

THE BEST BRITISH POETRY 2011

Editor: Roddy Lumsden

Salt Publishing

REVIEW BY STUART B CAMPBELL

In the 70s there was a folk band who branded themselves 'the second best folk band in Scotland'. This bit of mischief had the effect of making others in the field wary of claiming the number one title and anxious about where they might be in the pecking order. A gauntlet had been thrown down and arguments ensued. The moral is: as soon as a ranking – numbers – is introduced into art, questions are bound to be asked. There are seventy poems in this anthology – so who wrote and where was the seventy-first best British poem published? A nonsensical question, perhaps, but it highlights the absurdity of league tables. A more reasonable question might be: what makes these the best British poems of 2011?

In his introduction Roddy Lumsden admits “the subjective nature of selecting and editing a book like this is at odds with such an objective word as 'best'”. Whilst he states his selection has “no manifesto” and there is “no ulterior motive”, he makes no attempt to provide a rationale for his choice other than “These were the poems I felt were best”. Lumsden's choice of poems came from print and web-based magazines; he hopes the book is “a snapshot of what is happening at present”.

So what does this collection tell us about what is happening at the moment (allowing for the fact that seventy poems is a very small sample of those published and that the 'snapshot' cannot be described as objective)? Lumsden points out that the gender balance of the poets is “exactly 50/50”; that he's “pleased to note a quarter of the poets here are under 30” (twelve of which were recipients of an Eric Gregory and/or Foyles award; a good number are graduates or students of post-graduate creative writing courses); and there is a “mix of well known names, less-known and emerging poets”.

Here's some more statistics: The poems are taken from 41 magazines; three of which are Scottish (more or less demographically proportional), two are Welsh, but none Irish. It's not clear if these are the only magazines that Lumsden read, or if they are just the source. Nine of the poets are Scottish, four Irish, three Welsh, forty-six English and nine from other countries, now resident in the UK (again, all roughly

proportional). It might be observed that the 'snapshot' indicates there is uniform poetic activity across the UK; nationality is not the issue here. What is remarkable is the fact that only one poem (by Alexander Hutchison) is in anything other than standard English. There are no Welsh, Gaelic, Ulster Scots, or Cornish language poems. There are no poems in any obvious regional or ethnic dialects, such as African-Caribbean, despite the fact that some of the poets originate from countries like Tunisia, Iran and Guyana. There is little, either, in terms of the content of the poems that hints of locality. There can be no requirement that an anthology should be representative of all languages or ethnicities, but it is notable that there is little in this collection that indicates “a varied and thriving UK poetry scene”, at least not linguistically. Some (politicians?) might regard that as a triumph of integration, but it could equally be regarded as the powerful hegemony of standard English. It might merely be the consequence of Lumsden selecting 45% of the poems from just four magazines.

Lumsden deals “with the B word” by suggesting that anybody with a problem about what 'best' means could just have “a cup of tea and a nap”. The other problematic 'B word' in the book's title is 'British'. Trying to define what 'Britishness' is has proved to be fraught with difficulties for some politicians. It is not a straightforward matter: whatever categories might be applied are not necessarily discrete. For example, The Dark Horse magazine describes itself as international; is Jen Hadfield (born in Chester, living in Shetland) a Scottish or English (or even a Shetlandic) poet? Lumsden does not state what he understands 'British' to mean. As a consequence, with Lumsden selecting poems on the basis that he felt them to be “enjoyable, rewarding, accomplished”, this is a actually collection of poems in standard English (with Hutchison's as an oddity); and the extent to which it can be said to really represent the “strength and breadth” of British poetry is, at the very least, worth debating or exploring. What of the actual poems? Well, none of them are bad, many are interesting; whether or not better poems have been published in magazines over the last year might trigger a healthy debate.

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