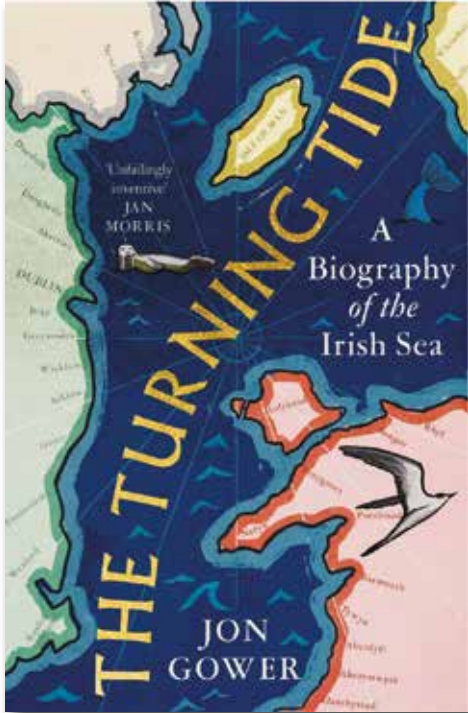


The Turning Tide: A Biography of the Irish Sea



by Jon Gower

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Reviewed by Keith Muscott

Jon Gower's Credo:

I write because I have to: books might bide their time, stalk you for a few years, but eventually they will hunt you down, demanding to be written.

Writing in two languages has rewards and challenges. Some words have yet to be invented in Welsh, so you have to make do, or make ones up, giving one a very real sense of adding something new to the literature of my small country.

Growing up, reading books gave a lonely child a ready source of boon companions. I still treasure that sense of companionship, the beautiful idea that someone, a stranger maybe, will spend a few hours in my company through the medium of a book. I always hope I'll entertain them.

WHEN I WAS AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF ORCA years ago I would board the ferry to Norway with other enthusiasts and do my shift on the bridge armed with a pair of bins to scan the horizon for signs of life. Despite watchers on other trips logging odd sightings of cetaceans, we saw zilch – except for a different kind of marine life on the cruise liners berthed by us in Bergen.

Cut to my home in Anglesey. In their season, I can see Risso's dolphins from the top of nearby cliffs where there are steep drop-offs with plentiful food in the depths; or harbour porpoises up close and personal from local beaches. Just a couple of examples of locally abundant sealife. Welcome to the Irish Sea.

Dr Jon Gower, an English Literature lecturer at Swansea University, has written 30 books, the best known being *The Story of Wales* that accompanied Huw Edwards's BBC TV series. He moves effortlessly from fact to fiction and from one genre to another; he is as happy scripting TV programmes as he is writing plays and novels – in Welsh or English.

This 'biography' of the Irish Sea has just been published by him after a lifetime's familiarity with his subject and those who live in the three nations bordering its shores. He is a bird watcher first, but is equally at ease talking about mammals, fish, people, towns, ports, ships, politics, the *Mabinogion*, history, language, cable-laying, Erskine Childers – writer and gun-runner – Ogham script and Neolithic argonauts... you name it. Nothing seems to escape his piercing attention. His description of Irish truckers arriving at the Holyhead ferry docks, impatient to return home, chimes with me: 'On the big roads into town lorries clatter in, air-braking near the Edinburgh Castle pub as they choose their lanes for the next sailing to Dublin.'

A. A. Gill may have called Holyhead 'The town where pebbledash goes to die', but Gower knows what has lain beneath its surface over the years: a deal struck in a Holyhead pub in the 1860s to ship thousands of firearms to the Confederate States, for example, that prefigured Childers and his yacht *Asgard*. Or as the point of entry for Irish prisoners after the Easter Rising of 1916, some in the *Slieve Bloom* that was also a livestock carrier, in which they were locked up with cattle, their dung, and the danger of their proximity in bad weather, to be sent at last to an internment camp in Wales, Fron Goch, to learn from one another how to be real rebels.

As a young warden on Grassholm with the later Welsh TV personality Iolo (say 'Yoller') Williams, also a warden back then, Gower worked hard to make safe the nests of gannets by removing polypropylene rope, fishing line, Courelene netting and other bizarre stuff that gannets weave into their roosts that accidentally chokes or snares their impotent young chicks.

When sixteen year-old Jon completed his O Levels, his parents took him to Ynys Enlli – Bardsey Island. The weather was bad and no boat came over from the island to pick up visitors, so the local vicar, a fellow bird watcher, gaunt and bony with long grey hair waving in the wind, offered to let him stay at his house until their luck changed. Jon used his GCE revision to keep the old man interested, telling him that Wordsworth was a pantheist poet – did he know what that meant? RS Thomas, the finest pantheist poet of his generation, merely nodded, to spare the boy's blushes.

Despite its teeming content, this book never palls. Gower selects a motif and follows it in Celtic spirals of association and meaning that you are bound to follow with enthusiasm through every thicket.

Much recommended. *KM*