Alien postings

William Scammell

FRANK ORMSBY

A Northern Spring

Apoth. Seeker and Warburg. £4.95.

"Travelling", the first poem in Frank Ormsby's latest book, celebrates the power of the imagination, but without resorting to inflationary aestheticism, or covertly proposing art as the true heroes of our time. The presence of his grandmother's "passion for Europe" as expressed in her French journal, packed full of sketches and travel timetables, "Driech and fine vistas". It soon transpires, however, that she is an ingenious stay-at-home who does all her travelling in her head:

She died in her Russian phase, in the hard winter of 1913, sunk between pillows as though she struggled through some pass in the Caucuses.

The title sequence, which occupies thirty-five of the book's fifty-four pages, is a series of meditations and monologues spoken mostly by American GIs training in Northern Ireland in the summer of 1944, with the economy of landings (though that event is kept firmly offstage). The bulk refers to the Ulster confederate up in these poems as "a province of the mind" in which the visiting soldiers, and various other immigrants, "vo-er with visions of survivors of the present 'Troubles'.

Unlike Heaney's bog poems or Mahon's snow parties and disused sheds, however, zooming downwards and upwards and backwards to get some perspective on a confused present, Ormsby's squaddies caught up in war-in-a-foreign-place stand out to speak, in a low key and with considerable integrity, only of themselves. One poem which lies outside the sequence, "Felix Peciosone's Crucifixion", about a soldier following instructions...A Roman in exile, earning his daily bread", clearly comments on the role of British soldiers in Northern Ireland now, but that apart I find it difficult to see how the main sequence reflects any light on the present. Occasionally the predicaments and voices of these soldiers are reminiscent of Randall Jarrett's war poems, occasionally of James Fenton's (notably "In The Diary", which also lies outside the title sequence). The pervasive stance is that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's play, little men caught up in history's hallucinations, as in "Cleo, Oklahoma", about a new small-town recruit: "I'm from the states to the Greyhound. Already I belong / to somewhere else, or nowhere, or the next / photographic. The Mayor spread his arms / and had trouble with History."

There was dust everywhere. It was too late to cry or too early. I heard the Mayor say: "We've had History before now, folks, in this town. There'll be more History soon."

That is really done, and so is the recent's instant denouement. Comprehensive incomprehension is certainly one way of coping, or satisfactorily not coping, with one's personal fate or destiny - big words best shuddered at in behoves. But perhaps our post-colonial myth of belonging "somewhere else, or nowhere, or the next / photograph" is as self-serving as the Victorian certainties it has replaced? It would be unfair to saddle Ormsby with personal responsibility for such explanatory myths, or failure to unravel them; yet the concluding line of "A Lesson of the War", even though spoken by a schoolboy - "I wish this war, this fashion, war, was over"...seems peculiarly symptomatic in his home.

The title echoes Heeny's celebrated poem, and the line quoted above is also a blackly humorous assessment on Reed's "racing the spring", for the child who speaks has seen a girl "lying with some airman at the foot of a field / They rolled in their bare skins and gave a cry / and then stopped fighting". As in some of Keith Dougall's poems, making love and making war are not always readily distinguishable.

This tone of palpable human ignorance is well expressed in the book's concluding poem, "Home". Ormsby is often at his best in such short pieces as this:

Once, in the Ginn's Ring, I closed my eyes
and thought of Ireland, the air-wide, skin-tight, multiple meaning of here.

When I opened them I was little the wiser, in that, perhaps, one
with the first settlers in the Lagan Valley,

and the Venetian boat people of Petralawn.

The juxtapositions make their own historically-ideological point.

What seems lacking in these sober and well-made poems is anything to counter the throw-away anti-heroics. This northern spring is indistinguishable from perpetual winter, and that carries its own risks of sentimentality and excess. "From the German" proposes some traditional values to set against the hapheproof violence, but the proffered phrases - "an inovable presence"..."some treacherous gift of innocence restored"...are revealingly archaic, the soft underlife of the tight-lipped silicon these poems deal in. There is much to admire in A Northern Spring, not least its ambitious reach, but the poetry of war, like any other, rests on its ability to be humbly convincing and convincing.

Engaged and engaging

Tim Dooley

FRANK ORMSBY

A Northern Spring

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TLS April 26 1985

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A Northern Spring

Doc ref: TLS-1986-1121 Date: November 21, 1986