

Title of the Book: *Declarations of Love*.

By Jim Aitken, Culture Matters Co-operative Ltd., 2022, £12.00, ISBN: 978-1-912710-49-2.

Mario Relich

Optimism of the Imagination

According to Greta Thunberg, ‘Beyonce was wrong. Girls don’t run the world: corporations and financial interests do.’ But how do you write poems about the kind of world we live in, as defined by Thunberg? One way of doing so is by keeping such a conviction as an undercurrent, but the poems first of all have to be about the resilience of human beings even in the worst circumstances. This is what the poems in Jim Aitken’s poetry collection *Declarations of Love*, in which all of the poems focus on what Graham Greene called ‘the human factor,’ brilliantly achieve.

The title-poem itself links such a project with appreciation of the natural world. The poem is made up of six quatrains, and in the last stanza the poet declares ‘I will come clean and openly admit to my infatuation,’ which has much to do with glorifying the onset of the seasons: ‘Every Spring it is copper beech, silver birch and laburnum/ and every Autumn it is maple and rowan. ...’ Other poems in this vein include ‘Fuchsia, Kinghorn’ and ‘Glitter and Glimmer’. The former identifies fuchsia as originally a Caribbean flowering plant, so at the end it’s declared ‘a migrant success.’ The latter describes the ‘diamond glitter’ of early morning frost, but by evening, the poet concludes,

‘I saw a mere slither of the moon
piercing the darkness of the day;
a glimmer of hope for the world.’

Such lines indicate an ‘optimism of the imagination’ (close to but distinct from what Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Letters* called the ‘optimism of the will’ which needs to leaven the ‘pessimism of the intellect’).

The poems expose the stark realities of for many today, but also never give up hope that change is possible, however unflinching the poem.

‘Homeless Man’ and ‘Drunkard’ are two of the most unflinchingly realistic. The second of the three stanzas goes as follows:

He lay there like a smashed egg
 and as I helped him
 on to his unsteady feet
 he mumbled some inaudible
 words of gratitude.

There is nothing judgemental about the ‘smashed egg’ image, nor is it sentimental. It conveys complete helplessness and a hint of psychological damage, which even the ‘inaudible/ words of gratitude’ cannot repair. The final lines avoid any easy way of dealing with this bleak situation, asking ‘how much/ you have you have to drink to get like that’, and ‘how much does it take/ to have this system afflict you so?’ The capitalist system in its current neoliberal phase is evidently blamed for the unfortunate state of this man, but this is not suggested in an ideologically censorious way; it’s a matter of how many questions need to be answered when we’re confronted with everyday misery.

In ‘Homeless Man’, one line refers to the man as ‘the victim of an elite’s rapacious greed’, and nothing in the poem contradicts this view. Yet it ends with the poet telling us that the man would not have welcomed being told ‘who had reduced him to this condition’, going so far as being scatologically rude about didactic advice. In short, it is not only a poem which denounces the economic conditions, indeed deliberate policies, responsible for homelessness, but also a powerful, illuminating statement about human dignity.

‘Beachcombing’ is a tribute to George Mackay Brown in three sections. In the first section we have the Orkney poet brooding, ‘like Hamlet before him’, on a ‘seaman’s skull’. The second section draws a parallel between the North Sea and the Mediterranean: ‘Once we called it Mare Nostrum.’ Not coincidentally, readers might remind themselves that it is what Mussolini called it. The section describes Greek beachcombers who ‘would welcome salty leather boots/ that had danced the waves from Orkney’, thus linking the historical traditions of seafaring in Greece and

Orkney, in tune with Mackay Brown's deep historical understanding. The second of three stanzas in the third section serves as a keynote to all the poems in *Declarations of Love*:

'For fragile is what we all are,

vulnerable our condition.

And what should flow, should surge from this

is nothing less than compassion.'

A poem like 'The Citizen of Nowhere' makes such a call for compassion totally explicit. It denounces how the authorities treat 'unwelcome' immigrants, pointing sardonically that

'...the blackbird has no papers

and needs no permission to sing

for he is native wherever he flies.'

Aitken's voice here echoes that of Robert Henryson's medieval animal fables.

In a lighter vein, but sharply satirical for all that, the title of the poem in Scots 'If Only Nicholas Witchell Spoke Scots', prepares us for what the poem tells us about members of the Royal Family who are well insulated from any 'cost of living crisis.' The poem is wonderfully illustrated by Martin Gollan. His drawing shows a television set in which 'Mitchell Scunnered' displays two fingers at us. Other drawings are more lyrical, and they all contribute to an attractively produced book.

In her Introduction, radical writer Fran Lock praises Jim Aitken as 'a poet who understands the power of language to shape perception, to create or restore our bonds with each other and with the world, but also to dominate and destroy.' In short, he is very much a political poet, but a nuanced poet who encourages readers to come to their own conclusions, above all, to imagine a better world.

Reference:

Aitken, Jim. *Declarations of Love* (U.K.: Culture Matters Co-operative Ltd., 2022).

Mario Relich is a poet who lives in Edinburgh, and on the Board of Scottish PEN. *Owl at Midnight* is his latest collection of poems.