
A Small Psalter

Pádraig J. Daly

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In the early days of the Merton Society its journal from the outset always included a poetry section, and indeed the biennial conferences always had an evening of poetry readings. On one occasion the poets Selima Hill, David Scott, Pádraig Daly and Michael Woodward read their poems. One would never forget the experience of hearing Pádraig Daly read a poem. The warmth of his tone and the humanity it reflected were very striking. You could hear a pin drop.

Scotus Press has published Pádraig's latest collection of poems and it does not disappoint. Pádraig's insight into human nature, the struggles of faith and his delight in the lives of his great-nephews and great-nieces reflect, as ever, his faith in humanity despite all the challenges it faces.

Pádraig is an Augustinian priest at St John's Priory in inner city Dublin. In one long poem, 'Liberties', he reflects on the forlorn and forgotten who live precarious lives, often on the street. Take Johnny:

He is in the lane all evening,
Arguing with himself,
Swotting imaginary flies,
Swigging from a quart flagon.

His hands are unsteady.
He roars out rich blasphemies
When the bottle misses his lips.

The Simon arrives with soup.
He curses them away.

The night grows cold:
He reaches for the sleeping bag
They left behind.

In contrast, in 'Old Nun in a Bookshop', we have a picture of the ambivalence of faith:

She is trying hard to believe in God.
The old certainties are gone.
She is eighty and weary,
Battered by the unbelief around her.

She slides along the bookshelves,
Hoping to find a fresh prophet,
Persuading her that life is purposeful,
That she is cherished.

The vocation of the poet is to write, for write they must. In doing so they provide a window into the world we inhabit at the same time allowing us to reflect on ourselves and our own lives. The long, profound poem, 'A Small Psalter', is a powerful and moving insight into the love of God and,

at times, God's absence:

Your love was certain:
We felt it every moment of our day,
Who feel its distance now.

And:

I marvel at those who blithely assert
Knowledge of You
When all I do is clutch on gossamer.

So:

They kneel in the front pews,
Looking towards you pleadingly.
They have charged me with their prayer.

Unsure of You myself,
I lay their miseries out.

Why do You not answer?
Does not Your heart like mine
Break for them?

The delight Pádraig's great-nieces and great-nephews bring to him is celebrated in a number of poems. Who could not delight in Sophie pictured in 'The Three First Communions'?:

In the end they persuaded you
That a dress was more in keeping
Than jeans or dungarees
For First Communion Day.

So all in white,
Tiara-ed in roses,
Preraphaelitely, you emerged.

By evening you were a tomboy again,
At the splashing fountain, leaping.

A Small Psalter is a rich vein of poetry. It shows how Pádraig Daly has a keen sense of observation, how he can see beyond a figure in front of him to profound inner depths. He is as acutely aware of the pain of living and

loss of faith as he is of the world's joys and delights.

And who but Pádraig Daly could in his poem, 'The Uses of Poetry', describe swans as:

Their silent heads treasuring deliquescent knowledge.

Pádraig told me recently that at 79 years old he was hoping to semi-retire. May he never retire from writing poetry.

Danny Sullivan is a former chair of the Thomas Merton Society and currently a member of it.

Note: 2 poems from the collection are printed on pages 18-19.