

**Meg Campbell, *Poems Adrift***

**Speech at the launch by Roger Robinson** (Emeritus Professor of English, Victoria University; editor of the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*)

St Mark's Church Hall, Pukerua Bay, Sunday November 18, 2007

I'll start with a thought that will be in the mind of everyone here, in the special circumstances of this occasion, people who value books who are gathered to launch a new book, only a few hours after we have lost its author. The best expression I know of the thought we share is by Milton:

*For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them...A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.*

So here is a book, modestly titled *Poems Adrift*, that contains "the potency of life as active as the soul" that was Meg Campbell, and is "the extraction of her living intellect." Today we launch Meg's latest book. At her funeral on Tuesday, and on other occasions, other things will properly be said, a fuller recognition, for instance, of the family she loved and to whom she dedicated this book - "with love to my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren." But today we celebrate the progeny of Meg Campbell, poet, the precious life blood of her spirit.

So first, thank you, Meg and Alistair, for the privilege of speaking on such a significant occasion. And thanks on behalf of all readers, now and in future, to those who worked so hard to bring this book so quickly into its precious life - Margaret Blair, Stephanie Drew its designer, and Alistair, who proved the perhaps unlikely truth that copy-editing can be an act of devoted love.

Thanks also to John O'Connor for his insightful and movingly written Introduction. Because John says some things about Meg's poetry so well, I won't repeat them - which means among other things that I won't discuss the poetic relationship between Meg and Alistair, except perhaps to remember a phrase Alistair used in *Poets in Our Youth* about another marriage between poets, when he called Jacquie and Jim Baxter's poetry "distinct but complementary."

There is nothing, despite Milton's word, "embalmed" about Meg Campbell's poems. She may sometimes drolly present herself in them as an old lady, "chairbound and windowbound," "her waist, not wasted now testifies to past pregnancies," "suddenly I'm tired, and lose the ability to balance," "Old age has answered my problems...I will become the prophet of good humour," talking to herself, anxious about grandchildren, secretly smoking when they're not looking, battling remembered rivals from the past, grumbling about her husband's night-time restiveness, "like a rogue dog around sheep...Will you settle down and sleep, old man?" Sometimes she is a comical old lady, as when she sends email to a friend called Sue and calls it S-mail, "Or Ishmael if you've had a few sheries."

Meg may in all these ways present herself as old and tired, but these are not old or tired poems. They are thought and feeling and enquiry for truth and fear of the unknown, and love and

passion - yes, passion - in process: alive, moving, shifting,  
uncertain, dynamic, and dramatic:

*I am caught*

*Running in the corridors of the mind...*

*Frightened, I impose your head  
between me and the pain...*

*So many poems in pieces float  
in and out...*

*Please don't turn away from me...*

*The wind forces us together and apart...*

*Could I*

*rein in a fast galloping horse?*

Those are from different poems, some of them opening lines with the impact and sense of slicing dramatically into a piece of life that remind me of Katherine Mansfield's openings. And the imagery is potent - wind, fire, the groaning sea at full tide, falling cliffs, toppling houses, kites on high wires, tightrope walking over an abyss, a bending mirror, electro-convulsive therapy, the executioner's axe, a shot horse - the images in these poems are powerful, sometimes violent, passionate, unstable, vibrant, challenging. Even the garden is a field of combat in the memory. *Poems Adrift* are not drifting gently on some quiet stream through a secluded retirement home, but tossing on an unruly and rock-strewn Tasman tide.

These are poems of late life in that through all this disturbance and ambivalence, this sense that "Life was half-pie, half-baked," runs an urge to find or at least seek resolution and peace:

*I want to shut down my life  
leave behind untidy pieces...I want  
to be tidy as never before...*

She seeks calm after the "thump and ache," peace after "wrath," "ease/like trees and flowers," safety for the elusive granddaughter, "a welcome somewhere/ Called Heaven."

In some poems, such as the memorable "The Conscience of the Queen," she finds a narrative that acts as a cohering metaphor. [Read fully by Jenny.] The allusion to "Hamlet" in the title, by the way, perhaps comes from Meg's acting days. Which leads me to say, as I wrote in the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, that Meg Campbell's poems are essentially dramatic:

*distinctive in their strong voice and almost muscular energy and  
the sense that even stronger feeling is being only with effort  
constrained...They can form unexpected links between the  
mythic and the domestic*

Sometimes in this book that stronger feeling breaks through to give an almost apocalyptic power to a poem like "Fire at Pukerua Bay:"

*Last night the wind tried  
one more time to blow God away.  
I tell you, I was shocked and scared.  
The trees were spectres, dry, and crabbed,  
branches scraping together like  
matches against a tinderbox  
and water wasted on sandy soil,  
unable to sink in half a fingernail.  
Dear God, ride a cold front over us,  
bathe us, moisten the earth,  
save us from fires igniting  
all around us. Only you can protect us.*

That ending leads me to an important group of poems within this book, poems of religious enquiry - not easy consolation but an exploratory, impressionistic, intellectually alert search for religious truth, in which Meg's Jesus is not (in her words) the marvellous vision of long hair and large sorrowful eyes and melting femininity with a permanent halo, but an elusive, disappearing, quirky, Now You See It... "quick brown fox," as three poems here hesitantly or defiantly name him.

[*"Discovering the Quick Brown Fox" read fully by Jenny.*]

These are religious poems that can be funny as well as provocative on the turmoils of religious faith and doubt - but it was Swift who challenged his critics to tell him where it is that God insists that we worship only with a "starched and cribbed countenance."

They are religious poems, but of enquiry more than assured belief; they write "patterns in the sand," by definition transient. None of this book is portentous or didactic. A book that opens "I can't explain..." and ends "I just wanted/to free myself to return/to my gardening" has no pretensions about the supposed public authority of the poet. Yet there are moments when with high dramatic impact they sock you with the direct truth:

*Poverty is a cage like no other.  
No such thing as 'poor but honest.'  
Poverty is life in prison: just cages,  
No choices... You stoop,  
Not to conquer, but to live...*

[*Read fully by Jenny.*]

There is one more poem I want to mention, because it deals openly and movingly with a topic that our society prefers to be evasive or embarrassed about - the sense of real loss when a loved household animal dies. This is "Lazar's Death:"

*Death and dogs. How could it be different? Could it be different?...*

*Tomorrow, oh tomorrow... it must never come, but will,  
In spite of tears and denial.*

The only previous poets I know courageous enough to write really good poems of genuine feeling about this experience are Thomas Hardy ("Dead Wessex the Dog to the Household" and "Last Words to a Dumb Friend") and Alistair Campbell, whose fine elegy for Buddy in "Just Poetry" is, again, distinct but complementary to "Lazar's Death."

There are several good poems of loss and mourning here, as Meg Campbell joins that growing group of New Zealand poets who are writing important poems about the experience of growing old and facing death - notably Lauris Edmond in "Late Song," Brian Turner, Alistair Campbell, in much of his work since "Death and the 'Tagua,'" and a writer I consider as much a poet as novelist, Maurice Gee. Thank God for some poets courageous enough to do more than play minimalist word-games and show off their cleverness. Meg eminently had that courage.

Three weeks ago in England I conducted the funeral of my brother, a large, wholly non-literary gathering, and was struck again, even among people who are not habitual readers, how valued, and wanted, and indeed almost indispensable poetry is at such moments of shared public emotion. So Meg's poetry now enables us to be with her spirit, "in travelling mode," to learn "belief, courage, and a sense of humour" from her, and to stand where we will all stand, where Meg stood until yesterday morning, as

*She waits at the fringe of sea,  
Of world, of eternity.*

It is my privilege to launch “Poems Adrift, dedicated with love to my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren,” by the late Meg Campbell - by the living poet Meg Campbell. I commend the poems to you as *containing a potency of life...as active as that soul whose progeny they are...the extraction of the living intellect that bred them.*