Bernard Spencer
Also edited by Peter Robinson


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Introduction: Bernard Spencer’s Admirers & Critics

Peter Robinson

On 10 August 1965, Robert Burlingame wrote to Bernard Spencer from El Paso, Texas:

This is a note merely to say that I have been reading and re-reading your volume of poems With Luck Lasting. And it has given me a great deal of pleasure. Living here as I do in the desert, I notice especially the things you have to say about boats. I like them, esp. the one ending with ELSA.

He goes on: “…gunshot through a veil…” is a splendid phrase. And the last stanza of “A Sunday” also’ and concludes ‘In brief, I enjoyed the poems.” What Robert Burlingame clearly didn’t know when he wrote this note, which might well have cheered the poet to read, is that Spencer had died exactly 23 months before on 10 or in the early hours of 11 September 1963. Though Dufour Editions published With Luck Lasting in the USA in 1965, it is clear from the address to which Robert Burlingame wrote that he had been reading the British edition published by Hodder and Stoughton in the year of the poet’s death. Spencer’s reputation, until recently perhaps, seems symbolized by this letter from an unknown fan to a dead author. Spencer’s cultural survival, it suggests, was due to his being remembered by a small number of readers, whose taste for the work appeared eccentric in the context of its simultaneous near complete cultural oblivion.

In this introduction to the first collection of essays dedicated to Bernard Spencer’s poetry and life, I hope to foreshadow the efforts and actions of such ‘eccentric’ enthusiasts, and briefly to contrast these readers with some indications of a general attitude that had taken hold by the 1960s and which may have remained largely intact despite Roger Bowen’s efforts to revive the poet’s fortunes at the end of the 1970s. It is by no means clear that this situation has now changed, as some of the responses to the recent new edition of his works have brought home. All I can say is that the lucky coincidence of my taking up a professorship at the University Reading in 2007, and reminding myself

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1 The Bernard Spencer Collection, the University of Reading: BSP 4/2/45 [MS5369].
that Bernard Spencer’s archives are held there (itself a consequence of Ian Fletcher’s support for the poet and his writings) occasioned a renewal of work on his manuscripts by scholars and students, leading to the cataloguing of the archive by Verity Hunt, the organizing of a centenary conference in autumn 2009, the publication of his Complete Poetry, Translations & Selected Prose by Bloodaxe Books in February 2011, and a satisfyingly wide response to the publication. What might have happened, then, is that those surviving eccentrics had banded together with a new generation of students, researchers, scholars and poets to suggest that a liking for Spencer’s achievement need not be a preserve of the far-flung, the marginal, and the eccentric. Alan Jenkins at the TLS recently referred to the poet, I am told, as ‘the much-liked Bernard Spencer’ when he found himself having to decide between a number of claimants to the task of reviewing the Bloodaxe volume. Bernard Spencer: Essays on his Poetry & Life is, itself, a gathering of work by such enthusiasts, old and new, some of it presented at the centenary conference, promising at least the possibility that Spencer’s work may now, and continue to be, valued as it should—including, as it does, some of the finest single poems written by an Englishman between 1935 and 1963.

Let me continue, though, with another of Spencer’s American fans, one whose praise reads as painfully double-edged. In his autobiography, The Real West Marginal Way, the poet Richard Hugo singles out for praise an unexpected early inspiration: ‘In the late forties I found a book of poems by the English poet Bernard Spencer, called Aegean Islands and Other Poems’, he writes, but adds: ‘It is far from the best, I know, but that isn’t important. It has meant more to me than many books that were far better.’ Hugo’s evident affection for Spencer’s work doesn’t prevent him from continuing in this limiting vein, and he does this

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2 It is often the fate of editors to clear up slips in earlier editions only to perpetrate some of their own. The following, which will be corrected in later printings, have been noted since publication: p. 104, l. 2: FOR pulling READ pulled p. 104, l. 11: FOR wanting READ wanted p. 106, l. 12 FOR stand READ stands p. 120 l. 1: FOR was READ were p. 132, l. 15: FOR startling us as READ startling as p. 144, l. 13: FOR a death READ in death p. 304, 6 lines up: FOR parts of town READ parts of a town p. 309, 8 lines up: FOR quiet READ unquiet p. 309, 7 lines up: FOR quiet READ unquiet

partly from ignorance of the conditions in which the poetry he admires was composed. Spencer, he continues, ‘left home (though he went farther than I wanted to), and he lived near water and there he found his poems. In his case he lived in self-exile in both the Greek Islands and in Egypt, with a group of writers and scholars, George Seferis the one destined to become the most famous.’4 But to call Spencer a ‘self-exile’ in the poems of 1940 to 1942 that appear in Aegean Islands is not quite to understand them or him, and to have overlooked the world history of those years. Hugo picks out the close of ‘Yachts on the Nile’: ‘and it may be, too, we are born with some nostalgia / to make the migration of sails / and wings a crying matter.’5 In wartime Cairo, this poem’s close is a discreetly personal lament for the long separation that he and his wife Nora were, like so many others, forced to endure by the world historical events of those years.

Yet Hugo in his mostly well-meaning praise strikes the right note when he speaks of how Spencer ‘found his poems’ beside water, a place Wallace Stevens would also sometimes go to collect ‘poetry from one’s experience as one goes along’.6 He quotes generously from Aegean Islands, but his linking comments keep taking away with one hand what he had seemed to give with the other. Introducing the title poem, he writes ‘Spencer had a charm that could only come from a winning naiveté. What poem fell as innocently on the page as the first poem in his book?’7 I’m not sure I would trust a poet whose work displayed naiveté and innocence, and Spencer’s can be trusted; but after Hugo has quoted the whole of ‘Aegean Islands 1940-1941’ it gets worse: ‘He took firm, tender and private emotional possession of a region where he was a foreigner, and intruder perhaps, certainly a stranger, and he felt it. And he lived his invented relation with the landscape out to some kind of poetic realization.’ Then follow caveats aplenty: ‘I would have liked to have said “to poetic perfection” but that would be wrong. He

4 Ibid.
6 Wallace Stevens wrote that ‘The collecting of poetry from one’s experience as one goes along is not the same thing as merely writing poetry’, ‘Adagia’, Collected Poetry and Prose ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 901.
Introduction

didn’t come close to executing most poems perfectly. But some kind of perfection lay in his acceptance of what he was, a bewildered innocent in the face of a thousand years of civilization and history and wisdom, what many of us have been at least once in our time if not forever.” Here Hugo mistakes a poetic strategy for a personal limitation, while, assuming that there might be but one such thing as ‘poetic perfection’, he begs questions about what it can or could be. He further imagines that a communicative work, a poem, could merely be the trace of a ‘private emotional possession’. The poem’s memorable linguistic articulation would make it something already neither ‘private’, nor, being published, a ‘possession’, or, it being in shaped poetic form, only or simply ‘emotional’.

Introducing the three passages he likes from ‘Greek Excavations’, ‘Delos’, and ‘Yachts on the Nile’, Hugo writes that ‘Spencer was not afraid to blurt out the simplest, most disarming truth.’ The apparent praise of ‘not afraid’ is taken away by ‘blurt out’ and while ‘disarming truth’, if ‘disarming’ is understood in depth, would sound like high praise, the fact that this is ‘the simplest’ once again takes away what it appears to give. Spencer ‘was not afraid of his innocence, his poetic roughness’ and his ‘poems seem to settle for a simple, direct validation of his relations with the world, often made crudely but honestly’. I don’t think this can possibly be true: if his works are honestly constructed as poems they cannot be crudely made. If they are honest in their validation of his relations with the world, then what makes them valid is their art and if the relations with the world are true then they won’t be simple or simply direct. The essays on Spencer’s poetry gathered here reveal instances of the many ways in which the terms of Hugo’s praise are inadequate to the complex warmth of his feeling.

Yet as with Spencer’s much-loved Thomas Hardy (and every other poet who has ever written), we could not be able to enjoy the good without the existence of the others. The writing of poetry is not, cannot, and should not be, the production of specimens for fetishists of flawlessness. At its best it is a scrupulously honest verbal engagement with the multifarious difficulties of life by poetically talented, humanly flawed people, writing from within the swim of things. The strengths of real poets’ works are inseparably dependent on their weaknesses,

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8 Ibid. p. 155-6.
which will themselves be expressive of the difficulties with which they are working. Spencer is an exceptionally fine example of such a poet, one whose poems are never bolstered, padded, sustained and defended with the mannerisms of the higher gossip, of society agendas, signature styles, or other career production demands.

Hugo found Spencer liberating because he did not find himself overawed by this unknown English poet: ‘Literature, the important stuff, Eliot, Pound, Williams, was being offered in the classrooms at the University of Washington. They belonged to everyone, but Spencer belonged to me.’\(^9\) This is understandable and honest too, indicating one reason why poets cherish their neglected favourites, and it leads into his introduction for the poem ‘Olive Trees’: ‘I felt my chances at ever writing anything so grand as literature were slim and I decided I would be happy to settle for a poetic world as limited and innocent as that of Bernard Spencer. Once in a while I might get lucky there and come off graceful.’\(^10\) Hugo’s self-concerned strategy, with its relevant and shared emphasis on luck, expresses the understandable anxiety of the young poet by haplessly denigrating the art of the person who, because not intimidating, could fairly offer an example that wouldn’t make his own juvenile work seem too bad. Spencer was useful because Hugo was, at that stage, a poor and apparently modest writer and the British poet wouldn’t make him feel so bad about it.

Still, Hugo’s writing on Spencer is, however qualified, willing to admit that he has cared for the poet’s works. This praise contrasts markedly with the later response to Spencer and his poetry by Geoffrey Grigson, commenting on the discovery that Martin Dodsworth and Ian Hamilton had taken an interest in Spencer during the mid-1960s.\(^11\) Grigson was then able to praise just one of the poems by Spencer from the 1930s that he had published in *New Verse*, that one being the love poem for Spencer’s first wife Nora, ‘Part of Plenty’. Yet not only would he not have been able to enjoy that poem if Spencer hadn’t written the others, and most likely if Grigson himself hadn’t published them, but the record shows that writers and critics have found other poems to

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\(^9\) Ibid. p. 156.

\(^10\) Ibid. p. 157.

\(^11\) Grigson’s published response to Martin Dodsworth’s article in *The Review*, edited by Ian Hamilton, appeared in *The Private Art*. Grigson wrote to Dodsworth at the time, as we learn from his essay in this issue.
admire and cherish from this early—and evidently faltering—period of Spencer’s work: Kenneth Allott had good words for ‘Allotments: April’; anthologists of the decade have found others to praise; and ‘A Thousand Killed’ was featured by Christopher Hitchens as an exemplary insight of direct relevance to the politics of the first decade in the new century. Though on a far smaller scale than that of Hardy’s poetic oeuvre, Spencer’s too finds its engaging readers unable to decide amongst themselves which are the good ones and which the others. In their recent review articles Peter Carpenter, Frances Leviston, Adam Piette, and Robert Wells each write while alighting on hardly any of the same poems. This is because none of them are dishonest, and all contain memorably turned twists of rhythmically exploratory phrasing able to contain an experienced insight or perception.

Todd Swift similarly picks out a personal list of twenty poems, a list that includes hardly any of those named so far, and warmly asserts that ‘you’d be hard pressed to dispense with any of them’, adding in a similar vein to Hugo’s that ‘the rest of his poems are rarely as fully achieved, as intensely right, as these are.’ Along similar lines, Wells entered the caveat that in the interests of new readers the new edition had not marked off clearly enough the ‘superfluous material’ from the ‘eighty or ninety poems of which, together with the sheaf of translations, Spencer’s work essentially consists.’ Yet it need not be part of an editor’s role when bringing a poet back from the brink of oblivion to set up a cordon sanitaire somewhere or other between eighty and ninety of the essential works and the more or less superfluous rest—beyond indicating the writings that were published or collected during the poet’s lifetime, and those that were not. Readers of Bernard Spencer, whether new or returning, should be trusted to make their own discoveries, and make their minds up for themselves. In a cultural

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14 Todd Swift, ‘Missing Figures’, *Poetry London* no. 69, Summer 2011, p. 44.

situation where chronic historical and cultural amnesia is all around us, it’s advisable to protect and preserve what we can. Some might insist that this requires our making such discriminations. Yet readers, whether the young Richard Hugo in Seattle or living in the desert like Robert Burlingame, effect cultural survival for writers’ works by following their needs and hungers. Such longevity may not be achieved by dictating to them the boundaries between what they must and need not read. One problem with drawing such distinctions is that in our understanding of literature and culture we cannot know beforehand where the insights that each of us individually need will come from. When exploring a poet as consistently free from dishonesty as Spencer we can find our self-knowledge increased by attending to his slightest remarks about literature, life, and those cherished poems with which one or other critic would ‘be hard pressed to dispense’.

For Bernard Spencer: Essays on his Poetry & Life I have gathered the following critical explorations of his life and art, and its relation to the writing of contemporaries, as an overdue tribute which it is hoped will help new readers to appreciate further this exemplary and resilient work. I am grateful to the writers published here for their patience during the organizational and editorial process, and for allowing their essays to be included. I would also like to express my gratitude to Bernard Spencer’s widow, Anne Humphreys, to his son Piers Spencer, and, of course, to my editor Tony Frazer for his support during our work together on this volume.

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