

Enchantment and Haunting:
Bimbling in Jarra:
Chris Harrison's Photographs

Val Williams

*Kid with a tab: 'Andy, you got a match?'
Andy: 'Not since Erroll Flynn died.'*

(|| *Belong Jarrow*: Chris Harrison, Schilt, 2012. p. 16)

Chris Harrison's work is concerned with memory and remembrance, and as such is suffused with melancholy. *I Belong Jarrow* is a continuation, perhaps a culmination, of two decades of photographic work, which has explored ideas of home, histories and class. Throughout Harrison's work, there is a pervasive homage to the past, to memories glimpsed and transmitted through the process of photography.

I Belong Jarrow, could also read *Do I Belong Jarrow?* as Harrison questions the complicated issue of belonging to a place that has been left. As he notes, writing from Oslo, where he now lives and works: *I have forgotten the language of my fathers and not yet learned the language of my children.* (www.chrisharrison.no)

Harrison made the photographs in *I Belong Jarrow* on recent (2010-2012) visits to his birthplace, the northern town of Jarrow,

which, during the industrial revolution and until the mid 1930s, had become a major centre for British shipbuilding. The closure of the shipyards in the mid 1930s led to the Jarrow Crusade of 1936, a hunger march from Jarrow to London, which has become a milestone in the history of the British labour movement. The Crusade is present in Harrison's photographs, both physically, in a number of images, and imaginatively. It appears in photographs of a commemorative mural (|| *Belong Jarrow*:

Chris Harrison. Schilt, 2012. p.19)

and a sculpture installed on a platform of the local station: *The Jarrow marches are everywhere in Jarrow, it is something that at least my generation grew up with. We knew people who had been Marchers. The picture of the metro station has the sculpture of the marches on it and the hoarding has the marches painted on and someone has helpfully written on it: "is Shit!"*

(Letter to the author 17 August 2012)

The Jarrow that Chris Harrison presents to us, in 2012, is a bleak monument to

a tarnished modernity intersticed with the human presence of Harrison's friends and family, portrayed warmly and in the deep rich tones, light and shade, which Harrison became known for in such series as *Under the Hood* (1995-6). For over ten years now, Harrison has lived and worked in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, and his vision is both that of insider and outsider. In Jarrow, Harrison returns not only to his birthplace, but also to his first photo series that he produced, *'Whatever Happened to Audra Patterson?'* (1991-2). *Audra Patterson* is the chronicle of Harrison's tracing and photographing his classmates at the Valley View Junior School, which he left in 1978, at the age of eleven. As Harrison revealed: *The more people I found and photographed, the more I realized I was looking for me.* (www.chrisharrison.no)

The genesis of *Audra Patterson* was a class photograph from 1978. Harrison is in the front row. The photograph is generic and typical of the mass of school group portraits, which play such an important part

in the British collective memory. Harrison recalls:

I had the picture of Valley View School since I was a kid. Audra had hidden herself behind someone else, later when I went looking for her no one knew where she was. I got the title from that. It was like she represented that lost past and the fact that she was hidden on the actual photo just made it more poignant personally. I guess as an idea it was the leaving college (Trent Poly) and feeling like I had grown. I wanted to measure myself against my junior school classmates. I hadn't had the best of times there. I came from an estate which no one else came from; all my mates in the street were Catholic and went to Catholic school thus began a lifetime of alienation! I am the one in the glasses front row, sitting right next to my mate Clifford who is doing life for murder. I suppose I have always been fascinated by the relationship between photography and the past.

(Letter to the author, 16 August 2012)

Audra Patterson is initially positioned as a mystery – an invisible missing girl, a history lost, a schoolmate, a murderer, a child displaced from his background, a sense of alienation. It is a haunting and an enchantment; caught in Harrison's school photograph, we remember our own and ghosts encroach upon the present. Harrison sets out to lay the ghosts, to solve the mysteries by calm, analytical portraiture, seeking out the children in the photograph, establishing them as adults, operating in their own individual spheres of life and work. 'I wanted' he notes enigmatically, 'to see how I'd grown'. (Ibid)

Audra Patterson set the scene for a remarkable set of photo series made by Harrison in the 1990s. *Under the Hood* (1995-6), *Noblesse Oblige* (1996) and *Sites of Memory* (1996-7). *Under the Hood* was the result of Harrison's artist's residency at the Viewpoint Gallery in Salford. During the residency, he photographed a group of young men living in one of Salford's most problematic council estates. Sean, Jason, Jimmy Bones, Macca, Alan, Wayne, Michael, James and Mike were photographed for the project, against a background of rich red velvet. They emerged as sportsclothes-clad troubadours, serene and reflective. Critiqued by some, at the time, as glamourising youths who were seen as part of a troubled and disruptive underclass in a polarised British society, *Under the Hood* remains one of the few photo series to emerge from the new

British colour documentary which neither satirised nor objectified a group in society, which saw itself as marginalized, bound into, and emerging from, a culture of poverty and lack of opportunity. *Under the Hood* gave these young men dignity – as one sitter, Jimmy Bones, said 'You made us look brand new'. (www.chrisharrison.no)

As Harrison remarked recently: *My work is not fictional. But neither is it an objective truth. My work is highly subjective, coming as it does from an emotional analysis of the world, not a rational one. My photographs are of real people and places, and nothing, including my attachment, is constructed. I'm not interested in deconstructing the medium of photography, I still feel that it has something to say; I take pictures of the real world to show what's there, not to critique photography. There is no irony in my work. I'm a romantic. Irony requires distance, and I want to get as close as possible to my subject.* (Letter to the author, 16 August 2012)

In the mid 1990s, Harrison began a documentation, in large-format panoramic colour photographs, of war memorials from World War One. He had lived near one in Jarrow, and had noticed how the names inscribed on it were being eaten away by fumes and chemicals.

We had a War Memorial at the top of our street, you couldn't read the names as the acid rain from the local factories had

washed them all away. They recarved the names recently, but there was one lad's name they couldn't find. Whoever he was, he belonged Jarra. (I Belong Jarrow: Chris Harrison, Schilt, 2012. p. 2)

Sites of Memory documented war memorials across the UK and Ireland. Some dominate their surroundings (Glasgow, Dublin, Bolton), while others are dwarfed by the urban clutter which surrounds them (Marlborough, Belfast, West Auckland). One appears on the wall of a bungalow, another tucked in by the side of a bike shop. Harrison investigates how history is absorbed and assimilated within the present, waiting to be discovered.

And it is this process of discovery which informs Harrison's most recent work, *I Belong Jarrow*, (2010-2012), a compilation of urban landscapes, portraits of friends and family and Harrison's own writing. It is a kind of journal. In the book, Harrison includes, and writes about, Chris Killip's 1976 photograph, *Youth on a Wall, Jarrow*:

I don't know what other people see when they look at this photograph, but I see me. I'm a Jarra lad of about the right age. The battered school uniform and the 8" Docs, the rolled-down football socks, that was me. What is he looking at? I can't answer that question, all I can say is that what I see isn't the literal truth of Jarrow, but it's my truth and my story. (Ibid)

In the years before Chris Killip came to Jarrow, making photographs for the series which would be published as *In Flagrate* (1988), other photographers had been attracted by its history and its poverty. In 1937, the London-based émigré photographer Bill Brandt made the photograph *Coal Searcher Going Home to Jarrow*, as part of his work documenting the English. Brandt knew of the Jarrow Crusade, had read the essays of the English novelist and journalist George Orwell, and was also informed by J.B. Priestley's seminal text *An English Journey* (1934), which documented the decline of northeast England as an industrial hub. Commenting on his photograph, Brandt remembered:

He was pushing his bicycle along a footpath through a desolate wasteland between Hebburn and Jarrow. Loaded on the crossbar was a sack of small coal, all that he had found after a day's search on the slagheaps. (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/b/bill-brandt-biography/>)

Chris Harrison's documentation of Jarrow, which has been ongoing since *Audra Patterson*, could be seen as both a continuation of, and a challenge to the work of both Brandt and Killip. Though acknowledging his interest in the Killip photograph *Youth on a Wall, Jarrow* (1976), Harrison's photo series has as much to do with autobiography as it has with documentary. His methodology is that of a wry and sometimes wistful diarist,

documenting Jarrow in the same way as the photographer Peter Mitchell had recorded his impressions of Leeds in the early 1970s. (www.photoworks.org.uk)

I Belong Jarrow contains two very different sets of photographs. The bleak melancholy of modern Jarrow, its bland modernity offset against crumbling corners and the occasional depiction of its 'village' past are in stark contrast to the intimate portraits of friends, family and neighbours which are, in many ways, the coda to the entire series. Jarrow may be mundane in its topography, deprived in its architectural fabric, but beyond this façade is a human richness in which Harrison has a significant emotional investment. Like Bill Brandt, he is now a kind of *émigré*, distanced by time and geography, half acclimatised to another, Nordic culture, seeing Jarrow from both the inside and the outside, but always retaining intimacy and a certain sense of yearning.

Harrison began the Jarrow work after attending the Northern Lights Masterclass in the Netherlands. His account of the process is a key to how this work can be understood:

I had to produce something between the September session and January. There was a brief window where money, time and familial understanding all aligned and I was off. I spent about 8 weeks in total photographing in Jarrow, split over several trips. I basically bimbled (sic) all over Jarrow with my camera over my shoulder.

I visited places that I remembered as a kid and places that meant something to me. After my next to last trip I showed the work at the Masterclass and Inge Hondebrink – one of the other students – said you shouldn't go back too much more as you're starting to get to know it again. It was true, I was starting to see like any other photographer, and we love the freaky and bizarre. I wanted to see it how I remembered it. Not as some strange alien place full of denizens. I had to keep hold of that fresh eye. So my final trip I had organized four days and the second day I photographed my sisters' three kids, who are like me, my brother, and my sister in explicit terms ...

I was acutely aware of the jam jar syndrome, A famous Jarra lad claimed he was so poor as a kid that he had to drink out of jam jars, my mother acidly commented that that would be news to his mother. I didn't want a mythological Jarra. It's the one I grew up in, not affluent by any stretch but not a ghetto either. Growing up working class just wasn't that bad! I didn't censor myself when I took the pictures, I just photographed and some things made sense in the edit. Whatever was the most true stayed in the book.

(Letter to the author, 16 August 2012)

Harrison sets up a contrast between Jarrow inside and Jarrow outside, in this rich combination of urban landscape, portraits and domestic interiors, and binds the

three together by his written commentary, which is a rich and understated literary source, taking the series beyond the photographic document. Harrison works in a photographic genre which has been dominant over the last four decades – the bland cityscape, the insouciant detail, the veneration of the ordinary and the everyday. It can be traced back to William Eggleston in the late 1960s, and has been reinterpreted by generations of photographers since then. Harrison occupies a distinguished place within the practitioners of this genre.

But it is in the way that Harrison marries words and photographs which sets him apart from other documentarists. Using an anarchic mixture of jokes, observations and personal histories, he takes us to the heart of his own Jarra, and leaves us there to make of it what we will. Reading Harrison's text is like listening to stand-up, a repartee and stream of consciousness, which has its own particular magic. Opposite a photograph of a decayed shed, Harrison has written:

Sid from across the road went to the jungle with the Commandos. A bit of him didn't make it home. (p. 7).

In an entry next to a photograph of his sister's pristine house he remarks:
An Englishman's home is his castle. A Jarra lad's is his wife's. This is our Justine's. (p. 20).

This laconic text touches on the past but is very much of the present; without nostalgia,

it illustrates the fleetingness of memory, the retention of small detail, insignificant events which encapsulate whole histories. Documentary photography, at its best, does this too, reminding us that photography is much more than information, that it is a compelling fiction drawn from the real. It tells us about places we may never visit – William Eggleston's Deep South, Martin Parr's New Brighton, Paul Graham's Northern Ireland – but through the magical prism of photography, we become insiders, habitués.

I Belong Jarrow is almost a plea. It is about losing and almost regaining.

Almost always just out of reach.