

The Poetry of Anne Born: an Appreciation

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A full account of Anne Born's life, paying tribute to her achievements as historian, translator and poet – and her committed membership of the Devonshire Association for nearly thirty years – has already been admirably made in the obituary by Robin and Pamela Wootton in the Report and Transactions of The Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and the Arts, Volume 144. The main intention of this appreciation is to celebrate the enjoyment that anyone without that prior knowledge can obtain from her poems.

When I was a lad – the day before yesterday – poets were labelled. There were Nature Poets, Romantic Poets, Classical Poets, the Meta-physicals, War Poets, and a mysterious group called Modern Poets, often viewed with some trepidation or a weary shake of the head. Those wanting to parade their knowledge might refer to the Scottish Chaucerians – not a popular folk group or exclusive Edinburgh dining club, but some late fourteenth century poets of independent Scotland. In a way it was rather tabloid or Sellar and Yeatman (Romantic Poets were usually regarded as a ‘Good Thing’), nevertheless useful for chapter headings and giving an approximate feel for the *zeitgeist*, mood of the moment, spirit of the age.

What label then for Anne Born (Fig. 1), the subject of this appreciation? Shall we say ‘Nature Poet’? Certainly, as her words welcomed us to Kingsbridge:

*The Ham is a dune cushion to lounge on
by the river's last swing to a mouth
that swallows the sea twice a day*



Figure 1. Photograph of Anne Born (supplied by Oversteps Books).

Along the coast: *Long breakers draw in steady
as breaths to expire on the sand,
their whiteness gasps at sapphire,
their foam is light as a sigh*

Or walking on Dartmoor in a wind that “fills us with cold fruity wine”, we hear

*rivers and streams
talking down to the sea’s
hiss at the edge of land*

One poem I particularly like is FOXY:

*Suddenly
out on the cliffs
she faced me: a vixen
with a pally intimate grin
that let me in on secrets
she seemed willing to pass on.
My clothes grew into skin
my feet were as deft as hers.
She turned then, self-assured*

*went back into her life.
The place where she had been
emptied of her
except for a whiff of wildness
she'd shown me could somewhere be mine.*

It's vivid and direct. Her descriptions of sea and moor and birds and animals are not expressed with rapturous delight, the pantheistic reverence we find, for example, in Wordsworth, nor the folksy charm of Robert Frost; in the main there's a cool, almost clinical, unemotive appraisal, thoughtful and detached, observed with careful accuracy, telling of direct experience.

Let's take another label – as they say, something completely different – the 'War Poet'. Here's an example from the sonnet sequence based on letters her father wrote home to his father and sister while serving at the front in the Great War:

*I've lost count of all the horses
I've had with me in these four years.
My grey mare Dolly first out at the start
dyed with permanganate - white horses were targets
banned the battlefield. But the dye wore off
and Dolly was sniped from under me and died
screaming. Horses cry louder than men
and one hit in a team stuns the whole ride.
How many times I've held their heads,
shot and left them in the mud; we're not amazed
though yet to see them nod and acquiesce -
a wounded pair followed their groom through a day's
battle, bridleless, undismayed.
Who owns the means for such accounts to be paid?*

A later poem - SARAJEVO - looks with anguish at much more recent events in Bosnia, at the time brought to our television screens in stark detail:

*cold she lies on stones
dark hair winged
eyebrows perfect arcs
classic cheekbones.*

*The handsome man beside her
has turned away to sleep.*

*Their elegance
invites the camera.*

*Her wide eyes gleam
and you can almost hear
what she is telling
about her dream.*

*Her eyes are open
was there no time
or could no one bear
to close them ?*

In contrast, there are other less serious subjects which Anne Born wrote about, like *Drinking Cointreau with a Dutchman, a Dutch-woman and a Swiss by a peat fire in County Clare* or *A break in time*, both celebrating the simple pleasure of relaxing in good company. A favourite of mine is *Night Drive West*, a hymn to the A303 before by-passes and dual carriageways made crooked paths straight, also recalling memories of someone who enjoyed driving and, when at the wheel, maintained a lively pace. However I should again emphasise at this point that, although I inevitably refer briefly to events in her life, a full account, paying tribute to her achievements as translator and historian and her involvement with the Devonshire Association, has already been admirably made in the obituary by Robin and Pamela Wootton in the *150th Anniversary Report and Transactions*. My principal intention is to focus on the satisfaction that anyone without that prior knowledge can obtain from the poems. I find with some poets – though definitely not the case with Anne – the less you know about the life the more you enjoy the poems!

Let's take one more of those labels: is she a 'Romantic Poet'? In my view not, as already suggested, like those of the early nineteenth century, but definitely in what, without any pejorative connotation, we might call the 'Hollywood' sense. Love is 'a many-splendoured thing' and a recurring theme in Anne's poems, like the one which contrasts our "changed climate" with the unchanging contentment of living with someone you love:

*A new climate's hot unseason
baffles flowers and birds with winter spring*

.....

*In the mist nothing much is clear
except the mud on our boots
and our long warm changeless habitude.*

That same feeling, a simple expression of lasting affection, infuses the poem THERE:

*It's not when you enter a room
and a voice sounds out of the air
by the window.....
It's not the body-curved cushion.....
a newspaper folded at the wrong page.....
But the companion in the dream of hills
who walks with you into the bramble-fenced drive.....
who takes your hand and with an arm
round your shoulders, leads you away
to the garden where it is morning.....*

Such lines are full of unfettered free-flowing sentiment with which we can happily identify – coupled (in all senses) with the joy of sensual pleasure uninhibitedly expressed in SEAFEASTING:

*My clothes trail down the beach
as stepping stones to the depths
I'm in for now. Water, oh, my lover,
here I am to meet your high tide.*

*You seem cool but your strength
rocks me, holds me, covers me,
and what an appetite you give -
I dive deep for a handful of oysters,
.....
I drink air champagne, chew seaweed bread,
dive again and come up with more.
We mingle our juices, sea and I,
know each other's ebb and flow.*

*I suck on a sand eel to tickle my tongue
as you lap around each crease and orifice,
smooth away tensions, whisper
sweet storms into my ear.*

*How you always draw me to come
in with your tides and depths and muscle,*

*your dangers. Oh my challenger,
how do I pit my passion against you ?*

Wow! After the 9.00 p.m. watershed! In that and other poems there appears to be a triumphant rejoicing in the pleasure of being a woman. As a mere man, admittedly old-fashioned and aware that he's getting on to dangerous ground, moving into quicksand territory, but – he says hastily – not in any way condoning unfair discrimination, I can't avoid the impression from press comment and articles that today some modern women are rather cross about being a woman, whereas Anne's poems provide an exhilarating escape from controversial angst, suggesting that being feminine can be rather fun, bringing great pleasure and happiness, sometimes even girlish delight. Supremely added to that, with the exclusively special experience of giving birth comes the wonder, responsibility and sense of fulfilment indicated in the poem SINGLE TICKET:

*.....you beat
at my heart, turn in my sleep.
We share blood and hope in the dark.
My alarm bell rings and I start
to push at the door
Till I open and you come out
Throw up an arm at the light*

*Can you take what I give you, love,
This single ticket for life ?*

Thus far our survey of Anne Born's poetry has ranged from the tragedy of death to the unending wonder of life, between them all the breadth of experience and different subjects which intrigued and fascinated her and which she was continually exploring with an ever-eager spirit of enquiry – and there's more to come. But before that I want to highlight two other aspects of her work. First, the considerable on-going encouragement she gave to other poets: gratefully received by members of the Company of Poets (including my son James being 'encouraged like a new shoot to grow', as he said in a poem celebrating her 80th birthday); by members of the Devonshire Association with and for whom she edited the anthology *Leaves* in 1991; and all those who had their work published by

her very own Oversteps Books. I am pleased to add that this increasingly prolific publisher is still based in Devon under the supervision of Dr Alwyn Marriage, Anne's appointed successor and herself an accomplished poet. No need to compromise your principles by going to Amazon – full details of the current list can be found on www.overstepsbooks.com.

The second aspect of Anne's work that I don't want to neglect is her interest in and application to the craft of poetry, experimenting with different verse forms, techniques and styles, rather one assumes like her work as a translator, not just finding the right word but the best method of presentation for clarity of communication and total effect. Through Shakespeare in particular the structure of a sonnet is well known, but there are several others – like the sestina, villanelle, and pantoum – the details of which are beyond the scope of this paper. Those who wish to investigate further can find them set out in *The Poet's Manual*, in their variety and complexity perhaps comparable to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and often presenting a difficult challenge if the poet is to conform successfully to the discipline of the structure, continue to make sense – and remain well-tempered. In addition to these established forms, Anne was interested in how the poem looked on the page, how its appearance might be a mirror image of the subject: two memorable examples are her poem replicating the building of Castle Drogo and another imitating and extolling Rowena Cade's construction of the visually dramatic Minack Theatre.

Those two latter poems are typical of another distinctive characteristic. Just as in *Histories*, jointly written with fellow poet Alex Smith, and in her poetic biography *Drake*, she is posing answers to the questions: 'What actually happened? Why did they do that?', so in these poems about construction (like others about making clocks or mining tin) she seems to be asking, with 'mechanically minded' curiosity: 'How does it work?' 'How did they do it?' 'What tools did they use?' The poem STRIPPER – not what you think – is a vivid example:

*He fleeces her
in less time than it takes
to strip a woman -
in one minute*

*he's thrown her
 caught her between his legs
 and turning her anti-clockwise
 peels her, first the throat,
 a short curved cut,
 then down a flank and leg
 so her coat falls open
 neatly around her tail,
 the other legs, the back,
 and she and warmth are parted.
 Discarded with a push
 she leaps away, sprung lighter,
 to a wondering lamb
 in close-curved jacket
 neat-fitted to a body
 ripe for the table.
 "Smell it," the shearer says,
 thrusting the fleece at my nose,
 "It smells delicious." It does,
 lanoline-sweet, alive.
 Her heavy furs are rolled
 in paper, great bolts
 mount up in the barn
 a crop of warmth
 to take us through winter.
 Tonight her paleness
 glimmers in the dark.*

It's as if her notebook and pencil are always there – like David Hockney wandering through the Yorkshire woods with his ever ready i-Pad.

There are two poignant examples of an almost scientific manner of enquiry and analysis, both concerned with infirmity in old age. In the poem SEIZED, published in a 1994 collection, a daughter cares for an elderly mother whose mobility gradually diminishes:

*She liked mechanical things,
 tinkered with motors,
 could have been an engineer.*

*First her fingers stiffened.
 she blamed the cold,
 stumbling, swore at obstacles*

.....

*Speech failed, she spoke with her eyes,
visitors knew what she said
without need for sound.*

But her eyes forgot how to talk,
.....

Nearly twenty years later, Anne Born returns most movingly to the same theme in lines written after her stroke:

*Felled with a blow
inaudible unsensed.
Felt as malaise, the body crazed.
A sudden cuff to the heart,
a box on life's ear.
"How well you look," all say,
and you grouse, if this is well
then I prefer ill !
It's quite a knock-out
not a lucky stroke
and chucks you rock-bottom
so you must climb or crawl
out of this pit into the land of light.*

Age could not wither, nor custom stale the infinite variety of her exploration of the world within her as well as the world around her.

But not only the world around her, also the ground beneath her – I conclude by referring to her perennial interest in geology, found in *The Torbay Towns* and *The History of Kingsbridge and Salcombe* and well expressed in *SOUTH DEVON Combe, Tor and Seascape*: "There are five extrusions of granite in the South-West Peninsula.....These form a curved backbone to the peninsula and the granite uplands are like great vertebrae protruding from the land's back." It is this 200 million years old granite that dominates the moorland landscape in the poem *Hillson*, one of her finest achievements. Long-standing members of the Association will recall it was first printed in the *Transactions* in 1994 and 1995. Published again in her 1999 collection *Planting Light*, it was finally and appropriately included in *Singing Granites*, written with Australian poet Glen Phillips and published in 2008, a collection celebrating the "natural landscapes" of Western Australia and of

Devon “with their predominant granite features” and “concentrating on the place of granite in the lives of those who live in these regions”.

Hillson is a major work of the imagination in a 16-part sequence, based on a brief reference in William Crossing’s *Guide to Dartmoor* to a child once ‘found on Stall Moor and adopted by some good people in the neighbourhood’:

*The child opened his eyes
to clouds’ mothering fleeces
against the glare of light.*

.....

*A moorman saw ravens
circling down from clouds
grunting hunger,*

*above a wail
thinner than a lamb’s
and alone.*

The child grows to manhood, leaves the farm where he has been brought up and (as in the local story) returns to build a house on Stalldon Barrow and earn a living making clocks. As the years go by, such is his ingenuity (and the poet’s detailed descriptive skill), he then discovers his tools “could make a rain gauge”. The poem’s strength of narrative is enhanced by reference to a lost love and it ends with Hillson looking out over the high moor from his home and accepting the permanence of all that he sees:

*Granite and thistledown,
his clocks, the sky and stars,
now as then, were there*

*moving through all weathers,
times and seasons,
loss and gain.*

What I hear in this is that granite may not be eternal, but its endurance is as close to the concept of eternity as our minds can grasp; it has endured and will continue to endure. To be linked, like Hillson, with that permanence is to be linked with all that we know on

earth, to be fully engaged with all that life offers, to accept it with affirmation.

*So why be old when life is always new ?
When work is pleasure and the hard jobs fun,
When fortune gave me the world's most perfect view.....*

Lines from the poem Anne Born wrote for her 80th birthday, reflecting not only the positive attitude that prevailed throughout her active life, but also her pleasure at the view of the Salcombe Estuary seen from her lovely home. Members of the Devonshire Association who heard them read at the Kingsbridge Conference then had the opportunity – both literally and in spirit – to share that “most perfect view”.

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