# Seaport:

# An Interview with Robert Hampson by Edge Hill Alumni

**The personal, the historical, the geographical (and of course the poetical) spar for attention in *Seaport*. How difficult was it to rotate all these things at once?**

The directly personal element is quite minimal. The second edition (*Shearsman*) has an additional poem about my grandfather. I never knew him – he died long before my birth. All that has survived of him is a single photograph (which I have). The poem takes off from that. The 1970s material, which might look personal, is mainly taken from print sources – with some input from my memory of the feel of the times.

The initial impulse is geographical with that approach to Liverpool from the sea, which is followed up by the quotation from Conrad. This introduces the idea of 'landfall' and leads into the early focus on the docks. The structure, however, is historical. I wanted four core periods in Liverpool's development, and I wanted a core figure in each case: the first section begins with Defoe but then settles on Hawthorne; the second works with Melville; the fourth with John Lennon, the fourth with William Roscoe. The historical research was the driver.

**There is an interesting balance between the loco-specific and the loco-generic in your approach to the city of Liverpool. Also there's specificity in naming. For example, authors or merchantmen are named, while the poor and disenfranchised are often grouped together as a collective voice. Can you explain some of your creative strategies (or poetics) in revealing / not-revealing the actualities / silences of space and history in this book?**

A lot depended on the sources. As I have said, certain figures were placed at the centre of each section. Hawthorne and Melville were outside observers and that determined their perspective. They recorded the poverty and exploitation they saw, but they generally didn't name names, even when they were using specific examples.

It occurs to me now that I could have looked at other materials – archival materials, local newspapers – but that wasn't the research method I was used to, and archival research was harder then than it is now. I do have a future project, based on genealogy, which would be archive based and would engage with named individuals, but I haven't quite worked out how to do it – and  don't have time as yet for the

archival work it would involve. I am aiming to read Alison Light's new book, *Common People*, about her working-class family history as a prompt.

For the modern period, for the 'City at War' section, I was using newspaper reports and radio interviews. Radio interviews generally didn't identify the (Toxteth) rioters they interviewed, for obvious reason. My sense is that I would have anonymised anyway to make generic. However, I do name Kenneth Oxford, the Chief Constable, and David Moore, who was killed by a police car. With the former, I had some anxiety about being sued; with the latter, I had some anxieties about the feelings of his family – and also anxieties about legal action: the early newspaper reports were about a 'hit and run' case; later reports were that the car involved was a police car.

The failure to 'name names' might also be because I was writing from outside Liverpool and didn't have access to local papers.

**Whilst writing *Seaport*, were you conscious of the fact that the quotations within the poem would affect how it was to be read? Is this strategy meant to disconnect a reader from the poem to think about the quotation before proceeding to read the rest of the poem, or was your intention for it to add to the flow of the poem (to be part of the text)?**

The quotations sprang, in part, from the use of printed sources. It sprang also from my adoption of a 'poetics of impersonality' from my reading in modernist literature. Thus I had decided to focus each section on someone who wasn't me. (William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* was in the background here.) I wanted an 'objective' rather than an explicitly 'personal' engagement with the material. (These terms necessarily appear in 'scare quotes' to indicate their problematic nature.) I thus wanted to bring other voices in. For example, the 'Who owns Shell' section was taken from an interview with a rioter: the BBC interviewer was trying to show that the riots were mindless destruction, whereas the unnamed interviewee made clear how the targets weren't random but strategic …

The quotations aren't there to disconnect the reader from the poem. It is not like *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos*, where you have to take time out to track down the

sources. It is rather a collage of materials, where the focus is on how these materials play against each other.
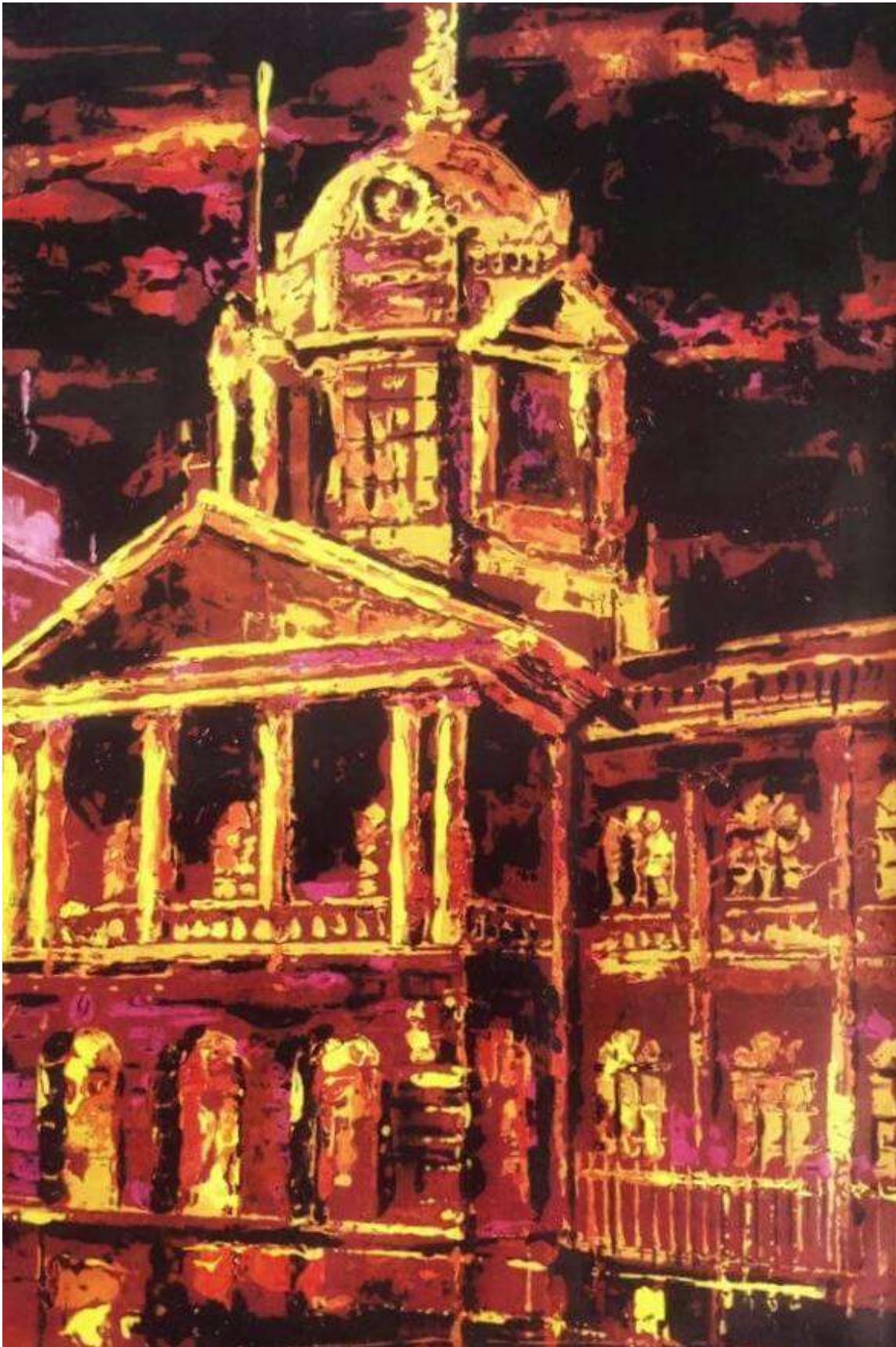
**Seaport refuses explicit anger but instead reveals (or suggests) anger expressed through events or *things* (for example, the slave trade and the Toxteth riots). When talking about the troubled social and historical aspects of Liverpool, how difficult was it to maintain this kind of restraint?**

A. This is exactly right about the poem's intended way of working. In the first place, I thought the facts and things were eloquent in themselves – as in the current social and political climate. For example, the statistics about unemployment in Liverpool spoke for themselves. Secondly, I didn't think it was useful (or appropriate) to have me positioned between the facts and the reader: it isn't about me or how I feel about the facts; it is, rather, about how the various facts assembled in the whole work speak to each other.

To answer your second question: it wasn't difficult for me to maintain the restraint. First, I had moved away from ideas about poetry as 'self-expression' or explicit 'self-exploration'. I was interested in exploring the history of Liverpool as a way of understanding Liverpool's present. That epigraph from Pound is relevant here: 'A man does not know his own ADDRESS (in time) until he knows where his time and milieu stand in relation to other times and conditions'. This is also where my own investment comes in: the history of Liverpool was obviously relevant to my own development and my own options and decisions.

**What was the main reason you decided to write about Liverpool rather than where you live now? How difficult was it to re-approach Liverpool, a city that must have changed a lot since you've lived here?**

When I began this project in the 1970s, I was a postgraduate student living in London. I wasn't sure where I would find work: I knew I had to be prepared to be mobile to find a job, and I wasn't sure whether I would ever return to live and work in Liverpool. The start of the poem was precisely that uncertainty. That is why Part 1 has that long passage from Conrad as its epigraph: I wasn't sure whether this work was the prelude to a 'landfall' or part of a process of 'departure'.

*Seaport* was written during the 1970s and early 1980s. The last parts of the published text were written in response to the 1981 riots – at a time when I had just begun a full-time post at Royal Holloway. I didn't know I would spend the rest of my career at Royal Holloway, but I did know that, for the next few years anyway, I was likely to be living in London. The final poem, 'The Leaving of Liverpool', marks that recognition.

When I started the project, it didn't feel like 're-approaching Liverpool'. I had left Liverpool in 1967 to come to university in London, but, as an undergraduate, I had returned at each vacation. As a post-graduate, I still had family and very good friends in Liverpool – and my closest friend in London, Peter Barry, was also from Liverpool. As I have tried to suggest above, the poem was my way of negotiating my own relationship with Liverpool rather than re-approaching something from which I felt separate.

**The forms of the poems in *Seaport* reflect an 'open field' approach, but sometimes the lines are flush on the left-hand side of margin and there is less movement between lines. Was there a particular reason you decided to do this?**

You are right: 'open field' poetics was the initial context for the project – and shapes the use of the page-space in the early part of the poem. I had been reading Charles Olson's *Maximus* poems, and I was also very influenced by Allen Fisher's extended take on London in *Place*. Peter Barry, Ken Edwards and I brought out an 'open field' issue of the magazine we ran, *Alembic*, in 1975. William Carlos Williams was also important for the idea of linking the city to a human figure, as was Joyce's *Ulysses*, where each section has its organ and the whole constitutes the human body. Now that you draw my attention to it, I notice that the first place where I make the lines flush with the left margin is in 'spun-yarn' – in two sections describing the docks. I think the idea there was the sense of enclosure by the dock walls, whereas the previous section is about a voyage and the next is about moving through Liverpool. I return to the left-registered form for the reports from the 'committee of one' – I think again because of the sense of constraint. The final part shifts between open field and left-registered forms … I think because of the kind of information particular poems deal with… There is a sense of more expansive and more compressed engagements. It

might be the effect of song lyrics, but I think it is also the case that I had grown less interested in 'open form' over the decade that I was engaged with this – and that my own poetics had changed.

**I'm interested in your writing process: were you 'ambulating' on location in Liverpool when researching this book or were you returning to the city through memory?**

No. I wasn't walking though the city. This was written from a distance – using mainly printed sources, some radio reports, and some memory (though mainly for atmosphere rather than detail).

**There are sections of *Seaport* that are still unfinished. How might this relate to the idea of history (or even the poem itself) as unfinishing?**

I really like this idea a lot – that the unfinished nature of the poem links to history as on-going. However, that link is purely fortuitous. I had intended to finish the poem, but the missing section involves a lot of research – and I got a full-time job just at the moment when that research and thinking needed to be done.

**Do you have plans to release a 'complete' version of *Seaport*? If not, why?**

I brought out an 'interim' edition in 1995 because parts of the poem had been published, and what existed of the poem as a whole had been given a number of readings, and there was some demand for a printed version in my part of the poetry world.

I would like to bring out a 'complete' version. I know what will go into the third part. It is a research project around William Roscoe, Liverpool in the nineteenth century, and the rise and fall of the Florentine republics. I had completed some of the work on Roscoe when I had to stop in the 1980s. I would like to finish this part of the project, but it is a matter of finding time: it is about a year-long research project, and I suspect the result will be as long as *Seaport*. It is also unlikely to be written in the style of *Seaport* – just because so much time has passed.
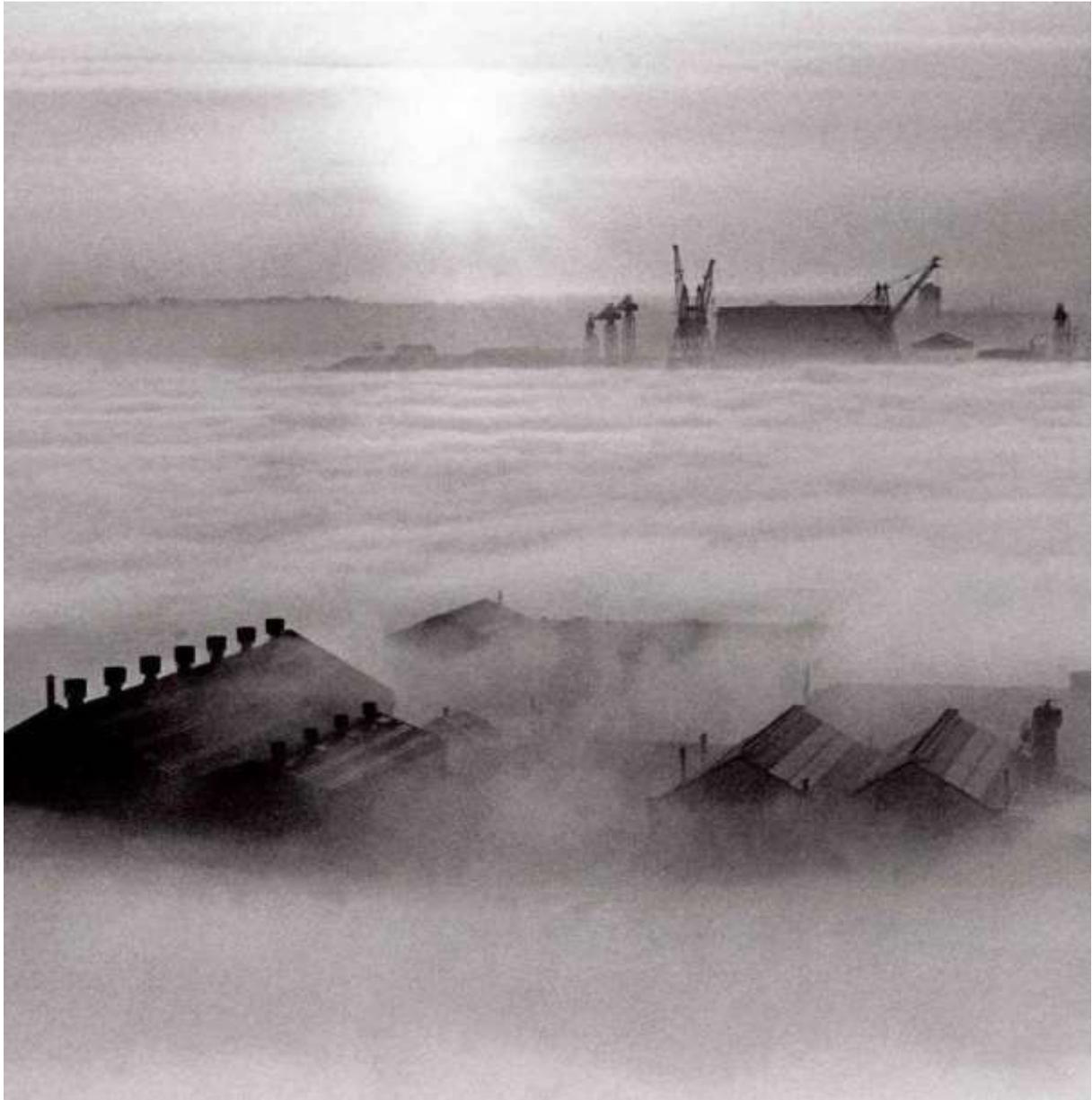
**How would a Liverpool poem of the C21st sound?**

This is difficult to answer. I know that, when I was in my teens, a 'Liverpool poem' meant the work of Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten. I didn't try to write like any of them, but Henri's writing of Liverpool 8 was a kind of permission to write about Liverpool. I hear from James that certain aspects of *Seaport* have struck home with you - its 'loco-specificity' and 'historical time-travel' – and, what pleases me most, that you can see the unfinished narrative as part of your own. I think the answer to your question is that what a Liverpool poem of the 21st century sounds like depends on you.

RGH