

Poetry

Reviews by Charlie Gracie

Tracey Herd's latest collection, *Not In This World* (Bloodaxe, 2015), was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize. The collection is wide-ranging and both personal and universal. It closes with a poem of such sensitivity about a young American writer's (Marina Keegan) death in a car crash. This is a bit of a theme in the book, with a dark poem, 'The Little Sister', and a short series on the death in a plane crash of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Popper. In some ways, this theme sums up the collection's strength: a variety of style and focus and the poet's willingness to immerse herself in the lives of others. Throughout, Herd's voice is strong and the poems jump from the page. There are dream-like poems, such as 'Reverie', that explore solitude and fear in a forceful way. 'I live for those blank, black hours, when / I no longer have to count the stars'. It is a collection that explores the place of women in life, on screen, in fiction and Herd's balance of the distant and the intimate make reading and re-reading her poems a joy.

A Ravel of Yarns (Red Squirrel Press, 2015) is a beautifully presented collection by Anne Connolly, with the poems living very easily on the page. The poems are arranged into three skeins (loosely coiled yarn or threads) with linked but separate themes; she maintains thematic integrity while taking the reader in so many directions. The meaning of cloth, in her poems related to flax and linen, is explored at all levels. Connolly's touch is delicate at times, such as in the deeply poignant 'Oh the Lady in Red'. I like the humour too, a humour that is woven into the cloth of the poems, a light thread. Connolly plays around with form and shape; she seems to enjoy the craft of poetry. Some of the poems follow the rhythms of weaving; others are free and have a narrative style (like 'Flow') that take you into childhood memory, war, days out. Many have a looseness of soft rhyme that is so engaging and easy to read that it must have taken sweat to deliver.

Robin Lindsay Wilson's collection, *Myself and Other Strangers* (Cinnamon Press, 2015) is an interesting read. Wilson's brings the reader densely populated poems that are enjoyable on the tongue. His style is quite specific, almost clipped. He writes with humour, he writes with a vulnerability that is engaging. In particular, I enjoyed the work that focused on intimacy,

both emotional and sexual; these have real purpose and drive about them. From *The Constant Husband*: ‘the firefly crawled over him / but he could not see its light / he was looking for his wife / in the moon stunned barley fields’. *Couch Potato* is another lovely poem that explores meaning in relationships, holds onto dreams, understands the importance of moment. Intimacy explored in a slightly jagged way, honestly.

The Empathetic Store (Mariscat Press, 2015) is a pamphlet by Jackie Kay that has poems written with sharp tenderness. The words spin around the ideas, beautifully scattered, and take the reader on a journey, among other themes and places, around the lives of Kay’s family and the west and islands of Scotland. (It is worth noting that in her early interviews after becoming Makar, she has said that the islands are a priority for her.) The rhythms are sure-footed and the ideas are hammered into place so very firmly. Her use of repetition works well with the immediacy of story-telling in many of the poems. This is so in the final few, a sequence called the Ardtornsih Quintet that completes the collection. *Waiting for the Corran Ferry*, the final poem, when read aloud, pulses. An earlier poem in Scots makes *A Lang Promise* from the new Makar: ‘ and while there is breath in me, I’ll blow it it intae ye’.

William Bonar’s debut pamphlet, *Offering* (Red Squirrel Press, 2015), is a gathering of words with a good deal of space around them. Spare is the word I would use; a sparseness that is immediate and that is open. This is not a sign that he doesn’t know how to fill the space on the page, rather that he knows how to do it with little waste. The title poem, for example, paints a vivid picture that explores relationships, culture, love. The two-line stanzas offer structure and the narrative style of the poem is helped into its deeper meanings by that: ‘And we ate, like graceless northern gods, / too young to imagine how we might receive.’ Overall, the poems’ meanings and the use of imagery pack a punch. Bonar’s sense of place and thing is solid. *Markings* offers a great example of this, with its move, in two short stanzas, from pissing on the frosty ground to the nature of humanity and the universe. It is what poetry should be about.

Glamourie is the latest collection by Donald Adamson (Indigo Dreams Publishing 2015). He writes with the confidence of a poet who knows how words work; all the structure and the hard graft of crafting poems are hidden in accessible lines. Of the five sections in this book, the second, ‘Ninian’s Land’, is outstanding. Adamson moves easily between Scots and English in a collection that is broad in scope. The poems here are rooted in landscape and

fuse history and myth with the now. He isn't lost in landscape, however, and throughout he hooks the reader into human experience. Neither is he soft in his observation. My favourite in the collection, *Kilgramy Colliery Speaks to my Great-Grandfather*, personifies the colliery, talks to economic relations, and lays out the inevitable un-doing of the workers. In a strange twist, it is the colliery itself that survives, almost human, after being discarded in its own time. 'When they've finished with me, / ... my veins will preserve / coal unmined, fires unlit'.

Sheena Blackhall has four pamphlets produced between May and November 2015: *The Cloud Collector*; *The Evil That Men Do*; *Flashback*; *The Spirit Hoose* (all published by Lochlands). The collections are mostly poetry, but there are tales and plays in there too. Themes across the pamphlets range from the bombing of Hiroshima and the death of fish to poems inspired by paintings. She takes Cezanne's *The Stove in the Studio* and has a good deal of fun with it (from *The Evil That Men Do*): 'Granmither's dumplin's, rich and rare / Were sappy and beguiling / Fowk lued tae sup her daily fair / Sae keep the pottie bylin'. The pamphlets contain a number of translations into Scots, owersetts. These work well among the other poems in Scots and the work in English. Blackhall also shows her working, with notes around the writing explaining her ideas, her inspiration and, as in the poems in *Flashback*, giving historical information. This approach is not overbearing and works well with the breadth of themes. The work is, however, squeezed onto the page and, while it adds to the jam-packed aspect, it is less visually appealing than it might be: that is a publishing issue rather than a writing issue and takes nothing away from the pleasure that reading these pamphlets brings.

Eileen Carney Hulme's collection *The Stone Messenger* (Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2015) is sculpted, honed from experience. I read the book from the back, travelling from Scotland's east coast to Sarajevo to Enniskillen, meeting the poet there all the way at different ages and stages of life. Reading the book revealed a story that is truly moving, personal poems, but, while often sad, not depressing. They are, for the most part, poems about loss and love and are crafted with sensitivity. Stones and pebbles feature strongly in many of the later poems and this thematic echo adds very well to the overall sense of permanence in among loss. In fact, throughout the collection, Carney Hulme's voice is steady. 'Closer than Breathing', in the final sequence, is expansive in subject and focussed in style, pared back, and its sharpness is knife-like. In the same section, (the oddly titled) 'In a World of Positives' insinuates the

possibility of healing within the pain of loss: 'It's hard to be carefree / with a river running / between us'. This is the subtlety with which Eileen Carney Hulme writes. It is present in the Sarajevo poems, where her concern for all those who have lost is sharp. 'In A Box at the Bottom of the Wardrobe', she reflects on kept things and the 'communion of lives' they represent. That is a beautiful, layered image and summarises one of the underlying themes in the collection; that of togetherness, despite loss.

Stuart A Paterson's poetic engagement with his subject comes across strongly in his new pamphlet, *Border Lines* (Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2015). His focus is Dumfries and Galloway, an area richly blessed with poetic voices in the far past and now. The landscape is not separate from the people, nor the people unscathed or unmoved by what nature has laid out for them. Hills become worthies ('Criffel / lifting its bald napper mournfully'); towns take on parts ('Gatehouse \ of Fleet laid white china-tidy below'). Many of the poems have lists and, while some are a little overdone, most are litanies that express the bursting-with-stuff way in which Paterson sees his surroundings. The poems are great when read aloud: the alliteration, the quirky observations, his heartfelnness, all come to the fore then. Many of Stuart Paterson's poems are really funny ('Pub Quiz' is a stand out) and others have deep, serious themes. 'Barnhourie', addresses permanence and change and the way these concepts intermingle. In this poem, summer suddenly becomes a cold November; last year's otters have a new brood; bluebells give way to gorse. It is not devoid of melancholy, this poem, but it is more about the inevitability of joy than the inevitability of pain: 'the lesson learned: / that every darkness keeps a little light'.

Ron Butlin's latest book, *The Magicians of Scotland* (Polygon 2015), is a substantial collection, interestingly illustrated by James Hutcheson. In three sections ('Magic Places', 'Magic People' and 'Magic For All'), Butlin covers a wide range of subjects. He plays successfully with form, using the page to its full to push meaning further. Many of the poems are, naturally, given his Makarship in Edinburgh, about that city, from that city's perspective. In 'Whatever Next', he wonders 'Who hasn't dreamt of Windfarms in Princes Street? / Strictly democratic, they'll brighten up our lives'. His poems are often like this; subtly (pointedly) funny and a little off-beat. In 'Disposable Buildings Are Made For Disposable Lives', he juxtaposes Skara Brae and IKEA, ancient longevity with impermanence. Later, 'God Gives The Universe A Second Shove', a poem of punches un-pulled. The two longer sequences, one on the Edinburgh trams and the other on the Glasgow Commonwealth Games,

appealed less to me than the single poems: perhaps they had a feel of commissioned work that needed written. He certainly has no problem in sustaining longer pieces and some of those long single poems are among the most enjoyable. The best section is, for me, 'Magic People'. 'Professor Higgs Throws the Biggest Party Since the Big Bang' is excellent. An almost prosaic description of the science culminates in a beautifully poetic reflection: 'Whirling atoms / and the turning wheel of stars / stand integrated - / revealing Creation's utter certainty / and grace.' The poems in this section focus on well-known events and people, and on the intimate, as in 'Remembering a Good Friend'. Ron Butlin's mastery is clear: 'and here's the writing on the wall. / We wrote it.'

Charlie Gracie's poetry and fiction have featured in a range of literary publications. His poetry collection, *Good Morning*, was published by *diehard* in 2011.