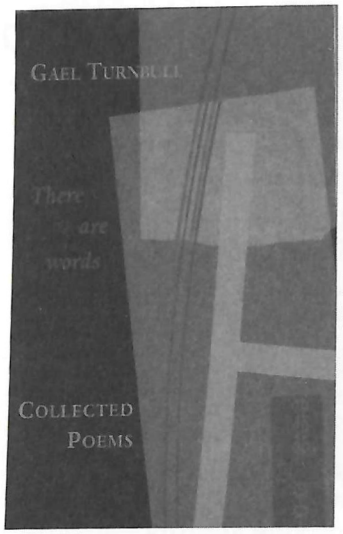


Gael Turnbull, Collected Poems, "There Are Words"

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Reviewed by John Hudson

Gael Turnbull's sudden death in 2004 shocked the literary communities of many countries. It was testimony to his popularity as a figure and his breadth of contact with cultures. Inevitably his death created the need to collect his work, a huge task as Gael had not only lived in many places and many countries but had been published widely. The task fell to Jill Turnbull, and she and publisher Tony Frazer have done Gael and his poetry true credit.

I only had the pleasure of publishing Gael's work once but he was a subscriber and supporter of Markings; indeed Gael was a great supporter of poets and poetry. He believed in poetry and, despite his wide range of interests and his profession as a doctor, he saw his mission in life as poetic.

This is wide-ranging poetry, the original voice of a poet moulding a world of influences across fifty years. The poems carry ideas and have the goal of uncovering and presenting beauty and coherence.

Famously Gael was a great reviser of his work. He treats the subject humbly and wittily in the poem "Remake":

Remake the world?
Remake myself?
Troubles enough
Rewriting this.

The pun, the inversion and the paradox are used to reveal fresh aspects of his subject, especially so in a poem such as "It's been" where the word "time" is robbed of its clichéd uses through repetition to unfold a touching confession.

He is capable of observation, not only of human relationships but also nature: "Gnats churning in the stillness of a summer dusk/ or showers of minnows swirling in a hollowed pool" (The Unwavering Sun) or "A quaver of light/ trees sift the dusk./ Far sounds curl/ in the ear, falling. (A Breath of Autumn).

There is playful humour and lightness of touch: "Dot, diddle, dot, diddle,/ so many pretty colours -/forget-me-nots, marigolds – (La Sainte Face) and there is profound questioning of being and happiness in poems such as "From the Sanskrit". "They find me crying and commiserate// but would I waste tears on less than joy?"

There is a self-consciousness about word play and poetry that is always light of touch. This is perhaps best exemplified in his 1995 collection "For Whose Delight" from which the title poem for this Collected Works is taken, "There Are Words". This is a particularly successful work that doesn't bear partial quotation.

It will soon be time to produce a "Selected Poems" to aid the reader less acquainted with Gael Turnbull's work. However, this volume will remain a cornerstone for anyone interested in enjoying this rare poet and for it we can only be thankful.