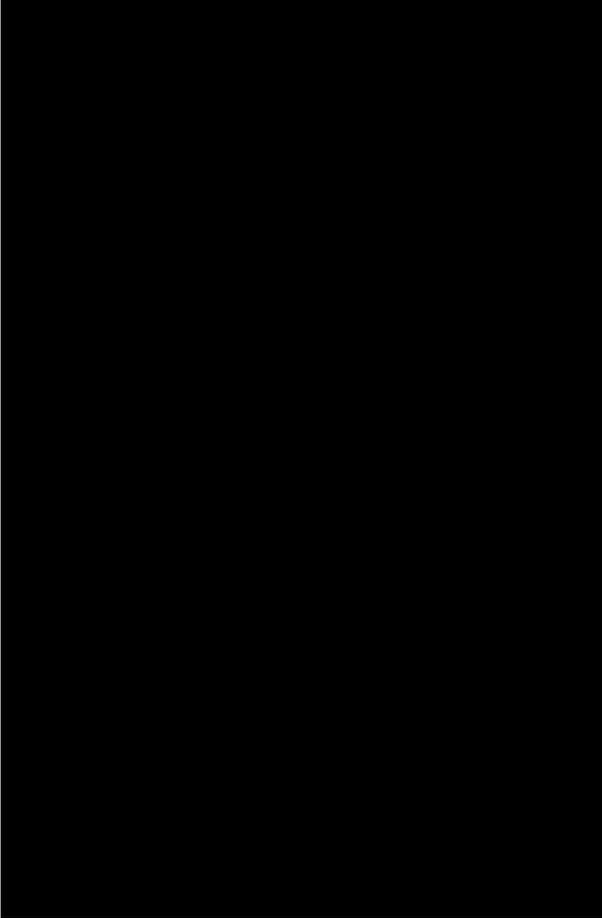


'Bale Fire', by Jim Carruth

Review by Louisa Gairn



Jim Carruth's latest poetry collection *Bale Fire* (2019) has at its heart questions of loss and renewal, identity and home, of how we negotiate and maintain our sense of belonging. As a follow-up to *Black Cart* (2017), and conceived as the second part of an eventual trilogy, the poems in *Bale Fire* are organised into three sections, or 'cycles': 'Change in the Weather', confronting the darker realities of the declining farming community; 'Home', adapting elements from Homer's *Odyssey* to portray a community of Scottish hill farmers; and 'Forgotten Furrows and Field Songs', lyrics reflecting on the endurance, transmission and renewal of rural traditions and experience.

The nuanced meaning of 'bale fire' as 'bonfire, beacon fire, funeral pyre', frames the central concern of the collection, urgently questioning the possibility of salvaging something of this community's language and identity, to 'create from these brief fragments of sound / an echo louder than its diminished source?'. This anxiety about loss runs throughout, informing Carruth's exploration of the cyclical or universal aspects of our relationship with the natural world, alongside the specific, contemporary and local concerns of modern Scottish farming communities, whose identity and livelihood are under threat.

Bale Fire offers a defence of this identity, even while explicitly setting out to confront what Carruth calls the 'human cost' of farming on individuals and the community as a whole. The first cycle of poems, 'Change in the Weather', carries an epigraph from Wendell Berry, the American writer and farmer, who defines

community as 'the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared'. However, Carruth's approach shares much in common with Lewis Grassie Gibbon. In *Bale Fire*, 'community' is not necessarily a harmonious or positive force; it may tolerate suffering and abuse as much as promote cooperation and resilience, as in the portrait of a relationship between a failing farmer and his community in 'The Other Wilson', where 'words, relentless as west-coast rain / threatened to wash him away'. In his 'Author's Note' Carruth highlights statistics about rural victims of abuse and suicides by farmers, which are then confronted in the poems 'On the Turn' and 'Trouble at the Farm'. *Bale Fire* thus gives voice to perspectives which are little thought about or represented in our urban-centric society, demonstrating that, far from an escapist idyll, poetry of the rural environment is rooted in modern, real world concerns.

Above all, the collection affirms the value of ways of seeing, speaking and knowing drawn from farming experience that are rarely considered, or even acknowledged, by wider society. While *Black Cart* explored Carruth's difficulty in fully belonging to the rural community, *Bale Fire* reflects a disconnection from the conventions and priorities of the metropolitan world, in poems which question the value we put on knowledge: the officially-sanctioned and quantified knowledge of the schoolroom, corporate office or bank, versus the tacit, hands-on expertise and hard-won wisdom of the people who work the land. In 'School Milk', the child of a farming family feels out of place, his 'clumsy writing constrained between narrow lines', his movement curtailed by 'strap-backed warnings to keep off the grass'. Even the milk does not taste like home, provoking an image of industrial farming practices, with 'Lines of sad cows shut up inside all year, / chained in cubicles, kept from the grass'. Similarly, the office sacking scene played out in 'Transferable Skills' brings out a dark humour in representing the gulf of understanding between two different spheres, but also a demand for justice and honesty:

*Could they manage a budget with the income so low,
Or work through the night with a difficult calving?
I can listen for the mother's bellow and know
what must be done to save them both.*

Here, the grey-suited, empty jargon of 'competencies and fit' contrasts starkly with the 'fit and place' contemplated in *Black Cart's* 'Far Field', whose farmer

offers up 'a prayer, a promise of belonging'.

Thus while

to share in a continuing heritage of farming traditions and experience, and demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Scottish rural poetry and perspectives in an era when questions of belonging and our relationship with the natural world are ever more urgent and vital.

Bale Fire is published by Birlinn Ltd (2019). Jim Carruth's latest poetry collection



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