

Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology.

Maroula Joannou

Jane Dowson (ed.), London: Routledge, 1996. ISBN 0 - 415 - 130967 - 4 pbk £8 99.

There is only one woman, Anne Ridler, represented in Robin Skelton's classic anthology, *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964), the book in which many of my generation were introduced to the poetry of the 1930s. Jane Dowson's anthology introduces the poetry of twenty-seven others, several of whom have been eclipsed by their relationship to the better-known men and women in their lives. Elizabeth Daryush was the daughter of Robert Bridges, Frances Cornford the mother of John Cornford and the granddaughter of Charles Darwin. Laura Riding lived with Robert Graves, Vita Sackville-West was the partner of Virginia Woolf, and Valentine Ackland the lover of Sylvia Townsend Warner. Several of the women poets included in this collection; Sylvia Townsend Warner, Nancy Cunard, Edith Sitwell, Dorothy Wellesley, and Victoria Sackville-West are somehow larger than life. Often remembered as English eccentric rather than ec-centrics, they were never in a class-conscious decade allowed to forget the privileges of birth. Edith Sitwell, in particular, became a symbol of everything which the Auden group considered to be anathema: 'Miss Sitwell presented to the public an image of the poet which was far more effective theatrically than anything a thirties man could dare to invent, and also opposed in every way to that image of the poet in society which the thirties generation was busy trying to clarify' (Skelton, 29).

The problems that women poets have experienced in getting recognition have often had more to do with reception and publication of their work than any inherent qualities of their writing. Anna Wickham, one of the poets in Dowson's anthology, for example, was sent to a lunatic asylum when her husband heard that her poems had been accepted for publication. As Sylvia Townsend has suggested, the neglect of her contemporaries may be in part because 'they only went off one at a time', and not collectively (Dowson, 16). The isolation of women poets has been important in a world where poetry has been published by small presses, and in a cultural and literary context in which coterie of poets with similar affiliations have often acted as their own best

publicists. MacNeice, Spender and Day Lewis had a strong respect for each other's accomplishments, and sang each other's others praises, despite the fact that Spender has said that he, MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis were never in the same room until 1948! As Queenie Leavis complained, 'it is no use looking for growth or development or any addition to literature in such an adolescent hot-house' (Baker, 349). The domination of the literary culture of the 1930s by the Auden group has resulted not only in the exclusion of interesting poetry by men whose style and concerns were different from theirs, for example, Randall Swingler, David Gasquoyne, and Kenneth Allott, but also of the twenty-eight women whose work has been resurrected in this anthology.

Jane Dowson is a scrupulously careful reader and editor. This is a generous, inclusive and discerning selection, which has sought to draw in as many women productive at the time as possible—one criteria for inclusion being that each poet must have published at least one book of her own poems—and Dowson also extends her net over poems which appeared in two periodicals, *Time and Tide* and *The Listener*. It is a timely companion volume to Janet Montefiore's important re-reading of the decade, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996), which largely restricts itself to prose but addresses similar questions about gender, writing and history. All edited collections have problems of inclusion and exclusion and cannot possibly satisfy everyone. I was disappointed to find only one poem by Nancy Cunard, who founded the Hours Press, which published many important Modernists, including Ezra Pound and Laura Riding. A gifted poet in her own right, Cunard is a germinal figure in any re-reading of the culture of the 1930s.

Anyone coming to Dowson's anthology will want to question what writers as disparate as Frances Bellerby, Valentine Ackland, Lilian Bowes Lyon, Elizabeth Daryush, Anne Ridler, Sylvia Lynd and E. J. Scovell have in common. But that is precisely the point. Dowson embraces difference, resisting the temptation to force these women into shoes that do not fit. The anthology represents poetry of a wide range of styles, subjects and mood; from the introspection of Naomi Mitchison's 'Woman Alone' to the stridency of Valentine Ackland's 'Instructions from England', a missive from the Spanish Civil War, to Ruth Pitter's affirmative 'Old, Childless, Husbandless' and E. J. Scovell's closely observed, 'The Poor Mother'. It could be argued that politics is at least as useful a demarcation line between writers of the

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