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C H I C K A S H A

Two Writers of Historical Poetry: A Conversation with Robert Cooperman and Alvin O. Turner

BY SARAH WEBB

In this Internet interview, the participants (poets Robert Cooperman, Alvin O. Turner, and *Crosstimbers* editor Sarah Webb) corresponded about writing historical poetry. The interviewer was particularly interested how this kind of writing brings different disciplines together in ways that might affect the writer's process of creation.

Sarah: Why do you do historical poetry? There's history, there's poetry, why did you combine them?

Alvin: I think using poetry allowed me to capture the sense of story and its multiple layers in ways I could not have done with conventional historical narrative. It also allowed movement into something akin to creative non-fiction. I suppose the same thing could have been accomplished via an historical novel, but that raises a whole set of different problems. The other way of saying this is to note that I am a historian and I am a poet. Usually I "change hats " from one focus to the next; *Hanging Men* allowed me to combine the two.

Sarah: Bob, you've got the question and Al's response. What do you say?

Robert: Like the novel, poetry frees me to go behind the historical record. And since I'm a lazy man's novelist, a tale teller, poetry is a natural for me. Poetry also allows me to pay very conscious attention to language and to character: what level of diction characters of different educational, social, and geographical backgrounds would use. Someone like my violent John Sprockett is largely self-educated and a homicidal maniac, but he loves poetry and lives in a sort of fantasy world of knight errantry, which he, at times, brings horrifically to life, so his level of diction would be far different from say, an average prospector or just a worthless road agent (thief).

Sarah: Is your process of creating different when you write historical poetry than when you write your other poetry? I doubt, for instance, if you research as part of creating your other poetry, and ideas and details may come to you differently.

Robert: Good question, Sarah, but aside from research, the process is basically the same. In either case, I throw everything into a first draft including the kitchen sink, and then whittle and whittle and whittle, ideally, most of the time, until I've got a poem of less than a page long. Some of the mytho-historical poems are longer than a page, especially in a collection titled *A Tiny Ship Upon the Sea*, which is based on an old Irish folksong, "Arthur McBride," which was a protest song of the mid-19th century against the British practice of pressing Irish (and leading up to the War of 1812) American seamen into the British navy and tricking or coercing Irishmen into the British army.

Also, in terms of historical poetry, one poem will often lead to the germ for a second and third, so that I'll view a significant action from a number of different points of view. So if one poem is from the point of view of say, my alter ego John Sprockett when he goes nuts and kills someone in a bar, a second poem might be spoken by a soiled dove, a third from Sprockett's friend Shorty Cameron, who sort of idolizes the madman, another from the point of view of the brothel madam, Jezebel LeDoux, etc.

What about you, Alvin?

Alvin: I write basically two kinds of poems—reflective/exploratory and story. Sometimes I combine those, as many of my historical pieces present condensed versions of much longer stories with the potential for unfolding, recognition of nuance and similar values. On the other hand, the historical may be much simpler than that, capturing a small slice of life, or characterization of a person or a period.

I also see another difference implied in your question, and that may separate some of my works from Robert's. *Hanging Men* is a collection of interrelated stories. Some of those in *Waiting For the Rain* share a relationship to the dustbowl and depression but each stands alone otherwise, and this is not true of all of the *Hanging Men* poems.

Robert: I have the same agenda: historical-mythical poems, and what I call occasional poems, poems taken from my life or the life of people I know or read about in the papers. To further muddy the waters, when I write on classical themes, like the poems in *Troy*, I'll write formal verse, either blank verse, as in the first part of the collection, which deals with the minor heroes of *The Iliad*, who are all killed by the major heroes, and concluding with a sonnet; or as in the case of the second part of the book, poems about the Night of the Trojan Horse, for which I used villanelles. In that collection, I wanted forms that were closer to the formalism of the Ancients, and I chose the villanelle for a couple of reasons, although, historically, it's strictly a love poem and doesn't lend itself to narrative: I love the form, and I wanted to see if I could do it; plus the sinuousness and repetitions inherent in the form lent themselves to the multiple treacheries of that night and its aftermath.

Alvin: I think Robert is wider as a poet than I am, but I also sense that some poems call for different treatments. I love sonnets and have been working on the perfect one for my wife for 45 years.

Robert: That would make a very nice anniversary present.

Alvin: I have been thinking about your question some more. In the case of the *Hanging Men*, it allowed me to treat a subject as a historian that would not ordinarily be a concern for an academic historian. Hanging, vigilantes and such tend to be the province of history buffs rather than academics.

Sarah: Some of the things in history that people respond to—like their family's path to America or across the country, how people lived in their daily life, the way people approached ethical dilemmas in different times—those really are worth considering, even if professional historians don't see them as inside the frame.

Alvin: Family histories and daily life are in the frame for many historians, though usually not ethical dilemmas and such. But you are certainly right that much of what many people find interesting from the past remains outside the academic frame.

Sarah: Are there special problems or possibilities you face as you write historical poetry? Part of my thinking is how do you handle the history? How do you keep the reader knowledgeable enough with the history to understand the poem? Does the detail of the actual event help in creating the poem?

Robert: Part of the problem with historical poetry is that if you're writing a dramatic monologue, say, from the point of view of a historical or fictional character, you've got to account for the way speech patterns have changed, and so has diction. There are idioms and slang that are also era-and-class specific. For instance, you can't have Catherine the Great talking the same way you might have Thersites, the one commoner mentioned in *The Iliad*, who gets the crap beaten out of him by Odysseus, for daring to diss his betters. Look at how differently Hamlet and Bottom speak.

But the great thing about writing historical or what I call mythical poetry is that you can make up so much stuff. This is especially true when you're working around the edges of history. For instance, no one really knows why Ovid was exiled from Rome to the Black Sea, so that allowed me to speculate and then to create a whole life for him in his banishment. And if you use fictional names for characters in relatively minor incidents (like the real Isabella Bird being accompanied up Long's Peak by Mountain Jim Nugent in 1873, whom I turned into Sophia Starling and John Sprockett), then all sorts of possibilities open up, and you're no longer strictly bound by the historical record, but can create a romantic encounter for the two that adds spice to their adventure.

As for keeping the reader knowledgeable about the history or fictional incident, sometimes a title can help. You don't have to have a one-word title, but can explain a bit of the background in the title of an individual poem.

Agatha Cornwell Cavendish's Last Battle with Her Husband in Gold Creek: the Colorado Territory

I lie in bed, rigid as a dead ewe,
waiting for him to slam our front door,
his boots a bear's tread; all pretense
of marital bliss crushed with his revels
at Madam Jezebel's, since I lost two babies.

But when drunk, he'll fall on me: more
a pumping machine than love or even lust.
He'll snore, while I wipe myself of his seed
with the nightdress he's torn off me.

Far worse, my all-but-certainty he killed
one of Jezebel's girls; worst, no one cares;
instead, the first men of town cover up
the vile deed, my husband too rich
and influential to suffer the consequences.

Now, the front door shudders, his weight
an ogre on the stairs, Leonard swaying, a lantern
in hand, his face grotesque in its glow.

"I'm no longer welcome at Jezzy's," he spits,
and he's on me, raging, striking my face;
I grope the hidden blade into my hand.

All goes dark—a mine devoid of torches
and headlamps—all I hear are screams:
mine, Leonard's, I'm not sure. Then nothing.

ROBERT COOPERMAN □

For the opening poem in *A Dream of the Northwest Passage*, which was a fantasy on what might have happened to the 17th century explorer Henry Hudson had he made landfall in the Canadian Arctic and not perished in his longboat, I used a long title, explaining that he and his crew were kneeling in St. Ethelburges Church in London before Hudson's fourth and final voyage (This they did, by the way; I saw the plaque in the church, which still stands in the East End of London). So the title can set the scene. You can also use an apt quote in the headnote before the poem begins. Mostly, though, you can be very sly about slipping in needed information in a phrase or two of historical background, well placed within the poem. If you're really sneaky and good about it, the reader won't even know you're doing it. On the other hand, in that book about Hudson there were technical terms I had to get into poems, like the rigging used on ships in the 17th century and the Inuit names for stone "men" who act as navigational tools for natives of the Arctic, and for those terms, I needed footnotes. Also, in *A Tiny Ship Upon the Sea*, I used so many figures from Irish myth and Irish life as it was lived in the 18th century that I needed a glossary in the rear of the collection to explain them all. And that was actually great fun.

I've always written stand-alone historical poems, like one about Galileo in old age or another about Bach's less than cordial relations with the wife of one of his patrons, and I can tell you that it's always easier to sneak the historical information in when you're dealing with a whole sequence. You have more time and leisure to spin the story, for one thing, so a digression here or there, or an aside, isn't nearly as intrusive.

There's a truth about lying (and great poetry is great lying): keep it simple. In the case of historical poetry, the germ of the story-poem is always rooted in history. There was a war at a place we've come to call Troy, but it wasn't in the 12th century BCE and it wasn't over a beautiful woman. But that didn't stop the poet we've come to call Homer. In the case of my *A Tiny Ship Upon the Sea*, the British in the 18th and early 19th century were basically kidnapping able American and Irish seamen and landlubbers and forcing them to serve in the British navy and army. Everything I created after that fact stems from it. So yes, it does help to have a kernel of fact to begin with.

Alvin: I may have cheated to some extent in *Hanging Men* as I used endnotes and an afterword to address some aspects of the particular story of the era depicted and related events. I would hope, though, that *Hanging Men* would stand alone without the notes, certainly as story, possibly as sermon. The notes, however, reflected the dual purpose of that collection of poems; I was functioning as both historian and poet.

This is not true of my other historical poems. For those, I drew the content of a poem from historical events or stories, some of which were based on my research, but I wrote as poet. That distinction may be a very fine one, but it emphasizes that poetry emerges from a creative process with parallels to fiction, music composition, or art. Any of these can reflect historical content, but we routinely allow them to stand alone, and readers, listeners or viewers do not require an understanding of that content in order to appreciate the work. For example, I used to read a great deal of naval fiction and still do not know for

Jubal Collins, a Paid Sniper on a Roof, Discusses the Marksmen's Options While Waiting for John Sprockett to Ride into Gold Creek: the Colorado Territory

Sprockett'll be riding low and hard,
firing to keep us pinned like Federal artillery.
So the chances of picking him off
before he reaches the saloon, and guns
down Wainwright and the others
in that devil's posse that killed the woman
and Doc—for witnessing the Mayor slash Lily—
as bad as Booth escaping a Yankee exaltation.

Think Sprockett'll be satisfied with that carcass pile?
No sir, he'll want us too—perched precarious
as nestlings on a teetering cliff. We ain't paid
enough to sit like ducks' webbed feet froze
overnight into a winter pond, rifles shaking
in our hands, at the thought of facing
that son of Satan more rampageous with vengeance
than a spring snake-hole seething with moccasins.

I'll bet Mayor's hoping all but one of us is killed,
so he can save most of our fee: he's already
being bled like a butchered hog by Miz Jezzy,
that spider in her brothel parlor's web-throne.

So do we fight and get killed by a murdering
angel of bile, or do we ride out with our advances,
and live to tell the tale? That's what I thought.
Besides, I can see Sprockett dust-deviling for town.

Sheriff's riding hard, too: with the same idea as us.

ROBERT COOPERMAN □

sure what a yardarm is and cannot define the differences between a frigate and a cruiser.

Details help me to channel my thinking and to write, but they cannot be the focus of either and can be a distraction.

The differences between Robert's work and mine may offer another way of thinking about the poetry/ history interface. I said before that I think of him as a more complete poet than I am. He also reflects a much wider sense of the sweep of history in his work than I do in mine. Sometimes, that includes a knowledge of eras and events that I have very little if any sense of. Yet I am a historian in ways that he is not. I approach the past with the tools, concerns, and assumptions of a particular academic tradition while his questions and perspectives are shaped by a different one.

I am not sure how to explain those differences or how they are reflected in our poems, but they point to some interesting questions and that is never a bad conclusion to a discussion. □

The Half Breed Tracker, William Eagle Feather, Watches Over Mary Wexford: the Colorado Territory

I told Sprockett to avenge Mary and Doc,
to stop him from hovering like a bear,
his breath all winterkill and rotgut,
whilst I tried to keep Mary alive:
nothing Sprockett could do but scare me
worse than Windigo's yellow stalactite-fangs.

He rode out after he buried Doc, scratching
a warning to let him rest easy even if a Hebrew,
whatever that is; I never studied Jesus.
Ma spoke only of the Great Spirit
and the Good Land at Journey's End.

Now, Mary flutters like a tattered moth
betwixt this life and the one none of us
can vouch for sure as a deer trail or bear scat.
Fear cougar-claws me: what'll I stammer
when Sprockett returns from blood spilling,
if Mary's just dust? He'll kill me too,
for failing to save the one woman to care for him.

I pray to the Great Spirit, change her poultices,
cool her head with a wet rag, pray some more.
Every twig-snap is Sprockett riding up, yanking
out his blade, demanding why she ain't fit to dance.

I've even hoped, a little, that devil's posse
will finish him and forgot me: plenty of trails
lead away from those killers the Mayor sent
to shut up Doc and Mary about what they saw
when he sent Lily Bartell to the whites' heaven.

Open your eyes, Mary, smile, say something.
But here's Sprockett; Doc, why'd you get killed,
you're the one with real medicine hands.

ROBERT COOPERMAN □

After Taking Vengeance, John Sprockett Returns to His Camp above Gold Creek: the Colorado Territory

At least Mary's breathing, Eagle Feather,
though shallower than a kitten's dish.
And they're all dead, the high line riders
that murdered Doc and left Mary for dead.
So's their paymasters: DeLacey and Cavendish:
the devil who killed that soiled dove Lily Bartell,
for what she mocked or threatened him with.

But it was Cavendish's wife stuck him with a blade
longer than a Comanche war lance; she sits statue-
still, waiting to be escorted to the state asylum.
The only one escaped was Sheriff Dennehy;
last I saw, slapping leather from Gold Creek
like cavalry was breathing Hell's retribution
down his boar-sweaty, yellow spine,
but seeing Cavendish's wife's bloody handiwork
puts me off killing, like a colt with a case of colic.

Mary's fingers feel colder than winter.
Don't let her die, William, though you'll say
she's in the Lord's hands or the Great Spirit's.
Easier to believe in Hell than the Good Place,
the way I've lived. But Mary's suffered more
than Lear's Cordelia: that scorpion, Stillwater,
tossing lye in her face, her witnessing Cavendish
rip into Lily Bartell and her big mouth,
why she and Doc had to run in the first place.

It ain't fair this tiny breath be taken from her.
Are her eyes blinking? Is she trying to talk?
Drip water onto her lips. Did her chest just heave
like she's trying to take in a mountain of air?
Say something, sweet Mary, say anything.

ROBERT COOPERMAN □

A grim discovery: April 19, 1909 4:04 AM

Ada butcher boy just seventeen, knew death well
had stood ankle deep in offal and gore
from the cows he had helped to kill.
Blood and death had been part of his life
as long as he could remember.
Tough, even by the standards of his day,
had pulled his own wisdom teeth with pliers,
yet ran running home to Mama, leaving
forty pounds of beef near the livery door
where he had seen the hanging men.

He would later tell his story time and again
unable to leave its burden behind
the story rooted deep in who he was
a fate he shared with the town he called home.

ALVIN O. TURNER □

Hanging Men, by Alvin O. Turner (Twin Territories: Historical Perspectives on Oklahoma, Mongrel Empire Press, Norman, OK, 2011)

A REVIEW BY ROBERT COOPERMAN

These are the facts: on April 19, 1909, four men (Jim Miller, Jesse West, Joe Allen, and Berry B. Burrell) were lynched in a stable in Ada, Oklahoma. To make sure we're aware that we're dealing with historical events here (though the author did inject some fictional elements into characters' motivations and reactions), Alvin Turner provides an old photograph of the hanging, four men with broken necks, like terrible mobiles or sculptures, hanging in a barn.

The four were accused of killing Gus Bobbitt, a rancher and, like the four arraigned for his murder, no better than he should be. All of them were men who skirted the law, or used it for their own ends, or just shrugged, said, "What the hell," and broke it if to do so suited their ends.

Out of these sordid facts Turner, a former dean at East Central University in Ada, has fashioned a powerful collection that begins with a depiction of the feud between these five men, continues with the lynching and who was to blame, to the psychological consequences of the act on some of the perpetrators of

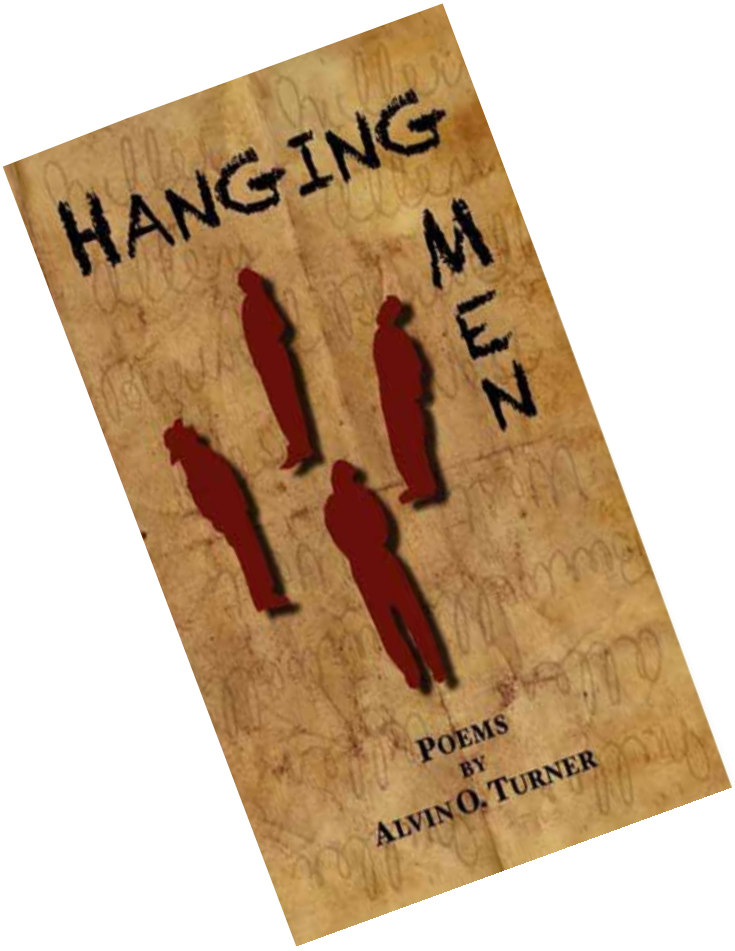
the "exaltation," and also to the rationalization that various of the better sort of men in the town used to let themselves off the hook both in the eyes of the law and in terms of their own emotional health, and also to use the act as a way to justify the end that it served, the greater cause of bringing justice (in the form of far fewer murders) to that particularly lawless part of Oklahoma.

The poems are told from the point of view of a seemingly dispassionate, all but omniscient third person narrator, a stand in for Turner, as it were, looking back, describing events, and in an image or a comment passing judgment, or at least letting us, the readers, know that motives were murky, men were ashamed of what they had done (and should be), and people kept their mouths shut, in some cases for over a century, about what exactly had occurred and who exactly were responsible for taking the law into their own hands.

To go along with this omniscient perspective, Turner employs, to great and powerful effect, a tone and diction seemingly flat as the prairie itself. Thus he tells us in one of the early poems in the sequence, "Pontotoc County, Chickasaw Nation, 1890," "tribal and federal law useless against/whiskey traders and worse/the line between law and outlaw, blurred/as subject to change as the prairie winds." He rarely sermonizes, but with a phrase or two, usually at the end of the poem, presents an observation or an image that nails the situation's horrid ambiguities, as in "A grim discovery: April 19, 1909 4:04 AM," when an Ada butcher's assistant of seventeen happens upon the hanging bodies while taking a short cut through the barn, and is forever tainted by what he has seen: "He would later tell his story time and again/unable to leave its burden behind,/the story rooted deep in who he was/a fate he shared with the town he called home."

Despite or maybe because of the harsh subject matter, Turner also gives us some mordant, gallows (pardon the pun) humor, as when, in "Hangman," his narrator quips, "There is an oft-quoted jest in these parts/about giving men a fair trial and/then hanging the guilty bastards." The title of the poem refers not just to an actual hangman, but to later writers about these events, who have "no need to hear a defense,/no need for judge or jury…"

Like so much that happens when men take matters into their own hands with deadly results,



nothing is simple in *Hanging Men*, except the brute fact that four men killed another, though the role of one of them has always been disputed, and that no one really knows how many men took part in the lynching, because the townspeople, for the sake of going along to get along, have conveniently forgotten who the perpetrators were. So in the one poem told in the first person, Turner has Senator Robert S. Kerr recall events and come up with this: "I was still a boy when it happened…./My father …was not one of the 40 [men thought to have taken part in the lynching]/ of that, I'm sure./Mama always said he came in early that night."

If everyone is to blame, then no one is, which is how people get on with their lives when the unspeakable happens. This is a powerful collection, well worth reading and re-reading. ▫