

# A Depleted World

Adrian Grima interviews Robert Minhinnick

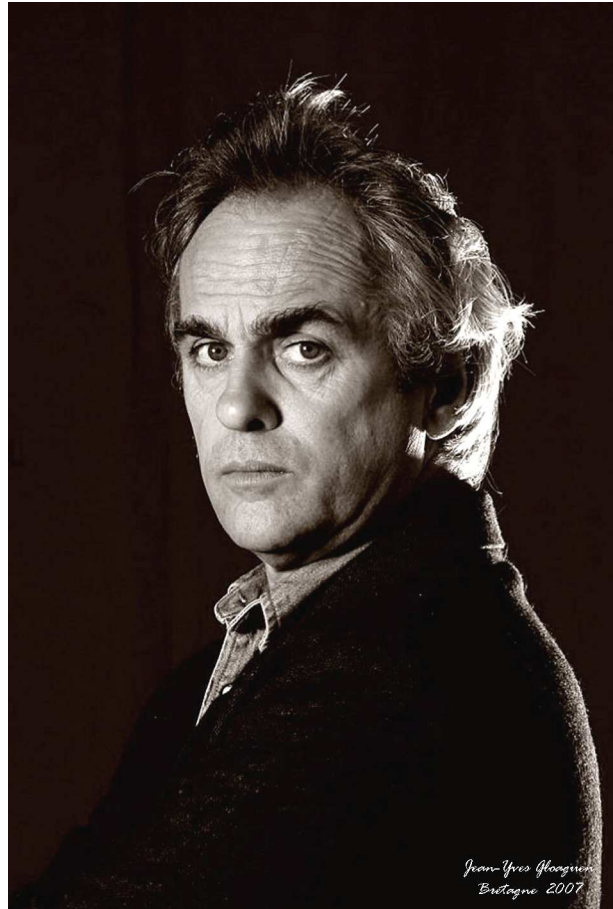
The Welsh environmental campaigner, essayist and poet, Robert Minhinnick, whom *The Sunday Times* of London has described as “the leading Welsh poet of his generation,” will be in Malta to read at the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival at Couvre Porte in Birgu on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 September at 8.00pm.

We spent a good deal of time together when he was in Malta for the first time in 2006 for the LAF Sealines writers’ residencies hosted by Inizjamed and supported by LAF and the British Council. We talked about his compelling poetry, especially works like “The Yellow Palm” (which you can hear him read at [www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)) and “Twenty-Five Laments for Iraq,” but mostly about his book, *To Babel and Back*, which had just won the 2006 Wales Book of the Year

Award. It’s a beautifully written, insightful, unsettling travel log that tackles with grit but also with great humanity some of those issues the mainstream Western media chooses to ignore.

One of these issues is uranium. In his book Robert Minhinnick doesn’t write about the use of uranium enrichment by the self-righteous West, with its very own horrendous arsenal of nuclear weapons of mass destruction, or the use of depleted uranium in the bombs it drops on the Rest. He writes about a sixty year old Navajo uranium miner clinging to an oxygen cylinder in what he calls the “Third World” of south western USA. “On the wall behind him is a series of X rays: his cancer maps.”

Robert Minhinnick sees uranium and radioactivity in general as an image or theme running through his work. “Its about how we are polluted, changed etc by an inescapable power – and that doesn’t mean always for the worse. Uranium itself is a highly political issue – especially the use of depleted uranium in modern warfare – in armour and shell casings for instance, and what happens to that depleted uranium (DU)



after it explodes. But as a metaphor in my work, radioactivity is not always destructive. It can be transformative.”

I ask Robert about the US. In *To Babel and Back* he writes that “The US has destroyed its history and environment. It delights in the disneyfication of its own psyche. But the US teems with mysteries. Despite the wagon-trains, Hollywood and rock ‘n’ roll, it remains unexplored.” I ask whether it’s a US that chooses not to portray its diversity. Is it because it is afraid of what that diversity, what those mysteries can do to its glorified national imaginary?

“I am definitely not anti American – I know too many wonderful US citizens, and I love the American landscape in all its variety, plus US literature. Maybe like anywhere else – the UK for instance – outsiders rarely see more than a stylised or idealised or cliched version of the place. But because of corporate uniformity and mediocre politics, I’m afraid that people outside America feel increasingly alienated and suspicious of that country and its global agendas.”

The book, or travel log (I’m not sure he would appreciate that description – and here’s why), is, in a way, a collection of short stories. “The Forty-four Levels: i.m. Caryl Ward” is a very particular piece. But at the same time it is also quite typical of the collection as a whole. It moves with stylistic ease but also with deep anguish between short accounts of a poet friend smoking away his cancer in a hospital garden, with “tobacco’s sweet eureka taking years off your face,” to what was meant to be a night at the opera with *Aida* and her audience in the Arena of Verona, to Bryn Cwtywn in Wales and the memory of its opencast mine being erased by a Call Centre promising a thousand jobs where “our children will stare into gold screens and thread voices on a loom.” The piece ends with the heavy heart of a writer who has lost a poet friend who can write “hilarious” cancer poems. It ends with friendship, space, and memory resisting erasure. I ask whether he agrees.

“For me the death of my friend was particularly poignant because it occurred when she seemed to have overcome years of bad health, bad luck and depression. Her death terrified me – the cancer came out of the blue and was highly aggressive. The world appeared without justice or love. I’ve juxtaposed my friend’s death, the Welsh farm where she was brought up and which was obliterated by mining, with the picture of an Italian child begging in Verona – that’s what *To Babel and Back* is full of – juxtapositions and uneasy relationships.”

### **Dramatis Personae**

Robert Minhinnick was born in 1952 in Neath, South Wales and now lives in Porthcawl, also in the South of Wales. He grew up near Bridgend and studied at the universities of Aberystwyth and Cardiff, then after working in an environmental field, co-founded Friends of the Earth (Cymru) and became the organisation's joint co-ordinator for some years. He is advisor to the charity, 'Sustainable Wales' and edits the international quarterly, *Poetry Wales*.

He has published two collections of essays: *Watching the Fire Eater* (1992), which won the 1993 Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year Award; and *Badlands* (1996), essays about post-communist Albania, California and the state of Wales and England. He has also edited *Green Agenda: essays on the environment of Wales* (1994).

His poetry collections include *A Thread in the Maze* (1978); *Native Ground* (1979); *Life Sentences* (1983); *The Dinosaur Park* (1985); *The Looters* (1989); and *Hey Fatman* (1994). A *Selected Poems* was published by Carcanet in 1999, followed by *After the Hurricane* (2002). In 2003, the same publisher issued his translations from the Welsh, *The Adulterer's Tongue: An Anthology of Welsh Poetry in Translation*.

His short stories or accounts are full references to characters, writers, artists, places, from Mr. Ogmore to Bill Bryson and Borges, from Ground Zero to El Greco (who also spent time in Malta before moving to Spain). It allows us to reconnect with the artists, characters, creatures, and spaces that have shaped our past and our present.

"The book is full of characters – many of them are artists, glimpsed briefly. Mr Ogmore is pretty much me – I was brought up near the Ogmore river and still live there. Nobody could be more Mr Ogmore than me – as I say in the book. I've given a new life to Dylan Thomass character from *Under Milk Wood* – where of course Mr Ogmore has only a small role. Its about personae again – the freedom the creation of a persona gives a writer to range widely and achieve the unexpected.

I quote from *To Babel and Back* again: "Arapaho," Native American people now living in Wyoming, Oklahoma and Montana, "crazies meant the contrary of what they said, did the opposite of what they were told. My perfect civilisation. And the nightmare? Being born on the Gilbert Islands. Everyone was a warrior. When they weren't killing outsiders the Gilbertians fought themselves. No-one was allowed a shield but people wore cocunut fibre armour. Give me Tusker every time." Is that Robert Minhinnick's Mr. Ogmore (the "perfect gentleman" from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*) talking, or is it Minhinnick himself? Does someone who thinks like that feel like an outsider in the kind of world we're living in hijacked by a "Generalised Anxiety Disorder"?

“Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is how the media or government or the corporate world will manipulate the population. There’s nothing new in that. GAD is a development of cold war paranoia – it seems we always have to have an enemy or fear. My writing is full of observations that are better said by dramatis personae than the naked author. Some of them I agree with, some things not. But it’s a tremendous liberation to be able to create characters who say outrageous or surprising or poetic things.”

### **Increasingly Irrelevant Borders**

In “Burning Season” Robert Minhinnick writes with self-conscious ambiguity about Europe and national identity. “Blissfully, in that garden, I seemed to grow up with no sense of national identity whatever. Nobody talked of countries. Ideas were more interesting. Maybe that’s the first step to freedom. Or the ultimate stage of oppression.” However he seems to reconnect with his blissful years when, in the next sentence (at the start of a new paragraph), he points out that “The fires run on across Europe and no border stops them.” Are not the real dangers to life today transnational, from poverty to environmental degradation, from global injustice to existential malaise? Should we really be fighting over national borders rather than getting together to tackle real global threats like the business of war and global warming?

“My father,” he answers, “was Welsh but he never spoke about Wales as a place that might one day have more political independence or separate identity. Borders are not all bad, we need them in many aspects of life, though in terms of states and countries they seem increasingly irrelevant. Nationalism, like anything else, can be narrow and exclusive and poisonous – but its also a positive force in maintaining identity and culture. Said like that, the essay seems arid and abstract. But it’s not – the particularised detail, the imagery, and the depictions of place see to that I hope.”

I ask again about “Burning Season,” in which he writes about “sea-swans” that stretch “from one world into another,” that race from the “unbeknown” into “my dimension with their whooshing and their whoompering.” Robert Minhinnick predicts “a time when there will be no swans but swans in stone and silicon, and swan DNA guarded behind steel doors.” Is this really where we are all heading, despite our decades-old environmental awareness and activism?

“Already we live in an environmentally depleted world. Maybe gene technology might resurrect some of our losses. Those were real swans – I watched them land on the sea just 300 yards from my home – it was a thrilling experience. If we are creating a world where such things cannot exist, then we are truly barbarians.”

In “The Blue Wolf” Robert refers to what he seems to suggest is the myth of the “absolutism of scientific truth” and the incorruptibility of science, even in the face of dictatorship. Is it true that art can lie but science cannot? (90) Are they really that far apart?

“No – science can be made to lie. And there are areas of science we are finding – such as particle physics, for example – where divisions between what’s true and what’s not are blurred. Again, don’t think of a world without either science or art – they have always existed together and surely nourish each other. The Blue Wolf ends with an image that frightened me when I saw it and thought about it. I saw two men one midnight in Prague – in black leather, with shaven heads – talking under an architrave: above their heads a blue wolf was painted on the plaster. To me the blue wolf looked like an idea – a terrible idea – that was passing from one man to the other.”

### **Poetry and Prose**

There are many sparks of poetry in the prose pieces of *To Babel and Back*. Does Robert Minhinnick see himself as a poet at heart? Could this book have been written as poetry?

“There is lots of poetry in *To Babel and Back*. Some of the pieces were conceived as poems, and even written first as poetry – including the swans, and parts of Mr Ogmores and indeed some of the more political passages. Prose can accommodate poetry and poetry accommodate prose – I use them both, I’m a writer, why shouldn’t I? To me, there are no major divisions between them.”

*The Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival at Couvre Porte in Birgu on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 September is being organized by Inizjamed and Literature Across Frontiers in collaboration with the Birgu Local Council and with the support of the Culture 2000 programme of the EU. Entrance is free.*

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