

The President's Column

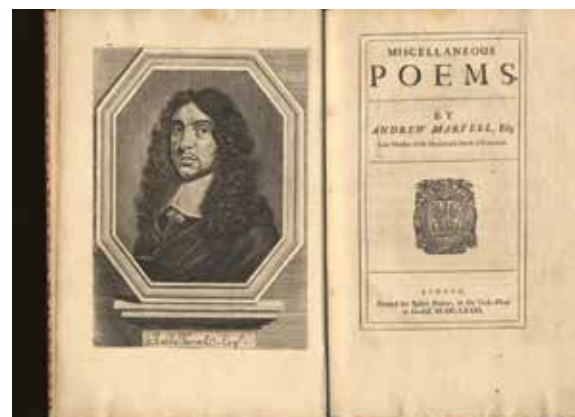
From the time of Andrew Marvell to Philip Larkin, Hull has been regarded as a 'city of poets'. This coming year Hull will be the UK City of Culture and has organised a 365-day series of literary, artistic, dramatic and historical events. Recovering the various aspects of the city's past also has a powerful place in the programme. The Family History Help Desk, located in the splendid Hull History Centre, will provide volunteers from local family history societies to help visitors with their own family history research. All members of the local community, from novices to old hands, are welcome, to seek advice and share their findings.

History is also a key part of the planned cultural activity. For example, in a hands-on performative mode, the festival has engaged the good services of a dramatic group known as The History Troupe who have developed a series of historically-shaped plays, primarily for schools, but also for the public. Each piece of drama is drawn from historical research, and accompanied by a workshop which encourages discussion and perhaps even participation with and from the audience, and a deep consideration of some of the historical sources. The key themes fit well with the current interest of the HA and of school curricula. So for example, one called 'Reaching for the Land of Green Ginger' draws together themes of **migration and citizenship**, by exploring the lives of migrants in Hull 1880-1914. Examining and tracing how these people reached Hull, and where they came from, is undertaken by examining the historical evidence they have left behind – oral histories, family stories, poems and songs. Other workshops will explore the narrative of Hull's connections to Africa, for example, by building stories based on a variety of objects found in the Albert Foundation collection. A narrative exploring the many global trade routes bringing and exporting objects, machines and foodstuffs to and from the major ports of the world will complement this extra-European dimension. Other themes which may tempt you to visit include plays about returning soldiers from the First World War; a history of Hull FC in the early years; and under the intriguing title of 'The Strange Death of Corsetry', a play that examines the changing role of women and work either side of the

Great War. Other projects include 'The Silver Hatchet Gang' which explores the history of Hull's violent gangs; memories of the Zeppelin Raids over Hull during the war; and the compelling life of Thomas Somerscales, a-Hull born artist who found himself embroiled in a Marxist conspiracy and had links with a Czarist prince and a formidable businesswoman. You can find out more at: <http://thehistorytroupe.org>

I have had the good fortune to visit Hull to deliver a lecture, and was very kindly given an opportunity to visit the city archives in their splendid new building which houses archives dating from 1299. The City Archivist, Martin Taylor, took the time before the lecture to give me a behind-the-scenes visit to the resources. I had especial delight in being shown the tightly-bound handwritten sermons of Andrew Marvell senior, sometime Master of the Charterhouse and Lecturer at Holy Trinity Church, who died in a boating accident in 1640. These are an under-used resource and would tell us much about the religious climate in which the young poet was educated. There is more than one side to the story of Andrew Marvell, the poet so familiar to us. Marvell junior was a political figure and a writer of polemic prose works, as well as a metaphysical poet. He tutored Lord Fairfax's daughter and was a friend of John Milton. He wrote against the growth of popery and arbitrary power and in doing so became a 'Whig hero' friend of liberty and freedom in the eighteenth century, rather than a gentle poet of love.

Marvell was an MP for Hull from 1659 until his death in 1678. He wrote a series of surviving letters (most of which are published and in print) to his constituents keeping them abreast of political developments. He repeatedly spoke out in the House of Commons against the persecution of Nonconformists (as his father had been) and dissenters, and sat on the committee that repealed the law which allowed heretics to be burnt. Indeed in the autumn of 1670s he was a lone voice condemning the prosecution of two City of London aldermen who had resisted the impositions of the Conventicle Act (which Marvell acutely described as the 'quintessence of arbitrary malice'). The law classified saying prayers in the family house as a



sedition act, and incentivised informers to profit from the fines imposed by shopping their neighbours to the local constables. The two City of London Aldermen, James Hayes and John Jekyll, had tried to mobilise a mass protest against the enforcement, and then attempted to bribe the Mayor of London from punishing dissenters. Marvell's stand in the Commons was noted by his enemies. Throughout the 1670s, he had to resort to clandestine means when he published his attacks upon persecuting bishops, corrupt politicians and greedy aristocrats. Many of his printers and booksellers were arrested and imprisoned or fined.

The recent edition of Marvell's verse (by Nigel Smith) has provided ample evidence for the erudition and power of his literary vision. Combine this with studies of his political writings and we are privileged to encounter a fully committed political figure, who defended political liberty and religious freedoms to his dying days. The University of Hull, which hosts an annual Marvell lecture, promises to deliver much more this coming year: and if you are abroad in Chicago or Texas, there will be conferences devoted to the poet and politician from Hull. Known by the mid-eighteenth century, in the words of the radical Thomas Hollis, as Marvell the 'incorruptible', hopefully the events of the coming year will extend public understanding of this great lyric poet and committed 'commonwealthman' to a wide and international audience.

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