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Memories of John Heath Stubbs, 1918 - 2006

John and I first met in 1965, although we didn't see each other much until later on. In his early days, John was very successful. When I met him he had been published by the Oxford University Press and was well respected in the literary world.; many friends and poets admired his work. He often gave lectures and talks and was in high demand for poetry readings. Many people found his poetry a little difficult; he didn't write the easy poems that people wanted. There is an obscurity in his poetry; you have to read and think about it before you can get anything out of it. John had a mind like an encyclopaedia – he knew every period in history when it came to poetry and poets. While he was aware of the movements in the poetry world, he was extremely independent and didn't follow or identify himself with fashions. He wrote in the style he wanted to write in.

Many say his poetry as romantic. John hated his poetry being called romantic, although in some sense it was. There was a deep conservatism in his poetry that put off contemporary people. He was a prolific writer and wrote poetry every day of his life. He contributed to hundreds of little magazines, one of which was *The Tablet*, a literary and religious magazine. John was the last in a group of poets, among them George Barker, Charles Sisson, Thomas Blackburn and Philip Larkin. I must include Larkin even though he and John disliked each other. When John was at Oxford, he co-edited the *Eight Oxford Poets* with Michael Meyer and left out Larkin. I think there might have been a bit of jealousy there, although John never admitted it.

John's mother was a classical music scholar who introduced him to the world of music. He had a great love of the opera and Guthrie McKie (John's good friend and executor) and he would often go. John often listened to music on his radio. Music influenced a lot of his poetry. John hated jazz; he thought it was mumbo jumbo and didn't understand it.

It was in 1970 that Charles Sisson recommended John to Carcanet Press and the Carcanet Press went on to publish many of his poems during the seventies and towards the end of John's life. Michael Schmidt, the Editorial and Managing Director of Carcanet Press is a great man for rescuing poets that have been neglected by other publishers. John Rety, a Hungarian publisher, also published some of John's works under Hearing Eye Publications.

In 1968 I started to see John more, and we began to spend a lot of time together. It was then that I started organizing poetry readings around groups of poets connected to John. There were older poets – George Barker, Thomas Blackburn, Stevie Smith – and younger – Bernard Saint, John Wain, George Macbeth and Alan Brownjohn. In 1969 I started *Aquarius*. The idea was to publish some of the poets that were doing poetry readings in the Lamb and Flag, a 16th Century pub in Covent Garden where Dryden used to read his poems. I created an editorial committee including John, Alan Smith (a *Guardian* reporter), John Ezard and the late Clive Steel.

I was the one person that got John off the cigarettes. He used to smoke them all the time and was trying to quit when I met him. The poem I wrote about him describes him smoking his pipe in a pub. I used to clean his flat and I would hide his pipe from him until he finally gave up smoking.

If John had his sight he would have been better, I think. He had been going blind since he was a small child. In the early '60s he often went to Soho to meet his literary friends and was able to get around quite well by himself, but as time went by he had

to rely on others to take his places. He suffered a great deal of pain in his life being handicapped like this, and he also suffered with depression. People would ask me how he composed his poems. I think he dictated them and then went back and added commas and such; that was how he published his poems. John could have been a great teacher if he had had the chance. He did some teaching at Oxford, doing tutorials for Professor John Jones and he taught in Ann Arbor in the United States. Under other circumstances, if he had had his sight, it is possible John would have ended up as professor at Oxford.

John was an old-fashioned Victorian in some sense. He was a high Tory but didn't identify with the modern Tory party. He saw Margaret Thatcher as a socialist and became disillusioned when she shut down the mental hospitals and turned the patients out onto the streets. That was the beginning of beggary in this country, at least of that sort, and it annoyed John very much. John was also a lifelong royalist. He held a very unfavourable view of Princess Diana because of her splitting from Charles. He called me once the day after a party in Earl's Court and said that Henry VIII had executed his wives for disobedience, and Diana should be executed!

When it came to women, John was an awful misogynist. He was entirely opposed when they started introducing women to the colleges and clubs. When he met women in company, he seemed to have the idea they were trying to seduce him. There was a certain type of woman he was attracted to: those who were unmarried and unattached. He was annoyed when I did a women's issue of *Aquarius*. There were a few women who liked him, such as Stevie Smith, a novelist and poet and one of those who did poetry readings at the Lamb and Flag.

There was a great deal of snobbery present in John's character. When you would go to a party with him, he would instruct you on how to act, to arrive late and leave early. He implied that he disliked Edward Heath, a prime minister in the 1970s and a member of the Tory party, because his father was a carpenter. He once asked me to cast his vote (he always needed someone to cast his votes for him) and told me he was voting socialist because he didn't like Heath. John was arrogant and stubborn in many ways; if someone attempted to help him cross the street, he would strike them with his stick. However, he was a very generous man. Although he didn't have much money, he always gave to charity. He lived in genteel poverty. I remember he had this little table given to him by his mother and it was propped up by a Clive James book of poetry.

John was a devoted Anglican and had a great knowledge of the Anglican faith. He would have made a good theologian if he hadn't been a poet. He was very much under the influence of C.S. Lewis while at Oxford. There was a period before I met him when John went through a religious crisis, but he eventually went back to his beliefs. John went to church regularly, and towards the end of his life, when he had lost most of his sight, either I or the vicar had to take him. Once I tried to take him a different way that I thought was quicker and John got angry and told me I 'didn't know my bloody geometry!' While he was doing the praying, I was doing the housework.

John had great difficulty in writing his memoirs, largely due to the fact that he was so devoted as an Anglican. A friend wanted to write his biography, but the two had a falling-out because the man couldn't write it. John finally wrote his memoirs, but failed to come to terms with himself. In all writing you have to be honest, be yourself, and John wasn't. He wouldn't admit that he was a homosexual. He was very religious and saw it as a sin. So his memoirs failed, because he wouldn't be honest with himself.

John's last days were painful, both for himself and those who knew him. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in November 2006. John had to be put in a nursing home because he couldn't look after himself any more. He had Alzheimer's and thought he was going mad. He kept quoting the poem 'I am what I am' by John Clare, and he thought that Clare was aware of his mental condition. In that last year of his life, his poems were written in his head but he never wrote them down. On July 16th, 2006, Guthrie McKie and I celebrated John's last birthday with him in the nursing home. He was 88. The nurses also had a party for him. It must have been hard for the staff – John could never come to terms with the home. On Christmas Day I went to Guthrie's for Christmas dinner and then to the nursing home on my way home to see John, but he didn't recognise me. I left him around 8pm and headed home. At 2am I was woken by a phone call from Guthrie telling me that John had died. Only a few of us went to his funeral; Guthrie and I, and John's niece, and grand-niece. It was quite a cold day and we had forgotten to bring John's hot water bottle. Hundreds of people came to John's church service near Westbourne Grove, even those that didn't like his poetry. I think we'll all miss him.

I am a great admirer of John's poetry. I think his work will thrive after his death and he will become well-known. He will be most remembered for *The Parliament of Birds*, his epic poem *Artorius* (both published by Enitharmon Press), and his translations of Giacomo Leopardi. John was unfairly neglected in his life, and his blindness prevented him from achieving everything he could have achieved. He could have been a great teacher, and his work was never appreciated as it should have been.

He was a great poet. Put it that way.