



***The Rope Walk* by Maria McMillan. Wellington: Seraph Press (2013). Pb, 34pp. ISBN: 9780473236328. Reviewed by Olivia Macassey.**

Produced in a limited edition from Wellington-based small poetry press Seraph Press, this slim volume of twenty four poems is hand-bound

with an aperture in its manila cover revealing a linocut by Joe Buchanan. While *The Rope Walk* is Maria McMillan's first collection, she has been writing for a number of years, and this chapbook has the deft touch of an experienced poet. The titular "rope walk" could refer to a Nineteenth century ropery (a place where ropes themselves were made), or alternatively to a tightrope wire act: and both of these walks are present in the poems. Both are apt metaphors for the poetry itself. Just as a rope is made of bound strands or fibres, *The Rope Walk* comprises a sequence of interrelated poems, which speak as different personae: several generations from the same fictional family of Scottish immigrants. The speaker is seldom explicitly stated, but through recurring characters and themes, we form an oblique understanding of their interwoven lives and histories.

There is a sense that for McMillan both the old country and those who make the journey – as well as their dead – are, like the ship itself, 'a weight passed forward/by many hands' (p 25) through later generations. This interconnectedness is supported by the way there are threads between poems, such as when the poem "1989", which circles around a freezing works closure, ends on 'and keep the meat/soft and sweet' (p 11). This gives way to the first lines 'Christmas day. We eat ham/ and many good potatoes' (p 12) in the next poem, which centres on the immigrants. So the sense of connection between generations is carried forward even through the quotidian element of food.

To return to the metaphor of rope walking, McMillan's writing is finely balanced, taut, and strong. She occasionally uses Scottish dialogue appropriate to the different characters, drawing on the appeal of these words – I love 'the trissle,/

thrummle of thistle finch" (p 34) – without being intrusive or self-conscious. Emotional content is often evoked in seemingly minor physical details. A woman sits "still as if simple or my own lost bairn" (p 31) In 'Ten-ups' the ostensible subject matter, a straightforward anecdote about a pair of boots being worn at a party, is laced with a grim undercurrent of violence:

I didn't get you them for decoration.  
Some trick of Heidi's I suppose.  
She should know better. Me  
Like a horse newly shod. His voice

like a hammer. What do  
you mean? Don't you know?  
She should tell you.  
You should ask her.

(p 7)

At this point, the poem ends, but its resonance doesn't. The pared-down, deceptively simple lines here are characteristic of this collection. Its spare, but sure-footed use of language is well-matched with the subject matter, and its interest in connections with that which surrounds us: as Scottish pioneers deal with heartbreak and burial at sea, a tightrope walker finds the limitations of her body, a grandmother remembers 'the sad smell of gorse' (p 28). Well-made and aesthetically pleasing, but never at the expense of meaning and engagement, *The Rope Walk* is an impressive work.