

Words on Sheepskin

By Laila Sumpton



We have rights, they are not given-
realised when inked, then acted.
We have rights destroyed, diluted, flouted,
then welded anew in rhetoric fires-
in a law maker wars that buffets our rights
between crown and barons, crown and commons,
with 'boo', 'hurrah' jousting over green benches.

Each decade rephrases our penalties,
our liberties, and the mound of cast-off laws
is growing- as the tailor re-fits skin
over bones and organs, then re-stitches
the tears on the cheek of Lady Justice,
adds to and weakens her muscles before
they argue and anoint her into being.
Whilst crowds gather to watch the few wielders
of libels, pamphlets and brazen placards
as they jump before all the king's horses
all the king's men; trying to put our lady
back together again.

Heirs of our rights were etched on a shield
held up by barons against a tyrant crown
laws as big as the sheep they were scratched on
with a few petering off down the legs
and into oblivion.
Above the shrivelled seal, of skeletal John
wrapped in robes with a sword pointing at God

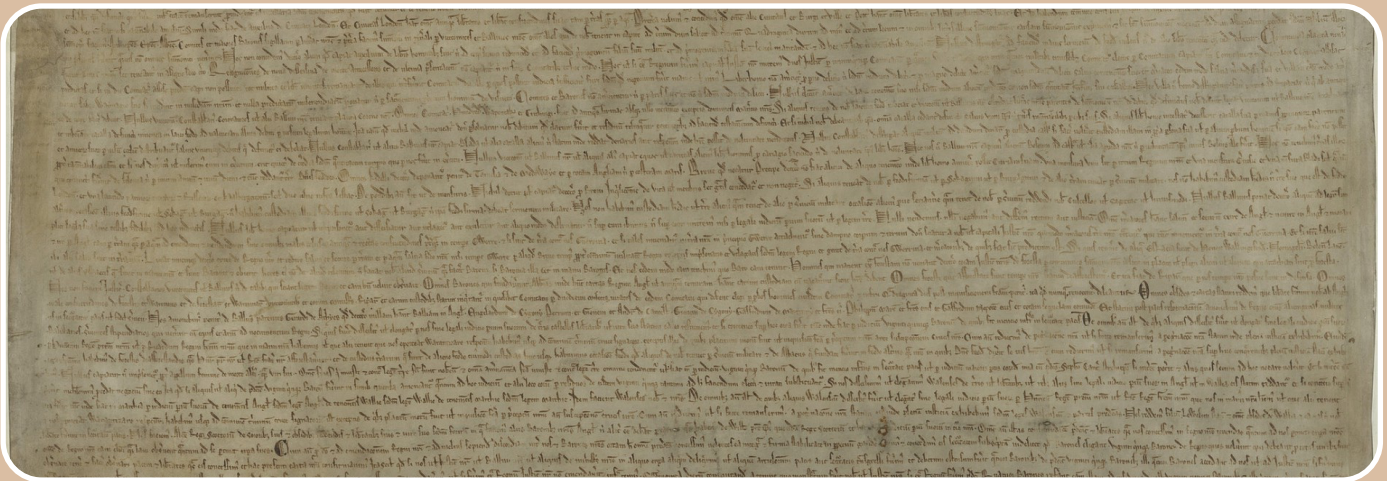
shadows of former words proclaim that-

No free man is to be taken
without the lawful judgement of his peers.
That a woman's word cannot imprison a man-
save on the death of her husband.
That all Welsh hostages must be returned.
That the Church of England shall be free.
That there must not be, under any circumstances,
any more fish weirs in the Thames of Medway.
That no town can be made to build a bridge,
unless they have an ancient oath to do so.
That widows can remain widows if they choose.
That wine, ale and corn should be measured
by the London quarter, everywhere.
That officials cannot partake as they please,
even if they do so in the London quarter.
That the City and their dragons can hold fairs
and be supreme, whilst no man, including the
king,
most particularly the king, shall be above the law.

They scraped away gold, to reveal a wooden chair,
for below every polished floor is Earth,
and above each roof is sky-
so we still re-sole our boots
to march for the ghost and grandchild
of our Magna Carta.

Read about the background to the poem [here](#)

Laila Sumpton: Why I Write



How would you categorise the writing?

'Words on sheepskin' is a poem which sought to condense key facts and my impressions of the Magna Carta exhibition at the British Library, which was curated to celebrate the 800th anniversary. It is a very literal, straightforward poem - which tries to explore the original laws in the document, look at what rights are and why we still need to defend them in the UK today, when the Human Rights Act is under threat. It is a poem with a campaign and an explanation angle, but it is also an opinion about our current attitude towards rights.

Why did you write the piece?

My concern about the creation of a British Bill of Rights motivated me to write this piece, and linking it to the current conversations around the Magna Carta seemed appropriate - both in terms of campaigning and as a way to frame our rights within a historical context. I approached the British Library, asking them if they had engaged writers to respond to their exhibition and was delighted when they asked me to write a response to be published on their medieval manuscripts blog.

What do you think makes it an effective piece of writing?

This is not my most lyrical or well written poem, but I wrote it with a sense of urgency when trying to explain a very small part of our human rights context and the need to defend the Act. I think the clarity and humour helps make the medieval text accessible, and hopefully helps us reflect on the evolution of rights