



The Conch Trumpet
by David Eggleton.
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Reviewed by Patricia
Prime.

Dunedin-based David Eggleton has published six books of poems and a book of short fiction, as well as a number of works

of non-fiction. Eggleton delivers another exciting collection of poems in *The Conch Trumpet*,¹ where the poetry encompasses lyrical verses about the coast, mountains, lakes and rivers as well as dark, satirical poems on politics and snapshots of history. The collection is divided into five sections: Shore, Inland, Waitaha, Erewhon Unearthed and Fire.

It is an elusive poetry, often working through clusters of images which relay a mood, an emotion, a description, as in the first title poem, “The Conch Trumpet”:

Stars are setting westward,
other stars are rising eastward:
a handful of sparks on the horizon,
glow-worms on the roof of a cave.

Eggleton’s poetry is delightful because of the extraordinary way in which he feels the joy available to us in language, and because of the way in which, poem after poem, he shows us this joy and renders it so we can share it. This is of course no more than half the truth, and the impression the volume makes is somewhat more complex.

For a start, we could take “Sunday’s Song”: it is a poem of 21 end-stopped lines, leading from a whistling kettle to the “fading echoes of the old folk’s choir.” It strings together a variety of sounds: dry stalks, the river, sheep, a hymn, crushed metal, smashed glass etc. so assembled to compose a poem. Language fascinates the poet in a very inclusive sense, as we see in “Fiord Haka,” where dolphins leap, a ship rumbles, the fiord wobbles, a whale thrashes, a rockfall splashes and very many other sounds illuminate the poem. The letters, the symbols, the sounds that make up a word, the patterns, engage Eggleton in more than one sense of the word.

In the same spirit of playfulness, the second section, Inland, begins with the poem “Syzygy” (meaning conjunction or opposition of the moon with the sun). In the poem we see the moon in all its guises: torch-shine, a ball, a mirror and many more. It’s a poem of natural observation, but Eggleton’s simplicity is of the elegant and artful order, suggestive. For all the naturalness of his observations, he does not eschew ingenuity and the bizarre in his verse. A beautiful instance is seen in “Hydrangeas.” The poem opens with the simple statement: “Shrubbery’s floral bells. / Delicate as grace-notes, touch as wicker-knots.” The poem is in the genre of nature notes with just enough imagination in the exact notation as may be permitted in a poem. But the poem does more: it leads to a poetic explosion as the hydrangeas are variously described as having perms, bathing caps or called “balloons,” “Powdered wigs” and more. Eggleton’s images, for all their imaginative distance, are not incongruous: he relates what he has seen and beckons the reader to look closely with him.

The next section “Waitaha” (meaning Māori iwi, inhabitants of the South Island) focuses on the mountains. The poem “Orogenesis” appeared in a craft collaboration with jeweller Anna Claire Thomson as part of *A new line: 8 jewellers, 8 poets*. It features shale, flakes of rock, the strata, shingle and dust, formed by the movement of the earth. The poem ends:

Some force has left no stone unturned but tumbles
down climatic slopes steep as speedy escalators –
each to seek true weight on a trial and error basis,
till, caught by river rapids, they bank up as shingle,
and, an eternity later, riverbed dust blow sky-high.

Eggleton repeatedly provides an eye-witness account of nature: he is mostly a poet of the outdoors, a keen observer. He is also interested in the spiritual quality, the purpose and motivation of nature, which tend to remain forever elusive. Eggleton invites the reader to join his explorations and to take a closer look at the seemingly familiar, as we see in “Cloud-Piercer”:

On winter’s serrated edge glints
snow’s teeth, talons, feather-slick tints.

Nothing loath, prowled by air’s current,
great alps bulk above canopy.

His poetic reality is shaped in the act of perceiving; in the focus on particular things and



details that hint at a larger meaning but, at the same time, point to the possible randomness of the universe. The seemingly ordinary loses its dullness, if one is willing to look. It is there that nature hides its small miracles. As Samuel Butler says in "Wilderness":

'At every shingle bed we came to . . . we lay down and gazed into the pebbles with all our eyes.'

Eggleton seems to derive his strength and inner peace from such spiritual encounters that reveal a fundamental truth about life which can be felt rather than explained.

In the section Erehwon Unearthed the poet writes about Mackenzie in the poem entitled "The Visitation":

Mackenzie kneels near Waitaki,
enters a tree poem in a log-book.
Seals it with highway tar,
hammering leaf against leaf.
Mountains echo his amphitheatre.
Raindrops pluck skins on Pukaki.

It is part of his unique outlook on life that all the seeming multiplicity, randomness and insignificance of human experience belong to the same coherent order, as we see in the poem "Atua of Nowhere Zen" where

Elders photographed staring at gold-rush sun
could not see daylight through a Union Jack
or rabbit after rabbit bolt from the gun.

"Between Two Harbours" is an ambitious long poem – a vision of the scene viewed over Auckland – and concludes with the lovely lines:

Flying boat engines chatter their reverie.
White terns are wind-swept in accelerando.
In slow formations of gulls that follow,
I trace your wake on echoes of the sea.

The final section, "Fire" starts with "Night Flight to San Francisco" and centres around the idea of the non-stop flight and what occupies the poet's mind during this time:

This flight is non-stop:
a frigate bird in dimmed fulguration.
So the sleep of reason snores,
and the brain fears aneurism,
or a twenty-four hour power nap.

Eggleton mixes gorgeous imagery ('afflatus of angels,' 'therapeutic nihilism') with common scenes, such as vending machines, extractor fans and aisle queues, and passing pronouncements on the world ('your newscasts stream / in hallucinogenic braids, 'a blinged-up city' and 'Jeeps approach, packed with life coaches') that leave room for the reader's imagination. More interesting and accomplished is the highly associative "Ode to Coffee": a poem about the effects of drinking too much coffee:

. . . each drop a silky piano note
steamed from the roasted bean,
cupped in cardboard, polystyrene,
painted glass, or hand-thrown ceramic,
and summoning up wavering syrups of Araby

Then he switches to the longer poem, "Testament to Databody Dave," where he considers the electronics of the modern age, with their

Outpourings as unstoppable as the Huka Falls:
tiddlywinkers with tapered fingers twiddle
out texts and Twitter tweets, stripping a topic bare –
locusts moving on, having appropriated,
eviscerated,

In the final stanza Eggleton finds his own solution to the problem:

I'm drinking decaf in the global warming.
I'm hunched over a gasper in the global aging.
I'm perched on a push-bike in high-visibility vest,
and updating my status: "hand-jiving
high-fiving, bumping booty, total-retro frug-fest.

A beautiful collection. I find myself torn between anticipating the next poem and not wishing to leave the one I've just read. But then I do, and I am not disappointed. Not every poem touches as well, but this is the nature of books of poems. Eggleton's words will haunt the reader with their strange sense of connection and recognition.

1 Front cover and internal artwork are by the poet's brother Tony Shane Eggleton and the Author's Photograph is by Elizabeth Marsh.