

This is Hugh McMillan's fourth book, and reprints several poems from his previous collections, *The Triumph of the Air*, *Tramontana*, and *Horridge*. McMillan is 41, and a History teacher in Dumfries. By that myopia which selects certain poets for approval and ignores others, his work has been neglected to date in Scotland. He was the most noticeable omission from the 1993 Polygon anthology, the exclusively-titled *The New Scottish Poets*, and his slightly older contemporary, Tom Pow, also a teacher from Dumfries, and a quite different type of poet, has tended to be given more attention north of the border. McMillan himself has satirised his neglect, in an amusing foreword by the apocryphal Fintan O'Hallorhan, to his lively if uneven collection, *Horridge*:

He was not in the *20 Best Scottish Poets* anthology, the *20 More of the Same* anthology, or the *32 Poets Who Live in the Central Belt Not in Any Anthology Yet* anthology. I am saddened to see that he has not even been included in the recently published *Best of Young Bald Scottish Poets* anthology.

McMillan's main qualities are evident even at a cursory reading: sharp humour, veering towards satire, and sometimes crossed with a frank romanticism which, at its best, is touching. The poems have immediacy and an engaging lack of portentousness. They strike an authentic note, and are often pitched, as our responses to being alive are, between extravagance and cynicism. While probably written with an audience in mind, they don't attempt to court an audience's sentimentality. McMillan is an expert debunker. The book's opening poem, 'The World Book of the McMillan's' is the poet's take on those idealised American invitations to familial vanity. The piece moves deftly from a quote from such an invitation to a grim truth not found in the conventional World Book, taking in ridicule on the way:

In these pages, **Hugh**,  
you will bear witness to the heroism  
and industriousness of your ancestors  
and learn about the forebears  
who shaped the history of the world,  
like **Fergus McMillan, the 8th Man of Moidart,**  
**Hector 'Steamboats' McMillan,**  
**the inventor of the 12 Bore Scrotal Pump Beam...**

Norman MacCaig once remarked that obsession with ancestry was a drearily Scottish characteristic, but McMillan is convincing on the theme. 'Shug, Alex, Jock, Willie', another poem which seems to be about dead relatives, ends movingly:

*What do you want, I ask of them.  
You, they say.  
You,  
And our time again.*

Usually, McMillan works in a tautly-made free verse. Even where poems as a whole are unsuccessful, certain lines ring out. ‘Saturday Afternoon in the Grotto’, a Christmas vignette which ends unmemorably, portrays: “...a file of cheery white faced boys / with convict cuts and little oval heads like eggs / and bright red freckles...”

Sometimes the poet’s directness, often a virtue, simply states the obvious, and the reader misses the pleasures of exercising his or her own imagination. In ‘Rumours’, the narrator, out with his son, Andrew, who displays the unselfconscious belligerence of many a wee boy, watches at the end of the poem how “the sun drops behind hills / like blood.” You draw the predictable conclusion. At other times, conversely, you can feel you haven’t been given everything needed to understand a poem, and it remains obstinately private, such as ‘Angles’.

Not surprisingly, McMillan has a strong historical sense. In ‘History’ he examines the politics of historical representation in the guise of ‘the last whaler’ in a village, and denotes the authorities as “waiting, waiting, / for an incident serious enough/ to have him removed,/ strangled in his bed by a hit-man / from the National Trust....” And a piece like ‘Hans from Wuppertal’, “The Reich’s favourite test pilot”, whom his listeners nicknamed “Hans the Liar”, communicates a genuine grimness, almost an awe, in the face of recent History. It is all the more powerful for being understated:

Long into the evenings  
With ice patterning on windows  
He would spin them tales  
of the forests of Thuringia,  
dark tales for the dark.

If McMillan’s work were merely a sort of streetwise satire, there would be little to distinguish him from many other contemporary British poets. What marks the poetry out is its notes of real feeling. These occur throughout the book and round out the voice of the poems. The expression of desire for what W. S. Graham called ‘the longed-for loved event’ adds a poignancy to the voice of experience.

McMillan’s work lacks the politically-correct carefulness of some of his contemporaries. Even when dealing in clichés, such as the drunken Scotsman attempting to mollify by explanation his sober judgemental wife (a scenario almost certain to elicit empathy among his fellows in the male poetry culture in Scotland), the poet adds an unusual twist, as in the amusing ‘The X-Files: Bonnybridge, October ‘95’. His humour has the fine excess that short-circuits po-facedness: “Lorraine / before you hit me with that object/ shaped like a toblerone/ let me explain.”

That this poet's work has yet to find its way into any 'major' Scottish anthology says nothing about its quality, but perhaps a good deal about contemporary literary politics. In part, the Scottish poetry scene, like any other, is a mix of backscratching and indifference to genuine talents who remain apart from the ruckus. While any verse written at any time is unlikely to be durable, and no one can tell what work is likely to last, McMillan's poetry is, at the least, thoroughly contemporary. *Aphrodite's Anorak* seems to me to include some of his best work to date. It remains to be seen whether it will enhance his reputation. It deserves to. Rarely less than readable, the poet can write, as in 'Address to a Galway Pen', lines of great charm and resonance:

...don't get lost in my lining and burst,  
or desert me for a postcard writer;  
such work is not for you,  
your sleek lines gleam with publight,  
stars ripple in your length,  
there is magic in you.