

REVIEW: A BOOK OF LIVES

Eberhard Bort

Edwin Morgan, **A Book of Lives**, Manchester: Carcanet, 2007, 105 pp, pb, £9.95, ISBN 978185749188.

In November 2006, more than two years after the official opening of the building, Scotland's Makar, the Glasgow poet Edwin Morgan, eventually managed to see the Scottish Parliament building 'in the flesh'. At the opening, Liz Lochhead had read the poem Eddie Morgan had contributed to the day's festivities, as he was too ill to even attend. Here now, it serves as the opening poem to Eddie Morgan's latest collection, under the title 'For the opening of the Scottish Parliament, 9 October 2004'. In it, he describes the building thus:

We have a building which is more than a building.

There is commerce between inner and outer, between brightness and shadow, between the world and those who think about the world.

Is it not a mystery? The parts cohere, they come together like petals of a flower, yet they also send their tongues outward to feel and taste the teeming earth.

Did you want classic columns and predictable pediments? A growl of old Gothic grandeur? A blissfully boring box?

Not here, no thanks! No icon, no IKEA, no iceberg, but curves and caverns, nooks and niches, huddles and heavens, syncopations and surprises. Leave symmetry to the cemetery.

But bring together slate and stainless steel, black granite and grey granite,

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seasoned oak and sycamore, concrete blond and smooth as silk – the mix is almost alive – it breathes and beckons – imperial marble it is not!

He then goes on to evoke the historic location at ‘the heart of the city’, and addresses the expectations the people have of this new institution:

They want it to be filled with
thinking persons as open and adventurous as its architecture.
A nest of fearties is what they do not want.
A symposium of procrastinators is what they do not want.
A phalanx of forelock-tuggers is what they do not want.
And perhaps above all the droopy mantra of ‘it wizny me’ is what they do not want.

After admonishing the people’s representatives not to take the consent of the people for granted, the poem ends with the emphatic ‘So now begin. Open the doors and begin.’ It was a ‘gallus’ moment, in Brian Taylor’s phrase, at the opening of the Parliament, performed with gleeful *esprit* by Liz Lochhead. Respect and irreverence, celebration and admonition, awareness of the historic moment and hope for the future – the poem lived up to the occasion and gave it a touch of pizzazz. And it makes for a spirited start to this collection.

It is followed by another ‘political’ poem, which asserts the role of poets and writers as the ‘unacknowledged legislators’ of the land:

Talk’s the thing. Dialogue’s the thing.
If any parliamentarian should be so remiss
As to think writers are interchangeable,
Or stupid, or irrelevant, or poor doomy creatures,
Punishments may have to be devised,
I say *may*, we want to persuade, not scold.

(‘Acknowledge the Unacknowledged Legislators!’)

It also asserts Edwin Morgan, now aged 87, as an eminently public poet. No ivory tower here. And that is brave for the poet laureate who had to move into a care home in recent years, after he was diagnosed with terminal prostrate

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cancer in 1999. ‘We cry but we create’ (‘Love and the Worlds’) could stand as the motto for this life affirming collection. It is brimming with energy, and shows all the inventiveness and dexterity Edwin Morgan’s use of language has become renowned for. Who but Morgan would tackle his cancer head on in an encounter between a cancer cell, Gorgo, and Beau, a healthy cell, with down-to-earth echoes of Hamish Henderson’s ‘The Flying o’ Life and Daith’? Only that here Gorgo gets the best lines – but doesn’t the devil always?

His ‘Planet Wave’, a sequence of poems that had its origin in a commission for the Cheltenham International Jazz Festival of 1997, spans history from the very beginning, twenty billion years BC (‘It was a bang and it was big’) to Woodstock (‘Starry and scary was the jangled spangle, /.../ When Hendrix plucked, it was the mane of a lion./ His fingers did the work of several hands.’) to the big bang of the Twin Towers and beyond to 2300 AD (‘Worlds were being lost, were being born’).

Perhaps at the heart of the collection lies ‘Love and a Life’, a sequence of fifty poems full of joyous energy, interlaced with the pain of his illness, about loves past and present, written between September and November 2002. It contributes to the impression that this is both a very public and a very private collection, sprinkled throughout with autobiographical reflections.

Against all the odds, **A Book of Lives** shows the poet laureate in fine literary fettle, full of ludic linguistic trickery, word play and alliterative invention (‘blissfully boring box’ – is he perhaps alluding to David McLetchie’s inspired idea of an ‘Asda-parliament’?), and his trademark ‘inversion and near, but emphatically not, repetition’ (McWilliam 2007) – as again best exemplified in the opening poem:

When you convene you will be reconvening, with a sense of not wholly the
power, not yet wholly the power, but a good sense of what was once
in the honour of your grasp.

At the launch of the book in Glasgow, the wheelchair-bound Makar was full of optimism: ‘I wouldn’t say it was my last one, maybe there’s a little more writing to go.’ (Miller 2007).

In March 2007, the Scottish Executive announced that Edwin Morgan would become the first member of a new Scottish cultural academy, apparently modelled on Ireland’s Aosdana. Culture Minister Patricia Ferguson said: ‘This new scheme, a cultural academy in essence, will help recognise and nurture

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cultural talent and promote excellence in our national cultural life. It will provide inspiration to aspiring and developing artists and promote Scottish identity through art and culture at home and abroad. I am sure the members will be a powerful and respected body and Edwin Morgan is a more than fitting candidate to be the first member.' (Scottish Executive 2007) There is no gainsaying that!

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