

Fire Stations / review by GEOFFREY CLARKE  
Acumen, no.47, September 2003

I had had a hard day at the office when I first looked at *Fire Stations*. The omens were not good. I would be tough on a saint let alone a mere mortal should they not live up to expectations, and expectations were high. This was a new poet to me and I looked for something dazzling, exciting, and at times I was not disappointed. He is a man of undoubted talent with a large range of subjects. I particularly liked his opening poem '1965' (his birth):

the twelve-hour haul of not being born,  
between two worlds — induced. I make it late,  
this bloody, headlong drop towards the light.

Also I rather liked 'Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh' and 'July Fugue'. Probably his best poem is 'Saturday Night' which indeed received a commendation in the National Poetry Competition 1999. It is difficult to pick a solitary line or two out of this poem because each is so interconnected. I also do not want to give the words away which indicate what the poem is about as I consider this would spoil your enjoyment at working it out, and here lies a possible problem. His work is not for the faint-hearted who want everything to be dished up so that they do not have to think.

This is a thinking man's poet, an intellectual (although rarely do you need a dictionary by your side). Some may say his poetry borders occasionally on obscurity and, yes, on occasion I found this to be the case. Certainly a number of poems challenge the reader, dare the reader to read again, some to solve the mystery he has set.

His work may not therefore be for "the man seated on the Clapham omnibus" who probably still aches for the simplicity of John Betjeman. And yet when he did write a very simple poem, i.e. 'Stratheden' about children, it did seem rather ordinary in a way, certainly by his standards, missing the superb similes / metaphors of a Gillian Clarke poem for example on a similar subject.

For a first collection it is remarkable, however. You would consider him to be an old hand with a number of collections behind him. He is a comparatively young wine and given time, maybe not long, to mature could turn into a 'classed growth'.