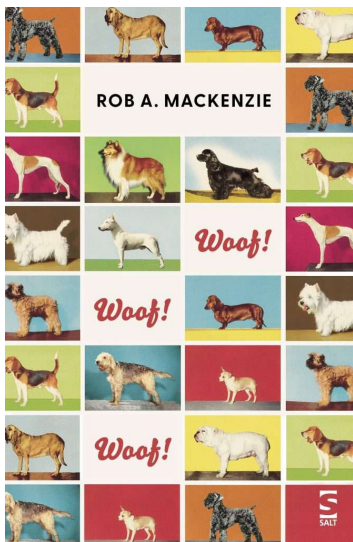


# 'Woof! Woof! Woof!', by Rob A. Mackenzie

Review by Matthew Macdonald



Rob A. Mackenzie's fourth collection of poetry is something of a diversion from his previous works in terms of content, tone and form. *The Opposite of Cabbage* (2009), *The Good News* (2013) and *The Book of Revelation* (2020), all published by SALT, were explorations of life with tongue well wedged cheekward, an eyebrow raised at convention and pretension, and a willingness to glory in the sillier side of the world. From its title, *Woof! Woof! Woof!* would appear to be another step along the same path, yet this collection shows Mackenzie breaking away from his own tradition and forging something convincingly new without abandoning the hallmarks that returning readers will be looking for.

Mackenzie's ability to distil ideas into sparse turns of phrase remains as strong as ever, captured in the poem 'Shore' -

*compare the ancients*  
*use of the passive*  
  
*voice to designate*  
*acts of God*

So, too, do we find Mackenzie's characteristic blend of clear-cut images against

surrealist backdrops. A painter's eye reveals itself here in poems such as 'The Book', 'Goldfish', 'A Bad Morning for Radio 4' and 'Recipes', with the collection as a whole all the more enjoyable for the thematic range that Mackenzie brings to his work.

In 'Portobello Beach', each stanza correlates with a seasonal change taking place. Shorn of the surrealism and satirical sardonicism of other poems in the collection, this poem shines brighter for its simplicity and the humanity in its tone, which evokes both longing and sadness. A similar lyrical touch is present in 'Arthur's Seat', my personal favourite in the collection 'Exchange/Gift', and 'The Hour, the Hours'. Though this lyrical perception has always been present in his work, these poems showcase Mackenzie honing his ability to condense reality into art.

In terms of form, one of the most intriguing poems is 'Triptych'. Mackenzie presents the opening lines of the Bible (Genesis 1:1-5) as the central column of three, which wrap around each other to enable the reader to process and understand the lines in multiple ways. Each column can be read as a small lyric in and of itself; each line can be read horizontally across each column; and the first and third columns can be read together to form an ephemeral poem of their own. Here, Mackenzie's adaptation of space and the mannerism of his presentation on the page evidence the development of his experimental poetic style.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a collection crafted over the last few years, *Woof! Woof! Woof!* responds to the political climate and provides biting social commentary. While some poems wear such content lightly, like the sprawling poem-sequence 'Slates of the Nation', there are also those which place Mackenzie's political leanings front and centre, as seen in 'The British':

*It brought cheer to think of themselves  
as victors, without having to think  
of who the victims were or whether*

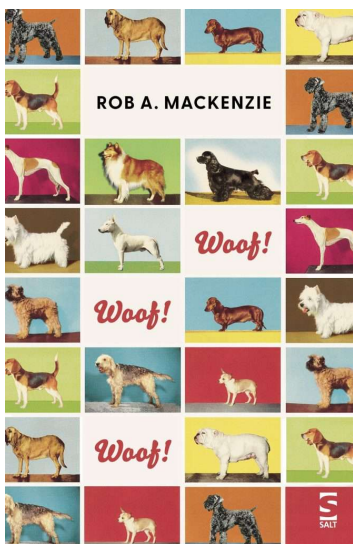
*victory was worth the heat awaiting them*

Throughout the collection, Mackenzie showcases his ability to synthesise something entirely ineffable and ultimately amorphous into something that can be expressed and, more importantly, understood by anyone in only a few words or lines, highlighted in the opening stanza of 'Year of the Rat':

*I'm not always able to miss people the way I feel I should  
the living and the dead: absences that leave me despairing  
at their lack of progress, or my failure to preserve them in  
memory, lie astrologers' predictions before a year begins*

For readers already familiar with Mackenzie's work, *Woof! Woof! Woof!* will be an enjoyable experience of finding the core components of his adventurous style emboldened by new flourishes of form, movement and technical ability. For those who are reading Mackenzie for the first time - this will be a hell of a first taste of his poetic talent.

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