

Bernard Jones and Frances Austin, William Barnes (English Studies, forthcoming)

The Language and Craft of William Barnes, English Poet and Philologist (1801-1886). By FRANCES AUSTIN and BERNARD JONES. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press. 2002. 267 + xviii pp. Price: \$89.95

This is, the authors declare, the first book-length study of Barnes. Of the four key poets Christopher Ricks chose to rehabilitate in his *New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1987) Barnes has remained most obscure, despite the subsequent appearance of two first-rate selections of his poetry, by Andrew Motion (1994) and Valerie Shepherd (1998). Barnes's use of dialect, his extreme devotion to the local scene, and the general sense of eccentricity that lurks about his reputation, may have told against him—though his principal male rival in the revival stakes, John Clare, could be charged with similar transgressions. At any rate, the authors of this important study have employed a *modus operandi* that makes perfect sense of the dialect work and the localism, if not the eccentricity. Frances Austin is a linguist, Bernard Jones the most eminent of Barnes's editors, and they accordingly look very closely at the language and the text throughout their study. Although the book is largely organised by categories reflecting aspects of Barnes's poetic techniques, what we have in effect here is 'close reading'—an extensive and widely varied series of quote-and-discuss essays on the poetry. This has the multiple advantages of making the reader necessarily imbibe a great deal of Barnes along the way, while repeatedly drawing attention to, and very often demonstrating, the range, technical skill and linguistic richness of the poetry, the variety of his work.

The first section of the book covers the life and early poetry in two necessary bread-and-butter chapters, but the story really begins to come to life with the third and final chapter of this opening section, on the early eclogues. We see Barnes developing here a form which encompasses some of the strongest features of his verse, allowing him to dramatise, capture dialogue, describe. He shapes classical verse forms to encompass his own form of 'doric' language, and is enabled to engage with the politics and culture of his landscape. The second, central section of the book covers language, 'measures', sound-patterning and figurative language. This, together with the two chapters that follow it, on 'modes' and 'moods', is the heart of the study, systematically covering all the main aspects of Barnes's art in very considerable detail: not only dialect and verse-form, but simple issues such as use of nouns and verbs, etc. These sorts of discussions are not only extremely useful, but have wider implications. For example in the chapter on verse-forms, the authors note that Barnes seemingly avoids the stanza form most associated with Burns, which casts interesting

light on his determination not to be 'bracketted' as a poet. Contrastingly, his use of alliterative forms, most famously in the line 'Do leän down low in Linden Lea', shows the depth of his rootedness in English verse traditions. Barnes, as the authors show, also uses Welsh and Persian verse forms, which demonstrates a cosmopolitan side to his poetry, along way from the parochial image he is sometimes saddled with.

The final section is more miscellaneous, encompassing not only 'modes' and 'moods', but two other important but disparate critical topics: the question of 'standard' English and dialect, and the comparison with Clare. I found the latter a little disappointing. The authors have a tendency to respond sceptically to fashionable critical postures. Thus they very swiftly dismiss modern critical theory in the study of Barnes (a door they rather too firmly close, in my view). They also believe, perhaps more reasonably, that the debate over whether Barnes's standard English is worse than his dialect work is not helpful. And they seem fairly sceptical about connections with Clare. They conscientiously place similarly themed passages from both poets side by side, but to little avail, as they admit. Yet the description of Barnes in the conclusion to their study as what we would now call a conservationist, 'concerned with preserving, or even reviving, knowledge and customs for posterity' (p. 249) could certainly be applied to Clare with equal force, and might have made a better starting point for a comparison between the poets than their side-by-side quoting.

To conclude, then, this study has some limitations in its perspectives, but is nevertheless a valuable achievement. By sticking closely to the text, reading widely within the poetry, by applying their linguistic and editorial knowledge (and indeed their very considerable wider experience of Barnes) to good effect, the authors have produced a useful study, and a point of reference for all who are interested in Barnes's neglected but wonderful poetry.

Nottingham Trent University

DR JOHN GOODRIDGE