

## Autumn News

A last flurry (I hope) of page proof corrections and typesetter's queries for the *First Kingdom* got in the way of writing in the last couple of weeks. Then a few other projects regarding trees, mapping my local landscape and some teaching about medieval pottery for the Bernician Studies Group got in the way. Once the decks were cleared I had to get back to writing on the *Wood Age* project. Momentum is the thing with big projects: 120 thousand words seems like a mountain; and because life often intervenes, you need a method of getting back into it when you open a word file and it looks as though the words have been put there by an alien: what on earth was I thinking writing THAT? Where was *that* thought going?

I take the view that you can't be creative every day; but you can be productive. And when the muse isn't co-operating, or when concentration is low or other demands use up all your brain space, you need to accomplish something, even if it feels like you are only treading water. I'm often asked about so-called writer's block. I don't really acknowledge it. There are good and bad days and periodic feelings of self-loathing, hopelessness and the desertion of all inspiration are part of the creative process. But it isn't a nightmare. Syria is a nightmare; Yemen is a nightmare. This is a job.

So: I make sure the bibliography is up to date: it's a pain in the neck to compile at the end of a project, and it's fairly mindless. Done. Get out a pile of books that you need to read and work out which order to read them in. Done. Go back to the last chapter and read it through, fix mistakes, add footnotes where necessary (another job which, left until the end, can cause serious heartache). Done. After all that I hope to be a little bit more in the groove. Then I start writing, knowing that it might be lousy writing; but I can always tweak it or bin it. Words on the page make you feel like you have accomplished. There's always the nagging feeling that you are behind (it's true: you ARE always behind); but actually, with the right preparation, early starts to the day and efficient clearing of the decks, it's amazing how quickly you can catch up.

This week I finished a draft of Chapter Three of the *Wood Age* – dealing with the physical aspects of wood and its utility. It could be dry; but that's where narrative skill comes in: changing pace, adding tension, evoking interesting images and choosing examples that allow the reader to make connections for themselves. I made a highlight of writing about the Neolithic Sweet Track in the Somerset Levels – a wonderful piece of archaeology and human ecology. In the end, the chapter sailed by, and I have a week now in which I can catch up on reading before I need to prepare notes for Chapter Four.

## Reading

I got to read a novel! Yes: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, said to be the finest Scottish novel. I am a great admirer of Scottish writing, so I was eager to try it. As it

happens, we were in Oban (between lockdowns), having come back from Barra on the ferry after a four days' quick break: walking, mostly. We had got to Barra on the twin-prop air service that flies out of Glasgow: what a treat: landing on the beach at low tide on perfect sand with still blue skies. We saw more otters and dolphins than I've ever seen before. Anyway, we had a spare hour in Oban and it was hammering with rain, so we went to Waterstones. I admit it, I do go and check if they have any of my books in. A shameless indulgence.

Well, I like *Sunset Song* very much: I like the Doric (Aberdeenshire) dialect in which it's written; I like the lilt of the language and the turn and fold of landscape; and I liked Chris Guthrie, the protagonist, who grows up on her brutal father's farm just before the First World War. There are two sequels; they are on my list, next I get to a book shop.

I'm also re-reading Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*; just to remind myself of his particular take on history. Useful to have that perspective in my head as I try to compose a long narrative that needs a similarly strong thread of ideas.

## Talking about thinking about writing

Maybe I'm in a minority; but I can count almost no writers among my long term friends. My writing connections are nearly all through the Royal Literary Fund, for whom I have worked on and off for a decade; they are a fantastic organisation. I do very little for them now, mostly because I am so busy with writing; but I keep up with a few colleagues, who have become friends; but we talk very little about our own writing. So I oddly find I have limited conversation about writing for its own sake. My father, who was superbly well-read and highly critical as a reader, would have been a great sounding board, as he was a fine editor; but he died ten years ago. There are times when I just want to talk about narrative technique: to test thoughts and ideas that I'd like to try.

Often I find I have the most in common with filmmakers, who see narrative in a very different way: much less wordy; much more about visual characterisation and emotion. They have a very technical view of construction – film scripts are much more closely critiqued before they make it to production, because there's so much more money involved. But since lockdown those almost casual chats over coffee in town (and by Town I mean Newcastle) are distant memories. Readers will know what I mean when I say that it's easy to take such fellowship and good craic for granted. I miss it.

Here's hoping the boffins get their vaccines out asap. And then, as one scientist said when the vaccine news started to look promising, let's hope the politicians don't fuck it up.

Hear hear!