

REVIEW: ANGUS THE ESSAYIST

Bernard Crick

Angus Calder, **Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory and Representation**, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2004, 304 pp, hb, £35.00, ISBN 0708318681; 281 pp, pb, £16.99, ISBN 0708318673.

Angus Calder, ed., **God, Mongrels and Demons: 101 brief but essential lives**, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, 384 pp, hb, £16.99, ISBN 0747560501; 2004, 448 pp, pb, £8.99, ISBN 0747568758.

Angus Calder, **Scotlands of the Mind**, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2002, 265 pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 1842820087.

Taking these three books together, and recalling as well his **Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic** (1994), Angus Calder can be claimed with only the slightest hesitation as among the finest essayists writing in English today. The slight hesitation is that, like any free-lance writer needing to make books out of essays, reviews and occasional pieces written in many different places, he will sometimes include routine commissions alongside self-chosen essay topics which exhibit the highest quality of the essay as a great but under-praised genre of writing in English.

But damn reservations and extol by comparison. Angus Calder stands as an essayist at least as high as Neal Ascherson and Francis Wheen. Only Gore Vidal towers above them all. Tom Nairn may, at his best, beggar all as a polemicist, but he shows none of the pleasure of discursive writing, and thus the unexpectedness of the true essayist as free spirit rather than someone who draws his strength from his adversaries. We love Tom for the enemies he has made. We admire the essayist for being his tenacious, somewhat tortured and erratic yet reflective self.

*Bernard Crick is author of **George Orwell: a Life, In Defence of Politics and Essays on Politics and Literature.***

Review: Angus the Essayist

However, what is an essay? In the **Oxford Book of Essays** – which, by the way, only included Macaulay and Robert Louis Stevenson among Scots, no moderns, not even Naomi Mitchison – John Gross in his introduction, while seeing essays as having all shapes and sizes, does opine that the central tradition of essay-writing from the time of Montaigne is marked by ‘intimacy and informality’. Hazlitt said of Montaigne that ‘he did not set up for a philosopher, wit, orator or moralist, but he became all those by merely daring to tell what passed through his mind.’ He refused to be hampered by preconceived notions of order and regularity, said Gross. Dr Johnson had seen the ‘irregular’ nature of the essay as its most obvious characteristic. In his dictionary he defined it as ‘a loose sally of the mind’.

The essay is a peculiar but reasonably specific form of writing. It can be moral, didactic and serious, even propagandistic, up to a point; but it is not a sermon, it has more informality and flexibility; above all it leaves the reader in some uncertainty about what is going to be said next; how the discursive argument will develop; and the argument will not be conclusive or structured logically – an essay may be quite content to raise an issue, to force it on a reader’s attention, but then to ruminate and speculate, neither to orate nor pontificate; above all it will seem personal not objective, will give a sense of listening to an extended conversation by an odd but interesting individual. An essay may refer to facts, evidence and authorities, but only in passing; it is not, like a legal advocacy, an ordered argument set out logically step by step. An essay speculates and enquires, as if the author is thinking aloud; it must not appear over-contrived, but rather appear to be a set of free associations made by a sensitive and well-stocked mind.

I copy that long sentence from my introduction to **The Penguin Essays of George Orwell**. I argued that Orwell’s real claim to outstanding excellence is as an essayist, as it should be for Calder, not withstanding historian and poet too. The essay suits the man of independent mind, even if he joins a party, even if a party as stern and determined as the Scottish Socialist Party. I recall that Orwell once said that ‘a writer could not be a loyal member of a political party’. At the time he was a member of the Independent Labour Party. The stress must have been on the word ‘loyal’. All loyalty should have its limits to the man of independent mind – it does not need Burns to tell us that. Angus may have been a feather in Tommy’s cap but I suspect Tommy of enough sense not to have risked Angus on a platform in case his free-wheeling views, with cup rather than cap in hand, should turn inwards rather than his outward satirical blasts of disgust at both Labour and SNP.

Scottish Affairs

In **Scotlands of the Mind** he draws our attention to the plural. This is as true for consciousness as for language. As he says in his short but plangent piece in Tom Devine and Paddy Logue's **Being Scottish** (Polygon), 'I am very queasy about any attempt to integrate all the different Scotlands of history and the present into some bogus essential Scottishness', although some common threads and traits persist, such as 'lack of deference'. That could be challenged by common observation, except, I agree and notice, by the sometimes unexpressed comparison with the big neighbour. Born of Scottish parents in London and educated in England, Angus Calder encountered Scotland like a revelation when his Scottish tutor at Cambridge invited the singer Jeannie Robertson to meet her students, and sing – all night. That brought home to him and him to home.

So the sense of closeness across classes which persists to this day, I believe, in many contexts, can be seen in the evolution of Scottish Presbyterianism, in the practical, sociable character of our enlightenment – I cherish the image of Hume and Smith carousing in an Old Town howff as they discuss Free Trade – and in the roles of Scots working together in the Empire. It can be discerned in Johnny Buchan's Toryism as clearly as in Jimmy Maxton's socialism.

He sees the language as the link. Both Smith and Hume would politely speak court English, or what we now oddly call with growing uncertainty 'standard English', to visitors, and they avoided Scotticisms in their writings for the very practical reason to reach the widest possible readership in Europe as well as the American colonies; but they spoke to each other in braid Scots. And yet he is clear that there never was nor can be a standard Scots. He quotes with relish the squib of Tom Leonard:

MAKAR'S SOCIETY

GRAN MEETIN

THE NICHT

TAE DECIDE THE SPELLIN

O' THIS POSTER.

Review: Angus the Essayist

This is, of course, an emancipatory and non-deferential thing, compared with the old dominance in England of, and still the rear-guard action for, standard English. And Scots itself (or selves) shows the varieties of English.

The apparent rambling essayist can illuminate many things that the fully serious political commentator (not to mention the political scientist, no, no!) might miss. The first day of the Scottish Parliament:

Around ten, as I slipped down to Princes Street to shop, I realised, with the start of a tear in my eye, that many of the perfectly ordinary looking people who had arrived in cars and cabs with old folk and children – families entitled to seats inside – or who walked quietly past us towards the hall, must have been new MSPs whom we did not recognise. Just as it should be, our own new Parliament, people like us setting about their business in grey Edinburgh five years to the day when John Smith MP, who had willed it so strongly to happen, had died. In just such grey weather I stood in a very large crowd outside a church in Morningside where his funeral was held, much more of a State occasion than this one. But today's low key opening was what he would have wanted, matter of fact, part of the ordinary life of a normal nation, with no higher drama than Tommy Sheridan's clenched fist, seen on TV later as, after protesting, he took the oath of loyalty to his sovereign – just Elizabeth here, not 'The Second', since we had no prior Elizabeth.

What a beautifully balanced piece of love and irony. I just give that one example of his skill as an essayist – so seemingly casual, so full of extended meanings, almost like the metaphysical depth-charges in the banalities of Beckett or Pinter speak. To unpack that passage would be a very good Citizenship or English lesson, in Scotland. But some of the later essays show that he does not always see the ordinary as benign. In 'Describing Scottish Culture' he would 'like to imagine Scotland as a nation re-asserting republican virtue against the corruption of the republican ideal in the USA'. He would truly like that, if only most of the actual membership of the Parliament and their unimaginative activities and somewhat philistine attitudes did not stand in the way. Calder is an egalitarian socialist who also loves high culture, opera as well as folk-song; and we can look forward in his next gathering of essays to his musings on how closely, indeed, the views of many MSPs must reflect those of their constituents in willing the diminution, if not the destruction, of Scottish Opera. The building they are in is quite enough culture and expense for most of them.

Disasters and Heroes: on war, memory and representation are essays of a different kind, meditations on how famous authors and ordinary combatants have tried to describe, realistically or not, extreme events, mainly of the Second World War. The 'Introduction' confesses candidly that his fascination and concern with accounts of war arises from *not* remembering – for he was only two years and two weeks old – when his family's house in south London was bombed. His elder sister and his aunt were not in the Morrison shelter. 'Fiona escaped unscathed but doctors would spend months picking 156 pieces of shrapnel out of Margie's back – after which, with pleasing irony, she would marry a German POW twelve years younger than herself.' So 'all my life I have seen constructing and reconstructing memories of an event which I could not have remembered.' Every two or three months he dreams of 'broken glass underfoot or in my mouth'. The essayist does not so much intrude the personal upon the reader but uses it to warn, in different contexts – such as a meditation on war memorials and comparisons of several notable memoirs or literary evocations of war (notably Evelyn Waugh's only semi-fictional account of the shambles of the retreat through Crete in 1941) – of how all memory is recreated and partial, especially the memory of traumatic events. But his scepticism is a deep, if at times tortured, humanism.

Most of us on the Left hide any understanding of the psychology of combatants either by derogatory clichés – our old friends sadism and masochism smother the common soldier – or by simply denouncing war. A cult of military heroism is, indeed, a bad thing; but a world that cannot recognise and honour individual heroism (whether in war or everyday life) is somewhat lacking. In a consumer society it is very hard to take seriously the point of William James's once familiar demand for 'a moral equivalent for war'. Angus implies that it is there under our eyes: the moral force, tenacity and individual sacrifice that would be needed for real social and political reform. His meditations cover an immense range of dilemmas. They are as good as anything in his classic social history, **The People's War: Britain 1939-45**, and much better than his overly polemical **Revolutionary Empire: the Rise of English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s**. The character of the person, sometimes gentle, sometimes vehement, transmutes into a prose that can deal calmly with extremes, and even humourlessly without trivialising.

The cover of the book shows this well. It is an incredible photograph, censored in 1941, of a male gun-crew in women's dresses manning a coastal battery (pulled out of a rehearsal for a Christmas pantomime or such by an

Review: Angus the Essayist

unexpected contingency). There must always be a place in socialist theory for contingencies. That was the trouble with old Marxism.

Gods, Mongrels and Demons: 101 brief but essential lives is based ‘on twin premises that the oddballs, tinks, heidbangers, saints, keelies, nutters, philosophers, freaks and suchlike deserve to be drawn awhile from the periphery to the centre of our consciousness and that these apparently marginal lives are not only interesting in their own right, but often tell us more about the mores of a country or a time than the lives of its better known citizens.’ Blurbs, such as I have just quoted from, are usually deceptive. This is not. Calder has collected an extraordinary collection of accounts of or by obsessives. But this is not to mock eccentrics, rather to show that any account of the world and human nature that ignores them is inadequate. Did not Brecht somewhere speak of ‘the laughter of free men’. That is one of the gifts and devices of the true essayist in the tradition of Montaigne and Orwell – oh well, not always up to their standard, of course; but far, far closer than most others today.

August 2004