

INTRODUCTION

The title of this book, *Andrew Young: Priest, Poet and Naturalist*, is taken from the memorial tablet erected by his parishioners in St Peter's Church, Stonegate, East Sussex. To them, naturally enough, he had been primarily a priest; but the second person of this trinity, the poet, was not only first chronologically but was more basically the linchpin of his personality. He was a priest by choice and a naturalist by habit, but he was, from the beginning, an *inevitable* poet.

When he went up to Edinburgh University in 1903, he read for a general arts degree which included Fine Art, Latin and Greek, Natural Science, Logic and Metaphysics, Archaeology, and Moral Philosophy: an incredibly (and nowadays untenably) wide spectrum of knowledge. 'Edinburgh University was to me a true Alma Mater, Kind Mother,' he said many years later, and when he finally left, having extended his three-year course to four, it was for the equally safe, 'motherly' confines of New College, Edinburgh, for four years' theological training. Few poets in the English language, with the obvious exceptions of Milton and T.S. Eliot, have had as much formal academic education as Andrew Young. Understandably, he was later described as being formidably well read.

'A faded photograph shows me as a child with curls riding a hobby horse,' he recalled at the age of 82, and added: 'I have been riding hobby horses all my life and, while I have kept on changing horses, a favourite hobby has been with words.'^[1] To relegate words to the status of 'a favourite hobby' is to totally underestimate their real importance in his life, yet such a throwaway phrase is typical of the man whom his daughter Alison remembered wearing, 'the amused, half-mocking smile of one who reveals little of his inner thoughts,'^[2] and whom Richard Church called, 'wry, witty, epigrammatic, shrewd, and finally, *elusive*.'^[3]

1. Andrew Young, 'Early Days' from *New Poly-Olbion*, 1967.

2. Said to the present author in 1983-84.

3. Richard Church's essay in *Andrew Young: Prospect of a Poet*, ed. by Leonard

Yet if Andrew Young is to be found anywhere, it is in his words. As F.R. Leavis said of the archetypal poet: 'He is a poet because his interest in his experience is not separable from his interest in words; because, that is, of his habit of seeking by the evocative use of words, to sharpen his awareness of his ways of feeling,' and, in Young's case, ways of thinking, 'so making these communicable.'^[1]

'Evocative' and 'communicable' are perhaps key words here: though not principally an innovator, like Hopkins or Eliot, he strives to be 'evocative', precise and original in his imagery (who could forget 'those hidden *ventriloquists* . . . singing in the wood / Flinging their *cheating* voices here and there' [my italics]) and to make his viewpoint 'communicable' to others, as he rarely did directly. This 'displacement' activity may have been a psychological prop to a man intrinsically introverted and often socially inept (e.g. he had no small talk) but it also helps to push him into Ruskin's, 'first order of poets, who feel strongly, think clearly and see truly.'^[2]

It is the central contention of this book that Andrew John Young (1885-1971) is still seriously undervalued amongst twentieth-century poets, principally because he has been over-anthologised – and by implication, dismissed – as yet another 'nature' poet of the Georgian ilk, and because he was outside the mainstream 'movements' and innovations of his own time. Indeed, he actively disliked innovators such as Yeats, Auden and Eliot, preferring Spenser, Hardy and Edward Thomas. Yet in the seven volumes of poetry published between 1920 and 1931, there are clear signs of change and development towards a more individual, spare, less ornate 'period' style. Paradox and a deceptive simplicity were becoming his hallmarks. By 1933 he had taken the advice he later gave when adjudicating a poetry competition: 'When writing poetry, try not to be too poetical.' By 1939 he was writing his best collection of short poems, *Speak to the Earth*, in which his originality is not in his verse forms but in his conceits, imagery, paradoxes and verbal tropes. Ironically, by 1952, *Into Hades* opens with an almost Eliotian line: 'One midnight in the Paris Underground'.

A reassessment is long overdue: Roger Sell's 1978 *Trespassing Ghost: A Critical Study of Andrew Young* (Åbo Akademi, Finland) began the process by labelling him 'a major poet', but he is arguably a *great* poet, a modern metaphysical, a poet's poet, whose idiolect is distinctive and whose 'individual talent' both links to yet subtly changes literary 'tradition'.

Clark, 1957.

1. F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932.
2. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol.3, 1843-1860.

If, as Pope observed, ‘the proper study of mankind is man’, then it is also of ‘man in his circumambient universe’; interlinked, one with the other, where the physical and moral universes meet. Young sees and shows the relationship between external nature and human nature, often through the prism of pathetic fallacy, symbolism, paradox or metaphor, as when he asks, rhetorically, in *Dead Crab*:

Or does it make for death to be
Oneself a living armoury?

Young had no illusions about nature, human or animal, and no sentimentality about either: he was a meditative observer; something of a moral philosopher; a theist and a pantheist; an ironist and wordsmith. Many of his poems may be seen as meditations on mortality and immortality, themes which come together in his final, major poems, *Out of the World and Back*. These themes are present from his earliest poems (perhaps they were an occupational hazard) but reach their full fruition in the Stonegate years, from 1941 to 1959, along with his tendency to juxtaposition, irony and wit:

I had seen Death at last:
He had ridden past me, not on his pale horse,
But on a cycle with the *Sunday Times*.

It is clearly not always true that Young’s is essentially a landscape without people, but it often is. Like Hardy, a poet he both admired and learned from, ‘he was a man who noticed such things’ as birds, beasts and flowers, on his long walks in the Sussex countryside, when he visited outlying parishioners, then sat silent when he arrived. On one such occasion he was offered a book, which he duly sat and read, then went home!

Andrew Young was, by any standards, an eccentric; a loner, introvert, perhaps misfit; a distant, detached family man who insisted on eating alone; a moody, chauvinistic patriarch who expected to be respected and obeyed. Perhaps he was more himself on the page than ever he was in person; yet he inspired great devotion in those who loved him, such as his long-suffering wife, Janet. The widow of writer Leslie Norris admitted after Andrew Young’s death that although ‘he was a terrible man’, she had ‘wept buckets when he died’ in 1971.

He was himself as much of a paradox as any creature he ever wrote about. His daughter Alison and her husband Edward Lowbury, in their biography of the poet (*To Shirk No Idleness*, University of Salzburg, 1997) comment on ‘his lack of interest in or understanding of other people’, which probably places him somewhere at what we would now call the Asperger’s end of the autistic spectrum. It must also have been a professional handicap in a priest.

Writing was a lifelong habit with Young from about the age of eight onwards, and allowed for the expression of a range of thought and feeling not expressed anywhere else in his life, except perhaps occasionally in sermons.

In some ways, Young played truant 'on principle' *all* his life, not just as an errant schoolboy at Dalmeny. Like Blake, Young spent much of his life not quite in this world, and he takes this to its logical conclusion in the two long, whimsical, Dantesque spiritual autobiographies on which his reputation ultimately rests. They link him in a line of descent from the medieval dream vision poets, Langland and the unknown 'Gawain poet' through Bunyan, Blake and Wordsworth. They are both Christian and classical pagan; using the 'conversational' blank verse of Shakespeare, yet unmistakably modern. Like Young himself, they are complex, paradoxical and multi-layered.

A wry, whimsical, observant, engaging persona is also clearly evident in Young's prose works, particularly in the two flower books, *A Prospect of Flowers* (1945) and its companion volume, *A Retrospect of Flowers* (1950). Both books are rich potpourris of anecdote, information, history and reminiscence, written in the tradition of the great English prose stylists such as Sir Thomas Browne and W.H. Hudson, whom he often reread. Yet they are not imitative but uniquely his own; the irony is, perhaps, that the genial, amusing and companionable persona evident in these volumes bore so little relationship to the man, as usually perceived.

In *New Poly-Olbion* (1967), a gentle take on Michael Drayton's 1613 poetic original, Young's prose is once again sparkling, amusing and full of literary references and conceits: 'Crocuses in gardens were awake, stretching themselves and yawning; if daffodils are the spring's trumpets . . . every garden had its brass band . . . even violets shivered in their purple hoods.' (*Cold Cotswolds*)

As well as combining poetic and natural observation, there is also a certain amount of carefully selected and controlled autobiographical reference, especially in the chapter 'Early Days'. Along with the unpublished and unfinished autobiography *My Life*, we have Young's reconstructed version of events to compare with the primary testimony of others and the 'internal' testimony of the poems themselves.

To write so well in poetry and prose is itself quite remarkable. Young had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1944, and after *A Prospect of Flowers*, honours came thick and fast: he was made a canon of Chichester Cathedral in 1947; in 1951 he was given an Honorary LLD from Edinburgh University; in 1952, after the publication of *Into Hades*, he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry; and in 1961 he won the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize for *Collected Poems*.

In his later years, he enjoyed the friendship of other writers such as Christopher Fry, Leslie Norris, Richard Church, Basil Dowling and Rosemary Sutcliff, and befriended younger poets such as Norman Nicholson and James Kirkup. Even Philip Larkin, a modernist if ever there was one, remarked of Young that 'his works are in no danger of being forgotten'. May these words prove not just prophetic but an underestimate of a truly remarkable voice in English poetry.

SAMPLE