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**Review Article**

**Poets and The Second World War**

*Spirit Above Wars: A Study of the English Poetry of the Two World Wars.* By A. Banerjee. London: Macmillan, 1976. Pp. 232. \$17.50.

*Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War.* By Vernon Scannell. London: Woburn Press, 1976. Pp. 245. £5.95.

As a perfectly mannered Monty Python newsreader recently announced, the Second World War is now entering a sentimental phase. Given current nostalgia for the forties, it is surprising how little popular awareness there is of the literature of the war. Television reruns of war movies on the B.B.C., renewed interest in the fashions and visual styles of the period, even the popular paperback series on battles and weapons, have all left the writing of the war comparatively untouched. Serious studies of specific writers have not made their work widely known. The much publicized recent biography of Keith Douglas, for instance, has not resulted in a re-issue of his *Collected Poems*, which remains out of print.

These two new books attempt to offer an account of the poetry written during the war. A Banerjee compares the English poetry of the First World War with that of the second, but his section on the later war is twice as long as that on the "The Pre-War Poetic Scene" (his first chapter) and the earlier war. Vernon Scannell, who is himself a poet of the second war, offers an introductory exposition of the poetry written about war by British and American poets. Both Banerjee and Scannell explain what selected poems are about, and both attempt some kind of summatory judgement on each poet discussed.

Although Banerjee has a woolly argument running through his study, neither he nor Scannell offers much more than a series of short, unrelated essays on the poets they have chosen. For readers who have no acquaintance with the poetry of the war, the books may have some interest. But the fragmented nature of each study, and the inability of either author to place the poetry in any kind of context means that their usefulness to anyone other than the uninformed general reader is much in doubt. Even assuming the existence of such a reader, however, there is little in these potted critiques to drive the layman to the poetry itself.

The complexity of literary reactions to the Second World War is probably one of the reasons that its literature is still little known. Unlike the English poetry of the 1914-1918 war, and the autobiographical prose written about it, the writing of the 1939-1945 war is not easily categorized. There is not a uniform sense of horror in the work growing out of the later war. There is also a wide variety of landscape and setting. There is a less clear division between the villains in authority and the passive, obedient victims than in the poetry of the earlier war. The concept of front-line suffering is more complicated because it often includes civilians. And much of the finest writing of the second war does not deal with action, but with the tedium of uniformed inaction. Of course there is a variety in the writing of the first war, but to the public it has an easily assimilable core. Its setting is the lunar landscape of the western front, and its manner is one of stoicism and horror. One has only to compare typical and popular works of each war to see the difference. *Journey's End*, *Good-bye To All That*, *Memoirs Of An Infantry Officer*, the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen; there are significant differences among all these works, but their cumulative effect is identifiable and comprehensible. In contrast, *The Purple Plain*, *Alamein To Zem Zem*, and the poetry of Alun Lewis seem to embody a confusing complexity of locale, manner and outlook. And if one adds to this second list, *The Ministry of Fear*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Power House* as representative novels of the second war, the dissimilarity is, at first glance, even more apparent.

Banerjee bases the argument of *Spirit Above Wars* on this difference: the similarity of response in the poetry of the first war and the variety of response in that of the later war. He argues that the basic intention of the earlier poetry was propagandistic reporting; that its mood is merely one of passive suffering. This narrowness — according to Banerjee — makes the poetry of the first much more limited than that of the second. In the later war the "poetical content" of war poetry "has been intensified and extended by war experiences" (p. 100). "The war, ironically enough, enabled poets to realise human experience with greater depth and immediacy. In short, the war concretely represented the tragedy of human life" (p. 100). The woolliness in these phrases is typical of *Spirit Above Wars*. Banerjee's criteria are arbitrary because they involve concepts as confused as that of war representing *concretely* the tragedy of human life. Banerjee seldom assesses the poetic quality of the works under discussion. Their level of achievement is assumed to be similar as he concentrates on their content, their revealed attitudes. The result is an extraordinarily stodgy, pedantic and moralistic approach. Here he is on the inadequacy of Wilfred Owen's reaction to war:

He started, as a war poet, from the basic position of his acknowledged model Sassoon, but without resting content with the negative emotions of anger and hatred aroused by satirical verse, he evoked positive feelings of pity and compassion . . .

This poetry has had a tremendous appeal for its humanity and nobility. But now, when we can see the horrors of that war in a historical perspective from a distance of more than fifty years, when we realise that the belief that the war could have been avoided was a myth or, at best, wishful thinking, when we find from the practices of the major poets of the Second World War that war can be best dealt with as an essential component of modern poetic consciousness, we begin to see weaknesses in Owen's "poetry of pity". . . . Owen, like the other poets of the First World War, was so overwhelmed by the catastrophe of war that he could not view it objectively as another symbol of the tragedy that pervades human existence. (p. 43)

Banerjee's obtuseness runs through his whole argument. What is objectivity in this context? How was Owen to view war "objectively", and why would this be an advantage? Are we all agreed on what is "the tragedy that pervades human existence", let alone that war is a "symbol" of this condition? The result of Banerjee's dogmatic search for "the wider implications of war" (p. 47), the "seeds of change expressed in purely human terms" (p. 60) — Owen's poems do not have these — "the paradoxes of the human condition" (p. 56), is that he seizes upon any mystical utterance that seems to him to interpret war "objectively" or "broadly". Thus the most romantic verse of Sidney Keyes, in spite of its vagueness and generalised dread, is closest to Banerjee's concept of "proper" or "appropriate" war poetry. While recognising that Keyes's writing is often "literary", he regards the poem "Rome Remember" as a "perfect" poem, with an "epic sweep" in "perfect keeping with the theme of lament and warning" (p. 194). He quotes the following lines in illustration:

The bronze wolf howls when the moon turns red.  
 The trolls are massing for their last assault.  
 Your dreams are full of claws and scaly faces  
 And the Gothic arrow is pointed at your heart.

It is, in fact, the absence of immediate experience to which Banerjee is responding. Keyes's own experience of the war was that of an undergraduate at Oxford awaiting call up while Europe burned, and that of the officer undergoing training. He was killed three days after going into action. His poems typify the bleak uncertainty of his generation, waiting for the end after Munich; that generation described by Alex Comfort as one "brought up in the certainty that it would be killed in action on behalf of an unreality against an insanity."<sup>1</sup> Banerjee sees "wider implications" in this mood (which was common to the young men of 1939, 1940 and 1941) but makes no attempt to place it in an historical context. Keith Douglas, too, went through this period of unrealised dread at Oxford and while undergoing training. But his manner changed after

experiencing combat. His best war poems are those growing out of his experience of fighting, although his melancholia, his *bête noire*, was not shaken off by the hardening and maturing effect of that experience.

Banerjee makes no such distinctions. Hot on the trail of "wider implications" and "the paradoxes of the human condition", he is attuned to generalised concepts and basically unresponsive to the immediacy of the best war poetry (including Wilfred Owen's). To Banerjee, Douglas's poetry is all of a piece: "His earlier poems foreshadow the subtle irony and detachment, coupled with the passionate attempt to explore the mysteries of Love, Time and Death" (p. 108). The only change is some mystical maturing: "It is true that during the year 1943-44, he created poems out of his actual war experiences, but in the majority of these poems the fundamental preoccupations remain the same as in his earlier poems" (p. 108).

Douglas's own views on experience and war poetry offer a stark contrast to Banerjee's blandishments. Writing on "Poets in this War" at the Middle East R.A.C. Base Depot, away from the fighting, Douglas insists on experience: "It seems there were no poets at Dunkirk; or if there were, they stayed there. Instead we have had poetic pioneers and land girls in the pages (respectively) of *New Writing* and *Country Life*."<sup>2</sup> As a result, Douglas asserts, there is not a single poet of the "present war" who "stands out". Poets like Keyes do not write about the war in Douglas's sense: "There are a number of very young men sprung up among the horrors of wartime Oxford, some of whom, notably Sidney Keyes, are technically quite competent, but apparently have no experiences worth writing of" (f. 144). There is a little posturing here. Douglas himself was only twenty-three in 1943, and his argument has an immaturity — particularly in its stridence — that his poetry and prose about the fighting avoid. His emphasis on war writers being engaged in "active warfare" is, however, both deeply felt and consistent with the maturing of his own poetry after the desert battles.

Opressed by his own experience of battle, Douglas argues that: "Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological" (f. 146). His own desert poems are striking contradictions of this assertion, but his sense of inadequacy before the example of Owen and Sassoon is clearly genuine. What distinguishes these two poets is that they "lived with the fighting troops and wrote of their experiences while they were enduring them" (f. 145). This accuracy of experience in the work of the earlier poets is unsurpassable by the next generation:

The hardships, pain, & boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great war (sic) that every day on the battle fields (sic) of the western desert — and no doubt on the Russian battlefields (sic) as well — their poems are illustrated. (f. 146)

Because Banerjee is so insensitive to nuance, he cannot illustrate what happened to Douglas's poetry as he matured. Instead we find this nonsensical comment on the weak Oxford poem "An Exercise Against Impatience": "Douglas was still in Oxford and had not, as yet, undergone actual war experiences, but already one can see a poetic mind that is intelligently aware of the terrible realities, and yet is robust with hope" (p. 113). Quite apart from the fact that the poem does not reflect a "poetic mind . . . robust with hope", Banerjee's approval of such a quality indicates how extraneous are his criteria for judging war poetry. He sees robust hope, presumably, in Douglas's sentence: "Even, we will command and wield/ good forces." The vagueness in the sentence is typical of the theoretic quality in a poem written in 1940, from the myopic confines of Oxford, about inaction and waiting. Douglas has argued that "spirits of every gentle sort/ are in the heart/ of every element, its richest part,/ imprisoned." The lines Banerjee quotes are preceded by Douglas's assertion that "in the chaotic state/ tomorrow, we can set these spirits free." The mood of "hope" is anything but "robust". Everything about the poem suggests a tentative, unrealised attempt at believing in the future at a time of spiritual atrophy. The poem only comes alive when embodying this mood, as in its clipped, truncated assertion, "The work will be/ for us now, only to wait," or in its opening section on Oxford itself:

This city experiences a difficult time. The old bells  
fall silent, or are bidden to silence. The buildings lean  
inwards, watching the questionable sky.

These lines capture the experience of Oxford in the first six months of 1940 and are conspicuously more convincing than troubled assertions about "good forces" and imprisoned spirits. Banerjee is so obsessed with universal attitudes to war that he is quite unable to see that the context of many of the poems he discusses is varied. Successful war poems in 1940 of necessity reflect a different reality from that of 1944. The phoney war and its malaise were *part* of the Second World War. There is no essential element to its poetry.

Of course Keith Douglas wrote about war before he had experienced it. But his Oxford attitudes to war do not "foreshadow the kind of war poems that he was to write after his own war experiences" (Banerjee, p. 113). They are poignant evocations of both his yearning for stable, permanent relations and his menaced appreciation of a last civilian summer in the ordered lushness of Oxford. Their immediacy is so striking because the emotion is so overwhelmingly real:

Well, I am thinking this may be my last  
summer, but cannot lose even a part  
of pleasure in the old-fashioned art of  
idleness. I cannot stand aghast

at whatever doom hovers in the background;  
 while grass and buildings and the somnolent river,  
 who know they are allowed to last for ever,  
 exchange between them the whole subdued sound

of this hot time. ("Canoe," 1940)

This is obviously a distinctive war poem even if its themes are not an "objective" contemplation of "universal" issues. In contrast, explicit depictions of war written by Douglas at Oxford have an unrealised, literary quality which is characteristic of poetry of the thirties rather than poetry of the war itself. "Russians", based on a report from the Russo-Finnish war, has a misplaced sense of detachment:

How silly that soldier is pointing his gun at the wood:  
 he doesn't know it isn't any good.  
 You see, the cold and cruel northern wind  
 has frozen the whole battalion where they stand.

This brittle facility antedates the fall of France. Douglas has emotions about the war, but it is not his, Englishman's war. It is a European war, and he can regret its bloodletting at a distance. The last line of "Russians" clinches the charade-like mode, reminiscent of Auden-Isherwood or Warner, in which the terror is to be insisted on — across the Channel: "Well,/ at least forget what happens when it thaws."

Douglas's descriptions of battlefields in the Middle East are of a completely different order.<sup>3</sup> Even his apparent detachment in the battlefield poems creates a mood of either frozen, fascinated horror or sardonic resignation. The closing lines of "Cairo Jag" offer a vivid contrast to "Russians". After describing the Levantine indulgences of leave in Cairo, Douglas continues:

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world  
 the vegetation is of iron  
 dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery  
 the metal brambles have no flowers or berries  
 and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine  
 the dead themselves, their boots, and possessions  
 clinging to the ground, a man with no head  
 has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

Banerjee's comments on these lines are typically tangential. In his 1956 British Academy lecture, G.S. Fraser compares the futility of the Cairo "conventions" with the dead soldier's packet of chocolate and souvenir. He points out the "ultimately enraging" effect of a world in which "moral death and disorder match physical death and disorder." Banerjee takes over this complex reaction of Fraser's (he quotes the relevant passage) and simplifies it out of

existence: "he (Douglas) depicts the squalor of civilian and military life, only to emphasize their sameness. . . . The idea behind the accumulation of diverse descriptions of civilian life and the military front is to show their essential similarity" (p. 125). Which comment completely overlooks the "enraging" quality produced by the seemingly dispassionate observation of a chaotic world in which horrors are familiar. To assume that the Cairo scenes depict normal "civilian life" is to have missed entirely the detached yet flinty tone with which the grotesqueries of the leave "Jag" have been evoked. It is the inevitability of return to the "new world" whose "vegetation is of iron" that colours the choices offered by the "stained white town", and links the poet's opening line, "Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake", to the headless man returned with his souvenirs from the enemy-leave-jag-base.

Douglas has not only digested his experience in a poem like "Cairo Jag". He also shows that mixture of toughness and compassion which is his distinctive trait. Banerjee cannot cope with this combination; his words tumble all over themselves in stupendously inappropriate comment: "his naturally passionate mind looked for thrills and excitement wherever he could find them, and his *Alamein to Zem Zem* shows that once he was in the battlefied, he reacted more easily to fear and exhilaration than the deeper issues of war" (p. 123).

Vernon Scannell is never as absurd as this, and his English sensibility is a relief after wading through Banerjee's curiously non-English study of writing that is almost always involved in a very intimate way with "Englishness" (or Welshness). Banerjee uses a fair amount of background information in *Spirit Above Wars* (without ever giving a feeling of context). He knows what was said about whom, and indicates what were the main literary trends before both wars discussed. Scannell approaches his poets directly and seldom refers to events or debates outside the poems. The result is much less turgid than Banerjee's scrambling through biographical and historical facts. Scannell has no central argument to his introductory study. But his views and expectations are marred by prejudices which merge into dogmatic assumptions about the proper nature of war poetry.

These prejudices manifest themselves when Scannell criticises a poet for inappropriate ideas or modes. For instance, many of Charles Causley's war poems, "instead of exploring and recording the bitter realities of lower-deck service in time or war, the boredom, physical discomfort, lack of privacy, fear, violence and claustrophobia seem more concerned with transforming and idealising" (p. 131). This is perilously close to a prescription for "bitter realities". The effectiveness of Causley's manner is not at issue. Scannell is denying him the right to that manner. The result is more disquieting than a piece of insensitive criticism which seems merely to miss the point — as in Scannell's commentary on Causley's "Song of the Dying Gunner A.A.1". In it, Scannell sees Causley dealing with death in a "euphemistic way":

Oh mother my mouth is full of stars  
 As cartridges in the tray  
 My blood is a twin-branched scarlet tree  
 And it runs all runs away.

Oh *Cooks to the Galley* is sounded off  
 And the lads are down in the mess  
 But I lie done by the forrard gun  
 With a bullet in my breast.<sup>4</sup>

To Scannell, death's "claws are drawn both by the music and by the imagery which denies death's ugliness and finality through a vague literary pantheism" (p. 128). What he has so completely missed is the pathos in the "song" with its forlorn homeliness in the mess-call, and the cleverly deadening effect caused by substituting "done" for the expected "down" in the penultimate line. John Carey remarks in a particularly acerbic review of *Not Without Glory*: "You can't beat that", as he quotes Scannell on the "Song": "Scannell's insensitivity almost always outdoes expectation."<sup>5</sup>

Insensitivity perhaps, but preconception is probably a better term. While accepting that Causley is "never dull", Scannell concludes that his war poems "generally contrive to evade direct confrontation with the material with which most war poetry deals, actual violence, terror, loneliness, separation and death. The quality that his poems all possess is the rather incongruous one of charm" (p. 133). (And Othello's tales to Desdemona?) Because of his insistence on a certain kind of response, Scannell brushes aside poems which appear sentimental. This is a pity because sentimentality and popular appeal are interesting facets of the literature of a mass war. Poems which embody stock responses are often peculiarly un-banal in situations where the stock response is genuine or even appropriate. Stiff-upper-lip sentimentality usually jars, but there are moments in the writing of the second war in which one is trapped into responding to sentiment. Scannell oversimplifies in bland comments such as: "John Pudney's facile verses were popular during the war but their shallow sentimentality would be unlikely to find admirers now" (p. 168).

The limitations of Scannell's prescriptive approach are most apparent in his uneasiness with F.T. Prince's "Soldiers Bathing". To him, Prince writes the wrong *kind* of poetry: "almost everything that he had written (before the war) evincing a cultivated and fastidious mind, but the transition from a scholarly peacetime existence to the life of a soldier in time of war seemed scarcely to affect the kind of poetry he was writing" (p. 153). One is not sure whether scholarly habits or Prince's cultivated and fastidious mind are most inappropriate to war poetry. "Soldiers Bathing", Scannell argues, is the only poem by Prince which "deals directly with a theme presented by the fact of his being a soldier," but the treatment is unsuitable: "even here the incident (of watching the men in



his unit enjoying a bathe in the sea) is curiously unreal, related as it is to paintings by Michelangelo and Pollaiuolo and to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ" (p. 153).

Prince's men are in fact rather vividly described in "Soldiers Bathing". However, their "game" is an escape from war. "All's pathos now." The ruminative note in the poem is probably what Scannell finds unreal, but it, too, leads to a marvellously vivid recreation of the cartoon (and later the painting):

And reading in the shadows of his pallid flesh, I see  
 The idea of Michelangelo's cartoon  
 Of soldiers bathing, breaking off before they were half done  
 At some sortie of the enemy, an episode  
 Of the Pisan wars with Florence. I remember how he showed  
 Their muscular limbs that clamber from the water  
 And heads that turn across the shoulder, eager for the slaughter,  
 Forgetful of their bodies that are bare,  
 And hot to buckle on and use the weapons lying there.

Little pathos here; and very little that is unreal. The rippling tension and energy of the naked figures in the pictures clearly contrast with Prince's shouting soldiers, playing in the sea. But the moral is explicit:

They were Italians who knew war's sorrow and disgrace  
 And showed the thing suspended, stripped: a theme  
 Born out of the experience of war's horrible extreme.

It is the hastiness of Scannell's method which prevents him from doing justice to poems like "Soldiers Bathing". He gallops through a series of poems, expressing his preferences, quoting chunks for purposes of exposition, and indulging in at times stodgy close reading, without any shaping argument or scheme. This map-maker's approach leaves *Not Without Glory* only as gripping as its quotations. Scannell does cover a wide range, and this in itself would be useful to a reader wanting to sample the poetry of the war via a simple introduction. Both the prejudices and the slap-happy approach of the author leave the book as little more than that, however. Without creating a context for the poetry of the Second World War, neither *Spirit Above Wars* nor *Not Without Glory* brings that body of writing any closer to the general public at which they are aimed.

#### NOTES

1. "Art and Social Responsibility," *Now*. Volume 2, p. 46.
2. BM Add. 53773 f. 143.
3. In a letter dated 10th August, 1943 to his friend J.C. Hall, Douglas is explicit about the effect of his battlefield experience:

In my early poems I wrote lyrically, as an innocent, because I was an innocent: I have (not surprisingly) fallen from that particular grace since then. . . . I see no reason to be either musical or sonorous about things at present. When I do, I shall be so again, and glad to. I suppose I reflect the cynicism and the careful absence of expectation (it is not quite the same as apathy) with which I view the world. . . . I never tried to write about war (that is battles and things, not London can Take it), with the exception of a satiric picture of some soldiers frozen to death, until I had experienced it. Now I will write of it, and perhaps one day cynic and lyric will meet and make me a balanced style.

(*Collected Poems*, edited by John Waller and J.C. Hall, London: Faber and Faber, 1966, pp. 149-50.)

4. This is the version from *Farewell, Aggie Weston*, Ashford: Hand and Flower Press, 1951, reprinted in *Union Street*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1960. Scannell (p. 128) quotes the last line of the first stanza as "And it runs all away." He spells "farrard" in line seven, "forward."
5. "Futility," *New Statesman*, 28 May 1976, p. 717.