

## **Rivers and Water Quality in the Work of Brian Clarke and Ted Hughes**

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### **Abstract**

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and novelist Brian Clarke (1938- ) were both fishermen whose art celebrated river life but also expressed concerns about river pollution, Hughes in his acclaimed poetry collection *River* (1983) and Clarke in his environmental novel *The Stream* (2000). These two writers have penetrated deeply into British culture with their profound insights. Indeed, this essay argues that when fishermen are also creative writers, culture can intervene on behalf of nature; that is, when nature is thus constructed for literary readers, culture becomes nature's own means of helping the human animal adjust to its place within the natural world. Here, then, the artistic achievements of these two writers are directly tied to their scientifically informed backgrounds as well as to their experience with writing in other modes, journalistic and polemical, as well as fictional and poetic ones. This reconnection of all aspects of an artist's work—the linking of art and activism, science and imaginative writing, aesthetics and environmental education—has important implications for cultural and literary studies. There is, after all, an urgent need to heal the rift between scientific and artistic modes of knowing in our confrontation with an environmental crisis—here more specifically the issue of water quality—that threatens the life of every living creature on the planet.

### **Keywords**

Brian Clarke, Ted Hughes, water quality,  
ecopoetry, environmental novel, activism, science, nature, culture

We British tend to take our many rivers for granted, living as we do in such a damp land, a land of cloudy days, fog, mist and rain. In fact, it is often the fishermen who first notice the deterioration of the water quality and who understand the consequences of this for the subtle links in the ecological chain of a watershed's total population, human and non-human. When these fishermen are also creative writers who construct nature for their readers, then culture can intervene on behalf of an encompassing nature; it can become nature's way of helping the human animal understand and adjust to its place in the natural world. And when such fishermen have the imaginative resources of the novelist Brian Clarke (1938- ) and the poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998), their writing can enable their insights about nature to penetrate deeply into British culture and, beyond it, world culture.

The question of the ethics of fishing has been suspended in this paper, although a correspondence with Ted Hughes on this issue has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Rather, this paper links the artistic achievements of these two writers with their scientific backgrounds, which play an important role in their imaginative consciousness-raising by means of narrative and poetry. The paper is part of a continuing research project which seeks to reconnect all aspects of an artist's work, linking art and activism, science and imaginative writing, aesthetics and environmental education.<sup>2</sup> The argument of this essay, then, is that really communicating to readers the scope of the environmental crisis we face today depends on integrating the talent for literary writing with a real knowledge of environmental science and real experience of environmental activism. More generally, there is clearly an urgent need to heal the rift between scientific and artistic modes of knowing in our confrontation with this crisis, not least where it concerns water quality.

Brian Clarke has had two careers, one in journalism—in a first job on the Political Desk of the *Guardian*; currently as Fishing Correspondent at the *Times*—and another (in between) working for IBM, where he was responsible for monitoring IBM's impact on the UK environment. He wrote two best-selling non-fiction books while at IBM—*The Pursuit of Stillwater Trout* (1975) and *The Trout and the Fly* (1980), both still in print. Although aimed at anglers, each contained much natural history, including new observations on bugs and fish. Clarke was Fishing Correspondent of the *Sunday Times* from 1975 to 1996 and has been Fishing Correspondent of the *Times* since 1991, writing about fish, fishing, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Gifford, "Go Fishing."

<sup>2</sup> See Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir*.

pressures on the aquatic environment. He left IBM in 1991, primarily to write his first novel, *The Stream* (2000), about which he says:

I wanted to write from inside nature, in a real way, dealing with real issues: to show the impact of human behaviour on the environment and wildlife, without anthropomorphising anything . . . something I found almost impossible, not least because I could find no reference points (that is, no precedents that I could discover). An added complication was that there was so much science and natural history to be conveyed without the reader being aware of it. (It is an aside, but every incident recounted in the finished book really happened—I saw it all, with my own eyes). (Clarke, email 9 Feb. 2006)

*The Stream* won the Natural World Book Prize, the UK's top environmental book award, and also the prize for "Best First Novel by a British Writer," awarded by the Authors' Club of Great Britain. Its combination of fiction, journalism, science, and activism make *The Stream* a unique work.

*The Stream* has at its heart the issue of water quality and its implications. The development of an industrial park in an economically depressed rural area will require new roads and the supply of huge amounts of water. At the same time a nearby farm, whose fields straddle the un-named stream, is to be modernized by the old farmer's son by means of new drainage systems, new strains of crops sustained by new fertilizers, and pesticides. But it is the life in the stream itself that is foregrounded in this narrative. The small and accumulative consequences in the stream of the various stages of these two projects are cleverly narrated in parallel, often with ironic effects made all the more poignant by the reader's awareness that only an observer such as Clarke would be able to register the subtle changes in the life of the stream. The ecology of the stream is brilliantly characterized as following "the law of continuing": "[T]he law that decreed all things, had made all life in the stream to fit in with this plan" (Clarke, *Stream* 9). It is important for the reader to appreciate the subtle details of the ecology of trout breeding that lies at the heart of the novel. Clarke's prose conveys this with clarity:

The law of continuing had taken special account of the eggs when the gravels were made. It had decreed that the currents should be so fast over the gravels that no silt could settle over them. In the exact places on the gravels where the fish had been told to dig their scoops, the

law of continuing had provided springs to well up from the stream bed so that the stones and the eggs could be washed clean from below. In the interests of the fish as well as their eggs, the law of continuing had decreed that the water in the stream should always be cool because cool water could carry more oxygen than warm and the fish as well as the eggs would need a lot of oxygen to survive. There was no small thing, not even the uttermost small detail, that the law of continuing had not made perfect for the fish that needed to spawn. (*Stream 58-59*)

The next paragraph shows how Clarke contrasts stream life with anthropocentric interests, the latter less directly and poetically expressed.

It was in the week that shares in Plantains and Greenmount soared because of the contracts they had been awarded for work on the development that the hen fish opposite Longate moved. On the day the old man was worrying about his bank statements again and his son was urging him to modernize the farm, the hen fish began to swim steadily upstream, following the route that the current had marked out. (*Stream 59*)

Crucial to both industrial and farming developments is their effect on water quality in the stream. Quite apart from possible pollution, small changes in the flow-rate will obviously effect depth, temperature, silt deposition, plant and insect life, as well as put pressure on the niches available for fish and animals further up the food-chain. Following a vivid description of the cob of a family of swans chasing off an intruding swan, Clarke concludes this chapter with a significant human decision that will affect their future:

It was evening, as the stream was flooded with a rose-water light and the swans were travelling in single-file again, when the Inspector sketched out his note about the danger to the two rivers if either were abstracted to supply water to the development. The following day he drafted his advice for the Minister. (*Stream 43*)

Clarke is careful to recognize good intentions by indicating that although an ancient woodland and archaeological site are to be sacrificed for the new road to the

industrial park, the Minister has required that boreholes are to be drilled for an independent water supply in such a way that neither of the two rivers, one on either side of the site and one fed by the stream, would be compromised. But the unspoken presence of global warming in the novel has resulted in a drought that undermines the best of human intentions. The boreholes are draining the same underground aquifer that feeds the springs. And the farm's new fertilizers and insecticides, together with the chokeweed that had in the slowed, lower and subsequently warmer stream and now has died, leave invisible "stains" in the water:

It was because the drought had come and the boreholes had come that the stains in the water were so strong. It was because the drought had come and the boreholes were taking water faster than the plan was replacing it that the springs had not risen for three winters in a row and the stains in the water were so little diluted. Neither the trout with the scar nor the gaunt cock fish with the hooked jaw and the huge head nor any of the other fish could see the stains put into the water by the dead chokeweed and the insecticides and the fertilizers and by the strange chemicals that seeped into the stream from the cracked pipe under the farm. The fish could not see the stains though the stains were everywhere about them and the fish could not feel the stains though they were everywhere passing through them. (*Stream* 198)

These "stains" would lead to gender changes in the fish, a phenomenon also observed by Ted Hughes and his friend Ian Cook in the fish of the rivers of Devon. Thus Clarke shows how the stream's rich and complex ecology is slowly being destroyed by many small but cumulative human causes, despite the best of intentions. Toward the end of the novel, Clarke records a television debate chaired by a "Lisa Pearce" about the "success" and the "costs" of the industrial park, a debate that attempts to represent the best arguments fairly from each point of view. Juxtaposed with these arguments are snapshots of the activity taking place on the now silted and hardened bed of the stream in which trout, already known by us as individuals, attempt to lay infertile eggs. The irony of this retrospective media debate and the pathos of the vain efforts of the hen trout are hard to convey without a lengthy quotation. The final paragraph will have to suffice:

The hen trout that had been covering her eggs with silt in her attempt to cover them with gravel, drifted downstream. She kept shaking her head from side to side and opening her jaws as though coughing or retching. Lisa Pearce was home and the studio lights were out before the dirt in the fish's gills worked free. (*Stream* 211)

This image of the silent writhing fish in degraded water could have come from the opening of Ted Hughes' powerful children's story *The Iron Woman* (1993). The final line of Clarke's novel, following upon the death agony of this same trout, ironically evokes the applause at the official opening of this human "success story." The novel ends:

As the cut ribbon separated and the silken ends fluttered, the eye of the trout that had lived as quick and light as water itself, stared sightlessly as though at something finally arrived, then rolled loosely back.

The dome of the sky looked down at it.  
And the applause rang out. (*Stream* 245)

Clarke and Hughes knew each other through fishing, and Hughes had offered to read the manuscript of *The Stream*; however, his terminal cancer was too advanced at the time when it might have been possible. It is an indication of Clarke's and Hughes' common interest in writing about their passion that in 1983 they both contributed to a book of essays entitled *West Country Fly Fishing*, although in this book they reversed the roles that might have been expected of them. Clarke, the angling authority, wrote poetically, as a visitor to the West Country rivers, about three memorable days fishing: "None of them, in angling terms, is of any great account. Except, that is, to me" (Bark 1). Enigmatic engagements with fish that were not caught gave Clarke something other than a memorable struggle with a Moby-Dick: "[T]he memories of the West Country that I cherish most are made of subtler stuff: of images and atmospheres, incident and charm; and fishes and water and light" (Bark 6).

While there is a life-enhancing attentiveness and poetic evocation to Clarke's writing, ironically it is the poet Hughes who contributes an overview of the history of the fishery through his two chosen Devon rivers, the Taw and the Torridge. Although Hughes can evocatively celebrate sea trout night fishing—"the least touch can be anything from half a pound to seven or eight—which is the difference

between a swallow and a tiger. . . . This . . . leaks an especially high-quality adrenalin into the blood—which is no doubt the drug we are hooked on” (Bark 36)—he focuses on an account of the dramatic decline of the trout and salmon fishery in these rivers. An indication that the subtext of this essay was really about water quality is revealed in an unpublished letter to his friend Keith Sagar:

Did you see my piece in *West Country Fly Fishing*? . . . The hoteliers on the two rivers are friends of one sort or another. So the essay is an attempt to glorify the rivers while suppressing the knowledge that they are going down the drain. Even twenty years ago they produced 1/3 of all salmon in the West Country. Last year only 43 salmon were caught on the Torridge (It used to be a thousand to 1500.). It’s become a farm sewer. (14 Dec. 1983, 139)

This last phrase gives a hint of a little-known practical (and political) concern that underlies the poetry of Hughes’ celebrated collection, *River*.

In his introduction to his selection of Hughes’ essays, *Winter Pollen* (1994), William Scammell attempts to anticipate criticism of certain intellectual positions repeatedly taken by Hughes in these essays and reviews. Scammell identifies two contentious assumptions commonly found in *Winter Pollen*:

The tendency to equate civilization with repression, for example, and reason with rationalization, might be countered by quoting Chekhov’s observation that there is more love for humanity in electricity and a hygienic water supply than in any amount of spiritual breast-beating. (Chekov had the later, fundamentalist Tolstoy in mind, and the nature of the peasants’ working week.) (Hughes, “Introduction” xiii)

Scammell included in *Winter Pollen* a 1970 review of Max Nicholson’s book *The Environmental Revolution* in which Hughes cites, as an example of the need for the public to pressure for government intervention, “the industrial poisoning of the water-systems in and around England” (131). As it happens, from the 1980s onward, Hughes himself was very active in the campaign for a hygienic water supply in the Southwest of England, writing a reasoned campaign statement for a public enquiry and helping to found a pressure-group that has expanded into a national research and monitoring organization concerned with water quality in the nation’s rivers. Thus whatever general tendencies Hughes observed regarding the uses of reason in

his culture, as an activist he certainly supported his lyrical celebration of the life of rivers in his poetry with a carefully reasoned discourse, one that was based upon his reading the latest available scientific evidence. The full range of discourses in what we now need to recognize as the “reconnected” work of Ted Hughes has been little known up to now because the evidence for it has been hidden in the archives of the poet’s letters and papers. Nonetheless, we can now see how science informed Hughes’ art, and how polemical discourse was deployed in the struggle to influence public policy. The way in which the multiple discourses and modes of knowledge that fed Hughes’ art and activism were integrated might provide a model for our own times.

Hughes was named Poet Laureate a year after publishing his collection, *River* (1983). At least two Hughes scholars believed that this collection was the height of the poet’s achievement at the time they wrote their books on his work (Robinson 205; Scigaj 290).<sup>3</sup> In his second book on the work of Hughes, Scigaj wrote: “*River* will one day be recognized as one of the central literary masterpieces of the world; it should be required reading for all humans on our planet to help them attain responsible adulthood” (*Ted Hughes* 133). This was Hughes’ ninth major collection, and it was to be the last to focus entirely upon his major theme: man’s relationship with the forces of the natural world.

The iconic figure of that relationship in *River* was the most primitive—the fisherman hunter, but in his most self-conscious 20th-century mode, as the poet himself. Just as fishing had always been a part of Hughes’ life, so too had rivers. Although the two rivers of his childhood—first the River Calder in West Yorkshire, then the River Don in South Yorkshire—were so polluted that they contained few fish, as a child Hughes fished in the canal alongside the River Calder (“big, but rare trout”) and in an oxbow lake beside the River Don, until the first silage made in the area killed all the fish (Hughes, *Three Books* 184). In Devon, where the poet lived for most of his adult life, his village, North Tawton, took its name from the River Taw, one of the rivers flowing from Dartmoor that he wrote about for *West Country Fly Fishing* and that also appears in *River*. Hughes’ belief in the symbolic value of a river as a “vein” in the life of the “sea-spirit” that regulates our globe had already been established in the poem “December River” in *Season Songs* (1976). So the *River* collection was, for Hughes, about more than the natural element in our environment that he knew most intimately; it was also about the current state of our relationship with this vital element.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Robinson’s and Scigaj’s critical comments on *River*, see Gifford 1995, 133-35.

When I asked Ted Hughes to tell me the story of his “greening” as a poet, he linked his reading of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* when it was first published in 1962 with his experience of the rivers of his childhood: “So my greening began you could say with everything that lay about me in my infancy” (*Green Voices* 132). The plight of the fish in those rivers of his childhood, as much as in those of his adult life, are, Hughes explained, an unrecognized indicator of human self-destructiveness: “[T]hese fish are simply indicators of what is happening to us” (*Green Voices* 132). Speaking more generally in an interview Hughes has said:

Most people I talk to seem to defend or rationalise the pollution of water. They think you’re defending fish or insects or flowers. But the effects on otters and so on are indicators of what’s happening to *us*. It isn’t a problem of looking after the birds and bees, but of how to ferry human beings through the next century. The danger is multiplied through each generation. We don’t really know what bomb has already been planted in the human system. (Morrison 34)

Thus Hughes’ poems about rivers and fish are also clearly about the links between water quality and public health, and what is not so widely known by readers and critics of his poetry, and of *River* in particular, is the extent to which this ecstatic poetry was informed by practical political action on behalf of the rivers in the southwest of England. The Hughes archives in Britain and America make clear the link between the poet’s activities across a range of discourses and of forms of intervention, all of them concerned with water quality and the health of the earth’s ecosystem.

The first poem Hughes offered as Poet Laureate was about the rivers of Devon and appeared under the title, “Rain-Charm for the Duchy, A Blessed, Devout Drench for the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry.” In fact, this poem had originally been intended for the *River* collection. The poet’s unpublished correspondence reveals that there was actually an environmental agenda behind it, and that it had had some effect on local politicians. “Surprising what effect the Poet Laureate label has,” Hughes thus wrote to Keith Sagar:

The line [in “Rain-Charm for the Duchy”] about the pollution (quite mild and domestic) of the Okement caused great agitation in Okehampton (responsible for the refuse)—might even affect the Council’s *laissez faire*. These are the perks.

Pity I didn't leave in the lines about the Torridge—they were “And the Torridge, that hospital sluice of all the doctored and scabby farms from Welcombe to Hatherlea to Torrington / Poor, bleached leper in her pit, stirring her rags, praying that this at / Last is the kiss of the miracle, / That soon she'll be plunging under her sprays, splitting her lazar crust, new-born, / A washed cherub etc.” But I thought it might seem in poor taste. (21 Jan. 1985, 150)

Of course, Hughes was a well-known fisherman so his concern about the water quality in rivers is understandable. In a long letter to the *Times* in 1985 he was concerned mainly about the effects upon “the employment and economy of their home rivers” of the 77,000 returning salmon caught by the Northumbrian driftnet fishery (13 Aug 1985). Hughes wrote a letter to me in answer to my enquiry about how he justified fishing,<sup>4</sup> but in a letter written to me the previous day that is marked “unsent” in the Emory University archive, he points out that it is the fishermen, rather than the water authorities, who are most actively concerned about the possible environmental consequences of fishing: “All the river renovation down here has been initiated by fishermen—I mean the actual cleaning of waterways. At least, in the early nineteen eighties it was—before it became politically OK. (And in fact, the political r[e]sistance was unbelievable—to a degree still is)” (15 Jan. 1994).

The poet's unpublished letters and documents in the British Library and the Hughes archive at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, reveal an impressive commitment of time and thought, for example in the attending of committee meetings, site visits, reading scientific reports (with titles like “The effects of surfactants in the Rivers Exe and Creedy”) and writing in various modes—letters, notes, speeches, satirical poems—that go beyond the poet's concern for water quality merely as a fisherman. Indeed, despite the economic significance of the riparian business in the southwest of England, Hughes realized that perceived interest in fishing as a “hobby” would undermine any arguments concerning water quality brought forward by riparian interests. In a letter to *Trout and Salmon* in July 1998, the poet charted the history of campaigns for improved water quality in Devon's rivers since the early 1980s and the 1985 Bideford estuary, but noted that “a river that is nothing but a fishery has a poor prognosis.” “Larger, social—in other words political—issues” had to be engaged by the riparian industry, he wrote. And in the archive there is a long note headed “A NEW NAME FOR RIPARIAN

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<sup>4</sup> See Gifford, “Go Fishing.”

ASSOCIATIONS,” which indicates the intensity of Hughes’ thinking about political strategy in the water-politics of Devon. He had obviously been stung by the fact that

. . . a big chief of the Water Company attending the Taw AGM . . . made the comment; it’s wonderful to see what lengths a lot of old buffers will go to for their private hobby . . . meaning “elitist hobby, pursued by rich snobs who want to keep the fishing to themselves.” We are stuck with an image problem. . . . [T]he bad effects are seen every time the Riparians try to defend the Sportsfishery against some damage . . . [and] have great difficulty getting their case taken seriously. (16 June 1993)

Hughes suggests “Taw Fishery Cooperative” before continuing,

[s]uddenly the cider works at Winkleigh wouldn’t be occasionally brushing off its nose end the fly-like thought of the Taw Riparian Association—that amiable gang of “silly old buffers.” It would suddenly be contemplating the idea of a group of businessmen intent on developing . . . a multi-million pound business of immense benefit to the whole of North Devon . . . [and] everybody else would be in a different frame of mind. (16 June 1993)

So it is significant that, when I began researching Hughes’ environmental political activity, Carol Hughes drew my attention to her husband’s being instrumental in founding the Westcountry Rivers Trust. What had begun with Hughes’ involvement with the Torridge Action Group, formed in 1983 to tackle a specific issue, led to his proposing the formation of the Westcountry Rivers Trust with Ian Cook in 1993. This was the first Rivers Trust in England that was instrumental in forming, with thirty other Rivers Trusts, the national water watchdog organization, the Association of Rivers Trusts.

In the Emory archive can also be found holograph draft and typed copies of plans for legal action against the South West Water Authority, which is accused of having “failed in its statutory duty to improve and maintain the fishery” (Hughes, Undated, Emory Ms. 644. Box 166, FF 1). The notes begin, “[a] crisis committee has been formed to explore the possibilities of Legal Action in defence of the Rod Fishery of the River Torridge” (Hughes, Undated, Emory Ms. 644. Box 166, FF 1).

This is followed by eight and a half pages of holograph notes charting the decline of the Torridge fishery from the 1920s to 1984. The Torridge Action Group was formed to call for a public enquiry into the implications for the estuary and rivers that would follow from the particular form of new sewage works proposed for Bideford. In this it was successful, and Hughes was asked to represent the Action Group by making a presentation to the enquiry in September 1985, the text of which is in the Emory archive. Hughes summarized the concerns of the Torridge Action Group in a letter to Keith Sagar in 1984:

I've been involved in a local battle, of sorts, over Bideford Sewage system. The Water Authority, mightily leaned on by local building interests, are putting in a type of sewage system that merely screens the sewage (takes out 20% "solids"—mostly cardboard, plastic etc.) . . . 1600 new houses go in immediately. (9 Mar. 1984, 143)

But a year later the depth of his involvement as he prepared for the enquiry was taking its toll on Hughes as he wrote to Sagar:

I made the mistake of becoming too involved in the battle over the River Torridge—fairly pointless. The battle is between the Water Authority and the Riparian Owners and fishermen. The Riparian Owners have lost collectively the best part of three million pounds and Albion will probably lose its run of salmon in the Torridge. But the whole business is perhaps mostly busyness and lies. I'm quite sick of it, but I don't see quite how to extricate myself. (7 June 1985, 152)

Fortunately he didn't extricate himself, and he made a brilliant speech at the enquiry, of which one witness Monica Pennington says: "You could have heard a pin drop. Nobody asked questions" (qtd. in Douglas). For ecocritics the significance of this speech is that it expresses as much a concern for the health of local people and tourists as it does for the salmon population, drawing on a range of scientific evidence from research on both humans fish, research into the consequences of raw sewage being discharged into the Torridge estuary at Bideford, an estuary that, according to Hughes' research, "takes 12 days to change itself completely." An

indication of the concern about the effects on the human population can be seen from this part of Hughes' presentation to the enquiry:

A local doctor has been heard to say that of all the holidaymakers who stay here for a few days canoeing and windsurfing and using the estuary for similar sports, 75% contract an ailment that needs treatment. [9 doctors from the Wooda Surgery in the Bideford area had expressed their concern with the present situation.] Bideford Chemists prepare for the tourist season as if for a campaign. The chemist in Mill St displays a window sign, advertising his cure for diarrhea. And in spite of their conditioning the local population does not escape. In general, they complain of an endless grumbling epidemic of throat and chest complaints and stomach disorders. In the 1984 tourist season 200,000 visited Bideford. . . . The effect of the estuary's pollution on the state of mind of the local residents is subjective and elusive. However, this depression is very real. Local people can feel in their bones that the whole situation is depressing. . . . And this depression accumulates. But it can be picked up quite quickly. You do not have to be a superclean German or American to decide, after one good look at the sludge, that the Torridge Estuary is no place for a holiday. (Hughes, Undated, Emory Ms. 644. Box 170, FF 1)

Here then is a poet and storyteller presenting vivid, detailed material as evidence at a public enquiry, in a mode of writing that was not formerly known to be part of his discourse. Yet the self-inflicted human ailments recorded here—transmitted by water, but also symptomatic of human pollution of earth and sky—surface in the poem "If" that was later included in the *River* section of *Three Books* (1993): "If you have infected the sky and the earth / Caught its disease off you—you are the virus" (137). The poem's final line catches the inescapable ecological pervasiveness of human water pollution: "Already you are your ditch, and there you drink" (137). Ten years later, a press release dated 2 June 1995 and concerning the formation of the Westcountry Rivers Trust states its aims more generally. There is "concern about pressures on natural water resources" in the west of England, and the trust intends to meet its aims through a broad range of activities, including

education—"the trust has already acquired an area of suitable river, allowing free access and fishing to children."<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes was of course a founding trustee.

Nor should it be forgotten that one of Hughes' most powerful educational interventions on behalf of water quality and public health was the children's story referred to earlier, *The Iron Woman* (1993). In a letter to his editor at Faber, Hughes wrote, "[w]e could send John Major a gold-backed copy. Present all the chieftains with one, maybe. . . . And all the cabinet" (26 Jan. 1993). In 1992 Hughes was a very visible supporter of Ian Cook's court case against South West Water for their failure to regulate water quality on a stretch of the River Creedy in Devon which Cook owned. There was a sewage works upstream, and the foam on the river was likened by Judge Cox to "the face of a beautiful woman scarred by disease" (Hughes, untitled news paragraph 12). Hughes was quoted as saying outside the courtroom, "[i]t's an important case, a historical case because it's reactivated the power of common law in this terrific issue of water quality in rivers" (Hughes, untitled news paragraph 12). South West Water contributed £5000 for a research grant that would enable the Institute of Freshwater Ecology to investigate the effect of detergents on the River Exe. Here was another example of practical involvement, the bringing about of changes to river quality that would be unknown to readers of *River*.

My project of "reconnecting all aspects of an artist's work" has important implications. In recent years ecocritics have been moving away from deconstructing representations of nature in literature and turning their attention to signs of the effects of environmental change upon both external nature and upon people in the environmental justice movement. Both Michael P. Cohen and Lawrence Buell have identified this as an important direction for ecocriticism. The lives of fish, local people, and tourists are all affected by a quick-fix sewage system that will enable developers to put in 1600 new houses, just as they are by the abstraction of the aquifer in Clarke's novel. Hughes is still known primarily as a Poet Laureate, and then as a writer of children's poetry and stories. In the last few years I have been researching the environmental agenda underlying and sometimes explicit in his creative work. It turns out that Hughes' other "work"—the more social and political sort that led directly to environmental interventions—in many ways informed his creative work. Although here I have discussed only this poet's activities concerning water quality in the southwest of England, in a previous paper I have documented a wider range of support and activity, on the part of Hughes, on behalf of other

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<sup>5</sup> From Gifford personal archive.

environmental causes.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, this so far relatively “unknown” side of Hughes gives a much clearer sense of the “whole work” of this writer, suggesting that other writers driven in an important way by environmental concerns (including the novelist Clarke) should also be “reconnected” in this manner.

Furthermore, we should perhaps give greater attention to the ways in which the reading and discussion of science has informed the fiction and poetry of environmental writers, as well as the ways in which the metaphorical language available to imaginative writers is used in their presentation of environmental science. Here, after all, we have an important instance of the interweaving of culture and nature, where each helps to define the other. The confluence of literary and scientific modes in writers who see their works as being in some sense environmental or ecological is an important case of the more general need to collapse the Two Cultures dualism that has for so long separated the “sciences” and the “arts,” in effect intellectually disabling schoolchildren in the English educational system, and perhaps in many educational systems around the world. It is as though Dickens’s analysis in *Hard Times* of the educational distinction between “fact” and “fancy” has been enacted at the age of sixteen for all children in the UK, for that is when they are forced to choose to study either Science or Arts subjects for their A levels.

The view of science expressed by Hughes in his essays follows the Dickens line that scientific objectivity excludes ethical and subjective aspects of experience even to the extent of holding “the human element” in contempt: “The prevailing philosophies and political ideologies of our time subscribe to this contempt, with nearly a religious fanaticism, just as science itself does” (*Winter Pollen* 146). Yet when Hughes needed to inform himself about what he calls “the chemistry of the Torridge Estuary,” it was to the latest available objective science that he turned. Science remains crucial today in helping us to reduce our multiple forms of pollution, as Clarke’s novel demonstrates.

If this investigation into the work of Clarke and Hughes demonstrates the importance of studying multiple modes of knowing and writing, of considering the relationships between science and fiction, polemics and poetry, memoranda and mythmaking, satires for fellow activists and stories for children, there are clear implications for the academy. The cases of Brian Clarke and Ted Hughes confirm the argument I make in *Reconnecting with John Muir* (2006): by focusing only on “artspeech” we may be ignoring a writer’s larger ecology of discourse, indeed his whole “reconnected” life. Therefore we need to explore the relationship between

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<sup>6</sup> See Gifford, “The Ecology of Ted Hughes” 37-45.

multiple modes of discourse that the academy so often keeps separate—those derived from our own scholarship, our criticism and our pedagogy as well as our creativity, from our practical as well as our theoretical concerns.

If we are really concerned, as we should be, about the future of both our environment and our culture—our public health and our poetry, for example—then we need to reconnect our modes of knowing and our modes of discourse in order to understand how these might inform each other in the service of both the planet and its people. This, surely, should be the purpose of ecocriticism, an activity of human imagination which is, as Hughes says of the imagination of each new child, “nature’s chance to correct culture’s error” (*Winter Pollen* 149).

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### About the Author

Terry Gifford is the author of *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995). Also co-author of *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (1981), he is currently writing *Ted Hughes* for the Routledge Guides to Literature series. Author of *Pastoral* (1999) and *The Unreliable Mushrooms: New and Selected Poems* (2003), his most recent book is *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* (2006). He is Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester, UK, and Profesor Honorario at the Universidad de Alicante, Spain.

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Hughes also translated works from Classical authors, including Ovid and Aeschylus. An incredibly prolific poet, translator, editor, and children's book author, Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate in 1984, a post he held until his death. Among his many awards, he was appointed to the Order of Merit, one of Britain's highest honors. The rural landscape of Hughes's youth in Yorkshire exerted a lasting influence on his work. Although marked by a period of pain and controversy in the 1960s, Hughes's later life was spent writing and farming. He married Carol Orchard in 1970, and the couple lived on a small farm in Devon until his death. His forays into translations, essays, and criticism were noted for their intelligence and range.

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