

# 'Dreams of Scottish Youth: A Seventies Odyssey, vols 1 & 2', by Graham Fulton

Review by David Manderson



*Dreams of Scottish Youth: A Seventies Odyssey* is a long poem sequence which describes Graham Fulton's years between the ages of eleven and twenty-two. Fulton was recognised early as one of the leading voices of the Itinerant Poets group set up with the encouragement of Tom Leonard in Paisley in the 1980s. Jim Ferguson, Margaret Fulton Cook and Brian Whittingham, later the first Tannahill Makar, were other members. Defined by the scholar and poet Alan MacGillivray as 'Individualists' due to the shared ethos of insisting their unique voices had the right to be heard, the Itinerants developed into a loose association of writers important within and beyond their town. Now in his sixties, Fulton has been at the forefront of this wave of Paisley poetry from the start.

I met Graham in The Bianca Nero coffee bar, opposite the Abbey in Gauze Street.

***Q. Why did you decide to write these books?***

*The main reason was I couldn't bear the thought of all these amazing memories of that decade being lost forever when I kick the bucket. I didn't want it all to be forgotten dust. I wanted to get all the images and experiences down on*

*record, however small, the good ones, the bad ones, the funny ones, the scary ones. The small things next to the big life-changing things.*

*I didn't want to write a nice flowing autobiography. Memory doesn't work that way. I wanted little flashes plucked at random then put down into a sort of order. Prose poems, I suppose, using heightened imagery instead of ordinary prose. Little snatches of existence that begin and end and move on. To try to make some sense of all the products of the time that are an integral part of it: films, TV, food, drink, music.*

*The books are just a few moments in time compared to the billions I must have actually experienced, but these are the ones that came to my head when I was dredging for memories – so they must be important, significant to me.*

**Q. But why choose this method as a form? Does the use of the short paragraph-poem, if that's how to describe it, have any precursors?**

*Style-wise I was very inspired by the short prose pieces of the American writer Sam Shepard, especially his collections *Motel Chronicles* and *Hawk Moon* (Faber, 1985). I didn't like his poems, but I liked his prose. Haunting, moving, fast bursts of life that were over before you know it.*

**Q. I suppose the question everyone asks is what made you want to become a poet. So... why did you?**

*All the clues to that are there in these books. Tragedy and comedy side by side. Ordinary life made extraordinary. The dark humour. The sixties was a time of innocence and wonder, but the seventies was definitely the ending of innocence, the beginning of hard reality. Cynicism joined with optimism. An incredible energy looking for a focus. I was playing in a band, writing lyrics, daft things. I didn't have a clue, and still didn't have one when I started writing poems in the mid-eighties. But it was an important part of the development. I learnt that writing about small things, everyday things, was vital. Look after the little things and the big ideas will take care of themselves, will emerge out of the 'smallness'.*

**Q. Such as life... and death?**

*I first encountered death up close in this decade, which is the main theme of my*

*poems in later years. It had a big effect on me, and so did the need to live every moment as well and as directly as you can. Music is the thread running through the whole decade. The soundtrack to life.*

***Q. I've heard you describe yourself as a punk poet, which runs the risk I suppose of making you seem a bit dated. It's very specific.***

*Punk was vital, my true era. I was always a nice quiet lad, but punk showed me a way to be an individual without being destructive. Most people think punk was destructive, but it was the exact opposite. It opened creative doors for a lot of creative people. Don't be a spectator. Don't be afraid to be an outsider and don't follow the herd. Find something of your own and go for it as fast as you can. We didn't bevvv much, no drugs, no women, just music. We were focused and driven. I've taken this DIY / don't be afraid to have a go at something punk philosophy through the rest of my life.*

So how closely, or otherwise, does Fulton meet his aims in *Dreams of Scottish Youth*? First, there's no doubt where the memories and vivid flashbacks come from. The books are illustrated throughout with the photographs, posters, ticket stubs, cartoons, holiday snaps, book covers, album covers and polaroids that Fulton has collected from his past. The very ordinariness of these objects says much about the security and freedom he enjoyed as a boy, encouraged by his parents to imagine, to read and to draw. They include a garden snap of his dad Fergie, whose death from a heart attack in his family kitchen takes place towards the end of the first volume. The piling up of detail and the sense of time passing quickly created by the short paragraph form, inspired by Shepard (better known as a screenwriter, playwright and actor), never slackens yet allows poignancy. The poet kisses his dad's forehead one paragraph later, tells his mum he's lost his best friend two paragraphs on. He learns early that everything disappears. What is not said has as much impact as what is, while the pace of the short prose stanzas illustrate another of Fulton's wishes for his work, which is the urgency of the need to live every minute.

Music does indeed run throughout the text, and we are treated to lists of songs (by bands including Lindisfarne, Bowie, Mott the Hoople) that are part of the sense of life whizzing by. As Fulton grows, so do his tastes, and Hawkwind featuring the amazing Robert Calvert saying 'orgasm' over and over and Stacia

dancing naked are noted. Soon, Calvert becomes a Fulton hero and trailblazer as he brings out a book of poems ('Poetry. Good grief.') Split Enz and Cardonald College's art department are appearing over the horizon as the first volume ends.

I agree with Fulton about the importance of punk to his work because it's from this moment in the endless series flashing by - that hot summer of '76 - that his life and purpose meet. The second volume of *Dreams* gathers strength as Fulton, now seventeen, finds his direction. The combined impact of his dad's death and his decision to open his life up to art and music creates in him a quality noticeable throughout his work: determination. Few writers have produced so many collections (twenty-four full-length volumes to date), and the streetwise qualities of speed, focus and not being scared to be different are strikingly evident. Fulton knows the tune ends too soon. He learns the drums and powers his way through friendships, clubs, gigs and more Hawkwind albums. He's a good band member, hard-working, dedicated and fun to be around. The band is what it's all about. God Save the Queen by the Sex Pistols, No More Heroes by The Stranglers. He gets a job in Busby and meets Lesley Drummond (their friendship is the subject of part of another excellent collection). The band gets good, the band falls apart. The Fog disperse. Fulton decides to leave music and do something else. 'If I can't be a drummer in this band then I won't be in any band.' That attitude again.

On his website Fulton describes himself as 'never a member of the Poetry Establishment in Scotland', and no doubt there are some who do not consider his work 'proper' verse in the traditional sense. Personally, I'm glad he's still out there, banging away to his own tune on his sharp, subtle drum. May it go on for a long time.

*Dreams of Scottish Youth* is published by Published in Silence Press



*Dreams of Scottish Youth: A Seventies Odyssey* is a long poem sequence which describes Graham Fulton's years between the ages of eleven and twenty-two. Fulton was recognised early as one of the leading voices of the Itinerant Poets group set up with the encouragement of Tom Leonard in Paisley in the 1980s. Jim Ferguson, Margaret Fulton Cook and Brian Whittingham, later the first Tannahill Makar, were other members. Defined by the scholar and poet Alan MacGillivray as 'Individualists' due to the shared ethos of insisting their unique voices had the right to be heard, the Itinerants developed into a loose association of writers important within and beyond their town. Now in his sixties, Fulton has been at the forefront of this wave of Paisley poetry from the start.

I met Graham in The Bianca Nero coffee bar, opposite the Abbey in Gauze Street.

***Q. Why did you decide to write these books?***

*The main reason was I couldn't bear the thought of all these amazing memories of that decade being lost forever when I kick the bucket. I didn't want it all to be forgotten dust. I wanted to get all the images and experiences down on record, however small, the good ones, the bad ones, the funny ones, the scary ones. The small things next to the big life-changing things.*

*I didn't want to write a nice flowing autobiography. Memory doesn't work that way. I wanted little flashes plucked at random then put down into a sort of order. Prose poems, I suppose, using heightened imagery instead of ordinary prose. Little snatches of existence that begin and end and move on. To try to make some sense of all the products of the time that are an integral part of it: films, TV, food, drink, music.*

*The books are just a few moments in time compared to the billions I must have actually experienced, but these are the ones that came to my head when I was dredging for memories – so they must be important, significant to me.*

**Q. But why choose this method as a form? Does the use of the short paragraph-poem, if that's how to describe it, have any precursors?**

*Style-wise I was very inspired by the short prose pieces of the American writer Sam Shepard, especially his collections *Motel Chronicles* and *Hawk Moon* (Faber, 1985). I didn't like his poems, but I liked his prose. Haunting, moving, fast bursts of life that were over before you know it.*

**Q. I suppose the question everyone asks is what made you want to become a poet. So... why did you?**

*All the clues to that are there in these books. Tragedy and comedy side by side. Ordinary life made extraordinary. The dark humour. The sixties was a time of innocence and wonder, but the seventies was definitely the ending of innocence, the beginning of hard reality. Cynicism joined with optimism. An incredible energy looking for a focus. I was playing in a band, writing lyrics, daft things. I didn't have a clue, and still didn't have one when I started writing poems in the mid-eighties. But it was an important part of the development. I learnt that writing about small things, everyday things, was vital. Look after the little things and the big ideas will take care of themselves, will emerge out of the 'smallness'.*

**Q. Such as life... and death?**

*I first encountered death up close in this decade, which is the main theme of my poems in later years. It had a big effect on me, and so did the need to live every moment as well and as directly as you can. Music is the thread running through the whole decade. The soundtrack to life.*

**Q. I've heard you describe yourself as a punk poet, which runs the risk I suppose of making you seem a bit dated. It's very specific.**

*Punk was vital, my true era. I was always a nice quiet lad, but punk showed me a way to be an individual without being destructive. Most people think punk was destructive, but it was the exact opposite. It opened creative doors for a lot*

*of creative people. Don't be a spectator. Don't be afraid to be an outsider and don't follow the herd. Find something of your own and go for it as fast as you can. We didn't bevvv much, no drugs, no women, just music. We were focused and driven. I've taken this DIY / don't be afraid to have a go at something punk philosophy through the rest of my life.*

So how closely, or otherwise, does Fulton meet his aims in *Dreams of Scottish Youth*? First, there's no doubt where the memories and vivid flashbacks come from. The books are illustrated throughout with the photographs, posters, ticket stubs, cartoons, holiday snaps, book covers, album covers and polaroids that Fulton has collected from his past. The very ordinariness of these objects says much about the security and freedom he enjoyed as a boy, encouraged by his parents to imagine, to read and to draw. They include a garden snap of his dad Fergie, whose death from a heart attack in his family kitchen takes place towards the end of the first volume. The piling up of detail and the sense of time passing quickly created by the short paragraph form, inspired by Shepard (better known as a screenwriter, playwright and actor), never slackens yet allows poignancy. The poet kisses his dad's forehead one paragraph later, tells his mum he's lost his best friend two paragraphs on. He learns early that everything disappears. What is not said has as much impact as what is, while the pace of the short prose stanzas illustrate another of Fulton's wishes for his work, which is the urgency of the need to live every minute.

Music does indeed run throughout the text, and we are treated to lists of songs (by bands including Lindisfarne, Bowie, Mott the Hoople) that are part of the sense of life whizzing by. As Fulton grows, so do his tastes, and Hawkwind featuring the amazing Robert Calvert saying 'orgasm' over and over and Stacia dancing naked are noted. Soon, Calvert becomes a Fulton hero and trailblazer as he brings out a book of poems ('Poetry. Good grief.') Split Enz and Cardonald College's art department are appearing over the horizon as the first volume ends.

I agree with Fulton about the importance of punk to his work because it's from this moment in the endless series flashing by - that hot summer of '76 - that his life and purpose meet. The second volume of *Dreams* gathers strength as Fulton, now seventeen, finds his direction. The combined impact of his dad's death and his decision to open his life up to art and music creates in him a quality noticeable throughout his work: determination. Few writers have produced so

many collections (twenty-four full-length volumes to date), and the streetwise qualities of speed, focus and not being scared to be different are strikingly evident. Fulton knows the tune ends too soon. He learns the drums and powers his way through friendships, clubs, gigs and more Hawkwind albums. He's a good band member, hard-working, dedicated and fun to be around. The band is what it's all about. God Save the Queen by the Sex Pistols, No More Heroes by The Stranglers. He gets a job in Busby and meets Lesley Drummond (their friendship is the subject of part of another excellent collection). The band gets good, the band falls apart. The Fog disperse. Fulton decides to leave music and do something else. 'If I can't be a drummer in this band then I won't be in any band.' That attitude again.

On his website Fulton describes himself as 'never a member of the Poetry Establishment in Scotland', and no doubt there are some who do not consider his work 'proper' verse in the traditional sense. Personally, I'm glad he's still out there, banging away to his own tune on his sharp, subtle drum. May it go on for a long time.

Dreams of Scottish Youth is published by Published in Silence Press

---

*(c) The Bottle Imp*