

THE PAST IS ANOTHER COUNTRY ALISON BRACKENBURY SHARES SOME THOUGHTS WITH KAY COTTON



Let's travel back 60 years. In 1962, Jenny Joseph was the first woman to receive an Eric Gregory Award (given annually to British poets under 30). Twenty years later, I received one. I was only the 13th woman to do so (* see note).

Today's statistics are very different. I was lucky in 1982. Education had helped to prise open doors for a few women poets. Unlike my grandmother, I went to a grammar school. (Only 25% of English pupils did.) Unlike my mother, I went to university. (Only 6% of English pupils did.) So the group most likely to submit poems, successfully, for publication was small. By 29, I was one of them.

Although I can't find figures, I believe that far fewer new poets were published in 1982. Broadsheet newspapers reviewed them. Publishers did their marketing – and did not always expect poets to do numerous readings. A reasonably successful poet could do an unrelated full-time job.

By the next century, I realised that there were numerous excellent poets, performing frequently. Only health-wrecking nocturnal plunges into social media and gruelling evening trips to London kept sales alive until retirement let me join the public life of poetry.

In 2024, I now read, admiringly, many younger published poets from highly varied backgrounds. Many teach creative writing. Many are adept at social media.

I am delighted that some women's ability to operate as poets seems less disrupted by parenthood than mine was. But how would a new poet with a non-poetry job now fare? And, although poetry publishers seem almost swamped by submissions, many audiences seem to consist almost entirely of poets. This was not the case in 1982.

Starkly, I think that my generation, with notable exceptions, did not send poems which many people valued into the wide world beyond poets. I regret this, and take my share of the blame.

One practical final note. Poets, do submit poems to journals. They may reach a wider audience than many collections – and will help you towards book publication. That, I think, has not changed since 1982...

* Editors' note: from commencement in 1960 to 1981, the year before Alison Brackenbury was included in the awards, 108 Eric Gregory awards had been issued.