

Peter Bennet, *Goblin Lawn: Selected Poems*, Flambard, pp.127, £8.50

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By Paul Batchelor

There are no overtly autobiographical passages in *Goblin Lawn*, but Peter Bennet's work is immediately identifiable for its formal tact and precision, and even when a persona is adopted, it is Bennet's voice – by turns genial, querulous and tender – that inhabits the poems and animates the characters. This ensures that his influences do not take over, although a characteristic tone is of Walter De la Mare's melancholic mystery leavened by Norman MacCaig's delight in surprising images. Here, Bennet issues a warning to genealogists:

You'd starve, in any case, if you went back,  
the past contains no sustenance,  
the birthday cakes are grey with dust,  
the orchards there grow only apple cores. ('Genealogy')

Bennet provides several images of isolation which, taken together, suggest a wish to stand outside of society in order to allow the imagination freer scope: 'Since exile here, he understands/ he is a figment of his own imagination.' ('Content') A dubious position for an artist – but it works for Bennet, who lives in the Wild Hills of Wanney: a beautiful but secluded part of Northumberland that provides ample opportunity for a reclusive lifestyle. An attentive reader would gather this from reading *Goblin Lawn*. There is evidence of isolation's dangers: the sequence 'Jigger Nods' is cryptic, as distinct from mysterious, and why Bennet felt the tale of Henry Jigger – a caricatured 1950s schoolmaster with a liking for Latin tags and booze – to be a worthy vehicle for his talents is beyond me. However, there is also everywhere evidence of Bennet's long fascination and unfashionable respect for the craft of poetry. In addition to his touchstones De la Mare and MacCaig, Bennet has learned from W. S. Graham an understanding of the poem as a problematic but essential means of communication, and from Robert Browning a knack for creating personae who can buttonhole the reader within a line or two: 'You think I only cook, and clean, and launder?' ('Ogress') or 'In your attic there could be a shrouded globe,/ some tinsel, flashbulbs, and a picture book...' ('Breathe Carefully') or 'I am the kindest of the secret kings' ('The Secret Kings').

Bennet is also adept at 'the image' which stands as a poem in itself without authorial comment, and many poems read like short stories rendered down to a single dramatic scene. One of the best of these is 'Fairytale,' which describes

A company of white geese by the stream  
down where the lane goes through a farmyard  
overhung and dark with oaks,  
are moonlit so that they resemble  
excisions from an older, radiant world.

The poem ends by telling us 'Each night the geese are there again, but stronger.' Perhaps the power of any symbol lies in its ability to withhold its full significance: exactly what the geese symbolise remains untranslatable and unknowable.

Bennet's finest achievement is 'The Long Pack.' This sequence of 28 poems tells the story of a couple haunted by the ghost of a ranter who, according to Northumbrian folklore, tried to smuggle himself into Lee Hall in Bellingham: he planned to murder the occupants and steal their money, but was caught and killed. In Bennet's present-day update, the ghost wants to smuggle himself back to life by being re-born as the couple's child. Written from various points of view, 'The Long Pack' is a thriller, a ghost story, a love story and a meditation on the Northumbrian landscape. Jumping across centuries and genres, the sequence is jewelled with moments you would dwell on if the thing wasn't so dramatic. Unusual, mysterious poetry standing well outside contemporary fashions: highly recommended.