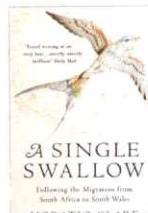
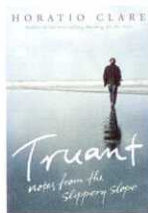


# Horatio Clare

## INTERVIEW



Horatio Clare is a travel writer, broadcaster, and teacher with a strong attachment to Wales. His books include *Running for the Hills* (set in his parents' farm in the Black Mountains), *Truant* (about his fight with drug addiction), *A Single Swallow* - relating the hair-raising adventures he had while following swallows' spring migration from South Africa to Wales), *The Prince's Pen*, a sci-fi novel about the future of Wales, and his latest travelogue, *Down to the Sea in Ships* which is a widely-acclaimed account of two voyages that he made round the world in container vessels.

Horatio Clare has produced radio programmes for the BBC, edited and contributed essays to several anthologies, and written articles and reviews for lots of magazines. He has won several prizes, including the Somerset Maugham Award, and the Foreign Press Association's Travel Award.

His candid style and generous approach to life have won him many friends, but his wild streak has led some to accuse him of being a spoilt member of the privileged classes and others to jeer at him for being less gritty than he pretends. **Caroline Juler** aims to lay such jibes to dust.

You've said several times that being Welsh is important to you. Would you explain why, given that although you were born here, I think, like mine, your parents weren't Welsh (or were they? If so, forgive me.)

Wales is where I grew up; I am Welsh in that I come from a valley and a hill which are in Wales. I love the country and the culture - it's home, though as someone with non-Welsh parents who was born in London my Welshness is a matter of upbringing and affection, rather than blood. (Though my mother is a Williams and her mother was a Lloyd-Williams!) But the important thing is that Wales has got a lot right. We don't ask for passports when you arrive, there is no border fence: I am entirely impatient with nationalism, and frontiers, and who has the right to live where. It

is all nonsense. I am Welsh, British, European and citizen of the world. Flags and allegiances are great at the level of the rugby pitch: beyond that it's all tosh. I have lived in England, France, Italy and Wales, and I hope parts of me belong to all those places.

On your website, you quote a stoner review saying that *Truant* was written by a limp-wristed middle-class twit who couldn't handle his drugs - or something like that. Is it hard to get people to take you seriously?

No one should be taken seriously, certainly not me, beyond whatever good they are able to do, at any level. The books seem to have had some good effects and I am very proud of that. It is a constant and wonderful surprise that readers take them seriously, and a huge honour.

*Truant* was a personal and difficult book, and no hit, but the people I was trying to reach, many of them young, and some with very difficult lives, have responded to it in the most passionate and moving way.

Your books have a great sweetness about them, but they are very hard-hitting in places. There was a moment when I was tempted to compare you to Patrick Leigh-Fermor. I wonder how you stay focussed on issues that really matter - which you clearly care deeply about - without getting sucked into the commercial traps which publishers may want to set for you?

My experience of publishers has been overwhelmingly positive. The industry is full of people who believe that good books need to be published, whether or not they make much money. Thanks to Chatto and Windus, John Murray, Eland and Seren, and foreign publishers, as well as various papers and magazines, I have been able to write about things which seem to matter, to say what I have seen of the world and what I have made of it, and to reach a readership. No one has ever told me what to write; they have only helped me put it better. God bless publishers, agents, editors and publicists!

In your book, *A Single Swallow*, you fling your rucksack, or suitcase, into the sea from Gibraltar. It was an incredible journey from South Africa. Firstly, do you still feel that this absolute fracture between the two worlds exists? How do you cope with that?

We are all being asked to deal with the fracture between 'us' and 'them' every day. The fences we have erected between the poor world and ours will never keep 'them' out - instead the fences have snaked into our society, and more and more of us are learning what it is like to be on the wrong side of them. We desperately need a more egalitarian system, as a first step to a fair world. Britain is in a disgraceful state: our politicians lack courage and vision, our press lacks idealism and cause, and as a people we lack radical resolution. We were once known for our innovation and energy: we ought to be champions of social justice and fairness - we still have shreds of that reputation left, which is why so many want to come here. Many of our most capable and idealistic people go into NGOs, which is great, but we need them in government. The most foolish thing is the idea that economic growth, personally and nationally, is the most important measure of progress. It is killing us.

And secondly, how could you throw all your notes away - never mind the passport and money?!!! To a pedantic and timid creature like me it seems unbelievable. But then, Michael Jacobs said he never wrote a single word while he was travelling - except to remember names.

I may have been in a radically reordered state, after a very long and very intense journey! I wouldn't throw everything away again, but at the time it was the right thing to do. And when you have written it all down once it is easy to remember the important bits.

And I've been wondering about writers and artists and subversiveness: I've just been re-reading Miklos Haraszti's *The Velvet Prison*, first published in France

in 1983. He talks a lot about the romantic assumption that artists must be free, if not completely at odds with 'mainstream' society (the Establishment), in order to be true to themselves, but that in Hungary and other Communist countries, they were seduced into towing the state's line by the allure of 'being useful', and doing something real at last, and then, lo and behold, they would condemn others who refused to do the state's bidding as being wreckers. I'm still not entirely sure what Haraszti is actually saying, but the gist is that artists/writers were slowly brain-washed into self-censorship. But being subversive for its own sake is a tricky one. Is anger important, and do you ever have to manufacture it?



Anger is a great propulsion to action and to writing, but it invites self indulgence. It comes down to Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility' - no reader needs a rant, but he or she responds tremendously to deep feeling. Passion is the way forward, not anger. (You can tell I am from the original Star Wars generation.)

Do you have hope for the future, and if so, can you explain why,

and how the huge changes that are happening now could become beneficial?

The darkest hour comes...! We invented numbers and economies to serve us, yet somehow we have contrived to enslave ourselves to them, and we have half murdered our paradise. But between the might of nature and the call of the human spirit there is tremendous power. I believe generations to come will live better lives than we do, and measure them according to higher values than money.

Sometimes I think we're sliding into a colossal war in which the poorest will simply perish. I read a bit of sci-fi and the scenarios are getting more real, I think. Also interested that you recommended George Orwell to us; I read a lot of his essays as a result, and saw that Will Self has recently called Orwell a mediocre writer.

Will Self has earned his platform, and I admire him, but Orwell's integrity, plain elegant style and depth of vision are peerless. How terribly clearly he foresaw our times.

Which brings me on to the whole caboodle of free speech: is it more under threat than ever? I've just read Ana Politkovskaya's 'Putin's Russia' and it's terrifying... but there are so many cases around the world of journalists being persecuted for telling the truth.

Thanks to the internet speech has never been more free, and, in the clamour, never harder to hear. But with Snowden, Wikileaks and parliamentary expenses journalism showed it can still score wonderful hits. Orwell would be proud - and enraged by Putin and terrified by Google. (Why do they keep buying military robot manufacturers and biotech firms?) We need whistle-

blowers as never before, and we need direct action in support of human rights. It is striking that hacktivists are mostly young and driven by idiosyncratic nihilism. If we could combine Human Rights Watch with the power of Anonymous we could really make some progress.

Do you think of yourself as a journalist or a writer, or both? Where's the dividing line?

Both. My latest book, *Down to the Sea in Ships*, is part reportage, part travel, part nature writing, part history, part documentary. But most books, including novels, contain some or all of them. When I write journalism I stick to facts. When it's a book, though, the business is truth - slightly different! As Jenni Diski put it, it doesn't matter what you write, what matters is how you write it.

George Monbiot says that ever since Alastair Campbell had a go at it, the BBC has become a wee, timorous beastie. Do you think that's fair?

I was a staff member during the Hutton Enquiry and during the aftermath - it was a horrible time. A lot of good people left but there are many more still there; far from being wee or timorous it is still one of the world's great institutions, though perhaps not as confident as it was. But look at their great correspondents! Alan Little, Orla Guerin - you don't get any better or any less timorous than them.

Politics comes into your books a lot: you seem unafraid to tell it like it is, so please don't EVER stop. I'm rambling a bit now, but it's as though the islands of free speech are sinking into an ocean of oligarchic bullying. Perhaps they always have been, but complacency is death. I like the encouragement you give to other, younger, newer writers. Would you tell me a bit more about

that, and how you see your role as a teacher as well as a writer?

Teaching is one of the most useful things you are asked to do as a writer, perhaps the most useful. I absolutely love it. With writing you can move, inform, and maybe even help people, but real teaching is the highest profession. I am not one of those qualified professionals, but I did have great teachers, so it's a question of doing what you can to emulate them. And encouraging other writers is one of the great privileges of the job. You hear about authorial jealousy but less about the help we give each other, which is fantastic. The encouragement I have had from my heroes and heroines has kept me going. Wales is particularly blessed in kind writers: Jim Perrin, Jan Morris, Niall Griffiths, Jay Griffiths - what riches!

Got to ask about drugs - should there be a global policy on their sale, distribution and use, and if so, what? One of my best friends died of drink four years ago; she was 54 and wouldn't have dreamed of using drugs. Ironic.

Clearly a little of what you fancy, be it wine, coffee or something stronger is fine, but addiction is a waste of time and life. I am appalled by how much time I wasted. Some of the young are always going to want to shove the doors of perception: the rest of us are responsible for teaching them how careful they need to be. I would be happy if my children never smoked anything, but one way of helping them might be to break the link between rebellion and experimentation through legalisation, given that prohibition has failed.

What would you like to see happening to and in Wales over the next 50 years? Where should its

politics go? Is there something good about being on the periphery that allows writers, artists, thinkers and so on to be freer than they might in the centre of things?

Nuclear-free; investing in tidal power; with an overhauled education system (which trains and pays teachers properly, then lets them get on with it, dispensing with 90 percent of their bureaucracy and 50 percent of the testing; and we should be investing in small schools, not closing them); a cherished and unprivatised NHS; more investment in the environment and an expansion of the National Parks; more and better trains and buses; fewer cars; a taxation system which hits every company that makes money out of the people of Wales - Vodafone, Amazon, Google, this means you - for a fair slice of the profits they make here: how hard can it be? And we really need to look after the environment. Chinese tourists were asked what they valued most: they said clean air, clean water, natural beauty and a sense of freedom. Croeso i Gymru!

Have you got another book on the go? Would you tell me about it?

I am into the revisions of my first children's book, working title *Aubrey And The Terrible Yoot!* It's about a little boy whose father is attacked by a dreadful monster. This monster cannot be killed. But the little boy is not daunted by anything, and he decides to take it on. A comic, thrilling and magical tale - we hope! - which also happens to be a book for children, and adults, about depression. And two other projects coming up, one about the Brecon Beacons, and one which might be a book about the wind. But I think you must have had enough of that from me for now... 🍀