



**David Cobb**



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 "Arvon" Media, Devonport, Devonport, Devon, PL2 2LJ, UK)  
 (Try the Arvon Foundation Newsletter)  
 and DAVID COBB'S "BETTER THAN THE ARVON FOUNDATION" (Arvon Foundation)  
 of David Cobb, Devonport, Devon, PL2 2LJ, UK (also telephone, friends  
 of the Arvon Foundation, 10000 "Arvon" Media, Devonport, Devon, PL2 2LJ, UK)  
 do you read and/or write?

## HAIKU ?

If so, do you suffer from lack of contact with others who do too?  
 How?

DAE SVETTS and DAVID COBB are keen to "find out if, in the British  
 Isles, there are enough of us in this situation to form an

## INTEREST GROUP.

If you are interested, please fill in the slip below and send it,  
 WITH A STAMP OF APPROXIMATE VALUE, TO:

David Cobb, Strobus, Sherford, Brighthelm, Devon CVR 4RN.

Maybe you also have a friend who might like to join?

Your e.s.v.c. will come back to you as soon as possible for  
 specifically you before about October 1982, as we need to leave  
 good time for our plans to circulate. I will bring you news  
 one way or the other - either it is possible to set up a group  
 or it is not.

If necessary, plans are held at this stage, but if all goes well  
 we foreshadow the following stages of development:

Stage 1: Group held together by a quarterly Newsletter  
 Stage 2: Group meets and forms a Society, Newsletter continues  
 Stage 3: Journal launched; Society and Newsletter continue

Thank you for reading this!

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To: David Cobb and Dae Svetts

I would like to hear more about the possibility of a Haiku  
 Interest Group in the British Isles, and to join and complete a  
 s.v.c.

Name: JAMES KIRKUP Telephone No: \_\_\_\_\_

ATTC

## A Slice of David Cobb

If British Haiku had a face, that would be David Cobb's.

David turned 90 last year and I thought it would be lovely to offer a fresh slice of his haikai life for the readers of *Blithe Spirit* to relish. Matthew Paul did similarly ten years ago when David turned 80. When I thought of doing a reappraisal, I was not sure I could offer anything new. Not one to be fazed easily, I decided it would at the very least be a sweet reminder of some of the best writings in the English haikai world. The good thing about this is that I spent several hours with David in his house in Essex, and came away richer for the experience.

David says he fortuitously stumbled on haiku on a flight to Japan on 7 July 1977. The day of Tanabata on which it is believed that the lover deities of Orihime and Hikoboshi (the stars Vega and Altair) get to meet. The in-flight magazine mentioned haiku, urging people to give it a try as a new hobby. Always up for a challenge, David quickly wrote a 5-7-5 haiku. Too bad for us that he has not saved any of those early attempts. As they say, there has been no looking back since then, except with satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

David particularly recalls with gratitude the guidance and encouragement he received from Joan Giroux and James W. Hackett, both North American poets. He played a key role in setting up the Haiku Interest Group with Dee Evetts and David Kirkup in 1990 which promptly led to the formation of the British Haiku Society.

Although David's writings of the first 12 years, until 1989 is unavailable, it is still evident that he was one of the earliest to recognise that the 5-7-5 structure was not sacrosanct, and was a little too long for ELH. There are many 5-7-5 haiku from those early published ones, but those that don't conform to this are equally numerous. David edited the earliest issues of *Blithe Spirit*, for the first year (1990-91), when it was still a bunch of typed and photocopied sheets stapled together. He also doubled up as the secretary and treasurer for the society. He took over from James Kirkup as president in 1997, a responsibility he carried until the end of 2002. He returned to jointly edit issue 10:3 with Ken Jones, an issue dedicated to haibun.

Through the years, David has won many awards and judged countless contests, whilst also publishing his writings regularly, in journals and as books. His writings have been anthologised many times. And yet, he continually strives to improve his writing and revises them.

As an example, his haibun which I have been honoured to publish on this issue went through four revisions before it passed muster with him!

## Haiku

Here are some early published ones, all with clear kigo, and one of them is a 5-7-5—

hugging himself  
the snowman eases his limbs  
under the lawn

(The Rialto, 1989-90)

the bee enters  
its buzz  
in the foxglove

(The Haiku Quarterly, winter 1990)

on the stroke of noon  
the snow-gown of the cypress  
is turning to rags

(Iron, 1990)

David has experimented through the years, in form, approach, theme and content. From what I saw in the Blithe Spirit, I note a turn in his haiku from 1998. They become consistently deeper, eschewing simple wordplay, and with a distinct voice.

Some of his haiku over the years from Blithe Spirit—

behind the coal box  
a black cat licks the wind  
out of its fur (4:1)

Perseid shower  
snuffs out  
my need to sneeze (3:4)

touching the round ball  
of the sleeping hedgehog—  
every prickle yawns (11:2)  
from afar, a cuckoo  
cracks in the lawn  
pull apart (12:2)

black soil of the Fens  
a rainbow  
sinks in (16:4)

One thing that David has made his own is a sub-genre that satisfies being both haiku and senryu; not sitting on the fence, but proudly straddling the two camps, with clear logo of nature elements as in haiku, and a distinctly senryu-like humour that does not shy away from portraying people. Here are a few that illustrate this.

stuffing the Guy -  
drafts of poems  
long ago in print (4:1)

leaves falling —  
the shared driveway  
suddenly all mine (6:1)

pruning the firethorn—  
on the gardener's balding head  
more blossom than hair (9:3)

Christmas handshakes—  
every bug in the village  
in the vicar's hand... (11:1)

Many are strong in the vertical axis, calling to mind previous poems or literary/cultural references, but with a clear stamp of his own.

army blankets—  
traces of the warriors'  
wet dreams (11:3)

deep down in her bag  
she says she has an apple—  
the other man's wife (13:2)

And some of his many fine senryu—

Palm Court  
a down-at-heel quartet  
take it out on Strauss (11:3)

Blair on holiday—  
I declare war  
on Montbretia (13:4)

crossing the road  
the blind woman takes my hand  
the blind man doesn't (14:2)

When I asked about haiku other than in three lines, David said he had once tried to rearrange some of his haiku in one line for the fun of it, and decided there was nothing in it for him (BS 19:1).

A four-line haiku from BS 15:4—

river and ridge  
the land I love  
folded  
like a hand

I also found one concrete haiku (BS 23:2) and one cirku (BS 19:3)

David has remained very much in touch with the times, but is also always a step or two ahead of the game. He has confidently questioned what was often assumed to be sacrosanct, either directly or through his writing. Some of these include the 5-7-5 form, the use of Zen, the slavish emulation of Japanese kigo and presumed values, and the use of poetic devices such as metaphors.

Reacting in BS 9:4 to Annika Reich's thesis in German, he opines—

*"Westerners writing about haiku also mention the power of the season word to release common associations, but my impression is that we are much less concerned about using it as an integrative force, as a way of dealing with socio-cultural aspirations. I believe the Western haiku writer's intention is, with some pregnant image, to put down a reference point, from which base the reader can set out and rediscover things in his or her own personal schema of experience."*

He however cautions that it is not to be taken to the other extreme of being totally individualistic and, thereon, idiosyncratic. His comments on modern '*avant-garde*' and '*surrealist*' haiku from Japan further along demonstrate this –

*"... juxtapositions of images which don't conjure up any feelings connected with nature or everyday human life, but seem to have much more to do with hallucination, or with taking idiosyncrasy consciously to extremes"*

Here is a gendai haiku from him, amply illustrating his views above (BS 20:4)

the Aged Novice—  
his camel excommunicates  
the Flying Pope

He also takes a swipe, therein, at '*apologists for haiku in the West*' who insist on 'selflessness'. He notes the difference between "*surrender of Self (individuality) and the surrender of Ego (self-centredness)*". He also agrees that the "*close identification of haiku with zen*" is a misunderstanding, foreign even to the Japanese.

David has always been clear that haiku has to draw from and adapt to the local land, culture and heritage. In an address delivered at the 20th anniversary of the Society (published BS 20:3, he advocates this when speaking on inclusion of iconic places in the British Cultural Landscape in the haiku we write (uta-makura and hai-makura). He observes a conspicuous lack of this in the haiku written until then. He presents a cogent and convincing argument for this, illustrating with several of his own haiku as examples. One such—

a man with a torch  
goes looking for a name—  
Menin Gate

In an essay on the "Gendai" movement in Japanese haiku (BS 21:4), David clears a myth or two about what constitutes Gendai and how it is in turn being influenced by haiku being written in languages outside of Japan. He also prophetically notes—

*"The time will come when Western haiku- already an adaptation of Japanese haiku— will begin to stagnate. I do not think we have reached that point yet. But when the need for reform/renewal does come, I guess it is more likely to take the form of further adaptation— in the direction of our own literary heritage and/or literary presence. It is doubtful if the way forward then will be to 'borrow back' impulses that the Japanese poets have acquired from us."*

Are we at that juncture now?

## Haibun

That David is a past master in writing haibun is well established. David believes his book-length haibun, *Spring Journey on a Saxon Shore*, published in 1995, to be his best work. And he only began writing haibun in 1994! Modelled loosely on Basho's, *Oku no Hosomichi*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, this is a travelogue that is quintessentially British in its theme, content and style. Reviewing it, Martin Lucas hails it as "a superb work of haiku literature", calling the book "a riot, packed with useless information (the best kind) and ghostbusting and gravedigging so thoroughly..".

Haibun makes its first appearance in *Blithe Spirit* in 1996 and again in 1997, in the name of "haiku with headnotes" by David. This is indistinguishable from haibun, which David himself readily admits a few issues later, when pulled up for it by Dick Pettit.

His shorter haibun are familiar to all of us. I would like to share excerpts from some of his haibun published in the *Blithe Spirit*. He wrote on war often, writing dispassionately, or perhaps disillusionedly?

### **Business in Eden**, BS 13:3

He swears and wipes the desert from his eyes.

*I know men who have taken life needlessly in conflicts. They live with the mark of Cain upon them.*

*Rubs a finger along the stripe he has just sewn on his sleeve. Remembers how his father, also a corporal, brought home a souvenir, a bayonet. Used it in the garden to dig up weeds.*

job of labelling  
the field they have just sown  
a template of skulls  
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Or often with wry humour—

### **CODE NAME 'OPERATION SPARE TROOPER'**, BS 20:2

#### ***Operational Outcome.***

Spotted by ex-Major, Welsh Guards, World War II, bearing silver-topped swagger stick, recruiting 'spare bodies' (min. requirements age 75+, height 5'11", no walking stick) to reinforce honour guard on pathway along which coffin borne to the church door. 'Squad' (so called) forms up

in line, two paces apart, left dressed. Stood to attention, stood easy. Slipping back automatically into drill movements last practised sixty years ago. Stretching of vertebrae. Bracing of neck. Tingle in the toes.

how stiff the creases  
the Union Jack passing  
down the thin grey line

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This one is on sibling rivalry, making the reader wonder if it is autobiographical.

summery night -  
a cuckoo measures it  
with three or four calls

'Out you go now, I'm waiting for the egg-man and I'm lighting the copper. Make sure you're back sharp at one.'

'I haven't got a watch, mummy.' Most five-year olds haven't.  
'You've got a tongue in your head.'

So out into the garden, where my baby sister's smiling in her pram.

Ever since dad took a quick snap of her, and between them they won The Happiest Baby of the Year Competition, she's been doing that, smiling sunnily in all weathers, I'll bet practising to win another one.

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This one is brutally honest bit equally compassionate. And the beauty of the piece is best appreciated by reading it aloud. The "t" sounds repeat sonorously throughout. A master craftsman at work here—

### **Pavane For A Dying Blue Tit, BS 21:3**

.....your would-be 'saviour'. Yes, honed as his muscles and a fit ten stone ten, he is powerless to help you.....

But come, here is a makeshift nest for you, straw in a teacup, and just once I will dare to lay a finger on your tiny head and stroke it. More and you will have a fit. I won't even attempt to pipette some water into that furious beak.

At least I may hope to spare you the indignity of ants crawling into your arsehole or the neighbour's cat taking you to bits.



how offensive—  
our word to express your voice  
is ... cheep  
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David also wrote surreal haibun (Soulmates, BS 18:4), quasi-historic haibun ("A Letter to Edmund", BS 16:1; A Walk With Issa (And The Dog Came Too), BS 18:1) and murder mysteries (The Week, BS 15:3).

## **Tanka**

David has written only one tanka that has been anthologised. From its quality, it seems a pity he did not take it up seriously.

The landscape painter  
seated by flowering meadows  
has all on canvas  
but the slap of pigeons' wings  
and the honey-ache of bees.

David has also written sequences and participated in renku/ renga and at least one tan-renga. Lest anyone think that David is and has always been a haikai poet, you may be surprised to know that David has, amongst other things, worked for Longman publishers, been to Japan to learn how they taught English there, taught German in England and English in Thailand, written/drawn English learning aids and texts for Thai/foreign language students. He also writes other poetry in English that are not of the haikai ilk.

David now happily spends his days with Dyson, his Black and Tan Cavalier King Charles spaniel, digging and maintaining a plot in the local church, meeting friends, and of course writing.

Thank you David for the time you spent with me. And thanks Dyson for welcoming me and not letting me be.

**Shrikaanth Krishnamurthy**

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