



OBITUARIES

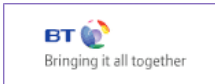
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Jonathan Williams: Poet, essayist and publisher

Saturday, 22 March 2008

Jonathan Williams was a poet, essayist, photographer, hiker, gentleman and conduit – the "truffle-hound of American poetry" as the critic Hugh Kenner called him. In 1951 he founded the Jargon Society press, publishing and collecting poetry, fiction, photography and folk art. For more than 50 years he nurtured and championed a generation of poets and writers, both in the United States, where he was particularly associated with the Black Mountain Poets, and in Britain.

Williams visited Britain for a large portion of his life. It was the poet Basil Bunting who suggested Dentdale in Cumbria to him as a place to live, a few miles from the River Rawthey of Bunting's Brigflatts and its Quaker Meeting House. After finding Corn Close, and some extensive rebuilding, by 1969 the 17th-century cottage became Williams's English base, returned to each year from May to November. The other half-year was spent at Skywinding Farm on Scaly Mountain in North Carolina, and there is an uncanny parallel between the two houses, not only in that both are on a ridge above a valley road from which you must wind, but in their light, their calm and respite.

He had first come to England in the early 1960s with another poet, Ronald Johnson, and rented a room in the house of the artist and illustrator Barbara Jones in Hampstead. From there they walked out on journeys through the country: Kilpeck, Southwell, Shoreham, Cotman country. The resultant poems are scattered through their books of the time: Williams's *The Lucidities*: sixteen in visionary company (1967) and Johnson's *The Book of the Green Man* (1967).

Williams was an impeccable host. Thomas Meyer, his companion these last 40 years, is an astounding cook and often worked in the vernacular. His shepherd's pie would coat the palette with just enough fat for the claret. (Williams had a flair for wines and delighted in such names as Trouléguy and Irancy.) Breakfast conversation lingered throughout the morning while letters were opened and fragments added to the drift. There were always quotes hatching, as when the wife of a photographer ventured "I like nature, but I don't like to get any on me" at the threat of a walk. There was a punning ear for the scurrilous – Shameless Ninny, his name for the future Nobel laureate. Much of this gets collected into what could be Williams's pillow book, *Quote Unquote*, published in 1989 with illustrations by Glen Baxter.

His generosity as host extended to supporter, friend and critic and sometimes publisher of poets, artists and photographers, many then unknown: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Thomas A. and Laurie Clark, John and Astrid Furnival, Sylvester Houédard, Stuart Mills, Spike Hawkins, Harry Gilonis, Ian Gardner, Trevor Winkfield, Karl Torok, Raymond Moore, Thomas Joshua Cooper. He also championed the work of some of the most important poets in mid 20th-century America, including Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. Williams learned from and extended the Poundian school of apprenticeship in the writing and publishing of poetry.

The Jargon Society begun by him in 1951 as a student of Charles Olson at Black Mountain College re-affirms the role of poetry publisher, and in the 1950s and 1960s he would travel America giving readings and selling the books he kept in his car. Hugh Kenner called Jargon "the custodian of snowflakes". The unostentatious and plain sewn paperback and simple case-bound book issuing from Jargon have become models of small press publishing. In this they complement and give rise to the clarity of intention of James Laughlin's *New Directions* and Dick Higgins' *Something Else Press*.

Williams's association with photography and photographers also began at Black Mountain (he had also studied at the Chicago Institute of Design and at Atelier 17 in New York, following a period at Princeton), but his eye was completely his own, and you could even tell a JW polaroid when you saw one. *Portrait Photographs* (1979) remains one of the best testaments to his work. (Look at his Herbert Read and Alvin Langdon Coburn.)

This was later extended to *A Palpable Elysium*: portraits of genius and solitude (2002), which incorporates other outsiders, as well as carvings and headstones, and even landscapes. His vast photographic archive has recently been acquired by Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Among the many hundreds of poems he wrote, the volume we have for a collected works to date is *Jubilant Thicket*, which Williams compiled himself with Thomas Meyer in 2005. The richness, ear, concision and range of his work are held here.

Diminished in recent years by fallen arches in his feet, probably the result of too much earlier walking, Williams stayed home and listened to his beloved music. As the poems will tell you, it rises thunderously from late 19th-century romanticism to the beginnings of the 20th, but there is always the space for a chamber piece. Such would be, and of its time, the hauntingly beautiful adagio of Suk's *Serenade for Strings*, and I can hear it playing now in the library at Corn Close.

Jonathan Williams, man of letters, and I have seen him write as many as 40 in a morning, was concerned with the genre of the obituary. He was not a "coffin-chaser" as the poet Alan Halsey once had it. But he wanted the job done properly, and admired the eclecticism that could become its subject.

Simon Cutts

Jonathan Williams was an early, enthusiastic and unbuttoned contributor to the obituaries columns of *The Independent*, writes **James Fergusson**. He read the newspaper when he was on Cumbrian summer furlough, and even from North Carolina would communicate regularly by ever-changing letterhead ("Agneau Agnus Bident Cad . . . 72 names that can be given to 'the young of sheep'"), wry Jargon picture cards (Basil Bunting by a sign, "BEWARE BULL"), fax (when urgent) or, latterly and only reluctantly, the bland medium of e-mail. In the matter of obituaries, he said, *The New York Times* "have never learned the secret".

His favourite subjects were outsiders, mavericks and provocateurs like himself, for whom craft was all and the rent came later. "I am quite resigned," he wrote in 1988, "to being a displaced Celt from the white-trash hills, read carefully by at least 87 very good readers here and there." Introducing a checklist of Williams's extensive publications in 1989, Guy Davenport wrote that he had given up trying to explain Williams to people, but asserted that, as a poet, he was "a satirist in the classical mode" and "a moralist" – and "one of the finest craftsmen of our time". Williams crackled with energy as writer, publisher and self-publicist, but was also generous in observing others, capturing them in memory as vividly in words as he did often on camera.

On these pages Paul Potts, "the people's poet", fills his trenchcoat with inscribed William Burroughs first editions but is let off affectionately for his "chutzhah"; Dom Sylvester Houédard, the concrete poet and Benedictine monk, lures Williams to a lobster lunch that cost £25 each "even back in the Sixties"; Howard Finster, a Georgia folk artist and preacher, ribs him effortlessly about his calling ("Poetry, well I swan, I don't know much about such as that"); and the poet and cookery writer

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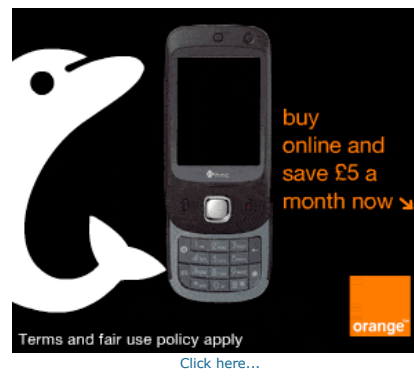
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