

# *Urban Pastorals*

By Clive Wilmer

Worple Press

When I heard Clive Wilmer read his *Urban Pastorals* last Monday evening in the Cambridge University Library I was moved. There was a quiet solemnity about the delivery but it was tinged with wistfulness and a gentle wry humour that had echoes of Alan Bennett talking of his Yorkshire childhood. Peter Carpenter's Worple Press has published these short pieces of nostalgic insight into a childhood spent in the South London of Tooting Bec and I recommend everyone to get a copy. The Press is based at Achill Sound, 2b Dry Hill Road, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 1LX and is well-known for excellent productions (including volumes by Iain Sinclair).

When D.W. Harding wrote his seminal essay on nostalgia for the first issue of F.R. Leavis's Quarterly Review, *Scrutiny*, in 1932 he referred to 'simple homesickness' being 'an aspect of social life' where the home that one yearns for 'comprises the whole familiar framework—objects and institutions as well as people—within which one lives and in dealing with which one possesses established habits and sentiments.' It is an established truth that no man is the author of himself and in moments of clarity, and humility, we can recognise how much we are the result of everything that has happened to us. This awareness is, of course, a far cry from some regressive tendencies that can be bound up within the world of nostalgia:

'regressive because the ideal period seems to have been free from difficulties that have to be met in the present, and nostalgic because the difficulties of the present are seldom unrelated to the difficulty of living with an uncongenial group.' (Harding)

Clive Wilmer's beautifully poised writing never runs the danger of forfeiting its tone of recognition: the past's importance is registered precisely because it **is** the past. Tooting Bec Common reappears before our eyes like some Proustian scene as the waters of time recede:

‘A boy playing on summer afternoons could forget that he did not live in a rural paradise. There were ponds and a boating lake and stretches of woodland, an Italian ice-cream cart and a swimming-pool. There were squirrels and songbirds, and you’d come home with sticklebacks in a jam-jar or a stag beetle in a matchbox.’

It was a time of hope: Clement Attlee, public drinking-fountains, Public Libraries, Socialist Ministers ‘whose lexicon was Morris and John Ruskin’ and who wanted ‘to build a paradise on earth’. When Clive Wilmer spoke about the background to this sequence of pieces he was clearly moved: the hopefulness of those years offered a glow just as the early ventures into the world of schooling centred around Miss Inkpen who ‘passed on her legacy’, a copy of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*:

‘She had already taught me to count and spell. That day, I held the English language in my hand.’

Clive Wilmer is a fine poet and I recall the short piece he wrote for the *TLS* in June 2007 when he referred to the world of translation. After pointing out that those who put themselves through the labour of learning a language deserve our respect and deference he made the central statement ‘but skill in languages is no guarantee of poetic accomplishment’. *Urban Pastorals* gives us the fruit of Miss Inkpen’s legacy as did the earlier volume from Worple Press, *Stigmata*. In the opening poem from that 2005 volume Wilmer’s lens of words clicks sharply and decisively:

‘A withered leaf that curls round its own form—  
Though not resisting death, still on the tree,  
Still of the world, simply by being there.’

‘Still’: time and quietness; a past reflected upon, mused upon; the light of *Urban Pastorals* when all that seemed to lie ahead is all that composes the now, the still, the still.

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