

Talking about Downland

In October 2023, Jonathan spoke to Anna about her relationship with the Downs, and in the course of the conversation shared some of his own thoughts on what makes this landscape so productive for writers and artists.

Setting the scene...

Jonathan [JD] For me Downland is a book of beautiful paintings with some words (Anna, you may see it slightly differently!), but certainly the focus is our connections with what we still call the Berkshire Downs. I know that as we speak you are sitting near to your studio, a mile or so away from the Downs. So, you're very close to the subject matter, aren't you?

Anna [AD] The Ridgeway from where I'm sat right now is about 40 minutes' walk away, all uphill. I'm in the village of Aston Tirrold.

Personal histories...

JD This stretch we're talking about is the Middle Ridgeway between Streatley – where the River Thames cuts through a line of hills – going west towards just above Swindon. When I was growing up in Didcot, this was the part of the Downs I would go to. I went first with my dad, who was a keen cyclist – he wanted his children to be keen cyclists, particularly his son. So, from the age of six or seven, I was on bike rides with my dad, trailing behind him. I distinctly remember, at the age of eight, the first time I was able to climb up onto the Downs without getting off my bike. We would cycle out on a Sunday across the clay vale south of Didcot, and then up onto the Downs, through East Ilsley, West Ilsley, Aldworth, all those villages. So, the Downs have always been in my mind, and if you live in Didcot – and I know you went to school in Didcot, Anna – depending on the light, the Downs either appear very low on the horizon or as these towering mountains. So that's my story about the Downs. Well, what about you? When did the Downs start to come into your work?

AD Well, I like to think that the connection I have with the Downs and the Ridgeway is something that I've always had because I went to school in Avebury and then I moved here, at about the age of seven, to Aston Tirrold – although I was born in Wallingford, on the Thames. So, the Ridgeway connects the places where I've lived. When you were talking about Didcot and cycling with your father, I was thinking of going on a school bus to Didcot and travelling through all the villages. I was always staring out of the window. I was the sort of kid that would sit on their own daydreaming. And as you meandered around the villages you are always catching glimpses of chalk downland. Also, my grandparents, who lived in the village, were avid walkers, so we were dragged out for long walks on Sundays. I liked the fact that we would walk up the Downs. As a child I never quite understood why they were called the Downs – I was definitely walking up them. Connected to the village are the Aston Downs, and further on, the Blewbury Downs, and these connect to the Churn Estate, so we have the feeling of lovely open landscape.

The Downs in detail...

JD I know your father is something of a scholar of the Middle Ridgeway, with a knowledge of so many facets of this area of countryside. How did his interest in the Downs affect you?

AD He walked the Ridgeway with his brother-in-law in the 1970s, including the stretch we're talking about. They did it as two young lads with backpacks, unsuitable footwear, no water, and I don't think they finished it all, between you and me, but they had a lot of fun en route. I

remember him talking about this epic walk, and I was always very interested in doing that myself. He also had a knowledge of chalk downlands because he was an ecologist. So, on walks he encouraged my sister and I to look at the nature around us, at the biodiversity. So, I've always had that kind of visual connection to the landscape through him. Very much so.

JD You and I know this landscape very well and I have the reality of it in my mind. But I also have a version of it from your paintings and you may have some versions of it through my words. But for people who don't know what the Middle Ridgeway is like, I wonder how we would describe this landscape. Anna, as you're the visual artist, could you describe this landscape?

AD It's very much a farmed landscape now, very arable, very open, and it provides us with incredible panoramic views across the Thames Valley and the Vale of the White Horse. There's an incredible network of footpaths and old drovers' roads – even I get lost at certain points up there, when there's five or six tracks intertwining across the Ridgeway. You get a feeling of escapism. You get a feeling of being solitary in the landscape. It's very relaxing, but it's also inspirational. You're constantly looking. The light up there is really quite something. In all weathers, even like today, which is a bit murky because we've had a storm, it is dramatic.

JD Yes, you're right. I've spent the last two years reminding myself that this part of the world isn't what people imagine the South of England to be. It's not shopping centres and gastropubs. It is actually rather wild. Hardly anybody lives on the Downs because of the lack of water. Villages are mostly located at the foot of the Downs or further down the dip slope towards the River Kennet. It really is a lonely place, which makes the sheer quantity of tracks and footpaths slightly ghostly. That there must have been so much traffic up here at one point, presumably 2,000 years ago. I've often been up on the Downs and there's been literally no one else in sight, which given you're only two miles from Didcot Parkway Railway Station, is impressive.

Artists of the Downs...

JD That emptiness you've mentioned makes me want to ask you about your artistic influences. How have you developed as an artist, and how have you come to produce these very vivid, hyper-realistic paintings?

AD My influences and inspiration come from 20th century British artists, like Paul Nash. I also love his brother's work – John Nash – who was the lesser known of the two at the time but has now gained better recognition. There's also, obviously, Eric Ravillious who painted, so brilliantly, the chalk downland landscape and managed to capture the quality of that light we're talking about. I have a book, edited by Richard Ingrams to accompany a Ridgeway exhibition in Swindon in the 1980s, of an amazing series of artists. I flicked through this book as a child, and I was absolutely in awe of all the work. There is one painting, by a chap called Patrick Malacarnet from Jersey. It's a beautiful panorama of the Uffington White Horse. This book and the exhibition had a profound effect on me.

JD That painting could be an 'early Anna Dillon'. There is an almost a geometric analysis of the landscape. There is order but a disorder also.

Subverting the genre...

JD As an aside, one of the things that drew me to your paintings, was the fact that human life is hidden. We see the fields, we see Didcot Power Station – now gone – and the odd building, but generally your landscapes are depopulated, as if they are prelapsarian – before the fall or after

the apocalypse. This gives me space to write, so thank you; but why do your paintings focus on the non-human?

AD Probably, if I'm being frank, the Victorian genre of landscape painting always included people who were working the landscape but I feel like those paintings have become a little bit 'chocolate boxey'. I didn't feel that adding the human element into the landscape added anything. For me, it's the love of the landscape, how it has been shaped by humans rather than the humans themselves.

JD Yes. The centre of gravity is the land and the colours and shapes. I've always been struck by – and I've responded to it in one of the poems – the extraordinary range of colours you use for what I would say is just like green or grey. I know you're not doing a photographic reproduction of what you see – you're doing a version of it filtered through your imagination – but would you say a little bit about your use of colour?

AD There's an Austrian artist people might be familiar with, Friedrich Hundertwasser, who produces beautifully coloured work. His bold, primary colours inspired me. But here I'm going to pay credit to my former art teacher of Didcot Girls School, Ron Freeborn, who sadly passed away a few years ago. He was a phenomenal art teacher and has left an amazing legacy of artists inspired and encouraged by him. He taught us to paint and not be afraid of colour. He taught us colour by looking at the Impressionists' work. He taught us to look beyond what was there to see colours that other people might miss.

JD That's interesting, because when I've responded to your paintings with poems, I've resisted the urge to simply describe the painting. I've been thrown into trying to describe what is beyond the painting, a personal response. My late father is with me, of course, because he dragged me up to the Downs and he is present in my life.

More about fathers...

AD Did your father have an influence on you becoming a poet, apart from being able to connect to the landscape?

JD He was evacuated when he was 12 to North Wales and lived in a Welsh speaking community and didn't really speak Welsh. So that made him a lonely and slightly troubled boy. And he was probably a lonely and slightly troubled man throughout his life. But he loved to perform and was a great dancer and he loved to sing as we were cycling, which was excruciating if you're 11 and your father is singing as you cycle. So, I inherited from him a desire to be heard and to entertain people and to create.

A writer's response...

JD But let me ask you another question, Anna. I know you wouldn't call yourself a literary person, but your studio is full of books, often about the physical world you've painted. How has it been to have someone else write in response to your paintings?

AD I am happy to confess that I'm quite dyslexic, which I think is reasonably common when you use the creative part of your mind. I wish I could be a good writer, but I'm not. I greatly admire people who have this skill and I'm drawn to your poetry because the landscape is being seen from two perspectives, with the link being our personal love of this landscape.

JD Thank you very much. It has been an absolute pleasure, of course, but also it has caused me to get to know the painters who inspired you to understand where you've come from. And

perhaps we have had a similar journey through the English tradition in the way we have responded to a non-urban landscape. It has also been fascinating to see something of how you make a painting, the sheer physical hard work it takes. And you have made so many wonderful paintings, mostly, not exclusively, of the chalk hills of the south of England and in that tradition of landscape painting. So, let me ask, where are you going now? How are you developing your art?

Future directions...

AD I'm embedded in the landscape. There is nothing I'd sooner do than continue to paint landscapes. I've become a big walker. Walking and painting mesh together. There's so much of the British Isles that I want to see, walking and then painting. I've recently collaborated with a drone pilot, Hedley Thorne. We've just finished the Wessex Airscapes Wiltshire exhibition at the Wiltshire Museum. I've also abstracted a bit with some of my work, collaging and mono-printing, which has enabled me to have a smaller, looser style of work, which is stepping away from the control required by the large oil paintings. So that's really fun and it's quite exciting as a new medium. I'm loving it because it's risky, you don't know where it's going, it's hit and miss. It is really dynamic. And what, what about you, Jonathan?

JD Well, I never know after one book what I'm doing next. And you never know if there's going to be another book because the poetry world is full of ups and downs. I'm probably, possibly heading in the other direction for you, in that I'm more and more interested in form and the restrictions that form places upon you and the outcomes as a result. This means you write much more slowly because to write in a highly formulaic way, working away at the same block of text, draft after draft. But like walking along the Berkshire Downs on the Ridgeway, there are many little paths to take if one wishes, but the old road goes on and we simply follow it.

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This is an edited and abridged transcript of the conversation between Anna and Jonathan. The conversation in its entirety is available to watch on the Two Rivers Press YouTube channel here:

<https://youtu.be/OyafqWtsL3o>