An Annotated Homecoming

Samuel Rogers

The Poems of Basil Bunting **by Don Share (ed.). Faber & Faber, 2016. £30. ISBN 978 0 571 23500 1.**

> There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
>
> They don't make sense.
>
> ('On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos'; p. 117)

The key poets of British modernism are united in being unique examples of the great British eccentric. David Jones, the Blakean artist-poet, invented at least one new form ('painted inscription') through his diverse cross-discipline practice. Hugh MacDiarmid, who once fell from a bus and was apparently saved only by his unruly hair,[1] defined his job as 'erupt[ing] like a volcano, emitting not only flame, but a lot of rubbish'.[2] Basil Bunting (1900–85), who once joined a paid mob outside his Tehran hotel shouting 'Death to Mr. Bunting!',[3] earned his bread as a journalist, diplomat, spy, and sailor, but seldom as a poet. All three poets have, like Ezra Pound in Bunting's estimate, produced mountainous work, difficult to either scale or bypass – but sometimes a joy to behold 'if the reader doesnt spend time and energy looking for a nice logical syllogistic development which isnt there' (Bunting to Harriet Monroe, quoted p. 285). A disciple of Pound, Bunting would later form a vital link between high modernism and the literary experimentalism of 1960s Britain. As Don Share rightly points out in this book, '[t]hat Bunting's work has so often been published defectively is a poignant and crucial fact about the circumstances of his life and the fate of his work' (p. xxvi).

For those wishing to consider the original contexts of Basil Bunting's poetry, it can be hard enough to find a concise, thorough account of the poet's publication history, such as Share supplies (pp. xxvii–xxxv) within his Introduction. The early stages of this history figure a variety of formats and almost as many setbacks. An early pamphlet of 1930, *Redimiculum Metallarum*, was privately printed in Milan, and followed by appearances in a number of 1930s anthologies. However, the most important of these, *Active Anthology* (1933), famously lost half of its print-run to wartime bombing. The 1935 typescript, *Caveat Emptor*, was the first substantial grouping of Bunting's work, but a publisher could not be found for it. A breakthrough came with *Poems: 1950*, containing many of the poems Bunting is now known for; however, the edition was prepared without authorial input and contained numerous errors.

[1] Nancy K. Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and His Work* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 5.

[2] *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamilton, 1984), p. 531.

[3] See James McGonigal and Richard Price, 'The Star You Steer By: An Introduction', in *Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed. by McGonigal and Price (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 1–7 (p. 2).

Something of a turnaround came in 1965, when *The Spoils* was printed in Newcastle, at Tom Pickard's expense, and distributed by Migrant Press. The first run of these books, though not blown up in the blitz, was lost in the post from Newcastle; but a second printing began to cement Bunting's new position not only as 'a major poet', but also as belonging to the 'older generation' of the 'British Poetry Revival'.[4] It is seemingly in this capacity that Bunting would later be persuaded by Eric Mottram to serve as President to a radicalised Poetry Society.[5] As well as Pickard and company, Fulcrum Press did much to solidify Bunting's overdue presence in print, issuing his *First Book of Odes* and a selection of his work, *Loquitur*, both in 1965. Without the receptiveness of a younger generation of poets and publishers, it seems unlikely that Bunting would have found energy for the crowning achievement of his career, the completion and first performance of *Briggflatts* in 1965, followed the next year by its publication in *Poetry* and in its own volume from Fulcrum. The relative success of the latter indicates that Bunting had at least partly emerged from 'obscurity and penury' (p. xxx). As Share details, the hardback edition was followed by three-thousand paperbacks, plus second impressions of both.

In the remaining two decades of his life, Bunting published few standalone volumes of material: Share details only two small pamphlets of 1967 and two incarnations of 'Version of Horace' in the 1970s. Much more activity occurred in the way of ordering and extending his collected body of writing through a series of different editions. As noted by Richard Caddell – Share's predecessor in the editing of Bunting's work – the flawed 1950 collection established 'the basic arrangement (Sonatas: Odes: Overdrafts), and to a great extent the sequence of poems which was to be worked on and added to over the next 35 years' (quoted by Share, p. xxix). Thus, the 1968 *Collected Poems* added a 'Second Book of Odes' (never in fact published as a book); a decade later, Bunting corrected this text for OUP and added four new poems; then, in 1985, shortly before his death, Bunting added one more poem to an American edition. From *Caveat Emptor* (1935), through *Poems: 1950* and *Loquitur* (1965), and eventually to the last 1985 project, one can begin to see Bunting as preoccupied with organising and grouping a body of work. One can almost imagine this reordering as akin to Wordsworth's adjusting of *The Prelude* – a kind of consolidating of the self around fixed 'spots of time'. Share's editorial task is not then a simple, retrospective exercise, since it extends and modifies a format in which his subject was most invested. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Bunting, when finally extended the luxury of overseeing editions of his work, had very much of an editor's fastidiousness: 'According to OUP archivist, Dr Martin Maw, beyond ensuring that the poems appeared in the proper order Bunting apparently did not give additional instructions for the [1978] book' (p. xxxiv). Combined with his lack of editorial control in other areas of his oeuvre, this laidback approach helps explain the inconsistencies across Bunting's body of work.

After Bunting's death, Caddel edited an *Uncollected Poems* in 1991, consisting of material previously published in periodicals but not hitherto collected. This was followed in 1994 by OUP's *Complete Poems*, which would be reset and reissued by Bloodaxe (2000) and New Directions (2003). The latter two texts are still in print, and offer Bunting's poetry in a perfectly readable format, with

[4] Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960–1975', in Peter Barry and Robert Hampson (eds,), *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50 (p. 20).
[5] See Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013), esp. pp. 460–64. See also Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

an editorial introduction and Bunting's own notes. However, no editor has previously undertaken the task of meticulously reviewing the various competing texts to offer a substantiated, definitive edition. Caddel – who supported Share's project until his death, and is a dedicatee of the book (p. xii) – seems to have been rather more straightforwardly concerned with doing the poems justice and bringing them to their rightful readership. In the *Uncollected Poems*, he occasionally 'chose versions he preferred instead of Bunting's latest known revisions' (p. xx), showing an inclination quite removed from that of Share, who shies away from correcting 'Mr.' to 'Mr' with 'too little evidence to justify an alteration' (p. xxxviii). Both dispositions ultimately belie the greatest respect for the poet and his work, which in Share's case means taking no editorial liberties.

As Archie Burnett points out in his edition of Philip Larkin, 'reviewers on the whole do not have time, or take time, to investigate the sources of the texts: this is one reason why editors must bear large responsibilities'.[6] Few scholars could readily attest to the final accuracy of Share's text without redoing the detective work he has undertaken, using extant books and periodicals as well the few available typescripts and proofs. However, Share is a diligent and transparent editor, who accounts clearly for his process in his 'Note on the Edition' (p. xiii), his 'List of Abbreviations and Symbols' (pp. xv–xvii), and his 'Introduction' (pp. xix–xl). Using Cadel's as his copy text, Share presents a definitive version of Bunting's corpus (the work published in his lifetime occupying pp. 5–156, the uncollected taking pp. 157–271). All emendations to the copy text are dutifully listed in a two-page appendix, while full details of textual variants occupy pp. 475–517. Other useful appendices include the facsimile of a draft of *The Spoils*, and a short guide to Bunting and Persian poetry. Share defines his remit as covering all the poems Bunting published (or intended to), all the poems published posthumously, and 'some fragments, mostly published in work by others' (p. xiii). He seems to avoid the phrase 'Complete Poems' (though it does appear on the dust jacket), which may possibly suggest that he is holding out hope for some undiscovered manuscript. As it stands, the material added since the previous edition consists rather meagrely (as the competition are keen to point out) of 'three minor poems not in the Bloodaxe edition, together with a number of variants, anomalies, fragments and "false starts"'.[7]

While diligent and transparent editing of the poems is a major appeal of this book, Share's heftiest achievement comes in the form of nearly 250 pages of annotations. Along with introductory comments on the various books or sections of poems, each text is given an entry in the following format: 1) introductory remarks often touching on the process of composition and the immediate reception of the poem; 2) a publication history of the poem; 3) specific annotations and glosses. For some of the minor poems, the comments or publication history may be omitted, and the whole entry might be as short as a few lines. For *Briggflatts,* the entry spans almost 40 pages, while some of the individual annotations (including a very useful one on Domenico Scarlatti) are two- or three-page essays. Share's style of annotation is one of collation rather than overt explication: he draws encyclopaedically on critical, biographical, and editorial materials, refers to interviews and public

[6] Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Archie Burnett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. xiv. Another laudable editor, Burnett is incidentally acknowledged by Share for his 'steady guidance in the formative years of this work' (p. xi).

[7] 'Note on *The Poems* (2016)' <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/product/complete-poems-655> [accessed 26 June 2018].

readings given by Bunting, mines Bunting's personal library, and offers straightforward definition via the *OED* and *English Dialect Dictionary*. Share describes his task as 'bringing together and organizing this material from disparate sources as it bears upon individual poems' (p. xxiii); the result is a digest of relevant information, hugely useful for first-time readers, but prompting many fresh ideas for returning ones as well. There are inevitably some oversights in this material. The annotation of 'girdle', for example, follows Bunting's own note in defining a cooking vessel, but fails to note how this is combined with the more familiar, sartorial sense of the word (p. 356). The dual-sense of a corset and a hot plate is important, given that the surrounding lines (and *Briggflatts* as a whole) similarly connect the sexualised female body to the domestic, rural space ('her hearth', 'her settle'; p. 56). More broadly, one could sometimes wish for more interpretation of the bare facts, and a greater willingness to show how they impact upon the meaning of the text. This, however, is already a mammoth book, and Share does more than enough in opening up interpretive avenues for his readers to tread. He and Faber have also produced an eminently navigable craft: on each page of poetry, textual variants, and annotations, the footer gives cross-references to help the reader move between these sections of the book.

Rather than proceed chronologically, Share follows the pattern set by Bunting and continued by Caddel, dividing the poems into formal/thematic categories. We begin with the 'Sonatas', dated from 1925 to 1965 and representing the keystone of Bunting's poetic achievement, and a vital contribution to the modernist long poem. In using this musical analogy for his long-ish poems in numbered sections, Bunting sits alongside his friend Louis Zukofsky (who borrows from the structure of the fugue in his *"A"*, in particular), but also his more irksome colleague T. S. Eliot. Eliot reportedly writes in 1942 that '"sonata" in any case is too musical' to describe his own poems;[8] Bunting, meanwhile, claims to have pointed out the sonata structure of *The Waste Land* to Eliot in the early 1920s (p. 355), and much later opines 'bugger TSE. He was before me with Preludes, but I'd a bunch of Sonatas before he thought up his Quartets' (p. 306). Aside from *Briggflatts*, which is still readily available as its own volume, the rest of Bunting's long poems will have most frequently been read in a collected edition, ranged alongside their fellows. The reading experience is gruelling but enlightening, enhancing the shared tensions that, generally speaking, characterise this work: between the autobiographical and historical; between the denigrated individual and the tyrant; between the sexualised pastoral and the sterile promiscuity of the metropolis. There are sections of 'Villon' that fall clunkily into iambic tetrameter (p. 6), lacking the angular concision Bunting acquires in parts of 'The Well of Lycopolis' (1935) and has perfected by 1965. Yet the ending of 'Villon' is strikingly in harmony with the poet's later masterwork:

> The sea has no renewal, no forgetting,
>
> no variety of death,
>
> is silent with the silence of a single note.

[8] Quoted in Helen Gardner, *The Composition of 'Four Quartets'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 26.

How can I sing with my love in my bosom?

Unclean, immature, unseasonable salmon. (p. 9)

As in *Briggflatts*, a restless, nautical uprootedness clearly informs Bunting's modernist poetics, but is simultaneously associated with loss and amnesia. There is an implicit comparison with the solidity of land, and the memory embedded in place, which Bunting would thoroughly mine thirty years later. Share documents an intriguing exchange at this point: Harriet Monroe asks 'why salmon?', with Bunting evasively replying that he 'had been angling for a very long time for a very big fish' (p. 284). A more telling answer is that salmon learn to swim upstream, back to where they spawned. It would take some time for the 'immature' Bunting to do so, but the reader can detect the beginnings of the process here.

After the sonatas comes Buntings 'Chomei at Toyama', a loose interpretation of the Japanese work of Kamo no Chōmei (1155–1216), followed by the two books of 'Odes' (a catchall for Bunting's short lyrics), and the thirteen 'Overdrafts' (a designation Bunting gave to his loose adaptations or responses to Latin and Persian poets). Thus stands the sum of Bunting's collected work. We then have the uncollected odes and overdrafts, a longer adaptation – 'The Pious Cat', from Zakani's Persian – and three versions of 'They Say Etna'. All that remains unaccounted for are two 'School Poems', three 'Limericks', and a gathering of 'Fragments and False Starts'. Bunting himself addressed his eleventh ode, cantankerously, '*To a Poet who advised me to preserve my fragments and false starts*' (p. 87); and a comment from almost fifty years later further suggests how the completist urge of this volume would have rubbed its poet the wrong way. Asked to write an endorsement of a posthumous Ezra Pound volume, Bunting replies: 'It would be more profitable, more to his glory, to throw away some of the poems Pound printed than to print those he threw away himself' (quoted p. xxiv). Share has to contend more broadly with the rift between his intentions and the sentiments of Bunting – who rejected the critical value of autobiography and verbatim interviews, who saw annotation as an admission of weakness, and who industriously destroyed his drafts. As a result, Share spends a chunk of his introduction debating with the Northumbrian poet ('Bunting's own view of such information was tersely articulated' (p. xxii); 'Bunting foresaw this kind of research, and tried to hedge against it' (p. xxiii)). One does end up wondering if the poet is right and we would be better off with a slim *Selected Poems*.

It remains to be said, however, that this is a landmark volume for British poetry and for scholarship of British modernism. The earlier Bloodaxe volume will continue to have some appeal, being thinner and cheaper (only £12 in paperback); and certainly the standalone edition of *Briggflatts* has a part to play in the reading and teaching of Bunting's work. In most respects, however, Share's volume radically supersedes its forebears. The poems have never been better (or more reliably) presented, and Share's editorial apparatus is both erudite and user-friendly. From 'Villon' onwards, Bunting struggled to place his work in an appropriate venue that would find him a readership ('Eliot has it at present, but I expect he will return it'; p. 276). Ninety years later, Bunting has finally hit the big time, and it is encouraging that Faber have priced this variorum edition so reasonably; this scholarly volume is not one of those that remains beyond the means of all but university libraries. Fittingly, it is the editor of *Poetry* – a magazine supportive of Bunting from

Monroe's editorship onward – who guides us through the verse, and ushers Bunting squarely back onto our shelves.