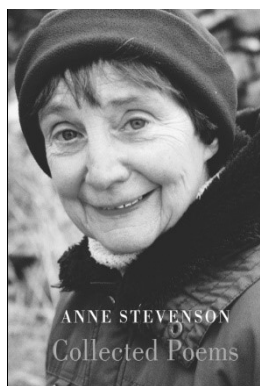


A STARRY ACHIEVEMENT
ANNE STEVENSON'S *COLLECTED POEMS*
REVIEWED BY DILYS WOOD



“a recurring theme of hers is that women can achieve the same fulfilling intellectual and spiritual awareness as men. Examples she cites include Jane Austen (“Dear votary of order, sense, clear art”), Sylvia Plath (“the fiercest poet of our time”), her friends Frances Horowitz (poet), Nerys Johnson (painter), and not least her mother.”

Before dipping again into the 560 pages of this posthumously published collection it may be worth highlighting some of the notes I scribbled during the first reading. I needed to remind myself of who she was, this strong-minded, witty woman, who wrote and published poetry for over sixty years and is sometimes called an ‘Anglo-American’ poet because she spent most of her adult life in the UK, with a deservedly high reputation here. I suspect that it’s easier to understand her as formed by US tradition, but other things come first, such as her immense talent and dedication to the poetry she regarded as ‘high art’, demanding huge effort, self-control and explication – definitely not a field for self-publicists or woolly-minded amateurs (targets of sharp criticism in Stevenson’s critical writings).

‘Stevenson’s a woman’, my first note reads, ‘Daughter, wife (several times!), mother, with some strong female friendships – deeply interested in all these roles and some down-sides’. I also noted: ‘American influences on the young poet paramount: including Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop (a shining light for her) and Sylvia Plath (not such a shining light?) – very wary of ‘self-pity’ and confessional poetry, hence her reservations about Plath’. I noted: ‘She was raised in an intellectual, cultured family where she received an intense musical education – did this set her up to become an intellectual leader and literary activist herself (teacher, critic, essayist, biographer)?’ My final scribble relates to the themes that repeat themselves across her work: ‘Interested in individual character, history, national characteristics, landscape, flora and fauna, the hard but rewarding life of the artist, spiritual experience (but not a mystic?). She’s so against ‘isms’ and preaching of any kind, but deals with some of the key issues of our time in, usually, an oblique way’.

Despite the rich opportunity offered by a ‘Collected’, I’d find it hard to illustrate how Stevenson’s work developed, except that there are more deeply ‘spiritual’ poems in the later collections and fewer poems that are mainly ingenious and finely wrought, such as tend to be written in youth. To trace her development book by book (these poems are drawn from seventeen collections) would require a thesis rather than a review, so I just want to pick on a few of her key interests, while stressing that some ‘givens’ – honed formal skills, keen observation, a good sense of the piquant and humorous (as well as darker aspects of life), pleasure in making us ‘sit up and take notice’ – stamp her strong personality on the handling of a wide range of subject-matter. Whether statistically true or not, I suspect that ‘womanhood’ (comprising parenting) is the subject that engaged Stevenson most, and this relates to several factors: her relationship with her mother; the strong and highly stimulating increasing success of woman writers (and specifically poets) in her lifetime; the way this very success highlighted the divided loyalties of working women with children; her sense of men as spiritual rivals (as well as lovers, friends, sources of support).

By beginning her poetry career in the US, Stevenson got a head start in understanding herself as a woman of high ambition and entitlement. Her chief influence was Elizabeth Bishop. She got to know her when Bishop (and, a little earlier, Bishop’s self-appointed mentor, Marianne Moore) stood far

higher on the vibrant post-war US literary scene than any woman did in the UK (they were also supported by lavish grants and prizes). She was very aware of the UK's lagging, addressing Fleur Adcock in a poem, *Now We are 80*: "Time was when we two were the only two, / Two women poets on the Oxford list" (from *Completing the Circle*). Not discouraged, a recurring theme of hers is that women can achieve the same fulfilling intellectual and spiritual awareness as men. Examples she cites include Jane Austen ("Dear votary of order, sense, clear art"), Sylvia Plath ("the fiercest poet of our time"), her friends Frances Horovitz (poet), Nerys Johnson (painter), and not least her mother.

"A mother, who read and thought and poured herself into me; / she was the jug and I was the two-eared cup" (*Arioso Dolente*, from *Granny Scarecrow*): this is Stevenson's tribute to her own mother and an indication of how positively she often sees family relations. Many poems here express anger or rollicking humour about the chore (and trap) of bearing children: "It's my lot each May to be hot and pregnant. / A long way away from the years when I slept by myself" (*The Suburb*, from *Reversals*); "A woman's life is her own / until it is taken away / by a first particular cry. / Then she is not alone / but part of the premises", *Poem for a Daughter*, from *Minute by Glass Minute*. By contrast, some of her most highly developed and searching poems refer to what she admits can be the satisfaction and pleasure of 'pouring herself' into her children. The attractive eponymous poem *Four and a half dancing men* is about entertaining her sick child with cut-paper figures while weighing up his character and potential ("silent intensity, / grave as his liquid eyes"). *Teaching My Sons to Swim in Walden Pond* (from *Astonishment*) goes well beyond the idea of teaching swimming, as she imagines herself imparting ideas to her sons about respecting the environment under threat ("With Boston already baying in the distance, / close and louder every night, closer and fiercer"). This is one of Stevenson's strongest ecological poems, yet firmly fixed in the idea of passing wisdom down through the generations, this being one of her recurrent themes. Even when focussing on women in the past whose lives were constricted she senses patience and endurance.

Some of Stevenson's most striking poems are about women friends, often citing the spiritual power seen to emanate from their dedication to art. *Red Rock Fault* (from *The Fiction-Makers*), one of her poems for Frances Horovitz, remembers a beloved place, "You carried your love of that rushy place / in the candle of your living face / to set in the dark of your poems". Dedicating her book *Granny Scarecrow*, 'For Nerys Johnson whose spirit is a durable fire', Stevenson has two poems about her in the next book (*A Report from the Border*), including, from *Portrait of the Artist*, "She lives next door to dying / In a shack of bones, / A gorgeous spirit furnishing / that worst of homes. // A votive flame, she celebrates / The air she burns." *Tulips* (from *Astonishment*) portrays a woman hard to extinguish, "When Nerys in her wheelchair painted tulips / they were strawberry-coloured, like her hair. / She gave them a life far longer / than the one life gave her". These lyrical, passionate poems show her women friends as powerful and transformative. With intentional irony, *Tulips* is directly followed by *Password*, where Stevenson describes her own experiences as a woman: "Pretending love was true and life a myth. // Waking with a baby on her hip, / Yeats in her shopping basket, here she is, / Thin as a blade and angry as a whip, / Weighing her gift against her selfishness. // Three husbands later, here she is again, / Fighting her own defiance, breaking rules." We sense a kind of relief, even triumph, in confronting herself as a specimen of C20/C21 womanhood while avoiding the self-pity she hated.

If human nature is thoroughly studied here, the natural world is another major pre-occupation, the scale of her focus stretching from the minute to the cosmic. Pets, wild animals, birds, flowers and landscapes fascinate her. The descriptions are detailed, accurate, often exquisite: "Quick flutter, a scimitar upsweep, out of danger of touch, for / Earth is forbidden to them, water's forbidden to them / All air and fire, little owl-like ascetics, they outfly storms" (*Swifts* from *Minute by Glass Minute*); "Orchid-lipped, loose-jointed, purplish, indolent flowers / with a ripe smell of peaches, like a girl's breath through lipstick" (*Himalayan Balsam* from *Minute by Glass Minute*); "each silky delicate bell-stalk / carrying its carillon to one side, / dusky wine-cups, ringers of creamy anthers", *May Bluebells*, *Coed Aber Arthro*, from *A Report from the Border*.

In conformity with her own widely canvassed views on not subordinating the concrete, the observed, to opportunistic polemicism, Stevenson never wears her ecological heart on her sleeve. She

nevertheless conveys in some notable poems that being in nature can be for her a numinous experience. *An Angel* (from *Granny Scarecrow*) adopts the precise setting of one of the poet's regular long drives into Wales to frame a visionary experience. She's transported out of time, then the vision fades. She's continues driving with a migraine headache, "And through that fluorescent manacle, / the road flowed on through Wales". The poet's vision ("blink into genesis") involves knowledge that all creation is endangered: "Soon – fast-forward – forests were shooting up. / Seasons tamed lagoons of bubbling mud / where, hatching from the scum, animalculae / crawled, swarmed, multiplied, disbanded, / swarmed again, raised cities out of dust, / destroyed them, died. I turned to the angel, / 'Save these species, I cried."

"Save these species" is the kind of emotional appeal that (generally) Stevenson only allows herself after having built an elaborate scaffolding (narrative; dream; multi-dimensional poem sometimes based on a particular place). Though her work recognises the crises of her times, including war, genocide and the psychological pressures of modern life, 'distance' and restraint is important to her. She seldom writes in a spirit of indignant rhetoric, or with the conviction of being 'on the right side'. For example, *Journal Entry: Impromptu in C Minor* (from *The Other House*) uses the device of 'conversation with herself'. Beginning with comments on driving, a Scottish landscape, weather, she describes drifting into mindlessness, when a piece of music (on the radio?) brings up several topics: her dead father; Jewish refugees visiting in 1943 when she was ten ("the white-haired Jewish philosopher, makes shy mistakes in English"); WW2 ("Headlines blacking out the breakfast chatter ... Static and foreign voices on the radio"); her own deafness; her moral 'deafness' to the sufferings of the Jews; the fate of the composer of the music (Schubert) dying at thirty-one. The poem ends with reference to "the present and the future / of an every-minute dying planet / with a helix, a hinge of survival". There's no hierarchy of guilt and pain here but the sense of a common fate and (possibly) a promise of survival.

It's hard to do justice to the range of subject-matter in Stevenson's life-work, but the way she illuminates the past of her two countries, US and UK, exploring the idea of unavoidable, invidious 'legacies' in each case, is one of her claims to be a 'great' writer. This interest never leaves her, cropping up in portraits of her own forbears, or of contemporaries in both countries, denizens of what she clearly regards as very different traditions. Representative figures are sometimes seen in a tragic (or comic) light. In her poem about the English, *By the Boat House, Oxford* (from *Enough of Green*) her observations are on the cusp of grim: "Their husbands are plainly superior, with them, without them. / Their boys wear privilege like a clean inheritance easily ... The punts seem reconciled to their unexciting mooring. / But the women?"

Written in mid-life, *Correspondences, A family History in Letters*, is the book-length history of a fictional American family, 1829-1972, showing a profound interest in the forces at work: male hegemony, Calvinism, fear and guilt, the raw pioneer experience, civil war, business ethics linked with religiosity and social conscience, the Great Crash, family break up, neuroses. This engaging story with strong characterisation is a tour-de-force and reveals Stevenson's deep study of inheritance and the penalties attached to conformity/non-conformity. Near the end, Stevenson produces an address, a 50-line peroration about a failure of values. This not a personal plea (else she might not have written it) but a wake-up call to a nation: "We accuse you, fathers, / we accuse you of lies. / of pouring out a smoke-screen of high-minded fervor, / then setting off to murder / under twin banners, Profit and Compromise."

The "We accuse you" passage places Stevenson in the pulpit where, in general, she never wanted to be – out slips the secret of how passionate a writer she is. What she would like, I suggest, is for us to make our way through her tome (a deeply worthwhile read) setting out to find her. Her own words from the preface to *Completing the Circle* (included here), set us on our way: 'My aim ... is almost always to allow any poem I find myself wrestling with, to tell me finally what it means. Painful feelings need to be loosened by detachment and sometimes lightened by wit. Memories can be better understood when shorn of self-pity and given a context in a larger reality.'

Anne Stevenson (1933-2020) Collected Poems, Bloodaxe Books. £25. ISBN 978-1-7803765-1-6