

Interlinked and Independent Threads: Exploring the Poetry Eco-System of Leeds

THE BEGINNINGS

With the National Poetry Centre having recently found its home in Leeds, and poetry organisations growing and spreading their roots all over the city and surrounding areas, it is astonishing how 'niche' so much of Leeds' poetry scene remains. Not for a lack of enthusiasm or accessibility is this the case, but for a lack of exposure and, unsurprisingly, funding. This is not to say, however, that the scene needs a grand, public 'unveiling'; much of its value lies in its ever-changing, somewhat elusive, nature. What I wanted to do through my project, therefore, was not to create some 'encyclopedia of Leeds poetry', but instead to capture a glimpse into poetic activity in this moment in time, and to place it in the context of what has come before.

The desire to merge the past with the present in this way, as well as to give a sense of the unique impact that the environments of Leeds have on its poetry, led me to the idea of creating a 'map of Leeds poetry'. This map became the structure of my research and, although my work stretched far beyond literal pinpoints on a map, allowed for clarity and precision. As I was carrying out this research project for the National Poetry Centre, moreover, I made an effort to investigate not only what was there but what was missing, and what support would be necessary to enable the development of new initiatives, or indeed the re-establishment of old ones. With these aims in mind, I began my research.

THE METHOD

As my project was one that merged past with present, capturing this moment in time but also placing it in the context of what has come before, it was necessary to conduct two forms of research. In order to explore the current poetry scene in Leeds, it was necessary to work 'on the ground' - by attending events, developing relationships, and conducting interviews- so that I could understand a culture and community that often remains, perhaps by virtue of its nature, unrecorded. My examination of the history of poetry in Leeds, however, involved a far greater deal of source work, as I consulted publications, archives and websites in order to paint a picture of Leeds' rich poetic history. Both of these forms of research required very different skill sets, but what they had in common was a requirement for attentiveness, patience, and cultural sensitivity.

LEEDS POETRY- PRESENT

The current poetry eco-system of Leeds was my primary focus in this research project. It was a scene I was not particularly familiar with, but with the help of some very kind individuals, and google, I started to explore everything the city has to offer. I began by attending numerous and varied poetry open-mic events. By doing so, I began to gauge the rhythms poetry in Leeds moves by, and the groups that have formed and interlink within this network. At these events I learnt about community centres, poetry groups, and individual poets who all contribute to the colour and diversity of the scene.



I interviewed certain key players so that my research would be based on the thoughts and values of the people within the scene, not simply the impressions of one person. Doing so not only added depth and insight to my map, but also enabled me to ask the people themselves what they would want from a National Poetry Centre. Ideas about talent development programmes, publication support, and collaborations between health sectors and creative sectors were brought up. It also became clear, however, that certain spaces and groups deeply valued their separation from any external organisations; the line between collaboration and control is one that remains very important in the poetry eco-system of Leeds, whether that be in relation to open-mic event organisers and their performers, community centres and their visitors, or the National Poetry Centre and the community of Leeds. I also realised, during this process, that the rise and fall of certain groups and events is perhaps not the great tragedy I thought, but instead a natural fluctuation involved in evolution.

CONCLUSIONS

The spontaneous, fleeting, intangible quality of the open-mic nights, poetry groups and organised events that form such a great part of the Leeds poetry eco-system makes futile any attempt to fully record the scene. What is far more tangible, however, is the personal poetic development, inter-personal connection, and constantly evolving community that these organisations breed. Working on this project taught me to value impermanent, unrecordable moments without needing to 'capture', or even fully understand, them. This is a project that is only just beginning, and I hope will be continued, by myself or another, in the future.

LEEDS POETRY- PAST

Adding an examination of the history of poetry in Leeds to my map contributed, I hope, to this sense of evolution and fluctuation.

I looked into publications, individuals, and organisations that shaped the poetry eco-system of the past and discovered a wealth of activity that I had previously been unaware of. From a poetry fellowship at the university, to a spoken-word group that travelled to Washington DC, a host of organisations that contributed to poetic excellence in the city were revealed.

In placing this rich history by the side of the current scene I hope, therefore, to give not only a sense of evolution and development but also to raise the profile of Leeds poetry as a whole. It is a scene that is often underestimated, and I hope to bring some of its excellence to the forefront in this project.