

# Roads **less travelled**

An eye-opening trip through the Middle East changed the social and political views of London-based Tasmanian writer **Tadhg Muller**

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**BETTER FOR THE EXPERIENCE:** Tadhg Muller with his son Hector at Telegraph Hill in south-east London, where he settled after a six-month journey across several countries in the middle of the Islamic world.

In 2000, London-based writer Tadhg Muller left his home in Tasmania and spent six months travelling solo from Cairo to Pakistan. "I was 21, but I reckon I looked about 16," he says. With \$US1000 and a Russian map in his pocket, he journeyed by road through Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Iran and Pakistan, then on to Afghanistan to visit his brother Tom, who was there as an aid worker with the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief.

Muller still holds strong impressions of his trip through the heartland of the Islamic world, not long before the September 11 terrorist attacks. He recalls driving to Kabul with Tom and being waved over by Taliban who told their driver they had to stop to pray.

"The Taliban were curious as to who we were," Muller says.

"Our driver said we were 'Australians, the innocent ones'."

On the day he left Afghanistan, Muller encountered the regional head of Taliban security at the border. "He must have been 6'5", with long black hair and aviator shades," Muller says. "He walked over, embraced us both and said that the Afghans were a good people."

Before that, in Shiraz, Iran, Muller visited the tomb of Hafez, the Persian poet, with some locals his age. "Then we bought hashish in a park and were chased by the Iranian police," he says.

"We ended up in some dive and I remember an Iranian guy my age hitting on me in a cloud of scented smoke. So I got the first train out of there at dawn and headed for Esfahan - the city that is half the world, a city that for a boy from Tasmania seemed populated by the most sublimely beautiful women on the face of the earth."

After that adventure, returning to Hobart was an anticlimax.

"I felt much more disconnected from Tasmania after that trip," Muller says. "A lot of my views had changed dramatically in terms of what I considered to be important, including my political views."

The experience inspired more focused attention on his history degree at the University of Tasmania, which he'd interrupted to travel.

"Most of my time as an undergraduate had been a bit of a write-off, I didn't work much," Muller says. But when he returned, he continued with honours. "I researched and wrote on the Islamic Syncretistic tradition of Bengal, which is the contextualisation of Islam within

Bengali culture. It's a very alternative tradition within Islam, different from what we see represented today in the media."

Muller worked under the supervision of Islamic scholar Asim Roy, a Bengali who had left then-East Pakistan to work at the Australian National University, before landing in Tasmania. "He was the only academic there I felt any significant connection to," Muller says. "He was tough and didn't take any excuse for anything."

That positive experience didn't inspire Muller to follow in the career footsteps of his academic father - Hans Konrad Muller, who lives in Dynnyrne with his wife Jill and was for many years professor of pathology at the University of Tasmania - but it did kick-start his current trajectory.

"I realised what I really wanted to do was to write," he says.

"So I moved to Melbourne. I was unemployed and I used to go to the library and write. I met my wife Seeta there. I was sitting smoking on my veranda in Carlton. She's from New Zealand. We moved to London together 10 years ago so she could do her masters in printmaking. And my writing really intensified here." ▶

**SPREADING HIS WINGS:** Right, writer Tadhg Muller has been published in journals including *Southerly* and *Island* magazine; and below, Muller (right) with Sean Preston, the founder and editor of avant-garde magazine *Open Pen*.

Muller writes fiction about current issues. His original name is John, but he changed it to something that sounded more Irish to improve his chances of getting noticed by publishers – which seems to have worked. Now in his mid-30s and living in New Cross in south-east London, he's been published in experimental literary magazine *Open Pen* – an independent imprint launched in 2011 by Sean Preston, who also works for the Ninja Tune record label.

His short fiction has also had a run in *Southerly*, Tasmania's *Island* magazine and in *Griffith Review: Tasmania – The Tipping Point?*, which I co-edited in 2013. We sniffed out Muller's talent through his sister-in-law Cate Sumner, an international lawyer now based in Hobart with Muller's ex-diplomat brother Konrad, who is also a writer. That all led to Transportation Press, a publication platform set up last year through crowdfunding.

Co-edited by Preston in London and Rachel Edwards in Hobart, it has delivered *Islands and Cities: A Collection of Short Stories from London and Tasmania*. Muller brokered that editorial partnership and helped get the venture off the ground.

"Transportation was a good opportunity to get more Tasmanian writers exposed outside Tasmania and to build workable offshore connections for them – bypassing the mainland," he says.

"There's quite a vigorous writing scene in Tasmania, but not really anyone with the capacity to present writing from within the island outwards – and anyway it's good to take things into your own hands.

"One of the founding ideas was writing and other forms of art and expression have a real role in society. Look at the complete frailty of current politics – it's time for writers and artists to step up. One of my parting gestures was for the next issue to be focused on Iran, with guest editor Shirindokht Nourmanesh. I wanted to open up dialogue with a place that's too often politicised, because there's so much that is human that is happening beyond politics. If you look at the way we understand the current situation in Syria, for example, the human aspect is often completely forgotten.

"I write what I'd call contemporary social literature, looking at what happens to the bottom end when everything goes to s---. I look at the people I've been exposed to and the challenges they face.

"Around the time of the credit crunch here in London, in two years I had and lost about 12 jobs. I was working in cafes, bakeries, delis, warehouses, I was fundraising on the street. My wife was studying, we were short on cash and we had a small child ... Hector's now nine and we have Paloma, who's 16 months. It became apparent there wasn't much point stressing about work. There was nothing to be lost, I really needed to just go hell for leather and write. And what I was also facing was a vision of collapsing Europe.



## I LOOK AT THE PEOPLE I'VE BEEN EXPOSED TO AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

"The kinds of jobs I was doing are always staffed by people at the bottom, so across the past five years I have mixed with the washed-up dregs of Europe who've arrived in England – including university graduates who'd done interesting jobs, but without other economic opportunities they've drifted into London from Italy, Portugal, Spain and places such as Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. So I've worked 50-hour weeks with people like that and mainly written at night."

Muller also writes by day. Mainly, if unexpectedly, about cheese. After that "long stretch of anarchy" without a steady income, he secured a job as a buyer with a business dealing in high-quality, artisanal cheese from Italy, France, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands.

"I sit at a desk and people bring me cheese, I taste it and put together arrangements for other people to sell it, and I merchandise," he says. "Like wine, good cheese has a story. My favourite cheese is Abbey de Bologne, a sheep's cheese from the Pyrenees, made by Benedictine monks. I like the idea of monks making cheese – it harks back to my Catholic upbringing.

"In Tasmania, I went to school at St Virgils. It's a Christian Brothers school, so it had a particular ethos, to work with the poor. I've always been most comfortable with that kind of work. Catholicism has always embraced a broad spectrum of views and I think the current Pope is talking a lot more sense than most. So I do consider myself to be Catholic as much as anything else – but deeply lapsed.

"In terms of my writing, I was really happy when the London homeless magazine *Rough Diamonds* took on my writing. They said, 'We can't publish your poems because you're not homeless, but if you like we can make you our guest poet'. I honestly would prefer to be published there than somewhere trendier."

St Virgils affected Muller in other ways. "I came to Tasmania when I was four, from Melbourne, and I was born in Bristol because my parents were overseas at the time," he says. "But my father's father was Swiss-German and the rest of my family are Irish Australians.

"Your last name can have a surprising and strange impact on how you are perceived. At St Virgils, this 'Muller' always put me in a slightly blurred category – with the Italians, the Greeks, the Yugoslavs, the Poles. I was always perceived not as a Brit, or a Celt, but as somehow European."

But Muller doesn't see that as a problem – if anything, the contrary. "Boring as it sounds, I tend to generally be quite a social person, but I am also quite a lone person," he says. "To be honest, I am a fairly late developer.

"A lot of writers I know have been writing since their early 20s, but I don't think that's something I could have done at that time. As I've grown more confident with my writing, I've started to turn back to writing about Tasmania. I'm looking more towards what I've come from myself, rather than writing about direct experience with the lives of other people."

Muller has no plans to move back to Tasmania, because "my home is where my wife and children are and to go back to where I have come from would be to impose terms that aren't equal".

"That would not bode well, as much as I love the place I come from," he says. "And in the long run, if I do have anything large published, I think it's more likely it will be about where I am from, rather than where I am. So I'll never take that earlier home for granted."

