Classic Poetry Series

Edwin Brock

- poems -

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Edwin Brock (19 October 1927 – 7 September 1997)

Edwin Brock was a British poet. Brock wrote two of the best-known poems of the last century, Five Ways to Kill a Man and Song of the Battery Hen.

Early Life

Brock was born in Dulwich, London, in 1927. He grew up in a turbulent working class family with no literary aspirations. He won a scholarship to a local grammar school but his formal education ended after he gained his School Certificate. Brock's interest in poetry was inspired by a paperback anthology of modern verse which he picked up idly as a bored 18-year old, waiting to be de-mobbed from the Royal Navy at the end of the Second World War. This chance encounter in Hong Kong was to prove revelatory and from then on Brock, completely self-taught, began to write his own poems.

Literary Career

Gradually Brock started to be published, firstly in the smaller magazines and eventually in the Times Literary Supplement. During this period, Brock served as a police officer in the Metropolitan force, the unusual combination of policeman and poet giving rise to a brief period of fame when a tabloid journalist published an interview with Brock under the banner headline: "THE THINGS HE THINKS UP AS HE POUNDS THE PECKHAM BEAT".

Brock was embarrassed by the sudden attention, but he continued to pursue his writing with serious intent. His efforts bore fruit when his first collection was accepted by the small but prestigious Scorpion Press in 1959. Its title, An Attempt at Exorcism, touches on the essentially personal nature of Brock's work, the frankness of which connects him to the Confessional Movement which at that time was in the ascendancy in the United States. Indeed, Brock is one of the few British poets of this period to be known in America, with New Directions publishing several of his collections.

Brock left the police to become an advertising copywriter, a profession which he claimed to despise, but in which he became very successful creating the famous strapline for the UK Financial Times newspaper of 'No FT. No comment'. Brock resented the way work distracted him from his real creative life in poetry, but he continued to write alongside his career, publishing over a dozen collections and becoming increasingly prolific toward the end of his life.

He was also editor of the poetry magazine, Ambit, for almost four decades. In 1966 his status was recognised by his inclusion in the influential Penguin Modern Poets series together with Geoffrey Hill and Stevie Smith

Brock authored over a dozen poetry collections, a novel and an autobiography.

Amongst many woks he wrote two of the best-known poems of the last century, Five Ways to Kill a Man and Song of the Battery Hen, but his work deserves wider recognition beyond these anthology favourites.

Brock's poems amply demonstrate the virtues of his "intensely felt, supple, direct and memorable work." Five Ways to Kill a Man is chilling in its deliberately emotionless tone as it uses the language of a practical manual to explore humanity's cruelty. Progress is reduced to the way in which mankind has "improved" its methods of killing. Inspired by a performance of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem and written quickly, the poem has an air of authority which Brock's reading emphasises.

Song of the Battery Hen is similarly suited to being spoken aloud. Though written as a dramatic monologue, in his introduction Brock makes it clear the poem has autobiographical resonance. As such it is a good example of his belief that "most activity is an attempt to define oneself in one way or another: for me poetry, and only poetry, has provided this self-defining act.".

Personal Life

Brock married Patricia Weller (Nellie V Weller, born 1930, still living,) in 1949, with whom he had a son and daughter. The marriage proved to be an unhappy one and was dissolved in 1964. The traumatic experience of marital conflict and divorce permeated his poetry at the time, for instance in the bitter and powerful An Arrangement for Seeing Children.

Brock died in 1997 following a contented retirement alongside his second wife, Elizabeth Skilton, with whom he had shared thirty happy years.

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Works

An Attempt at Exorcism (poetry collection, 1959)
The Little White God (novel, 1962)
Here, Now, Always (autobiography, 1977)
Five Ways To Kill A Man

Five Ways To Kill A Man

There are many cumbersome ways to kill a man.
You can make him carry a plank of wood
to the top of a hill and nail him to it. To do this
properly you require a crowd of people
wearing sandals, a cock that crows, a cloak
to dissect, a sponge, some vinegar and one
man to hammer the nails home.

Or you can take a length of steel,
shaped and chased in a traditional way,
and attempt to pierce the metal cage he wears.
But for this you need white horses,
English trees, men with bows and arrows,
at least two flags, a prince, and a
castle to hold your banquet in.

Dispensing with nobility, you may, if the wind
allows, blow gas at him. But then you need
a mile of mud sliced through with ditches,
not to mention black boots, bomb craters,
more mud, a plague of rats, a dozen songs
and some round hats made of steel.

In an age of aeroplanes, you may fly
miles above your victim and dispose of him by
pressing one small switch. All you then
require is an ocean to separate you, two
systems of government, a nation's scientists,
several factories, a psychopath and
land that no-one needs for several years.

These are, as I began, cumbersome ways
to kill a man. Simpler, direct, and much more neat
is to see that he is living somewhere in the middle
of the twentieth century, and leave him there.

Edwin Brock

Morston Marshes

Into this muddy coastline
the North Sea seeps silently
twice a day
under the kestrel's weather eye
in the growing puddles
gulls drill the marsh
for nothing we can see
or screech their territory
like fishwives
from the tops of poles

even in August
the sky drowns us
in small drops
settling on hair and eyes
wanting us flying in it
or grovelling in the ooze
at the water's edge

I died in this country
and came back
to pay my debts
to its wetlands

something fishes me
all the way
back to where it began

and is beginning again
down the years
with a million denials.

Edwin Brock

Tas in March

White on dark water, so stark
I leave my binoculars behind
and watch with bare red eyes
two swans, taut with sexuality,
stretching their necks
alternately side by side.

They are early: colour is
still to come to bone-dry rushes
and trees bank black strangling

their green. It is a hard wedding:
sharp brambles and ivy-covered
stumps hunch and hug;

sleet pokes the surface from
a blank neutrality, to come back
spitting with all its mouths.

Roused, the spread wings
beat their own storm towards
the north, wind against wind.

Somewhere in all this a small
heat is held, like the hope
of a cold man drowning.

Edwin Brock

The Ghost Dancer

It is surprising to be here, now,
among these people at the end.
Far way, or so it seems, from
anywhere where anything happened.
The tiny river Tas drags its heels
past our windows, barely able
to push aside the willowherb and reeds.
The swans have flown to deeper water
and one pike has cleared the pond.
Yet it has happened to someone,
as surely as the ghost we saw
that wild autumn evening
dancing downhill beside
my father's grave. It was more real
than any question or belief,
more substantial.
I can still feel the wind in the trees
and the unaccountable silence
waving us away.

None of us wants less than this:
looking over the strands
of history
to one moment of memory
recalled in love.

Edwin Brock

The Sea, The Sea

In a house
at the edge of a cliff
you can hear the sea
even with the windows closed
but at night
in your small bedroom
with the green and brown leaves
rustling the wallpaper
you leave the window open
to the wind
and even in your sleep
hear the sea slap and suck
and the pebbles running back
to where they were made

but the edge of the world
is crumbling
and houses with both closed and open windows
fall into the sea
with shops and churches
which according to legend
still sound their bells in storms

and in those smug houses
which are safe from erosion
the sea
even with its windows open
and the wind at its back
whispers so far away
it is lost in the conversation of dreams

until now
with so little time left
almost any empty house will do
near or far from the sea
even if you have to change the wallpaper.

Edwin Brock

These Old Songs

grow in the mind,
their rhymes chiming endlessly
with the sound of feet walking
or rain falling or being taken up
by garden birds, one line at a time.

Landmarks, favourite stones,
reminders of moments
that only history makes important,
we hum them down to immortality

so that now they fence us in
with the faces of lost opportunities,
and all the moons and Junes that ever were
are meadow-larking above England.

Edwin Brock

Winterton

It is a sinking
into sand; marram grass
too sharp to lie on; eyes
stinging in the wind, and
a nerve in the cheek jumping
like an actor playing Dostoevsky.
A few memories remain:
the seal pup
dragging its wound up the beach
showing a ripped belly
and crying for help;
terns dive-bombing
the air above their nests;
the flotsam fox
bitten and chewed
scourged and scraped
but still recognisable

and always the grey North Sea
disappearing into a grey sky.

Beachcombing between the season's
limbs to discover
loneliness

or coming off the frost-crisp dunes
rejoicing in ownership.

Sixty-eight years should burst
the walls of a skull with this;
but mostly it drifts
like fine sand, or bangs
against the groynes whenever
the wind blows towards the land.

Edwin Brock