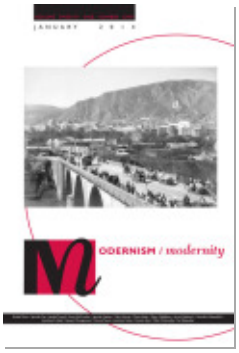
A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting by Richard Burton (review)



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Florian Havemann, Irina Liebmann, and Angela Krauß astutely links these lyrical, investigative and polemical engagements with the absent father, also to the demise of the GDR-as-fatherland.

The contributions of the last section are deeply charged with poetological (Karen Leeder) and philosophical (Catherine Smale, Benjamin Robinson) issues surrounding textual and pictorial ghosts and revenants of GDR history. Leeder examines the motif of the *danse macabre* in an edited volume entitled *Neue Totentänze*, a collection of poems illustrated with woodcuts by Karl-Georg Hirsch; Smale focuses on Liebmann's documentary volume *Stille Mitte von Berlin*; and Robinson muses on "the iota of difference" in Franz Fühmann's work as a compelling trope for the memory of GDR socialism.

Overall the volume offers many insightful, detailed, and varied analyses of contemporary engagements with memory. In different ways, the contributors show how aesthetic transpositions can articulate, challenge, proclaim and question the complex and ambivalent historical event that retrospectively came to be abbreviated as the *Wende*. Particularly noteworthy works by artists such as Tellkamp, Brussig, Schulz, Liebmann, and Dresen are discussed by different scholars and with different methodological and topological premises, creating a fascinating intertextual dialogue. However, the volume does not offer a sufficiently thorough discussion of the major categories and terms ruling the epistemological underpinnings of memory discourse and forgetting. The distinct, yet permeable, boundaries between the individual, communicative, cultural, and collective modes of memory formation remain to be investigated further. In addition, as a book that is impressive in both its trajectory and its aim, *Competing Memories* would have benefited from some discussion of gender and ethnicity as factors in memory formation and expression.

A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting. Richard Burton. Westport, CT: Prospecta Press, 2013. Pp. 618. $49.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Annabel Haynes, Durham University, UK

In "On the Flyleaf of Ezra Pound's Cantos," British poet Basil Bunting wrote of his friend's work:

> There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
> . . . . . .
> you will have to go a long way round
> if you want to avoid them.[1]

Now, after years of peaks and troughs of attention, Bunting's own Alps may be veering ineluctably onto the horizon. After all, Richard Burton, in his monumental new biography, asserts that Bunting might well be "Britain's greatest modernist poet" (7).

Bunting claimed that his 1965 magnum opus *Briggflatts*, "An Autobiography," contained all the personal information a reader of his work would ever need. This warning might deter his followers from delving into a murky—even mythic—personal history, but it is with Bunting's warning in mind that Burton begins his biography: an epic of some 618 pages. Bunting encouraged his correspondents to make liberal use of the hearth and the waste paper basket, as he did, in order to ward off future pesterers, so it is fitting that Burton wonders whether Bunting had "some kind of posterity death wish" (9). Indeed, 471 pages in, Burton quotes Bunting, admonishing potential biographers as "industrious compilers" and stating: "I'd rather leave the lid on my dust-bin and the earth on my friends' graves" (471). Nonetheless, Burton bravely soldiers on.

In spite of such caveats, the temptation to uncover the biography of a man who lived multiple lives as "a conscientious objector, prisoner, artists' model, journalist, editor, sailor, balloon

operator, interpreter, wing commander, diplomat, spy and, above all these, a poet" (1) is irresistible. The story of a life more interesting than fiction deserves to be told in detail.

Basil Bunting, born in Scotswood-on-Tyne in 1900, lived in London in the early 1920s, rubbing shoulders (and more) with modernist muses in Kleinfeldt's, or The Fitzroy Tavern: a London boozer, perched next to Bloomsbury and frequented by artists and free thinkers. Bunting moved on to Paris, where he worked for Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*. Next, he traveled to Rapallo, Italy, where he was mentored by Ezra Pound. He also lived in Spain, the United States, Isfahan, and Tehran before returning to his native Northeast of England, where he was part of a revivification of avant-garde and British poetics in the 1960s and onwards.

Although Bunting enjoyed periods of some publishing success, as *A Strong Song Tows Us* shows, his reputation has been in perpetual flux since his first poetic outputs. Burton explains that most readers who have heard of Bunting at all are aware of him simply as an acolyte of Pound (398). The biography addresses how the fits of inattention afflicting Bunting studies can be remedied. He explains the need to both revive and restore the poet's reputation, as well as to rescue him from what Burton perceives to be his diminution to the status of a regionalist writer of little relevance. *A Strong Song Tows Us* suggests: "the way to interest people in the work of a neglected poet is to tell his story, not to harangue them" (3).

Bunting repeatedly insisted that poetry's primary concern was not sense but sound. He resisted readings of his work that prized the personal over the poetic, although Burton shows that *Briggflatts*, for all its musicality, is as personal as a poem gets. Nevertheless, the facts of Bunting's life are less important than the verse that lives on after him, and Burton's book addresses this issue with care. Its title is a line from the long poem *Briggflatts*, which remains the "strong song" that "tows us" through this biography. The book is modeled on the sonata structure of *Briggflatts*, which is ordered into a chronological sequence of five parts and concluded with a coda. The biography also begins with an epigraph from the poem, and never strays far from the poetry.

The chapter titles are lines taken from the poem sections to which they correspond. And Bunting's modernist-style compilation of references, voices and images is paralleled by Burton's list of sources: the fruits of his wide-ranging and thorough research that took him from Durham in the UK, across the U.S., and back to London. One minor issue is the placing of this wealth of references as endnotes at the back of the book, which requires the reader to flip back and forth through the volume at some rate.

Burton's ability to present these items without over-explication allows the reader to infer or invent his or her own conclusions. His book creates a vivid portrait of Bunting through a bricolage of material. For example, the section "A Reluctant Student" contextualizes the poet's boyish letters to Lionel Robbins, wherein he talks about his travels in Denmark, with details about Bunting's spell at the London School of Economics. Elsewhere Burton lays out the historical background of important moments in Bunting's life: the first chapter begins with a description of the relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War, with which Bunting's birth coincided (19–22). In this way, Burton positions Bunting as a significant historical figure, influenced by, and influential in, his own time.

Burton writes that when he began the biography, which took him three years to complete, "Basil Bunting moved into our home" (595). Burton's lovingly crafted work shares this familiarity with its readers, and makes the book widely appealing even to the uninitiated audience. He quotes generously from primary sources, many of which are previously unpublished. Bunting's poems punctuate this story, mostly quoted in their entirety. The scrupulous research invested in the poems' references provides a welcome crib. The pithy, powerful readings give some of Bunting's more obscure work clarity, appreciated by the seasoned reader and the newcomer alike.

Bunting mellowed with age, as Burton explains in the last two sections of the biography, which cover the "winter" (5) of the poet's life. That is when he started warming to the idea of sharing his many life stories. His work, steeped in the oral tradition, portrays the poet as a craftsman, skilled in the folk art of storytelling. An image of Bunting's childhood emerges

from a series of anecdotes. We are told that Bunting was allegedly dandled on Joseph Skipsey's knee (25), and was patted on the head by Swinburne (110). These moments of physical contact effected a passing of the poetic baton, which bypassed the institutionalized learning that Bunting hated, according to the biography. Perhaps the storyteller is a thing of the past, but Bunting's life stories carry some of that sparkly-eyed vigor of the folk orator. *A Strong Song Tows Us* is the first big and comprehensive biography of Bunting published to-date. Burton's book arrives at a time of renewed interest in the poet. He takes into account some early biographical works and respectfully explains why there has been a need for a bigger and more encompassing study of Bunting's life. The many myths and tall tales the poet propagated to tease and amuse scholars have hindered the fact-checking that a biography necessitates. With due humor and affection for Bunting's spun yarns, Burton is ground-breaking in his debunking efforts.

Burton mostly avoids getting overly personal in telling the poet's story, and especially its bleakest moments. In his late years, Bunting descended into poverty. This part of the biography is made no less heart-rending by the lists of publications and reviews with which Burton accompanies the story in the "Coda." The deeply personal tone of some of Bunting's letters—those which have survived his demand that all his correspondences be binned or burned—illustrate why the biographer seems to feel such a strong sense of duty to make Bunting known as a great poet. He responds to the obvious neglect that the artist endured in late life by planting him firmly in the midst of a modernist cohort. He writes: "[Bunting's] friendships with W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in the 1920s and 1930s put him at the heart of the modernist revolution" (8). Bunting enjoyed the friendship of other literary greats, including Mina Loy, Louis Zukofsky, Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Creeley and Tom Pickard (whose autobiographical works are also invaluable vignettes into Bunting's life). His involvement in the Newcastle poetry scene in the 1960s is somewhat glossed over—an omission perhaps intended to prevent further marginalization of his work. So much *is* covered, however, that perhaps this gap simply provides an entry point for further investigation.

Burton's book is no cold rendering of facts: it is a creative, generative project. It is a deeply scholarly narrative, but the story and its storyteller are still entertaining enough to appeal to a non-academic readership. The book illuminates the stars in Bunting's constellation: if Burton's work is a valuable contribution to modernist studies, it is an invaluable one to Bunting studies.

Notes

1. Basil Bunting, "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos," *Complete Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), lines 1–7.

Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism. Lisa Goldfarb and Bart Eeckhout, eds. New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp. xvi + 184. $130.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Joshua Kotin, Princeton University

Between 1898 and 1900, while an undergraduate at Harvard, Wallace Stevens published eighteen poems in student publications. His next published poems did not appear until 1914. What was Stevens doing for those fourteen years? Why the long silence?

Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism, a collection of ten previously unpublished essays edited by Lisa Goldfarb and Bart Eeckhout, examines Stevens's life between 1900 and 1914 and its impact on his later poetry. After graduating from Harvard in 1900, Stevens moved to