Michael Hanke (ed.)

Through the Granite Kingdom

Critical Essays on Charles Causley

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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

In memory
of the painter
Robert Tilling MBE RI
1944-2011
friend to Charles Causley

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Preface

This is the first collection of essays devoted exclusively to the work of one of England's most popular twentieth-century poets, Charles Causley (1917-2003). He was also a dramatist, short-story and children's writer, essayist, reviewer and broadcaster, and for thirty years taught primary-school in his home town of Launceston in Cornwall. It is too early to define his place in modern English letters, especially if one considers the recent decline in the reputations of certain once undisputed masters of twentieth-century literature. Still, a glance at anthologies of the last two decades shows that at least a dozen of his poems have become firmly lodged in the cultural memory of present-day readers.

Causley always regarded himself first and foremost as a poet. That is why this volume, apart from a study of his plays and a personal account of his activities at Exeter University, is devoted exclusively to his verse. The essays are either focused on the analysis of individual poems – among them anthology hits like "Recruiting Drive", "I Am the Great Sun", "At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux", and "Betjeman, 1984" – or they concentrate on Causley's mastery of form and subject matter.

Among the contributors are Causley specialists, friends and acquaintances of his, authorities on particular subjects or genres, and scholars who have recently become interested in his poetry. Several are practising poets. Important essays on Causley published after 1975 and noteworthy reviews and introductions are listed in the select bibliography.

I am deeply grateful to the contributors. Special thanks are due to Raimund Borgmeier, Michael Ferber, T. J. Minnes, Ronald Tamplin, Rory Waterman, and Hans-Joachim Zimmermann, who offered judicious advice from which I have greatly profited. I am especially happy to acknowledge the financial support provided by some contributors to make publication possible.

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Causley and his Critics

MICHAEL HANKE

Charles Causley's first collection of poetry, *Farewell, Aggie Weston*, was published in 1951, and his subsequent career as a poet lasted for more than half a century. Few British poets of his generation have, towards the end of their lives, been lucky enough to look back on steadily increasing public acclaim spanning fifty years. The reasons for this success lay, as Philip Larkin wrote on the occasion of Causley's 65th birthday, in the fact that

> . . . you
> Make lasting friends with all you do,
> And all you write; your truth and sense
> We count on as a sure defence
> Against the trendy and the mad,
> The feeble and the downright bad.[1]

Fifteen years later Ted Hughes praised Causley as a "marvellously resourceful, original poet" whose verse "could well turn out to be the best loved and most needed" of all that had been written during the second half of the last century.[2]

Causley's poetic achievement is the more remarkable in that he also juggled the roles of playwright, short-story writer, librettist, broadcaster, and – for thirty years – primary-school teacher. He was noted for his unfailing sense of duty and dependability, his capacity for "getting on with it" (to use one of his favourite expressions). Promises, including the dread deadlines, were kept. This reliability as much as the popularity of his poetry motivated distinguished publishers to invite him to edit anthologies conspicuous for their originality and scope. Several became bestsellers. It was failing health which prevented him from accepting a final commission to edit a selection of de la Mare's poems for the Faber *Poet to Poet* series. But it is as a poet that he wished to be remembered, and this collection of critical essays has been compiled and edited with this wish in mind.

Charles Causley was born in Launceston, Cornwall, in 1917 and died there in 2003. He is buried in the churchyard of St Thomas's Church, not far from the house where he was born beside the River Kensey. He was essentially a reserved

individual, with a strong sense of privacy. A revealing glimpse of his personality may be found in the short tribute paid to him by Jack Clemo:

> He was tall for a Cornishman (we are supposed to be short like the Welsh), and while his spectacles and schoolboyish quips denoted the teacher, there was a broader independence and loneliness in the blend of poet and sailor, his deeper self. Outwardly he looked neat, comfortable and well-groomed, with no trace of the rebellion against sleek society that was so obvious . . . to some extent in me.[3]

Clemo rightly rejects the notion of Causley belonging to a "school" of Cornish poets. However, Causley, echoing Thomas Hardy, might have described the inhabitants of his Cornwall as "beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal".[4] He would have agreed with Robert Frost that "you can't be universal without being provincial".[5] But as poems like "My Friend Maloney" or "Timothy Winters" show, Causley was no more at peace with "sleek society" than Clemo. In fact, a note of social criticism resounds through many of his best poems.

Causley described his beginnings and abiding interests as a poet as follows:

> I wrote my first poems while I was in the Royal Navy. Up till 1940, I had scarcely left the small town in Cornwall where I was born. What affected me as much as anything during those wartime years was the fact that the companion who left with me for the Navy on that same day was later drowned in a convoy to northern Russia. From that moment, I found myself haunted by the words in the twenty-fourth chapter of St Matthew: 'Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left'.
>
> So it was that the earliest poems arose directly from wartime experience. Some were elegies for lost comrades; others were studies of the disasters and humours that war strews round with terrible and obvious prodigality . . .
>
> As well as the inevitable wartime subjects of separation, love, death in far and lonely places, I have also been obsessed by the theme of lost innocence.[6]

The theme of lost innocence is central to several poems discussed in this volume, notably "Nursery Rhyme of Innocence and Experience", "Recruiting Drive", "To a Poet Who Has Never Travelled", "I Am the Great Sun", and "At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux".

But there are other topics important in Causley's work which have received little attention, in particular the validity of Christian faith and precepts in the modern world, a subject often linked to the motif of the church and churchyard visitor, as in "I Saw a Shot-down Angel", "By St Thomas Water", "In Coventry", "At the Church of St Anthony, Lisbon", and "Greek Orthodox, Melbourne".[7]

In the mid-seventies, motivated by the prolonged illness and death of his mother, Causley began to compose family portraits, especially of his parents, and character sketches of intriguing people he had come to know on his travels

through Europe, Australia, and Canada. And the older he got, the more he probed into the events of his own childhood, especially his father's early death in 1924. His poem about final reunion with his parents ("Eden Rock") appears at the end of the last three editions of his *Collected Poems*.[8]

Causley had emerged in his first collection as a poet without the flippancy and egotism which pervaded the work of some of his older contemporaries who had been spared war experience.[9] There is instead a profound sadness in unassuming but moving poems such as "Song of the Dying Gunner AA1" and "Convoy". Yet "the experience of a soldier's death in Causley's poetry is never softened or flawed by sentimentality or patriotic pathos", and he "was not convinced of the moral justification for this or any war".[10] This is seen in the menacing "Recruiting Drive" which, more than any other of his poems, illustrates how in Causley's poetry "the lively step of the verse is quite clearly and deliberately working against what it is actually saying".[11]

Propelled by rhythmic force and powerful surreal metaphors, "Recruiting Drive" is camouflaged as a popular marching song. Not taken in by the naivety of Rupert Brooke's vision of "swimmers into cleanness leaping"[12] or Julian Grenfell's peremptory "he is dead who will not fight",[13] Causley gives the lie to the romanticization of what, yet again, was to be a soldiers' hell. The poem has wrongly been chided for muddled imagery. Causley derived much of the deliberately chaotic assemblage of metaphors from the mysterious anonymous song "Green Grow the Rushes, Oh!" with its gallimaufry of "the seven stars in the sky", "the eight bold rainers", and "the nine bright shiners". No doubt a more or less plausible prose paraphrase of images like "the nine bright shiners", "the scribbling sea", and "the freezing fair" might be concocted.[14] But it is Causley's intention to merely suggest rather than reveal the hideous and inexplicable. The attractions of war in his poem are so seductively displayed as to make virile young men take leave of their senses and morals, and the theatre of patriotic duty becomes a playground for satisfying perverse desires. The sexual comedy of Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer*, which Causley (a self-professed London theatrical habitué) would certainly have known, has turned sour with a vengeance.

While Causley was, and still is, admired by fellow writers, academic critics have been, and still are, inclined to steer clear of him. His poetry was included in anthologies edited by Heath-Stubbs and Wright, Edith Sitwell, Larkin, Heaney and Hughes, Neil Philip, John Fuller, and Philip Gross,[15] but one looks in vain for him in anthologies edited by university professors, such as Christopher Ricks's *Oxford Book of English Verse*. M. H. Abrams's *Norton Anthology of English Literature* is a rare exception. For academic anthologists, twentieth-century English poetry often calls to mind first and foremost the great Modern-

ists Pound and Eliot and their followers. These poets have rightly been regarded as bold innovators who blew away the cobwebs of late Victorian and Georgian conventions.

The new poetic climate was firmly established in the mid-nineteen-thirties, and held sway for almost half a century in the influential *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) edited by Michael Roberts, until Peter Porter's 1982 revision. Roberts rigorously excluded all poets who – as he put it – had "written good poems without having been compelled to make any notable development of poetic technique".[16] He mentions de la Mare, Blunden, Muir, Campbell, and Plomer, but he also excluded, without mention, poets such as Edward Thomas, Frost, and Sassoon. Quite apart from whether Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender can really be said to have contributed substantially to the development of poetic technique, the metrical experiments favoured by Roberts, such as free verse and sprung rhythm à la Hopkins, were still valid entrance tickets to the third edition by Donald Hall in 1965, by which time the Modernists and their followers had carried the day.

Hall found himself on quaking ground when it came to proposing a tenable definition of the term *modern*. He sidestepped the issue by using a nonspecific concept of *modernity* as his principle of selection: "Doubtless I have . . . also used my idea of modernity to excuse my omission of several . . . poets whom I do not really like anyway."[17] It must have been even more difficult to decide who to include in the supplementary section devoted to poets who had come to notice since the days of the poets of the thirties:

> I feel less certain about the word 'modern' than I would have felt in 1936. Should I omit Philip Larkin because he is not 'modern'? I see no useful sense of the word in which he *is*, yet the anthology is unthinkable without him. On the other hand, I have omitted at least one poet I admire because his best work is ballads which call to mind their ancient originals; it would seem *too* absurd to pretend they are 'modern'.[18]

This "one poet" must have been Causley, for he was the only prominent poet since Kipling to write in that genre. That Hall did in fact cherish Causley's work is shown by the *New Poets of England and America* anthology which he co-edited in 1957. It included four of his poems, three of them ballads.

Hall might have been less reluctant if he had revised his conception of modernity in the light of the first review of *Farewell, Aggie Weston* by Roy Campbell in 1951 – which brings us to the more favourable resonance Causley's work has found among fellow writers:

> He seems to me to be very much out of the ordinary, because he has mastered the ordinary medium – the vernacular – as no other poet has mastered it in this century. It is the most difficult medium to write in, since it is a test of one's ideas, and twenty times more difficult to get away with than any private Hopkins-lingo . . . his poems . . . have an