

A POET'S WAR: The British Poets and the Spanish Civil War. Hugh D. Ford. *Oxford University Press*.

Like it or not, the description 'Poet's War' suggests that ideologies were more central in this than other wars. Whether the inevitable Liberal position that poetry is about personal things and politics irrelevant can be a useful starting point for an analysis of this period of English poetry is doubtful – and it is this position which Professor Ford holds and which limits the work.

He sets out to explore some of the responses of politically engaged men to the horrors of the fighting, and also to catalogue the attitudes of poets at home. So the book is a panorama of thirties beliefs.

One poem, Marshall's *Retrospect* exemplifies a typical response where commitment has been discarded in the confrontation with the real disaster:

Then the bombs  
Belching earth pits  
One two three sudden  
Four, wait wait wait five,  
Six god that's it  
Glass smashing and one thin endless scream  
Then a dullness in the head,  
We stand over the table . . .

This falls shorter than Marshall imagines, because here the war is only felt as a series of unrelated intensities which, although they can be suitably contrasted to moments of ordinary living (the kids slide in the roadways . . . the harlot shops invite . . .) cannot be understood in more general terms. The instant of crisis is presented as an unusual depth of life which, though objectionable, is not devoid of a certain romantic grandeur – the feeling of having visited the frontiers of human experience.

For these men there is no more understanding the war. What was initially a non-Romantic feeling (solidarity, common effort) quickly collapses and the old individualism reasserts itself in a listing of fragmented experience crammed with detail but not referring to anything outside itself. This is what Ford censures as 'an actual transcript of life'.

This is one aspect of an obvious duality facing the poetry of all combatants: on the one hand commitment (and the danger of propaganda) on the other romanticism (*me* at war – so documentary of experiences). Professor Ford thinks that the best poets are the Communists who had to try their rigid theories under combat conditions, and either suppress their reactions with Marxist dogmas or let their humanity show. But perhaps he does not understand that the Communists were much more whole in their beliefs than he can allow; they did not live the war (like the liberals) as a protest against tyranny, but as a phase in a total programme of social reconstruction. While they had this focus, the experience had a meaning and the fighting was in the long run a humane activity. For the less dogmatic (like Ford) who fought for decency, liberty, justice – the crudity of the fighting overpowered the commitment, control was lost, and the poetry becomes a compendium of atrocities. What happens to language under those feelings is understandable:

The eyes of the wounded sodden in red . . .  
The body melts with pity . . .  
Little lakes of blood still specked the stones . . .

the poets feel around with words to recreate things they cannot look at.

A good example of the consequence of this position is Hyndman's lines to a dying militiaman: 'That was all, / no slogan, / No clenched fist / except in pain.' Ford is right to ask whether dying men are Communists for Hyndman; political

commitment is not central here, but abandoned under 'real life' conditions where it is suddenly found irrelevant.

The better poets were already poets before the war started. (The formula 'Commitment – then war – then poetry' is suspect, because war is often found to be an inexhaustible source of big feelings and a kind of poetic ransacking may take place where intensity ends up by ousting the first belief.) To watch the Communists deal with their new feelings is moving: the Marxist philosophy of death had to be re-valued under fire.

Wintringham is an older, more experienced poet who had lived out the First World War, so it is not surprising that he could maintain the difficult theses of death and revolution right to the end.

Neither fools nor children any longer,  
Those ways, traits, gone away  
That once made life a luck-game, death a stranger,  
We're going on.

Professor Ford won't have this for its politicality. But is the alternative more humane? Cornford whom he presents as the best poet is more aware of the enormity of the sacrifice. But Professor Ford is wrong to say that lines like

Heart of the heartless world,  
Dear Heart, the thought of you  
Is the pain at my side,  
The shadow that chills my view

are 'a relief and a surprise' from a Communist because he 'can express affection for something beside the cause'. It's a pity the Professor has to fall into the same old platitudes about political opinions and 'real love'. It is not enough to say that there is 'another side to Cornford's verse' because it is not enough to say that when Cornford writes 'no talisman will keep is safe from harm' this is 'not much more than a political lesson forced into verse'. Perhaps if Professor Ford looks hard he will find that the 'political verse' is informed with the same kind of feeling as the 'non-political verse'.

The conclusion is, inevitably, to write off most of the poetry written around the Civil War, which is what Ford does. But he does not approve of the Movement poets who saw the war as a defensive fight for the free human spirit rather than a precise political war. Although most of them embraced Communism, their sympathy was probably with the Liberal Government of Spain rather than the mass-movements behind it – and their relations with the Party were troubled by their self-questioning. The effect for Auden was a withdrawal from politics. For Spender a precise initial commitment quickly reverted to a general sympathy for the suffering and sick which prevented involvement and pushed him into inaction. Day-Lewis could metaphorise the war into a general struggle between good and evil and so 'minimised the part that politics had to play'. MacNeice applauded the spectacle of selfless dedication on both sides, and approved the camaraderie and sacrifice without a real personal engagement. Ford says that 'it was only in the war that they discovered what political commitment really involved' and we feel that their liberal concept of freedom (Freedom is more than a word . . . ) was not seen in terms of any real social structure and could not sustain any greater commitment than one of 'good where good's being done'.

This said one wonders what Professor Ford is looking for. The book leaves a confusing impression because at one point he demands more technical expertise, at another political practicality, and at another less politics and more poetry. This ambiguity is due, no doubt, the Professor Ford's belief that, finally, poetry and politics don't mix – a view that is implied in the very title. A 'Poet's War' is immediately felt to be something rather less than a 'Non-Poet's War'. If this is the case, then the weight of disbelief falls not so much on war as on poetry and then we have a book which ends by dismissing its own subject-matter.

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