

Extending The Tradition

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Mick Imlah, *The Lost Leader*, Faber, £9.99, ISBN 9780571243075

In an age when image is everything, the worst thing a poet can do is to send out mixed messages about his or her identity. Pushed to the corner of the playground and perennially strapped for funding, the poetry industry must do all it can to be accessible (i.e. consumable) and that means presenting itself in essentially sociological terms: gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and national identity being the most significant. In these matters, however, there is no room for fuzziness: a woman poet is a woman poet, even if she declares otherwise, a second generation Indian or a Pakistani poet does well to versify – humorously, if possible – about his or her ambivalence towards Britain, (with a few references to cricket and Bollywood thrown in for luck) and Scottish poets must be recognizably Scottish, at least in name. Yet, as Mick Imlah argues in this extraordinary new collection, what's in a name?

I've got this mongrel and seemingly-Islamic M. IMLAH,
the SMITH, J. of phonebooks from Fez to the Indian Ocean.

For which I protest, there's a primary school near Edinburgh
that part of me never left, and cite my classmate Lorna MacDougall,
who grew up to share the name of the novelist Ishiguro,
'Ish' to his friends on the circuit, or point to the passage in Google
which proves IMLACH was what my family too had originally been,
Gaelic for *those of the loch*, until with the Clearances of Jura
the 'c' was lured from its croft by the trawlers of Aberdeen
and struck out o'er the moor, O.

This brand of combative wit is present throughout *The Lost Leader*, giving it a deft, sharp and often very funny edge, reminiscent of the Scots flyting tradition, yet it is matched by that gift for wistful tenderness and skilled lament in which Imlah's more Scottish-sounding predecessors excelled. Indeed, this is a book very much concerned with the dead, from one Gordon Brown (a rugby player nicknamed The Ayrshire Bull in his

heyday, rather than our present-day lost leader), to the poet Tennyson, and with the ‘Scottish’ past, from Columba’s monks to the London Scottish, of whom

All sixty volunteered for the touring squad,
And swapped their Richmond turf for Belgian ditches.
October: mad for a fight, they broke too soon
On the Ypres salient, rushing the ridge between
‘Witshit’ and Messines. Three-quarters died.

It is not just this concern with the past, but Imlah’s approach to it, that reminds us of Robert Louis Stevenson’s remark, in *Weir of Hermiston*: “For it is the mark of the Scot of all classes: that he stands in an attitude to the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good or bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation.”

This sense of identity with the past is as much a defining characteristic of *The Lost Leader* as Imlah’s sly wit and wide-ranging intelligence, and it is the tension between the two – between elegy and classical detachment – that makes this an outstanding collection. It is also a highly ambitious book in any number of ways: in its exploration of the complex loyalties and conflicts of the Scottish Diaspora, in its profound and occasionally subversive dialogue with such poetic ancestors as Gray, Tennyson and Henryson, in its reworkings of myth and history, in its technical brilliance – and in considering a book so very much haunted by the ghost of Tennyson, we should remember Eliot’s remarks on that poet’s technical gifts: “In ending we must go back to the beginning and remember that *In Memoriam* would not be a great poem, or Tennyson a great poet, without the technical accomplishment. Tennyson is the great master of metric as well as of melancholia; I do not think any poet in English has ever had a finer ear for vowel sound, as well as a subtler feeling for some moods of anguish.”

Of course, when dealing with “some moods of anguish”, subtlety is of the essence, and Imlah achieves this in a wonderful balancing act between what Eliot might have called honest feeling and a steady, yet restrained irony, (see ‘Gray’s Elegy’, for example, or ‘The Ayrshire Orpheus’, among others). What emerges from this is a technical accomplishment that, while it might be unfair to compare it with Tennyson, is certainly rare in contemporary poets. Which is not to say that contemporary poetry does not boast a fair number of technically skilled writers, but simply to remind ourselves that

technical accomplishment has to be there for a reason. Craft for its own sake is mildly interesting, but not, in the end, very nourishing; in *The Lost Leader*, on the other hand, that technical accomplishment arises out of the necessity of keeping honest – and often very strong – feelings in play without putting them on display, thus simplifying and cheapening them. In this respect, we see in Imlah a poet working to continue and extend his tradition, rather than merely working within it. Nothing in this beautiful and memorable collection – and this is a book that demands re-reading and, in places, a return to that old practice of getting by heart – illustrates this better than the final sequence, ‘Afterlives of the Poets’, which begins with a by turns touching and funny latter-day *In Memoriam* for Tennyson himself, and concludes with these wonderfully lucid and moving lines on mutabilitie:

And fair play to rejects – to busts with broken noses –
whose last great work was finding a shed or a stable to die in,
if they dream away their loss of face in a sky like that;
if there, though day’s glare or the northern night obscure them,
though nature has done with them, still through the void they hurtle
their wattage,
powered with the purpose of having been – being, after all, stars,
whose measure we may not take, nor know the wealth of their rays.

John Burnside's most recent collection is *Gift Songs* (Jonathan Cape, 2007). His latest novel, *Glisten*, was published in May.



Everywhere Is Here

STEVEN MATTHEWS

Jorie Graham, *Sea Change*, Carcanet, £9.95, ISBN 9781857549843;

Yang Lian, translated by Brian Holton,

Riding Pisces: Poems from Five Collections, Shearsman, ISBN 9781905700912

Jorie Graham’s last collection, *Overlord* (2005), contained much truly great poetry, blending meditations on prayer, history, and the self’s relation to others, in unique and special ways. Her new book, *Sea Change*, to a certain extent inevitably follows in the wake of that