

The Writings and West Country World of Samuel Daniel (1562?-1619)

In 2012, with Charles Dickens's 200th eclipsing all else, Samuel Daniel's 450th is the kind of literary anniversary which will be easy to forget. The Elizabethan poet, playwright and historian has none of those advantages with posterity (works in print, cultural prominence, a fast-moving and well-documented life) that the Victorian novelist enjoys. There is no definite date to set on the birth as even the year, 1562, is only a best guess. Putting a face to the name is also very difficult, or at least commits us to hunting high and low. From the magisterial figure conjured by the bust which is part of Daniel's memorial on the wall of St George's Church, Beckington, we have a fine artistic impression of how a writer with so commanding a range might most appropriately be imagined to have looked. For something more nearly approaching a genuine likeness done from life, the curious would need to visit the Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendal, Cumbria, home to the Appleby Triptych.

Very different though the images of Daniel that they offer might be, the Beckington bust and the Appleby Triptych were actually commissioned by the same seventeenth-century noblewoman, Lady Anne Clifford (1590-1676). The latter is her so-called 'Great Picture'; and the inclusion of Daniel's portrait in the left-hand part of this, above a pile of books, points to the intellectual debts that Lady Anne Clifford was conscious of owing to the man who in the late 1590s had become her girlhood tutor. This was the time when Daniel's star burned most brightly. His poetic career was only a few years old, but discerning observers were already adding Daniel to a very select band of English poets thought to have the potential for greatness. In *Affaniae*, his 1601 collection of Latin verses, Charles Fitzgeoffrey identified Daniel as the likeliest instrument for Phoebus Apollo if the Greek god of lyric poetry ever wanted his music heard in England. Others had struck much the same note. When in 1598 Francis Meres ventured to list those of whom the nation should feel proud, two of his key categories—for poets by whom “the English tongue is mightily enriched, and gorgeously invested in rare ornaments and resplendent abilliments,” and for poets whose sonnets “bewaile and bemoane the perplexities of Love”—saw Daniel sandwiched between Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser on the one hand and, in approximate accordance with the order of seniority, William Shakespeare and Michael Drayton on the other. The alphabetical symmetry, surnames beginning with S and D, would have been complete if Meres had not been writing a few years too soon to take account of the claims of John Donne, whose writing could rise to rare heights of resplendence and whose love poems were later said by John Dryden to have “perplexed the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy.”

The forward line of leading poetic players into which Meres's list of nominations had slotted Samuel Daniel could scarcely have been any more formidable. Although at so early a stage in his career Daniel must have been seen as something of a surprise selection, he found himself in very good company here too; for at this time that would have applied to Shakespeare as well. In the early 1590s, at least, Shakespeare had been the presumptuous interloper who drew the scorn of Robert Greene: “There is an upstart Crow ... supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you.” The other leading literary upstart of the early 1590s, acclaimed

in a much more magnanimous manner by Edmund Spenser, was Samuel Daniel: “there is a new shepherd late up sprong, / The which doth all afore him far surpass.” Although Spenser was not implying anything bucolic about Daniel, since in the pastoral tradition ‘shepherd’ can simply be code for ‘lyric poet,’ the provincial origins both of Daniel and of Shakespeare not only shaped their writing but shaped their respective reputations. Having those origins gave them an affinity and set them somewhat apart from their poetic peers. Both men returned to their provincial beginnings in later life, and in fact remained true to them even in death; for instead of being buried in St Paul’s Cathedral (where Sidney lay, to be joined eventually by Donne) or in Westminster Abbey (already Spenser’s resting-place, and subsequently Drayton’s too) they were buried many miles from London. Shakespeare’s mortal remains went to Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, with the famous injunction “curst be he who moves my bones,” while Daniel was destined soon afterwards (1619) for burial in Beckington, with the “monument to his memory”—bust, pediment, and tablet, as directed by the unceasingly grateful Lady Anne Clifford—left to be added in 1654.

The putting up of the Beckington memorial to Samuel Daniel was also the putting down of a clear cultural marker. Effectively, the monument became a boundary stone, which—fifty years after the fact—moved the limits of Elizabethan literary culture a little further to the west than they might otherwise have gone. Since Lady Anne Clifford’s other commissions had included (in 1620) a mural monument for Edmund Spenser in Westminster Abbey, it also gave a somewhat belated matching pair of memorials to a matching pair of poets. It posthumously paralleled Daniel with Spenser as two writers of monumental ambition—whose epic works (Daniel’s *Civile Wars* and *History of England*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*) evinced an explicit concern with English nationhood—and it placed Daniel’s West Country and Spenser’s London on a par with each other as both the seedbeds of that ambition and the spots in which it most fittingly and auspiciously worked itself out.

This, for Daniel, was an enormously fortunate and illustrious poetic twinning, as well as a better and more realistic match than the one with Shakespeare. Its effect was to emphasise, as one of the points of resemblance by which it might have been warranted, the deep and defining awareness of local attachment that he and Spenser had shared. With the younger poet, we simply see a decisive westward shift of that special sense of belonging which for himself Spenser had fixed in “mery London,” finding that city “my most kindly Nurse, / That to me gave this Lifes first native sourse.” For Daniel, Somerset fulfilled this same role—containing the birthplace to which he seems to have felt himself forever called back, and becoming the region to which he would delight in returning with his memory and imagination even before he could return there in person. Unfortunately there is no reliable birth record by which his ties to the county might be precisely pinned down. They have sometimes been traced to the southern and western sides of Somerset, since one tradition has him hailing from near Taunton; but they are now more plausibly narrowed to the north-eastern part—with Wellow a strong contender since in 1564 it saw the baptism of a ‘John Daniel,’ very possibly the younger brother of that name who went on to enjoy a distinguished musical career.

Daniel’s West Country world would later extend to the neighbouring county of Wiltshire, probably as a result of his being invited in the early 1590s to Wilton House. Here a glittering

literary circle had grown up, presided over by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (and sister to the late Philip); and here it was that Daniel tutored Philip Herbert, destined to be the second husband of the next notable pupil who was placed under Daniel's tutelage, Lady Anne Clifford, and therefore also destined to have his portrait—just like Daniel's own—incorporated into the Appleby Triptych. Wilton became the place which, as Daniel himself put it, “I must ever acknowledge to have beene my best schoole, and thereof always am to hold a feeling and gratefull memorie.” How often that sentiment drew him back to Wiltshire, and how close he came on any such occasions to Wilton itself, remains unknown; there is some evidence linking him in the last years of his life with Longleat, and a suggestion that when he retired to the country he initially settled near Devizes. His last home, however, was in what is now Rudge, slightly to the east of Beckington.

Conjectural though some of them inevitably are, these associations with Somerset and Wiltshire profoundly influenced the shape of Daniel's career; and if it were possible to appoint a Bard of Avon from those two counties, as well as for the different river of the same name in Warwickshire, Daniel would fit the bill perfectly. Sure enough, where Spenser would famously pay tribute to the Thames (“Sweet Themmes! Runne softly, till I end my song”), Daniel pays tribute to the Bristol Avon. In his *Sonnets to Delia* (1592), dedicated to the Countess of Pembroke, we find the following poetic manifesto:

No, no, my Verse respects not *Thames* nor *Theaters*,
 Nor seekes it to be knowne unto the Great,
 But *Avon* rich in fame, though poore in waters,
 Shall have my Song, where *Delia* hath her seat:
Avon shall be my *Thames* ...

The Avon may not be in the same league as Spenser's “sweet Themmes,” but in a particular kind of fame—fame by association—it is still rich, as Spenser himself had conceded (citing its transit through “wondrous Bath, / And Bristow faire”) in *The Faerie Queene*, and for that reason it is entitled to pride of place among rivers of the lesser sort. In thus directing his song not to the Thames but to the Thames's poorer relation, Daniel executes two deliberate departures from poetic convention. In Daniel's day, and for many years after, there was a standard comparison of the Thames with the Avon, which normally worked very much to the detriment of the latter; for example, Richard Savage's poem “London and Bristol Delineated” (1743) pitches “deep, unsullied Thames” with its “mild majestic tides” against “a ditch-like river, / Rude as [its] rocks, and muddy as its waves.” Another common manœuvre among poets was to represent the flow of that same deep and unsullied Thames as a model for the skill that they had shown—or hoped to show—in making their verse likewise “runne softly” for the reader; John Denham in “Cooper's Hill” (1642) tells the Thames that in writing poetry he aims to “flow like thee, and make thy stream / My great example, as it is my theme.” Daniel turns the standard comparison on its head, renouncing all that belongs to the social mainstream in favour of what sits on the provincial margins; and, as if to show that less is sometimes more in literature too, he makes a point of contenting himself with a far more modest and unassuming emblem of his own poetry

than the big brimming river which might have been expected. The Avon is to the Thames as the sonnet is to the epic; and Daniel feels no need either to sail down the Thames or to launch into epic. (He had not yet written any of the long poems towards which the aspirations of so classically orientated a poet would at some point inevitably tend.) In each case the smallness of scale, far from being felt as a source of shame, is seen as a specific excellence.

In this vindication of the quiet cultural backwater, therefore, Daniel has included both the humble sonnet and England's unpretentious south-west. The former is still a fine vehicle for the display of poetic power; and, by the same token, the latter is a perfectly suitable showcase for the sort of beauty of which it is the poet's business to sing. No apology is required either from Daniel himself for initially choosing the sonnet rather than the epic as his literary exercise-ground or from Daniel's subject, Delia, for holding court in the West Country rather than in the cultural cockpit that was Elizabethan London. It is of course that detail about Delia, her West Country residence, which most commentators have regarded as revealing her identity. Daniel's dedicatee, "The Right Honourable The Ladie Mary Countesse of Pembroke," must also be his subject, it is often assumed, and Wilton House must be the place "where *Delia* hath her seat." Intriguingly, however, the solution to which Daniel means to lead us might lie even closer to home than that. One possibility raised recently is that 'Delia' may be a triple anagram: that is, a name which points to the poet's beloved being a purely imaginary figure, or IDEAL LADIE, and into which in a third strand of anagrammatic elaboration the poet DANIEL then dissolves his own name, after the same subtraction—of one N—that a Brendan or a Norman would need to make in order to become Brenda or Norma. Daniel would only have been doing to himself what others, recognising what good fodder he made for the Elizabethan fondness for anagrams, also delighted in doing—and not just with his surname, but with the SAMUEL too. (John Taylor, whose task was made even easier by the interchangeability in Early Modern English of the letters I and J and by the variant double-L spelling of the name 'Daniel,' contrived to blend both names into "Jesu Amend All.") If indeed Delia was so named as a means of bringing her as close as possible to Daniel himself, there would be fresh force in his hailing of the Avon. It would not just be Daniel's "Song" which the poet's manifesto statement represents as gravitating towards the West Country, but his entire being.

Like his choice of the name Delia, Daniel's characteristic cleaving to this region appears (even if one leaves aside the question of where exactly he was born) multiply determined. At least three distinct locations in the western counties through which the river Avon softly runs would have seized and held Daniel's imagination. One of them, of course, was Wilton House, very palpably the West Country stronghold of all that Philip Sidney had taken 'poetry' to embrace. With the other two locations, however, Daniel's connection was not recent and personal but deeply embedded in the country's collective unconscious.

The Somerset location which operated most potently upon the national psyche had in fact been pinpointed twenty years before Daniel's birth, by John Leland: "At the very South Ende of the Chirch of South-Cadbyri standith Camallate, sumtyme a famose Toun or Castelle." Although Leland looked in vain for any physical traces of what was "sumtyme" there, since the locals had carried away the foundations of "dusky blew stone," he found that the traditions linking Camelot to the Once and Future King remained intact: "The People ... ther ... have hard say that Arture

much resorted to Camalat.” Grown from Somerset soil, therefore, was a dream of national deliverance focussed on the figure of King Arthur. That dream came alive for Daniel and his fellow poets in 1603, when James VI of Scotland succeeded to the English throne. The resulting Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland inspired Drayton to a “Gratulatorie Poem” which looked forward to James bringing back the glories of the past: “O now revive that noble Brittaines name / From which at first our ancient honors came.” Daniel joined in the celebrations with “A Panegyrike Congratulatorie to the Kings Most Excellent Majestie”:

Now thou art all *Great-Britaine* and no more,
No Scot, no English now, nor no debate;
No borders but the Ocean and the shore:
No wall of *Adrian* serves to separate
Our mutuall love, nor our obedience ...

The long process of healing necessitated by the dreadful divisions between the houses of Lancaster and of York—about which Daniel had written extensively, from 1594 onwards, in his *Civile Wars*—could now, with “this mighty werke of union,” be considered complete:

The broken frame of this disioynted State,
Being by the blisse of thy great Grandfather
Henry the seventh, restor’d to an estate
More sound then ever, and more stedfaster,
Owes all it hath to him, and in that rate
Stands bond to thee that art his successer:
For without him it had not been begunne,
And without thee we had beene now undone.

These hopes of national revival through the advent of a new Arthur were soon transferred to James’s son, Prince Henry. One worry might have been that King Arthur (a Celtic hero converted into the standardbearer of Englishness) was too inextricably bound up with Anglocentric notions of British identity to symbolise national unity after so grand an erasure of ethnic difference as Daniel had been proclaiming; but such worries were not permitted to intrude, and Henry was accepted as the ideal incarnation for the seventeenth century of the spirit of Camelot. In 1605 Daniel dedicated a play, *Philotas* (which in the event sailed too close to a treacherous political wind and so turned out to be his unluckiest work), to the young prince. In 1610 he wrote a masque, *Tethys’ Festival*, in honour of Henry’s investiture as Prince of Wales. On 6th November 1612, however, Henry died, and with him many people’s hopes of mending broken Britain. Daniel was among those who most openly mourned and most acutely missed the prince. The account of Arthur which Daniel had just written for the first instalment of his prose history of England suddenly seemed tinged with the sadness of elegy and lament:

A man in force and courage above man, and worthie to have beene a subiect of truth to posterity, and not of fiction (as Legendary writers have made him:) for whilst hee stood, hee bare up the sinking State of his Countrie.

The same concern as in the “Panegyrike Congratulatorie” with the restoration of a disjointed kingdom makes itself powerfully felt here. If Delia had been the Ideal Ladie, King Arthur (“the noblest of *Brittaines*”) and Prince Henry could now be seen to have merged to form the perfect prince. The celebration of Arthur in the person of Henry had by this time turned into a celebration of Somerset. In the first instalment of his long poem *Poly-Olbion*, which like Daniel’s *Philotas* was dedicated to Prince Henry and which like Daniel’s history began to appear in 1612, Michael Drayton sings the praises of “fruitful Somerset” as a county distinguished by the presence or proximity of “*Arthur’s* ancient seat, / Which made the *Britons’* name through all the world as great.” It was not just Daniel’s personal origins but the origins (to which he equally yearned to return) of the nation as a whole that seemed to lie in Somerset. Rather than an effort to secure for himself the quiet life—“Country-safety” and “the fields of rest”—which his character Rosamond regrets having renounced, Daniel’s rural retirement could thus be reckoned an attempt to reconnect with what had once made Britain a land of hope and glory.

Within the same 25-mile radius of Beckington, but in a different direction (and much closer to Wilton House), stood a structure which time appeared to have forgotten even more completely than it had forgotten South Cadbury and the “Toun or Castelle” of Camelot. Already Stonehenge was on the tourist trail, and its mysterious fascination was felt particularly by those who were guests at Wilton (including, in 1620, King James himself). Daniel contemplated it with some puzzlement in his 1599 poem “Musophilus”:

And whereto serve that wondrous *Trophei* now,
That on the goodly *Plaine* neere Wilton stands?
That huge dumbe heape, that cannot tell us how,
Nor what, nor whence it is, nor with whose hands,
Nor for whose glory, it was set to shew
How much our pride mocks that of other lands?

Daniel found Stonehenge outlandish, even disturbing, because it did not plainly proclaim its purpose or its origin. (One theory current at the time was that it was some kind of memorial for the dead; another, that it had been a Roman temple.) However, in so far as the outlandishness of Stonehenge taught Daniel a crucial lesson about what the monuments which the Elizabethans themselves put up needed to aspire to do, the sight of it was still a revelation, and no less haunting than—for quite other reasons—the thought of Camelot. The lesson Daniel learnt was that, if we are not to risk cultural amnesia, our statues, our memorial sculpture, our church architecture, whatever enshrines and records our best selves or is a vessel of history and knowledge handed down, must be harmonious, skilfully devised, and palpably fit for purpose. It was a lesson which Daniel very readily applied to poetry, since investing any well-wrought poem with the value and function of a ‘monument’ was a gambit frequently found in Elizabethan

writing, for instance in the sonnets of Shakespeare (“Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rime,” “Your monument shall be my gentle verse, / Which eyes not yet created shall o’rread”). Daniel shared that view, declaring in his 1603 *Defence of Ryme* that poems are “sacred monuments” which “containe the honour of the dead, the fame of the living, the glory of peace, and the best power of our speech.” Accordingly, he used poetry to set as if in stone the reputations of individuals, and also (most notably in *The Civile Wars*, on which he continued to work until 1609) to keep national history alive. Poems could do this far more effectively than mere heaps of stones, however huge. At the start of the fifth book of *The Civile Wars* Daniel imagines himself visited by the ghost of Henry V, who says that he does not want “dumb stones” erected by way of tribute to the heroes of old but wants “holy lines” written about them instead:

Would God, our times had had some sacred wight,
Whose words as happy as our swords had bin,
To have prepar’d for us *Tropheis* aright,
Of undecaying frames t’have rested in;
Triumphant Arks, of perdurable might;
O holy lines! that such advantage win
Upon the Sieth of Time, in spight of yeares:
How blessed they, who gaine what never weares!

Delia, likewise, is going to be blessedly preserved in her youth and beauty by the sonnets that Daniel has devoted to her: “These are the Arkes, the Trophies I erect, / That fortifie thy name against old age.” A poem, moreover, can give eternal life to the writer as well as to the subject; even once “*Wilton* lies low leuell’d with the ground,” he tells the Countess of Pembroke in the dedicatory poem prefixed to his tragedy *Cleopatra*, her writings—and specifically the work she took over from her brother Philip, producing an English version of the Psalms—will form a monument that “cannot be overthrown.”

Little wonder, then, that Daniel cared intensely about perfecting the works which he himself would offer up to posterity. In 1607 a verse epistle which he addressed “To the Reader” represented him as their “curious builder,” continually considering alterations and improvements:

I may pull down, raise, and reedifie:
It is the building of my life, the fee
Of Nature, all th’inheritance that I
Shall leave to those which must come after me.

It was left to Daniel’s brother John, who became his executor, to put the finishing touches to that inheritance, in the form of the posthumously published *Whole Workes of Samuel Daniel Esquire*

(1623); but arranging to best advantage the fabric of his poetry, whether this involved the careful chiselling through revision of individual phrases and lines or entailed decisions as to which poems should be grouped with—or annexed to—which other poems, had also been an unremitting labour of Daniel’s own. For Daniel to have been so much an architect of the printed volume and the printed page reveals him as one of the first poets to seize the implications of the major cultural shift that was then in the offing, from poems circulating in manuscript (such as, when they first came to the attention of Francis Meres, Shakespeare’s “sugred Sonnets among his private friends”) to poems designed for the medium of print.

Here, as in much else, Daniel was a man who saw both sides. Straddling the reigns of Elizabeth and James, he speaks to us from—and about—a world on the cusp of significant political as well as literary change. He was amphibious enough to prosper at court and thrive in the country. He was versatile enough to master all of the principal poetic forms (lyric, narrative, and dramatic), and to write as effectively in prose as in verse. The text of the Beckington memorial spells out that versatility by describing Daniel not only as a poet but as a historian also, and as excellent in both capacities (sometimes of course, as in *The Civile Wars*, simultaneously so). Even the accompanying sculpted image, as if intent on ensuring that this monument will be nothing like a dumb heap of stones, is eloquent about the reach of Daniel’s achievements; for it gives him a classical appearance, like Virgil or Horace, with a wreath and the suggestion of a Roman toga. Superficial verisimilitude has been sacrificed, it seems, for the sake of capturing an altogether deeper truth: that Daniel was the kind of writer who belongs to the whole world, as much as to Somerset and Wiltshire, and who is (as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare) “not of an age, but for all time.” When Daniel dedicated *Cleopatra* to the Countess of Pembroke, he echoed the “non omnis moriar” which in Horace’s *Odes* (3.30.6) expresses the poet’s hope and belief that through the work he is presenting to posterity he and his name will avoid annihilation. Daniel’s ambition, as this poem declares it, is similarly to save his name by means of his writings: “Then though I die, I cannot yet die all.” The poem ends by restating that ambition in more qualified and diffident terms:

... this doth animate my mind,
That yet I shall be read among the rest,
And though I doe not to perfection grow,
Yet something shall I be, though not the best.

The 450th anniversary of Daniel’s birth is a welcome opportunity to test this typically circumspect claim, and to decide whether or not it was correctly pitched.