

Treasure trove of unseen writing by poets Hughes and Heaney reveals vital creative friendship

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A unique literary and artistic archive unveiled today transforms our understanding of the great poets Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. It reveals that they drew career-defining inspiration from a virtually unknown friendship circle, and a shared passion for water and fishing, spanning five decades.

Image

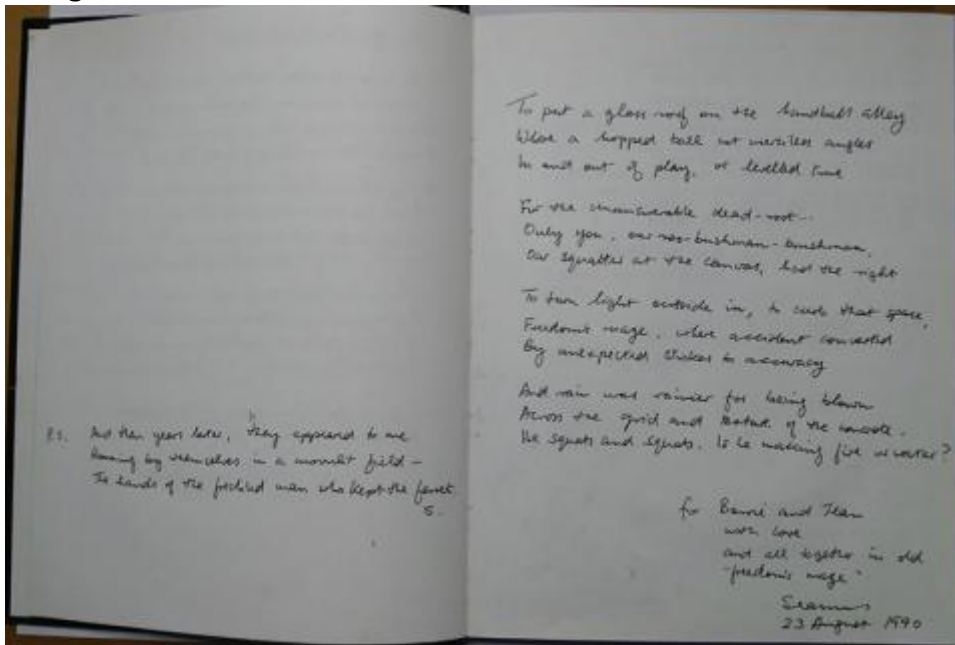


Photo credit: Mark Wormald

Two poems by Seamus Heaney, inscribed in the guest book of Barrie Cooke and Jean Valentine, 23 August 1990. Credit: The Heaney Estate.

The collection, acquired by Pembroke College Cambridge, is a treasure trove of previously unseen poems, personal letters, photographs and literary papers by the writers, and drawings and paintings of their work by their artist friend Barrie Cooke.

Pembroke College acquired the archive from the Cooke Estate with the generous support of Ted Hughes's sister Olwyn's bequest to Pembroke with assistance from the Arts Council England/V&A Purchase Grant Fund, the National Heritage

Memorial Fund, Art Fund, Friends of the National Libraries, Old Possum's Practical Trust, and the Duke of Devonshire's Charitable Trust as well as from alumni and friends of the College.

Highlights from Ted Hughes' pen include 25 vivid letters, written over a span of 30 years, a poem entitled 'Trenchford on Dartmoor' written for Cooke and his wife, and a sketch entitled 'The Dagda meets the Morrighu on the Unshin near Ballinlig', which offers a wonderful angler's retelling of Irish mythology. Like the letters, it speaks volumes about fatherhood, writing, fishing and friendship.

Admirers of Seamus Heaney will delight in the dozens of typescript and manuscript drafts of poems and letters he sent Cooke from November 1971. These include an unknown and unpublished poem called 'The Island' about the house on the River Nore in County Kilkenny where Cooke, his wife (the Dutch potter Sonja Landweer) and their young daughter were then living, and Heaney's sense of liberating excitement at the life of the river in which they were sometimes literally immersed.

Writing to Cooke in March 1972, at the moment when he was making the decision to embark on a life as a freelance writer, Heaney told his friend: "Your confidence in us engendered confidence in ourselves and it is strange how the secret will to change burgeoned after that morning's walk at Lugalla and then, more irresistibly, in your kitchen on the Saturday night when we ate the pike. The first supper!"

A later entry in Cooke's guest book includes two poems, one about Heaney's father, one an early version of one of Heaney's "Squarings" about Cooke and his studio. Both would appear in his collection, *Seeing Things*. And there are wonderful photographs revealing his and Cooke's affection for Ted Hughes.

Barrie Cooke was born in Britain in 1931 and lived in Ireland from his twenties. He became Ireland's leading expressionist artist, highly regarded for his responses to the waters he fished and campaigned to protect from pollution. But the archive reveals that he also made a major contribution to literature.

Cooke is already credited for suggesting and illustrating Ted Hughes' poem, *The Great Irish Pike* (1982). But the archive also contains wild images of Hughes', *Crow* – published 50 years ago this autumn – and evidence that their collaboration went back to the early sixties. Letters and poems in the archive reveal another dimension to Cooke's influence. In his company, in and beside the waters they fished, Hughes's head and heart turned "Irishwards", as he put it, towards a

"freedom and flow", an "inner freedom" that made him and his son Nick "completely happy", as he put it to Heaney.

In his final years, Barrie Cooke's family feared he had lost his collection of poets' letters and manuscripts, including major international poets who attended the Kilkenny Arts Week, which he co-founded in 1974. But during a conversation about Hughes with Pembroke's Dr Mark Wormald, he suddenly pulled out a cardboard box full of treasures. Cooke died in 2014; ideas for the archive's future have evolved in the years since.

Mark Wormald says: "The tenderness of the letters between these men takes my breath away, and it transforms what we know about their work and personal lives. Ted Hughes emerges as an absolutely devoted father, a wonderfully generous friend, and someone who lived and breathed nature through fishing. And Cooke's influence on Seamus Heaney, as an artist who was completely committed to the natural and mythological history of Ireland's waters, was real and enduring, as was the nourishment Heaney took from their friendship."

A keen angler himself, Wormald adds: "Fishing is the UK's biggest participation sport but it suffers from a fair bit of cultural snobbery. This collection blows that out of the water. Without fishing and without Barrie Cooke, their fishing-obsessed friend, Hughes and Heaney's poetry would have looked very different."

Barrie Cooke's work with Heaney ventured from the riverbank into Ireland's peat and wetlands. Cooke invited Heaney to join him in a "private 4-dimensional bog wallow"; Heaney responded, sometimes directly inspired by Cooke's own art, and this eventually led to an illustrated edition of *Bog Poems* (1975), with plates by Cooke and published by Hughes's sister Olwyn's Rainbow Press two weeks before Heaney's much better known collection, *North*. The collection includes over forty haunting watercolour and charcoal images Cooke made on that journey. Cooke later illustrated Heaney's, *Sweeney Astray* (1984) and the artist's preparatory paintings and drawings in the collection help explain why the medieval Irish epic inspired them both so much. Two fine lithographs marking Heaney's seventieth birthday are also included, as is Cooke's watercolour portrait of the poet.

Pembroke, Ted Hughes' alma mater, already has a significant collection of the poet's manuscripts, artwork, fishing tackle, fish and furniture, including his writing desk and chair. This, and Wormald's ongoing research into the friendship, persuaded Cooke's daughters to give the College first option. The fact that Pembroke has managed to acquire the collection prevents it going to universities

in the United States, where a considerable amount of Hughes and Heaney material is already held.

The archive will now be catalogued, conserved and curated in Pembroke's library. A series of exhibitions will follow in the College's new public gallery due to open in 2022. Pembroke also plans to stage exhibitions in Ireland and the US.

Mark Wormald says: "This unique collection is deeply rooted in British and Irish culture so we're delighted to keep it on this side of the Atlantic. It will bring joy to a lot of people. It's going to inspire books, articles, teaching and public events, on literary friendship and the interplay of text and image."

René Olivieri, Interim Chair of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "This previously unseen archive gives us a vital new insight into these great literary and artistic figures and how their close friendship impacted their collective work. We at the National Heritage Memorial Fund think it fitting that this archive joins the outstanding collection of Ted Hughes material at Pembroke College.

"In the year that marks the 40th anniversary of the NHMF we are proud that this archive will be included among the wide range of iconic artefacts and places across the UK that the NHMF has played a vital role in saving. We're pleased to support Pembroke who will care for it for the nation and welcome plans to exhibit the archive in Ireland and further afield in the future."