

The Commonwealth of Winds

James Marriott

In the midst of the 2018 Labour Party Conference in Liverpool, a group of comrades under the banner of Artists4Corbyn made a journey to the wind turbines just off the coast. The grey pillars of the generators that march across the horizon are visible from the northern parts of the city. Our intention was to gain a visceral experience of the Green Industrial Revolution being launched at the Conference. The following day at 'The World Transformed' we retold the story of our voyage.

The *Discovery* slips through the lock gates of Liverpool Marina and Gary Flint steers her out into the broad brown stream of the Mersey. The tide has just come on to the ebb and the current helps this fibreglass catamaran out into Liverpool Bay.

Ours is a strange crew. There is Gary and Lena from the Institute of the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. The children chose not to come, and Tesla Spinoza, the dog, wasn't allowed on board. There is Tim and Ken from Liverpool Walton Constituency Labour Party. Terry is here and Zoe with her recording equipment, both from Cambridge. And me from Platform.

We have come not to pull Cod, Whiting or Ray from the murky sea but to take possession of the Burbo Bank Offshore Wind Farm.

It is not long before we catch a glimpse of our prey, the array of turbines standing pale in the western sea. From this moment we never lose sight of them. Behind us the terraces and tower blocks of the city stretch away to the north and south.

There is a steady Force 2 from the North East. The breeze is cold in this morning hour, but the wind with tide makes for a calm passage. We leave Burbo cardinal buoy to port, the boat alters its bearing and we settle in for the forty minutes it will take us to reach the base of the turbines.

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Lena calls us together by unfurling a white mainsail made into a banner with scarlet lettering that reads

The people will possess the wind.

In full voice Gary reads from Norman MacCaig's 'A Man in Assynt':

Who owns this landscape?
Has owning anything to do with love?
For it and I have a love-affair so nearly human
we even have quarrels. -
When I intrude too confidently
it rebuffs me with a wind like a hand
or puts in my way
a quaking bog or a loch
where no loch should be. Or I turn stonily
away, refusing to notice
the rouged rocks, the mascara
under a dripping ledge, even
the tossed, the stony limbs waiting.

I can't pretend
it gets sick for me in my absence,
though I get
sick for it. Yet I love it
with special gratitude, since
it sends me no letters, is never
jealous and, expecting nothing
from me, gets nothing but
cigarette packets and footprints.

Who owns this landscape? -
The millionaire who bought it or
the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning
with a deer on his back?

Who possesses this landscape? -
The man who bought it or
I who am possessed by it?

Soundings

We are ready to perform the script we have prepared. The noise of the boat means that we stand close as we loudly declaim our lines to the audience of the grey ocean.

Lena: Who owns this seascape? The millionaire who bought it or we who are possessed by it? What does it mean to be possessed by the sea? What does it mean to take possession of the wind turbines that dominate this western horizon?

Terry: We can see before us Burbo Bank Wind Farm and Burbo Bank Extension Wind Farm. The first array of 90 turbines had been erected by the Danish state owned company DONG by 2007. The second array, of 258 generators, was commissioned by the same corporation in 2017. Together the blades of these machines generate on average 256 mega watts of electricity. Burbo Bank has the capacity to power 230,000 households. When every home and office, every school and shop, is properly insulated and efficiently lit and heated, then these turbines will provide enough power for all citizens of Liverpool and beyond.

Lena: How did DONG, which has since changed its name to Orsted, seize this resource in the first two decades of the century? The bed of Liverpool Bay belongs to the Crown Estates. Ultimately it is the Queen, of course guided by the government, who grants the right for Orsted to erect its turbines here. This wind that blows from the coast of Lancashire across the sea towards Ireland, belongs to everyone and no-one.

Tim: A platoon of accountants marshalled the loan from a general staff of international banks who financed Orsted to construct these machines. Now Orsted sells power to the Big Six electricity corporations who go house-to-house collecting their profits on the bills of millions of families and businesses across the UK.

We are getting close now. The extraordinary towers rise above us. Their monstrous blades slice through the air.

We shout against the sound.

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Gary: Every part of each turbine was loaded on barges at the Cammell Laird dockyards in Birkenhead and pulled by tug on the same sea route that we are following. With the aid of cranes of outlandish size the towers were lifted into place and fitted onto concrete foundations sunk deep in the mud bed of the Bay. At the pinnacle of each pillar was fixed the generating unit onto which three blades were attached.

Lena: How can we have not noticed the building of these massive structures? Once the western horizon was a grey line, now it is dotted with an army of machines that suck money from the movement of air. That same breeze was the power that filled the sails of the trading ships that made the fortunes of the merchants of this city.

How are we to harness the common resource of the wind that rocks our boat on the Bay? How are we to harness it for the common good? How can we ensure that the money gathered from the bills of families and companies is turned to repair buildings and seal them from the Winter cold and Summer heat?

Terry: What if the land and sea shift from being spaces under corporate control, utilised in generating return on capital, to places under common control, common ownership? The common-land and the common-sea.

What is now the property of Orsted will have to become the property of the people of Liverpool. The rights that the Crown and government hold over the seabed of the Bay will have to become the common rights of those that live along this coastline.

Gary: What is the benefit of 'control' over a resource, over a place, without a sense of ownership through the heart? A sense of possession. Before ownership comes possession. And we have come to here today to help possess these wind farms. To grab them in our imaginations, to let them seep into our dreams, and fill our daily thoughts.

Zoe: Thirty years back the Merseyside band, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, released their song *Stanlow*. They used a wild track recording of a pump at the Stanlow Refinery to create the base rhythm of the piece. To the beat of the machine Andy McClusky sang:

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*We set you down
To care for us
Stanlow*

Now we will record the blades of turbine number seven on Burbo Bank Wind Farm to provide the base rhythm for a track of some future sound.

The captain cuts the engine and the boat begins to gently rock. With headphones on and staring intently at the digital recorder Zoe holds the microphone above her. We stand silent.

A short while passes with the blades swooping above us.

The engine is restarted and we turn for home. We have gathered what we came for.

The possession of the wind farm has begun. The resources of the air are coming back into common ownership.

Together we declaim:

The People will Possess the Wind.

Thanks to Birlinn Limited for permission to quote from Norman MacCaig's 'A Man in Assynt'.



Photo courtesy of Lena Simic/Gary Anderson/Institute of Art & Practice of Dissent at home