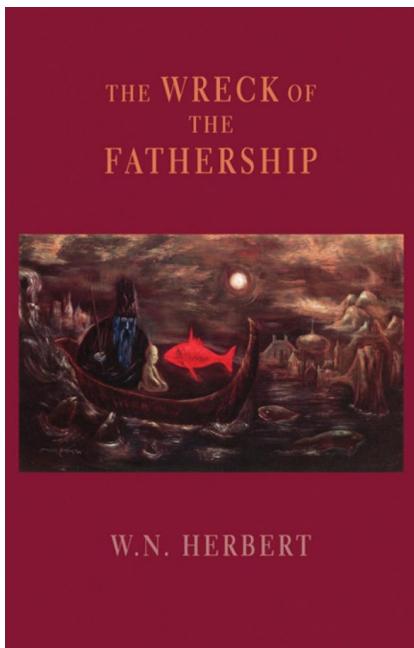


# 'The Wreck of the Fathership', by W. N. Herbert

Review by Matthew Macdonald



*The Wreck of the Fathership* by Dundonian Makar W. N. Herbert comes across much like an iceberg: for all that it offers on the surface, much of it is driven by what lingers beneath – the shadow cast on Herbert by the death of his father soon after he began composing the collection, the whole focus of which became, understandably, altered.

The first poem, 'Fathership Glosa', opens with the line 'Your death poem, Dad, was premature'. A more concise description of the feeling of loss is hard to conceptualise and it paves the way for a collection anchored by death, grief, and the endless re-engagement with the pain of loss, finding natural comparisons in this respect with the *Elegies* of Douglas Dunn. While it is the title-sequence that reveals intricacies of the father-son relationship, and thus holds the weight of the poet's grief, different forms for Herbert's loss emerge throughout the collection.

While the force of the elegiac keeps death at the forefront of *The Wreck of the Fathership*, the versatility of Herbert's writing established in his earlier collections is ever-present. Herbert has an aptitude for melding the 'poetic' and the mundane, elevating seemingly banal subjects – as seen in 'The Three Flies' –

into verse. Taking as its theme the travel of three Dundonian flies to Fife, this poem - written in Dundonian Scots, with a perspective of the world that is tongue defiantly in cheek - is positioned alongside others that explore loneliness, distance and the things that connect us all. One such poem is 'The Road Bridge', which contains some of the lyrical flourishes found throughout the collection that mark Herbert's long-established poetic aptitude:

*On the other side of the clouds  
meteorites are scratching the black  
to be let out*

Another strength of the collection is Herbert's willingness and ability to use and integrate multiple languages. Many of the poems are written in English, but Herbert's poems written in Dundonian Scots tend towards a deeper expressiveness. Additionally, a number of poems signal Herbert's extensive work as a translator, such as 'Pagomenos' in which he folds Greek words into his lines in ways that elevate the subject both linguistically and emotionally:

*Malotíra lines the fences, yellow dabs on sage;  
and pockets of papoules, which Chaucer knew  
as vetch, crowd out kitchen gardens with  
their soft fishhooks of tendril, ear and petal -*

*('Pagomenos')*

While the collection offers space to light-hearted imaginings - one particular highlight being 'Death Wullie', where Dundee's own son Oor Wullie and the Grim Reaper are merged in comic poetry excellence - contemporary political landscapes are never far from view. Whether in several poems about Scottish Independence, and the 2014 referendum in particular ('The Parliament of Birds' and 'Kirsty Wark on Broughty Ferry Beach, Or, An Indy Ref Ode' being personal highlights), or following the 2015 General Election ('Explaining Irn Bru to the English') or Brexit ('The Fall of Brexitopolis'), Herbert demonstrates a keen concern and participation in the current affairs affecting both his homeland and the world beyond. In one blistering sequence of poems 'Executive Quatrains/Captain My Captain', Herbert takes a long look at the presidency of Donald Trump and spears the former president with typical Scottish satire.

All of this is to say that the collection is filled to bursting with a variety of poetic forms and styles that beg to be devoured through multiple readings and which present a veritable smörgåsbord of themes and content for any reader. *The Wreck of the Fathership* reveals Herbert at the height of his powers, but nowhere is this more evident than in the collection's title-sequence, its opening lines evoking the poet's personal grief in their tenderness:

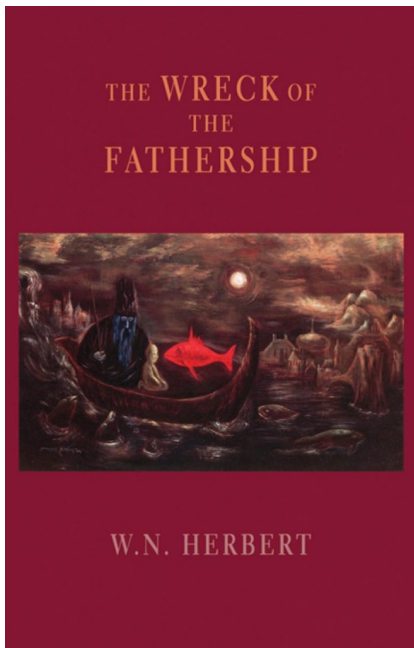
*My father was never old  
not even on his deathbed  
his hair still boyish across  
the brow I kissed him on*

In this sequence, Herbert pairs the loss of his father with found poems of material from the Friends of the Dundee City Archives documenting the Mona Disaster, an RNLB lifeboat rescue attempt in December 1959 that resulted in the loss of all eight hands on deck. Herbert's merging of collective and personal tragedy makes for the most emotionally charged and devastating sequence of the collection. By marking not only his individual loss but also the universality of grief, the poet offers a collection that speaks to tumultuous times, yet also finds space for hope:

*Grant them peace, Patron of the sea,  
Smith of the winds and rains, from  
Gall of salt's final swallow*

(‘XX’)

*The Wreck of the Fathership* is published by Bloodaxe Books



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