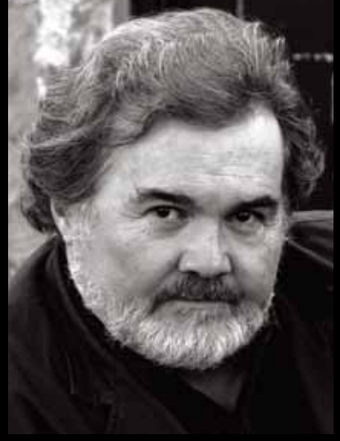

Photo: Caroline Forbes

Sean O'Brien

Sean O'Brien is a poet, critic, playwright and editor. Five award-winning collections, most recently *Downriver* (2001), which won the Forward Prize, were followed by *Cousin Coat: Selected Poems* 1976–2001 (Picador, 2002). His essays, *The Deregulated Muse* (Bloodaxe), and an anthology, *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (Picador), appeared in 1998. His plays are published by Methuen and his short stories by Comma Press. He is Professor of Poetry at Sheffield Hallam and a Visiting Professor at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. His version of Dante's *Inferno* will be published by Picador in October 2006 and a new collection in 2007.

Writing on the Writing on the Wall

Instead of being responses to the inherent significance of rivers and mountains, forests and oceans, and to those man-made sites which compel the imagination, nowadays the meanings which humankind has always discovered in the environment are often said to be our own inventions. Yet though the world has allegedly undergone a disenchantment, we are still magnetized to certain locations. Their resonance is specific and non-transferable: hence we go back to them or, with luck, we live alongside them. Many people have personal lists of such sites. Mine would include Venice, Red Square and New Orleans, and Hadrian's Wall is likewise an eminent example of a place that continues to seem charged with meaning.

It is of course stretching a point to describe the Wall as 'a place' in itself. It is extensive and multiple, gapped but imaginatively continuous. It links the coasts, serves as an ancient political division, raises a rampart against marauding Picts and has offered a source of building-stone for farmers indifferent to the big picture. It also provides a giant time-piece by which to measure the evanescence of human life – a condition which the Wall, like all great monuments, renders both melancholy and strangely satisfying to contemplate. 'Look on my works ye mighty and despair!' writes Shelley in the intensely pleasurable 'Ozymandias'. The Wall might be called a world in its own right. It presents one of the richest metaphors of our infinitely various condition. It is capacious, mysterious, hospitable to multiple and contradictory interpretations, as much at home to the individual – the Roman legionary, the Victorian antiquary, the present-day walker – as to the imperial strategy which ordered the vast and ingenious labour which went into its construction.

← *View from Sewingshields Crags*
Photo: Sara Lurati/ARTS UK

Given the immense imaginative resource provided by the Wall, it is surprising that a project such as Writing on the Wall has not been undertaken before. In fact, though, the project demonstrates the meeting of two important strands in contemporary thinking about writing: firstly that writers – poets, most often – should be enlisted in public projects, and secondly that the participation of professional writers should be matched by broad public participation, across the range of age and ability. This is of course by no means the first time such work has been done – it has become a staple of arts activity – but it seems especially apt to the Wall, where people of all kinds, often drawn from remote places – the Roman army itself recruited as far afield as North Africa, Romania and Turkey – have wandered, fought, loved and worked during two thousand years. It is in a real sense public property, a site in which everyone – including many who have yet to visit it – can be said to have a stake. The work of Writing on the Wall has been firmly planted on the Wall itself, in dramatic performances, readings, workshops, talks and – most welcome – in international encounters between writers and audiences.

In its cunning way, W. H. Auden's 'Roman Wall Blues' takes account of this wide ownership. Auden balances comedy with the exasperated gloom of the Roman legionary who actually has to live those rigours – cold, dirt, frustration, jealousy, boredom – which the poet is free to imagine from the comfort of his study. The poem thus offers a humanizing balance to imperial grandeur. Indeed, the soldier's preoccupations lend reality to the grand abstractions he must glumly serve. Linda France's 'The Love Potion of Polemios', derived from an engraved ring found at Corbridge, explores another aspect of the private sphere, the erotic, which for a time overrides the claims of the political world while exploiting its language: 'He looks at me / slowly and I glisten. Makes me wait / till the sun is an arrow in the sky. / The best omen. He is the Emperor / of Amber…'

This theme of doubleness takes another form in W.N. Herbert's work, which is fascinated by the way in which the Wall both joins and divides, and by how it defines the space which will in time overcome it: 'here begins beyond.' Herbert's ballad, 'Song of the Marchmen', investigates what Auden's legionary ignores – who 'we' are, who 'they' are, and what we're doing here. These are questions of enduring relevance, whether on the scale of neighbourly grousing, or in the eruption of civil war, when the vanity of empire exceeds its power to understand or control the consequences of its folly. Katrina Porteous' 'The Ruined Thistles' exemplifies the permanence of such themes, and the contradictory 'truths' which they offer. Porteous recalls Ted Hughes' fine poem, 'Thistles', but where Hughes writes in praise of persistence and courage, Porteous sees the thistles' persistence as evidence of inescapable folly: 'Their wits fly away like smoke / Into next year, and the next.'

There is, quite properly, no single appropriate summary for the work undertaken by Writing on the Wall. It offers a rich and diverse mixture of writing at all levels from the expert to the novice. It exemplifies and celebrates co-operation and exchange of skills and ideas. It affirms the arts of peace, on a site intended to enshrine conflict. It draws the imagination back to the familiar strangeness of the Wall itself. It commends the examined life, which is all the justification anyone can require. Hafsa Bekri-Lamrani imagines the shade of the Emperor Hadrian in the King's Arms declaring: 'Poets and poetry taught me / History's ephemeral vanity / and the strength of life over stones'. We live in hope.