

“Poetry is a hoard of delights against time’s ruinings.” Such is George Mackay Brown’s definition of poetry in his introduction to *The Shell House*, by Gerry Cambridge. It is Cambridge’s first collection of poetry, but he has published widely in periodicals like *Lines Review* and the *Spectator*. Of Irish parentage, the poet lives in Ayrshire. As Mackay Brown puts it, “There is a cosmic element in his poetry that is strange, powerful and moving”, and I certainly can’t improve on that. Cambridge’s poems about cosmic matters range from the playfully sinister ‘On a Solitary Wasp That Nested in My Kitchen’ to a tribute, laconic in words and imagery, to the concept of ‘Gaia’.

His poems are delightful, exuberantly so, in a way quite remote from young contemporary poets who tend to stray not very far from popular culture, class resentments and streetwise wise-cracking. A radically different world is conveyed in poems like ‘Foxgloves’, ‘Worlds’, ‘Night Thoughts’, and ‘Encounter With a God’. All are shortly and tightly written, but each one scintillates with a kind of visionary compassion. ‘Worlds’ ends as follows: “And space-backdropped, the soaring pine I walk by / Sways its many limbs in an eerie motion, / A black and star-perched sail, singing of ocean.” Other poems have a strong storytelling element, and are consequently expansive. ‘Whispers of Troy’, for instance, immediately creates suspense and intrigue in its opening lines: “The rifle-shot out of the quiet country dark / Stopped the scratch of my pen on the page.” ‘An Old Crofter Speaks’, a poem in which the crofter’s Scots voice sounds authentically real, is as masterly and convincing a dramatic monologue as any admirer of Browning could wish.

Despite many of his poems being about birds, flowers and nature in general, Cambridge is no reactionary traditionalist. You’d need only to read ‘Once in the *Burke and Hare*’ to realise that. Its voyeuristic focus is a “poor, bleakened Circe” of a pub dancer; the poem is a sonnet, but completely contemporary in sensibility. It ends with the following lines: “I may deny no need the wild sun lends me, / But no rich oleaginous man will pocket my eyes.”

Gerry Cambridge is certainly a poet to watch, and his poems are likely to triumph over the test of time.

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from *Scottish Book Collector*, Winter 1995-96, Dec-Jan issue.