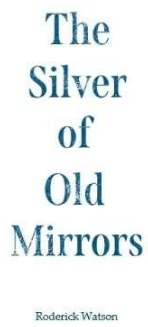
‘The Silver of Old Mirrors’, by Roderick Watson

Review by Jeannie MacLean



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Of course! Roderick Watson’s poems in the slim volume in my handbag have been laid down on its pages with thought and care in an edition which pleases the eye, as well as the heart and soul. The speckled photographs which bookend the poems create atmosphere, silently enhancing them. Words, printing, visual art, woven together. A collaboration with the Voyage Out Press echoing Manutius’s achievement some five hundred years previously.

Roderick Watson has published 2 other collections of poems, *True History on the Walls* (1976), and *Into the Blue Wavelengths* (2004). An Aberdonian by birth he studied at the University of Aberdeen, and Peterhouse, Cambridge where he gained a doctorate on the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid. He has had a long career in higher education encouraging the writing of others and being involved in

publishing and is currently Emeritus Professor at Stirling University and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Approaching this collection by a man of Roderick Watson's stature in the Scottish world of letters felt slightly daunting, until I reached the title and first line of the poem 'Noli Timere': 'So this is it and here we all are'. I felt welcome. Welcome to watch the mother playing cards and to admire the unfolding of memory and recognise 'it is time alone at work' while exploring the timescales of the poem. Watson has used his poetic skill to engage the reader fully in the process.

'Touch your finger to the surface and reach', a delicate instruction in the eponymous poem 'The Silver of Old Mirrors', seems to contain all we need to access the ideas of memory and passing time which permeate the collection. Memories shift and glitter on the page inviting you to seek that which is conjured into sound and image to strike both heart and eye.

The soundscape of 'In the Park' is immersive in its description of a music gig in France on a hot afternoon, given to us in the present tense so we can feel the heat, hear the booming music, the helicopter and the cacophony of the birds, and share the 'sudden delight at the end of it all'. It demands to be read aloud.

The poem 'On Sleat' brings us from deep time and the formation of folds of Lewisian gneiss, to the immediacy of memory of a summer afternoon at the point of Sleat, feeling the heat in the rock and 'the breathless drop of sudden desire' on a languid afternoon.

Have you ever experienced the flash of a memory stimulated by seeing something like bright light on water? Memory caught in a moment. Roderick Watson captures this process in 'At the Bridge'. A moving love poem in which he describes his recognition, 'She is going to be the light of my life'. Memory at shutter speed: 'anyway it was one hundredth of a second in the year 1960 quick as the click of a shutter opening and closing on both our lives – the silver salts that pierce the heart out of the dark'. Although the shutter speed is fast the image lasts through time and reprints itself in the constancy of love. The passage of time in this poem, apparently simple, is quite complex in its working. The beginning is present, with a juxtaposition between recent past and projected future, repeated in the third stanza as he speaks of 'the rest of our long day two children and three grandchildren yet to come', where time seems to move both ways at the same

time. And forwards and backwards again, ‘out of the dark into the light back to the dark again.’ Ending with past memory in sound and sight, ‘The river’s roar. The salmon falls. The green shirt she wore.’

Warmth and quiet intimacy are offered among images of ordinary life, yet this simplicity belies the complexity in poetic structure and meaning. ‘An Ordinary Day’ teases us into thinking this is about playing the saxophone, with the idea that practice will bring mastery, until we realise it is about life itself, with a repetitive image of the last breath of life. A meditation on death while living, bringing memories to the fore and seeing them through to their inevitable ending.

The section *bursting into light* opens with ‘Surfacing’. The mysterious early days of a baby’s life described in an evolutionary way from watery depths, until she reaches out and grips her sibling’s finger and joins the world of others – ‘and then at last to grip’ immortalising that wondrous moment, which science would have us believe is mere reflex.

‘Family Values’ offers contrasts of children who have gone before or live in another culture, and sets them beside observations of more modern youngsters, capturing in fifteen words glorious evidence that ‘Grandchildren have passed this way’. In contrast the subtlety of ‘Old News’ in conflating horrors from local history with the plight of migrants seen on television news is caught in the image of shadows across the river which ‘do not follow when we turn aside’.

Watson’s poetry is accessible and inclusive of the reader but keeps letting us know we are in the hands of a poet who can conjure lasting images from the apparently simple, giving us memory ‘like the back of your mind. Damp forgotten storage’, in ‘Paddling in the Styx’, and lightly voicing the fear of diminishing memory, ‘There are many of us here / on the ferny bank waving to each other…’.

We are left with poignant questioning of memory in ‘Left Unfinished’:

> *Where do they come from*
> *these sudden returns?*
>
> *Why do they come back after*
> *So many years? At night*
> *When you aren’t looking?*

The melancholy of regret captured, ‘more lasting than bronze’. This delicately curated and masterful collection takes us into imaginative spaces which exist between words and lines, those spaces to be inhabited by the readers’ own reflections and empathy. It rewards repeated reading by unfolding more layers of poetic experience, classical allusion, and treasured memories of the extraordinary ordinary in life.

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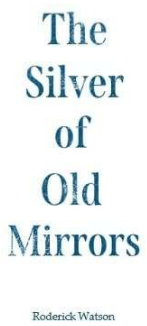

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