

F. W. Harvey: Soldier, Poet

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When I was in school in the 1950s, our anthologies included a poem called "Ducks", which entertained me as a whimsical comment on the oddities of life. It never dawned on me to ask who its author was or to seek out the context from which it came. I simply remembered it and could quote its beginning: "From troubles of the world / I turn to ducks"; and its end, the comment that God is "probably laughing still at the sound that came out of its bill." Only many years later, when I was working on Ivor Gurney, did I come across Gurney's bosom-friend and fellow-poet, F. W. Harvey, and discover that he was the author of "Ducks". What is more, and what would have made the poem far more interesting to the schoolboy, I learned that the poem was written in Holzminden Prison Camp when Harvey was a prisoner of war in the First World War, and had come out of Harvey's deep gloom during his time there. And for a whimsical footnote, Anthony Boden tells us that when Harvey was told that "during the Second World War one of the English exercises in German schools had been to translate 'Ducks' into German, his reaction was: 'Serves the Germans damn well right!'".

This book is a fascinating and easy-to-read biography of a minor author of the first part of this century. I say "minor author" deliberately, in spite of Anthony Boden's assertions to the contrary, since it is important to get him in perspective. The weakest part of the book is its critical assessment of the poems, and its judgments of their status. On p. 286 we are told that "One year after the publication of *September*, Harvey's poems were selected for inclusion in the prestigious

Augustan Books of Poetry series; acknowledgement of his acceptance as a major British poet." Well; not quite. I don't think that a collection which includes Maurice Hewlett, Sylvia Lynd, and J. C. Squire can quite claim to bestow major status on a poet, though it does indicate his reputation in 1926, just as today the demand for a second edition of this book indicates a continuing and perhaps growing interest in Harvey. The nature of the reaction to Harvey's poetry is very little explored. "It was an immediate success" we are told of *A Gloucestershire Lad* on p.129, but those are the last words of the chapter. We learn on p.159 that it had gone into a fourth edition by March 1917, but we hear little of the critical response. The book amply provides other things which make the critical simplicity no great loss. We have narrative, illustration, anecdote and context for the poems, and we have a generous number of the poems, which can thus speak for themselves, and we can judge for ourselves.

This is a revised edition, of which the most satisfying new feature is an index, in fact two indexes, one of people and the other of poems, which is a clear and useful way of organizing a book which is both biography and collection of poems - there are about a hundred quoted, usually in full. Apart from the indexes there is little change from the 1988 edition, though as a sign of the times, where the earlier introduction noted a "renewed public awareness of the suffering of those many thousands of young men who crossed the Channel bravely to face unspeakable horrors" and "a revival of interest in that infinitely smaller number who earned the 'War Poet'", in 1998 the awareness "remains undimmed" and the interest is "continuing". There are a couple of new pictures.

Where the book most notably succeeds is in placing the poems within the life. Ignoring that much-to-be-ignored suggestion that poems can stand irrespective of context, Anthony Boden's book is an articulation of biography to highlight and introduce the poems. The poems tell their own story: they are often treated simply as speaking directly of Harvey and they are used as part of the narrative: but the narrative places them and shows them growing from Harvey's life and experiences.

This is a friendly and unpretentious book, telling of Harvey most of what can be known. It is perhaps too friendly and kind to explore

the darker suspicions that one might have about the nature of his later life and his marriage. There is some hint on p.276 of Harvey's "world-weariness" which "beset his later years", but it isn't expanded on, though it does lie behind some of the more remarkable of the poems. And Harvey's wife and family are mentioned suspiciously little.

This book has the virtue of a modesty about what it can say, and a consequent willingness to let the subject speak for himself and to include many pictures as well as text. Stuffed with photos like a family album, the book shows the visual flavour of the times as well as describes them. We have pages from the trench editions of the *5th Gloucester Gazette* for example, photographs of prison camps and escape tunnels, and many pictures of family and friends.

In the increasing number of books from or about the First World War, it is important to have a book which deals with the life and work of a soldier whose experience was not all at the Front line, but substantially in prison camps, which is as important an aspect of war as the fighting itself. Harvey's life provides that corrective, and shows that suffering in and after the war can be long and slow as well as hot and hurried. At Holzminden, perhaps the most miserable of his seven German prison camps, Harvey reached the lowest ebb of his feelings. He wrote later of prison experience that "Whether a man highly strung feels it more than a duller and more animal type, or less, I cannot tell, but with a little more than two years" experience of it, I can say with certainty that it is by far the worst thing that ever happened to me, and a thing from which I shall possibly never recover." He never did. Harvey was shaped fundamentally by his war experience, not outwardly perhaps, but in his disillusion with the trappings of the world and his indifference to success, except as a poet, and that success was only slight and perhaps more local than he deserved. He was never happy with his job as a lawyer and was always something of a disappointed man, but the photographs of Harvey on Armistice Day remind us of the weight of his war experience, just as the photographs of the football, hockey and cricket teams remind us that he could, as in "Ducks", see the fun side of a hard life. But not only in "Ducks" do his poems reach an individual quality, and his poems are worth reading for their more often tragic than comic feeling.