On *Ends & Beginnings* (1994) by Iain Crichton Smith

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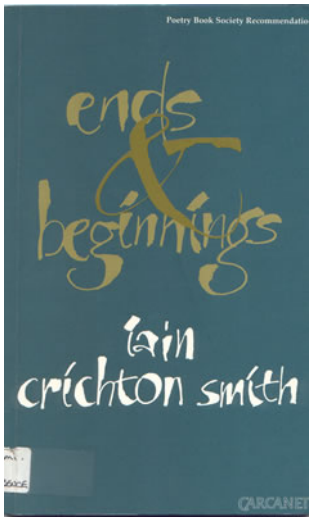

Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting Poets' Pub (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*
1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English* (with Robert Garioch)
1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*
1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*
1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*
1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*
1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*
1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

The Book

Smith, Iain Crichton
Ends and Beginnings
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1994)
216x134mm, paperback, 152 pages, plus 10 preliminary pages (i-x)

The collection contains 102 poems, grouped into six sections numbered '1' to '6', plus a preliminary poem. The sections, and their main topics, run as follows:

'Poetry', preliminary poem
Section 1, 33 poems, on old age and dying
Section 2, 7 poems, on places outwith the Highlands
Section 3, 26 poems, on the local and the universal, the transient and the eternal
Section 4, 11 poems, on the academic life
Section 5, 13 poems, on others and otherness
Section 6, the poem 'Conversion' in 11 parts, the extended monologue of an Israeli soldier before and after battle

The back-cover blurb states that the collection 'begins in elegy, with the exiles and deaths about which he writes so memorably, and progresses through place, history and positive changes'.

The Title

The collection's title is neither the title of an individual poem nor a phrase taken from one. It rather highlights the main themes of the book, broadly death and rebirth. Ends and beginnings, rather than beginnings and ends: death may be the end of an individual life, and the individuals portrayed in the book have a number of strategies for facing up to the enormity of their own death; but people, and ideas, are reborn in various guises.

The phrase recalls the motto of Mary, Queen of Scots, 'en ma fin est mon commencement' (in my end is my beginning), a phrase which resonates with the intricacies of Celtic knotwork, as well as the image of the two snakes, each eating the other's tail, which MacDiarmid used in 'To Circumjack Cencrastus' (1930). It suggests the circular rather than linear concept of life, and thus of time. The 'ends' of the title are explored most fully in the first part of the book, in poems about people preparing for their own death, and

in memorial poems to friends of the poet who have died. The recurrent (though not only) season in which the poems are set is autumn, the season of endings, a final flourish before the barreness of winter; but also (think of Keats) the season of fruits, of the creation of the seeds of the future. 'Teachers' is a typically oblique and touching memorial, as the fates of the poet's teachers are described: strokes, withdrawal from the world, death in a Latin-speaking underworld. Autumn is used in contrasting ways: the figures have been blown away by 'a huge wind' like 'the leaves of autumn', but the poem ends on a resonant final image, 'and there are apples trembling in their hands', suggesting that for all the pathos of their ageing and dying, they continue to contribute to the present, and to the future.

The 'beginnings' of the title relate to the young people who pass through the book, their unthinking, unthoughtful energy and zest for living in sharp contrast to the relectiveness of the old: the monotonous green of spring against the sudden flaring brightnesses of autumn. In the poem 'The Young Girls', he writes

> Poetry has to do with misty mornings
> and beginnings, beginnings.

In a review of the book, Andrew Biswell wrote that this 'derides the idealistic reader'. Given Smith's obvious delight in 'clear autumn days' one cannot read the above lines as a statement of his own position, but equally clearly he has a love for the clumsy and unfocused and spontaneous energy of the young, preferring celebration to derision of such enthusiasm. Here poetry too is part of the transient world, and thus part of life. The old lady may be 'sick of books' as she prepares for death among the 'nameless hills', but paradoxically it is the young, with their appetite for the transient, whose minds are receptive to books, to an extension of knowledge beyond the immediately perceptible. Poetry for Smith is part of an ongoing learning process, not something which has a fixed value to be grasped by means of study. The poem 'Aberdeen' in section 2 sums this up most fully, with its images of the the past providing energy for the present, by way both of newly-discovered North Sea oil, and of the classical literature, Virgil and Lucretius, he studied at university there. Both ultimately fuel his poetry less, he states, than remembered images of 'the coupled virginal hilarious girls' and 'the pimply boys, brylcreemed and unheroic' on the city's Union Street, for 'riches are what we find / in what is transient, perilous and oblique'. Nonetheless the poem closes with a striking image of the ongoing and urgent contribution of death to life:

and ghosts in lumbering suits rise from their toil
and the furious vigour of fermenting graves.

The Decade – 1990s

A new generation of Scottish writers, born either side of 1960, began to make their mark in Scotland, in the UK, and beyond. Novelists such as Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy, Irvine Welsh and Ian Rankin took Scotland out into the world; poets such as Robert Crawford, W.N. Herbert, Kathleen Jamie and Kevin MacNeil took the languages of Scotland out into the world, where they seemed to be more or less understood. Iain Crichton Smith's unexpected and much mourned death in 1998 followed those two years earlier of Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig and George Mackay Brown, leaving, of the eight writers in 'Poets Pub', only Edwin Morgan to see in the new century. Morgan in the 1990s (and beyond) continued to explore new subjects and forms.

A Contemporary Reading

The book is in six sections, plus a prefatory poem, 'Poetry', perhaps too slight a poem to stand as a marker for the collection as a whole, but in many ways typical of Smith's work. It is discussed in some detail of Robin Fulton's review of the collection (see below, Further Reading).

The first section opens with 'Lewis', about an old man on the island who has spent time in Canada but is now back home, 'holding at night in [his] bed/a dialogue with God'. The poem is at first addressed to, and then written in the voice of, the old man, suggesting on the part of the poet both a distance from and an identification with the character. As in many poems throughout the book, it is a bright autumn day. The sea around Lewis is contrasted with 'the lakes/and rivers of British Columbia', a contrast heightened by the speaker's concept of God's heaven as 'Your kingdom of fresh water'. In the opening lines, 'The waves/are perversely sparkling', presumably 'perversely', because the old man sees himself as a 'sinner', and because the Bible stories are 'more real to [him] than Lewis', so present delight or beauty is considered undeserved and anyway goes unperceived. At the end of the poem, rather than suggesting any hope of salvation, it is 'the tall magnificent spruce / [which] are climbing to heaven'.

The poem introduces the book's main themes in a concise and measured way: the perception of the natural world through a theological or, as Smith

prefers to put it, dogmatic filter, as opposed to unmediated sensory perception, and the centrality of Lewis to his concerns, as a natural and theological landscape. The bareness of the landscape is equated with the bareness of its religious culture, an extreme form of Presbyterianism. Smith takes his stand against this, insisting that life can only be lived fully and meaningfully outwith its strictures, in a kind of existential openess to transience. The strong antagonism he feels towards the Bible and its teachings is expressed unequivocally in the following poem, 'The Bible' which closes with the lines

> And its victims have black faces and its saints have batons
> and their diseased ethics are undazzled by rainbows.

There is occasionally a sermonising aspect in Smith's work which places him much closer to the tradition he is attacking that he would appear, elsewhere, to admit. Lewis is his touchstone; he gauges notions of beauty and freedom in relation their lack on the island. It is a negative touchstone, and leaves a certain ambiguity and tension at the heart of his work.

The tension is less problematic in the poems about teaching and academic life, in which Smith is able both to acknowledge the value of literature and warn of its potential to fog our perception of the world. The poems in section 4 are in many ways the most interesting in the book as a group, teasing back and forth the relationship of art to life, particularly the appreciation as opposed to the creation of art. 'The Scholar' presents a shabby figure undone by a belief in the unworldliness of literature, a figure who, like the naïve students in 'The Young Girls', has gone on believing that 'poetry is about misty mornings', rather than integrating it with life in the present. The poem ends with his remembering a cafe which he liked to visit as an undergraduate, 'whose owner could talk knowledgeably about Proust'. This figure can perhaps be seen as having found a certain equilibrium, living and working in the world while taking an interest in, and gaining something from, literature. The successful academic of 'The Scholar Says Goodbye' fails to mention literature, yet he comes across as successful in terms of not just his career but of his life overall. Taking his farewells from those he has worked with and is obviously fond of, he is able to face the unknowns of the future with neither fearfulness nor complacency. The final lines compare him to a goose flying north in the spring, 'ungregarious guest of a new spring'. Smith is sensitive to the corroding effect caused by too deep an immersion in literature at the expense of interaction with the world, indeed as an excuse not to attempt such interaction.

Smith happily finds inspiration in the everyday: 'the constant music of the possible' (p.9), 'the random kaleidoscope of images' (p.105), 'multifarious glitter' (p.134). Poems in section 3 use various images of a vase to link the transient and the eternal. In 'The Theft of the Vases' two vases, stolen and assumed to have been spirited out of the country, are connected with Keats' Grecian urn, a kind of ideal form. This leads Smith to muse that 'Eternity exists in another place', a phrase humorous in its absurdity, which also underlines Smith's belief that it is only through our perception of the transient that we can begin to comprehend eternity. In 'Putting out the Ashes' the act of filling the bin at night grants the poet a sense of the limitless energy and bounty of things. In 'Waiting for the Ferry', the poet conceives 'a dead horse' made of the debris, real and imagined, in the filthy river, which speaks to call out for life 'on the shore... among buttercups'; an act of recycling, as well as an act of creative imagination. But there is also the constant battle against eternity, purity, death, which threaten to overwhelm the living messiness of things. This is perhaps most brilliantly realised in the poem called simply 'A Story', in which in taxi driver is forced to defend himself with a 'rusty rail' pulled quickly from a fence, when he is attacked by 'the madman' wielding a 'pure sword'.

The poems are written using a variety of stanza forms and line lengths, from the metrically regular to free verse. Perhaps the most common form of stanza is the tercet, usually with an irregularity somewhere in the poem: a stanza split to form a single line and a couplet, a closing couplet, a quatrain and a couplet instead of two tercets, etc. Edwin Morgan has written of Smith's work:

> He wrote quickly, usually without revision, and with the risk (which he was aware of) of being careless and slapdash when he was not writing under good pressure. On the other hand, he gained in a sort of unstudied, often surprising lyrical quality which he couldn't have got any other way.

The work often appears slapdash, but usually repays further attention. The way images and ideas resonate off each other within individual poems, and within the collection as a whole, is striking, and it is interesting to note the range of poems which reviewers of the book refer to, as if each had been struck by something particular, rather than all agreeing on the 'major poems' within the collection and leaving the rest to their fate. Sometimes Smith's gamble does not seem to pay off: there are a number of poems in secion 1 which seem to add nothing new in terms of ideas and images; but overall the

book offers a rewarding mix of fluent utterance underpinned by a density of ideas and images.

'The Spider' (section 3) has the insect spinning its web on (what else) 'a clear autumn day', and it is compared to the poet at work. Both are at the centre of 'a structure with nothing in it but itself', working 'a technique without ideas', and at the end of the poem the poet muses on why they should both still be doing what they do, after all

> So much has been truly made,
> the great responsible dead.

Smith seems to have moved beyond theology and academe, and is proposing poetry, all art, as 'a technique without ideas', something which will be made perfect by an absence of deliberate conceptual thought, and a consequent (it is implied) sensitivity to natural, inherent forms. Not that such forms are uncomplicated: the spider is initially compared to an 'astronaut', which works visually in terms of a being in space trailing a single line behind itself, but also in terms of the poet moving weightlessly into the unknown, and the level of underlying sophistication making this act possible. There is an element of doubt as to why one should continue to attempt to make art, given the achievements of the past, but Smith implies, comparing himself to the spider, that it is a natural, instinctive, central part of being alive.

This idea is explored later in the book in a much more problematic context. The book's final poem 'The Conversion' is written as the extended monologue of an Israeli soldier before and after battle. In it he thinks back to the deportation of the Jews to concentration camps in the 1940s. The Jews, like other characters through the book, were 'weighed down with the weight of [their] symbols', and their 'devotion to words / [has] clouded the world'. Their Nazi persecutors, on the other hand, were

> ... freshly-born
>
> to the images of reality , to trains just as they were,
> to guns just as they were, to the speechless landscape,
>
> to the dew without sorrow, to the bouquets innocent of grief.

Here Smith seems to be testing his own belief in an non-ideological perception of the world against the nihilism of the Nazis, for whom 'History opened its gates, and all was permitted'. It's not clear what is to prevent his

own existentialism slipping also into nihilism, that is, it is not clear what barriers he is erecting against such nihilism. The 'conversion' of this poem's title sees the speaker move from a belief in a righteous and vengeful God to an existential view that Death is the only transcendant reality, but in what way does this differ from the world-view of the Nazis, in what way guard against their nihilism? How do we live with and learn from the past without becoming trapped in 'a ruinous snare of history and books'? The poem offers a fine deconstruction of God to replace him with a 'final uncluttered pure humanity' which seems a rather vague and unconvincing notion to set against centuries of the persecution of the Jews, for example, and now the Israeli state's determined military measures against those it perceives as its enemies.

Smith's own example as a writer suggests not so much aetheism as the paradox or dialectic of struggling towards and celebrating an existential freedom while maintaining the intellectual touchstone of a longstanding literary and theological tradition, and the geographical touchstone of a place of belonging.

Further Reading

Smith, Iain Crichton
Collected Poems
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1992)

Smith, Iain Crichton
Selected Poems
Audio tape; also featuring an interview with Michael Schmidt
(Bournemouth: Canto, 1985)

Nicholson, Colin (ed)
Iain Crichton Smith: Critical Essays
A collection of critical essays about Iain Crichton Smith's work. Includes Select Bibliography.
(Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1992)

Glasgow Herald
8 October 1994
Review by Alan Bold of Ends and Beginnings

Lines Review
no. 132 (March 1995); p.57
Review by Robin Fulton of Ends and Beginnings

Poetry Review
vol. 85, no.1 (spring 1995), pp.73-4
Review by Robert Crawford of Ends and Beginnings

Times Literary Supplement
4 March 1995
Review by Andrew Biswell of Ends and Beginnings