

MARCUS CUMBERLEGE

A BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONOLOGY

I. Parents and childhood in France and England.

1905. Claude Michael (Mike) Cumberlege, D.S.O. (father) born in London.

1915. Nancy Pemberton Wooler (mother) born in Toronto, Canada.

1936. Mike and Nan marry and settle on the Cap d'Antibes, in the South of France. For the next 3 years Mike who, like his father Rear Admiral Claude Cumberlege, is a highly experienced seaman and poet, skippers private American schooners in the Aegean and Adriatic.

1938. Marcus Crossley Cumberlege born Antibes, near Nice, 23 December.

1940. Marcus and his mother escape from France and settle in Chelsea, London, where they spend four years of the war and endure the German bombing. Mike is enlisted by Special Services for action in occupied Crete and there with his ca•que H.M.S. Dolphin he becomes a hero of the Resistance.

1943. After blocking Greece's Corinth canal behind enemy lines, Mike is captured and taken to a concentration camp in Germany. Here he spends the rest of the war, before being taken out by the S.S. and shot two days prior to the liberation in 1945.

1944. Marcus and his mother are evacuated from London and spend a year with his grandfather the Admiral in Sussex.

1945. Himself a future Odysseus, he is given a children's version of Homer's *Iliad* which he reads by torchlight under the bedclothes, and is sent away for a year to a boarding school in Somerset.

1946. His mother goes to live on a farm in County Cork, Ireland with Lt. Col. Len Livingstone-Learmonth, whom she marries. Marcus boards at a traditional British naval preparatory school called Stubbington in Hampshire. Aged seven, he commutes by himself to Ireland by train and boat three times a year until 1952.

II. His bases in England and world travel.

1947. Marcus meets King George VI and shakes his hand at Buckingham Palace when receiving his late father's two Distinguished Service Orders for outstanding gallantry in active combat.

1948. 28 January. Sister Finola Livingstone-Learmonth born Mallow, County Cork, first of three children in his mother's second marriage.

1949. 26 May. Future wife Maria Lefever born Kortrijk, Flanders, Belgium, third of five children to Juliaan Lefever and Godelieve Witdouck, from a family of Flemish flax farmers living in the famous tapestry-weaving area of the country.

1952. Marcus wins a scholarship to Sherborne School, Dorset. At Stubbington he had been in the top class for three years and started writing poetry (in secret) at the age of 12. Sherborne is a disappointment: he “fags” (cleans for older boys) and gets beaten regularly. He continues to study

Latin and Greek and specializes in modern languages.

1954. Marcus is now corresponding in satirical verse with his grandfather the Admiral on the Cap d'Antibes and his poems are published in *The Shirburnian*. The family has left Ireland and moved to Sarratt, Hertfordshire, where his Canadian uncle Ray Wooler manages the village pub. Marcus writes to T.S. Eliot about his enthusiasm for Rimbaud and gets a long reply.

1955-1956. He wins the Sherborne School Poetry Prize twice, the rifle-shooting prize four times and is school bantamweight boxing champion. He edits *The Shirburnian* and criticizes the male chauvinist school system. He wins a scholarship in English and French to St. John's College, Oxford, who grant him two years' leave of absence to travel. (Being asthmatic, he does not qualify for national service). He buys a new Lambretta scooter for 200 pounds and bikes to Madrid to stay and work on a farm with his Spanish cousin Jos_Mar'a Avial. While there, he is invited by his father's sister in Peru to stay for a year and a half, before going up to Oxford.

1957. He ships from Liverpool to Callao in Peru, a four week crossing with Spanish emigrants, stays on farms and plantations in the country's main three regions, and teaches English to adults at the British Council in Lima, staying with his family outside the city.

1958-1960. Marcus crosses South America and embarks for Europe from Buenos Aires. His colourful older friends in the jungle, where he has spent his last months in Peru, have persuaded him, against his inclination, to take up his place at St. John's College. His old schoolfriend John Weston is waiting for him on the quay at Marseille with a delapidated Austin Seven, and they visit the Admiral before motoring back to England. Marcus' relationship with his parents has suffered from his long absence in Peru and they advise him to drop Oxford and start working in the kitchen of a hotel. Marcus goes up in October, and begins to find life at Oxford lonely and dull after his adventures in South America. For three years the only poems he writes are versions of Pablo Neruda's Spanish, the first of many great poets he is later to translate. He spends his evenings at the bar of the Randolph Hotel, attends only one lecture in three years and dislikes his antiquated English Literature courses. He nevertheless boxes and shoots for the University and is President of the St. Johns' Dramatic Society. In the vacations he delivers crates for Schweppes. He also sails to Crete (to look up his father's wartime friends) and bikes again to Talavera, the home of his Spanish cousins. His parents never cease asking him how he intends to convert English literature into pounds, shillings and pence.

1961. Armed with a third class degree from Oxford, and a colossal emotional hangover, he is pressed into work at a metal window factory in Essex 1962. Alienated, he suffers a youthful breakdown. Recovering, he takes a six-week journey in a Norwegian tanker back to Peru and a sheep farming life in the Andes. Later, living alone in Lima, he starts writing poetry in Spanish.

1963. Ill health follows while teaching at the British Council, and he is flown home for hospitalization. He has re-discovered C_sar Vallejo and his English poetry bears the marks of this influence. In the autumn, he works at a language school in Oxford, where his colleague Neville Sattentau introduces him to the Zen Teaching of Huang Po, translated by John Blofeld. He starts contributing to poetry magazines and his automatic poems are later included in *Running Towards A New Life* (1972), an unpublished version of which wins him one of the five Eric Gregory Awards for the most promising British poets under the age of 30, in 1967.

1964-1965. He joins Ogilvy and Mather, an international advertising agency in London, and works there until 1967. He meets Ava Paranjoti (b. Bombay, 1945) at an advertising conference in Paris, and they are married in 1965.

1967. Eunice Ava Cumberlege (Tixie) born at London's famous Charing Cross Hospital, 24 February. The couple are living in Highgate, but move to Hampton Court, Middlesex. Ava works for the Indian Tea Centre in Oxford Street and Marcus becomes assistant advertising manager at the British Travel Association.

III. Expatriate

1968. *Oases*, Cumberlege's first collection, published by Anvil Press Poetry. Leaving the advertising world behind, he decides to move to Paris. They live there for a while in Colombes with Ava's Indian mother. Marcus teaches English at the Lycée International of Saint Germain en-Laye, just outside Paris.

1969. The three-year marriage breaks up in January. Tixie stays with her mother. Marcus takes a room in the HTM tel Carcassonne in the rue Mouffetard in the Latin Quarter, and starts writing poems in French. Friendship with the Peruvian novelist Alfredo Bryce whom he had known in Lima in the fifties. Marcus makes many contacts with Latin American poets and musicians in Paris nightclubs. He goes to London and there he meets his future wife Maria Lefever. He hitch-hikes down to Spain and his adventures there are recorded in an unpublished novel called *Houria (Freedom in Arabic)*, written in Ireland.. He continues to teach in Saint Germain en-Laye until the summer of 1970, and then goes to Kortrijk to see Maria and her family.

1970. Marcus and Maria seek a pastoral setting and go to live in Connemara on the West Coast of Ireland for two years. They live the life of beachcombers and he writes most of the poems contained in *Firelines* (Anvil Press Poetry, 1977). Several of his Irish poems are published in *The Dublin Magazine*, others in Belfast. This continues his poetry contributions to more than thirty magazines in many countries.

1972. Marcus and Maria, their funds exhausted, return to Belgium and decide to live in Bruges.

1973. Marcus learns Dutch. He moves furniture in an auction room and Maria assists in an agency promoting Flemish song-writers. They marry in Bruges' Town Hall on 9 November. Their joint income for that year, declared and approved, amounts to BF 20,000, or half a month's wages. It is the first money they have earned for two years, a great improvement on the 3 pounds a month they got for winkle-picking in Connemara.

1974. The Dorset poet Owen Davis, an old school friend, comes to stay in the tiny house at Walstraat 10 and together the two ragged bards write *Bruges, Bruges*, a long ode to Cumberlege's adopted city. It is published in a handmade edition of 125 the following year, and sold on the streets. They meet the Flemish novelist and poet Herman Leys, who makes a Dutch translation of this book published by Orion Desclée De Brouwer in 1978 and illustrated by Horst De Blaere. In the hope of meeting people, Marcus joins the Royal Bruges Chess Circle and wins the Winter Championship.

1975. Marcus and Maria move to Westmeers 84, where they live for the next 20 years. Marcus translates official tourist literature, maps and guidebooks for Bruges City and West Flanders Province until 1994. Titles include: Hans Memling, Marcus Geeraerts, Frank Brangwyn, The Pageant of the Golden Tree, Find Your Way in Bruges and Bruges Inside Out.

1976-1983. Marcus works with many Bruges poets, musicians and artists, and helps to organize informal poetry readings in the city with Marc Braet, Fernand Bonneure, Patricia Lasoen, Jan van der Hoeven and others. He publishes five small collections, including *XX Vriendelijke Vragen*, with Horst De Blaere, in his own original Dutch. Since meeting Maria in London in the spring of 1969 he has

written hundreds of haikus and he is now invited by Professor Henri Van Praag to lecture on that subject at the experimental University of Lugano, based in Hilversum. While teaching in Zürich he comes across a phrase (*Namo Amida Butsu*) in D.T. Suzuki's *Essays* which causes him to convert to Shin Buddhism. In 1979 Maria starts work as an assistant at the City library, a job she still retains. Tixie, aged 12, comes from Paris, and pursues her secondary school education at Sint Andreas, returning to France in 1985, aged 18.

1983. Marcus is hospitalized with an alcohol problem from which he recovers. But his manic depression remains with him, though very much milder in recent years. He makes a deep study of astrology and earns some pocket money setting up and analyzing horoscopes and giving talks on the subject.

1986 (1 January). Marcus writes *Le Bateleur* ("The Magus"), later collected in *Things I cannot Change*, his first poem for a very long time, the prelude to an uninterrupted torrent of writing over the next twenty-four years.

1989-1994. This period sees the deaths of Marcus' and Maria's mothers. He continues to write haiku and works on the poems contained in *The Best Is Yet To Be*. He travels with Maria to Dorset, Portugal, Canada, Madeira, Prague and Amsterdam, visits his daughter Tixie in Fontainebleau, buys a house at Eekhoutstraat 42 and they move in two years later, after extensive renovation. Maria furnishes it and decorates it and creates a lovely town garden.

1995. He translates his friend Marc Braet's collection *Poem In October* from the Dutch and it is presented at the Dylan Thomas festival in Wales.

1997. Cumberlege, a recognized world poet with nearly twenty collections behind him, is appointed English translator for the European Poetry Festival in Louvain, a post he occupies for five years. He teaches English to adult groups in Bruges for the next thirteen years.

IV: World Poet

1999-2000. Marcus and Maria are invited to Japan by Tsuneo Yamane, a retired professor Marcus has met and kept in touch with for twenty years. They are personally guided and visit the main Shin Buddhist temples in Kyoto and Nara. Marcus records his impressions in haikus and poems. Back in Europe, he is confirmed at a ceremony in Dÿsseldorf and receives a Japanese name "Ji-Shin" meaning "Express truth". They take the first of many annual holidays in the North of Scotland and are now spending every Christmas with Owen and Anne Davis in Dorset. Marcus publishes the bilingual haiku collection *The Moon, The Blackbird and The Falling Leaf*, helped in the translation by Odette Van Heirsele and Herwig Verleyen.

2001-2004. Marcus organizes and takes part in several poetry readings, with emphasis on younger writers, at venues which include De Balseboom (where he teaches), poet Guido Gezelle's Garden, the City Library, the College of Europe, Raaklijn Bookshop, Lokke Dize, Lappersfort Wood and Boekencaf_ Inzicht. In 2002, to celebrate Bruges being Cultural Capital of Europe, he publishes the bilingual *Angels At Work* and holds an exhibition in Groeninge Gallery with six multi-media artists highlighting different aspects of his poetry. Piet Balffoort, Natalie Vervaeet and Peter Albrecht assist him with the Dutch translation of his book.

2005-2010. Marcus and Maria stay with poet friends Roger Green and Tony Brignull on the Greek islands of Hydra and Skiathos and make a second visit to cousin John Wooler and family in Nova Scotia, Canada. They continue to holiday in Scotland with Jan Clutterbuck and friends (a private book

of haiku commemorating ten visits written there) and spend Christmases with the Davises in Dorset. Cumberlege takes part in the cultural event *Corpus 2005*, with Herman Leys and Horst De Blaere, thirty years of his Bruges work being displayed in a room of the Guido Gezelle Museum. He also exhibits a selection from his two hundred-odd written pocket notebooks in the City Library. Daughter Tixie marries French blues guitarist Mick Ravassat the same year - he and Marcus perform poetry and music together in West Flanders. A long-standing ambition is achieved when, in 2009, Marcus publishes *In a Nutshell*, a collection entirely devoted to his Shin Buddhist poetry over the years. The same year he and Maria visit his family in Bolivia and stay at some of the country's most outstanding sites. In 2010 he fulfils a promise made forty years earlier to take Maria to Peru, where many descendants of his English aunt Diana Cumberlege still live. His *Selected Poems* (forty-six years' work) are launched in the Gothic Room of Bruges' City Hall on 16 October 2010 with introductions by Alderman of Culture Yves Roose and prize-winning English poet Sir John Weston.

2011. After a year and a half delving into the past, Marcus is once more a free spirit. He will spend many hours writing and dreaming at the table in Maria's garden. His projects include a major modern Belgian haiku collection with Herwig Verleyen, the two poets translating each other and Valerie Decler illustrating them with her photographs. He has long written 17-syllable prose haiku sequences and will be gathering some of these. Marcus dreams of anthologizing the best young Bruges poets in Dutch, and editing a book of World Poetry. His travel impressions, poetry and prose, in Bolivia and Peru fill a dozen exercise books and may also see the daylight of Europe.