

# 'The Wilderness Party' by A. B. Jackson

## Review by Stewart Sanderson



Coming twelve years after A. B. Jackson's Forward-Prize-winning first collection *Fire Stations* (Anvil, 2003), *The Wilderness Party* is, as the blurb says, a 'long-awaited follow-up'. Comprising three sections — 'Acts', 'Natural History' and 'Apocrypha' — this last a twenty-one-part sequence published as a limited edition pamphlet by Donut Press in 2011 — *The Wilderness Party* is also, like the earlier collection, a book preoccupied with questions of belief, textual inheritance and the uncanny.

The first poem in the book, 'Acts', splices the Song of Solomon with found extracts from a UN report on the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay:

*With regard to these acts: removal of clothing,  
nudity in front of females and before prayer,  
the belly a heap of wheat set about with lilies [...]*

Jackson juxtaposes the biblical fragrance of 'spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon' with 'lap dances during interrogation'. The tension here isn't just between the American military's unpleasant ways of making people talk and the Song's erotic praise poetry. 'Acts' pushes the variant languages of its source texts

together, with the poem's effect deriving from the rub of these two tonalities — one coldly analytical, one anything but — against each other.

Jackson makes a more extended use of found text in the central 'Natural History' section of *The Wilderness Party*, combining 'Philemon Holland's 1601 translation of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and original material in the same spirit, including made-up words'. This results in a delightful series of animal poems, written in a skewed, slightly unhinged version of early modern English. The first, 'Of Elephants', begins as follows:

*The clemencie of Elephants. How Elephants  
breed and how they disagree with Dragons.*

*How they make sport in a kind of Morrish dance.  
The Elephant who wrote Greeke and read musicke.*

Not to mention the elephant 'enamoured upon / a wench in Egypt who sold nose-gaies and wickerishe'. It's hard not to be won over by such unabashed linguistic play — as well as a curious pathos — eliciting the reader's sympathy for these rather human pachyderms, haunted by the 'troublesome flie' and from whose tusks 'men make / images of the gods, fine combs, wanton toies'. Given the collection's ludic preoccupation with matters religious, it's tempting to link these three ivory products together — the graven idol, ultimately, may be no more than a wanton frippery. People, moreover, may be more like elephants than they suspect (for some reason in this connection I can't help thinking of Banksy's ill-fated 'This looks a bit like an elephant').

The second poem in the series, 'Of Lions', is equally entertaining, with Jackson informing the reader that:

*Authorities agree, a Lion is never sicke  
except for a certaine peevisshness of stomacke;  
the cure, tie severall she-apes to his backe:*

*the verie indignitie of their malapert saucinesse  
may move his patience to a fit of madness,  
and feasting on apes, their blood, a Lion improves.*

There's something irresistible in the spectacle of a woebegone, flatulent lion being forcibly improved by the liberal application of saucy chimps. Indeed, confronted with so visually arresting an image it's easy to overlook the skill with which Jackson (or possibly Philemon Holland) has fashioned the poem, with the line endings 'sicke', 'stomacke' and 'backe' clicking satisfyingly into place in the first tercet quoted. In the second, 'saucinesse' is followed, naturally enough, by 'madness', before the sound change of 'improves' brings the passage to an abrupt halt.

Mining an obscure Elizabethan text and supplementing it with his own coinages, 'Natural History' manages to be funny without being trivial. Like W. S. Graham, who I'd hazard a guess is a key Scottish precursor, Jackson frets away at language, teasing and tickling it into all sorts of unlikely shapes. The way he ransacks Holland's translation for raw material might also be compared to MacDiarmid's practice in much of his later work, for all that 'Natural History' is an infinitely more ludic (and, it has to be conceded, manageable) proposition than *In Memoriam James Joyce*. In this context it's fitting that 'Treasure Island', a poem from the 'Acts' section of *The Wilderness Party*, took first prize in the Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition back in 2010. Here I'm thinking of the connections one might make between Morgan's use of sound and found text and Jackson's evident delight in making English do things it's not used to doing.

The third and final section of *The Wilderness Party* was the part of the book I found most challenging. 'Apocrypha' is Jackson's riff on the sonnet sequence, comprising twenty-one numbered sections, each made up of four free-verse tercets and a closing couplet. As disparate a pair of epigraphs from Wallace Stevens and George Bush suggest, these are poems with a diverse cast of characters, full of potentially apocryphal, sometimes salacious anecdote. For instance, the beginning of the sequence:

*Ruth at sunrise, grooming horses.  
The bit, bridle, curry-comb of love  
was her business.*

*Simeon skulked around indoors,  
consulted Qabalah, threw sticks,  
anything to improve sex.*

What is the reader to make of this? Is there a coherent narrative here? Or are we on firmer ground if we stay closer to a more aural appreciation of the poem's spikily inventive soundscapes? As a reader who missed out on a Sunday School education, I feel more confident in my responses to assonance and alliteration. Jackson concludes this first poem in the sequence as follows:

*Ruth gathered apples. The Elohim  
stamped in their stalls.*

Are these the original Ruth and Simeon? Or are they modern-day characters with biblical names? Both perhaps — after all, this is a poem in which the horses Ruth is grooming appear to have been deified.

The next poem in the sequence urges us to 'avoid St Andrews' and elsewhere we learn that 'Judith spoke UNIX, cracked / other command languages', with regards to which it's interesting to reflect that human systems of signification aren't necessarily the only or even the best ones in existence. Computers, elephants and lions all have languages of one sort or another. If we admit the possibility of divinity, should we then consider the possibility of divine languages, presumably beyond human comprehension? The tenth poem in 'Apocrypha' opens with the memorable image of Elvis rolling away a rhinestone as he rises from the dead like Jesus after the crucifixion. The sequence and book end with 'a scrambled air command, a sole / surviving god, his wow and flutter'. It seems to me that wow and flutter are good words for what Jackson does in *The Wilderness Party* as a whole.

[\*The Wilderness Party\* by A.B. Jackson](#) is published by Bloodaxe Books, 2015.

---

(c) *The Bottle Imp*