



SUMMER'S PROFUSE ENDS

Reviews by Will Daunt

ed. A.Croft/ S.Dymoke	Not Just A Game	Five Leaves	£9.99
Peter Day	And	Poetry Monthly Press	unpriced
Graham Plender	The Common Sharing	Raddle Bank House	£7.99
Barbara Hardy	The Yellow Carpet	Shoestring Press	£8.95
Eddie Wainwright	Tying Loose Ends	Lapwing Publications	£6.95

Anthologies of poetry about sport run the risk of becoming any number of the following: too male; too obsessive; too ordinary; too worthy. Happily, Andy Croft and Sue Dymoke's selection, *Not Just A Game*, eschews any of these pitfalls. This is a smartly presented and edited book, which deserves a wide readership.

The beauty of a good, themed anthology is that it will appeal as much to lovers of the theme, as to those of the genre. Here, the diversity of subject matter is united by that sense of how pastimes help us make sense of our lives (as the adept introduction says: 'any anthology of poems says a good deal about the society which produced it'). Take William Scammell on *John McEnroe* (one of his four remarkably diverse tennis pieces): 'The nation's right arm ached, was overcome/ with transcendental lust to smack your bum.'/ And Irish too ... That baked-potato face ...' And so, we recall the Englishness of Wimbledon, courts and all.

Do some sports provoke more and/ or better poetry? That judgement may be too close to call, but here, cricket and football do best in terms of pages scored, with golf, rugby league and ten pin bowling (at one poem a piece) apparently providing less poetic inspiration. Two pieces on cricket illustrate the pleasing breadth of this book. There is the dry English humour of a fielder in Neil Rollinson's *Deep-Third-Man*: 'A man could drop dead out here/ in the long grass, and no-one would know./ They never found Blenkinsop, fielding/ at deep-square-leg ...' In *Song for Lara*, Jean 'Binta' Breeze pads up differently, but with an equally compelling love of the game: 'is a pair a eye dat see de ball/ before de howler tink it/ a pair a leg dat dance wid ease/ anywhere he lan it'.

A good book finds a space, and fills it. More than anything, it's the open-mindedness of the editors' selections which makes *Not Just A Game* so engaging. You'll find Larkin, Betjeman, Cope and Fanthorpe here, but may enjoy equally the extracts from Andy Croft's marathon *Great North Run*, or the unique vividness of Camilla Doyle's *A Game of*

Bowls (written during an air raid): 'I hear soft chimes, I hear a ring dove call,/ And all the pleasure of the men who played/ Reaches me still and keeps me unafraid.'

The open-ended title of Peter Day's new book reflects the author's preferred style: an uncluttered simplicity. Particular skill is therefore needed in paring down the verse to its essentials, something that works well in an unforced piece like *Two Thrushes*, where a few words say enough: 'both call/ "come out, come out,"/ clear and full/ from pale breasts;/ glass sharp,/ songs shape/ wind's music.'

The title poem feels like another piece in an enormous unfinished jigsaw, depicting the natural world craftily, but without artifice: 'And I see amber shingle/ sparkling under rippling water ...'. However, the impact of this accumulating picture is varied. *Visit*, for example, courts cliché by referring to 'ghosts' that 'pass' and 'ancient stone' (an image repeated in *Beyond understanding*). A few pieces, such as *A Trace*, need a little more subject, or shape (and a little less use of the definite article).

Alternately, Day hits the mark in those poems with a clear impetus, or ambition. The triolet, *Fine Time*, while a little heavy with adjectives, catches its subject: 'This is the time of fresh, damp ground/ scuffing crinkled, crumpled leaves'. Those pieces which break away from conventional expression, like *Free Flight* are as economical, but more provocative than some of their peers: 'Soft golding flowers/ segue to seed head/ ...misty silver pappus. ... flies free/ towards the great Perhaps.'

The writer does what he says in the title in *Low lie, look hard to see*. Close to his subjects, he achieves a greater focus: '...soldier beetles pathways by/ hogweed flowers in wave like grasses'. Elsewhere, the natural subjects tend to generalities, with a great deal of water, field and trees. Perhaps there is a finer balance to be struck between the writer's choice of vocabulary, and subject matter.

But, in *And*, Day has sown seeds which promise fine flowers. The best of what's replanted will flourish.

Don't judge a book by its blurb: the prosaic back cover of Graham Plender's new book suggests a stodgy read inside, given its author's apparent 'lightly stoic perspective'.

The title and cover photograph suggest something less obvious, and more enticing. The contents bear this out, being sharply focused and written with an assured vitality.

Plender does not usually labour his purpose. In *Helen Thomas Fears for Edward*, the shadow of the Great War haunts the poet's marriage, '... But he was home/ To fold your arms around, pulling his mouth down/ On your own chill lips.'

Like the broken love concealed in *A Mariner's Romance*, there is deliberate understatement in the title *Cicely Saunders tells of the beginning of the hospice movement*. Here, it is the brief and passionate love for a patient that drives the narrator's altruism: 'As the spark went out an unbearable hurt - / the smart of him - passed through me'. Such writing reassures by showing the powerful ordinariness which can drive achievement.

The same vividness penetrates *After Gerontius*, an exploration of Elgar's self-doubt, after The Dream's initial, hostile reception at Birmingham in 1900. The composer's self-belief is restored by simple virtues: friendship and the countryside around Malvern. Neither is

idealized, but the thrill of cycling brings back the greatness in the man: 'I could swoop free-wheeling down upon them/ the silence whistling its harmonies into my eardrums'.

Plender's interests are far from narrow; we are drawn, with equal conviction, into contemporary miseries: a bleak sadness in *News Of Mother*; the bare deprivation of *Moldovan Orphans*, or the *Armenian Earthquake, 1988*. Here, the native perspective is shocking in its mundaneness: '...Doors, roof-joists, bed-frames,/ all burn: they are burning their homes/ and the meanest necessities for life left'. Sadly, the poem evolves into something closer to a polemical history lesson, thereby losing the effect of its otherwise stark impact by straying from the author's characteristically unselfconscious style.

More than anything, the many voices in *The Common Sharing* act as sharp intermediaries between our perceptions of artist and reader. Plender helps us to see how little separates fame and obscurity, fulfillment and despair.

Barbara Hardy's poetry is clearly at least as important to her as her academic output and, *The Yellow Carpet* affirms her supple style. There is strong work here, specifically when the past shines from the page in graphical memory, or when Hardy hits a sensual nerve by relaxing syntax.

The book's first eleven pages are vivid and engaging. Pieces like *Blitz 1941* and *Deus Absconditus* recall the dense layers of family in a Welsh childhood, the father at sea and an estrangement from the once 'loud Sunday sung' attachment to church. A condensed and distinctive vocabulary evokes, naturally, the shards of memory: 'I look touch savour sorrow and hear/ but what I know I felt for God's not there'.

The Photograph is a finely composed exploration of love that could never be voiced (presumably it's the author's mother, as a child, who gazes out from the sepia): 'I see familiar eyes .../ and will not tell you how I love that child/ and cannot tell you how she breaks my heart'.

Another abstracted affection is caught by the fugued memories of *Slow Foxtrot*, where the fragments of a distant intimacy sparkle with the thrill of the dance: 'his jaw lit by one slow match struck/ for two cigarettes slow/ first kiss quick'.

The roots of other moments in *The Yellow Carpet* extend into the present. Like its subject, the title poem is a carefully woven verbal pattern of domestic colour, supporting a family through the years: 'it lined the comfort of our living room/ ...then squared the children's dancing ground/ their cloth of gold, forest and labyrinth'. *Balcony View* is a pleasantly-assembled panorama that explains how we all can: 'woo the blues for an easy weep'.

The book's subjects become progressively more ambitious. *Travelling Light* is a bright recollection of a meeting, near Elsinore with the: '...old acquaintance.../ who helped James Joyce brush up his Danish'. There are references to other art forms: pottery, painting, Keats in London and a five page translation at the close. They intrigued (rather more than they entertained) this reader.

There are parts of *The Yellow Carpet* which feel unfinished: *The Siege of Philbeach Garden March 1985* is a good tale, but its ballad form is undermined by an erratic metre;

The Black Poplar and *Can't Complain* lack substance (despite the former's attractive illustration). Alternately, short pieces like *Winter Solstice* and *Honeymoon* convince, as in these lines from the latter, concluding a succession of exhilarating images: 'You love as if you live for ever/ a boy and a girl running to the sea/ plunge into their breaking wave'.

Tying Loose Ends is Eddie Wainwright's best, and biggest book. It is also his fourth in as many years: a remarkable achievement. His two previous Lapwing Publications now read like confident, opening movements for this cunningly scored tour de force, which rolls effortlessly from one theme and setting to another.

A profound thread of understatement, often tying the 'loose ends' of a piece with apparent, but provocative neatness, secures the verse's power. *Cartwheels*, a sober portrayal of the mixed modesties of adult and childhood, summarizes its oddly listless subject thus: 'Children are like this sometimes'. Golfing memories, and the pangs of loss are tellingly balanced in *A Round At Streamleaze*: 'One should learn to live like this; like that'.

Such resolutions simply ask new questions, So, *Eddie Gill* (one of several intricate memoirs) addresses a lost and loved uncle, acknowledging, as if in passing: 'I recall your quick wit, index of a quick mind'. An adept non sequitur nails the poem's conclusion: 'They never even told me when you died'. Or there's the stark analogy drawn from seeing a son's first grey hair, in *A Full Head*: 'Shocking to be so reminded/ your son won't live for ever. Brown to grey, silver/ then nothing'.

Wainwright explores the less familiar without airs or traces of smugness. A group of Austrian pieces depicts the stark and looming shadows of the last century, cast over this one: an appalling Russian memorial to the 'liberation' of Vienna; *The Invasion of Lower Austria, 1945*, a pastoral paradise, condemned; a reflection on the resurrection of the Austrian far right in 2000, neatly aligned with our own nation's context, and conscience.

And wit is always there: the old Wordsworth gets a deserved comeuppance in *The Sage Explains Himself*. He looks back with pompous sterility on his fertile youth: 'it behoves you to explain the vapourings of your bolshie period'. A different celebrity is the subject of the brutal satire in *Kylie and the Fairies*, corrosive in its depiction of the fragile anatomy of contemporary icons, via a perversely-told fable.

The ease with which concern and compassion highlight themselves depends on the subject; on the one hand, there's the straight sadness of the eulogy to a cat (*In Memory of Poppy*); on the other, the candid sympathy for the stricken *Andrea*: 'This blood in her pee is really bugging things up' a compassionate portrait of decline, its precision excused because 'she never reads poetry', and more somberly 'will never/ know'.

The book is dedicated to its half-hidden hero, Eddie's love, Diana. In the closing *Intimations*, the couple survey 'a barren heap of earth transformed with love/ and skill'. Like Eddie's work, this garden, and its gardening *could* be finished. But when Diana suggests, "Now surely it's complete," she, we and the writer know the reverse is true: the writer's garden is always 'growth in progress'.

In the meantime, buy and enjoy this special and important book. The freshness, care and authority of the writing are something rarely found.