

*The Waste Land. A Biography of a Poem*, Matthew Hollis (Faber)

I love *The Waste Land*. My Dad, an engineer and aeronautical draughtsman who had retrained as a school teacher, was not a great reader of poetry, but he did like T.S. Eliot, and Eliot was one of the first poets I read for myself. I loved the incantatory nature of his writing, and the vivid imagery of the London, pub and river scenes in *The Waste Land*. Even studying the poem for English A Level didn't put me off, although the pencilled translations and notes are still in the margins of my father's copy of Eliot's *Collected Poems* which I kept after he died.

Neither my own notes nor Eliot's published ones do anything other than point elsewhere, offering a glossary of source materials, allusions and asides that doesn't actually help understand or experience the poem, which I prefer to remain as a series of shifting scenes and episodes rooted in 20th Century London and Modernism. Others of Eliot's poems work differently, and critical work that deconstructs or theologizes poems such as 'Ash Wednesday' or 'The Four Quartets' are more useful than those that impose a grand narrative on or reveal a hidden meaning in *The Waste Land*.

The title of Matthew Hollis' book suggests that it offers a new approach to Eliot's poem: I was intrigued by the notion of the biography of a poem rather than a poet. However, the subtitle is a misnomer; what we actually get is yet another sprawling biography of Ezra Pound, T.S. and Vivienne Eliot, and an account of their interactions with each other, publishers, writers, supporters, enemies and critics.

I'm really not sure what Hollis thinks his book is doing, or why he thinks Eliot's interactions with the likes of the Bloomsbury Set are of particular interest. The book is often clunkily organised, with set scenes interspersed with both summative episodes and unwanted authorial commentary and scene setting. What are we to make of the fact that 'A hunter's moon hung low over Margate' (p. 290) or that 'Pound took to life on the Left Bank' (p. 278), or being told that 'Something truly exceptional had taken place between Eliot, Pound and *The Waste Land*, something truly rare' (p.362) ?

Pound's editing and re-versioning of Eliot's draft text is well-documented elsewhere, not least in the published volume of *The Waste Land Facsimile*, and much written about. I really don't need Hollis to give me or the editing process his seal of approval! Better to look at versions of the text and think about how the language and form of the poems and overall sequence works than offer banal context and vague approval.

There is, thankfully, some close reading and intelligent criticism on offer here, but not enough; time and time again we are returned to the geographical settings and (perceived or assumed) emotions of Eliot's life, all too often in relationship to a revolving cast of characters whose biographical back stories are awkwardly dropped in for the reader before any action commences. The book made me dig out my copy of Kevin Jackson's wonderful epistolic book *Constellation of Genius*, (Windmill Books, 2013) which wittily documents the international web of

modernism, through the lives of artists, musicians, writers, thinkers, scientists and politicians throughout the year 1922.

I am glad *The Waste Land* continues to find readers and provoke new critical writing but, despite Hollis' note that he has not drawn on previous biographies and has returned to original sources (and I am not accusing him of doing other than he claims), it mostly feels like an intelligent and thoughtful condensing and distillation of material that is already available. It's engaging, mostly well-written stuff, but it needed to focus on the poem more, which surely is – along with other work by Eliot – what it's all about? Pound gets it right in the 1966 quote which Hollis uses as one of the book's epigraphs: 'I can only repeat, but with the urgency of 50 years ago: READ HIM.'

Rupert Loydell