Landscapes of Past and Present

Kathleen Bell reviews:
Peter Riley – *Due North*, Shearsman, 2015. £9.95

In both Steve Ely’s and Peter Riley’s books, England is its past as well as its present. The landscape is a palimpsest; current struggles and sufferings overwrite the histories of individuals and groups without erasing them so that England today comes fully into focus only when we glimpse the past.

This is, of course, inescapable in our own lives. It is however rare to see poetry that so whole-heartedly moves through time as a means of speaking of and to the present.

Steve Ely’s book, *Englaland*, is his second and follows his widely-praised debut collection, *Oswald’s Book of Hours*. *Englaland* is baggier and more uneven in tone but the best work in it is excitingly original and the language adventurous and exuberant. Once more the the poems range from Anglo-Saxon England, especially the Battle of Bruananburh, to the present day. And the landscape is no cosy, generalised England but a specific, known northern landscape over which battles have raged for centuries.

Battles are Ely’s chief subject and his poems relish the violence some men inflict on one another to a disturbing degree. I found the alliterative ‘Big Billy’ – a eulogy for three successive triumphs of a bare-knuckle boxer – disturbingly hard to read because the cumulative effect of so much ‘corpse-crunching impact/smashing and splatting like meat under steel’ evoke the violence of the bouts exactly. (I also look away when presented with scenes of detailed violence on film or television.) It’s rare to see violence in poems presented with such raw immediacy although you can find such gruesome details in the *Iliad* and probably in the Anglo-Saxon poetry with which Ely is familiar. Here they arrive without the protective filter of time, history and cultural esteem.
But the physical combats which preoccupy Ely also serve as a way of understanding and celebrating a certain kind of working-class masculinity – a masculinity which is also opposed to the power which currently shores up both old and new wealth. One of the ‘swinish multitude’ in the one-act play, ‘The Scum of the Earth,’ looks forward to a just and kinder future, though with no sense of how that might be achieved:

With billhook in hand
and cherub’s red brand
Adam takes back his land.

Three acres, a cow,
common and plough:
God knows how.

The powerless people of Ely’s poems are haunted by loss. In a complex and difficult poem about Mrs Duffy, labelled a ‘bigot’ by Gordon Brown, Ely imagines the world of not very long ago, before the ‘privatised ’I’ reduced community ‘to consumer/and lifestyle niches’. He looks back to a time within living memory:

there was life
and thriving, a thronged high street and market,
cinemas, a theatre, libraries, pubs and teams.

But more often the lost landscapes Ely celebrates are rural or semi-rural places where the conflicts and communal events of the past cannot be quite overlaid by the detritus of the present – and it is in these landscapes, with their acutely observed birdlife, that the poems find glimpses of hope:

Holy Thursday on the slope above Tom Bank
Wood. Ploughed-out, crop-choked,
bramble-snagged footpaths. Barbed-wire
and threats to prosecute. Farm machines
spraying and flailing. Landscape mute and
depopulate. But a remnant remains –
lampers and moochers, birders and hikers, bluestalkers, dog-walkers, shaggers and gawkers – creedless dissenters from a doped congregation, sleepwalking in the spirit, re-entering their Kingdom.

The landscape that is crossed and re-crossed in Peter Riley’s *Due North* is even broader in scope and more varied than that of *Englaland*, and even more than the terrific cover photo (by Richard Gascoigne) suggests. It was that photo and the title that drew me to the volume, coupled with Peter Riley’s name; he’s a poet who has been on my ‘to read’ list for years but I’d hesitated, fearing he might be too ‘difficult’ or experimental in a way I could not quite grasp. There is difficulty here, but also immediate pleasure. This long poem has a wonderful, subtle music as well as images that enlighten, disturb and draw the reader in. There are fragmentary stories too, which echo one another and the whole poem is shot through with hope and kindness. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve sat down to write this review only to be drawn back into the poem. When the review is written, I shall read it again, at least once more – and when I’ve done that, I shall seek out Peter Riley’s back catalogue.

Like Ely, Riley is deeply concerned with place, movement and the loss of community. The poem begins with ‘human groups moving/over the great grasslands with the herds,’ reminding us that migration is our common heritage. At times this movement, echoed here as elsewhere by the spacing of lines on the page, becomes more specific:

We sang them across the river, someone wrote it down and we asked the way, to the next labour market, or the next war and were told to follow our noses but when we get there we may have to wait, under the lamp post, by the barracks gate, for a kiss in the night, or a ticket to Warsaw. Perfectly freely, we partook, innocently, solemnly and apart, saying little, learning the tongue, spurning privilege and on into the forest.
Here the poem speaks in the voice of the communal ‘we.’ Elsewhere it moves from the collective history of migrations, sometimes linked allusively to specific points in history, as here by the reference to the song ‘Lili Marlene.’ Elsewhere an individual, who may at times be Riley himself reflecting on his individual past, is seen in relation to a broader picture of change and loss, as here where personal experience follows an account of shared, though unequal, access to government and culture in a recent, English past:

Full-hearted governance, free library, honey-coloured perpendicular stone, mutual aid societies, wool market, “chapels for almost every class of dissenter”
strict codes of punishment for breaking contracts

The poets I worked with and learned from and loved and feared recede one by one into somebody else’s career, like birds in a mist.

Riley’s concerns are as wide as the geographic scope of his poem and it is impossible, in a short review, even to list them all. They include the role of language, the ease with which we become complicit with the duplicity of politicians and institutions (including the duplicity of universities), war, madness, poetry, the land, music, inequality of power. As the poem gathers momentum the echoes and lyrical passages deepen in meaning so that short stanzas which may seem obscure when extracted resonate because of their context. For instance, the following seven lines from section V “Locospotters” are not explained but deepened by the context of the poem as a whole:

Lie still, children of war
in your stone beds under
the dark adjective. The woman
with the guitar will sing to you
of places whose names you know
and the strangers who sent you here
across the toiling seas. Keep close…
Here, some of the huge abstractions with which the book deals become both strange and specific. But elsewhere in *Due North* abstractions become part of the detailed experience of everyday life: silence can be carried “in a side pocket” or “folded against the flank” while trust can be held “like an old watch on a chain.”

The hope and kindness this book offers are not easily achieved, and they cannot be separated from its acts of mourning. Section XI ‘The Ascent of Kinder Scout’ (previously published separately as a chapbook by Longbarrow Press) is both elegy and parable, as well as a great deal more. It links the ‘wild self’ with the yearning for sociality experienced in the acts of climb and descent. Here as elsewhere the poem takes in the beauty that seems to lift us out of the everyday, only to return us to the world in which we live:

These jewels of thoughts stick to our heavy coats, half way round the world arriving at dawn to knock gently on your door when you are suspended between two worlds to make sure you choose this one, it wants your vote. The stars in the sky become invisible in the blue sweep of light, angled onto work.

But neither world exists without the other. The world of thought, of beauty, of poetry and of music doesn’t cease to exist in the world of the everyday, any more than the stars cease to exist in the ‘blue sweep of light.’ One of the most remarkable aspects of this poem is that it covers so many aspects of the world without diminishing any.

There is much more I want to say about this poem, and much more I have yet to find within it. But it’s time for me to finish writing this review, and time to pick up *Due North* and read it again. I urge you to read it too.

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