

Rabbits And Bastards

DAVID MORLEY

Alan Brownjohn, *Collected Poems*, Enitharmon, hb. £25.00,
ISBN 9781904634218

Poets rarely visited Blackpool when I was growing up there and, if they chanced to, they did not give readings: for if poetry is the opposite of money, Blackpool was the opposite of poetry venue. So when Alan Brownjohn showed up to read at the Central Library in the early 1980s we all gawped as if he'd escaped from the zoo or stepped from one of the glowing star-ships that adorned *The Illuminations*. It was like the scene in his poem 'We are going to see the rabbit...':

Which rabbit?
The only rabbit,
The only rabbit in England
Sitting behind a barbed-wire fence
Under the floodlights, neon lights...
On the only patch of grass
In England...

Or so it seemed to us in the poet-free zone called Blackpool where the coin arcade was our teenage culture choice. I admit we were not at his reading "in thousands" but we hoped for illumination and Brownjohn lent it and left something behind in several of us (for there were a few of us starting out as young writers). What he lent was the idea that there were patches of grass in our culture; places and stays where poetry could exist, despite the neon-lit social pressure to chase cash and cut a living. I gave up my part-time job as a bingo-caller, and started writing instead.

The poets who influence us are like heroic teachers. Their influence takes the form of a series of one-sided marriages, but one where the new writer keeps the house as it were. I learnt that imitating a poet with a dense or highly distinct voice (say Hughes, Plath, Dylan Thomas) closes down your own possibilities if you do not possess the articulate cunning to escape their stylistic force-field. There's nothing wrong in sounding roughly the same as the poets you admire (your critics will smile at the head-start this gives them), but imitation can be nine-tenths limitation. However, Brownjohn's visit seeded an idea that if you are starting out (as many readers of poetry and poetry magazines are), it seems a good idea to sample styles of writing

that are plain, clear, or which simply do not possess linguistically nervous tics. Alan Brownjohn's *Collected Poems*, beautifully produced by Enitharmon, is worth your time for many reasons; not least what it can teach. Its clear, precise suite of styles, especially across the length of the sequences; his fascinating use of fiction in poems; and what Sean O'Brien calls his "mesmeric, meditative pace, and a consistently dramatic mode, surely related to the strategies of the classroom" (Brownjohn was a teacher) create open spaces for readerly and writerly engagement.

Like O'Brien (who I suspect is influenced by him) Brownjohn is a careful and secular moralist in his verse; and, like O'Brien, his stanzas never become little nanny-states with palpable designs on the reader (although that risk is always there in both poets). The care is in the observed detail, which is often minute in its attention. We squirm with the bandmaster among the officers, our "eyes always going to the face speaking next" in the much-anthologised 'Class Incident from Graves', while,

The band put away their instruments out at the back, having
Drunk their beers, standing.

How much observed and obsessive social tension is there in that single word *standing*. You could build a revolution on it, but we don't do those in Britain.

To return to the Blackpool where business was a kind of necessary art form (as the poet Richard Hugo once said of his own experience in post-war America): Alan Brownjohn is merciless about such matters, and the fierce natural selection of money-making processes. His poem against business mentality is tenderly titled 'Bastard', and should be compulsory reading for all of us who imagine we are not. For Brownjohn, "The Bastard is full of fear and fantasy, / And the fantasy that made his world for him / Becomes a fantastic fear of losing it [...]". But our smiling friend does lose it, in both senses, and loses his world in a speech against the shareholders:

'I've sussed it out – you're just a lot of *bastards*,
A lot of dirty, crooked, scheming *bastards*!'

When the door slams hard behind him, they look at each other
And shake their heads with humane and pitying smiles.
'Poor bastard', one compassionately murmurs.

Humane and pitying smiles. A fantastic fear of losing it. How devastatingly accurate in all its plain, clear, open language. Alan Brownjohn is far fiercer than his care and attention make him out to be, and a wonderful

poet whose lifetime attention to verse is celebrated by this very solid *Collected*. What a pity, in some ways, he was never part of a real government as well as a government of the tongue (he was once a labour councillor and a parliamentary candidate). What would the acknowledged legislations of such a poet look like?

David Morley's 'The Charges On Midsummer Night For The Coventry Mysteries' appears on p. 32.



Thinking Back

STEVEN MATTHEWS

Ed. Douglas Dunn, *Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry*, Faber, £12.99
ISBN 9780571228386;

Ed. Paul Muldoon, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Faber, £12.99
ISBN 9780571228379

What is going on at Faber Poetry? After a decade and more in which the imprint has noticeably failed to foster new talent (although one in which it has been noticeably canny in acquiring talent fostered elsewhere, as in the aftermath of the collective moment of madness by the Oxford University Press delegates), there come these reprinted anthologies. The editorial decision behind their re-appearance is truly strange. Both volumes are unedited republications of books that appeared originally in 1986, in the case of the Muldoon, 1992/3 of the Dunn. Nothing, so far as I can see, has been altered in either case. There seems to have been no request to Muldoon or Dunn to update their selections, or to consider adding new names to the lists of the anthologised, or perhaps to remove others. What we have in each book, then, are curiously time-locked productions which now seem remote from current debates around what used to be called regionalism and the centre, margins and mainstream, modernism and modernity, in poetry.

Think back, if you can, to a time before the Anglo-Irish Agreement, let alone before the cessation of violence and a degree of all-Ireland government in the north of Ireland; think back to a time before the limited devolution for Scotland created by the Blair government. Think back to a time when Seamus Heaney had not long published *Station Island*; a time