

The Cut Of The Light Poems 1965-2005: Jeremy Hooker

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Blake Morrison once dismissed him as a “mere landscapist” but Hooker is so much more. As the very title of this (in everything but name) Collected Poems indicates, Hooker combines verbal delicacy with close observation of the natural world, then takes it one stage further, into the numinous and the unearthly. It is no coincidence that the reviews quoted on the dust cover come from *The Tablet* — though these poems are profoundly secular — and from Michael Simmonds Roberts. Hooker is a poet marginalized from literary London, and from any serious consideration in the UK outside the likes of *PN Review*, *Agenda* and this magazine, but the quiet strength, dignity and lack of ego of these poems make them something very special, and built to last.

Not that there are not faults. Hooker’s early work can be preachy, while some of the later pages here veer towards the prosy, but here at last in one volume brought together from a series of publishing houses are the distilled aperçus of a thoughtful, highly learned writer, taking on time and place. The key quality is openness — to the natural world, to history, to friendship, to love — and this is mirrored in a kind of free-standing and rhythmic plainness, learnt from the likes of George Oppen, in which lyric grace comes quietly, but with at times a devastating beauty.

Crushed bracken fronds, where we lay
(Remember the nightjar’s churr.)
Dry river bed through the woods,
Torrent of stone, tumbled and stilled. (‘Lines to M’)

And the best poems here deal with near-unbearable pain, whether of a sense of loss infused in place, or a divorce, or a series of epitaphs, or rather recreations. Hooker’s work is ultimately benign, a sense that learning and feeling are enough to help us survive.

Hooker was tutored by FT Prince at Southampton University, and first anthologised by Faber — in 1969, alongside the likes of Douglas Dunn, Elaine Feinstein and David Harsent - then published by Enitharmon, later Carcanet, then again Enitharmon (my own small place in literary history might reside in my quietly bringing poet and publisher together by hints and nudges for that reconciliation). Although he is usually — if at all — characterised as being ‘Anglo Welsh’ — he grew up near Southampton, then in the New Forest, where his brother continues to work in tree management, worked in a kibbutz, taught for many years in Aberystwyth, then went freelance in Winchester and Holland, before returning as a professor to his adopted Wales. Ironically, it is the south country where he was born and raised that has continued to be Hooker’s own

particular touchstone, and it is interesting how by comparison poems set in, say, Israel and Holland, are worthy and well researched, but somehow uninvolved. His poetry about Wales is a whole other subject, awed, sometimes angry, but written as if by an outsider, the fictionalised subject of his radio play *Englishman's Road*, which ends in a dialogue of the deaf. But it is out of such tensions and disruptions that the major artistic creations here have evolved, and which makes this poetry so relevant to anyone (us all, really) who is forced to work away from where we grew up. And thus makes the particular universal.

Of course, this is not the whole picture of Hooker as a literary influence and inspirer. The Bibliography which fronts this collection lists a series of publications about writers who have also suffused his own poetry - Powys, Edward Thomas, David Jones etc. — and also of more than passing interest are his published Journals, which flesh out some of what could otherwise seem abstract. Also absent is artwork from some of the books gathered here, by the likes of Norman Arnold and Lee Grandjean, and with which Hooker's poetry creatively interacts. There are a few previously uncollected or fugitive poems, from the likes of the anthology *Common Ground*, from rare pamphlets and — most revealing — 'Poems to Carol', poems of lost love. The omissions are few, the odd poem here and there of which none are hugely missed, and occasional prose interjections, which are still available to any serious scholar in the original publications. This is a book devoid of padding.

The first poem of all here is carefully chosen — 'Tench Fisher's Dawn' is about night fishing, of which Hooker is as keen a fan as his surname would suggest, and is a kind of calling-on song, setting out his artistic agenda: "then, casting out, we're suddenly in touch". This precedes a wholesale re-ordering of early work, previously spread over various books, pamphlets and *Faber Introduction 1*, although one sad omission here is 'Thomas Hardy's Study'. Less to be mourned is 'Short Thin Poem For Alfie', though it does hint at an early interest in American 'Beat' poetry which never saw publication, but explains the later interest in the open forms of George Oppen and the like. One interesting omission from *Landscape of the Daylight Moon*, published later but collecting work written between 1969 and 1973 is his first long poem, 'A Hambledon Sequence'. The verbal density of that over-contrived would-be epic is not particularly missed. *The Elements* was a pamphlet, published in 1972 by Christopher Davies: most remains here, except two poems more crucial as literary archaeology than good verse, 'To A Welsh Poet' — at a guess about RS Thomas and 'Song Of The Ashes' a poem dedicated to JC Powys.

Another omission is the prose introduction to *Soliloquies Of A Chalk Giant* published in 1974 and heavily dependent on Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, which appeared three years earlier. This firmly identifies the subject as the priapic Cerne Abbas hill figure, but that can be easily deduced from the text. If that book is the last of Hooker's apprentice works, his one uncontested masterpiece

follows. *Solent Shore* appeared in 1978, and for all its sense of locality drew particular praise in the US. Here little is omitted, apart from ‘On Spede’s Map Anno Domini 1611’ and parts of the portmanteau poem ‘The Witnesses’, plus some explanatory notes. This delicate and profound meditation of living near the sea — divided into two sections, ‘Foreshore’ and ‘Ebb’ — is the epitome of an identification between self and the place where one grew to consciousness.

Still on my wrists I feel
The reddish fluid
Where the waters breaking fell. (‘Birth’)

If that collection remains a triumph, its successor *Englishman’s Road* published two years later, was a mess, a book literally in transit between the Solent and the west of Wales, and much is omitted here, from both sections, along with all the dramatic action from the radio play of the title. On the other hand, and quite rightly, almost nothing is trimmed from *Master Of The Leaping Figures* published in 1987, and dealing with both a divorce and a move back to the south. All that is gone is the prose introduction to ‘A Winchester Mosaic’ and a couple of stops on the way of the river poem *Itchen Water*, first published by Winchester School of Art in 1982, with etchings by Norman Arnold in a sumptuous edition. This is Hooker’s most personal book, his angriest and his most emotional, dedicated to his daughter Emily (an inscription lost here) and ending with a prose explanation, ‘A Poem Like A Place’ which filled in some of the background, “written from a reality which is different from any I could have anticipated”.

The Cut Of The Light, though, has only reached its halfway point. Here are just about the complete texts of three important and richly textured collections, *Their Silence A Language* (1993), *Our Lady Of Europe* (1997) and *Adamah* (2002), plus his most recent full length poem, *Arnolds Wood* published as a pamphlet by Flarestack in 2005. Perhaps fittingly, the book ends with a series of elegies, to his mother, father, brother and Les Arnold, “poet and teacher”. So why do I feel a sense of emotional distance from this later, beautifully wrought but sometimes emotionally low key material? It is down to the clash of personalities and friendships, something which influences so many reviews and critical overviews, but is seldom directly stated.

As a young PhD student, who discovered *Solent Shore* in a long gone London remainder bookshop, and felt as if it was some kind of homecoming for me as well as the poet, I was for many years a committed and energetic proponent for Jeremy and some allied poets of the south, including Sean Street and Paul Hyland. I organised the first public reading of *Solent Shore* in the region it wrote about, and wrote many essays on and reviews of Hooker’s work, including an long critical introduction to an anthology called *South* and then co-founded a briefly lasting magazine *Flint* to celebrate this new movement — as I saw it — with Hooker as its presiding literary exemplar. This became *South* magazine, which still flourishes.

The best of all the Hooker influenced young poets, to my mind, was Andrew Jordan, who was actively involved in the battle to save Twyford Down, taking the poetry of place onto the front line. But for whatever reason, Jordan threw in his lot with various then fashionable Northern poetry magazines and writers who saw this as a terrible threat to their own fragile self-esteem. This ended with one of them threatening me with a “good Yorkshire kicking”, and a series of vituperative and extremely negative attacks by Jordan, then ironically funded by Southern Arts, on both myself and David Caddy, culminating in a slur on my feelings after the death of my mother. This was enough to make me draw a line under my involvement with the poetry world, resign as assistant editor of *Tears in the Fence*, and concentrate instead on writing about rock and folk music, and saving Dimbola — the former home of Julia Margaret Cameron — from demolition, and turning it into a museum and arts centre. But the emotional bruises were still there, and Jeremy completely failed to realise how profound a wound Jordan had inflicted, making light of it and my own declaration that as a result I was giving up poetry. A small loss, some might say, but I was amazed and hurt in turn by his attitude. Reading this magnificent book both makes me sad that things came out as they did, angry that Hooker is not better known but hugely respectful of the dedication which Enitharmon has shown to one of its finest talents, and convinced yet again how right I was to single out this’ poet as being so special. As he himself writes in a prose piece omitted here, Jeremy Hooker’s work is part of a literary continuum which values language as a “common, changing, historical medium in which words and names are meeting places for the living, and for the living and the dead”.

Brian Hinton

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For a different point of view see:

http://www.nonism.org.uk/downloads/FarmyardFascistsA5_Sept96.pdf