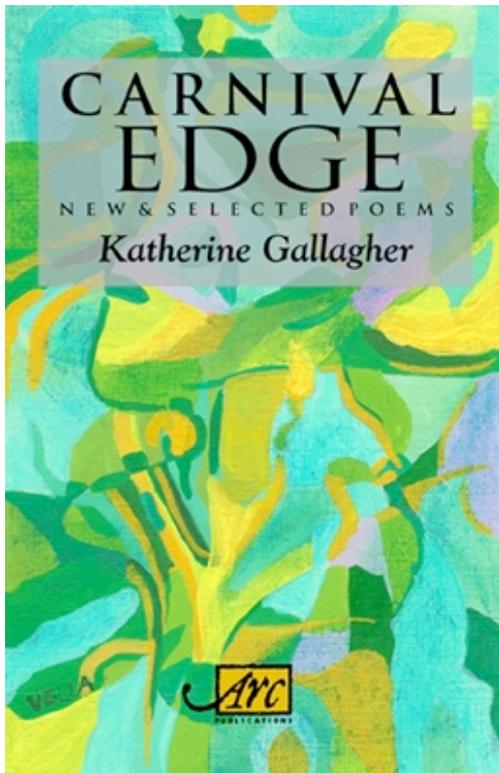


Carnival Edge: New & selected poems by Katherine Gallagher. Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2010, pp. 170, £11.99 Paperback, ISBN: 9781906570422.



Katherine Gallagher, an Australian poet living in London, has published another beautifully-written anthology on the lives of ordinary people. However, in this case, it is primarily about an extra-ordinary life: her own.

Carnival Edge: New & Selected Poems depicts a reality imbued with beauty and fulfilment as well as loss and separation. Gallagher's poems are both a distillation of her journey through life and an exposé of those vulnerabilities to which we as human beings are prone. But what is most striking is that she has been able to use poetry as a medium to reconcile distance and separation from a homeland that is obviously still very much part of her identity.

These poems defy easy categorisation. Gallagher's visual descriptions invite us to smell, taste and delight in her experiences as she highlights the extremes of her homeland 'where weather's a way of life'. (33)

In this poem, one experiences the intensity of heat, dust and the endless flat landscape of Victoria's wheat belt. In white Australian literary tradition, the myth of an empty land has traditionally been employed to portray place as all-devouring and overwhelming. As a result, this 'empty land' obscures other histories of possession, presenting a land previously unoccupied. Echoing this, Gallagher's poetry evokes the space of the white settlers. The land is 'cleaned to the bone' not only of its trees but also of the Aborigines. Their history is 'silenced'. The silo is:

an upright of the mind on dry horizontals
where trees have been stripped
wheat country
cleaned to the bone. (33)

Initially the reader is confronted with an image of an arid land, devoid of life, but this vision subsequently dissipates into an image of a mirage reminding us that everything is 'imagined':

where the mirage
lays its tantalizing sea blueness
from the sky's plate glazed. (33)

‘Wimmera Windscreen’ encapsulates the poet’s nostalgia for the land she grew up in – a nostalgia she has never lost. The poem represents a land that is not easy to live with, in its constant challenges to those who dare to try and tame it but which is exhilarating and ultimately liberating. By combining land and sea imagery, boundaries are blurred and the interconnections between the past and present, within nature, and the land versus the city, are highlighted. Here, nature and man co-exist, with both adverse and positive effects.

It is through the dynamics of landscape that Katherine Gallagher is able to ‘naturalise’ the histories and identities that are inscribed upon it, simultaneously making and hiding social and historical formations. Through the cultural processes of imagining, seeing, historicizing and remembering, space is transformed into place ... but it also needs ‘a name’. This theme is further explored by Gallagher in her poem ‘Laanecoorie’ through her use of repetition of words and images to denote ownership and loss:

Laanecoorie on the Loddon, with its long Aboriginal name:
Laanecoorie, the strange sound of it, not knowing what it meant. (112)

By using the Aboriginal name for place and the settler name for the river, Gallagher is able to connect the presence of the Aborigines and the settlers to one space which she then links to a memory of death using ‘the river’s bulges, its twists’ to highlight the fragility of life, with the river representing loss and renewal as a way to reconcile passing: ‘Looking back forty years, two brothers and a cousin lost to Lethe’. (112) Here there are two levels of loss, loss of the land to the settlers and loss of life, but this also reflects the loss of Aboriginal lives, thus connecting both the settlers and the indigenes in the cycle of life and death. Gallagher’s world is assembled from experiences and memories as she meanders through landscapes and personal histories. Names and places rekindle images of events:

as we swam full-pelt into the rippling swell
with never a thought for the futures in waiting,

carrying with us always the mud and the stones and the memory
of Laanecoorie on the Loddon, with its long Aboriginal name;
aware only of the day, the heat of sun, the cool of water –
the Loddon, fringed by stout red gums, with their knotted roots. (113)

Throughout her poetry, Gallagher uses ‘place’ as a stage where history is played out. In ‘Maldon, Old Mining Town’ she introduces a new history, Australia’s colonial past to the present, exploring this from gold mining through to a new kind of exploitation, tourism. She highlights the temporality of life:

Everything’s stage-set for history
and tourists (30)

This once gold-rich town has become the backdrop for colonial histories of those ‘white men’ who were not necessarily successful, among them, Gallagher’s forebears:

. . . bullock-drays and the old diggers
pegged to their shadows –
my great-grandfather who
just missed a mine here,
couldn't go deep enough
to crack the golden rib, (30)

In poems about explorers and pioneers, Gallagher uses their journeys to represent a 'nationalised' landscape. This use of the spatial metaphor of 'the journey' has traditionally been employed by emergent nations and nationalisms such as Australia's, to confirm identity. In fact, *Carnival Edge* could be described as one long journey, and the metaphor of life as journey, ties this rather eclectic selection of poems together.

In 'Homecoming', Gallagher describes the trials of the explorers who paved the way, opening up the land for Australians to claim as their own:

an antipodean patchwork:
this was the explorers'
wasteland and their trial –

Sturt's inland sea
still waiting
as the earth drums messages (64)

But this collection is more than a nostalgic look at one person's struggle with her ancestral past. It encompasses all of Katherine's Gallagher's personal themes of family and homesickness as well as the struggle to reconcile parting and death.

In 'Hybrid' she alludes to her voluntary exile from Australia:

I have swallowed a country,
it sits quietly inside me (121)

In '1969 III – Geneva', it is ambiguous as to whether the subject is a lost love or country but Gallagher's characteristic subtlety and simplicity of language allows multiple interpretations. With touching effect, in poems about parting, whether through distance, death, or the end of a relationship, there is no remorse or self-pity, only resolution and tenacity:

Though you're a hemisphere away
here you are: close-by –
our conjuring trick of never parting. (79)

Katherine Gallagher's *Carnival Edge* is like a walk in a bushland glade dappled with colour, history and warmth. The remarkable subtlety and sensitivity of the poems as one

wanders through a maze of interlinking stories of time, colour, love, loss and children's revelry on dry riverbeds, makes them both eerie and tantalising. *Carnival Edge* is an intensely personal collection of poems displaying Gallagher's sharp powers of observation and her wide-ranging generosity of vision.

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