

*Scotland's Reign*

Kathleen Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead: Poems 1980-1994*.  
Bloodaxe, £8.95

Since the mid-1990s Kathleen Jamie's star has risen to such an extent that she is now, with the possible exception of Don Paterson, the most successful Scottish poet currently writing. Absolutely in tune with the post-devolution Scottish *Zeitgeist*, Jamie's poetry has won for itself in Scotland a popularity comparable to that of Simon Armitage in England and Billy Collins in the United States. A jacket-blurb from the *Scotsman* goes so far as to say that "Genius is no stranger to the work of Kathleen Jamie". Of course, one should always be leery of such effusive praise, but the sheer dynamism of her much anthologised "The Way We Live" (1987) indicates that at least some of the hype is justified:

Pass the tambourine, let me bash out praises  
to the Lord God of movement, to Absolute  
non-friction, flight, and the scary side:  
death by avalanche, birth by failed contraception...

One of the interesting things about Jamie is the way she casts a cold, nay, a jaundiced eye on the world around her, and yet at the same time retains a kind of optimism. In "Mother-May-I" (1994), Jamie tells us how though the woods are a place "where hitchhikers rot/ in the curling roots of trees,/ and men/ leave tight rolled-up/ dirty magazines" she still wants to go out into them:

Mother may we  
pull our soft backsides  
through the jagged may's  
white blossom, run across the stinky dump  
and muck about

at the woods and burn  
dead pleased  
to see the white dye  
of our gym-rubbers seep downstream?

There will probably be some types who'll object to Jamie's portrayal of men as a species who do nothing much apart from bury hitch-hikers in the woods, read pornography and "lift up your skirt/ and take down your pants/ even though you're crying". But in these poems Jamie displays an entirely engaging devil-may-care attitude, and her language is so vibrant.

This selection starts with the previously uncollected "View from the Cliffs" (1980) in which "Orkney rises like the letter D" and "Philosophical fishermen" lift "lobsters for London". The Orkney/London dichotomy is a faint foretaste of Jamie's later concern with all things Scottish. The title poem of her first collection *Black Spiders*, published in 1982 when she was just twenty, has some of the erotic charge of "Mother-May-I" quoted above. And in a poem such as "November" one gets the sense that a significant talent is emerging. However, most readers will probably skip through the eleven poems from Jamie's first collection, and make straight for her subsequent work. Reading the poems from *A Flame In Your Heart* (1986)—a sequence set during World War II—I felt that Jamie hadn't yet found her subject matter, although the poems are, as one would expect, more formally assured. And in her description of a pilot being shot down she shows what she's capable of: "There was a sort of quiet feeling, as if/ wardrobes and pianos were falling silently downstairs,/ before the plummet, what happened you said/ when you were hit, how the ground rears up like a rabid mare". Jamie comes into her own in her third collection, *The Way We Live* (1987). Apart from the title poem there is "Julian of Norwich", and another (far more interesting) sequence "Karakoram Highway" where among "Soft talking somnolent takers of tea/ and a three-legged dog" she sees the devil "baking chapati". At her best, Jamie has a wonderful ear for the musicality of language and a great eye for an idiosyncratic image.

That said, the poems from *The Autonomous Region* (1993) irritated this reviewer rather. Another sequence, they deal with Jamie's journey across China towards Tibet during the lead up to the Tiananmen Square massacre. The danger here is of her

becoming a travel-poet, an “airy-internationalist” of the worst sort. The weakest section of this sequence is where Jamie decides that China is the place to start talking pronounced Scots: “Folk that talk lik rivers o risin/ will be swept awa tae gutters lik the rain/ o this dynasty o wickitness/ grieve agin the night and howl wi dug”. In some dialect poems such as Tony Harrison’s *V* or Blake Morrison’s “The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper” there is an accord between the poem’s subject matter and the manner in which the poet decides to speak. This is lacking here and Jamie’s switch into Scots dialect seems gratuitous to say the least.

*The Queen of Sheba* (1994) is the final collection represented in this book. In *The Deregulated Muse*, Sean O’Brien observed that Jamie’s work has “in *The Queen of Sheba* and since” become “a poetry of the Condition of Scotland”. Several of the most successful poems deal with Scotland in the run-up to devolution. In “Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead” we see the Scotland of the past “her stiff old ladies’ bags,/ open mouthed, spew/ postcards sent from small Scots towns/ in 1960” onto “the civic amenity landfill site”. There is something strangely Larkinesque about the “Mr and Mrs Scotland” portrayed here as “the bulldozer comes/ to make more room, to shove aside/ his shaving brush, her button tin”. In “The Republic of Fife”, Jamie glances back at one of the main reasons for the recent wave of nationalist sentiment in Scotland: “the motorway/ where a citizen has dangled,/ maybe with a friend clutching/ his/her ankles to spray// PAY NO POLL TAX on a flyover/ near to Abernethy”. Later in the same poem she looks hopefully into the future:

my house

on whose roof we can balance,  
carefully stand and see  
clear to the far off mountains,  
cities, rigs and gardens,

Europe, Africa, the Forth and Tay bridges,  
even dare let go, lift our hands  
and wave to the waving citizens  
of all those other countries.

Jamie seems to be on something of a roll here, having at last found her subject matter. There are pitfalls though for poets lauded for speaking on behalf of the “Nation” or this or that fashionable

cause. Particularly when the cause is one as limited as Scottish devolution, which in and of itself hardly adds up to a world view. In Ireland Eavan Boland (for her feminism) and Paul Durcan (for his satirical take on the Catholic Church and gombeen Ireland in general) were both once similarly lauded, but have lately come to be rather tame laureates for things as they are. After devolution, one might ask, what now for Kathleen Jamie?

If her most recent collection *Jizzzen* (1999), is anything to go by Jamie seems determined to write more and more in Scots dialect. And the mix of Scots dialect and standard English in *The Queen of Sheba* poems is very convincing. I just hope that she doesn't decide to write exclusively in Scots dialect because, to paraphrase something Don Paterson said about fellow Scot W.N. Herbert: when Jamie writes in English a thousand times more people get to see how good she really can be.