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Siobhán Campbell: *Cross-Talk*

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Siobhán Campbell is a poet whose achievements have been recognised with several awards and her poems have been widely anthologised. Besides writing poetry she is a member of the Faculty at Kingston University in London. Siobhán Campbell's *Cross-Talk* (Seren, 2009) follows her earlier collections *The Permanent Wave* and *The cold that burns*.

The collection opens with a brief quotation by John Hewitt and another one by Louis MacNeice. Hewitt's lines reflect on tragic change while MacNeice addresses the internal dynamism of poetry. More striking is the fact that both poets are Protestants from the North, though both of them spent a considerable time in England (in fact MacNeice spent most of his life there) – in spite of this both poets are strongly embraced as formative influences by a wide range of contemporary poets, often irrespective of their sectarian background. The afterlife in the volume of these two quotations, however, is an even more intriguing affair: the lamentation of Hewitt for having to dismiss the pastoral reading of the present is somewhat readjusted by the MacNeicean ideas of internal conflict, just as the deliberately unromantic approach to experience is occasionally (but indeed, only occasionally) mellowed by more comforting elements in the poems of the volume.

The collection is divided into three sections yet only the last one is marked by more than simple numbers, bearing the title of the whole volume. The very first poem of the volume is a tentative promise of a journey north (without any definite reference, e.g. an article or a capitalised initial), yet the title itself, "When all this is over" casts a shadow of doubt over the venture as the "all this" is only vaguely explained in the course of the poem by references to such concepts of "batter" and "crisis". The implications of the details, however, evoke the spirit of freedom and something akin to that pastoral atmosphere which comes under revision in the course of the volume, thus a framework is created out of the simultaneous presence of hope and sober insight, with the latter providing the control.

The collection presents a rich stock of experience ranging from the everyday to the legendary. There are episodes drawn from the trivia of everyday life ("Removal" "The last long drag") which intend to arrest those moments which have been cherished sources of poetry since the time of Romanticism. Side by side with this everyday experience there appear accounts of figures of a near-legendary status from the past of an intimately known community ("Pitched",

"Hothead") with the sustaining pride such a heritage offers. Common superstitions are also included ("Quickthorn", "Blind Eye") which trace allegiances back to a recognisably Irish poetic fatherland. Some of the accounts are bizarre ones as the characters make for a rather awkward experience – the poem "That other walking stick" commemorates such a figure, with a walking stick employed for the sole purpose of beheading certain flowers ("weeds"). There is also the pseudo-legendary "Canola" in which the modern name for a variety of rapeseed is traced back to an imaginary origin of women taking up a position implying rape, collapsing different worlds into each other.

Several of the poems reflect on visits to the North, exploring various aspects of the journey as well as the experience of the border and the world beyond that. Indeed, the whole collection is haunted by the spirit of the North in some form or other: there are references to the Troubles such as the practice of tarring and feathering girls "for loving / from the wrong camp" ("The last long drag", p. 12) or the "*No Fraternising*" ("Parsing", p. 34) graffity recalling usual Unionist battle-cries; several instances hint at the internal divisions of the society of Northern Ireland ("North", "Defined by negatives", "Turns", "The Surprise"). The otherness of experience on the other side of the border is richly acknowledged, even in the form of puns playing on Northern accents ("How could we catch their weird?" in "First Time Up"), and that experience with its bifurcations seems to stamp its mark on the majority of poems in the collection as the fierce logic of a world of conflicts conditions the eyes to register all kinds of events in a light that leaves little space for sentimental assessment.

This fierce logic is employed even in accounts which seem to be free of any other (political, sectarian or indeed any other) consideration. "Giving the Talk" is one such poem – the speaker proudly announces intimate familiarity with the smallest details of the surrounding landscape, concluding with a reference to a road accident taking the life of two children, yet no apparent emotions are reflected in the narrative. Occasionally the tone involves a more personal scale (it becomes nearly informal and colloquial in "Return") but there is a tendency to maintain a reflective distance in spite of the lyric.

The diction is clear and precise yet the poems retain a highly suggestive quality and a degree of mystery about them, making for a challenging reading at what Dillon Johnston would call the "forward edge of language" (Johnston xvii). The wit employed in the poems is striking, yet the deliberate insistence on balancing accounts does not allow sympathy to blur the contours of observations, which creates the impression that the contemplated world is held at an arm's length for a clearer vision.

There is a palpable presence of the Celtic tradition in the cadences of the collection as rhymes and half-rhymes richly resonate through the individual pieces. Alliteration is also frequent and the generally lavish use of sound patterns creates a special music that forms an essential element of the dynamism of several of the poems as the narratives are often at an angle to the music sustaining them, embodying that "internal conflict" which is pointed out by the

MacNeice quotation. The music lulls as well as unsettles, the narratives flow and then come to abrupt ends or turns – the whole collection is outlined by such contrary trends.

Few of the poems end on a consoling note, providing a neat closure and making an organic and consolingly harmonious whole. Instead, there are surprises spared until the end, bizarre turns and comments which tend to complicate the picture and suspend the poems rather than closing them in their own compete circle of reference. This makes the volume an engaging reading, one that opens up basic categories of reference to scrutiny and subtle reconsideration and the lingering mysteries inescapably draw the reader into the poems which in turn keep yielding up other suggestions and subsequent mysteries as well, to embody, and not only to hint at, the cross-talk of the title.

References

Johnston, D. *Irish Poetry After Joyce.* (2nd ed.) Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997

Two poems by Irish poet Siobhan Campbell
from *Cross-Talk*, her fourth collection of poetry from Seren Press, October 2009

Canola

Far from the astronomers and the counsellors,
the princess gathers her most loyal courtiers
to the safe landing-place for underlings.

If we arrange ourselves like this, she says,
bending her supple back to reveal the lemon suns,
we will survive the collapse of everything we know.

Her maids try the pose, decide it's surprisingly comfortable.
'In the coming times there will be travellers
who'll look from their windows past the subtle greens

stunned by our parade of brightest yellow.
Rape they will say, knowingly, as the word turns
into something like oil on their tongue.'

Removal

This morning
  a hare stood stem-still
    watching my door open square

Sodden look of thud and tear
  hock sworn speed
    the zip of fields into halves

What motioned him to start
  race from a dented den
    where grass unfolds his form?

His breath more white
  more of it on the air than mine
    from a smaller heart

I see the brown eye
  of the spied replicator
    is counting me out

Beyond my lintel
  home recedes
   until it is vastly gone

His seize on the day
  thickens time
    like a bomb