**Civil and Civic**

by Jonathan Bennett


Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Jonathan Bennett was born in Vancouver and currently lives in Keene, Ontario. He grew up in Sydney, Australia (his mother is Australian), but he did all his publishing in Canada – including two novels, a collection of short stories, and two poetry collections. He returned to Canada when he was sixteen, finished his high school here, went back to Australia, came back to Canada, and completed a university degree here. However, I can assure you that he is no ping-pong ball, just a writer who wandered a lot.

The first poem in this collection, “Back Roads,” talks about cars:

> It is a beautiful car; it is a concession line.  
> Late light, amber and broken by the ashes  
> and cedar groves, streaks the dirt road now  
> and into the future. Three deer appear just  
> ahead, still as lawn ornaments, at the edge  
> of a field of farmed firs. (11)

We hear the alliteration, the interior rhyme, the clatter of “c”s, the anguish of twisted syntax, the line breaks that add to the static through their sudden enjambment, and we recognize that a new voice is making itself heard. Take a look at the words that end the lines – words like “just” and “edge.” They are hard and sharp, like the careening of a car along an S-curve at high speed. Is the “late light” streaking the dirt road or the dirt road streaking by in the late light? The line break that leads to the second couplet can carry both, especially when it is found in the middle of a strangely contorted phrase: “amber and broken by the ashes / and cedar groves” – a strange juxtaposition of descriptors. But, in the end, the poem comes together with precision accuracy.

Bennett’s unique voice shows itself in the section from the middle of “Woody and Wiley”:

> So there’s your father and I armed to the teeth  
> with a plug-in chainsaw and nylon cord  
> one-upping an electric brush and floss,  
> the know-how of a YouTube how-to,  
> nervous neighbours, polite as Canadians,  
> looking on as it claps like August thunder, teetering. (14)
The words are precise and the images would please William Empson. What is the sound that “claps like August thunder”? Does July thunder have a different sound? Notice as well the contemporary lingo captured in “the know-how of a YouTube how-to.”

Then there’s the cleverness of the opening line of the next poem, “Ravens, Working Holiday”: “Together, don’t they toll an unkindness?” where a grouping of ravens is known as an unkindness. This sentence leads to “Oily slicks of solder blue and char black, / they are despoiling the japonica / of quince.” Bennett is a master of poetic sound: the way the “ck” in “slicks” resonates in “black” at the end of that line, the way the “p” is carried forward from “despoiling” to “japonica,” the last sound of the latter being captured by “quince.” Bennett’s ear is flawless.

The title “Civil and Civic,” as we are informed in the acknowledgements, is taken from the name of an Australian construction company. The title poem was inspired by the 2003 Montreal World Trade Organization protest. Although there are 17 lines in this poem, it bears resemblance to an earlier sonnet, “Bungalofts in Bobcaygeon.” In that poem, Bennett telegraphed the volte (or turnaround) by the following device:

Rosemary remains.
We don’t go far now. (18)

The structure of that poem was clear, as it had the standard 14 lines. However, given that numerous sonnets over the centuries, including some of the earliest English ones by poets such as Gascoigne and Shakespeare, contained a varying number of lines, we cannot discount this one. Here are the central few lines that contain the volte:

Trapped, wet in a tent, some bitch recites Brecht.

We play Hacky Sack.
They open tear gas.
An act born from a crowd’s seething will
I heave the blunt harm of a brick at helmets
and shields, a slow, magnificent arc. (23)

There is no doubt that the broken poetic line heralds a change in the poem’s temperament, given that, prior to the break, the poem is concerned with the peaceful protesters while following it is violence. But even in the clash of ideologies that this poem vividly captures, Bennett is still concerned with sound, such as that in the amazing line “Trapped, wet in a tent, some bitch recites Brecht.” Also, Bennett’s eye for detail renders his poetry truly contemporary and lasting, words like “Hacky Sack” saying more than any descriptors could. The image of the arcing brick evokes a sense of Thoreau’s existentialism, a seemingly violent act becoming a symbol of peace.

Why this collection was not nominated for the Governor General’s Award can be only because of the exceptionally strong competition last year. I have no doubt, provided Bennett keeps writing like this, that he will one day not only be nominated for but win some prestigious awards. ✨

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