

# **Finding New Approaches to Interpreting Family History Research as Creative Narrative with Poetry and Poetry Film**

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and

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Sarah Tremlett

## My Practice

I have been collecting family history for over 25 years, mainly as a way of achieving a sense of belonging, absent since childhood. As a poetry filmmaker, artist, theoretical writer and researcher I have been making poetry films and text-based films since 2005. I realized more recently that I wanted to develop my reference material as a creative work, one that felt and read more like a novel, but with both fact and imagined myth. For various reasons I have titled this project *Tree*.

In any research-based project it is important to outline the outcomes you are aiming for, in order to develop the realization process. I knew that I did not want it to be solely a *written* exercise in life writing, but one that could be both print and online, as a multimedia work. It was also important to me to develop a more intuitive, artistic approach than one that simply records as accurately as possible the lives of earlier generations. For me the past lives on in all of us. How much we repeat it, or reflect it, is a constant driving force in my research.

## Discovering Identity Through the Geopoetics of Ancestral Place

In terms of experiential storytelling, researching family history is not only about discovering unknown facts but place itself; to actually visit sites, and touch and experience them. When I trained as an arts journalist I would select, photograph and write about artists in their own environment. Also, in this particular chapter from *Tree*, I have the chance to bring the personal side of 'public' history to the fore; showing how human characteristics and circumstance, (often unknown to historians) lie behind historical facts.

There are a number of ways to find out information about where your ancestors lived: the land registry, tithe maps, valuation office records, the National Archives, historical maps (the Ordnance Survey was founded in 1791), gazetteers, Genuki, trade directories, or the census for example. Whilst some of these are necessary to my research, it has also been important to me to visit the places where my ancestors lived; to touch and experience them first-hand.

## New Approaches to Family History Narrative

As far as I know, combining long-term research with poetry alongside poetry film is a new approach to creating family history narrative. However, poetry is well-placed to respond to researching ancestral places: either directly through a psychological perspective, or unconsciously and instinctively identifying with resonant objects where there seems no direct relation. I have often heard people say 'I don't know where that came from', or that they felt it was another person's voice projected through them.

Equally, poetry films are ideal vehicles for combining different temporalities, or mnemonic spaces. They often create palimpsests, (with verbal and filmic layers), where the past bubbles up into the present, creating ripples, visually, verbally, metaphorically and literally. How a filmmaker treats place and the past is central to this kind of research. Do you respond with your first reaction; do you film whatever you find in whatever light or circumstance; or do you let the events that took place, filter through in the way the film is edited?

## Project Design

With diverse forms of unwieldy documentation both on my computer and in actual files – I decided on a Western version of the Japanese form of 'haibun' to combine factual prose, poetry as field notes or haiku and poetry film. My ancestors mainly worked the land in different ways. My personal 'theme' then became a toponymic investigation as to how my name evolved as a geopoetic and mythopoetic working connection to place through time.

Currently, my documentation crosses four countries and a time span of over a thousand years. As such the first thing was to decide how I would present the information. I have chosen the chapter form of the novel because I ultimately want to frame my research within a chronological narrative. I decided on ten chapters as an initial target, with each one containing factual documentation, prose poetry and poetry film, telling both my ancestral story and my own journey in discovering it.

However, the order in which I have refined and combined data has been mainly for expediency and instinct. I began with the First World War in Devon where there is a crossover between personal family history and the politics of public events. This is the first chapter to more or less reach completion as 'Paper River, Knotted River' (see on).

## The non-chronological viewer/reader

As the project is a growing work in progress, so it will be read and viewed online in non-chronological chapters, where each has to hold its own. The whole picture from the earliest

records to today will only be clear when all have been assembled together, like a poetry collection.

#### Studying other Creative Approaches to Family History Narratives

There are a number of poetry films concerned with immediate family history, for example *Rodeo Days* (2019) by Australian Marie Craven; whilst poetry documenting a particular place (and letting it have its own voice) has its exemplar in British poet Alice Oswald's *Dart*, and the subsequent poetry film by Marc Tiley (2014). Equally, there are a number of books that combine poetry with family research. Ruth Padel writing on her ancestor *Darwin – A Life in Poems* (2009) combines different viewpoints, tracing the life of a great man through time. Bernadine Evaristo's work *Lara* (1997) which is termed semi-autobiographical, is written in couplets and stretches back 150 years.

#### Listening to Others

I would advise other artists in this field to widen their knowledge base and scope out family history conferences or meetings. I went to the Rootstech Conference (2019), where it was mainly focused on finding ancestors, but I attended talks entitled *Tracing your Ancestral Home* (Nick Barrett), *A Sense of Place* (Myko Clelland) and *How Can We Write Good Personal Stories* by Liv Marit Haakenstad. They all agreed that though research can be dull, cold facts can create interesting narratives. Common advice was to show, not tell; find a 'core of truth' but remember the ethics of publishing private information. Practical tips included how to organize a timeline, or material by year, or topic. But what you produce doesn't have to be complete and chronological (Armstrong Taylor). In many cases advice was about oral history, or talking to older relatives, gathering their stories, objects, heirlooms, ways of speaking; whilst the five senses are important in any account. We were wisely told that 'Reports convey facts. Stories (even factual stories) convey *meaning*' (Armstrong Taylor). Ultimately, they exhorted us not to think we are too insignificant to write such a story: 'It's about universals, and you are the illustration of that universal'.

In this chapter 'Paper River, Knotted River' there are three parts: Part One is documented history; Part Two a contemporary poem as field notes, and Part Three a Poetry Film. Each Part contributes to the whole, and each chapter has a different composer, in this case Jeffrey Boehm who has an excellent ear for industrial and mill locations. Part One has been abridged for this publication.

# Paper River, Knotted River

a 'chapter' in three parts: essay, field notes, and poetry film

from *Tree*

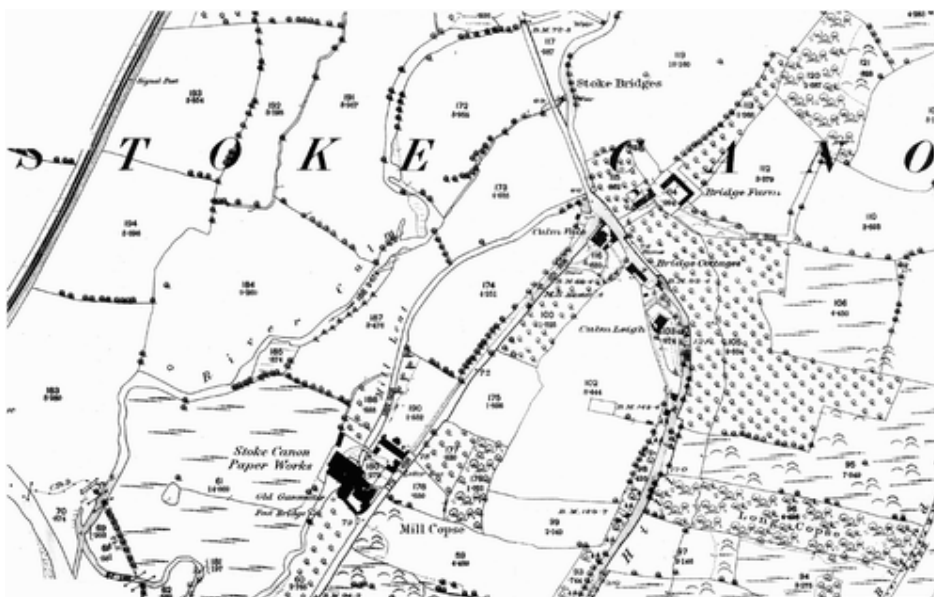
a journey into ancestral places

## Part One: The Past – The Intertwined Fates of the Poplar, a River, a Mill and a Family; or How a River was Exploited and Exacted its Revenge

'Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him' (Proverbs 26:27).

The toponymic origin of a surname may not be because a person or group have similar characteristics to a natural object or place, but were adept at its skilful exploitation.

Just north of Exeter lies Stoke Canon (a 'settlement belonging to Exeter Cathedral's canons'), now more commonly known for being a commuter village and on the Paddington to Plymouth line. With low-lying flood plains, (historically said to have been an island on occasions), it sits just above the watery confluence of the Exe and the Culm. Why the Church wanted this land is open to question. Was it once a mythic site, more akin to the Isle of Ely? Walking towards Exeter from what has been called by historians an 'unremarkable' Devon village, a long, mediaeval bridge system (some say 1274, but at least 1326) spans two braidings of the Culm and a mill leat, with three weirs marshalling water levels.



Once, standing almost halfway across, in the silence of a morning with cows grazing either side, a spiritual conviction might have descended; but, today, fending off the revving commuter traffic it is hard to imagine. From this vantage point, the site of the mill can be seen to the right through poplar and willow across the meadows; now new shiny zinc-coated roofs glint in the morning sun. It was not always so.

The river Culm (meaning knotted or winding) rises in the Blackdown Hills at a spring near the old RAF Culmhead. It flows through the Devon Redlands, a pure, fast-flowing river, attracting numerous paper mills along its banks in the Victorian era: two at Rewe, six from Huxham and 18 from Bradninch (Maxted). Devon was known for making paper in the nineteenth century, and became the main employer in Stoke Canon for a century and a half, accompanying the growth of the printed book (Blundell Jones, 2012). The Victorian emphasis on learning and knowledge for social betterment created a burgeoning demand for books, periodicals and newspapers. The characteristics of the river were vital: good quality, pure, iron-free water was the most important element for a paper mill, in producing better quality, white paper (Bodman 2003).

### Exploiting the River

Sheets were originally handmade from rags, collected by rag and bone men (the bone used as size for the paper). It was lyrically noted that *rivers produced books from rags*, the moral redemption of knowledge on pure white paper from the poverty of dirty rags (not unnoticed by Dickens) (Wynne 2015). In this equation, the pure river spiritually cleansed and recycled or literally and metaphorically gave new life to the social conditions of the time; less was said about the effluent produced by the mills, nor their working conditions, and employees' rights. Social change occurred at the expense of the environment and a polluted river.

Chlorine bleaching at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century enabled coloured rags to be used, but contributed heavily to river pollution, and poor quality paper. By the 1870s, rags became in short supply, even though the Victorians sought to recycle cloth (Tournoy 2008), and wood gradually supplemented rag paper. Paper made from wood consists mainly of white cellulose, but also a dark substance called lignin, making wood stiff and trees stand tall and upright, but also turning paper yellow. Lignin also gives paper a strength, so blue and pink colouring matter were originally used to attempt to remove the yellow impurity.

*'The wood from poplar which is generally preferred [emphasis added], furnishes a very white fibre, and is easily digested, but since the fibres are short it is sometimes found advantageous to mix them with longer fibres, such as those of the spruce or pine, although the latter wood requires a much more severe treatment in boiling with alkali than the former'* (Watt 1907: 58). Today we still use poplar, as well as other deciduous trees such as birch, beech and eucalyptus, or conifers like spruce, fir or pine.

Water has always been key to making paper. Fibres immersed in water are subject to mechanical beating and chemicals to make pulp. They are then fed along conveyer belts with vibrating wire mesh where the water is partly removed. Continuing through rollers and steaming achieves a dryer, stronger, bonded paper that is then coated and calendered to make sure the paper irregularities are smoothed out. Approximately 85% of the water used in the pulp and paper industry is process water and much of this returns to the river (Sappi 2012).



Rags were: 'boiled in a cauldron for a long time before being rinsed in a steam-powered machine and subjected to manganese, vitriol and salt to make them white' (Wynne 2015). Chemicals such as zinc bleach liquor, sulphate of soda, hydrochloric or sulphuric acid, chloride of calcium, chloride of lime and bleaching powder 'quantities of caustic soda in leys of different densities' (Watt 1907), were used in all the processes, and to break down the fibrous material and get rid of lignin. Paper was also treated with size – which could be made from animals (boiling of hide pieces) creating a stench over the whole mill – to prevent ink and gum etc. penetrating the paper.

The Culm, a river containing both coarse fish and a breeding ground for salmon was exploited mercilessly for its purity, by over 20 mills along 27 kilometres of its banks. Toxic substances detrimentally affected ecosystems. Today we also dump large amounts of fibre, starch, resins, bleach, dyes, sizing materials, and other matter into our pure rivers, creating effluents that can cause loss of life, thermal impact, slime growth, scum formation, and loss of aesthetic beauty in the environment (Bajpai 2018).

### Fated Fortune

The hard reality of industrial mill life set against a bucolic setting was not unusual in

Victorian times, but Stoke Canon mill seems cursed, having more than its fair share of accidents. Could an ancient ecclesiastical contract have been crossed, on that very spot, transgressing its 'holy' blessing; or maybe nature – the river itself, tired and used had finally been driven to exact its revenge. Perhaps local papermaker Grace Cragg was aware of this, when as the first known owner in 1780 she took out an insurance policy on it with the Sun Alliance (Shorter 1957). She was certainly a woman of foresight since a Mr. Cragg (likely her first husband) was badly injured when a cart overturned in 1790. She then married into the Dewdney family. For a while production expanded aided by firstly the reduction of excise duty in 1837, and then its abolition in 1861. But in 1844 a fire occurred when the mill employed around 30 people – 'loss of property has been great, a considerable part of the manufactory and a farm house contiguous being destroyed' (*Exeter Flying Post* 1 August 1844). They seemed to recover from this, aided by the boom in the demand for paper and this fueled William Dewdney's ambitious plans to improve the mill, paralleling his sense of himself as a country gentleman, not so much 'in trade'. He totally remodelled their home from a modest long, thatched house into a double-fronted gentleman's villa between 1863–70 (Pevsner 1989).

By 1867 they were employing over a hundred people and powering three steam engines, but fate again intervened; in 1867, an explosion occurred: 'Stoke Canon, Fearful Boiler Explosion' (*Exeter Flying Post* 6 February 1867). It seems that as ambition overreached itself, economic disaster was sure to follow. Despite the Dewdney's renegotiating their terms with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, an auction notice appeared in *Exeter Flying Post*, (18 March 1874) offering the business for sale at auction.

However, worse was to come. In July of the same year, Thomas and William Dewdney were involved in a court case, heard before the Lord Mayor of London at the Mansion House under the Debtor's Act, and accused by John Arthur Reed, a buyer of their paper, with having misused a cheque of his to pay the wrong creditor (*Exeter Flying Post* 1 August 1874). The charge of fraud was dismissed, but the incident suggests a struggle to remain solvent (Blundell Jones 2012). William and Richard Dewdney had reached rock bottom, and it has been rumoured that, after this slight on their business or another insurance claim, the Dewdney in charge at the time committed suicide on the nearby railway line, and a week later his wife did the same.

With such a history, in November, 1876, the mill was sold: 'The Mills have two Machines capable of turning out twenty-five tons per week of "printings" and "shops". Frederick my great grandfather had been a farmer further north near Langford Budville. Something made him change profession. Was there no money in farming (something my grandfather, a tenant farmer, later told my father who wanted to farm). What seems clear is that Frederick was in some way an outsider. His father early on had turned away from farming to milling paper, and Frederick's brothers were working for him, centred on Head Weir Mill, further

down the River Exe, in Exeter. But when Frederick decided to leave farming he didn't join them in the highly profitable mill in Exeter, no. He decided to go it alone.

When the Dewdney's ran into difficulties Frederick saw an opportunity to run his own paper mill. He rented in Stoke Canon with his wife Louisa and eldest son William (b: 1871), before moving in, and making small alterations. Whether he chose to ask Louisa about the new business opportunity, is another question. Perhaps he painted it that she would have a better life, closer to Exeter and civilization. Perhaps she was the one who prompted the decision. In 1881, aged 39 Frederick was listed in the census as a paper manufacturer employing 18 men, ten women and four boys. He was running a tighter operation than the Dewdneys and life was prospering with the birth of more children. At first everything ran smoothly, but slowly the mill's bad fortune returned.

In 1886 Frederick's much-loved son William Frederick died, aged 15. He and Louisa must have been heart-broken but stolidly carried on. Perhaps it was from proximity to imported rags carrying cholera, a disease that would kill within a day. It was often found in the women rag sorters, who usually worked in small family groups, crammed into badly ventilated lofts. Equally the same conditions were ripe for transmitting smallpox, another deadly killer. Women often wanted to move up to the cleaner environment of the 'Salle'; this was at the other end of the mill where the finished sheets were sorted and counted (Harris 1999).

William's death left the middle son Charles, (who was 11 at the time), as the new successor to the business, followed by the youngest brother my grandfather Henry Wilfred (b: 1882) 'Fred', alongside his sisters Ellen, Alice, and Minnie. Charles had to adapt to a new role, but more disaster was to follow. In the face of a tough but successful business, and eleven years after the death of her eldest son, Louisa Tremlett died in 1897 at the relatively young age of 54. Charles was 20 and my grandfather 15 at the time. Charles, as barely a young man with no role in the family business, found the weight of the enterprise falling on his shoulders, alongside giving emotional support to his father. In 1901, perhaps to develop strength of character, his sense of duty and commitment led him to voluntary service in the Exeter battalion as second lieutenant.

Meanwhile, my grandfather escaped. He opted for his father's earlier choice – farming, but way beyond the economics of British farming conditions. He set sail for New Zealand where, the story goes, he 'slept with his head on the saddle'. My vision of my grandfather (whom I met only once) is a man who wore tweeds and smoked a pipe, in a plainly furnished rented, old, ivy-covered, Oxfordshire farm, with no central heating or electricity. Like an adventure from The Famous Five I went to bed with a candle (in the 1960s) and listened to sparrows arguing outside my window early in the morning. [This farm has since been renovated beyond recognition]. My grandmother Marie Schwerrer, of German descent, was a concert

pianist who had two grand pianos (and passed away after playing one evening). I learnt in my forties from an uncle that she had red hair, but I never met her. My grandfather was a man who sought a peaceful life, with few 'possessions' for whom it seems farming was a vocation not a way of making money. He had turned his back on trade, the mill and all it encompassed.

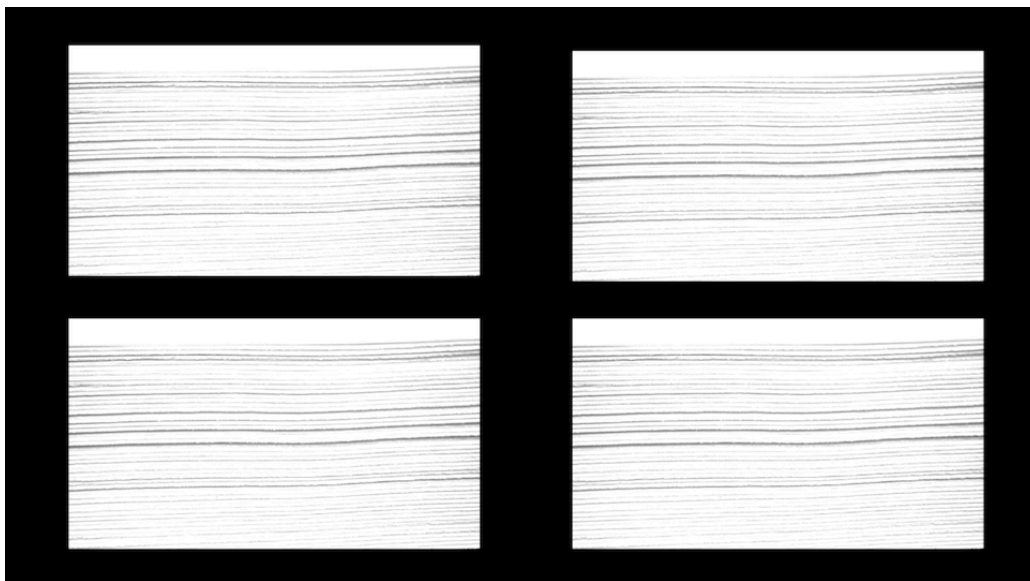
As papermaking grew, early societies were formed to address industrial conditions. Throughout the early years of the twentieth century the unions were gathering strength, with rising standards and stronger rules. Trade unionism roughly doubled between 1900 and 1913 and nearly doubled again by 1920 (Wrigley 2015). This in part reflected the growing advance of socialism in parts of Europe including Germany, Austria, Russia, France and Italy. After various incarnations, by 1914 the papermakers' union became the National Union of Printing and Paper Workers (Modern Records Centre, Warwick University).

On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914, Bosnian Serb Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Austro-Hungarian heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The two sides failing to reach an agreement initiated the beginning of the First World War a month later. The ruling classes in some of the European countries hoped a short, victorious war would put an end to class differences and reduce the support for socialism that threatened the existing order (Tonge, 2018). In Devon, the war enacted its own rippling crises in terms of production and workers' strikes. The wartime demand for soldiers (at first volunteers) in the Armed Forces meant the remaining labour force was diminished but also stronger. Conscription didn't begin until January 1916, and before then some 2.4 million men volunteered for the army, mostly in the first year. After discussions in the autumn of 1914 between employers and trade unions, there was a *failure to agree on measures to increase output with the reduced available skilled labour* [emphasis added]. Ultimately, by the Munitions of War Act on 2 July 1915, strikes were banned, and workers were forced to increase labour, seeking arbitration through special industrial courts called munitions tribunals where necessary. In the first three months of 1916, 5,828 cases were heard at the busiest twenty-one local tribunals. Yet little legal action was taken against strikers. *Taking employees to court was not likely to enhance industrial relations in employers' workplaces* [emphasis added] (Wrigley 2015).

### Pulp Fiction

However, in small, industrial areas of England, such as in Devon, employers found that losing brave, good men, often meant dealing with those left on new terms. Paper rationing was enforced although newspapers were expanding, and the Armed Forces sought light reading matter. Books were increasingly produced with poor quality paper, giving rise to the term – pulp fiction – and sent to those on the front. Government propaganda replaced journalistic reportage through The British War Propaganda Bureau (WPB) publishing

numerous pamphlets, posters and books. White, grey and black leaflets indicated their relationship to falsity.



#### Devon Wartime Spirit

On 9<sup>th</sup> June 1915, the *Flying Post* contained this compelling advert for men to join up.

*'These boys didn't shirk, they want help. Listen for a moment - can't you here (sic) them calling to you? BE A MAN. There's a king's uniform waiting for you, go and put it on now'*

The Mayoress of Exeter was a formidable fundraiser and organizer, having collected £400 since the outbreak of war. Soldiers on Exeter station were supplied with a bag containing: a large sandwich, two pieces of cake, an orange or banana and a pack of cigarettes. Provisions were supplied to around 13,000 soldiers between September and January (Maxted 2007).

Frederick's father and brothers at Tremlett Bros Ltd 'contributed £262 10s to the Times Sick and Wounded fund in the June', (Maxted 2007). We do not hear if Stoke Canon Mill contributed funds, but maybe this was because, during the spring of 1915, it was undergoing unrest. The mill workers were beginning to feel the pressure of a reduced workforce. Production was down and Charles, who was running the mill for Frederick, told the remaining staff to work to a piecemeal tonnage system, by quantity produced. Supported by their union the workers

demanded instead that their pay be increased by three shillings a week. At this time, all the employees were housed in tied cottages belonging to the mill. Les Kennedy, labour historian: 'The Tremletts, the owners of the mill, said that would cost them far too much, in fact they offered to open their books up to the public and said it would cost an extra £500 a year. And the workers said no, we're serving you with a notice to strike' (BBC 2014).



At the same time as the formation of the Munitions of War Act in July 1915, putting in place arbitration tribunals, the mill was forced to stop production. On 7<sup>th</sup> August, 54 out of the 58 (these figures vary) men, women and boys employed went out on strike. Kennedy: 'The case went to court. By the middle of the August (1915) the Tremletts had clearly had enough, and decided to seek an injunction to have all the workers evicted from the workers' cottages for the mill'.

It seems that negotiation wasn't Charles' strong point; and no doubt he was mindful of the strong financial support his family had given the war effort. Employers and the media accused the strikers of being unpatriotic, betraying brave fighters in the trenches. Charles had a knee-jerk reaction.

Kennedy: 'The case was heard by magistrates sitting at Exeter castle. The union fought the case in the courts claiming it was impossible for the tenants to harvest the crops growing in their gardens in the time allocated, and that the eviction was "a weapon to break up the strike"'. Historian Jean Seaton notes: 'The local newspaper reported a Mrs Radford saying that she had gone to work in the mill to keep her home going, after her husband had been paralyzed following an accident there [this was often caused by falling under a ream of

paper]. But eviction orders were still granted against her and 13 other strikers. She warned that she would end up living in a tent. And that's exactly what she did, along with 50 men women and children, three dogs and a cat, in tents provided by the papermaker's union'. A two-day court case ended in favour of Tremlett, and the strikers were evicted (BBC 2014).

They camped in a field in the village which is now the children's playground, helped by the school mistress. Kennedy 'Ultimately the action was a failure as blackleg labour from Scotland was brought in to break the strike' (BBC 2014). Down they came, and the mill wheel began turning again: the rollers, beaters, pulpers, finishers; the horse, the donkey pump, all got back to work. Meanwhile, the strikers won widespread support from around the area, and the 19 men, 13 women and six boys, were supported by their union. Ultimately, some found other jobs in munitions factories or joined the army.



But were the workers emboldened by the union into an act they instantly regretted? And did Charles overreact as a man who served in the Exeter battalion as a young man, and had been foisted into his managerial position – his elder brother's role – almost against his will. Negotiation was not his strong point; either work for the pay there is, or leave.

In 1924 when Winston Churchill visited his old friend and military comrade Sir Reginald Barnes, for tea, at his farm in Stoke Canon, Charles was invited along. I can see how this can also look like sweeping the lives of others under the class carpet. The workers lost not just their livelihoods but their homes. There is also a sense of the absence of a mother and wife, in the hardness of Charles' decision. In fact, Charles did not marry until he was 54 in 1930; all the hallmarks of a man committed to his position and serving out his duty to his father and his trade.

Standing outside the partly derelict site of the Old Paper Mill today, these events may not be visible but are interred in its history; an unspoken, dark cloud that is trapped

within family memories. Bad fortune has run its diverting course, like the leat to Stoke Canon mill. Perhaps the church had an old score to settle; or perhaps the river, over-worked, harnessed and inexorably polluted, levied its own revenge. For Charles, it was a terrible choice to have to make. Perhaps he found such 'knotty' decisions too hard; the river was working its fulminating spell. Elements of this story have repeated in my own life, and I wonder have I also paid the price for what happened in Devon at the start of the First World War?

Today a Chinese businessman has taken it over, with shiny zinc roofs and a security gate. The old buildings are being rejuvenated for import and export, so they say in the pub. The waterwheel and the main buildings are long gone, the leat is calm, and aside from a couple of remaining mills upstream, the water purity is better than it ever was. As I stand on the ancient bridge, gazing into the quiescent flood waters, there is a sense of quiet new beginnings.

In an era of environmental catastrophe, it must be clear to everyone that this pure river, and its fine eco structure should be protected and valued. And, as such, as far as I know, no bad fortune seems to have yet befallen the latest owner; although it is hard for me personally not to feel a sense of abeyance in the air. As I walk along the banks of the Culm, catching sight of steely fish on a cold, grey Devon morning, I am careful of the cow-pocked edges, disappearing into the deep, dark water.

## Part Two: The Present

### Knotted Walk – Along the Culm

'And shadowy birds are flying slow' (Li Ts'ao)

Yesterday was the higher reaches of the Culm  
Dried banks – cussed cows  
A silent white egret rising up beyond us – flying slow  
Evening back in Stoke Canon pub  
At the bar, turns out a local – a friend of a friend  
tells of Tremlett – a porter working in Dartmouth with 48 cousins  
and of his own ancestors on Anglesey, of Welsh kings – and now with a flat in town.  
But he did live up in a community in the woods for years  
getting water from the vicarage.  
*They evicted them just before ten years were up*  
'cos we could have made a claim to the land.  
[This was the first sign]. I say you should write about it.

Today we walk to a demolished paper mill  
Along the road a walker strides past us – *Ann* she says  
*The north of Exeter is better for walking – no motorways* – tells us the best route  
*Turn right past the chapel and the abandoned house*  
I ask her name – I don't know why.

A private sign and away to the left a man strides horizontally across  
the frame of my eye and an arc of ruby red Devons  
Click – the owner – click potential altercation  
But catching up *Andy* is a tree surgeon checking power lines  
Walks with us through Rillaton wood – nice job  
*Not in late summer – the horseflies – we use the same stuff as the army.*

Tells us about the trees – giant sycamores, sweet chestnut and *poplars*, *he says are balsam*  
The oak over there 600–700 years old – a planet within a planet  
He takes our picture – one either side  
I ask him his name – hands on history  
Guidedness lit I hear their names – *Ann* and *Andy*  
I say the next person will be – *Alan*.

Disused mill – office and site caretaker – who, weary of sitting with newspaper  
Takes us to the river – untouched at more or less its midway point

*There was a waterwheel – there where there is green – in 1050 [1050?]  
There was a corn mill further over, it was Acland land, they leased it out.  
Demolished when it was a recycling plant  
The same company bought Stoke Canon mill [and sealed its fate].*

Edwardian manager's house – faded stained glass birds – warbler emblem  
*when I worked here this was the bowling green  
The social club had a sprung dance floor for Friday night dances – then they went bust.  
The guys who did the demolition wanted to put the river straight so it wouldn't get flooded –  
with a forty-five-degree angle bank.  
The ecologist bloke said no you've got to put it as it was. But you can already see the  
problem it is already washing passed the rocks down there  
It won't take long before its back the way it was.  
[It won't take long before its back the way it was.]*

*There was a hell of a lot of fish in there until about a month ago  
Then I saw all these dead fish come floating down  
Could be silage or a tank from a farm cracked open – or mill dyes near Cullompton.  
It happened at night and went all the way down to Stoke Canon.*

The fishermen say Dace up to half a pound  
Chub to three pounds, pike up to fifteen pounds – lucky if you find a barbell.  
People don't know it is a salmon river not just coarse fishing.  
At any time – swans, buzzards, snipe and cormorants  
wrens, ducks, dippers, sand martins, wagtails  
The beat thick with nettles, greater reed mace and not Himalayan balsam?  
No, that's red campion.

Downstream roach and gudgeon with carp. White clawed crayfish  
– in Devon only two small populations survive –  
*because of falling water quality, and the voracious predator – the American signal crayfish.*  
[Is there again falling water quality? No, not again. We must stop this.]

The weir now has the salmon run – but how can they come?  
If we built weirs before that where they couldn't pass  
And their memory of where they were spawned four years earlier has been blocked?  
Surely, if they lose their memory, they cannot breed and cannot die.  
I stumble by the water's edge. *This water, its eye on me? Does it recognize me and my kind?*  
I ask his name – *Alan*. Coincidence or fate? This is a true story.

Part Three: *Paper River* Poetry Film <https://vimeo.com/344068197>

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