

OBITUARIES

Ian Hamilton

Poet, biographer, editor, and critic

IAN HAMILTON was a poet, biographer, editor, and critic with a formidable reputation for rigour and acerbity. Yet, in person, at least on the single occasion I met him in 1996, he seemed at first shy, almost diffident.

Born in King's Lynn, Norfolk, and educated at Keble College, Oxford (where he took a third), at the age of 24 – in 1962 – he founded the influential “little” poetry magazine the *Review*. It was modelled in part on Geoffrey Grigson's ferocious *New Verse*, a journal so severe it used to attack its own contributors. In the *Review*, Hamilton championed the clipped, tightly-written poem, rarely more than a dozen lines in length; he also became known for encouraging critical frankness, even inventing a character, Edward Pygge, who wrote scurrilous accounts of poetry and poets in the magazine's pages. Hamilton served as Edward Pygge the First.

The *Review* folded after a decade. Two years later, in 1974, he founded the *New Review*; subsidised by large amounts of Arts Council money, it had headquarters in Soho, beside the pub The Pillar of Hercules, where Hamilton often held court and introduced young writers to each other. The *New Review* was an early encourager of poets like Seamus Heaney and Douglas Dunn; it ceased publication after 50 issues. It began by ambitiously paying contributors; it ended up, Hamilton claimed, borrowing money from them.

The magazine, like its predecessor, created controversy: the English poet-critic Donald Davie, the genius loci of another poetry magazine, *PN Review*, writing to that magazine's editor Michael Schmidt, commented: “There's no wonder we never write without mentioning Hamilton and the *New Review* . . . We all have a patriotic duty to drive the *New Review* out of existence by every means in our power, and I consistently exert myself to that end.”

For a critic so renowned for tough-mindedness, Hamilton wrote poetry, collected in his first book *The Visit*, in 1970, and, later, in *Fifty Poems* (1988), and *Sixty Poems* (1998),

which seems delicate, almost evanescent, except in those moments in which he chronicles his father's terminal illness and first wife's madness; he called himself a lyric poet of “the miraculous persuasion”.

“I think of a genuine poetic moment,” he told me in 1996, “as miraculous or near-miraculous, and that that's what truly lyric poetry aspires to.” As he grew older, he experienced fewer of these moments.

Hamilton also largely gave up the forthright reviewing (for the *Observer*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *London Magazine*) for which he had become best known. He found that his increasing number of literary acquaintances began to make honest reviewing impossible.

Instead, he turned to biography, writing an acclaimed book about his friend, the American poet Robert Lowell, published in 1983. Later commissioned to write a biography of J D Salinger, whose *The Catcher in the Rye* had been a seminal book to the young Hamilton, he had to re-write the biography when the famously-reclusive Salinger used litigation to prevent quotation from some of his letters in the volume. The book became, instead, *In Search of J D Salinger* (1988), a meditation, in part, on the nature of biography. The case also established legal precedent over the definition of “fair use” of copyright material.

Following that harsh experience was Hamilton's *The Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (1992), a modest classic in its colourful account of the personalities and politics surrounding the ownership of literary estates. Hamilton wrote wonderfully in the book about poets and poetry in a style wry, affectionate, and salted with the insider knowledge of a practitioner of the art. His accounts of Swinburne and Burns in *Keepers of the Flame* are touching and sometimes hilarious examples.

On the occasion I met him in London it was to interview him for the poetry magazine the

Dark Horse. The interview began in his study over drams of Glenfiddich; it finished at a nearby pizza restaurant over two bottles of wine. He expounded entertainingly about poets, biography, little magazines, and his then-forthcoming book about Matthew Arnold, published as *A Gift Imprisoned* in 1998. Some readers took his feeling that Arnold disapproved of the poetic in himself as having a connection with Hamilton's own life: a sense that critic and biographer had, largely, overshadowed the poet.

This sense of wasted potential may have been in evidence, too, when he combined it with another of his obsessions, football, in two books on Paul Gascoigne, *Gazza Agonistes* (1993) and *Gazza Italia* (1994). Over lunch, in 1996, he tried to draw me out concerning football. I confessed only to a brief liking in my youth for Leeds United, on account of their pure white football strip. “How aesthetic,” he said, wryly.

Ian Hamilton was a genuine “man of letters”, and certainly one of the most interesting writers about poetry in Britain over the past 40 years. As a reviewer, he could be deadly, on one occasion reviewing a young poet's first collection three times – once under his own name, once under a pseudonym, and once anonymously – and each time negatively. Reviewing another poet, he wrote of his work that his “speciality is the suburban fable and much of his subject matter seems to have been drawn from a pious reading of his local newspaper; it is the beast in us which brings that sense of danger to our breakfast tables”. Hamilton in his reviewing always put literature, not the feelings of poets, first; and when he couldn't do that any more, he stopped.

Ian Hamilton, poet, critic, biographer, editor; born March 24 1938, died Hammersmith, December 27, 2001.

GERRY CAMBRIDGE