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Reviews


Ever since the publication of *The Story and the Fable* in 1940 and *The Narrow Place* in 1943, more and more readers have been quietly discovering that Edwin Muir is one of the few authentic "voices" (and the even fewer authentic visionaries) who has written in English during this century. J. C. Hall's edition of *Collected Poems: 1921-1951* and his essay on Muir in the series "Writers and Their Work" were, among other things, public recognitions of the number of such private responses; and those volumes introduced the living Muir to an audience much wider than he had ever known before. Since Muir's death in 1959, there have been an increasing number of serious appraisals of his work (those by Helen Gardner and John Holloway seem to me among the best). Now Professor Butter's study joins the other volumes in "Writers and Critics," a series devoted to writers of the past century who are still felt as living presences today. It is the most extensive and substantial treatment of Muir which we have had.

The book contains six chapters: "The Man," "The Critic: Of Literature and Society," "The Novelist and Autobiographer," two chapters on "The Poet," and a "Conclusion." In the central section of the book, Professor Butter considers, chronologically within each chapter, each volume that Muir published. (*The Estate of Poetry*, the posthumously published Norton lectures at Harvard, seems to have appeared too late to be treated.) He places the works within the context of Muir's life and development as a writer. His careful scholarship gives particular weight and interest to his comments. He has read the uncollected writings; he has examined the manuscripts; and he is able to quote from unpublished letters and personal reminiscences. He includes a bibliography of Muir's published volumes, notes on the translations and occasional pieces, and a brief selected bibliography of secondary commentary.

Although this present work is clearly (and properly) conceived as an introductory critical survey of Muir's life and work, the bits of new information which are modestly presented make one look forward to the full biography of Muir on which Professor Butter is now engaged. At first thought, to write a biography of a man who has left one of the best
autobiographies of this century would seem a thankless task; but Professor Butter has already shown by his tact and discrimination here that there is more to know about Muir’s "story," if not his "fable," than we now know, and that the additional knowledge will be of value.

If one has any misgivings about the book they may be that Professor Butter pays too great attention to Muir's limitations and claims too little for him. He concludes his chapter on "The Critic" with, "...he gave incisive and well-balanced assessments of particular writers, which are still, and will remain worth reading. But he did not make any important contributions to the theory of literary criticism... It is, surely, as a poet, not as a critic, that he will live." Of the novels, he remarks: "Parts are produced by the not very powerful imagination of a novelist trying to tell stories about fictional characters, parts by the powerful imagination of a poet brooding over his own experience. Though the novels are not wholly satisfactory as fiction, the presence of the poet in them results in their containing moving and memorable passages, which make them more worth reading than many more nearly perfect works." On a number of occasions, it seems to me that his criticisms of specific poems are less generous than the poems themselves would warrant. In a day when one is used to extreme statements, when, particularly with modern poetry, critical "appraisals" usually either praise highly or damn, one may feel that Professor Butter could have allowed himself a little more extravagance. One may be afraid that, amid all the noise, this quiet and conscientious voice may go unheard.

And yet, even as one formulates the objection, one is conscious of the fact that a critic who has truly responded to Muir's own voice is probably incapable of being shrill. Professor Butter is concerned neither with mass conversions nor with "selling" Muir. He is giving the most careful and most just appraisal he can to a writer of whose greatness he is convinced, but whose occasional weaknesses or limitations he recognizes. The critic whom Professor Butter most nearly resembles is Muir himself. One feels that Muir would have liked this book. And if Muir's own voice continues to be heard increasingly today, one need not fear for the effectiveness of Professor Butter's account of it. There are, here, no extravagancies for later critics and scholars to condemn. The final paragraph is a model of the sort of modesty, honesty, and commitment which we badly need in criticism—and which will be heard:

I have enjoyed Muir's poems more than any other new ones I have come across in the last ten years or so. I am confident that he is a genuine poet because he speaks always with an individual voice. I am confident, too, that he is a poet of major importance because of the depth and comprehensiveness of the vision which his poems collectively contain. In comparison the work of

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most other modern poets seems to me fragmentary. The last time I saw him he told me he was planning a long poem. He did not live to write it, but, in a sense, he had already written it; for his poems, taken together, make up a whole.

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In the last letter Robert Burns sent to James Johnson (ca. 1 June 1796), before the publication of Vol. V of the Scots Musical Museum, he wrote, "I will venture to prophesy, that to future ages your Publication will be the text-book & standard of Scottish Song & Music." Burns was in a position to know for he had by this time been collaborating with Johnson for nine years. From the second volume of the Museum on Burns was centrally concerned with it: he collected or wrote almost half the songs which appeared thereafter, he wrote the prefaces for three of the volumes, and without his enthusiasm it is more than possible that Johnson would have let fall the project after the third or fourth volume. In this last respect it is worthy of note that the six volumes appeared in the following years: 1787, 1788, 1790, 1792, 1796, and 1803. During the period 1790-1796 Burns was also busy writing and collecting for George Thomson's Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs (5 vol., 1793-1818). Both collections slowed down considerably after the poet's death. Upon completion of the final volume Johnson wrote of the set with justifiable pride: "it unquestionably contains the greatest Collection of Scottish Vocal Music ever published."

Burns's prophecy was correct; the Scots Musical Museum remains to this day a standard work on Scottish song. Collected in it one finds traditional songs and airs, as well as songs written especially to be set to tunes which either had no words or whose words were bawdy or otherwise objectionable. It is not easy to ascertain the exact number of songs Burns contributed to the Museum as not all of them are indicated as being his. Some have been identified through Burns's letters to Johnson but not all of this correspondence has survived. Ninety-seven songs are acknowledged as Burns's in the indexes, but over two hundred were probably collected, touched up or written entirely by him.