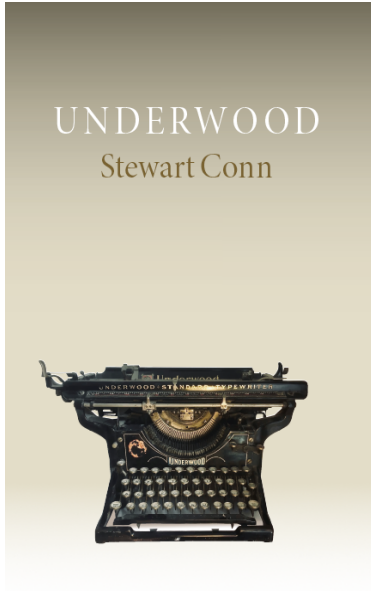


# 'Underwood', by Stewart Conn

## Review by David Manderson



Now in his eighty-seventh year and still one of Scotland's finest poets, Stewart Conn offers us a new pamphlet. *Underwood*, a collection of recent work published by Mariscat, is another affirmation of his sensitive yet thorough probing of the world around him, with his focus on the interplay between his humanity and the things he holds dear, insights often found through art and music.

Appointed Edinburgh's first Makar in 2002, Conn has in many ways beaten a unique path in the arts. Poetry is his foremost practice, with his work exploring his landscapes and cultures and responding to other art forms - especially painting - and the transitoriness of human life. But he has also been a producer, a playwright, a head of radio drama and an encourager of others. The musicologist and composer John Purser, for one, was persuaded by Conn to write a drama of his own. The resulting play, *Carver*, was drawn from Purser's radio programme *Scotland's Music*, broadcast in thirty-five parts on BBC Radio Scotland. Based on the life of a sixteenth-century Scottish composer, it won a Giles Cooper Award in 1991.

Conn's own body of work has certain connecting themes. The Ayshire of his youth is one; the passage of time another; the particular life he has led, first in Glasgow and then Edinburgh, a third. But these are springboards into closely observed

worlds filled with friends, family members, places, events and trips overseas, children and grandchildren, galleries, iconic buildings, animals, views and city scenes. For each of these subjects and many others, Conn makes a poem with a deep dedication to his craft, and often with wry, understated humour.

Conn has also described the poet's task as seeking 'significant detail in the face of horror', and many of the poems here do just that, confronting the terror experienced by many - especially the elderly and infirm - during lockdown. With life restricted to a view through a window, Conn's poems proffer momentary joy. The cheerful chaos of doves crash-landing into a cherry tree. A symphony played full blast over empty gardens. Everyday objects - an ancient typewriter, a blue-fly, a doll - take on new significance. 'Underwood', the vale of tears near Hell where Dante's Virgil walked, is also the typing machine Conn composed his first play on. Its keys are damaged but they still offer 'vital clues' for lively, entertaining work still to be done. The 'real horrors' - isolation, dementia, hallucination, personal loss, abandonment in care homes - are all faced, while a wooden doll on a grandfather clock seems to glow with the protection of a guardian angel. Conn countenances despair and then turns carefully to the small offerings: the memories, gifts and keepsakes that lead us back to our shared humanity. The dismal spectres and 'Household Ghosts' are ordered away.

In addition to the pandemic poems, the poet also offers reflections on work by the artist Peter Doig and others set in post-impressionist Paris, where he feels panic among a mob of roller-bladers and lost in clouds of imaginary steam in the Musée D'Orsay. A faded photograph triggers thoughts of loss while a storyteller's tale reveals that part of ourselves which will forever hurt. Conn's task has always been to lead us back to our own impermanence and fragility, the facts of life that make us realise we are still alive in the world. In the last poem here he hopes that his new ending will be *au revoir*, not *adieu!* Amen to that.

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UNDERWOOD  
Stewart Conn



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