

KIRKPATRICK DOBIE

*For Thomas Hardy*

Is it not strange how the dead disappear  
in their obsequies, how we adjust  
to their absence, recovering from our fear,  
telling ourselves we must  
but in no wise needing to.  
We could take it on trust.

So strange! It is almost as if the stones  
we tread and pass by on our journey  
were gravestones mastering our meditations,  
making a beaten way  
to full forgetfulness  
in a slow interplay.

Only in poetry is the thing remembered  
remembered better than it was  
as if an April in September  
greened, not to golden gauze,  
but intensest purity  
like Keats's Grecian Vase.

For only in loss can we apprehend  
what it is we have lost, and so  
in poetry it is lovelessness we mend  
when to the dark we go  
Orpheus-like but enlightened  
into a land we know.

*Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital*

This place — this other Bloomsbury —  
is Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital,  
by chance, and something rare of spirit,  
the first art gallery in England.  
Set up in seventeen forty six it houses  
a priceless, costless, antique clutter,

the native genius in confused diversity —  
sculpture and furniture, carvings by Rysbrack,  
rondels by Wilson, oddments of Handel —  
bust by Robiliac, Grandfather clocks ....  
and high above, in faded glimmering gilt frames,  
great masterpieces of their makers:  
Ramsay and Reynolds, Brooking and Joseph Wilton,  
Hogarth and Gainsborough; and best of all  
old Captain Coram's portrait, painted  
in his red coat; looking surprised, as well might be  
to find himself in such fine company.

And there are things, although not strictly art,  
that touch the heart:  
a key, a cup, a shell, a little cross.  
Tokens to cling to an identity,  
illiterate mothers and their loss.

*Mrs Betty McGeorge*

Betty, brought home from nursing home to die —  
an old woman — still would cry  
for home.  
'It isn't home!' she'd say  
her fingers plucking at the overlay.

'Sure! Sure it is! There is the tree  
you planted. You can see  
the top, and just beyond it's the first tee  
at Nunfield.  
Listen, and you can hear them at their game.'

And she would look and listen  
keenly, but always came  
that odd disturbing disavowal:  
'It's like it, but it's not the same.'

*Immortal Memories*

What would he make of it, old William Burnes —  
the Anniversaries, Statues, Mausoleums?  
Imagination turns  
to that clay biggin made with hands.  
One understands  
that he might not have liked it,  
might have thought  
it vanity, and dearly bought:  
the applause of fools.

Earnest, Jehovah-orientated, poor,  
he must  
have hoped above all for a steady boy,  
his trust  
being in Election, not in joy.

So, on another level, Christ's disciples found it hard  
to come to terms with that spilt box of spikenard.

*William Burnes: Robert Burns' father*

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*K*irkie Dobie died in January 1999 at the age of 91. The Dark Horse is proud that it printed the first ever consideration of his poetry, plus a generous selection of eight pages of poems, in our launch issue in 1995. About nine months after his death Ann Karkalas, always one of his staunchest advocates, submitted a selection of work previously unprinted for consideration. We print a number of those poems here.

*Kirkie Dobie was buried with his manual typewriter (the vicissitudes of using which frequently receive comic mention in his letters), perhaps to be fully prepared for when inspiration strikes, in whatever realm.*

**K**IRKPATRICK DOBIE was that increasingly rare thing: a poet who spent his life in one place, and wrote from that perspective. Born in 1908 in Dumfries, with the exception of a few years in Hawick as a bank clerk in the early thirties, he never lived elsewhere. In the 1930s, after the tragic death of his brother, he took over the family grain business in the town. An impressively well-read autodidact — Shakespeare and the Romantic Poets were special favourites — with a subtly polemical and argumentative nature, he wrote verse

which shares something of the unfoolable tone and scepticism of the astute grain merchant he was. Coupled with his sure grasp of craft, this gives his best poems an authority taken direct from experience.

Yet he did not begin writing seriously until middle age. He was a founder member of Dumfries Writers' Workshop in 1967, and self-published locally a number of pamphlet collections, which usually sold out. He never courted publication in magazines, unless requested to submit work. When I commented about his being unfairly 'overlooked', he shot back: "I've been overlooked because I never sent magazines anything. I felt it would be a waste of time." In his private literary judgements on other poets he brought the breadth of his literary knowledge and long perspective to bear; consequently, he was a stringent critic.

It wasn't until the publication of his *Selected Poems*, in 1992, by Cornwall's Peterloo Poets press, that he came to the attention of a wider public. Ann Karkalas, of Glasgow University's Department of Continuing Education, was instrumental in the book's publication. Kirk, or Kirkie, as his friends knew him, was then 84. The book deserved wider attention than it received. Its poems are rigorously made, engaging, and wholly individual. Writing about some of them in *The Dark Horse*, Ann Karkalas noted that they "make the familiar seem strange, but not at all as a deliberate shock-effect. The strangeness belongs to the world."

Kirkie never lost a sense of the world's strangeness, refracted as it often was through his lifelong debate with Christianity. He had an individual cast of mind which was diverting and unpredictable. He retained a gift for following, confidently, the complexities of his own intellect. Yet there was nothing arid about this. The whole man was always engaged.

Near the end of his life, in a letter to me, he reflected: "...of my parents and the shop and store and the gamekeepers — 'Manly men, servants but not servile' — the only thing left — precariously — is what I've set down in verse." Mixing craft with the grain of an individual voice, some 10-15 of his poems could surely hold their own in any anthology of the best Scottish poetry this century. In an age of hype and inflated reputations, that is no small claim.

GERRY CAMBRIDGE

The above obituary is reprinted from *The Herald*.