

Northwords Now

Autumn 2010

Reviewed by Irene Hossack

Tessa Ransford's *Not just Moonshine* (2008) collects new and selected poems written over the last four decades. In his Foreword to the volume, Michael Lister explains the decision to order the poems according to their date of composition, rather than date of publication.

He writes that ordering them this way allows the poems to refer more to Ransford's life than to her books. This is an interesting approach, which also helps to reveal the growth and development of Ransford's oeuvre and her evolving poetic voice through the years. The themes of womanhood, motherhood, love, spirituality myth, the natural world and sense of place, are as much evident in the early poems as they are in those written recently. It seems inappropriate to single out certain poems from others as the collection represents a life and as such is of a whole. Overall the poems reflect a woman's experience and the experiences and insights of women, echoing the feminine in voice, tone and subject matter.

The volume takes its title from a remark made by Sir Walter Scott '...every thing is moonshine, compared with the education of the heart', quoted at the beginning of the book. Given that the poems are a reflection of Ransford's life and explore many wide-ranging themes, the collection can be seen as a reply, showing that moonshine is not insubstantial or without meaning and is a worthy subject matter for poetry. Indeed the Foreword tells us that Ransford selected the title in defiance of the notion that looking on the moon is old-fashioned. This is further confirmed by the poem that sits opposite the quotation. 'Moonlight over Arthur's Seat' is a poem in isolation, before the Acknowledgements and Foreword. Arthur's Seat, a landmark of Edinburgh, with the reflective light of the moon playing upon it, brings an exchange between nature and humanity, showing their interdependence. This poem serves as the poetic introduction to the themes and subject-matter of the poems that come after it.

'Poems written in the 1970s' begins with 'Poetry of Persons' where repetition in the first lines of each stanza creates the sense in which people interconnect. It is a love poem to humanity showing that we have most when we let go. 'How things happen' is a development of the theme of love and uses repetition to reinforce the connection between human love and nature. Love is 'beyond analysis', it 'happens' and cannot be defined. Comparing a first meeting with that of two seagulls 'caught in a shaft of sun' the poem develops the proposition that we are not in control, as we imagine ourselves to be, but should embrace the notion that we are subject to forces of nature and good can come of this.

'Poems written in the 1980s' contains some of the poems from the series 'Medusa Dozen'. Exploring the complexities of womanhood through the figure of Medusa, these powerful poems express the female condition. 'Medusa Six' begins: "

*Self-transformation is what makes us women,
our peculiarity, defining feature.
Watch it as girl becomes mother,
as the mother adapts to
every phase of growing in her child.*

Embracing the sometimes negative figure of woman as 'The witch, the wise woman' the poem claims these characteristics as positive forces, women are "part of the spiral of creation,/ its dyings and renewals.'

Throughout the collection are poems that play with form. One formal element in particular, is the use of repetition. This repetition can be within stanzas or through stanzas and brings a sense of wholeness to the poems, reinforcing meaning, as formal choices should. In some poems the final word in a line is repeated in the first word of the next line.

Waxwings in the park: variety is the spice of life'
(from 'Poems written since the millennium')
is one example of this:

*A flock waxwings in the sycamore
sycamore in February in the park
park green and windswept in the city
city grey yet glistening in the east*

The repetition brings a focus to the language and at the same time develops rhythmic evocations of landscape, though Ransford is careful not to overuse this formal element. Poems that explore science are informed and playful. 'String Theory' (from 'Poems written since the millennium') considers "a universe that's knitted out of string'. 'Choices: the Goldilocks Principle' successfully plays with form to consider 'the golden mean', a scientific notion of extremes, and the requirement for things to be just right for life in our universe to flourish:

*the value of the in-between:
that just-right balance knyfe-edge keen
for human equilibrium*

The poem understands the fragility and complexity of life for humanity and in nature, themes which run through Ransford's poetic output.

Tessa Ransford's contribution to the life of poetry in Scotland is remarkable. Among many other achievements, she was the founder/ director of the Scottish Poetry Library from 1984 to 1999 and set up the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award to encourage poetry pamphlet publication. It is to be hoped that she will continue supporting and encouraging poets, and poetry writing in Scotland, and that we will experience more of her poetic explorations in the years to come. |

The Eildon Tree

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Reviewed by Julian Colton

For the past forty years or more Tessa Ransford has had a profound influence on the Scottish Poetry writing scene.

She is author of sixteen books and pamphlets, founder of the Scottish Poetry Library in 1984, and the School of Poets, was editor of *Lines Review*

for over a decade and founder of the Callum MacDonald Memorial Award for Scottish pamphlet poetry. All this before recognising her sterling service to Scottish Pen and her Royal Literary Fund writing fellowship at the Centre for Human Ecology and more recently at Queen Margaret University. She is clearly a poet, and poetry facilitator, of immense energy and vision. *Not Just Moonshine* is yet more confirmation of this viewpoint. Split into sections reflecting much of her best work from the 70s, 80s, 90s and other poems written since the Millennium, it's a book allowing a fascinating overview, dare I say it's a magnum opus, of a life dedicated to poetry, ecology, environmentalism, family, music, friends, spiritual matters and all aspects of life centred on creativity. However, as she says in a later poem 'In My Bones', these concerns arise from an organic holistic lifestyle as natural to her as eating food:

*Drill my bones, shake the dust
nothing shows how I am fed
by poetry, music, children, friends;
paintings, letters, photographs
undetectable to those
who dig my bones millennia hence.*

Art here flows from daily life and though many of the poems might seem to some intellectual, and perhaps even difficult when she's contemplating Eastern religions, mythologies, epistemology, Love, Beauty, Wisdom, Ransford never loses sight of the fact of who she is as a human being and her role as Mother, lover, wife, daughter and her part in a greater community, indeed the wider cosmos. For example, her reflections on India are not those of a mere tourist as her thoughts are embedded in deep personal experience. See 'Two Way' for confirmation:

*I think of India and yearn for my childhood,
my parents brave and hardworking who wilted
there my siblings who died. Here I found
a country reserved as if promised and jilted ...*

*That's how my ancestor sailed in a paddle steamer
from Clyde to Malay, became Harbour Master.
Practical, kind, principled, tough, yet prey
to ideals, we're set to go on like that: two way.*

For Ransford there is always the pull and root of India, the foundation and lure of Edinburgh/ Scotland's history and future and yet the sense of belonging to a world, a universe beyond borders, beyond statehood.

This may or may not be a consequence of her youthful feelings of statelessness. The later works show a poet finding peace in a devolved Scotland with perhaps an eye on full independence.

*A step for Scotland carved in stone
a parliament without a throne
a country each of us can own*

*a wisdom, knowing as we are known
a going forth and coming home.*

*Who among us now will work
for light that penetrates the dark
for freedom climbing like the lark
for the democratic spark -
whose the tread that fits this mark?*

(Incantation 2000)

This long book rewards the reader who follows the development of her argument over time, who takes the trouble to look up the obscure word, the previously unmet concept. Speaking as an editor here, what is most gratifying when considering any Ransford piece is the clear writing and the thought which has been invested in the poem's form. There are sonnets, concrete and free verse poems et al, but whatever the layout, the writing is always underpinned by incredible clarity, a crucial consideration for anyone who wishes to adopt the poet's vocation. And it is a vocation. This collection leaves you in no doubt of that fact.

The thoughts of R.S. Thomas might be apposite in his 'To a Young Poet':

*For the first twenty years you are still growing,
Bodily that is; as a poet, of course...*

*From forty on
You learn from the sharp cuts and jags
Of poems that have come to pieces
In your crude hands".*

*You are old now
As years reckon, but in that slower
World of the poet you are just coming
To sad manhood...*

And that's the thing about Ransford's work, it never comes to pieces. Her deceptively low register, her often eschewing of simple, convenient rhymes and alliterations, allows her readers to remain onside, to share the thought. Though I have to put my cards on the table and say that in all truthfulness for me the consistently strongest section of the book is devoted to her work from the 1990's when themes of love, family and loss are to the fore in poems such as 'Elegy', 'Stoic', 'Entwined' and 'Two Halves'.

These poems take strength from their emotional directness and yet in a more cerebral poem like 'Conception' Ransford can still catch you off balance and reel you in, deftly demonstrating her knowledge and command of device in a poem, despite the reference to Shelley, reminiscent in rhythm of 'On First Looking Into Chapman 's Homer' by Keats:

*Copernicus imagined revolutionary orbs
and their celestial movement, uniformly*

*circular, the axiom of astronomy; and Shelley
saw Allegra stretch out her arms to him
dead dream—child in the shore's wild foam
where he would drown
on 8th July, a chance storm.*

'Maiden Aunts' is a good example of the poet's balanced perspective even when considering close relatives. Ransford nimbly avoids falling into the trap of over sentimentalising or looking down her nose. Knowledge, personal insight, reflection, again it's all to be shared.

*Jane, Belle and Ella
three sisters bright and beautiful
virginity a kind of hell,
despised, denied, rejected,
hypocritically respected.
Now we can turn this upside down,
make spinsterhood the highest crown:
let fertility now avail
for every Ella, Jane and Belle.*

This sharing allows Ransford to consider socio-political events and it's quite astonishing how she manages the difficult balancing act of intellectual consistency and yet being able to develop or modify her viewpoints with time.

Despite the obvious strength of the 90's section there are fine works spread liberally throughout the collection. A personal early favourite of this reviewer is 'How things happen':

*Our meeting was beyond analysis
it happened
like sunlight catching a seagull
two seagulls
so that they fly in the gleam of it.*

*We were going the same way
as it happened
although we did not stop to ask
nor did we
think of going separately.*

*We were hoping the same world
would happen
though we did not compare notes
try to define
the method or the end of it.*

*We did not think of love.
If it happens
it will be beyond analysis
like two seagulls*

caught in a shaft of sun.

Such profound wisdom and doesn't it usually arise from poems with deceptively simple words and images? *'Not Just Moonshine'* is a fine collection from one of Scotland's most significant and interesting living poets.