

Agenda Review

Joe Allard

The Backyards of Heaven: *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Ireland and Newfoundland & Labrador*, edited by Stephanie McKenzie and John Ennis, (Waterford Institute of Technology, Scop Productions Inc. ISBN 0-9730945-2-4. 22 Canadian Dollars; 15 Euros).

This new anthology features a cross-section of 164 poets, some established, others aspiring, writing in Ireland and Newfoundland & Labrador. Most readers will probably be more familiar with the celebrated Irish poets like Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, Derek Mahon, Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney than with their established Canadian peers like Al Pittman, Michael Crummy, Mary Dalton or Randall Maggs. One delight in this venture, beyond encountering old favourites in revealing juxtapositions, is meeting so many unfamiliar and new voices. The volume is dedicated to the memories of Al Pittman and Seán Dunne and takes its title from the former's *Rites of Passage*

‘The ground beneath our feet
is our foothold for as long as we
can stand and hang on. The sky
is where birds and angels dwell.
We’ve all been visitors there and come
Back home to the back yards of Heaven.

When I was asked to review the collection, I expected to be confronted with arguments about the poetry of the North Atlantic, about cultural affinities between Ireland and Newfoundland and Labrador, about rugged coast-lines and the brooding sea. In short I expected wither the kind of manifesto that is so commonplace in anthologies of British poetry in the last century or an editorial assumption of the oracle – as assertion of a somehow infallible canon.

The first, the ‘manifesto’ collection, might be seen to begin with Edward Marsh’s Georgian anthology in 1912 announcing ‘new strength and beauty’. The Imagist anthologies of Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound in 1914 and 1915 and Michael Robert’s *New Signatures* collection in 1932 all sought to celebrate novelty. Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* (1956) celebrated the poets of the Movement to the exclusion of other more maverick or apocalyptic recent voices. In 1962 Al Alvarez (in *The New Poetry*) produced a clarion call to British poets to look and listen across the Atlantic: developments in U.S. poetry signalled the future. Nearly a decade later Edward Lucie-Smith (1970, *British Poetry Since 1945*) remarked that ‘the present situation’ in British poetry was ‘a general submission to American influence.’ In 1982 Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (*Contemporary British Poetry*) detected ‘decisive shifts of sensibility’ which signalled a new hierarchy led, ironically it now seems, by Seamus Heaney and find its real darling in Craig Raine and the ‘Martian’s (including, of course, Andrew Motion himself). A further proliferation in the ‘manifesto mode’ is the 1988 Paladin collection *The New British Poetry: 1968-88* co-edited by Gilliam Allnut (‘quote feminist unquote poetry’), Fred D’Aguiar (‘Black British Poetry’), Ken Edwards (‘Some Younger Poets’), and Eric Mottram (‘A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry’). Each of these editors has a thesis and an ace to grind.

An example of the other sort of anthology, which I’ve called the oracular, might be the 1996 O.U.P. Toronto *20th Century Poetry and Poetics* edited by Gary Geddes. Such tomes are designed, it seems, for university level classroom study. The presentation is scholarly and academic and there are no value judgements beyond including, which renders each poet as canonical. Geddes quite blandly includes a healthy selection of his own work with a, not surprisingly, quite sympathetic introduction.

He also includes a number of relatively unfamiliar (at least to me) Canadian poets, and, interestingly, none of the Newfoundland & Labrador poets in Ennis and McKenzie's collection.

When I opened McKenzie and Ennis's handsome and substantial (340 pages) **The Backyards of Heaven** I found no such manifesto but, rather, a brief and lyric introduction thinking about 'themes and resonances', about 'related sentiments'. The poems, grouped in an almost narrative and thematic fashion, are presented in 'a symphonic structure, with recurrent motifs' which ultimately unites the poems. There is no manifesto, there are no axes grinding away in the background. I was also surprised, and then pleased, given the broad scope and sweep of the collection, that the editors don't include themselves. They are both poets, but self-inclusion (see Lucie-Smith, Andrew Motion, Gary Geddes) is itself a significant editorial decision which raises serious problems for some readers. The editorial stance is of subtlety and humility: it is fired by love of poetry and genuine admiration of the work included.

One effect of so natural and unpretentious an editorial policy is the illumination that is shed in both the direction of seeing the familiar in a fresh light and meeting the unfamiliar in a more recognisable context. Rather than colonizing Seamus Heaney as an example of the new 'Martian' in British poetry (Motion and Morrison), or exposing his poetry in a Laureate vacuum (both Poet and Nobel Laureate spring to mind in this context), he is allowed to breathe naturally and fruitfully next to Sylvester Joe, a seventeen year old Mi'kmaq lad from Newfoundland (the youngest poet in the volume), or the late Eithne Strong, or the cosmopolitan Dr Goh Poh Seng, born in Malaysia, educated in Dublin, who practiced medicine in Singapore and Newfoundland, where he now lives.

The 'symphony' that is *The Backyard of Heaven* is in four movements which have a seasonal and cyclic nature: *Heroes of Spring*; *Oceans and Ships*; *Snowstorm: The Survivors*; and *Helios Brings Morning to Corner Brook*. The poems in each larger section are divided into smaller motival sections. *Heroes of Spring* positively bursts into life with the arrival of Spring after a tough Newfoundland winter in Randall Maggs' vivid and energetic poem 'Heroes of Spring';

*'The heroes of spring!! My daughter
leaps into my bone-littered dreams, my son
and the dog close behind. Ta da! Ta da! Her eyes lit
with dangerous delight, look what you left under the snow!!!
All that work for an extra week of spring, I said.
How long can winter last, I said.
But now, chastened by my dozen winters here,
I chop and gouge at the frozen bank with the rest
And they bear me no grudge – we're frantic after buried walls.
Squat hedges, dropped sets of car keys. We toss winter
Higher and wilder into the sun's gold teeth, further
And further into the steaming street,
Pish for the city's ordinance.
O anarchy of April.
O heroes of Spring'*

What follows are poems in the same view of relief, release and expectation provoked by the end of winter by Susan Ingersoll, Rita Ann Higgins, and Joseph Woods. I had expected at first that there would be a balancing of Irish and Newfoundland & Labrador voices to compare and contrast tradition and aesthetics. The arrangement does, indeed, loosely play back and forth but always for thematic and symphonic reasons – dictated by melody rather than by geography.

The tone modulates with the first of Al Pittman's poems in the collection. 'The Sea Breeze Lounge', a positive comment of hope and survival;

.....
'I think it's worth it, whatever else our obstinate ailments are, that we don't fall down, that all three of us (and you) do our best to walk upright and go with hope to wherever we are bound. Right not I know we three could use a drink. And this round's on me. But, most of all as far from here as you happen to be this round's a toast to you, your agility and your vigorous ascent to the top of your dreams.'

.....
Then another Randall Maggs poem is followed by a tribute to the legendary, and late, Irish Hurling champion Christy Ring, by Séan Ó Tuama:

.....
'Looking at his corpse laid out,
the day of his untimely death,
a woman said: "It would be a sin to bury such a man."

I have not managed yet to bury Christy Ring.
Sometimes I imagine him
Being venerated
In the care of the group god, Aengus,
On a slab at Newgrange
And at each winter solstice
For just one half an hour
A ray of sunshine
Lighting up his countenance.'

.....
It is presented first in the original Irish, then in an English translation by the author. Including poems originally in Irish and French, with admirable translations is another positive feature of the anthology. 'Christy Ring', a celebratory lament, if you will, is neatly followed by Seamus Heaney's translation from Anglo-Saxon from *Beowulf* 'Beowulf's funeral' is both celebration and lament:

.....
Elders are very kind and very nice. Sometimes they can be so nice they will spoil us. They are excellent cooks like my Grandmother Joe. We should respect our elders because any place and any time they could pass on into the spirit world. A note to young people out there: If an elder tries to teach you something listen, because once my Grandfather Gilbert tried to teach me something native, I didn't listen and he died one week later'.

.....
One poem plays off another in ways that surprise, enlighten and fulfil.

Oceans and Ships is the second movement, as it were, in this symphonic presentation. Here are groups of poems treating land and seascapes, travel and, in a section called 'tectonics', love' we are treated to twenty-five love poems which range from the almost chemically erotic *Blodeweed* of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill or *Carm* of John Steffler; to the powerfully narrative prose reflection *Bread* of Michael

Crummy; to the entertaining pieces *I Promised My Love I would Boil Her a Herring* and *The Bean Feast* by Peter Harley and Seán Dunne respectively.

Snowstorm: The Survivors changes the tonal register. Here are poems treating pain and violence, loss of place and of others, and poems of spirit and religion. My description perhaps suggests that the third movement is universally in a minor key but, on the contrary, although much here is heartfelt and moving, there is much tonal modulation and surprise.

The final movement of the anthology, *Helios Brings Morning To Corner Brook*, fulfils the promise of daily and seasonal cycles; we return to morning and Spring. The sections here deal with place, with animals, with family and elders, with hope and the human spirit. The eighteen animal poems, like the love cycle in *Oceans And Ships*, are a delightful range in tone and subject ranging from Rita Kelly's surprisingly moving *Broc ar an mBóthar* (*Badger on the Road* translated by Ethel Connolly), to Francis Harvey's remarkable (and remarkably funny) *Heron*, to Jade Watt's intelligent and effective *To a Sow Bug in My Room* (her first published poem according to the editors – watch this space with interest in future), to Carol Hobbs' sympathetic *Narwhal*, to Joel Hynes' reminiscence *There's a moose in the meadow! A moose in the meadow!*

Of the poems treating family and the past, Lillian Bouzane's *foremother* is most impressive, as is (having had one myself) Eithne Strong's *To a Teenage Son*. The coda of the anthology takes its title, *Sit with me Before I cross Over*, from a piece by Chief Joe Misel, Traditional Sagamew and Newfoundland District Chief for the Mi'kmaq Grand Council. It is short enough to cite in full:

Spirit World

'Sit with me before I cross over
Hear my voice, it speaks of truth
My stories are of our ancients
My heart has seen the future
Look at my wrinkled face very line
Is full of love for my people
Some day you will sit with us
Some day you too will be an elder'.

The Backyards of Heaven closes with another powerful offering from the late Al Pittman, *Lines for My Grandfather Long Gone*, which combines reminiscence, tribute and elegy. Although in a slightly more minor key, it brings the collection full circle, musically speaking, to Randall Maggs' ecstatic opening *Heroes of Spring*. This volume is a must for anyone who delights in poetry, melody and the adventure of discovery.