Anthologies should, by any reasonable life cycle, be a dying breed. The Irish poet Paul Muldoon has offered the opinion that anyone who assembles an anthology must be certifiably mad – an opinion which those of his countrymen who put together the much-criticized Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing might well now share. But – and not just because of the indefatigable operatives at W. W. Norton – it would seem there is something of a boom in the field at the moment. This despite the dismantling of received canons.

Indeed, that dismantling is one of the forces that drive the engine, so to speak. As I type these words, I can glance at my own shelves and see specialized anthologies by the score: anthologies of particular national literatures (from Japanese to German – all, I hasten to add, in translation); of particular forms and genres (from haiku to the sonnet); anthologies organized by gender, by ethnicity, and by period (not to mention the silly ones, or perhaps more fairly the “specialized.”) That marvelous gathering of versified howlers, The Stuffed Owl, is sadly out of print, its place taken (more or less) by the recent Very Bad Poetry. Once, confronted with the need to take a gift to the house of a very distinguished poet, I wandered the used book shops of a major world city, and came up with an anthology of “second best poems.” It bore a careful introduction explaining the precise grounds for inclusion, and the table of contents was frequented by, among other names, Longfellow. Dog poems, cat poems, holiday poems of every stripe – the list goes on and on. And to return to the more serious level, there are an increasing number that proudly announce the transcendence of any cultural limitations, in favor of
“world poetry.” Then too the canon, being in a constant state of flux, generates constant revision and hot competition: each publisher is proud to announce that its compendium of, say, American writing, is less blinkered and more “inclusive” than any other. Anthology-building is, after all, a fearsome work, not least because any anthology is immediately attacked on the grounds of its biases and omissions, as the Field Day Group learned.

Yet the fact is that college professors will persist in offering survey courses, and survey courses, if they are not to be prohibitively expensive, rely on anthologies. (Dover Publications, with its one-dollar “thrift editions” takes another tack on this problem; but their catalogue is necessarily limited). Indeed, anthologies may have a certain advantage. I have disliked them for years, and usually tried mightily to avoid using them. But when I succumbed one term, the result was an encounter the following summer with one of the best students in the class, who thanked me for steering her toward the anthology. “I had some time on my hands, over Christmas, and I just picked up the book and started exploring. I found some poems by Wallace Stevens I really liked, so I rushed out and bought a copy of The Palm at the End of the Mind. I’m going to take it with me to the Cape next summer.” This, I must add, from an engineer-in-the-making!

Milkweed Editions, which labels itself a “non-profit publisher” (but is that not true of all publishers devoted to poetry?) seems especially committed to anthology-making of a quirky and rich kind; and the husband-and-wife team of Kurt Brown and Laure-Anne Bosselaar are exemplary editors. Glancing at the list of further titles in the back of each of these two volumes, I am irresistibly drawn to an anthology “about rebels, exiles, and renegades,” and another “about Americans and their cars.” I already know and respect one “about sports and games.” And is it not awfully enticing to see a book that announces itself as arising from “the apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist shepherd?”

But I wander from the task at hand. Kurt Brown invokes, as tutelary spirits, Edward Abbey (“Any good poet, in our age at least, must begin with the scientific view of the world, and any scientist worth listening to must be something of a poet” [xiv]) and George Steiner (“The notion that one can exercise a rational literacy in the latter part of the twentieth century without a knowledge of calculus, without some preliminary access to topology or algebraic analysis, will soon seem a bizarre anachronism” [xiv]). Lest it be thought that Brown dips into the lower ranks of poets, the table of contents contains such names as Charles Simic, Albert Goldbarth, A. R. Ammons, Howard Nemerov, Forrest Gander, Jorie Graham, John Updike, William Stafford, and Billy Collins.