

Robyn Rowland, *Line of Drift* (Doire Press, 2015)

In 2015, Robyn Rowland published two collections of her poetry. At first glance, *Line of Drift* appears to be very different from *This Intimate War*, in which all of the poems cohere around the horrific Gallipoli/ Çanakkale conflict of 1915.¹ In keeping with its title, *Line of Drift* is a freer vessel which is not moored to a single cataclysmic event. However, upon close reading – and this collection repays attention – shared features emerge. Both collections bridge the northern and southern hemispheres, albeit each in its own way. In doing so, both address life, love, death and renewal; or, to put it differently, both explore humanity in its essence.

In *Line of Drift*, Rowland's path through life gives the work its cohesion. However, in evoking memories of a lifetime balanced between two homes in two continents, the one in her birthplace, Australia, and the other in her ancestral Ireland, Rowland is concerned not with chronology but with fluidity. Although the collection is divided into four sections, these are not temporally, geographically or thematically disparate or exclusive. In this respect, their titles are apt: 'Here and There' (I); 'Changing Tides' (III); and 'Along the Drift' (IV). The title of the second section is rather different and is eponymous with that of its single constituent poem: 'Unbroken Stone in a Stubborn Sea'. This 'Epic of Inishbofin' (49), synthesises many of the poetic and thematic elements variously present in the shorter poems in the book, typifies Rowland's powerful narrative and descriptive abilities, and symbolises the human capacity to endure through time in the face of uncertainty, cruelty and calamity: 'Drowning, famine, cholera – TB, slavery and war / the harsh life of the fisherman, the struggles of his wife – / comfort is built out of these' (53-54).

In this collection, Rowland unfolds before the eyes of the reader the natural landscapes of Australia and Ireland; she alludes to history and to tragedy, both public and private; she evokes ways of life, traditional, modern, nomadic and artistic; and, above all, she remembers people, the celebrated and the beloved. This is Rowland's world, comprised of her experiences and her memories: 'Poetry is not something we *do* but something we *be*' ('Research Statement for Creative Works to be Submitted for Peer Review' 92).

The reader, on the other hand, may never have seen Australia or Ireland, or watched a lorikeet or a curlew. We may feel frustrated because we do not know the friends to whom Rowland dedicates so many of her poems (often *in memoriam*). Perhaps we have never heard of the immolation of Victoria by bushfire on 'Black Saturday' (18), or of the silting up of the 'quartz-clear' Birrarung, River of Mist in the 'Yarrack Valley of the Wurundjeri People' (42). We may never have chased rainbows to Cong on the N59 past 'Joyce's loughs' (46), or braved the 'capricious sea' to the Isle of Inishbofin (49). It is of no matter. For what Rowland seeks to do, through her poetry, is to touch the reader at a deeper level of experience and to compel responses to this connection. Our personal 'line of drift' through life may be different, but we all know about belonging, friendship, shared pleasures, love, betrayal, sickness, ageing, loss, departure, separation, death, grief, nature and memories. *Line of Drift* appeals to the universality of that experience. Rowland invites us to find something of ourselves in the poems and to recognise our place in a shared universe of the emotions, and to say: 'Yes. I know this. It feels/ just like that' ('Research Statement for Creative Works to be Submitted for Peer Review' 93).

¹ *Editor's note*: see Catherine Akca's review of *This Intimate War* in this issue of *Transnational Literature*.

Thus, Rowland's poems are multi-layered. The setting which shifts between Australia and Ireland, or the many poems which describe journeys or departures, not only recreate the real experiences of the poet but also, at another level, reveal her search for identity and for a sense of belonging:

Being seed blown back from generations lost, we knew
leavings are our habit – we can do them in the dark –
that returning is what we only half-know in the body,
carried in our genes like a tune often hummed
a part-recalled melody searching for its words
... ('Blue Moon' 79)

At yet another level, such poems represent the trajectory which we all trace through life towards death and our human need to make sense of it. On occasion, Rowland addresses this quest for meaning explicitly, including when trying to come to terms with the death of a friend: 'You feel so utterly gone from me, / how can I hold onto the light, belief in anything?' (80). Consolation is found in the notion of renewal: 'There is a resettling of all living things. / There is a sadness tucked into the hem of being. / There is certainly a beginning again' (Beside the Glass Wall' 77). In many of the poems, the cycle of life, death and renewal is implicit in or reinforced by Rowland's choice of imagery, most often using natural phenomena such as the transition from day to night, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the ebb and flow of the tides. While none of these metaphors are original, their distillation into poetry is skilfully handled:

Air cannot hold onto the wave's roar
Nor beach-sand remain the same,
imprint of current washed away.

Beyond the barrier of shore
ocean fills into waves that return to the unfettered sea.
And so much water, we reduce to dew,
...
Is it then the true one within
becomes itself again infinite, irreducible,
suspended in a greater formlessness of soul? ('Formlessness' 81)

In summary, and in the light of an article which Rowland published in relation to lyric poetry,² it seems to me that by poeticising her own experience in *Line of Drift*, Rowland seeks to stimulate her reader to empathy at the level of fundamental human emotions, and, having established that connection, to share her own insights into the relationship between artistic endeavour, the natural world and the meaning of human existence: 'Life is full of confusion, but holding onto beauty / in the

² Robyn Rowland, 'De-lyricising the lyric? A response to David McCooney's 'new lyricism,' *Blue Dog*, 4. 8 69-78, 22 April 2016 http://robynrowland.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/De-lyricising-the-lyric_.pdf.

natural gives our watery presence a firmer grip. /.../ Golden Bird of poetry. Irreplaceable' ('Golden Flight' 28).

To what extent does Rowland achieve this aim? To the extent that one is receptive to her words.

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