



***Bright the Harvest Moon: HAIKU AND Renga Imitations*, by John O'Connor. Christchurch: PG Poets'Group (2011). RRP \$20. Pb. 100pp. ISBN: 978-0-9582191-6-7. Reviewed by Karen Peterson Butterworth**

Only a handful of New Zealand haiku poets merit the title of *haijin*, or haiku master, and John O'Connor must be counted among them. I cannot equal the depth and breadth of his knowledge of the pioneer Japanese masters, so I approach this review from the viewpoint of a moderately well-informed haiku reader telling other readers what to expect.

The book's haiku and renga are divided into six sections headed 'After Bashō,' 'After Buson,' 'After Issa,' 'After Shiki,' 'After The Followers of Bashō,' and 'After Other Haiku Masters.' Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) evolved the haiku (which he called 'hokku') from existing Japanese verse forms, and other *haijin* have continued to develop it up to the present. Each of O'Connor's haiku takes off from a master's haiku and lands a little or a long way away from the original. (Renga are a related form, i.e. longer poems written by two alternating poets).

In his prefatory note, O'Connor says he has taken the same general approach as American poet Robert Lowell did in his *Imitations* (1961), a volume of loose translations of poems by classical and modern European poets. These haiku are neither direct translations nor new haiku based on direct observation by the poet. (Bashō: 'Learn about pines from the pine, and about bamboo from the bamboo.') They fall somewhere in between, more like variations on a theme in music. For example he renders Bashō's most famous haiku (*transl. William Higginson*) as:

old pond . . .  
a frog leaps in  
water's sound

as (I omit O'Connor's font variations, of which more below):

ancient pond –  
a frog breaks  
the meniscus!

I cannot compare the music of O'Connor's word flow with the original Japanese, but the word 'meniscus' has a lovely sound and fascinating associations for me. Readers' attention is directed to the breaking of something much more specific than the age, silence, and stillness of the original scene, yet symbolises all these. The exclamation mark underlines Bashō's understated core of surprise. This change of focus makes the haiku clearly O'Connor's own, albeit with a deep bow to the original.

In an end-note O'Connor says he is having fun, sometimes serious, with these haiku. Serious fun? An oxymoron? Not quite. Every successful haiku contains a contrast underlain with harmony and universal truth. Most of O'Connor's poems achieve this. E.g (from 'After Buson'):

Nowhere  
for us to stay  
house lamps  
on the snow.

***Bright the Harvest Moon*** seems in part a sly criticism of the trends modern western haiku has followed – the monotonous grooves some writers have slid into, from which O'Connor strives to jolt us. These grooves include the common pattern of three short lines either left-justified or centred, and the reliance on standard western typefaces, from both of which practices O'Connor frequently departs. He succeeds well with his variations on the form of haiku on the page. Most are refreshingly innovative without distracting the reader from the content. Many actually reflect the content better, e.g. he makes the line ripple in several haiku, and the word 'resting' slide as if onto a sofa.

He is not quite so consistently successful with his innovative use of computer typography and iconography. A few haiku include some lines or images much blacker than others; or widely disparate-shaped fonts placed alongside each other. Some of these contrasts disturbed the flow of the haiku's words for me. Others, using hollow outlines of flowers, a butterfly, the moon, or fonts which showed, but did not overstate, the contrast between the haiku's images, were most successful in replicating the delicacy of Japanese characters and illustrative techniques. I would like to show you how they look, but I lack O'Connor's meticulous skill and patience with the possibilities of his computer, so you will need to read the book.

Enough of form, although its variations are a noticeable and seemingly deliberate feature of this

book, and on to content. Like all readers, I related to some haiku better than others. In his selection of which of the thousands of classical haiku to imitate, I deduce that O'Connor chose those which related best to his own life experience. For example I felt he captured Issa's down-to-earth observations well, but wished he had chosen some which featured the master's wry intimacy with small life forms like fleas and flies. But, these were a much more pervasive feature of Issa's time than they are ours.

In this book O'Connor combines his grounding in the masters' work with his own minimal and elegant

wording, plus bold innovations in form which are more often successful than not. He pushes the boundaries of his art-form, a necessary project for a master, and one which is bound to make some readers uncomfortable. *Bright the Harvest Moon* challenged, teased, irritated, amused, satisfied, and stretched me in turn. It is a book for haiku aficionados and fresh discoverers alike. The latter are perhaps less likely to object to breaks from tradition and evaluate the poems on their merits. As with all good poetry, it works best to simply let the images seep into one's mind and resonate with what is already there.