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NOT JUST MOONSHINE

Tessa Ransford
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Reviewer Dorothy McMillan

No one has done more for the cause of poetry in Scotland than Tessa Ransford: one of her enduring monuments is the Scottish Poetry Library which she founded in 1984 but she has not been idle since she retired from active management and the SL moved into its present premises in 1999. Since then there have been books and pamphlets, honours, awards, a scholarship and a Royal Literary Fund Fellowship at the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh.

Ransford is an eclectic and committed poet: eclectic in her willingness to absorb whatever tradition of thought or craft fits her immediate purpose and committed to what have seemed to her inescapable spiritual and aesthetic truths. She is able to be simultaneously modern and traditional and to embrace the creeds and values of both east and west that best fit her passionate belief in freedom of thought and openness to all that is best in past and present. She is aided in this, of course, by her experience of India, where she was born and spent her childhood years, Pakistan where she worked in her twenties, and Scotland, especially Edinburgh, which has been her home for many years.

Her latest collection, *Not Just Moonshine*, compiled for her seventieth birthday, draws its poems from each of the last four decades and so celebrates her life in poems and her poems in the history of the second half of the last century and the first years of this. What an impressively varied gathering it is: there is little, whether of national or merely local concern, that has passed her by. She responds to global issues – nuclear, ecological, political – but also, for example, in a manner reminiscent of Hopkins, to the movement of sculptures away from what has seemed to be their natural home in the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh to the new Gallery of Modern Art. This apparently small displacement helps us to understand the cost of other exiles and ejections. We

Sense the exile they must know
in having lost their Eden,
and the loss we find
in this unpeopled garden.

Much of the interest in poems collected from a long period derives from how they change over time. Thus the poem ‘Islam’, shaped in the pattern of a minaret, was a celebratory poem when it was written in the Seventies and has now become a much needed plea for

tolerance and love; and ‘Mother Forgive’ for a ten year old “lass dead in Belfast” now becomes a memorial for many more dead children from across the globe.

The volume’s epigraph quotes Walter Scott’s insistence that writers will never grasp their real function if they do not learn to ‘consider everything as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart’. Ransford’s title puns delicately on both the human and natural implications of ‘moonshine’ – the poems do engage with the human heart but also with the natural world, literally with moonshine and other natural phenomena, and they do so in a manner which lifts their sentiments above the merely material, without their ever becoming sententious. The transcendent is invariably linked with the mundane and the human with the natural world. In ‘Autumn in Kincraig’ the natural and the human are delightfully and wittily linked by half-rhyme in the last line of each stanza: “rain splatters/ on plastic hoods among the woods…. then shower of sun/ gently catches golden larches”.

There is a kind of graciousness about the later ‘Poems Written Since the Millennium’, that supports the notion that age brings a growth in wisdom, a better understanding of oneself and one’s place:

Don’t ask us where we come from; where we go
is more important. Yet we leave a trail
a string of beauty, broken, that we made,
homeless yet homeful, scattered now.

But Ransford has not grown resigned; not at all. The recent poems are just as determinedly outspoken about injustice, cruelty and simple carelessness as anything she wrote when she was young. Casual mistreatment of the vulnerable and cavalier damage to the world we live in still lift Ransford to eloquent protest and protection, as when she asks Pheobe Traquair’s tapestry angels to receive “today’s dead children/blasted by bombs dropped ‘collaterally’” and the “bodies of children who slowly die/of infestation, infection, starvation, neglect”.

Yet many poems are still celebratory. The colourful waxwings with “yellow tail and sealing-wax red tip/to every feather of the wings” are generously welcomed: “migrants among our crows and starlings/our gulls accustomed to the slanting sun”. And when the speaker in the concluding poem asks the Wishing Tree for freedom, harmony and for her poems to tell a story for the future, for her children’s children, the “luminous shoots” and the “blossoms budding from every coin” seem to be signs that grant the wish. Tessa Ransford has never lost her faith in that powerful trinity – nature, love and, above all, poetry.