

RICH GLEANINGS

by Gerry Cambridge

The Deed of Gift

by Timothy Murphy

Story Line Press, 109pp, \$12.95

ISBN 1-885266-62-6

Once worked with an old crofter in Orkney who would have enjoyed Timothy Murphy's poems. His name was Tom Mackay. He was built like a tree bole and liked a dram. He would have made no concessions at all to 'literariness'. He would have listened carefully to Murphy's verse and, the crofting equivalent of Graves' honest housewife sorting out poems like good and bad apples, would have rejected any that came near to straining his credulity. Leaving apart those poems in which the references would have been beyond him, among the remainder he would, I am sure, have rejected very little.

R. S. Gwynn, writing of this book in the American periodical *Chronicles*, allies its style with that of Hardy and Housman, and observes that Murphy writes as if Modernism never happened. In the environment this poet writes from, Modernism never did. Modernism was a largely urbocentric phenomenon. In a way, and not denying the depth of craft and reading from which these poems come, Murphy, as was once said of R. S. Thomas, is not at all literary. That is what constitutes his originality. Like the Scottish poet's, Angus Martin of Kintyre, his best work is as authentic and real as roots.

The poet falls squarely into the tradition of the regional writer of distinction. He has lived most of his life in North Dakota. He has written that it was a place in the late sixties thought of by some members of the literary set as an Indian Reservation. Born in 1951, he was educated at Yale under the brusque tutelage of Robert Penn Warren, whom he remembers affectionately (see *The Dark Horse* #6, pp 8-10). He has been a farmer — but in a region where huge farms are the norm — and is now a venture capitalist. He lives with his partner Alan Sullivan.

Published when he was 47, Murphy's first book, *The Deed of Gift*, is unlike most first books. Not only does it represent the fruit of over twenty years writing, but its author uses metre, rhyme and slant-rhyme exclusively. Divided into five sections, the book opens with 'Farming by Night' and closes with a group of 'Early Poems' on Classical themes. There are also poems about hunting, shooting, fishing; there are love poems, vignettes, a monologue by the ant-lion (that peculiar insect which waits in a pit for prey to fall down the sides into its waiting jaws), and philosophical reflections, many of them couched in Murphy's characteristic short-lined stanzas. Murphy's poetic influences appear to be deep rather than wide: Yeats, Frost, Wilbur, and A. D. Hope (the latter two handsomely

addressed in dedicatory poems) seeming most prominent among them. Here is 'The Failure' from the book's opening section:

Tractor and combine axle-deep in muck,
seedcorn and soybeans frozen in the field,
the home farm pledged against a bumper yield,
he has run out of money, time and luck.

What would his frugal Swedish forebears think
to see their hard-won holdings on the block?
There is no solace for a laughing-stock
in woman's arms, religion or strong drink.

Any day now the banker will foreclose,
summon the sheriff and the auctioneers.
What will he tell his sons in twenty years?
He cannot wholly blame the early snows.

While Murphy's surface similarities to Frost are obvious, there is nothing in Frost quite as bleakly implicated by farming as that. This gives a flavour of Murphy's farming poems: they are all about crop-failure and bankruptcy, a world where a farmer "forfeits his life / to the banker's knife", and where "a ploughshare buries / a farmer's worries." — buries, but doesn't assuage. The last quote is from 'Harvest of Sorrows', a beautiful poem with a forbidding title. The poem's lines descend the page like a procession of mourners, though splendidly garbed by the virtuoso rhyme and technique:

Now harried sparrows
forage in furrows.
Lashing the willows,
the north wind bellows
while farmers borrow
on unborn barrows. *castrated pigs*
Tomorrow, tomorrow
the sows will farrow.

A poem with such a title should be gloomy, yet it isn't. The paradox is that there is something almost consoling in the collection's clarity of vision. As Richard Wilbur says in his laudatory preface: "...I hear in [its] music the jauntiness of a survivor, and the high morale of a man who has a purchase on reality, however bleak."

Not that it is all crop failure and repossession. Murphy is capable of an

engaging whimsy and a sardonic humour I have often observed in those living in extreme environments. In 'Deconstruction' the poet wittily endorses the primacy of the creative act, with a sly debunking of deconstructionist critics and a wink at his own background:

Rummaging in rubble,
critics are scribbling
like fieldmice nibbling
in a farmer's stubble.

That is the complete poem. Many of Murphy's poems are short; some, epigrammatic. Here, for instance, is 'Fame':

Mockery is bitter
as arthritis to a knitter.
Flattery is sweeter
than a liter of cognac
to a dypsomaniac.
Knit for eternity.
Drink in anonymity.

If Emily Dickinson mocked telling one's name the livelong day to an admiring bog, Murphy here advocates a pure cynicism. This sonorous and intriguing little poem could only have been written by an outsider. Poets enjoying even modest fame usually do so too well to wish to write in these terms about it. As Dickinson did, Murphy converts neglect into an aesthetic strategy, and if there is something futile about it the futility is not in Murphy's attitude: ultimate oblivion is probably the fate of all art, after all; indeed, of all human endeavour.

Some contemporary readers — I am occasionally one of them — may long for a bit of free verse among all the rhyme, something a little less constrained. Murphy never wastes the reader's time, but he can seem a little too clipped at times. In general he is completely — perhaps too completely — in control of his material. When he asks rhetorically at the end of 'Requiem': "Why are we born with tongues / if not to praise the dead?" the bawdy irreverent cynic in oneself can easily provide several other reasons. And are we not born with tongues to praise the living too? At such points one remembers Auden's advice to the poet regarding anticipating the different types of reader a poem may have. Fortunately, such lapses on Murphy's part are rare.

His work in terms of technique is mainly a straightforward pleasure. He has no peculiar and offputting stylistic quirks. When he writes a line it is a line. Look at the clarity and robustness of rhythm in these four lines from 'Sunset at the Getty', a poem about the eventual fate of that museum:

Even the sirens cease their serenade
Outsung by the bard of that dark glade
where Hades hides away his purloined bride
and Gettys of antiquity reside.

One can imagine on the strength of *The Deed of Gift* that Murphy would endorse the description of poetry as “memorable speech.” He is a master of the “plain style”. His poems rarely fall below a certain — rather high — standard. There are outstanding poems here, including ‘Harvest of Sorrows’, ‘Sunset at the Getty’, and ‘The Quarrel’, as well as a great number of very likeable, individual, and tautly-made pieces. It would be hard to confuse Murphy with any other contemporary poet. No one else writing poetry in English sounds quite like him.