

A Review of *No More Hiroshimas*

by David Burnett

(Other Poetry Series 2; No. 27, 2005; pp99-100)

James Kirkup, who hails from the Northeast, is probably the principle interpreter of Japan to the West and is in this respect the Lafcadio Hearn of our age. His passionate response to Hiroshima is, therefore, both informed and sympathetic as well as widely ranging.

These poems, which also include translations of those by others, have been written over many years. Their spring was his shock in hearing of Hiroshima at a land workers' hostel in Ponteland on the sixth of August 1945. British magazine and book editors, however, were reluctant to publish these poems so he issued them himself in 1983, a collection which was also ignored by reviewers in this country. There are good poems here and the collection wrestles with one of the central issues of our times. Why should such poems be ignored? One suspects in this rejection a sense of unacknowledged guilt and an insular unconcern with the wider world and with the past as well as certain unease with profound seriousness in the arts. There is, in short, a failure of vision, to look both within and without. Their re-publication is both necessary and desirable.

These are not easy poems. They compel us to face the horrors of nuclear warfare and they warn of the much more powerful neutron bomb. They also emphasise that we live in a world of murder, deceit and callous profiteering and that there is a general and cold indifference to the suffering of others such as refugees and of animals. Society is brutal, repressive and intolerant, but we as individuals are also responsible: "We are all prisoners of one another, / And all our captors are ourselves." We have, therefore, to see and to reform ourselves, to love each other, to stand against received opinion, and in spite of all to hope and to recall that even in the second World War "On both sides / A common brotherhood survived."

A poet speaks and the message is more powerful than this. There are, for example, “rainbows” of squid and octopus, a sun “crudded” in thin snow, and an aged Bertrand Russell with “the mask of a tragic hawk”. There are, furthermore, the technical bravura of a prosaic obituary in the haiku form, the subversion of a familiar Christmas carol, and biting satire and irony, as in the “death of sound mind” of a suicide for peace.

In his later years a notable obituarist, Kirkup has in fact throughout his life repeatedly and memorably witnessed to and documented our mortality. The poem sequence “White shadows” with its insistent, drumming antinomies is surely the canonical response to the white shadow of a man annihilated at Hiroshima. The title poem, moreover, exhibits a characteristic strength, his resolute and unflinching grasp upon reality: with Antaeus and Yeats he keeps his footing firmly on the earth. Hiroshima today is indeed as he depicts it a sad, tawdry, ramshackle and cheaply commercial squalor and emptiness, yet it is here that are preserved the stopped watches, the twisted buttons, and the charred boots of the dead. Amidst detritus and dereliction of the living there are those also of the dead. As at Auschwitz, it is these pitiful relics which disturb and which we remember. These are “the memorials we need.”

For Shelley the great gift of poetry is the imagination. Our response to Hiroshima as to Auschwitz and Nanking must be to see and to enter into the experience of others. *Pace* Adorno, there is not today a failure of poetry but of humanity. The task of the poet is to see and to speak without fear or favour and that of the public to read and see. There is here much sane and salutary common sense about nuclear warfare, but it is above all the poet and his vision which matter. He refers in passing to schoolboys abstractedly thumbing pornography with “second-hand” looks. What he invites us to do here as elsewhere in his work is to see as he does, truly, wholly, and unflinchingly. It is this vision, which earlier readers of these poems lacked, which can free and save us from ourselves. To be healed and whole we must first see what we are and how we behave towards each other.

“Questions are hard, but it is worse to remain silent.

Nor can we afford not to look. We must see all, and say all
To satisfy the dead who died with such indignity, the shades
That are watching us, white speechless. We cannot look away.
cannot look away.”

For the poem *No More Hiroshimas*