

Ancient Water by Dan Thompson

(Written to accompany the work of Lau Yat Wai, when exhibited in the Oriental Room at the Powell-Cotton Museum, Birchington for Interbeing, August-December 2021. In that room, these words were spoken in a recording by Clive Holland.)

All we are and all we ever were is water.

*Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea*

Earth has been a watery planet for 4.4 billion years. There has been enough water to fill the oceans since the beginning of the planet's formation. There is water in the seas, and water in the clouds, and there is water locked deep in the earth's crust, mantle and core - enough to fill the oceans again five or ten times over. 'From space,' Heathcote Williams says, 'the planet is blue./ From space, the planet is the territory/ Not of humans'

William Anders framed our image of the earth as a blue planet. He was born in Hong Kong, the son of a US Navy lieutenant, in 1933.

Hong Kong had been established as a British trading centre under the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. The British exported the industrial revolution to East Asia through the 1000 square kilometre territory on the River Pearl Delta, and in return sent tea, silk, and opium back to the United Kingdom. The British built race courses, parade grounds, and cricket pitches in the east, while the west was filled with Chinese shops, crowded markets, and bustling tea houses.

Hong Kong is a phonetic translation of the city's Cantonese name Heung Gong, which means 'fragrant harbour'.

Like many other place names, it records our relationship with water. Lincoln comes from the Celtic word 'lindo' for pool and Latin 'colonia' for colony. 'Lindis' also means lake or pool, as in Lindisfarne.

Exmouth, Plymouth and Yarmouth mark the 'mutha' or mouth of a river. 'Aber' means the same - Aberdeen and Aberystwyth. And 'acsa' too - it is found in the exe of Exeter and the ax of Axminster. 'Gate' is a break in the sea cliffs - Margate and Ramsgate. And 'ay' or 'ey' mean island, from Orkney in the north to Selsey in the south.

'Burn' and 'bourne' and 'broc' come from the Anglo-Saxon for a large stream or small river - Kilburn, Glyndebourne, Carisbrooke. A beck is a stream, too - Holbeck, in Leeds, and Tooting Bec in London. In Old English, 'ea' means river, and this is remembered in place names like Pevensey. Many places have bridge or ford in their name, to record crossing over water; Bradford, Guildford, Dartford - Redbridge and Robertsbridge.

And the 'hythe' in Rotherhithe means a wharf, a landing-place for boats.

By the time Anders was born, Hong Kong, the fragrant harbour, was the sharp point where cultures and ages crossed. Not just east and west, but old and new, traditional and modern. There were buildings like the Supreme Court, typical colonial architecture - and newer buildings like the modernist block of the 17 storey Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. A new style of capitalism was replacing the fading colonialist one.

In the harbours, the streamlined white liners of the Orient Line, out of the shipyards of Barrow-in-Furness, shared the water with traditional Chinese sailing ships. Imperial Airways were flying mail and passengers to the island, with scheduled flights from Croydon Airport established in 1936, and they had an office in the Peninsula Hotel. Royal Air Force flying boats explored Asia from Hong Kong, and Pan Am's Pacific flying boats used the waters, too. Here, on sea and by air, the world was visibly becoming closer, more compact, better-connected.

Today, 90% of the world's trade relies on shipping, and every year 11 billion tons of goods are transported by 50,000 merchant ships crewed by over a million mariners. They move 1.5 tons for every person alive. The value of shipping trade is more than 14 trillion US dollars. Shipping is an intensely complex operation; avocados are shipped from Chile to arrive in Europe just as they ripen.

In 23 March 2021, the container ship Ever Given grounded in the Suez Canal, wedged diagonally across the waterway, as tight as the collar beam in a cruck-framed timber house.

The Suez Canal carries 15% of the world's shipping traffic. With the Ever Given aground for six days, hundreds of ships were backed up in the surrounding seas and lakes, unable to move between Europe and Asia.

Onboard the Ever Given were 18,000 containers. The modern cornucopia included copies of Oliver Jeffers new book, *There's A Ghost In This House*: the book's launch was delayed. There were bicycles and blankets. Ikea had 110 containers onboard. Companies across the world saw their trading impacted by the delays.

The Ever Green is owned by the leasing subsidiary of a Japanese shipbuilding company, chartered and operated by a shipping company from Taiwan, registered in Panama, and its technical management is the responsibility of a German ship management company. Shipping is, in every way, a global business.

Over 2500 ships are registered to Hong Kong, making it the fourth largest shipping fleet in the world.

In Hong Kong, Anders grew up around ships: a typical naval childhood. His family were living in China, upriver from Hong Kong, when the Japanese invaded, and he later recalled drinking bullion tea on a hotel porch while he watched the Japanese bomb shipping in the Pearl River. His father commanded a gunboat on the Yangtze River. When the ship was bombed, Anders' father waded into river reeds to hide.

In 1951, Anders followed his father into the navy, enrolling at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis. He was soon flying, and switched to the US Air Force. He flew interceptor jets over San Francisco Bay, before being sent to Iceland to intercept the wide-winged Soviet bombers that still fly today over the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, North Sea, and across the Kara Sea up to the Arctic Ocean, testing NATO's northern flank. He joined the Air Forces Institute of Technology, and received a master's degree in nuclear engineering which enabled him to join the third cohort of NASA astronauts on his 30th birthday.

He was assigned to the three-man crew of Apollo 8, which was initially set for an earth orbit, but - with NASA worried that the USSR was taking the lead in the space race - that was changed to the first ever circumlunar flight.

On December 21 1968 Apollo 8 launched and after a three day journey, orbited the moon ten times. On Christmas Eve, during the third orbit, Anders turned a Hasselblad camera loaded with Kodak Ektachrome film towards the earth. His photo is officially NASA Image AS08-14-2383, but it is popularly known as Earthrise. The photo records the wet blue earth against a deep black infinity as it rises over the edge of the dry, dusty moon. The African continent is just visible, and clouds swirl across the planet like brushstrokes in a Van Gogh painting of the night sky. The 'beautiful blue halo' that peasant-poet-astronaut Yuri Gagarin described, the biosphere that keeps us alive, is just visible.

'Oh my god. Look at that picture over there, there's the Earth coming up. Hand me that roll of colour film, Jim.'

On December 27 1968 Apollo 8 splashed down in the Pacific Ocean, 1000 miles south-southwest of Hawaii. The crew in the recovery helicopters could see sharks swimming around the floating capsule.

The crew were picked up, and the film was recovered and developed. Life magazine gave the photo a double-page spread in the first edition of 1969. The US Poet Laureate James Dickey wrote a poem to accompany the photo:

"And behold/ the blue planet steeped in its dream"

Stewart Brand's Whole Earth Catalogue was a compendium of the tools needed for living a good life - grinding flour, drilling a well, weaving your own fabric. It put the tools, knowledge, and skills in the hands of anyone who wanted them. Brand's ambition was that it would let anyone, anywhere in the world, pick up a telephone and have access to all the knowledge they needed. "We are as gods and might as well get good at it", he said.

Brand was one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, committed to changing the global consciousness. The title for his publication came from a campaign he launched in 1966. There was a rumour that NASA had the first satellite photo of the sphere of Earth seen from space, the first image of the 'Whole Earth'. Brand believed that image would be a powerful symbol. On the cover of the first Whole Earth Catalogue was a mosaic of satellite images making a picture of the whole planet.

On the cover of the second edition was Earthrise.

The photo, the by-product of an arms race and a military-industrial society, had become the image which would frame the environmental movement, James Lovelock's Gaia Theory, Spaceship Earth, and how we see the world today.

Fifty years to the day after taking the photo, Anders said "We set out to explore the moon and instead discovered the earth."

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

For more information, including images of the exhibition and a link to the audio recording, visit www.danthompson.co.uk