



# MOSS WORDS

edited by Abbi Flint



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Featuring poems by:

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Aurora Fredriksen

Antony Hall

Ingrid Hanson

Henry McPherson

Rachel Webster

Poetry © 2025 The authors

This work forms part of the Moss Worlds project, led by Anke Bernau, Aurora Fredriksen and Ingrid Hanson at the University of Manchester and funded by the University of Manchester Research Institute.

<https://mossworlds.co.uk/>

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P.12 *Tortula muralis*, © Antony Hall

P.15 Moss 'protest' sign inspired by a workshop led by Antony Hall and Sophy King, © Abbi Flint

P.22 Portrait of Richard Buxton, in Manchester Museum's botanical collection © Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester.

P.25 The University of Manchester's Moss House, at the Firs Environmental Research Station, © Abbi Flint

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# Preface

It's a great delight to introduce these poems of various kinds that have come out of poet and researcher Abbi Flint's work with the Moss Worlds project, funded by the University of Manchester Research Institute across 2024 and 2025.

The project's overarching aim is to 're-story' moss, bringing Manchester's botanical, civic and aesthetic histories of moss into dialogue with the contemporary challenges of our ecological and biodiversity crises. Over the course of the project we have also found ourselves thinking together about scale, time, resilience and the importance to both creative and critical thinking of the slow, careful, embodied attention that mosses evoke and elicit.

All of these matters are so beautifully addressed in the poems Abbi has written for this collection, and touched on in the few she has skilfully drawn out of others of us on the team, that any further words seem unnecessary. We hope this collection draws you too into a closer interaction with the mosses all around us.

Anke Bernau, Aurora Fredriksen, Ingrid Hanson

<https://mossworlds.co.uk>

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## How might we re-story moss through poetry?

This was the question that sparked the creative words in this pamphlet. The poems included here are infused with the insights and experiences of the interdisciplinary Moss Worlds team, who brought their own scholarly and practice-based understandings of mosses as researchers, artists, practitioners and – for many of us – occupying the messy and generative spaces between these roles. The project has encouraged us to engage in rich, creative and collaborative conversations, facilitated through workshops, research visits and moss walks.

The poems are presented in two parts. In the first section are poems written by members of the Moss Worlds team in response to a workshop I facilitated. Over the course of a couple of hours, we explored our multi-sensory and affective relationships with mosses, found new ways to describe these fascinating plants through poetry, and employed poetic research methods to create new poems from the writing of nineteenth century botanists such as Richard Buxton, Robert Braithwaite and Leo Grindon. I am grateful to all participants in the workshop, who engaged enthusiastically and creatively with this way of writing, and to those who generously agreed to share their wonderful poems within this pamphlet.

The second section comprises poems I have written in response to some of the wider themes of the project. Some of these were informed by encountering mosses in person: preserved specimens in Manchester Museum's herbarium; the cultivated mosses in the Mouse House at the University of Manchester's Firs Environmental Research Station, and a walk with the Friends of Medlock Valley to explore mosses making their homes in a reclaimed post-industrial landscape in central



Manchester. Other poems draw on the writing of historical moss-collectors and wider contemporary research and writing on mosses.

Several poems within the pamphlet were created through a process called poetic transcription. This is a form of poetic inquiry, similar to found poetry, that uses words and phrases from existing texts to create new poems. All of the texts used are in the public domain and are detailed in the 'Notes and acknowledgments' section at the end of the pamphlet.

The poems included in this volume explore many different aspects of mosses and our entangled relationships with them; from the scientific to the aesthetic, from the personal and emotional to the functional and ecological. They blend themes of time-depth and scale, and consider diverse settings where we might 'meet' with mosses: in museums; in botanical gardens; in our homes; in our cities; and, beyond. Within these poems we hear the voices of the contemporary, of botanists of the past, and even of the mosses themselves. They resonate with a sense of wonder, and a spirit of attentiveness and care, that cuts across disciplinary perspectives of these small and unassuming plants.

Each of these poems is a moment in a larger ongoing dialogue that built through a series of workshops led by members of the wider Moss Worlds team, and I am grateful for the many rich opportunities and conversations that spilled out from these. Together, the poems are offered as an invitation into the fascinating world of moss, and to consider how we might re-story moss through poetry.

Abbi Flint



Manchester Free Libraries Herbarium.



*Hypnum*  
*cupressiforme*  
Var *compressum*  
Species 74

Windsor. Coll

Manchester Free Libraries Herbarium.



*Hypnum*  
*cupressiforme*  
-  
Species 74  
Common  
In Winter

Windsor. Coll

## The Poetry of Moss

Winter brought mosses  
again dripping with water  
with it they vanish

Aurora Fredriksen

## **Preface**

Much reduced in circumstances  
when quite a child,  
the fields and brickyards  
I was accustomed to wander.  
Common though they may be  
to me, really and truly beautiful  
common Chickweed  
Germander Speedwell  
Creeping Tormentil  
starry blossoms  
spell words

Rachel Webster

## **We were by the tumbling stream**

We are by the tumbling stream,  
by the rocks dripping with water,  
developing our texture in the constant moisture.  
We are on the ground, and we are among the stumps.  
We may vanish to appear no more until succeeding sessions.  
We are peeping over the wall.  
We are in the bogs the clay soil, and on the old apple trees,  
we are tenants of the neglected Flowerpot.  
They are captivated by our verdant carpets.  
They find us among the rocks of sandstone slate and limestone,  
they find novelty in each district, whilst their search was in vain elsewhere.  
They extended their lists, travelling yet further,  
toward the commons so that they may find us.  
They remove us with pocket knives and other necessary apparatus,  
submitting us to the microscope.  
Reaping their richest harvests, they remove our surplus rocks and soil.  
They squeeze out our water and lay us out and press us until quite dry,  
reserved at their convenience, we are kept for years unchanged.  
We developed our texture in the constant moisture,  
by the tumbling stream and the rocks dripping with water.

Antony Hall

## **The uses of moss**

The old writers  
delighted  
in the many uses of moss:  
Laplanders' beds, small brooms (in northern England),  
lights for Arctic nights.  
Polytrichum cradles winter-weary bears,  
Hypnum the squirrel, the dormouse, the bird.  
Unnoticed, uncared for by passers-by,  
moss harbours  
what we little dreamed of:  
elegant mollusca, tiny beetles, curious acari.  
Adding their tribute to every mountain rill,  
replenished by mist and snow-wreath,  
myriad cells concoct an atmosphere –  
both food and physic to the mind.

Anke Bernau

## Viriditas

Hard to tell one moss from another  
without a hand lens and the eye of love.  
You pass them on a morning walk:  
a vagueness of verdancy seeps  
round the edges of your city-mind.

Give them time  
and they'll give it back expanded:  
lay a cheek against the grey-green buzz  
of *Bryum argenteum*, bring your eye  
to a bristle-moss dark against birch bark,  
lie down on the neighbour's lawn and magnify  
filaments of feather moss, freedom fighters  
in camouflage.

Millennia unfold in your eye-glass.  
Breathing in the scent of gathered rain  
and certitude, you hunker down  
in greenness.

Ingrid Hanson



**Fox-tail feather-moss**

*Thamnobryum alopecurum*

Trunks, reaching from below  
Branches spreading to the light  
Green, Lively  
My small jungle of fuzzy trees  
But why a fox?  
Uplands, but not grounded in peat  
Softly climbing the rocks  
Water tumbling  
My small jungle of fuzzy trees  
But why a fox?  
Feeling the damp in the leaves  
Regenerative right to the tips  
Toothed, egg-shaped  
My small jungle of fuzzy trees  
But why a fox?

Rachel Webster



**Tortula muralis**

Tortula, Tortuga, tortoise.

Slow crawler, thin stick of fire.

Not content with being a sponge,

You are a pebble maker, stone breaker

Pinned with stems of bronze

Muralis, mural, mooring,

More than a flicker, you are a little mountain

Held close in the crack of a wall.

Red-grey rock hugger,

Stubbornly bristling upwards,

Without moving anywhere.

Henry McPherson

## **Tenanted by moss**

A neglected flowerpot, crevices  
between bricks, the clay soil of stubble fields,  
here these tiny tenants make their homes.

Tenacious, delicate of texture,  
wet with winter waters and gone by spring  
(returning green in autumn).

On rocks dripping with water,  
rocks of sandstone or slate,  
limestone, mountain sides, neglected paths,

on commons, in lanes and woods, ground  
and banks, in bogs  
and on the stumps and trunks of trees,

here too we meet with mosses:  
Pottia, Ephemerum, Tortula muralis.  
Body to body, skin to leaf and stem,

squatters alike on the tracts and cracks of earth,  
how do we greet them?

Ingrid Hanson



## Moss Words

Abbi Flint

## **Moss**

After Eleanor Farjeon

Moss grows almost anywhere,  
on the ground, up in the air

in a tree like candy-floss  
stuck to branches, you'll find moss

at the edges of a stream,  
under hedges, in between

places other plants don't like:  
on the wheels of rusty bikes,

nestled into pavement cracks,  
on the bricks of back-to-backs,

in a heap of fly-tipped clothes  
mosses sprout from button-holes,

where a factory used to stand,  
on a sleeping statue's hand.

Take a look and you might find  
greening places left behind,

softly and with quiet care  
mosses growing everywhere!

## Nondescript

*Leviniskya affinis* (Wood bristle-moss)

After Elizabeth-Jane Burnett

Sky thistle, you are far from low. You are the constellation between tree's fingers. A high-rise world builder without roots. *Affinis*, affinity, loyal to water, lover of clean air, you are the canary in the woods. Green fountain inside and out, outside and in. Not apple or pine, but a slow racing pea, mantis, malachite. You are all greens if green is also daffodil and bronze twilight. Dry you are crushed – not dust – velvet whisker of hope and thirst. You keep your teeth turned inwards. Damp. Soother of bark and skin. Each of your leaves a thin place of water. Fuzz-maker. Muddler of earth and air. You are the tree's comforter. Jade lint that swaddles joints. Pioneer porcupine. Your bristles are the brush that paints the sky. Nondescript you are an ordinary wonder.

## Moss House haiku

*Bryum capillare* (capillary thread-moss)

City homemaker

your spring-blush needles stitch

a cushion of stars

*Hypnum cupressiforme* (plait moss)

How tenderly, green

is plaited under and over

to clothe tree's bark

*Lunalaria cruciata* (crescent-cup liverwort)

Oh, happy friend!

How has your waxy face

caught the moon's smile?

*Metzgeria furcata* (Forked Veilwort)

Confetti curls!

Ribbon-fingers outstretched

to catch the dew



*Neckera complanata* (Flat neckera)

We have always  
held you close: shoe stuffer,  
mopper-upper, salve.

*Neckera crispa* (crisped neckera)

Matinee idol  
tinsel tips turned skywards  
for water's applause

*Oxyrrhynchium hians* (Swartz's feathermoss)

Your scruffy lace-work  
feathers bare places, spills threads  
like a pulled jumper

*Thamnobryum alopecurum* (fox-tail feather moss)

A wall forest  
of tiny Christmas trees  
baubled with droplets

## **Lancashire working men of science**

‘The poor can enjoy the pleasures of study of science  
as well as the rich’ – Richard Buxton

Gardener, blacksmith, twister-in,  
porter, shoe-maker, bleacher,  
saddler, bat-maker, journeyman,  
mechanic, labourer, weaver.

Royton, Eccles, Cheetham Hill,  
Hunt’s Bank, Whitefield, Prestwich,  
Tyldesley, Stakehill, Great Ancoats.  
Well-read, ardent, working

botanists in humble life,  
wandering fields and brick-yards  
meeting with plants  
where they grew.



*Richard Buxton (1786-1865)*

## **Reminiscences**

This is a bibliography,  
a shorthand  
of all known moss  
told in plain style.

The life and work  
of landmen: day  
by day, year by year,  
long hours outdoors  
held in a single row of stems,  
so intimately familiar.

Each specimen  
is a faded photograph,  
a reminiscence  
of growing freely –  
embracing any light  
and the wholesome  
odours of spindrift soil.

All the world  
as a painted background.

For this is, before all things,  
a dazzling wealth,  
immortal and unique,  
a model of quiet beauty:

*we are only waiting  
for land to be given,  
for a cool house.*



## **In the Moss House**

This is the house where time slows to attend  
to the drip-shush of water between green.  
Where filmy ferns unfurl and mosses bend  
their heads, sporophytes silent as urns.

Know that this shimmer-forest in miniature  
was a hundred years in the growing, yet  
still smells bud-raw. Kneel at this altar  
to perpetual moisture, to spectral light.

Hear each stem's story within a story  
of water held close as breath. Mosses live  
lightly, wear their ancestry as dew. They  
have no borders, only the supple heft

of body to rootless body, the common tilt  
toward light. This is the house that moss built.

## **What moss taught me**

Tiny truths. A lesson in chemistry and change from rootless engineers. Gentle bridge between all times – forest lurker, cave dweller, goblin gold. Small and speechless grounded clouds. Listen. Be a green ear, a home to dainty mushrooms. Re-invent as feather and blanket. Jewel. Be a care-full gardener, a green mirror. Be moved by water. Glisten. Lower does not mean lesser. Don't forget to rhyme with other plants. Crackle. Resist vasculature, it is enough to stem and leaf, to sense another's fine print, filigree. Gather. Be both eye and skin. Occupy the cracks, find a home in slow re-enchantment. Moss is our memory, their histories are our histories, a barometer of harm and healing. We hold them against our hurts. We breathe the moss-breathed air.





## Notes and acknowledgments

‘Haiku’ by Aurora Fredriksen, ‘We were by the tumbling stream’ by Antony Hall, and ‘Tenanted by moss’ by Ingrid Hanson are adapted from Robert Braithwaite, (1883) ‘Mosses’, in Taylor, J. E. (ed), *Notes on Collecting and Preserving Natural History Objects*, London: W.H. Allen, pp. 145-158.

‘Preface’ by Rachel Webster and ‘Lancashire working men of science’ by Abbi Flint are adapted from Richard Buxton, (1849) *A botanical guide to the flowering plants, ferns, mosses and algae found indigenous within sixteen miles of Manchester*. London: Longman and Co.

‘The uses of moss’ by Anke Bernau is adapted from Robert Braithwaite, (1871) ‘The Moss World’. *Popular Science Review*, Vol x, pp.366-378.

‘Moss’ by Abbi Flint was inspired a Moss Walk jointly led by Moss Worlds and the Friends of the Medlock Valley, exploring mosses growing in a former industrial site which is now a green space within central Manchester. You can find out more about the Friends of the Medlock Valley here: <https://medlockvalley.org/>

‘Reminiscences’ by Abbi Flint is composed of words and phrases taken from the ‘accidental archive’ of various scraps of texts used by collectors as moss packets to house specimens, in Manchester Museum’s botanical collection. Many thanks to Manchester Museum and the Curator of Botany, Rachel Webster, for access to these collections.

‘What moss taught me’ by Abbi Flint began in a workshop led by Henry McPherson and is informed by notes from other workshops and wider reading (especially Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book *Gathering Moss*).



## How might we re-story moss through poetry?

In this pamphlet we share poems created as part of the Moss Worlds Project: an interdisciplinary project based at the University of Manchester, which investigates the historical, contemporary and future importance of mosses in the Greater Manchester area. They are part of the project's work of 're-storying' mosses, tracing out connections between naming and knowing, aesthetics and science, the human and the nonhuman, as we think about our contemporary moment of ecological crisis.

Find out more about Moss Worlds at: <https://mossworlds.co.uk>



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