



Interview with Bob Weighton

As of April 2019, **Bob Weighton** shares the title of 'Britain's oldest man' with another supercentenarian, Alf Smith, of Perth in Scotland. Astonishingly, both men were born on the same day: 29 March 1908. Bob was born and brought up in Hull in Yorkshire and trained as a marine engineer. Since then, he's had a rich and varied international life with a focus on peace-making and the worldwide church. His wife Agnes died in 1995 and he lost one of his sons, Peter, in 2014. He has two surviving children, David and Dorothy, ten grandchildren and at the last count, 25 great-grandchildren. Faith has been an enduring strand in his life and he has always written poetry. He's not a denominationally minded person and enjoys telling people: 'I was baptised in a Congregational church... confirmed in a Presbyterian church and... married a Methodist.' A good friend of Anna Chaplaincy founder Debbie Thrower, Bob was instrumental in her early work with older people in Alton, Hants. He talked to *Bible Reflections for Older People* Editor, Eley McAinsh, just before his 111th birthday.

I've been writing poetry since I was at school: scurrilous nonsense about other people, mainly teachers. I obviously didn't put any of that rubbish into the book, though it was the groundwork of knowing about structure and rhythm, sonnets and iambic pentameters. But it was some years later, when I was in college, that I began to be more seriously interested in poetry and writing: writing essays and sermons as well as poems because I had a leaning towards being a preacher at some point. I never delivered those sermons, but I have box files full of ones I've written and delivered since.

How did the writing of poetry fit with your work as a marine engineer?

People might think that being an engineer has nothing to do with art or poetry or literature. Engineers are looked upon as being ignorant of everything but engineering and assumed to go around in a boiler suit with an oil can in one hand and a big spanner in the other. So there's a prejudice about engineers in the world of the arts, but it's quite ridiculous. Leonardo da Vinci was certainly an engineer as well as a poet and artist. It's this identification of the person with the job they do or the colour of their skin or where they've come from, instead of saying 'here's another human being', but that's a total error, a total mistake. That's a message I constantly have to repeat.

You were a teacher in a mission school in Taiwan as a young man. What took there?

You never know exactly why you do things, but there were quite a few contributory causes which led me to volunteer to go abroad as a missionary, although my leanings were towards engineering. One big factor was that when I graduated, and after my apprenticeship, the Great Depression came along. The Wall Street Crash in 1929 hit the United States and the engineering firm that I did my apprenticeship with got less and less busy as time went on. In the end, there were no orders for ships on the books at all, so all my fellow workers lost their jobs. Some went to sea as sea-going engineers, but that work was also dwindling as ship-building both in Scotland and England hit a rock and engineering didn't look all that good.

I thought of lecturing in a technical college and I did apply for those roles, but to no avail. There were too many people looking for jobs, and I had no experience of teaching. So that was a dead end, but at the same time, alongside my job search, I had a very strong Christian faith and as a student in university I came into contact with the Student Christian Movement. It still exists, but not in the way that it did in my day, when leading theologians would come and give a series of lectures at the annual conference. I went three years in succession to the SCM Swanwick Conference. There were so many people there that the men were all encamped in marquees in the grounds. They were great fun and you were assigned to a marquee with people from all different colleges and from overseas, and the emphasis was very much on the world church. It was when the World Council of Churches was being talked about and planned. So I had a strong grounding in the church being a world church and that was another factor to stimulate the idea of going abroad myself.

When I did write to find out what I could do, they said, 'Oh, we want an English teacher in Taiwan.' So I went up to Selly Oak to train: a year's crash course in education and Bible study, and an introduction to what I could expect to meet in the Far East in terms of social customs, language and religion. After the course I sailed – or steamed – out to Taiwan where I stayed right up until the outbreak of World War II, except for an interlude in Japan, where I went for language study because as that time Taiwan was a colony of the Japanese Empire and Japanese was the official language. Although I could have just taught English, half the staff didn't know any English and none of the administration was done in English, so it was absolutely necessary in order to have a fuller part in the life of the college, taking assemblies in Japanese, for example.

Which mission society sent you to Taiwan?

I'm not very denominationally minded, but I was brought up as a Presbyterian and the Presbyterian Church had what to all intents and purposes was a mission society but it wasn't called that; it was the Overseas Committee for the Presbyterian Church. In other words, it wasn't just something tacked on to the denomination; it was part of the denomination. It had three key objectives which were very forward-thinking when I went out in 1933. It was drummed into me that my job was to assist in the founding and nurture of an indigenous church, not just a branch of the UK church. The three objectives were the founding of a church which was self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.

You said in another interview 'I've seen the world fall apart twice' and I wonder how that experience affected you?

Well, I don't know what I would be without those experiences. Of course, I was only a young child – six years of age – when World War I broke out, and I had no awareness of what was really going on the world. My world was the world of a child of six. I was well aware that there was a war, but you didn't realise at that age what a war consisted of. I saw soldiers on the streets, and the young men who came to say goodbye to my mother and father and all they talked about was that he was 'going to France'. I had no idea what France was then, but of course most of them didn't come back and by the age of ten, when the war ended, I'd begun to realise. When the Armistice was signed, I remember going to the city and watching all the dancing and the singing; I knew all the songs.

After the war, when I was in my teens and at college 'world peace' was a prime conviction of most young people of my age. We were all naïve enough to think that we would be different; we wouldn't get ourselves into that mess; ours would be the generation that was going to see world peace, but of course it didn't happen that way.

How do you reflect on that theologically? All those hopes and dreams and convictions?

Well, first was the realisation that we are no better than our fathers. We're just the same, so we have to work harder, do something more positive for peace, rather than just let things slide along. There are

always people who see war as the solution to their problems, but it never is. So if anything, I've become even more devoted to the peace movement as the years have gone on – who couldn't be? Every Christian should be.

After all you have seen, and given the state we seem to be in now, are you hopeful for the world, hopeful for the future?

I'm hopeful because I believe in the ultimate victory of peace. It's not a naïve hope. I hope that there are enough of us who will stand up against those who hate and blame others on the basis of race, sex, nationality or anything else. We have to fight this on all sorts of different fronts in society, and especially in all those places where certain far-right parties are on the rise. As I say, I'm hopeful because I believe in the ultimate victory of peace, but the outlook is not very bright at the moment.

In your poems, and in your life, there seem to be three enduring strands: Creation and Nature, Love and Friendship, and 'From Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond...'

When I began sorting out all my work – the poems that survived – the chronological order and the subject order seemed to coincide. So all the early ones which I wrote before World War II are 'Youthful Yearnings', and then the others all fell naturally into themes, including the funny ones and the family ones.

Do you still write?

Well nobody, as far as I know, decides they're going to write a poem. An idea strikes you, or you maybe hear someone say something, and that starts a train of thought which can only be put into verse. It's the same with sermons – where does a sermon come from? I know ministers have to produce one once a week and I would find that hopelessly impossible because some weeks I would have nothing to say. But then all of sudden, there's some odd coincidence or you meet somebody, and the ideas and thoughts come tumbling out. So as long as I've got a scrap of paper, I just jot it down, but they all come in different ways and prompted by different events. Nothing is original. I don't write the poem; the poem tells me to write it down.

You've said in other interviews that you're 'one of the lucky ones'. Your contentment and peacefulness are both attractive and rare: have you always been like this, or has it come with the years?

Oh, I think it's come with the years, yes. It's not my doing. I've just followed the thoughts, the ideas, the philosophy which commends itself the most.

You were one of Debbie Thrower's first contacts in Alton, when she started her work with older people.

I'm remarkably pleased and I rejoice that while I've been in Alton, this idea of Anna Chaplains has sprung up and is flourishing. Before this, Alton was an unknown place and now it's the centre of all this and I'm very chuffed about that. The clergy in the town saw that so many people, like me, were retiring to Alton, and moving into care homes, and they thought they should do something to support them and they appointed Debbie. Someone in the Methodist Church suggested she come and talk to me. I gave her a few ideas and we've been friends ever since. It all stems from that, much to my astonishment and exceeding gratitude.