Jocelyn Brooke (1908-1966)

Jocelyn Brooke spent most of his life in the little village of Bishopsbourne, which lies some 5 miles or so south-east of [Canterbury](/canterbury/20c-canterbury-home), concealed like a secret in the Elham Valley, where it is washed (and occasionally flooded) by the intermittent waters of the Nailbourne. He remains an obscure and neglected figure, best known, if at all, for \_*The Orchid Trilogy\_*, which comprises \_*The Military Orchid\_* (1948), \_*A Mine of Serpents\_* (1949) and \_*The Goose Cathedral\_* (1950), and \_*The Dog at Clambercrown*\_(1955), strange, haunting and digressive works which mix fictionalised autobiography, literary criticism, psychology and botany. In these, and his novels such as \_*The Scapegoat\_* (1948) and \_*The Image of a Drawn Sword\_* (1950), he portrays his ‘own mythopoeic vision of [his] favourite landscapes’ [1] or ‘a country of the mind,’ **[2]** a transfigured version of his beloved Bishopsbourne and its surroundings, by turns Edenic and disturbing.

Brooke was born into a well-to-do family in [Sandgate](/placesqz/sandgate-overview). In 1911 they started spending holidays in a cottage in Bishopsbourne, which his father later bought. Jocelyn’s nanny, of whom he was excessively fond, went to live in Ivy Cottage in around 1923, and the young Jocelyn was a frequent visitor. From 1938 onwards he lived there more or less permanently, apart from spells in the armed forces during and immediately following the Second World War.

Brooke imagines the Bishopsbourne of his childhood as an idyll, a kind of English middle-class Eden. He seems to recall ‘the village… held in a perpetual trance of summer afternoons.’ **[3]** It becomes ‘the symbol of a happiness’ which promised to return every year. **[4]**

Yet to his childhood imagination this entrancing, languid summerland was constantly threatened by a winterland of subterranean creatures, ‘a dark, alien race, their naked bodies crouched in narrow, pitch-black corridors,’ who might emerge at any moment to abduct him to their terrible caverns. **[5]** Liminal places – shafts into the underworld – from which these demonic presences may emerge, dotted the countryside of his childhood. A water tower which still stands mysteriously and menacingly in Woodlands Wood by Adisham was one of their outlets. One day, out walking with his nurse, to his horror he actually saw them there: ‘they clung like monkeys to the railing round the tank [of the water tower].’ **[6]** He and the nurse turn and flee. What he had seen were East Kent miners larking around on a Bank Holiday outing, industry and other classes breaking into his bourgeois paradise. The water tower is still there, but the miners are all gone, now.

To the south-west of the imaginal realm around Bishopsbourne lies a place which is an absence, a negation, which threatens to sap meaning out of Brooke’s mythopoeic Kent. This is much worse than the eternal struggle of Heaven and Earth, as it drains his imagination of life and energy. He calls it ‘an ill-defined, uncharted kingdom,’ **[7]**, at the centre of which is a place which is not a place with the name Clambercrown and a pub which is not a pub, called The Dog.

One unbearably hot day the adolescent Brooke decided to walk there. First he took a train to Elham, along a line which has itself now become a present absent, marked out by isolated bridges, tunnels and footpaths between [Canterbury](/canterbury/20c-canterbury-home) and Folkestone. Setting out on foot, he got lost, and suffered ardours both physical and mental, before arriving only to find that The Dog had closed down. The experiences empty his inner and outer world ‘of life and meaning,’ leaving ‘an anarchic chaos of meaningless images.’ [8] It is only appropriate, then, that Brooke’s strange, haunting novel \_*The Image of a Drawn Sword\_* identifies Clambercrown as the place from which World War Three spreads across Britain, with the enemy establishing its advance H.Q. in The Dog. **[9]**

Brooke’s re-imaginings lend national significance to this otherwise relatively obscure part of East Kent: England’s political and psychological, metaphysical and mythological stability seems to depend on events here. His visionary landscapes of promise and loss, paradise and terror draw in part on existing local folklore. Bishopsbourne’s little river, the Nailbourne, is one of the five traditional woe-waters of England, intermittent streams whose flowing is understood to foretell disaster for the nation, ‘the fell season,/Predestined and foreknown’ as Brooke’s poem ‘Month’s Mind’ has it. **[10]** Even when the riverbed is dry, the beautiful scenery of the Elham Valley is haunted by the secret knowledge that disaster is inevitable, that the waters, like Brooke’s subterranean demons, will sooner or later burst above ground.

Brooke also makes reference to Old England’s Hole, a landscape feature halfway up Bridge Hill, just outside Bishopsbourne. ‘Local legend asserted,’ he writes, ‘that the Britons had entrenched themselves here in some last, desperate stand against the advancing Romans.’ **[11]** Brooke’s landscape is where England is lost: a place of nostalgia for what once was but may be again.

References

1. Jocelyn Brooke, *The Orchid Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981) 257.

2. Jocelyn Brooke, *The Dog at Clambercrown* (London: The Bodley Head, 1955) 256.

3. Brooke, *Orchid* 26.

4. Brooke, *Orchid* 30

5. Brooke, *Orchid* 183-184.

6. Brooke, *Orchid* 184.

7. Brooke, *Clambercrown*, 65.

8. Brooke, *Clambercrown* 193.

9. Jocelyn Brooke, *The Image of a Drawn Sword* (London: The Bodley Head, 1950) 181.

10. Jocelyn Brooke, *December Spring: Poems* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1946) 25.

11. Brooke, *Orchid* 261-262.

Further Reading

Christopher Scoble, *Letters from Bishopsbourne: Three Writers in an English Village* (Cheltenham: BMM, 2010).