

Bashabi Fraser, *The Homing Bird* (Indigo Dreams, 2017)

Bashabi Fraser's *The Homing Bird* is essentially a beautifully-produced booklet containing fourteen poems; for the most part, these explore the poet's relationship with India and Scotland. The title-poem, headed 'Kolkata' and 'Edinburgh', gives us a panoramic view of how these two cities have shaped her consciousness and imagination. She is, indeed, a citizen of both, and these world-renowned cities anchor her dual identity as Indian and British, bearing in mind that they are also distinctive capital cities, Kolkata of West Bengal, and Edinburgh of Scotland. Both parts of the title-poem intertwine personal memories of the poet as a girl and university student with comments about the cultural and political significance of the two cities, by means of the traditional technique of apostrophe, which involves addressing them as persons.

What comes across in 'Kolkata' is a strong sense of its population's teeming, variegated dynamism, as in these lines alluding to the effects of Partition:

... you became a haven
For the bereft and bereaved,
The city of migrants ... (7)

But these lines are a mere speck of detail enhancing a poem rich with contemporary and historical resonance. The final section gives a deeply sympathetic description of exhausted 'rickshaw wallahs', yet it also eschews sentimentality when defining them as 'that remnant of bondage / And embarrassing labour, a burden of the past ...' (9).

Part II of 'The Homing Bird', addressing 'Edinburgh', has an entirely different feel to it. 'Kolkata's / Undaunted sprawl' (11) is contrasted to Edinburgh's more sedate pace of life, reinforced by its newly-built tram system, which like building the metro in Kolkata was for a time very disruptive:

When the metro was the excuse for organized chaos
In my old city, now transferred to the knotted
Reality of Leith Walk and Shandwick Place,
In my chosen dwelling space.

And now the gleaming white trams weave with confidence
Down Princes Street where people meet in this intimate city. (12)

But for the poet what makes Edinburgh uniquely special is its many literary associations, as embodied in its street-scape and architecture, and recognised by UNESCO:

... in this City of Literature
Where Rebus frowns through Fleshmarket Close
And Hogwarts looms in the many-towered splendour
Of George Heriot's School ... (13)

The allusions are very contemporary, since it is Ian Rankin who created DI Rebus and JK Rowling, inspired by the architecture of George Heriot's, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, so Part II focuses not so much on Edinburgh's past, but very much its present. It does remind us, however, of the following:

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You remain, Edinburgh, the urban inspiration
Of Geddesian vision and a Makar's delight. (13)

Patrick Geddes did, in the early twentieth century, formulate an integrative vision of how Edinburgh could combine its past glories with modern buildings and gardens to further enhance the cityscape. The Edinburgh Makar, moreover, is the city's official bard, and the current one Alan Spence was inaugurated at the City Council recently, but he also harks back to the Edinburgh court poets of the Renaissance, such as William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas.

There is also a certain amount of ambivalence in how the poet relates to Edinburgh:

But have you accepted me, Edinburgh?
You are no stranger to me, for I know
Your wynds and crescents, each curious close,
Your basalt rock and Forth view. (12-13)

...

But will you let me blend in Edinburgh
With the flowing pen power you hold in your folds? (13)

In the context of the entire Part II, however, these lines sound like the playful musings of a sceptic, of the kind that David Hume would have recognised. It's Bashabi Fraser's 'Makar's delight' in what Robert Louis Stevenson has called 'the precipitous city' that provides the dominant key. 'Homing Bird' illuminates two aspects of the poet's psyche, how her consciousness was shaped by Kolkata and her imagination by Edinburgh, relatively speaking, because consciousness and imagination cannot really be separated. It is undoubtedly a major poem.

The other poems in the collection are all related to the two parts of 'The Homing Bird', extending explorations of identity in various ways. Two of these, 'India Calls' and 'In My India', itemise what has been gained and what has been lost since independence, and the country's place in the globalised economy. In 'India Calls', diversity is the key to everything: 'Kurtas vie with collared shirts / and saris rival mini skirts' (23). 'In My India' obliquely denounces sectarian political trends in contrast to a more liberal-minded India in the recent past:

In my India we were moving
With the world, pushing orthodox
Boundaries, countering ignorance
In the Spirit of Rabindranath
In tune with Gandhi's tolerance. (26)

The poem ends with this clarion-call: 'Give me back *my* India!' (26).

Another poem, 'Walled-In: Walled-Out' reads like a reflection on our age of resentment and pinched expectations. It begins with a line alluding to Robert Frost: 'Do good walls make good neighbours?' It goes to show the consequences of simply building walls to keep out 'the other'. Here is an excerpt:

So while walls shut out
Suicide bombers, harvesters, employees
Of the starving free, they shut in

The waller who cements fear
In brick and stone ... (18)

One of the most delightful poem in this outstanding collection is 'Christmas: Burra Deen'. It intoxicates the reader with festive images of celebratory decoration:

A warm wrap-around sun of fun
And of trees with paper leaves
Cut into leaves of fir foliage, defying
The ambient green branches and colourful
Butterfly hues on bushes redolent
Of colonial migrations of dahlias,
Cosmos, petunias, poppies and
Chrysanthemums in white plenitude
snow-like on a soft Christmas night. (29)

The conclusion makes clear that Christmas is also an Indian national holiday:

... and the nation slept
To wake up on a national holiday
on Burra Deen – the Big Day of Christmas. (29)

Bashabi Fraser is well-known for her poems in *From the Ganga to the Tay* (2009), *Ragas & Reels* (2012), and *Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers* (2015). *The Homing Bird* is on a smaller scale, but very much like a Mughal miniature painting, and it therefore shines with a jewel-like brilliance.

Mario Relich