

*Nothing is being suppressed. British Poetry of the 1970s*, Andrew Duncan (Shearsman)

I've said it before and I'll say it again: I am glad Andrew Duncan has written his books about 20th century poetry, but I wish he'd do some proper research, reference material, and not be so opinionated (or at least use critical material to back up his arguments). But at least he is paying attention to what went on in the world of poetry (or parts of it), this time in 1970s Britain, the decade when I first encountered and paid attention to small presses and alternative bookshops, though in my case it was a weird mix of Brian Patten, Adrian Mitchell, Ted Hughes, Ken Smith and Julian Beck alongside T.S. Eliot and the WW1 poets I was studying at the time in school. For me though, postpunk and improvised music was in the mix, as well as experimental theatre and radical politics – and I wish poetry was sometimes considered in relation to what else was going on at the time.

There are, it has to be said, some great sections in this book, and it does feel like the most shaped and edited of Duncan's critical volumes. That doesn't of course, mean there isn't his normal conjecture, assumption and generalisations, sometimes made using scant evidence. In fact the first chapter of *Nothing is being suppressed* is called 'Generalisations about the Seventies' which, despite my scepticism, is an intelligent series of statements 'designed not to be controversial' but 'placed as the front as a basis', a kind of foundation for what follows. It works well, even if one feels one can't argue back to what is being presented as a given here.

Duncan is at his best when he writes at length about a subject, so chapter such as 'Speaking Volumes', a weirdly selective summary of what books were published when, and his quick dips into Conceptual Art and Visual Poetry are less successful. Yes, Michael Gibbs and John Powell Ward are good examples of the latter, but one can't help feeling that Duncan is regurgitating information gathered up in a recent Uniform Books edition on the former, and that other visual poetry by the likes of Bob Cobbing also deserve attention.

Chapters on 'Psychedelic Coding' and 'Post-western' (not cowboys but Western society seen through fringe science, home and landscape: a good example of wider contextualisation) are better, if brief, whilst elsewhere Duncan seems to want to elevate a few selected names. There's a whole chapter on Colin Simms and his poems of American experience, whilst the oddly titled chapter '*The Bloodshed, the Shaking House*' creates a kind of alternative history, or 'folklore', where 'Martin Thom and Brian Marley are remembered as the supreme moments of the Seventies, the excelling goals for journeys to bring the dace back to life.' Their work *is* interesting but one gets the feeling of a desperate attempt at literary mouth-to-mouth resuscitation long after the corpse has gone cold.

Elsewhere, another strangely titled chapter, 'The Geothermal Turret: *News of Warring Clans*', turns out to be an erudite and considered critique of Prynne's work; in fact one of the most lucid discussions of his poetry I've read. It's a highlight of the book, along with chapters on Iain Sinclair, Allen Fisher (though I think this is mostly drawn from Duncan's book of interviews with him – apologies if this is wrong), and a discussion about 'Who Owns the Future?', where Duncan questions the critical elevation of Ken Smith and Basil Bunting. This is mostly intelligent and well-reasoned, although I fail to see why Smith's marvellous *Fox Running* prompts Duncan to ask 'Why doesn't Smith describe feelings?' Because the reader

can work them out from the events and description in the text; they don't need to be explicit!

In a strange example of synchronicity I'd been rereading and listening to *Briggflatts* before my copy of the book arrived. I can understand Duncan's suspicions about the imposition of a new canon or hierarchy but it seems to me that there are obvious answers to be had. Ken Smith was one of two Bloodaxe authors who the publisher managed to get high profile publicity for: in Smith's case this was mostly the result of him being writer-in-residence at Wormwood Scrubs prison. Bunting was very much a neglected modernist, and – as Duncan I'm sure knows – was reintroduced to the poetry world by Tom Pickard, at a time when modernism was being reconsidered, and 'poetry of the North', ideas of place and locale, as well as dialect and excluded voices, were in vogue. That doesn't mean I don't rate both these poets and texts highly, it's just the way things happened. I for one am glad that both *Fox Running* and *Briggflatts* remain in print and continue to attract readers.

Strangely, neither of these texts get a mention in the other fantastic chapter, where Duncan considers 'the Long Poem of the 1970s' by discussing the long poems, plural, of the era. Duncan makes a strong case for them being 'a feature of the 1970s', offers up a lengthy but selective reading list, and then offers brief comments on a strange selection of these, often missing out texts I'm not alone in thinking important, e.g Ted Hughes' *Crow*. Perhaps Duncan feels enough words and time have been spent analysing the more famous poems he names, perhaps he is attempting to be inclusive, write about his favourites, or draw attention to neglected work? There's also, of course, the possibility that what he writes about had more of a presence at the time, although I'm not convinced.

Whilst it's good to see long poems or sequences by W.S. Graham, David Jones (a bit of a shoe-in), Harry Guest, (An)Tony Lopez, Allen Fisher, and Andrew Crozier included, but I'm far less interested in the work of Jeremy Reed, Ian Crichton Smith and George Macbeth (who Duncan disses anyway). There's an interesting conclusion to the chapter, noting the practical and financial difficulties of publishing long poems in magazines, proposing that long poems were 'a line of advance', and suggesting that

The starting point for these poems is questions which are rather older and which were often put by readers of poetry. The questions *where, what is your moral and theological vision? And what is your political commitment and system?* The long poems connect to the questions but don't answer them [...]

I'm not convinced, although Duncan is astute in realising that long poems were often written due to 'internal exile, a rejection of the values of the news media and of what political and cultural authorities were saying.' He also notes that 'rejection could either be from the Right of the Left and was certainly more to do with the failure of authority than with dislike of their success.'

He mentions Judith Kazantzis here, someone whose work I certainly feel is neglected, but mostly adheres to the binary notion of 'mainstream poets like Thwaite, Hooker, Wain, Hill, Humphreys' (despite recognizing that their work is 'similar to the alternative poetry') in opposition to 'the Underground', cynically suggesting that '[t]here was an alternative

*everything*' and that in the end '[t]he unavoidable questions of the mid-70s were resolved by a wide-spectrum surrender to the power of capital' and that '[a]lternatives became less fascinating.'

Yes, but... Resolved or defeated? Isn't there a difference? And what about new innovative and experimental poetics that emerged despite the collapse of the so-called Underground? Just as small publishers found new ways to sell their books after the collapse of alternative bookshops, just as society changed and adapted after the end of the 60s utopian dream, poets found new audiences, new forms, new media, new ways of publishing, new ways to write. In his 'Afterword', Duncan offers a different picture, accepting that 'you can see the Underground as a river that breaks up into dozens of shallow streams and finally runs into the sand.' I'm a cynic at heart, but this seems simplistic and negative, reductionist even. I'm interested in some of those streams, and believe that some find routes to other lakes and oceans.

I can't help feeling that Duncan sometimes strays too close to the mainstream, focussing on published books, whilst choosing to stay away from performance poetry (where are John Cooper Clarke and Attila the Stockbroker in Duncan's 1970s?), theatre or stand-up. Maybe even song lyrics (Howard Devoto anyone?), let alone the freeform improvisations of Julie Tippetts and Maggie Nichols at the London Musicians Collective which might be considered as sound poetry? And where is Michael Horovitz? Surely he at least deserves a mention?

No, nothing is being suppressed, least of all by Andrew Duncan. There's no conspiracy, but I want a bigger, different picture. I know that part of this is to do with taste (it always is), but I can't help feeling Duncan doesn't quite play his cards straight here: is this a survey, a critical book, or Andrew Duncan's extended desert island books? How critically detached or emotionally invested is he? 'There is grey sludge underneath consciousness', he declaims in his discussion of liminality and the sublime, a sludge Duncan thankfully keeps well away from, preferring to say in the sludge-free thinking zone.

In the end, the 'Afterword' lets Duncan cover his tracks. He notes that the defeat of Corbyn in 2019 has added another layer to his and our perception of radicalism, and altered the underlying thesis of how he began this book, and acknowledges that '[t]here is a whole world of alternative poets today', at the same time giving a nod to visual arts and literary theorists. He concludes by answering some of my questions, stating that he wanted 'to rescue things that have never been written down and which are threatened with forgetfulness and decay', and declaring that he is 'describing what people said and wrote in the 1970s' whilst flagging up the problem with setting aside 'what people in 2020 [and presumably 2022] think about the time and what selective memory processes have been set in motion to cover up deception.' If he almost undermines the whole project with his jibe that 'any kind of marketing is better than total oblivion', he then recovers enough for an upbeat ending, where despite 'discontinuity' there is 'a whole theme park of abandoned poetic projects' to explore. I can't see how Duncan can dissociate himself from contemporary poetry and thought, but once again he has produced an intelligent, provocative and sometimes annoying volume.

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