

Dangerous Tocsins

Matthew Hollis & Paul Keegan (eds), *101 Poems Against War*.
Faber & Faber, £8.99

The cover is exciting. Three stark colours which depict the letters W-A-R rising, as though from a black desert, to stand silhouetted against an angry red sky. Overhead, like cream zeppelins caught in the searchlights, the characters “101 Poems Against” hover in formation. Despite the title, however, this is not a pacifist’s anthology. Nor is it a polemical one. Sadly, despite the packaging, which very much suggests we are taking something bold and outrageous in our hands, it is a book which will upset very few people.

The title is unhelpful. Many of the poems in this book are not *against* war—it would be more accurate to say that they are *about* war. Andrew Motion, in his notably feline afterword, makes this clear. Quoting Wilfred Owen (“All a poet can do today is warn”) he admits, in sidelong fashion, the concept of “just war”: “Owen’s maxim has held firm through the years, even in wars (such as the war against Hitler) which are generally considered ‘just’”. But if that concept is admitted, in what meaningful way can the anthology as a whole be described as *against* war? Motion points out that these poems leave us in no doubt about “war’s misery and waste”. And this is so, but then who doubts—anywhere—that war is miserable and wasteful? Motion goes on: the anthology “brings us face to face with the terror of war at a time when our airwaves are filled with talk of the war on terror”. Again, this is not saying much—war is terrible—Motion’s neat rhetorical inversion is just that, rhetoric rather than substance. In a further careful formulation, he summarises the anthology’s value: “It shows us that—whatever our faith—we compromise, betray or wreck our selves when we take up arms against one another”. Or, mark you, not *and*—it may be that we only *compromise* ourselves when we engage in war. If Motion’s summary of what the anthology stands for is correct (there is no editorial

introduction, so we must take it that the editors largely, or wholly, agree with his characterisation) then it is rather limp—and obvious.

Of course, this book does not emerge from a vacuum. It rides in on the back of anti-war sentiment—mostly European—which preceded the war in Iraq. Both by packaging and timing, the book suggests that it takes a position against the policies of the British and American governments (though nowhere is this explicitly stated.) A number of Arab writers have, rather pointedly, been included.

The selection and arrangement of poems is curious. The book begins with Simonides and Archilochus, suggesting a chronological arrangement, but only a few pages later we find Jo Shapcott. The poems included are not, most of them, unambiguously against war, but they tend to be poems designed to “get a reaction”. Often highly rhetorical they leave one with the impression that some kind of decisive statement has been made, some sort of definitive feeling has been caught. A few of them take aim at qualities, supposed virtues such as patriotism and bravery, which are secondary to conflict—the target not so much war itself as various states-of-mind which, at some time, have been considered necessary to accompany it. Three separate poets, for example, disparage what is by now perhaps the most-ridiculed of all Latin maxims, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Wilfred Owen’s broadside is probably the most famous and there are further attacks by Ezra Pound and Arthur Hugh Clough.

It should be said that the anthology contains quite a few excellent poems—no less excellent for being familiar. Who will complain if Thomas Hardy’s “Channel Firing”, Stevie Smith’s “I Remember”, Edward Thomas’s “Rain”, Keith Douglas’s “How to Kill”, Philip Larkin’s “MCMXIV”, and Ted Hughes’s “Six Young Men” all get wheeled out again? There is also a sprinkling of unfamiliar, excellent poems including Yehuda Amichai’s “The Diameter of the Bomb”, Goran Simic’s “The Sorrow of Sarajevo” and Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It”. The book contains relatively few stinkers, but there are some quite bad poems, for example, by Anne Finch, Charles Hamilton Sorley, and Clarence Major. Then there is “American Football (A Reflection upon the Gulf War)”, a remarkably stupid poem by Harold Pinter:

Hallelullah!
It works.

We blew the shit out of them.
We blew the shit right back up their own ass
And out their fucking ears.

It works.
We blew the shit out of them.
They suffocated in their own shit!

If this is Pinter in reflective mood, what would he be like writing off the top of his head? Then there are a number of puzzling inclusions. Given the anthology's tone, the two poems by Yeats seem discordant. "On Being Asked for a War Poem", for example, states that poets have nothing helpful to say in time of conflict:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right.

Its companion, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is also not obviously an anti-war poem (unsurprising given Yeats's later composition of fascist marching songs), rather it is a poem about the singular psychology of the speaker and the irony of the circumstances in which he finds himself. More relevant poems by Yeats to include would be "Easter 1916" and (better still) "Meditations in Time of Civil War". But these are poems of a type which the anthology tends to shun. "Easter 1916", despite its over-exposure, requires a degree of contextualisation, while "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is complex and many-angled. Tellingly, both poems are nuanced and ambivalent about the value of conflict, and the appearance of ambivalence is something which the book tries to avoid.

Another strange choice is "Green Beret" by Ho Thien. In this poem, translated from the Vietnamese, a Green Beret threatens a Vietnamese boy with the death of his father unless the boy gives up information about the resistance. The boy says nothing, his father is killed, and the soldier starts to think the boy knew nothing all along. But the poem ends:

And the boy knew everything.
He knew everything about them, the caves,
the trails, the hidden places and the names,
and in the moment that he cried out,

in the same instant,
protected by frail tears
far stronger than any wall of steel,
they passed everywhere
like tigers
across the High Plateau.

It is hard to read this as other than a celebration of the power of the Vietnamese resistance—and in stereotyped martial language at that (“far stronger than any wall of steel”, “tigers”). It is another poem hard to square with the book’s title. A similar puzzle is Seamus Heaney’s “Sophoclean” which does not mention war at all—one can only speculate that its inclusion is some sort of mistake, especially when one considers other poems by Heaney which might have been used, for example, “Punishment” and “Strange Fruit”.

This anthology, hastily conceived and indifferently executed, reflects the current difficulties which arise from mixing poetry with promotional culture. While promoters are quick to describe poetry as truthful, fearless, critical, and cutting-edge, their promotion encourages practices which are lawyerly, cautious and sly, with one eye on the audience all the time—which is why Motion was the ideal choice to write the afterword. While it packages itself as a brave statement, this book is much more an amalgam of knowing gestures. It is just a pity that the best-known publisher of poetry in Britain, instead of resisting such empty promotional tendencies, has rushed to embrace them.