

*Madame Fi Fi's Farewell* offers a substantial and rewarding collection of [Cambridge's] own work. There are more very good sonnets here (such as 'From Spain', a beautiful love poem); there are some delightfully witty poems of lust; some fine verse epistles. There is an excellent, adroit elegy, both moving and humorous, on a local beauty once lusted after and now dead. Cambridge is another fine epigrammatist, as in the two lines titled, quite simply, 'Epigram':

Safe settled love is weeping at Eros,  
That daimon who rhymes imperfectly with loss.

There are poems richly evocative of the rural life of Orkney and Ayrshire, human and non-human. This is an accomplished collection, the best I have seen from the poet. (The book is all the better for a splendid cover, though the artist/designer responsible for it doesn't seem to be credited anywhere.)

GLYN PURSGLOVE

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Sadly missing, though, is Gerry Cambridge's 'The Absence of Letters', first published in specialist sonnet journal Sparrow and now in his third collection, *Madame Fi Fi's Farewell and Other Poems*. It combines the classic sonnet theme of mature erotic love and — to an extent — the idea of the metaphysical conceit in a nifty little twist that compares the poet's love life with that of W. B. Yeats and his epistolary relationship with Maud Gonne.

That is typical of the wit to be found in what is a meaty book. 'A Whitmanian Reply' happily supports my thesis about the continued importance of verse with form, and is a robust response to fellow Scottish poet David Kinloch and his dismissal of Scotland as a "land of villanelles and sonnets". Cambridge's title poem is the retiral notice of a fisherman-serving prostitute [is she? GC] on the Isle of Arran and is aching to be made into a short film. Along with Matthew Fitt's Kate O'Shanter collection, also from Luath ... and, of course, Burns, Cambridge's verse is the best of Scottish.

KEITH BRUCE

*The [Glasgow] Herald, 8 March 2003*

Gerry Cambridge, *Madame Fi Fi's Farewell And Other Poems*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, pp. 128. £8.99.

One of the Author's Notes that opens Gerry Cambridge's latest collection states "Someone once remarked that poetry has a built in lie detector. By the time you come to write the stuff with any force, you are more or less fixed in your own character and personality". I will pass on the first statement, — and only wish it were true — but, about the second, say that whatever fixity there may be in personality and character, it happily does not mean that a poet's work is "more or less fixed" from the time they begin to write with maturity. Gerry Cambridge has a singular background for a poet, a truly (and successfully) self-educated man who became a natural history photographer and journalist, then gave it all up for poetry, founding the Scottish-American poetry journal *The Dark Horse*, much influenced by the New Formalist revival in the States. After a couple of chapbooks, he published '*Nothing but Heather!*' (Luath, 1999) a stunning collection of natural history photographs each accompanied by a poem, most of which were in free verse. Although this has produced for him a reputation as a nature poet, readers of *Madame Fi Fi's Farewell* will find the poet has moved on a considerable distance from those poems, which were perhaps something of a straitjacket for the talented and humane voice that Cambridge exhibits here. By turns warm and wry, evocative and reflective, his work is direct appreciation of life, its subjects ranging from love to nature, from other people to himself. What is most apparent is the freshness of the work, executed in a beautifully controlled diction that has no postmodern blips and squibs in it and whose sentiment is blessedly free of irony, postmodern or postlapsarian. There are no histrionics about self and identity; there is no anger, there are no diatribes: this is a man who has lived quietly and deeply, observing and noting, communing with nature and fellow men and women, knowing the struggle of life and sharing it with them in all weathers and seasons.

The collection opens with a series of love poems where gratitude for and sharing with another are based on detailed recollections: lipstick, lady's smock, a pomegranate. Other lyrics act as voices for characters who have not been so well blessed, such as "Old Man in the Department Store" who regrets his missed opportunities:

Gun points of lipsticks in their serried rows  
protrude. And gladly I'd surrender  
Among the boudoir splendour  
to the force I never chose.

Other lyrics revisit old acquaintances, women who were once the dream of local boys like himself, to say nothing of Madame Fi Fi, the unlikely purveyor of sexual solace to Arran's fishermen, who decides — with regret — there will be "no more red heels" walking the quays.

There are poems as letters (to the American poet Timothy Murphy, to the Scottish poet William Neill), as a polemic against a poet who inveighed against poetic form, as a record of creative writing classes with children, all in a variety of forms ranging from

couplets and quatrains to flowing Whitmanesque ebullience to knowing modernist allusion in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Edwin Morgan”, an affectionate address to one of Scotland’s most tirelessly inventive poetic voices. There is a sequence based on the poet’s residency as Brownsbank Writing Fellow in Hugh MacDiarmid’s cottage, where the naturalist finds himself completely at home in the countryside, but equally fine observations of the Pentlands, and of the city in “Glasgow Vignettes” where “Sauchiehall Street in hot July/Is a long hallelujah of vivid women”. For all the warmth expressed in its many manifestations, from sympathy to surprise, what is most impressively achieved is the poet’s evocations of the cold. Poems such as “Bus Journey in Snow”, “A Winter Morning” and “Frost” delight in resistance to adversity as well as delighting in what extreme conditions can teach, such as a night of -19.8 degrees centigrade survived in the caravan that was for many years the poet’s home:

We huddled in our matched desire,  
for cold makes every level one  
with its huge press, is paragon  
Of hopelessness- made cat, me,  
coal tit, worm, alike in misery.

This collection is an impressive gathering of many observations and tones, its control of image and expression a welcome reminder that simplicity and directness can still offer a good day’s work in the field of poetry, where no lie detector is needed to weed out the true from the false.

N. S. THOMPSON

This review appeared in *Oxford Poetry* XI, issue 3

A reader would be right to assume from the book-cover, with its caricatural illustration of a blowsy woman, that sex and sexual fantasies figure as the main theme in this new Gerry Cambridge collection. To my mind, however, the book's major strength and attractiveness lie in the poet's response to the natural world, to birds as in ornithology rather than birds to be pulled. In fact the book divides into two sections: the first contains formally accomplished poems that celebrate and deprecate adolescent and mature yearnings; the second contains some fine long poems centred on Scottish island landscapes.

'The Duck Shooters', though in parts grammatically strained, is a poem in which turbulence in personal life and a deep love of nature interpenetrate. This poem is a subtly built up narrative in which the poem's protagonist has hitched a life with duck shooters: birds literally bagged are imaginatively depicted:

Bottle green heads, cream eye-flashed, emerald specula

and this line of mysterious beauty, gathers emotional force at the poem's end where the car door

Slams, and tail lights like red eyes it drives  
Diminishing off down the empty road  
Certainly, with men and guns, and dark-bagged birds.

The narrative, which is of a real event or which is used as a device to tell something slant, carries conviction because its precise, carefully placed language moves through an experience to recreate for the reader a real sense of love, hurt twice over.

The poems about sexuality, adolescent and adult, are well crafted but their formal exactitude sometimes seems to me to control rather than convey the stuff of passion. On the other hand, the poet's commitment to detailed descriptions of the geography, and especially the weather of a remote Scottish island, gives an intimation of an almost metaphysical landscape. Cambridge's senses yield a vision. Reading him I was reminded of Doty's

What is description, after all,  
but encoded desire?

The function of poetry like Cambridge's 'Island Letter' or 'The Day's Response' is not only to contain some of the brilliance of the perceived world inside the writer but to transmit to the reader a sense of exhilaration and strangeness that occur when the self encounters the world as other.

Cambridge opens doors. In the first stanza of 'The Day's Response' [an epistle to the Scottish poet William Neill] the door of a small room opens onto a view of trees and rocks on a windy day and then:

You know last year  
I spent two months on Papa Westray, and  
Was nearly driven mad. It was too real,  
Too actual, bare stone and rapid clouds,  
Sun's high cataclysm and the wind that swept  
From nowhere to nowhere, space, space, as if  
A door had been flung open and I found  
Myself stood at the edge of some abyss...

The poem's diction avoids portentousness and works because feelings are grounded in well observed details, e.g. of the one-eyed cow and nesting terns.

Cambridge writes with energy and in an idiom that, by and large, accommodates island people and conversations; the 'ooriness' of island darkness, 'the gusty brilliance' of an island day. He is eloquent, but also has a light touch, and many will enjoy the empathy and warmth of his 'Tale of a Cat', in which he, a non-cat-lover, is seduced by a stray. Sensuous descriptions 'spine like string pearls under my hand' and echoes of Christopher Smart's 'My Cat Geoffrey' convey an unmawkish tenderness, just as much as poems with more apparent gravitas.

In terms of this poet's ambition and scope, one may return after reading him right through, to one of the quotations he uses to preface the book '...I've been waiting for some visionary experience, that would change everything about me, and give me courage and poise, and let me behave sinlessly.' A not unworthy aspiration for a writer.

NADINE BRUMMER

FROM *Critical Survey*, vol. 16, no 1, 2004

Gerry Cambridge parodies the same Wallace Stevens poem in his “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Edwin Morgan”, a genial homage to the most various tutelary spirit in contemporary Scottish poetry: “Eddie stood firm among the swaying Scottish bards./ He was a sane part of the pantomime.” Cambridge is an honest-to-goodness makar of rhymed verses, as in the first one from the title poem of *Madame Fi Fi’s Farewell*:

Rattle down the shutters, cast away the key,  
Relinquish the rivers at last to the sea,  
    Old Jock of Lochranza,  
    Taut as a stanza,  
Can come no more for me.

Cambridge associates regular metres with virility, but his last line’s dig in the ribs is aptly *triste*. Rhyming on prefabricated ideas, such verse can be weak on development. In the two poems and an elegy for a certain Sue Donaldson, Cambridge is affectingly compelled to write out teenage sexual fantasies well into middle age. [But how does the reviewer know when these poems were written?] He is as at home in the pentameter couplets of “Island Letter” as in the improvised patterns of “Glasgow Vignettes” or “Candles”. Yet for me it’s in the ranging forms, when he gives himself more space than a sonnet, and a head of rhythmic steam, when he gets one like “Water” for instance, that the *Other Poems* of his title most convince.

PETER ROBINSON

From *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 2003

[Timothy] Murphy is the subject of a friendly tribute that appears in Gerry Cambridge's new collection, *Madame Fifi's Farewell and Other Poems*. Cambridge, a Scotsman of Irish parentage who spent twenty-five years living "in a caravan [mobile home] in rural Ayrshire," praises Murphy not only for having composed a poem (he doesn't say which one) "taut and spare in word and line, / Clean-flowing," but for knowing whereof he writes:

No art without such knowledge can  
Matter a damn to thinking man  
Whether in farm or caravan,  
    That is all one;  
That knowledged edge is better than  
    Bland chirping on.

There is, assuredly, no "bland chirping on" in Cambridge's book, which like Harrison's and Murphy's collections contains more than its fair share of poems that have something to say but that do so with a winsome, self-effacing wit and exhilarating formal dexterity. To be sure, in "A Whitmanian Reply," Cambridge purposely crosses the border into "Song of Myself" territory, the better to chide Walt's self-appointed acolytes for failing to recognize, and live up to, his real legacy:

O where are the modern free versers with a droplet of  
Whitman's rhythmical energy,  
rhythm that's the root of the universe, with metre its regular partner;  
or of the orbic flex of his balls, singing the pæan testicular,  
jetting his love-juice abundantly over the umbrella'd masses  
detumescent and muttering curses?

Chopped prose, and I say—what is that?  
Meanings obscurest to all but the most intimate friends— what are they?  
I say I have more in common with Whitman than any free-  
verser, in a time of sonnets he wrote rhythmical free verse  
based on the prose in the Bible,  
in a time of free verse based not, alas, on Biblical prose I write  
sonnets, quatrains, and some ballads. . . .  
Amphibrach, dimeter, caesura and pæon, I lie and loaf at my  
ease among the prosodic textbooks, all of which I ignore.

This is a formalist manifesto to make one stand and cheer. Nor is it Cambridge's only piece of first-rate free verse. In "Tale of a Cat," the poet, no cat lover, describes his initial resistance to the entreaties of a "leaf-frail, leaf-tremulous" feline that showed up one day at his home,

. . . scratching at the door, as a steel nib scratches  
a page,  
Wanting only to be taken in and kept,  
Saying, if not in words, I am life, I am life, accept, accept.  
Fierce-fanged, curve-clawed, rasp-tongued happy life.

Touching but unsentimental, this poem provides yet more evidence that the best non-formal poetry is almost invariably produced by consummate formalists.

BRUCE BAWER

From 'A Plague of Poets', *The Hudson Review*, Vol LVI, Number 4, Winter 2004