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Not saying anything

by [Paul Dean](#)

On *C. Day-Lewis: A Life* by Peter Stanford.

Peter Stanford

C. Day-Lewis: A Life.

Continuum, 368 pages, \$32.95

It took me some time to hunt down any of the poetry of C. Day-Lewis, even second-hand. The centenary of his birth, in 2004, saw the publication of a selection edited by his widow, the actress Jill Balcon, but it had to be printed by subscription and seems to have vanished already. I can report, however, that there is a good reason for this; the poetry is mostly dreadful. Naturally, Peter Stanford does not think so, and quotes liberally, but the more he quotes the clearer the mediocrity becomes. Nor does Stanford succeed in making us warm to the man. Day-Lewis's own autobiography, *The Buried Day* (1960), is elegant but evasive. The life by his son Sean (1980) is more frank about his sexual escapades. Stanford is more detailed still—fatally so, for who could like, or even respect, a man who could write the following?

Poets do tend to fall in love with a woman (sometimes consciously even) in order to beget a poem upon her, and when that's done, gradually withdraw.

Sean Day-Lewis quoted the passage, but insisted that his father was not as much of a cad as it makes him sound. Stanford's fuller picture leaves one uncertain. Day-Lewis felt free to behave like this because he was a Bard; the poetry that resulted would justify the behavior. Unfortunately, it doesn't.

Admittedly, there was much early unhappiness to confront. Day-Lewis's mother died when he was barely four; his father refused to grieve but overwhelmed him with emotional demands; a beloved Irish aunt, who came as housekeeper and who took the boy on annual carefree holidays in Ireland, was ousted by his father's new wife, whom he called his "step-dragon" and with whom relations were cold. The natural introspection of an only child grew into morbidity. "Who are you?" he would ask his reflection in the mirror; later on adding, "Which of you is you?" This was a question he never managed to answer.

As a boarder at Sherborne School, and as an undergraduate reading classics at Wadham College, Oxford, where he was tutored by the celebrated Maurice Bowra, he felt free to develop his literary and musical talents, but made few close friends. He was drawn to drab and earnest types, not at all Bowra's idea of a social circle. A poor degree was followed by some years of school-teaching, before he became financially independent in 1935, having meanwhile married Mary King, the daughter of his old English master at Sherborne, and had two sons. Thereafter he earned his living

by writing poetry, criticism, and fiction (including a series of detective novels under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake) and translating Virgil. He wrote, too, a minor children's classic, *The Otterbury Incident*, which was still being read when I was at school. Honors came with the years: he was Clark Lecturer at Cambridge, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Norton Professor at Harvard, and, for the last four years of his life, Poet Laureate.

Day-Lewis's early verse was in the Georgian vein, full of mythological vaporings and pastoral frippery. His meeting with W. H. Auden in 1926 changed that, although, after an understandable early bout of star-struck imitation, he kept his distance, ignoring Auden's strictures about the haste with which he wrote ("You sound as if you were wanting your tea.") He exists now, if at all, in people's minds as a "Thirties poet" with Auden and Spender—the indistinguishable hybrid "Macspaunday" of Roy Campbell's malicious caricature—but he published more volumes after the 1930s than during them, and his membership in the Communist Party was brief and half-hearted ("The comrades are all very respectful, and call one 'sir'.") Yet it was the 1930s work which got all the attention; his post-war volumes were tepidly received, although they are arguably better (or, at least, less bad).

Peter Stanford's explanation of this waning reputation is straightforward. For him, Day-Lewis fell foul of Modernism—by which he means, essentially, Eliot and Pound—in continuing to write poems that kept to traditional metrical forms and rhyme-schemes, and were predominantly lyric in character. Yet that has not prevented Betjeman (his successor as Poet Laureate) or Larkin from being enormously popular. Besides, Eliot and Pound agreed with Day-Lewis that poems should have intelligible structure and rhythm, and both, for that matter, could write metrical and rhyming verse in masterly fashion when they thought it appropriate. The use or renunciation of traditional form is a side-issue; what matters is what you do with the form you have chosen. Stanford seems to think "Modernism" advocated a hieratic, aesthetic view of poetry as disconnected from contemporary life. Does he really think that *The Waste Land* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* exist in a vacuum, sealed off from the post-1918 world? (Had he had Wallace Stevens in mind it might have been a different matter.)

Similarly, he accuses F. R. Leavis of animus against Day-Lewis because the latter offended a belief, which he repeatedly ascribes to Leavis, that poetry should be analyzed "over and above any interest in the mind or personality of the poet, the social context of the writing and emotional response to it by the reader." If Stanford had read Leavis with any attention he would know that Leavis never thought any such thing. Leavis printed adverse reviews of Day-Lewis in *Scrutiny* simply because he believed that the poetry was of poor literary quality. It is also ridiculous to compare Day-Lewis's flimsy manifesto of 1934, *A Hope for Poetry*, with Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* of 1932, on which it leans heavily. No one would claim *New Bearings* as Leavis's best work, but its grip and insight leave Day-Lewis standing.

Stanford is impatient with the charges of imitateness and lack of a distinctive style which were repeatedly brought against Day-Lewis in his lifetime. This is a difficult matter to keep in proportion. Poets will inevitably echo their predecessors. Hardy, Yeats, and Frost were mentors to Day-Lewis, and his poetry of the 1930s and 1940s is full of them:

For me there is no dismay
Though ills enough impend.
I have learned to count each day
Minute by breathing minute.

("The Poet")

It's impossible not to hear Hardy in the first two lines here, or the verbal and rhythmical borrowing

from “Easter 1916” in the next two. Again:

... as though
You were dead and your shape had returned to haunt me

You slipped from my arms and played in the breaking
Surges to tease and enchant me.

(“On the Sea Wall”)

We can’t *not* think there of Hardy’s “The Voice” and “After a Journey” (or resist saying “enchant”—Day-Lewis, like his model, could be incredibly clumsy with rhymes, “iris/desire is” or “sweeten/beat in” for instance). Sometimes excusable allusion shades into parasitic dependence, and although in his later verse Day-Lewis shook off this mimicry to some extent, he was never entirely free of it.

The biography, like the poetry, is much preoccupied with its subject’s love life. His twenty-two-year marriage to Mary was conducted almost wholly for his convenience; she tolerated his philandering with amazing patience, banking on his basic need for the security she offered. He always came back to her, with empty promises of reform. He fathered one child out of wedlock, and possibly a second (the evidence is unclear). From 1941 to 1950, he conducted a passionate romance with the novelist Rosamond Lehmann. He worked in the Ministry of Information during the war years and kept a London flat which made it easy to meet; Mary dutifully forwarded his letters “c/o The Hon. Mrs R. N. Phillips” (Lehmann’s married name). Lehmann’s belief that Day-Lewis would marry her was shattered when he deserted her for the much younger Jill Balcon; she was still in shock from this twenty years later.

Day-Lewis and Balcon married in 1951 and two further children followed, but he continued to have mistresses, some chosen from his assistants at Chatto and Windus, the publishing firm where he worked as an adviser on manuscripts. Fearful of repeating his own father’s mistakes, he was remote from his own children. “Sometimes,” Sean poignantly remembered, “if we were lucky, he’d play.” *If we were lucky*. Some of the most successful poems Day-Lewis wrote were about, or addressed to, his children, regretting this distance, including his single best-known poem, “Walking Away” (1962), which remembers the pain of watching Sean going off to school by himself, and ends with “Love is proved in the letting go.” Another poem in this vein is the posthumously published “Children Leaving Home,” which shows more flexibility of movement than he often managed.

All this made for domestic turbulence; at one point he described himself as “more scened against than scene-ing.” No doubt much is due to the way his emotions were both repressed and exploited by his father, and to the substitute mother figures in his childhood: experiences which seem to have made him separate the domestic from the sexual roles in the women he knew. There comes a point, however, when excuses are paltry. Balcon once asked him what his view of marriage was; he replied, “It’s a habit—a very good habit.” I am haunted by those words, terrifying in their coldness, about the poet begetting a poem upon a woman. When Stanford placidly remarks that the marriage to Balcon offered Day-Lewis “a new range of feelings and experiences to examine in his poetry,” he seems to have caught the infection.

Day-Lewis set much store by images. He published his Clark Lectures, given at Cambridge in 1946, as *The Poetic Image* (1947). This contains some insights into isolated lines of poetry, along with some eye-popping judgments; George Meredith, we are told, is “the greatest image-maker since Shakespeare.” But—as in fact the *Scrutiny* reviewer, R. G. Cox, pointed out—an image can’t be isolated from questions of tone, realization of the idea, or control. Day-Lewis’s image for the image itself was “a whirl or vortex on the surface of a calm sea,” which would draw the poet down and then

cast him up to the surface again. This seems oddly close to a surrealist concept of imagery, which he elsewhere deprecated as too cryptic. Certainly it is possible to find some lamentable images in his poetry from different periods:

The armies of the dead
Are trenched within my bones,
My blood's their semaphore, their wings
Are watchers overhead.

(“In Me Two Worlds,” from *A Time to Dance* [1935])

One day when the breath of roses
Plumpened a swooning breeze
And all the silken coombes of summer
Opened wide their knees.

(“The Unwanted, from *Poems 1943–1947* [1948])

Leave smouldering chagrin like
fag-ends to char
Your fresh-painted sill of life!

(“Father to Sons,” from *Pegasus* [1957])

Pegasus also contains my favorite bad line, from “Moods of Love,” written in the wake of a short-lived affair with Elizabeth Jane Howard: “Where thigh-bones mope along the tainted shore.” As a Dali painting, this would be a masterpiece; as a poetic image, it simply induces the giggles. For a lyric poet, imagery is crucial in the conveying of feeling; if that fails, there is little left to admire.

When asked which of his poems he hoped would endure, Day-Lewis picked out the sonnet sequence “O Dreams, O Destinations,” from *Word Over All* (1943), and “On Not Saying Everything,” from *The Room* (1965). The sonnets, in Stanford’s words, “journey through childhood to delayed adolescence and on to adulthood,” and display a characteristic tone of “questions without clear answers” and “attendant melancholy.” The conclusion has its power: “Travellers, we’re fabric of the road we go;/ We settle, but like feathers on time’s flow.” Yet what repeatedly strikes one is, again, the muzzy imagery, the patchy realization: “the womb’s lingering haze,” “earth’s concentric mysteries,” “when our souls engage/ With the common mesh and moil,” “the sighing distances beyond/ Each height of happiness.” As long ago as 1913, the despised Pound had warned, in “A Few Don’ts,” against mixing the abstract with the concrete, a fault he attributed to “the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.” Perhaps he knew a thing or two about imagery, after all.

“On Not Saying Everything,” written at Harvard in 1964, is Day-Lewis’s statement of a “doctrine of limitations” in nature, human relationships, and poetry:

A poem, settling to its form,
Finds there no jailer, but a norm
Of conduct.

With Jill Balcon in mind, he says “Love’s essence, like a poem’s, shall spring/ From the not saying everything.” But the “the” (as in “the letting go” of “Walking Away”) is fussy; and when earlier we read—

Play out, then, as it should be played,
The sweet illusion that has made
An eldorado of your hair
And our love an everywhere.

—the groan that escapes us at the atrociousness of “an eldorado of your hair” is accompanied by the sad recognition that these lines travesty one of the best moments in Donne’s “The Good Morrow” (“and make our little room an everywhere”).

Shortly after his return from Harvard, Day-Lewis’s health began to fail, and his last years saw a marked decline. His brief term as Poet Laureate was as undistinguished as those of most Poets Laureate have been, although his marriage and his children gave him a happiness he had rarely known previously. He died of pancreatic cancer in 1972 and was buried in Stinsford churchyard, near his revered Hardy. He was lucky in the generosity and forbearance of those who loved him, and he has been lucky to find such an admiring biographer. “Poetry was the point of my life,” he said a few weeks before he died. I am sure this was sincere, and that he did the best he could, but I feel Auden was right; he should not have stopped for tea.

Paul Dean is Head of English at Summer Fields School, Oxford.

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