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Alan Bold: An Enduring Friendship

In common with many of his closest friends, I first met Alan Bold in what could be said was his natural habitat—a pub. It was in Milne’s Bar in Edinburgh to be precise, in the days when it really was a dive bar, albeit with the reputation of a “poet’s pub”—the sort of place which the poet Hugh MacDiarmid admired, with “a complete absence of music and very little illumination.” It was certainly not the tarted-up marketing man’s creation that it became in the 1980s when it was reinvented as a “literary pub” and marketed accordingly. The year was 1971 and it must have been in the early months because I had just begun working with the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) as part of the team overseeing its expenditure on literature. Part of my brief, and an enjoyable one at that, was to get to know as many Scottish writers in as short a time as possible. A few days earlier I had been given an idea of what to expect when the poet Norman MacCaig proffered the well-meant advice that Scottish writers were much given to slapping each other on the back. “Too bad they forget to remove the dirk first,” was the all-too-typical Norman-ish after-thought.

It was therefore with some trepidation that I walked from the SAC headquarters in Rothesay Terrace to Bold’s stomping ground in Hanover Street and it was not just Norman’s warning that unnerved me: the man I was going to meet arrived in the bar with a well-deserved reputation. Not only was he the author of several highly praised (rightly so) volumes of poetry but he was considered to be an *enfant terrible*, a rebel with a cause, a plainspoken and occasionally outspoken critic who believed that black was black and white was white and that to compromise was the work of the devil. In other words, Bold lived up to his reputation as a libertarian who fully endorsed MacDiarmid’s

credo: "They do not love liberty who fear licence."

As it turned out, we got on famously and so began a lifelong friendship, enlivened throughout its existence by frequent meetings with many lost days and, in later life, by a voluminous and gossip-filled correspondence which will one day be deposited in the National Library of Scotland. It occurred to me at the time—and the thought has never left me—that in Alan Bold Scotland possessed something of a renaissance man who was much underrated and much misunderstood. Here was a poet who was also an incisive and courageous critic unwilling to mince his words. Here was an artist who could both paint and write about the process. Here was an open and generous man who, in private, could be thunderingly funny. Here was a sporting enthusiast who admired the extravagant athletic gifts of Mohammed Ali, then the world heavyweight boxing champion, and who could discuss the works of Elvis Presley with the same erudition that he brought to Pound's *Cantos*. Here was Alan Bold, poet and painter, and his life story is well worth recording before memories grow dim and myth blunts the harsher realities of his life.

Alan Bold exploded onto the Scottish cultural scene in 1965 with all the force of a right hook from his hero Mohammed Ali. Not long past his twentieth birthday and a student at Edinburgh University, he collaborated with the artists John Bellany and Sandy Moffat in an audacious assault on the artistic establishment which all three men deemed at the time to be overly cautious, complacent and unwilling to accept new challenges. Having found common cause with the two art students, Bold joined forces with them in holding an alternative art exhibition which was hung on the railings outside the Royal Scottish Academy. For the show—"provocative, even explosive," he wrote later—Bold produced a trenchant catalogue which promoted his friends' work and had some harsh words to say about the artistic status quo. "Immodestly," as Bold admitted later, they called themselves "the Big Three" but their outburst caused quite a sensation: at the height of the Edinburgh International Festival they had made a significant impact by punching their way into the nation's cultural life.

The comparison is not inapt for boxing always played a major part in Bold's life. Apart from a lifelong interest in the sport—Ali with his style and raw panache was a natural role model—Bold had been handy with his fists while a youngster at school and had trained at Edinburgh's Sparta Boxing Club, the nursery for many a fine Scottish boxer. There he gained the unique distinction for a Scottish poet of sparring with Ken Buchanan, a boxer who was later to become the lightweight champion of the world: when Buchanan won the title Bold told friends that he felt an immense surge of vicarious pride because it was an achievement with which he could relate. Taking the point a stage further he argued that if a Scottish boxer from a background similar to his could become a world champion then there was no reason why he (Bold) should not succeed in making a similar impact with his poetry.

That Bold made such an early impression owed everything to his raw tal-

ent matched to a steely determination to succeed, whatever the odds. He was born into an Edinburgh working class family on 20 April 1943—a birthday he shared with Adolph Hitler (to his immense chagrin)—and given such an unpromising background he seemed destined, as he put it, to leave school only to face the “pressure of everyday defeat.” As he remembered his childhood in a small tenement flat in Gayfield Square at the top of Leith Walk it was a grim poverty-stricken existence brightened by occasional glimmers of hope, such as one golden summer in Orkney where his father worked as a clerk of works with the Department of Agriculture.

At the beginning of 1956 two events turned the boy into the writer and artist he was to become. First his father committed suicide in a quarry in Orkney, a death which was to inspire one of Bold’s finest poems, “A Memory of Death,” with its acute understanding of the impulses that led his father to take his own life and the sense of despair that must have accompanied his final moments.

He left the land rover
And stared deep into the water
Thinking life offered nothing more than this liquid pit.
Everything shrunk to the need for action,
For decision.¹

Then, in happier circumstances, Bold fell under the influence of rock and roll music, especially as it was interpreted by Elvis Presley. For him the Memphis singer was not just a pop star; he was a rebel, an artist who was capable of challenging set opinions and breaking new ground. This was not a voice crying in the wilderness but a sound inspiring something akin to hope. As Bold himself admitted he, too, became a rebel, a member of the awkward squad at Broughton Secondary School where he stoutly resisted all attempts to educate him. It does not take much imagination to see him as a stubborn and sullen young man kicking against discipline and refusing all attempts to help him. As his teachers predicted, Bold left school without qualifications to work in a succession of dreary manual jobs which would lead him nowhere. Then a miracle of sorts happened. He applied to return to Broughton and, despite opposition from some members of the staff who argued that he was a disruptive influence, the astute headmaster Robert J. Walker agreed to have him back.

It was a wise and generous move. Not only did the school have a solid literary reputation, having had under its roof at one time or another writers such as the poets J. K. Annand, Hugh MacDiarmid, A. D. Mackie and the novelist Fred Urquhart, but Bold repaid the debt by getting the necessary qualifications to enter Edinburgh University. This proved to be a golden period which brought him into contact with his lifelong friends and collaborators John Bel-

¹Alan Bold, *A Perpetual Motion Machine* (London, 1969), p. 18. Henceforth Bold.

lany and Sandy Moffat and introduced him to an older generation of poets. It was a heady literary education and to get some idea of the intensity of purpose which the moment contained it is only necessary to read Bold's poem "June 1967 at Buchenwald" which was written following a visit to East Germany. This was Bold's first opportunity to travel outside Scotland and the experience brought home to him the paradox of the dual existence of German cultural achievement and its subversion by the Nazis. Underpinning the poem is the motto which greeted the inmates when they entered the camp at Buchenwald "JEDEM DAS SEINE" ("Everyone gets what he deserves" or "To each his own"):

This happened near the core
Of a world's culture. This
Occurred among higher things.
This was a philosophical conclusion.
Everybody gets what he deserves (Bold, p. 10).

In a self-conscious attempt to keep faith with earlier artistic revolutions Bold, Bellany and Moffat promoted the aims of a "Realist Renaissance" in which art and literature would play equal parts, and before too long they had won the approval of MacDiarmid whose own Scottish Renaissance earlier in the century had changed for ever the face of Scotland's literature. This was not just another po-faced assault on the Establishment but a serious attempt "to find the new." Bold and his friends soon found themselves joining MacDiarmid and other poets in the legendary Rose Street pubs where they encountered the ebullient personality of poet and artist Sydney Goodsir Smith as well as many other kindred spirits. MacCaig, Tom Scott and George Mackay Brown were also regulars but all the time Bold was honing his own precocious literary talent. As a student he produced the avant-garde magazine *Rocket* and his first collection *Society Inebrious* received a warm reception when it was published in 1965—one critic discovered "a colossal latent force which in a few years should have assumed gigantic proportions."

By the late 1960s Bold had established a solid reputation as a poet and literary activist. The Poet Laureate Cecil Day Lewis considered him to be one of the great hopes for the future—as the literary advisor to the publishers Chatto & Windus he enabled Bold's early volumes to be published in The Phoenix Living Poets series—and through a deepening friendship with MacDiarmid Bold enjoyed a standing which was denied many others of his generation. Not that Bold depended on the patronage of his seniors. He was a potent force in his own right and throughout that intensely fecund period a succession of invigorating collections of poetry appeared: *To Find the New* (1967), *A Perpetual Motion Machine* (1969) and *A Pint of Bitter* (1971). His long poem *The State of the Nation* (1969) was welcomed by the reviewer of *The Times* for setting "a new standard for technical virtuosity."

By then, too, Bold had emerged as a trenchant and scholarly maker of anthologies. His *Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* (1970) displayed his wide and stimulating knowledge of radical texts, as in a different way did his anthology of war poetry *The Martial Muse* (1976). By any standards Bold's output was prodigious and a startling number of anthologies of poetry devoted to subjects as diverse as sex, drinking and literary quotations appeared in rapid succession. He also found the time to edit critical essays on writers with whom he felt an affinity—Lord Byron, Harold Pinter and Muriel Spark for example—and through his literary journalism he was a tireless promoter of Scottish literature.

In 1978 he took an unusual sidestep by producing *Scotland Yes!* a collection of forty poems cheering on the Scottish football team to glory in that year's World Cup. Contrary to popular belief—the collection was greeted with much scepticism—this interest in football was not prompted by the chance to capitalize on Scotland's participation in the football World Cup. Bold's "Football Triptych" had already appeared in the collection *A Pint of Bitter* but that did not save him from obloquy and the appearance of this populist and demotic poetry created a good deal of controversy in the public prints. Against angry claims that Bold had cheapened himself MacDiarmid defended his protégé with the no uncertain statement that football could be the stuff of poetry and the collection became a *succès de scandale*. Bold could hardly be blamed that the Scottish football team failed to fulfil his hopes that "we'd shock the world and show it how to play"—they were ignominiously defeated—and the poet remained suitably unruffled by the inadequacies of others to live up to his high hopes.

Inevitably, given his huge output, some of his work was uneven and it would be fair to say that while the number of his books and editions was impressive as evidence of his energy, ingenuity and mental power, Bold's productivity was uneven from an artistic point of view. That being said, he himself could be his fiercest critic, introducing his collected prose, *An Open Book* (1990), with the trenchant words: "Criticism should offer an exploration of artistic issues and achievements, not the application of dogma, though the dogmatists continue to have their day." Inevitably, too, he attracted criticism from writers who were either envious of his success or believed that he was only interested in courting publicity; some of them came from within the academic community, with which he had always had an uneasy relationship. With them, as with other critics, Bold adopted a no-nonsense attitude. When the occasion demanded he could be a piranha in Scotland's literary goldfish bowl, always ready to counter any insult, but he tended to dismiss an overly hostile review with the thought that the writer could not survive three rounds with him in the ring.

However, to those friends with whom he felt comfortable he was both loyal and generous and he cast his net widely. In addition to his circle of artistic and literary friends he enjoyed close friendships with the composer Ronald Stevenson, the film-makers Douglas Eadie and Brian Crumlish and the actors

John Bett and Harry Stamper. He also enjoyed a long and fruitful association with the writer and editor Robert Gittings who co-edited many of the literary anthologies. Happiest in the pub—for years he was a familiar figure in Milne's Bar, the Abbotsford and the Café Royal—he was a born raconteur and an excellent mimic who brought fun and gossip into any conversation. Then, just as it seemed he would become a permanent fixture in the Rose Street pub scene, Bold liberated himself from his Edinburgh tenement for a cottage in Fife in the mid-1970s. Taking advantage of the Scottish Arts Council's Writer's House on the Balbirnie estate near Markinch he moved himself, his wife Alice and daughter Valentina across the River Forth to live in Fife. When the period of tenure ended he was offered another cottage nearby and soon settled into the quieter ways of country living.

Not that it made him any less rumbustious or reduced the creative urge. In addition to establishing himself as first-rate literary reviewer, first for the *Scotsman* and latterly for the [Glasgow] *Herald* as well as for the *Times Literary Supplement*, he continued to produce a bewildering variety of books, proving to doubters that it was possible to marry rigorous editorial standards with a high rate of productivity. And as he always added somewhat ruefully, because he had to make his living from his pen he had to make sure that it worked for him. (Unlike many authors of his generation he was an enthusiastic supporter of new technology and was an early user of word processing systems.)

All the time, though, he was building up to the book which is his literary masterpiece: his biography of Hugh MacDiarmid, published in 1988. Like a fighter sparring with a difficult opponent he probed the great man's defences with a masterly edition of letters followed by an anthology of his prose writings. These prepared the way for a literary biography which is a model of its kind: scholarly, generous and, above all, wise in its judgements. It went on to be a worthy winner of the McVitie Prize. In one sense the biography was a piece of pietas to a writer whom Bold always considered to be his friend and mentor. But there was much more to it than hagiography, for in a very profound way it is Bold's literary statement, a book which carries an unmistakable signature. MacDiarmid was not only placed within the context of his times but Bold laid down many of the ground rules for a fresh interpretation of his poetry. His handling of primary sources was exemplary and it would be true to say that Bold succeeded in meeting the ambitious aims he laid down for himself in his essay "Biography and Biographers" (1988): "of putting him [MacDiarmid] in the public domain, establishing him as a poet of genius with a vision for humankind."

In the later stages of his life, to the dismay of his many friends, Bold's literary output diminished and it seemed that the great volcanic fire was finally burning itself out. Although *A Burns Companion* appeared in 1990 and he was always brimming with fresh ideas, a revisionist biography of Robert Burns was taking longer than expected and by the time of his death it remained uncom-

pleted. The publication of his only (and much underrated) novel *East is West* (1991) was scant comfort and he did not live to see it included in a list of best Scottish books which was produced in 2005. Through no fault of his own, Bold's work began to be omitted, quite scandalously, from anthologies purporting to cover the best of recent Scottish poetry and it is likely that a younger generation of writers have not even heard of him.

Restless, wide-ranging in his interests, a writer who added immeasurably to Scottish literature and to our understanding of it, Alan Bold was an extraordinary man whose friendship and generosity touched many people. In Alice he had a loving and protective wife and in the last few years of his life he took immense pleasure in the contribution which his daughter Valentina was making to Scottish literature as a leading academic and literary critic. For me and for many other close friends it was a privilege to have known him and in no small measure we all found ourselves diminished by his death at far too early an age—he was only 55 when he died in April 1998. The title of one of his earliest books (1971), written when Alan was still a young man, full of hope for the future and aware of his own abilities, was not only prophetic but for many of us it says it all: "He will be greatly missed."

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