

THE FLIGHT OF THE TURTLE: NEW WRITING SCOTLAND 29

Edited by Alan Bissett and Carl MacDougall

Association for Scottish Literary Studies

REVIEW BY PAUL F COCKBURN

Anthologies and competitions celebrating and encouraging Scottish writers may not be rare these days, but they nevertheless have a habit of, at best, blazing like fireworks for a short few years and then vanishing. It's therefore a genuine achievement that the 30th annual New Writing Scotland anthology will be published next summer. In years to come that 'historic' volume may well overshadow its immediate predecessor, but that would certainly be a shame; the 29th volume of New Writing Scotland, *The Flight of the Turtle*, contains much that is praiseworthy.

With the work of nearly 100 writers represented in the volume, it is clear that the country's wordsmiths are still busy honing a new, relevant self-image despite the deep-rooted cultural and political suppressants highlighted by Alan Bissett and Carl MacDougall in their editorial. Thanks to its continued open door submissions policy, it is equally reassuring to see that *The Flight of the Turtle* continues the long New Writing Scotland tradition of providing a platform for both new and returning writers, whether they offer prose or poetry.

That said, there's one glaring disappointment. The volume takes its title from a touching poem by Aberdeen Makar Sheena Blackhall, which is rooted in the fragile birth of rare loggerhead sea turtles on a beach in southwestern Turkey. Inspired by the greater possibilities inherent in the title, however, cover artist Alex Ronald has painted a lovely romanticised close-up of a turtle in heroic flying helmet. Sadly, such playful use of the fantastique, a tradition in Scottish literature that's been repeatedly dismissed by blinkered realists in the name of literary respectability, is somewhat overlooked in this collection. The nearest New Writing Scotland 29 approaches the worlds of SF, fantasy and fairy tale is with Tracey S Rosenberg's genuinely wry job description for a new Doctor Who companion, or Joe McInnes's evocation of a childhood 'Loast World' filled with something far worse than dinosaurs.

This should not be a surprise, given that neither of this collection's editors have particularly championed SF and fantasy (or any of the commercial 'genres') as valid expressions of a modern, Scottish voice — despite many of the UK's current top

SF and fantasy authors actually being Scottish “by birth, upbringing or inclination” (to quote the *New Writing Scotland* submission instructions). As a result, most of the poetry and certainly all of the prose is firmly rooted in the mundane minutiae of everyday life — although, in the hands of authors ranging from Lynsey May and Leona Garry to Allan Radcliffe and Allan Wilson (to name but four), it’s fair to say that such minutiae is refined into poignant, meaningful stories that say much about us all.

To what extent *The Flight of the Turtle* is a genuine snapshot of current writing in Scotland is, of course, open to debate, given the number of submissions and the quality and range of the work finally selected for publication; however, it’s fair to say that it’s likely to be the closest we’ll get.

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