

In Search Of Charlie Curnow - A short Personal Photographic Project

Who is Charlie Curnow and why am I searching for him?

It's actually a bit of a trick, the title of this talk. Charlie Curnow is a fictitious character who appears as 'the hero' if you like in a series of books written by Alan M. Kent and set in Cornwall. Not perhaps, the part of Cornwall that you may be familiar with, but a part that would not seem so different from the village in Wales where I was born and grew up. That village is the ex-coal mining community of Merthyr Vale & Aberfan, though born in Aberfan in 1962, I moved across the other side of the river to Merthyr Vale in 1967 where I lived until leaving for University at Swansea in 1981. Charlie Curnow, in the first book (Proper Job, Charlie Curnow), was born, lived and grew up on the 'Trelawny Estate' (Grenville Gardens), part of the ex-tin/copper mining community of Troon, located just outside Camborne in Cornwall on "The Great Flat Lode", when we first meet him he's dreaming on the bus between Redruth & Camborne heading home to Troon :-

"Charlie Curnow's all-time, top five, most significant rock recordings of the past forty years. If he was ever asked, this is what he'd say:

Led Zeppelin IV

Nirvana - Nevermind

Metallica - The Black Album

Green Day - American Idiot

A toss-up between Deep Purple (In Rock) and Husker Du (Zen Arcade).

The MTV interviewer wudn' even know who the hell Husker Du were. Only the most influential US Punk band of all time. And, if she asked what were his other earliest influences, he'd offer:

The Holman Climax Male Voice Choir

Star Wars IV, V and VI (Okay - and I, II and III).

Camborne's Trevithick Day.

Skinners Ale.

The Cornish Poet, John Harris (1820-1884).

And if the sexy-groovy-belly-button-pierced babe, sitting in the studio, overlooking New York Times Square wanted to know where he found the inspiration for the finest rock recording of that year - the Brit & Grammy award-winning album 'Songs full of Bollocks' which was destined to spend longer on the chart than even Pink Floyd's 'Dark Side Of The Moon', he knew what he'd say. He'd think of now and say,

Chrissie (she'd be called something like that), I base all my songs on the estate where I grew up on back home in Cornwall. I got a lot of inspiration from the people there - and of course, Cornwall's ancient and romantic landscape.... which these days, I don't get back to see often enough..."

And thus begins our introduction to the world of Charlie Curnow and his dreams, aspirations and hopes for his life. Yet the book is also about identity, the Cornish Identity as distinct from the English identity. The setting for the book doesn't really very far from three places - Camborne, Redruth and Troon (Except for a short excursion to Truro). It's not a 'polite' book - it's written in the Cornish dialect and some may find the author's use of 'Anglo-Saxon' terminology offensive but, get past that and you'll find that it's a pretty realistic, down-to-earth book.

Just like Charlie, I have my own set of significant influences and, were you to ask me for my top five photographers I would give you the following :-

(Sir) Don McCullin
Chris Killip
John Bulmer
Dan Wood
Chris Harrison

With significant influences from :-

John Spinks,
Phillip Jones-Griffiths
Jane Bown
Sissel Thastum
I.C. "Chuck" Rapoport
Martin Parr
Bill Jay,
The Poet Idris Davies
My home villages of Aberfan & Merthyr Vale

I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that most of you will have heard of at least 3 may be 4 of those photographers, and that they would be probably be Don McCullin, Martin Parr and Jane Bown, maybe Chris Killip.

To come back to the book and Charlie - to read a book and to be inspired by its contents to learn more about the people and the area in which it has been set is one thing - but, how do you capture an idea? What is the process that you will use? For me, the process is that of walking the area, in as open minded a way as possible, to try and see the photographic possibilities yet also to try and remain as truthful to the reality of a situation as is possible. I have several 'guides' that I use for this -

Psychogeography
The 'Flaneur'
The 'Derive'
Photosketching

Each of these combine to help create a photographic record of an area which you can utilise as the basis for a later return, to spend more time and effort in capturing images which you can combine to form a narrative structure which may even come to contain a little something of the photographer themselves. I also find that the following quotes from other photographers help one to bear in mind the final aims of the project -

"Photography performs one function supremely well; it shows what something or somebody looked like, under a particular set of conditions at a particular moment in time." - Bill Jay

"You don't make a photograph just with a camera. You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved." - Ansel Adams

"Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures." - Don McCullin

"A photographer must possess and retain the receptive faculties of a child who watches the world for the first time." - Bill Brandt

When visiting Cornwall, I often find myself being surprised at the similarities of certain areas with those of my native South Wales, this can lead to a state of mind that lies somewhere between the Welsh concepts of Hiraeth & Cynefin (these are not unique to the Welsh but exist in Cornish, Breton and Portuguese).

Hiraeth:

"Hiraeth" is a Welsh word that cannot be accurately translated into English. It is more a "feeling" or "state of being" than something which can easily be described. It is more than "homesickness", deeper than "longing", both nostalgic and yet not. It has been described as a "sense of place" yet it is not confined to any single place, or indeed time. It is all of these things and yet none of these things.

Cynefin:

"Cynefin" like "Hiraeth" is another of those Welsh words that cannot be accurately translated into English. "Cynefin" is usually translated as "habitat", or as "that place where an individual or organism feels that they belong" yet, it goes deeper than this. To belong here, in this place, is to feel the heavy weight of history itself. It is to be not only in the landscape but also part of the landscape.

I'd often thought that there were similarities between Wales & Cornwall, not the least of which was the Pioneering Steam Engineer Richard Trevethick. His 'Penydarren' engine ran along the tramroad that went through the village of Merthyr Vale on its way to Abercynon with its 10 tons of Iron and 50 passengers!

But the world of Cornwall that produced and is described by Charlie Curnow is a far place from that associated with the tourist areas like Newquay and St Ives. As much as the areas of Tenby and the beaches of the Gower are from the Taff, Ebbw and Rhondda valleys.

In many ways, Charlie Curnow, although fictional, shares the dreams and aspirations of many people that I grew up with back home in Merthyr Vale. There were some who wanted to form a band, there were some who saw sport as a way out, and there were some who saw education in the same light. But there were also those who stayed, got apprenticeships or jobs and made a life. Some actually managed it - did I actually 'get out' of the valley - I don't think so because it will always be a part of me. It still influences how I look at the world and the places in it, whether through a camera lens or just with my eyes and like Charlie I've had my chance at success - though that depends on how you define success....

The ending of "Proper Job, Charlie Curnow" -

"A'n Charlie? What of Charlie? Well he still saw everyone. Still drank the same places. Still teased the tackers around the 'Gardens' Still wished things had been different. You could still see 'un most Saturdays comin' home from John Olivers with a new CD or two in his hand. He still had a mind t'form another band, but fur now, he was happy enough t'think Balance hadn't been a total lash-up. In some ways, it had been the best o'times. He knew that, when he stepped on the the First Bus t'go t'Trelawney Gardens. He knew his legendary status had been guaranteed.

'Eh? You'm Charlie Curnow 'ent 'ee? You used to be in that band....'

It wudn' no platinum discs on the wall at home. But it didn' matter. If the bus driver t'Trelawny knew of 'un, he'd made it. He knew it had been a proper bleddy job."

For Charlie, it's not the end, there are another two books in this trilogy and for me, gaining an MA and more importantly, holding a successful exhibition, is not the end of the path. How do I know it was successful? Because people who visited liked the work, they enjoyed it and were challenged by it - that's a success, not the MA, not the letters after the name, be they MA, LRPS, CPAGB or FIAP.

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