and I have learnt hugely from this about how best to move from introductory 'topic' to concluding 'focus', and how to signpost your themes as you journey through the text from start to finish; I have written about this as well, at great length!

momentum; other ears, I fear, might consider the result to be doggerel. However that may be, I have had to pay great care to the passage from line to line so that a reader will easily adapt to the metrical flow, for single lines cannot, metrically, stand alone: they have to combine, musically, with their neighbours. I found that while a single line might work by itself, it had to work with the lines on either side or the progress from line to line would be uncomfortable. This is what has taken me more time than anything to get right, which I may not have done yet. At the same time, each verse begins afresh with a line that is meant to set the pace of the lines that follow, and each verse should therefore have its own overall rhythmic coherence: if I have succeeded, readers will pick this up, and that will help them to work their way through to the end: but this is what I cannot foresee or foretell. Whether Mark would have approved of what I have managed to do, I do not know; I have to hope that he would.

ONE LAST TOLL OF 'FANCY'S KNELL'³

I When boys might play till dark
 or five o'clock school or tea,
 either I would call for Mark
 or Mark would call for me:
 and leaving behind all traces
 of tasks we had left undone,
 with the sun upon our faces
 we would set our course and run.

II While hardly idle pleasures,
 pleasures they always were,
 as we paced our racing measures
 through the lucid Shropshire air,

³ The subtitle, partly ironic, was 'Trying to keep up with MM': I would never have kept in sight of him as a scholar, but hoped that I might as a rhymster: Mark was my master of verse. I held my own as a runner.

a countryside fit for running
as the year turned gold then dun,
the daylight slowly waning
as southwards withdrew the sun.

III At Shrewsbury on the Severn,
boys ran to a strict routine,
a long-established pattern
since, say, eighteen-thirteen:
they followed a calendar
on a weekly Exeunt,
each of the runs particular,
they called themselves *The Hunt*.

IV I was handed the reins in '60,
summoned to Little Grange,
where Basil Oldham charged me
to have no truck with change:⁴
I promised to do my all
and meant it, *sans* affront,
to hold in trust "***the ritual
and regalia of The Hunt***".

V The Huntsman's orisons
were liturgy not laws:
his *Gently forward!* began the runs
and ended each scheduled pause
that let those slow at the back
catch up with the eager, or rash:⁵

⁴ JBO was a legendary housemaster, the school librarian, and a world-renowned connoisseur of incunabula.

⁵ The Huntsman's '*All Up!*' brought a run to a temporary halt: these scheduled pauses were thus

at *All those Hounds...!* the pack
sped away on the homeward dash⁶.

VI The Huntsman's horn was real
but hardly ever blown,
and the whips, if just as real,
were not wielded but held on loan;
the hounds were boys whose role
was to *Couple Up!* the field,
and the first to arrive at the goal
was recorded as having 'killed'.

VII And when a hound had killed
with three or four good wins
he was likely to be billed
a 'Gentleman of the Runs':
the privileged at play,
relicts of an obsolete age,
yet, heeding such customs, they
kept faith with their heritage.

VIII Lest any reader mistake,
the hounds were a volunteer pack
and no animal's blood was at stake:
on the days at which I look back
the quarry was Mark and me,
who first having scouted the route
could keep, none faster than we

'all-sup's'.

⁶ In full: 'All those hounds who want to kill, run fast and run hard, and the devil take the hindmost'; but the Huntsman never got beyond 'hounds' as the hounds were already away.

were, ahead of the hounds in pursuit.

IX Like any true Hunt we had limits,
and ours opened out like a fan
upon prospects of borderland summits,
where yearly by rota we ran:⁷
we covered a well-surveyed ground,
re-crossed it and quartered it back,
until the dependable hound
knew each stile and hedge-side track.

X We began with **The Bog**, a run
to start the new term on its toes:
an 'Indian Summer' sun,
a lingering summer rose,
the haws like droplets of blood,
in a balmy September heat,
the stubble a golden flood
as we crossed it on delicate feet.

XI **The Bicton** kept also to ways
in easy reach of *The Schools*,
though hospital builders these days
have concreted over the pools
around which wild hedges had grown
as tall as young trees, while a splash
of gold plum leaves was strewn
across pathways of black riddled ash.

⁷ The School's termly Calendar is called, perhaps humorously, the *Fasti* (from **dies fasti**, the days when judgements would be handed down): all the runs, one a week in a regular sequence, were printed in the *Fasti*.

XII All built upon now,⁸ Mark says,
that late eighteenth-century heath,
the horseman's less frequented ways,
that narrow and leaf-scattered path.
(And gone, too, the meadows where I
would run in the gloaming late,
the dog-rose in hedge-rows nearby,
as I'd come home from Hook-a-gate.)

XIII **The Horton** extended our range
where cattle contentedly browsed
and a brick-built, weathered grange
that ages of farmers had housed
sat secure in its wooded demesne
in a stockade of orchard and stack
at the end of a stone-cobbled lane
where our path was a hoof-pocked track⁹.

XIV **The Tucks** was another affair,
the school *en masse*, in a rout
for which I did never much care,
when a gent might behave like a lout:
simply all-licensed jesting and games
in comical hat-wear and togs
that upset young mothers with prams

⁸ I am recalling the 1960s and '70s, and the 'now' of the first version of these verses was the late 1980s: much had already changed by then and much more has changed since. As it is now 2012, my time references and the verb aspects may at times become a bit fuzzy.

⁹ Alas, not as secure as it seemed: if I have read the map aright, the by-pass runs straight through it.

and terrified slumbering dogs.

XV My distaste, though, had really to do
with its not being true to the role
we had set for ourselves, just a few
of us out for much more than a stroll.
Yet, constricted to traffic-free sites,
a jaunt that still sounds like a stunt,
it runs on as the last of the rites,
all that's left of the Michaelmas Hunt.¹⁰

XVI We went back, in happier mood,
to being a handful of hounds,
as the scents of an autumn wood
drew us south to the verge of our bounds,
out of range of a rifle's salute
and the eye of an unchained bull,¹¹
to where leaves would lie underfoot
as we skirted **The Bomere Pool**.

XVII [We broke bounds twice, to go
up river on **The Shelton**,
downstream to **Haughmond**'s low
pine-tufted bluff and common,
where Wilfred crossed by boat
at Uffington, we're told,

¹⁰ I am not absolutely sure about this, but it is now impossible to run over the old routes: the once empty roads are too congested and new roads have closed the gateways to the old cross-country trails.

¹¹ If a red flag was flying on Sharpstones Hill, we had to avoid the rifle range laid out on the top of the hill; sometimes we had to avoid a bull as well.

from 'Mahim', Monkmoor Road,
his best boots 'blessed with gold'.]¹²

XVIII The air grew chill for **The Cruckton**,
as wheel-ruts filled with rain,
and oaks turned black and sodden
and furrows swam with grain,
until up from Hanwood climbing
for a hilltop farm we strode,
and raced home in the darkening
down the length of the Longden Road.

XIX **The Cruckton** had set off back
on the path of **The Horton's** kill,
but switched to a newer tack
once up a bank by the stile
just across the road from where
by an inn — Great Hanwood's 'Gun' —
The Horton had paused before
its long run-in began;

XX and where **The Cruckton's** kill
began, **The Ley Grange**, too,
would pause, and here Earl's Hill,
ink-brushed, came into view,
or clouds of sable and gold
with pennants of gold in train,
while the air on our skin blew cold,
with more than a hint of rain.

¹² As his brother, Harold Owen, tells us in *Journey From Obscurity* (Oxford, 1963)

XXI From Pulley to Hook-a-Gate,
The Long in the term to come
would be the school *First VIII*
match course when running at home;¹³
but scythed by the motorist's arm
the pasture to road-works yields,
no way to The Day House farm,
nor home by the Housemasters' Fields!

XXII I would often go running alone,
and once, as winter set in,
The Long Mynd bare to the bone
and Earl's Hill slumbering,¹⁴
I came, about-turning for home,
with a just-risen moon face to face,
deep primrose and round as a dome:
a runner's prescription of grace!

XXIII Then on to **The Longden**, the last
of our outings, the longest as well,
to Lyth Hill, our ultimate cast
at the end of a long uphill haul,
where we once saw a genuine Hunt

¹³ Two shorter runs, **The Redhill** and **The Hook-a-gate**, came between **The Cruckton** and **The Long**: these were local excursions over Pulley Common and round The Day House Farm, both now overrun by a bypass.

¹⁴ Khalid Nazir, one of Michael Charlesworth's boys from Lawrence College, Ghora Gall, Pakistan, was awarded a scholarship to Shrewsbury School in 1968: he compared the silhouette of Earl's Hill, Pontesbury, to that of a sleeping elephant, and he would have known. (Michael was a great supporter of the Hunt.)

flush its bracken- and gorse-grown grounds
till to kennels they finally went
with a musical crying of hounds.

XXIV Lyth Hill is still noted for sights,
an outcrop of vantage whence lie
long vistas of age-moulded heights
and an empty and far-reaching sky,
as the dusk unobtrusively paces
over Shropshire's agrarian plain,
while on each barren hilltop the traces
of Celtic encampments remain.

XXV Wenlock Edge was indigo,
snow feathered Caradoc,
a bleak wind ruffled the snow,
the turf was as hard as rock,
when the sun shot the last of its rays
through clouds that bulwarked the west,
and stained a blood-tinted rose
Caer Caradoc's undulant crest;

XXVI and the Stiperstones were black
as coal on a green-washed sky
when racing we set off back
down fields where sheep would lie,
and hedge trimmings once on a time
with bonfires speckled the gloom,
the ditch grasses sharpened with rime:

night fell two miles from home.

XXVII From Michael's mass to Christ's
come sun, come rain, come snow,
we kept our yearly trysts,
now decades long ago,
while time runs ever faster
and does not seem to mind
that ends come nearer quicker
while youth drops far behind:

XXVIII *Our* youth, that is; today's
young runners hasten on,
although those ancient ways
are now un-trodden, gone;¹⁵
the eager hounds still quicken
to the Huntsman's melody,
but I'm now fifty-seven,
Mark rising fifty-three.

Sapporo, March 1988--September 1989
substantially reworked January-March 2012

Envoi So, on they press, the years,
my tally now four score,
but Mark, who had no peers,
is dead at seventy-four;

¹⁵ If readers have a copy of *Mort*, they might look at 'A Shropshire Laggard Writes', pages 32-33, another melancholy tale of changes to the land as they have affected the Hunt.

the knell of closing time
has stilled Mark's hymnody,¹⁶
and my regretful rhyme
must be his threnody.

Sapporo, March 2012

¹⁶ In 2005, Mark published a book of translations that he had been working on during the years of his retirement, *Latinised hymns*, Latin versions of more than 300 familiar English hymns, Latin and English side by side, all singable to the familiar tunes: it is a work of pure disinterested *poesis* that even I, with my minimal Latin, can work my way through if I really try: *Utinam linguis studuilles!*, he wrote in my copy, for he knew that I applied the words of Sir Andrew Aguecheek (suitably modified) to myself. Oh, if only I had indeed devoted myself to a study of the tongues, and how I wish that when I was a boy Mark had been my teacher!