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978-0-521-12141-5 - A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry

Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle

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## A HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH WOMEN'S POETRY

*A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* offers a uniquely detailed record and analysis of a vast array of publications, activities and achievements by major figures as well as lesser-known poets. This comprehensive survey is organised into three historical periods (1900–45, 1945–80 and 1980–2000), each part introduced by an evaluative overview in which emerging poets are mapped against cultural and literary events and trends. Four chapters in each section consider the major figures, including Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Jennings, Sylvia Plath, Anne Stevenson, Eavan Boland, Carol Rumens, Denise Riley, Grace Nichols and Carol Ann Duffy. The individual essays reflect and stimulate continuing debates about the nature of women's poetry. They offer new critical approaches to reading poems that engage with, for example, war, domesticity, Modernism, linguistic innovation, place, the dramatic monologue, Postmodernism and the lyric. A chronology and detailed bibliography of primary and secondary sources, covering more than 200 writers, make this an invaluable reference source for scholars and students of British poetry and women's writing.

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*For R. R. D (1931–2002) and R. H. W (1921–2004)*

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## *Preface*

A proliferation of anthologies and reprinted works over the past twenty years has raised awareness of the number and variety of women publishing poetry in the twentieth century. At the same time, there is a sense that separatist treatments may have had their day. While this book is not intended to confine poets to a female-only tradition, reading position or audience, history tells us that without a distinct literary terminology, tradition and role models, women's poetry will continue to have uncertain status and fade from literary memory. The need to explore and chart the literary processes against which the woman poet defines herself and her art has led us to combine literary-historical survey with critical commentary. We have negotiated between recording reputations, largely based on critical reception, as they stand, and reassessing the significance of overlooked, as well as established, work. In wanting to present a near-exhaustive record of publications, we have erred on the side of comprehensiveness in the List of Published Works and in the 'Overview' to each of the three historical periods. The chapters develop critical readings which are pertinent to the period yet can also transfer to poetry in other historical or cultural frameworks. We envisage that some readers will enjoy the linear account of poets' writing in the context of women's social and literary environments. Others might already have an interest in particular names, or be moved to explore poets who have been brought to their attention for the first time. The breadth of styles dissolves any lingering assumption that the poetry of women is somehow formulaic and irrelevant to cultural or critical trends. At the same time, reading the works in context illuminates how a complicated gender-consciousness is frequently integral to their writing. In documenting and evaluating the publications and activities of well- and lesser-known poets, we want, primarily, to secure their future by stimulating new kinds of critical conversations about women and poetry.

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*Chronological Table of Selected Historical and Literary Events 1900–2000*

Year	Historical events	Literary events
1901	Death of Queen Victoria.	
1903	Marie Curie wins Nobel Prize.	
1904	Founding of the WSPU in Manchester.	
1908	Women Writers Suffrage League founded by Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton.	
1909		<i>Poetry Society</i> founded. Cicely Hamilton, <i>Marriage as a Trade</i> .
1910	Death of Edward VII. Suffragette March in Hyde Park.	
1911		<i>The Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review</i> , founded, ed. Dora Marsden (November); runs until October 1912.
1912		Carl Jung (1875–1961), <i>The Theory of Psychoanalysis</i> . <i>Poetry Society</i> formed; <i>Poetry Review</i> launched. Lady Margaret Sackville made first President.
1913	Royal Commission on Divorce.	Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) <i>Interpretation of Dreams</i> (1900) translated into English. <i>The New Freewoman</i> founded, ed. Dora Marsden.
1914	First World War starts.	<i>The Egoist</i> (formerly <i>The New Freewoman</i> ) founded, ed. Harriet Shaw Weaver, assisted by Richard Aldington and Dora Marsden; runs until 1918. May Sinclair, <i>Feminist Manifesto</i> . Carl Jung, <i>Psychology of the Unconscious</i> .
1916		
1918	First World War ends. Women over 30 get the vote. Countess Marckiewicz elected to Parliament.	
1919	Sex Disqualification Removal Act; all professions open except the church. Nancy Astor is first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons.	<i>The Egoist</i> becomes Egoist Press, London. Inauguration of <i>Vogue</i> in Britain.
1920		<i>Time and Tide</i> (1920–76) started by Lady Margaret Rhondda, London.
1921	Marie Stopes opens first birth control clinic in London.	

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Year	Historical events	Literary events
1922		<i>Good Housekeeping</i> launched.
1923	BBC launches 'Woman's Hour'.	Carl Jung, <i>Psychological Types</i> .
1924	Workers' Birth Control Group.	
1927		<i>Close-Up</i> magazine founded by Winifred Bryher. Vita Sackville-West receives Hawthornden Prize for Poetry. Laura Riding and Robert Graves start Seizin Press (1927–39), Mallorca and London. Cheltenham Festival inaugurated.
1928	Women over 21 get the vote.	Nancy Cunard starts The Hours Press (1928–31), Paris. Ray Strachey, <i>The Cause</i>
1929		Virginia Woolf, <i>A Room of One's Own</i> .
1936	Spanish Civil War starts.	Penguin Books launched. Ray Strachey, <i>Our Freedom and Its Results</i> .
1937	The Matrimonial Causes Act.	<i>Woman</i> magazine launched.
1938	Inheritance Act.	
1939	Second World War starts.	
1942	Beveridge Report published.	
1944	Education Act.	<i>Outposts</i> magazine launched.
1945	Bombing of Hiroshima; war ends. Introduction of Family Allowance, state payment to mothers. BBC launches Home Service and Light programmes.	
1946	Royal Commission on Equality recommends equal pay for women teachers and civil servants.	Vita Sackville-West's 'The Garden' wins Heinemann Prize.
1947	India and Pakistan granted independence. Princess Elizabeth marries Lt. Philip Mountbatten.	
1948	NHS established. SS <i>Empire Windrush</i> lands in London. John Newsom report, <i>The Education of Girls</i> .	
1951	Festival of Britain (May–September).	National Poetry Competition flops.
1952	Death of George VI; accession of Elizabeth II.	
1953	Coronation. Kinsey Report: 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female'.	
1954	Rationing ends.	

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Year	Historical events	Literary events
1955	National Council of Women, conference on single women.	Ruth Pitter awarded Queen's Medal for Poetry. Elizabeth Jennings wins Somerset Maugham Award.
1956	Report on Marriage and Divorce, the Morton Commission.	Outposts Press evolves from magazine. Elizabeth Jennings appears in Robert Conquest's Movement anthology <i>New Lines</i> .
1957		Claudia Jones founds <i>The West Indian Gazette</i> .
1958	First Aldermaston march. Notting Hill race riots. National Council of Women, conference on working mothers.	
1959	Obscene Publications Act.	Michael Horovitz founds <i>New Departures</i> . Frances Cornford awarded Queen's Medal for Poetry.
1960		R. D. Laing publishes <i>The Divided Self</i> . Jenny Joseph wins Eric Gregory Award.
1961	Contraceptive pill introduced in UK.	Penguin cleared of obscenity in <i>Lady Chatterley</i> trial. Simone de Beauvoir's <i>The Second Sex</i> published in Britain. Doris Lessing, <i>The Golden Notebook</i> .
1962	Marilyn Monroe dies. National Housewives Register founded.	
1963	Profumo Scandal breaks.	Stevie Smith 'Poet of the Year', Stratford-upon-Avon Festival. Sylvia Plath dies. Betty Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> .
1965	Mary Quant opens Bazaar.	Approximately 7,000 people attend Royal Albert Hall Poetry reading featuring more than 40 poets.
1966		Juliet Mitchell, 'The Longest Revolution' in <i>New Left Review</i> . Writers' Workshop formed.
1967	Abortion Law Reform. Family Planning Act.	
1968	Martin Luther King assassinated. Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech. Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.	Northern Poetry Library founded. Kathleen Raine fails to get Oxford Chair of Poetry.

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Year	Historical events	Literary events
1969	First landing on the moon. Divorce Reform Act.	Enitharmon Press founded. Poetry Society's Poetry Gala, Royal Festival Hall. Stevie Smith awarded Queen's Medal for Poetry. Kate Millett, <i>Sexual Politics</i> . Sheila Rowbotham, <i>Women's Liberation and the New Politics</i> .
1970	First Conference of Women's Liberation Movement, Ruskin College, Oxford (February). Equal Pay Act.	Germaine Greer, <i>The Female Eunuch</i> . Kathleen Raine wins Cholmondeley Award.
1971	First International Women's Day (March); women march in London and Liverpool.	Stevie Smith dies. Phoebe Hesketh elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The Arvon Foundation Centre founded.
1972	First Women's Refuge set up in Chiswick, London.	<i>Spare Rib</i> launched. <i>PN Review</i> launched. Wendy Mulford founds Street Editions. Kathleen Raine receives WH Smith Literary Award. Molly Holden wins Cholmondeley Award. Liz Lochhead wins Scottish Arts Council Award. Penelope Shuttle wins Eric Gregory Award.
1973		Virago Press launched. International Cambridge Poetry Festival inaugurated.
1974		Jenny Joseph wins Cholmondeley Award.
1975	Sex Discrimination Act. Equal Opportunities Commission set up. National Abortion Campaign launched. Employment Protection Act introduces statutory maternity rights.	
1976	Domestic Violence Act. First rape crisis centre opens in North London. Mairead Maguire founds Community of Peace People movement later winning Nobel Peace Prize.	Onlywomen Press founded. Gillian Clarke edits <i>Anglo-Welsh Review</i> . Fleur Adcock wins Cholmondeley Award.



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Year	Historical events	Literary events
1977		Elaine Showalter, <i>A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing</i> .
1978	Hite Report. Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) formed.	The Women's Press launched. Anne Stevenson elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.
1979	Margaret Thatcher becomes first woman Prime Minister; lowest number of women MPs (19) returned in 20 years.	Medbh McGuckian wins National Poetry Competition. Pamela Gillilan wins Cheltenham Literature Festival/ <i>Sunday Telegraph</i> Poetry Competition. Anne Stevenson co-founds The Poetry Bookshop, Hay-on-Wye. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar publish <i>The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination</i> . Denise Levertov elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters.
1980		Elaine Feinstein elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Medbh McGuckian wins Eric Gregory Award. Dale Spender, <i>Man Made Language</i> .
1981	The Prince of Wales marries Lady Diana Spencer. Brixton riots.	
1982	First Greenham Common Peace Camp. Channel Four launched.	April: Evening of International Poetry at the First International Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books.
1983		Grace Nichols's <i>i is a long-remembered woman</i> wins Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Carol Ann Duffy wins National Poetry Competition. Medbh McGuckian wins Alice Hunt Bartlett Award.
1984	Miners' strike prompts formation of Women Against Pit Closures.	Patricia Oxley edits the new <i>Acumen</i> poetry magazine. Alison Fell wins Alice Hunt Bartlett Award.
1985		<i>Women's Review</i> launched. Denise Levertov receives Shelley Memorial Award from Poetry Society of America. Jo Shapcott wins National Poetry Competition (joint award).

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*Chronology*

Year	Historical events	Literary events
1986		Carole Satyamurti wins National Poetry Competition. Jenny Joseph wins James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Helen Dunmore wins Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize.
1987		Poems on the Underground. Elizabeth Jennings wins WH Smith Literary Award. Wendy Cope wins Cholmondeley Award. U. A. Fanthorpe elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.
1988	Berlin Wall comes down (November). Sian Edwards first woman conductor of Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.	The Poetry Library moves to South Bank, London. Carol Ann Duffy wins Somerset Maugham Award. Selima Hill wins Arvon/ <i>Observer</i> International Poetry competition. Gwyneth Lewis wins Gregory Award.
1989		Carol Ann Duffy wins Dylan Thomas Award. E. J. Scovell wins Cholmondeley Award.
1990	Nelson Mandela released. Mary Robinson elected President of Ireland. Poll Tax riots (March). Mrs Thatcher resigns (November). Tracy Edwards captains first all-women crew to complete Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race.	Nicky Rice wins National Poetry Competition. Elaine Feinstein wins Cholmondeley Award. Helen Dunmore wins first prize in Cardiff International Poetry Competition.
1991	Helen Sharman first Briton in space.	Judith Wright awarded Queen's Medal for Poetry. Jo Shapcott's 'Phrase Book' is joint winner of National Poetry Competition.
1992	Ordination of first women deacons in Church of England. Betty Boothroyd becomes first female Speaker of the House of Commons.	Forward Poetry Prize set up. Kathleen Raine awarded Queen's Medal for Poetry.
1993		Elizabeth Jennings receives CBE. Carol Ann Duffy wins Whitbread Poetry Prize.
1994		First National Poetry Day. 'New Generation' Poets launched. Ruth Fainlight wins Cholmondeley Award. Alice Oswald wins Gregory Award.

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Year	Historical events	Literary events
1995		Carol Ann Duffy awarded OBE. Wendy Cope wins American Academy of Letters Award. Kathleen Jamie wins Somerset Maugham Award.
1996	Prince and Princess of Wales divorce.	Orange Prize for Women's Fiction launched. Ruth Padel wins National Poetry Competition. Fleur Adcock awarded OBE.
1997	Labour party wins general election. Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister; 120 women MPs ('Blair's Babes') win seats.	Jenny Joseph's 'When I am Old I shall Wear Purple' chosen as the Nation's Favourite Poem.
1998	Death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Devolution in Scotland and Wales; 25 women elected to first Welsh National Assembly.	Poetry on the Buses.
1999	Devolution in Northern Ireland. Minimum wage introduced in UK.	Carol Ann Duffy elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and nominated for Laureateship. Oxford University Press closes its poetry list.
2000		Kathleen Raine awarded CBE.