Fifth World Drum  
by Anna Marie Sewell  

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham  

Although this is her first collection of poetry, Sewell’s is not an unknown name – at least in Edmonton. Of Mi’gmaq/Anishnabe/Polish heritage, she has been active on the Edmonton arts scene for some time. In addition to writing and performing poetry, theatre, stories and song, she directed Big Sky Theatre which produced Aboriginal theatre in Edmonton and on the international Aboriginal theatre circuit. She was a founding member of the Stroll of Poets Society as well as being active with the Raving Poets, who describe themselves as “Canada’s premier purveyors of spoken word awesomeness who produce top notch reading series that feature live music and poetry.”  

Whether it is a delight in esoterica or a deep appreciation of Aboriginal spirituality or both, readers will enjoy the manner by which Sewell both begins and ends her poetic excursion with a prayer. Her first poem, “don’t read this then,” ends with the following epigraph: “we all inherit and bequeath the wind / that joins us together” (9). The final poem “is this drum” is a thing of beauty which deserves to be quoted in its entirety:  

if this drum beats  
anywhere at all now  
surely one day my feet  
might find its rhythm  
has spread like grass root  
humble humbling  
soft chains of thanks  
giving rise to  

a spacious  
dangerous  
gracious  
soul
fit to live singing
in this world of wonders. (90)

In the poem “birds in a hurricane,” Sewell describes a trip she took to Korea, and it includes a mantra:

wind and water did this
wind and water
breath and tears
wind and water (43)

There are elegant lines:

lost in the hurricane
there is a song
on which to rise
onto the highways of the moon
this breath on wings
those wings in air
this air wind breath
this body drum

Wind and drum are pervasive images throughout this collection. The poem “languages” describes Sewell’s immersion in Aboriginal languages, having received this heritage from her father:

by the mackinah! my dad would say.
his voice would roll out and snap down on the end.
if he was really mad, it was
by the jumped up ol’ whistlin’ mackinah!
what, i wondered, was a mackinah?
i had it in mind that he meant
some kind of raincoat, a quaint swear.
only now, twenty years and more since he left this island
do I read Gitche Mackinac – a name for the great turtle.
he spoke ojibway as a kid, before school.
and somewhere, his Mi’gmaq relatives got a word or two
through. we had mo’in and keena (16)

She defines these words both in the poem itself and in what she calls “Endnotes and Glossary.” Sometimes, as in “Mi’gmaq fog song,” she brings too much in at once, and loses the reader:

must make another world  kim-ewistu
we must make another world  elisknuwet
rainbow in the bay  tal ma! (14)

Confusion arises when the first two lines in English which would, given their almost identical construction, call for a similarly almost identical word or phrase give rise to two extremely different words. This confusion is compounded in that third line by the use of “tal ma!” appearing to translate “rainbow in the bay” and yet, earlier, was translated as “of course!” leaving the reader perplexed as to what exactly is taking place in this poem. Without direction, the reader remains lost, rendering the poem ineffective.

Lest one think that Sewell has left behind the Slavic part of her heritage, she gives us “yevshan”:

you take the sage – yevshan –
you breathe it in
yevshan yevshan
you call from it a story
of your own people far away
an eastern light, far grasslands (20)

We learn in the endnotes that “Ukrainian people tell the story of a hostage prince, and how the smell of the wild herb yevshan, borne on the wind, fed his soul and kept him free in captivity” (94). One wonders why she refers to a Ukrainian story but never address anything Polish in her poetry even though that constitutes the maternal part of her ancestry.

There is much more contained within these pages than spirituality, language and ancestry. “water to drink” sounds like a poetic excursion by the Raving Poets:
we came out of the bush
out of wolf willow and feverfew
turk’s heads and paintbrushes
poplar and spruce, alder and thin-shanked grasses
to stand before the river

a pack of wild poets
speechless on a beach of pebbled sand (23)

Replace the wolf with peach-leafed willow and the feverfew with red osier dogwood and you would have been coming out onto Winnipeg’s Red or Assiniboine – these quickly disappearing bushes, or similar species, giving rise to the destabilization of riverbanks. The turk’s heads and paintbrushes would have been replaced by goldenrod and dock.

It seems appropriate to cite one final poem ‘about the ocean’ containing the whisper of prayer:

it comes back to me in quiet moments
softness of one summer night
smell of festival
flowers against the sea
walking on St. Mary’s up to Maggie’s
talking Prayer Sticks Peyotl and Whale (54)

There is much on offer in Sewell’s initial collection. There are a few rough patches but these should give her incentive to explore more deeply in her next.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.