

Pass the Hammer

James McCabe, *The White Battlefield of Silence*. Dedalus Press, £5.95
 Jean Bleakney, *The Ripple Tank Experiment*. Lagan Press, £5.95
 Adrian Rice, *The Mason's Tongue*. Abbey Press, £8.95

The last job undertaken, with limited mobility in his left arm, by the master craftsman from whose burial I've just come, was a flight of stairs. The fact that he was a master craftsman to his fingertips shows in the lengths he went to and the pains he took to build a stairs that can be mounted and descended any number of times without it crossing your mind because it is, as they say, going nowhere. And now it transpires that the bottom step alone must've taken days to make, on account of the kettles of hot water needed to make the wood supple, and the grooves cut into the back of it to fashion a curve you wouldn't notice was there but that would trip you up in the worst possible way if it wasn't. That kind of painstaking care and attention, I suspect, has something to do too with the business of making poems. In the hotel after I heard it said that most of the craftsmen plying their trade today are wood butchers by comparison, and that when he walked onto the job you were embarrassed to be caught with a hammer in your hand, so that when you attempted to use it you invariably hit the wrong nail and got the wrong sound.

If Thomas Kinsella ("an old fog-bound Viking, reaching for / The uncertainties" in "A Visit to Kinsella") walked onto the site of *The White Battlefield of Silence* it would be only natural for James McCabe to blacken a thumb or two. Kinsella's own take on the uneasy relationship between apprentices and craftsmen in his ironically titled "Brothers in the Craft" speaks of "a taking in hand, in the hopes of handing on", and of Clarke as the craftsman who "murmured in mild malice/ and directed his knife-glance curiously amongst us".

This book, marking the end of an apprenticeship, includes poems about a visit to the master and dedicated to him, and despite overt statements on the poet's job consisting "of walking back to Paradise" (isn't there a song?), all the printer's spelling, and a blurb

that does him the disservice of stating that the collection reflects “his belief in the druidic function of poetry”, there are plenty of sound steps in it. The title itself may seem slightly OTT, even when you discover its source in a lovely elegy for Augustine Martin which marks out McCabe’s site, where:

The little battalions of words march out
Onto the white battlefield of silence.
Poetry, you said, was like an empire
Surrounded by barbarians, monsters

—though the implication that its practitioners are somehow exempt from being numbered among those legions shouldn’t be given too much credence. A hint on the central metaphor comes from *Finnegans Wake*, given as an epigraph to “Autumn Treatment”: “No wind no word. Only a leaf, just a leaf and then leaves”. So leaves are words, and by extension dead leaves are silence?

He is either hammering the point home or flogging a dead leaf, and they may amount to a stylistic tic stricter editing should have dealt with but they are absolutely everywhere: “a funeral of leaves”, “the dictionaries of dead leaves”, “the little dead leaves lie at my feet”, “the last leaves die”, “the leaves of long vanished trees”, “Thit duilleog agus duilleog eile”, “they are burning the dead, heaped / like leaves”. This creates an autumnal mood which is so prevalent that sooner or later you begin to wish there might be some end in sight to them, or you start to take them to heart as the recurring motif they are intended to be.

Phrases which sabotage their own attempt to mean anything by trying to mean too much, such as “the irresistible attraction of sameness” and “the biography of infinity”, are fewer and farther between in the second half of the book, where more of the blows land where they are intended. The haiku form acts as a positive restraint, forcing McCabe closer to the silence he has marked out for himself, into trying to make fewer words say more.

“Fear and Misery in the Third Reich” and “Eagle’s Nest” in the final section “Propaganda” are a clear step up from the rest because of the powerful, uncluttered images and unsettling humour, and the fact that they send you to consult the dictionary on basic words you assumed you knew the meaning of, like “settlement” and “faithful” and “mandate”. “New Order” goes:

I see the future—
A bright, empty autobahn,
A string of dirty

Red cattle trucks heading
In the opposite direction.

These later poems hit the nail more soundly on the head and show McCabe capable, when he is not keeping one eye trained on the master, of writing well-measured lines and assembling them effectively himself.

The title of Jean Bleakney's first collection will mislead anyone expecting poems taking science as their source. She has traded in the science lab for the garden centre in which she is on first name terms with a huge array of blooms—cinquefoils, lilies, Valentine roses, golden crown daisies, oxalis, buttercups, hybrids, marigolds. The sheer variety is intoxicating. You name it, it's there, and although nobody knows better than the poet/gardener herself that a little thinning out and judicious pruning never go astray, at least the dead leaves have been raked up and placed in the compost heap.

In "Mock Orange", the garden in its cultural context reveals "The tight-clipped lawns and patios of Ulster/ are littered with rescinded petals/ in overlapping clumps, like piecemeal shrouds", an uncharacteristically bleak view which I inclined to miss the more I read on. *The Ripple Tank Experiment* is chock-a-block with poems intended to get a rise out of you, "in the MacNeicean tradition" (Carol Rumens says).

If this book is in that tradition and MacNeice is, as Thomas McCarthy describes him in a recent poem "the poet of the damaged", speculation on the damaged with whom Bleakney's poems are concerned would lead one down the path of her allegorical garden where buckets of fairly light-hearted suffering seems to be going on—the poet is frequently "lamenting winter losses; cruel springs; the weevil-eaten leaves of rhododendron;/ the cut-and-come-again of nettle-stings ("The Unreliable Narrator")—without any real damage ever being done.

Robert Lowell, in a Library of Congress recording from the 1950s, identified the reviewer's habit of picking out lines in which Lowell levels accusations at himself and his writing, and accusing him and his writing of precisely the same things. Despite the lines in "Knitting" in which the poet "can't honestly remember / any particular fondness for poetry", Bleakney does have a fondness, for verse of the lighter variety, which is indulged in poems like "Afterwards", "Every Little Helps", "Dick Detail", "Mid-Cycle", which might better have been consigned to a place where the sun doesn't shine. "Afterwards" in its entirety goes:

When I'm gone— when they gather round and see the grey
gradation up the curtains, the mugs' brown rings,

Red cattle trucks heading
In the opposite direction.

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gradation up the curtains, the mugs' brown rings,

The dust, the clutter, the tacky vinyl—will the neighbours say
'She was a woman who never noticed such things'?

Knitting, shopping, gardening, celebrating, housework, politics, marriage, work, remembering, sex, driving—most of the things we are all engaged in—are her subjects, with a light feminist spin added. Whatever is happening is happening outside in the Northern landscape Bleakney is familiar with, on Narin Strand, considering the view from Carran West. She is a streetwise, stargazing horticulturist who, when considering the lilies, is anything but soft on the meanings they may be coaxed into yielding. "They're out and out chancers / those lilies, with their fulminant anthers" ("Be careful of the lilies!"), which leans, however much the poet feels at home among them, towards a certain over-familiarity with the garden's full-time residents.

When the poems are allowed to speak more for themselves, rather than have words put into their mouths, they speak volumes. The suggestiveness of the first half of "Out to Tender", where the language, rather than the poet, seems to be doing the talking, is one of the unexploited strengths of Bleakney's writing.

All along the motorway
they're resurfacing and bridge-strengthening
and seeding the central reservation
with wild flowers.

But only an hour or so ahead
there is fierce growth in the ditches
and the road diminishes
to unmendable potholes.

And there are places where the light
suddenly drops; where the branches,
out of reach of the hedgecutter,
are irrevocably pleached.

The poem appears to have something of the "inevitable shapes and pulses" which Michael Longley in a recent television interview spoke of as fundamental to verse. It starts strongly, convincing because it sounds like the language that measures up naturally to the occasion of the poem. In the second half the poem becomes explicit and remains unresolved because the temptation to round off on a light note is given in to, with the cowboy landscapers with their Castlewellan Golds who "can do feats and shite wonders". Granted it's funny but the first part is more satisfying.

"Fuchsia Magellanica", addressed to Carol Rumens, is one of the

more successful poems, because the meditation on the thing itself, filled with genuine affection for its subject, is sustained, and the temptation to go for a closing flourish is resisted. It ends:

Yet here you are—as big as Buddleia;
as deeply anchored in this heavy loam.
Fuchsia magellanica, concede that this
most temperate of climates could be home.

I found myself wishing at times that the poet would be a little bit more reticent about herself, less the source of her own subject matter, however tongue-in-cheek the self-defining statements the poems appear to be making. Good light verse can't be any easier to write than the other kind, and while there is plenty of light verse here I would have liked to have read more poems of the other kind, of which "Postcard" is an example, which closes convincingly, "In rain that is commensurate with tears / another generation learns to grieve. / On this, the hardest summer here in years, / we count the maimed. We name the disappeared".

Is there a beautiful ambiguity in the "up to" in the sound bite on the back of *The Mason's Tongue* by one of our master craftsmen which states that "[Rice] has a nice sense of what he is up to as a poet". Or do I only imagine it? Naming the people's names and the brilliant names of the places where they live is one of the things he is up to—Ballywindy, Mullaghduh, Drumgurland, Dundressan, Mulderdsleigh Hill, Mullaghboy, Islandmagee, Portmuck Bay, Skernagh Point—honouring by turns the people who are alive and kicking and the ones who have died, continuing the naming-the-names tradition of John Hewitt's, "I take my stand by the Ulster names, / each clean hard name like a weathered stone; / Tyrella, Rostrevor, are flickering flames: / the names I mean are the Moy, Malone, / Strabane, Slieve Gullion and Portglenone". Rice's poems, however, are more interested in listening in on his neighbouring estates, on the serpents at the hearts of them and on the parish lore, rather than in taking a stand by them.

It is in an ugly world of lust, pigs, amputated tongues, attempted arson, guilt, murdered corncrakes, marching bands and malicious gossip that these poems get their starts. None of them express tongue-in-cheek remorse about neglecting housework, and unpleasant surprises are delivered in the kind of physical language that is equal to them. The tongue of the title poem on "the cool slab of strand" is "an odd curl of meat" that "dropped from the wet spade". Strong verbs bear it out—scooped, seized, flop, flung, hushed, lapped—all in the same stanza, laid on good and thick, to telling effect.

Managing to make “hope” and “POPE” rhyme in “Gable End” is one of the collection’s less obvious achievements, but when Rice’s tongue slides over towards the precincts of his cheek and speaks with insider knowledge about the Protestant heart as “a zoo of lust”, “Its lascivious craving for conquest” (“The Gift”), and in “Handing over the Reins”, set up as a hard-liner in a sound studio under time pressure to record a sound-bite, which concludes, “Our inheritance is Protestant...is scriptural... / Is Protestant... Is straightforward and simple. / We’ve run out of time. I take it that’s ample?”, rhyme and irony combine and make for strong writing.

As close as he comes to making an overt statement on the poet’s job occurs in his observation of an Islandmagee blackbird about its business in a back garden as it “treads the ground and listens, / To work his fantastical art— / A breathless sounding / Of the worm’s earth-dark”. The poem *tells* that treading, listening, working, and sounding are the words that the writer of the poem associates with the job of making poems. Some of the more successful poems go one better and actually *show*, like “The Musician’s Union” which ends:

It’s canvassing time in the local election,
When bigots and brethren court doorstep opinion;
It’s a chance for a band to come into its own,
So long as it carries a tuneful selection
For the voter’s riposte to the Pope and the bomb—
Partisan ditties that in booths they will whistle,
Where X marks the spot and completes the charade.