

Collected Poems One 1968-1997, Peter Finch (Seren)
Collected Poems Two 1997-2021, Peter Finch (Seren)

The small press world was very different in 1982 when my friend Graham Palmer and I started *Stride* magazine. Magazines were analogue, usually photocopied or duplicated, often stapled by hand, and sales were via mail order unless you could persuade 'alternative' bookshops to take copies on sale or return. Even when booksellers were friendly and did sell copies, it was hard to extract money from them; and sales never covered the petrol I used up motorcycling round London stores or driving the meandering route I sometimes took to drop copies off in Oxford, Leamington Spa, Coventry, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester...

There was, of course, no internet, email, or social media. You could swop flyers, leave them in bookshops or the South Bank poetry library, and send review copies out – often in exchange for magazines you were expected to review. There were small press fairs, often in draughty halls in strange towns or cities, with little publicity and even fewer sales, though you did get to meet other publishers and poets. I particularly remember the first time I met Allen Fisher and Alan Halsey in Shrewsbury, and also meeting and propping up a bar in Northampton with Mike Shields (of *Orbis*) and Martin Stannard because the main room with our stalls in was suddenly – and unforgivably – commandeered for an all day poetry reading.

There were small press poets who immediately got in touch with every new magazine who editors soon learnt to ignore, along with submissions of rhyming doggerel, but there was also the delight in hearing from new authors, and in becoming part of something that seemed alive and experimental, with a history of 1960s and 70s revolutionary zeal, readings and magazines, but that now walked hand-in-hand with post-punk and improvised music, music zines and independent cassette labels, radical theatre, and new performance and exhibition spaces.

There were of course key individuals within the small press scene, often at odds with the likes of the Poetry Society and ignored by mainstream poetry publishers, and there was one more key than others: Peter Finch, who operated out of Oriel, Cardiff. He had previous with his own small presses, and actually wanted to stock new magazines, wanted to submit to yours (and mine), wanted you to keep going, wanted you to be different, opinionated and make things possible; he would heckle and encourage. He put on poetry festivals and events in Cardiff, which is where I was first introduced to him in person by the writer John Gimplett. I had a *Stride* stall, did a reading, and watched Bob Cobbing and Bird Yak clear a restaurant with their mix of yowling, abstract drumming and gas-mask one-string guitar. I'd seen plenty of that kind of stuff at the London Musicians Collective, usually with five or six others watching, but nobody except Finch would think of sticking them in front of 200 people eating their lunch and then enjoy watching the diners' responses and subsequent mass exodus, leaving full plates and wine glasses abandoned on the tables.

Since then I've promoted a couple of Finch readings in Exeter – one as a support act to Roger McGough, which he smashed; read once or twice more in Cardiff for him; and co-tutored an Arvon Foundation course with him. And although I've failed to tempt him down to Cornwall,

we've kept in vague touch via emails and poems. I've also amassed – courtesy of jumble sales, library turn-outs and secondhand bookshops – quite a collection of early Finch publications, which helped explain the amazing and informed talk he gave at Arvon on Sound and Visual Poetry, and also offered critical context.

Because, as these hefty new books make evident, Finch came out of Dada and Surrealism, out of performance and sound poetry, out of collage and cut-up, erasure and what we now call sampling and remix. His work is entertaining, experimental, thought-provoking and accessible; a real pick'n'mix in fact. But Finch knows what he is doing, and over the years I learnt to trust him completely as an editor and poet. When he opened for McGough in a sold out Exeter theatre he began with an abstract sound poem, and I confess I had a moment of panic. Soon, however, the audience, who were mostly there to see the headliner, began nervously laughing before guffawing and offering wild applause. Finch reeled them in further with a couple of more straightforward poems and kept them in the palm of his hand for the rest of his varied performance.

It's great that Seren have given Finch (and his editor Andrew Taylor) so much space to fill, and have reproduced so much of Finch's visual work, some even in colour. Subject matter, processes, affectations, source material and poetic influences, enter, exit and re-enter the work, but there are always new materials, new processes and ideas in the mix too. There is also a sustained attention to and curiosity about language itself: how it can be remoulded, changed, abused, erased; what happens when syntax or meaning is destroyed, when different vocabularies or reference materials collide, when texts are alphabetized, torn up, or turned into lists. How poetry can be made new. Always.

This work sprawls and expands, feeding on itself and everything that is around it. It comments and critiques, dances and debates, screams and shouts, sometimes sulks in the corner but then quietly comes out rested and refreshed, raring to go. It is alert, blurred, crumpled, distressed, energetic, folded, gorgeous, hilarious, incredible, jokey, charismatic. It is often ridiculous, always serious, never afraid to embarrass itself or satirize others, whilst constantly acknowledging Schwitters, Cobbing, Ginsberg, and whoever Finch has been reading that morning. It is questionable, ridiculous, subversive, terrific, unique poetry which cannot be snared, trapped or caged; yet Taylor and Seren Books have charmed it on to the pages of this generous, rain-filled, assertive, definitive collection. I look forward to volume three.

Rupert Loydell