

SOCIOPOETRY

I have chosen to start my book with this, most relevant of themes. Sociopoetry. Sociopoetry has always fascinated me. In case you are ignorant I will briefly describe the concept of sociopoetry. It is – as you might expect – poetry, which concerns itself with socio. Things falling under the banner of socio would include guns and prisons, the state of hospitals, how much we should give to beggars, whether we should experiment on beggars/force them to become soldiers, her nibs the Queen, the plight of the ethnic and whether there should be a National Lottery – and, if there is, should it be easier to win. My father is a member of society so I have recently been bending his ear about what it is all about. I'll drive to his boathouse and we'll sit down, open a crate of Adnams and try and get to the bottom of things. He has some pretty extremist views, which only begin to make sense after about four Adnams. He believes that single people should be made to ring a heavy, town-crier-style bell when they walk into pubs and multi-millionaires should be forced to carry their first million with them in a large Karrimor rucksack at all times. In addition he doesn't agree with hoodies and he is unsettled by sign language. He thinks that a lot of the ills in society can be traced back to the fact that everyone wears jeans these days. He refuses to even use the word – calling them 'blue trousers' – and can quote some amazing statistics about convicted murderers since the turn of the twentieth century and

the colour of their trousers. In addition, he thinks that it would be good to have a president in charge of the whole world (he suggested Michel Platini), he thinks that rock should be easier to buy outside of seaside towns and he believes that he himself should be knighted.

- 2** I enjoy having these discussions with my (bearded) old man. Once we're good and stoked, and we've put the world to rights, he'll sling his bottle against the wall, trudge over to the rowing machine, take off his blazer and slacks and get down to business. There's no finer sight in sport than my old man, lashed off his skull, a blur of black swimming trunks and white vest, making that flywheel squeal. If I've got half of his appetite for giving a rowing machine a good seeing to when I hit his age I'll be delighted. In truth, I'll be delighted if I'm able to put away the amount of Adnams my old man does at that age, and discuss elements of socio the way he can. He is a very great man.

POEM#714

'THE JOHNNY'

Chris darned his condom in front

3

of his electric fire.

Then he slung it in the tin,

Popped it closed

And set off for Clara's.

POEM#444

'BATESY'S BANTER'

- 4** 'While you're down there . . .'
Mike Bates said to Candy.
He'd vaguely thought people would laugh at this.
Unfortunately, the reason Candy was crouching
near his groin was precisely to pick up a glass
which Mike had broken.
And also she was his daughter-in-law.
So it didn't get a laugh at all.

POEM#445

'AM DRAM'

Maria sat sobbing in her cell at the
all-women's prison.

5

Why had she stabbed the old man from her
drama club in Leicester?

And why wouldn't the prison governess let
her put on *Shakers* by John Godber?

POEM#1155

'PR'

- 6 The Queen took a normal job so the public would
hate her less.
She became a lollipop lady.
Some hoodlums soon found out about this.
They started goading her; calling her posh and
firing ducklings at her through a homemade
bazooka made out of catering-size cans of beans
fastened together with gaffer tape.
It started to get to Her Majesty.
She would get home, throw her lollipop stick onto
the couch and be a right cow to the D. of E.
He'd say things like, 'If you don't tell me what's
wrong I can't help.'
She'd just fart and eat her crisps and carry on
watching *The Apprentice*.

POEM#1004

'ARNOLD'

Arnold was constantly unhappy
Because he was a maggot (the type of worm).
He knew he couldn't do anything about it.
That he should just get on with it.
But he couldn't help himself.
And so he dwelled on it.²

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² I expect this is also how people with glasses must feel.

POEM#770

'DERRECK WOODS'

8 Derreck dangled by the dunk-pot.
He caught me staring at his penis.
I quickly averted my stare and pretended
I was interested in his hip.
And then I loped, awestruck, towards
the Jacuzzi.³



³ This is based on bitter experience. There's a man at my gym without even the vaguest grasp on what it is to be English. After he's showered he just stands there for ages with his dick out. It's as if he finds the idea of covering himself up deeply offensive. I'm only human – I don't go out of my way to look at him but there's only so much of this a man can take before he gets sucked in. Even once he chooses to get dressed, his approach is quite remarkable. Whilst most normal Englishman will start with his grounds and work outwards, this creature opens with the socks and then moves on to his shirt. He's still swinging merrily as he puts his dog collar and crucifix on. There was an occasion last summer where he must have been going straight to a barbecue and actually had his deck shoes on and his rucksack over his shoulder before he put his pants and Bermuda shorts on. I hated this and was physically sick.

POEM#1177

'LOVELY STUFF'

A website was developed.

9

Homeless guys and people who had mansions

they weren't using were hooked up.

Suddenly tramps were living in luxury.

They were exultant!

Some of them had staff!

POEM#112

'SIGHTS'⁴

- 10 I just found out
Someone's trying to kill me!
It's exciting, yes.
But also dangerous.
He's a professional.



⁴ The film *Leon* is superb. It's all about a trained killer who makes friends with a little girl and a plant. He is a Frenchman but you can't help but warm to him in spite of this and the fact that he carves out a living by shooting people dead. One Christmas my brother bought the DVD for his wife but the DVD wasn't in the case. She was furious, but ultimately calmed down and had three beautiful children by him.

POEM#1070

UNTITLED

'Can I have one more crumb please?'

11

Said the boy from the novel.

'No,'

Said the mean character.

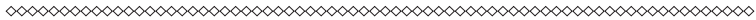
Then the author described the dreadful carpets

and said how cold it was.

POEM#908

'THE CRUCIBLE'⁵

12 Neil Robertson (the snooker player)
Made eyes at Michaela Tabb
(the handsome referee).
Ultimately he lost patience and groped her.
She resisted his advances, fending him off
with a rest.
He sloped back to his chair and started chugging
down Highland Spring like it was going out
of fashion.
She tucked her blouse back into her skirt
And awarded Graham Dott the frame.



⁵ I was chasing a girl and got us tickets to watch John Higgins vs Anthony Hamilton at the Crucible in 1997. Our tickets were for the evening session and Higgins had won the match in the afternoon with a session to spare so it was a bit of a letdown. In the end they wheeled out Willie Thorne and Dennis Taylor to do trick shots and tell anecdotes about their time in snooker so they wouldn't have to give refunds to us punters. It was all right. Willie Thorne used George Best's line about spending ninety per cent of his money on women and drink and wasting the rest. That went down pretty well. Lottie didn't know what to make of it. Watching these old-timers egging each other on and me in her ear making excuses for them. On the way home she was loath to speak to me. She said that she felt betrayed; that she was too nice a girl to be treated like this. She was walking quickly, clutching her programme to her chest in the drizzle. I could barely keep up. I kept on yelling after her that I hadn't planned on

POEM#942

'PUBLIC REACTION'

- 14** A pop star changed her hairstyle.
And everyone hated it.
Literally every single person in the country (UK)
Absolutely hated it.
It was long at the sides and on the top and short
at the front and back.
But – to reiterate – *everyone hated it.*
In fact, when she came out and did her first song
literally every single person in the O2 arena
whistled and threw shit at this pop star.
She got them back on side by singing a couple
of classics.
But then everyone remembered her hair and,
ultimately, she was lynched and eaten.

POEM#994
'SUSPICION'

Michael put 50p in his piggy bank every day
for three years.
He smashed it open.
There was two pound fifty in there.
He frowned and looked up at his cellmate.

15

POEM#400
'WRENCHED'⁶

16



⁶ In the end a decision was made not to print this one. It was decided that it was sexist and that, in the current climate, there's no sense in *seeking out* controversy. If you're good enough it will come to you. It was frustrating for me because, as I kept arguing with my editor, I don't think the lass in the poem is particularly degraded. Or at least you can argue that some girls would, actually, be pretty happy to get involved with this sort of thing. My editor suggested that the feminists might not see it like that and I responded that, frankly, I couldn't give too much of a shit about those guys. Truth be told, I've not got a great deal of time for feminism, and this in spite of the fact that, purely in terms of lineage, I am myself half female. In 2008 I was invited to do a recital at a conference about feminism in London and the whole experience left a sour taste. During a break between seminars I went for a dump in the ladies'. They didn't like that much. They were throwing perfume bottles into my cubicle, calling me every name under the sun. I was just standing there with my trousers round my ankles, yelling that I thought they were crazy. I said I was breaking down barriers and reasoned that they should be applauding me – not attacking me. One of them threw a Kenwood mixer over the door. I continued to claim, as articulately as I could, that they were only feminist when it suited them.

POEM#520

‘PLANS’

Shawn watched the two black belts⁷

17

demonstrating.

He frowned.

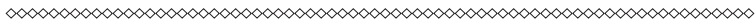
It would take him ages to get that bloody good.

Then he smiled.

But once he was . . .

Well – Benjamin, Glass Derreck and the other

one wouldn't know what had hit 'em.



⁷ I tried karate once. I was living in Russia and putting on weight because of their food and culture. A friend was joining a karate class so I went along out of interest. I couldn't understand the instructions per se so I was drawing a lot on my recollections of kung fu films and those guys you'd sometimes get on *Record Breakers* who karate-chopped a pile of bricks to impress Roy Castle. I went to two classes but I found that the inside of my elbow hurt so I quit. On Saturdays we used to go on walks with a Russian family someone had found on the Tube. One time they invited us to their home for tea. They had nothing and yet gave everything. It was very humbling. After tea we watched *Octopussy* in Russian. I wasn't full but I didn't say anything because I was still feeling humbled. When we left we bought ice cream from an invalid. That stuff tasted *too good*.

WAR AND PEACE AND RELIGION AND SHOPPING

Love it or loathe it, we all have an opinion on war. Funny to think that, generations ago, people were tumbling over the dunes with their archaic guns and blowing up Nazis with a view to *ending war altogether*. Of course, as time has gone on we find that the odd war does no real harm and, in fact, is good for things like technology, tourism and the nation's sense of self worth. One thing's for sure, I couldn't do it myself. I'd enjoy the travelling side of it, of course, but I'd hate the other, well documented, downsides. For me the opening half hour of *Schindler's List* provokes the same reaction as an episode of *The Office* – I'm behind the sofa, cringing; I can barely watch. The idea of staggering around on a beach looking for my own arm fills me with dread, quite honestly. Also, I am one of these people who overthinks things, so, even though I'd know, deep down, that I was being daft, I'd be worrying that a lot of the soldiers I was peppering with bullets might be really great guys. Of course, there's no way of checking this, as, by the time you're close enough to chat to them, or to see if there is common ground in terms of tastes in music et cetera, the evil buggers have peeled off a dozen pellets into your eye. I have talked to my father about

this. He openly admits he took the coward's way out and was born *right at the very end* of WWII. He has no great lust for war and, in his darker moments, has stated that he thinks there should be no more wars at all. The money saved, he argues, could be plunged **20** into more sophisticated paintballing centres to satiate the needs of the bloodthirsty. On several occasions I have stated to him that without wars a large part of my income, of any poet's income, would be hugely compromised. At this point he starts spouting nonsense like 'Why can't you write about peace?' and we have to agree to disagree. To write poems where no one is suddenly obliterated by a bomb would be overwhelmingly disrespectful to the likes of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and those other brave balladeers who risked all to report on death for our entertainment. And so it is that I have devoted a whole section to war (with a couple of poems about religion and some shopping ones thrown in so we don't slit our wrists at the horror of it all!).

POEM#681

'THE RULES OF WAR'

Lee snuck off to get a crêpe and some beer.

21

When he came back to the trench his major gave
him a right ticking off, including killing him
with his revolver.

POEM#684

'THE REALITIES OF WAR'

22 Oliver Hampton-Church,
Whose main trick was to pretend he was
surrendering and then shoot Germans
through his flag,
Eventually shot so many holes through it that it
stopped covering up his gun enough, and a
Japanese chap cut his head off.⁸



⁸ The war poetry I include is not, then, based on my own experience. It is based on the experience I imagine the poor buggers on the front line have to go through. I tend to go to Dunkirk or Calais or at the very least Dover if I'm going to write war poetry. Last summer I went there with some lads. We did the supermarkets and then cruised the museums. I snuck off a couple of times and scribbled down a few ideas and then we'd meet up and grab some food in the evening. On our last night we split up and all went to different restaurants and then reconvened in a tavern by the front. One of the lads was still hungry and it later transpired that he hadn't gone to a restaurant at all. He had walked out across the sands and dipped his head into the edge of the ocean.

POEM#679

'THE AWKWARDNESS OF WAR'

23

Matt was literally all over the place.
A bomb had banged near him and three
 chunks had hit him.
The worst one was about as big as a hubcap
 (if the car was as big as a Labrador).
It went *woomph* into his chin and he went woozy
 straight away.
He couldn't see shit.
'Horace! Horace!'
He yelled at the soldier next to him.
But things went from bad to worse.
Embarrassingly, it wasn't Horace but a different
 man from another regiment.
Matt cringed and pretended he was calling past
 this ginger guy to an imagined Horace a little
 further towards the sea –
And safety.

POEM#329

UNTITLED

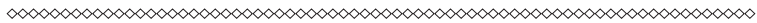
24 A Christian⁹

Noticed he was good at sprinting.

He arranged a 100 metre fun run for
his congregation.

Not only did he finish a disappointing fifth,

But his vicar beat him wearing a gown and
cassocks and clutching an orb.



⁹ People often forget that this section is partly devoted to Religion. Far be it from me to pontificate about Religion. So much has been said about the existence or otherwise of Christians, you hardly need me to wade in with a well-meaning effort to ‘settle it once and for all’. We’re all old enough and daft enough to make up our own minds by now, I think. Suffice to say that a man in whom I trust completely (Rick) reckons he’s been inside a Church, and I’ve seen videos he’s taken on a camera phone of a vicar, which seem genuine. But then if you look at the chaps abroad who are promoting their Korans and blowing their chests up – they swear blind that the whole thing is much more to do with mosques and synagogues. Very thorny thing, Religion. For what it’s worth, I think there must be something in it, or how do you explain the endless bloodshed?

POEM#1101

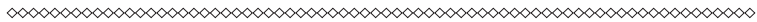
'THE INCIDENT IN RYMAN'S'

Chris hadn't seen Tania for about three years
when they bumped into each other in
Ryman's and he forgot her name.
This was very embarrassing, to say the least.
But, typically, Chris talked his way out
of trouble.
And soon he was fucking her against a fax
machine that also photocopied.

POEM#584

'SHOPPING GARRETT'

26 Lesley Garrett¹⁰ frowned.
Her fist was bleeding.
'I'm afraid we simply don't recognise that
as a method of payment,' the sales
assistant repeated.
'But it's worth more than that telly!' Garrett
yelled; and she punched the bit on the
till again.
The bald sales assistant went deeply ashen.
'You can't pay by singing,'
He reiterated.
But Garrett had already slotted her backing CD
into a nearby Denon.
She waded back to the till, ordered a weak boy to
bag up her widescreen, spat out her gum and
began to sing.



¹⁰ I had a big row with one of the builders about this lady. I mentioned that I'd watched a television show called *Who Do You Think You Are?: With Lesley Garrett*. He corrected me and said the show was called *Who Does Lesley Garrett Think She Is?* I told him he'd got that one wrong – I argued that this was just an angry thought he'd had in his head. He kept on shouting details from the show out to prove he'd seen it. He was brandishing a large tool that looked like it was designed to tighten things but also had a blade on it, and yelling things like 'HER GREAT

POEM#680

'THE FUTILITY OF WAR'

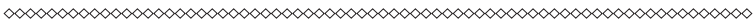
All the soldiers were on the beach throwing
bombs at each other.

After two hours Alan hit a horrid German and
that meant they'd both lost exactly 300
sons/people.

Richard giggled.

'We're back where we started.'

Then an accurate German fired a bullet
through his neck, and that was him
done, too.



GRANDFATHER SOLD PIANOS', so eventually I had to back down and
he called me a pussy – and continued to call me that, in fact, whilst I made
him a cup of tea.

POEM#838

'THE FURIOUS CITIZEN'

- 28** Philip dropped a bomb from his plane onto
some foreign soldiers.
Everyone who knew someone who died was
very upset.
One woman actually shook her fist at
Philip's plane.

POEM#324

‘THE SIKH AND THE CHRISTIAN’

A Sikh and a Christian¹¹

29

Traded religions

For the rest of the day

The Sikh died that afternoon – an enormous
icicle fell through him.

The Christian – as a tribute – stayed Sikh for
a further month.



¹¹ It's always heartening to see people from two religions playing nicely together. It tends to work best with things like babies and little boys and girls, as they haven't been taught who to discount yet owing to their beliefs. I read an account once (possibly apocryphal) about a Buddhist gentleman who lent a Christian his lawnmower. When you hear stuff like that you can't help but remain hopeful, exultant even. I remember when I read that article I dashed straight down to the shops and had a couple of cans of Guinness to celebrate. I then scanned the article and sent it out to the guys to see what they made of it. They loved it and I got them over to my gaff and cooked for them. Most of them were already lashed by the time they arrived. One of them brought an American girl.

POEM#1010

'CORPORAL MOORE'S MISSION'

30 Corporal Moore

Was asked to go undercover.

He would be shot, pierce enemy lines as a ghost

And – hopefully –

Report back to Sergeant Cornwall (a medium).