**Preface**

This book, which comprises thirteen, mostly short, essays, is a sequel to my 2017 self-published memoir *Keep on the Move.*

Several essays - ‘On Memory’, ‘On John McGahern’, ‘On Chopin’ and ‘On *Private Passions*’ - discuss in more specific detail themes highlighted in that book.

Others, like ‘On Dying’, ‘On Pain’, ‘On Brexit’, ‘On China’ and ‘On Being Normal’ address completely new topics; while ‘On Chess’, ‘On Big Sport’ and ‘On Creativity’ reflect on important aspects of my thinking and life that were previously mentioned, but only incidentally.

*Keep on the Move* was a very book-based memoir. So is this collection, to the extent that quotations and other people’s ideas similarly feature prominently throughout, all of which, as before, are acknowledged in footnotes.

In his final collection of essays, *The Plain Speaker*, my literary hero, the Nineteenth Century essayist, William Hazlitt, likened his preferred writing style to extempore speaking and the painting of frescoes, which “imply a life of study and great previous preparation, but of which the execution is momentary and irrevocable”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I hanker to self-present as much here, and often, following Hazlitt, in a manner which is intentionally contrarian and so inevitably provocative. Indeed, although I am not an intellectual, despite regularly aspiring to be one in my imagination, my aim in this book, akin to Edward Said who was, is to be “a disturber of the status quo”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Polemical prose is often my weapon of choice in this process. When I was an academic, I was constrained never to use it, entirely because of the mistaken reason that it was unscholarly. What nonsense! What a hidebound conception of the scholarly!

For isn’t the greater truth more that polemical writing, in the correct hands, is as capable as academic writing at getting at the truth? Indeed, there are some – and I am one of them – who think the latter regularly obscures it.

I am here in this collection thus more like the literary critic and poet, Tom Paulin, who once tellingly described a well written essay as a “statement of “individual conscience that bears witness to a folly, for which sometimes a remedy is proposed”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In his book *Essayism*, the Irish writer Brian Dillon says something similar, claiming that a great essay should “be at once the wound and a piercing act of precision”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The ones in this collection are certainly vulnerable; occasionally, I’d like to think, they are penetrating.

The essays here also vary a lot in length. Some, like ‘On Memory’ and ‘On Being Normal’, are very short – a few pages – others, like ‘On Brexit’ and ‘On China’ aren’t, occupying a lot of space.

Initially, I worried about this discrepancy, thinking there should be some effort exerted by me to maintain consistency. Then I realized this was to confuse form with content.

For some topics I essay about here, by their nature, demand more space than others – a view confirmed by reading John le Carré’s brilliantly conceived memoir, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, which includes chapters of radically inconsistent length.[[5]](#footnote-5) I thought: if a writer as good as le Carré isn’t troubled by this matter, why should I? I resolved not to be. Don’t you be either.

The topics?

In the order as given, they are:

1. *On Memory* reflects on the reliability of recall in the process of telling autobiographical stories.
2. *On Dying* discusses death and the sense I have of my own mortality.
3. *On Big Sport* is a very hostile critique of the ethics and economics of professional elite sports, with premier league soccer at its heart.
4. *On Pain* makes sense of the sense I have made of being in severe pain at particular moments in my life, including recently when I suffered a life-threatening heart attack.
5. *On Private Passions* explores new aspects of my love of classical music.
6. *On John McGahern* is an appreciation of one of my favourite Irish novelists and short story writers.
7. *On Chopin* is an approving assessment of his piano music.
8. *On China* is the story of my love affair with a country.
9. *On Creativity* outlines what I think a real education is all about.
10. *On Brexit* explores my ambivalent attitude about the functions and politics of the European Union.
11. *On Covid-19* reviews the likely medium- to long-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic.
12. *On Chess* discusses why I love chess more than it loves me.
13. *On Being Normal* reflects on how it feels to be in a host of losing minorities, thinking that, while I rarely win arguments, particularly about political issues, I usually express the better ones during them.

**David Halpin**

January 2021

North Yorkshire

1. William Hazlitt, ‘On Application to Study’, in Duncan Wu, (ed.) *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, Volume 8 (The Plain Speaker), London, Pickering & Chatto, 1985, p.57. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, London, Vintage Books, 1994, p.x. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Paulin, ‘The art of criticism’, *Independent Newspaper*, 26 March, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brian Dillon, *Essayism*, London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John le Carré, *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories From My Life*, London, Penguin, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)