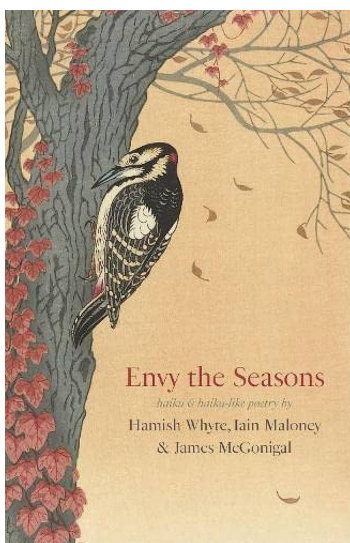


'Envy The Seasons: haiku and haiku-like poetry', by Hamish Whyte, Iain Maloney & James McGonigal

Review by Matthew Macdonald



This mini-anthology brings together the haiku and haiku-like poetry of three Scots writers, with each taking the core concept of the Japanese originals and infusing it with a uniquely Scottish approach and vocabulary.

A haiku is formed traditionally from three phrases of phonetic units in a pattern of 5-7-5. Coming from the original *hokku* form used as the seasonal setting of a longer composite work called a *renga*, a haiku is traditionally formed of two complimentary phrases balanced by a *kireji*, or cutting word, and embodies a directly seasonal image. Not all of these elements translate well, and so the traditional form of an English haiku is a short form poem, often seasonally linked, composed of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

Each poet in the collection incorporates seasonality, and the juxtaposition of natural and artificial life, in charming and often unexpected ways.

Of the three writers, Hamish Whyte writes in a form closest to the traditional

haiku. In addition to the very careful interweaving of specific seasonal images, the entire sequence of translations from Paul Bergese ('Le Coucou du Haiku') covers a year from spring to winter time.

*On the wrinkled cheek
The child deposits a kiss:
A cure for old age.*

As in the haiku above, when Whyte incorporates humanity it is often to counterpose age and youth. This works as an additional reminder of the seasonal and temporal stamp that are the hallmark of haiku.

Birds feature prominently in Whyte's translations, often black birds against stark winter colours -

*The black of the crow
Seems a blacker black today:
The fields are all snow.*

*Its early April:
Blackbird among the flowers:
Guarding the cherries.*

or the wisp of bright colour of a woodpecker seen

*Sprung out of the grove
A zebra flash through the air.
The woodpecker's laugh.*

As would be expected, there is much to do with colour in Whyte's work, particularly in relation to flora and fauna:

*The white butterflies
Are laying siege to the bush:
Rubber plant flowers.*

*Engraved on the shore
Still quivering with water:*

The trees of the sea.

Much of the beauty of these pieces comes from their simplicity and succinct nature, and Whyte's ability to encapsulate so much in so little. One of the best examples of this is a haiku from the winter end of the sequence:

*A shape in your shawl
Keeper of your body's warmth:
The cat on the chair*

While Whyte works far more within the traditional form, Iain Maloney pushes the boundaries slightly further in his poems, which play around with the topography of the page - sometimes longer, sometimes shorter. In many ways they remind me of the Dharma Pops of Kerouac and the Beats. Alongside these exercises in shape and form comes an undercurrent of wry humour:

*After dark
Its too cold
For poetry*

Maloney is as able to encapsulate a complex emotional core in a few words:

*Let the silences
Be silences
We can talk later*

*A hair's length away
Moulding the pillow
With me still*

*The snows of Bennachie
Break the horizon
Of the grave*

The natural world and the seasons are still present across Maloney's work, but in an understated manner. These poems touch more on the minutiae of human life, rather than the interweaving of nature and the modern world. What Maloney

achieves through his poems is the weight of delicate moments, and this skill is best exemplified in the haiku below, presented as the final piece in the sequence 'In Tsurumai Park':

*In Japan
Farewells are long
Goodbyes sudden*

The haiku of the final poet, James McGonigal, sit between the traditional form of Whyte and the more free-form of Maloney. McGonigal approaches his haiku with the resonant and evocative vocab of Scots. Reading his poetry, it seems so obvious that Scots and haiku should go hand in hand. As he mentions in the preface to his work: 'I call them *twigs*, in the Scots sense of a quick realisation, which must come from the Gaelic *tuig*, to understand, perceive or discern':

*Peck awa, birdies -
Try tae wark oot the sleekit
Equations o frost.*

This, the opening poem of McGonigal's loose sequence 'Winter Hereabouts', sets the tone for his approach to this work. Like Maloney, much of McGonigal's haiku touch on more concretely human affairs:

*Slip atween ice-cauld
Sheets for a sled-ride through parks
Smooored wi skirlin dreams.*

*The world's been screivit
In Braille, and we tak a haud
Wi growe-grey mittens.*

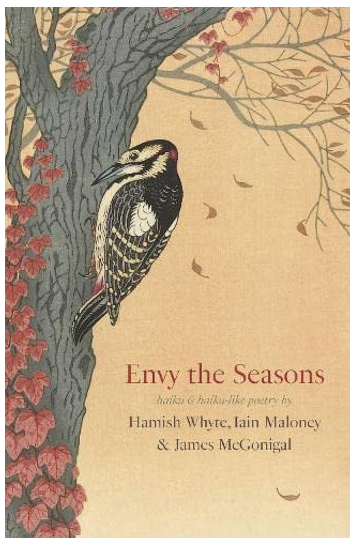
But that's not to say that the natural world doesn't appear in all its splendour for McGonigal - it does, in a discernibly Scottish way:

*The seais nae fashed
By rain blashin doon again
Its back and shoulders*

*Snaw's oan the wey, luik -
Lang-drawn-oot and gowstie clouds
Like heevin's ribcage.*

McGonigal's concept of the *twigs* is one that really allows the Scots language to flourish in the haiku or haiku-like form and, after reading this collection, I hope that it becomes far more commonly used.

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