

Well

Fleur Adcock, *Poems 1960-2000*. Bloodaxe, £10.95stg

Like many *Collected Poems* issued by Bloodaxe—J.H.Prynne and Peter Reading's come to mind—*Poems 1960-2000* is rather an unwieldy paperback. Unlike theirs, however, it looks too slim to be a lifetime's work. It isn't *quite* a lifetime's work: the early poetry omitted in *Selected Poems* (1983) is also omitted here, but we need not necessarily expect any more. Adcock has announced her retirement from poetry. In an interview with Julian Stannard in *Thumbscrew* 17 she gives her reasons: "When the forbidden pastime [of poetry] [...] becomes your way of earning a living the glitter goes from it. But you're not allowed to say this; people are terribly, terribly shocked." It is typical of Adcock not to offer the usual pieties about being lucky to be able to make a living from poetry, but perhaps she should ask how many people were genuinely shocked. On the evidence of most of the new poems in this collection the glitter has definitely vanished; we might only hope, not for good. The versicles of "Kensington Gardens" are too slight to constitute Adcock's last words, and the final verselet, "Goodbye", seems slyly to promise a return:

The scruffy blue tits by the Long Water are fed
for the last time from my palm—with cheese, not bread
(more sustaining). The chestnut blossoms are dead.
The gates close early. What wanted to be said is said.

It's "(more sustaining)" that does it, I think. Some of "Kensington Gardens" reminds the reader of Louis MacNeice's "park poems", collected in *Solstices* (1961). Both sequences are concerned with animal behaviour, with the pressures of history and culture on humans, with death. *Solstices* consolidated MacNeice's hard, spare late style, the great accomplishment of which was his last volume, *The Burning Perch* (1963). If Adcock decides to return to poetry, it will with any luck be with work that has some of the glitter of MacNeice's final collection.

MacNeice is a definite presence in Adcock's poems: "The Hillside" is a kind of "Snow" without the snow; in both poems the world is disjointed by invisible barriers between nature and civilisation. The four

sections of Adcock's 1979 collection *The Inner Harbour* have titles which recall MacNeice's sequence "A Hand of Snapshots", though Adcock's "Beginnings", "Endings", "To and Fro", "The Thing Itself" aren't as evocative as MacNeice's "The Left-Behind", "The Gone-Tomorrow", "The Once-In-Passing".

Auden bulks still larger in the early work; "Look before you Shoot" adds a tinct of barbed nursery whimsy to what Conrad Aiken once called (referring to a very different poet) *vin Audenaire*. "Gas" offers post-apocalyptic confirmation of the doctrine that poetry makes nothing happen: "the single newspaper that we have seen/ (a local one) contained only poems." Later, Adcock acknowledges the influence and subverts it. "4 May 1979" echoes "1 September 1939" in more than its title. For Auden's "conservative dark" Adcock has "the Tory sky/ such blue elation of spring air!" The 1970s, another "low dishonest decade", ends with the blossoming of "Honesty, that mistaken plant". Plant, here, manages to evoke all the usual meanings of the word: flora, industry, dishonest practice, giving us a wry sense of how firmly Thatcher's government planted its feet under Britain's table. With this kind of wordplay, Adcock has moved a long way from the ugly foregrounding of verbal wit that mars some early poems:

"Don't take umbrage dear." I wish I could.
Instead I stand bedazzled by them all

Longing for shade.

("Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow")

Recognising that pun can bring the reader no satisfaction, only self-satisfaction; but the self-congratulation in these poems isn't always the reader's. "Moa Point" tells of the poet's childhood encounter with a sea-slug. It is given to her by two biologists engaged in fieldwork, who clearly hope she will be disconcerted by it, but she remains impassive:

"See that?"
said the one with the freckles (they were both quite young)
"it doesn't seem to worry her."
"Oh well," said the other "these local kids..."
I kept my eyes down for a moment
in solemn, scientific study;
then said in my recently acquired
almost local accent "Thank you."

The adult assumption that a child's responses can be predicted and exploited for the amusement of grown-ups is indeed an interesting subject, and the tensions between the "local" and the outsider constitute a consistently compelling theme in Adcock's work, but here these

are all but overpowered by a gym-mistressy reproach to the squeamish reader: *Come along, it can't hurt you, don't be such a sissy, I was far braver at your age...* A different self-satisfaction spoils "Folie à Deux":

They call it pica
this ranging after alien tastes:
acorns (a good fresh country food
better than I remembered)

That parenthesis evokes succinctly a recently ruralised middle-class smugness at finding such a deliciously *local* exoticism. But Adcock rejects this satirical possibility: she wants the reader to take an interest in the relationship she depicts. It isn't a very interesting one, mainly because it relies on that tired old conceit of juxtaposing food and sex.

I'm troubled, too, by Adcock's comic poems. "The Prize-winning Poem" is amusing, but there's something cruel about an established poet getting comic mileage from the ineptitude of amateurs. And how dull she makes that "masterpiece we'd all write if we could" sound! Advocacy of the well-made poem is more common now than at any time in the last fifty years; more common than it was in 1983, when this poem first appeared in a book. We all suffer because this humorous advice has been taken; magazines and collections are filled with boring prize-winning poems on the Adcock model, and *that* seems less funny by the day. "Smokers for Celibacy" isn't really funny either: too long, at 34 lines, to bite; too short to achieve the comedy of relentless repetition. It doesn't compare well with the earlier "Against Coupling", which *is* really witty:

There is much to be said for abandoning
this no longer novel exercise—
for not "participating in a total experience"—when
one feels like the lady in Leeds who
had seen The Sound of Music eighty-six times...

"A Political Kiss" is unsatisfactory in that it doesn't do for New Labour what "4 May 1979" does for Thatcherism, but "An Apology" is doggerel: "Can it be that I was unfair/ to Tony Blair/ His teeth after all are beyond compare/ but does he take too much care/ over his hair?" This might challenge momentarily the politician who thinks the key to the female vote is a *bouffant* and capped teeth, but it does nothing for the rest of us. "It's Done This!" is a poem about a middle-aged woman who is unable to work her personal computer, and should have been placed where it would lend a touch of class, on the letters page of *Woman's Weekly*.

This collection makes the reader rather sceptical of those alleged virtues for which Adcock has been praised: the subtlety, the quiet eroti-

cism, the conversational lyric voice, the “*deceptively* laid-back tone”, the “*deceptively* simple” style. The quotations are jacket puffs from Carol-Ann Duffy and Jo Shapcott respectively; the italics are mine. Why this rhetoric of deception? It seems to be code: code for no feminist stridency, no separatism, “no ranters” (Adcock’s criteria for admission to her *Faber Book of 20th Century Women’s Poetry*). Adcock has built her career on her opposition to ranters, but that doesn’t seem to preclude a kind of confessionalism. As she says to Stannard on the poetry of the 1960s: “As poets we were all writing about ourselves—what else was there to write about?” Irony aside, there is a fair amount of writing about herself in this volume, most of it confirming the reader’s suspicion that confessionalism without rant is just plain dull:

You’d love this place: it’s your Central Otago
in English dress—the bony land’s the same;
and if the Cromwell Gorge is doomed to go
under a lake, submerging its brave orchards
for cheap electric power, this is where
you’d find a subtly altered image of it,
its cousin in another hemisphere:
the rivers gentler, hill more widely splayed
but craggy enough. Well.

(“Letter to Alistair Campbell”)

Well. The Alistair Campbell of the title is the poet’s first husband, not the New Labour adviser. Which is probably just as well.

Adcock is far better when she’s working with a persona and singing ballad metres, as in the sequence *Hotspur*. Here, the speaker of the poem, Elizabeth Mortimer, describes her husband’s fate:

Families undo families;
kings go up and kings go down.
My man fell; but they propped him up
dead in Shrewsbury Town.

They tied his corpse in the marketplace,
jammed for their jeers between two stones;
then hacked him apart: a heavy price
he paid for juggling with thrones.

Four fair cities received his limbs,
far apart as the four winds are,
and his head stared forth from the walls of York
fixed on Micklegate Bar.

This is simplicity without deception; Adcock is so good at making awkward, exhilarating lines that you wonder why she wastes her time

on blank verse letters. Another set of lyrics for music “Mrs Fraser’s Frenzy” has a similar spare appeal. The sequence begins:

My name is Eliza Fraser.
I belong to some savages.
My job is to feed the baby
they have hung on my shoulder.

The examination of madness, racial prejudice and trauma in this poem compels *because* it abandons that rather mealy-mouthed idea of subtlety that Shapcott and Duffy, among others, profess to admire.

Adcock has been far more successful and influential than the “archetypal female confessional poet” she resists. For her, this is Anne Sexton “whom I don’t care for at all.” Who hasn’t heard a woman poet at a workshop or reading rejecting confessionalism in favour of a clear-headed formalism? The repudiation of a confessional or feminist stance (later Adrienne Rich is another Adcock *bête noire*) has penetrated every level of women’s poetic production. Perhaps Adcock should keep a step ahead of her imitators, whose dreary tide of laid-back conversational poems threatens to engulf her own talent. She might do this by reconsidering her antagonism towards the archetypal female confessional poet.