

## Reviews



### GETTING UNDER ITS SKIN

*This London* by Patrick Hicks. Salmon Poetry, Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland. 86pp.; 12 euros.

A book of poems about London by any non-Londoner has to be of interest. But a book of poems about London by a 'foreigner' has to be of especial interest. Patrick Hicks is "a dual citizen of Ireland and the United States" who captures 'the Great Wen' so well in *This London*, and what he captures best of all is its humanity. "In spite of my thinned Irish blood," he begins "and that battle in Virginia", (Yorktown)

I have returned with the flag of a pen  
to claim these streets as my own ...

in the prologue poem.

Patrick Hicks gets under the skin of the metropolis in a number of ways. Everywhere there are local references ranging from, say, Buckingham Palace, "Two guards shoulder their M16s – a rhyme of metal – / and the flag above the Queen snaps like gunfire", to Soho, "The streets of Soho throbbed in an orgasm of light, / so your question shouldn't have surprised". And historic reference: the terrible vengeance inflicted by Boudicca on the Romans for her flogging and for being forced to witness the rape of her daughters:

She returned to Londinium  
with 100,000 warriors bent on bloodlust,  
and made a pyre of Caesar's colony.

As Hicks puts it: "Vengeance like hers / should not be banished into the wild". Or remembering "The Great Stink of 1858" when London became, in Disraeli's words, "a stygian pool reeking with ineffable and unbearable horror" or, in Hicks' words "simmering thickly beneath a July sun, / the Thames was soupy excrement".

But, as I have already suggested, vital as the historic sense is, and as important as it is in a volume like this to capture the *genius loci*, most important of all is the living London of humanity. Well, almost all these poems show an alertness to the human side of things, whether the good of the depicted Florence Nightingale or the evocation of soldiers setting off from Charing Cross Station for the Great War, "These soldiers walk on healthy legs, / they have yet to be baptised by the oil of war". But two of the finest instances of Hicks' humanizing treatment are where he captures brilliantly the darker side of London life. First in the Soho poem, 'Red Light District', where he is propositioned by a prostitute:

The streets of Soho throbbed in an orgasm of light,  
so your question shouldn't have surprised me.  
Your accent was Russian, born beneath Soviet wreckage,  
and I couldn't help but notice the thin fabric of your shirt,  
how you were just out of girlhood, on your own.

Huntress, your eyes held me.  
I see now that you were out for the kill,  
fingers of menstrual blood  
smeared across your cheeks,  
betrayal locked in the zoo of your ribcage,  
it prowls your heart, sniffing  
for the meat of my wallet.

Little daughter, what brought you to London  
because, surely, it couldn't be for this,  
to slide open your body like a button,  
to swing the blunt hammer of this question:  
I'm clean ... want to fuck?

And then when he is caught up in a suicide on the London underground:

We were waiting for our journey to Point B  
when the conductor, in blunt words,  
told us our train had been cancelled.  
There has been a fatality on the tracks,  
*please move to Platform 4.*

I thought of greased rails,  
unstoppable metal,

eyes widening,  
and the impact of a funeral.

But the lady next to me,  
with her shopping bags and stormy hair,  
was equally destructive when she yelled,  
*Bloody Hell! Now I'm going to be late!*

Molten steel fills my ribcage,  
my teeth are barbed-wire,  
but the killer bees I want to spit  
are stuck on the flypaper of my tongue.

Already, she is picking up steam for the exit.  
A cane holding up a man is knocked aside,  
and this woman, her bags clattering behind,  
explodes down the platform, the horn of her mouth blaring...

Both poems humanize the great city of teeming millions by converting the necessarily impersonal – through instances of passion, betrayal, anger, selfishness, etc. – into the vividly personal, no matter how reprehensible and disagreeable that personal may be. Whether it is the whore 'sniffing / for the meat' of the poet's wallet; or the callous indifference of the woman shopper to someone's death – an indifference that so outrages the poet and us, the readers through the poet. Patrick Hicks with his clear-eyed perception and the ability to focus on the apposite and illuminating detail has something of Chaucer's and Defoe's gift in his writing. And, as I myself wrote a book of London poems, I feel in a stronger position than normal to endorse this fine volume.

WILLIAM OXLEY

*Iscairiot's Dream* by Gary Allen, Agenda Editions, The Wheelwrights, Fletching Street, Mayfield, East Sussex TN20 6TL. 80pp.; £8.99. *A Short History of Mornings* by John Levett, Shoestring Press, 19 Devonshire Avenue, Beeston, Nottingham, NG9 1BS. 66pp.; £8.95. *Background Music* by Cynthia Fuller, Flambard Press, 16 Black Swan Court, 69 Westgate Rd., Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 1SG. 64pp.; £7.00.