

LOVE IN A DAMP CLIMATE: REVIEW BY NOEL WILLIAMS

Lowland by Will Kemp

169pp, £7.99 Cinnamon Press, Meirion House, Glan yr afon, Tanygrisiau, Blaenau Ffestioniog, Gwynedd, LL41 3SU

www.cinnamonpress.com

Kemp's second book from Cinnamon, and a third is already on the stocks for next year. You can understand why the publishers like his work. It is easy on the ear, lyrical, personal, natural, and has a direct voice that is immediately appreciable and understood. He also engages directly with his subjects, so that readers have little problem knowing what he is on about, or finding themselves in his concerns. Many of his poems have virtues that modern audiences yearn for: work that is well crafted and imaginative, but which is not too testing, intelligent without being an excessive strain on the reader's own intellect.

Lowland differs from his first book, *Nocturnes*, in that it's essentially one long narrative, and can be comfortably read at a single session. It's unusual to find a poetry collection which is a page turner; I found it difficult not to carry on reading the next poem, and then the next. I think this is a strength, speaking to the logic, coherence, personality and appeal of the voice. However, it perhaps also represents something of a weakness, too, in that some pieces can simply be "consumed"; that is, read and immediately understood, without the need or desire to go back and delve more deeply. In fact, because some topics repeat across the whole volume, it may read more like a novella in verse than a collection of singular, separable poems.

The book is not, however, a long narrative poem, nor is it, in strict terms, even a narrative. Its story is told by the interplay between different pieces, sometimes by an overlapping, where Kemp shifts the angle of view on something already mentioned, sometimes by the gaps between them, where we must interpolate an intervening state or feeling. Nor is it unsubtle. We're not told everything. We must create part of the story for ourselves from the clues which individual poems give, or from their absence.

The core topics are love, and love's failures, especially the early intensities of (I think) adolescence, and thus we have occasionally the extravagant language of love. Kemp has to straddle that delicate line between powerful feeling and cliché. In a similar way when reading Carol Ann Duffy's *Rapture*, exactly how you feel about some lines will depend on how willing you are to appreciate the lyricism of the familiar. For example:

Branches no more than black veins
in a lifeless sky – and how bright
the blood on trampled snow.

[“The Massacre of the Innocents”]

For me, as in *Nocturnes*, the great pleasure is such sensual moments. Admittedly, I'm a sucker for this kind of lyricism, so Kemp will always please me: “a Mondrian of moated fields” (“Zuid Holland”), “a snow-capped / range of clouds” (“Gelderland”), “sky a braille of stars” (“Afterwards”) although there's as much pleasure in the familiarity of narrative movement as there is in mere descriptive aptness. Where the two things coincide, Will Kemp's poetry shines.