



[Hold Your Ideas In Your Hands](#)

I'm sure many writers will agree that using a prompt is a great way to develop a story idea and get your writing flowing. So, if a phrase or a sentence or a photograph can stir our imaginations, what about using real objects? In March Fermanagh Writers visited the Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum. The writers' group is working with the Living Legacies project and were asked to create stories inspired by artifacts related to events on the battlefield and in Ireland during 1916. The museum offered us a private 'behind the scenes' tour of the museum. Ciaran Elizabeth Doran, the curator, showed us some pieces from their collection and explained how they obtain the artifacts, record and display them. During her talk, we had a chance to examine First and Second World War artifacts much closer than most museum visitors are able to do.

Since I am writing a series of Short Reads and novels set during the Second World War in Northern Ireland, I was fascinated by these everyday items – such as women's utility stockings and boys' leather boots – very different from today's versions.

My imagination was particularly captured by a herbal remedy first aid kit that had belonged to the curator's father. He used it to treat patients for minor ailments such as diarrhoea on the battlefield and in an internment camp during the Second World War.

Why did these artefacts affect me more than just a photograph of the same items? It's simple really. A photograph can't capture the texture of an item or the weight of it as you hold it. Or the smell of it. Or any sound it may make as you lift and examine it. A photograph, especially an old, faded one, may not record the colour accurately either. I could feel the smoothness of the delicate glass vials and the textured roughness of the leather case that held them. I could hear the tiny creaks the leather made as it was twisted this way and that, and smell a faint musty odour from it. I could also see the powdered remains of the herbal mixtures in each vial and where the penciled labels were beginning to peel away from the vials. I wouldn't have noticed these details looking at a photograph.

Observing these set my mind racing, and I could imagine the doctor on the battlefield. It would be easy to begin jotting a story about the man this item had conjured in my mind. So, for me, getting up close to real objects is a great way to set a story in motion.

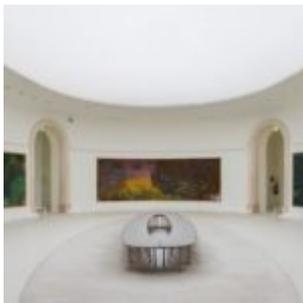
Other writers may not share my interest in wartime history – or even history at all, for that matter – but they can still find objects to inspire their writing. A visit to a museum, a planetarium, an art gallery, a zoo, or a park will yield many objects to fuel the imagination.

Here's an exercise to stimulate you: Chose an object and examine it closely. Use all of your senses. Jot down your reaction to it and any thoughts it stirs up. Let your mind roam until a story idea emerges.

Your story may not even relate directly to the object. Maybe its colour or the sound it makes reminds you of something else. Run with the string of ideas the object conjures in your mind until you have a story you want to write.

Try it and see what happens.

Diane Ascroft lives near Fivemiletown and writes Historical Fiction



[EKPHRASIS: Saying Goodbye to a Work of Art](#)

The one certainty of a holiday is our having to say goodbye to it. I still remember how, as a child, I used crane my neck and look back at the Rock of Cashel as it receded, its massive grey becoming smaller and paler. Just before it faded to a dot, a sudden bend whipped it from my sight. It was the victory of reality over dream, necessity over wishful thinking.

How often have we turned at the door of a gallery room to take a last look at a painting or sculpture – often not, by any objective standard, the best – which has seized our interest? There are, for each of us, particular works which evoke a sense of *déjà vu*, a longing for the unattainable, for some kind of perfection or permanence. Whatever the feeling, however ill-defined or dimly felt, there is an impulse to stand at the door for one last look. I never look at *Toward Night and Winter* by Frank O Meara in the Hugh Lane Gallery – and I've seen it countless times – without instinctively thinking that I was there, in that place, at that time. It's strangely reassuring to know myself, after all these years, still capable of a thought so opposed to fact and logic.

What do we bring home with us? Memory, a wish to return; sometimes, even, a fear of going back, that the work, seen again, will lose its magic? Sometimes it's best just to imagine. As Tarry Flynn's uncle said about the farm, 'Shut your eyes and you'll see it better.'

Ekphrasis is the poetic re-interpretation of a visual work of art. Many Irish poets have explored this genre, notably Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon. At its best, it results in a work of art fit to take its place alongside its inspiration. The difficulty lies not in interpreting the work, but in attempting to recapture the experience of standing before it, or turning round for that last glance. Like Tarry's uncle, I've found it necessary to look with the closed eyes of the exile, sometimes adding a layer of fiction in order to preserve the essence of the experience – and then to walk away, letting the poem sit. Some of it is true, some not quite so, but all, I hope, is authentic.



Toward Night and Winter

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LES NYMPHEAS

The girl in front of Monet's
lilies stands as though before a screen
where every iridescent colour plays
the music of her teens,
losing herself in violet, or perhaps
dreaming of the first girl Monet kissed.

So still is she, the light
turns and envelops her; she seems to be
assuming a far lily's almost-white,
the dark weeds' mystery,
as if she were discarding layer by layer
herself, the self she thinks herself, that other

the moment lays upon her,
and suddenly how slim she has become,
spectral even, her breath the merest tremor:
she takes the colours' warmth
with her into the foggy Tuileries,
its gravelled lines, its sharp October trees.

*Ted McCarthy lives in Clones, Co. Cavan and is a poet, script-writer and translator. His first collection *November Wedding and other Poems* won the Brendan Behan Memorial Award in 1999.*

An archive of his poetry and translations can be found [here](#)



Power-Hose Murals

It's Tuesday 7th July, probably the hottest day we've seen this Summer and I thought this would be a good day to work outside. I have fair hair and freckles – it wasn't!

I'm just back from completing my new series of power-hose barn murals. Some people call it reverse graffiti and I suppose that's as good a name as any. What it involves is taking a power-hose to a dirty wall and 'cleaning' an image into it. We've all tried to draw a face or write our name as we grudgingly clean the yard for our mothers, don't deny it. Well, this is the same but with a little preparation.

Actually, a lot of preparation.

When planning a mural for this technique I have to think in black and white, or light and shade. There isn't much room for subtleties unless it's a really black wall, so broad brush strokes and definite edges are the golden rules. I draw my design on paper, wrap it in plastic to water-proof it and take it with me on location. This I use as a guide to keep me from straying when I'm hanging off a ladder in a field with water spraying round my face (it's more fun than it sounds).

I've been creating these murals alongside my more traditional painting work for about five years now. I do them in association with [Sliabh Beagh Arts](#), a fantastic group I was lucky enough to get involved with who have, in many ways, changed my life. The group's main aim is to bring art out of the galleries and make it accessible and available to everyone, particularly those who would never set foot in one. My barn murals sit perfectly into that way of thinking.

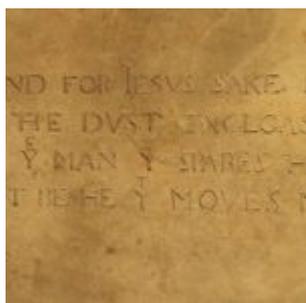
Although I've had several themes down the years I keep going back to wildlife which, funnily enough, I'd never choose to paint traditionally. I think it's the setting that points me in this direction; I want them to be part of the landscape and look like they have every right to be there. My favourite series so far has been my murals of animals that were once part of everyday life in Ireland when the forests were still here and we weren't. The brown bears, giant elk, wolves and wild boar that once again 'inhabit' the Sliabh Beagh area give me no end of pleasure when I drive past them.

What I love most about the murals I think is that you wouldn't even know they're there unless you happen to turn the right corner and look in the right direction at the right time. They're scattered widely and wildly over

Fermanagh and Tyrone, some beside main roads, others more secretive; and, as with all art, some people may look at them and think nothing of them or, more probably, "What idiot did that?" but some might see them and think that's cool.

That's enough for me.

Kevin McHugh lives and works in Lisnaskea and specialises in murals and acrylic on canvas. See more of his work at kevinmchughart.com.



[The Genius of William Shakespeare](#)

In a small Chapel in rural Warwickshire a man is buried with three other members of his close family, in front of the altar. There is a rhyme on his headstone containing a curse on those who would disturb his bones. Why are he, and his words, still important today four centuries after his death?

William Shakespeare, Bard of Stratford, was the son of a glover, small-time landowner, part-time civic councilor and sometime sheep-rustler.

These are the inauspicious beginnings of a genius who still dominates the theatre and whose radical ideas still have resonance today on the global stage.

Shakespeare understood power. He knew the effect it has on people, for good or for ill – lessons which many of our leaders in government, business and society still need to heed. He understood people, both men and women; indeed Sigmund Freud based many of his archetypes on the wide range of Shakespearean characters. It can be said that we understand ourselves and the people around us through William Shakespeare.

In *Henry IV Part II* he had the line 'Uneasy is the head that wears the Crown;' correctly identifying the insecurity of many individuals in power. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he created a fable about festering feuds between 'tribal' families. In the Merchant of Venice he creates a villain in Shylock that many people can relate to, who provides a rational justification for his actions. In Othello, villainy lies not with the murderer but in the insinuating words of Iago. How do we cope with people who are 'other'? Othello is an outsider, not because of the colour of his skin but his identity as a Moor of North

Africa – that is, a Muslim. In the Scottish play, Lady Macbeth entreats unnatural powers on the battlements, to remove her gender, her feminine nature, in order to find the strength to commit murder, to kill a King. Today, our whole understanding of gender continues to evolve.

Many people may say that Shakespeare stole stories liberally from the histories and medieval literature, as well as the Greek and Roman Classics. So he did, but he put them in a form and a language which is as powerful, meaningful and current, as it was when his plays were first performed. We are still playing with Shakespeare, putting it into new contexts, as in Baz Lurhmann's glorious *Romeo + Juliet*.

We know very little of the man himself. It was an age when many works of art were unsigned. The first portfolio of his work was not put together during his lifetime; it was his friend and peer, Ben Jonson, who collated the work and appended Shakespeare's name to it, several years after his death.

This gives some credibility to the argument that this man of Stratford was not the author of his plays. Shakespeare lacked a University education and how could he know so much about the English Court and – and foreign courts?

A lot of this argument arises from simple class snobbery with a fig-leaf of pseudo-historical analysis. My own theory is that the answer to the riddle is to be found during Shakespeare's lost years, after he left Warwickshire and his wife and children to pursue his ambitions as a player, an actor of the day, in London.

After several years he set up a Theatre company and a Playhouse in Shoreditch. How did he get that money? Certainly, not from his father, or from his own apprenticeship in the glover's trade. The major paymasters at that time were the State and the Catholic Church.

Decades later, Aphra Behn was known to have been employed as a spy in the Dutch Court at Antwerp for Charles II, before turning her hand to play-writing. I believe that Shakespeare was also employed as a spy and he traveled to Milan, Verona and Venice. As a Player, he would have had ready access to these courts, and as a spy he would have learned the subtle arts of observation, subterfuge and collection of information, all of which would be of benefit in his future writing.

In the courts of that time, the class structures and protocols of aristocratic hierarchy were rigidly enforced, particularly at Court. As a 'low-born' Player, Shakespeare would not have attracted much attention. Complete obeisance was expected and demanded of a 'low-born'; you could not be seen to look upon persons above your station in life. It would be a natural thing to learn to observe unobtrusively, you could not perform your role otherwise. As a spy, Shakespeare could have memorised conversations and documents by translating them into rhythmic forms, like the iambic pentameter of his plays. It would have been far too dangerous for him to write anything down.

Shakespeare may also have been allowed privileged access through his mother's

family connections, the Ardens, who were noted Catholics. In this way, I believe, Shakespeare received his education and political knowledge as well as his money.

In Hamlet we see two Players, Rosencratz and Guildenstern, deeply involved in the political machinations, albeit as tragicomic pawns, and a Play as a key device in Hamlet's vainglorious plan. I wonder it that is a case of William Shakespeare taking a bow before us?

I was convinced of Shakespeare's authorship when I saw a performance of Henry V part I performed in his native Warwickshire dialect and I saw and heard how the language came alive. These are not the words of a university-educated Southerner. Recently the talented actress Maxine Peake, used her glorious Mancunian to great effect in the role of Hamlet. I was also privileged to see a King Lear performed in pure 'Saif Laindon' rap-style in Lambeth, to a very non-traditional audience. It sang to us in a way that I found both moving and inspiring. The iambic pentameter of *de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum* has found a renewed currency amongst the rap generation.

I love the clarity and musicality of the classical Shakespeareans like Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, but there is something to be said for finding new ways of expressing the form.

Shakespeare is important both historically and in the world today, but I would argue that the real importance lies in the art of his work, the art of entertaining people. That is, for me, the true genius of William Shakespeare.

John Llewellyn James is a poet and a member of Fermanagh Writers

Shakespeare is buried in [Holy Trinity Church](#), Stratford-upon-Avon