

Poetry Wars

ALAN BROWNJOHN

Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court*, Salt, £16.99, ISBN 139781844712489

Nowadays, unless you speak to a few scarred survivors, you might not realise that the Poetry Society 'wars' of the 1970s ever happened. Best forgotten, then? *De mortuis*, etc.? No. Those battles were real, and depressing, and one way of reading this absorbing book is as a warning: Don't get involved in literary organisations which are starved of cash but

richly endowed with inflated egos and conflicting tendencies. Old issues and obstreperous personalities can surface in any generation, and devour a lot of time.

Peter Barry, who himself saw a little of the action, sides with the 1970s modernists, offering a fastidiously researched and reasonably fair account of what happened – coming from that side of the lines, anyway! In the mid-1960s most poets believed the Society had become a backwater of traditionalist no-hopers. But in 1970, in the early days of Arts Council grant aid (money concentrates the minds of factions wonderfully), two parallel movements were discernible. One was an effort by those Barry unsuitably labels as “conservatives” to drag the Society into the broad mainstream of modern verse, the other a campaign by modernists “radicals” to swing it towards late avant-garde poetry.

Few on either side could be proud of their part in the ferocious struggles that developed. Barry’s theme is the success of the radicals in achieving control of the Society, its spacious but crumbling Earls Court premises, its poetry events, and its publications – notably *Poetry Review* under the controversial editorship of Eric Mottram. He maintains that a “British Poetry Revival” took place, though average readers of poetry would recognise few of the names and empathise with little of the verse. He then describes the counter-attacks by poetry “Reform” and “Action” Groups, and an eventual walk-out and boycott by the radicals. That ended three years of bitter conflict sometimes coming close to physical violence. Society staff carried police phone numbers to General Meetings, just in case.

Much trouble (as Barry explicitly and implicitly confirms) was due to the radicals’ refusal to consider *any* mainstream poetry worth their attention. The doctrinal obstinacy of the charismatic sound poet Bob Cobbing and the erudite theorist Eric Mottram (the radicals’ principal guru) did their cause few favours; exciting talents in the experimental tradition lost out in the confrontational atmosphere. Chaos and aggression prevailed in the premises and at Society meetings, spilling over into the radicals’ favourite bar next door; whose proprietor would be genuinely surprised to see this reviewer occasionally daring to take a drink.

Peter Barry concedes that the radicals committed crucial tactical errors. Mottram declined to expound his editorial policy in the magazine; refused to include any reviewing. Unsympathetic groups were purged from the premises in what felt like a ruthless take-over; the radicals were dissenters who themselves stifled dissent. Their refusal to work through any kind of “establishment” channel, and their resolute hostility towards the Arts

Council (though they may have been perceived as impatient and sometimes cynical, they *were* the funding authority and never actually withdrew any grant) were profoundly self-defeating.

The author's account of Mottram and his mission explains a lot about an impressive but determinedly difficult individual. Elucidatory editorials in *Poetry Review* about the kind of poetry he and his followers promoted – as in one admirable chapter here – would have won friends. Instead, the radicals preferred to make enemies and be paranoid about the establishment. Altogether it was a sorry period. It can only be hoped that Peter Barry is right in believing that modernist poetry now has its fair chance; and presumably doesn't need to storm frail citadels like the Poetry Society.

Alan Brownjohn's latest volume is *Collected Poems* (Enitharmon 2006).