

The Bull Calf

Reviews of Fiction,
Poetry, and Literary
Criticism

in the millennium by Barry McKinnon

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Barry McKinnon

in the millennium. New Star Books, 2009.

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in the millennium is a continuation of Barry McKinnon's lifelong project to process the meaning of making a home in an essentially inhospitable place. McKinnon's poems plod through the barrens of downtown Prince George and spare us nothing – we are subject to the

unpleasant details of a city centre in the throes of death. These are colloquial, confiding poems that address streets, rivers, neighbourhoods, and other poets by name. Each poem exemplifies the poet's struggle to find the self within the place.

in the millennium is ambitious and risky in that it offers it all up and asks nothing in return; McKinnon is the opposite of the poet who comes to writing to bestow his answers to the world as revelations. The poem is the process, the poetry the vehicle toward understanding, and while reading *in the millennium*, we discover at the same rate as the writer.

In "Surety Disappears" this uniquely McKinnon question is posed: "where is my rock in earth's /rocky path? //myself?" (49) Admitting its vulnerability while at the same time venerating the place/the journey/the poem the question is one we aren't meant to answer, but we are driven to consider, through all the poems in this collection, who we are, when we are, where we are, and where, exactly, is here?

in the millenium, although it travels and causes us to question ourselves, does not let us forget that we are also considering Prince George, with its damaged downtown, its drunks and toughs, its sloughs and "cutbanks," its stately homes and mills. In the poem "Surety Disappears," a deeply self-examining poem, McKinnon also draws the valley where the Nechako and Fraser Rivers meet with accuracy and a level of wonder:

Cottonwood Island – 30 below (March

river hued blue in / north sun

over mill

all energy is the incomplete

this end

in space

(I glance the cutbanks

in the

irreversible luck of time

to make

my heart a memory (55)

There is an imperative demand in McKinnon's words: that we look and then look again at the familiar or for the lost because they bear scrutiny. What we find, no matter how small, is information toward greater understanding of the world and of the self. Repetition of words and isolation of words make for reverberations and resonances within the work. Rereading offers new echoes of words that deepen the feeling of the individual poems and reinforce the searching nature of McKinnon's verse. The final poem in the book, "Prince George Core" (139) alone says more about a city and a man than you would think possible in a few short pages – its despair and spare, unflinching words do everything to pare away the bullshit and offer up a truth. *in the millennium* is hard-hitting poetry. Underneath the harsh description of his place is still tenderness: the honest work of a man sorting through the days trying to figure it all out.

In the tradition of the confessional, "procedural open-form" writing (as Rob McLennan calls it) that this poet practices, poetry can be seen as the act of describing oneself into being. McKinnon has long probed at self-discovery within the context of Prince George, and his intimate, half-articulated thoughts draw the reader close and deepen the engagement with his work. This book also continues the western

tradition of the long poem or the book-length poem, extending the invitation to the reader to enter into the exploration as a companion on the journey. McKinnon, in his slow, circuitous journey, continues the conversation that George Bowering refers to in his commentary in the *New Long Poem Anthology* (edited by Sharon Thesen, Coach House Press, 1991): "So why do I keep writing long poems? Well, Barry did. Bob does. Nicole does. This is how we talk to each other. We are so lonely otherwise. This is how we say our final important serious stuff to each other." *in the millennium* is an invitation to walk, talk and discover together.