Steve Ely
*Oswald’s Book of Hours*
Smokestack Books

**Biography**
Steve Ely started writing poetry on his seventeenth birthday. A former Sunday League footballer, revolutionary socialist and secondary school head teacher, he lives in the West Riding of Yorkshire and is fascinated by the history of England and the English propensity for violence.

In *Oswald’s Book of Hours*, he sets up the seventh century King of Northumbria as an alternative patron saint of England and writes for him a “handbook of devotions” loosely modelled on a Medieval Book of Hours.

His other works include a novel and five unpublished poetry collections.

**Reviews**
'Steve Ely takes the archaeologist’s spade to the idea of England – its myths, its heroes and villains, its forgotten corners, its persistence in the historical imagination. There’s a passion to the language, a radical fire reminiscent of Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* and Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts*.' (Ian Parks)

‘In Steve Ely, the North has found its voice in work that echoes Ted Hughes, Basil Bunting, Geoffrey Hill, the bloke in the corner shop, the Yorkshire breeze and autodidacts and pub philosophers across the region and beyond. This can become our creation myth, our encyclopaedia, our atlas, our sacred book.’ (Ian McMillan)

'a work of startling imagination and affirmation.' *(Acumen)*

**In his own words ...**

‘*Oswald’s Book of Hours* is essentially an excursus from *Englaland*, my work-in-progress since 2009. *Englaland* is a series of poetic trajectories into England and the English. Oswald, the seventh century King of Northumbria, seemed to me a key and neglected figure in English history and a touchstone for many of the issues and themes that pre-occupy me – the role of the North in the larger polity of England, the English propensity for violence, the Catholic roots of England, hunting with dogs, natural history, landscape, class, race, resistance and rebellion, the relationship of England the *gaeltacht* – and others. *Oswald* was originally conceived as a section of *Englaland*, but it grew. To cut a long story short, I set up Oswald as a kind of alternative patron saint of England and wrote for him a ‘handbook of devotions’, loosely modelled on a mediaeval Book of Hours. I planned the book in detail, poem by poem, and began writing it in January, 2011. I finished it by April of the same year, barely deviating from the plan. I wrote *Oswald* so rapidly that in a sense, there was no development of the work – it didn’t exist, and then it did – the drafting period was incredibly brief. However, the obsessions of half-a-lifetime are incarnate within it.’
Incipit euangelium secundum Wat Tyler
Compline: Coronation of the Virgin
Michael the Archangel

Read on ...

• Incipit euangelium secundum Wat Tyler translates roughly as ‘Begins the gospel according to Wat Tyler’. What does this poem do with the idea that it’s somehow impolite to discuss religion and politics?
• What can a poet do with a historical figure that a historian can’t?
• Compline is the last church service of the day, sometimes known as night prayers. Why might this poem be called ‘Coronation of the Virgin’?
• For a hare to be killed by a dog: is that a perfect end? Who is the ‘us’ in the prayer at the end of the poem?
• The figures in the last two lines of ‘Michael the Archangel’ are James Randi and Richard Dawkins, one-man embodiments of scepticism and atheism respectively. How come they are being co-opted as ‘canons of the Church’? Which is the stronger power in this poem, science or faith?