



University  
of Glasgow

Bold, Valentina (1995) Review of: H. McMillan, Horridge. *Lines Review*,  
134 . pp. 52-53. ISSN 1952-1998

Copyright © 1995 The Author.

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or  
study, without prior permission or charge

The content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format  
or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/90690/>

Deposited on: 18 February 2014

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

A cheery, matter-of-fact way of commenting on life's tribulations—typical of the North East.

And the puzzles and frustrations? There are some glosses for individual poems, but very few. Most do not need them, admittedly, and the Editor recommends the *Concise Scots Dictionary* for difficulties with Scots words. George Bruce's introduction is helpful too for the ". . . but I know what I like" reader. Nevertheless, some puzzles did remain—though it does a reader no harm to be puzzled. Perhaps more frustrating is the lack of bibliographic detail, and not just to satisfy a curiosity as to whether one poet was our former biology teacher.

These are minor quibbles. I like some of Ian Olsen's selection and not others. But the anthology makes me think about Aberdeen and remember words, places and moods. This was obviously one of its main intentions.

CHRISTINE SINCLAIR

## HORRIDGE

By Hugh McMillan. Chapman Publishing, £5.95.

I first encountered Hugh McMillan, and his poetry, in 1993. As the only passengers on a 6 am train from Glasgow to Dumfries, we struck up a conversation. Enthusiastic about verse, even at that early hour, McMillan gave me copies of *tramontana* (1990) and his lettercard *Horridge* (the kernel of the present volume).

The technical facility of previous collections is equally evident here. Aside from this, the most striking aspect of *Horridge* is the employment of two opposed personae. On the one hand, there is an understated, sensitive soul; endearingly reminiscent of Frank Kuppner at his most thoughtful. On the other, there is a pawky humorist whose voice is, at times, gratingly brash.

A series of lyrical, if at times depressing, landscapes exemplify the first style. Natural backdrops overpower figures within McMillan's poems. He is preoccupied by unequal interactions between people and places. "Tea Leaves" juxtaposes "October afternoons / disguised as night" with "a boy with scarlet cheeks" interested primarily in comics. "Impressions," centred on St Andrews, offers evocative details like "gulls tumbling across wells of blue / cut like iceholes" and a horse "at the rim of the sea." Nature is dominant here; while the sands remain: "we walk back / leaving no footprints." "The Window" makes a provocative point of contact between the environment and its inhabitants and draws attention to human hubris: "as if all the stars had to look at was us."

Another recurrent concern, no doubt reflecting the writer's experience as a history teacher, is time. Eternity is encapsulated in "Ritual Roads," showing McMillan's descriptive skills to their full advantage. "Checked fields and webs of trees" highlight the "crisp Sunday creases of the land." The poet's characteristically pared-down vocabulary allows an apt simplicity to this countryside, inhabited by shadowy figures:

and people, ghosts on a landscape green as sap,  
move off to church on paths scattered in the hills  
like scars; gingerly, as though on glass or bones  
or memories, the purpose transient,  
the roads, ritual.

McMillan's fascination with continuities between past and present is balanced by his cynicism towards the heritage industry, "The Oban Experience" is admirably concise, comparing the "voodoo" of "Heritage Wharf" with the significant seascape which surrounds it: "not a hologram or clockwork gull in sight." McMillan discerns "a sad story worth divining" here, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. Occasionally, though, his ironic tendency is overdone. "The World Book of the McMillans" mocks commercial history within a single-joke framework, sustained with difficulty:

Dear Hugh McMillan,  
you have been selected by our clan computer  
to receive a copy of  
The World Book of the McMillans \$149.95  
(including unique hand painted coat of arms).

Among the ancestors referred to in "The World Book" are bizarre figures like "Hector 'Steamboats' McMillan, / the inventor of the 12 Bore Scrotal Pump Beam." Less glamorous predecessors are ignored, like "Archie McMillan / who died of silicosis" and "Struan who drank himself to death."

Serious points about selective pasts are often obscured by the slapdash humour of *Horridge*. Its couthy cast of characters is, sometimes, overwhelmingly irritating. In "West Coast" an unappealing drunk poses as "a Scottish fisherman" in "a historical tableau." Similarly, "The Whaler: History" describes the last of a line, who sits in a wicker chair drinking a bottle of beer: "Fuck youse, he shouts at the trippers" observing "it was hard but we had fringe religions / and folk music." The final comment is over-obvious: the whaler's jet crosses, at £3, are "for history surely / a small price to pay."

Schoolboy wit, then, detracts from *Horridge's* success. The book's framing pieces, for instance, are not very funny. Preceding the poetry is a piece highlighting McMillan's neglect by the editors of *32 Poets Who Live in the Central Belt Not in Any Anthology Yet*. Sometimes McMillan seems driven by a need to shock, with shades of Graham Fulton at his least inviting. The final item purports to be a last, suicidal letter, the poet's "senses deranged by a Cold Sore." "Letter from the 24th Congress of the Communist Party" lists highlights which include "when Felix Dzerhinsky got his cock out, / . . . and pretended to be Babar." In "Bright Blue" McMillan rejects the drabness of a pub decorated "to suit the Scottish psyche," suggesting appropriate names for its colour scheme: "Potato Brown / or Shades of a Shitey Sunday Night."

McMillan's creative strength is not in downbeat, streetwise verse but in neo-romantic visions. Amidst much that is unpalatable, *Horridge* contains many more moments of startling and accessible beauty.

VALENTINA BOLD