

24 September 2013 *For immediate release*

New poetry commissions offer fresh perspectives on the UK's historic canal network



Gas Street Basin by Eric Gaskell

Discover the 'transgressive glamour' of our canals in October when **The Poetry Society** and the **Canal & River Trust** premiere a new series of commissioned film-poems, with live events in London and Birmingham and a special canals and waterways edition of BBC Radio 4's Poetry Please.

Poets have long been inspired by rivers and the sea, but where was the poetry of canals? The Poetry Society and the Canal & River Trust appointed boating poet Jo Bell as our first Canal Laureate for 2013. All year, Jo Bell has been travelling the UK's 2000 mile network of waterways, writing new poems, and encouraging others to find inspiration in their local canal. Other leading poets including Liz Berry, Ian Duhig and Ian McMillan have also been commissioned as part of the Canal Laureate project.

Tying in with National Poetry Day on 3 October, and this year's theme 'Water, Water, Everywhere' we launch some of the thrilling new poems inspired by our canals.

Film-maker **Alastair Cook** accompanied four of the poets from bridge to lock to aqueduct, through sun, ice and rain, to make a series of new film-poems. **Jo Bell**, chose Stone in Staffordshire as the location for her piece, *Lifted*; while **Ian McMillan** went to Stanley Ferry, Wakefield to make *The Water Doesn't Move: The Past Does*. "The aqueduct speaks / In the voice of round here: vowels / Flattened by hammers, words / Shortened like collier's breath" writes McMillan. **Ian Duhig's** *Grand Union Bridge* returns to Paddington Basin, and the 'old black canal' of the poet's adolescence. 'I wanted my poem for Alastair's film to suggest a place of transgressive glamour, including glamour in its own magical sense; a place where lines were crossed, even between the living and the dead,' says Duhig, who draws on references from 1950s crime movie *The Blue Lamp* and the Irish mythical otherworld Tir na nOg. **Liz Berry's** *The Black Delph Bride* took her back to Dudley in the Black Country, after the discovery of an original Victorian canal map, with its dark and sinister-sounding placenames. 'Enchanted by the feeling of ghostliness that lingers across the network,' Berry was 'inspired by canal songs and murder ballads where a beloved girl all too often meets a sorrowful end in water.'

Alastair Cook's four film-poems are premiered as part of **National Poetry Day Live** at Southbank Centre on **3 October**. Presented by the Poetry Society and Southbank Centre, National Poetry Day Live is a water-filled celebration of the best new

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poetry and spoken word. Compered by John Hegley and Joelle Taylor, this free public event also features live performances by poets such as Simon Armitage, Patience Agbabi and Hannah Lowe as well as a shanty choir and Amy Sharrocks's *Museum of Water*. National Poetry Day Live runs from 1-8pm. The canal film-poems will screen between 2.30-4.30pm.

Amy Sharrocks's *Museum of Water* is a collection of donated water and accompanying stories. The public are invited to choose some water, put it in a bottle and bring it to the National Poetry Day Live on 3 October. Tell us why you chose this water – as a poem if you like. Specimens of canal water will join the Museum along with other exhibits such as puddles, tears, melted snowmen and baby's bathwater.

On the **6th October** a **special edition of BBC Radio 4's Poetry Please**, presented by Roger McGough is recorded at a public event at **Birmingham Literature Festival** at 2pm (admission free). The Canals and Waterways-themed programme will feature live performances by Jo Bell, Liz Berry and Ian Duhig of their new canal commissions. There will also be readings of other favourite canal poems. The programme is recorded at the new Birmingham Library for broadcast later in October.

On **12th October, Birmingham Literature Festival** screen Alastair Cook's four film-poems as part of a further celebration of canal poetry **hosted by Jo Bell** at the new Birmingham Library: **The Kingfisher Corridor** (2-4pm). 'The Kingfisher Corridor' also features new poems by Jo Bell from her year as Canal Laureate together with new work by guest poets who accepted her challenge to celebrate the people and places of the canals in poetry. Joining Jo Bell on stage are poets from across the UK including **Alan Buckley, Heather Wastie, Julie Boden, Sarah Watkinson** and **Tony Walsh**.

Jo Bell will also lead a canal poetry writing workshop 'Water, Water, Everywhere' at Birmingham Literature Festival on 12th October at 10am.

In May 2013, the Canal Laureate launched a national call for new canal poems. Since then, almost 300 new poems have been gathered. A selection of the best will be published throughout the autumn on the Canal Laureate website www.waterlines.org.uk. Visit the website for further information on upcoming events, new poetry about canals and Jo Bell's regular blog. Recent posts include news of Jo Bell's trip to the Lagan Navigation in Northern Ireland, and her seaborne adventures on 'The Slime Road', taking her barge Tinker up the Bristol Channel. For latest news follow Twitter @CanalPoetry.

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**For further information and to arrange interviews, please contact Sophie Baker
on 020 7420 9895, or email sbaker@poetrysociety.org.uk**

Notes to Editors:

- **The Poetry Society** was founded in 1909 to promote a "more general recognition and appreciation of poetry". Since then, it has grown into one of Britain's most dynamic arts organisations, representing British poetry both nationally and internationally. With innovative education and commissioning programmes and a packed calendar of performances, readings and competitions, the Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages. It publishes the magazine *Poetry Review*, runs the National Poetry Competition, the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award and the youth performance poetry championship SLAMBassadors UK. www.poetrysociety.org.uk
- **Canal & River Trust** cares for 2000 miles of canal and river across England and Wales, including the nation's third largest collection of listed structures as well hundreds of important wildlife habitats. The Canal & River Trust has a partnership with Arts Council England to deliver a pilot contemporary art programme encouraging more people to experience and be inspired by the arts, a key goal of Art Council England's 10-year plan for the arts, *Achieving great art for everyone*. The arts have historically been used to win new supporters for the waterways' cause, and the programme will find creative new ways to introduce more people to the canals and rivers as friends and supporters while also engaging with existing communities. www.canalrivertrust.org.uk
- **Canal Laureate**. Poet Jo Bell has been appointed by the Canal & River Trust and the Poetry Society as Canal Laureate for 2013. The Canal Laureate project is part of a wider partnership between the Canal & River Trust and Arts Council England, which aims to attract more visitors to the waterways while surprising and delighting existing communities through exciting and innovative art projects. More information on the Canal Laureate project, including Alastair Cook's new film-poems and other newly commissioned canal poetry, can be found at www.waterlines.org.uk Twitter @CanalPoetry

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- **National Poetry Day Live.** NPD Live on 3 October is presented by the Poetry Society and Southbank Centre, London and this is its fifth year. The programme of events runs 1-8pm at Clore Ballroom, Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, Belvedere Rd, London, SE1 8XX. Admission is free.
- **Museum of Water.** Amy Sharrocks's *Museum of Water* visits this year's National Poetry Day Live on 3 October. *Museum of Water* is a collection of publicly donated water and accompanying stories, an encouragement to consider the many ways in which we access and enjoy water; paddling in the sea, splashing in puddles, drinking from taps. Accumulating over two years in different sites worldwide, *Museum of Water* is an invitation to ponder our precious liquid and how we use it. *Choose some water that is precious to you. Find a bottle to put it in. Tell us why you chose this water – as a poem if you like. We will keep it for you.*
- **Birmingham Literature Festival.** The Canals & Waterways edition of BBC Radio 4's Poetry Please is on Sunday 6 October, 2-3.30pm, and The Kingfisher Corridor is on Saturday 12 October, 2-4pm. Both these events, and Jo Bell's writing workshop (10am on 12th October) are at the Library of Birmingham, Centenary Square, Broad Street, Birmingham B1 2EP. Book tickets at www.birminghamliteraturefestival.org or by calling the box office on 0121 245 4455.
- **Alastair Cook.** Award winning film maker and conservation architect Alastair Cook works principally in landscape and portraiture. His work is rooted in place and the intrinsic connections between people, land and heritage. He curates programmes for festivals such as the Filmpoem Festival in Scotland, and his films have been screened throughout Europe. You can find more information about his work and residence at North Light Arts at www.alastaircook.com