

LOST WORLDS

The poet and writer Tom Pow has recorded the struggle of disappearing rural communities across Europe. He tells **Mary Smith** about a way of life that's vanishing fast

Photography by Phil Rigby and Tom Pow

An article in a Canadian newspaper about a dying village in Spain had a profound effect on an award-winning, Dumfries-based poet and writer, Tom Pow. The story of how the village of Villabandin in Leon was dying and its old people were worried about who would look after their graves prompted a strong emotional response in Tom – so much so that he has spent the last couple of years travelling to Europe's dying villages researching, talking to people, taking photographs and creating ways to make public both his findings and his own response to the phenomenon.

Tom, who is head of Creative and Cultural Studies at Glasgow University's Crichton Campus, has had several collections of poetry published, the most recent of which, *Dear Alice: Narratives of Madness Narratives*, won the poetry prize in the prestigious Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust and Scottish Arts Council awards. His *In The Becoming, New and Selected Poems* is being published by Polygon with a book launch in the Duncan Room at Easterbrook Hall in Dumfries on June 25. Tom has also written radio plays, a travel book about Peru and books for children.

"When I was growing up in Edinburgh we used to spend time in the Highlands so I knew the history of villages being emptied," he says. "When I read the article about Villabandin I felt an emotional, visceral connection which led me to investigate further. I discovered populations are falling all over Europe. By 2030 Europe will lose one third of its population. Rural areas will be most affected."

The statistics tell a stark story of declining rural populations. A third of Italian farmland has been abandoned. Every day, two villages in Russia disappear. In Spain approximately 100 villages are facing imminent extinction.

Villages throughout rural Europe are dying through a combination of factors including low birth rate, young people going to the cities and failing infrastructure. "The reasons are common to all countries but there are subtle differences," Tom explains. "In Russia, for example, when the collective state farms collapsed, nine out of 12 villages went out of existence. I felt it was worth investigating



On his travels, Tom encountered old women in rural France and beautiful decaying buildings in Central Russia



because, although the abandonment of the countryside is a trend that's been happening over 200 years, it has gathered pace recently. It feels like the end game as regards a small village dweller. It's as though peasant Europe is reaching its last days."

Tom's proposal to investigate Europe's dying villages won a Creative Scotland Award in 2007, allowing him to take time out to travel to Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia and Greece. He says: "I wanted to see the village I'd read about – Villabandin – and to find out which areas were most affected. I thought I'd work on some kind of trajectory through Europe and part of Russia."

In Russian villages, only the old women were left: "Life expectancy for women is 75 and for men it's 58. The women were very warm and welcoming. They knew their villages were dying but this was their way of life and they were sticking to it," Tom says.

"The old women in these villages enjoy a certain independence. They have large gardens in which they work in the summer, growing their own food so they have a good diet. Their pension goes further than in the city. They would be lost in the new Russian cities. These women are 'Old Russia' and feel that compared to them the new city Russians have no sense of common purpose."

Before, these villages had populations of around 400 people. "Once the school goes, the electricity goes – electric cables are stolen by people from the city," says Tom, "and then the infrastructure goes. For the old people Communism meant greater equality and shared common experiences."

"The changes these women have seen though their lives are amazing. More than 27 million people killed, no men coming back from the great patriotic war. They faced near starvation after the war. They saw the changes in Communism. They remember communism was the good time. But, they say: 'life is life'."

In Eastern Germany the fall of the wall led to hundreds of thousands going to the west. Since 1991, more than two-thirds of those who left Eastern Germany have been young women. Had they remained, 100,000 babies



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would have been born in the region.

"Perhaps we have to face that large areas of Europe will fall out of habitation. We're heading back to a period when as much as a third of the land is uncultivated. Forests are being replanted and Europe is as heavily forested as in the middle ages."

France for a long time has had a metropolitan bias against country and peasant life but is now recognising village life is part of its heritage. The hope is that it can be saved through tourism.

"You drive through villages and all the shutters are up. The local people will point to houses and say 'that one and that is owned by English'. They don't live there permanently but go back and forth," says Tom.

"In Dienne, in the Massif Central, there's a lovely wee hotel. The owner said to me: 'Look, nobody is here, only a cat.' She says that if her father needs to speak to anyone he has to go to the graveyard."

Tourism can do something to save villages and in northern Spain villages being revived are on the pilgrim route of Santiago de Compostela. In some places people have invested to run small hotels.

"For myself there is a huge sense of elegy about it, but also a sense of the longevity. This is the end of a past kind of life that extends right through European history for hundreds of year. This is the end and I feel it should be marked, be acknowledged. We should give more care to people who will be the last of their kind," says Tom. "The other thing lost when villages die is that direct intimate connection with the countryside: where nature is not seen as a spectacle but an intimate involvement."

"If that's dead, then people in cities who had a connection lose it. Like the kind of reaction shown in Britain during foot and mouth – people were amazed when farmers cried when their animals had to be culled. There was no understanding of the value of farming."

Tom has launched a website featuring images of the villages he visited, interviews, statistics, sounds and artworks reflecting his journeys. People can submit their ideas and views on the issue. His response to what he has witnessed also includes poetry and he has set up Pueblo Press Ltd which has published *Songs from a Dying Village*, to be followed by *Signs from a Dying Village*.

"I'd like to go back – but I also want to visit other villages. I'd like to go back to meet the old herder, Alberto, I met in Spain who lives in his village for three months on his own in the winter with his cows. When he dies, who knows what will happen to his cows, his house? When he was young he was part of the village school – he saw the people all go and now he's the sole person left." 

■ Tom's website is www.dyingvillages.com. You can email him at tompowjstp@googlemail.com.