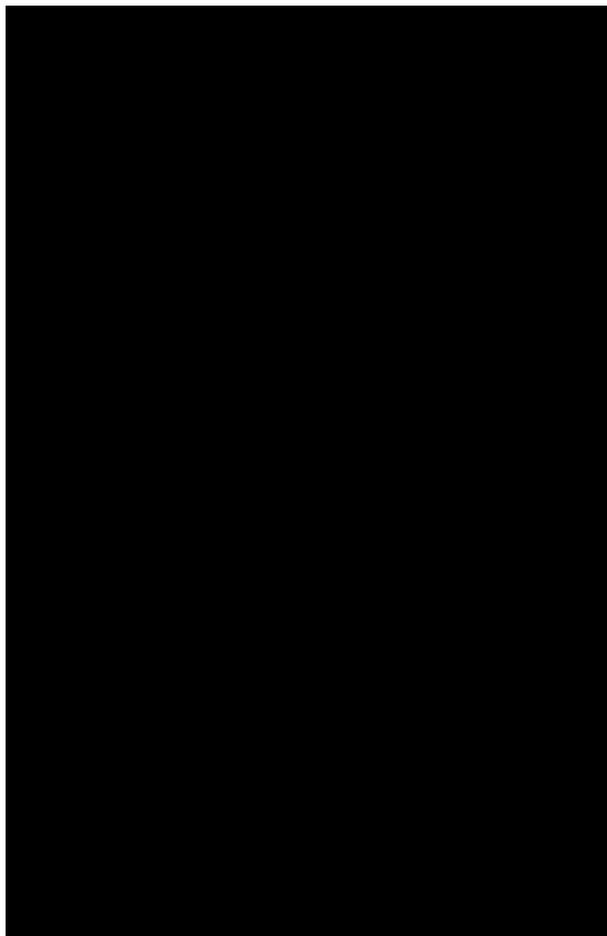


'Floating the Woods' by Ken Cockburn

Review by Richie McCaffery



, Ken Cockburn's latest collection from Luath Press, contains in an authorial Afterword the admission that all of these poems came about from various writing commissions, collaborations and residencies in his capacity as a freelance poet. Yet, for poems written for special occasions, this collection does not come across as disjointed, but rather it shows recurring themes and consistencies in his work, taking poetry outside of academies, into the wilds and to the people who might not ordinarily encounter it in their day to day existence. One striking feature is how many of these poems find power in the listing and cataloguing of items, as if Cockburn himself is a curator of human nature. The opening poem Norm is a

collection of social customs as regards greetings, the closing line reminding us sharply, in the days of Brexit, of our national unfriendliness to outsiders:

Cockburn lists the history of Orkney, comes up with a colour chart of shades of blue in An Alphabet of Blues but this tendency to collect and classify and find

music and poetry in that activity really comes into its own later in the book with poems such as *Crailing Pomona* which is a paean-cum-tasting notes to the great variety of apples, such as:

Cockburn's accumulation of observations and urge to list in his poetry reminds me strongly of the *Scotland small?* section of Hugh MacDiarmid's

to inhabit the land which inspired it, Cockburn's work, too, feels like it exists equally in this present book, but also in situ in the places that it draws upon. Cockburn, like Finlay, engages playfully with myths and the aesthetics of the Roman Empire, to show us how, more than two thousand years on, we live in more or less exactly the same way:

Poetry is, in many ways, about paying a debt to others – other poets, other people, other places – and repeatedly in Cockburn's poetry you get the impression of a poet who has sown nothing but good will in his craft and is slowly reaping this in his work. This is perhaps most apparent in the strongest poem of the collection, kept for last, *Midwinter Wishes*, which abounds with the poet's generosity:

This poem additionally stands out because it is one of the few poems here that contains a first-person lyrical 'I' speaking voice. Cockburn rarely allows his ego or presence to get in the way of the delivery and telling of his poems and even here the first-person speaker only gives the poem a sense of urgency and directness. There is never a sense that he owns the poem or the experience behind it, but rather that he works in service of the poem, in its best interests. From some of the poems, such as *Backwater Republic*, you might be mistaken in thinking that the poet is consciously retreating from urban centres, or else from the stresses and

strains of a busy world, yet other poems, such as *Cloqueliclot* are concerned with the big questions of nationhood, empire, war and the legacies of all three. Visiting the war-fields of Flanders, the speaker observes a contrast between the deathliness of official mourning for those dead in the war, and the fecundity of the earth, how it yields *Swollen cabbages and walls of sweetcorn*. There is no sign of a poppy () anywhere, but a child, trying to pronounce the word in French as spoken by her mother, inadvertently forges a new, trans-language word that mixes poppy () with (blistered) and , which brings to mind again the bloodshed:

Although this book is composed entirely of separate occasional poems, these poems nonetheless fuse together to become a major poetic event. Cockburn is a taxonomist of human experience and humankind's attempts to render the natural world and its phenomena into language. The title might sound ethereal, as if the poet is escaping and drifting off into their imagination, but instead these poems find a poet illuminating real life. *Cloqueliclot* finds the speaker bemoaning the fact that they cannot fly like a bird, and are stuck here with [their] gravity. The physical poet is rooted via gravity on earth, but their work in is clearly airborne.

by Ken Cockburn published by Luath Press

2018.

, Ken Cockburn's latest collection from Luath Press, contains in an authorial Afterword the admission that all of these poems came about from various writing commissions, collaborations and residencies in his capacity as a freelance poet. Yet, for poems written for special occasions, this collection does not come across as disjointed, but rather it shows recurring themes and consistencies in his work, taking poetry outside of academies, into the wilds and to the people who might not ordinarily encounter it in their day to day existence. One striking feature is how many of these poems find power in the listing and cataloguing of items, as if

Cockburn himself is a curator of human nature. The opening poem *Norm* is a collection of social customs as regards greetings, the closing line reminding us sharply, in the days of Brexit, of our national unfriendliness to outsiders:

Cockburn lists the history of Orkney, comes up with a colour chart of shades of blue in *An Alphabet of Blues* but this tendency to collect and classify and find music and poetry in that activity really comes into its own later in the book with poems such as *Crailing Pomona* which is a paean-cum-tasting notes to the great variety of apples, such as:

ktusnea

Poetry is, in many ways, about paying a debt to others – other poets, other people, other places – and repeatedly in Cockburn's poetry you get the impression of a poet who has sown nothing but good will in his craft and is slowly reaping this in his work. This is perhaps most apparent in the strongest poem of the collection, kept for last, *Midwinter Wishes*, which abounds with the poet's generosity:

This poem additionally stands out because it is one of the few poems here that contains a first-person lyrical "I" speaking voice. Cockburn rarely allows his ego or presence to get in the way of the delivery and telling of his poems and even here the first-person speaker only gives the poem a sense of urgency and directness. There is never a sense that he owns the poem or the experience behind it, but rather that he works in service of the poem, in its best interests. From some of the poems, such as *Backwater Republic*, you might be mistaken in thinking that the poet is consciously retreating from urban centres, or else from the stresses and strains of a busy world, yet other poems, such as *Cloqueliclot* are concerned with the big questions of nationhood, empire, war and the legacies of all three. Visiting the war-ewar-ewar w re

a poppy () anywhere, but a child, trying to pronounce the word in French as spoken by her mother, inadvertently forges a new, trans-language word that mixes poppy () with (blistered) and , which brings to mind again the bloodshed:

Although this book is composed entirely of separate occasional poems, these poems nonetheless fuse together to become a major poetic event. Cockburn is a taxonomist of human experience and humankind's attempts to render the natural world and its phenomena into language. The title might sound ethereal, as if the poet is escaping and drifting off into their imagination, but instead these poems find a poet illuminating real life. Cloqueliclot finds the