

CND interview with Antony Owen

The anniversaries of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are an important opportunity for anti-nuclear campaigners and society more widely to reflect on the impact of nuclear weapons. Broadly speaking, what role do you believe culture plays in this process of remembering what happened and keeping the memories alive?

Culture has the power to memorialise or sensationalise events so it is vital. At its best we have seen how the poems of Wilfred Owen, Keith Douglas and the Landay women of Afghanistan showed the human cost of war from WW1 to modern conflicts. Through the camera lens of Don McCullin we saw the tragedy of Vietnam and through the paintbrushes of Picasso; the civilian bombings upon Guernica. At its worst we have seen the vile propaganda of Nazism in WW2 using film and art to demonise Jews as bubons and spiders. From the dawn of time culture has been used for both good and bad so when I write I feel a profound responsibility to reflect modern times and the human experiences of conflict. When writing about the bombing upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki the perspective I grew up with was from outside the mushroom cloud not underneath it. The story kept from me and our generation was incomplete with a focus on victory and not consequences of a new nuclear age of mass proliferation of nuclear weapons. Giving a western perspective on an eastern tragedy like the atomic bombings upon Japan allowed me to explore those who suffered as humans and not subjects of a flag. It is the flags that prevent empathy and promote labelling a whole people as evil because of the actions of a few in power. The survivors I met in Hiroshima were children when the atomic bomb fell and were not cruel to POW's so how can culture not respond? We only have to look at the film Barefoot Gen and Manga to see the power of culture in creating whole new genres of expression and forms to events in history.

How do you think culture can convey a political message in a more effective way than campaigners?

They're equal, symbiotic. A canvass needs a painter and a painter needs colours to create a picture so all of us create that final image or construct whether it's a picture or a poem. My peace poems are more powerful when used at an event like Hiroshima Remembrance Day as it expands a perspective to the one, they came in with. Imagine CND without campaigners and the generational legacies it has left like the late Bruce Kent who was a huge inspiration to the social conscience in my written work. Campaigners spark debate and emotions and writers, painters etc articulate and transcend those emotions.

Where do you find inspiration for your peace work?

Ordinary people who endured extraordinary experiences like survivors of conflict. My Nan survived two bombings and saw some of her children evacuated whilst raising a baby without her husband who served in Algeria. Of all the testimonies I have heard I would say 90% of them are by women and I find that fascinating because it shows that there is a definite destructive alpha-construct we have created in men not expressing their feelings or trauma. Imagine all those lost treasures of their stories we never got to hear. Imagine all we could have learnt of PTSD. My inspiration is curating those people's experiences whether that is from research or shared testimonies.

What approach do you take when writing poetry about the nuclear bombings?

Endless research using statistical analysis from as many sides as possible. In addition to that personal research by meeting people who endured conflict so I can "feel" the makings of any poems before I have written them. After I visited Hiroshima and met two survivors (Hibakusha) I went straight into that darkness and came back damaged emotionally requiring therapy from not only their stories but

extensive research of the impact atomic weapons had and still have upon people to this day. Writing is an injurious privilege and as survivor Sueko Hada told me in Hiroshima who was eight when she lost her family to the atomic bomb *"Suffering is a treasure because I can now share it with you"*. Of all the research I have learnt that Peace Education is so important because too many people have blind faith in their leaders and this is a huge problem because if a mind is made up so quickly from a singular perspective then to change that mindset is difficult. Since Nagasaki over 2050 nuclear tests have taken place and I read once from The International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament that a single Ohio-class submarine could hold 19 times the total blast power expended in World War II. How crazy is that? The approach I take therefore is to do my bit to save my daughters' generation from the madness of ours as she rightfully will ask me one day *"Dad, what the hell were you doing when all this was happening"*?

Can you expand on how you began working on The Nagasaki Elder?

It began as a child watching Threads which scared the hell out of me. As an adult I always felt a calling to write about nuclear weapons and conflict in general. So many people like my Nan were overlooked and none of these were garlanded in medals or had remembrance cenotaphs erected for them but they were the most courageous of all because after the war they helped the soldiers become civilians again, Fathers again, sons or daughters again. I just dedicated my time to making time for these incredible people.

You have visited Hiroshima. What impact did this have on you?

Massive. I left my shadow there with my heart. It is the city of permanent shadows. I will never forget Honkawa School, the Genbaku dome, the survivors, the friendships I made. Hiroshima changed my life but nearly took it from that abseil into the darkness I took in researching it. Everyone should know the story of Hiroshima and Sadako because there are approximately 13,000 nuclear weapons each much stronger than those dropped on Japan and if you do your research you will see that that is more than one for every city on our planet so we must proliferate peace, art, respect, understanding and not nuclear weapons.