The Fall of Fulcrum

Peter Barry (2007)

Fulcrum Press was a major avant garde poetry press begun in 1965 by Stuart Montgomery, a Rhodesian-born doctor and poet. It launched with the publication of Basil Bunting’s *Loquitur*.

By 1969, when it published Roy Fisher’s *Collected Poems*, it had an office at 20 Fitzroy Square, W1, and a list that included the major poets of British and American 1960s modernist poetry – Basil Bunting, Roy Fisher, Lee Harwood, Jeff Nuttall, Tom Pickard, Tom Raworth on the British side, and on the American Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Allen Ginsberg, Lorine Niedecker, Jerome Rothenberg, and Gary Snyder. By 1969, the backlist was forty titles long, and around eighteen new titles per year were being added. The books were handsome, well designed hardbacks, the routine first print for each book was an astonishing 3000 copies. The best-seller was Bunting’s *Collected Poems*, which reached a sale of 7000 by 1969. When the success of Bunting’s *Collected* became known in the publishing world, Penguin offered him £50 for the paperback rights – a bad joke, as Montgomery said – and instead Fulcrum did the paperback itself, to the benefit of both poet
and publisher, just as Faber would have done. Fulcrum, then, was transforming the poetry scene, by-passing the big-league poetry-publishing players, and looking set to transform the poetry-publishing scene in the 1970s. Yet by the mid 1970s, Fulcrum had vanished, leaving a quarter-century vacuum in terms of broad-scale radical poetry publishing which would not be filled until the arrival of SALT in the late 1990s. So what’s the story behind the sudden fall of Fulcrum, and what (if anything) can be learned from it?

Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925 – 2006)

- The Fall of Fulcrum came about because of a dispute with Finlay about the publication of Finlay’s book *The Dancers Inherit the Party*.
- Fulcrum described it as a First Edition.
- But Finlay said it had already been published twice before.
- He went to law to have the edition withdrawn, and eventually won the case.
- Montgomery was unable to meet the costs, and Fulcrum collapsed as a consequence.

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Finlay’s poetic activities were various. The Wild Hawthorn Press was founded by himself and Jessie McGuffie in 1961 and the periodical *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*, published by them until 1968, served as a forum for new kinds of poetry which incorporated visual as well as verbal elements. In 1963 Finlay published *Rapel*, his first collection of concrete poems, and *Standing Poem I*, his first poem/card. So Finlay established his reputation in what was then known as a Concrete Poetry, and later was called Visual Poetry.

Essentially, this is about making designs with words and letters, so that the designs play or pun with meanings. ‘Acrobats’ is a brilliant example. ‘Fisherman’s Cross’ typifies an austere form of formal aestheticism/ascetism which was one of Finlay’s trademarks. In a well-known letter in 1963 Finlay describes the appeal of Concrete Poetry; he sees it as an escape from ‘the now fashionable poetry of anguish and the self’: I take this to be a coded reference to the American ‘Confessional Poets’ – Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and so on - who were recommended as a model for British poets by Al Alvarez in his 1962 anthology *The New Poetry*. Finlay adds that Concrete Poetry is ‘a model of order, even if set in a space full of doubt’.
‘Barque’ represents a kind of minimalist conceptual play which is very much the spirit of Concrete and Visual poetics. The pieces are objects of meditation or Zen contemplation. Finlay frequently used aspects of boats and sailing ships, the forms and functions of which seemed to obsess him.

Finlay also practised what might now be called Land Art, setting up various versions of ‘Little Sparta’, a space in which a more literal version of ‘Concrete poetry was exhibited. Little Sparta embodied a kind of anarchic individualism, and expressed a rejection of liberal values (Sparta was the militaristic city-state of the Ancient Greek world) and conventional aesthetic values. Anyway, by the mid-60s he had made a name for himself as a radical innovator, and had become quite a desirable author for a small press to publish. Hence the offer from Fulcrum in the late 1960s.
Finlay gave an account of the dispute with Fulcrum in 2001, in an interview for the on-line magazine *Jacket*, 15th Dec. 2001 with Nagy Rashwan, and I’m going to read out Finlay’s response to the question he was asked about this issue, and then comment on some of the points made.

Not all your collaborators have been happy ones. Can you tell me about your dispute with Fulcrum Press?

The dispute with Fulcrum Press was quite bizarre. *The Dancers Inherit The Party* had been published twice, and Fulcrum Press asked if they could publish it again and, after I had signed the contract, they informed me that they intended to describe it as a first edition. But it patently was not a first edition, it was a third edition. At this point I wrote to the Arts Council of Great Britain because they gave a grant to the publisher and I said public money shouldn’t be used to subsidise fraudulent editions. This is very clear and quite simple, but they wrote back to me very rudely telling me to mind your own business, and things like that.

So, I wrote to The Scottish Arts Council, which had short-listed the second edition of the book for a prize two years before. They told me that if London says that it is a first edition then it must be a first edition. Then I wrote to the Association of Little Presses and they said something like: ‘You’re selfishly spoiling a good racket’, because you get more money for the first edition! I found all this extraordinary!

Then I got the Parliamentary Ombudsman to make an investigation and he consulted The British Museum who confirmed that the book couldn’t be a first edition. But when they were asked to say that publicly, they refused to do so. The National Library of Scotland, a copyright library which received editions of all my books, also refused to say anything. It is extraordinary that something so clear could be deliberately ignored like this. My position was really quite simple, I didn’t wish to take part in a fraud on the public. But at that time most poets either were published by Fulcrum, or wished to be published by Fulcrum, so they seemed to consider me a danger, and after six years I was completely isolated. Nobody spoke to me anymore, and people were saying ‘it is not nice to fight’ and all this kind of thing.

So, then, I went to the Consumer Protection Department which sent the book to Sotheby’s whose expert on literary fraud, a man called Carter, said that it could not be a first edition, took the publisher to court, and got the ruling that I was right. It then took the Arts Council Of Great Britain a further two years to accept the court ruling and to apologise to me.
But I was never forgiven, I was always reminded that I did something terrible. The fact that I was proven right counted for nothing at all. What people remembered was that I had caused a lot of trouble to these institutions by asking them to stand up and speak a simple truth. But it was very instructive to me! *This was when I first realised what culture is.* [My italics]

http://jacketmagazine.com/15/rash-iv-finlay.html

The short poems in the collection are not in themselves especially remarkable. This is the title poem. Outside the realm of Concrete and the land art materials, Finlay tended to be folksy and whimsical. Re-read today, these pieces don’t seem as good as Brian Patten of the Liverpool Poets, who was doing the same kind of thing around the same time. Subsequent editions added material of a more innovative nature, which strengthened the collection considerably. But what exactly was the sequence of the editions of *Dancers*, and who was right in the dispute?

![ Publishing History](Image)

The first publication was in 1960, by Gael Turnbull’s Migrant Press, which had started operations in 1957. Turnbull was a Scottish poet and doctor of international background. The title page reads: *The dancers inherit the party:*
selected poems ... with two woodcuts by Zeljko Kujundzic, Worcester, Migrant Press, 1960. This was an Octavo size pamphlet of 35 pages.

A Second edition of this was published in 1962 Worcester/Ventura, California: Migrant Press, 1962, 22cm, 35pp. Turnbull worked for some years as an anaesthetist at Ventura County Hospital, returning to a similar post in Worcester, UK, to avoid conscription to Vietnam.

The third edition was Fulcrum’s, 1969, similar size (21 cms), but now with added material which brings it up to 48 pages, that is, more than a third as long as the original editions. The extra space is taken up by seven new poems which were added to this edition, having been written between 1961 and 1966, and having appeared in various places, including in Cid Corman’s magazine *Origin*.

Not surprisingly, there is now a large gap in the publication history of this title – over twenty five years, in fact. Publishers weren’t falling over themselves to re-publish a book which had destroyed a press, and Finlay was becoming famous for his propensity to get involved in long-running disputes. Needless to say, I myself would not have touched this subject if Finlay hadn’t joined the Dead Poets Society in 2004.

(4) *The dancers inherit the party; & Glasgow beasts, an a burd*, Foreword by Robert Creeley; Afterword by Alec Finlay, Edinburgh: Polygon, (117pp.) 1996.

The fourth edition appeared after Finlay had followed a particularly Scottish trajectory, whereby radical and dissenting poets can become the Establishment even while still dissenting – Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Morgan come to mind. Finlay became a prominent figure on the Scottish cultural scene, and *The Dancers* was re-published by the Edinburgh press ‘Polygon’ as *The Dancers Inherit the Party; & Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd*, Foreword by Robert Creeley; Afterword by Alec Finlay, Edinburgh: Polygon, (117pp.) 1996.

*Glasgow Beasts* is in some ways a more interesting text than *Dancers*. It is written in Glasgow dialect, and described on the title page as ‘a wee buik fir big weans’, and was first published by Finlay himself in 1961. Various mock heraldic beasts of the city, such as the Zebra Crossing, speak a few words in tough Glasgow street-talk, each one illustrated with a ‘paper-cut’ design. It had caused a big row when first separately published – so Finlay was happy - and was famously denounced by the aging Hugh MacDiarmid as being written in ‘the language of the gutter’. It can be seen as the forerunner of famous Glasgow dialect work like Tom Leonard’s ‘This is the six o’clock news’ series.

Finally, in 2004, the year of Finlay’s death, *The Dancers* was re-published in a kind of compendium of Finlay’s non-concrete poetry and prose with the title *The Dancers Inherit the Party: Early Stories, Plays and Poems*, edited and introduced by Ken Cockburn, and published in Edinburgh by Polygon, in association with Scottish Poetry Library – 245 pages in all, and this is the only edition of *Dancers* that I possess myself.
Well, what I don’t have is a definitive answer: why did Montgomery regard it as legitimate to call the book he published a first edition? Perhaps he felt that the addition of seven new poems to a fairly small booklet made it a different book, which could legitimately be so described. Why did Finlay object so strongly? Was it just the disinterested pursuit of truthfulness? It might have been – I don’t really know. He was a character well aware of the publicity value of a big public dispute – rows between writers often get much more attention than what writers write.

Finlay’s papers are at three collections in the USA, in Indiana, Los Angeles, and Illinois, and there is some material in the Tate Collection.

Interestingly, the Getty material at LA seems to be catalogued in terms of the many wars, battles, disputes, and controversies that Finlay was involved in throughout his life. As you see, the Fulcrum Affair heads a list of eleven major disputes.
So what can we learn from the sad story of the Fall of Fulcrum? Firstly, I’d say, it shows us that collective designations of oppositional poetry do not represent the reality. There aren’t any homogenous ‘Margins’ which are collectively in opposition to the ‘Centre’ and have interests and procedures in common. Poets reject the cultural dominant for many different reasons, and their different reasons will often put them at odds with other parties on the so-called Margins too. Disagreements between various oppositional factions will often be more ferocious than those with the forces of the Centre.
Secondly, there is something about the possibility of a breakthrough to prominence and success which inspires distrust and backlash from the more radical poets themselves. Radical poets are suspicious of success, often assuming that it must have been obtained at the cost of selling out. Repeatedly, there seems to be a moment when the break-through is subverted in a kind of abortive gesture even by those who have achieved it. Thus, the 1970s take-over of *Poetry Review* ends with a walk-out by the radicals themselves – the dark secret (as I suggest in my recent book) is that they weren’t pushed – they jumped. Similarly, the 1990s break-through by Iain Sinclair with the Picador Re/Active anthologies seems to doom itself to failure by abandoning the mission to explain and filling the series with work that clearly requires some kind of mediation. Here, Finlay seems to put the brake on the expansion of Fulcrum in a spirit which is almost puritanical – it’s all beginning to look too much like capitalist success: poets should be fighting it out day-by-day with the forces of philistinism and cultural conservatism, not living it up on Easy Street. There are presses today – like SALT – which are achieving prominent, up-front distribution of attractive books, abandoning the hand-produced, small-scale, locally-based craft values of the traditional small press poetry publisher. The danger is that the same kind of backlash could occur again. The presence of that danger is one of the lessons of the Fall of Fulcrum.