

Emotions Ablaze with Intensity. Geoff Page, Canberra Times, 11 Dec, 2010

Seasons of Doubt & Burning: New and Selected Poems. By Robyn Rowland. Five Islands Press. pp 226. \$29.95

Reviewer: Geoff Page

Though Robyn Rowland had an earlier distinguished career as an academic, she is, as her **New & Selected Poems** makes clear, essentially a poet of the emotions. To a lesser extent, she is also a poet of landscape (though nightscapes and seascapes might be more accurate terms). Her long identification with, and knowledge of, Ireland serve to intensify this.

Seasons of Doubt & Burning begins, like many "selecteds", quite sensibly with a group of new poems and then goes back to sample the poet's first book and work its forwards. Rowland's new poems are plainly the outgrowth of earlier work that many readers will be familiar with but they also tend to have an objectivity and a historical dimension that was not always seen in the earlier books. Sometimes, as in the erotic poem "The Kiss", this new objectivity can still culminate in a powerful subjectivity, albeit, in this case, expressed in the third person.

Other recent poems deal directly with historical phenomena as diverse as the "Loch Ard" shipwreck near Port Campbell in 1878, the kamikaze pilots in World War II and the Jewish king, David. The Japanese poem is peculiarly insightful, deeply moving, and probably also useful, by analogy, in understanding the motivations of Islamist suicide bombers. "So much attention to metaphor, to poetry; / the constancy of flowering and its passing away. / So much reckless use of belief, / sons blown away, petals to powder in the astonished air."

Reading this **Selected** also allows a composite and developing portrait to emerge of certain key figures in Rowland's personal life to emerge, most notably of her difficult and unhappy mother, her long-lived and affectionate father and, rather less attractively, the Irish monk with whom she had a long, intermittent (and ultimately unsatisfactory) love affair. Her two growing sons (raised by her as a single mother) also feature across successive books to complete the picture. Concerning the three adults mentioned, Rowland can be very graphic but is never less than fair (even though two of them perhaps may have less than fair to her).

Another feature of **Seasons of Doubt & Knowing**, in addition to this autobiographical element, is Rowland's unremitting metaphorical density. One can see this in almost any two lines chosen at random. While the poet may sometimes employ a "flat" or

straightforward statement as the climax of a poem but it's far more typical of her to say: "Globes of ruby are hanging like pairs of earrings, / lighting lamps of trees, flashing among emerald leaves / licked wet with sunlight" ("Homage to a sister-in-law"). Some readers may find this sort of imagery almost overwhelming; others will delight in its visual energy.

Many readers, perhaps of a third kind, may also appreciate, among the autobiography and subjectivity already mentioned, a number of political poems such as "Lament for Ethel Governor", "Greek Women in Resistance" and "The Fallen". Here, and in other poems like them, Rowland steps outside her own personal concerns, to consider and present a range of injustices, many of them too soon forgotten. "Stamped 'indeterminate sentence' / dragged to the peninsula of Trikeri to perish, / bodies beaten, wrenched in the twisting games / the guards will play with cornered flesh, / they burned their fevered will to ferrous strength". ("Greek Women in Resistance"). Later in the same poem she notes that "Trikeri today is a picnic spot, / children quarrelling over hiding holes / trampling oblivious the stained earth".

What readers are less likely to forget, however, is the intensity of Rowland's accounts of her personal joys and sorrows: her (successful) struggle with cancer in poems such as "Alone and in Darkness" and "Living with Terrorists"; her long love affair with Ireland (and her unsatisfactory monk); her fraught relationship with her mother (with its missed opportunities) and her tenderly moving portrait of her sprightly but slowly ageing father. Some (more Calvinist?) readers may draw back from what they may think of as Rowland's metaphorical or descriptive excess; others will revel in it. This reviewer is inclined to the latter response but can understand the former.