

Historical Spirit in the Selected Poems of Robert Conquest

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ABSTRACT

Robert Conquest was a popular English-American poet and historian. He has been recognised for his significant contribution to history especially soviet history. His historical documentation of Soviet regime is believed to be his landmark output. Historical spirit is one of the main attributes of his poems along with social, cultural, political and other issues. He is also regarded as one of the dominant "Movement Poets" of the 1950s which included names like Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn. Robert Conquest's artistic acumen found reflections in different aspects of writing like History and Politics, Poetry, Novels, Translation and Criticism. The sheer energy that replete his poetry is also commendable. As a poet Conquest always tried to draw upon the significant moments of his time in which history of poetry and politics have intersected with the energetic embellishments of themes. Since he belonged to "The Movement" his poetry contains the prevailing tone which is academic and urbane. The spirit of a historian always found expression in the poetry of Conquest where he cherished the revolutionary ideas in a powerful manner. He was a poet who has used his creative genius by actively and boldly portraying the period of disillusionment and disappointment through his poems earning for himself a place as one of the major historian poet of his age.

Keywords: Historical spirit, poet historian, Movement, poetry, revolution.

George Robert Acworth Conquest (1917-2015) was born to an American father Robert Folger Wescott Conquest and an English mother Rosamund Alys Acworth Conquest on 15 July 1917 in

Great Malvern, Worcestershire, England. Conquest is a widely recognised modern poet whose poems have been published in various periodicals from the year 1937. His poem entitled “For the Death of a Poet” earned him PEN Brazil Prize in 1945. He was awarded the Festival of Britain verse prize in 1951. In his life time he had published seven volumes of poetry and one work of literary criticism entitled *The Abomination of Moab*. He also brought out a verse translation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s epic *Prussia nights* in 1977. He got published two novels i.e. *A World of Difference* in 1955 and *The Egyptologists* in 1965. In 1955 and 1963 he edited the *New Lines* anthologies and in 1962-63 he was the literary editor of *The London Spectator*. Conquest also authored 21 books on Soviet history, political philosophy and international affairs. His works *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (1999) and *The Dragons of Expectation* in 2004 are well received worldwide. His classic *The Great Terror* (1968) has been translated in most of the European languages as well as in Japanese, Hebrew, Turkish and Arabic. Praising the contribution of Conquest Michael Lind said, “Historian, philosopher, and poet, Robert Conquest embodies the civilisation that he has spent a lifetime defending. His meditations on the horrors, lunacies and triumphs of the twentieth century should be required reading as a new century begins” (quoted in preview of *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*).

Robert Conquest displayed his scholarliness across the world. He became a Visiting Poet and Lecturer in English at the University of Buffalo in 1959-60. He also held the research appointments at the London School of Economics, the Columbia University Russian Institute, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Heritage Foundation and Harvard University’s Ukrainian Research Institute. Conquest has been the Fellow of Royal Society of Literature, the British Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the British Interplanetary Society. He received several recognitions and awards which include the Order of the British Empire and Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George; the

Jefferson Lectureship in 1993; the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Michael Braude Award for Light Verse in 1997; the Richard Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters in 1999; the Fondazione Liberal Career Award in 2004 and the Presidential medal of Freedom in 2005.

Robert Conquest was a noted poet in the British literary circle representing a group of "The Movement" poets which included poets like Philip Larkin and Sir Kingsley Amis. These Movement poets completely rejected the experiments of earlier poets. Conquest has been recognised as poet historian but he always considered himself as much a poet as an historian. Once Maurice Bowra told Conquest that he found his poetry "much more satisfying than almost anyone else's now writing." Alongside his historical works, Conquest brought out several volumes of his poems and in 1956 he edited an anthology entitled *New Lines*, which included nine poems by Philip Larkin who became a close friend. Conquest shared very close bonds with Kingsley Amis, with whom he wrote the squib, *The Egyptologists*, in 1966. Amis included some of Conquest's light verse (under the pen-name "Stuart Howard Jones", "Victor Gray" and "Ted Pauker") in his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse* in 1978.

Conquest's poems ultimately focus upon the discourses regarding social, cultural and political issues. His poetry, an outcome of the Movement's Poetry, emphasizes upon the intellectual up-rose and breakdown of certain ideologies in the modern society. Conquest was of the opinion that the societies in the modern age should be systematically ordered or organised not on the basis of theological or spiritual ideals but according to the temporal prudential standard. As Conquest produced his most of works during Prague spring, his works, drawn from the philosophical tradition, offered a serious pause to those who insisted upon thoughts, full of excess romanticism. Conquest is also the boldest theorist of the pro American lobby in the British politics. He was an interesting personality during the 1980s that

remained active throughout his life in the academy, press and politics affording him a usual opportunity to reflect on the relationship between poetry, politics and war.

Robert Conquest has presented an 'anti', a crucial element in his poetry with anti-liberal and anti-dogmatic tendencies. He created a radical contrast between falsehood and truth in his poetry. His peculiar views regarding certain recurrent issues intimately shaped his works related with history and poetry. Conquest had the heart of a poet with the sight of a historian. He was courageous enough to bring to light a great number of unimaginable tales of human sufferings. He always took the side of truth and firmly stood by it. He has been praised for his reflection of truth about the Soviet rule. Lot of discussions and debates are held on the works of Conquest describing the Soviet rule. His works made huge impact on the minds of both East and the West. "His historical intuition was astonishing," said Norman M. Naimark, a Professor of Eastern European history at Stanford University. "He saw things clearly without having access to archives or internal information from the Soviet government. We had a whole industry of Soviet historians who were exposed to a lot of the same material but did not come up with the same conclusions. This was groundbreaking, pioneering work." (*New York Times*)

Conquest was, believed many critics, very much interested in the incidents happening in Russia and the Soviet Regime. But Conquest had a very keen eye on other significant moments in the history of the age in which he lived. He was able to trace these moments of the modern age where history of poetry and history of politics intersected each other. He writes;

Age that ignored the unavenged Ukraine
 'Imperialist Britain' seething in its brain,
 An age of art devised for instant shock
 An age of aestheticians talking cock,
 With education-but let's cool it, lads
 And say, a means of inculcating fads. (*Penultima* 63)

Robert Conquest was brave enough to pick daring subjects to be the themes of his poems. His poems continue to make tremendous impact on the readers' minds. He was able to highlight with a lot of force the issues related with the modern generation. He cherished the revolutionary ideas through his creative output. He was careful to portray the incidents of an age, which was full of disappointments and disillusionment, with the deft of a poet historian;

Accepting at a certain age
That the World's indeed a stage,
He sees the phonies in the stalls:
For the last time he bellows "Balls"!
And then the Curtain Falls. (74)

Conquest has wonderfully drawn the historical picture of his age in his poems. Through his poetic works he has prepared the historical documentation for those who can read and visualise the age in which he lived. With his keen observation Conquest has been able to present his age as well as its ill-elements also;

Our age requires... But first we should expound
What sort of age it is. Just look around!
An age that thinks it knows, what's known to none,
Just how societies and psyches run.
An age of terrorists and absolutes;
One primes the missile and the other shoots.
An age of intellectuals talking balls
Picked up in gutters or in lecture halls,
...An age of people who're concerned, or care,
– With schemes that lead to slaughter everywhere.
... When churches pander to advanced regimes
Whose victims fill our nightmares with their screams. (62)

Conquest was very alert with the happenings of his age. He was deeply concerned with ills in the society and wanted to bring them to the forefront to make the people aware of the bad effects which hurting their advanced civilisation. He presented in very simple words the hypocrisies and falling morals of the

age. The lucidity with which touched the various subjects of his time made his readers understand his poems like the documents of history. This is the achievement of Conquest as poetic historian of excellence.

Conquest quite fearlessly showcased the political tyranny of the Russian leaders in his poems. He presented the ill-effects of the political ideologies of the Russian leaders. His poems voiced the agony of people in Russian who became the victims of the dictatorship. Conquest in his poem entitled “Last Hours” writes;

The great sunset loses its strength.
The cloud's black that was hyacinth.
... The thick hues, the transparencies:
It all devolves into a darkness,
Folds back into the cool abyss.
Dead in the water, the day is gone.
There's nothing new under the sun,
Still less when it's gone down. (109-110)

Conquest would always be remembered for his remarks on the contemporary situations. He was able to put forward his views in a very powerful manner which immediately appeals to the readers. In the poem “Whenever” he put forward his opinion in a very effective way, “This age requires “ a tongue that naked goes/Without more fuss than Dryden’s or Defoe’s” (62). It is because of his poetic reflections that the world has been able to know various historical facts. The modern age would definitely be indebted to Conquest for his literary output with historical perspectives. His views on Marxism, Russian leadership, World war, political dictatorship etc. will always be immense sources of happenings in the 20th century. Fareed Zakaria rightly sums up Conquest’s contribution; “Robert Conquest is that rare prophet who has lived to see his work confirmed by history. Now he reflects on this tumultuous century with high intelligence and even temperament. Honor this man – and read his book.” (quoted in preview of *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*). Conquest deliberately gave titles to some of his poems in such a way that

they were able to describe ages, infact describe some period in history. Some of the prominent titles are "At the Rebirth of St Petersburg", "The Fells (Mid 19th C), "Goethe in 1816", "The Idea of Virginia" etc.

Poetry of Robert Conquest no doubt is the specimen of his historical bent of creative art. He has presented the history of almost last hundred years with such precision that most can only dream of. There are few in the world of creative writer who can present the Western politics and with such mastery. His poems are also the creative pieces of research and learning. He undoubtedly deserves the place which he holds. "He is not only a historian but a poet" finally epitomizes Peter Vansittart in *London Magazine*. (quoted in preview of *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*).

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