

On Warwick—Jane Holland

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On Warwick is the product of Jane Holland's year as Warwick's Poet Laureate. It's not unusual for local laureates to write poems about major landmarks of the area but the main poem in the collection, 'On Warwick Castle'—described in David Morley's foreword as Holland's 'modernist piece de resistance'—is probably one of the more ambitious works of public poetry generated through a local laureateship. It's 18 pages long and, rather than plodding sequentially through the history of the castle and the characters that have lived (and died) there, it brings them all back to life simultaneously. The main recurring themes are shit, sex and death, while the action takes in aristocrats mourning lovers, traitors begging for mercy and old men talking wistfully of battles gone by. Holland sets up interaction between historical events and the castle's current status as a historic tourist attraction:

... Master John Smith
 etches his name, and date
 of his imprisonment: Master John Smythe, Guner to his Majesty Highness
 was a prisner in this place and lay here
 from 1642—tell the Here, he's interrupted by the blade breaking
 or a tour guide, descending. The fantastical elements are mixed with historical detail that steers well clear of cheery nostalgia: This could have been the year
 Richard Neville rode against the King
 30,000 men and a shortage of spades
 to bury them
 under the green-skinned oaks at Towton.
 Instead, they lay in the shallows for weeks, a bridge
 of rusting armadillos.
 More died there than died at the Somme,

one in every hundred Englishmen's—On Warwick Castle; aside, the pamphlet also features other poems written during Holland's year as Warwick Laureate—including 'On the Renovations at Leamington Spa Station, 2008', commissioned by Chiltern Railways and 'Leamophants', commissioned by Warwick District Council to commemorate the history of elephants in Leamington Spa. Writing poetry as part of a public role is difficult because you have the twin challenges of writing a worthwhile poem and fulfilling a wider duty to say something—in the case of a local poet laureate, saying something about the area that will make it seem interesting. On Warwick manages this very well. David Floyd