

Book Reviews

Beyond the Drift

New & Selected Poems

David Scott

Bloodaxe Books Ltd 2014

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£12.00

David Scott's latest book, dedicated to his wife Miggy, draws on his four previous Bloodaxe titles with a whole collection of new poems. With over 200 poems in all, written from the 1970's until 2014 there is surely something in here for everyone. Well known and much loved as a founder member of the Thomas Merton Society and a frequent contributor to Merton conferences, David has won prizes and accolades for both his literary and priestly work. In 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury conferred on him a Lambeth Degree Doctorate of Letters (D Litt).

This piece is not a literary criticism of these lovely poems. It is perhaps more of a meditation than a review. In 2014 I spent three weeks alone in a remote cottage in the Highlands of Scotland, watched autumn transform the land and read *Beyond the Drift* in the dark evenings. I offer here a few personal choices and some responses to the poems from a place of solitude and silence. I think David would approve.

The work of the poet is to use words with care, clarity and love in order to help us to experience the world more deeply. These wide-ranging poems fulfil that in abundance. They seem to emanate from a contemplative place of compassion and scrupulous attention. With a

spareness and economy of words and with deceptive simplicity David can distil the essence of a moment or a quality in a way that quickens my knowing of what it is to be alive and to be human. So in *Angel of the North* he writes:

Perhaps it was the bird circling round its head
or the empty goal posts in the field behind it
or the man with the pit-bull terrier among the daisies
and the dandelions, or all the dead lying underneath
the hill, that jump-started me to tears.

In the best tradition of priest-poet, many of David's poems draw on his priestly vocation and his long and varied experience of parish life, both rural and urban. In *Locking the Church* he captures and shares with us a moment of grace:

Tonight the sky is wide open
And locking the church is a walk
Between the yews and a field of stars.

He invites us with disarming candour to join him in prayer in *Prayer and the Hair Salon*:

I am a priest of Winchester.
A candle flickers in the upstairs cell.
I watch the snow fall on the heads
of the passers-by. My prayer is soft
as snow. It does little but
cover the ground, and the candle shivers.

And in *The Sunday School Cupboard* he describes with gentle humour and a meticulous eye for detail a lost world, 'another generation's way of doing things':

The felt-backed shepherds and the stamp books
with rusty staples should have gone long ago.
All of Advent Sunday's stamps
are stuck together in a great wodge.

What a friend he is. This collection includes many generous, open-

hearted poems for, about and dedicated to people he knows. There are poems here too about Thomas Merton, Donald Allchin, George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins and R S Thomas.

Like Bruckner's flawless motet 'Locus Iste', many of David's shorter poems are pristine and finely crafted. He writes with grave tenderness about the experience of *Boarding School* at a young age:

I have no memory so clear as a stranger
turning off the lights.

Searching the geography of the springs
and the thin blanket of the night, I recalled
the newt tucked into the locker, and pondered
the meaning of us not sleeping tight at all.

And listen to the wonderful rhythm and rhyme of this evocative passage from *Cathedral Evensong, Winter*:

A downy chin suspended on a ruff
covers a deal of stuff like homesickness.
Do they know how good they are, how rare,
and only a handful of us there?

I linger too over his poem *Retirement*, identifying with this extract which elucidates for me the inner imperative that draws me back to this Highland fastness year after year:

I'll go into a wood, a barn, a room
and not come out until my heart
is settled back on God the pivot
I the balance.

I love the experience of working alone in the wild garden here. There is a sense of space and freedom as I go where the unhurried flow of the day takes me – on sometimes into the dusk and the first evening star. There is such healing in this untrammelled time. In *Evening Light* David finds the words:

So it was for this I came away
to get the long view, free from

what the next minute I'd be late for,
or have no time to finish.

Most important perhaps for me, writing in this wild and lonely place, are the nature and landscape poems, and the lines that express so eloquently the lucidity and spaciousness of silence as in *Castle Rigg Songs*:

Cleft fast in the stone's skin
is a lichen tuft. It is the air's
embroidery: silent, slow, patient, deft.

When I am back from the Highlands, this is a book I will keep by me. When life becomes busy and congested, when the inevitable demands threaten to overwhelm, when weariness robs life of its mystery, then David's poems will, I know, slow me down and reconnect me to a source of inner replenishment. They embody a quality of mindfulness and attention to the ordinary that stills the soul.

Heather Lyons has recently stepped down after serving for 10 years on the committee of the Thomas Merton Society. She spends periods of time in silence and solitude in a hermitage in Scotland.

The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton

Daniel P. Horan, OFM

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Shortly after Easter in 1940 Thomas Merton made a trip to Cuba. He was there to pray, to affirm his relatively newly found faith, and to discern more clearly his vocation. He spent much time sitting at the back of churches, and records one particular occasion in the Church of St. Francis in Havana where, in many ways so like St. Francis, he had a vivid sense of being almost blinded by the manifestation of God's presence at the Consecration on the altar. 'Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!' he exclaimed within himself, and was left breathless with joy and peace and happiness that stayed for hours and that he never forgot. And yet, in his characteristically self-deprecatory style, he goes on to