

A Commonplace

Jonathan Davidson & Others

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Published 2020 by
Smith|Doorstop Books
The Poetry Business
Campo House
54 Campo Lane
Sheffield S1 2EG
www.poetrybusiness.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-912196-33-3

Jonathan Davidson hereby asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design & typeset by Tim Morris
Cover image: 'The Industrial Henge'
by Anna Dillon (www.annadillon.com).
Author photo by Lee Allen
Printed by T J International

Smith|Doorstop Books is a member of Inpress:
www.inpressbooks.co.uk. Distributed by
NBN International, 1 Deltic Avenue,
Rooksley, Milton Keynes MK13 8LD.

The Poetry Business gratefully acknowledges the support of Arts Council England.



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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A Note on A Commonplace

The poems by Jonathan Davidson that feature in this collection were written between 1981 and 2019 in Didcot, Leicester, Ilkley, Skipton, Coventry, Denbighshire, Birmingham and Sheffield, and in Ventspils (Latvia) and Kyiv (Ukraine). The commentary was written in Birmingham between Summer 2018 and Summer 2019. The final edits took place during July 2019 in Haapsalu (Estonia) and from October to December 2019 in Birmingham.

For Mollie & Frederick and my Mother and late Father

Introduction

Poems – my own and other people’s – are scattered across my life. They are in books and notebooks, folded in wallets and hidden in desk drawers; a few are memorised. They are as commonplace as food and drink. I wouldn’t want to live without them, although I dare say I could. They will be the last things I forget when everything else is gone. Some of these poems are gathered together in this book, *A Commonplace*.

A Commonplace is a collection of my own poems interleaved with other people’s poems, poems I admire and that give solace or inspiration. As there are things I want to say about my own poems, and about those by other poets, I have included an ongoing commentary. This isn’t something I’ve done before, but it has made me think about how poetry is released into the world. By strange chance I learned, half-way through writing the commentary, that Ted Hughes had *almost* gone down the same path. Here’s what he said in 1989:¹

*I’ve been thinking of making a selection of my verses and setting them in a commentary – like the Vita Nuova. The pieces I mostly read. // This is heresy. But there seems to me a possibility that many poems simply slip from the great memory because they lack context.*²

I’m not afraid of heresy: heresy is my middle name.³ The commentary is the context.

Footnotes are given to some of the poems and to the commentary. They add afterthoughts and additional information. A bibliography is no bad thing for the curious reader, and so one is included.

1 From a letter to Keith Sagar, 5 August 1989, p. 174, *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*.

2 I am indebted to my friend Greg Leadbetter for bringing this letter to my attention.

3 It’s not. My middle name is Frederick.

There is also a gazetteer, with grid-references where locations are difficult to identify by name only. Readers can set off to visit them all and be home by Christmas.⁴

Gathered together – the poems, the commentary, the footnotes, the bibliography and the gazetteer – the whole forms a kind of commonplace book.⁵ So, having now introduced *A Commonplace: Apples, Bricks & Other People's Poems*, we can begin. Here follows, overleaf, a poem I like very much by Richie McCaffery.

4 Which Christmas I wisely do not say. It makes quite a journey: you'll need a flask and some sandwiches.

5 Commonplace books were common from the Renaissance onwards. They were a place to gather all sorts of ideas, quotes and memories.

Brick

By Richie McCaffery

They say Belgians are born with a brick
in their stomachs, such is their love
of property. It's taken us until now
to have a few thousand of our own.

I've brought little to the buying
of this place, but I do have a brick.
It's deeply stamped *Radcliffe* –
the brickworks (that no longer exist)

that made the red blocks
of the 1930s semi I called home.
My rough brick won't sit flush
in these fine walls. Still, I lay it down.

This poem is from Richie McCaffery's book *Passport*. I like the seeming simplicity of it, how unostentatiously it builds⁶ and how powerful is its understatement. And it has that truth about it that cannot be denied, about the Belgians and the *Radcliffe* brickworks:⁷ all necessary for the poem to work.

The house Richie⁸ grew up in was probably not dissimilar to my own semi-detached ancestral home,⁹ although a few decades older. And the good bricks too, how they nurtured so many of us: cold, hard, regular, permanent and in their lifelessness life-sustaining. I'm with the people of Belgium when it comes to bricks.

Of course, I am projecting my own interests onto Richie's poem. It is, I suspect, far more about the relationship being cemented¹⁰ by joint ownership than the nature of bricks as things. Perhaps. But I want poetry to say one thing and also mean another, and this poem does that. And it is a fine thing.

The poems that follow are not about bricks – my brick poems will come later – but about my mum, mostly after my dad died.¹¹ The first is a poem about the poem 'Won't', written by Walter de la Mare.¹² I've two poems in this book about other people's poems, as well as many poems by other people. It is confusing, I know.

My sister, Sylvia, is referenced in the second poem. Throughout her life my mum called us all by the name of whatever cat was in the house at the time. My mum grew up near Liverpool,¹³ a city that at times was divided by religion. The instance described in the final poem made me laugh when it happened, and it still does.

6 Pun intended.

7 Although, frustratingly, it is not listed in my copy of *British Bricks* by David Kitching. It transpires it was actually one of many 'brands' produced by the Amble Brickworks in Northumberland.

8 We are acquainted so I think I can be so familiar.

9 The bottom end of Icknield Close, Didcot, Oxfordshire.

10 These puns won't stop just because you want them to.

11 August 2017.

12 I included this de la Mare poem in my book *On Poetry* and the cost of the permission to do so sadly forbids me doing so again. It can be found, of course, in de la Mare's own collections.

13 Formby, then Crosby.

Won't

Mum reads me 'Won't' by Walter de la Mare,
as she used to when we were first mother
and son. It's the same house, the same air,
the same words, but in her head another
woman holds her little boy. She tells me:
I read this to you when I was your mother.

Her voice distorts. She doesn't cry. A bee
taps at the window, twice, then drifts away.
*But you're still reading it, I say, and we
are still mother and son.*

*Oh. Will you stay
for your tea?* she asks, as she always does.
I won't, no; sorry. I have to get away.

Clouding Over

Clouding over, she forgets a face,
then a date, then the day of the week.
She calls her daughter the name of a cat
she had as a girl. The lightning striking
momentarily illuminates her life:
the night she woke to see the city burn;
that time they told her she was adopted.
The thunder reminds her of the bakery
she worked in. She remembers the *Falls*
at Llangollen, the river in full spate:
The rowing boat capsized, we all got wet.
The clouds are beautiful. It starts to rain.

Nineteen Fifty-Six

To lighten a dark day, Mum and I are looking through an old album of bits and pieces. We come across a faded postcard of the vaulted, ornately gilded and preposterous interior of what Mum says was a B&B (with evening meal extra) favoured by the budget traveller venturing abroad for the first time.

We look at the postcard. Outside the garden shivers. *Mum*, I say, *this is the Palace of Versailles, residence of Louis the fourteenth.*

*Is it? Well,
I stayed there with Audrey, my oldest
friend. And she was a Catholic too.
We met at a dance in Liverpool.
I'll phone her later. Is she still alive?
I think she is. I'll phone her later.*

With reference to the poem 'Won't', a bee *did* tap at the window twice that day, then drifted away. And my mum did say the last line in the first stanza. I had asked her to read aloud to me Walter de la Mare's poem 'Won't', from his book *Poems*, as she had done often when I was a child. I must have been two or three when she bought this book. I still have it. The pages are brown with age and those that carry the poem 'Won't' have been repaired with Sellotape. The book has delicate line drawings by Margery Gill. 'Won't' is illustrated with a drawing of a mother cuddling her son on her lap.

I asked my mum, then eighty-six, to read the poem to see if she remembered it. Suddenly, half-way through, she did. It was a moment. And then she didn't. She is, my mum tells me, very forgetful these days. I wanted, in writing my poem, to echo the formality of de la Mare's poem. The rhyme scheme should go unnoticed but lodge in whatever part of the brain picks up these things. There is, in the penultimate line, a hanging-rhyme¹⁴ on the word 'does'. It is hanging because I forgot about it. If you find a rhyme for 'does' later in the book then that's deliberate.¹⁵

But what about my dad? My dad: bloody hell. He could be a right so and so. Here are three poems in his memory.¹⁶

14 A term I have just now coined.

15 Yeah, right.

16 Roy Frederick Davidson, 1932–2017.

End of Sample.

ON POETRY

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'From attentive close readings to thoughts of how poems might best be shared, his belief in poetry and its ability to touch and transform us shines throughout. This small book is a gem and any reader interested in poetry and how it can enrich our lives will find Davidson a fine companion.'

– Liz Berry

'Wonderfully diverting, affably anecdotal, and profoundly readable ... Davidson is a great leveller, rightly asserting that poetry is for everyone.'

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'The best thing about Davidson as a critic is that he isn't distracted in his quest to find the real deal. What interests him is 'what remains when the fuss has died down—the quiet voices' ... This is a book, refreshingly, not for the academic, though academics might enjoy it, but for the writers.

And, of course the listeners.'

– London Grip

'I found much to reward and contemplate in
Jonathan Davidson's *On Poetry*'

– Jane Commane, Nine Arches Press

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— Stuart Maconic

'Distant and yet close, intimate and yet somehow objective, the quiet power of these tender and true poems pulls you in. Davidson is as interested in the haunting strangeness of nostalgia as he is in the oddly humanising effect of the mundane. And he often finds in the ordinary something joyous and surprising. This is a remarkable collection.'

— Jackie Kay

'These poems are carefully crafted, even artful, almost exquisite at times in the ways they precisely deploy the language of the everyday and images of ordinariness. Davidson documents the personal importance of everyday things in such a way that what might be thought trivial is discovered to be essential, and what might be ignored as commonplace finds its own voice.'

— Orbis

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A COMMONPLACE

JONATHAN DAVIDSON

Praise for *A Commonplace*

'This book and its poems are very good, in brave
and unusual ways.'

– Alison Brackenbury

'*A Commonplace* is hugely readable – original, modest, wise and
entertaining (the chatty footnotes work especially well). Above
all, it is a friendly book, an invitation to join a conversation,
not a lecture or an intellectual ultimatum.'

– Andy Croft, Smokestack Books

'What shines through is the openness of the venture and the
sense of poetic community and involvement of different voices
and poetics in a constant communion.'

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