

Chancellor Dharker,

In our university library's archive, there is a letter from 1993 about today's honorary graduate: the American poet, translator, teacher, and activist, Professor Carolyn Forché. The letter was written by the editor of the Hexham-based Bloodaxe Books. He had just read Carolyn's *Angel of History* and, writing to her US publisher, described her work as being 'of such quality'.

Many others had already made the same judgment. Carolyn's first poetry collection, *Gathering the Tribes*, won the Yale series of Younger Poets Prize with verses written in a way that revels in the substance of every word, from the 'lumped smoke of piñon' to the 'mokva' and the 'old Dodge / tailgate'. Carolyn's ability to blend English with other languages is already evident here and continues to this day, as Spanish, French, Slovak, Japanese, Tewa and more appear in her writing. She has published translations of Mahmoud Darwish, Robert Desnos, and Claribel Alegría.

In the late 1970s Carolyn won a Guggenheim fellowship that funded travel to El Salvador as part of Amnesty International. Her visit coincided with the beginning of a civil war. Carolyn's award-winning memoir, *What You Have Heard is True* looks back on this time, but she first wrote of what she saw in verse in her second collection, *The Country Between Us*. One of its poems describes how a colonel handled a dismembered body in front of her.

He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught the scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

Such writing caused controversy: what right did Carolyn have to publish this, to blend the personal and political in poetry? Carolyn's answer appears in her anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. She introduces the book as 'the result of a thirteen-year effort to understand the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination'. She herself had experienced this in El Salvador, in the occupied West Bank, in Lebanon, and in South Africa. Praised by Nelson Mandela as 'a blow against tyranny', Carolyn's anthology showcases writing that she calls 'poetry of witness'. These are poems that are both 'an event and the trace of an event'. They prove that arguments about poetry and politics are too often too narrowly defined.

‘When we read the poem of witness’, Carolyn explains, ‘we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us. [...] Witness begets witness. The text we read becomes a living archive.’

Carolyn’s third collection, *The Angel of History*, appeared a few months after *Against Forgetting*. Its third section, ‘The Recording Angel’ ends on these lines:

It was as if someone not alive were watching
Slowly, that is, over time, itself a barrier
And just then the doves rose and battered the wind
Where a notebook was kept once during a visit
This is my cap. This is my coat. Here’s my shaving gear in its linen sack.

Derek Walcott praised such writing for its capacity to condemn horrors ‘not with dialectic, but by the ironic serenity of beauty’. The collection is about memory and witness, and the mention here of a notebook reflects a key aspect of Carolyn’s own practice. Carolyn’s notebooks have got smaller and more portable over the years, and some have been lost, but she still has access to over one hundred fifty of them – and she always carries one with her. Carolyn pays attention to the world. Indeed, according to a friend of hers, Carolyn’s commitment to poetry is not just a commitment to it as an art form, but also to it as a ‘spiritual discipline, a discipline of attentiveness’. A poem like ‘Prayer’, from her *Blue Hour* collection, testifies to the quality of Carolyn’s attention, as it lists objects and imbues them with significance: ‘Belongings gathered in the last hour, visible invisible: / Tin spoon, teacup, tremble of tray, carpet hanging from sorrow’s balcony’.

On the website of our university’s Newcastle Centre for Literary Arts there is a study of a poem from *Blue Hour*. The website also records other connections between Carolyn and Newcastle University, all of which reflect her work and its alignment with our values of creativity, justice, and freedom. There are videos of her reading poetry and discussing human rights at the Newcastle Poetry Festival, which she helped to become a truly international event. Carolyn has also delivered teaching and studied with colleagues at the university, earning a PhD by publication from us, supported by research into ‘The role of notebooks and memento collections in the work of a poet and memoirist’. And in 2017 she co-edited with Jackie Kay an anthology of poetry that marked the fifty-year

anniversary of Martin Luther King's receipt of an honorary degree from Newcastle University.

All of Carolyn's books have been published in the UK by Bloodaxe Books, whose archive sits in our university library. This includes her most recent – and Pulitzer-nominated – collection, *In the Lateness of the World*, whose poem 'Lightkeeper' centres on the words 'You say to me, Stay awake' and explores what one person can teach another. Carolyn has herself taught and inspired many, giving classes in Alaskan prisons and university seminar rooms. Students recall the generosity of the materials she provided, the careful attention she paid to their work, and the efforts she made to help them access tuition. With one former student she has produced an anthology of Ukrainian poetry entitled *In the Hour of War*. The publication, like so many of Carolyn's works, exemplifies how language can shape our experience of extreme situations, even as it is affected by it.

Chancellor Dharker, for her devotion to poetry and its capacity to bear witness, for her advocacy, and for her attention to and engagement in the world, I present to you Carolyn Forché as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Dr James Harriman-Smith
Public Orator
5th December 2025