

Review

Hampson, Robert and Barry, Peter, eds. 1995. *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*.

Manchester : Manchester University Press. 247 p. Prys £12.99.

The poet and critic Donald Davie has pointed out how British readers prefer poetry which, unlike modernist verse, does not make demands on them in terms of surface difficulty and philosophic thought. The influential *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) followed public demand in its editors' selection of mainstream poets, which ignored black, feminist, and more avant garde and modernist poetry published over the last two decades by small presses and 'little magazines'. The essays in this collection, *New British Poetries*, redress the balance by discussing the poetry produced in the period 1970-1990 by poets who rejected the emphasis of the Larkin-Heaney-Hughes school in favour of modernist techniques which subvert assumptions about the poetic voice and bring questions of language, gender and politics to the fore. The authors have concentrated on that area of poetic production in the 1970s and 1980s which developed mainly in poetry readings, performances, and 'little magazine' activity. Much poetry produced in the 1970s was consciously internationalist and in dialogue with American and French poetry published by the smaller presses. The 1980s saw an overall shrinkage in such production, but this was compensated for by the rise to prominence of marginalised groups in Britain, like the Welsh, Scots, blacks and women.

Eric Mottram's essay on the Poetry Revival in Britain (1960-1975) is informed by personal experience of the period, with its running battle between the small presses and the monolithic Arts Council and media controllers who determined funding and prominence based on their own assessment of what constituted important poetry. (The figure of Charles Osborne, Literature Director of the Arts Council in the 1970s becomes a floating signifier throughout the book!) The argument slides into polemic, but it does show how vitriolic was the battle in the early 1970s between state-funder and struggling presses which resulted in the effective restriction of the range and innovation of poetic production. The essay is an attack on the mannered poets who made up the Movement, and the tyranny they exerted over the poetry scene for years (Mottram refers to the Thwaite-Larkin-Hamilton axis, or 'Axis', with its obvious connotations), but it is written with verve and indignation, and makes for arresting reading. Mottram ends with a comprehensive overview of the work of Revival poets, showing their range,

innovation and firm conviction that poetry was not a consumer product to be instantly digested.

In more colloquial vein is an essay by Fred D'Aguiar on Black poetry in Britain. He discusses the work of James Berry, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Grace Nichols, John Agard and Jackie Kay. What he underlines in this fine overview is that attempts to isolate Black poets' work and group them together irrespective of gender, region and class are absurd. He points out that poets of similar background often have much in common, whatever their racial differences, and the articulation of the rich variety of Black poets' experience in Britain has changed what it means to be British.

The last essay in this first section, "Mapping the Field", is devoted to an in-depth survey of 'little magazine' activity. R.J. Ellis also keeps Charles Osborne on centre stage, as the arch-enemy of 'little magazine' publishing – someone who ensured financial constraints for these magazines from which they never fully recovered. It would not be going too far to say that it was, perhaps, the vendetta between Osborne and Mottram (recounted in detail by Ellis) which provided the *raison d'être* for this very book, that the long-standing dispute (with rancid repercussions) between the establishment and innovative voices proved the occasion for this collection of essays. Ellis also offers an overview of anthologies which published Revival poets, being notably trans-Atlantic in flavour in their dialogue with the Beat and Black Mountain poets, and the New York school, and ends his essay with a consideration of a major debate in the 1980s, the extent to which political commitment can be sustained within contemporary modernist practices.

Peter Middleton's essay in the second section, "Poetics, Politics, Procedures", on the 'politics of subjectivity' in British poetry is informed by incisive theorising, although it tends to lose direction as it proceeds through the labyrinths of language and discourse. It identifies as a reason for the marginalisation of radical or innovative poets (even if internationally recognised) not the cultural identity of the poet but the politics of subjectivity within the poetry. Poetry that constructs its relation to the public sphere through an investigation of subjectivity in language does not lend itself to appropriation by the establishment. "You can be a shaman as long as you only talk to crows and other denizens of rural life"; start to shake the cultural heritage *status quo*, and you will be excluded from establishment institutions. Middleton then offers a critique of the speaking voice in mainstream poetry, which assumes that a poem records an 'I' speaking authoritatively and arrogantly ('Who am I to speak?' is the essay's subtitle). He shows how the best recent British poets have struggled in post-modern vein to articulate the relations between self, language and power, concluding that the 'I

has not only to be learned, but struggled for; these poets have recognised the political importance of subjectivity and will accept marginality to speak for it.

A more engaging essay is Helen Kidd's which focuses on female writers in Britain in an investigation of the politics of the writing subject. Using her own poems as subject-matter, she demonstrates her aversion to the tyranny of fixed form and absolute truth, preferring to experiment with the placing of words and playful questioning. She views this as essentially feminist, a way in which female subject identity is formulated. She also explores the concept of "the woman in the ordinary", to use Eavan Boland's phrase, which sanctions the quotidian, and essentially female tasks. Cross-over between self and other, and between different art forms, she argues, is employed increasingly by women and echoes early modernist experiments with written and performance arts. Wendy Mulford's fluid image of the sea is celebrated as a means of negotiating subject identity, as is the idea of using language as a series of floating signifiers. Kidd ends a witty and elegant essay with an apologia for not making the writing of poetry her life, since it would privilege art at the expense of life and imitate the great male writing 'I' which transforms everything into its own subjectivity.

Robert Hampson's own essay in this collection interrogates language and ideology in contemporary poetry through exploration of the poetry of Allen Fisher, Charles Madge, David Miller, Ken Edwards and Adrian Clarke, much of which exhibits a sense of the power of place. This gives the poetry its *engagé* quality, informing it, in Clive Bush's words, with "a sense of the moment as a complex of occasions, as the meeting-place or crossroads of a multiplicity of codes or forces".

The final section of the book, "Case Studies", offers contributions by David Miller on Gael Turnbull, Peter Barry on Allen Fisher (again!), and Robert Sheppard on Lee Harwood. These are all in-depth explorations and, as such, reward specialist interest only. However, the concept of 'content-specific' poetry (which includes scientific, historical and social data and thereby challenges what constitutes the poetic) as employed by Allen Fisher is, perhaps, of wider interest. Barry's essay demonstrates how his long mid-1970s poem, "Place", which deals with South London, is concerned with the subject's attempts to 'place' himself within locale, culture, the historical and political juncture. Such poetry questions the nature of the speaking subject, throwing up a variety of disparate voices which lack an authoritative and privileged viewpoint.

This is a collection of provocative essays, some of more specialist interest than others, but all offering a trenchant insight into the vagaries and difficulties of poetic production outside the mainstream production of British poetry in the last two decades. I couldn't shake off the feeling that it was an old grudge or

festering sore which led to the recruitment of some of the contributors, but – whatever the provenance – the collection as a whole makes a significant and very handy companion to anyone teaching contemporary British poetry, or seeking to understand the deeper issues of situating herself as poet or cultural activist within the contemporary British scene.

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