

Geoff Page reviews *Mosaics from the Map* by Robyn Rowland

NOVEMBER 23, 2018 / MASCARA / 0 COMMENTS

Mosaics from the Map

by Robyn Rowland

ISBN: 978-1-907682-62-9

[Doire Press](#)

Reviewed by GEOFF PAGE



In 2015, Robyn Rowland published two books which seemed to be career-defining moments for her. They were the bilingual *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Chanakkale 1915* (originally with Five Island Press in Melbourne and now republished by Spinifex) and *Line of Drift* (with Doire Press in Galway). Between them they illustrated Rowland's long and developing involvement with Ireland and Turkey as well as with her native Australia. Her new book, *Mosaics from the Map*, again from Doire Press in Galway, continues these themes and operates at the same high level of achievement.

It also reminds us of Rowland's considerable and growing dexterity with the demands of the long poem and of poetic sequences. Both of the two 2015 books had several such poems and sequences and this one has even more. By "long" I mean poems of two or three pages plus, as opposed to half-page or one-page lyrics — or sonnets, for that matter. The risks of long poems, of course, are that they lose compression, one of poetry's key ingredients, and can tend towards prose (even if written in strict metre). In *Mosaics from the Map*, Rowland has avoided these problems rather well.

There are several strategies by which she manages this, of which the most important are probably the depth of her research and her passionate identification with the subject matter. Her poems here are long because there is so much that the poet's readers need to be aware of in order to have a sufficient comprehension of the issue.

Mosaics from the Map is divided into four sections: an introductory miscellany with several poems set in Turkey; a second biographical one focussed on the aviators Alcock and Brown; a third mainly set in Bosnia during the 1990s wars and a fourth with Australian and family references.

It may be instructive to look at one long poem from each section. The first we encounter is "Titanic — A Very Modern Story". It's made up of nine long-line stanzas re-telling the now well-known story of the famous 1912 shipwreck. It begins with an epigraph from a survivor, Jack B. Thayer, who surmised that "the world of today awoke April 15th, 1912."

Rowland cleverly begins every stanza with a short word or phrase to illustrate this modernity — and to emphasise all the elements of the story which have kept it relevant. "It has heroics," she begins and goes on to talk of the radio operator, Jack Phillips, "in the Marconi wireless room /without windows" who "kept sending signals in perfect Morse".

"It's 'local'," Rowland continues in stanza two and talks about the Irish element in the story, particularly a survivor's marriage "smothered in a deathly hush", a husband now "shamed for his survival, /yet he'd seen so many off safe and who wouldn't jump for a boat?"

Rowland continues in this way in subsequent stanzas covering the international dimension to the story, the role of coincidence, the role of greed in the taking of excessive risks, the sheer incompetence ("no binoculars in the crows' nest so only fifty seconds between spotting the berg and hitting it"), the weather of the night itself ("sky jammed tight with an excess of stars"), the immediate aftermath (the rescue ship, the "Carpathian", "a ship of widows") and the longer-term, rather trivialising aftermath (the heroic band-leaders' violin selling in 2013 for "one million pounds").

Rowland's metre, an important part of the poem, is somewhere between iambic or trochaic hexameter and free verse, an intriguing decision which risks clumsiness but in fact maintains a kind of continuity while keeping the reader's ear guessing.

The whole poem is clearly "documentary" in intent, e.g. the facts in the Carpathia's "loading 710 left alive from the 2200 who boarded", and yet it's also shot through with lyrically descriptive, if disturbing, passages such as: "The dead clustered in their / white lifebelts like flapping seagull wings in the lapping waves". The Titanic story has been often told, usually in prose and at much greater length, but Rowland has made the event even more poignant, while at the same time somehow foreshadowing the wastage that was to occur in the conflict about to begin just over two years later.

Mosaic's second section, "Sky Gladiators" is a sequence of six poems about the careers of the aviators Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown who made their reputation in World War I and then became the first to fly across the Atlantic non-stop in 1919.

The sequence starts, characteristically for Rowland who is always keen to look beyond the "received" imperial account of events, with her poem, "The Other Side of Things". It begins from Alcock's point of view in 1917 as he flies over Constantinople, "A city lovely in both poetry and Churchill's dreams ...". The rest is from the viewpoint of the nine-year old Turkish boy, Irfan Orga, who looks up to see "three planes appear. / He never saw such a thing, wings and whirring. He wishes / he could fly." Then we are shown the "cartloads of lolling heads, limbs akimbo, disconnected flailing stumps and the surprised wounded ...". The poem ends with a resonant couplet: "This was the first bomb. They meant to hit the war office but the bombs went wide, a man said. No-one believed him."

The next poem in the sequence, "High, Higher: Alcock" begins again from Alcock's point of view above the "mat of minarets / and domes" and goes on to describe the rest of his and Brown's war experience, "knowing we made a difference, new gladiators of the sky. / We'll win. This war will end all wars. Never again." The irony is more than a little touching.

The third poem, "Dead Reckoning: Brown" is from Brown's point of view above the Atlantic in 1919 and looks back over the terrors and hardships of the war, including "Fourteen months in a German camp in Claustal". Lines like this may not sound poetic in themselves but in context they work perfectly well. It is one of Rowland's persistent achievements that she can manage such combinations of the flat and the lyrical.

The last two poems in the sequence are concerned with Brown's continuing PTSD (though the poet doesn't call it that), especially during World War II in which his son, Lieutenant "Buster" Whitten-Brown was shot down on June 5/6, 1944.

Part three of *Mosaics from the Map* consists entirely of "War. What is it Good For?", a nine-poem sequence set in mainly in Sarajevo in the wars of the 1990s. It emphasises the pointlessness of the conflict, the internal opposition in Belgrade to the war and its unrelenting savagery. The sequence is varied and hard to summarise but its tone and texture can be sampled perhaps with a few lines from the viewpoint of a woman in Sarajevo after the widely-reported bread queue massacre on May 27, 1992. "The knee is smooth, lovely in its meniscus-shaped curve, / thigh pale from lack of sunshine close to the torso, / and the foot, its cardboard tag, five toes pointing towards / the sun, surprised almost, caught off guard."

It is this kind of evocative detail which takes Rowland's apparently "political" poetry well beyond the limitations of partisanship. Although her long lines often have a rhetorical feel they are far removed from the self-interested rhetoric of the third-rate politicians who bring such damage about.

The final section of *Mosaics from the Map* is dominated by the sequence, "Touchstones", in which Rowland re-creates the lives of some of her Irish ancestors, particularly her great great-grandmother, Annie Harding Lambert (1880- 1957), and the successive ravages inflicted on them by scarlet fever or scarlatina, as it was sometimes called. It's an extended familial tribute that quite a few Australian poets (including this reviewer) have felt compelled to make over the years. And it's always interesting to see where the emphasis is put, which maternal or paternal line is traced back and which ignored or deferred.

The "Touchstones" sequence begins with "Family Catalogue August 1880" which delineates the social and political context in Ireland when Annie was born. Several of the subsequent poems are written in the voice of Annie. The eighth poem is in the voice of her son, John, and remembers that his mother "preferred being close to a harbour, a beach, / or a river. Said her soul always rested near moving water. // On her papers they call her settler. But she never was."

Rowland's admiration for her great great-grandmother — and the resilience she embodied — is clear and the poet's sustained portrait of her times more than convincing.

Significantly, in the sequence's ninth poem, "Postscript", Rowland makes her divided feelings for Ireland and Australia quite explicit: "I am everywhere and nowhere, longing pulses / inside the green whispering in my blood. Belonging, exile — the seesaw. / That word home — it draws itself out like a skewer."

GEOFF PAGE is an award-winning poet and critic. His most recent collection is *Hard Horizons*, 2017. He edited *The Best Australian Poems* (2014 and 2015)

[#Issue 23](#)

[Varuna Mascara Writers Fellowship](#)



[Recent Posts](#)

[William Farnsworth reviews *Glass Life* by Jo Langdon](#)

[Cat Money by Jane O'Sullivan](#)

[Artichoke Hearts by Tanya Vavilova](#)

[Hoa Pham reviews *No Friend But The Mountains* by Behrouz Boochani](#)

[Jeffrey Errington reviews *All My Goodbyes* by Mariana Dimópulos](#)

[The Heart and the Choke by Michelle Hamadache](#)

[Geoff Page reviews *Mosaics from the Map* by Robyn Rowland](#)

[Caitlin Wilson reviews *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko](#)

[Tamara Lazaroff reviews *No Country Woman* by Zoya Patel](#)

[Light Borrowers: UTS Writers' Anthology 2018 reviewed by Beejay Silcox](#)

[Adventures in the Panoramic Delta: An Interview with Chris Andrews, Translator of Marcelo Cohen's *Melodrome*](#)

[Evelina by Elleke Boehmer](#)

[Tony Messenger reviews *In Some Ways Dingo* by Melody Paloma](#)

[Thuy On](#)

[Jill Jones](#)



Mascara's editorial support have raised my writing to a higher and more humane level.

- Martin Kovan

Newsletter

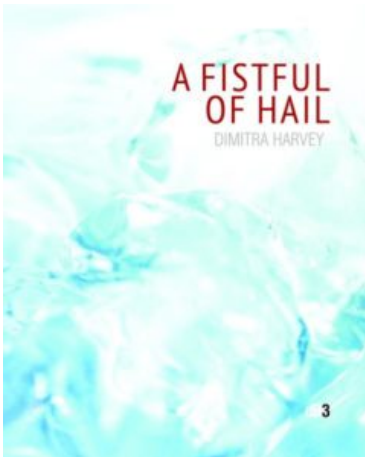
First Name

Last Name

Email

Subscribe

deciBels3



My Tweets

Tweets by @mascarareview

Mascara Literary Review Retweeted



Terri-ann White
@terriannwhite

Pretty exciting shortlists!
Mascara Literary Review Avant-garde Awards. The focus is on books which are innovative, stretching the boundaries of genres aesthetically, philosophically, and socio-politically. There are always more books than we can possibly select. Winners 5 Feb.

4m



Mascara Literary Review
@mascarareview

Subscribe to #MascaraLiteraryReview's #newsletter : mascarareview.com/newsletter/

Newsletter

Visit the post for more.
mascarareview.com

15m



Mascara Literary Review
@mascarareview

Replying to @mascarareview

#AvantgardeAwards shortlist for Best #Poetry [twitter.com/mascarareview/...](https://twitter.com/mascarareview/)

[Embed](#)

[View on Twitter](#)



Australian Government



Wollongong Writers Festival





© 2007-2018 Mascara Poetry Inc. First Published April 07, ISSN: 1835-4017

All Rights Reserved All work in Mascara is the sole property of the artists and may not be reproduced for any purpose without permission.
