

## THE INTIMACY OF PLACE

*Made in Edinburgh – Poems and Evocations of Holyrood Park* by Tessa Ransford with  
photographs by Michael Knowles

There is currently a new attention being paid to Place. Often it comes with that important capital P. These Places tend not to be places we know through quotidian experience, but Places whose layers of history, natural and social life are unpicked and examined anew. Psychogeographers walk parcels of landscape, looking for clues as to why the place/Place makes them feel the way they do. None of this is unwelcome; it is simply a change of accent and intent. For, of course, there have always been writers whose concerns are deeply embedded in a sense of place: Norman MacCaig's Lochinver, for example, or Michael Longley's Carrigskeewaun. But, in each of these cases, there is the rinsed eye of the visitor rather than the daily encounter. This is what makes Tessa Ransford's *Made in Edinburgh, Poems and Evocations of Holyrood Park* so interesting.

The poems in the book reflect a thirty year engagement with Holyrood Park – in fact the earliest poems here were published in 1987. So, although the book is structured seasonally, we can be sure that much of what is being observed is layered by the exercise of repeated observation. Against such familiarity ('what of the singing thrush I stopped to see/and where the yellow-hammer and their nests?' from *Ambience*), there is the excitement of incident:

A spaniel ran among [the geese] as  
they fed, and they have risen  
as one, alight, and feed again in flock

Gulls, too, are circling  
noisily by the window

as if there were agreement in dissent

Celtic heads and beaks and knotted

necks with vivid eyes

have come to life around me

(from *12 December*)

Many of the poems have a specific date as their title and this adds to the sense of the book as a journal. If one of the primary aims of poetry is to bear witness, then *Made in Edinburgh* bears witness to a natural reserve in the centre of an ancient city that many, through familiarity, ignore: its titles embrace *Trees in Winter Sunlight*, *Jackdaws*, *Waxwings*, *Mating Toads*, *Cygnets* and *Dragonfly*. There is even a spirit of the place in *Gorse Girl*:

My gorse girl

dazling pale

*quine o' the whin*

scorns to smile

There is an aesthetic challenge here: how best to respond to such a steady influx of sensory material. The poems employ a large range of forms, but are characterised by lucidity and flexibility – the clean lines of the sketch. They flow with minimal punctuation – echoing the notations of the eye:

Just where they fell

sprawled in the park

on sunlit grass

a bike, a boy, a girl  
in black, white and steel

(11 July – *tete-a-tete*)

There is also a playfulness in many of the poems; a delight in rhythm:

Wind in pines  
wind on water  
wind in rushes  
wind on feather

(*March Weather*).

But of course, for all its familiarity, Holyrood Park is central to Edinburgh (to the more ancient story that the poems also touch on) and so this is also a book of poems about Edinburgh itself. 'Robert Fergusson, /before his fall and desolate death' is mentioned in *Edinburgh, April Evening*. However, the fascination with Place is of course that everyone experiences it differently. There is much here that reader will recognise, but the book, as a whole, represents Tessa Ransford's Holyrood Park. Both hers and Michael Knowles, whose black and white photographs reframe what is familiar and also capture a wildness that will make many of us look at this landscape afresh. In doing both of these things, Knowles work enhances the experience of reading the poems. There are many fine photographs of birds, so it is fitting that, in writing about swallows in *Homeseeker*, Ransford should acknowledge the nest site of her own creativity:

My home is equally in my head and I seek it  
always, not allowing myself to rest.

Tom Pow