WILLIAM RADICE
FOR POET LAUREATE?
In joy or grief, this country needs a poet

Britain should not lose faith in the ability of a poet laureate to have something worth saying

William Radice

What is the Poet Laureate for? I recently wrote to Andy Burnham, the Culture Secretary, with this question, offering this answer: ‘He or she should be able to write strong poems for public occasions - witty or moving or passionate or indignant as the occasion demands.’

Much of the debate on the next poet laureate (who will be appointed for a ten-year term in May) confirms this as a thoroughly unfashionable view. The assumption is that the post is a silly anachronism, that public or ceremonial poems—particularly about the monarchy—are bound to be laughably bad, and the best thing is for the laureate to find a new role, as a poetry promoter or ambassador. This is what Andrew Motion has done, and the online Poetry Archive that he has set up is rightly admired. The chorus behind one favoured successor or another is basically singing for more of the same.

But why? Have we so totally lost faith in a poetry of public feeling that we no longer think it worth attempting? Is our country now so diverse and disunited that it is impossible for any poet to find ground that all can share? We still have a monarchy—and it is not unpopular. We still come together in celebration of Christmas, new year or sporting triumphs. Disasters or crimes can unite us in shock or grief. Threats to the environment oppress us with joint anxiety. Moral outrage (sometimes) rouses us to mass protest. Aren’t these fit subjects for poetry?

Public or national poetry can never be the whole of a poet’s work. He must also express deep inner feelings, discover, as my friend and fellow-translator Juan Mascaró put it, that ‘the universal is personal’. This is why the laureate poems of even the best poets laureate tend to last less well than their more intimate works. But that is not to say that public poetry is inevitably worthless, that it cannot strike a chord at the time it is written.

There are three prerequisites. The first is an advanced and versatile poetic technique. Because metre and rhyme in modern poetry have largely fallen out of favour, many poets—even famous and fêted ones—never acquire that technique. Freer forms can be appropriate for some purposes, and as T.S. Eliot said: ‘No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job.’ But poets who want to catch a particular mood or write a poem to suit a person or occasion need the maximum number of arrows in their quiver. To be unable to use traditional forms or create adventurous new ones reduces the chances of a bull’s eye.

The second requirement is wit. It’s an aspect of poetic intelligence, and makes tendentious, dogmatic or bigoted poetry a contradiction in terms. Sceptics about the laureateship never seem to see that the monarchy is a wonderful
subject for amusing, yet affectionate verse. Its grandeur, absurdity, mystery and banality should be meat and drink to a genuine poet. I imagine the Royal Family themselves are well aware of this. They must long for laureate poems that make them laugh. The last thing they want is solemnity. They get more than enough of that in their weird and tedious work.

Third, a British poet laureate must take on board that, through accidents of history, English is now the world’s lingua franca. He or she must strive to add an international dimension to the job. National events in this age of instant communication are often global events, and vice versa.

There have certainly been past poets laureate—Wordsworth, Tennyson, Bridges, Masefield—who have fulfilled the first requirement, but it’s harder to think of any who met the second. Dryden, perhaps, and Betjeman, although he found when faced with actually writing laureate poems that his wellspring of wit dried up. The third requirement is new, and if one thinks on, one realises that present-day society brings further unprecedented challenges.

Britain is multiracial, multicultural and multilingual: a responsive poet laureate must take account of that. If he or she wants to add the religious or spiritual dimension that poetry often needs to be poetry at all, the traditions of the Church of England will not on their own be sufficient. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and more will all want their voices in the choir.

Above all, a poet laureate must write in a spirit of altruism and with self-giving warmth of heart. Solipsism, egocentrism, obscurity—still so common in poetry even in this postmodern age—are unlikely to deliver the goods. The poems that work will have to be written not just for the poet’s pleasure but to please others and to bring people together.

Impossible? Barack Obama took the world by surprise with his victory. Hundreds of acrostics have been written using his name. Some may even exploit what his name spells backwards. I humbly suggest that the next poet laureate’s oath of office should be that same word, amabo, ‘I shall love’. Anyone who cannot truthfully utter it about the job would probably be advised to steer clear of it.

*William Radice’s latest book of poems, the dancing mouse/die tanzende maus, is published by Hirundo Press (Hamburg).*

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**If you agree that William Radice should be the next Poet Laureate, please write TODAY to**

Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP  
Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport  
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Email: enquiries@culture.gov.uk
William Radice’s main publications

**Eight Sections** (poems, Secker & Warburg, London, 1974)

**Strivings** (poems, Anvil Press, London, 1980)


**Louring Skies** (poems, Anvil Press, London, 1985)


**The Translator’s Art: Essays in Honour of Betty Radice** (ed. with Barbara Reynolds, Penguin, 1987)

**Char Baktrita** (‘Four Lectures’, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1990)


**Snatched by the Gods**, a libretto for a chamber opera based on a poem by Tagore, music by Param Vir (Novello, London, 1992)


**Juan Mascaró: The Creation of Faith/La Creació de la Fe** (ed., Editorial Moll, Palma de Mallorca, 1994; Rupa & Co., Delhi, 1995; Bayeux Arts, Calgary, 1999)

**The Retreat** (poems, University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1994)


**Martin Kämpchen: The Honey-seller and Other Stories** (tr. from German, Rupa & Co., Delhi, 1995)

**Before and After** (poems, Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 1995)


**The One and the Many**, readings from Tagore with photographs by John Berridge (ed., Bayeux Arts, Calgary, 1997)

**Swami Vivekananda and the Modernisation of Hinduism** (ed., OUP, Delhi, 1997, 1999)


**Myths and Legends of India** (retold by W.R., with translations by P.Lal, Folio Society, London, 2001; Penguin India, 2002)


**Sigfrid Gauch: Traces of My Father** (tr. from German, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 2002)

**A Hundred Letters from England** (Indialog Publications, Delhi, 2003)


**Beauty, Be My Brahman: Indian Poems** (Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2004)

**This Theatre Royal: A Trilogy in Stanzas** (Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2004)

**Green, Red, Gold: A Novel in 101 Sonnets** (Flambard Press, Hexham, 2005)

**Chinch-Chanca Cooroo, or The Weaver’s Wedding**, a libretto for an opera for young people, based on a story by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, music by Bernard Hughes (Wild Woods Music Ltd., Sunbury-on-Thames, 2006)

**the dancing mouse/die tanzende maus** (poems, with woodcuts and German translations by Caroline Saltzwedel, Hirundo Press, Hamburg, 2008)